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# *Horror in presa diretta*

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## **Presentazione a cura di Corrado Peperoni**

Negli ultimi venti anni il cinema horror ha mostrato una notevole vitalità e una apprezzabile capacità di rinnovamento, pur in assenza di un vero rinnovamento generazionale a livello autoriale - a grandi autori degli anni settanta/ottanta come Cronenberg, Carpenter, Hooper, Romero, Craven, Raimi, Argento - non sono corrisposti successori adeguati.

Mantenendosi fedele ai propri capisaldi, l'horror ha infatti evidenziato una mutevolezza, una permeabilità, una capacità di ibridarsi con altri linguaggi mediali e con altri generi, che ne ha confermato l'incrollabile appeal popolare, in una dinamica di culto per certi versi simile a quella che ha attraversato le diverse stagioni e le diverse evoluzioni dell'heavy metal.

Come frutti più evidenti di questa interessante stagione dello spavento sul grande schermo, possono essere indicati cinque sottogeneri:

L'horror postmoderno e ipercitazionista, che vede il suo indiscusso capostipite in *Scream*, ritorno al successo planetario di Wes Craven dopo i fasti di *Nightmare* e l'unanime plauso della critica per il meno conosciuto *Il serpente e l'arcobaleno*. In realtà più che di un sottogenere vero e proprio si tratta di una tappa evolutiva del genere nel suo complesso;

L'ondata degli horror orientali: *Ringu*, *Ju-On*, *Dark Water*, *The Grudge*, *The Eye*, *Red Shoes*, *Two sisters*, *Shutter*... solo per citarne alcuni. In questi film la paura affonda le proprie radici nella cultura dei paesi d'origine, nella religione buddista e shintoista, nelle quali i morti continuano a vegliare sulle persone vicine o a perseguitare quelle che hanno fatto loro male in vita. Per questo stesso motivo l'uso dello splatter, del gore, dell'effetto grandguignolesco è molto misurato, mentre tratto ricorrente è la presenza di sfumature melò, legate ai temi del bisogno d'amore o dell'infanzia/innocenza perduta;

Il torture porn, che vede nella reiterata e compiaciuta esposizione dell'inflizione del dolore l'elemento distintivo fondamentale. A questo filone appartengono le fortunatissime saghe di *Hostel* e *Saw*, ma anche *Martyrs*, *Serbian Film*, *Captivity*...;

Il remake degli horror anni settanta, da *Non aprite quella porta* a *Le colline hanno gli occhi*, da *Halloween* a *The Fog*, da *Amityville Horror* passando a *La città verrà distrutta all'alba* fino a *L'alba dei morti viventi*. In questo caso molti appassionati hanno ritenuto quest'ondata di remake un indice di ripiegamento su stesso del genere, incapace di trovare nuove fonti di ispirazione;

L'horror in presa diretta, o reality horror, o realist horror, che porta lo spettatore dentro l'orrore.

A quest'ultimo è dedicato il nuovo numero di *OI3media*. Film come *The Blair Witch Project*, *Rec*, *Rec2*, *Cloverfield*, *Paranormal Activity*, *Paranormal Activity2*, *Diary of the dead* hanno creato e alimentato un nuovo sottogenere che ha saputo ispirarsi al passato sfruttando al meglio tecnologia, tensioni, e linguaggi del presente. Così, se è innegabile il legame a ritroso con film come il *Cannibal Holocaust* di Ruggero Deodato, con il filone dei Mondo Movies, come pure con l'estetica del documentario e del reportage giornalistico, è ancor più vero che molti di questi lungometraggi non potrebbero essere concepiti, pensati, senza il digitale, inteso sia come tecnologia adottata in fase realizzativa, sia come tecnologia diegeticamente onnipresente. In quest'ultima accezione l'esempio più significativo e noto è quello di *Cloverfield*, un aggiornamento dell'horror al post 11 settembre, al tempo dell'orrore planetario in diretta televisiva, al tempo delle infinite soggettive possibili, stante la liquida pervasività dei device digitali capaci di riprese audiovideo. Ma anche il debito con il mondo videoludico è assolutamente rilevante: assolutamente palese il legame tra numerose sequenze di *Rec* è l'estetica di molti videogiochi horror: l'azione ripresa in soggettiva dal protagonista, l'ambientazione claustrofobica, cadente, irregolarmente e scarsamente illuminata, gli attacchi velocissimi, ipercinetici dei contaminati. Infine il fitto intreccio di queste produzioni, tipicamente low budget, con il mondo di Internet, tappa irrinunciabile all'interno di un percorso narrativo che diventa crossmediale, ed al contempo formidabile strumento di marketing virale, come avvenuto per *The Blair Witch Project*, per il cui successo s'è rivelato decisivo.

