Something To Scream At:
New Horror, Terror Culture, and
Screen Realities

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Abstract

This thesis identifies 21st-century American horror as a distinct genre cycle, examining its cultural significance. Focusing on successful, independent, original horror movies and paratexts, I read New Horror in the context of post-9/11 terror and society’s changing relationship with screen technology. The engagement with issues of fear, mediation, and reality makes New Horror a valuable medium of social commentary. This thesis establishes a framework for reading New Horror and demonstrates its application to pertinent examples of New Horror.
Declaration

i. The thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD.

ii. Due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.

iii. The thesis does not exceed the word limit exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies, figures, and appendices.

Naja Later
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Introduction

Horror is back from the dead. Against all expectation, American horror cinema saw a massive creative boom in the early 2000s that continues with expansions and innovations today. ‘New Horror,’ the name given to this cycle of the genre, is popular, profitable, and prolific. Micro-budget films from newcomer filmmakers dominate the box office and critical discourse, popularising sub-genres of ‘torture porn,’ ‘found footage,’ and the suddenly-sprinting zombie. American New Horror shows sociopolitical insight as striking as its terrifying spectacles. The terrorist attack of September 11, 2001 in the United States of America and the subsequent ‘Age of Terror’ in the Western world create much of the context for New Horror’s success and significance. New Horror offers critical insight into terror as a culture and a screen media phenomenon. In this thesis, I offer a framework for reading the relationship between terror media and horror. I suggest that New Horror engages in a critical commentary on contemporary problems of media narratives around fear and reality.

New Horror

‘New Horror’ is a cycle of the genre that shows remarkable developments on, throwbacks to, and deviations from earlier decades. Innovative filmmaking has carved out a new era in horror history, recognisable by its unforgiving scares, political overtones and its self-reflexive relationship with media and the real. The influx of movies in the early 2000s had overwhelming financial and critical response, and the cycle continues to refine and develop itself today in the cinema and beyond. New Horror is still expanding into uncharted territories, pushing the limits of the genre’s ability to frighten us. Movies of this period reinvent and introduce a distinct set of monsters, aesthetics, and subtexts that are recognisably characteristic of New Horror, engaging specifically with sociopolitical issues of the 21st century.¹

¹ Other Anglophonic nations have contributed to this genre cycle, with the United Kingdom and Australia producing a wealth of visceral horror movies in the same period that offer a similar commentary on terror as an international cultural phenomenon. There are adjacent trends such as the New French Extreme, New Extremism, Japanese ‘J-Horror,’ Korean ‘K-Horror,’ and Spanish horror cinema may be categorised as ‘New Horror’ in its capacity to address sociopolitical concerns in a nationally specific context. Cycles such as J-Horror and the New French Extreme deal with their cinema history and cultural traumas in nationally heterogenous ways. As such, while keeping with New Horror’s symptomatic self-reflexivity and political criticism, these movies are not always consistent with the cultural relevance or chronology of New Horror’s alignment with terror. For the sake of brevity I restrict my discussion to American New Horror. I have published a case study of Australian New Horror in a terror context in 2014. See: Naja Later, ‘Horror in the Outback,’ in Places and Spaces of Monstrosity, ed. Craig Douglas and Rosalea Monacella (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014), 83-92.
American Horror cinema has a rich history of generic cycles. These cycles ebb and flow with the sociopolitical climate, fluctuating between subversive and conservative; antagonistic and introspective; and sincere and baroque. New Horror can easily be identified as distinct from genre trends of the 1990s, which celebrated the death throes of the slasher sub-genre with teen idols, camp self-reflexivity, and milder violence. New Horror exploded onto screens with spectacularly gory ‘torture porn’ best seen in the *Hostel* (Roth, 2005) and *Saw* (Wan, 2004), starkly realistic ‘found footage’ such as *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2007) and *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008) and the zombie coming rapidly back to the big screen. These appearances were made even more striking by the cultural discourse surrounding them that suggested Americans had no interest in horror post-9/11. This recalled the previous cycle of horror innovations from the late 1960s to the 1980s. A host of newcomer filmmakers at the time such as Wes Craven, Tobe Hooper, and George A. Romero used examples from the period include *Scream* (Craven, 1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Gillespie, 1997), and *Urban Legend* (Blanks, 1998), all of which spawned a number of sequels. Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller claim that these teen slashers were ‘characterized by disengagement and psychological introversion,’ describing this period of the genre as ‘stagnant and predictable’ compared to the Vietnam period and the New Horror cycles. This criticism has become the consensus among scholars and New Horror filmmakers. See: Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller, ‘Introduction,’ in *Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, ed. Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 2.

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2 Examples from the period include *Scream* (Craven, 1996), *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Gillespie, 1997), and *Urban Legend* (Blanks, 1998), all of which spawned a number of sequels. Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller claim that these teen slashers were ‘characterized by disengagement and psychological introversion,’ describing this period of the genre as ‘stagnant and predictable’ compared to the Vietnam period and the New Horror cycles. This criticism has become the consensus among scholars and New Horror filmmakers. See: Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller, ‘Introduction,’ in *Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror*, ed. Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 2.


4 See: *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968), *Last House On The Left* (Craven, 1972), *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977), *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980), and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (Craven, 1984), and various sequels.
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extreme horror as a vehicle for scathing criticism of America’s involvement in the Vietnam War.\(^5\) This period influenced and codified many of the trends present in New Horror. The modern zombie, the low-budget production values, and gruesome special effects influence New Horror; as do the explicit overtones protesting a conservative American administration’s involvement in excessively violent and spectacularly televised wars, and the various social effects thereof. This period’s antecedents, including the invasion trend of the 1950s and the Gothic trend of the 1930s, are best summarised in a sociopolitical context by Mark Jancovich and Robin Wood.\(^6\) The creative and critical legacy of these earlier genre cycles is immeasurable, and when New Horror draws from its predecessors it is able to articulate contemporary concerns with nuanced tradition and innovative specificity.

The monstrous success of New Horror at the box office and across television, Internet, and other new media marks a degree of its cultural impact. Horror’s commercial potential is key to its significance. Read in an economic model, high box office returns indicate a broad viewership and greater cultural recognition. The profitability of New Horror has enabled proliferation, with the number of popular horror films rising high enough to be called a movement in genre. There are trends, idiosyncrasies, and inventions enough to earn the title ‘new’ horror. New Horror is

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remarkable in its wealth, mobility, and insight. Contextualising its powerful position in popular culture enables a greater understanding of the atmosphere in which it prospers.

New Horror’s profitability has captured the attention of popular critics and academics, leading to a rise in horror scholarship. Film critics express astonishment at the prominence and success of visceral independent horror productions.  

Scholars such as Phoebe Fletcher argue the cultural significance of early New Horror hits *Hostel* and *Saw III* (Bousman, 2006):  

Last fall [2006], “*Saw III*” opened at No. 1 with $33.8 million, before going on to gross $80.2 million at the domestic box office. That’s more than studio fare like “World Trade Center” and “Miami Vice.” “*Hostel*” grossed $47.3 million in its run last year, better than more mainstream suspense fare like M. Night Shyamalan’s “Lady in the Water”.  

Not only are New Horror movies outperforming major thrillers, Fletcher observes they also trump megabudget family franchises such as *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Adamson, 2005). Numbers like these are remarkable in the context of horror as a niche or ‘cult’ genre, indicating horror's return to the cultural fore.  

Many prominent New Horror movies can be categorised into three emergent sub-genres that have captured the attention of a generation: torture porn, found footage, and virus movies. The films discussed above are of a sub-genre dubbed ‘torture porn’ by journalist David Edelstein, a hotly contested but recognisable moniker. Popular titles include *Hostel, Saw, Wolf Creek* (McLean, 2006).  

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8 McClintock, ‘Blood Brothers.’  

9 Phoebe Fletcher, “‘Fucking Americans”: Postmodern Nationalisms in the Contemporary Splatter Film,’ *Colloquy: Text Theory Critique* 18 (December 2009), 76-77.  

10 Lowenstein argues that ‘torture porn’ is a misnomer, preferring ‘spectacle horror’ to describe ‘the staging of spectacularly explicit horror for purposes of audience admiration, provocation, and sensory adventure as much as shock or terror, but without necessarily breaking ties with narrative development or historical allegory.’ ‘Spectacle horror’ cannily identifies the problematisation of spectatorship in New Horror, which will be discussed in Chapter One and developed through Parts Two and Three in and beyond torture porn. For the purpose of clarity, I use ‘torture porn,’ as it continues to be the most culturally recognisable term for the collection of movies studied. See: Adam Lowenstein, ‘Spectacle Horror and *Hostel*: Why "Torture Porn" Does Not Exist,’ *Critical Quarterly* 53:1 (2011): 42; Edelstein, ‘Now Playing At Your Local Multiplex.’
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Torture porn films are grouped by their graphic depictions of torture; an absence of fantasy or science fiction elements; and a gritty, desaturated aesthetic. The violence of torture porn is often underpinned by scathing sociopolitical critiques and an obsession with challenging spectators. Most are original stories created by young directors, many international, working independently on budgets of less than US$10 million. Without stars, accessible ratings from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), high production values, or the bankability of adapted or remade stories to boost ticket sales, the overwhelming commercial response to torture porn is indicative of its social currency.

The independent successes have allowed major studios to venture into horror more often, especially as distributors. Paramount Pictures distribute independent productions such as Cloverfield (Reeves, 2008) and the Paranormal Activity franchise (Peli, 2007; Williams, 2010; Joost & Schulman, 2011, 2012; Landon, 2014; Plotkin, 2015). Movies such as these and The Blair Witch Project (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999), [rec] (Balagueró & Plaza, 2007), its American remake Quarantine (Dowdle, 2008), Diary of the Dead (Romero, 2007), V/H/S (Bettinelli-Olpin et al), The Last Exorcism (Stamm, 2010), and Chronicle (Trank, 2012) use the ‘found footage’ technique.

The narrative and formal device of found footage presents the movie’s content as civilian-recorded and later ‘found’ footage of nonfictional events. The success of the sub-genre is symptomatic of the changing role of screen and recording technologies in the 21st century, and these technologies’ relationship with crises and violent events. While this format is used intermittently in many

11 ‘Torture porn,’ for all the high-profile moral panic surrounding it, has only a few notable titles. Most of these were produced or distributed by independent Canadian-American studio Lionsgate (also called Lions Gate): their curious approach to marketing is discussed in Chapter Seven. Sometimes included are remakes from earlier slasher and ‘cabin in the woods’ cycles by torture porn auteurs: Halloween (Zombie, 2007), The Hills Have Eyes (Aja, 2006), and The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Nispel, 2003) are examples. These are not discussed, as their success is largely owed to pre-established titles: while they show the influence and evolution of the Vietnam horror period, I am interested original 2000s movies. Following the initial boom, a bevy of forgettable imitations were released around 2005-2009, but these demonstrated little critical insight and seldom distinguished themselves from the ironic exploitation trends that follow any horror cycle. To provide thorough investigation, I focus on Hostel in Chapter Two and the seven Saw movies in Chapter Six, and I have written on Australian torture porn such as Wolf Creek in the paper ‘Horror in the Outback.’ Rob Zombie’s movies are excluded as Linnie Blake provides an excellent model for reading them in a similar context. Close investigation of Hostel and Saw allow me to illustrate the full political potential of torture porn, and these chapters may be used as a model to read others in the sub-genre. A full list of sequels is included in the filmography. See: Linnie Blake, ‘“I am the Devil and I’m Here to do the Devil’s Work”: Rob Zombie, George W. Bush, and the Limits of American Freedom,’ in Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror, ed. Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 186-199; Edelstein, ‘Now Playing At Your Local Multiplex.’

12 ‘Found footage’ had earlier incarnations in a few examples of horror mockumentaries: Alexandra Heller-Nicholas provides a comprehensive monograph on the genre’s evolution, and I will discuss found footage New Horror in Chapter Six. See: Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Found Footage Horror Films (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014).
different New Horror examples, these movies can be categorised as a sub-genre when employed as an exclusive narrative technique. Found footage shares torture porn’s low-budget high-profit trend, and the new style of storytelling has been used to revive many classic horror tropes such as the haunted house, the monster invasion, the zombie outbreak, the demonic possession, and the like.  

The inclusion of the camera in the diegesis, as well as the framing of the films as nonfictional, allows found footage to explore the complexity of the mediated ‘real.’ This self-reflexive storytelling, and audiences’ enthusiasm in engaging with spectatorship outside the traditional narratives of cinema, highlights New Horror’s significance in understanding our shifting relationship with screen media in a terror context.

Zombie stories and similar virus narratives are another notable sub-genre to reach cultural saturation. Kyle Bishop notes: ‘Since 2002, the number of both studio and independent zombie movies has been on a steady rise.’ 28 Days Later (Boyle, 2002), Cabin Fever (Roth, 2003), Dawn of the Dead (Snyder, 2004), Land of the Dead (Romero, 2005), Right At Your Door (Gorak, 2006), Diary of the Dead (Romero, 2007), and World War Z (Forster, 2013) are among a plethora of movies using a zombie-like virus narrative. Virus stories have found major studio support, and their popularity has enabled unprecedented success in other media such as television, novels, Internet fictions, live-action play, and continued success in video games. The cultural obsession with zombies is explained best by their threat to conceptual boundaries, and the absence of character which allows us to impose the fears of the era on them. This century, zombies represent terror

13 The haunted house has continued to thrive as a horror trope this century. The sub-genre has major studio support that ensures its perennial success, and does not often coincide with the independence, developments, or political commentary of other New Horror sub-genres. The primary concern of the threatened family is, as Wood notes, timeless, though Kellner observes a subtext of economic instability and housing crises during the Ronald Reagan’s and George W. Bush’s presidencies. Excepting the Paranormal Activity franchise, the haunted house sub-genre will not be discussed, as its success and subtext are not linked closely enough with terror culture to merit space for exploration. James Kendrick provides an excellent analysis for further reading on paranormal horror during this period. See: Kellner, Cinema Wars, 15; James Kendrick, ‘A Return to the Graveyard: Notes on the Spiritual Horror Film,’ in American Horror Film: The Genre at the Turn of the Millennium, ed. Steffen Hantke (Jackson: The University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 142-159; Robin Wood, ‘The American Family Comedy: from Meet Me In St. Louis to The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,’ Wide Angle 3:2 (1979): 5-11.

14 Contention over the mythology of zombies has become a pop culture phenomenon in itself. Zombies’ speed, shape, sentience, origin, and durability are often restricted by purists to Romero’s canonised mythology, despite Romero’s own openness to challenges and revisions with The Crazies (1973), Dawn of the Dead (1978), Day of the Dead (1985), and Land of the Dead. A science fiction ‘viral’ origin and transmission is consistent in most 2000s zombie mythologies. While it can be argued that examples such as 28 Days Later, Cabin Fever, and Contagion (Soderbergh, 2011) are not ‘zombie’ movies, there are obvious and significant intersections between the ‘viral apocalypse’ trope and zombie narratives. This flexible understanding of zombie and virus sub-genres allows us to observe an overarching cultural paranoia over apocalyptic pandemics.

15 Bishop. ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 17.
politics not only in terms of bioterrorism but concerns about pandemic scares, economics, government, natural disaster, and apocalypse. Endless permutations of the virus theme has ensured there is a zombie story to address every real-life event of the century. The release dates of successful virus movies tend to coincide with seasonal panics over anthrax, ricin, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, bird flu, swine flu, Ebola, and Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome, suggesting a recurring cultural resonance.

In the sociopolitical context surrounding these successes, New Horror is remarkable: many cultural commentators anticipated that post-9/11, the horror genre would be overly traumatic and decline into further obscurity. However, these assumptions failed to account for horror’s value in critically articulating contemporary traumas. New Horror thrives in its cultural context because it does not simply reflect or exacerbate an audience’s real-world traumas. Rather, the cycle is able to suggest some rare truths—and criticise some common untruths—of the world surrounding the cinema.

**Horror as a Social Barometer**

Contextualising the surge of horror requires an understanding of the atmosphere in which horror flourishes. Adam Lowenstein foregrounds a reading of horror that favours ‘culturally specific, historically contextualized cases.’ The explosive popularity of New Horror suggests that fear and spectacular violence are forefront in the zeitgeist, and the commentaries offered by New Horror are

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16 There is a wealth of scholarship on these zombie movies, with Bishop and Lowenstein demonstrating the strongest political readings of the zombie. For this thesis I will build upon these works to discuss the critical capacity of zombies in a media context, exploring how they mirror real political problems by threatening new media spaces such as television, journalism, and live play. Zombies outside of the horror genre, while fascinating as a meditation on their social currency, are excluded. Comedies such as *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004) and *Zombieland* (Fleischer, 2009) and dramas such as *Warm Bodies* (Levine, 2013) and *In The Flesh* (BBC, 2013-2014), though fascinating cases that complete the zombie’s function of pushing boundaries in a generic capacity, do not relate to my key concerns of terror culture and media realities. Similarly, beyond the viral concerns of occasional vampire movies, the successful transmigration of vampires beyond horror, especially with major studio support, places them outside the scope of this thesis. I have studied *Blade* (Norrington, 1998) as an example of vampires trespassing generic boundaries in a forthcoming publication. See: Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 16-25; Adam Lowenstein, ‘Living Dead: Fearful Attractions of Film,’ *Representations* 110:1 (Spring 2010): 105-126; Naja Later, ‘The Daywalker: Reading *Blade* as Genre Hybridity,’ in *Historical Essays on the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, ed. Matthew McEmry, Robert Moses Peaslee, and Robert G. Weiner (Jefferson: McFarland, forthcoming 2015), n.p..

17 Melnick notes the consensus that violence and irony would vanish from popular cinema, while Kathy Smith speculates that disaster movies will be too realistic. See: Melnick, *9/11 Culture*, 50; Kathy Smith, ‘Reframing Fantasy: September 11 and the Global Audience,’ in *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to ‘Reality’ TV and Beyond*, ed. Geoff King (Bristol and Portland: Intellect, 2005), 69.

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crucial to a wealth of audiences. The history of horror movies as ‘barometers of society’s anxieties’ is supported by scholars such as Bishop, and many have remarked upon New Horror’s renewed ability to engage in contemporary sociopolitical concerns.\textsuperscript{19} Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller note that New Horror ‘emerged as a rare protected space in which to critique the tone and content of public discourse.’\textsuperscript{20} Joseph Maddrey discusses ‘horror movies as social metaphors,’ while Gabrielle Murray calls horror ‘a Richter scale, charting the unease in society of generational subconscious fears.’\textsuperscript{21} Douglas Kellner expands upon the critical ability of this relationship:

[...] critical interpretations of a film can help provide understanding of contemporary US culture and society and thus contribute to important debates over politics and the state, corporations and the economy, economics and environmental crisis, terrorism, war and militarism, and threats to democracy.\textsuperscript{22}

Bishop also links film, specifically zombies, and politics, stating:

Wars and other tragedies affect cultural consciousness like the blast from a high-yield explosive or a massive earthquake. The ensuing shockwaves reach far and wide, and one of the best ways to recognize and understand these undulations is by analyzing the literature and film of the times.\textsuperscript{23}

These theorists associate horror cycles with periods of unrest, anxiety, fear, and violence; particularly when these issues are highly visible in popular media. The horror movie is suggested as a tool for reading these concerns, and articulating subversive critical discourse in a popular medium.

The relationship between horror and cultural traumas is described by Lowenstein as an ‘allegorical moment.’\textsuperscript{24} Lowenstein argues compellingly that traumas such as 9/11 and war, which

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Briefel and Miller, 3.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Maddrey, \textit{Nightmares in Red, White and Blue}, 2; Gabrielle Murray, ‘Hostel II: Representations of the Body in Pain and the Cinema Experience in Torture-Porn,’ \textit{Jump Cut} 50 (Spring 2008): n.p..
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 17.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Lowenstein, \textit{Shocking Representation}, 2.
\end{itemize}
‘cannot be represented,’ are displaced onto the horror genre.⁵ Horror is acknowledged by Lowenstein as ideal for representing trauma:

[…] the allegorical method these horror films employ to engage historical trauma results in a more confrontational address of the spectator than is found in those contemporaneous art films that are often more explicit in their references to traumatic historical events (and always more critically praised).⁶

Lowenstein identifies that horror’s resonance with its contemporary context is not simply a reflection or trivialisation. Rather, the genre’s capacity for self-reflexivity and confrontation allows horror to offer challenging critical insight into complex sociopolitical problems.

It is long been established by critics that horror contains social commentary, but filmmakers have seldom been so vocal in explicitly linking their work with sociopolitical problems as those in New Horror. Jerod Ra’del Hollyfield describes Eli Roth’s political intentions as ‘a filmmaker who stated to the BBC that his intentions were to make films with “the pessimistic point of view of not trusting the government.”’⁷ Murray also quotes Roth making a direct reference to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks:

In regards to the first Hostel’s box office success and this trend in explicit horror, Roth commented that teenagers who were 10 when 9/11 happened are now 16 or 17. They have “grown up being told that you are going to get blown-up. Terror Alert Orange... they want something to scream at” that is as shocking as the events of their lives.⁸

George A. Romero is quoted with similar observations by Maddrey: “Horror is radical,” he [Romero] says, “It can take you to a completely new world, new place, and just rattle your cage and say, wait a minute—look at things differently [...] We don’t want things the way they are or we

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²⁵ Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, 1.

²⁶ Lowenstein, ‘Living Dead,’ 107.


²⁸ Roth quoted in Murray, ‘Hostel II.’
wouldn’t be trying to shock you into an alternative place”.

Matt Reeves claims of his film: ‘Cloverfield very much speaks to the fear and anxieties of our time.’

New Horror is deliberately engaged in discourse over terror, and spectators are addressed as active participants in reading meaning around political commentary, media, and New Horror’s take on reality. The cycle’s ability to shock is explored in different ways across the sub-genres, giving New Horror a powerful critical capacity that reflexively addresses a spectator’s relationship with their sociopolitical reality.

This self-reflexivity is key in New Horror, which often subverts the dominant narratives in other media, demanding spectators recognise horror’s relationship with and criticism of the social climate. I will explore how New Horror is able to interact on many levels with its audiences to engage directly or subtly with sociopolitical problems. The popularity of New Horror suggests that viewers not only want, as Roth claims, something to scream at, but also a means of contextualising the fears of the outside world into which horror spreads. New Horror is entrenched as a critical part of popular culture, and an excellent means to understand the complexities and anxieties of the society surrounding it.

**Horror and Terror**

Any examination of 21st-century Western culture is shaped to some degree by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Four flights were hijacked by terrorists and crashed into the World Trade Centre in Manhattan, New York, and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., killing almost 3000 people. This attack had a monumental cultural impact in the USA and other parts of the Western world, triggering the ‘War on Terror’ and impacting on a breadth of social spheres, the most pertinent for this thesis being the development of media technologies and the revival of the horror genre. The trauma of 9/11 and its complex suffusion into a culture of ‘terror’ is critically explored in New Horror, the apt ‘allegorical moment’ to confront the role of media and the changed realities of

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29 Maddrey refers in particular to Romero’s Night of the Living Dead and the recently remade Dawn of the Dead. Romero has also directed the New Horror films Land of the Dead and Diary of the Dead. See: Maddrey, Nightmares in Red, White and Blue, 129.


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a post-9/11 world. As obsessions with fear, New Horror and 9/11 are inextricable cultural landmarks.

9/11 represents a turning point in American history; a profound event with immeasurable ramifications. It marks a definitive shift into a new social climate in which New Horror thrives: what I will call a ‘terror culture.’ This suffusion from 9/11 into terror culture is facilitated by government, by the news industry, by business interests, by popular culture, by media technology, and by social discourse. Adriana Cavarero notes: ‘In the discourse of politics and the media, “terrorism” is today a word as omnipresent as it is vague and ambiguous, its meaning taken for granted so as to avoid defining it.’ ‘Terror culture’ is dynamic, plastic, and infectious, allowing it to perpetuate its social and political relevance. This nebulous and insidious fear has become an inescapably adaptable monster of the post-9/11 world. Though ‘9/11’ identifies a single day, the ensuing ‘terror’ has extended and expanded the influence of the event well beyond its original time and place. The far-reaching effects of 9/11 terror impact political, economic, technological, and social issues continue today.

Since 9/11, ‘terror’ has been used to contextualise all kinds of fear and violence prevalent in America and the West. A narrative of causality may be constructed for political purposes: for instance, the implication that Iraq was involved in 9/11 was used by George W. Bush’s administration to justify the 2003 invasion. The narrative of ‘terror’ facilitates oppressive security

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32 As will be discussed in Chapter One, post-9/11 ‘terror’ is a deliberately nebulous and ambiguous concept, but distinguishable from pre-9/11 ‘terrorism,’ a term with a complex global history with culturally discrete applications. For the context of this thesis, I am working from and through ‘terror’ as the concept emerges from post-9/11 discourse and the Bush administration. I argue that this concept is functionally indefinite, but some culturally recognised assumptions that separate it from 20th-century ‘terrorism’ include: international rather than domestic antagonism; a conflation of ‘terror’ and ‘terrorism’ that enables its paranoid diffusion; an association of blame with Islam and the Middle East; especially affiliation with a guerrilla organisation; the aesthetic of mass destruction and decay; and screen media spectacularity. All of these are discussed further over the course of the thesis. On the conflation of horror and terror, see: Adriana Cavarero, Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); David Teh, ‘Art and the Veil: Censorship after 9/11,’ Australian & New Zealand Journal of Art 5:2 (2004): 53.


34 Cavarero, Horrorism, 2.

legislation such as the PATRIOT Act; and funding for anti-terror border control measures used chiefly to block economic refugees from Latin countries. Following the anthrax scare in October 2001, ‘terror’ infects discourse surrounding natural virus pandemics that have swept the globe since: in more paranoid journalism, these outbreaks may be attributed to bioterrorism. ‘Terror’ describes the superficial resemblance between Ground Zero of the World Trade Centre and the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and implies the Bush administration’s failure to respond adequately to catastrophe. I am interested in the obfuscated processes by which these events become ‘terror’: I argue that New Horror helps to illustrate these processes critically.

This ambiguous conceptualisation of ‘terror’ has grown to shape politics, society, and popular culture since 9/11 far more than any specific acts of terrorism could. New Horror’s effectiveness lies in its ability to deal with the range of terror’s cultural manifestations. New Horror movies engaged with the genre’s traditional critical issues surrounding gender and sexuality, for instance, may still be read in a post-9/11 context. As terror insinuates itself through various cultural fields, New Horror is able to feature and criticise these fields, their relationship to terror, and the complex processes of insinuation.

New Horror films have confronted terror in a variety of ways, some more overt than others. Movies like Hostel and Cloverfield explore post-9/11 American relations and the destruction of civilian New York respectively. The Saw and Paranormal Activity franchises focus on issues of spectatorship, authenticity, and media narratives symptomatic of terror media such as surveillance and the 24-hour news cycle. Found footage often resembles the first news reports of terror-related crises, where civilians document horrific events with their own media devices. The scope of New Horror’s subject matter represents the scope of terror’s cultural impact. New Horror plays its advantage as a screen spectacle, often criticising terror in its culturally spectacular context. Discussing the 2004 Dawn of the Dead remake, Bishop says: ‘The chaos, disorientation, fear, and destruction [the heroine] witnesses are disturbingly similar to the initial news footage broadcast on

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38 My study of Paranormal Activity in Chapter Five is an example of how the gendered antagonism between characters articulates criticism of surveillance and home security measures justified by ‘terror.’
September 11, 2001.'\(^{39}\) Kim Newman notes the coincidence of *Hostel* and news of torture in Guantánamo Bay.\(^{40}\) This imagery can be intentional or coincidental: in *Diary of the Dead*, Romero extends the resemblance of New Horror and terror to include actual ‘terror’ footage in a fictional context.\(^{41}\) Bishop acknowledges that *28 Days Later*, shot in the United Kingdom in mid-2001, bears a striking resemblance to 9/11 that undeniably resonates with audiences following the film’s 2002 release.\(^{42}\) These are all examples of terror aesthetics being re-imagined in New Horror: from these spectacular allegories, this thesis aims to explore the range of ways New Horror media frames terror as a culture and a spectacle.

**The Spectacle of Terror**

The relationship between New Horror and terror is supported by their cultural dissemination as screen media spectacles of fear. The development of 9/11 into ‘War on Terror’ and the ancillary sociopolitical issues that create terror culture occurs in no small part due to the cultural experience of terror as a screen spectacle. For those outside Manhattan and the Pentagon, 9/11 was often experienced through visual media. Slavoj Žižek notes that: ‘For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen.’\(^{43}\) Terror news since is increasingly accessed by the proliferation of screens in our daily lives. The screen media that broadcast 9/11 have become an inextricable part of terror’s context, complicating the relationship between the spectacle and the ‘reality’ of terrorism. The cultural impact of terror is in part due to its ability to be transferred and mediated: my discussion of ‘terror’ as it interacts with New Horror is seldom ‘real’ terror but its media spectacle. New Horror, itself a genre of spectacular media violence, is able to self-reflexively address this cultural experience of terror.

\(^{39}\) Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 22.


\(^{42}\) Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 22.

Numerous critics and academics have described, whether explicitly or implicitly, terror and New Horror’s spectaculaity. Kellner repeats the phrase ‘put on display’ when describing horror films that allude to terror-related issues.44 Teh claims terror imagery and ambiguity:

Terrorism and visual culture must both tap into this tension between spectacle and secrecy, for artifice is integral to both. Still, one might have thought it difficult to confuse them—until we saw 9/11 and marveled that it wasn’t a movie, or with Karlheinz Stockhausen, simply mistook it for an art of diabolical beauty.45

Teh repeats the visual nature of terror in referring to ‘the arch-media-event which reframes them all, the artful terror of 9/11.’46 Melnick notes: ‘Just 5 days after the attack, Neal Gabler (2001), a historian of Hollywood, wrote in the New York Times that the hijackers were “creating not just terror: they were creating images.”’47 Terror is, in cultural discourse, a powerfully spectacular phenomenon. It is culturally disseminated and interpreted in visual terms, often through visual media and screens. New Horror functions so well as an allegory for terror and a space for critical discourse because it engages with these spectacular aspects of terror. Briefel and Miller note that New Horror movies ‘retell stories of 9/11 through visual narratives of horror.’48 When it uses the genre of narrative cinema to engage in terror, it self-reflexively foregrounds the role of the spectacle in mediating terror; suggesting spectacular terror can be used as a political tool or to create a zeitgeist.

Screen Mediation

The spectacle of terror represented in screen media is often described as movie-like and unreal, alluding to the ambiguity between New Horror’s fictions and terror’s realities that enables a critical relationship.49 Geoff King notes: ‘A very real event was experienced - at least in part - through a

44 Kellner, Cinema Wars, 7.

45 Teh, ‘Art and the Veil,’ 57.

46 Teh, ‘Art and the Veil,’ 64.

47 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 65.


49 For further discussion of the ‘like a movie’ phenomenon, see Chapters One, Three, and Four.
frame provided by Hollywood spectacle.' Melnick claims that this spectacular ‘unreal’ context is essential to the cultural development of terror:

What is most important in all of this 9/11-as-film talk is the reflexive and obsessive insistence that no cultural sense could be made of the attacks until they were “derealized” and put into the familiar fictional contexts that Hollywood is in the business of constructing.

The association between terror and the spectacle is often accompanied by questions of authenticity. Screen media are able to show, frame, and create narratives of terror. The capacity to show terror enables it to spread and gain social traction. Framing or mediation is of vital importance to this thesis: this process creates a limited, directed, and fractured context of terror while obscuring its subjectivity. In New Horror, the same processes of framing are what makes us imagine Quarantine as realistic and Fox News as unrealistic. The linking of these fractured representations of terror into a narrative—whether through paranoid apophenia, critical investigation, or deliberate juxtaposition in media—is ‘narrativisation.’ This helps us understand the construction of consequentiality that connects 9/11 to the invasion of Iraq; how resources to combat terrorism are used against Mexican immigrants; and how natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, or viral pandemics from avian influenza to Ebola, become part of terror discourse. This also helps contextualise why New Horror—a genre cycle riddled with elements that seem to echo terror culture—is able to criticise the processes of authentication and narrativisation that separate fictional media from the ‘real.’

The screen’s role in collating terror culture and New Horror is imperative to consider in a social and technological framework. For contemporary consumers, screens are a vital source of information and entertainment, and the line between the two is blurring: New Horror deliberately plays with our culturally recognised authenticators that maintain this line, while terror journalism borrows horror language and imagery to sensationalise its stories. Cinema and television screens are increasingly joined by new media such as computers, digital cameras, camcorders, smartphones,

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51 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 51.

tablets, and public advertising screens, allowing anyone to create and consume anything from breaking news to horror movies in the home or on the street. Our context for the ‘real’ world is augmented and fragmented by the media technology that evolves symbiotically with terror culture. Different market demands placed on journalism by these technological advances have brought criticism of authenticity, mediation, and narrativisation into popular discourse. New Horror enters this discourse by addressing fans as active spectators able to creatively participate in their media environments, drawing fierce critical attention to the semi-obsurred processes that render ‘real’ media fields such as journalism subjective.

Diverse media have always been important to horror, and horror has always self-reflexively engaged with its medium. The flexibility and proliferation of smart technology has given New Horror a myriad of spaces in which to work. New Horror takes advantage of these to diffuse its presence as insidiously as terror culture, challenging the boundaries of ‘real’ across and between the rich media environment that has flourished in the age of terror.

Shattered Reality

Horror’s history of critiquing social issues by transgressing its fictional bounds is noted by Maddrey:

53 ‘New media’ loosely accounts for the digital technology developing from the late 20th century and continuing today, with the World Wide Web as a useful focal example. The devices tend to advance too quickly in kind and function to be usefully or comprehensively listed. Benson-Allott and Lisa Gitelman problematise the term for its vagueness; its exclusion of culturally significant contemporary analogue technologies; and its failure to account for the ‘newness’ of any technological advancements in history. Case studies of ‘new’ media in this thesis tend to include at least media ‘new’ to horror storytellers: smartphone applications, wikis, and weblogs are examples that we would not, for instance, have seen in the Vietnam horror cycle. As in the case of ‘torture porn,’ I use ‘new media’ as a recognisable, if contested, term. See: Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, 11; Lisa Gitelman, *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 17-18.

54 The symbiotic evolution of the screenscape and terror culture is discussed in Chapter Four. An exploration of how social and technological fragmenting post-9/11 impact on the concept of ‘reality’ occurs in Chapter Seven.

55 During a long history of breaking the fourth wall in cinemas, horror consciously engages with new screen technologies through which it may be viewed. Benson-Allott describes this engagement in vivid detail, from the broken glass screen referring to the VHS in *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980), to perhaps the most famous case of *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998). In Chapter Five I discuss how the DVD format enables cycling multiple endings in *Paranormal Activity*. Chapter Seven studies promotional posters designed to be banned; Chapters Eight and Nine include a variety of interconnected online horror hoaxes designed to challenge the authenticity of ‘real’ Internet media. See: Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, 1-2.
[...] filmmakers have responded to cultural changes with cries of the damned, new hopes and self-consciousness that seems to blur the line between film and society, fiction and reality (thereby threatening the narrative itself). [...] The horror genre is more popular today than ever, and as America continues to evolve in the shadow of its past, audiences will continue to watch those shadows on film.56

New Horror’s capacity as a ‘shadow’ or ‘allegory’ is supported by the terror context in which it occurs. Žižek claims that when 9/11 news screened, ‘the image entered and shattered our reality.’57 The ‘shattering’ is imperative in understanding how New Horror is able to enter terror discourse. Post-9/11 ‘reality’ is something fragmented, disparate, incomplete, subjective, and requiring active restructuring to create context. The subjective process of ‘authenticity’ in news media—and New Horror that addresses—becomes a question of ‘reality’ as New Horror shifts from the cinema to new media. I suggest that this conceptualisation is part of the ‘real’ environment of the new media screenscape, in which media technologies and their functions are fragmented across devices and content. The destabilised, decentralised shards that make up terror ‘reality’ are easily addressed by New Horror texts that experiment with authenticating processes, contextualising markers, fragmented frames of information, and fears that transfer across media. New Horror takes advantage of ‘shattered’ reality’s subjectivity to challenge and threaten real issues in terror culture.

New screen technology means that a study of New Horror media encompasses far more than the cinema feature. These technologies allow horror to circumvent its traditional limitations—budget, criticism, authorship, accessibility, and so on—and become formidable in both popularity and creativity. New Horror produces significant short films, television programmes, trailers, featurettes, posters, images, websites, databases, online fictions, reviews, critical essays, rumours, hoaxes, urban legends, games, live play, videos; the list is endless. Each of these manifestations of New Horror provide insights into its contribution to terror and screen culture. Many do this by subverting or drawing attention to the cultural markers that delineate the ‘real,’ creating a porous boundary between horror and terror that enables critical dialogue.

56 Maddrey, Nightmares in Red, White and Blue, 6.

57 Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, 16.
Introduction

New Horror has developed outside the cinema as paratexts to movies, new media, and transmedia stories. As terror culture suffuses further from 9/11 into other social spheres, so does New Horror evolve from movies to develop across media, producing some of the cycle’s most interesting works in the 2010s. My interest in works which gain cultural capital without high production budgets continues in this area: 2010s New Horror includes some remarkable narratives that unfold across multiple media, such as transmedia stories and Alternate Reality Games. These are stories which require active navigation through different media to follow a narrative, and deliberately mimic or overlap into ‘real’-seeming media contexts. Some of these narrative fragments bear uncanny resemblances to ‘real’ terror content, challenging the veracity of terror as a tool of political context. Assembling a narrative from these fragments while exploring their ‘realism’ as subjective and contextual is vital to our enjoyment of these New Horror stories. This self-reflexive process is imperative in understanding the complexity of New Horror’s critical insights into terror culture. We may see how terror is constructed into a narrative through fragmented media, its influence evolving into current social, political, and technological concerns. The remarkable innovations of New Horror in new media create platforms from which the genre may challenge how terror narratives are constructed as ‘real,’ and how we reflexively navigate our shattered media realities.

Terror, Screens, Realities

This thesis consists of three parts, focusing on the three areas of terror culture, screen media, and shattered realities. The opening chapters of each part will establish the cultural context for each area. Subsequent chapters present case studies of relevant movies and other creative works which demonstrate New Horror’s relationship to these areas. Parts and case studies are often inter-referential, as terror, screen media, and cultural realities develop symbiotically. I have chosen case

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58 I am working from Jonathan Gray’s theory of paratexts researched in Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts. According to Gray, ‘every media text is accompanied by textual proliferation at the level of hype, synergy, promos, and peripherals.’ Examples include ‘ads, previews, trailers, interviews with creative personnel, Internet discussion, entertainment news, reviews, merchandising, guerrilla marketing campaigns, fan creations, posters, games, DVDs, CDs, and spinoffs.’ He claims that: ‘Given their extended presence, any filmic or televisual text and its cultural impact, value, and meaning cannot be adequately analyzed without taking into account the film or program’s many proliferation. Each proliferation, after all, holds the potential to change the meaning of the text, even if only slightly.’ Gray’s theory that paratexts potentially destabilise the centrality of the ‘core’ text is particularly significant in Part Three of this thesis. Reading New Horror works as potentially decentralised collections of texts is crucial to understanding its relationship with terror: as ‘terror’ is often a decentralised collection of events, and often terror and New Horror ‘paratexts’ are the points of most intriguing overlap. See: Jonathan Gray, Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts (New York: New York University Press. 2009).
studies which best represent the concerns of each part, but the thesis is structured to demonstrate that a New Horror movie primarily concerned with terror politics may also be read in the context of post-9/11 screenscapes and subjective reality. Cases such as this are signalled or revisited in other chapters to indicate the complexity of these relationships, while tangential examples and readings are suggested where relevant.

Part One is organised around terror culture and films that deal explicitly with terror-related sociopolitical issues. Chapter One explores how terror develops from 9/11 into a cultural phenomenon, exploring its initial social impact to the political events and tangents that redefine ‘terror’ as they become part of its narrative. Though far from a comprehensive history of terror’s impact on the US and the wider Western world, this chapter proposes a critical understanding of ‘terror’ and its influence on multiple social spheres.

Chapter Two discusses how *Hostel*, one of the first and most successful movies in the ‘torture porn’ sub-genre, deals with torture, violence, and the post-9/11 American identity in an international context. In this chapter I suggest that the Manichean politics of Bush’s War on Terror are subverted through antagonisms and ironies centring around American identity in *Hostel*. The film deconstructs idealised post-9/11 American to critique the relationship between torture and nationalism, presenting an ambivalence between violence and homogeneity typical of the New Horror cycle.

In Chapter Three I begin my discussion of the found footage disaster movie *Cloverfield*. *Cloverfield* is one of the most explicit 9/11 stories in popular culture, dealing with civilians filming the destruction of New York by a mysterious monster. Through found footage and the movie’s extensive Alternate Reality Game, this 9/11 story is framed by the context of the media spectacle. This introduces the screen’s role in terror culture, used in *Cloverfield* to criticise problems of authenticity and narrative in our understanding of 9/11.

Part Two of the thesis engages in terror culture’s relationship with screen media, and New Horror movies which self-reflexively address the screen in a terror context. Chapter Four traces the symbiotic relationship between terror culture and the social and technological evolution of the screen. The proliferation of screen technologies and media content post-9/11 raises significant questions about the authenticating and narrativising processes that differentiate and contextualise terror and New Horror. From citizen journalism to surveillance, this chapter outlines some of the complex intersections between the technological, economic, social, and political aspects of terror and media cultures.
Chapter Five takes key examples from the found footage sub-genre which boomed in the latter years of the 2000s decade and early 2010s. Returning to *Cloverfield* and introducing *Paranormal Activity, Quarantine, Diary of the Dead*, and others, I discuss the self-reflexivity inherent in the entertainment of found footage, and how this critically engages with news media and citizen journalism.

Chapter Six interprets the seven *Saw* films as interrogations of the spectacle, surveillance, and narrativisation. A combination of dialogue, special effects, mise-en-abyme, and nonlinear storytelling are used to aggressively confront the spectator. This confrontation demands a self-reflexive examination of how we actively or passively contribute to the narratives around torture and surveillance. I suggest that this leads to criticism of the fragmentations and linearities created by mediating terror as a spectacle, and that this criticism is key to understanding the success and continuity of the *Saw* series.

Part Three, opening with Chapter Seven, focuses on New Horror’s relationship with reality. As ‘real’ terror media borrows from horror storytelling techniques, New Horror confronts spectators in ‘real’ media. Here I follow New Horror outside the cinema and across transmedia narratives, in places where it may self-reflexively critique how content is mediated as ‘real,’ and how this enables New Horror to empower itself as a cultural expression.

Chapter Eight identifies the core function of the zombie as one of violating borders, and studies this violation when the zombie appears in ‘real’ media. I employ a case study of news reports about Rudy Eugene, a Florida man who attacked and ate another man before being killed by police. This launched the 2012 ‘Summer of Zombies,’ where the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention were forced to officially deny the existence of zombies, while zombie role-players took to streets to frighten their neighbours. Observing the hoaxes, sensationalisms, and juxtapositions of ‘real’ media reports from this period, I identify how New Horror is able to permeate ‘real’ spaces and critique how paranoia and panic are spread as easily as horror and terror.

Chapter Nine discusses the loosely organised Alternate Reality Game surrounding the ‘Slender Man,’ a folkloric monster originating from the Internet. The Slender Man is authenticated by collective storytellers contributing to his mythos and media, playing a complex game in the liminal spaces at the edges of frames. This mythology is a mise-en-abyme of interconnected stories, bleeding easily into ‘real’ media and reflecting the ‘shattered reality’ of terror culture.

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The works discussed in this thesis are far from exhaustive: rather, cases are curated according to their cultural eminence and interest to a sociopolitical framework of reading. Since New Horror is such a prolific and evolving field, I suggest that the close scene analyses in these chapters may be used as a model for reading further New Horror omitted. This structure aims to provide three angles of approach to the greater canon of New Horror, with cases demonstrating ideal applications. As scholarship attains greater historical hindsight into the development of terror culture; and as the New Horror cycle continues to experiment with new and confronting ideas; I am hopeful that this thesis may exemplify a contemporary reading of terror and horror, and provide a framework for reading in the future of horror scholarship.
Part One: Terror Culture
1. Terror Culture

‘In times of terror, people want to be terrified.’ (Eli Roth.)

With trademark bluntness, Eli Roth summarises the relationship between the sociopolitical zeitgeist of the early 2000s and the rise of New Horror cinema. After the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the Western world was thrust into the ‘Age of Terror.’ Terror’s impact reaches from downtown Manhattan to the Western world; from the morning of 9/11 to the terror-related attacks and arrests occurring to this day. It reshapes language and technology, and is used to discuss everything from natural disaster to blogging. The culture of terror is inextricable from the New Horror movement.

In these simple terms, it hardly seems surprising that a genre named ‘horror’ could flourish in an age named ‘terror.’ The sprawling concept of ‘terror culture’ has a fascinating and complex relationship with horror, which is explored throughout the thesis. While horror theorists make very specific definitions and distinctions between the two terms, my approach is their contemporary cultural functions: ‘terror’ being the effect of terrorism; ‘horror’ being a narrative genre; and both being synonyms of fear. This chapter of Part One introduces terror culture, its developments, and how New Horror articulates it. The subsequent two chapters use pertinent movies as case studies exploring different aspects of these articulations.

Terror culture’s complexity and significance is such that extensive and excellent research has been dedicated to the field, and Part One attempts to discuss these issues succinctly by producing an overview of the scholarship about terror and cinema. Such is the scale of terror culture that a comprehensive overview is impossible in a single work: instead, this chapter outlines major events

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2 Adriana Cavarero in her book *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* discusses the etymology of ‘terror’ and ‘horror.’ She identifies a fundamental difference between ‘terror’ as implicit of movements from trembling to fleeing, and ‘horror,’ a paralysing disgust in imagining fates worse than death. Cavarero’s contemporary ‘scenes’ exemplifying these definitions are contrasted as the panic seizing a Baghdad mosque at the threat of a bombing; and the identification of a Chechen suicide bomber’s remains. Though I am working with more popular definitions—‘terror’ stemming from post-9/11 discourse and ‘horror’ as a film genre—Cavarero’s analysis highlights some interesting nuances to these terms. Her terror, conceptualised as a fleeing mass, illustrates how ‘terror’ moves quickly and infectiously through a wide cultural consciousness. ‘Horror,’ meanwhile, is described with ‘mirrors’ and the ‘unwatchable,’ captures the conflicted spectacle of the horror genre on screens, its stillness recalling Adam Lowenstein’s ‘moment.’ See: Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 5-8; Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 2.
and manifestations of the Age of Terror, to subsequently explore how they appear in New Horror.
The following chapters apply in greater detail the popular readings of terror theory for New Horror,
and demonstrate new applications of post-9/11 politics in prominent New Horror works.

As a contemporary cultural study, it is difficult to discern whether the Age of Terror has an
end: social and political developments not yet explored in academic discourse, not to mention new
films and trends in the horror genre, are ongoing. Further possibilities for terror and New Horror are
presented to conclude this chapter.

**From 9/11 to Terror Culture**

Terror is at once easily identifiable and insidiously limitless. If a conclusion to the Age of Terror is
not yet determined, the beginning can be pinpointed to the day. On the 11th of September, 2001,
four US passenger planes were hijacked by the terrorist group Al Qaeda and crashed: two into the
twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York, one into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C.,
and one in a field in Pennsylvania after passengers overcame the hijackers.\(^3\) Referred to in cultural
shorthand as 9/11, the attacks killed nearly 3000 people and had a staggering cultural impact that
shapes the 21st-century Western world. The New York attack was easily the most iconic and
influential, represented as it was in the media as a devastating spectacle, shocking the globe.

\(^3\) Serge Schmemann, ‘Hijacked Jets Destroy Twin Towers and Hit Pentagon,’ *New York Times,* 12th
0911.html#article>.
The New York attack had few comparable political or social precedents. Noam Chomsky notes: ‘For the United States, this is the first time since the war of 1812 that the national territory has been under attack, or even threatened.’ This improbability, and the nature of the attack itself, helps generate the resulting terror. The impact of terror and death is discussed by Kevin J. Wetmore Jr:

The terror attacks on September 11, 2001 were not aimed at those who died in them. They were not aimed at the people on the planes or in the buildings. Those individuals, tragic though their deaths were, were simply a means to an end for the terrorists. The

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4 Schmemann, ‘Hijacked Jets Destroy Twin Towers and Hit Pentagon.’

actual targets, the greater victims, so to speak, are those forced to watch, unable to help, hope or change anything. The terror attacks were a spectacle designed to show that the United States was vulnerable, that it could be attacked and badly hurt, that it could not protect its own people.⁶

That Wetmore refers to those afraid as ‘greater victims’ suggests not only their number, but that terror is more culturally significant and further-reaching than 3000 deaths in another context: it has been commonly noted that the resulting War on Iraq has claimed many more lives without such widespread historical trauma.⁷ Death by terrorism affects thousands: terror by terrorism affects millions. The political concerns become social concerns as civilians are at risk, not of death, but the threat of death.⁸ This perceived risk can be observed in the many examples of surveillance, raids and arrests made, often erroneously, to protect civilians from ‘terror.’ The cultural credence of threatening terror makes 9/11 and its terror incredibly perpetual and personal, allowing anyone in the West to become a ‘greater victim.’

The description of 9/11’s cultural impact is striking. In a work titled 9/11 Culture, Jeffrey Melnick states: ‘Post-9/11 indexes a profound rupture in time and space. It is clear that the events of 9/11 shape [...] our understanding of nearly everything in the political and cultural lives of Americans since that date.’⁹ The distinct brand of terror patented by 9/11 is what expands a single day into something that can create a definite cultural moment, one that ‘ruptures’ our cultural realities. Where Melnick uses ‘9/11 culture’, I use ‘terror culture’ to describe the sprawling influence that had its origin point in 9/11 and has since encompassed far more. It is ‘terror’ that gives 9/11 such contagious power. As described by Kyle Bishop, in the context of New Horror:

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⁸ Recall Robin Wood’s basic formula for the horror genre: ‘normality is threatened by the Monster.’ Terror is a cultural monster, always framed as a threat to normality. See: Robin Wood, ‘An Introduction to the American Horror Film,’ in Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film, ed. Barry Keith Grant, (Metuchen: Scarecrow Press, 1984), 175.

The terror attacks of September 11, 2001, caused perhaps the largest wave of paranoia for Americans since the McCarthy era. Since the beginning of the wave of terror, American popular culture has been colored by the fear of possible terrorist attacks and the grim realization that people are not as safe and secure as they might have once thought.10

Bishop’s statement functions here in two ways: first, it demonstrates how 9/11 impacted on the American state of mind by generating paranoia over further terror. Second, it displaces 9/11 in time. While the attack has a definitive beginning, ‘9/11’—or more specifically, the terror of more ‘9/11’ that has become a part of Western culture—continues well beyond the date itself. It echoes the famed statement by then-National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice: ‘Every day since [9/11] has been September 12th.’11 As when Melnick refers to the current era as a ‘9/11 culture’ or a ‘Post-9/11’ period, this imagines the current era as a groundhog-day-like period that continues to generate momentum through terror. Different terminologies, such as ‘Post-9/11’, the ‘Age of Terror’, the ‘wave of terror’, and the ‘War on Terror’ suggest how terror can be measured as time, as affect, as culture, as language, and even as space. It is a period with a beginning and no end, as Melnick notes when he refers to the ‘rupture in time and space.’12 The spatial rupture is also discussed by Wetmore:

I have heard anecdotally from New Yorkers of tourists asking ‘where 9/11 is’, referring to the footprints of the Twin Towers. Linguistically, this question indicates not only that 9/11 is now perceived as a place, not an event, but that the place it is located is solely the province of Manhattan.13

Perhaps echoing Rice and Melnick’s statements, this story implies that 9/11 ‘is’, not ‘was’: the period, if not the actual event, is still occurring. It is also a place, and a place representing an


absence where towers should be. I would argue that this space is not as limited as Wetmore claims. The fact that terror has the temporal potential to occur in any place creates a paranoid space where looming terrorism—like the absent towers—could exist. A locus exists on the 11th of September and in Manhattan, and terror as a culture functions because it potentially exists anywhere. The borders can be violated: normality can be threatened. The greater victims are constantly terrorised and at risk. This extends beyond the US to the greater West, as Chomsky notes that Europe, although experienced in domestic terrorism, had not suffered serious external threat like 9/11 in an age. Australia, meanwhile, has a keenly developed paranoia of post-9/11 Islamic terrorism, as I have researched in past work. Terror culture’s great effectiveness is in its potential to be anytime and anyplace: it is a self-perpetuating and self-sustaining culture.

The power of post-9/11 terror is this plasticity. It is able to permeate so many aspects of society because it has no definable exclusions. It is an ongoing time period; it can demonstrably rupture secure space. Its victims are any individual or culture touched by terror. Its antagonists are anyone who perpetrates fear, or the threat of fear. Through its potential to occur anywhere and to anyone, it exists everywhere and influences everyone.

The language of ‘terror’ helps illuminate its currency. Melnick notes that ‘9/11 is a language’; one used to describe most any aspect of 21st-century Western culture. The malleability of terror through language is summarised effectively by David Teh: ‘The global media have proven ill-equipped to distinguish between terror (the affect) and terrorism (a strategy), a conflation which issues from the official discourse of the Bush Administration.’ This conflation allows for many other contradictions and complications that manifest in terror culture, many of which are explored across the thesis. Undefinable ‘terror’ bleeds into New Horror, described by Roth in simple terms of being ‘terrified’ by movies. That Teh attributes the misuse of ‘terror’ to the news industry and the White House suggests the ways fear can be used politically, such as when 9/11 develops into Bush’s ‘War on Terror.’ The emancipation of ‘terror’ from ‘terrorism’ enables its germination into a political and cultural epoch. The troubling incoherence of ‘terror’ continues today, as American

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journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates tweets: ‘Word “terrorism effectively has no meaning.”’ The inherent problems of polluting the concept of ‘terror’ will be discussed subsequently, as the expansion of terror’s definition is demonstrated.

The Impossible War on Terror

The ‘War on Terror’ is, at first glance, fundamentally indefinite. Recalling Teh’s note that the term conflates terror and terrorism, this makes for an indefinite enemy: terror, the affect, cannot be contained or terminated. Wetmore explores the conundrum of a war on terrorism:

The “war on terror” […] is problematic at best because it is unwinnable by definition (2011: 146). It is a war declared on a tactic, not a particular group, nation or individual. Anyone can use terror. Success can only be measured, therefore, by how well the terror has been eliminated, or by how well terrorist attacks are prevented.

The War on Terror can neither be fought nor won. Linnie Blake notes the absurdity of a nation trying to ‘wage war on the abstract noun that is “terror.”’ That it still functions as a political movement is indicative of the effectiveness of ‘terror’ as a concept. As ‘terror’ evades theorisation, its War cannot end, and its Age has no foreseeable limit. Slavoj Žižek states: ‘The “war on terrorism” thus functions as an act whose true aim is to lull us into the falsely secure conviction that nothing has really changed.’ Dana Heller calls post-9/11 terror ‘an abstract, placeless, and faceless

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18 Coates’ tweet expresses frustration at the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s refusal to categorise the 2015 shooting of nine worshippers at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina, as ‘terrorism,’ despite the alleged shooter’s apartheid motivations. This is the latest of many examples suggesting that the post-9/11 definition of ‘terror’ has hazy associations with: foreign attackers, especially from the Middle East; followers of Islam; affiliation with extremist groups; and swift retaliations by conservative Americans. This allows many atrocities to be dismissed outside the sphere of ‘terror’: the prolific murders of Black civilians in the US this decade are an example. See: Ta-Nehisi Coates, Twitter post, 21st June, 2015, 10:52 a.m., accessed 28th September, 2015, <https://twitter.com/tanehisicoates/status/612422744366546944>; Andrew Husband, ‘FBI Director Says Charleston Shooting Not Terrorism,’’ Mediaite, 20th June, 2015, accessed 28th September, 2015, <http://www.mediaite.com/tv/fbi-director-says-charleston-shooting-not-terrorism/>.

19 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.


nemesis.’ With ‘terror’ having branded itself in the most nebulous terms, it becomes a cultural umbrella under which, to echo Žižek, nothing really can change. Terror is anything, and in a terror culture, terror is everything.

The buzzword of ‘terror’ allows it to permeate cultural and political spheres which ‘9/11’ can not. The ‘War on Terror’ is manifested, however dubiously, in the US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. These events, along with many others, fall under the ‘terror’ umbrella, and it is striking how universal ‘terror’ is that these associations can be built into a culture. The evolution of ‘terror’ from 9/11 into dual wars in the Middle East is outlined by many critics. Often understated is how arbitrary the relationship is between 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and how insidiously the language of ‘terror’ was used by the Bush administration to connect these events. Ten days after 9/11, announcing the attack on Afghanistan, Bush suggests that the Taliban are sheltering Al Qaeda, but justifies the invasion by stating: ‘Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.’ His 2002 address regarding Iraq references 9/11 four times, and ‘terror’ many more, arguing that: ‘confronting the threat posed by Iraq is crucial to winning the war on terror.’ He attributes Iraq’s potential for terror to weapons of mass destruction, later exposed as intelligence fabricated to justify the invasion. As stated by Teh, the political discourse post-9/11 is a significant contributor to ‘terror’ becoming an indefinite but powerful tool in generating fear and explaining violence.

Descriptions of the political state post-9/11 neatly summarise how these arbitrary political events and violences are given a narrative by terror. Rather than exposit the historical situation myself, I will explore the excellent discourse that illuminates the use of terror to create a cultural and political narrative. Wetmore’s description of the 9/11 aftermath alludes to terror constantly as connecting subsequent political issues:

The attacks shocked the United States and directly resulted in wars in Afghanistan (whose government under the Taliban sheltered al Qaeda), and Iraq (which actually had


nothing to do with the terror attacks), as well as greater restrictions and security legislation within the United States such as the USA PATRIOT Act.26

In these cases, the threat of terror is used to justify these actions, rather than terrorism itself. 9/11 is always cited as the cultural origin point, and terror is always implicit if not overtly stated. Douglas Kellner provides a scathing and detailed discussion of the political manipulation of ‘terror’:

The events [of 9/11] would become a global catastrophe when the Bush-Cheney administration’s “war on terror” mutated into a terror war that included an invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, a clash between Hezbollah, and Hamas that resulted in widespread bombing and destruction in Lebanon and Gaza and rocket attacks on Israel, terrorist attacks all over the world, and general fear and insecurity on a global scale.27

The ‘mutation’ here is notable, as is the ‘global scale’ on which mutated terror is felt. Kellner describes the fervour of terror in the US that created this momentum into numerous arbitrary wars, calling it ‘the war-crazed terror hysteria saturated country.’28 What this demonstrates foremost is the incredible credence of terror. Its malleability as a threat allows it to justify and organise events by creating a narrative, both officially and unofficially. These events sustain and disseminate terror that it may grow into a culturally defining movement. The creation of fear, and its use to propel a narrative, suggests a strong resemblance between political discourse and the horror genre of the time.

**Terror without Terrorism**

While the use of ‘terror’ can be deployed to justify political action, more striking are other examples in which terror encompasses random events. Wetmore describes the ascription of terror and violence in the following:


Yet the first thought being that terrorists are the ones behind any horror, achieves several effects. First, it is a natural impulse in the wake of 9/11. When anything happens in the United States in which people die by violence, the first thing the media asks is, ‘is it terrorists?’

This effectively describes how closely terror hovers over the cultural mindset, and how it works in the context of ‘anything.’ Terror culture grows to accommodate issues that share nothing with terrorism. Instead, these demonstrate new definitions of ‘terror’ that give it permeability: the violent death of US citizens; paranoia over secret domestic invasion; constant surveillance; xenophobic nationalism; large-scale urban destruction; and the ineffective-if-expensive response of a government to crises. The two most fascinating examples of these terrorism-less terror events to be reflected in New Horror are the virus scares and Hurricane Katrina: the best example being real disaster footage of Hurricane Katrina integrated into *Diary of the Dead* (Romero, 2007).

In the months following 9/11, the US was swept by fear of an anthrax outbreak. Terror paranoia was at fever pitch when a few incidents of anthrax distribution swept the news, suspected to be a bio-terrorist follow-up to 9/11. When the scare died down, ‘terror’ had effectively associated itself with the fear of an outbreak: an invisible threat from foreign nations crept through the average-looking citizen, violating the (national) body, threatening to decimate civilians and collapse cities. Evidenced by the name, the pandemic ‘scares’ of the 21st century fall under the umbrella of terror culture. Since anthrax, outbreaks of SARS, bird flu, swine flu, Ebola, and MERS have swept the Western world with waves of terror.

Stranger yet is the association between Hurricane Katrina and terror. Hurricane Katrina was a natural disaster that devastated the city of New Orleans in 2005. There was absolutely no terrorist involvement, and the paranoia of terror culture was never so strong as to popularly suggest that terrorists could control the weather. Katrina brought to the nebula of ‘terror’ the imagery of a US

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30 *The Last Exorcism* (Stamm, 2010) similarly employs prolonged shots of Katrina’s aftermath in the rural landscape of Louisiana. Pandemic scares are so frequent that zombie movies, along with more realistic virus narratives such as *Right At Your Door* (Gorak, 2006) and *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2011), coincide too frequently to mention. Since 2010, *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–) has offered perennial returns of the zombie to pop culture, as paranoia over child vaccinations and vicious superbugs legitimise the zombie on a primetime weekly basis. See: Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2013), 64.

city physically and culturally destroyed, with countless lost and killed, and an ineffective government response. The latter belies a critical aspect of terror culture that is best distinguished in Katrina: when Hurricane Sandy swept up the East coast in 2012, terror and government inadequacies were not a major issue. Katrina remains one of the most unusual exaggerations of ‘terror’ to arise in popular discourse, and makes an excellent example of how ‘terror culture’ is ubiquitous in popular narratives.

Figure 2: The aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The association of Katrina and terror is not uncommon. Immediately following his statement on ‘times of terror’, Roth mentions the war on Iraq and Hurricane Katrina. Bishop draws attention to

r=0>.

redirection=guardian>.

34 Roth and Cavuto.
the visual similarities between 9/11, the Iraq war, and Katrina. Wetmore’s statement post-9/11 culture is bookended by direct evocations of terror:

The post-9/11 period also includes a decade’s worth of catastrophes, terrorist attacks and natural disasters which have only heightened our collective sense of vulnerability, paranoia and pessimism. Contributing to this period of seemingly increasing despair are the experiences of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, two lingering wars, the economic meltdown of 2008, the Gulf oil spill of 2010, and significant terror attacks around the globe since.

‘Terror’ is effectively emancipated from ‘terrorism’ that it may function culturally. To Bishop, terror is ‘shocking ideas and imagery’; to Wetmore, it is a ‘collective sense of vulnerability, paranoia and pessimism.’ These help provide a better working definition of the ‘terror’ brand that makes terror culture. These are also the cornerstones of New Horror: any New Horror that engages in ideas such as these is, like many other cultural expressions of the period, engaging in the discourse of terror.

The Culture of Terror

Terror infiltrates culture well beyond politics. When reading New Horror and terror, it is important to note that terror clouds social and economic issues of the West with an even more abstract relationship to terrorism. Melnick describes this overshadowing as fundamental to the definition of terror culture:

The obsessive deployment of 9/11 as an “answer” - a way to talk about, say, proper gender roles, or racial and ethnic conflict in United States history - is a major cultural phenomenon of our time and will be treated here not as a hurdle to leap over but rather as what scholars in cultural studies call a “cultural formation”.

35 Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 22.
36 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.
37 Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 22.
38 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 63.
Terror’s definition is so loose that it can be effectively applied to all of these issues, colouring them with the uncertainty and pessimism that distinguishes the period. On a more official level, the Bush administration’s deployment of terror language associates many issues during that period of leadership with terror. When Kellner lists the issues of Bush’s terror culture, he mentions ‘the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, [...] terrorism, war and militarism, environmental crisis, and the conflicts of the 2000s over gender, race, class, sexuality, religion, and other hot button issues.’

Terror gives context to concerns that were never before, and likely will not be in future, terror-related. Occurring as they do in terror culture, and experienced by those ‘greater victims’, their relationship to terror—whether more direct in the case of race and religion, or less in the case of gender and sexuality—must be examined.

It can be claimed that all New Horror engages in some way with terror culture. If terror functions in such a broad context, then the horror genre’s core principles of fear and spectacle are inherently terror-related. Terror culture contextualises social issues with fear: New Horror does the same. This allows for almost any New Horror text to be read as a terror text, when its subject matter may deal with anything from environmental crisis to sexuality.

This is discussed in great detail by Wetmore in relation to horror and gender. Gender is a perennial theme of horror criticism, and continues to be in terror culture. Wetmore offers an extensive discussion of how terror overrides concerns of gender in New Horror:

Horror criticism has seen a shift away from gender in the wake of September 11. There are two primary ways to understand gender and politics after 9/11. On the one hand, 9/11 transforms horror, rendering gender no longer a central issue. A collapsing building or a crashing plane does not care about one’s gender, orientation or relationship with one’s father: everybody dies.

Wetmore’s other primary way of understanding is that ‘9/11 was not gender biased, but our culture’s understanding and reconstruction of it is.’ This exemplifies how New Horror engages with the genre’s traditional gender antagonisms. Gender issues in New Horror can be read on a spectrum between an introspective development on the genre’s gender history and a deployment of gender


40 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.

41 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.
politics to complement and articulate terror issues.\textsuperscript{42} My concern is with those aspects specific to terror’s intersection with gender issues: for instance, the use of gendered power dichotomies and surveillance in Chapter Five; and the narrativisation of disaster through a knight-saves-princess plot in Chapter Three. For this part, and for this thesis, discussion of gender in horror is restricted to its relevance to terror culture and related theories.

There are equally complex intersections between terror and other sociopolitical issues. I have suggested that the haunted house and the zombie sub-genres struggle with economic instability stemming from the War on Terror.\textsuperscript{43} This instability, along with the demonisation of non-white Americans in post-9/11 paranoia, contributes to racial tensions in the US discussed in Chapters Two and Eight. Further readings of terror’s influence on various areas as articulated in New Horror are suggested throughout the thesis.

The Boundaries and Agents of Terror

Terror’s applicability functions by threatening boundaries; rendering the secure insecure; and dividing through fear. 9/11 threatens the borders of the safe, mainland US; meanwhile the spectacle of terror infiltrates the safe, television-owning household. Terror itself subsumes the boundaries of its definition as ‘the affect of terror.’ A central concern of terror culture is this boundary between the

\textsuperscript{42} While the slasher sub-genre continues to deal with what Carol Clover has categorised as the Final Girl in remakes and homages like \textit{The Cabin In The Woods} (Goddard, 2012), its self-reflexivity develops to confront a spectator’s active engagement: this engagement is discussed in Chapter Seven. In haunted houses and demonic possessions, women are often the vessels of disruption that represent the economic instability during the housing crisis and the rotting heart of American nationalism discussed by Linnie Blake. New Horror sometimes ambivalently engages with the post-9/11 narrative dismissing ‘gender’ as inconsequential, alternately enforcing and subverting nostalgically patriarchal heroes. They recall the valorisation of firefighter heroes of 9/11, constructed as apolitical uniformed heroes in Dana Heller’s analysis. Heller claims the firefighter ‘represents a persevering, indefatigable American masculinity […] an important object through which the nation was encouraged to seek compensation for a terrorist act.’ Their incarnations may be seen anywhere from the sheriff of \textit{The Walking Dead} (AMC, 2010-) and the war journalist of \textit{World War Z} (Forster, 2013) to the all-American gunslinger of \textit{Sharknado} (Ferrante, 2013). See: Blake, \textit{The Wounds of Nations}, 130; Carol Clover, \textit{Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Dana Heller, ‘Introduction: Consuming 9/11,’ in \textit{The Selling of 9/11: How a National Tragedy Became a Commodity}, ed. Dana Heller (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 11-13.

\textsuperscript{43} Both the \textit{Paranormal Activity} and \textit{Insidious} (Wan, 2010) franchises develop on the haunted house in ways that address the most recent US housing crisis. While working from horror’s traditional disturbance of American household as an institution, these movies feature the family itself as haunted. In \textit{Insidious}, this poses the very post-9/11 problem to which buying a new house offers no solution. The zombie, meanwhile, can represent the mindless consumer, flooding malls to buy flags post-9/11 and infecting crowds with their terrorist paranoia; or the uprising proletariat demanding authorities be held accountable for the atrocities claimed necessary for the terror state. Snyder’s \textit{Dawn of the Dead} (2004) and \textit{Shaun of the Dead} (Wright, 2004) feature the former; Lowenstein’s analysis of \textit{Land of the Dead} (Romero, 2005) exemplifies the latter. See: Adam Lowenstein, ‘Living Dead: Fearful Attractions of Film,’ \textit{Representations} 110:1 (Spring 2010): 108-116.
safe and unsafe, and the constant fear that this boundary will be broken. This is fundamental also to the horror genre, and New Horror often critiques the volatile line between the safe and the dangerous in the context of terror culture.

One of the clearest manifestations of the boundary issue is in the paranoid nationalism and xenophobia that swept the US and other Western countries post-9/11. Melnick uses examples such as a virulent rumour that circulated of Arab-Americans ‘celebrating’ the news of 9/11. The movement of American nationalism in many ways reasserted the strength of US boundaries and generated political solidarity for the War on Terror. Jennifer Scanlon notes this in her analysis of American flag sales post-9/11: ‘the public’s determination to fly the stars and stripes in the face of terrorism was offered as perhaps the strongest symbolism of our collective identity and determination to fight the ubiquitous yet elusive enemy.’ Terror’s nebulosity, and its emancipation from ‘terrorists,’ made a usefully faceless enemy that was projected in xenophobic terms, as reinforced by Bush’s ‘Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.’ Politicians and New Horror creators used this potential enemy to create a variety of fear-inspiring monsters. Adam Lowenstein quotes Michael Rogin, describing a similar political technique used during the Vietnam War:

[...] the Vietnam era depends on particularly strong manifestations of what Michael Rogin calls “political demonology,” a “tradition at the heart of American politics” consisting of “the creation of monsters ... by the inflation, stigmatization, and dehumanization of political foes.”

Given that ‘demonology’ is generally the realm of fictional horror, this suggests a neat similarity between the political zeitgeist and the genre cycle.

The War on Iraq is an example of political demonology in terror culture. Iraq’s responsibility for 9/11 was suggested by the Bush administration, as was the fabricated evidence of WMDs that could potentially violate America again. Iraq forms a more concrete example of the ‘us and them’

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44 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 29.


46 ‘Text of George Bush’s Speech.’

47 Michael Rogin quoted in Lowenstein, Shocking Representation, 113.
mentality of terror, which is discussed by Melnick: ‘The constituency of “us” was rarely called into
question: “us” meant US - the politically unified, culturally homogenized “heroes” and “victims”
marching as to war by the early afternoon of September 11.’ 48 The rampant nationalism creates
narratives for victimhood and heroism: xenophobia put forth a convenient ‘other’ to isolate danger,
but the boundary is easily deconstructed. Iraq was not exorcised: terror was not contained. Terrorists
were proven to exist, anonymous and dangerous, within national borders. It is fundamental to their
effectiveness. Teh reflects this when he describes the problems in ascribing terror a face:

Why, if it says nothing, are we offered the word terror with such frequency? An answer
lies in the peculiarities of the conflict since 9/11. Not only did America not know its
enemy, it didn’t even know who its enemy was. There’s nothing more terrifying than a
foe that cannot even be addressed. This order-word allows us to conjure a half-way
coherent threat. Its incantation, therefore, while it opens up a prolific discourse of fear,
evertheless begins by granting a modicum of security or relief. No doubt this relief is
nominal. 49

Similar to Rogin and Lowenstein, Teh makes use of fantastic language such as ‘conjuring’ that
provokes a reflection in New Horror. The demons of terror are intangible and insidious, feeding
paranoia to make everyone a potential terrorist and render every boundary unsafe.

Despite these attempts to draw and redraw the boundary of ‘us and them,’ terror’s
unknowable threat renders the act fundamentally impossible. Dean Lockwood quotes Žižek on the
issue:

Terrorism tends to deconstruct the distinction between friend and foe. As Žižek
comments, ‘Every feature attributed to the Other is already present at the very heart of
the USA’ (43). The enemy, like the virus, infiltrates and reproduces itself within the
host. It becomes inseparable from the host, neither properly part of the body nor entirely
alien. 50

48 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 7-8.
50 Slavoj Žižek quoted in Dean Lockwood, ‘Teratology of the Spectacle,’ in The Spectacle of the Real: From
Hollywood to ‘Reality’ TV and Beyond, ed. Geoff King (Bristol and Portland: Intellect, 2005), 77.
This concern becomes imperative to terror culture and New Horror. Every movie discussed deals with this in some way: in Hostel (Roth, 2005), the hunted becomes hunter; the ‘alien’ of Cloverfield (Reeves, 2008) is a result of corporate greed; demonic possessions and sudden zombie infections corrupt the characters of found footage movies; in Saw (Wan, 2004) the killer lies dormant beside his victims the whole movie. Monstrosity, like terror, is a threat that comes from anywhere and anyone. The agents of terror are as ubiquitous and amorphous as demons, perpetrating their ubiquitous and amorphous brand of terror. The anonymous and insidious monsters of New Horror are monsters of terror culture.

American Terrorists

These discussions in literature and popular culture reveal a criticism of authorities as perpetrators of terror (not terrorism.) National administrations and authorities have their own accountability for terror; through the deployment of terror language to motivate and justify extreme action and violence; the Orwellian surveillance measures pushed during the period; and the accused inaction or even complicity in terrorist attacks. This strain of terror, in which the homogenous monster is often the most dangerous, is represented with heavy criticism by New Horror: government interference triggers and exacerbates monsters in 28 Days Later (Boyle, 2002), Planet Terror (Rodriguez, 2008), Quarantine (Dowdle, 2008), and Cloverfield. Every antagonist in torture porn is terrifyingly familiar to his or her victims: they are all-American stereotypes; neighbours; and metaphorical girls- or boys-next-door. Even the invisible demon of Paranormal Activity (Peli, 2007) is conjured by the victims’ family.

Terrorism is acknowledged as being manipulated by administrations and media to spread terror as a political means to an end. Describing 9/11 and other events during the Bush period, Kellner states: ‘These made-for-media events become global spectacles that create fearful populations more likely to be manipulated by reactionary forces who give simplistic answers to contemporary anxieties and problems.’ The reactionary forces Kellner alludes to here are the Bush

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51 Planet Terror was intended to be viewed as a 91-minute movie in the style of a double feature with Death Proof (Tarantino, 2008). This entire experience is titled Grindhouse, and includes special paratexts such as trailers for imaginary movies. The extended feature is 105 minutes, and was released outside the US to stand alone. Here I am referring to the latter version, as it contains more details of the political background to the zombie threat.

52 Kellner, Cinema Wars, 100.
administration and the news corporations that pushed his platform. His critique of the political period is scathing, and it illustrates the narrative of dissent that directed fear and mistrust towards authorities that pushed a terror agenda:

The Bush-Cheney administration began by pushing a hard-right agenda. After the September 11, 2001 terror attacks on New York and Washington, it rammed through harsh restrictions on civil liberties in the so-called USA Patriot Act and began a disastrous war in Iraq in the name of protecting the US from terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.\textsuperscript{53}

The USA PATRIOT Act, its name reflective of the popular nationalism at the time, came with justifications of surveillance and the indefinite detention of ‘terrorist suspects.’ The conflicting and misleading language of terror I discussed earlier is used to both justify and amplify the paranoid state that exists in terror culture. A ‘USA patriot’ was one willing to watch and identify anyone or anything as terror. These paranoid restrictions fell under the umbrella of terror’s suspicion, and was met with criticism such as Kellner’s.

New Horror often navigates the redirection of fear, examining the role of Americans, Westerners, and their authorities in the generation of terror. Jason Middleton notes the manipulative nature of the administrative discourse at the time when he traces the coinciding success of torture porn:

The cycle’s popularity and visibility peaked between the release of *Hostel* in 2005 and its sequel in 2007, aligning with the period of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the broader campaign Bush termed the “war on terror.” Bush used this phrase in a speech just nine days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, to describe his administration’s ostensible goal of attacking and defeating not only Al Qaeda but “every terrorist group of global reach.” During a time in which initially widespread support for the president’s policies, following 9/11, gave way to deep national diversions and conflicts over the idea of “preemptive” or “just” war, racial and ethnic profiling, “homeland security” and governmental surveillance, and the American use of torture,

\textsuperscript{53} Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, 1.
films such as *Hostel* presented a nightmarish vision of fears and anxieties rooted in real-world politics.\(^{54}\)

This suggests a deliberate political critique on behalf of New Horror creators that reflects a wider view of dissent that proliferates in terror culture. Terror’s power is in its ability to direct fear anywhere: when various authorities employed this as a manipulative tactic, the same fear was directed at them.

This subversive view of the political manipulation of ‘terror’ is articulated constantly in relation to New Horror. Manifested in many of the New Horror films is the danger and violence homogenous to the West. The paranoid citizens under a paranoid government fall into terror culture’s narrative as terror infects every space, every time, and every entity. When David Edelstein coined ‘torture porn’, he summarised this sentiment:

> Fear supplants empathy and makes us all potential torturers, doesn’t it? Post-9/11, we’ve engaged in a national debate about the morality of torture, fueled by horrifying pictures of manifestly decent men and women (some of them, anyway) enacting brutal scenarios of domination at Abu Ghraib.\(^{55}\)

The connection is made in this seminal piece between 9/11, terror paranoia, and the revelation of homogenous terrorists, in this case torturers. The example of Abu Ghraib, referring to the leaking of photographs depicting American soldiers torturing prisoners in Iraq, is pertinent to New Horror as the photographs appeared during the release of many of the torture porn films.\(^{56}\) The event revealed in visual media the American monstrousness—it is the ‘American patriots’ that Edelstein implies when he says ‘manifestly decent’—that is perpetrated in the War on Terror. The public revelation of American aggressors coincides with the chilling twists of torture porn, where the real monsters are always far more familiar than is comfortable. New Horror subverts the dominant political ideology

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\(^{56}\) I will develop on the relationship between Abu Ghraib and terror as media spectacle occurs in Chapter Four.
of obliquely foreign monsters, instead identifying the growing cultural fear of monstrosity closer to home.

While many official narratives encourage a controlled and directed view of terror, New Horror represents terror’s monsters everywhere. The faces of terror are the changing monsters of New Horror: an arrogant leader in *Land of the Dead* (Romero, 2005); an inept authority in *Saw*; a vicious civilian in *Quarantine*; a corrupted loved one in *Paranormal Activity*; a corporate product in *Cloverfield*; and a complicit community in *Hostel*. Examples abound in the genre, with their sociopolitical representations identified and discussed by the literature, and many explored in the following chapters. One example worth mentioning at present illuminates the ultimate homogeneity of terror. *Cabin Fever* (Roth, 2003), was made immediately post-9/11 with a pessimistic view towards the American heartland and its brutality. A group of college students visit a cabin and become infected with a flesh-eating virus polluting the cabin’s water source. Notably, the virus does not kill any of them: instead, they destroy one another in survivalist paranoia. Linnie Blake discusses the film’s conclusion: ‘It is entirely apposite that the film closes with the infected ‘Down Home Spring Water’ moving out into the wider American world; this being a nation requiring no external threat to bring about its destruction.’57 Blake’s work encompasses the re-emerging 1970s sub-genre of ‘hillbilly horror’ that deals directly with homogenous American monstrousness. Even in the case of these stereotypically American aggressors, however, terror culture and criticism allows them to be placeholders for any relevant aggressor. This is reflected in Wetmore’s reading of the sub-genre, where he suggests rednecks may stand for anything from ‘Red Staters’ to Middle Easterners and terrorists.58 This should recall the omnipresence of terror: that it is arbitrary, and that it can infect anything and anyone. It can be used to represent whatever needs to be read, and fuels itself through uncontainable fear. New Horror reflects terror as the multifaceted and contrary phenomenon that it is, and what it encapsulates above everything is the overpowering omnipresence of terror in the contemporary cultural mindset.

**Terror Internationally**

Like the New Horror cycle, terror has scope well beyond U.S. borders. The Western world participates in the culture of terror, and 9/11 is deeply influential. Terror has its own articulations


overseas, which can not be thoroughly discussed in this thesis, and attacks similar 9/11 have
occurred on smaller scales in the West.

The Western participants in the War on Terror indicate countries deeply affected by terror
culture. Coincidentally, the UK and Australia also participate significantly in New Horror.\textsuperscript{59} The UK
has a long history with terrorism, most notably due to ongoing conflict with Ireland. However, the
‘Age of Terror’ brand was patented in the UK by London Tube Bombings on the 7th of July, 2005.
Perpetrated by Muslim terrorists and nicknamed 7/7, the event was framed as an echo of 9/11. The
impact of 7/7’s images of devastation, especially the aesthetic of citizen journalism, can be seen in
New Horror films in the UK and internationally. Bishop demonstrates how UK film, even in the
coincidental case of \textit{28 Days Later}, has direct associations with terror culture:

\begin{quote}
[…] the film […] presents a disturbing sequence of images of a metropolitan London
void of all human presence. At the time of its conception, this moment in the screenplay
was probably intended to simply shock audiences with its foreignness, but after
September 11, the eerie street scenes take on new meaning.\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

In cases since, and certainly post-7/7, terror culture specific to post-9/11 makes its international
presence felt in the UK and beyond.

Australia is deeply affected by terror after the Bali bombings on the 12th of October, 2002,
in which an Indonesian nightclub full of Australian tourists was attacked. In accordance with terror
culture, these attacks were followed by harsher measures of surveillance and heightened national
paranoia. Domestic terror scares, followed by often-erroneous arrests and Islamophobic attacks,
continue to this day. Most recently, the ‘Sydney Siege,’ in which a Middle-Eastern expatriate held
customers of a Sydney café hostage, was compared by journalists to 9/11.\textsuperscript{61} Along with contentious

\textsuperscript{59} I have discussed Australia’s contribution to the torture cycle up to 2012 in earlier work. The UK has
produced acclaimed and influential New Horror media, particularly in the zombie sub-genre. \textit{28 Days Later}
introduces the sprinting zombie; \textit{Shaun of the Dead} parodies both the genre and the cultural cynicism toward
terror and economic recession; while TV series \textit{Dead Set} (E4, 2008) attacks the boundaries between ‘reality’

\textsuperscript{60} Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 22.

\textsuperscript{61} Debra A. Klein, ‘Sydney Siege: Innocence Lost as Australia Catches Up to the US,’ \textit{Sydney Morning
participation in the invasion of Iraq, these ‘terror’ events place Australia and the UK in the spectrum of terror culture, demonstrating its international ramifications.

Australia’s passionate participation in terror culture demonstrates the arbitrary aspects of terror, and in turn its pervasiveness. Australia’s prolific output of New Horror—Wolf Creek (McLean, 2005), Dying Breed (Dwyer, 2008), The Loved Ones (Byrne, 2009), Wolf Creek 2 (McLean, 2014), The Babadook (Kent, 2014) are a few—in the 21st century can be read as coinciding with the culture of terror. UK New Horror expresses similar concerns to US movies about the fallout of terror culture: oppressive surveillance measures; xenophobic border security; pandemic scares; economic inequalities deepened by the War on Terror; media narrativisation of ‘real’ violence; and the militarisation of domestic forces: these can be seen in 28 Days Later, Shaun of the Dead (Wright, 2004), Doomsday (Marshall, 2008), Attack The Block (Cornish, 2011), and television series Dead Set (E4, 2008) and In The Flesh (BBC, 2013-2014).

Beyond the ‘Coalition of the Willing’ that invaded Iraq with the US, terror insinuates itself as a cultural context in the Western world. Terrorist attacks in Europe in the 2000s and 2010s are put in a post-9/11 context, such as the Madrid train bombings in 2004 and the attack on French publication Charlie Hebdo in 2014: the former inspired by Al Qaeda; the latter called ‘France’s 9/11.’ These events become part of the ‘terror’ narrative that stems from 9/11, exemplifying the greater Western experience of terror that Chomsky suggests. Countless further global examples of terror violence could be explored in the context of 9/11, and this process of contextualising may be expressed in New Horror: though space does not permit in this thesis, I hope the framework of Chapter Three may contribute to further readings.

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62 In addition, Australian director-writer team James Wan and Leigh Whannell have gained success with Saw, Insidious (2010), and The Conjuring (2013), although these movies are US productions and have few distinctly Australian characteristics.

63 As I have mentioned in my introduction, France has a thriving horror cycle in the 21st century known as the New French Extreme: In My Skin (de Van, 2002) Irréversible (Noé, 2002), and Martyrs (Laugier, 2008) are examples. These may be read in relation to post-9/11 terror; however, as there is significant nationally specific context informing this cycle, it could not be done justice within the primarily American framework of this thesis. See: Elizabeth Nash, ‘Madrid Bombers “Were Inspired by Bin Laden Address”,’ The Independent, 7th November, 2006, accessed 28th September, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/madrid-bombers-were-inspired-by-bin-laden-address-423266.html>; John Lichfield, ‘Charlie Hebdo: After France’s 9/11, This Land Will Never Be The Same Again,’ The Independent, 9th January, 2015, accessed 28th September, 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/charlie-hebdo-after-frances-911-this-land-will-never-be-the-same-again-9969165.html>.
Terror’s Future

The Age of Terror defies conclusion, because the definition of terror defies exclusion. It remains to be seen what event or movement will signify the end of terror culture and close the Age. The War continues as long as the tactic of ‘terror’ continues, and in a practical sense endures in the ongoing occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan by US and Coalition forces. There have been many great sociopolitical developments in the US and the West since 9/11, though many appear to be further manifestations of terror in a new guise. The cultural descendants of terror continue in the present day: the use of screen media to authenticate, narrativise, and fictionalise; the fear of surveillance; economic recession caused by the War on Terror; and the problems of overzealous militarisation are monumentally influential in current affairs. New Horror continues to thrive, remaining culturally responsive and dynamic in addressing contemporary issues.

It may be claimed that the height of terror culture was in the mid- to late-period of the 2000s decade. Middleton’s discussion of the torture porn cycle peaking between the two Hostel films suggests this. Kellner’s heavy critique of the time being oriented around Bush’s leadership would suggest 2008 as a conclusion. The ending of the Bush administration ushered in a new political era for the US, and President Barack Obama’s leadership has many other iconic aspects that define the West post-2008. I suggest that terror has not yet released its grip, and that the narrative of post-9/11 terror continues to contextualise and justify many sociopolitical issues today.

Terror is malleable and adaptable, and its presence may be read in numerous issues of the 2010s. The killing of Osama Bin Laden by a US military team in 2011 was undeniably a terror-related cause for celebration in the West, and a step in the ongoing War on Terror. Middle Eastern turmoil coincided with heavy political dissent and screen media during the Arab Spring of 2010-2013, in which social media was used by civilians to organise revolution and protest against authoritarian leadership in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria, and many other countries. These revolutions echo terror culture, in which the Middle East becomes a battleground; countless civilians are killed in the excessive responses of authorities; mass devastation and paranoia abounds; journalism plays a deeply contentious role; and screen media is used as a subversive tool.

Within the US, the Obama administration has fallen under its heaviest criticism when terror-like incidents occur: any issue of misdirection, surveillance, or violence bring a doubt that is symptomatic of a culture accustomed to terror. The issue of media control continues with deep

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64 Middleton, ‘The Subject of Torture,’ 2.
Terror Culture

Concerns over censorship and surveillance. The 2013 controversy over the National Security Agency—whose name should invoke terror—illegally spying on US civilians’ Internet and phone activity was initially justified under the PATRIOT Act. Post-9/11 security concerns continue to justify harsh measures taken against Mexican immigration; the militarisation of police forces; continued torture in the still-open Guantánamo Bay prison; and shocking human rights abuses recently revealed as part of the Central Intelligence Agency’s counter-terrorism interrogations.

International and economic aspects of terror culture can be seen in the Occupy Wall Street movement, the popularity of which germinated similar ‘occupations’ in cities across the globe. Organised through social media networks, the objective of the protest had a similar intangibility to terror: it was generally in response to corporate greed and widespread relative poverty common in US civilians. It is unquestionable that the devastating cost of the War on Terror contributed to the massive economic instability of the US after 2008, with the Iraq occupation costing US$1.7 trillion 2003 and 2013. The terror of financial instability and the sinister corporate overtures of terror culture come to a head in the Occupy movement.

As terror perpetually threatens to emerge from within the US, police are militarised by the Department of Homeland Security. ‘Homeland security’ justifies the US Department of Defense contributing excess equipment designed for battlefields to neighbourhood police forces. The war-induced recession deepens social inequalities that lead to the greatest political unrest in the US this decade: the protests by Black communities across the country over police brutality. A veteran of Afghanistan remarks on the resemblance between Ferguson, Missouri, where weeks of protests

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Terror Culture

were held after an unarmed Black teenager was shot by a police officer. The same camouflage uniforms, rifles, and armoured trucks are used in American neighbourhoods and the War on Terror. Fabricated suspicion of threatened safety becomes adequate reason to strike against seemingly random targets, recalling Bush’s invocation of Iraq’s WMDs. Manichean narratives are constructed by major news sources while networks of citizen journalism destabilise the authenticity of media in a crisis. Apocalyptic scenes of urban destruction and overzealous armed forces of New Horror become a reality in US cities.

![Police outfitted with military equipment to deal with civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri.](image)

Figure 3: Police outfitted with military equipment to deal with civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri.

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Two major attacks in the US in recent years provide interesting cases of how ‘terror’ is publicly contested in a post-9/11 context. The first is the Boston Marathon Bombing in 2013, in which two homemade bombs killed five and injured almost 300 people. Emphasis in the news reports making sense of the attacks was placed on the bombers’ association with Islamic extremism, their objection to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and the vague associations with Al Qaeda. The surviving bomber was charged with using a ‘weapon of mass destruction’ and described by prosecutors as a ‘terrorist.’ The second example is the 2015 shooting and killing of nine in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston, South Carolina. The FBI in this case refused to categorise the attack as ‘terrorism,’ allegedly for legal and financial reasons. Despite the announcement of white supremacist dogma during the attack and in online posts preceding, the suspect's motivations were popularly contested as apolitical. When Coates tweeted that ‘terrorism’ has no meaning, he refers to the control of ‘terror’ context by authorities such as the FBI. These attacks demonstrate the impact of post-9/11 ‘terror’ on current events. One is recognisable within the nebulous stereotypes of terror: perpetrated by followers of Islam born overseas against white ‘everyman’ Americans. The other is an Anglo-American suspect punishing a minority community othered as violent and thuggish—a conservative narrative consistent with response to recent protests and the church’s history as a site of civil unrest. If the threatening of Black citizens by militarised Americans stems from the War on Terror, referring to the Charleston act as ‘terrorism’ highlights an uncomfortable narrative of how terror is perpetuated into a culture.

The disparity of ease in defining these attacks as ‘terror’ owes to the narratives constructed from 9/11, and highlights the political motivations behind these constructions.


74 Husband, ‘FBI Director Says Charleston Shooting Not Terrorism.’

75 In Kelly Chen’s report of the event, many commentators are quoted referring to the act as a ‘hate crime,’ while the state’s Governor obscures this with the claim: ‘we’ll never understand what motivates anyone […] to take the life of another.’ See: Kelly Chen, ‘Charleston Church Shooting: White Gunman Kills 9 At Historic Black Church,’ The Huffington Post, 18th June, 2015, accessed 28th September, 2015, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/2015/06/17/charleston-shooting-churc_n_7608738.html?ir=Australia>.
These examples suggest the breadth of terror’s social, economic, and political impact, showing how terror influences and intersects with other events and issues. They demonstrate the ongoing relevance of 9/11 in the discourse of ‘terror’ and the insidious malleability of the language and its politics. When New Horror addresses the later manifestations of terror, it criticises the contextualising process that relate these issues to terror. In the fictional world of *Land of the Dead*, a direct connection can be made between a fear-paralysed state and a class system that is vertically and racially organised. The zombie apocalypse that destroys the US in *Planet Terror* originates with bioterrorism caused by rogue soldiers that assassinated Osama Bin Laden. Surveillance in *Paranormal Activity* only makes the American home less safe, the danger escalating as newer media technologies in the sequels completely undermine safety and security. The ‘truth’ behind the destruction of New York in *Cloverfield* must be uncovered through extensive research, where civilian-generated media reveals corporate conspiracies and failed military strikes. The complex and often opaque connections that sustain terror’s influence appear in New Horror, reimagined and re-contextualised. They are self-reflexively presented to make viewers conscious of cultural and political fears’ function in constructing a narrative.

**Horror and Terror**

Terror and horror go hand in hand. Their coincidence is reflected in discourse: the ‘horrors’ of 9/11 are referred to as often as the ‘terror’ experienced during a movie. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr states: ‘As the purpose of horror is to generate fear in the audience, it becomes perhaps one of the best vehicles for allowing our culture to process the experience of terror.’ Wetmore continues by stating that ‘the role of the horror film is to cause fear. The role of the terrorist attack is also to cause fear. Both the horror film and terrorism are rooted in the visual experience of horrifying images that cause dread and terror.’ When the ‘social anxieties’ Bishop describes are elevated to terror, and terror is the zeitgeist, New Horror’s explosive success is to be expected. Roth’s statement on how ‘people want to be terrified’ can be mined for meaning: horror condenses, narrativises, articulates, and critiques terror and its infinite aspects.

Part One of this thesis discusses close engagements between New Horror and terror culture. The genre articulates how post-9/11 fear operates, illustrating the dynamic and infectious nature of

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76 Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*.

77 Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*. 
terror as it sweeps the culture. It exposes how monstrousness is attributed when terror is given a face. It critiques screen visualisations of violence and the spectacular experience of fear. It questions the social impact of paranoia and the political use of fear. It interrogates the boundaries of the safe and the unsafe as terror shifts them. New Horror gives us a unique opportunity to investigate terror, and the cycle’s success demonstrates how its criticisms are a significant cultural movement.

The relationship between New Horror and terror culture fluctuates between precise and general. The iterations of terror discussed overshadow New Horror, as they overshadow popular culture in general. The genre cycle and the cultural movement are inextricable, and each is underpinned by the common language of fear. New Horror offers subversive narratives and critical insights into the developments of terror culture, as is explored in the following three chapters. In the subsequent Parts of the thesis, the shadow of terror culture continues to inform my reading New Horror works. As an engagement between horror and terror as dialogic, and a genre commenting on issues specific to post-9/11 society, New Horror remains a strong medium for reading and contextualising terror culture.
2. ‘I’m Not American’: The International American In 

Hostel

Eli Roth’s Hostel (2005) deals more explicitly with the post-9/11 American than any other movie in the torture porn sub-genre. This chapter presents a close reading of Hostel, as the film and its director are overtly critical of the terror narratives used to justify archetypes of the righteous American and the violent foreigner of the War on Terror. The film follows Josh (Derek Richardson) and Paxton (Jay Hernandez), two college-age American boys backpacking with an Icelandic friend Oli (Eythor Gudjonsson), lured to Eastern Europe by the promise of promiscuous women. They learn too late that the hostel is a front for the ‘Elite Hunting Club,’ whose rich clients are paying to torture and murder victims of their chosen nationality. This already indicates how the film implies post-9/11 xenophobia as a violent threat from outside the West. However, a good/evil binary echoing Bush’s ‘us or the terrorists’ politics is subverted in Hostel, as this chapter explores. The film identifies, contrasts, and deconstructs many of the Manichean stereotypes rife in conservative terror discourse. Representations of foreignness in Hostel highlight the complexities of post-9/11 American nationalist violence and identity, crucial concerns at the time of its release.

Torture Porn: the Terror Blockbuster

The cultural relevance of Hostel is indicated by its box-office success. Phoebe Fletcher describes how: ‘Made for little over US$4 million, Hostel opened at number one in the US and Canadian box offices to generate more than US$20 million in its opening weekend, pushing Disney’s The

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1 Hostel and its sequels (Roth, 2008; Spiegel, 2011) are one of three popular American torture-porn franchises launched in the early 2000s. The other two are Rob Zombie’s ‘Firefly family’ movies (House of 1000 Corpses, 2003; The Devil’s Rejects, 2005) and the Saw franchise (Wan, 2004; Bousman, 2005; 2006; 2007; Hackl, 2008; Greutert, 2009; 2010). These too have a strong political subtext, dealing with similar issues of American identity in relation to torture and the spectacle of torture. Linnie Blake addresses Zombie’s use of the redneck American and nationalist violence, while Douglas Kellner argues that the Saw killer represents Bush’s Vice President Dick Cheney in all his conservative malevolence: the latter will be discussed in Chapter Seven. At present, however, I wish to demonstrate how close analysis of Hostel exemplifies a political reading of the sub-genre. See: Linnie Blake, “‘I am the Devil and I’m Here to do the Devil’s Work’: Rob Zombie, George W. Bush, and the Limits of American Freedom,” in Horror after 9/11: World of Fear, Cinema of Terror, ed. Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 186-199; Douglas Kellner, Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 7.
'I’m Not American’: The International American In Hostel

Chronicles of Narnia out of the top spot. Hostel’s success is owed in no small part to its political resonance with audiences in America and the West; audiences surrounded by deceit, torture, and violence in the news. Roth, quoted by Gabrielle Murray, identifies his audience as the 9/11 generation:

In regards to the first Hostel’s box office success and this trend in explicit horror, Roth commented that teenagers who were 10 when 9/11 happened are now 16 or 17. They have “grown up being told you are going to get blown-up. Terror Alert Orange... They want something to scream at” that is as shocking as the events of their lives.

Fletcher offers a similar quote from Roth: “‘What’s worse, my movie or Dick Cheney? Nobody actually died in my movie. People actually die because of Dick Cheney, and he doesn’t allow you to see it.’” Roth’s awareness of the political climate and the 9/11 generation’s experiences with spectacular violence are clear in Hostel.

Scholars have made similar connections between the film and contemporary terror events. Adam Lowenstein notes that ‘Hostel’s production and reception took place within the shock waves generated by the Iraq War’s Abu Ghraib torture scandal.’ Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. notes of the film: ‘What America has done to its alleged terrorist prisoners is repeated on screen, frequently done to Americans.’ And, notably, done by Westerners. Douglas Kellner describes the torture porn cycle overall as: ‘a series of popular films that feature graphic violence which were the mark of the second Bush-Cheney administration. As the violence in Iraq accelerated in 2006-2007, a spate of powerful films emerged that interrogated violence in US society and culture.’ According to Kellner, ‘the violence and brutality of the era is on display in a cycle of horror films that feature


4 Fletcher, “Fucking Americans,” 76.


7 Kellner, Cinema Wars, 6.
torture, such as the Saw and Hostel film series. Dean Lockwood identifies more specific world events: ‘In the news while Hostel was performing exceptionally well at the box office were stories of an attempt by American military authorities to break a hunger strike among detainees at Guantánamo Bay by strapping them into ‘restraint chairs’ and force-feeding them.’ Christopher Sharrett describes both Hostel films as ‘the most self-consciously political phase of torture porn.’ David Rimanelli and Hanna Liden note:

> Any number of critics and commentators, including the director himself, have suggested that the film reflects the queasy moral climate of the United States in the wake of Abu Ghaib and other dubious foreign-policy incidents and international public-relations disasters.

Kellner, Lockwood, Rimanelli, and Liden all cite Americans as the source of Hostel’s contemporaneous real-world violence, an observation that will be the focus of this chapter. This mirroring of sociopolitical violence and horror violence echoes the key conflict in Hostel, repeated and interrogated from every angle. Hostel is critical of the dualist stereotypes constructed post-9/11 to justify the War on Terror. The deconstruction of Manichean politics demonstrates New Horror’s capacity for subverting its contemporary cultural constructions. The politicised binaries of the good American and evil foreigner are dismissed by these scholars. The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (Adamson, 2005)—a multi-million dollar Disney fantasy production based on the children’s classic—celebrated Manichean constructs of good and evil, and was notably overwhelmed by Hostel, an independent, hyper-violent horror film investigating the complexities in our terror-inspired cultural stereotypes. As this chapter will argue, Hostel’s power lies in the subversion of post-9/11 binarist discourse, manifesting terror culture’s growing sense of doubt in such concepts. In Lockwood’s words: ‘What torture porn does is to amplify horror’s potential to shake us out of our subjective security.’ The security afforded by Manicheanism, and the

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8 Kellner, Cinema Wars, 7.


12 Lockwood, ‘All Stripped Down,’ 46.
justifiability of the ‘security’ measures taken in the War on Terror based on Manichean assumptions, are thoroughly shaken throughout *Hostel*.

‘Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists’

Kellner identifies George W. Bush as the source of post-9/11 Manicheanism.13 Dualisms of good/evil, American/foreign, terrorised/terrorist, West/East, victim/aggressor, white/nonwhite, English-speaking/multilingual, Christian/Muslim, and many more created a binarist dogma with which America could navigate the shattered post-9/11 reality. These dualities appear in political discourse in vague terms – affording some plausible deniability – but are used to suggest consequentiality between 9/11 and the Bush administration’s attack on anyone not suggested to be ‘with us.’ However, as other scholars note, doubt in such black-and-white politics was growing around the time of *Hostel*’s release. The terror spreading from 9/11 was beginning to direct itself toward these stereotypes and those who established them. Fear of the ‘other,’ initially used to secure national and conceptual boundaries in the wake of 9/11, was overtaken by the fear of an unreliable administration and news industry. *Hostel* coincided with a watershed of events such as Abu Ghraib, the contentious re-election of Bush, growing awareness of violence and costs in Iraq, and other issues calling into question the trustworthiness of the Bush administration’s politics. Jerod Ra’del Hollyfield summarises Roth’s deliberate political overtones:

[…] applying “torture porn” as a way to summarize the work of a filmmaker who stated to the BBC that his intentions to make a films with “the pessimistic point of view of not trusting the government” […] appears to neglect both the complexities of Roth’s work and contemporary horror film’s potential as a cultural document that navigates the tensions between American nationalism in the “War on Terror” era and the globalized world.14

These tensions are often underpinned by the dualistic post-9/11 stereotypes. I suggest that *Hostel*’s success lies in the collapsing of these stereotypes, indicating a shift in contemporary conceptions of nationality, politics, race, language, capitalism, gender, voyeurism, and violence. Questions of

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intersectionality, of what is good and who is evil, are presented and repeated endlessly throughout the movie, and in its paratexts and sequels.

Before examining the film itself, we are presented with our first and most basic contradiction: the title *Hostel*. Homonymous with ‘hostile’ in an American accent, the word immediately suggests a conflation of good and evil principles. Murray quotes Elaine Scarry’s etymological discussion of this oxymoron:

> Civilization itself in its language and its literature records the path that torture in its unconscious miming of the deconstruction of civilization follows in reverse: the protective, healing, expansive acts implicit in “host” and “hostel” and “hospitable” and “hospital” all converge back in “hospes,” which in turn moves back to the root “hos” meaning house, shelter, or refuge; but once back at “hos,” its generosity can be undone by an alternative movement forward into “hostis,” the source of “hostility” and “hostage” and “host” – not the host that willfully abandons the ground of his power in acts of reciprocity and equality but the “host” deprived from all ground, the host of the Eucharist, the sacrificial victim.”

The inversion of language in *Hostel* disrupts safe and dangerous boundaries in a single word, suggesting that the two are not contronymous but inextricably linked. The wordplay of hostel and hostile introduces the binary of good and evil, but also shows how easily the two can become confused, because linguistically and conceptually they are two sides of the same coin. This recalls David Teh’s discussion of how the word ‘terror’ is used by Bush.16 These linguistic binaries and antonyms imply the extent to which other binaries—some of which justified the War on Terror, a confusion in its very name—were becoming complicated. *Hostel* hit cinemas when the difference between concepts like ‘hostel’ and ‘hostile’ were in question. The word ‘hostel’ represents both home and away, one inside the other, and literally echoes hostility. When *Hostel* becomes synonymous with one of the decade’s most recognisable horror movies, the sinister undercurrent of horror is culturally contaminating the safe, domestic space of a ‘hostel.’ Similar doubts about domestic America were highlighted in real events, and *Hostel* disturbs these with its disturbing content.

15 Elaine Scarry quoted in Murray, ‘Hostel II.’

Josh and Paxton, ‘Fucking Americans’

The most apparent subversion in the film’s plot is the bait-and-switch of the main characters. From the beginning of the film, the shy Josh is presented as the hero in a bildungsroman story. Lowenstein states that ‘Josh is the more conventionally sympathetic American character when compared with his often brash, cocky, and coarse friend Paxton.’\textsuperscript{17} It is Josh’s journey the camera and narrative follows in the first act, tracing the subplot of his budding sexuality. If the film follows horror tropes of traditional slashers, Paxton’s murder is guaranteed. However, Roth executes an homage to \textit{Psycho} (Hitchcock, 1960) by eliminating Josh halfway through the film. The switch occurs when one of the boys awakens in a torture chamber wearing a hood. The character breathes heavily, attempting to look around the killing room. In this scene, Roth cuts together the sound of Hernandez and Richardson breathing to create confusion over who the victim was. The cinematography is rich with ambiguity and political subtext, as Lowenstein describes:

\begin{quote}
But here in \textit{Hostel}, the I-camera belongs to the victim, not the killer. Through horror genre iconography, then, the I-camera provides a visual suggestion that Josh stands in not just for an American victim of torture, but also for an American torturer. The inverted use of the I-camera is one way (but not the only one, as I will explain below) that \textit{Hostel} confronts the audience with American responsibility for Abu Ghraib rather than dismissing it.\textsuperscript{18}
\end{quote}

When the hood is removed and Josh is revealed, tortured, and subsequently killed, the audience encounters the most overt disruption of duality in the film: the narrative convention of main character/supporting character, and to a minor degree good guy/bad guy is turned on its head. The audience is forced to follow Paxton for the remainder of the film, after only tidbits of character development between Josh’s narrative.

The disorientation caused by switching Josh and Paxton is deliberate. Roth says in the film’s commentary track: ‘I wanted them [the audience] to feel as [...] helpless and lost as Paxton does.’\textsuperscript{19}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} Lowenstein, ‘Spectacle horror and \textit{Hostel},’ 52.
\textsuperscript{18} Lowenstein, ‘Spectacle horror and \textit{Hostel},’ 52.
\textsuperscript{19} Eli Roth and Quentin Tarantino, ‘Commentary with Eli Roth and Quentin Tarantino,’ \textit{Hostel}, directed by Eli Roth (Santa Monica: Lionsgate, 2005), DVD.
\end{flushleft}
By shifting the focus to a character initially presented as deeply American and deeply troubling, the audience is forced to confront a troubling American identity to follow the narrative. It is easy to dismiss Paxton in the first half-hour of the film as a stereotypical American bully, but when Paxton becomes the protagonist, the film complicates Paxton’s negative traits. By initially portraying Paxton as the American stereotype of the arrogant alpha male, Roth can freely criticise the post-9/11 American’s privilege, misogyny, homophobia, and nationalistic elitism. Paxton demonstrates all of these traits in the first half of the movie; disparaging Europeans; sexually objectifying women; comparing prostitutes to animals; teasing Josh and others for their possible queerness; and enthusiastically partaking in sex and drugs. Josh, meanwhile, is the innocent, amicable American, characterised with all the naïveté of 9/11 victimhood. An audience accustomed to the Manichean binaries of the time can make the simple association of Josh-good and Paxton-bad, dissociating from Paxton’s brand of Americanness, but the switch in leads is the clearest rejection of any set oppositions. Lowenstein calls Josh and Paxton ‘doubled halves of a single American self – tortured and torturer in one.’\(^{20}\) Shifting sympathy towards Paxton demands that the audience confront their association with a complex American, one who is not always admirable. Paxton comes to represent both sides of a number of dualities, revealing gradually that every character, most significantly the American, has a degree of culpability in the economies of nationalised violence.

‘Too American’: American Identity as Relative

For all that Paxton’s behaviour is typical of the arrogant American abroad, he is revealed to be well aware of post-9/11 American xenophobia. Paxton is Latino, and his all-American posturing is suggested to be a front to obscure his racial otherness. When captured by Elite Hunting, he cries: ‘Look at me, I’m not fucking American!’ and in doing so exposes the racist constructs of the post-9/11 US. This line alludes to the domestic racism that exploded following 9/11, when people of colour in America became suspected terrorists. The USA’s hostility towards Latin America is now tied up in terror politics: the justification and funding for violently strict anti-immigrant control on the US-Mexican border comes from Customs and Border Protection’s anti-terrorist efforts.\(^{21}\)

\(^{20}\) Lowenstein, ‘Spectacle horror and Hostel,’ 54.

Paxton’s dissociation with his American identity alludes to the politically sanctified definition of him as a terrorist.

Paxton is conversant in post-9/11 racism, where American identity is a Manichean us-or-them philosophy and people of colour are ‘them.’ Jeffrey Melnick describes the racist sentiments circulating post-9/11 in the form of a call to boycott Arab businesses amidst rumours of Arab-Americans celebrating 9/11: ‘As with so many rumors that developed after the hijackings, the “celebrating Arabs” rumor functioned, perhaps above any other concern, as an opportunity to say in some fairly direct way: “Here is our new circle of ‘we.’”’

Paxton reveals that he is not always a part of that circle—a circle of Americans—excluded by his race. Paxton has abused his American identity throughout the film, flaunting his privilege and overplaying an American stereotype. His hyper-American performance obscures his racial otherness for most of the movie. In highlighting his status as a person of colour, he betrays his awareness of how racist stereotypes inform American identity, and how America privileges not the American national but the white American. With this simple statement, Paxton identifies himself as a liminal character, between the racist and nationalist binaries of conservative terror culture.

Throughout the film Paxton embodies American aggression towards the outsider despite—or perhaps because of—his own outsider status as a Latin-American. Paxton’s dubious American status suggests both the conservative attempt to enforce binaries aligned by race, nationality, and violence, and the difficulty of upholding them. For all Paxton easily defines the local and foreign, he recognises that he fluctuates between these culturally assumed boundaries. Latin-Americans like Paxton are characterised as a threat to border security, supported by counterterrorist legislation. Paxton’s confession that he is ‘not American’ suggests that his act of the American stereotype may be overplayed to protect his national identity, especially among European outsiders. His nonwhite status is dangerous in the post-9/11 landscape, and only when he thinks it may save his life does he admit that he is a victim of nationalistic racism, and that his identity is in part what Americans consider the ‘other’.

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Another indicator of Paxton’s surreptitious internationality is the use of foreign language in *Hostel*. None of the languages spoken in the film are subtitled, serving to disorient the audience. Paxton, however, is multilingual: his non-English lines are not subtitled. The first scene in which he breaks into German is a surprise to the other characters, as it is the first revelation that he is not completely the ignorant American. Speaking English damned him later, when he is ordered to ‘speak’ and swears at his captors in English, he is declared American and sent to be tortured, despite him calling attention to his Latino status. Jason Middleton notes how these markers of internationality serve to other Paxton: “In these final scenes, then, the film first differentiates Paxton from the conventional ‘ugly American’ by foregrounding his self-identification as an ethnic other within America, and his proficiency with foreign languages.” Once again this level of internationality is part of his bartering tool, when he begs for his life before a German torturer. In this scene, Paxton disrupts the opposition of himself and the torturer, this time with language instead of race. James Morgart describes how language disrupts of opposition between the torturer and victim:

> When Paxton finally begs for mercy in German, the businessman stops midstride and is visibly mortified at his victim’s ability to communicate with him in his own language to the point that he requests Paxton be ball-gagged by one of the guards, perhaps

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suggesting a preferred alienation from the victim in order to enact a suppressed desire to dominate “the other.”

In these moments, Paxton embodies an American identity that is fluid and subjective.

Paxton’s Americanness is ultimately subverted when he encounters a character that embodies the stereotype better than he does, and reacts with horror. During his escape from his German torturer, he runs into a character credited as the American Client (Rick Hoffman). The American Client assumes Paxton is another club member and chats with him about the pleasures of torture and murder. His aggression is characteristic of the bullying white American stereotype, far more intimidating and sinister than any of the Eastern aggressors. Roth echoes this when he states in the commentary: ‘The people who are doing the worst shit in the movie are Americans.’ The American Client’s discussion of a ‘quick’ kill being ‘too American’ recalls the displacement of torture for entertainment in an Eastern setting, such as in the Abu Ghraib scandal. The American Client serves to condemn the post-9/11 construction of American innocence, depicting Eastern Europe as merely a backdrop for the Western antagonists. Kim Newman claims: ‘In a world where foreigners worry about winding up at the mercy of Americans, Hostel is about Americans being terrified of the rest of the planet.’ However, this is not strictly true: Americans, and more broadly Westerners, are cast as aggressors, with the East a complicit victim of the Elite Hunting Club’s business dealings.