Buona lettura!

## **L'inferno del Reale *Diary of the Dead* - Le cronache dei morti viventi di George A. Romero**

**di Andrea Mariani**

*A forza di volere il mondo sempre più reale,  
lo si sta devitalizzando: il reale cresce, cresce,  
un giorno tutto sarà reale, e quando il reale sarà universale  
sarà la morte.*

*Jean Baudrillard*

### *Una cronaca*

L'epopea dei morti viventi di George A. Romero sembra manifestare caratteri che delineano un nuovo ciclo di episodi, dopo i primi tre capitoli della saga. *Diary of the Dead* dichiara fin dal titolo l'intento cronachistico dell'operazione di Romero, l'idea cioè di raccontare attraverso l'espedito del film nel film e soprattutto grazie alle tecnologie *user-friendly* delle varie *handycam*, la realtà in diretta, e di riflettere sulla sua rappresentazione, più radicalmente di qualsiasi altro film di genere, se escludiamo il coevo *Redacted* di Brian De Palma (a cui per altro la nozione di genere risulterebbe quanto meno stretta). Non sarà evidentemente un caso che i film che più di altri nell'ultimo decennio hanno indagato le potenzialità delle nuove tecnologie nel *direct-cinema* per la rappresentazione della realtà, siano un horror e un film di guerra; sempre che per questi due film valgano le generiche classificazioni di genere.

I primi tre episodi della saga dei morti viventi si presentavano come una complessa narrazione, sempre allegorica e in qualche modo satirica, che comunque rispettava un coerente sviluppo diacronico: la notte, l'alba, il giorno; appunto *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985).

A partire da *Land of the Dead* (2005), fino a *Diary of the Dead* (2007) e all'ultimo *Survival of the Dead* (2009), l'epopea (che negli ultimi episodi è interamente contemporanea: tre episodi in cinque anni; la prima trilogia si sviluppava in quasi un ventennio) sembra perdere quella coerenza temporale nel suo sviluppo e ricercare una nuova formula identitaria: in sostanza sembrano delinearsi due trilogie distinte e coerenti al loro interno. *Diary of the Dead* rappresenta con ogni probabilità la chiave di questa nuova trilogia, tutta orientata ad una lettura dell'epoca contemporanea.

La cronaca polverizza la prospettiva temporale; vale a dire schiaccia la visione diacronica dell'epopea su un eterno presente, come se Romero cercasse un grado zero del mito, per raccontare la contemporaneità e soprattutto una realtà che sembra perdere la sua dimensione diacronica, in un costante e continuo appiattimento su di sé, sullo spazio della propria esistenza reale: le immagini riprese che compongono il film, non fanno altro che ri-guardarsi, come se lo

sguardo del l'uomo della "terra dei morti viventi" avesse perso la direzione prospettica del proprio sguardo, lo sguardo verso "l'oltre" nello spazio e nel tempo, e si sia rivoltato su se stesso, appunto verso la terra su cui poggiano i nostri piedi: "invece di proiettarsi lontano, davanti a sè, la vista si abbassa per osservare soltanto la punta dei piedi" [1]. Anzi in *Diary of the Dead* lo sguardo è talmente e ostentatamente auto-riflesso che gli zombi si vedono a malapena: è l'episodio in cui la presenza degli zombi è meno evidente, e comunque quasi sempre indiretta, mediata. Lo sguardo è tutto sui - presunti - viventi. Non è un caso infatti che il film si apra e si chiuda con due manifestazioni di narcisismo - è il caso di dirlo - estremo: nella prima sequenza del film, quando la giornalista - poco prima di documentare una strage - si riflette nello specchietto retrovisore del furgone, e nella penultima sequenza, quest'ultima forse la più "politica" del film, in cui Jason Creed - "l'occhio" dietro la macchina da presa che registra il "diario" - invoca uno "shoot me", per essere ripreso dalla videocamera, ma anche (e quindi) ucciso. E però salvato. E d'altra parte la protagonista lo dice esplicitamente nel corso del film: "si vuole essere visti", e a questa *vanitas* post-moderna non sono condannati solo coloro che vengono ripresi, ma anche gli "operatori", chi guarda e registra, chi produce immagini. Tutti sembrano attratti da questa sorta di "distrofia scopica". Il film stesso è fatto di immagini prodotte da uomini che si riprendono. Un atteggiamento solipsistico che Romero traduce in vero contagio virale, da cui nessuno pare salvarsi: "siamo tutti morti" recita disillusa, sveglia e cosciente la voce di Debra. Che cosa produce questo virus dunque? Quello che per tutto il film viene accusato è una sorta di accecamento o di narcolessia: quello che Debra comprende e dichiara fin dall'inizio del film (ed è la dichiarazione di intenti del film che lei monta e mostra a noi, *Death of the Death*, che sembra profetizzare l'unica soluzione possibile alla saga: la fine - death - dell'apocalisse con il risveglio degli zombi), è la necessità di risvegliare e far credere. Quello che in sostanza Debra intuisce è l'esistenza di una verità che gli altri non vedono, accecati da una realtà presunta (viziata da una parte da questo estremo "pseudo-narcisismo", dall'altra - anche se in misura minore [2] - da un sistema informazione/comunicazione corrotto o falso: "i media ci vogliono far credere che sia tutto normale" accusa Tony, "danno la colpa agli immigrati clandestini"): solo le immagini riprese da Jason e poi montate gli permetteranno di capire e di vedere veramente. "Non sapevamo quello che stesse accadendo, finché non montammo il girato". Riprenderemo e cercheremo di approfondire queste affermazioni più avanti, ma ci bastano queste poche righe per afferrare la complessità del problema dell'immagine che Romero introduce in questo suo quinto episodio: se da una parte la proliferazione delle immagini smaschera una *vanitas* che è l'evidenza di un vero e proprio accecamento nella visione della realtà [3], dall'altra sembra riaffermare la fede nelle possibilità del cinema (infatti solo le immagini montate e quindi dichiaratamente *fiction* sono rivelatrici della verità) nell'opera di "disvelamento", risveglio, resurrezione delle esistenze intorpidite.

*Una cronaca indiretta*

Di che realtà parliamo dunque? La realtà tradotta dalle *MiniDV* e dalle *handycam* professionali o dalle microcamere dei *mobilePhones* o delle videocamere di sorveglianza sono la sostanza del film che Romero ci mostra, ma sono anche l'unica realtà che i "sopravvissuti" e fuggitivi sembrano percepire: la realtà nella "terra dei morti viventi" è costantemente in differita e quando le telecamere si spengono perché scariche o perché la registrazione viene fermata, abbiamo veri e propri buchi narrativi: non esiste altra storia al di là di quella registrata, "non esiste nulla se non viene registrato" afferma cinicamente Debra prima di accendere un polemico confronto con Jason. In questo modo però la realtà diventa lontanissima, piuttosto che avvicinarsi e divenire a portata di tutti, la realtà, il mondo vero diventa qualcosa di assolutamente estremo [4], irraggiungibile, infinitamente lontano: in questo senso è perfettamente logico che sia horror, la realtà più estrema per eccellenza, come è perfettamente logico che *Redacted* sia un film di guerra: la guerra è la realtà estrema che traduce nella