**The War on Terror, Slovakia**

The East is ostensibly suggested as the place of threat, but it serves only to highlight the evil already present in the West. Elite Hunting is a capitalist business run entirely by Westerners: the business card is printed in English, and the clients—with the exception of the Japanese client (Takashi Miike) and a Japanese victim Kana (Jennifer Lim)—are all Westerners. The Slovakian locals, along with Russian lackeys, provide support, but exploitation of the former is made clear. It is Western greed that lures every character, including Josh and Paxton, to Elite Hunting. Slovakia is portrayed

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25 Roth, ‘Commentary with Eli Roth and Quentin Tarantino.’

I’m Not American’: The International American In Hostel

Rustically, not to denigrate the East, but to emphasise the Westerners’ imposition on the space. According to Hollyfield: ‘the lack of verisimilitude [with a realistic Slovakia] that some critics perceive as bigotry allows Roth to criticize the xenophobia and nationalism of his film’s protagonists, leaving them to survive in a foreign world informed only by the American capitalist ideology responsible in part for the tumultuous history of Slovakia.’27 The film’s ‘Slovakia,’ shot as it is in the neighbouring Czech Republic, is a deliberately oblique space: in parts reviving the Slavic gothic of classic horror, in others bearing scars from the USSR that could recall Afghanistan. The vagueness of space, a plot point in the film’s first act, serves ironically to endorse a specific reading of the War on Terror: that ‘Terror’ is an unspecific place in which the US and the West an enact its righteous violence post-9/11. The West/East binary is initially the most obvious political binary, but the subtext of the film suggests that the East is a scapegoat, merely a grounds where Westerners can take advantage and express their violence. Even the chaotic nature of the East that allows Elite Hunting to operate is, as Hollyfield claims, owed to American imperialism and capitalism.28

The implications of Western evil, with all the internalised violence played out in the East by Paxton’s internationality and Elite Hunting’s Western business, have resounding political overtones. With support for the war on Iraq dwindling, Hostel’s depiction of American capitalism expressed as Eastern violence is scathing. The dualisms presented establish a nationalistic critique of the post-9/11 American far harsher than the criticism of Paxton’s arrogance: the American is violent, hateful of outsiders, ignorant, and greedy, and he takes this out on the East.

‘It’s not in my nature’: the ambivalent American

After establishing the ambivalence between good and evil within the American identity, Hostel carries on its interrogation of the audience’s identification with violence. One of the few scenes developing Paxton in the first act is in the first meeting with the Dutch Businessman (Jan Vlasák). When disagreeing with the businessman about eating meat, Paxton declares that he is a vegetarian and a pacifist. When the businessman tells him it’s human nature, Paxton responds: ‘Well it’s not in my nature.’ Paxton characterises his vegetarianism as an abhorrence of violence against other

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28 Like Mexican-US border politics, former Soviet states are loosely tied up in terror politics. Slavoj Žižek acknowledges that the CIA’s investment in destabilising the USSR in Afghanistan led to the formation of Al Qaeda. Pseudo-Slovakia in Hostel functions as a similar site of American exploitation leading to torture and terror. See: Slavoj Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 27.
creatures, and a part of his very being. This is echoed in his name; ‘pax’ translating to ‘peace’ in Latin. Wetmore claims: ‘Pax (‘Peace’), like America, must use violence and torture in response to violence and torture in order to achieve some sense of justice in the world.’ For all that Paxton is repulsed by violence early in the film, he soon learns how easily it can be used as a tool. When a local gang of children steal his phone—severing his only remaining connection to the West—he attacks and attempts to choke a child. In that moment, he realises just how lost he is, echoed by a policeman who tells him: ‘You are so far from home.’ Fear has forced him against his nature, and the pacifism which distinguished him from the Dutch Businessman is slipping.

Figure 5: Paxton and the Dutch businessman blur in a mirror in Hostel.

The opposition of Paxton and the Dutch businessman escalates until the film’s climax, in which their opposition is shattered. When Paxton hears an echo of the businessman’s first conversation about meat, Paxton follows him into a bathroom for revenge. He severs the same fingers Paxton lost to his German torturer, and slits the Dutch businessman’s throat with a scalpel, the same tool the businessman used to murder Josh. The moment before Paxton kills him, the shot moves to a mirror that reflects, blurs, and distorts both characters. Paxton’s violence has become internalised, and he fluctuates between good and evil. According to Murray in her analysis of Hostel: ‘An explicit, intense violent action can bring us face to face with corporeality, the transient nature of our morality.’ This transience is central to Hostel, suggesting no rigid ideals of right and wrong can exist alongside violence.

29 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.

30 Murray, ‘Hostel II.’
The switches Paxton makes between aggressor and victim are further explored in Hostel: Part II (Roth, 2008). The second film involves three young women lured to the same hostel, but the narrative also closely follows two of their killers, Todd (Richard Burgi) and Stuart (Roger Bart). Todd and Stuart are two bored American clients looking to buy excitement when they go abroad together. Roth acknowledges that he wrote Todd and Stuart as imaginings of Paxton and Josh as adults, with a strikingly similar dynamic. Middleton observes Paxton’s potential evolution in the American Client, a predecessor to Todd. This extension of Josh and Paxton is used to further deconstruct the dynamic of alpha male/beta male and aggressor/victim. In Hostel, Paxton moves from the dominant male in Amsterdam; to the pacifist on the train; back to the bullying friend; then frightened and alone; choking a child; captured by Elite Hunting; switching often as he fights or hides on his way out; running scared; and murdering the Dutch Businessman. He resumes his victim status when he is killed during the opening of the second film, but is replaced with his spiritual successor Todd. Todd bullies Stuart into joining Elite Hunting, echoing Paxton’s attitudes toward prostitutes and search for bigger thrills. Todd plays his aggressive American stereotype through the course of the film, until he accidentally maims his victim (Bijou Phillips). He suddenly realises that he is no murderer and refuses to kill her. While trying to escape the contract, he is eaten by dogs. This brings Paxton’s arc full circle: Todd represents a potential future Paxton, a posturing alpha male who will not kill animals or women. Paxton fluctuates between the violent and the peaceful, the aggressor and the victim, embodying both as much as he embodies different nationalities. By moving Paxton through these identities, Hostel questions the post-9/11 stance on violence: is the American a victim or an aggressor, the terrorised or the terrorist? Does an act of violence justify revenge? Can a victim reconcile with pacifism after suffering violence? Hostel presents both sides of every answer, deconstructing any right or wrong choices.

You watch, you pay: the gendered torture spectacle

Paxton’s journey through violent and victimised aspects is often manifested through gender and the gendered spectacle. The power struggle between torturer and victim is repeated in gendered terms throughout the film, echoing the horror genre’s traditional disruptions of binarist gender and spectacle, placing it in the context of terror culture. In the first act of Hostel, the camera follows Josh as he wanders down the hallway of a brothel, silhouetted figures copulating behind the many

31 Middleton, ‘The Subject of Torture,’ 17.
screen doors. When he hears screams, he opens a door to find a couple engaged in BDSM-torture play. Later, Paxton walks down a similar hallway in the Elite Hunting Club, as disoriented and disgusted as Josh was at the brothel. Now it is Josh laid open on a table for his client: in a torture situation, gender and sexuality are substituted by nationality and violence. This is part of Paxton’s comeuppance for his initial misogyny: now he and Josh assume the roles of whores, where foreigners pay to do what they want with young bodies regardless of gender.

After traveling to a country on the promise of loose women, and preying on roommates they meet on arrival, the sexual predators become prey. Two local women seduce Paxton and Josh, drugging them and taking them to the Club. When Paxton realises he has been betrayed by Natalya (Barbara Nedeljakova), he says: ‘You fucking whore, you fucking bitch!’ But Natalya immediately dismisses the misogyny, recognising his position in the situation: ‘I get a lot of money for you, and that makes you my bitch.’ This reinforces the capitalism that underpins the gender binary in the film, which deconstructs the gendering of how a human body can be bought and sold. It is expressed when Paxton declares that women are animals, products, or entertainment, only to be treated as all these things himself. Paxton’s treatment of women as products makes him the ‘bitch’ when he becomes the product. The women of Hostel are not innocent of torture; nor are the female soldiers photographed in Abu Ghraib. Women in the movie make the same insidious shifts from good to evil, often articulating the movie’s truths: that bodies become products; that a ‘bitch’ can make you her ‘bitch’; and that the spectacle of violence has some cultural value. Paxton’s assumptions of dominance because of his nationality or gender are baseless when faced with the Elite Hunting business. There, he has no status in the dominant side of the binary because the only dichotomy remaining is that of capitalism. Even this he learns to fake, by dressing well and fooling the American Client.

The subtext of gender in the film help to highlight the troubling pleasure of spectatorship in Hostel. Torture is at its most shocking in terror culture when it is spectacular: it was the glee photographed in the American torturers posing beside Abu Ghraib victims that horrified the Western world.32 When Josh encounters the couple in the brothel, the woman shouts at him: ‘You watch, you pay!’ This highlights the position of the viewer and the visual throughout the film. The line ‘you watch, you pay’ suggests that watching is worth something; that voyeurism is a predatory act. Later, Natalya claims Oli and Josh, already taken by Elite Hunting, are at ‘the art show.’ The victims of

32 This is discussed further in Chapter Five.
Elite Hunting are not only ‘bitches’, they are ‘art’: they are explicitly spectacular. The statement reflects the role of the viewer as the spectator of art: in this case, the art of torture ‘porn.’

Like every other subject/object binary in the film, however, the spectator and spectacle are convoluted roles. According to Lockwood:

To recall, for [Carol] Clover, the true eye of horror is that which introjects the image at the same time as which the image is projected upon it. Stressing the materiality and affect of the image, Steven Shaviro has extended Clover’s observations to argue that the image disrupts the dualism of subject and object.\(^\text{33}\)

The disruption of dualism is central to *Hostel*, and the camera is often used to highlight this. Murray states: ‘The audience’s experience of identification and projection is a complex one that involves perception of the world in a diffuse, shifting array of positions and engagement, affectation and identification-projection.’\(^\text{34}\) Point-of-view shots jump between Josh, Paxton, and their hunters. The torturer and victim switch roles as Natalya traps Paxton. The pleasure of watching the brothel’s make-believe BDSM tortures turn quickly to the ‘real’ torture of the Club. The fun of watching *Hostel* is underpinned by a wider context of spectacular torture and terror that cannot be ignored.

**You Have Been Warned: the seen and obscene of the War on Terror**

Outside the feature film, promotional material prompts and characterises the contrary shifts between binaries.\(^\text{35}\) A now-defunct promotional website was established titled *you have been warned*, loaded with promotional material and the warning in the title.\(^\text{36}\) The warning of not-watching as an enticement to watch echoes Pamela McClintock’s claim: ‘If a horror movie is worth its weight, people will actually recommend that others *not* go see it.’\(^\text{37}\) The tag of ‘torture porn’, itself a

\(^\text{33}\) Lockwood, ‘All Stripped Down,’ 46.

\(^\text{34}\) Murray, ‘Hostel II.’

\(^\text{35}\) The significance of paratexts such as marketing materials is discussed by Jonathan Gray, and will be addressed thoroughly in Chapters Three and Seven. See: Jonathan Gray, *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (New York: New York University Press. 2009).


dualism of sex and death, or pleasure and pain, is essential to Hostel’s visuality: porn is visually excessive, and obscene. Teh echoes a similar sentiment in a discussion of 9/11 art: ‘This is the pornography of information, pornographic in precisely the ambivalent sense of the “obscene”–that is, showing too much–but also an obstruction of seen/scene.’

A trailer featured on youhavebeenwarned.co.uk features shots of Josh and Paxton being tortured with the narration: ‘What if the voice, and the blood, and the flesh, was yours?’ This challenge of subjectivity is furthered in the website’s game, enhancing the viewer’s level of interactivity with the film. The site is the movie and not the movie itself; it suggests Hostel be seen and not seen; and it collapses the spectator and the victim-turned-torturer. This confusion of spectatorship external to the film itself is reflective of the violence taking place on the news during Hostel’s release.

The release of the Abu Ghraib prison photographs utterly distorted the position of the viewer in terror culture. The American was no longer naïve, seeing the War on Terror filtered through what Lee Rodney calls the ‘military-entertainment complex.’ The visual narrative of the Iraq war was no longer controlled by the military’s ‘embedded’ journalists. Upon the release of the photos, news sources were saturated with images of Americans engaging in, enjoying, and photographing torture. The War on Terror, experienced through mediations of these scenes from Iraq, was no longer a narrative of good Americans versus evil terrorists. Middleton suggests that Paxton eventually overcoming the American Client is optimistic of moving beyond this dichotomy: ‘by invoking and then vanquishing Paxton’s monstrous future self in the form of the American client, the film suggests an alternate path for America than the one to which its present actions must inexorably lead.’ The pro-war American is not a sustainable characterisation in Roth’s films, and the franchise anticipates the growing popular criticism of the War on Terror.

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38 Teh, ‘Art and the Veil,’ 55.


40 Rodney, ‘Real Time, Catastrophe, Spectacle,’ 39.

41 Middleton, ‘The Subject of Torture,’ 22.
‘People actually die because of Dick Cheney’: torture porn and real terror

_Hostel_ provides a chance to visualise the War on Terror as a fictional narrative, offering audiences not only Roth’s ‘something to scream at,’ but a context in which the newly complicated roles of Americans could be explored and understood. Critics identified endless ways for the audience to engage in _Hostel’s_ visual violence. David Edelstein raises theories from sadism, masochism, to morality.\(^{43}\) Joe Queenan claims: ‘It is almost as if young moviegoers in western societies, envious of the real-life atrocities being visited upon innocent bystanders every single day in Baghdad and Darfur, are using films as a means of vicariously experiencing the terror of being tortured to death.’\(^{44}\) Murray claims: ‘My sense is that audiences want to feel intensity and fear.’\(^{45}\) I suggest that

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\(^{42}\) ‘You Have Been Warned.’


\(^{45}\) Murray, ‘Hostel II.’
Hostel offers all of these things at different points in the film, shifting through perspectives to explore the impossibility of any binary politics in terror culture.

By disrupting all these dualities in the film, especially the visual and violent disruptions, Hostel disrupts to some degree the fiction/reality binary. It engages in extremely contemporary fears; fears of violence not only in the unknown, but in the American identity. The success of Hostel indicates how significant 2005 was as a moment of uncertainty, where the terror culture’s definitions of identity, nationalism, race, gender, language, and violence needed exploration and interrogation. Hostel’s outright rejection of Manicheanism exposes vital questions that the terror culture has taken for granted. It articulates disturbances between popular concepts of ‘us’ and ‘them’; who is American; what makes one dominant; whether East is the true source of contemporary evil; what the relationship between art and violence; the relationship between American capitalism and violence; and how terror affects victims. Hostel challenges the cultural assumption that the American is tortured by 9/11, suggesting the growing suspicion that is America the torturer.

46 For further discussion of New Horror’s threat to post-9/11 ‘reality,’ see Part Three of this thesis.
3. *Cloverfield* Is Like A Movie

In the wake of 9/11, the phrase ‘like a movie’ became the popular way of describing the attack on New York.¹ Seven years after 9/11, the found footage monster movie *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008) perhaps best articulates the strength of this perceived relationship between 9/11 and the cinema, as will be argued in this chapter. The film makes close reference to 9/11 and terror culture by deconstructing its cinematic and spectacular elements; the narrativisation of terror in the news; and the negotiation of the ‘real’ in screen media.²

*Cloverfield* is, in the most basic terms, a disaster film. It is presented in found footage style, following five friends as they record with a diegetic handheld camera the overnight destruction of New York by a giant monster.³ Most of the action is recorded by the gormless Hud (T.J. Miller), as he follows hero Rob (Michael Stahl-David) to rescue Rob’s long-lost-love Beth (Odette Yutsman). In their journey across the ravaged city they lose friends Jason (Mike Vogel), Marlena (Lizzy Caplan), and Lily (Jessica Lucas), witness the razing of many beloved New York icons including the Statue of Liberty, and fall victim to the military’s spectacularly ineffective retaliation against the monster. Hud is eaten by the monster, leaving Rob and Beth to record a final testimony before the military bombs Manhattan, ending the film—but not, apparently, the monster.

The origin of the monster, nicknamed ‘Clover’ by the production crew, is never made clear within the film. Clueless news reporters and bystanders speculate the possibility of terrorists, government, or aliens. Only through the extensive viral marketing campaign can it be deduced that Clover is likely a deep-sea creature accidentally provoked by a mining corporation and a falling satellite. These and many other details were tracked down by voracious fans online in anticipation of *Cloverfield*’s release. The marketing paratexts comprising an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) are

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² *Cloverfield* presents a layered commentary on terror and screen cultures. As such, *Cloverfield* is a difficult text to place in this thesis. Of the texts studied, it makes the closest visual and narrative reference to 9/11, and is thus an excellent case for understanding horror’s close relationship with terror. As a found footage movie, it explores the complexities of verisimilitude and authenticity between cinema and news media, a key concern in Part Two of this thesis. The marketing campaign engages in the Alternate Reality Game or ARG strain of viral marketing, relevant to the final part. *Cloverfield* effectively bridges the areas of terror culture, screen media, and shattered realities, and the chapter is presented here to introduce terror’s cultural context as a spectacular screen event that shatters realities, building the framework that guides the rest of the thesis.

³ For more extensive discussion of the found footage sub-genre, and *Cloverfield* in the context of found footage, see Chapter Five.
an essential component in understanding *Cloverfield* and its cultural significance. The promotional materials for *Cloverfield* included a massive online hunt for virally distributed material including fictional news reports, social media profiles, business pages, video journals, and so on. Much of the movie’s story can only be understood by collecting the scattered details tracked down by fans. The act of assessing these media fictions, and their construction into a narrative that closely mimics 9/11, offers a critical understanding of terror culture as a ‘movie’: this is key to understanding *Cloverfield’s* cultural significance.

This chapter will explore how *Cloverfield* navigates the complex problem of 9/11 and its relationship with the ‘real,’ especially ‘reality’ as it is represented in screen cultures such as TV news and Hollywood cinema. Hollywood has a long history of self-reflexively commenting on such issues, as Robert Ray notes in a discussion of post-WWII Hollywood: ‘the movies responded less to historical events than to the audience’s culturally mediated perception of such events.’ In the 21st-century West, no event has been so colossal, nor so culturally mediated, as 9/11. The problem of 9/11 and its perception is so contentious that it has caused the definition of ‘real’ to be one of the most complex issues in terror culture. The nature of the ‘real’ post-9/11 is explored in great depth by Slavoj Žižek in his book *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, which this chapter closely references.

**9/11 as a Movie**

One of the clearest articulations of 9/11 as a negotiably-real event was its immediate comparison to a movie. 9/11 is described by many as being presented in a deliberately spectacular style by attackers. Jeffrey Melnick quotes journalist Neal Gabler’s claim that hijackers were ‘creating not just terror; they were creating images.’ This act of spectacle is much of what contributed to the

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5 Not all viewers of *Cloverfield* will undertake this process: however, the film is unsubtle in suggesting a greater complexity to the narrative than is first apparent. This suggestion itself is critical of simplistic 9/11 narratives.


formation of terror culture in the wake of 9/11, giving a single event such impact. In describing the link between the spectacular and cultural influence of 9/11, Douglas Kellner says: ‘Resonant images help construct how people see the world, and the oft-repeated images of airplanes hitting the WTC [...] were amongst the most compelling ever witnessed by a global media culture.’ This suggests that 9/11 was contextualised as a spectacular and cinematic attack, one that highlighted the role of media in framing reality.

This spectacular intent and compromise of reality manifested in commentators describing 9/11 as ‘like a movie,’ a phenomenon tracked in detail by Melnick and Geoff King. According to King: ‘live-reality television coverage […] evoked constant comparison with big-screen fictional images.’ This suggests a grey area in the verisimilitude of different screen media, in which an event such as 9/11 is unrealistically cinematic, or cinematically real. The realism of cinema will be discussed in detail later in the chapter, as Cloverfield’s found footage presentation and ARG illustrate how cinema intersects with the ‘real.’ Regarding the real becoming cinema, Žižek emphasises the cinematic as fictional in his discussion of 9/11 as a screen event:

[...] we begin to experience ‘real reality’ itself as a virtual reality. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on a TV screen [...] was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others [...]?

9/11 is like a movie, and its likeness—combined with or caused by its spectacular presentation experienced through screens—causes it to be less ‘real.’ Melnick suggests that this ‘de-realizing’ philosophy was used to aid in understanding the event, as its unprecedented nature became incomprehensible until it could be re-imagined in fictional terms. The subjectivity of this understanding, and what cultural sense was being constructed around 9/11, is not an insignificant

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11 King, “‘Just Like A Movie’?’, 47.

12 Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, 11.

13 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 51.
Cloverfield Is Like A Movie

question. Cloverfield touches upon the dangerous repercussions of narrativising an event through ‘de-realizing,’ but its critique is centred on the act of narrativisation, and the complex process of exploring 9/11 as a culturally real or fictional phenomenon. Recall King’s summary of the 9/11-as-a-movie sentiment: ‘A very real event was experienced—at least in part—through a frame provided by Hollywood spectacle.’ Kevin J. Wetmore Jr. puts this relationship in the context of Cloverfield in the following: ‘Cloverfield represents 9/11 as a mainstream blockbuster […] and has also been recognized by numerous critics as a film that reinvents 9/11 as a monster movie. Cloverfield’s ultimate significance is not in its ability to discuss the real event, which is but a means to an end: instead, Cloverfield is the cultural frame through which we understand the ‘real’ 9/11.

The Spectre of 9/11

![Cloverfield Poster](http://cloverfield.wikia.com/wiki/File:Statue-poster.jpg)

**Figure 7: A cinema poster for Cloverfield.**

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14 King, “‘Just Like A Movie’?”, 47.


*Cloverfield* makes extremely close references to 9/11 itself. When the found footage style compromises the scale and spectacle of the typical disaster movie 9/11 is claimed to resemble, *Cloverfield* instead mimics the aesthetic of actual footage recorded of 9/11. The resemblance is often uncannily close: like 9/11, little footage exists in *Cloverfield* of the first attack. *Cloverfield* repeats the subsequent spectacles of falling towers and mass panic, complete with camera-jerking clumsiness, throughout the film. Kellner says: ‘Playing on post-9/11 fears, the film uses 9/11 imagery of falling skyscrapers, panic in the streets, dust and blood-soaked mobs running from the disaster, and general chaos portending social collapse.’\(^{17}\) The visual allusions through setting, composition, and content are clear.

The most iconic and evocative 9/11 image of *Cloverfield* is the famous movie poster, depicting a headless Statue of Liberty. It is impossible not to recognise the destruction of a famous New York tower as having 9/11 allusions. Ironically, this particular image of headless Liberty is never actually seen during the film: the poster’s existence as a paratext draws attention to the fact that the spectacle of 9/11 was in many ways a construction around and after the event. The poster provides a macroscopic scale typical of disaster movies that found footage cannot supply, and demonstrates the disparity between a live event, experienced in *Cloverfield* as shaky and disjointed, and its media suffusion, with a clear narrative and context.

The first sign of disaster occurs in the movie when Liberty’s head comes tumbling down Rob’s street. The fear and disbelief of the New Yorkers is tangible, and the traumatic effect of 9/11 is visually represented on Liberty’s face, the claw-marks giving her an expression of marred horror. On this moment, Kellner says:

> The monster is never really clearly shown and the footage of the crowds and collapsing buildings reveals the film to be a 9/11 exploitation flick. Yet the decapitated head of the Statue of Liberty that appears in a crowd scene in lower Manhattan suggests a broader theme of the end of innocence even for the affluent young, in the era of bin Laden and Bush-Cheney, where spectacles of terror have become part of everyday life.\(^ {18}\)

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\(^{18}\) Kellner, *Cinema Wars*, 126.
Cloverfield *Is Like A Movie*

This links the 9/11 image back to terror culture, summarising in a moment—one that never happened—the far-reaching effect of 9/11 trauma that transformed it into a culture.

![Figure 8: The collapsing pair of towers in Cloverfield.](image)

If Liberty is not an ample metaphor for New York’s iconic skyline being marred, then *Cloverfield* does not hesitate to supply more. In its rampage Clover destroys the Empire State Building, the Brooklyn Bridge, Grand Central Station, and Central Park. Perhaps most haunting is the nameless pair of skyscrapers in which Beth is trapped. Wetmore claims: ‘As on 9/11, it is the building itself that harms [Beth] as much as the monstrous being attacking New York.’19 One of the towers has been broken partway up by Clover, and the top half leans precariously where it has crashed against the adjacent tower. This forms a visual metaphor for the claim that 9/11 shattered reality, an echoed alternative image of broken twin towers set to destroy New York like dominoes. As Rob, Lily, and Hud climb from the upright tower into the bent one, they enter the new reality of New York’s fallen

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towers, and the world is literally shifted off its axis. Wind screeches as they make the crossing, and they search through damaged apartments on a dangerously slanted floor. The whole world is at a Dutch angle, the staple of horror cinematography, and the metaphor could not be simpler: after the monstrous destruction of a New York skyscraper, everything is topsy-turvy.

**The Terror Narrative**

These visual allegories prompt a reading of their assembly into the narrative 9/11 and terror culture. By juxtaposing the story with 9/11 imagery, *Cloverfield* illustrates how news media connects different events and concerns to connect the causality of terror culture. This is instigated in the movie when the possibility of terrorism is quickly voiced by characters. One asks: ‘Think it’s another terrorist attack?’ Clover is the catalyst of this 9/11 allegory through its actions, and through its treatment by other characters it is identified as the avatar of terror itself.

![Figure 9: A Cloverfield still edited to highlight the falling debris.](image)

A monster personifying the fears of the era is its own homage to Hollywood history. Joseph Maddrey states: ‘the monsters themselves shape-shift from decade to decade as the fears of the popular audience change.’\(^{20}\) He claims that if 1950s movie monsters ‘were not the direct results of

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atomic testing, the new monsters often fell—like bombs—from the sky.12 To the average viewer, Clover’s origins are not made clear beyond the aforementioned speculations. If one were following the viral campaign in which fans collaboratively collect snippets of the story, one would know when to zoom and freeze-frame some accidental footage at the end of the film, captured by characters Rob and Beth at an earlier date in the story.

Like its ancestors, Clover seemingly falls from the sky, and is quintessentially 9/11. Clover's first impact is only captured by accidental amateurs, like the first plane hitting the tower, in an awkwardly framed blink-and-you’ll-miss-it moment of truth. To those who missed this detail, the effect is still evocative of 9/11: Clover’s ongoing under-visualisation mirrors the amorphous ‘terrorists’ that stir paranoia in terror culture, creating fear precisely because they are unidentifiable and inexplicable. Daniel North expands on this relationship, and Clover’s representation as terror culture beyond terrorists:

If Godzilla embodied (and revisited) fears of atomic destruction, then Cloverfield’s monster might be seen to give head, limbs, and torso to a morass of nightmares about terrorist attack (the creature even brings its own contagious biohazard in the parasites that fall from its skin), ruptured borders, and the fracturing of America’s military dominance. We could even see Cloverfield's monster as a truly post 9/11 beast.22

In the space of a single night, Cloverfield’s story connects and comments upon not only 9/11 but the fallout of terror culture, demonstrating the event’s massive impact. By incorporating references to other terror events and disseminating information through fragmented media sources, Cloverfield demonstrates the fragile cohesion that creates the Age of Terror.

Many other issues falling under the umbrella of ‘terror culture’ are raised by Cloverfield, demonstrating the narrative cohesion applied to ostensibly disparate events that give terror culture its power. Marc Savlov claims that the 9/11 references are not overt, but notes that 9/11 is not treated as an isolated event, either:

[...] that’s the key to the film’s second stroke of genius: its nearly subconscious evocation of our current paranoid, terror-phobic times. The pall of post-9/11 dread

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21 Maddrey, Nightmares in Red, White and Blue, 31.

22 Daniel North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen: Cloverfield’s Obstructed Spectacle,’ Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies 40.1 (Spring 2010): 90.
hangs over *Cloverfield* in a very emotionally tangible way, although it should be noted that [director Matt] Reeves and [producer JJ] Abrams never directly refer to it.\(^{23}\)

This paranoid, terror-phobic environment is depicted with efficiency in the world of *Cloverfield*. A character suggests Clover was made by ‘the government,’ echoing 9/11 conspiracy theories. Žižek articulates these theories in rhetorical questions, posing the ‘monsters’ of 9/11 as ‘presented by the official media as the embodiments of radical Evil? Is not the truth that behind the fact that Bin Laden and the Taliban emerged as part of the CIA-supported anti-Soviet guerrilla movement in Afghanistan […]? Is not the USA fighting its own excess in all these cases?’\(^{24}\) In these moments, the film’s speculations over government, corporations, terrorists, and monsters summarises these deep concerns on the issue of 9/11, the foundation of terror culture, and the motivations behind what Brian A. Monahan calls a ‘particular reality’ being presented.\(^{25}\) The theory presented by the viral marketing, which like many 9/11 theories involves extensive trawling through Internet media, suggests that Clover is homogenous to Earth. The debris falling from the sky is merely a catalyst which, combined with unethical practices of a drilling corporation, provoke Clover to attack. The addition of corporate conspiracy, and the convolution of its unraveling, echo the investigative aspect of terror culture: the search for a ‘why’ that is never fully satisfied.

Similarly, North briefly mentions the ‘biohazard’ attached to Clover, which forms an interesting subplot relating to some of the further-reaching issues of terror culture. Rob, Beth, Hud, Lily, and Marlena attempt to escape the disaster through empty subway tunnels. Guided only by cell phone lights and their camera’s night vision, this scene is nearly identical to the few images captured during the London Tube Bombing of 2005.\(^{26}\) Recorded on civilians’ handheld devices, and presenting the awkward mise-en-abyme of other screens recording unfolding disaster, the Tube becomes the New York subway and seamlessly joins the narrative of 9/11 terror in *Cloverfield*.

While underground, the group are attacked by dog-sized monsters that tumbled from Clover. Marlena is bitten, and her wound quickly becomes infected. When the group find a military shelter, Marlena is whisked behind a curtain by panicked officials, and appears to be shot in the head to

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\(^{24}\) Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 27.


\(^{26}\) See Chapter Five for more on the visualisation of the London Bombing.
Cloverfield Is Like A Movie

avert the consequences of infection. This sequence reconstructs the anthrax scare in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, emphasising administrative over-reaction and the possibility of conspiracy: her execution is sudden and pre-emptive, and the officials demand that Hud turn the camera off. Wetmore interprets this as another aspect of terror: ‘[Marlena] is a monstrous suicide bomber, exploding open to generate more terror among the doctors and soldiers.’

Figure 10: A still from the subway sequence in Cloverfield, including the monsters that bite Marlena. See Figure 16 for a similar image taken after the 2007 London Tube Bombing.

Administrative malpractice is a repeated motif in the film. The narrative between 9/11 and the war on Iraq, bridged by the brand of the ‘War on Terror,’ is taken for granted in Cloverfield. The American military are quick to mobilise in the wake of the New York attack, and halfway through the movie viewers witness the full shock-and-awe campaign against Clover with tanks, rockets, fighter jets, and helicopters. This resembles the war on Iraq most critically when the copious explosions are spectacularly ineffective. A second strike is staged at the climax of the film, this time showing the devastating economic and cultural cost of these wars by bombing the entire island of Manhattan. Wetmore notes how this destruction affects the space and echoes 9/11:

The fact that ‘Central Park’ is now identified as ‘US-447’ resonates with the transformation of ‘World Trade Center’ into ‘Ground Zero’, and the repeated numbers

27 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.
Cloverfield *Is Like A Movie*

447 hint at 911. The renaming of landmarks in the face of an attack in this film and the increased military presence in New York all suggest the experiences of 9/11.\(^{28}\)

Still, the military’s ends do not justify the means: Rob and Beth must be dead, and a voice is heard over the credits screaming ‘It’s still alive!’

Figure 11: A shot of a diegetic TV screen in *Cloverfield*. See Figure 15 for a similar still from CNN on 9/11, including the red, white, and blue graphic stating ‘America Under Attack.’

An attack on New York leads to a military overreaction, after which civilians flee through a danger-ridden subway, causing fear of a deadly infection, administrative conspiracy, and so forth. The misplaced chronology of these events in the film and reality illustrates the degree to which terror’s cause-and-effect is a construction. By giving these terror issues narrative cohesion, *Cloverfield* illustrates and criticises their abstract relationships. The confusion and the acts of sense-making are voiced through clueless journalists, recorded by Hud as he watches televisions. Dismayed presenters can make no sense of the attack, and the news titles are near word-for-word quotations from real 9/11 newflashes: 9/11’s ‘America Under Attack’ is *Cloverfield*’s ‘New York Under Attack.’ Wetmore describes this in detail, first for 9/11 and then in *Cloverfield*:

> Only national media figures were giving information, and mostly that was conjecture and expert hearsay: what the government was doing in response to the attacks, whether

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\(^{28}\) Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*. 

additional attacks were coming or already underway, and if there was another, different kind of event planned for that day, were all unknowns for the people watching. […] The experience is captured in films such as *Cloverfield*, where the characters only briefly catch news announcements in an electronics store after the immediate attack. Otherwise, they remain in the dark as to what is happening, where the creature is and how the counter attack is going.29

The scramble for understanding in the aftermath happens in the unfolding of *Cloverfield*'s narrative, but the news is presented as unreliable. This double metaphor is used to great effect *Cloverfield*, and the play with different media verisimilitudes forms the crux of the film’s deconstructions.

**Documenting New York**

*Cloverfield* cannot be discussed without taking into account its distinct formal style. The success of the found-footage sub-genre is partially due to its coincidence with terror culture, and the changes in media technology that occurred around 9/11.30 The use of the technique in *Cloverfield* distinguishes it from other monster movies, and also enables the film to comment through form on the aesthetic of 9/11. It draws attention to the distinct verisimilitudes in cinema and news by highlighting, colliding, and confusing these theoretically disparate aesthetics and realities. *Cloverfield* is easier to compare to 9/11 not only because the subject matter, and the accidental-footage style in which we watch 9/11 are visually similar, but because this realism collides it with the real event of 9/11.

The aesthetic mirroring of 9/11 is uncanny, and draws attention to 9/11 as a recorded event. As a civilian-recorded disaster story, *Cloverfield* especially highlights the subjectivity of recording and presenting media on screen, because it is not done in the style of seamless major news reports or Hollywood cinematography. The camera is uncomfortably diegetic, and its noticeable flaws and honesties cast doubt upon media verisimilitude. North claims this makes the film more realistic: ‘The film purchases authenticity by displaying a shaky camera that seems to not know where the next point of interest will be located, catching it too late or misframing it.’31 The attention drawn to

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30 For a full discussion of the found footage boom in the context of terror media culture, see Chapter Five.

31 North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 87.
subjectivity paradoxically lends the style authenticity, and in doing so exposes potential duplicities in professionally invisible verisimilitude. North expands on this theory by claiming: ‘the film uses this aesthetic of opacity to construct a critique of the film’s apparent realism.’ By alluding specifically to 9/11 the film critiques the apparent realism of terror culture and the duplicity of presenting 9/11 narratives.

The relevance of recording techniques to *Cloverfield* and 9/11 suggests that terror is given a great degree of power through the subjectivity of its mediation. In an interview with *Shock*, Reeves discusses citizen journalism such as Hud's as both essential and paranoid in terror media: ‘*Cloverfield* very much speaks to the fear and anxieties of our time, how we live our lives. Constantly documenting things and putting them up on YouTube, sending people videos through e-mail—we felt it very applicable to the way people feel now.’ Reeves’ description of the dissemination of media as a ‘fear’ is an essential part of how citizen journalism can frame and re-frame terror events. Hud’s mistakes in recording are obvious, and his subjectivity is reflected when he shoots other civilians making their own recordings, and films television screens. His lack of understanding demonstrates the struggle to contextualise 9/11, and his difficulties in communicating a narrative critiques the construction of 9/11 in screen media. The absurdity of recording the story at all is brought to light, but justified by the fact that ‘people need to see this.’ Hud recognises these terror events as a spectacle; as a spectacle that must be ‘documented’, narrativised, and spread worldwide. This shows the immense apophenia that makes terror media into terror culture.

The formal gestures towards realism, complemented by the Alternate Reality Game marketing, suggest that fans’ engagement in fictional and real media is not discrete, but complex. Žižek argues that we must ‘remember the postmodern doxa according to which ‘reality’ is a discursive product, a symbolic fiction which we misperceive as a substantial autonomous entity.’ The lack of autonomous reality places *Cloverfield* audiences in a position where the real 9/11, and the presentation of 9/11 where it noticeably overlaps with *Cloverfield*, can be deconstructed and criticised. North says:

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32 North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 76.

33 The availability of new media technologies and how this impacts on terror culture is discussed in Chapter Five.


Cloverfield is like a movie

[...] Cloverfield feigns the appearance of a documentary, where events should not seem to be unfolding in patterns pre-determined by genre or commercial expectation. Yet it is clearly a fantastic tale and therefore implies that, by convention, we associate documentary realism with specific formal techniques.\(^{36}\)

Cloverfield oscillates between formal authenticity and spectacular Hollywood fiction, and in doing so demonstrates a similar representation of 9/11.

The film opens with a fictionalised Department of Defense label claiming the following sequence is retrieved footage. North notes its fictional juxtaposition:

This has been preceded by the customary production and distribution company logos, which establish the film as a commercial property to be consumed as entertainment, but the Defense Department stamp effectively sections off the fiction from those “other” authoritative labels. This creates the pretext of alternative ownership, and thus, creates a framework within which all subsequent images will be interpreted as a chronicle of actual events - testimony from an eyewitness.\(^{37}\)

This realism is exaggerated and subjected by the Alternate Reality Game, discussed in more detail later in the chapter. At present it is important to note the ease with which Cloverfield merges fiction and realism. In doing so, the film draws attention to visual techniques used to establish ‘realism’ and how they operate in situations like 9/11.

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\(^{36}\) North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 76.

\(^{37}\) North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 77.
The effectiveness of *Cloverfield* as a found footage film owes much to the relationship between 9/11, screen media, and culturally mediated reality. The images of falling buildings and the narrative of the monster resonate because they are shakily recorded events, becoming fragmented stories that appear on our screens, in an inextricable confluence of fiction and reality. By operating as a fictional cinematic story, and as ‘real’ found footage supported by ARG media, *Cloverfield* demonstrates a similar operation in the popular reception of 9/11. It is important to note the screen as a mediator in this situation, and when Žižek expands upon the problem of the ‘real’:

> [...] precisely because it is real, that is, on account of its traumatic/excessive character, we are unable to integrate it into (what we experience as) our reality, and are therefore compelled to experience it as a nightmarish apparition. This is what the compelling image of the collapse of the WTC was: an image, a semblance, an ‘effect’, which, at the time, delivered ‘the thing itself’.

*Cloverfield* may be read as one nightmarish apparition that substitutes the ‘reality’ of 9/11. In a less philosophical and more technological sense, what affects these compromised realities in terror culture is the way they are filtered and framed by media, specifically screen media. Žižek is instrumental in drawing attention not to the impact of the aeroplanes hitting the buildings, but the

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Cloverfield Is Like A Movie

impact of this spectacle as it hit screens. This is where, and more importantly how, 9/11 becomes terror. It is the reason Cloverfield constitutes one of the most salient criticisms of 9/11 while making no direct reference to the event itself. In terror culture, no such reference—no such reality—is necessary.

Attention can instead be paid to the screen, and how the screen mediates these realities. Cloverfield mimics the citizen journalist aesthetic because it carries a cultural authenticity and because it is an aesthetic of terror culture. It emphasises the subjectivity of recording by presenting moments of mise-en-abyme, where Hud captures others recording the event or films the news on TV. These frames-within-frames self-reflexively call attention to the act of framing, and the motivations behind it. The authentic found-footage style being used to present something fantastical highlights the issues of framing and authenticity in an aesthetic that has become synonymous with terror.

By using the markers of authenticity to convey a constructed fictional narrative, Cloverfield questions the means and motivations behind this technique in relation to 9/11. This manifests as a criticism of news media in the wake of 9/11, and illustrates how terror functions in popular culture. When Cloverfield displays cinematic elements, it also displays how cinematic techniques operate in relation to terror. Cloverfield performs an act strikingly similar to that of news media in terror culture: it takes an incomprehensible attack on New York, places emphasis on its realism, and constructs fundamentally fragmented issues into a semi-cohesive narrative.

News Mediation

Cloverfield demonstrates how ‘real’ media can be framed, fictionalised, narrativised, and otherwise used as a means to an end—whether that end is the diegetic justification of war, or profits in the entertainment industry. While the film critiques this act of framing, it does not offer a solid explanations for the motives behind creating a subjective mediation of terror. Instead, fans are left to examine and deconstruct the subjective role of media in our understanding of the ‘real.’ Just as an audience can engage with Cloverfield as fantastical and authentic, so can they disassemble the elements of the ‘real’ and entertainment in similarly ambiguous media.

9/11 is widely discussed as a subjectively presented event. Monahan offers a detailed criticism of news media’s role in creating terror culture:
Much of how we made sense of the attacks in those first days, weeks, and months after their occurrence and, in turn, how we have come to understand and act on “9/11” in the years since, derives from how the media first constructed and told the tale.\textsuperscript{39}

Monahan’s reference to 9/11 as a constructed ‘tale’ emphasises the degree to which 9/11 narrativised the War on Terror. What Žižek called too traumatic/excessive to be comprehensible was given sense by giving it a narrative: in other words, creating 9/11 as something ‘like a movie.’ King notes:

A shift towards a more cinematic-continuity assemblage of images might be understood as part of the process of implying some kind of mastery or control over the events, reducing to some extent their potential to shock.\textsuperscript{40}

The reduction of shock, similar to Melnick’s claim of ‘derealization’ for understanding, is one of many suggested motivations for narrativising 9/11. Jay David Bolter suggests that narrativisation links and thus justifies the war on Iraq, as is echoed in 	extit{Cloverfield} by the military’s unsuccessful acts of vengeance.\textsuperscript{41} These narrativisations of 9/11 are so subjective—and the event so culturally shattering—that many scholars suggest it destabilises reality.\textsuperscript{42} This suggestion, also put forth by writers such as Žižek and Melnick, highlights the importance of an ambiguously fictional text such as 	extit{Cloverfield} in the discussion of 9/11. It emphasises the extent to which reality itself is manipulable in screen media. There is significant work fans must do to disambiguate the realities and narratives presented in 	extit{Cloverfield}. Certain aesthetics apply in both 9/11 and 	extit{Cloverfield} to make a ‘real’ spectacle. Comparisons to movies abound in discussions of 9/11, but like 	extit{Cloverfield}, the news asserts a degree of authenticity. King describes the verisimilitude of news and its role in this sensation:

\begin{center}
\textsuperscript{39} Monahan, \textit{The Shock of the News}, 9.

\textsuperscript{40} King, “‘Just Like A Movie’?,” 54-55.


\textsuperscript{42} See Chapter Eight for more.
\end{center}
A number of modality markers made it clear that the real images on September 11 were not something from or ‘just like’ a movie. For a start, it would be abundantly clear to viewers with any media literacy that what they were watching on the day was of the nature of a ‘breaking’ live news event, an intrusion into normal programming or into normal news coverage. This is made apparent through numerous familiar conventions, including commentary by news anchors, reporters and ‘experts’ and through graphics presented on-screen. These are not absolute guarantors of authenticity, given that such devices are sometimes used in fictional works, precisely because of their power to evoke an impression of the real.\textsuperscript{43}

By purchasing authenticity using techniques such as these, \textit{Cloverfield} reflects how other media such as news does the same. The effectiveness of 9/11 in founding terror culture is in its ability to simultaneously employ the tools of fiction and reality in screen representations. Critics such as Melnick discuss the ‘branding’ and fictional framing of 9/11 with storytelling staples such as heroes, victims, and revenge narratives.\textsuperscript{44} Others note that in spectacle and story, 9/11 closely resembles a fictional movie. King suggests that reality and fiction are ‘dialectical […] that a complex relationship exists between the two.’\textsuperscript{45} Like \textit{Cloverfield}, terror’s effectiveness lies in its conflation of reality and fiction. This summarises the means by which ‘reality’ is compromised in the cultural understanding of terror.

\textbf{Tales of Terror}

Understanding the powerful function of the ‘real’ becoming a narrative illuminates how terror can be used as a tool of control, fear, or motivation large enough to be called a culture. Kellner’s claims that spectacular terror may be ‘manipulated by reactionary forces who give them simplistic answers to contemporary anxieties and problems’ is significant here.\textsuperscript{46} These simplistic answers are often lifted from cinematic narratives, and receive heavy criticism when used in situations such as the war on Iraq. When cinematic narratives, spectacles, and comparisons are used as a means to a political

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{43} King, ““Just Like A Movie”?,” 49.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{44} Melnick, \textit{9/11 Culture}, 7-8 and 50.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{45} King, ““Just Like A Movie?””, 54}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{46} Kellner, \textit{Cinema Wars}, 100.}
end, cinema is put in a powerful position to comment in return. Kellner suggests that criticism and authenticity were easier found in a medium with ironically greater opacity in its fictions:

[...] Hollywood films sharply critiqued salient aspects of the Bush-Cheney administration in entertainment and documentary cinema. They presented different and more critical visions of 9/11 and the so-called war on terror than either the Republican administration or the mainstream corporate media.47

_Cloverfield_ takes full advantage of the cinematic aspects of 9/11 by celebrating its own Hollywood history. The narrativisation of the news is parodied in the film by in what North calls the ‘romantic rescue narrative’ of a ‘generic blockbuster.’48 The intrepid hero Rob, followed by his bumbling sidekick Hud, must rescue his long-lost love Beth from a tower as they are threatened by a huge monster. The classic pattern of this story performs two functions: it frees _Cloverfield_ to flaunt the aesthetic qualities of the film, and it critiques the imposition of such narrative simplicity on a tragically senseless event. Like 9/11 in screen media, _Cloverfield_ carefully balances these moments of spectacular narrative and authenticity, but in the latter the collisions are presented in a critical light. As North noted, the film presents the ‘authentic’ stamp of the Department of Defense immediately after the Hollywood studio logos.49 In one moment, the characters see the destruction authenticated by multiple television screens in a store, two of which show news anchors discussing ‘New York Under Attack’. The third, however, still shows cartoons, implicitly presenting the uncomfortably close relationships between the ostensible seriousness and reality of news media next to the outlandish fictions of cartoons. This visual juxtaposition is a scathing criticism of journalism in the midst of disaster, and encapsulates the part-authentic, part-fiction formula used by _Cloverfield_.

This critique of media context goes far beyond the question of whether we watch the news in the same way we watch cartoons. References to entertainment-oriented media abound in _Cloverfield_, but like a critical viewer of 9/11 media, an audience must engage beyond traditional modes of spectatorship and closely scrutinise the screen. The

47 Kellner, _Cinema Wars_, 259.
48 North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 91.
49 North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 77.
closest references to Hollywood in *Cloverfield* are also the best hidden. Due to the handheld presentation of the entire film, *Cloverfield* constantly demands a spectatorial approach different from the average feature film. Like in 9/11 discourse, these Hollywood references abound for the perspicacious viewer. Beside the classic boy-saves-girl narrative, and the glimpse of poster for *Escape from New York* (Carpenter, 1981) in the background of one scene, the moments of greatest ‘reality’ are also the most jarring breaks in the diegesis. By colliding iconic fictional imagery with 9/11 imagery, the film comments upon the reality of the terror narrative, and how it can be presented as ‘real.’

These Hollywood homages are embedded in the most ‘authentic’ moments of verisimilitude: the points at which the camera malfunctions. King describes this in relation to 9/11: ‘Absences or reduced quality of images - such as shaky camerawork, dodgy focus or awkward zooms - signify that events have not been staged for the convenience of the production of images.’50 In *Cloverfield*, these moments epitomise that authenticity while recalling Hollywood fictions. Hidden in these blinking, fuzzy cuts of *Cloverfield* are single frames of classic disaster films including *Them!* (Douglas, 1954), *King Kong* (Cooper & Schoedsack, 1933), and *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954).

Like 9/11, *Cloverfield* establishes itself with subtle but concrete reference to the Hollywood spectacular and the classic narrative. *Cloverfield* is utterly a movie fiction, and it demonstrates the ease with which this fiction intersects with authenticity in the case of 9/11. Close and critical references only be found through close examination of the texts, in this case the ability to freeze-frame and the knowledge of when to do so. These extra requirements criticise the reception of terror media at face value, and the demand that no screen representation of reality be taken for granted.

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50 King, ‘“Just Like A Movie”?’, 50.
Cloverfield Is Like A Movie

Figure 13: A frame originally from *King Kong*, spliced into *Cloverfield*.

**Cloverfield as Paratexts**

This interrogative mode of watching exceeds the movie’s capacity as a cinema text. *Cloverfield* cannot be studied as a text without discussing its extensive use of paratexts. The political and technological commentary in *Cloverfield* is underscored by the impetus for fans to not only watch but interrogate the texts. According to North: ‘Spectators were not constructed as passive consumers awaiting the film’s release, but as participants in search for the information necessary to pre-imagine it then to unravel its mysteries.’ North provides further detail on how *Cloverfield* paratexts demand investigation:

> The film does not answer all the questions posed by its pre-publicity, and rather than providing prompts that tell the curious how long they must wait before they can “see it all,” the marketing campaign provides information that will equip the committed spectator with a broader context and clues for finding the solutions to

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51 For this discussion, the word ‘Cloverfield’ is used as an umbrella term for all texts relating to the story: the feature film, the DVD extras, the marketing materials, the events, the fan discussion, and so on.

52 North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 77.
questions left unanswered by the film’s restricted narration, urging potential viewers to work for these solutions, to take up roles as investigators.53

Reflecting on Cloverfield’s political and technological commentary, this investigative mode of spectatorship is essential to deconstructing terror culture. The encouragement to participate and interrogate across different forms of media and different representations of ‘reality’ is integral to understanding the cultural significance of Cloverfield.

As part of the marketing campaign, the Alternate Reality Game of Cloverfield presents transmedia promotional materials as ‘real’ texts.54 Alternate Reality Games are defined by Jonathan Gray as ‘a multi-site, multimedia puzzle or game, often associated with a television program or film.’55 Chuck Tryon notes: ‘Cloverfield developed a large fan culture on the Web through carefully released trailers, alternate-reality games and social networking tools in the weeks and months leading up to the film’s release.’56 A myriad of texts compose the Cloverfield ARG, found mostly on Internet sites and some in ‘real’ media such as live performances. It is nearly impossible to curate a comprehensive collection of the marketing materials, although an attempt is made by the fan-operated website Cloverfield Wiki.57 That this database is managed by fans emphasises the extent to which the ARG can engage fans and confidently disseminate fragmented information. In many cases the materials have not been adequately archived, as some websites have expired. North describes this issue:

Viral campaigns [...] depend on relinquishing control: releasing key pieces of information in carefully chosen places, in the hope and expectation that it will spread organically by through [sic] the target audience, as a virus spreads from person to person within a population. A viral campaign is thus, by nature, difficult to study. It is too diffuse to be comprehensively catalogued, and too dependent on

53 North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 79.

54 For more on Alternate Reality Games, see Chapter Eight.


56 Chuck Tryon, ‘Video From The Void: Video Spectatorship, Domestic Film Cultures, and Contemporary Horror Film,’ Journal of Film and Video 61.3 (Fall 2009): 41.

ephemeral forms of communication that leave few traces and no official
documentation.\textsuperscript{58}

This hindrance has its most interesting manifestation in the apophenic collection of details: to
create verisimilitude, these texts lack any official mark. The investigative activity of
\textit{Cloverfield} fans often causes accidental or ‘red herring’ material to be included in collections.
This is a most unusual and complex issue for ARGs: the integration and necessary inclusion
of ‘unofficial’ materials such as online discussion, red herrings, and hearsay. The successful
ARG integrates itself into ‘reality’ until there is no discernible line between the ‘text’ and the
‘real.’\textsuperscript{59}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{myspace.png}
\caption{A screenshot of character Jason’s Myspace page. The page is now defunct.\textsuperscript{60}}
\end{figure}

The ARG provides many markers of ‘reality’ that reinforce the found-footage authenticity of
the film. Many characters have online profile pages on the social network Myspace, which

\textsuperscript{58} North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 80.

\textsuperscript{59} The significance of online media in horror storytelling and representations of ‘reality’ will be explored in
greater detail in the Part Three of this thesis. I return to the \textit{Cloverfield} ARG in Part Three, in which issues of
textual decentralisation and ‘real’ storytelling are more thoroughly discussed. This chapter is concerned with
the \textit{Cloverfield} ARG’s ability to deconstruct screen portrayals of 9/11 and the development of a terror
narrative.

were maintained as though though they were the pages of ‘real’ people. There are ‘official’ websites for Slusho, Rob’s employer, and its parent employer Tagruato. Other related websites include T.I.D.O. Wave, an activism group working against Tagruato but not mentioned in the film, and jamieandteddy.com, a website run by two characters with brief film cameos who were—only according to their website—investigating Tagruato. These websites demonstrate the ambiguity of ‘reality’ and fiction in online spaces: these paratexts effectively mimic the verisimilitude of real social networking pages and corporate websites, demonstrating the ease with which ‘real’ information can be synthesised. While blogs often provide a timely and honest outlet for citizen journalists, hoaxes such as Cloverfield can gain quick traction. Monahan discusses how official websites, such as those Tagruato and Slusho are parodying, are structured in subjective ways:

The responsibility and retaliation [to 9/11] frame also found support in other media forms, such as the Internet. An examination of all major U.S. news websites that covered the attacks found a similar justification for war. Not only was the responsibility and retaliation frame evident in their content, but it also was embedded in the sites’ formats, with several navigational links promoting military action as the only viable response to the attacks.61

Due to the close relationship between terror and Web 2.0, the conspiracy websites can carry a degree of authenticity—or at least integrity—particular to the Internet. Conversely, the authenticity of the ‘official’ sites—news sources and Tagruato—is under heavy scrutiny in terror culture and the Cloverfield ARG. Cloverfield capitalises on and critiques the role of Internet culture in representing the ‘real.’ The ability to deconstruct or ‘play along’ with these representations is the how one plays the ARG, and necessary for those seeking the ‘truth’ behind Cloverfield.

**Reality as a Game**

The clues toward Clover’s origin are only provided in these materials. Beyond the occasional speculation in the film, the only indication found in the feature is when something falls from the sky in a ‘flashback’ to Rob and Beth’s date, presented as footage shot weeks earlier and mostly

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overwritten by the recording of the attack. A fan must participate in the ARG to know when and
where to freeze-frame and zoom to spot the falling object—and know the object is not actually
Clover—as it is nearly invisible and inexplicable in the film. The context of this object can only be
constructed by a meticulous following of the ARG conspiracy.

The conspiracy suggests Tagruato is mining a deep-sea product that Slusho is using in its
drinks, but the product may have dangerous effects. Environmental groups are rallying against
Tagruato’s work, which seems to include deadly hush-ups, but not before some falling space shuttle
debris destroys a Tagruato mining station in the Atlantic Ocean. Due to the shuttle accident, the
dangerous product may have mutated an undiscovered deep-sea creature. Hurt and enraged, the
creature surfaces and wreaks destruction on the confused and terrified citizens of New York.

These ‘answers’ to the story are left only for investigative viewers; those willing to collect
and process information, deconstruct whether it is ‘real’ or valuable, and connect different paratexts
to make sense of the narrative. Ironically, when consuming these ‘real’-appearing media, and
subscribing to the alternate reality, one must recognise Cloverfield is also a fictional spectacle:
amongst the fan collections of ARG materials can be found the time signatures for DVD users to
freeze-frame and find classic Hollywood images hidden in the ‘real’ footage. This disrupts the
linearity that lends the film authenticity, while motivating the hunt for ‘authenticating’ material that
corroborates the narrative. This suggests that fans can experience Cloverfield on many levels of
‘real’ and fictional, appreciating the film as a spectacle and as a pseudo-authentic network of texts.

The Terror Reality Game

By alluding to the spectacle and politics of terror, Cloverfield suggests a deconstruction and
investigation of terror culture. The Cloverfield ARG extends the commentary on terror by
representing the fragmented and questionable elements of terror culture. A fan negotiating
Cloverfield can similarly negotiate the shattered reality of 9/11, collecting and connecting events to
understand how terror culture functions. The realities and fictions—or the authenticity and spectacle
—of Cloverfield can be weighed and observed as they can in terror culture, as this chapter has
discussed. The function of different media such as television news, handheld footage, and social
networking profiles are questioned and subverted, demanding more from North’s ‘passive
consumer’ to be understood.