Storia l'horror visionario. Vivere immersi in una realtà in differita, in cui l'unica prospettiva spaziale e temporale è "autoreferenziale all'infinito" [5], ci rende progressivamente non solo incapaci ma addirittura impossibilitati ad agire: se non nella forma della re-azione, e quindi della fuga. Una fuga all'infinito per reazione a un impulso che non sappiamo decifrare, capire, pensare, perché non riusciamo a vederlo. Completamente assorbiti da una realtà indiretta, mediata, infinitamente autoreferenziale, continuiamo a reagire, come l'ape continua a succhiare il miele nonostante le sia stato reciso l'addome [6] nell'esperimento citato da Heidegger, come i morti viventi di *Dawn of the Dead* tornano a fare shopping nel centro commerciale, nonostante, ad eccezione del cervello, tutte le loro funzioni vitali siano state interrotte. Come se quella ricerca, "la ricerca disperata del reale al di là delle apparenze" - accusata in *Diary of the Dead* - attraverso i mezzi di riproduzione digitale, avesse prodotto "lo stratagemma definitivo per evitare un confronto con il Reale" [7]. Iniziamo ad intendere quale nuova figura di zombi Romero tenti di delineare in questa seconda, post-moderna trilogia dei morti viventi. E a pensarci bene Romero aveva introdotto la questione di questa nuova "stirpe" di morti viventi già in *Land of the Dead*, nel personaggio del minorato e orbo Charlie (uno dei pochi sopravvissuti e forse l'unico a "credere ancora nel paradiso") che costantemente, e quasi ossessivamente, rivelava nei suoi compagni il germe virale di questa incapacità di vedere l'ovvia realtà: "io faccio spesso gli incubi: guardami non si vede che faccio sogni terribili?", e "insomma guardami, non si vede che devo bere qualcosa?", e ancora del suo amico Riley "guardatelo, si vede che non fa certe cose" e così via in quasi tutte le battute che recita...ma in *Diary of the Dead* siamo oltre, anche se in un'altra storia. Dopo un nuovo inizio.

Ma come vincere questo contagio? Come risvegliare le coscienze, come salvare i sopravvissuti? Il risveglio passa necessariamente attraverso un'altra illusione, se è possibile ancora più potente

dell'illusione della realtà sopra descritta: "ho aggiunto alcuni effetti speciali e della musica: la verità da sola non basta, la gente deve avere paura per riuscire a credere e a svegliarsi". Ovvero per dirla con le parole di Baudrillard, che sembra un riferimento sempre più calzante per una lettura approfondita del film di Romero: "non si combatte l'illusione con la verità, ma con un'illusione più forte". Infatti proprio perché il reale è diventato un fenomeno estremo, "non si può più pensarlo come reale, ma occorre pensarlo come fuori dalle orbite, come se fosse visto da un altro mondo - come illusione" [8]. In questo modo Romero, nel suo alter-ego Debra, di nuovo una donna, riafferma la sua fede nel mezzo cinematografico in particolare e nel potere della finzione in generale per l'apertura alla verità. Riprendiamo dunque la frase di Debra, che prima abbiamo accennato, "non sapevamo quello che stesse accadendo, finché non montammo il girato": il montaggio, non solo la visione del girato, ma il montaggio, la creazione del film con gli effetti visivi e sonori, diventa il momento della rivelazione per Debra, il momento della visione rinnovata, chiara e lucida. Come a dire che nella proliferazione delle immagini dell'epoca contemporanea, l'atto consapevole (che deriva da un'azione e non da una re-azione) e l'occhio responsabile del singolo demiurgo che compone, ordina e modella una visione, è ancora insopprimibile se si vuole salvaguardare la possibilità di mantenere una chiave d'accesso alla verità. "Finché non montammo il girato...e vedemmo quell'orrore": l'occhio del demiurgo/regista è anche quello che sopporta la visione dell'orrore, della realtà estrema, rivelata per la prima volta. Ma per poter risvegliare, per potere rivelare, la mistificazione è inevitabile: le immagini in presa diretta non fanno che riportare una realtà comunque indiretta (anche se in diretta), in differita e ostinatamente autoriflessa (autoreferenziale): ovvero una realtà estremamente lontana; solo il montaggio e la creazione filmica possono rivelare l'orrore e la giusta visione, possono ridare alla visione la perduta prospettiva verso l'oltre nello spazio, e nella dimensione diacronica del tempo.