If the Cloverfield movie is the core text to the ARG’s paratexts, then 9/11 is similarly the
core text of terror culture. These relationships are examined and challenged in the process of
enjoying *Cloverfield*, and the allusions of terror extend throughout the ARG. Many of North’s notes on the *Cloverfield* ARG apply in significant ways to the investigation of terror culture. The following is discussed in relation to fan theories of *Cloverfield*, but can be read in the context of terror: ‘This is similar to the effects of apophenia, a perceptual process whereby, in the absence of a clear set of connected evidence, people infer or imagine patterns and links between disparate phenomena.’*62* These disparate phenomena are common in terror: for instance, the description of Hurricane Katrina as part of terror culture, or the deceptive link by administration and news media made between 9/11 and the Iraq invasion. North refers to the ARG as:

[...] a paranoid space of obstructed vision and partial knowledge. Taken together, the two create a seamless environment of obsession and confusion - the former, through its restricted imagery and narration; the latter through its web of impenetrable clues - denying the comfort of clarity to audiences and characters alike."*63*

This description is uncannily applicable to the media representation of 9/11 and its role in constructing terror culture. Reflecting on Kellner’s discussion of Hollywood as fertile ground for terror criticism, Monahan’s and King’s on the unreliability of news in representing the ‘real,’ and on the symbiotic relationship between Web 2.0 and terror culture, *Cloverfield* is perfectly positioned to critique terror culture.

As seen in this chapter, a *Cloverfield* fan is prompted to equip tools to navigate the dangerous field of terror culture. The movie and its paratexts demand a critical reading of the political, technological, and cultural issues of terror. Representations are layered and self-reflexively loaded, exploring how terror is manipulated through Hollywood-like spectacle, unreality, narrative, authentic verisimilitude, news media, citizen journalism, and online paratexts. *Cloverfield* is far more than a visually cutting-edge 9/11 film with a savvy marketing campaign: it is a complex deconstruction of terror media that challenges what we call ‘real.’ If 9/11 is like a movie, *Cloverfield* is the movie.

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*62* North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 82.

*63* North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 84-85.
Part Two: Screen Media
4. Screen Media

The medium of the screen is a crucial factor in the relationship between New Horror and terror. Mediation and distribution through screen devices create the framing narrative of terror post-9/11. This process of mediation, which I argue grants terror much of its cultural significance, is explored critically in New Horror. It is imperative to consider the media through which horror and terror become popular, and how changes in screen technologies underpin this significance. The development of terror culture aids, and is aided by, the development of screen culture. This symbiosis can be seen in post-9/11 New Horror media, which makes literal the relationship between fear and the screen. In the following chapters I discuss how terror introduces, and how horror extrapolates, issues of mediation, spectatorship, and authenticity. The movies studied in Part Two have similar political allusions discussed in Part One, but my reading here pertains primarily to the politics of the terror screen. I suggest that the changing role of screen technology and news media in representing post-9/11 ‘reality’ bears a critical relationship with New Horror. This chapter aims to introduce the relationship between screen media, terror culture, and horror.¹ Following the preceding Part’s criticism of how ‘terror’ is constructed from an amorphous phenomenon into a cohesive narrative, I now aim to critically analyse processes of mediation that enable this.

One of the key issues in these chapters is the relationship between horror and news media. This framework follows from Chapter Three. I seek to use horror as a means to discuss the significance and subjectivity of ‘the media’ as an umbrella term for journalism by exploring how fictional horror and ‘real’ terror collide on screens. The news industry’s role in terror culture is a major point of critique and comparison in this thesis.² The fundamental role of news as a prolific, [1]

¹ I am interested in exploring the complexities of ‘media’ as a cultural behemoth. ‘Media’ is a term that, like terror, has grown to include a collection of concepts in the 21st-century West. There is considerable conflation, confusion, and overlap in our understanding, exacerbated by the rapid developments of technologies that change how we use or access media. ‘Media’ used in horror and terror scholarship may refer to devices such as cinema or smartphones; it may be audiovisual content; or it may reference genres such as horror, or journalism. The shifting meanings of ‘media’; the ‘mediation’ that takes place in the creation and reception of media; and the relationship between ‘media’ and ‘real’ fears are critical to this part of the thesis.

² The genre of ‘news’ is used to refer to a broad spectrum of current information media, whether corporate-owned news television bulletins or critical discussions in the blogosphere. The screens and media facilitating news include everything from television to Internet devices to public billboards with displays of recent headlines: in general, the multiple screen technologies dominating radio and newspapers as sources of current sociopolitical information. ‘Major news’ is used here to describe the increasingly competitive corporate media networks. Terror culture ‘news’ also incorporates citizen journalism; news imitations such as hoaxes; and a wider, Internet-based conflation of information, opinion, criticism, discussion, and disinformation. In this analysis, ‘news’ accounts for a sprawling category of considerable cultural influence, and one of the primary distributors of ‘terror’ on a cultural level.
formative, and ubiquitous source of our reality is a necessary consideration in understanding terror’s
cultural weight, and horror’s criticism of journalism.

An emergent issue that I discuss in the relationship between New Horror and screens is the
issue of authenticity or realism as it applies to terror culture. Part Two of this thesis is situated
between *Terror Culture* and *Shattered Realities* for this reason, and often signals Part Three when
expansion on the theory of reality is possible. ‘Real’ in this Part appears with deliberate quotation
marks to denote its subjectivity, and its cultural ambiguity in post-9/11 media. ‘Real,’ for the
purposes of this Part, has a context applying to terror and to media veracity; how screens can
complicate the line between authenticity and fiction in terror and New Horror. ‘Real’ refers to
information becoming disinformation; to mediation as a subjective process of representation; to
fiction or entertainment aesthetics informing authentically-marked representations; to the screen in
opposition or conjunction with lived experience; and to media’s capacity to generate authenticity. I
suggest that New Horror critiques the screen’s relationship with these realisms, identifying ‘real’ in
its culturally ambiguous context.

The following two case study chapters offer complementary readings of how screens and
mediation are used self-reflexively in New Horror to critique terror culture. Chapter Five explores
how New Horror complicates media authenticity through the found footage sub-genre. Found
footage occurs in an interesting space between authentic and fictional media, demanding self-
reflexive attention to the process of framing terror. Chapter Six identifies the common thread of the
*Saw* series as a focus on spectatorship and narrativisation in relation to torture and surveillance. The
terror of *Saw* is always put in the context of framing and spectacle, interrogating the uncritical
spectator. These chapters demonstrate New Horror’s criticism of terror’s subjectivity by drawing
attention to the significance of the screen in mediating terror culture.

**9/11: the Spectacle**

The cultural impact of 9/11 is in part due to the spectacular nature of the attack, and to the global
media networks that distribute spectacle. For the masses, the terror culture during and following
9/11 was ‘experienced’ through the screen. The ubiquity of terror culture suggests that it is not the
WTC attack itself – experienced firsthand only by New Yorkers – that had massive cultural impact,
but the mediated representations. The culturally significant understanding of 9/11 is the screen 9/11.
In the following, I seek to contextualise how and why screens are an essential element of terror
culture.
Scholarship of 9/11 relies on the language of spectacle, imagery, and media. Slavoj Žižek, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr, and Neal Gabler note that spectacular imagery is terrorism’s intentional effect of 9/11 and a source of its political impact.3 Geoff King makes a similar claim: ‘It is worth remembering that the enormous reality of September 11 probably would not have happened at all if it had not been for its potential to produce the spectacular imagery.’4 King alludes to the means of production and reproduction that give 9/11 its status as ‘enormous reality.’ The attack itself is a spectacle, but it gains its enormous reality when that spectacle triggers the production and distribution of imagery. 9/11 is enormous because it was able to be recreated through screen media and shared through global networks. It is an enormous reality; a reality that is created and framed by screen media. Douglas Kellner contextualises this relationship in the following:

Resonant images help construct how people see and interpret the world, and the oft-repeated images of airplanes hitting the WTC, the buildings burning and then collapsing, and piles of rubble left in their wake were amongst the most compelling ever witnessed by global media culture.5

In the works of Kellner and King, media is the overarching social context for 9/11 and terror. 9/11 shapes the world not through presentation but representation: a representation of such significance that it defines reality. The next three chapters aim to examine this screen context for terror, and explore how New Horror self-reflexively criticises the screened and real worlds.

The emphasis placed on screen media as the context for 9/11 gives screen media the utmost cultural significance in the terror-stricken world. When 9/11 is described as ‘like a movie,’ it calls attention to the important cultural role of movies in a climate of fear. Like 9/11, horror visualises fear through screens. When New Horror engages in the narratives of terror culture, its self-reflexive use of screen as a medium draws attention to terror as a media phenomenon as much as it does terror itself. Robert Ray identifies this reading of cinema in an earlier context:


The postwar period, therefore, reconfirmed two basic facts about American cinema: first, the movies responded less to historical events than to the audience’s culturally mediated perception of such events; second, Hollywood’s adopted mythology had proved extraordinarily palpable.6

It is this culturally mediated 9/11—the hypothetical movie that 9/11 is ‘like’—that overshadows terror culture.7 Terror in this Part is discussed as the mediation of terrorism: the fearsome spectacle which is recorded, framed, and spread through screens to become terror culture.

Recording Terror

The recording and distribution of terror spectacle becomes part of the process of terror culture. Screen media are a facilitator for terror culture’s events; the formulation of these events as a narrative; and a terror aesthetic. Terror both triggers and is enabled by developing media technology: handheld image-capturing devices, surveillance systems, news networks, and Web 2.0 are examples of media technologies contributing to terror’s spread in the 21st-century West. Mediating terrorism suffuses ‘terror’ on a cultural scale, and the mediating process raises issues of authenticity and reality. From the branding of 9/11 by news networks to the use of Hurricane Katrina footage in horror movies, ‘real’ terror is both compromised and empowered by the mediating process. Terror, as it is understood in a cultural context, is a media spectacle that intersects and collides with fictional and subjective media. The effectiveness of terror cannot be extricated from its ability to be mediated, and the subjectivity of that mediation in fictionalising or representing authenticity. The media of terror is the core of terror culture, as it becomes the prime distributor of terror on a cultural scale.

7 Žižek describes a concrete connection between Hollywood and 9/11 politics in Welcome to the Desert of the Real: ‘a group of Hollywood scenarists and directors, specialists in catastrophe movies, had been established at the instigation of the Pentagon, with the aim of imagining possible scenarios for terrorist attacks and how to fight them.’ These Hollywood professionals were hired with the aim of ‘establishing how Hollywood could help in the ‘war against terrorism’ by getting the right ideological message across not only to Americans, but also to the Hollywood public around the globe—the ultimate empirical proof that Hollywood does in fact function as an ‘ideological state apparatus’.’ The political uses of mediated narrative and screen spectacle were abundantly clear to the Bush administration. See: Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, 16.
In key terror events such as 9/11, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the PATRIOT act, the Abu Ghraib scandal, the 7/7 London Bombing, and Hurricane Katrina, media technology plays a vital role. When Kyle Bishop and Wetmore these in the context of terror, it is the distribution of images and stories through screen media that gives them impact as terror events. Each issue is iconic to terror culture due to its spectacularity and its screen presence. For the PATRIOT act and Abu Ghraib, it is the contention surrounding recording and privacy. For crises such as 7/7 and Katrina, it is the citizen journalists’ recordings of event for mass distribution via news networks and other screen media. Each of these events contribute to the narrative of terror culture by participating in media, often in troubling and unconventional ways.

Figure 15: A still from a 9/11 TV report.

As discussed, 9/11 owes its massive cultural impact to its spectacular nature, and, inherently, the fact that this spectacle was recorded to be watched on screens throughout the world. Lee Rodney

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notes: ‘Captured on video by vigilantes and web-cams all over Manhattan [...] the telegenic spectacle seemed crafted for real-time media.’

According to Melnick: ‘It has become commonplace to note that September 11, 2001, is the most photographed day in history.’

Monahan describes how the mediation of 9/11 gives it subjective cultural power:

The media devoted more resources to covering the attacks and their aftermath than to any other event in the media age, and audiences were riveted to that coverage for weeks and, in many instances, even months after the attacks. This attention created a context in which the dominant media narratives had an unusual influence in shaping the meanings attached to these events and the cultural and political responses to them.

It is the issue of ‘shaping,’ framing, or mediating that becomes significant in discussing critical discourse of terror in screen media. The means by which mainstream news ‘shaped’ 9/11, and the context of popular and fictional media, is discussed in more detail by Melnick:

With new brands (“America Under Attack”), logos, and theme music – heavy on the kettle-drums – ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, and CNN were the first out of the gate in packaging the event for the American public and viewers around the world. It did not take long for other major players in the entertainment industry to enter the breach, and conversations about how the tragedy should be understood in the context of popular culture began almost immediately.

These mediating techniques allow terror culture to bleed into pop culture and borrow its narrative power. Pop culture, meanwhile, takes advantage of this overlap to engage in terror discourse; in the case of New Horror, to self-reflexively comment on how mediation corrupts dichotomy of authenticity and fiction.

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10 Lee Rodney, ‘Real Time, Catastrophe, Spectacle: Reality as Fantasy in Live Media’ in The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to ‘Reality’ TV and Beyond, ed. Geoff King (Bristol and Portland: Intellect, 2005), 38.

11 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 65.


13 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 50; Monahan, The Shock of the News, xii.
The omnipresence of terror images on news screens and their reflection in New Horror is discussed in detail by Bishop with regards to zombie movies:

Scenes depicting deserted metropolitan streets, abandoned human corpses, and gangs of lawless vigilantes have become more common than ever, appearing on the nightly news as often as on the movie screen. Because the aftereffects of war, terrorism, and natural disasters so closely resemble the scenarios of zombie cinema, such images of death and destruction have all the more power to shock and terrify a population that has become otherwise jaded by more traditional horror films.  

What Bishop identifies from the terror experience are the ‘scenarios, scenes, and images’ that appear on news media. The aesthetic of destruction seen in recordings and re-playings of 9/11, Abu Ghraib, Katrina, and 7/7, mediated and branded by new screen technologies, has both a cinematic and news-like quality. This suggests that terror news can be discussed as a genre that intersects with New Horror.  

As 9/11 became a formative aesthetic for news media, it also paved significant ground online. For many Americans post-9/11, official news sources were inadequate, and the Internet became a primary source of information. Robert Andrews tracks the evolution of Web 2.0 in terror culture, with 9/11 as a major catalyst:

When the world changed on Sept. 11, 2001, the web changed with it. While phone networks and big news sites struggled to cope with heavy traffic, many survivors and spectators turned to online journals to share feelings, get information or detail their whereabouts.

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14 Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 18.

15 Philip Brophy suggests these intersections of sensationalism in horror and news in his study of The Amityville Horror (Rosenberg, 1979). Brophy claims that unlike The Exorcist (Friedkin, 1973): ‘The Amityville Horror purported to be a dramatisation of an actual event. This time, yes: it really did happen. Still, the film was as interesting as the News, a type of telling that performs a journalistic dance around its factual base, creating a dull gap between fiction and fact, neither one nor the other.’ See: Philip Brophy, ‘Horrality - The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films,’ Screen 27 (January-February 1986): 6.

As terror culture moves into the 2010s, Web 2.0 plays a greater role. Throughout the 2000s, the Internet becomes a prolific source of information, disinformation, and opinion. According to Andrews:

Since 9/11, the rise of “warbloggers” and online political commentators like Glenn Reynolds’ Instapundit has been, in many cases, a direct response to the U.S. government’s post-9/11 foreign policy, kickstarting a culture of questioning, poking and prodding from which no public figure is safe.  

Other famous ‘warblogs’ have spread critical ideas of terror media, and the truths of terror, with varying success. Blogs, microblogs, and social media networks continue to spread and facilitate both terror and terror criticism. Terror culture has a rich online existence, and its relationship to New Horror is discussed further in Part Three. In all the present examples, the role of the Internet is to diversify and complicate the network of screens, and the veracity of media content, in the daily life of terror culture.

Citizen Journalism

Handheld devices play an essential role in terror culture as a means of both recording and accessing media. From the handheld video camera through to the smartphone, terror moves quickly and widely through pocketable screens. Events such as the 7/7 London Bombing have been iconically

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captured by camera phone technology. When Andrews notes this, he theorises a direct relationship between the impact of an attack and the accessibility of handheld media devices:

But the volume of another attack, should one occur, could be amplified still further by newer technologies. The growth in ownership of cell-phone cameras since 9/11 meant that commuters’ contributions to coverage of last year’s southeast Asia tsunami and the July 7 terrorist attacks in London tube trains were more pictorial and more immediate.19

During 7/7, like 9/11, terror becomes a catalyst for the screen’s growing significance in terms of the technology itself and the social function of media. Andrews quotes Alfie Dennen:

While 9/11 was covered explosively in the blogosphere, 7/7 set the bedrock for wider acceptance of the value in citizen media […] It was definitely the point at which ordinary people with camera phones became the news.20

This supports a significant cultural shift in our cultural relationship with screen media catalysed by terror. The aesthetic of citizen journalism, occurring at the junction between screen and terror cultures, becomes a cultural institution with recognisable tropes and issues attached. As one of the primary vehicles of terror media, citizen journalism both enables and problematises terror: terror is easily captured and disseminated, but its representation is often chaotic and contradictory.


Figure 16: A camera phone picture from the London Tube Bombing showing stranded citizens fleeing the Underground. In the foreground another citizen journalist is photographing events with a camera phone.21

Videos and images with the distinct traits of camera phones are iconic of citizen journalism. The poor picture quality, awkward cinematography, and immediate proximity generate an aesthetic distinct from traditional news reportage and disaster photojournalism, and the style is mimicked in New Horror. Chapter Five explores the intersection between found footage and citizen journalism in detail. Citizen journalism implicitly promises an immediacy and an authenticity, calling attention to how professional journalism frames and stylises violence in its reportage. By no means are citizen and professional journalism in opposition, however: citizen recordings provide a cheap and quick resource for professional networks, which in turn enable citizen recordings to be distributed widely. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas states that amateur camerawork ‘can offer alternatives to mainstream media,’ suggesting that only after user-based distribution systems like Youtube does citizen journalism reach its full ‘political potency.’22 Heller-Nicholas suggests a subversive counter-


narrative for ‘real’ events generated outside mainstream journalism: this potential is explored further in Chapter Five.

In the range of media sources representing terror, no singular authentic representation is conclusive. Rather, citizen journalism self-reflexively demands an awareness of how media is subjectively framed as authentic. New Horror criticises the subjectivity of framing and mediation in the context of fear, creating a critical discourse with terror media. This contributes to an increased level of media criticism necessitated by the technological status quo.

7/7 makes for an excellent case study of citizen journalism. In many of the most striking images captured by camera phones, one can see other Londoners with their phones aloft taking similar pictures. It was popularly derided as absurd or crass to be taking pictures, but the only difference between the citizen journalist approach and that of professional news photography is the lack of taboo acknowledging the presence of a camera. Citizen journalism has its own way of streamlining the mediation process: its lack of slickness serves as a badge of veracity. Rodney discusses this slickness as creating a particular news paradigm in which the mediated representations supersede truth:

The introduction of embedded journalists in Iraq and the excessive focus on 24/7 coverage also emphasized real-time information and appeared ‘unedited’. The similarity between news presentation and reality media in the last few years has led to some commentators to pronounce the arrival of a new ‘military-entertainment’ complex. Just as the military-industrial complex described the gray area between interests of industry and military, or the military as industry, there is an increasingly gray area between ‘managed combat information, news and entertainment’ [quoting J. Crandall].

Rodney makes the excellent observation that entertainment media play their own role in complicating the authenticity of particular news styles. Entertainment television branded as ‘reality’ blends news and amateur aesthetics to create something simultaneously authentic and utterly narrativised. Here it is worth recalling how terror news is often discussed in cinematic terms. Commentators refer to 9/11 as being ‘like a movie,’ as discussed in Chapter Three, and footage of fictional and real violence is often noted as blurring the lines between horror and terror. Bishop notes this often:

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23 Rodney, ‘Real Time, Catastrophe, Spectacle,’ 39.
Although the genre [zombies] is forty years old, these concepts resonate more strongly with present-day Americans than ever before, where events like the September 11 attacks, the war in Iraq, and Hurricane Katrina provide comparable forms of shocking ideas and imagery.  

And on Katrina, in more detail:

Nightly news clips showed the deserted streets of New Orleans as if the city were a film set, with abandoned cars, drifting newspapers, and stray dogs. Of course, these events may not directly affect the production of zombie movies, but they certainly affect an audience’s reception of those films.

When Bishop ascribes the zombie’s success to an audience’s correlation of disaster terror and horror, he acknowledges that screen culture enables this relationship. The technology that evolves in the shadow of terror is used by a generation that can make these correlations and connections due to the complex mediation of terror, horror, entertainment, and news.

Screen devices such as smartphones or televisions represent entertainment and news with considerable slippage between the two, and nowhere is this more striking than in the case of New Horror and terror. Amateur camerawork (‘am-cam’) and citizen journalism raise issues of recording and framing, authenticity and narrativisation, spectatorship and responsibility, representation and distribution, screen multiplicity, media realities, and the circulation of fear. Writing on Iraq war blogging, Melissa Wall claims:

[…] as corporate media’s international news coverage shrinks, the market for citizen journalism from around the world will likely increase in the future as amateurs play an even larger role in providing audiences with first-hand information about the world. But just as with reality television shows, this citizen content may lead audiences to believe they are viewing something more authentic and unfiltered than they are likely to be actually seeing.

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24 Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 22.
It is significant that Wall uses reality television as a point of comparison. Negotiating the ‘reality’ of news reports, user-generated content, reality television, and New Horror movies as they are mediated through screens is a complex process endemic to understanding terror culture. These genres are competitive in authenticity and are often hybridised. Their media can be fragmented across a number of screens or collapsed into seamless presentation on one.\textsuperscript{27}

In New Horror, the sinister aspects of terror media are critiqued directly. The chilling objectivity and omniscience of surveillance media complements citizen journalism as a new aesthetic: authentic, incidental, and pervasive, it closes the loop of the media-rich world in which one can not only record at any moment but also be recorded. The cultural presence of surveillance technology is a powerful device in the found footage film, and often makes appearances in torture porn. In series such as \textit{Hostel} (Roth, 2005; 2008; Spiegel, 2011) and \textit{Saw} (Wan, 2004; Bousman, 2005; 2006; 2007; Hackl, 2008; Greutert, 2009; 2010), the surveillance and recording of torture—the mediation—is an extension of the torture itself. Wetmore notes the visual allusions between surveillance as a narrative device in the \textit{Saw} films and the presence of surveillance in news:

\begin{quote}
Jigsaw [the villain] also watches his victims on video, frequently resembling security videos. Several times in the first film, the audience watches the prisoners on Jigsaw’s monitors. The image resembles both security footage, made familiar on the evening news, and videos of hostages presented by terrorists.\textsuperscript{28}
\end{quote}

The reception of New Horror becomes inextricable from terror news media during its production and release. Overshadowing the \textit{Hostel} films is a terror event defined and triggered by citizen recording technology: the Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo Bay prison scandals. In the cases of Guantánamo and Abu Ghraib, it must be taken into account that is not that the torture itself happens—it being an unfortunate truth that torture occurs well beyond terror culture—but that the torture finds its way into news media. The Abu Ghraib scandal became a part of terror culture when photographs of prisoners being tortured and abused by American soldiers were leaked to news

\textsuperscript{27} Zombies are notorious for this. \textit{Diary of the Dead} (Romero, 2007) splices real news footage into a movie; \textit{Dead Set} (BBC, 2008) pretends to be a reality TV program.

\textsuperscript{28} Wetmore, \textit{Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema}. 
The photographs are not from journalists, and are not for official purposes. They are taken by soldiers as mementos, and therein lies their terror. Torture becomes an entertainment spectacle recorded as photographs, and when spread through news media, this mediated torture becomes terror. As with 9/11, the photographs made real the nature of terror culture, and by turning terror into media, gave it cultural impact. *The Washington Post* originally leaked the photos, subsequently claiming that the event ‘is now infamous for photographs of the U.S. military police abusing Iraqi prisoners.’

![Image of US soldier Lynndie England torturing a prisoner in Abu Ghraib.](image)

**Figure 17: US soldier Lynndie England photographed torturing a prisoner in Abu Ghraib.**

Jason Middleton’s description of Abu Ghraib’s effect on terror culture highlights the significance of the media spectacle and authenticity:

> Before the revelation in early 2004 of the images of abuse and torture performed by American soldiers on Iraqi prisoners in the Abu Ghraib prison, the imaging, and hence imagining, of how the post-9/11 “war on terror” was being carried out was constrained by a mass media apparatus generally subservient to a Pentagon ban on images of dead soldiers.

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31 ‘Chronology of Abu Ghraib.’  
The Abu Ghraib scandal called into question what it meant to record and distribute in an age where recording and distribution is done so easily. The role of the mediator and the spectator, in this case the photographer, was publicly problematised. Discourse turns to the convergence between entertainment and terror, and this cultural moment is the peak of torture porn’s box office success. The outcry against torture porn carries echoes of Abu Ghraib, coded even into the name of the genre. It is not only torture, but the pornography of torture: the recording and the implied enjoyment of the medium is part of the atrocity. On a greater scale, it illustrates how media facilitates terror—the torture porn of Abu Ghraib becomes terror media—creating a symbiotic relationship in which terror and screen media shape a culture.

The prevalence of terror in the recent history of media technology engenders a presence of spectacle, violence, and fear in screens. There is terror in the aesthetics of citizen journalism and surveillance; in the conspiracies and hoaxes of Internet discourse; in the viral videos shared through handheld devices; in the questionable subjectivities of major news sources; in the mediated representations of ‘reality’; and in the proliferating media devices delivering New Horror to viewers anywhere and anytime, such as the tablet, the phone, the computer, and the TV. I have no intention of validating one source or style of entertainment or ‘real’ media over another: rather, I am interested in the proliferation of this media and how New Horror uses it to critique terror culture. What can be certain is that a striking level of critical media literacy, reflected in New Horror, is required for those navigating such a diverse and saturated environment.

From the Camcorder to the Cloud

New Horror occurs in an age where the technological and cultural position of the screen has unprecedented significance. This is crucial to an understanding of how horror functions in popular culture: its production, distribution, reception, medium, narrative, and social influence relate to screen technology. Media devices are in constant and rapid development, making a comprehensive discussion of the period impossible. In the following I hope to give a brief overview of screen media technology’s evolution in the 21st century as it pertains to New Horror’s cultural impact. This study focuses on how media, specifically screen media, have a shaping influence on daily life and terror cultural experience and how New Horror asserts its relevance by addressing and critiquing issues around developing media technology.

Two interrelated changes to the 1990s mediascape precede and inform New Horror and terror culture: the 24-hour news cycle and the camcorder. As both became available for the average
Western consumer, supply and demand for video media abounds. The camcorder precedes the digital camera, later converged with the mobile phone, as the readily available video recording device equipped with four key elements: a competitive price allowing wide social access; the ability to record images and video for screen viewing; a small screen for replaying and accessing this media; and a compact design allowing the device carried at any given moment by the user. The potential for these devices grows later through smartphone’s capacity to quickly upload, download, and share video media on the Internet. From the growing popularity of the camcorder arises a new formal genre of video: am-cam, or amateur camerawork, documented by Amy West and recognised in its fictitious imitation as found footage.\textsuperscript{33}

Meanwhile, the 24-hour-news cycle drastically alters the economic structure of the news industry. News shifts from its periodical daily position of newspaper, radio, and television programs to a continuous stream on selected television and computer screens. Generating a constant supply of news ahead of equally prolific competitors, networks make sweeping changes to television news in generic terms. News increasingly resembles entertainment media, championing highly dramatic stories and aesthetics to attract viewers. According to Monahan: ‘news workers construct news as public drama using narrative principles that have been “ripped from television” or other productions of Hollywood’s fictional register.’\textsuperscript{34} Reports become narrativised to increase their appeal, giving them a growing resemblance to fictional storytelling. The reality TV genre and the concept of ‘infotainment’ arises as the hybrid of news and entertainment, giving news a model for cheap production and high ratings. Bolter notes that ‘Viewers will then be prepared to accept the narrative structures offered in the less well-scripted, real-time coverage of wars and disasters.’\textsuperscript{35} In the 1990s, the ‘reality’ genre development and influence occur in the arena of television. By the 2010s, screen devices have utterly overtaken newspapers as the medium of news consumption, and Web 2.0 provides an endless supply of highly competitive news sources. Internet news continues the sensationalist market strategy through the use of colloquial headlines and ‘clickbait.’ In two decades of endless news and ‘news,’ this flood of exaggerated information inevitably becomes contradictory, compelling viewers to understand truth as a selective process, if only due to the quantity of content.

An alternative means for post-1990s news networks to create competitive news is by sourcing citizen journalism—made available and palatable by the normalisation of the camcorder—


\textsuperscript{34} Monahan, The Shock of the News, 7.

\textsuperscript{35} Bolter, ‘Preface,’ 11.
for its immediacy and viability. The increasing reliance on citizen journalism and entertainment-branded media gives the news genre, hypothetically synonymous with unfiltered truthful information, noticeable new stylistic trends. Some of the ways in which the aesthetics of citizen journalism and news converge are demonstrated in terror culture and New Horror, when found footage movies are presented as ‘real,’ and when 9/11 is described as ‘like a movie.’ This highlights the terror applications of the cultural trajectory towards Henry Jenkins’ theories of screen media convergence.\(^{36}\) In the context of this thesis, convergence collapses and fragments the politically devastating issue of terror and the critically provocative genre of New Horror. What is also betrayed in this discourse is how media becomes a part of the everyday, and in turn a part of ‘real’ life, where the realism of a movie and the movie-likeness of a real event can be interchangeably discussed.

Screen technology has an increasing presence in the everyday, and in turn, the everyday is increasingly appearing through screens. Anne Friedberg succinctly encapsulates this in the following:

> Screens have become a pervasive part of daily experience. Buildings are adorned with screens as exterior walls, sports stadiums add Jumbotrons to the proscenium space of spectacle, screens show games to sports spectators in a time loop of instant replay and a crosscut to its fans, fighter pilots and military strategists conduct manoeuvres on screens with global positioning, televisions have gaming consoles and eye-toys, computers interface with other screens and digital archives, PDAs browse the Web, cell phones take and transmit photos.\(^{37}\)

Even since Friedberg’s work in 2006, the quality, portability of, and access to screens has increased with the advent of tablets; the ubiquity of smartphones; the increasing standardisation of screens in public advertising spaces; and the sophistication of home cinema. Caetlin Benson-Allott notes that older technologies such as camcorder and videotape remain culturally significant in new media: ‘since its disciplinary formation during the mid-1990s, new media studies has routinely equated new with “digital” and disregarded mechatronic (mechanic + electronic) antecedents to digital


Benson-Allott raises the insightful point that multifunctional media technologies are not necessarily digital or new, but that all participate the division of Jenkins’ plethora of ‘black boxes’ that fracture and multiply the screens in our cultural landscape. These all increase and affect the ways and means by which we access terror media, and, significantly, how New Horror is accessed. Like other media genres, New Horror and terror become culturally relevant through their accessibility via many media devices. From this, I aim to discuss how New Horror plays with media technologies and fictional narrative in the context of terror.

The relationship New Horror and terror is supported by the contemporary multiplicity of screens and sources of media. Jenkins’ work on media convergence provides the framework for the complex interface of devices and media in the 21st century:

By convergence, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.

I seek to apply this flow and migration between media industries such as terror news and horror storytelling, and how convergence allows a critical discourse between these fields. My interest presently is in the variety of generic styles converged on a single screens: for instance, how news segues into movies; viewing into recording; watching into playing; and fictional narratives into real information. The technology itself simultaneously champions media collapse and multiplicity: although, for instance, the smartphone allows communication, recording, and Internet access, it is not the singular converged point of access to this stream. Smartphone owners exist in a mediascape where all the devices and screens described by Friedberg perform similar functions, in which most can do one and one can do most. Discourse variously casts convergence as a carnival; a cell; a labyrinth; or a library: New Horror both critiques and celebrates these archetypes. A degree of

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40 Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 15.

41 As I move towards the *Shattered Realities* part of this thesis, it is the divergence between multiple devices that becomes the focus: I am interested in how migration and navigation between media to follow narratives of horror and terror affects the ‘reality’ of these stories.
sophistication is required to interpret and navigate contemporary media, and the success of New Horror’s approach suggests a culture that is engaged by this challenge.

I am interested particularly in Benson-Allott’s metaphor of ‘shattered’ screens, inspired by the *Friday the 13th* (Cunningham, 1980) title card appearing to break the fourth wall by smashing the glass screen of a television.\(^{42}\) For the following chapters, I wish to explore the proliferation of screens or ‘black boxes’ as shattered and fragmented; pieces of media which never give a full picture, scattered through our daily lives. The metaphor of sharp edges and lack of cohesion is significant in reading how New Horror is able to refract and shift meanings of terror, reflecting itself and fracturing the authenticity of terror narratives. I will return often to contemporary screen culture as endemically fragmented, decentralised, and challenging as the concept of ‘shattering’ becomes imperative to Part Three.

I have discussed how terror events show a symbiotic relationship between the perpetuation of terror culture and the development of screen technology. On a broader scale, the scholarship surrounding post-9/11 theory and New Horror make frequent reference to how fear, whether terror or horror, plays with our mediascape. In the primary example, the increasing demand for news at the point of 9/11 triggered mass access to multiple media, as described by Monahan:

> Of course, television was not the only source of information used by the media audience in the wake of the attacks. After a few days, many people sought more detailed information than what televised news could offer, and so they increasingly turned to other sources, such as newspapers and the Internet.\(^{43}\)

While newspapers have become a niche medium in the wake of smart technology, Monahan’s statement highlights a public demand for multiple media technologies, with a singular source or medium of news becoming inadequate. Implicit is a multiplicity of truths and realities surrounding the 9/11 world that one news source cannot supply, suggesting a growing understanding of media representation’s subjectivity. Melnick describes 9/11 art as ‘revised constantly, […] [reaching] its audiences through a myriad of channels of image and information.’\(^{44}\) According to Melnick, 9/11 media destabilises the monolithic media paradigm dominant until that period: ‘[…] the usual

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gatekeeping mechanisms that have defined American cultural life since World War II were being surpassed by a less organised and, at times, anarchic set of possibilities.\textsuperscript{45} The anarchic possibilities and the myriad of channels described by Melnick are terror culture’s status quo. Whether confusing, clarifying, or only conveying terror, screen culture and technology have unprecedented influence on the contemporary West.

**Horror and Terror Between Screens**

The growing dominance of screen culture brings terror, fear, and violence’s spectacular aspects to the sociopolitical fore. As a medium of representing realities, the screen contextualises terror as a screen phenomenon. In terms of cultural influence and daily experience, the screen becomes the dominant means through which fear and terror are experienced. Kellner emphasises the terms of the spectacle when he describes this:

> Political and social life is also shaped more and more by media spectacle. Social and political conflicts are increasingly played out on the screens of media culture, which display spectacles such as sensational murder cases, terrorist bombings, celebrity and political sex scandals, and the explosive violence of everyday life.\textsuperscript{46}

As terror and sociopolitical life are redefined in terms of media spectacle, horror enters the discourse with unique cultural power. Long established as a medium of fear on the screen, horror cinema is ideally positioned to critique a society gripped by terror media.

Horror cinema has a long history with critical mediation and spectatorship. Horror narratives and aesthetics are engaged in an aggressive play with screen media, self-reflexivity being a fundamental pillar of the genre. This is well-documented in Carol Clover’s book *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, and by Philip Brophy in his study of ‘Horrality.’\textsuperscript{47} However, in the current media ecology New Horror cannot fully be referred to as ‘cinema.’ Many of the case studies in this thesis concern movies with successful box office returns, a remarkable feat

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\textsuperscript{45} Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 14.


when cinema culture is in so tumultuous a period. However, ‘cinema’ no longer encapsulates a working definition of horror movies: nor is it the only medium of the horror genre to be culturally significant. Screen technology collapses our cultural engagement with movies, as mentioned by Friedberg:

In the last two decades, with accelerating speed, the media-specific distinctions between cinematic, televisual and computer media have been eroded beyond recognition by the digital technologies that have transformed them.48

The quality and scale of television technology has earned it the name ‘home cinema,’ highlighting the importance of media diversity in horror. As Benson-Allott explores from video nasties to made-for-TV monster movies to DVD special features, horror movies demonstrate their media-savvy nature by extending beyond cinema.49 Chuck Tryon describes how new television technology affects the horror experience in the following:

In particular, state-of-the-art home theater systems transform movie-watching at home into something that rivals the visual pleasure associated with theatrical projection, allowing movie fans to avoid the unruly audiences often associated with public space even if movie-watching at home seems to disrupt the public film cultures associated with going to the movie theater.50

Tryon suggests that the culture surrounding horror cinema disappears with the advent of home cinema, but New Horror has a striking public presence. New Horror capitalises on the wealth of media available to its fans to host promotional buzz, fan communities, and horror discourse.51 Horror moves through public spaces across the breadth of screens available: playing movies on a handheld smartphone or tablet; advertising posters and trailers on digital billboards; projecting recordings of cinema audiences reacting to the scares in a movie; and using transmedia for

48 Friedberg, The Virtual Window, 3.

49 Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens, 1.

50 Chuck Tryon, ‘Video from the Void: Video Spectatorship, Domestic Film Cultures, and Contemporary Horror Film,’ Journal of Film and Video 63.1 (Fall 2009): 41.

51 See Chapter Seven for a case study of how New Horror posters are distributed to be seen only in certain contexts.
promotion. The public culture of horror is more active than ever. New Horror resists confinement to any one medium, and any particular mode of address. It exists in an age of hybridity and multimedia, in which one can easily swipe between news reports and zombie movies on a device that fits in a pocket, or stream live on the Internet a recording of one’s reactions watching a cinema-quality movie in one’s living room.

In the forthcoming chapters, the case studies use New Horror movies, particularly those which self-reflexively critique contemporary problems of mediation and spectatorship. All New Horror movies, purely by way of being screen spectacles concerned with fear and violence, bear some relationship with the concerns in this Part. The first two Hostel movies are a useful example. Although they have a nostalgic Gothic sensibility and deal more directly with nationalist and gendered violence respectively, both are noted in scholarship as products of a 21st-century screen media culture. David Rimanelli and Hanna Liden highlight the liminal but pivotal presence in the first film:

While we see not one computer in Hostel, the entire narrative is ultimately dependent on the respiratory system of the World Wide Web. Clients gain access to Elite Hunting—the name of the thrill-kill operation—through an e-mail address printed on a business card: blatanikov@gang.rus.

And in the sequel, Gabrielle Murray observes the smartphone’s role in connecting victims with their torturers: ‘Men with blackberries and mobile phones frenetically bid for the girls.’ In the first film, fake camera phone pictures are used to trick multiple victims: in the second, a character uses an Internet banking transfer to buy her freedom. A dominatrix yells in Hostel: ‘you watch; you pay!’

52. Fans can co-operate in New Horror ARGs such as Cloverfield and in uncovering the mysteries of horror video games such as the recent playable teaser mystery mini-game in the Silent Hill franchise. Others role-play live and online: the former and latter are researched in Chapters Eight and Nine. Many stream videos of themselves and their friends watching horror; and use everyday media technology to record and share their own horror movies in smartphone applications such as the short-lived The Crypt. See: ‘P.T.,’ Kojima Productions, 2014; Alex Zalben, ‘Eli Roth Launches His New Horror App, “The Crypt”,’ MTV, 14th February, 2014, accessed 29th September, 2015, <http://www.mtv.com/news/1722340/eli-roth-crypt-app-horror-fans/>.

53. The above examples are those surrounding New Horror movies. The genre has bled into television, gaming, Internet, journalism, and the real world: this movement is explored in Part Three.


reminding us that this is a world in which the violent spectacle is valuable. Self-reflexivity and screen violence are seldom far from the surface of New Horror works. In this climate, New Horror can take for granted that its audiences have a highly advanced level of media literacy and a honed ability to critically engage with the prolific content of their many screens.

**The News Media Reality**

An advanced media literacy may be suggested to develop in conjunction with screen development. In the following discussion I wish to highlight an element of media literacy crucial to terror culture: the critique of media’s relationship with reality, authenticity, and mediation itself. This trend is a product of many developments in screen technology: the fear and doubt inherent in both terror paranoia and new technology; the new aesthetic trends of information media; the availability of platforms offering widespread discourse; the conflict between market competition and authentic reportage in the news economy; the diversification of photography and recording sources revealing the subjectivity of framing and mediating; the presence of surveillance networks heightening awareness of self-reflexivity and spectatorship; the easy synthesis and distribution of disinformation; the attention to media technology as a source of social, political, and cultural understanding due to its spread; and the collapsing boundaries of information and entertainment, or the real and the fictional. New Horror is another screen technology development that represents a trend of criticism for those engaged in screen culture.

The media industry has a huge demand for multiple screens with multiple media functions. It is a social norm in the 21st-century West that we are capable of navigating a diverse set of media devices in our daily lives, and enjoy voraciously consuming mixed media as much as creating it. The screens present in daily life come with the assumption that users can make complex identifications between information, entertainment, and media falling between such as parodies, hoaxes, transmedia projects, and, often, New Horror. The status quo is a society equipped to recognise, interpret, contribute to, and critique an extraordinarily complex media world. The popularity of New Horror narratives engaged in this challenge—not to mention the creative boom of filmmakers and fans—supports a market that recognises, enjoys, and explores media complexity as far more than an antidote for numbness. When New Horror critiques media authenticity and subjective reality, it often does so in relation to news media, particularly screen journalism.
In terror culture, dominated as it is by media technology, news media’s significance is garishly authoritative. News media is vital, and vitally subjective, in representing a social, political, and cultural reality in the age of terror, as illustrated by Monahan:

[…] news is the principal source of information for most of us, particularly for events and issues to which we are not directly connected. The images and information we acquire through our interactions with the media shape our perceptions of social reality. The productions of the news media, in particular, direct our attention and shape how we think and talk, about what is featured as news. We use this information as a basis for activity, as a cue to how we should define the situation, and as a way to understand current events. We make sense of political and social issues and learn about our culture and social institutions through the frames and interpretations provided by social media.⁵⁶

Žižek offers a more cynical statement, writing before the normalisation citizen journalism and Internet discourse:

With the spread of the anthrax panic in October 2001, the West got the first taste of this new ‘invisible’ warfare in which – an aspect we should always bear in mind – we, ordinary citizens, are totally dependent on the authorities for information about what is going on: we see and hear nothing; all we know comes from the official media.⁵⁷

The problems of ‘official media’—which I refer to as major or corporate news networks and sources—are worth deconstructing. This core of the news genre is surrounded by critical discourse in a variety of forms, with notable examples such as citizen journalists blogging their on-the-ground experiences of war, websites mirroring real news stories as political satire, and social media networks destabilising major news sources. While major news does provide a dominant narrative of terror culture, subversive narratives abound in the mediascape. Examples of these counter-narratives are prevalent in many New Horror works, from *Cloverfield* to the hoaxes discussed in Chapter Eight.

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Noting the colossal influence of news media, and considering the ever-growing presence of screens in daily life, its role in shaping terror culture is instrumental. New Horror’s ability to tap into current affairs takes advantage of the screen as a medium for both news and fear to critique terror news trends: disparate aesthetics, conflicting information, cinematic spectacles of violence, generic narratives, spectatorial problems, and questionable realism. These trends make news’ role in our reality a troubling and conflicted issue, and are the basis of strong criticism.

From the news coverage of 9/11, the integrity of screen journalism falls under heavy scrutiny. The subjectivity of news representation and its processes of mediation demonstrate the means by which terror comes to be understood and even experienced in the Western world. Geoff King’s collection The Spectacle of the Real hosts insightful interrogations of 9/11 media, with Jay David Bolter’s study focusing on the seamless editing:

For example, in their ‘total coverage’ of the collapse of the World Trade Center, the networks soon began editing out the images and sounds of falling bodies (those who had jumped from upper stories), which they deemed too brutal. In the age of near-real time spectacle, coverage acquires two meanings: to report the event completely and at the same time to cover over and refuse to acknowledge the gaps.58

This double ‘coverage’ is a recurring theme in major media criticism, as is the contronymous meaning of ‘to screen’ being both ‘to show’ or ‘to hide.’ Bolter, like many other critics, draws attention to the complex processes and techniques used by major news to curate our experience of reality—recalling that this mediated 9/11 is the ultimate ‘reality’ event, ‘experienced’ by those outside New York or the Pentagon only through news media.

Many techniques are discussed as means of ‘screening’ terror news, and many of them are borrowed from genres of entertainment. These are the techniques that provoke commentators to call 9/11 both ‘like a movie’ and an ‘enormous reality.’ Some news networks edit undesirable footage to create a seamlessly believable coverage; some use rough footage as a badge of raw authenticity; some inject narrative into news stories to make them palatable; some use branding methods to communicate context and experience. This arsenal of generic techniques meet mixed success: narrativised terror news is accused of motivating wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, among other political and economic agendas. Rodney describes it as such in the following:

The chain of events from the aftermath of September 11 to the invasion of Iraq has also followed a similar path in terms of its mediated representation—from the confessional apparatus of the talk show (played out in the drama of 9/11) to the retribution enacted in the nightly coverage of the invasion of Iraq, which has taken on the dimension of surveillance as punishment and ultimately entertainment.\textsuperscript{59}

The smorgasbord of news sources using these disparate authenticators creates a contrast in supposedly seamless realities, while improved communication technology supports the critical discourse surrounding major news. In the simplest sense, these techniques of mediating reality can be understood as the use of mitigators and fictions to create a particular ‘real.’

The listed techniques of news mediation destabilise the perception of news as a hermetic and unmediated genre. King illustrates this in his discussion comparing ‘realistic’ Hollywood special effects and the ‘reality TV’ genre:

The two also overlap in many instances, however, nowhere more clearly and jarringly in recent years than in the ultimate ‘spectacle of the real’ constituted by the destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, live-reality television coverage of which evoked constant comparison with big-screen fictional images.\textsuperscript{60}

King encapsulates a number of contradictions that provoke news critique, such as the generic conflation of three ‘realities’: news, special effects, and television. His description of this conflation as both clear and jarring suggests that tumultuous relationship between the news realities and the critical media literacy of terror culture. Similar to Bolter’s double ‘coverage,’ this subjective ‘real’—a competitive way to brand authenticity—highlights the disparities of the divide-and-conquer philosophy of news verisimilitude.

The use of graphics and music are a more traditional set of semantics framing screen journalism falling under criticism. Melnick’s discussion of 9/11 news reports draws out the issues of genre hybridity of news and entertainment branding.\textsuperscript{61} The framing elements of music and graphics

\textsuperscript{59} Rodney, ‘Real Time, Catastrophe, Spectacle,’ 44.

\textsuperscript{60} King, “‘Just Like A Movie?’”, 13.

\textsuperscript{61} Melnick, \textit{9/11 Culture}, 50.
engender 9/11 with a constructed sense of context, familiarity, and understanding: more specifically, the understanding that America as a whole is experiencing attack. Despite being the most familiar semantics of the news genre, in this period the heightened use of logos, music, and slogans emphasises the process of mediation occurring between events and their screen representations.

The composition of footage and its presentation of authenticity falls under heavy scrutiny. The relative randomness of handheld citizen journalism and the unfocused glimpses offered by security footage are contrasted with the tailored style of professional photography and video journalism. Compared to the slick framing of professional shooting, amateur footage projects authenticity. This perception of amateur footage as unrefined or unmediated indicates a growing attention to formal composition and its relationship with authenticity. The multiplication of styles offered by major news—the cheap citizen journalism and the slick professional shooting—creates a self-reflexive critical cycle in which the authentic and mediated elements of one draws attention to the other. As the generic boundaries between areas such as news, documentary, opinion piece, cinema, and incidental footage converge, their relative authenticity distorts. Misha Kavka draws attention to the formal or technical composition that communicates this realism: ‘Even documentary or live transmission is thus open to questions about technological and narrative intrusions into the reality presented.’ As a shockingly ‘real’ event becomes ‘like a movie,’ movies and the news converge to look more like documentary and citizen journalism. Composition and recording technology lose their objective invisibility, entering the narrative of authentic representation.

The narrativisation of news, whether as a political tool or a competitive economic strategy, is a subtler issue that falls under criticism. According to Bolter:

The news networks had long realized that their coverage of a disaster needed to be turned into a story. The technique of narrativization was used extensively throughout the September 11 coverage, as vignettes of sacrifice and heroism served to build up a larger story. The technique was used again in the coverage of the American mobilization against and invasion of Iraq.

What Bolter loosely connects here is how these generic tools shape the events of terror culture: in the news, the war on Iraq becomes narrative causality; Bin Laden the villain to Bush’s hero.

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Rodney’s description of the ‘reality’ entertainment narrative being used to justify Iraq is a sinister example of the effectiveness of news mediation. While a direct political agenda for news corporations is a separate debate, it can be surmised that perpetuating terror culture is at least a profitable model for news sources. For all its associated political effectiveness and relative subtlety, narrativisation is often criticised in popular culture and discourse. The proliferation and diversification of news sources offers a variety of stories—narratively polished by major news and unpolished by citizen journalism—that are inevitably contradictory, and what is interpreted as ‘real’ must always be subjectively selected.

As the media revolution comes of age in the 2010s, the bleeding edge of technology is nicknamed ‘smart.’ It is a telling label not only for devices but for their use. Smart technology is fast, networked, and multifunctional, meeting the needs and values of its market. The smart media economy can resemble a mise-en-abyme; perpetuating terror, disinformation, paranoia, surveillance, and a mediated reality. Optimistically, smart media offers platforms of critical discourse, endless information, and creative opportunities. Navigating between these extremes, smart users interact with a plethora of devices every day: smartphones, tablets, phones, televisions, laptops, computers, public screens, gaming consoles, music players, and so forth. Many are networked via Internet or local connections, with content traveling between screens for the user to follow. The content and functionality offered by these devices is multifarious—the defining traits of the smart device are its multifunctional speed and ability—bridging the shrinking gaps between fields such as news, information, entertainment, creative activity, play, and social communication.

A user critically and subjectively interfaces with this mixed content at a speed demanding a ‘smart’ approach. The smart screenscape is both elevated and diffused as a cultural condition. Media-enabled society celebrates complexity, rendering attempts to isolate ‘media’ from ‘real’ obsolete. The cultural reorientation around screen technology elevates and diffuses terror culture, as is discussed in the following New Horror case studies. I suggest that New Horror works such as the Saw and Paranormal Activity (Peli, 2007) franchises should be read in the context of their ‘smart’

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64 At risk in this discussion is the assumption that the public are media dupes, and that criticism is reserved for an academic elite: this is criticised by Benson-Allott as an erroneous underestimation of the status quo. While this is not an ethnographic study, the theory of uncritical news consumption is incongruent with a market that demands media complexity and demonstrates an interest in the critical media narratives of New Horror. There is a self-reflexive game of reality and fiction being played in New Horror, calling fans’ attention to the processes and contexts differentiating the two. The culture of critical media literacy supports films that trouble the aesthetics of realism, explore the dangers of of uncritical spectatorship, and emphasise the importance of challenging dominant narratives. See: Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens, 9.
media delivery, and are thus able to offer challenging critical narratives on the fragmentation of screened reality.

**New Horror On Screen: Case Studies**

In using the medium of screen, all New Horror films bear some relationship with screen culture. The examples I have selected are among the most popular New Horror phenomena that self-reflexively address screens in narrative and aesthetic. Demonstrating a trend of media literacy, these films challenge fans to critically assess the screen as a cultural mediator.

Chapter Five tracks the success of the found footage sub-genre of films from 2007 until now. I suggest that while *The Blair Witch Project* was a pre-9/11 horror sensation, the style did not become a sub-generic trend until the citizen journalist aesthetic gained significant cultural momentum in the following decade’s age of terror. Found footage makes a fascinating case study for the stylistic process of mediating realities and fictions, incorporating narratives of subjective cinematography and authenticity. These films challenge the formal trends used to assert authenticity by juxtaposing a realist aesthetic with fantastical monsters, offering a commentary on the subjectivity of screen media. Operating in a complex space between fiction and reality, the additional transmedia promotions and paratexts expose how mediation affects narrative and authenticity. The diegetic camera alludes to citizen journalism and surveillance, calling attention to the role of recording and mediation in situations of terror and horror, while self-reflexively addressing the layered practices of watching and participating in screen culture.

In Chapter Six, I suggest that the uniting theme of the *Saw* film series is the practice of watching. The *Saw* films consistently use visual mise-en-abyme and meta-narratives to interrogate the role of the spectator, particularly as it applies to violence. As audience alignments and perspectives shift between characters and instalments, the post-9/11 concept of an inert and uncritical spectator is repeatedly challenged. Characters are caught in a web of watching, being watched, observing and reacting. Reflecting a screen-rich culture, the scenes of *Saw* use layers of frames, windows, cameras, mirrors, and screens to perpetuate a self-reflexive and frightening cycle. The series demands a dynamic mode of spectatorship suited to the smart generation, suggesting that those who cannot navigate the media world are, like victims of the series’ villain, trapped.

These case studies serve to illustrate how intertextuality and self-reflexivity have evolved in the horror genre. New Horror addresses a media-literate world, operating in a cultural and technological zeitgeist that grants the genre a powerful critical position. Screen technology has
become more influential and complex than ever before, and New Horror successfully capitalises on its ability to critique media culture.
5. ‘I’m Documenting’: Found Footage in Screen Culture

The found footage trend is one of the most distinctive sub-genres of New Horror. The movement booms from 2008 with *Paranormal Activity* series (Peli, 2007; Williams, 2010; Joost & Schulman, 2011; 2012; Landon, 2014; Plotkin, 2015), *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008), *The Last Exorcism* (Stamm, 2010), *Diary of the Dead* (Romero, 2007), *V/H/S* (Bettinelli-Olpin et al, 2012), the Spanish film *[rec]* (Balagueró & Plaza, 2007), and its American remake *Quarantine* (Dowdle, 2008).¹ The most recognisable unifying trait of the sub-genre is the affectation of an amateurish aesthetic, deviating strikingly from traditional cinematography as a device of narrative authentication. Presented by particular visual markers as barely-edited footage of ‘real’ events, shot by characters with diegetic cameras, the footage is supposedly ‘found’ after the characters’ deaths and distributed for cinematic release. I suggest that the saturation point of the found footage craze occurs, like most other New Horror sensations, at a watershed moment technologically and culturally, when video recording and distribution technology shifts mediation of terror and the real. As will be explored through popular examples of the found footage trend, this sub-genre takes advantage of the multiplication of aesthetic techniques used by different media genres leading up to the 2010s to assert and play with realism. Engaging viewers in a complex game of negotiated realities of monsters and magic, the realities these films will be shown to truly represent are those of subjective news aesthetics and creative media technology such as handheld recording. The rampant success of found footage occurs during a cultural shift toward critical media literacy endemic to the the later terror climate.

Defining ‘Found Footage’

In the process of classifying found footage, the significance of the unconventional interplay between narrative and cinematography becomes clear. The most recognisable element of a found footage movie is its formal devices, which become inextricable from the narrative. The camera in found footage is integral to the diegesis. This results in a particular visual style, close enough to cinema’s spectacular appeal with the mass availability of high-quality recording technology, but separate enough to authenticate the film’s incidental recording by its characters. The handheld ‘shaky-cam’ and the static surveillance archives are the two styles most easily recognisable. These

¹ *[rec]* is one of the few non-American films considered in this thesis, while *Quarantine* is one of the few remakes. Given that *[rec]* was a major catalyst for the trend, it is discussed in this chapter. *Quarantine* is a very close remake, but it generally brings forth more terror-specific nuances than *[rec]*.
styles also situate the films’ relevance in their political and technological era. The diegetic camera is usually introduced by the narrative for means other than recording the pending horrors. It may be for an amateur documentary; a video diary; a news report; an online chat platform; or a home security system. As the monster descends, the camera is repurposed as a means to authenticate the fantastical crisis, or simply for characters to ‘document.’ Alexandra Heller-Nicholas defines the ‘found’ title as such: ‘Found footage horror films rely on the _fictional_ premise that the footage from which they are constructed existed previously, and has been re-utilized into a new, separate work.’

The incidental diegetic camera, no matter its original function, brings together collection of cinematographic approaches. Julian Petley summarises:

> […] “found” footage itself is an absolute compendium of visual devices which one associates with the documentary mode at its most immediate: shaky, hand-held camerawork, ‘accidental’ compositions, crash zooms, blurred images, lens flare, inaudible or intermittent sound, direct address to camera, scratches and lab marks on the print, and so on.

These flaws are affected by the professional filmmaking team to perform a variety of functions, the primary one being authentication. Recall that Daniel North notes that _Cloverfield_: ‘purchases authenticity by displaying a shaky camera.’ Beyond authentication, the handheld or incidental camera offers great benefits to a horror filmmaker. A deliberate lack of equipment and cinematographic professionalism lowers the production budget dramatically. Without traditional horror music or framing to act as a warning, veteran horror fans are freshly subjected to the imminence of jump-scares. Time-worn plots of the haunted house, the zombie apocalypse,

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2 As with any sub-genre, found footage has crossovers into conventional horror cinema. Crossovers occur in distinct segments of other films: it is common to have a mise-en-abyme in which the characters of a non-found-footage horror movie find and uncover videos in their diegetic world, usually of their forebears’ ends by the looming monster. This may be seen in _Dawn of the Dead_ (Snyder, 2004) and _Sinister_ (Derrickson, 2012). These episodes of found footage style embedded in other films is indicative of the movement’s significance; however, the films I discuss in this chapter are primarily found footage, with few overarching markers of fictionality or formal cinematic conventions.


exorcism, and the monster invasion movie can be refreshed by the new look. Pivoted around a relatively simple visual-narrative device, found footage makes for strikingly effective horror.

In a similar vein to the torture porn trend, found footage offers a visceral immediacy, socially and haptically. The handheld camera itself being diegetic threatens the fourth wall, such as in Quarantine, when the camera and audience are battered against a monster attacking the cameraman. The Cloverfield shaky-cam was dubbed ‘queasy-cam’ by Roger Ebert, suggesting a haptic relationship that reinforces the closeness of the film to the audience’s reality. Chuck Tryon’s summation of The Blair Witch Project (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999) succinctly notes the deviation from the impartial cinematic form: ‘In essence, the shot [at the opening of Blair Witch] correlates video with subjective vision rather than the objective, impersonal shots associated with a standard film.’

Chuck Tryon’s summation of The Blair Witch Project (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999) succinctly notes the deviation from the impartial cinematic form: ‘In essence, the shot [at the opening of Blair Witch] correlates video with subjective vision rather than the objective, impersonal shots associated with a standard film.’

Caetlin Benson-Allott describes how ‘The structural shock of the diegetic cinematographers’ deaths and the ensuing failure of the camera metonymize the spectator’s own death and make finding footage feel like a monstrous mistake. Meanwhile, the surveillance aesthetic authenticates itself through cool objectivity: its framing purely functional, it allows no sensationalism, but threatens the viewer with the rigid inescapability of a freeze response. Both styles challenge a viewer’s subjectivity through their familiarity: these movies become blockbusters in a world where most people carry a camera and walk beneath surveillance technology daily.

With the cinematography being incorporated into the narrative world, the narrative itself is free to explore different horror traditions. Once we look beyond the aesthetic, certain conventions illuminate the sub-genre’s history and its present social context. Unlike many horror sub-genres—the slasher, the haunted house, the zombie apocalypse, the demonic possession, the monster movie—found footage is not categorised by its antagonists. Grounded in its stylistic distinctiveness, found footage is able to explore the mythology of monster stories: Paranormal Activity revitalises the haunted house, George A. Romero reframes his zombies in Diary of the Dead, and the monster-disaster is retold as Cloverfield. Despite encapsulating such a spread of evil, found footage is seldom strays outside the fantastical. Poltergeists and mutants abound; stalkers and torturers do not.

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7 Chuck Tryon, ‘Video from the Void: Video Spectatorship, Domestic Film Cultures, and Contemporary Horror Film,’ Journal of Film and Video 63.1 (Fall 2009): 43.

The exceptions, as seen in *The Last Exorcism*, are brief and cartoonish, sustaining the cinematic suspension of disbelief through the proxy of characters who *do* believe in the uncanny.

The problems of naturalistic antagonists are linked to the sporadic history of found footage horror. The genesis of the sub-genre is usually cited as *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980), which in the 1980s stirred such controversy with its formal realism that Ruggero Deodato was famously accused of producing an actual snuff movie. Contemporary popular found footage avoids these controversies, keeping its narratives in the fantastical world of monsters and magic. Heller-Nicholas notes that fantasy is key to the play with authenticity in the sub-genre:

The pleasure of found footage horror in part stems from spectatorial knowledge that something we rationally know not to be true (the supernatural) can momentarily be reimagined (consciously or otherwise) as “real” because the vehicle in which that information is delivered is one we otherwise trust to provide reliable information.

The sub-genre’s play between familiarity and unfamiliarity, or realism and narrativism, is a recurring duality exemplified by ‘real’ footage of unreal monsters. Watching found footage movies, one must investigate what demarcates something as real, and the process by which something as whimsical as giant mutants and demons called ‘Toby’ might be fashioned into a semblance of truth. This process is central to the game of watching found footage, and a key concern of the period in which the movies flourish.

In this sense, it is not so much the *what* of the sub-genre’s monsters, but the *how* and the *why*. Historical horror monsters are updated for the 2000s by the aesthetic and the particularities of found footage: Matt Reeves suggests that *Cloverfield* articulates the cultural climate much like *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954) did, reframing it in the context of pervasive screen anxieties. Found footage can explore sociopolitical resonances in Horror through a literal contemporary lens.

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'I'm Documenting': Found Footage in Screen Culture

Reeves describes a culture of ‘constantly documenting’: this is a common found footage trope with a critical subtext. This running social commentary becomes a part of the dialogue, offering a self-reflexive criticism of horror and terror media in general. When the camera is incorporated into the diegetic world, it needs to have ongoing legitimacy in the plot. Early in Cloverfield, the introductory functions of the camera—documentary, memoir, surveillance—are interrupted by horror. At this point, a character’s motivation to operate the camera during a crisis needs new justification, heralding the mantra of found footage: ‘I’m documenting.’ I seek to identify the statement and act of documenting as significant to the sub-genre’s criticism of media authenticities.

In conjunction with, and occasionally in contrast to, these classifications of the found footage sub-genre, are the films’ framing markers of legitimacy. The formal component of am–cam cinematography, is the primary authenticator. It is complemented—and in the case of fantastical monsters, mitigated—by a number of other textual and paratextual elements. These elements further the film’s fictional world to partially de-fictionalise it. Examples such as am-cam cinematography, an opening intertitle explaining how the forthcoming footage was ‘found’ by police in Paranormal Activity, or promotional missing person posters for the film’s characters in The Blair Witch Project, are all creations by filmmakers presented within the cultural context of narrative cinema. These are not actual markers of legitimacy, but markers performing legitimacy: they appropriate the culturally recognised signs of nonfictional media to challenge their objectivity.

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12 Reeves interviewed by Rotten, ‘EXCL: Cloverfield Director Speaks!.’

13 The allusions to terror and screen cultures in this statement are discussed further at a later point in the chapter.
Narrative cinema has always used particular techniques to authenticate its fictions. Cutting-edge special effects; intertitles and promotional taglines for films ‘based on a true story;’ and reports of actors becoming immersed in their roles are some popular examples. In this context, the popularity of found footage after 2007 gains great cultural significance: it is not that one sub-genre is more ‘realistic’ than any other kind of cinema, but that the techniques used to perform realism differ greatly, becoming the focus of attention. Found footage speaks to a generation that understands the plurality of the ‘real,’ as will be explored in Chapter Seven, and the tools to create these realisms are diverse, even disparate.

When observed from a scholarly perspective, the authenticating markers of a found footage film seem as subjective as other cinema. These markers can be arbitrary, even absurd: intertitles in *Paranormal Activity* and *Cloverfield* suggest that authorities have recovered this raw footage, immediately after the Paramount Pictures distribution logo. But these authenticators are still effective: even if we do recognise that these are merely performances of authenticity, we still understand that authenticity is a performance. The association between a particular technique and its legitimacy, and the network of realism this creates for a text, is noted extensively in found footage scholarship. Petley notes in his discussion:
[...] what I want to examine here are the formal cinematic strategies which can lead
viewers, and are indeed intended to lead viewers, to believe that the images of death
which they are witnessing on screen represent the “real thing.”

Petley continues on this note of realism in the following: ‘The projection of the ‘found’ images
again gives rise to an overt concern with validating the nature of what is visible on screen and
audible on the soundtrack.’ He demonstrates the central concern of found footage: the process by
which a formal strategy is prioritised as valid or realistic. Amy West’s investigation connects the
cultural precedent of am-cam and the technological background of these strategies:

Compromises in audio and visual pleasure which this mode of production may entail are
traded off against a heightened feeling of the real – a trade audiences are more than
willing to make. The poor quality of caught-on-tape footage thus becomes a marker of
realness because it signals certain circumstances of production. The co-incidence of
unpredictable content and unprocessed medium adds up to a powerful and pervasive
sense of the real.

In West’s and Petley’s research, attention is drawn to the deviation found footage makes from
traditional cinema to perform authenticity. The core function of those classifiers contributing to
found footage, when grouping it as a sub-genre, is to perform—and, using fantastical monsters, play
with—the concept of ‘real.’ It is telling that in terror culture, catalysed by the real ‘like a movie’
moment of 9/11, one of the most emergent trends of horror is what could be called ‘real movies.’

Rather than moralising an audience willing to watch what appears to be ‘real’ murders, I
wish to draw attention to how something as unrealistic as a movie about monsters is able to engage
audiences in a real/unreal doublethink. Self-reflexive authenticity is the central, unifying device of
the sub-genre: the films’ novelty is derived primarily from the interplay between authenticity and
fiction, rather than the formulaic stories. North discusses this in the context of Cloverfield:

15 Petley, ‘Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death,’ 178.
16 Amy West, ‘Caught on Tape: A Legacy of Low-tech Reality.’ in The Spectacle of the Real: From
Hollywood to ‘Reality’ TV and Beyond, ed. Geoff King, (Bristol and Portland: Intellect, 2005), 85.
It is crucial that viewers notice these technical facets, since it is through their presence that the film accents its impression of authenticity, but it is equally crucial that they suspend disbelief and attribute them to the diegetic equipment and crew (the camcorder carried by Hud), and not to the massive resources of 20th Century Fox.17

In this statement, North highlights these authentication markers as performances, rooted in the film industry. It is often assured by scholars that while these movies enact a complex set of stunningly realistic techniques, fans are not at risk of believing that, in the example of Cloverfield, New York has actually been levelled. There are, of course, some exceptions: it is not uncommon to meet someone who believes the events of Blair Witch occurred, or that Paranormal Activity poltergeists are real. Benson-Allott acknowledges that found footage movies ‘are allegedly often mistaken for real by their viewers.’18 Blair Witch is an early example of the online Alternate Reality Game in which these films play with the limits of their fictional worlds.19 Peg Aloi states:

The accompanying web-based publicity campaign generated rumors of the film’s “authenticity” (i.e. that the ‘found footage’ was indeed real), prompting some audience members to visit the film’s location in search of ‘what really happened’.20

Aloi notes the existence of ‘rumours,’ and the concept of half-truths becomes incredibly useful when considering these films’ realism. These are films distributed by traditional means of the entertainment industry, usually with the textual and paratextual markers of narrative cinema: studio logos, credits, DVD extras, ratings, and promotional materials such as posters, trailers, and reviews. Like the monsters in the narratives, these situate the found footage sub-genre in the domain of traditional cinema.

Rather than suggest that found footage can be classified as more authentic, or popularly interpreted as such, I approach found footage as differently authentic. These differences are a serious deviation from the cinematic norm, highlighting a greater cultural context of a changing screen culture. These films present authenticity as a process, reflecting on the means by which

17 North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 87.
18 Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens, 170.
19 ARGs are discussed in Chapters Four and Seven.
reality becomes subjectively mediated. In a political context, it critiques how New York can be believably attacked in *Cloverfield*, or how surveillance systems can be manipulated by sinister powers in *Paranormal Activity*. The fact that found footage is a movie sub-genre, and is ultimately read as a movie sub-genre by popular audiences, suggests that the negotiations made between fictions and realities, and understanding how to make those negotiations, are not only culturally relevant but entertaining.

**Contextualising the Found Footage Boom**

Found footage, like many other New Horror trends, is situated securely in the technological zeitgeist. The previous chapter argued that the rapid development of recording and screening technology occurs in conjunction with terror culture: I suggest that found footage is successful because it trades on audience’s familiarity with amateur recording, surveillance, and citizen journalism. This familiarity becomes a form of play: it is both enjoyable genre recognition and a more ‘realistic’ form of cinema. Consider the chart overleaf, which I have constructed with data from the site Box Office Mojo:

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21 Regarding post-9/11 and found footage horror trend, the relevance of *The Blair Witch Project* should be questioned. As the film was released in 1999, it is not informed by the contemporary post-9/11 iteration of terror culture, but does operate with the culture of protean 1990s home recording technology. However, like *Cannibal Holocaust* in 1980, I suggest that *Blair Witch* is an isolate sensation, successful in part due to its novelty. Incorporating *Blair Witch* into the current wave of found footage films does not account for the relative box office success that makes found footage a trend, or for the techno-political context of the film.
This data reveals that the sub-genre does not become successful enough to be considered a major New Horror trend until *Cloverfield* and *Quarantine* in 2008. The trend is not a culturally hermetic or organic development. Found footage does not simply gain currency by repetition or saturation: it only entrenches itself when a wider media aesthetic becomes similarly entrenched in 2008. I suggest that these films thrive in an environment where screen culture and terror create relevance and context for found footage.

The found footage aesthetic shares a number of characteristics with the terror aesthetic. In the preceding chapter I have traced the development of media technology in conjunction with the

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cultural influence of terror, exploring the two as a symbiosis. In the cultural, economic, technological, and political spheres, terror both informs and is informed by the technology that records, mediates, and screens it. The citizen journalist aesthetic, favoured by news networks for its immediacy and economy, is integral to our cultural understanding of the terror age. This centrality of accidental footage remains throughout the terror period, enabled by recording technologies from handheld video cameras through to smartphones, usually unavailable to citizen journalists of the 20th century.

Along with this ‘real life’ incidental handheld aesthetic of terror, the static surveillance style gains relevance. As the primary styles echoed by found footage, these aesthetics are cultural icons of the period and are endemic to terror. Regarding citizen journalism in 9/11 and terror fallout, Kevin J. Wetmore Jr claims: ‘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.’ Wetmore also accounts for the prevalence of surveillance technology when he connects 9/11 with the USA PATRIOT Act:

The attacks shocked the United States and directly resulted in wars in Afghanistan (whose government under the Taliban sheltered al Qaeda), and Iraq (which actually had nothing to do with the terror attacks), as well as greater restrictions and security legislation within the United States such as the USA PATRIOT Act.

Similarly, Lee Rodney places citizen journalism at the heart of 9/11’s development into a terror age:

The prevalence of “amateur” video footage in much of what now stands for 9/11 certainly influenced how the invasion of Iraq was subsequently presented in 2003. The emphasis on ‘real life’ confusion as conveyed in the jerky, vertiginous sequences, dirty

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23 Some of cinematographer-characters of found footage begin with more professional training than the ‘amateur’ of am-cam: [rec] and Quarantine follow TV news crews; while The Last Exorcism and The Devil Inside are led by teams of documentary filmmakers. However, their work may be categorised as ‘citizen’ journalism when the horror strikes: they are cut off from their institutions and resources, acting essentially as rogue agents. Their professionalism is considerably hampered by the immediacy of their crises, and their continued documentation is intended as a counter-narrative to a mainstream ‘real’ media.


25 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.
lenses and hysterical commentary that came through in the camcorder tapes of the World Trade Center collapse gave new life to the old form of the eye-witness account.  

This identifies the terror period as one defined by a growing aesthetic trend. As this trend develops, found footage is able to engage with what Jeffrey Melnick called ‘America’s collective memory.’

In films such as Cloverfield, the destruction of New York is narratively similar: in others, the imagery is enough. Wetmore draws close similarities between 9/11 and found footage in the following: ‘In [rec] and its American remake Quarantine, a film crew documents an evening at an urban fire station, capturing horrific events when they follow the crew on a call, almost exactly like Hanlon’s 9/11.’ When a particular recording style is associated with terror, the films mimicking that style recognisably fit the model of New Horror as a post-9/11 movement.

The 2008-2010s period is a watershed of media technology. Wetmore notes: ‘The impulse to document is driven by and shaped by the technology that allows us to do so. It is also shaped by the popular culture of reality television.’ He connects this technological movement with horror by noting that ‘near universal access to the tools of film, video and still photograph production, have resulted in an approach to horror that focuses on documenting horrific experiences as they happen.’

Reality television as a generic model for found footage is supported by West: ‘The mechanisms of the am-cam ethos are reworked to suit the purposes of this character-driven realism and to serve the sophisticated palette [sic] of a new generation of reality television viewers.’ The closest popular alignment of reality television and found footage is the UK production Dead Set.

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28 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.

29 In accounting for the relatively late success of found footage in the terror age, the technological period should be considered in relation to terror. Found footage booms in a society growing accustomed to recording and being recorded, particularly during moments of terror. The omnipresence of potential terror discussed in Chapter One generates a necessity that recording technology be immediately available. In this sense, terror informs the growing demand for better media technology, and supports a social acceptance of recording and being recorded. As this movement gains traction—high definition camera phones being normalised along with CCTV systems—the found footage style becomes more relevant. The potential for horrifying events to happen to the average citizen, and the ability to record them, comes closer to our reality and brings these films closer to reality.

30 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.

31 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.

32 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 89.
(E4, 2008), using the house and premise of Big Brother (Channel 4, E4 & Channel 5, 2000-2014) in a zombie apocalypse story. The notably named ‘reality’ genre, like citizen journalism, re-envisions ‘real’ media in a narrativised style accessed by found footage.

Following reality television is the advent of Youtube, the ubiquitous video streaming website. Heller-Nicholas identifies Youtube as the key trigger of found footage as a blockbuster genre:

Found footage horror responded with a dramatic spike that reflected this growth in the acceptance of amateur filmmaking. Thanks to YouTube, by 2007 audiences were ready for found footage horror–movies that looked like they were made for YouTube that we could upload ourselves–to return to the mainstream.33

While it is easy to discuss Youtube as a turning point, it is best understood as symbolic of a greater cultural movement. Youtube complements and often shares content with reality television, competitive major news sources, terror media, amateur video, and citizen journalism. The content for these platforms is supplied through a range of handheld or cheap media with functions that vary from home archiving to national security. These technologies and networks have developed across different timelines from the 1990s to the present: however, the approach to the 2010s is the point at which they become a cohesive and culturally recognisable phenomenon articulated by found footage. West conducts an extensive exploration of the development of the found footage aesthetic, identifying the coalescence of recordings that hit saturation:

The sources of the video extracts presented by these caught-on-tape shows—and thus the impulse behind their production—are varied. A single show may include footage derived from security tapes recorded on CCTV, vehicle or helicopter mounted police video, or the handycam wielded variously by the tourist, the passer-by, the accident investigator, the “mom”. Each is freighted slightly differently according to the context of production. Too easily lumped together (all the better to dismiss), caught-on-tape footage generates many fine distinctions according to the technology used in the recording, the subject’s relationship with the camera, the impulse behind the recording

33 Heller-Nicholas, Found Footage Horror Films, 9.
(professional, archival, memorial, personal) and not least the controlling force behind the camera (be it human or mechanical).  

When West notes the dismissal of these styles of footage under a single category, she draws attention to the cultural recognition of varied but prevailing footages as a singular trend. The post-2008 period converges different recording phenomena into a recognisable genre.

West using motivations behind recording as a means of classification indicates the mass availability of recording technology: tourists, passersby, security personnel, and mothers are now literate in video production and distribution. Rick Altman, writing in 1999, identifies the potential in these demographics, who were traditionally media consumers rather than creators:

Stressing localized reception (in time as well as space) of texts produced by someone outside the reception sphere, critics have never taken seriously the ability of audiences to generate their own texts and thus to become intenders, mappers and owners in their own right.

This potential is key to the success of found footage, and I suggest that the success of the sub-genre is dependent on a shift in the production and distribution of video.

The catalytic media literacy of the period informs and infiltrates the diegetic worlds of films in the found footage boom. Reeves acknowledges the realism of having 2008 citizens record the destruction of New York on camera phones in Cloverfield:

We thought that was very accurate for the time. To me, I felt that if you do it in this style - if this event had happened in New York and you had been there with a cell phone or camera you could've told the story yourself. The fun thing I had in mind was there's this hidden idea that there's this Rashomon [Kurosawa, 1950] experience that exists - everybody who experienced this night had their cameras, they made their movie of this event. In our case, "Cloverfield" is one of them.

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34 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 85.
35 Rick Altman, Film/Genre, (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 212.
36 Reeves interviewed by Rotten, ‘EXCL: Cloverfield Director Speaks!’
This draws attention to the omnipresence of recordings available from 2008, and the cultural reality of citizen journalism in the period. By the release of *Paranormal Activity 4* in 2012, the presence of manifold recording technologies in the home is a given. The audience and the poltergeist watch a family through their video camera, multiple personal computer webcams, a motion capture gaming console, smartphones, and online video chats. The besieged citizens of New York and the haunted suburban family live in worlds suffused with recording technology are familiar to audiences able to recognise and identify with these recordings. Found footage gains traction when it achieves familiarity and currency, catalysed by the revolutionary media technologies and media literacy of the smart technology age.

The familiarity of found footage to the popular audience serves a complex double purpose. On the one hand, generic familiarity in the technological moment enables audiences to recognise and engage with found footage. On the other, it is familiar as a ‘real’ medium: we identify with the potential to record, edit, and upload real footage. This gives the films an undeniable frightening intensity: though we are generically aware enough to know it is a film, we cannot but recognise the realism of the cinematography. Found footage plays a complex game with terror's reality: it is not necessarily more ‘real,’ and nor are audiences collectively duped into believing so. Heller-Nicholas explains: ‘Its pleasures are not reliant on our gullibility, but rather on our willingness to succumb to the *myth* of the real that these films offer through a now heavily codified formal system.’

Found footage critiques reality as a genre or set of genres, with particular trends and markers, challenging boundaries between the ‘media’ world and the ‘real’ world.

In the present decade, and in the found footage film, reality is treated as a genre to be enjoyed. A series of markers are used to build realism, acting in ironic synchronicity with fictional markers such as zombies, studio logos, and the cinematic viewing environment. This mediated realism is indicative of a cultural recognition of subjective screen realities, and a media literacy equipped to criticise what generic markers are used to perform reality. As reality television tells us, the contemporary word ‘reality’ has multiple definitions and connotations of performance.

2008-2015 is a period not only of extensive media use but of literacy in this media: generating real or fictional recordings equips us with creative and critical tools to navigate reality. Found footage study reveals a greater culture preoccupied with the processes of authenticity, certification, realism, truth, and the shifting space of screens in our real world.

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At the narrative core of every found footage film is the premise of reality or authenticity. West notes it as a device in all am-cam productions, whether used in an entertainment or journalistic context: ‘[‘caught on tape’ circumstances] are made to serve as certification of the product’s authenticity, promising as they do the intersection of an unprecedented (thus unstaged) dramatic crisis and an amateur (thus innocent) recording medium.’ West makes clear the segue between contemporary technology and the culture of generic authenticity in the following:

This is why the flag of amateurism is waved so high in the field of caught-on-tape television. The self-evident non-professionalism of footage screened under the caught-on-tape banner certifies that the represented event is not staged, because both the technology utilised and the operator controlling it lack the sophistication to fake. Critically, West describes amateurism as a ‘flag,’ indicating the conceptualisation of an un-staged, un-fake realism as a symbolic marker. Centralising this flagging in Big Brother, West states: ‘the self-conscious display of process is specific to the reality genre (as opposed to ‘polished drama’) suggesting that part of the ‘reality’ of the reality television label is its truth-telling about processes of image production.’ In reality television and in found footage, there is an undeniable aspect of truth and reality, but West also identifies self-consciousness, display, and process. The effectiveness of found footage is in its ability to engage in different strains simultaneously: authenticity, the performance of authenticity, and fiction. Heller-Nicholas focuses the entertaining aspect of found footage as this interplay: ‘Found footage horror seeks (not always successfully) to create a space where spectators can enjoy having their boundaries pushed, where our confidence that we know where the lines between fact and fiction lie are directly challenged.’ These boundaries are shown as a process or mediation. To engage, the audience must challenge how these processes are taken for granted. There is a smart approach required when acknowledging the negligibility of the reality and fiction boundary, and creativity involved in engaging in this process as entertainment. Recognising screens as media able to perform simultaneous or contradictory realisms is integral to

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38 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 83.
39 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 83-84
40 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 90.
41 Heller-Nicholas, Found Footage Horror Films, 4.
the sub-genre’s success. The found footage film involves entertaining a negotiable, performed, and fragmented conceptualisation of reality, a process symptomatic of contemporary screen culture.

The Need To Document

Part of the realistic recognisability of found footage to an audience is the cultural impetus to record. Screen technology has an ironic relationship with documenting that is repeated in the narrative worlds of found footage films. The dialogue between characters often reflects the critical discourse surrounding the act of recording, whether as a process of subjectively framing or as a tool of truth-telling. This implicates the self-consciousness of new recording demographics and their self-reflexive critique of the media industry following creative involvement. The role of the camera in environments such as the home or in a disaster is interrogated in found footage horror. As characters question the power, appropriateness, and subjectivity of the camera, there is implicit and explicit criticism of traditional mediators such as news and entertainment industries. This demonstrates a shift in awareness toward recording technology’s ability to frame, indicating how common creative engagement with media demands a critical approach to all contemporary media. In the following case studies I discuss the explicit criticisms of the diegetic camera in found footage horror movies and the sociopolitical implications that follow.

In Paranormal Activity, the camera is the central propellor of the film’s intimate, claustrophobically simple drama. Presented as footage recovered by police from a crime scene, the movie follows Katie (Katie Featherston) and Micah (Micah Sloat), a couple claimed by the opening intertitle to have since disappeared and been murdered respectively. The camera is introduced by Micah, who buys it as a tool to investigate a suspected poltergeist haunting Katie. The film alternates between surveillance-style night scenes, in which we see mysterious movements affecting the sleeping couple and their house, and day scenes, in which Micah films his arguments with Katie over the camera and the hauntings. While the night scenes supply the major scares, the day scenes serve a complementary role in heightening the narrative tension. Katie is disturbed by the camera, and by Micah’s fixation on filming as the key to ‘deal with’ the poltergeist. Her suggestions that the camera is antagonising the poltergeist are dismissed by Micah, aligning Katie and the poltergeist

[42] Use of the actors’ real names suggests that they were a real-life couple; however, this trend is dropped as the sequels follow the fictional extended Featherston family. This is another shift in the balance of fictions and realisms in the franchise, as the films thread together an internally cohesive—though temporally fragmented—reality of the Featherstons and their neighbours.
against Micah and the camera. Katie is periodically possessed by the poltergeist, until in the climax she murders Micah and attacks the camera.

The situation of the Paranormal Activity camera pays homage to popular horror scholarship and spectatorship theory. The camera is a diegetic manifestation of Micah’s male gaze, as articulated by Katie when she objects to being filmed during sex, or when the couple make joking phallic references to the camera. While the gendering of a camera on these simple terms is hardly viable in an age of mass-accessible recording media, the film uses themes of masculinity to orient issues of power in contemporary screen concerns. Micah’s insistence on the camera as his tool of total omniscience and domestic dominance is his undoing. The poltergeist, remaining invisible for the entire film, defies Micah’s gaze and his perception of the camera as an authoritative truth-teller. Heller-Nicholas claims that ‘found footage horror’s frequent mission to capture the elusive and ethereal paranormal grant it a useful position to interrogate the often hazy lines between reality and its representation.’

Katie reinforces the political undercurrents of Micah’s attitude, objecting to his domineering imposition of surveillance in the home. As the poltergeist defies capture, Katie argues against the necessity or passivity of the camera in her private space: the camera is antagonistically noticeable, and unable to reveal a cohesive truth behind the hauntings.

What Katie articulates is a commentary throughout the film’s fantastic narrative and ‘authentic’ cinematography: the camera is not seamless in its presence or representations. As technology enables recording and being recorded to become a conscious part of everyday life, the camera’s significance and presence is highlighted. Katie voices post-9/11 concerns over the legitimacy of surveillance and its effectiveness and justification as a means to defeat invisible monsters in the home and homeland. She does not allow the camera to slip out of our awareness, drawing attention to its presence and position in the narrative and in culture. As an audience we are made aware of its limitations: though it captures the activity of the poltergeist, the poltergeist itself eludes the camera, drawing attention to the deficits of surveillance culture and recording technology. On a more self-reflexive level, the camera’s authority and authenticity is defied: the realistic production of unrealistic imagery, and the unusual conjunction of authentic cinematography with fantastic narrative, remind us of the camera as a compromising technology. Surveillance as a format of objective realism is deconstructed by West, quoting Arild Fetviet in articulating how Paranormal Activity makes use of and draws attention to the technique:

43 Heller-Nicholas, Found Footage Horror Films, 21.
The hand-held handycam is the embodiment of human point-of-view image capture, resonating as it so often does with the physiological responses of the operator. In contrast, the unblinking, mechanical eye of the wall-mounted surveillance camera betrays no investment in the recorded scene. The construction of reality necessarily occurs differently within these contrasting modes of image production. The first “feels real” because it fulfils a “powerful urge for a sense of contact with the real”, as it “inscribes” this physiological contact on the recorded text (Fetveit 2002: 130). This is a kind of real which is heightened by evidence of human error – the swoops and slips of a running, dancing, laughing, crying camera – which testifies to the amateur authenticity of the production. On the other hand, the second model “feels real” because its inflexible recording position signifies its infallible and impartial omniscience, recording whatever occurs within its range 24/7 without preference or participation.44

This perception of surveillance as ‘unblinking,’ ‘uninvested,’ and ‘omniscient’ is defied in *Paranormal Activity*. The omniscient, unblinking view continually fails to capture the invisible poltergeist. As the most politically sinister format of the am-cam styles, surveillance is portrayed in the film as powerful yet significantly subjective.45 *Paranormal Activity* makes a complex study of the camera, challenging and reiterating its imperfections and subjectivity, questioning its authority, and, as with all found footage films, not taking screen culture for granted.

Found footage performs an unusual double duty with its cinematography: first, the lack of ‘slickness’ generates an unfiltered sense of immersion, and second, it demands through its refreshing style and diegetic world-building that the camera becomes denaturalised to the characters and audience. The latter is best characterised by the camera-wielders’ mantra: ‘I’m documenting.’ Like in *Paranormal Activity*, the ‘documenting’ justification drawing attention to the camera’s omnipresence is not necessarily a negative criticism. Rather, it demands an acknowledgement and awareness of the camera and its mediating process. By the third act, it borders on the absurd when characters like Hud (T.J. Miller) in *Cloverfield* and the journalists in *[rec]* and *Quarantine* insist on documenting the team’s peril. In *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones*, camera culture has become so ingrained to youth that there is no question of the teen protagonists’ recording of their experiences. This becomes an explicit and self-reflexive critique on real-life photojournalism,

44 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 85.

45 I will return to the politics of surveillance in terror culture later in the chapter.
amateur and professional. The repeated trope of arguments between characters over the continued necessity of recording disasters reveals a collision of critical commentaries. The camera is not taken as a granted, objective necessity during a crisis, as it was when seamlessly framed only by professional operators. Its curiosity, if only due to its cumbersome nature as characters are in flight, reminds an audience that recordings, even in the distracting situation of a crisis, are framed by their operator’s subjective motivations and limited perspective. However, the narrative drive of these films insists that the camera does remain in the action: it is not a criticism suggesting that the camera be removed, for we as the audience would miss the climax if the camera were forgotten. Rather, the camera must be recognised as a powerful, subjective, and mediatory tool by the users, viewers, and bystanders involved.

The urge felt to document crisis has a long history. With the availability of recording technology to the everyday person, however, the act of recording disaster becomes a greater cultural movement, dragging its issues to light. Citizen journalism reveals a range of subjective motivations in recording. The footage may be considered lucrative by major news outlets seeking on-the-ground media below professional photographers’ prices. Whether for social or political reasons, a civilian may hope to capture images from their own perspective. Cynically, it may be suggested that placing a screen, even one as small as a camera lens, between oneself and an event is the most recognisable way for us to engage with crisis. In any of these recordings, media offers both a construction and deconstruction of truth and abstraction, with the multitude of recorded media created and distributed literalising the fragmented means of communicating and contextualising crisis.

The function of ‘I’m documenting’ as a justification to keep the camera, and thus the audience, in on the action until the movie’s climax is effective because it is familiar. A character’s urge to document is never so suicidal as to dissociate an audience: we recognise that with the technology we own, there exists a culturally ingrained obligation to record disaster. In the case of 9/11, Melnick describes:

But 9/11 brought with it a newer idea that the crucial images, those that would contribute the most to historical record and the affective inventory of 9/11 culture, would not only be of the people but also by the people for the people. We have at least some anecdotal evidence that many in downtown New York felt the call to take pictures as the planes hit.46

46 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 66.
This ‘call’ refers to the collision of the technological and cultural development towards citizen media. The concept of ‘by the people for the people’ implies the diversifying networks of production and distribution during the period, and the expectation that media—sometimes colluding, sometimes contradictory—will be generated and shared beyond official networks.

The personal process of recording crisis is documented extensively by West. Using the case study of a pair of building contractors’ incidental capture of a mudslide, West notes:

When the muddy bank [during Fox’s The World’s Most Shocking Moments: Caught On Tape about the ‘Deadly Mudslide’ in Portland] upon which the camera is trained begins to slip (“What was about to happen would turn the next two minutes into a heart-pounding experience”) the contractor’s reaction to it (to keep recording) forces a formal shift into the domain of caught-on-tape. This shift is determined by the nature of the pro-filmic event as much as by the operator’s cognitive process. At the very beginning of the extract, when the muddy bank is yet to slide, its status is mundane and the impulse behind the recording camera is that of routine engagement with the everyday. When the mud starts to slip, it becomes something special and the impulse to continue recording is predicated on a palpable desire to capture something rare, powerful and fleeting.47

West continues:

Initially calm in its survey of the muddy bank, the camera jerks with interest as a voice calls out “The hill’s going – have you got it?”, an exclamation which is at once a warning to bystanders of oncoming danger and an urgent appeal to the gods of am-cam spectacle to ensure the safe capture of event (even at the potential cost of human safety).48

This eloquently illustrates the cultural expectation of recording crisis by citizens that manifests in the 1990s. Even when the operator’s safety is threatened—whether by a mudslide or rampaging

47 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 86.
48 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 86.
monsters—recording is hoped to continue. The found footage movie communicates this obligation, but never uncritically: though the camera is allowed to continue recording, its presence is seldom taken for granted.

Discussing a more professional case of the urge to record, West makes the direct connection to found footage’s use of the citizen journalist narrative. When a participant in the reality television program *Survivor* (CBS, 2000-) was burned in an accident, questions surrounding the appropriateness of recording are raised and rebutted, a dialogue echoed often in found footage:

More succinctly [than host Jeff Probst], Mark Burnett told a press conference that he would have sacked the cameraman filming Michael Skupin’s accident if he had stopped shooting to assist the wretched man (Halfpenny 2001: 31). Both Probst and Burnett speak of the imperative of spectacle-capture, not only as a ratings puller but as some kind of grisly social mandate (“we have a responsibility…”). The compulsion to continue recording until the very end (think here of the final scene of *The Blair Witch Project*), as manifested by examples of caught-on-tape footage, becomes a marker of realness because it testifies to the mesmerising appeal of spectacle […] It seems that the *Survivor* cameraman was never in any danger of losing his job because, as for the contractor from Portland or the female director in *Blair Witch*, instincts of self-preservation or human succour proved to be weaker than the instinct to keep shooting.49

Crucially, West draws attention to the sense of responsibility and the value of both spectacle and reality. Rather than try to essentialise the motivations behind recording, or to suggest that spectacle has obscured reality, I suggest that found footage engages audience with the recognition of recording as a subjective and complex issue.

In some cases, found footage horror engages more directly with the anti-authoritarian post-9/11 narratives of New Horror. *Quarantine*, [*rec*], *Cloverfield*, and *Diary of the Dead* deal with camera crews experiencing disaster while authorities fail them or make matters worse. The camera is used to document a counter-narrative to the one constructed by the military-entertainment complex of corporate news, military organisations, and government. These cameras act as tools of truth-telling, although their subjectivity and mediating process is still evident. The honesty of the story is oppositional to the implied monolithic lie offered by authorities, deconstructing the

49 West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 92.
objectivity of mainstream news. Characters often struggle with their limited understanding of the bizarre or large-scale crisis, recognising that while the camera offers one truth, it contributes to a fragmented and contradictory reality represented through screen media. The camera is still discussed as imperfect or absurd, though in these cases it is justified through rebellious outrage at the betrayal by authorities.

The duty of recording disaster truthfully is incorporated into these films’ dialogues. *[rec]* and its American counterpart *Quarantine* feature an apartment building locked down by soldiers after an outbreak of super-rabies. A TV news crew and local firefighters are trapped with residents, and the journalist heroine (Manuela Velasco) insists in *[rec]*: ‘We have to show what’s going on.’ This echo of the post-9/11 citizen journalist ethos becomes integral to the plot and characters. In *Quarantine*, many of the residents suffering hostility from the military are notably of diverse ethnicities, while the aiding firefighters fit the post-9/11 hero stereotype. In *Cloverfield*, local New Yorkers fearing the drastic military retaliation against the invading monster record an impromptu final testimony before Manhattan is bombed. The need to ‘document’ is acceptable justification for maintaining the camera. Douglas Kellner describes a similar necessity for on-the-ground reportage of disaster in *Diary of the Dead*:

The young crew resolves to shoot footage of what is really happening and upload it on the video, pointing to a [sic] era of new media and sources of news and information in which “viral video” can be quickly distributed across the world via the Internet […] Of course, the theme of a lying media evokes the US corporate media in the run-up to Iraq and during large stretches of the Bush-Cheney era.50

In this statement, Kellner links the power of new media, and of found footage horror, as a means to subvert dominant terror narratives. Citizen journalism, translated in fictional cinema to found footage, is depicted as an essential means to simultaneously refract and retell truths about administrative misconduct and violence.

An alternate means of subverting terror politics is in the ironic use of surveillance-style footage. Most notable in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, the objective camera becomes diegetic as a tool of surveillance for later review by characters. In the first three *Paranormal Activity* films, the unusual activity in the central families’ houses prompts the installation of security cameras. The

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sequences of static surveillance footage we see as an audience are supplemented by recreational household recordings such as video journaling to give a thorough perspective on the space and characters. When read as a study on terror politics such as the PATRIOT Act, the degree to which surveillance is used becomes contentious, and is essential to the horror of the franchise.

*Paranormal Activity*’s surveillance tactics become a characteristic pattern in the films’ dialogue. In arguments that usually fall on gendered lines, implicating a greater issue of authoritarian privacy violations, the family patriarch installs the surveillance system to ‘catch’ the poltergeist—later revealed to be a demon known only as ‘Toby.’ The women, often the primary target of the demon’s attacks, tend to voice objections to the camera. Some suggest the demon is antagonised by the camera; others object to violations of their privacy. The former is proven true in the first film, when the final frames of the movie reveal the demon attacking the camera. In the fourth instalment, the demon takes control of the various webcam-enabled computers in the house to continue recording but block the footage from being reviewed by the family. At this point the demon and audience are unusually aligned as the only viewers privy to the footage, signalling an alarmingly sinister turn in the narrative. Arguments break out throughout the films over the justifiability of the surveillance system, its potential to ensure safety or antagonise invaders, its voyeuristic menace, its impotence, and the privacy of the collected data. These echo popular discourse surrounding the viability and dangers of pervasive surveillance that arose with the PATRIOT Act, occurring at a political level and increasingly in private spaces as networked devices gain more subtle recording abilities in recent years. The *Paranormal Activity* films voice these concerns: the demon at the centre of attention remains invisible, the cameras doing more harm than good.

**Reporting the Truth**

The unfortunate citizen journalists of found footage contrast, implicitly or explicitly, the culture of mainstream news media. As outlined in Chapter Four, the increasing use of citizen journalist media by major news networks highlights the viability of this aesthetic as a means of representing reality. The cultural power of this authenticity echoes Žižek’s “‘invisible’ warfare.” The invisibility of terror monsters is significant in franchises such as *Paranormal Activity*, where the demon is never shown. By mimicking the aesthetic of citizen journalism to depict fantastical stories, found footage

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subverts the authenticity of news media. Complementing this commentary is the frequent depiction of television news anchors failing to accurately portray the events captured by on-the-ground citizens. On occasions where news reportage is illuminating, there is still an undercurrent of absurdity in the lack of dramatisation necessary to differentiate a zombie invasion from footage of real-life terror events.

By parodying corporate news in this way—either through honest depictions of monsters or ineffective reportage of disaster—found footage draws forth many critical commentaries on the role of news in terror culture. Whether by conflating fictional and real news or prompting an audience to extract their differences, news media cannot be taken for granted in found footage. The sub-genre depicts news as a subjective mediator of reality, especially in relation to issues of horror monsters with 9/11 allusions. Geoff King differentiates the ‘real’ 9/11 news and the movie aesthetic, but this is complicated by found footage.\(^\text{52}\) Visually, these films make the difference between the ‘like-a-movie’ 9/11 and fictional disasters—invisible home invaders, New York destroyers, deadly diseases, overzealous military—a matter of splitting hairs. The use of news aesthetics, as King acknowledges, give an uncanny impression of the real. This is not to suggest that a *Cloverfield* audience is expected to believe that New York is razed, but that the ‘real’ can be uncanny, and that the appearance of news is easy to fictionalise.

By insisting on generating their own testimonies, the characters of found footage demonstrate a distrust in organised media to realistically represent terrifying events. As discussed, many New Horror films portray authorities as ineffectual, untrustworthy, or downright dangerous. In *Cloverfield*, *rec*, and *Quarantine*, military forces sacrifice innocent lives in danger zones to eliminate a few hostiles; soldiers also actively censor characters’ efforts to record. Even the professional news crew of the latter two movies despair that outsiders will never learn the truth of the situation that the military trapped them in. The interlinked problems of violent administration and an untrustworthy journalist industry are deeply pertinent to terror culture. Douglas Kellner uses the following example:

> In addition, [Robert] Greenwald directed and produced *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch’s War on Journalism* (2004), a powerful exposé of the Fox TV News network as a tool of the Bush-Cheney administration and Republican right. The film shows how talking

points were circulated from the Republican Party to the Fox News network that dutifully reproduced the Bush-Cheney line of the day, a complicity confirmed in interviews with former Fox employees. *Outfoxed* helped disclose that Fox is basically a propaganda organization for the Republican Party and is in no way “fair and balanced” as they laughably claim.\(^{53}\)

Kellner’s discussion of *Outfoxed* indicates that failures of accurate journalism in the terror age are a politicised issue. In a mysterious large-scale attack on Manhattan, and a suspicious case of urban biological warfare—the latter featuring firefighters as its heroes—protagonists join a common cultural dialogue over the reliability of mainstream journalism to truthfully report on terror events. Censorship is the overarching danger that necessitates the act of truth-telling propelling the plot. Whether the dangerous administration are diegetically present in found footage films or not, the criticism of mainstream journalism is implicitly terror-related.

![Figure 20: A military sniper shoots innocent citizens escaping a virus outbreak in Quarantine.](image)

When found footage does not depict the news industry as protecting military malpractice, it is subverting the mise-en-scène of contemporary video journalism. The easy synthesis of authentic-looking footage forms the premise of the found footage genre. By drastically altering the formal rules of fictional cinema, found footage exposes the fictionalisations present in conventional journalism. The study by Brian A. Monahan of mainstream journalism post-9/11 highlights the

recognition of fictional, sensational, and subjective elements contributing to the construction of ‘authentic’ news:

The public drama framework […] is founded on two core assumptions. The first is that news is a social construction, which suggests that what audiences see as “news” (i.e., the finished product that arrives on our televisions, radios, newspapers, magazines, and computer monitors) is actually the tangible manifestation of a series of decisions made by people—editors, producers, reporters, anchors, guest bookers, news promoters, and other media figures—who determine which events, issues, and individuals will be attended to, what resources will be allocated to their coverage, what aspects of an event or issue will be the focal point, which plotlines will be followed, which characters will be promoted, and so on.54

Monahan further expands upon this by suggesting that popular news stories are reshaped into culturally entertaining narratives.55 This theory is supported by Dana Heller’s discussion of post-9/11 discourse constructing figures of firefighter heroes and terrorist villains, and a revenge narrative leading to the invasion of Iraq.56 I suggest that found footage mimics these social constructions by creating real-seeming narratives instead of narrative-seeming realities. When Hud shoots televisions showing news adjacent to one showing cartoons in Cloverfield, it demonstrates the easy slippage between news and movies—between authentic and fictional—revealing more about the latter than the former. Benson-Allott notes that this slippage in George A. Romero’s Diary of the Dead ‘is less interested in mimicking nonfiction than in exposing the spectator to the fictionalization undergirding news production (both amateur and professional).’57 Benson-Allott’s study of Diary examines the futility of one character’s search for the ‘raw truth,’ which cannot be divorced from the mediation and sensationalism of video, whether in online citizen journalism or news.58


57 Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens, 64.

58 Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens, 62.
The collision between New Horror and journalist aesthetics has some key examples in zombie movies such as *Diary*. Diary and the *Dawn of the Dead* (Snyder, 2004) remake sporadically uses the found footage aesthetic. In both films, the reportage of the zombie apocalypse deliberately evokes real terror events, especially if we recall that the terror age encompasses wars, surveillance societies, pandemic threats, and natural disasters. Romero goes so far as to use actual footage of the Hurricane Katrina aftermath intercut with the fictional apocalypse. Quite literally, *Dawn* and *Diary* collapse the aesthetics of real and fictional as we understand it through news, in which New Horror and terror media seamlessly stream together. In *Dawn*, flicking news channels with recognisable and realistic images introduce the zombie crisis, as described by Angela Ndalianis:

“Real” and fictional news footage bombard the viewer with scenes of riots, abandoned buildings, police beatings, burning bodies, explosions, zombie attacks, crowds in states of mass hysteria, and micro images of blood flowing through veins, while news readers report the events that have befallen the world with utter disbelief.

Further, Kyle Bishop connects news aesthetics with the contemporary relevance of *Dawn* as a virus movie:

Similarly, the *Dawn of the Dead* remake was shot during another scare: the SARS epidemic of 2003. Snyder noticed the alarming parallels between his film and the nightly news; both were fraught with panic and misinformation (Snyder and Newman). The treat of infestation and other biohazards is hardly less significant today; it is hard to view either film—or any zombie movie, for that matter—without thinking of the recent threat of bird flu or avian influenza.

*Diary*, meanwhile, is acknowledged by Kellner as using Katrina footage critically: ‘Of course, the theme of a lying media evokes the US corporate media in the run-up to Iraq and during large

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59 The case of zombies being reported by news outlets is explored in Chapter Eight.

60 Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, 64.


stretches of the Bush-Cheney era. The films are remarkable in how seldom a criticism of terror news is so overt as to use real—not to mention real-seeming—terror footage, and in how smoothly it transitions into a zombie narrative. *Dawn* and *Diary* use a ‘real’ aesthetic to make a scathing criticism of the news industry in the terror age: the paranoia and chaos of the terror age are so drastic that there may as well be zombies, and news, which is so seamlessly constructed as an authentic mediation of reality, can be seamlessly deconstructed to incorporate something so outlandish as zombies.

Figure 21: A frame in *Diary of the Dead* that appears to borrow Hurricane Katrina footage.

This seamlessness is crucial to a critical reading of found footage movies. Traditional photojournalism is constructed to obscure construction; to mediate an unmediated authenticity. The flaws of citizen journalism and surveillance footage collide objectivity and subjectivity. At times the cinematography is too subjective, poor quality or mis-framing blocking important information that would cohesively create an authentic representation of events before the camera. At others, the objectivity is too much: a surveillance camera may not closely follow events, or a crisis may be too immediate to be subjectively framed. The accidents of the found footage news aesthetic draw attention to the polished narratives of corporate news. Sometimes a mis-framing simply shows the artistic efforts in professional photojournalists’ framing: sometimes it exposes extra information

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64 The frustrating objectivity of the surveillance camera is used to horrifying effect in *Paranormal Activity 3*. Much of the demon’s haunting take place offscreen when an oscillating camera scans into an inactive room, and tension builds during the agonising wait for the haunted room to come back into view.
subverting the news’ presentation of the story. Headlines, tickers, newscasters, text, animations, and so on, mediate the presentation of authentic news, adding a context which Benson-Allott claims ‘controls [a spectator’s] perception of images’ in relation to their truthfulness.⁶⁵

The presence of a crisis in found footage horror—always tangentially referencing terror—politicises the subjective mediation of real events. Jay David Bolter links military justification with corporate journalism in the following: ‘The pentagon, too, mastered the technique of coverage. “Embedding” reporters with the troops guaranteed that seemingly “total coverage” would include its own interpretation: the reporters would almost necessarily see the troops’ battle as their own.’⁶⁶ Bolter’s connection of terror politics, a questionable military, and the news industry suggest that found footage horror can be read with serious critical connotations. Bolter explores ‘coverage’ here as the contronyms ‘display’ and ‘hide’: our enjoyment of found footage involves a near-identical process of noticing and overlooking truths and fictions, or flaws and seamlessness.

The striking audiovisual difference of found footage centralises the formal elements of both cinema, being a narrative genre, and news, being presented as authentic footage. The break in formal traditions demands a constant attention to what formal elements are being used for what purposes in the film, and this attention is used to create subversive commentaries. Julian Petley quotes in his research: ‘As Brian Winston has argued: “Given the ideological power of the realist image in claiming to be trustworthy, it is clearly legitimate to use a faked documentary form to force the audience, as it were, to confront its credulity in such images and its prejudices about what they might represent.” (2000: 37).’⁶⁷ This game of credulity and incredulity is the dominant novelty of found footage, indicating an audience willing to engage in disparate formal genres as subjectively authentic. Tryon links the narrative of horror, and the flaws of found footage, to cultural fears: ‘This failure of video in the film plays into larger fears that video can be used to distort reality or confuse viewers, therefore constructing a “reflexive viewer” confronted with a critical perspective on documentary filmmaking (Roscoe 3).’⁶⁸ Contrasting the news and citizen footage consciously, and often diegetically, found footage is able to show the process and performance that occur in contributing the ‘seamless’ authenticity of news stories.

⁶⁵ Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens, 64.


⁶⁷ Brian Winston quoted in Petley, ‘Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death,’ 173.

⁶⁸ The reflexivity Tryon raises extends well beyond the documentary genre: Tryon writes shortly after the release of The Blair Witch Project, prior to genres such as surveillance and news being subjected in Paranormal Activity, Cloverfield, and Quarantine. See: Tryon, ‘Video from the Void,’ 45.
The juxtaposition of journalist convention with found footage lends found footage a limited authentic verisimilitude. Daniel North accounts for Romero’s history of criticising institutions when *Diary of the Dead*’s use of found footage opposes the journalism industry:

> [Diary] adjusts the template of his “living dead” series by having the action play out on footage captured by student reporters—Romero’s earlier zombie films, each a response to what the director saw as prevailing cultural trends, also prominently featured news media as documentors and distorters of global catastrophe.\(^ {69}\)

The distortion, linked through Romero’s intertextual zombie mythmaking to greater institutional mistrust, is shown through the elevation of found footage, voiced by characters insisting that they must film and show the truth. West identifies this superior authenticity in *Blair Witch*: ‘Located as “other” to professional broadcast-standard television production, this material asks audiences to invest in an innocent camera, one which always tells the truth because it lacks the art to dissemble.’\(^ {70}\) West’s insight is useful insofar as the civilian camera has some degree of stronger truth meriting it as the primary narrative tool of a found footage film. However, it must be accounted for that this ‘innocent’ camera captures a fictional, fantastical series of events lacking truth, the same lack criticised in the professional productions West uses for contrast. Found footage can be used to criticise conventional journalism, but the direction of North and West must be continued to open criticism of citizen journalism while appreciating the applications of found footage’s fictionality.

The opposition of citizen journalism is not to suggest that it can or should be championed as the people’s vessel of the truth: as Benson-Allott states, found footage contests that ‘all videos are equally unreliable.’\(^ {71}\) After all, citizen journalism above all other forms is lampooned by found footage by easily being filled with magic and monsters. Rather than read the deconstruction of conventional journalism as an elevation of citizen journalism’s authenticity, I suggest an oppositional reading. This enables us to examine what tools are used to construct authenticity, and acknowledge authenticity as constructed. These films exist in a culture that recognises a fragmented

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\(^{69}\) North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen,’ 88.

\(^{70}\) West, ‘Caught on Tape,’ 88.

\(^{71}\) Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, 64.
set of authenticities, each with their own subjective problems rendering the necessity—even the possibility—of an essentialist truth obsolete.

‘It’s Like Reality’

Watching, interpreting, and enjoying found-footage is a self-reflexive process. To engage in the interplay of real aesthetics with fictional narratives involves a set of deconstructions in which one must entertain authenticity or reality as fragmented. Relationships between the real and the fictional are not hermetic or dichotomous, but determined through a flexible series of choices and observations. These choices regarding what we interpret as real are reflective of a broader cultural attention to media and mediation as a conscious, self-reflexive process. Petley notes in his discussion of found footage technology:

[...the paradox of these various devices is that, whilst they are meant to testify the verisimilitude of what is being shown on screen, they also, at the same time, operate self-reflexively, drawing attention to the process of filmic representation itself and demonstrating that even the most ‘realist’-seeming text is in fact an artificial construct.]

This attention to self-reflexivity as a tool of threatening our boundaries of reality is integral to our understanding of media and terror cultures. My discussion of authenticity has thus far been a criticism of the political and economic motivations behind constructed truths: henceforth, I seek to explore how these ideas can be continued and expanded to recognise that terror culture realities are interwoven and fragmented through fictions, constructions, and in this case, found footage horror.

Found footage builds on a history of self-reflexive horror that teases and breaks the fourth wall. In the context of terror culture and media technology, this break is complex and critical. Found footage addresses a culture in which one is able to record at any moment, and must be aware of being recorded at any moment. Diegetic characters acknowledging the camera, and the culture of cameras, lends the text an ironic verisimilitude. The accessibility of a film like Paranormal Activity depends on our recognition of surveillance measures imposed after the PATRIOT Act. In the case of Paranormal Activity 4, the omnipresence of surveillance cameras is absolutely real: promotions for

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72 This is discussed further in Chapter Seven.

73 Petley, ‘Cannibal Holocaust and the Pornography of Death,’ 179.
the film featured video footage of test audiences jumping and screaming in their cinema seats. Meanwhile, one can pirate a new release *Paranormal Activity* film surreptitiously recorded by an audience member at a cinema screening. The cameras of *Paranormal Activity* extend well beyond the film. This culture surrounding found footage horror is a self-aware loop of being recorded and recording. Do we leave *Paranormal Activity* behind when we walk away into a space filled with security cameras and camera phones? We are willing to entertain the events of *Cloverfield* because it is entirely possible to record a crisis, namely an attack on New York, and we are also willing to believe that an attack on New York can contain some questionably real monsters. To recall that 9/11 was described as ‘like a movie’ but something ‘experienced’ en masse via television, the slippage and exchange between reality and mediation are endemic of the culture in which found footage horror succeeds.

This self-reflexivity has some interesting applications as a means of building suspense. At times, our removal as an audience to the normal voyeuristic distance of narrative cinema becomes disturbing. In *Paranormal Activity 4*, the poltergeist is able to access the family’s laptop webcams and block the collected footage of its activity from human access. When we see characters approach the movie screen, upset at the mysterious locking of their machines, we are aligned directly with the voyeuristic, malevolent entity as those privy to this video. This is not without its connotations to surveillance culture, and suspiciously invasive surveillance tactics enforced upon the US and the West. The use of an Xbox Kinect motion capture device echoes issues of corporate surveillance in Internet culture, such as Xbox models equipped with facial and vocal recognition capabilities that cannot be switched off. We watch *Paranormal Activity 4* knowing that what we see is how we could be seen, and the voyeur in the narrative is an explicitly secretive, malevolent entity. This distance speaks to one of the many negotiations an audience makes around subjectivity and realism, in which the distance from victim characters becomes a narrative division, creating uncomfortable alignments with real-life issues of being recorded and mediated. At times, the handheld camera performs a similar distancing function. Tryon describes the camera as a diegetic means of distance:

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75 Dave Tach, ‘*Kinect is Always Listening on Xbox One, but Privacy is a “Top Priority” for Microsoft,*’ *Polygon*, 21st May 2013, accessed 30th September, 2014, [http://www.polygon.com/2013/5/21/4353580/kinect-always-listening-on-xbox-one-privacy-is-a-top-priority](http://www.polygon.com/2013/5/21/4353580/kinect-always-listening-on-xbox-one-privacy-is-a-top-priority)
Later in the film [Blair Witch], as the filmmakers become increasingly exhausted and scared, Josh lectures Heather, criticizing her desire to keep filming, telling her, “I see why you like this thing. It’s like a filtered reality.” In this sense, the film self-consciously acknowledges the fact that Heather’s project to film everything will be incomplete and partial, with the camera serving as a means of shielding Heather from the dangers lurking in the woods.76

This placement of the camera as some powerful tool to render its frame fictional—even to characters diegetically experiencing crisis—is worth reflecting in a context of citizen journalism. When we are accustomed to disaster movies and to seeing terror events on a screen, we realise that even reality can be subjected through a piece of technology. Mediation becomes a psychic tool as much as a narrative or political one. The film, framed entirely in a fictional space—its viral marketing notwithstanding—still operates self-reflexively as characters discuss the filters of reality, calling attention once more not only to the issues of reality and fiction, but to the act of filtration, however real or fictitious that may be.