### *Una parodia*

Il pre-finale di *Diary of the Dead* anticipa l'evoluzione della saga. Parliamo in particolare della scena dell'inseguimento che coinvolge Tracy e Ridley "mummificato". A produrre un cortocircuito nella lettura, quasi metafisica, che dell'epoca contemporanea Romero fa in questo che è probabilmente l'episodio più complesso, a livello teorico, di tutta la saga, è un paradosso, il paradosso che però sta alla base della Storia degli ultimi dieci anni - e che probabilmente spiega la necessità di una nuova trilogia tutta compresa negli ultimi cinque anni - e cioè il paradosso della finzione che diventa realtà. Sta alla base della Storia degli ultimi dieci anni perché è nel 2001 che il più grande shock predetto da interi cicli di film catastrofici si verifica nella realtà: l'attentato al World Trade Center [9]. Romero infatti sceglie di ri-produrre e innestare nella realtà del film una sequenza horror, i cui stereotipi finzionali si verificano spaventosamente nell'inseguimento di Tracy, esattamente come da copione nelle sequenze iniziali del film, da parte di Ridley che, finalmente morto, può essere più vero della finzione horror: "te l'avevo detto che le mummie camminano lentamente". L'horror diventa reale nella visione ancora una volta apocalittica di George Romero:



si tratta quindi di un paradosso che se da una parte produce un cortocircuito (la realtà percepita è un'illusione apparente da cui non possiamo esimerci: siamo tutti zombi; il mondo reale è lontanissimo dalla nostra percezione, è una realtà estrema: non può che essere horror; solo un'illusione più forte della realtà può rivelare la verità: il cinema, il montaggio di Debra; ma oggi la verità è una finzione verificatasi nel mondo reale: corrisponde agli stereotipi di un film horror), dall'altra rende esplicita, se ce ne fosse stato bisogno, la ragione d'esistere di questo film (oggi la finzione è diventata reale, ed è - anche - un film horror), e che rendono questo film un'importante e fondamentale tassello della rilettura e rifondazione del mito americano post-11 settembre. Ma la scena finale non fa che riprodurre una parodia del genere horror, ed è qui che si nasconde la radice dell'evoluzione della saga, e della visione della realtà contemporanea di Romero: Romero ritrova la componente ironica di alcuni capitoli della saga (*Night of the living Dead*, ma anche *Dawn of the Dead*, meno in *Day of the Dead* e *Land of The Dead*) ma la sua ironia assume un significato diverso, o forse un surplus di significato alla luce della nuova trilogia. Di fronte ad una realtà che corrisponde agli stereotipi di una finzione, e che paradossalmente diventa parodia di quella finzione (vedi la scena dell'inseguimento finale, dove addirittura Debra/Romero aggiunge una sarcastica musica texana quando Tracy uccide Ridley), l'unico sguardo possibile sulla realtà è ironico e forse addirittura parodico. A questo punto Romero apre la strada al terzo episodio della nuova saga: *Survival of the Dead* (2009). L'ultimo film della saga diventa esplicitamente parodico: se in *Diary of the Dead* Romero usa le strutture e gli stereotipi del genere horror, in *Survival of the Dead* (che anche esteticamente è più vicino a *Diary of the Dead* che agli altri episodi della serie) Romero prende di mira il genere filmico fondante il mito americano nel mondo, il western (per altro già in *Diary of the Dead* si fa spesso ironicamente riferimento ai personaggi fondativi del mito americano: gli indiani e i cowboy). Attraverso i moduli formali del genere western Romero decostruisce (dopo le istituzioni statali a partire da *Dawn of the Dead*) l'istituzione familiare. Ma più che la lettura politica che possiamo dare a questo ultimo episodio, diventa estremamente interessante l'approccio ironico/parodico che Romero sceglie di utilizzare per chiudere il ciclo, come a dimostrare che "la contropartita della perdita dell'illusione - dopo la rivelazione che fa seguito alla visione di *Death of the Dead*, che come abbiamo detto potrebbe rappresentare idealmente la fine dell'apocalisse dei morti viventi [NdR] - sia l'apparenza di un'ironia oggettiva di questo mondo. L'ironia come forma universale della disillusione, ma anche dello stratagemma con cui il mondo si nasconde dietro l'illusione radicale della tecnica, e il segreto dietro la banalità universale dell'informazione". [10]

### Conclusion

In *Diary of the Dead* infine, Romero svela quella che potrebbe benissimo essere la matrice letteraria, o il modello ispiratore di tutta la saga dei morti viventi. Il bunker dentro cui si rifugiano i sopravvissuti del film, si trova simbolicamente dietro una libreria, che diventa in questo modo una sorta di barriera/barricata contro i morti viventi; tra i ripiani di questa libreria, il professore ritrova una

copia di *Le due Città* di Charles Dickens. Innanzitutto la contrapposizione politica tra due regimi sociali ha accompagnato tutta la saga, ed è ancora più esplicita in *Land of the Dead* (che pure raccoglie le conclusioni di *Day of the Dead* e si lega alla precedente trilogia) dove contrappone gli "aventi diritto" ai "non aventi diritto" ad accendere allo skyline di Friddler's Green, ma è chiaramente facile ritrovarla nelle classi dei "viventi" (o di certi viventi) e dei "morti viventi" che riprendono aggiornandola, la contrapposizione delle categorie Dickensiane dell'aristocrazia e del proletariato nel periodo del Terrore nella Francia rivoluzionaria, così in tutta la saga almeno fino a *Diary of the Dead*, dove il discorso come abbiamo visto diventa più complesso, anche sotto il punto di vista politico. Le due città sono anche le due realtà che in fondo abbiamo sempre osservato durante tutta la saga, ma se il modello di Dickens calza perfettamente nella chiave politica di quasi tutti gli episodi della saga, in *Diary of the Dead* la lettura diventa da una parte più metafisica - anche se comunque a partire da una visione storica (a partire dall'11 settembre) [11] - dall'altra complica la traduzione della figura, comunque mitologica, dello zombi. Complice il fatto che con questo film Romero tenta più esplicitamente un azzeramento della saga, il discorso sugli Zombi sembra diventare più disperato: "siamo tutti morti", la disperazione non emerge tanto dall'ultima sequenza con i bracconieri, piuttosto dal fatto che non sembra esserci scampo per evitare il contagio, [12] il sonno delle coscienze e la morte.

## Note

[1] Paul Virilio, *L'arte dell'accecamento*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2007, pag.65.

[2] da *Dirigido Por* n°380, luglio, Barcelona 2008, intervista a George Romero: "en los últimos años los medios masivos han ido perdiendo poder frente a los blogs en donde todo el mundo expresa sus opiniones...cualquier persona está invitada a participar de los medios... Los propios medios piden a la gente que actúen como reporteros...y el público es facilmente seducido por eso".

[3] vedi Paul Virilio, *L'arte dell'accecamento*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2007

[4] Jean Baudrillard, *Il delitto perfetto*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 1996, pag. 102

[5] ibid. pag. 102

[6] Giorgio Agamben, *L'aperto*, Bollati boringhieri, Torino, 2007, pag. 56

[7] Slavoj Žižek, *Benvenuti nel deserto del reale*, Meltemi, 2002, pag. 28

[8] Jean Baudrillard, *Il delitto perfetto*, pag. 102

[9] vedi Slavoj Žižek, *Benvenuti nel deserto del reale*, Meltemi, 2002

[10] Jean Baudrillard, *Il delitto perfetto*, pag. 78

[11] da *Dirigido Por*, n° 380, luglio 2008, intervista a Romero "siempre he tratado de hacer películas que reflejen los tiempos en que fueron hechas".

[12] da *Dirigido Por*, n° 380, "siempre me preguntan qué representan los zombis para mí, y respondo que representan el desastre. Representan los cambios en el mundo de los que nadie quiere hablar o de los que hablan erròneamente".