The immersive moments of found footage horror bring as much self-reflexivity as those in which the camera is a tool of ostensible distancing. The found footage camera can immerse a viewer in action by its physical movement through—and proximity to—danger in the narrative world. Ndalianis highlights the significance of the sensorium to New Horror and realism: ‘In […] New Horror, while not literal, the disgusting subject matter imbricates itself into our bodies and across our skin by inciting our senses directly, and synaesthetically, in very real ways.’77 Found footage has common associations with sensory experience: audiences shown to jump and clutch their faces; camera movements that disturb our equilibrium; and monsters attacking the camera. Ebert calling Cloverfield’s cinematography ‘queasy-cam’ refers to the way the audience is jerked and swung through a topsy-turvy New York by a running cameraman.78 In Quarantine, the camera is used as a blunt instrument to beat one of the monsters to death when it attacks the cameraman. The monster’s face cracks against the movie screen, smearing blood across the fourth wall.

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76 Tryon, ‘Video from the Void,’ 44.
As the camera’s subjects come proximally closer to the edge of the movie screen, the haptic experience of nauseating cinematography lends a particular realism to the genre. Jonathan Gray draws comparisons with the interactive and immersive aspects of video games, quoting Tanya Krzywinska: ‘She also sees the game’s ability to give us a first-person perspective (only truly matched by The Blair Witch Project and Cloverfield in film) as further placing the player inside the horror.’

When monsters crash against the screen; when the audience becomes a weapon; when the audience becomes a movie trailer; when we refer to a genre by physical queasiness; when the distinction must be made between the real and the literal real; when found footage seamlessly resembles real footage; we acknowledge that found footage reaches level of self-reflexivity in which extricating these films from reality is superfluous to their entertainment value. When Slavoj Žižek describes post-9/11 society as over-virtualised, the ways found footage corrupts and questions the definition of ‘real reality’ articulate a mass cultural preoccupation.

Finally, I seek to briefly incorporate the role of paratexts in the found footage genre. Found footage makes strong use of paratexts, and consuming them is part of the navigation between the fictional and realistic constructs thrown into relief by each film. Paratexts expand the horror narrative beyond the film, often into ‘real’ spaces and media. They can be complementary or

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81 This has been explored in Chapter Three, and is the key framework of Part Three.
contradictory to the ‘true’ narrative of the film: in either case, truth even within the film world is fragmented, necessitating collection and evaluation. The following case studies explore paratexts that confront the realism in both the films and the real spaces in which they exist, extending the ability of found footage to explore the subjectivity of real-seeming media.

Viral marketing campaigns, such as those surrounding Blair Witch and Cloverfield, use ‘real’ media such as missing persons posters and corporate websites for fictional characters. As with the mimicry of journalism, these media become part of the game in which realism is constructed to represent fictions. With their in-universe presentation styles, the fourth wall is broken beyond the cinema space that would clearly brand a film as fictional. Participating in the ARGs used to promote some found footage films, audiences entertain the film world as real. In the case of Cloverfield, audiences can befriend the film’s characters—some of whom are personified by already established movie stars—on social media. This level of participation in fiction involves information-gathering as entertainment: and with this information, the evaluation of the truthfulness or inclusion in the fictional world of the scattered viral material. The subjectivity of realism in a viral marketing campaign is key to its entertainment value. While the viral material enters and can even become lost in the canon of ‘real’ media, audiences also become part of the text, in some cases literally. ARGs can involve real actors or fans performing in public space. At other times, audiences become part of the promotional material: the use of audience reactions in the Paranormal Activity 4 trailers is an example. People become paratexts: the context in which we would normally expect choice clips from a movie becomes an opportunity to watch real people, blurring the boundaries between the real and fictional content, and revealing that their overlap is the locus of entertainment for found footage.

In other paratexts, fragmentation and fictionality are a means of complementing the film. Jonathan Gray, in his definition of paratexts, discusses the example of DVD extras:

But it also suggests that DVDs can enrich the entire textual experience: if DVDs can be seen as offering the real text, then they can perform a quick sleight of hand, reducing the authenticity of the cinematic release or the original television broadcast while elevating the paratext in status.

82 The corporate websites in Cloverfield are discussed in Chapter Three. The posters used to promote Blair Witch are studied by Aloi. See: Aloi, ‘Beyond the Blair Witch,’ 196.

83 Gray, Show Sold Separately, 89.
Gray highlights how the text itself can become a subjective paratext: that a film’s authenticity can be subverted through its own material. The consideration of DVD material is significant in demonstrating found footage not as a genre attempting realism, but a genre subverting the constructions of realism. Wetmore explains:

Not only are multiple viewings of a single film possible, but the new technology of DVDs and Blu-Ray allows for multiple versions of the same film to be placed in the same source and viewed sequentially or interactively. Alternate endings, deleted scenes, variant versions (the version not seen in theatres!), director’s cuts and extended versions mean there is no single ‘text’ of a film, but a fluid text that contains all the multiple variants.84

The fluidity and variation disrupts the idea of an authentically singular reality that can be represented on screen. As often as found footage extends into real spaces or real-seeming media, it retracts itself and demonstrates the ease with which it can return to the purely fictional. As discussed earlier, this is often done through the featuring of supernatural monsters. In a more insidious case, there are the multiple and alternate scenes offered by DVDs. Paranormal Activity is a prime example: the DVD, in each play-through of the feature, cycles a different ending scene. Whatever ‘realism’ Paranormal Activity offers, it also offers contradictory sequences of events every time it is revisited. The ‘reality’ of the movie’s ending is corrupted in the viewer’s memory and the franchise ‘canon.’ This bears a resemblance to different news reports representing real footage in sequences that are not cohesive, and acknowledges the means by which editing and contradictory representations contribute to the processes of fragmented realities. The plural Paranormal Activity endings demonstrate how paratexts can emphasise the games between fiction and reality, even shifting the film-watching experience.

This paratextual material, even in cases that break or delineate canon, can be re-incorporated by the film’s franchise. To further the plot of Paranormal Activity in its prequels and sequels, one particular ending—Katie killing Micah—is reiterated in the second, fourth, and fifth films to become the ‘true’ canon ending. This exaggerates the process by which a found footage experience involves the evaluation of some material as authentic and some as fictional, and becomes fundamental to one’s understanding of the sequel plots. In the case of Book of Shadows: Blair Witch

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84 Wetmore, Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema.
2 (Berlinger, 2000), DVD material pertaining to fandom of the original film was synthesised into the story of the second film. Aloi describes this in the following:

The “tale” of making the film, the ordeal the actors faced, may be added to the already complex layer of texts surrounding this production: the “fabricated texts” of the original film, the television specials, the dossier, the CD, and so on—and the “real texts” acknowledging the whole Blair Witch phenomenon, including online discussion groups, accounts of fans who travelled to Burkittsville to ‘get the real story,’ and the meta-cinematic sequel […]

Paratexts make an excellent case study for the extension of a genre’s fictional abilities beyond the scope of a feature film. They represent the layered, complementary, and contradictory canon ‘realities’ of films, and the navigation of these realities in ‘authentic’ media. This emphasises the extent to which our enjoyment of found footage is dependent on entertaining fiction and fictionalisation as a conscious process, and reality as multiplicitous—or, more critically, duplicitous.

Found footage calls into question our fragmented definitions of reality through simple means, many of which have been explored in this chapter. It subverts the generic markers of reality and fiction, forcing audiences to evaluate realism constantly. The sub-genre foregrounds the usually seamless techniques used to differentiate real media and fiction: we entertain fiction as realistic, and we evaluate real media’s capacity to incorporate the fictional. Aloi claims that this is a conscious choice: ‘The idea of what is ‘real’ and how such a question informs aesthetic choices seems crucial for all of these filmmakers.’ In found footage, reality is framed as a series of aesthetic choices and overlaps. Found footage is predicated on the ambiguity, multiplicity, and subjectivity of post-9/11 realities. Read politically, the critical narratives in found footage cinema adapt to real issues—or what we take for granted as real issues—with frightening seamlessness. More significantly, found footage draws attention to the fourth wall; constructed authenticities; mediating processes; and our representations of fear as a source of entertainment. Rather than suggest that found footage disturbs our cultural worldview, I suggest found footage makes a game of the disturbances in terror and screen culture.

85 Aloi, ‘Beyond the Blair Witch,’ 193.

86 Aloi, ‘Beyond the Blair Witch,’ 192.
The world of the popular found footage movie is a mediated one in which ‘reality’ can be synthesised. The interplay between realities and fictions as constructed through each film’s narrative and cinematography requires a level of media literacy typical of 21st-century screen culture. This interplay requires a critical understanding of the qualifiers of realities and fictions, with fear and horror directing these critical abilities to issues of terror and crisis. One may argue equally that the subversive political commentaries of found footage are elevated by their apparent realism, and that the apparent realism of terror media is open to subversion by its slippage into fictionality. From the bias of mainstream journalism to our understanding of the post-9/11 shattered realities, found footage is able to highlight authenticity or reality as performative, subjective, and mediated. To engage with found footage, as filmgoers of the age have in droves, is to engage with realities as screen-mediated processes.
6. Seeing Saw

In the first Saw film (Wan, 2004), the serial killer Jigsaw (Tobin Bell) poses the question to his photographer-victim Adam (Leigh Whannell): ‘What do voyeurs see when they look in the mirror?’ This question establishes the central concern of the Saw series; the question of self-reflexive spectatorship. The Saw movies engage with terror through ostentatiously spectacular violence, critiquing screen culture through fragmented disinformation in a mise-en-abyme of frames and screens. The ongoing discourse in the films, while ostensibly concerned with a variety of sociopolitical issues such as drug abuse and infidelity, serve primarily to challenge uncritical spectatorship in a dangerous and multiplicitous media environment. Every element of the Saw films—dialogue, cinematography, prop and set design, special effects, narrative, and marketing—asserts the series as an aggressive interrogation of self-reflexivity and terror media. The manifesto exists in the very title of the films: Saw is about seeing.

The Saw series includes seven movies: Saw, Saw II (Bousman, 2005), Saw III (Bousman, 2006), Saw IV (Bousman, 2007), Saw V (Hackl, 2008), Saw VI (Greutert, 2009), and Saw: The Final Chapter (Greutert, 2010). The series features Jigsaw—a killer whose title is passed on to a number of disciples—as he traps victims in torture chamber ‘games’ from which they must escape under extreme duress or die. The series is a nonlinear labyrinth of flashbacks and flash-forwards. Each movie follows a victim or law-enforcement officer seeking Jigsaw, and is punctuated by the spectacular torture games. There are constant twists that disturb the chronology: it is revealed that the second, third, and fourth films take place almost simultaneously. Later movies completely re-tell events of the earlier films in a different context, along with flashbacks to before the first ‘chapter.’ ‘Jigsaw’ is initially John Kramer (Bell), an engineer and master manipulator whose machinations are so complex that they continue well after his death in the third film. Two survivors of his games, Amanda Young (Shawnee Smith) and Larry Gordon (Cary Elwes), take up his legacy, along with ex-wife Jill Tuck (Betsy Russell) and FBI agent Mark Hoffman (Costas Mandylor). Victims are chosen on the somewhat arbitrary line of ‘not valuing life’ due to manslaughter, drug abuse, rape,

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1 For clarity’s sake, I will refer to the first film as Saw I and the collected series as Saw. Saw: The Final Chapter is also know by the alternative title Saw 3D. ‘Chapter’ is sometimes a more appropriate word for a Saw film, as the story unfolds across all seven movies.

2 Despite the two women using the ‘Jigsaw’ identity, male pronouns are used throughout the movies, and the proxies through which ‘Jigsaw’ communicates are characterised as male. Due to masks and puppets, it is often unclear which character is acting as Jigsaw.
legal malpractice, infidelity, self-harm, interference with games, and even photography: these disparities are only unified by Jigsaw’s themes of spectatorship. Almost every scene in the series is filled with screens and glass frames: surveillance apparatus, televisions, windows, mirrors, and shots through camera displays are just a few.

I wish to draw forth a number of motifs in Saw to establish their context in New Horror as a post-9/11 movement. American torturers, and terror violence framed as spectacular, are issues for terror culture in the period of the series’ success. Surveillance is a recurring theme, and the questionability of surveillance: who is surveilling whom; the voyeuristic or revelatory properties of surveillance; and the dangers of failing to recognise the contract of screen culture that one is always recording and being recorded. I am also concerned with the extreme nonlinearity of the series, which weaves an unusually complicated plot for a seven-part horror franchise. This nonlinearity—in which the ‘story’ exists in fractured, often misleading, disorganised sequences—is imperative to understanding the terror screenscape. This is both the work that is done to assemble and assess an authentic understanding of contemporary violence, and the arrangement of spurious and disorganised events into a narrative of terror. Finally, there is the deep self-reflexivity inherent in the mise-en-abyme of framing devices and broken spectacles. Saw and Jigsaw brutally confront spectators who cannot critically engage with complex information and terrifying violence. These films are so convoluted and so confronting that they demand a complex approach to the spectacle of violence. What follows is a collection of close scene analyses aimed to re-situate Saw not only in the context of torture and surveillance, but of the critical spectatorship demanded by the terror screenscape.

Torture as a Political Agenda

Scholars of the Saw films are often concerned with the politics of the series, but overlook how this applies to new media and terror spectacle. The series develops on its slasher movie predecessors by deliberately challenging the spectator and the frame. Attempts by critics to align Saw with a left or right political agenda struggle to account for this, because the films purposefully ricochet between heroes, villains, and victims, shifting their visual relationships by bombarding viewers with destabilising information and framing devices. Matt Becker acknowledges this problem in the earlier generation of horror films, claiming of 80s slashers: ‘political interpretations of these films

3 The functional definition of mise-en-abyme refers to two mirrors facing to create an infinite abyss: Saw quite often plays with this using diegetic mirrors.
based upon reading these characters as either predominantly sympathetic or unsympathetic (or heroic and unheroic) are problematic.’ This is especially true of the Saw films, in which the political agendas of the many characters—whose sympathetic capacities change wildly with every new twist—are informed and framed by the series’ ongoing challenge of critical spectatorship.

The disparity in critical reception is perhaps most evident in the analyses of the Saw films by Douglas Kellner and Christopher Sharrett. Both characterise Jigsaw as a vigilante with a conservative or right-wing agenda, but where Sharrett identifies Jigsaw as the protagonist, Kellner casts him as antagonist. According to Kellner: ‘the Saw franchise can be read as an acute diagnosis of US society’s most heinous features, and to demonstrate the noxiousness and lunacy of the right-wing extremists running the country.” This close political reading is excellent in contextualising terror politics in Saw, but overlooks the many victims chosen for motivations beyond conservatism. Kellner identifies Saw’s visual themes in his language:

The Saw franchise, which unveiled a five installment torture and gorefest series between 2004 and 2008, puts on display the demented illusions, grotesque hypocrisy, obscene violence, and utter lunacy of the Bush-Cheney era, which finds its true face in the sick and twisted killer-ex-machina Jigsaw (Tobin Bell).

Like the films themselves, Kellner’s writing is littered with visual references such as unveiling, putting on display, illusions, and the obscene. Sharrett’s reading is less directly political, but contains as many visual references:

The Saw franchise is another of the post-modern cinema’s examples of a vacuous critique of capitalist society from a decidedly conservative position. The sickly-green postindustrial world of Jigsaw, an environment whose overcast, bilious color pallette [sic] has become the norm in numerous films projecting the nation as a wasteland, suggests capitalist culture as a


Kellner, Cinema Wars, 7.

Kellner, Cinema Wars, 7.
“fallen world” at the end of its road-for vaguely moral rather than political and economic reasons. 8

While both analyses acknowledge the visual metaphors and cast Jigsaw as the right-wing avenger, the opposing sympathies are indicative of Saw’s ability to change and challenge the position of the viewer. ‘Jigsaw’ is more than one person, often represented by a literal puppet, and John Kramer’s position as the hero or villain changes with expository scenes that drastically alter every movie’s status quo. ‘Jigsaw’ is self-reflexively constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. This is seen below in the poster for the seventh film, because Saw is often painfully literal.

![Figure 23: A poster for Saw: The Final Chapter.](http://bloody-disgusting.com/photosizer/upload/sawfinalgame093010.gif)

The static alignments assumed by critics such as Kellner and Sharrett fail to consider Saw as a self-reflexive examination of horror’s traditionally dynamic perspectives. Horror has a history of subverting the role of the spectator: in the Saw films it is the titular concern. This tradition is best outlined by Carol Clover:

8 Sharrett, ‘The Problem of “Saw”,’ 34.

9 This is a static image of the poster, which is intended to be viewed online as a moving gif image with the impression of 3D. It is an example of how Saw images are expected to be seen in different contexts. It is one of studio Lionsgate’s many posters designed to be distributed through unusual networks, as will be discussed in Chapter Seven. See: Saw 3D, advertisement, GIF file, 2010, accessed 1st October, 2015, <http://bloody-disgusting.com/photosizer/upload/sawfinalgame093010.gif>.
A standard horror format calls for a variety of positions and character sympathies in the early phases of the story, but, as the plot goes on, a consolidation at both levels (story and cinematography), and in the final phase a fairly tight organization around the functions of victim and hero (which may be collapsed into one figure or, alternatively, split into many).¹⁰

The different Saw films arrange these perspectives in a number of ways, some conforming to Clover’s formula and others breaking it. In the case of the first film, the final act’s perspective of the hero-victims Adam and Larry is completely subverted: we have been watching Adam and Larry chained up in a bathroom with a corpse lying between them. When Larry escapes, the ‘corpse’ reveals himself to Adam as John Kramer, the Jigsaw killer: he has been alive and observing them the whole time. This reframes the entire narrative: as is typical of screen culture, we are in a constant state of watching and being watched, spectator and spectacle.

Scenes such as this are further explored in Saw V, when Jigsaw protégé Hoffman traps his pursuer, Detective Peter Strahm (Scott Patterson). In Hoffman’s trap, Strahm is promised a safe escape if he enters a suspicious glass box. When Strahm refuses, Hoffman enters the box, from which he can safely watch Strahm die in his place. Strahm’s reasonable assumption is that the glass box is the victim’s space: every other murder in the series has taken place in a contained, viewable space and performed with spectacular violence. Hoffman emerges triumphant because he self-reflexively acknowledges the complexity of the spectator and the spectacle in the Saw series and in screen culture. In this and many other examples, Saw is able to disturb the dynamic between seeing and being seen, between truth and screens, and between violence and vengeance: all complex and critical problems in terror culture.

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The shifting perspectives described by Clover are presented, highlighted and played with in cinematography, questioned by characters, and subverted by the narrative, as the seven films create and critique the spectacle and spectator. At times the spectator is aligned with Jigsaw and their accomplices, as Sharrett claims, conforming to what Clover describes as ‘film theory’s conventional assumption that cinematic apparatus is organized around the experience of a mastering, voyeuristic gaze.’\footnote{Clover, \textit{Men, Women and Chain Saws}, 8-9.} The more victim-oriented theory Clover favours is championed by Kellner, who notes that the films have heroes among the victims and law enforcers. However, alongside and because of these constant changes in perspective, self-reflexivity is constantly demanded of the \textit{Saw} viewer. Viewers must examine how these sympathetic or villainous characters deal with their own issues of alignment and spectatorship, and in turn examine how a viewer alluded to in the self-reflexive narrative deals with spectatorship.

In trying to identify a static spectator alignment in the torture porn genre, critics such as David Edelstein overlook the \textit{Saw} series’ commentary on the changing nature of spectatorship in screen culture. In his summary of torture porn, Edelstein raises questions on spectatorship without sufficient answers, hypothesising a series of alignments and their sociopolitical currency, but failing to acknowledge the significance of self-reflexivity and dynamic spectatorship endemic to the contemporary mediascape. Edelstein asks: ‘Is there a masochistic as well as a sadistic component to the mayhem? In the same way that some women cut themselves (they say) to feel something,
maybe some moviegoers need to identify with people being cut to feel something, too. Edelstein quotes Will Self’s analysis of the shifting point-of-view and viewer alignment in cinema, but does not identify spectatorship as central to films such as *Saw:*

Of the scene in *Reservoir Dogs* in which a sadist exuberantly mutilates a bound policeman, Self writes, “We lose sight of whose exact POV we are inhabiting. The sadist who is doing the torturing? The policeman? The incapacitated accomplice? It is this vacillation of POV that forces the sinister card of complicity upon the viewer”. In the *Saw* series, however, the dizzying vacillation is used in conjunction with dialogue on spectatorship that serves as a direct address to viewers, challenging the spectator out of complicity with its demanding questions and brutal violence exacted upon the inert.

Because critical responses to *Saw* fail to take into account horror’s rich history with spectatorship, the complexity of the series is often overlooked. I suggest that through endless references to spectatorship, the *Saw* films establish the central concern of examining and interrogating the act of watching. Questions raised about violence, truth, and the inertia are fundamentally oriented around spectatorship. *Saw* reflects the spectacularity of violence; how mediation, framing, and screens can create disparate truths; and asserts that dynamic spectatorship is the only means to manage the terror screenscape.

**Framing *Saw***

In the world of *Saw*, everything exists in the context of how it is seen. Even the title employs connotations of meaning-riddled spectatorship. The title ostensibly refers to the saw Larry uses to cut off his foot in *Saw I*, or a shortening of Jigsaw—a nickname given for the killer’s habitual cutting of puzzle-shaped pieces from his victims’ skin, and John’s love of puzzles. However, the title *Saw* best captures the content of the series when read to mean ‘to have seen.’ This manipulation of language engages in the self-reflexive tropes of horror. Phillip Brophy describes the similar use

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13 Will Self quoted in Edelstein, ‘Now Playing at Your Local Multiplex.’

14 This punning recalls the ‘Hostel’ contraonyms discussed in Chapter Two, and the troubled definitions of ‘terror’ in Chapter One.
of puns in horror culture when discussing the magazine *Fangoria*: ‘The title speaks volumes: gore, fantasy, phantasmagoria, fans. It simultaneously expands a multiplicity of cross-references and contracts them into a referential construct.’\(^{15}\) *Saw* does the same, introducing a layered set of meanings alluding to the complexity of watching. In the course of the series, ‘to see’ is explored and critiqued from a variety of perspectives, but above all portrayed as complex and dynamic. To follow the films, a viewer must understand the multiplicity of meaning and contract it as Brophy describes.

The *Saw* films introduce spectatorship as the central concern throughout the series’ narrative and mise-en-scène. In every film, the use of surveillance cameras, two-way mirrors, and screens are crucial to the story, and a screen or frame of some variety is present in nearly every scene of every film. The Jigsaw persona constantly emphasises the significance of spectatorship in messages, traps, and choice of victims. The dialogue of police officers hunting Jigsaw is peppered with visual references, detailing the importance of sight and perspective in trying to understand Jigsaw. Many victims are chosen for ‘watching others’ in various capacities, and their messages contain various visual allusions. Adam, the photographer in *Saw I*, receives the message:

> You’ve simply sat in the shadows, watching others live out their lives. But what do voyeurs see when they look in the mirror? Now, I see you as [...] pathetic. So, are you going to watch yourself die today, Adam, or do something about it?

An informant named Michael (Noam Jenkins) receives a similar message in *Saw II*: ‘You’ve made a living watching others. Now we will see if you are willing to look inward rather than look outward.’ In one of the many examples of multilayered spectatorship, Michael is being watched by the *Saw II* viewer, while on camera by Jigsaw, while watching a video of himself receiving eye surgery. The message continues: ‘What you are looking at right now is your own body [...] it’s right before your eyes.’ Michael is one of many examples in which a crime—in this case, snitching—is given an arbitrary relationship with spectatorship and the visual to emphasise the significance of watching in these films. The same occurs to Trevor (Kevin Rushton)—whose crimes are unnamed—and rapist Ivan (Marty Adams) in *Saw IV*, and to amoral lawyer Suzanne in *Saw: The Final Chapter*, all of whom lose their eyes. This places constant emphasis on the power of the eye and the abuse of that power: for Ivan, spectatorship was a malicious tool used when raping his victims. For Suzanne, her willingness to overlook illegal activity, or in Jigsaw’s words ‘see no evil,’ damns her. Like in many

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\(^{15}\) Philip Brophy, ‘Horrality - The Textuality of Contemporary Horror Films,’ *Screen* 27 (January-February 1986): 3.
other traps, the victims are condemned specifically for the different ways they deal with spectatorship, resonating with the series’ ethos much more than a political reading of conservatives demonising rape, photography, and legal malpractice. The metaphor is literal in the case of Michael: the key is in the eye.

Figure 25: Michael realising the key is in his eye socket in *Saw II*.

Along with the Jigsaw trap messages, John’s dialogue and messages in the films serve to obsessively emphasise a conscious spectatorship. Jigsaw constantly encourages police officers, survivors, and other characters to watch, look, and see. In *Saw II*, the first crime scene has ‘Look closer, Detective Matthews’ (Donnie Wahlberg) written on the ceiling. This sentiment is central to Lieutenant Rigg’s (Lyriq Bent) elaborate trap-mission in *Saw IV*, repeated as the phrase ‘See what I see.’ Hoffman-as-Jigsaw addresses Strahm in *Saw V* with ‘You’ve finally found what you’re looking for,’ and Detective Gibson (Chad Donella) in *Saw: The Final Chapter* with the message ‘Gibson see for yourself.’ In *Saw III*, John yells at horrified doctor-victim Lynn (Bahar Soomekh) ‘Look at me! Now you look at me,’ characterising himself as both spectator and spectacle. John also tells Lynn ‘You haven’t seen anything yet,’ when she mentions her failed marriage, contextualising the relationship as a visual experience. When John takes on Hoffman as his apprentice, he places a full-length mirror in front of Hoffman and asks: ‘What do you see? Look! What do you see?’ John often addresses him through the reflection, placing their interactions in a frame. Later Hoffman continues the tradition: when hunting John’s ex-wife, Jill, in *Saw: The Final Chapter* he says ‘I’ve
been looking for you. How do I look?’ and sends a video to police officers with the message ‘Look to where you’re being led [...] do you see it?’

Figure 26: John confronts Hoffman in Saw V.

In all of these cases there is an important self-reflexivity that addresses viewers as well as characters with questions of spectatorship. The densely layered instances of mise-en-abyme occur throughout the series, with characters acknowledging diegetic screens, frames and screens featured prominently and fluidly in shots. There are references to film culture so intense the fourth wall is almost broken. These techniques are incessant and creative: in many scenes, especially in Saw II, shots transition from monitors into ‘reality’ and vice versa. Similar transitions take place on televisions when Detective Kerry (Dina Meyer) is kidnapped in Saw III and when Jill watches a tape of John in Saw V. Cameras and film jargon litter the mise-en-scène of Saw: The Final Chapter, where Bobby (Sean Patrick Flanery), a character masquerading as a Jigsaw survivor, is making what John icily calls a ‘promotional DVD.’ Frames such as mirrors or windows are featured prominently in shots throughout the series, and monitor screens are omnipresent. The two-way mirror is common: in Saw: The Final Chapter, a door is hidden behind the mirror, and later Hoffman shoots Detective Rogers (Laurence Anthony) in the eye from the other side of a mirror. The characters and viewers of Saw navigate worlds riddled with screens and frames, the content of these screens only feeding mediated tidbits of information about torture and violence. The fear of surveillance strongly echoes fears in terror culture, and the fragmented screens with conflicting slivers of truth are an apt metaphor for the post-9/11 news industry. By breaking and transgressing the maze of frames, the
Saw series resonates with the complexity of decentralised screen media, and the importance of self-reflexivity in surveillance culture.

‘You haven’t seen anything yet’: Saw as spectacular

The Saw series also calls attention to the spectacle by highlighting itself as media. In Saw I Adam notes the scene’s similarity to reality TV after noticing surveillance cameras: Adam recognises that he is being made a spectacle. There is a running theme of theatricality in all the films, emphasising the spectacle and thus the spectator. The victims of Saw VI are all in an abandoned zoo, with different animal enclosures converted into traps. This exaggerates the role of the victims as captive spectacle, the glass boxes resembling both an animal exhibit and a film screen. This is taken further in Saw: The Final Chapter when the first trap is a large glass box in a city square. Like the horror audience, citizens stand around the box as the three victims inside are torn apart, watching in fascination. This is one of the most scathing uses of mise-en-abyme in the series: it transforms the spectators into another part of the spectacle, displaying and parodying the film audience.

Similarly, John and Hoffman use dioramas to plan their traps in Saw I and Saw VI, referencing the theatricality of the films’ trap scenes. In Saw: The Final Chapter, Gibson explains Jigsaw’s traps by saying ‘You know he likes to put on a show.’ When Hoffman begins moving the figures in his dioramas to resemble his surveillance monitors, it suggests the spectator-spectacle relationship as interactive.

Figure 27: Hoffman’s dioramas in Saw VI.
Pop culture references such as these abound in the Saw films. Mark Jancovich discusses horror’s history of intertextuality, claiming: ‘these films self-consciously flaunt their artistic and literary credentials, even while they were largely produced as a low-budget shocker.’ For the Saw films, this intertextuality further highlights and incorporates the spectator and the spectacle. When Michael cuts the key from behind his eyeball in Saw II, it recalls a similarly violent commentary on the cinema seen in Un Chien Andalou (Buñuel, 1929). The films take occasional breaks such as these from the generic verisimilitude of horror to destabilise frames and reference other films or genres. Flashback traps in Saw I have the thrash metal soundtracks, hyperactive movement, and stylised colour of an MTV music video. Saw: The Final Chapter changes the aspect ratio to a postcard frame in a flashback of photographer Adam. Saw V has a black shot with Strahm’s head in a glass box as a distant pinprick, rapidly zooming in the style of The Tingler (Castle, 1959), itself a reference to Gold Diggers of 1935 (Berkeley, 1935).

The inclusion of the glass box around the head is another deliberate imposition of the cinematic frame, calling attention to the film and in turn the viewer. References range from literary horror in Edgar Allan Poe’s pendulum trap in Saw V to Return of the Jedi (Marquand, 1983) in Saw IV’s tagline ‘It’s a trap.’ The tagline of Saw III is taken from John’s line ‘You haven’t seen anything yet,’ alluding to the famous ‘You ain’t heard nothing yet’ in The Jazz Singer (Crosland, 1927). In using this line, Saw V implies the significance of the visual and of spectatorship, suggesting—with considerable hubris—that the Saw films may be as revolutionary to the visual in cinema as The Jazz Singer was to sound. All of these references serve to establish the Saw films as literate in pop culture, encouraging the same kind of intertextual self-reflexivity in its viewers. As discussed in Chapter Three, these references to Hollywood classics also critically demonstrate the ease with which violence—in this case torture, rather than razing New York—and truth can segue into a spectacular narrative that may be used to justify that violence.

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17 A boastful exaggeration, certainly, but interesting to consider.
Figure 28: The gradually approaching disembodied head from the musical number *Lullaby of Broadway* in *Gold Diggers of 1935* (Berkeley, 1935).

Figures 29 and 30: Strahm’s head framed in a similar shot in *Saw V*. 
The series’ generous references to cinema and the spectacular suggest a critical reading of the representation of torture. The nonlinear arrangement of the Saw series uses trap sequences in a generic structure strikingly similar to musicals and Tom Gunning’s ‘cinema of attractions.’ The traps, with their careful dioramic arrangement, intense soundtracks, ostentatious special effects, and performance of the human body, interrupt the narrative as intermittent spectaculars. Adam Lowenstein notes that horror and musicals are similar in their ‘excessive; and spectacular deviation from Hollywood storytelling. The Saw attractions’ significance to terror culture is twofold: first; as an unconventional and self-reflexive address to the spectator. Second; the disruption of usual narrative progression draws attention to how terror spectacles are narrativised.

Gunning’s work focuses on early cinema, in which ‘attractions’ were films focused on displays of spectacle rather than narrative cause and effect. Gunning does not set narrative and attraction as oppositional, but demonstrates that one may challenge the other to create a rewarding film experience. Gunning describes the characteristics of attractions:

[…] a fascination with visual experiences which seem to fold back on the very pleasure of looking (colours, forms of motions […]); an interest in novelty (ranging from actual current events to physical freaks and oddities); an often sexualized fascination with socially taboo subject matter dealing with the body (female nudity or revealing clothing, decay and death); a peculiarly modern obsession with violent and aggressive sensations (such as speed or the threat of injury).

From these criteria, Saw traps can be read as attractions. These torture scenes are more than a meditation on the torture controversy in the War on Terror, or a game of special effects one-upmanship: their high stylisation supports and intensifies self-reflexive spectatorship.

Gunning’s study clarifies how these spectacular intermissions further the series’ agenda of challenging the spectator. Gunning states: ‘The attraction addresses the spectator, acknowledging the viewer’s presence and seeking to quickly satisfy a curiosity. This encounter can even take on an

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20 Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’,” 5-6.
aggressive aspect, as the attraction confronts the audience and even tries to shock them."21 Aggression, shock, and confrontation are obvious prerogatives of the torture spectacles, which Gunning suggests are inherently self-reflexive by way of their spectacularity. This attention to a self-reflexive relationship between the film and the spectator during the attraction is furthered by Gunning:

Attractions pose a very different relation [compared to the classic voyeur] to the spectator. The attraction does not hide behind the pretense of an unacknowledged spectator […]. As I have stated elsewhere, the attraction invokes an exhibitionist rather than a voyeuristic regime.22 This subversion of the voyeur recalls Jigsaw’s criticism of Adam and others as ‘voyeurs.’ The attraction does not interpellate the voyeur ‘in the shadows.’ The self-reflexivity Gunning suggests between the spectator and the attraction opens a critical dialogue surrounding violence as a spectacle. The violent spectacular is, after all, one of the driving functions of terror as a culture, and Saw draws attention to this by framing the spectacular as an integral part of the story’s challenge. These scenes interrupt the narrative and dialogue with their performances of torture: however, the spectacularity itself furthers Saw’s agenda of demanding critical, self-reflexive spectatorship.

The process of narrative interruption is itself a challenge to the spectator. Gunning explains that while narrative progression is not the prerogative in the cinema of attractions, the spectacle and narrative can function dialectically: ‘This desire to display may interact with the desire to tell a story, and part of the challenge of early film analysis lies in tracing the interaction of attractions and narrative organization.’23 As I have discussed, the narrative organisation of Saw is labyrinthine, deliberately displaced through frames of information and temporal disruptions. By interrupting the plot, the trap spectacles complement this disruption. Gunning notes that: ‘Rather than a developing configuration of narrative, the attraction offers a jolt of pure presence, soliciting surprise, astonishment, or pure curiosity instead of following the enigmas on which narrative depends.’24 His use of ‘enigma’ is particularly interesting: Saw is deliberately enigmatic. The narrative

21 Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’,” 5.
22 Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’,” 5.
23 Gunning, “‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t’”,’ 4
developments are as challenging as the spectacular interruptions: a spectator must critically assess the subjectivity, particularly the subjective temporality, of each new story development.

The nonlinear storytelling of *Saw* supports the atemporality of attractions, enforcing self-reflexive spectatorship. Gunning uses the title of his paper, ‘Now You See It, Now You Don’t,’ as an example:

> [...] the title of this essay [...] implies precisely this discontinuous succession of instants: *Now* you see it, *now* you don’t. In contrast, narrative temporality moves from *now* to *then*, with causality as a frequent means of vectorizing temporal progression. My title phrase stresses both the spectator awareness of the act of seeing and the punctual succession of instants, while narrative temporality moves through a logic of character motivation (“First she …, *then* she …”).25

The problem of ‘first’ and ‘then’ as progressive storytelling in *Saw* is that the narrative is utterly nonlinear, containing numerous revisions and rearrangements of the story. The third and fourth film are an excellent example: we are initially led to believe that it is ‘first’ *Saw III* ‘then’ *Saw IV*, before the revelation that they are diegetically simultaneous: a succession of ‘now’ and ‘now.’

Gunning’s discussion usefully highlights the significance of the nonlinear plot of the series. The twists, particularly those that introduce another level of spectatorship—a character from three movies ago was watching all along!—mirror the shattered screenscape that destabilises fiction, narrative, truth, and reality. The ‘whole story’ is constantly being obscured, reframed, upended, and scattered by the new frames of story and media offered from movie to movie. Assembling the plot and chronology requires a dynamic ability to construct these fragments and reconsider their arrangement with each unfolding of new information. Of course, this process involves self-reflexive spectatorship: to puzzle out a fragmented plot is another pun on the work of ‘Jigsaw.’ Jigsaw is a figure who shows his or her characters fractions of the truth in videos and spectaculars: the terror spectator is similarly shown disorganised media and expected to critically contextualise it.

Lowenstein emphasises Gunning’s atemporality in a political context, suggesting that these attractions are able to evoke narrative similarities between historical traumas.26 The spectacle’s disturbance of temporality forges allegorical connections and highlights disconnections between

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26 Lowenstein, ‘Living Dead,’ 121.
political events, particularly in the shattered realities of terror culture. The fractured narratives of *Saw*, punctuated by disturbances in the form of violent spectacle, create a disturbed temporality reflects the disruptive narrative of the War on Terror.

**Self-reflexivity and Survival**

The use of self-reflexivity to address a horror viewer is noted in Brophy’s description of ‘Horrality’ 1980s slasher films: ‘The contemporary Horror film *knows* that you’ve seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen; and it *knows* that you know it knows you know.’27 This cyclic and layered self-reflexivity is often used comically or to play with tropes of the slasher sub-genre: in the *Saw* series, it is a means by which to stage an assault on the conventions of the spectator. The only consistent critical stance that can be read is one encouraging spectators to be self-reflexive, critically and dynamically assessing the authenticity of violent media fractured across a screenscape. The characters that suffer heaviest criticism in the narrative are those that remain stagnant and inert as spectators, whereas the ones with more expanded roles are those able to shift and understand multiplicitous spectatorial and media relationships.

The films make abundant use of cameras as a diegetic plot device and a tool of self-reflexivity. Clover notes how the self-reflexive acknowledgement of film as film and the inclusion of cameras serve to address the viewer in horror cinema:

> Over and over, and in a remarkable variety of ways, modern horror plays out the same adversarial scenario. Film after film presents us with stories in which audiences are assaulted by cameras, invaded by video signals, or film images, attacked from screens. The implication, of course, is that the audience in question is meant to represent *us* in relation to the screen *we* are watching.28

Omnipresent surveillance cameras undermine the security of many characters’ situations, and the smooth transitions into monitored scenes and out to those monitoring e the relative relationship of the spectator and spectacle.

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27 Brophy, ‘Horrality,’’ 5.

Character awareness of dangerous spectatorship in the form of surveillance is noted by Dean Lockwood:

The control allegory is even more explicit in the Saw movies. We find here as well as the emphasis on surveillance on surveillance and tracking. “So that’s what this is... reality TV ...,” one Saw captive protests. Saw II imprisons its eight victims in a house that cannot fail to recall the Big Brother setup.29

This awareness is used as a trap in Saw III, when Detective Kerry sees herself on her apartment television; realises she is being filmed; and hunts for the camera. The viewer is shown this hunt by a shot of the television, with Kerry walking out of the frame and appearing on the screen, approaching the television screen/camera. Characters, particularly victims, call attention to spectatorship in situations such as these, showing a meta-awareness of being filmed and critiquing their position and danger as the spectacle of surveillance. In Saw II and Saw V, the victims discuss their knowledge of Jigsaw traps, alluding to the viewer’s knowledge of the films. By constantly calling attention to these frames, the films demand attention on the spectator and the necessity of collecting information from multiple frames or films.

Jigsaw’s full address to Adam—a covert photographer working for private investigators—in Saw I suggests the possibility of critical, subjective spectatorship:

Up until now, you’ve simply sat in the shadows, watching others live out their lives. But what do voyeurs see when they look into the mirror? Now, I see you as a strange mix of someone angry yet apathetic. But mostly just pathetic. So, are you going to watch yourself die today, Adam, or do something about it?

In this scene and many others, Jigsaw criticises his victims as spectators. As a photographer, Adam is punished as inert and uncritical. This also serves to destabilise the film’s spectators, self-reflexively addressing the potential to ‘do something about it.’ John’s own obsession with photography is revealed in Saw III, Saw VI, and Saw: The Final Chapter. His flashbacks in Saw III are to moments of then-wife Jill being recorded on a handheld video camera, included in the frame, and in later films their home videos are shown. John’s regret at losing Jill and their unborn child is

taken out on Adam, but in a fragmented screenscape of new media: a world filled with home videos, surveillance cameras, reality TV, dioramas, two-way mirrors, and physically lying in a room to watch the action. John-as-Jigsaw calling to ‘do something about it’ comes from a character able to utilise multiplicitous media, both recording and playing, giving limited and mediated versions of the ‘whole story,’ and turning violence into a spectacle. He physically shifts from the inert spectator of a dead body, leaving Adam to die as he ‘does something’ as small as walking away. This self-reflexive address, when keeping in mind the series’ recollections of classic cinema, attacks the apathetic spectator. The complex world of post-9/11 screen culture can be survived only by those who are able to walk away from Saw and critically interact with the complexities and contradictions of fragmented screen violence.

Figure 31: In the shock-twist ending of Saw I that came to characterise the series, the seemingly-dead John gets up and leaves Adam to die in the bathroom.

Throughout the series, the different roles assumed by spectators are highlighted and deconstructed. Hoffman’s illusions of the omnipotent surveillance master occur when he moves figures in his dioramas to resemble the surveillance monitors of his traps in Saw VI. His obsession with glass boxes representing screens is evident in the box welded around Strahm’s face in Saw V, mimicking a television screen. The box returns in the climax discussed earlier, when Hoffman-as-Jigsaw urges Strahm to enter another television-like box that looks to Strahm like a trap. Hoffman reveals that the box is not for the spectacle, but the spectator: he locks himself inside as the surrounding walls crush Strahm to death. Again, those who cannot dynamically recognise the fluidity between the
contemporary spectacle and spectator, and see that violence can be framed subjectively, are condemned.

This fluidity occurs earlier in the film as well, when Hoffman’s voyeuristic inclinations are indicated by the peepholes at his trap sites. In a number of forensic scenes, Strahm looks through Hoffman’s peephole and appears to witness the flashback to the trap that took place through the peephole, which Hoffman watched from Strahm’s position. The motif of peepholes serves a number of purposes in reorienting the films around spectatorship. Strahm’s visions through the peephole are able to reconstruct the past kills, and are theoretically enabling him to ‘see’ Hoffman, his quarry: both sides of the peephole are partially revealed by Strahm’s watching. Hoffman’s visual pleasures are depicted as excessive when traps from earlier films are revealed to have similar peepholes. This revelation, and Strahm’s failure to capture Hoffman, exemplify the subjectivity of the many visual frames giving fragments of the truth: the framing devices of Saw remain fragmented, incomplete, disrupting a cohesive linear narrative as a further disruption of the spectator.
Figures 32 and 33: Strahm and Hoffman use the same peephole in shots aligned to look as though they are watching each other in *Saw V*.

Just as Adam is accused of neglect through spectatorship, Ivan in *Saw IV* is accused of abusing it. Jigsaw addresses him:

Hello, Ivan. As a voyeur, you’ve kept photos of the ones you’ve victimised. Can you see the pain you’ve brought them? [...] Now I give you a chance to decide which is more important: your eyes, which have led you blindly astray, or your body, which has caused those around you endless suffering.

To read this statement, it is not immediately clear that Ivan is a rapist-murderer who has photographed and videoed his victims. Jigsaw puts the crime entirely in the context of spectatorship.
and spectatorial excess. With the exception of *Saw: The Final Chapter*—which shows more conventionally slapstick horror—the films notably lack the sexuality typical of slasher and torture sub-genres. When Ivan’s eyes are gored out, the rape-revenge trope is relevant only as a means to the end of destroying spectatorial conventions. Ivan is less a rapist, and more a photographer; simply accused of being a ‘voyeur’ like Adam. His crime is the inability to recognise the subjectivity of his photographic and sexual victims: his punishment is to lose his eyes. Just as Adam recognises himself as a ‘reality TV’ spectacle, Ivan is made a spectacle: for Jigsaw, at the time acted by Hoffman; for Rigg, who is made an unwilling accomplice; and for the film’s viewers. Jigsaw’s punishment of voyeurs borders on the hypocritical: however, it is those who do not spectate critically, taking media for granted, that suffer the most. Jigsaw’s mastery of his or her traps comes from an ability to be within and outside them simultaneously; to enact them through dioramas and surveillance; to switch from a literally dead, inert spectacle to a walking, dynamic spectator. The only consistent condemnation given to victims such as Adam, Ivan, Suzanne, and Strahm is their failure to recognise spectatorship as fluid and subjective, and critically interpret spectacles of violence in a mise-en-abyme of frames.

![Figure 34: Ivan’s eyes are impaled in *Saw IV.*](image)

As discussed in Chapter Five, the diegetic camera in New Horror serves a contentious and complex role. The *Saw* series shows the camera as it exists in the contemporary screenscape: something constantly present and constantly shifting. In *Saw I*, Larry explains how the camera disconnects him from his family in photography, a sentiment later implied with John’s home movies: ‘Someone, usually me, has to hold the camera, which means I’m always missing from the photos.’ For Adam,
the camera is a tool of truth-telling, despite the many deceptions in the screens and frames of the series. He claims: ‘Face it, Larry, we’re both bullshitters. But my camera isn’t, it doesn’t know how to lie.’ Adam is able to weaponise his camera, and thus his spectatorship: in a flashback, his apartment is blacked out by an attacker. Adam uses his camera flash to catch glimpses of his attacker and blind them. The camera is involved in a kidnapping situation again in *Saw III*, this time with Kerry. She attempts to master Jigsaw’s media by watching his trap tapes, assuming positions of the victim the tapes are intended for, and of the hunter watching the Jigsaw puppet. In the scene discussed earlier, her television flickers to a shot of her own apartment. She watches the live feed on the television and attempts to locate the camera, the shot stays on the television. She appears to approach the viewer through the screen, the frame shaking as she dislodges the camera, and a kidnapper appears behind her only visible on the television. In this scene, the helplessness of the camera is exaggerated by the viewer’s knowledge that Kerry is being stalked. When the mise-en-abyme situation of Kerry approaching a screen-within-a-screen becomes too close, the tension of the scene climaxes. Kerry loses control of the moment she forgets to watch the entire apartment.

‘Potential torturers’

Through establishing, destabilising, and deconstructing layered perspectives and roles, the films encourage a dynamic spectator. The self-reflexive address demands that characters—and infers that viewers—critically examine the spectator and spectacle. This is reiterated across the films, such as when John demands that Lynn look at him in *Saw III*; Hoffman look at himself in *Saw V*; and that Gibbs in *Saw IV* and Strahm in *Saw V* realign their perspectives. John, and in turn Hoffman, insist upon an acknowledgement, awareness, and acceptance of complex spectatorship. As the only consistent figure in the series, Jigsaw’s approach to spectatorship is deliberately complicated and requires active engagement to follow. These complexities are integral to the continuity of the series, and their challenging nature is sustained across a remarkable seven movies.
When discussing the success of *Saw* and other films in the torture porn sub-genre, critics such as Kellner, Sharrett, and Edelstein are inclined to read the films primarily as political allegory. As I discussed earlier, the *Saw* films are concerned primarily with terror tangentially, through screen concerns of fragmented media, surveillance, and questions of authentic mediations of violence. The contemporary screenscape is visualised in the opening trap of *Saw: The Final Chapter*, in which the new media spectator is submitted to a scathing critique. Three victims are trapped in a large glass box located in the middle of a busy public area. Initially, the box is ignored, but gradually curious onlookers gather to observe the trap. Fascination and indifference is dominant, with only one bystander attempting to help at the urging of the victims. When the trap activates, more gather to observe and record on their camera phones. When victim Ryan (Jon Or) yells, ‘What are you fucking staring at, you motherfuckers? Do something!’ it echoes Jigsaw’s message to Adam in the first *Saw*, but the crowd continues to watch the spectacle as though it is a fictional show.\(^{30}\)

The scene makes an obvious criticism of terror-era spectatorship. The urges to become citizen journalists and to mediate an unfolding crisis with handheld media devices are common New Horror tropes that reference terror culture. The self-reflexive criticism breaks through the mise-en-abyme, highlighting the multiple frames placed around violence: the glass box; the camera phone; and the horror film. These frames demarcate spaces of ambiguous fictionality, where the citizen

\(^{30}\) A similar criticism is voiced in *Diary of the Dead* (Romero, 2007): ‘We don’t stop to help; we stop to watch.’
Seeing Saw

journalists do not immediately realise that the trap is real. We are unconcerned with the love triangle of infidelity that trapped the victims: the scene’s critical focus is on the trap as a spectacular space. The public surrounding the trap recognise the cyclic self-reflexivity of surveillance and citizen journalist media, but fail to correctly assess the spectacular violence as authentic.

Issues of surveillance, reality, recording, and different kinds of screen situate the concerns of spectatorship in the Saw series in the contemporary. New screen culture demands dynamic spectatorship, and the Saw films force a viewer to navigate the complex terror screenscape. Jigsaw’s ‘voyeur’ that ‘watches from the shadows’ and is ‘led blindly astray’ cannot survive in post-9/11. Jeffrey Melnick identifies the condemned inert spectator as a pre-9/11 figure:

Numerous commentators rushed during the first weeks after 9/11 to insist that Americans would now be shaken out of their inertia, would refuse to pay to see violent movies, and would demand some new kind of entertainment.\(^{31}\)

The statement implies that watching violence as entertainment was a form of inertia, and the visual violence of terror culture demands a new form of spectatorship. The assumption that viewers would shun violent spectacle because of terror was quickly disproven, and audiences favoured films such as Saw to explore and interrogate the rapidly evolving nature of new media spectatorship. The sentiment of the Saw films resonates with the post-9/11 audience: spectatorship as a dichotomous, simple relationship was no longer relevant.

Kellner discusses how these films deal specifically with the displaying, or spectacle, of political issues when he claims that ‘the violence and brutality of the era is on display in […] the Saw […] series.’\(^{32}\) This suggests that the significance of Saw is not how the films deal with terror or torture in the narrative—which as I have discussed is too decentralised to have any agenda more significant than the interrogation of spectatorship—but how the films deal with the display of terror and torture. Kellner’s very literal political reading touches on terror issues that challenge the contemporary spectator, and these issues are dealt with most clearly when addressed as issues of spectatorship:

\(^{31}\) Jeffrey Melnick, 9/11 Culture (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 51.

\(^{32}\) Kellner, Cinema Wars, 7.
[...] Jigsaw turned his energies as an engineer and builder to construct elaborate torture mechanisms and tests to punish “Evil” of various sorts, just as the Bush-Cheney administration was constructing apparatuses of torture in Afghanistan, Iraq, Guantánamo, and other sites throughout the world to punish its alleged enemies and “evil doers”.

If the Saw films are to be read as reactionary to terror issues such as Abu Ghraib, it is by encouraging a critical spectator in instances of spectacular terror violence. The public outcry at the release of the Abu Ghraib photographs is in no small part because the photographs were taken with connotations of torture as an entertaining spectacle, just as torture is uncomfortably presented as voyeuristic spectacular in the Saw films. Melnick notes how the Abu Ghraib incident—the incident being the release of ‘happy-snap’-style photographs more than torture which took place—deeply complicated the role of the post-9/11 spectator: ‘This horrific photo album, leaked from a prison in Iraq, removed the aura of innocence from the activity of picture-taking.’ With the release of the first Saw, also in 2004, the questions of spectatorship, spectacle, and torture posed by the films make them invaluable as a means of critiquing and contextualising these issues.

The Saw films show a remarkable ability to self-reflexively deconstruct not terror itself, but its more culturally powerful cousin, the mediated spectacle of terror. Kellner summarises the offering of critical perspective as a valuable part of film history, but in few films is it as complex or salient for terror culture as those in the Saw series: ‘In general, cinema is a form of vision that provides ways of seeing, either reproducing conventional modes of seeing and experiencing the world, or enabling one to perceive things that one has not viewed or experienced.’ Saw as a series offers a layered and critical means of watching, confronting the viewer with a confrontational spectacle. By making intricate and complex use of mise-en-abyme, the series is able to critique the fragmented nature of the contemporary screenscape and reflect the work undertaken by spectators to construct a narrative around terror-themed issues. Issues of reality, narrativisation, and authenticity are communicated through strikingly complex plotting, in which meaning must be constructed from multiplicitious and contradictory media. The terror spectator’s responsibility is an emphatic concern of the series, which brutally deconstructs and criticises an uncritical, uncomplicated watching of violent spectacle. The series deliberately shifts and layers perspectives

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33 Kellner, Cinema Wars, 7.
34 Melnick, 9/11 Culture, 73-74.
35 Kellner, Cinema Wars, 13.
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and distorts frames while demanding these transformations be acknowledged and interrogated. To understand the extent to which the Saw series engages in contemporary culture, a viewer must become the self-reflexive spectator, willing to understand, explore, and critique screens’ violence. This compulsion is as simultaneously simple and complex as the single word that encompasses seven films: saw.
Part Three: Shattered Realities
7. Shattered Realities

The final part of this thesis pertains to New Horror’s propensity to subvert, complicate, and play with the spectator’s relationship with media and ‘reality.’ In preceding parts, the framework of reality has been present in terms of the reality-shattering impact of 9/11; political truths surrounding terror culture; reference to real political events by New Horror; and the screen as a mediator for reality. The case studies thus far have included successful independent New Horror movies. Many of these movies—especially those in the found footage sub-genre—are deliberately complicating the relationship between the spectator, the medium, and authenticity or reality. The following chapters demonstrate examples of New Horror crossing the boundary of cinema to confront viewers via ‘real’ media: in journalism, urban spaces, photography, Internet communities, and more. Transmedia storytelling, paratexts, and Alternate Reality Games are key in emphasising the currency of New Horror, drawing attention away from a core ‘text’ or film in the same way Slavoj Žižek suggests we have set aside ‘real reality.’

Post-9/11 scholarship suggests ‘reality’ is multiplicitous and fragmented. Every theorist has a different and inconclusive approach to post-9/11 terror and contemporary screen technology’s effect on our cultural definition of reality: an appropriate conclusion on reality would be that ‘realities’ in the age of New Horror are different and inconclusive. Jane M. Gaines succinctly acknowledges that: ‘Reality outside of cultural signs, as it is so often said, does not exist.’ The way New Horror deliberately complicates the space between the culturally signified ‘reality,’ Žižek’s lost ‘real reality,’ and the media of monsters is one of the genre’s most intriguing games. This is not to suggest that the demarcation between horror stories and ‘real reality’ is lost: rather, that challenging

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its simplicity is a key to New Horror’s entertainment.\footnote{Gaines notes the ineffectuality of nostalgia: ‘The postmodern indistinguishability between the real and its image always seems in danger of turning into a lament for a time when the two were clearly distinguishable, but in the end it is never exactly clear in this theory whether the breakdown between the real and the imaginary is a good thing or not.’ See: Gaines, ‘Introduction,’ 3.} As established by theorists such as Richard Allen, the pleasure of movies—even and especially horror movies—is in entertaining fictional media under a different definition of ‘real,’ a practice Allen notes requires active spectatorship.\footnote{Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, \textit{Found Footage Horror Films} (Jefferson: McFarland, 2014), 26; Allen, \textit{Projecting Illusion}, 3.} This activity is even more complex and challenging for New Horror in ‘real’ media, and new media theory’s redefinition of the ‘spectator’ as the viewer/user/player.\footnote{Stephen Dinehart is quoted as defining the VUP in Angela Ndalianis’ \textit{The Horror Sensorium}. The viewer-user is also coined as the ‘viewser’ by Dan Harries. See: Angela Ndalianis, \textit{The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses} (Jefferson: McFarland, 2012), 173; Dan Harries, ‘Watching the Internet,’ in \textit{The New Media Book}, ed. Dan Harries (London: British Film Institute, 2004), 180-181.} I suggest that the complexity of our conflicting and converging realities is one of New Horror’s most enjoyable and critical areas. In the following chapters I explore New Horror beyond cinema, in media and spaces that self-reflexively challenge the spectator to actively participate in navigating horror and challenging the ‘real.’

The relationship between New Horror and reality has recurred throughout this thesis. It fits within the framework of terror culture as movies dealing with ‘real’ issues; with what in terror culture is real and what is politically-motivated paranoia. The theme of reality becomes more explicit in Part Two of this dissertation, significant as it is to both case study chapters. Found footage is defined primarily on its ability to mimic realistic media, drawing attention to the mediation processes contributing to realism. As discussed in Chapter Five, the \textit{Saw} franchise explicitly criticises screen mediation’s relationship with reality, self-reflexively challenging audiences through mise-en-abyme and mind games. These New Horror works have a powerful critical relationship with contemporary reality theories, and this framework is foregrounded in the following chapters. The following chapters include some of New Horror's most interesting works: those which span multiple devices or spaces, complicating and fragmenting their realism.\footnote{Since the examples discussed are not based on movies, and span multiple media, these ‘texts’ or ‘works’ are best described as a networked ‘story,’ in reference to transmedia’s ‘story-world.’}
9/11 versus Reality

9/11 and terror culture are rife with issues of reality: the attack’s resemblance to movies; the presence and absence of towers; the experience of 9/11 by the West primarily through media; the confusion over whether Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction were real; the Abu Ghraib tortures made more ‘real’ or important by being photographed; the inclusion of Hurricane Katrina in terror politics despite containing no real terrorism; and the question of whether a War on Terror can really fight ‘terror.’ The pragmatic issues of realism centre around truth and inauthenticity: the scholarly discourse attributes to 9/11 a cultural fragmenting of reality. Geoff King and Slavoj Žižek are two prominent theorists attempting to navigate reality and 9/11, acknowledging at once that as a media spectacle, it contains an element of virtuality, fantasy, or unreality; but also through modifiers on their definition of ‘reality’ seek to reaffirm that—allegedly in spite of common opinion—9/11 is resolutely real. Žižek’s new reality is ‘virtualised,’ with the original definition now requiring an extra qualifier:

[…] we begin to experience ‘real reality’ itself as a virtual entity. For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others since – as Jeremy Bentham knew – reality is the best appearance of itself? 8

Žižek acknowledges that the TV screen conveying the catastrophic movie spectacle serves to undermine the ‘real reality.’ King similarly acknowledges that spectacularity and digital mediation potentially interfere with the reality of the event, even as it becomes the mass context in which 9/11 is experienced and understood:

The events of September 11 were, clearly, extremely ‘real’, in terms of their impact on those directly involved and on future American policy both at home and abroad. The domain of spectacular imagery is part of that reality, however, even aspects that

8 Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, 11.
might seem to have been experienced beforehand in the realm of out-and-out Hollywood fantasy.9

King establishes particular attributes that qualify 9/11 as not only real but ‘enormous.’ The unreality—the movie-like spectacular—is paradoxically and precisely what makes 9/11 an ‘enormous reality’ for those watching. King implies a set of realities and verisimilitudes, varying in relevance and function, in dialectic and overlapping relationships. I would not go so far as Žižek to suggest that 9/11 signifies an abandonment of ‘real reality’ or its significance. Rather, I contend that 9/11 serves as a catalyst for recognising Gaines’ culture of fragmented realities that shift in significance, requiring a series of inter-references and qualifiers to be distinguished.

Screening the Real

As argued in the second part of this thesis, screen media’s symbiotic relationship with terror culture contributes significantly to New Horror’s realities. The proliferation and prevalence of screens in the 21st century have drawn various popular criticisms for their role in mediating reality. Whether it be the suggestion that screen media representations have superseded proximal reality, or the acknowledgement that our ‘real’ world is substantiated by media input, the role of screen media in representing realities is imperative to this part. Žižek casts 9/11 as a fracturing point, claiming:

[...] what happened on September 11 was that this fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality. It is not that reality entered our image: the image entered and shattered our reality (i.e. the symbolic coordinates which determine what we experience as reality).10

This theory of ‘shattering’ is imperative to my framework of New Horror media. With screen terror as the catalyst, I wish to explore how New Horror engages with ‘reality’ as broken, multiplicative, uncoordinated, ambiguous, and dangerous. The ‘shattered’ fragments of New Horror and terror narratives are scattered across the mediascape, confusing their cultural signification as ‘real’ terror or ‘unreal’ horror. ‘Reality’ cannot be defined as singular, coherent, or hermetic; and this uncertainty is one of the deepest sources of fear and entertainment in New Horror. Caetlin Benson-Allott uses a


10 Žižek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real, 16.
similar ‘shattering’ method to discuss how horror self-reflexively confronts its medium and the viewer, compromising the relationship between these concepts. Finding and critically recognising fragments of realities are essential to New Horror engagement.

Scholarship of terror culture discusses 9/11 as a widespread screen experience. Screen media is a means of both authenticating crisis and ‘mediating’ it: bringing a fragment of the ‘real’ to the wider cultural sphere while subjectively framing it. James Friedman, working on television, describes this as an ‘inherent difficulty in describing and containing the ideological, economic, cultural, technological, and political influences that impact televisual representations of real events.’ Friedman’s discussion of television applies similarly to much of news media: ‘it is clear that television does not offer direct access to “the real,” but works to present a reality. The difference lies in a distinction between an idealized objective reality and subjective experience.’ The subjectivity of ‘a reality’ illustrates the multiplicative definitions foregrounded in terror culture, and the construction of discrete realities offers greater insight into the new cultural markers of ‘real.’ Misha Kavka claims: ‘The term ‘reality’ need not be limited to palpable or documentable experiences, but must increasingly be thought in terms of techniques of documentation which produce a sense of immediacy.’ These techniques of immediacy, and the shifting limitations of ‘reality,’ are complicated by new media and challenged by New Horror.

King’s discussion of 9/11 pertains specifically to our screen-mediated cultural understanding of the event, with the comparison to a movie compromising its realism. On the collision between the 9/11 as an enormously real event and the screen-mediated movie-like spectacle, he states:

"This is a paradox that, I would suggest, is symptomatic of the ways in which media constructions of the real-authentic and the fictional-image-spectacular generally exist in a dialectical relationship, in which each is mutually implicated in the other, and in which neither can entirely be separated out from the other. To argue this is not to surrender any distinction between notions of the real, including the spectacularly real,  


12 For further discussion of citizen journalism and the mediation of crisis, see Chapter Six.


and the entirely fictional, but to recognise that a complex relationship exists between the two.\textsuperscript{16}

This complex, dialectic relationship between our various understandings of realities and media texts is a significant cultural phenomenon.

New Horror successfully capitalises on the contentious spaces between terror events and reality as mediated by screens. When New Horror texts play with realism, the dialectic relationship between screen and reality is key to our horror and entertainment. Kevin J. Wetmore Jr offers a complementary analysis to King’s in the context of \textit{War of the Worlds} (Spielberg, 2005):

Paradoxically, Spielberg shows us how the camera makes the image both more real and less real than reality. The camera keeps us safe in a way that it did not keep its operator safe. But by seeing the images on the screen, we know they are ‘real’ in a way that special effects-driven actual film at that moment is not.\textsuperscript{17}

This negotiated more-and-less real, mediated by the use of screen technology, is a theme across New Horror texts, especially those incorporating found footage. The navigation between different manners of reality: the ‘more’ and ‘less’; the ‘spectacularly real’ and the fictional; the virtual reality and the ‘real reality;’ is typical of New Horror’s engagement with screen and terror cultures’ shattered realities.

\textbf{New Media, New Spectatorship}

The new realities emerging from the symbiosis of terror and screen cultures make explicit the processes by which we evaluate different media and assign it cultural significance. Verisimilitudes and realities are fragmented across media and ‘real’ spaces, requiring evaluation and qualification. Fictional works such as New Horror can engage in a more complex discourse with the real, emphasising the genre’s critical capacity. New Horror taps into the monstrousness of the liminal spaces between media, with monsters threatening the boundaries of more ‘real’ spaces. This

\textsuperscript{16} King, “‘Just Like A Movie’?” 54.

attention to the boundaries of media realities, and their permeability by horror texts, is discussed extensively in post-9/11 and New Horror scholarship. Misha Kavka and Daniel North suggest this heightened emphasis on media’s realities and fictions is not necessarily a submission of ‘real reality,’ but certainly a stronger platform for horror. Kavka states:

This has important implications in the age of media globalization, where the demand for an “ethics of actuality”, or a guarantee of strict overlap between reality and its representation, is being overwhelmed and reconfigured by reality in the service of entertainment (see Nichols 1994: 43-62).

This issue of representation and entertainment overwhelming reality is subsequently discussed in greater detail:

This is not to say that we no longer recognize the external world as real—I do not wish to argue for the full-scale paranoization of media society—but it is to say that what we can touch often matters less to our lives than what we see on the screen. The reality effects of the mediated real, what I am calling ‘constructed unmediation’, often have a greater urgency and a paradoxically greater immediacy than the world around us […]

What I wish to take from Kavka’s argument is the immediacy and urgency given to screen entertainment; that it has unprecedented attention as a socially significant aspect of reality. North approaches this from a cognitive angle:

Suggesting a binary division between the actual and the non-actual might also suggest that there is one set of cognitive processes that enables us to process the real world, and another that helps us to understand and conceive of the represented domain, but this is not really the case. There is considerable overlap.

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18 Misha Kavka, ‘Love ‘n the Real; or, How I Learned to Love Reality TV,’ in The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to ‘Reality’ TV and Beyond, ed. Geoff King (Bristol and Portland: Intellect, 2005), 94.

19 Kavka, ‘Love ‘n the Real,’ 95.

The overlap of processing in North’s examples—the actual and *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008)—indicates the complexity with which New Horror is able to engage with concerns of the ‘real.’ Taking into account Kavka’s argument that society has not lost touch with tangible reality, the challenges to reality in New Horror works are not necessarily to make them ‘real,’ but to critically examine the processes by which ‘real’ is defined. The Alternate Reality Game behind *Cloverfield*, explored thoroughly in Chapter Three, does not attempt to convince audiences that the real New York is razed by a monster. Rather, as North argues, it invites a complex play between *Cloverfield*’s alternate reality and our own.

Navigating these versions of the ‘real’ fragmented by 9/11 requires active spectatorship. The participatory process of entertaining movies as ‘real’ is not exclusive to new media culture, but is certainly foregrounded as New Horror’s strength. Richard Allen’s work on illusion and reality contains significant insight into the spectator’s relationship with the ‘reality’ of a film. Allen suggests that ‘the film spectator knows it is only a film and actively participates in the experience of illusion that the cinema affords.’ He further explains: ‘When we perceive a projective illusion, the manner in which we perceive it involves entertaining the thought that what we perceive is real.’ Allen highlights the example of horror in a discussion of *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero, 1968):

[… ] You might imagine that you perceive a world inhabited by zombies. In this case, you do not mistake a staged event for actuality in the manner of a reproductive illusion; rather, you lose awareness of the fact that you are seeing a film, that is, watching a recorded event that is staged before the camera.

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This suggests that the alternate ‘reality’—the story-world—of fictional cinema requires active spectatorship to entertain and to be entertaining. The outlandishness of zombies exemplifies the immersive spectatorship, but horror is equally able to cut closer to the ‘real’ with its visceral frights. Arild Fetveit, discussing reality TV programs about catastrophes, claims that these programs better authenticate themselves because: ‘What most powerfully conveys a sense of reality is, perhaps, the presence of death.’ The ‘reality’ of New Horror is confronting and compelling, reflecting the ‘real’ stories fragmented across news reports of terror and reality programs that conflate real footage with fictionalised narratives. The active spectator that participates in the shattered realities of terror culture, navigating the narratives of death across screen media, is a complex figure able to fully engage in the labyrinthine storytelling of New Horror.

In a new media context, the spectator’s ability to explore this labyrinth leads to a redefinition of spectatorship. From the activity of entertaining a film as reality to the interactivity of playing a video game tie-in to a television program set in the same fictional world, there is far more than ‘spectating’ taking place. Dan Harries uses the portmanteau of ‘viewer’ and ‘user’ to describe the new media spectator:

While the term “viewer” still retains a certain sense of passivity long associated with both film and television viewing, the term “user” seems equally inappropriate with its connotations of computational doings and “too-active-for-narrative-seduction” pursuits. Instead, I call this third emerging mode of spectatorship “viewsing”—the experiencing of media in a manner that effectively integrates the activities of both viewing and using, such as participating in a real-time online poll that directly affects a live video feed.

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24 The ‘story-world’ is a concept key to transmedia theory. The ‘story-world’ is the cohesive factor of a narrative spread across media. Elizabeth Evans quotes Geoffrey Long in describing this as the distinctive characteristic of ‘transmedia’: ‘However, as Geoffrey Long indicates, the term ‘transmedia storytelling’ has taken on a specific meaning relating to the creation of a wider, coherent fictional world that is delivered to the audience in multiple formats (2007:48).’ For the purposes of this chapter, it is useful to consider these fictional worlds as ‘realities,’ as Allen suggests. This is clearer in those transmedia stories characterised as Alternate Reality Games. There are alternate realities in transmedia storytelling, pseudo-authenticated by their transferral across media. Following these realities requires active viewer engagement, and in a transmedia context illustrates how multimedia texts that complicate ‘realities’ have become a popular and self-reflexive part of entertainment. See: Geoffrey Long quoted in Elizabeth Evans, Transmedia Television: Audiences, New Media, and Daily Life (New York and London: Routledge, 2011), 20.


26 As King has described, the ‘spectacle’ has become deeply complicated post-9/11: this reevaluation of the ‘spectator’ follows accordingly.

27 Harries, ‘Watching the Internet,’ 172.
Harries’ ‘viewser’ is active, using multiple screen devices, and engaging with a fictional reality through ‘narrative seduction.’ Harries notes that reality and its authenticators are a key to viewser entertainment: ‘By integrating the illusory “realness” of cinema, the “liveness” of television and the “connectedness” of the Internet, true viewsing experiences can now be created and accessed by a global audience.’

Stephen Dinehart refers to this spectator as the Viewer/User/Player or VUP, a succinct and useful definition that incorporates the ‘play’ element of new media spectatorship. ‘Player’ emphasises how spectatorship itself is playful; that ‘entertaining’ realities is foregrounded as the pleasure and challenge of new media and New Horror. Ndalianis places the VUP in the context of the contemporary mediascape and its relationship with reality:

In such a mediascape, we’re no longer just a spectator or game player, instead (if choosing to participate), we become embroiled in a collective experience that not only requires us to communicate with other media fans, but which also places us in fictional scenarios that present themselves as “realities”.

As a VUP, a spectator is interactive and media-literate, engaged in complex narratives that threaten to complicate realities and the cultural signs that construct them.

The VUP is also active in constructing the spectacle as a creator. Many screen devices have potential to create and share a user’s own content. Jenkins summarises this as such:

The new participatory culture is taking shape at the intersection between three trends:
(1) new tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content
(2) a range of subcultures promote Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, a discourse that shapes how consumers have deployed those technologies

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28 Harries, ‘Watching the Internet,’ 181.
29 Dinehart quoted in Ndalianis, The Horror Sensorium, 173.
30 Ndalianis, The Horror Sensorium, 163.
(3) economic trends favoring the horizontally integrated media conglomerates encourage the flow of images, ideas, and narratives across multiple media channels and demand more active modes of spectatorship.31

For New Horror VUPs, this participation can take many forms. This is horror created by ‘real’ people, distributed not always through traditional networks but developing organically across and between media platforms. These participatory stories can be immersive realities of role-playing and hoaxes; they often play with the authenticating markers of media to establish verisimilitude. Collectively authored horror narratives often exist in semi-real spheres of between ghost stories and urban legend: the lack of singular author destabilises the story’s anchor in fiction. VUPs can be required to do anything from sharing an ambiguously ‘real’ story on social media to physically fighting off actors dressed as zombies. Horror spectators have always enjoyed self-reflexivity: in New Horror, media technologies enable interactivity like never before.

Participatory New Horror storytelling is one of the genre’s most interesting developments. Some stories are rooted in popular horror cinema, such as the fan community developed around the Cloverfield campaign: discussion forums and wikis become part of the Cloverfield world, going so far as to give the movie its title. New Horror director Eli Roth’s promotion of fan-made trailers led to the development of The Crypt, a smartphone app on which VUPs created and shared short horror films and interact with established filmmakers.32 Many more filmmakers operate from sites such as Youtube, sometimes styled as ‘real’ found footage: Marble Hornets, discussed in Chapter Nine, is an example rooted in contemporary urban legend.33 There are countless Internet-based horror wikis: popular ghost story archive such as creepypasta collects a diffusive Internet genre ‘creepypasta,’ ghost stories and urban legends written to seem ‘real.’34 Particularly popular are stories about media horrors invading reality: a pertinent example is a legend of early Pokémon games haunting players


33 Note that Youtube usernames are subject to change: the poster’s name presently appears as ‘Clear Lakes 44 | Marble Hornets,’ reflecting a new project. However, the name used at the time of posting the ‘Marble Hornets’ series was ‘marblehorns,’ and this username remains in the channel’s hyperlink. See: ‘Introduction,’ Youtube video, 2:00, posted by ‘marblehorns,’ 20th June, 2009, accessed 6th October, 2015 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmhfn3mgWUI>.

to the verge of suicide. The archive-style websites lend themselves to VUP authorship and to alternate reality storytelling: some are designed completely ‘in-universe,’ using authenticity markers to appear as a website for a ‘real’ organisation. The website SCP Foundation presents itself as a database categorising monsters and paranormal phenomena, complete with jargon, reports, and paragraphs of ‘censored’ material. The VUP can also play with reality in live ‘games’: the most popular example would be zombie ‘shuffles,’ where fans organise online to role-play as a zombie horde. Haunted-house style attractions have resurged, challenging players to escape zombies and other monsters. One of the most fascinating examples, strongly developed and well-recognised across a wide set of loci, is the ‘Slender Man,’ the case study of Chapter Nine. Few of these examples exist solely in one media, where their fictionality might be contained. Rather, their realities monstrously transgress media and spaces: these are transmedia narratives.

Transmedia Horrors

The VUP exists in a web of technologies and storytelling techniques that allow New Horror to articulate sociopolitical commentaries in new and invasive ways. With accessible recording and distribution technologies, we have screens filled with reality: with the proliferation of screen devices, we have a reality filled with screens. Screen devices diversify and complicate our relationship with media content, and interactive technology allows users a more active role in exploring the real fictional content available. Allen may have entertained Romero’s zombies as real in a cinema: in this century, he may entertain them in hoax news websites; in movies overlapping

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38 The proliferation of screen technologies and our cultural relationships with them are discussed in greater detail in Chapter Five of this thesis. Anne Friedberg’s The Virtual Window gives a more comprehensive discussion of new media technologies. See: Anne Friedberg, The Virtual Window: from Alberti to Microsoft (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006).
with real disaster footage; or shuffling down his street. Robin Wood’s overarching theory of horror—‘normality is threatened by the Monster’—might be rephrased in this context as ‘reality is threatened by the monster.’ Entertaining the illusion of monsters beyond the cinema in ‘real’ media requires spectators to critically engage in the markers of realism that distinguish different genres and media technologies. Following these monsters across media devices and determining their ‘reality’ is how New Horror approaches transmedia.

‘Transmedia’ refers to stories which expand through a range of media, devices, or platforms. Henry Jenkins’ theory is as follows:

Transmedia storytelling refers to a new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence—one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.

Jenkins immediately acknowledges the technological developments of the 21st century that enable transmedia to flourish. These fictional worlds—these ‘realities’—scattered across media and requiring investigation echo the ‘shattered reality’ of 9/11, its ‘bits’ or fragments splintered and framed across screens, struggling with a narrative. Horror lends itself well to transmedia, having traditions of self-reflexivity, ambivalent endings, and the transgression of pre-established boundaries. Monsters can escape their movies to threaten the VUP in games and television, or ‘real’ media like news reports and home videos. ‘In-universe’ elements of transmedia draw attention to the mediators that authenticate and narrativise a subjective ‘reality.’ This enables transmedia horror to critically destabilise terror media: fragmented, framed, narrativised, and monstrous.

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The most interesting New Horror transmedia capitalises on ‘real’ media. This is media which establishes itself as ‘real’ through culturally recognisable markers. Fetveit argues of ‘am-cam’ reality shows and news television:

Rather than a general strengthening or weakening of the evidential credibility of photographic images, I think we are witnessing an increased compartmentalization of credibility; a shift of emphasis from general assessments of credibility to more discourse-specific judgements.

This is similarly asserted by Friedman: ‘Television does not simply portray a window onto a real world “out there,” but frames the world, contextualizes the narrative, and argues for the integrity of the reality it depicts.’ Friedman’s claim articulates Bolter’s double media ‘coverage’: covering ‘reality’ while ‘covering’ the framing process that renders it subjective. Understanding media credibility as a process, we can explore how New Horror’s transmedia stories and Alternate Reality Games employ similar processes to threaten normality or reality, and to critically threaten the integrity of processed ‘real’ media.

Some examples contain their story-worlds to conventionally fictional media. The Walking Dead is fascinating in terms of its massive popularity, and its adaptation from comic books to a congruent story-world of two television shows and a video-game. Like many other major New Horror texts, its ‘realism’ draws on visceral special effects, and its more thoroughly explored story-world. Transmedia legitimises its stories by expanding across media, creating a more thorough ‘reality’: one may switch off the television zombies only to find them lurking on a tablet. I am interested in transmedia stories that go beyond usual entertainment formats such as games and television, invading screens, spaces, and genres culturally marked as ‘real.’ Thus the cases studied in these chapters lack anchorage to traditional entertainment media. These monsters appear in fictionalised ‘archives’; in real-life role-plays; even in news articles that seem to imply, or at least worry over, the existence of zombies. See: Robert Kirkman, Tony Moore, Charlie Adlard, and Stefano Gaudiano, The Walking Dead (Berkeley: Image comics, 2003-); The Walking Dead (AMC, 2010-); Fear The Walking Dead (AMC, 2015); The Walking Dead: Season One (Telltale Games, 2012).

Fetveit, ‘Reality TV in the Digital Era,’ 129.

Friedman, ‘Introduction,’ 16.
The Alternate Reality Game is a variation on transmedia that foregrounds the verisimilitude and ‘realism’ of the genre. Tom Abba summarises the typical ARG as such:

In an ARG, the narrative reality of these source storyworlds is taken as genuine, and website material and real-world interactions combine with filmed media to produce a form that responds to player interaction, becoming, when employed successfully, both an adjunct to the original and a multimedia narrative experience in its own right.

ARGs capitalise on the ‘hunting’ and social networking aspects of transmedia to virally diffuse the ‘real’ story. ARG media aims for verisimilitude, buried in ‘real’ media and bearing the authenticating markers of ‘real’ content. ARGs fabricate character profiles on social networks and other communication technology, from phone calls to Myspace to missing persons posters.

Corporate websites, news report videos, and blogs are presented ‘in-universe,’ with common threads waiting to be collaboratively gathered by VUPs to make sense of the narrative.

Remarkable trust is put in VUPs to actively engage in, seek, interpret, communicate, and archive

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44 Famous ARGs include the campaign for *Cloverfield*, discussed in Chapter Four, and others created by 42 Entertainment: I Love Bees, Year Zero, and Why So Serious?, promoting video game *Halo 2* (Bungie, 2004), album *Year Zero* (Nine Inch Nails, 2007), and movie *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008) respectively. Most popular ARGs are science fiction, and make use of horror tropes. These ARGs are designed as virally-spread promotional mechanisms, deepening a VUP’s relationship with the story-world of the marketed text. In cases such as *Cloverfield* and ‘Year Zero’ their similarities to reality are political as well as aesthetic, allowing their ‘realism’ to be used critically. Both are diffused through media content almost indistinguishable from ‘real’ political events, focusing on the alternate reality’s evils of corporate exceptionalism; administrative lies and cover-ups; police states; and surveillance culture. These campaigns demonstrate the critical capacity of ARGs when tightly organised by a marketing company. Chapter Nine’s ARG is loosely organised: its organic, user-generated development gives it the horror of the viral and the ‘realism’ of word-of-mouth: there is no professionally-organised ‘story-world’ isolating it from ‘reality.’ Chapter Eight’s case is not by standard definition an ARG: however, its commonalities may be considered in the context of New Horror’s critical capacity. In many cases, the VUP-operated wikis provide the most comprehensive and accurate archives of ARGs, demonstrating the power of Jenkins’ ‘knowledge communities.’ See: *Cloverfield Wiki*, accessed 29th September, 2015, <http://cloverfield.wikia.com/wiki/Cloverfield_Wiki>; ‘I Love Bees,’ 42 Entertainment, accessed 6th October, 2015, <http://www.42entertainment.com/work/ilovebees>; ‘Year Zero,’ 42 Entertainment, accessed 6th October, 2015, <http://www.42entertainment.com/work/yearzero>; ‘Why So Serious?’, 42 Entertainment, accessed 6th October, 2015, <http://www.42entertainment.com/work/whysoserious>.


ARGs. I suggest that the critical skills needed to play ARGs are a product of—and an excellent tool for—navigating terror and screen cultures.

By using ‘real’ media, New Horror ARGs are uncannily good at rendering terror and horror indistinguishable. This makes them an excellent vehicle for political commentary, since all ARGs involve a critical interpretation of media’s relationship with a ‘reality.’ To play is to read realities as shattered; elevated and subverted by their screens. Media content is suffused across a number of unusual spaces, constantly shifting and refracting. One must recognise that real-seeming media content may be subjectively framed or fabricated by obscured signs of authenticity. These signs subtly connect one fragment to another: some assembly is required to follow the whole narrative. The narrative often points to monsters outside the frame, agents of a larger conspiracy driven by paranoia and threatening, always, to have connections that destabilise what we understood as ‘real.’

A VUP needs robust skepticism to keep up with an ARG, let alone with terror culture. The themes are often familiar to a terror generation: an obscured monster terrorising American cities, with dangerous and insidious connections to corrupt corporations and reactionary militarism, both constructed and fragmented across media whose subjectivity is a growing concern. Following apophenic elements forced into consequentiality—especially when some elements are spuriously mediated—draws attention to the narrativisation of terror culture. If terror culture were an ARG, playing would uncover the connections—and more significantly, the disconnections—between the narrative of 9/11; the Iraq war; the inclusion of Hurricane Katrina in ‘terror’ discourse; and the justification of surveillance technology and border security, to name a few examples. When news reports are indistinguishable from ARG materials save context, the analysis of whether this is ‘real’ or whether this subtly frames itself as a subjective and contextual version of ‘reality’ has significant applications. ARGs demonstrate that New Horror is not constrained by cinema and fiction: it infiltrates ‘real’ media, and offers real criticism.

Paratexts: Outside The Movie Screen

The following chapters track New Horror beyond the cinema’s ‘reality’ and into other aspects of popular culture. Some take place on screens, significant as they are to our reality; others network
across urban and physical spaces. The nature of fragmentation is such that infinite works could be studied here: New Horror’s sprawl from cinema, across media, and into the ‘real’ is one of the most significant developments as terror culture further diffuses from 9/11 itself. By moving beyond cinema, the studied New Horror works abandon a firm textual locus that grounds their narratives in a fictional verisimilitude: instead, I follow those which have grown organically across ‘real’ media. These works exemplify the models of New Horror’s success: the attainment of iconic cultural status, with few strong precedents such as large budgets and pre-established creators.

To appreciate the value of New Horror, we must recognise this reach beyond the limitations of cinema. Benson-Allott describes horror as self-reflexively ‘about’ itself in all its media: ‘since movies have left the cinema, they have also become about television, VHS, DVD, and—most recently—computer exhibition.’ New Horror infiltrates the terror screenscape in a myriad of complex ways; from promotional posters to spin-off games to live-action role-plays. Angela Ndalianis describes the transmedia and ‘real’ aspects of these in the following:

These fictions [viral marketing] rely on social networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube, mobile technologies, and websites, as well as real world events that include the placement of posters and advertisements on billboards, and the pervasive use of the urban landscape as a theatrical space that requires our performance as actors and puzzle solvers.

These spaces provide a far broader, more complex, and networked access to New Horror. Intertextuality and self-reflexivity contribute significantly to the meaning and commentary in New Horror. The exploration of New Horror transmedia transgresses threatened boundaries, between media with varying capacities to present itself as ‘real.’ New Horror’s capacity to extend itself to wider audiences, and to challenge those audiences in new, interconnected spaces, is key to its currency in this period.

ARGs such as ‘Why So Serious?’ required VUPs to gather in select cities to receive packages of media developing the game; ‘Year Zero’ graffitied streets with in-universe protest slogans, and hid similar packages at Nine Inch Nails’ performance venues. Smaller examples include jogging app Zombies, Run!, which plays audio simulations prompting the VUP to run from zombies. The app tracks the VUP’s speed and distance run, displaying a fictional ‘outpost’ onscreen which develops as the VUP runs ‘missions.’ Games such as ‘Patient 0’ employ actors as zombies, daring VUPs to immerse themselves in a laser-shooting role-play to overcome the undead. For more examples of live-action zombie play, refer to Chapter Eight. See: ‘Why So Serious?’; ‘Year Zero’; Zombies, Run!, developed by Six To Start & Naomi Alderman, 2012; ‘Patient 0.’

Benson-Allott, Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens, 167.

Ndalianis, The Horror Sensorium, 12.
The reach of New Horror works outside the cinema cannot be exhaustively studied. New Horror has extended into media such as novels, Internet short fiction, and independent video gaming, with unprecedented success.\textsuperscript{52} Some of the most popular New Horror developments in recent years have been in so-called quality television, with series such as \textit{American Horror Story} (FX, 2011-), \textit{Hannibal} (NBC, 2013-2015), and \textit{The Walking Dead} (AMC, 2010-). \textit{Hannibal} engages in subtle transmedia storytelling, relying on VUPs to recognise the mythology of its protagonist in novels and movies to follow the television narrative: additionally, the show offers unusual promotions such as a partnership with Chianti, a purely intertextual pleasure.\textsuperscript{53} \textit{The Walking Dead}, a cross-media


\textsuperscript{52} Horror novels have exploded in popularity, with high-selling examples including \textit{Pride and Prejudice and Zombies}, \textit{World War Z}, and \textit{Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter}. The zombie craze has reignited the horror genre in comics, \textit{The Walking Dead} being the most famous example. Web 2.0 platforms have enabled widespread creation and sharing of short fictions, as discussed above in such cases as \textit{creepypasta}. Independent video games, particularly those that are deliberately immersive, generate massive buzz: \textit{Amnesia: The Dark Descent} (Frictional Games, 2010) and \textit{Slender} (Parsec Productions, 2012) are noteworthy, the latter discussed in Chapter Nine. See: Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, \textit{Pride and Prejudice and Zombies} (Philadelphia: Quirk Classics, 2009); Max Brooks, \textit{World War Z} (London, Duckworth, 2007); Seth Grahame-Smith, \textit{Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter} (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2010).

\textsuperscript{53} Zimmerman, ‘Collectibles for Adults.’
adaptation from the comic series, expands the televisual ‘reality’ through a video game attracting fans of the show and newcomers. New Horror’s media expansion into ‘quality television’ reflects an infiltration of media that allows the genre to insinuate itself in cultural spaces beyond the cinema, beyond fandom, and beyond the limits of single-medium storytelling. Although examples of New Horror in quality television are not included in this thesis, my framework for reading their critical concerns and media relationships has significant future applications.

As ‘reality’ shatters, elevating media experiences and destabilising ‘real’ fragments, so too should our understanding of New Horror’s ‘texts.’ Horror is a deeply self-reflexive and intertextual genre: post-9/11, these advantages allow us to read New Horror as networked, transmedia stories that defy containment of their cultural meaning within a fictional context. Most of the preceding chapters have made some reference to movies’ paratexts, because movies as ‘texts’ exist in a rich media environment, and their cultural meaning is greater than what can be found solely within the feature. Jonathan Gray’s model of paratexts guides this practically and conceptually:

However, media growth and saturation can only be measured in small part by the number of films or television shows—or books, games, blogs, magazines, or songs for that matter—as each and every media text is accompanied by textual proliferation at the level of hype, synergy, promos, and peripherals. As film and television viewers, we are all part-time residents of the highly populated cities of Time Warner, DirecTV, AMC, Sky, Comcast, ABC, Odeon, and so forth, and yet not all of these cities’ architecture is televisual or cinematic by nature. Rather, these cities are also made up of all manner of ads, previews, trailers, interviews with creative personnel, Internet discussion, entertainment news, reviews, merchandising, guerrilla marketing campaigns, fan creations, posters, games, DVDs, CDs, and spinoffs.\(^{54}\)

These paratexts significantly enhance the reach and impact of New Horror on a social level. The cultural value of paratexts is in their accessibility, and they demonstrate the media literacy assumed of the VUP. New Horror accesses VUPs everywhere, threatening all aspects of normality with its monstrous media expansion.

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Even the humble movie poster spreads New Horror’s cultural impact. Among the simplest and most commonplace paratexts, posters communicate the complex yet succinct meanings of New Horror with massive public reach. The paratexts of transmedia and ARGs may be more intricate and networked, but posters have the breadth of access that make a sub-genre like ‘torture porn’ a commonly recognisable part of popular culture. Posters, like all paratexts, are able to complement the criticisms of movies: Adam Lowenstein’s study of post-Vietnam trauma and the poster campaign for *The Last House On The Left* demonstrates the historic relationship between horror’s promotional materials and political commentary. The work of Tim Palen, Chief Marketing Officer of Lionsgate, is similar in New Horror: Palen, Gray notes, dedicates one third of a New Horror production’s budget to promotion. In Chapter Six, I have described how Palen’s *Saw* posters

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Shattered Realities codify and foreground the subtext of the films. Now, I seek to briefly discuss how posters demonstrate the paratext’s power in our shattered reality.

Palen’s campaigns are hyperconscious of terror’s fraught relationship with the spectacle. The struggle between the screened—the shown—and the screened—the censored—is self-reflexively addressed in poster distribution. This is seen in the posters for Hostel: Part II. Palen discusses with Patrick Goldstein how one poster, a macro shot of meat from a butcher shot, was presented to the Motion Picture Association of America for advertising approval with a receipt to prove it was not ‘real’ human meat. Whether the MPAA would really suspect this, or whether this story becomes part of the promotional narrative of the movie, this demonstrates the ease with which New Horror spreads into the ‘real’ through paratexts. The poster was banned in one cinema for this ‘realism,’ the news of banning becoming a paratext and centralising the poster as a hidden ‘text’ to be hunted by VUPs on horror fan sites. Another poster, of actress Bijou Phillips naked holding her own severed head, was released by Palen exclusively online to be hunted and distributed through VUP networks outside traditional advertising media spaces. These paratexts are self-reflexively too shocking, too ‘real,’ requiring active VUPs to find and contextualise them. From this, Goldstein moves his discussion immediately to censorship of Iraq war photography: ‘a reality no-one wants to see.’ Lowenstein’s ‘allegorical moment’ accounts for the shift: the traumas of Iraq struggle for articulation via media while horror challenges the ‘reality’ of paratexts and where they can be mediated. This oblique relationship between terror’s ‘reality’ and the possible ‘reality’ of torture porn happens through media, disturbing both terror and its media, and the paratext’s cultural power.

Gray notes the ironic suggestion that paratexts can supersede their ‘texts’ in cultural significance, using the example of a movie trailer being a ‘text’ in its own right; the feature a spin-off. This bears a fascinating resemblance to theories of ‘reality’ post-9/11. Just as a movie ‘text’ is fragmented, gaining meaning and accessibility through these fragments, so is the shattered ‘reality’ of terror across the screenscape. The destabilisation of ‘real reality’ reflects a decentralisation of a ‘text’: paratexts and fragmented ‘real’ media are scattered through the cultural landscape, escaping their distant loci. In a network of paratexts, the core ‘text’ that separates fiction from ‘reality’ cannot


59 Goldstein, ‘Those “Hostel” Ads Test the Squirm Factor.’

60 An example of this in New Horror is in the Grindhouse (Tarantino & Rodriguez, 2008) double feature. Short films framed as ‘trailers’ for movies that don’t ‘really’ exist are screened as part of the Grindhouse experience. Ironically, the hype surrounding the trailers for ‘Machete’ and ‘Hobo With A Shotgun’ led to the production of ‘real’ Machete (Rodriguez, 2010) and Hobo With A Shotgun (Eisner, 2011) movies. See: Gray, Show Sold Separately, 10.
Shattered Realities

be isolated, and sometimes cannot even be found. The paratext itself can thus be read as horrifying: it functions to overwhelm textual boundaries, disseminating and diffusing our monstrous stories. Paratexts flourish in terror culture, where threats are subtly scattered across media to escape containment and obscure their ‘reality.’ Recognising the importance of the ‘side’ media attached to a greater cultural expression, we can see how New Horror might elevate itself beyond a ‘niche’ genre to echo terror culture, able to throw real cultural weight behind its criticism.

New Horror paratexts, especially ARGs, often rely heavily on ‘viral’ marketing. The ‘virus’ metaphor allows us to extend our understanding of paratexts and terror monstrosity. The ‘viral’ campaign insidiously appears ‘real,’ seemingly unconnected to a story or brand. It spreads through peer-to-peer distribution, infecting a population. Once a medium is infected, it becomes its own textual ‘host,’ another monster in the horde as a paratext holds its own cultural weight. The horde becomes another analogy for the ‘story-world,’ or, in this thesis, a ‘reality.’ In my case studies, there is no core ‘text’ that functions like a patient zero, and there is no quarantined ‘real reality’ beyond the reach of these stories. Each paratext of the transmedia experience is a host, able to spread the story while hiding its symptoms of fiction. As a genre, New Horror is able to self-reflexively take on aspects of its most terrifying monsters, enabling a scathing critique of the ‘real’ media over which it gains advantage in our cultural landscape.

Making Horror Real

New Horror’s capitalisation on transmedia and ‘real’ media gives the horror genre an unprecedented power. George A. Romero claimed that horror has the ability to ‘take you into a completely new world, new place, and just rattle your cage and say, wait a minute—look at things differently.’ We might extend the rattled cage metaphor to be fictional media spaces, or re-interpret the ‘new world’ as a screenscape in which the New Horror enters a ‘real’ dialogue with terror culture. There are complexities and subjectivities in many narratives of terror, and New Horror takes advantage of the cultural perception of post-9/11 ‘reality’ as ‘shattered’ to intertwine itself with terror media. New Horror borrows from terror, using monsters that evade framing and capture, slipping between media to lurk at the fringes of our reality. The monster can be a virus that spreads quickly and mysteriously through a nation, the narrative of pandemic forming through scattered stories, its most terrifying repercussions endorsed in trustworthy media. This relationship is symbiotic: news of terror and

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terror-like crises is ‘like a movie,’ borrowing the language of fear and monsters to create saleable stories. These terror fears are not only valid in their allegorical capacity: they are powerful because they demonstrate the lack of boundaries between fiction and ‘reality.’ Their resemblance to terror indicates how terror can be shaped, mediated, and narrativised to political ends, reflexively constructing itself as ‘reality.’ The implication that our ‘real reality’ is so fractured and vulnerable is, of course, horrifying: this allows New Horror not only to be politically critical, but to be effective as a genre.

To participate in transmedia New Horror, the VUP is engaged in collective, active storytelling. VUPs following these popular stories are collecting, recognising, and assessing the ‘realism’ in relevant media in relation to the multiplicitous ‘realities’ being entertained as part of the New Horror experience. The pleasure of transmedia New Horror is in both hunting stories and being hunted by the stories’ monsters: one may seek out the Slender Man, or a news story about zombies, at the thrilling risk of being found first. The ease with which these stories slip into ‘real’ media equips a VUP with considerable critical skills: one is actively engaged in every fragment of the new mediascape, following its shifts from fictional horror to ‘real’ terror. This complex approach is integral to New Horror’s cultural and critical weight.

Real New Horror in Practice

The following two chapters explore New Horror works which push the limits of media and the real. *Real Real Zombies* investigates zombies in new and ‘real media.’ A case study focuses on a real-life attack in Miami, Florida, by a man whom journalists nicknamed ‘the Miami zombie.’ Zombies, with their inherent threat of crossing boundaries, cross into a range of ‘real’ media surrounding the attack. From hyperbole and hoaxes to real news articles assembled as evidence of the apocalypse, the use of ‘zombies’ infects the real with the fictional, and the fictional with the real. The incident shows how New Horror’s monsters have transgressed into the mainstream to challenge our understanding of media reality, conflating terror paranoia and horror narratives through media slippage.

The final chapter, *Who Is The Slender Man?*, discusses an Internet-based monster called the ‘Slender Man.’ The Slender Man is unusually popular for a transmedia phenomenon without a major central text: Slender Man media and mythology are collaboratively produced by fans. The Slender Man hybridises many traditional horror mythologies with contemporary Internet folklore, always threatening realities with his real-seeming media. He is an inherently liminal figure,
Shattered Realities

decentralised even from his own mythology, spanning from photo-manipulations, video games, serial films, and live-action role-play. The Slender Man is a New Horror monster of horrifying mobility, personifying liminality by destabilising transmedia realities.

These chapters are presented to demonstrate New Horror as an open, developing genre. They demonstrate how New Horror is able to challenge, reframe, and criticise our understanding of terror culture, screen media, and our relationship with ‘reality.’ Transmedia horror threatens and explores the tenuousness of our post-9/11 media realities, moving the genre into new and challenging spaces. By engaging with realities as fragmented and multiplicitous, New Horror subverts the boundaries between fictional cinema and real sociopolitical concerns. Its cultural value as a critical medium is strengthened, enabling New Horror to remain an innovative and challenging field.
8. Real Real Zombies

The zombie outbreak has come to pass. Since returning to the cinema with *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002) legions of undead have infected all kinds of media. The undead can no longer be contained within the horror movie or video game: they are spreading through novels, comics, television shows, mockumentaries, internet, news reports, apps, and live-action play. I have suggested that New Horror zombies embody many criticisms of terror culture: they are the contagion of paranoia as it sweeps a nation; the danger of bioterrorism and accidental pandemics from foreign nations; the anonymity of terrorists as they infiltrate society; threats to domestic security; the militarised citizenry overreacting to these threats; the class war that supports the War on Terror; the many failings of government and military to respond to crisis; the struggle for media networks to convey information; and the devastated cityscapes that appear in the aftermath of terrorist attacks, natural disaster, and economic decay. Zombies, as will be explored, threaten normality with an insidious tenacity, violating the boundaries of bodies, of territories, and in some interesting cases, of the demarcations between fictional and ‘real’ media.

It is this spread through media which I find most interesting, as it articulates the fictions and slippages that enable terror to spread with similar tenacity. In this chapter, I follow zombies from the cinema to the context of ‘In Real Life’ or IRL in apps, live role-playing, and the case of Rudy Eugene, the ‘Miami Zombie’ who mysteriously attacked and attempted to eat another man before being murdered by police in 2012. Eugene’s attack caused a media storm of sensationalist journalism and uncanny hoaxes converging to imply an impending apocalypse of real-life zombies. This chapter studies the zombie-infused media surrounding Eugene’s example to demonstrate how zombies become a significant and quite serious aspect of terror culture, able to criticise the infectious paranoia of terror and the subjectivity of ‘real’ media.

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1 These examples illustrate how malleable zombies can be. Their usual lack of character makes them ideal model for whatever culturally relevant meanings may be useful to impose upon them. One may claim zombies need represent little more than the universal fear of death, embodied and pursuing us. However, the common tropes of New Horror zombies are undeniably related to contemporary problems in terror culture.

Locating the Undead

Zombies become ubiquitous New Horror monsters as they self-reflexively corrupt not only their fictional worlds but the media via which these fictional worlds are accessed. The horde has invaded Jane Austen novels; big-budget television drama; the how-to guide; and the TV news report. More interesting is the zombies’ movement into ‘real’ contexts, such as when they are reconfiguring urban space as a medium for fiction, parading through our streets, or threatening joggers role-playing as survivors. In other cases, zombies are discussed with some seriousness by crime journalists and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This violation of ‘real’ media marks the New Horror zombie’s real social impact. In this chapter I wish to explore how and why zombie fans break boundaries between ‘real’ and fictional media when they spread the virus narrative faster than the running zombie can carry it.

Numerous theories explain the zombie’s greater traction in the world today. Kyle Bishop provides an insightful exploration of the environment in which zombies flourish. To Bishop, the zombie explains and exaggerates relevant fears of terror culture:

This renaissance of the sub-genre reveals a connection between zombie cinema and post-9/11 cultural consciousnesses. Horror films function as barometers of society’s anxieties, and zombie movies represent the inescapable realities of unnatural death while presenting a grim view of the modern apocalypse through scenes of deserted streets, piles of corpses, gangs of vigilantes—images that have become increasingly common and can shock and terrify a population that has become numb to other horror subgenres.

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7 Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 17.
The zombie’s cinematic success coincides with heavily protested and highly televised American wars: zombie godfather George A. Romero has stated that his early films were a response to US involvement in the Vietnam War, and similar political criticisms can be seen in the last wave of zombie movies in Romero’s time.\(^8\) It is no coincidence that Romero became active again post-9/11 during the Iraq war, a period Bishop calls the ‘Zombie Renaissance.’\(^9\)

Virus scares have swept the globe on a regular basis since 9/11, with little in the discourse of public panic to separate them from paranoia over bioterrorism.\(^10\) *28 Days Later* was shot before 9/11 or the anthrax scare that immediately followed, but it garnered success due to its release at the height of these crises.\(^11\) Enough zombie films are released every year that each seems to be a commentary on the upcoming virus du jour: anthrax in 2002; SARS in 2003; bird flu recurring since 2005; swine flu from 2009 to 2012; Ebola in 2014; and MERS in 2015. The origin of the zombie virus is often politicised in New Horror: in examples such as *Planet Terror* (Rodriguez, 2008), it is a direct result of the American military in the War on Terror. Gendy Alimurung describes how VUPs have adapted zombie tropes as a direct commentary on the media paranoia of each virus scare:

As real-life H1N1 swine flu rages through Mexico, Europe, Asia and the United States, and the world’s medical organizations prepare for a mutated viral onslaught this fall, a hoax BBC “report” of a new “H1Z1” strain circulates. “There has been a small outbreak of ‘zombism’ in London due to the mutation of the H1N1 virus,” the hoaxster writes.\(^12\)

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\(^9\) Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 17.


\(^11\) Bishop, ‘Dead Man Still Walking,’ 22.

The H1Z1 hoax not only deconstructs virus paranoia as a terror problem: its more striking critique is that of news media and the reliability of administration, a central concern in times of terror. In *28 Days Later*, *Cabin Fever* (Roth, 2003), *Land of the Dead* (Romero, 2005), *Right At Your Door* (Gorak, 2006), *Diary of the Dead* (Romero, 2007), *Quarantine* (Dowdle, 2008), *Planet Terror*, and *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–), authorities such as the military, government researchers, and media sources are as much a danger to survivors as the infected: New Horror zombies are not only concerned with ‘real’ terror issues, but the ‘real’ dangers in terror.

As well as a commentary on violence, paranoia, government, and apocalypse, the zombie also serves as an important criticism on complacency. The New Horror zombie often challenges the question of who is the ‘real’ zombie: framed politically as which characters—and which audiences—are complacent consumers. *Dawn of the Dead* (Romero, 1978) and its remake (Snyder, 2004) express most clearly the zombie as a consumer, whether of mall goods, nationalist discourse, or terror news. Aviva Briefel studies the ‘conflicts and ambiguities’ of this consumerism in Romero’s *Dawn* and its 2000s homages. The comedy *Shaun of the Dead* (Wright, 2004) opens with urban Londoners going about their daily lives in a heavily ritualised, trance-like state: throughout the film, gormless characters are mixed up with actual zombies. Following the apocalypse, the zombies are both placated by and appropriated into banal popular media such as video games and daytime television: *Shaun* suggests, very cynically, that zombies are already ‘real’ inasmuch as they represent uncritical consumption of media.

According to Briefel, Romero revises and complicates the consumer criticism in *Land of the Dead* (2005), noting that the movie’s mall ‘operates under an ethnic and social exclusivity that Romero links to post-9/11 panoptic xenophobia.’

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13 I will return to H1Z1 in the case study of Eugene.

14 I have mentioned before that I am using a flexible definition of ‘zombies’ to accommodate other viral pandemic movies with similar concerns. Arguing the technicalities of which are ‘real’ zombie movies could be its own study in how certain zombie myths are favoured as more ‘real’ than others.


17 Aviva Briefel, “‘Shop ’Til You Drop!’,” 154.
ontological convergence between the zombies and the humans: Adam Lowenstein highlights the significance of the hero finally declaring that the zombies are the ‘same as us.’ The zombies of *Land* are initially distracted by firework shows: a simplistic spectacle—much like the spectacle of terror—used to control the masses. Their awareness of a greater problem, characterised by Briefel and Lowenstein as the War on Terror’s domestic class war, grows until they are able to launch a rebellion. Whatever boundaries zombies transgress, they trouble an uncritical approach to their political and spectacular context. In order to retain—or regain—humanity, one must be clever: in some subversive examples, and escape the inertia of post-9/11 media narratives. This confrontation of complacency is of utmost importance to the zombie’s critical potency in their contemporary context.

**Media Zombies**

Within their narrative worlds, terror zombies can comment on the political, the social, and the economic. By expressing these narratives in different media, zombies can comment our ability to critically engage in the media we think are ‘real’, and how we react to these issues in a ‘real’ context. Jody Keisner describes horror in this context: ‘Horror movies have become postmodern, in part, because of their questioning of reality; they push viewers to consider their own notions of what is real.’ Angela Ndalianis makes a similar claim:

> The horror genre, more than any other genre, has relied on the powerful relationship that’s forged between spectator, game player or reader and the fictional worlds it weaves for their consumption. One of the most powerful effects that horror has is to be able to affect the sensorium in such a way that it perceptually collapses the boundaries between reality and fiction.

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19 Briefel, ‘“Shop ’Til You Drop!”’, 154; Lowenstein, ‘Living Dead,’ 112.


This perceptual collapse makes the zombie’s political criticism all the more visceral, and all the more significant in enabling the zombie to terrorise these boundaries.

In some cases, this line is blurred by ‘real’ content invading traditional zombie media such as films. In Chapter Five I discussed Romero’s use of real Hurricane Katrina footage in *Diary of the Dead*. Many other zombie movies use fictional news broadcasts, often barely distinguishable from real news, to establish their story-worlds. *Contagion* (Soderbergh, 2010) makes science a key element of the virus narrative, avoiding the fantastical nature of zombies to exaggerate the possibility of a ‘real’ pandemic. The ease with which authentic news and information segue into the zombie narrative and aesthetic suggests how deeply terror media has troubled the ‘real.’

When zombies begin to corrupt ‘real’ spaces, they cause the VUP confront what is taken for granted as ‘real’; instances like a person walking down the street, a news screen-cap, a television report. One of the most tangible renegotiations of reality and fiction is the use of the urban space in zombie storytelling. Despite being geographically, physically ‘real’, the urban environment is used as a zombie space in similar ways as in any other media. A useful way of reconsidering these geographical spaces as a form of media is in the Internet term ‘IRL’, short for ‘in real life’.

IRL is just as susceptible to zombie invasion, and can be read in the same way as we might read zombies in cinema, television, comics, gaming, Internet, news, and so forth. Ndalianis describes an audience’s engagement with ‘real’ space as an IRL medium:

> [...] in the fictional expansion that occurs across media the sensorium turns its attention to an intensive cognitive and sensorial immersion into fictions that are dispersed across multiple media environments, which also include the “spectator’s” actual geographical landscape.

The zombie’s IRL presence has spread greatly since the ‘Renaissance.’ Cities throughout the world hold annual ‘Zombie Shuffles’: these are events for fans to dress in zombie costumes and march through a city, often mimicking both apocalypse and the ‘real’ activity of a public demonstration,

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22 The concept of ‘IRL’ helps to orient the zombie in relation to urban space, because it demarcates a ‘real’ space in the context of media, particularly Internet culture. ‘Media’ and ‘In Real Life’ are assumed to be exclusive categories, but the zombie breaks these down easily.

for the sake of enjoying a zombie experience. Just as the zombie can easily transgress many forms of media, so can the ‘fan’ of zombies corrupt boundaries between viewer, user, and player, embodying and creating the zombie themselves. Some of the most striking zombie narratives are not published or produced through major entertainment groups, but from these VUPs engaging creatively. The Zombie Shuffle represents a gathering of VUPs creatively using costume and engaging in the IRL medium of urban performance to play with conceptualisations of public space and political demonstration as subjective realities.

A more structured use of IRL space was the Patient 0 game by the appropriately-titled Melbourne company IRL Shooter. Patient 0 offered players a ‘real’ zombie game experience. Players engaged by roleplaying a group of mercenaries armed with laser tag guns. The game took place in abandoned suburban warehouse, set up as a fictional facility, with actors hired as attacking zombies. Fans in Patient 0 moved through these spaces and participated via live physical role-play in the zombie apocalypse: after playing, their engagement in this reality can continue through in-universe-style mercenary merchandise such as uniforms and costumes.

![Figure 39: A guide from the website of Zombies, Run!](https://www.zombiesrungame.com/)

A similar form of physical/technological gaming uses fictional sound over real space for the simultaneous purpose of entertainment and exercise. The iPhone application Zombies, Run! is essentially a soundtrack, but utilises the phone’s data to track the player/runner’s progress through the fictional world as they run in the real world. The app plays a series of fictional radio broadcasts

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26 Fortunately, despite the title IRL Shooter, ‘real’ guns are not promised or expected.

sent from a ‘base’ to which the player must run, with the broadcaster describing the horde ‘right behind you’ and sending encouraging messages. The app synchronises smoothly with a number of real and digital elements: as the phone’s Global Positioning System (GPS) tracks a runner’s movement, the player is told they have picked up various supplies for the fictional base, which is viewable on the phone’s screen. The player can choose mp3 songs that the fictional broadcaster will play as though they are a radio host. The player can also include chases, in which random attacks of zombies are announced, and the player is forced to run from the audibly moaning horde at a GPS-tracked speed or ‘die.’ While moving in a real space as tracked by GPS, the player is also developing a story-world via interactive audiovisual engagement. *Zombies, Run!* and other IRL sensations are transmedia experiences in the sense that IRL is a medium. When playing, fans are not asked to start a ‘run’, ‘mission’, or ‘game’, but to ‘continue story’: it is telling that the app is categorised under *Health and Fitness*, not *Games*. It is difficult to classify these works as ‘entertainment’, ‘game’, or ‘narrative’, but it is clear that zombie VUPs are engaged in playing, whatever the style, with ‘real’ space.

The danger of zombies is enhanced by their physical and geographical presence in these IRL spaces. So too are the fears that zombies represent: terrorism, urban decay, natural disaster, unreliable authority, viral pandemics, and economic strife. Still, the wider Western world often experiences these ‘disasters’ of terror culture only through news media. A popular explanation of the zombie narrative’s resonance is that zombies give fans a chance to act out their own experience with these hypothetical situations of terror, or as Bishop says; ‘the indulgence of survivalist fantasy.’28 This is certainly true of many zombie fans, but the creative works of zombie culture suggest a more critical use of zombie’s reality-compromising relationship. I propose that the IRL zombie does not cause fans to fantasise, but to examine the presentation of fantasy as reality through the powerful techniques of play.

The IRL zombie criticises the ‘reality’ of terror media and exposes its tendency to narrativise or sensationalise disaster while conducting itself as an unfiltered medium of ‘reality.’ In the context of zombies in news, it is worth considering Alimurung’s description of the zombie is a mindless consumer, representing to fans the risks of consuming news media without out any critical examination of its ‘particular realities.’29 If the fans are ‘survivalist,’ playing most often as the human opposition avoiding the virus, they are encouraged to be smarter. This is a more ‘real’ form

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29 Alimurung, ‘This Zombie Moment.’
of survival for the average zombie fan: the ability to critically navigate media and reality in terror culture is far more important survival skill than a fantasy disaster.

The creative commentary on media subjectivity is enacted by zombie fans as an extension of news reportage. Fans, bloggers, and journalists can insert the zombie into news media, revealing the subjectivity of markers and context that should divide fantastical zombies and ‘reality.’ Rather than implying that zombie fans are gullible or wanting to ‘indulge’ in fantasy, I suggest that the play of inserting zombies in ‘real’ media critiques the unreliability of news and the dangers of gullibility in terror culture. The boundaries between fiction and reality are so fractured in terror culture that the zombie can easily transgress them. From ‘real’ footage in zombie movies; from zombie fans playing in ‘real’ spaces; to the news media with all the markers of authenticity, ‘reality’ is subject to fictions of zombies, and their ‘real’ counterparts of terror paranoia.