### **Bios**

Andrea Mariani. Nato il 9 maggio 1985 a Erba (CO). Maturità classica. Laurea di primo livello in Scienze e tecnologie della comunicazione presso L'Università IULM di Milano con una tesi in estetica dal titolo "Per un cinema della scrittura. 'E la vita continua' di Abbas Kiarostami". Nel Novembre 2009 Laurea di secondo livello in Televisione, Cinema e produzione multimediale presso la stessa Università. Con una tesi in Filmologia e Filologia del cinema sviluppata presso la Fimoteca Nazionale di Madrid dal titolo "Prolegomeni al Napoléon di Gance. Segundo de Chomon e Abel Gance". 110 e Lode con dignità di pubblicazione. Ha da poco iniziato un corso di Dottorato in Storia e filologia del cinema presso l'Università di Udine.

**What If It's Real?: Live-record Horror and Popular Belief in the Supernatural**  
**by Joseph Laycock**

Following the release of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), there was wide speculation as to whether the legend of the Blair Witch, or even the film itself, was authentic. An essay by James Castonguay describes vigorous debate on Internet forums following the film. He quotes the following post from someone claiming to reside near Burkittsville, Maryland where the film is set:

The story is not fiction. No one says much about it but everyone seems to know that something erie [sic] and godless is happening in those woos in Frederick County. You cannot determine whether the story is fiction simply by hitting a few keys on your stupid computer!!! E-mail me.

I encountered this same epistemological crisis in college when I crafted one of the wooden dolls depicted in the film. A co-ed who lived in my dormitory told me that this was extremely unwise. The Blair Witch, she assured me, was quite real. In fact, she had read of it in a book of New England folklore years before the film came out. She seemed quite serious and I began to wonder if her interest in the film had caused her to create a false memory of something she had never actually read.

Since *The Blair Witch Project*, there has been a surge of horror films with a similar premise. Now a distinct sub-genre, "found footage" or "live-record" horror films succeed by creating doubt as to whether the story is fact or fiction. This is achieved through the found footage premise as well as "viral marketing" campaigns, in which promoters deliberately sow confusion in order to peak curiosity about the film. But this doubt is only possible when films portray encounters with supernatural entities that many people believe might *actually exist*. Without a cultural anxiety that such scenarios could actually happen, most of these films would be completely unconvincing. For this reason, the success of live-record horror suggests that the West is not the secularized, disenchanted society it is often thought as. Despite the cultural authority of science, many modern people still harbor fears of demons, aliens, and other entities. Furthermore, these films appear to have the power to alter plausibility structures, not only playing on modern legends, but creating new ones. *The Blair Witch Project*, which has inspired pilgrimages to Burkittsville, Maryland is a prime example. As such, live record horror films are not purely entertainment. For many, they function as cultural myths, reflecting and reinforcing actual worldviews.

*The Rise of Live-Record Horror*

Before modern cinema, horror writers used the epistolary format to give stories of supernatural creatures greater verisimilitude. Bram Stoker begins *Dracula* by stating that these papers have been arranged so that, "a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact." H.P. Lovecraft used the same structure for stories such as "The Call of

Cthulhu.” Like *Dracula*, this story is presented as a file of journals and documents collected from several people. But unlike Stoker’s tale, in which the monster is defeated, it is implied that each of the contributing authors has either gone insane or otherwise come to a terrible end. Both writers did significant research and incorporated many real-world details into their stories, causing readers to become confused as to where reality ends and fantasy begins. Today many in the West believe that Romanians truly did regard Vlad “Dracula” Tepes as an undead vampire. Similarly, some Lovecraft fans believe that the forbidden book known as the Necronomicon actually exists.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the epistolary horror story was adapted to the screen in the form of “found footage.” The earliest film with this premise is the controversial Italian film *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), directed by Ruggio Deodato. The story portrays a “film within a film”: When four anthropologists disappear while making a documentary about Amazon tribes, Dr. Harold Monroe departs on a rescue mission. He is too late to save the party, but recovers film reels recording their gruesome death at the hands of cannibals. The film, which was shot in Columbia, creates verisimilitude by contrasting the grainy “cinéma vérité” style of the found footage with the more traditional style of the framing narrative. The filmmakers even killed actual animals on camera in order to make the story more realistic. In one scene, the actors decapitate an enormous river turtle, which they dismember and eat. The film was banned in several countries for its depictions of gore and gang rape, animal cruelty, and its racist portrayal of actual indigenous tribes.