**The Miami Zombie**

One of the most startling events to provoke a zombie news sensation was the case of Rudy Eugene, the ‘Miami Zombie.’ On Saturday 27th May, 2012, in Miami, Florida, Rudy Eugene was found naked on the side of a highway, chewing the face of homeless man Ronald Poppo. When police ordered him to stop, Eugene reportedly growled at them. Police shot him once, and when he still continued his attack, he was shot dead. Initially the attack was blamed on a new drug called ‘bath salts’, causing a panic typical of terror culture and competitive online journalist sensationalism. However, no evidence of ‘bath salts’ were found in Eugene’s toxicology report: this ultimately another fiction used to narrativise events and emphasise panic. The bath salts fantasy quickly gave

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33 ‘What You Need to Know About Rudy Eugene, the Naked Face-Eating Zombie.’

way to a more sensational implication: that Eugene was a zombie, and the apocalypse was coming. After the myth of bath salts, the zombie fantasy was only another embellishment of the story.

This bizarre and tragic event caused a massive online media storm which one article called the ‘Summer of Zombies.’ Dozens of cases of cannibalism and violent behaviour in North America were reported and associated with the Miami Zombie for months after the event. Reports on chemical accidents and viral outbreaks in America’s South were revised in the context of Eugene’s attack. Official bodies such as the CDC were obliged to comment, indicating how seriously the possibility of a zombie virus was with Eugene. Hoax articles claiming that Eugene carried a highly contagious zombie-like virus went—appropriately—viral. Whether through repetition of the sensational ‘zombie’ buzzword; retrospective curating of ominous articles featuring common pre-apocalypse tropes; inflated reportage of similar-seeming attacks; the CDC being involved; or deliberate pranks, Eugene’s case demonstrated how easily ‘real’ media could be infected by zombies.

Zombie fans and many mainstream reporters flooded the Internet with articles about Eugene carrying a zombie virus or representing a zombie trend. Some blogs criticised fans for trivialising the traumatic injuries suffered by Poppo, and the dehumanisation of Eugene, who was described by family as ‘sweet and well-mannered.’ Greater in number, however, were articles on mainstream


36 There were not necessarily more cases of cannibalism at the time; rather the reports of attacks gained attention in association with the Miami Zombie case. See: Caulfield, ‘Another Florida “Zombie” Attack?.’


38 Campbell, ‘Zombie Apocalypse.’


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news websites using the word ‘zombie’ as often as possible. *Gawker* and *io9* led with headlines ‘The Zombie Apocalypse May *Actually* Be Upon Us’ and ‘How the Zombie Apocalypse Starts,’ echoing and exaggerating the already wild assumptions being made by more legitimate news sites. In an article titled ‘Zombie Apocalypse: CDC Denies Existence of Zombies Despite Cannibal Incidents,’ *AOL* reported on the CDC’s official statement five days after Eugene’s attack confirming that the ‘CDC does not know of a virus or condition that would reanimate the dead.’ *AOL*’s headline and text suggested a mistrust in the CDC’s statement, implying that the more likely reality was that zombies existed. Even *Time* magazine, using the less stringently journalistic medium of online blogging, published the headline ‘Zombie Alert’ with little irony. News sites’ willingness to use ‘zombie,’ whether in quotation marks or as an implied threat, indicates the extent to which the current reportage of crisis intersects with New Horror tropes and narratives.

**Figure 40: AOL’s article questioning the CDC’s denial of zombies in Eugene’s case.**


43 Campbell, ‘Zombie Apocalypse.’

44 Locker, ‘Zombie Alert.’

45 Campbell, ‘Zombie Apocalypse.’
The weeks following Eugene’s case saw a number of reports on attacks that were likened to Eugene’s. Any common elements—cannibalism, rabid aggression toward police, unlikely survival of traumatic injury—were framed to suggest a trend. A Maryland man ate his roommate’s brain and heart; a New Jersey man cut out his intestines and threw them at police; a man in California bit off his cousin’s nose; a Canadian man stabbed a victim with an ice pick, ‘dismembered the corpse and committed sexual and cannibalistic acts on it.’ Unfortunately, nothing suggested that horrific attacks such as these were more frequent than usual. Rather, the news reports of them were gaining greater attention by association with Eugene’s case, and by their seeming corroboration of the zombie apocalypse.

The prerogative for mainstream journalism to engage in zombie narratives to describe real events made these sources almost indistinguishable from popular tongue-in-cheek blogs. Hundreds of news articles, some relating to Eugene and some reporting on unrelated health scares and sociopathic attacks, flooded the Internet with ‘zombies,’ demonstrating the willingness of fans and media consumers to engage in the zombie as a ‘real’ problem. The blurring of boundaries between ‘joke’ news and ‘real’ news serves more as a parody of the latter than of fans’ gullibility. Parody was not the only form of criticism voiced by zombie fans: popular blog *Cracked* released an article with a scathing analysis of mainstream news’ reaction to the Miami Zombie. Titled ‘4 Ways the Face-Eater Zombie Craze Proves The Media’s Broken,’ *Cracked* lists the following: ‘The Internet’s Terrible at Reporting on Things,’ ‘Suddenly, Similar Stories Started to Surface!,’ ‘Reporting on the Internet is Terrible,’ and ‘Because Cracked Had One of Its Best Traffic Days Ever.’ Attacking news media as sensationalist and ‘terrible,’ *Cracked* demonstrates the breaking of boundaries between ‘real’ media, in this case news, and entertainment media such as joke blogs and fictional


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narratives. Rudy Eugene may not have been a ‘real’ zombie, but the representation of his IRL story by ‘real’ news sources suggests that zombies can infect media to the extent where a tangible, zombie-free reality seems to be more of a fiction.

Supplementing the more reliable news sources were a number of hoaxes that corroborated the zombie narrative. These examples, like the found footage movies discussed in Chapter Five, show how easily the markers of authenticity can be appropriated into a decent mimicry of ‘real’ news. They present a scathing critique of how subjective and sensationalist news media can be, and how conjecture, whether about ‘zombies’ or ‘bath salts,’ can spread more rapidly than an undead virus. Alimurung discusses the ‘H1Z1’ article that circulated during the H1N1 swine flu scare, which only slightly exaggerates the paranoia spread by ratings-chasing news media. During the Summer of Zombies, a fake Huffington Post article diagnosed Eugene with LQP-79, a virus which ‘destroys internal organs and affects the brain waves to make you hungry for human flesh’: a fabrication, certainly, but just as untrue as ‘bath salts.’ These news hoaxes are not limited to Internet news media: in February 2013, hackers accessed the emergency broadcast system of Montana’s KRTV television stations to alert viewers that ‘the bodies of the dead are rising from their graves and attacking the living.’ As the ‘real’ news was contaminated and critiqued to make us reconsider what realities we take for granted, once again IRL contexts were subject to the horde. Shortly after Eugene’s attack, news reports claim a ‘Fake Zombie Attacks Miami Residents,’ and in Melbourne, Australia, a ‘Melbourne “zombie” terrorises strangers.’ In these incidents, pranksters dressed as ‘zombies’ in public, frightening strangers and collaboratively authoring the fictional ‘Summer of Zombies’ with their costumed play. Clearly inspired by those calling Eugene a ‘zombie,’ these ‘real’ zombie pranks highlight the un-reality of the event, and challenge the willingness of news consumers to believe in any zombie disaster, in the news or in the street. These hoaxes demonstrate the ease with which the verisimilitude of news can be manipulated, and serve as a commentary upon the capacity of news to exaggerate disaster, especially in terror culture. They

48 Alimurung, ‘This Zombie Moment.’
49 ‘LQP-97 Zombie Virus.’
50 Cluley, ‘Hacked TV Channels Broadcast Zombie Apocalypse Emergency Alert [VIDEO].’
show how ‘real’ media, in part due to problems inherent with terror’s ambiguity, are not hermetic: they offer permeable spaces for critical New Horror play.

More striking than these parodies are the commentaries on news provided by zombie fans’ curatorship of coincidence. One example is a list in popular circulation immediately after Eugene’s attack is a piece titled ‘Zombie Apocalypse Coming Soon’ from the blog ihopericksantorum. The list collects ten news articles relating to biohazard scares and sociopathic behaviour in Florida, all published in the week prior to Eugene’s attack. A more extensive ‘Full zombie behavior watch list’

Figure 41: A fabricated screenshot of an article claiming Eugene carried a zombie-like virus.

52 ‘LQP-97 Zombie Virus.’

was recorded on the website *Pastebin*, linking worldwide reports of biohazards, viruses, violence, and brain disease news. None of the news articles are hoaxes; none claim any consequentiality to connect them: it is only their compilation that creates an apophenic narrative of a zombie apocalypse. By simply juxtaposing truths to make a fiction, these lists demonstrate, in true horror form, the slipperiness of terror’s subjective ‘realities,’ and how easily New Horror may interject with subversive commentary. The fictional narrative constructed from real events echoes the ‘War on Terror’ narrative that connects 9/11 to the invasion of Iraq—and subsequently to the militarisation of police and the continuing dehumanisation of Black citizens in America’s South that characterised Eugene’s case. The apocalypse is demonstrated as fragments of a particular ‘reality,’ given a certain sense and context when arranged as a narrative. Zombie fans work subtly with a network of ‘real’ media to show how subjective a context it may be given, offering a greater ‘story-world’ with the political connotations of the New Horror zombie sub-genre. These creations and contribution, fragmenting and reconstructing a ‘real’ incident, evoke the subtler terror problems that may not immediately be apparent in any one report of Eugene’s case. It demonstrates how these terror problems are intertwined with the fragility of post-9/11 ‘reality.’


55 I have discussed some racial conflicts in the US and their economic connections to post-9/11 policy in Chapters One and Two.
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Zombie apocalypse coming soon

5/16: McArthur High School HazMat Situation
Students, Teachers Decontaminated After Breaking Out In Rash
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/16/mcarthur-high-school-contamination_n_1521764.html

5/19: No confirmation on chemical at Fort Lauderdale International Airport

5/21: Police: Man bites woman in Westchester
http://www.mysuburbanlife.cc/westchester/newsnow/x639948018/Police-Man-bites-woman-in-Westchester

5/23: I-285 reopens after hazmat incident
http://www.wesh.com/r/31112110/detail.html

5/23: Man Bites Cousin’s Nose Off

5/24: Second Broward school reports mystery rash
http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/05/24/2815003/second-broward-school-reports.htm

5/25: Hazmat Called After Kids Exposed To Pesticide On Bus: Hazmat, EMS Respond To Lake County, FL School
http://www.wesh.com/r/31112110/detail.html

5/25: ‘Disoriented’ passenger subdued on flight in Miami
http://www.foxnews.com/us/2012/05/25/passenger-restrained-on-flight-to-miami-arrested/

5/26: Naked Man Allegedly Eating Victim’s Face Shot And Killed By Miami Police
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/05/26/naked-man-eating-victims-face-killed-miami_n_1548339.html

5/26: Florida Doctor Spits Blood at Highway Patrolmen After DUI Arrest

Figure 42: A list of random news articles compiled to narrativise a precedence to Eugene’s attack and the following zombie apocalypse.56

That the CDC were contacted for a statement reveals how culturally recognisable zombies are: nothing other than familiarity with zombie tropes would indicate that Eugene was contagious or undead; or that the CDC would have any involvement in the case. By involving the CDC, journalists could invoke the sensational possibility of a zombie outbreak. The CDC’s authority adds ‘realism’ that complements news media. Even their denial of any zombie viruses reinforces the

56 ‘Zombie Apocalypse Coming Soon.’
zombie narrative: the apocalypse only happens, after all, if the CDC fails.\textsuperscript{57} Through the Eugene event, the ‘real’ CDC becomes another text and authenticator in the organic transmedia phenomenon of this seeming zombie apocalypse.

The CDC had earlier embraced their association with zombies, demonstrating the zombie’s genuine usefulness in ‘real’ problems of terror culture. In 2011, the CDC hosted an ingenious public relations stunt: a campaign of blog posts, graphic novels, posters, and other media were released promoting ‘zombie preparedness.’ The campaign, studied by Neil Gerlach and Sheryl N. Hamilton, was packed with genuine information on the prevention of epidemics, but framed by a fictional context.\textsuperscript{58} While ‘real’ press releases on health and safety did not garner enough attention to prevent pandemic scares, the ‘zombie preparedness’ stunt went viral. The narratives of New Horror, as they intersect with real concerns, create a context for important discourse to be shared.\textsuperscript{59}

**The ‘Real’ Zombie Potential**

The zombie’s presence in ‘real’ media forces us to consider two options: the first, that zombies are ‘real,’ or two, that news media is not. Taking into account the statement by the CDC and horror fans’ ability to distinguish, even when playing, fantasy from reality, the latter seems more likely. Zombie play would suggest that fans can acknowledge the boundary of fiction and reality as a manipulable space, and thus that all media—even and especially news and IRL—are subject to creative fictions. This is not to say that reporters are deluded and believe in zombies, but that in a saturated media economy, news has been forced to take on more entertainment-influenced techniques to compete in the market. The infection of zombies in ‘real’ media offers new frameworks by which to read less visible problems of authenticity, sensationalism, and the politics of the zombie sub-genre. The games zombie fans play when spreading this infection shows a self-reflexive and critical carrying of the zombie’s cultural power into the complex fields of ‘reality.’

\textsuperscript{57} This is best seen in *The Walking Dead:* the first season heavily featured the CDC’s failures, and screened two years before the ‘Summer of Zombies.’


\textsuperscript{59} Another example of fictional pandemics intersecting with ‘real’ scientific applications occurs in online gaming. When Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game World of Warcraft (Blizzard, 2004) accidentally released a player-to-player disease that infected characters, it caused an in-game pandemic. How players spread, and attempted to contain, the disease was studied in a number of academic papers as a model for ‘real’ pandemics. See: ‘Virtual Game is a “Disease Model”’, *BBC News*, 21st August, 2007, accessed 5th October, 2015, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/health/6951918.stm>.\textsuperscript{234}
The zombie’s social impact can no longer be measured or contained within the major entertainment industry. The most creative and striking variations on the virus narrative are the independent fan movements of online news manipulation and play. Zombie fans have used the undead to comment on all manner of media and politics, deconstructing our boundaries between reality and fiction—boundaries which have disastrous real-world effects in terror culture. Techniques such as live performance, hybridised urban media, parody, hoaxes, curatorship, manipulation, gaming, and juxtaposition force audiences to confront and critique all forms of media before taking their realism for granted. Zombies articulate many sociopolitical issues of the age, but perhaps the most significant is their ability to deconstruct the media narratives of terror, becoming a re-negotiator of the real.
9. Who Is The Slender Man?

The Slender Man is a monster that has crept into our frame of imagination in recent years. Invented on the Internet forum Something Awful in 2009, the Slender Man has developed into an entire multi-platormed transmedia mythos. Defined by his liminality, he makes a difficult but valuable phenomenon to study in the New Horror mediascape. I suggest that the Slender Man’s transmedia development is inherent to his ability to challenge post-9/11 realities. I seek to situate the Slender Man in the shattered realities of terror by illustrating his liminality in media. Slender Man mythology is communally developed, making it an example of VUP creativity in new media ecologies, where one must be dynamically critical of realities, fictions, and media slippage. Using the framework of paratexts and Alternate Reality Games, I discuss the Slender Man as a polycentric New Horror phenomenon. As a multi-authored transmedia story, his polycentrism and transmedia movement are inherent to his monstrosity, and disturb his fictionality. The challenges of studying a decentralised and collaborative viral narrative illustrate how the Slender Man’s evolution can be understood in the context of shattered frames and the loss of what Slavoj Žižek calls the ‘hard kernel of the Real.’ As the Slender Man slips through a mise-en-abyme of different media frames, he mirrors then cultural decentralisation of the ‘real.’ Like the most effective New Horror monsters, he anthropomorphises ‘terror’: he is an amorphous, contagious fear, evading categorisation to perpetuate his horrifying power, corrupting narrative and media to challenge and fracture the ‘real.’ Those engaged in Slender Man’s world are using horror to challenge how and by whom different media realities are presented, making a formidable monster of criticism. The Slender Man uses transmedia horror storytelling to destabilise relationships between horror, media, and the fragmented realities of terror culture.

1 Note that while the original post may be viewed, the pictures may not load due to exceeded bandwidth. They can be seen in Figures 43 and 44. The pictures are cited as coming from this source, since this is their origin. See: Victor Surge, ‘Create Paranormal Images,’ Something Awful, 10th June, 2009, accessed 6th October, 2015, <http://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?threadid=3150591&userid=0&perpage=40&pagename=3>.

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The Slender Man Myth

It is fundamental when seeking an understanding of the Slender Man that one takes into account his marginality and the communal nature of his canon. I cannot give a comprehensive understanding of his mythology, and attempting to would curtail his significance: what merits study is that he is uncategorisable and in a constant state of development. There is no authoritative version of the Slender Man, but an outline of his more popular incarnations follows. The Slender Man first appeared during a horror Photoshop competition on the Something Awful Internet forums in 2009. Two black-and-white photographs, allegedly taken sometime in the late 20th century, display groups of children playing outdoors. Photoshopped in the background of each is a tall humanoid in a suit, with white tentacle-like arms emerging from its sleeves. Each photograph comes with a fictional caption, describing how these are theorised as appearances of the ‘Slender Man,’ who caused these children and many others to disappear or turn violent. From these photographs, three things are already apparent: that the Slender Man discourse is framed as ‘real’ urban legend; that his mythology is established through interlinked media of text and photograph; and that the Slender Man can be displaced into different contexts, in this case being retroactively mythologised in the 20th century.

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3 Victor Surge, ‘Create Paranormal Images.’

4 From this ‘first’ appearance, the Slender Man canon has been expanded by many Internet users onto many platforms. His appearance and nature are open for interpretation, but usually contain a number of tropes: his height is between two and three metres; his face is featureless and white or obscured; he wears a black suit; he has either long skeletal fingers or tentacles for hands; his presence corrupts recording devices; and he hunts children or people in general. These attributes contribute to his readability as a monster of negotiated reality, as will be discussed.

5 Victor Surge, ‘Create Paranormal Images.’
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Since the Something Awful phenomenon, many more photographs and written urban legends have circulated from different sources. Two of the most popular Slender Man stories are *Marble Hornets*, a film project hosted on Youtube, and *Slender Game* (Parsec Productions, 2012), a short horror video game, which I will use as case studies later in the chapter. The Slender Man gained significantly wider attention in 2014, when two 12-year-old girls in Wisconsin, believing him to be ‘real,’ attempted to murder a friend and become his ‘proxies.’ There are no authoritative archives of all Slender Man material: however, popular examples may be curated on fan-operated sites such as slendermanmythos. Slendermanmythos discusses how various users contribute to the mythos, framing the activity as an ARG. Often the creative contributions frame the Slender Man in a ‘real’ context, deliberately ambiguating his fictionality. Authoritative accounts will often historicise him: even Surge’s original posts date his ‘original’ pictures to 20 years earlier, while some contributors

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6 Victor Surge, ‘Create Paranormal Images.’

7 The video game is also known as *Slender, Slendergame*, or *Slender: The Eight Pages*. I will refer to it as *Slender Game*. See: ‘Introduction,’ Youtube video, 2:00, posted by ‘marblehorns,’ 20th June, 2009, accessed 7th October, 2015, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wmhfn3mgWUI>.

8 I have co-authored a paper on this case with Jessica Balanzategui, to be published in 2017. The paper studies media reportage surrounding the case, which further demonstrates the Slender Man’s capacity for disturbing boundaries of ‘real’ media and hegemonic cultural categories. For the sake of brevity, the case will not be discussed in this thesis. See: Jessica Balanzategui and Naja Later, ‘Dark and Wicked Things: The Slenderman, Tween Girlhood, and Deadly Liminalities,’ in *Misfits: Children With A Twist*, ed. Markus Bohlmann (Lexington: Lexington Books, forthcoming 2017), n.p..

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claim or imply that images are centuries old. Much like with found footage movies, this demonstrates the subjectivity of ‘real’ media’s authenticating markers. New Horror stories like the Slender Man are able to appropriate and subvert these markers, fracturing the Slender Man’s Alternate Reality across different media.

The Slender Man is one of the more popular examples of an Internet trend of horror storytelling. Following the sensations of hyperlink storytelling and user-edited wiki pages, websites such as creepypasta and SCP have become popular loci for horror narratives. Such sites often have verisimilitudes that VUPs follow or play with: SCP uses pseudo-institutional jargon, complete with fake censored omissions, to portray itself as the database for monsters and evil phenomena that must be Secured, Contained, and Protected. The Slender Man is one myth from this field that went viral, I suggest in part because his transferability is endemic to his monstrosity. His contagious slipperiness epitomises New Horror’s articulation of terror as contagious and slippery, compromising and reconstructing realities and narratives as they are fractured across media.

As a multi-platform, multi-authored ‘text,’ the Slender Man makes an excellent study for transmedia narratives. For the Slender Man, there is no workable origin from which he transitioned: all Slender Man media is transmedia. Multiple texts or canons must be considered to give a proper understanding of the Slender Man. There are edited photographs, games, videos, illustrations, short stories, costume role-play ‘cosplays,’ and the aforementioned lists and wikis themselves. The Slender Man shifts with ease between these many platforms, without an authoritative ur-text, transferring himself like a virus. To track the story, the spectator must make shifts in accordance with those of the Slender Man: the VUP works in Slender Man’s world as they view photographs, use wikis, and play games with him. These different approaches and platforms create a complex relationship between the VUP and the fiction, where challenges to realism are part of the game. Changes in markers of verisimilitude and authenticity, compounded by his appearance in a range of reputable-appearing sources, make him all the more horrific. If he can virally slip from a game to that story on Facebook about a disappeared friend-of-a-friend, his ability to slip into the subjective ‘real’ of terror culture is ensured.


Evading the Frame

Even the physicality of the Slender Man contributes to this fear. When he appears in a frame, he corrupts it. In his most terrifying incarnations, he is not immediately apparent: he defies centrism so much he cannot even appear central within his diegesis. He appears at the edges; in the background; and in the corner of one’s eye. In the *Marble Hornets* film series he makes random appearances stalking the film’s characters.\(^{12}\) When watching the short episodes of footage it can be a challenge to spot him outside a window or tucked in a corner. Later in the series he walks directly into the frame, causing the camera to malfunction badly. It is as though the medium itself cannot centralise him, with a horrific and aggressive adherence to his liminal territory. He personifies terror by being evasive, abstract, infectious, lurking, and negotiably ‘real.’

In *Slender Game*, one must wander in first-person perspective through woods, collecting notes on the Slender Man. The notes urge the player away with messages such as ‘don’t look or it takes you.’ He gradually stalks a player, always positioned directly behind: a player must turn around to find him. If he is seen following, the only way to escape is to turn away and run. To stay and look at him causes him to approach rapidly, and the game quality seems to deteriorate as he gets closer, until the speakers are screeching and the screen has turned pixelated into white noise, at which point the game is lost. Put literally, the point of *Slender Game* is that you can never look directly at the Slender Man.

In still images, this defiance of visualisation is manifested by his facelessness: he has no facial features that can be seen; only a blank space. His physical slenderness enhances his ability to slip away and reappear. He defies visual capture as much as he defies narrative or medium capture. He cannot be defeated or contained, as he remains open to being rewritten by new storytellers. By literally occupying the margin of frames, he is poised to slip into the margins of other frames, whether that is another medium or the frame of the ‘real.’

The Slender Man’s intangibility gives him power as a New Horror monster. His name is only a basic descriptor, and without face, accurate imagery, or authoritative canon, he constantly evades a familiarity that might reduce his frightfulness. The marginality that obscures him from the fictional, categorisable frame is complemented by the implication that he is always in a margin: he

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\(^{12}\) *Marble Hornets*, which is discussed in more detail later in the chapter, is a series of 87 Youtube videos uploaded between 2009 and 2014. The videos are purportedly unedited footage shot by the uploader’s friend, who disappeared while shooting a film he planned to title ‘Marble Hornets.’ The Slender Man appears in most clips, and is implied to have taken or killed the filmmaker. See: ‘Introduction.’
might appear in a game, or in a video, or in a picture, barely within the frame, and as his media slips closer to the real, he may be right behind you.

**The Organic ARG**

This transgression from the fictional spaces of screen media into the ‘real’ space is endemic to the shattered media realities of terror culture. As the various screens through which we frame and mediate the world proliferate, so do the ways we entertain a narrative as it transitions through challenging media. The convergence of media collapses the ‘real’ space into another host for viral storytelling. As Angela Ndalianis notes, the immersion of transmedia horror makes the ‘actual geographic landscape’ part of multiple media.\(^{13}\) This landscape becomes another medium amongst the multiple ones through which we view, use, and play with characters such as the Slender Man. The Slender Man makes a number of appearances—and disappearances—in the physical world. The most obvious case of tangible Slender Men is in the activity of cosplay, where enthusiasts dress up in Slender Man costumes to role-play as the character in the real world; usually at pop culture conventions and the like. While cosplay is a common practice across fan subcultures, it is notable that the Slender Man canon does not exclude the possibility of running into him on the street. I use this example to illustrate how, as the ‘real’ becomes a medium, so do media become more ‘real.’ The Slender Man’s slippage into our ‘reality’ renders it terrifyingly subjective: he is able to trouble our parameters for ‘real reality’ and the ‘Alternate Reality’ of an ARG.

Žižek’s claim that post-9/11 ‘real reality’ is a ‘virtual entity’ can be seen when Slender Man storytelling challenges the ‘real’ as a medium.\(^{14}\) The locus of ‘real reality’ must be let go to understand the Slender Man: we have, as Žižek states, lost interest in the ‘hard kernel of the Real […] which we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it.’\(^{15}\) As the Slender Man slips between our margins of a real-seeming fiction and a fictionalised real, showing how quickly we follow from frame to frame, his greatest weapon is his verisimilitude. He has no ‘hard kernel’ of origin: all of his media and mythology is polycentric, destabilised, and contagious.

As the central texts, media, or realities of transmedia storytelling become marginalised, marginal media gains significance. If one counts the ‘official’ genesis of Slender Man as the

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\(^{13}\) Ndalianis, *The Horror Sensorium*, 165.


\(^{15}\) Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 19.
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Something Awful pictures—although these destabilise themselves by masquerading as ‘recovered’—then the incarnations that follow are, accordingly, paratexts. In the case of Slender Man, it is apparent that these interconnected paratexts are instrumental to understanding the monster and its social significance. The Slender Man canon is comprised entirely of a network of paratexts: from Surge’s picture captions to gameplay videos uploaded by Slender Game players, the paratexts form what Jonathan Gray calls a ‘city’ of narrative, emphasising the networked polycentrism at play. Connected loosely and distributed socially online, these paratexts operate virally: they claim no authority but become authoritative through their spread, and their proficiency in developing the Slender Man’s liminal power. These narratives proliferate and corroborate across multiple platforms, enlisting VUPs in creatively and dynamically engaging with Slender Man mythology, challenging it to spread and become more ‘real,’ departing from any locus that would orient a core ‘text’ as fictional.

As a viral collection of paratexts masquerading to some degree as reality, the Slender Man can be categorised as an Alternative Reality Game or ARG. Ndalianis notes that ARGs and viral storytelling have a natural partner in horror:

[...] horror cinema is one of the most prolific in terms of adopting viral-marketing strategies, which isn’t surprising given that the most effective campaigns have played on the blurring of boundaries between reality and fiction – a key tactic favoured by horror.

In anticipation of these ARGs promoting movies, VUPs collect material distributed virally with no apparent locus. The materials—the paratexts—masquerade within the narrative ‘reality’ of the film being promoted. The hype, and the extended narrative world of the story, become fundamental when studying these texts: the paratexts subsume the importance of the text itself, as can be seen in Chapter Three. The same is argued by Gray for the ARG promoting The Blair Witch Project (Myrick & Sánchez, 1999): ‘[Blair Witch] has arguably remained as famous (if not more so) for its creative and masterful promotion as for the film itself, since in many ways, the horror began online

16 Recall that the posts themselves displace their ‘originality,’ framing the photographs as ‘found’ in the 1980s and ‘recovered’ for the Internet forum.


18 Ndalianis, The Horror Sensorium, 164-165.
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and in front of the television, not simply in a movie theatre.’ For the Slender Man, we can take
this hypothesis of the ARG subsuming the text a step further: in this case, there is no significant
core text.

The Slender Man is an outstanding example of the ARG, because it performs what
campaigns such as those run by 42 Entertainment have only pretended to perform. Usually, an ARG
is collected around a central text, the commodity being sold, with the paratexts being authored from
this singular point for marketing purposes. While fans do engage collaboratively for the average
ARG, there is still a central text with one author distributing material. For Slender Man, VUPs take
further what Daniel North describes in promotional ARGs:

[viral marketing] distributes the task of publicizing the film by urging spectators to
become active participants, entering into the narrative space of the film, and drawing
others in with them in order to collaboratively construct its meaning.

The collaboratively constructed meaning of Slender Man is genuinely organic. It is polycentric in
that there are no comprehensive Slender Man sources. There is no product being promoted or sold,
and no authoritative creator or text. Following a polycentric logic, every text is a paratext, and the
narrative reality has no ‘official’ canon. This suggests exciting possibilities of the viral Alternative
Reality Game: it uses its media and polycentrism to enhance and authenticate its horror, building an
thriving storytelling network.

The lack of an authoritative text or author is part of what makes Slender Man so fearsome.
No media company owns him, and there is no ‘official’ Slender Man: a rare feat for a pop culture
phenomenon. A lack of centrality is a lack of containment. I have been told rumours that the
creators of the original pictures, Marble Hornets, and Slender Game are actually one person
attempting to virally diffuse their idea. This insistence suggests a fundamental struggle with—even
a fear of—a monster that has not been sanctioned by and contained within a definable source. That
a single author only exists as a rumour exemplifies the Slender Man’s defiance of containment. As
the only ARG of its size to be organically generated, this makes Slender Man a groundbreaking
monster. Due to the obscured fictional roots of the ARG, the Slender Man may be ambiguously

19 The ARG, which promoted the actors’ deaths as ‘real,’ is discussed briefly in Chapter Five. See: Gray,
Show Sold Separately, 57.

20 Daniel North, ‘Evidence of Things Not Quite Seen: Cloverfield’s Obstructed Spectacle,’ Film & History:
Who Is The Slender Man?

located in the ‘real,’ since we have lost our cultural grip on the markers of ‘real reality’ from which he may be hermetically excluded. His lack of locus makes him quintessentially New Horror: he demonstrates the displacement or misplacement of a ‘hard kernel’ in post-9/11 reality as it is subsumed by the infectious culture of ‘terror.’

The Slender Man Displacing Time

The malleable and collaborative monster is hardly a new phenomenon, although the new media technologies which facilitate the ARG are. The Slender Man brings forth storytelling structures from fairy tales and folklore, which I suggest contort and confuse his fictional containment. There are distinctly contemporary aspects to the Slender Man which develop from these earlier frameworks: what makes this monster so curious is that while being symptomatic of the 21st-century mediascape, he also draws upon trends developed outside the dominant 20th-century Western storytelling model of Hollywood and its ilk. The polycentric and collaborative collections of fairy tale and the ARG underpin his horror, as they break Slender mythology’s temporality and associate him with formidably long storytelling traditions. This displacement in chronology is one way the Slender Man articulates 9/11’s shattering of reality: similar temporal fractures are evoked by the popular description of terror culture as ‘9/11, 24/7’ and ‘every day since [being] September 12.’

As in fairy tales, there is no way to accurately capture or replicate an authoritative version of the Slender Man. These are stories, often horror stories, which develop organically and through communal retelling. Their subjects often concern uncanny monsters snatching children. These creatures shift in their guises, adapting to new stories, but their monstrous function is timeless. Just as there is no essential big bad wolf, we cannot distill Slender Man. The viral nature of ARGs, like

21 The resonances between the Slender Man and fairy tale are discussed further in Balanzategui’s and my paper: we contend that the fairy tale allusions enhance the monster’s liminality, lack of containment to an original text or time period, and expansive cultural power. See: Balanzategui and Later, ‘Dark and Wicked Things.’


23 Marina Warner’s study of ‘bogeymen’ throughout European history reveals some uncanny resemblances between this myth and the Slender Man’s, which is again discussed in ‘Dark and Wicked Things.’ See: Marina Warner, Monsters of Our Own making: the Peculiar Pleasures of Fear (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2007), 27; Balanzategui and Later, ‘Dark and Wicked Things.’
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fairy tales, are deliberately polycentric. The monsters of folklore have a timeless ability to frighten, in part because they are so suffused through cultural spheres. I suggest that the Slender Man operates much as a contemporary fairy tale would: a child-eating monster that exists only in transient narratives, with an implication of ‘real’ tradition to underpin his horror.

The placement of the viral campaign and the ARG in the history of storytelling is also theorised by Henry Jenkins. Jenkins observes the following resonance:

Alternative reality gaming could be seen as a 21st century equivalent of a much older literary form – epistolary fiction. Many early novels, including Pamela (1740) Les Liaisons Dangereuse (1782) or The Sorrows of Young Werther (1815), consisted of fictional letters, journals, diaries, and newspaper accounts, which were presented by the authors with little acknowledgement of their fictional status. The authors often claimed to have found the materials in an old trunk or to have received them anonymously in the mail.24

Most interesting here is how the author, and thus the fiction, is deliberately misdirected. In the case of the epistolary work, it enhances authenticity and worth: for the Slender Man, it also brings the element of fear and the possibility of the story being ‘real.’

The liminality that enables Slender Man’s transmedia nature can be likened to a neo-baroque style. Researched in detail by Ndalianis, the neo-baroque has a history with horror, especially horror which exceeds confinement in a single platform or frame. Ndalianis illustrates the significance of this neo-baroque trend in her work: ‘It is specifically neo-baroque spatial logic that is embedded within the postmodern that remains the primary point of reference. This central characteristic of the neo-baroque […] is the lack of respect for the limits of the frame.’ 25 This disrespect allows the Slender Man to be fearsome, and to be ‘real’: like terror, he is able to infiltrate anywhere, and his embodiment of terror resonates with ‘real’ terror by disturbing the frame between reality and fiction. He does not only disrespect the frame but at times damages it. In Marble Hornets and Slender Game, the Slender Man’s presence actively corrupts the footage, and in less literal cases he

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does not remain framed within one author, narrative, or platform. One of the grossest violations of the frame occurs in a way that contextualises these historical cultural phenomena within the realm of the Slender Man is continued from his ‘original’ incarnation: the violation of time, and with it truth.

From the ‘first’ Something Awful pictures, the Slender Man has been retroactively inserted in history. The captions for the pictures claim that the photographs are taken in the 1980s, rather than created in 2009. Doctored photographs of the Slender Man are often artificially anachronistic, featuring sepia tones and historical dress. Reaching further back, the Villains Wikia page displays a woodcut supposedly from 1540 depicting the Slender Man. Written ‘in-universe’ style, the Villains Wiki page suggests that the Slender Man is to be feared because he is known across cultures and histories in a number of guises, and is more than simply a modern retelling of bogeyman folklore. To participate in this kind of narrative indicates a recognition that the Slender Man has an element of timelessness, and is ‘real’ folklore, while situating the transmedia format of Internet storytelling in a long cultural tradition.

![Figure 45: The photoshopped woodcut from Villains Wikia.](image)

While drawing from classic storytelling histories, the Slender Man is endemic to the 21st century in format and in cultural resonance. His story depends on the Internet forum; the ARG; the ability to ‘Photoshop’; the video game; the online video; the wiki; and the am-cam. What often comes forth

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27 ‘Slender Man.’
in the media Slender Man spans across is authenticity. The VUP of Web 2.0 uses stories such as the Slender Man to play with the collision of truth and fiction occurring on the Internet and across new media technology, and how these inform ‘reality.’ The horror of Slender Man operates by trapping a VUP in constantly mediated and reframed realities in which we must admit that either monsters are ‘real,’ or the cultural definitions of ‘real’ are irrevocably disturbed.

Two cases will be discussed in relation to the media slippages of the Slender Man that generate his authenticity: the Marble Hornets film and Slender Game. Both employ popular 21st-century horror tropes to generate for the VUP a mise-en-abyme. When we consider Slender Man’s texts with a medium inside another medium, we cannot but notice that our own world, reflected endlessly, might likewise be contained in a larger frame: thus, Slender Man reveals the horrifying possibility that we must consider ‘reality’ as a subjective medium. The narratives framing the various Slender Man media—the photographs already discussed, and forthcoming the film and video game—operate using the verisimilitude of the ‘real’ world. When trapped between these many frames of reference, centres of narrative, and fragmented media platforms, and following a monster that deals in border territories, the hermetic and hard concept of the ‘real’ shatters.

Marble Hornets and Mise-En-Abyme

Marble Hornets is a film series made by a group of students that popularised the Slender Man to a wider audience, attracting millions of views. Uploaded as ten-minute episodes on Youtube, the film is recorded in the found footage style discussed in Chapter Five. The concept of the sub-genre is taken further with Marble Hornets, a series that challenges the demarcations of ‘real’ media. This is actual amateur film, with no cinematic affectations—it has no official distribution or production values. Its effectiveness is in its ability to make a VUP forget that the footage is not the usual Youtube fare uploaded by amateurs with no generic affectations.

28 The mise-en-abyme is once more an apt metaphor for this case of the virtualised real and polycentric story. The literal translation of an ‘abyss’ may in this case be read as an abyss that operates as the antithesis of the ‘kernel.’
Who Is The Slender Man?

There are at least three conceptual levels to *Marble Hornets*: the first being the Youtube user marblehornets, who uploads clips between one and ten minutes long of ‘raw footage excerpts from [the fictional character] Alex Kralie. A college friend of mine.’ The user marblehornets claims that Kralie’s footage is for a student film—also titled “*Marble Hornets*”—that marblehornets uploads unedited after Kralie disappeared ‘in 2006.’ The subsequent level of fiction, the one purporting to be Kralie’s real raw footage, is the one in which the Slender Man appears: ‘Kralie’ and his ‘cast’ and ‘crew’ have their shooting interrupted as they are stalked by the monster. The third level is the actual “*Marble Hornets*” movie, the aborted film that we see being created. The “*Marble Hornets*” movie is a fiction made by the fictional Kralie, uploaded by the fictional marblehornets user. That all three levels are referred to by the same name—typeset here as marblehornets, *Marble Hornets,* and “*Marble Hornets*”—creates quite the mise-en-abyme.

The student film component of “*Marble Hornets*” serves as a misdirection, in which the verisimilitude of filmmaking footage and raw-looking Youtube uploads make the Slender Man seem authentic and unstaged. The middle level of *Marble Hornets,* the Slender Man’s level, uses his key

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29 ‘Entry #7,’ Youtube Video, 2:00, posted by ‘marblehornets,’ 7th July, 2009, accessed 7th October, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0q3eQjeerNU>.

30 ‘Introduction.’
horror tropes to craft a completely homemade horror serial. It establishes a framework of realism through the raw cinematography, depending on paratexts such as the uploader’s comments and the film-within-a-film ‘making-of’ verisimilitude. It backdates the footage to 2006, before the 2009 Something Awful origin, again disturbing the timeline and building a fake history for the monster. It plays on the Slender Man’s liminality by never centring him in the frame and damaging the footage whenever he comes too close, as though he has the supernatural ability to not only recognise but violate his framing media. The paratexts that combine to form the *Marble Hornets* aspect of the Slender Man mythology illustrate the horrific problem of 21st-century media: it’s not just that the Slender Man might be real, but—as we lose grip on what ‘real’ means between these fragments of media narratives—he might as well be.

As a creature of liminality and obscurity, the Slender Man’s real-world presence is defined by absence. Alex Kralie is such an absence. It is no exaggeration to say that marblehornets’ claim of Kralie’s disappearance is ‘real’: indeed no trace of Alex Kralie can be found. It is almost beside the point that Kralie was invented as a character for *Marble Hornets*. User marblehornets claims, with no indication that this is fiction, that Kralie is gone, and this is true. Whether he was taken by the Slender Man or never existed in the first place, the absence of an Alex Kralie falls within our working definition of ‘real.’ The fractured and embedded storytelling style typical of the Slender Man allows these ambiguous slippages between definitions subjective to certain ‘realities’ of what is authentic and what is fiction, ultimately troubling in many ways what is ‘real.’

**Playing the Slender Game**

The VUP role becomes particularly complex when applied to *Slender Game*. *Slender Game* is a short horror video game for computer platforms. In it, the player must wander through the woods, only able to control the direction, the running speed, and the use of a flashlight. The objective is to collect eight pieces of paper stuck to various landmarks, each with a written note warning the player about the Slender Man’s approach. At some point, he appears in the distance behind the player. One may escape if one runs away, but to look at him only quickens his advance. The game ends when he comes close enough that the graphic and sound quality deteriorates completely into white noise, and he attacks.

The game’s bid for realism is subtler than in many other media. Like in *Marble Hornets*, the Slender Man appears to corrupt the technology that captures him, drawing attention to the fourth
wall. The game uses techniques of immersion, such as the first-person perspective and control of
the avatar’s movement. This level of activity—a level of playing—means engaging in a fictional
reality beyond the role of a passive spectator. Rather than enter our world, the player enters the
Slender Man’s. The VUP becomes a character and the player’s world is another medium in the
many levels of frames that constitute the Slender Man’s abyss. By entertaining multiple realities
through playing not just the ARG but a first-person video game, the horror has greater weight and
the Slender Man becomes more powerful. Gray notes this when discussing the work of Tanya
Krzywinska: ‘She [...] sees [a] game’s ability to give us a first-person perspective (only truly
matched by The Blair Witch Project and Cloverfield in film) as further placing the player inside the
horror.’ As the player aspect of the VUP, the transference of reality in a particular medium occurs
slightly differently, where the player becomes part of the game medium, physically interacting with
controls to move the narrative forward.

A complementary part of Slender Man gaming culture also makes the Slender Game players
into a medium of their own. As always, it is not only the text of the game itself that is of
significance: it is the game’s paratexts that create the Slender Man’s mise-en-abyme. On the Slender
Game’s most popular fan-site is a banner with a number of pertinent links, amongst which one may
navigate to ‘The Legend’ and ‘Reaction Videos.’ The former engages in the usual folkloric style,
giving a brief biography that is often confusingly semi-fictional: ‘created at the Something Awful
forums [...] no specific information has been found about his origins.’ The latter is of great interest
for my discussion of Slender Man and mise-en-abyme. Almost as popular as the game itself are the
recordings of other players playing, from which one can draw great schadenfreude watching players
being terrified when the Slender Man catches them. In these videos, one becomes a viewer, as other
users upload webcam or game footage with sound recordings of their reactions as they play: a solid
example of the interchangeability of the VUP relationship. Like the Slender Man, players recording
their reactions are self-reflexively aware of their mediation, often turning to the camera and address
it. This fragment of the Slender Man narrative suggests that by entertaining levels of realism,
collating information from a cohort of paratexts, and taking on multiple spectatorial and
participatory roles, fans have an astonishingly complex approach to the new media environment.

31 Gray, Show Sold Separately, 189-90.
33 ‘Slender Fansite.’
On one hand, the reaction videos create a frame of distance between the viewer and the Slender Man himself. On the other, it exacerbates the mise-en-abyme and plays into his world of mediated realities. This is some of the rawest, most realistic media pertaining to the Slender Man. Players feeling the need to record their games echoes the ideology of ‘documenting’ in Chapter Five: that everything must be mediated and recorded before it is truly ‘real.’ Chuck Tryon’s discussion of *Blair Witch* suggests that the ploy for realism read with flaunting of unrealism should be seen in the context of the transmedia narrative:

‘Because of these two potential readings I see the film as inseparable from the promotional materials that framed its reception arguing that the film appeared as simultaneously hypermediated and unmediated. Thus, instead of merely returning to or contributing to an unmediated imagination of real horror, the film actually became a complex, if somewhat ambivalent, critique of electronic media.’

In Tryon’s example, the unrealism of *Blair Witch* is the noticeably bad film quality. For the Slender Game reaction videos, the removal from the ‘real’ takes place watching other players playing the game. The reaction videos could be considered their own transmedia articulation, or they could exist as an extra framing paratext to the game: in either case, the issue of mediation and multiple framing echoes through the Slender Man lore. What gives the *Slender Game* its realist edge is that unlike the other texts, in this instance are we watching real people being afraid of the Slender Man. It is a case in which, as we viewers gaze into the abyss, those players recording their gameplay know that the abyss gazes back.

**The Slender Man and Terror Realities**

The idea of ‘shattered reality’ is absolutely key to understanding the Slender Man. Slender Man is a shattered text: there is no ‘hard kernel’ of the Slender Man, only the prolific media through which we might follow his story. Underpinned by fear of terror, or fear of monsters, the ‘real’ becomes another medium through which terror fragments and spreads into a paranoid culture. The way we navigate the Slender Man demands that we negotiate the realistic and fictional fears that are

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34 Chuck Tryon, ‘Video from the Void: Video Spectatorship, Domestic Film Cultures, and Contemporary Horror Film,’ *Journal of Film and Video* 61.3 (2009): 42.
presented to us through the shattered mediascape, and consider how horror and terror shape the narratives we find.

The Slender Man is a monster of terror, as an emblem of the decentralised realities of terror culture, and as a monster that haunts our media. His facelessness is also the facelessness of terrorism, always threatening, but never quite identifiable. The Slender Man is a New Horror pioneer, symptomatic of a culture deeply responsive to a monster that is a media fractal, one demanding that we challenge what about terror is ‘real.’

As the politics of 9/11 ebb with time, its impact on media becomes the event’s forthcoming legacy. This is the narrative I have followed through Parts One and Two of this thesis. The Slender Man is the latest articulation of terror culture’s shattered media realities. Negotiating these realities through media requires dynamic transitions between viewer, user, and player, and self-reflexive understanding of media’s capacity to shape and fragment ‘reality.’ The Slender Man demonstrates a VUP’s potential to learn to recognise the multiple fictional frames through a story like *Marble Hornets*. The problems of being recorded, whether as a monster, an actor playing an actor, a victim of violence, or a player of a video game, are explored in *Slender Game*. Following transmedia narratives to explore context is done by engaging with media as a collaborator and a creator, recognising the ambiguities and liminalities of ‘real’ terror and fictional horror. The shattered reality of terror exists through endless margins, frames, fragments, and liminal realities. The Slender Man is an effective New Horror monster because he lives in these liminal realities.

The Slender Man is a slippery creature, but he has a slippery following. To be a part of the Slender Man’s world, one must be an adept viewer, user, and player. A working knowledge of new media is necessary, as is the ability to follow a frightening narrative as it fragments through frames more and less fictional. The Slender Man is created by horror fans that understand liminality and know that the most dangerous monsters are those that can’t quite be seen. Even to have followed the Slender Man through this chapter is to understand the abyssal horrors of the post-9/11 mediascape and the subjectivity of ‘reality’ for a horror narrative. The Slender Man demonstrates how transmedia New Horror promotes a critical understanding of the ‘real.’ What is terrifying, then, is not that the Slender Man may be real, but that there may no longer be something called ‘real.’
Conclusion

This thesis demonstrated how New Horror can be read in the context of its sociopolitical era. New Horror presents insightful and challenging criticisms of terror culture, highlighting its relationship with developments in screen media and changing conceptualisations of ‘reality.’ As has been argued, the current cultural value of the horror genre and its sociopolitical criticism is supported by this cycle’s success and innovation. The case studies chosen best reflect this success and innovation, targeting New Horror’s independent box office successes and examples of original storytelling. As the cycle develops into new media and storytelling, it continues to engage with the shifting manifestations of terror culture. In this thesis, I have offered a framework for reading prominent examples of the genre cycle from its formation to the present.

In the US and the Western world we have not yet released our obsession with post-9/11 terror. Terror culture sprawls, shifts, and resurfaces, its influences continuing to emerge in different ways. All New Horror may be claimed to relate to terror through their shared occupation of fear: the examples chosen in Part One and the rest of the thesis were merely those that deal with terror most explicitly. Terror strengthens itself through ambiguity, and New Horror uses this to its advantage, allowing its monsters to fill the nebulous and opaque cultural spaces that terror occupies. Still, the prominent sub-genres from this cycle codify tropes that may easily be read in the context of 9/11, the War on Terror, and the sociopolitical issues that follow. The violent spectacle, urban destruction and decay, unethical bodily torture, Manichean politics, invisible domestic threats, bioterrorism, threats to political and private boundaries, surveillance, military overreaction, irresponsible government, corporate-orchestrated disasters, destructive mass paranoia, growing mistrust in authorities, spectacles of violence—all of these characterise terror culture and New Horror. How these concerns emerge as tropes in New Horror often challenges dominant assumptions—assumptions which urgently need challenging—about their granted positions in the narrative of terror culture. As has been argued, when New Horror departs from these obvious parallels, it demonstrates terror culture at its most subtle and pervasive.

New Horror employs one of the genre’s greatest strengths, making critical use of self-reflexivity. This allows New Horror to criticise problems of terror in their significant cultural context of media representation. It is vital to understand that terror culture is powerful through its symbiosis with the screen media through which it spreads. This context illuminates how New Horror’s self-reflexive criticism of media subjectivity expands upon more dangerous problems of
terror culture, such as how framing and mediation processes may subjectively or maliciously authenticate and narrativise disinformation fragmented across media. Part Two has argued that New Horror uses complex spectacles and storytelling that confront and challenge the spectator to recognise and critically engage with these problems, reframing the subject matter of terror culture in relation to narrative and authenticity.

These refractions and articulations of terror and its screenscape are not merely representations in New Horror. Terror culture is so powerful that it fractures the cultural codifiers of ‘reality,’ and this has left another ambiguity for New Horror to negotiate. We must understand ‘reality’ as subjective and multiplicative as it is shattered by the cultural impact of 9/11. This allows New Horror not merely to reflect ‘real’ issues, but to challenge the cultural markers that separate reality from fiction. Developing from the criticism of terror’s spurious narrativisations and mediated authenticities, New Horror is empowered as ‘real’ critical media that intersects with the fragmentary realities of terror. New Horror’s evolution through the shattered mediascape demands a canny navigation of the changing and contradictory markers of the ‘real.’ Some of the most interesting recent iterations of New Horror are those that offer the most challenging navigations of terror’s realities, explored in Part Three.

As I have argued that all New Horror addresses to some degree the nebulous manifestations of terror, a comprehensive identification of these intersections would be impossible. I have noted further relevant movies and sub-genres as they occur throughout the thesis, with brief suggestions of how they may be read using this framework. New Horror is a diverse and exciting period for the horror genre, and innovative examples have arisen through the course of my research. The haunted house; the alien invasion; the slashers; the undead; the classic and Southern Gothic; and a far greater variety of international horror cinema; are all fascinating examples that merit research in New Horror scholarship. I am optimistic that the framework presented in this thesis may intersect with the distinct concerns of these sub-genres to an enlightening effect.

New Horror’s continued development as a cycle is beginning to manifest as emergences in different media. One recent development of great interest is in the area of ‘quality’ television. Like the independent horror cinema of the 2000s decade I have studied, TV horror has exploded in success and budget in the 2010s. A number of popular and critically acclaimed horror television shows have emerged in recent years: *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-), *Hannibal* (NBC,
2013-2015), and *American Horror Story* (FX, 2011-) are among the most popular.\(^1\) Popular TV genres such as the detective procedural, the soap, and the high school drama are hybridised with New Horror: a few respective examples include *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2013), and *Teen Wolf* (MTV, 2011-). Horror cinema classics are often remade for TV: *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) is retold in *Bates Motel* (A&E, 2013-) and *From Dusk Till Dawn: The Series* (El Rey, 2014-) retells the original movie (Rodriguez, 1995). This proliferation opens up interesting new readings of New Horror’s contemporary cultural relevance. The concept of seriality may be considered in the context of subjectively constructed narratives discussed in Chapter Six, for example. Transmedia theory is significant to television: particularly television that expands upon the story-world across episodes accessed through different media, such as the video game tie-in to *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012). Viral marketing and second-screening are common and even assumed in popular horror television, reflective of the shattered media ‘realities’ that inform New Horror storytelling. The context and relevance of New Horror is increasingly complicated by the ambiguities between TV and cinema that occur with on-demand services; diversified access platforms; and the time and budget concerns that once demarcated TV and cinema cultures. TV is one of the most prominent and rich examples of New Horror’s expansion through, and challenges to, different media.

There is no possibility of exhaustively listing the new media appropriated by New Horror storytellers. As quickly as a platform or format is popularly adopted, New Horror appears on it. The sources of these appearances are equally diverse and fascinating: in this context, the CDC and anonymous hoaxsters are as interesting as Lionsgate studios. I have briefly discussed live play, apps, and Internet ARGs: these confront the horror spectator in ways that cinema could never imagine. These media always create new opportunities for the genre cycle to engage with the sociopolitical, challenging its VUPs to reconsider the relationship between horror and the ‘real.’

The diversification of New Horror media is not usurping cinema, but complementing and decentralising it. Reflexivity and intertextuality are always encouraged for the horror fan: these are rewarded by the continuing innovations in New Horror. A great many independent New Horror movies have seen box office and critical success while the cycle has explored other media. They

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\(^1\) Only *American Horror Story* is not a remake of a book or film: its success despite this may be due to a greater reliance on melodrama conventions—and horror television’s traditional anthology format—than any significant horror syntax. I would suggest this reliance on remakes and genre hybridity is due to the far higher and continued financial risk of television production: the conservative nature of the remake enables the survival of high-budget New Horror television. Innovation in TV horror is less evident in conceptual originality, and more in the ongoing development of the story within the limitations of the medium.
continue to articulate terror’s sociopolitical repercussions, with sub-genres shifting in accordance. As discussed in Chapter Five, found footage has remained a viable format, suggesting an ongoing curiosity surrounding the process of mediation and authentication. Twists on the conventions of the haunted house are repeating with franchises *Insidious* (Wan, 2010) and *Sinister* (Derrickson, 2012) performing well in the box office. I have suggested that the inescapability of the haunting by moving house is an engagement with the housing crisis and recession resulting from the War on Terror. These franchises, and a majority of other recent New Horror successes are produced by Blumhouse Productions, which has overtaken Lionsgate as an independent horror distributor. Blumhouse’s popular trope of the threatened home is escalated in the very successful *The Purge* (DeMonaco, 2013) and sequel *The Purge: Anarchy* (DeMonaco, 2014). From the seeming drift of the cycle’s sociopolitical relevance into generic timelessness, *The Purge: Anarchy* presents an unflinching criticism of terror’s cruellest legacies. The movie is remarkably explicit in its confrontation of terror politics: a society is destroying itself through systematic violence sanctioned by a conservative dictatorship. The recurring themes across this collection of franchises develops the perennial horror trope of the threatened family within the context of the 2010s War on Terror: specifically, the War’s increasing exacerbation of a domestic, racially-stratified, class war. Complementing this phenomenon in the box office are revisions of classic sub-genres like *The Cabin in the Woods* (Goddard, 2012), *Warm Bodies* (Levine, 2013), *The Babadook* (Kent, 2014) and *It Follows* (Mitchell, 2014). These indicate the trend toward extreme self-reflexivity, operating in a culture of adept media literacy.

I hope that the framework of this thesis will aid readings of new contributions to the New Horror cycle, and that it may support continued developments of theory as the horror genre evolves. As has occurred in past genre cycles, the study of the field as it occurs produces valuable insight, and is a challenging and rewarding pursuit. How the movies and creations studied in this thesis become canonised in the horror genre’s history will certainly merit return and revision in scholarship. The context of history may radically alter definitions of terror culture: the study of 21st-century screen technology is already an exercise in revolution and obsolescence. This thesis is presented as a contemporary reading of New Horror and its relationship to terror and screen cultures, a field which has proven rich and, thus far, inexhaustible. The research evidences New Horror as an invaluable and groundbreaking critical expression of the period’s most compelling sociopolitical concerns.
Conclusion

New Horror is imperative in challenging the problems of its contemporary sociopolitical era. This most recent cycle of the genre once more demonstrates its remarkable aptitude for criticism. The development from 9/11 terror into a culture in the 21st-century US and Western world; the significance of screen media in this process; and the shattering of our cultural realities that results may be read and contextualised in New Horror. The cycle uses advantages of genre and media to articulate sociopolitical issues from terror to reality in ways that are not merely representational, but intersectional. Engaging with New Horror demands self-reflexivity and a complex spectatorship that is active, interactive, and creative, able to identify the intersections between terror and horror and how to navigate them critically. New Horror’s sociopolitical criticism makes it an invaluable cultural expression of its time.
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