What is interesting for our purposes is that many believed the human deaths depicted in the film were real as well. The famous director Sergio Leone wrote a letter to Deodato, which stated, “Dear Ruggiero, what a movie! The second part is a masterpiece of cinematographic realism, but everything seems so real that I think you will get in trouble with all the world.” Indeed he did. Ruggiero was arrested on obscenity charges amid allegations that *Cannibal Holocaust* was a “snuff” film depicting actual murder. The director was forced to reveal how he had simulated a woman being impaled on a pole, which appeared to emerge from her throat, without actually killing the actress. Although the film had been banned for other reasons, the media assumed that rumors of “snuff” were true. As late as 1993, when British authorities confiscated copies of the film at a comic-book fair, the newspaper *The Independent* reported that a “snuff” video had been seized. The “found footage” model was next used in the obscure film *The Last Broadcast* (1998) and the highly successful *Blair Witch Project* (1999). The next decade saw a flood of such movies including *Diary of the Dead* (2007), *REC* (2008), *Cloverfield* (2008), *Paranormal Activity* (2009), *The Fourth Kind* (2009), and *The Last Exorcism* (2010). Even famed director Werner Herzog got into the act with *Incident at Loch Ness* (2004). The live-record horror genre is likely to continue as these films consistently achieve commercial success disproportionate to their low budgets. A surprise hit at the 2010 Fantastic Fest film festival was a Norwegian found footage film entitled *Troll Hunter*.

*Live-Record Horror as a Sociophic Window*

The horror genre relies heavily on a “cultural shorthand.” Audiences all know what will happen if the characters take a shower, enter the basement, or walk through the graveyard. Without these subtextual cues, horror films could not create a sense of suspense. Douglas Cowan, in his book *Sacred Terror*, argues that successful horror films reflect deeply held and culturally specific fears, which he calls “sociophobics.” Horror movies, used as “sociophobic windows,” frequently point to the cultural influence of religion, contradicting claims that society is becoming increasingly secularized. *The Exorcist* (1973) is a case in point. When it was originally released, theaters in the United States and the United Kingdom reported viewers vomiting and fainting in the aisles. Cowan suggests that the response to *The Exorcist* reflects a deep-seated cultural fear of demons that has its roots in Christian tradition. I argue that modern live-record horror films offer a similar insight into popular ideas about the supernatural.

Although live-record horror frequently deals with the supernatural and the fantastic, the plots are fairly circumscribed. With the exception of apocalyptic scenarios like *Cloverfield* and *Diary of the Dead*, live-record horror typically draws on actual urban legends rather than portraying fantastic scenarios. The supernatural antagonists of these films are generally limited to demons or similar entities, aliens, or occasionally cryptid animals such as the Loch Ness monster. More than any other sub-genre of horror, live-record horror is dependent on the cultural lore surrounding these creatures to establish a subtextual understanding with the audience. To preserve verisimilitude, these films cannot rely on music or lavish special effects and must be extremely subtle in their portrayal of supernatural phenomena. As film critic Jeff Vice stated of *The Blair Witch Project*, “Never before have so many hackles and goose pimples been raised from so little in the way of onscreen action.” Similarly, in *Paranormal Activity*, a door swinging a few inches by itself is enough to indicate the presence of a demon. To an audience not brought up on stories of poltergeists and hauntings, the swinging door is an utterly mundane event. A small child would likely perceive nothing frightening in this scene. But for audiences who understand the cultural shorthand, the swinging door can be terrifying.

Subtext alone does not explain what makes these films frightening. Sociologists have found that a significant number of people living in the United States believe supernatural entities actually exist. The 1998 Southern Focus Poll indicates that nearly 59 percent of respondents believed in demonic possession and 40 percent believe in UFOs. A 2004 Gallup poll showed that 70 percent of respondents believe in the Devil. In the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey, nearly 70 percent of respondents indicated that demons “absolutely” or “probably” exist, 28 percent agreed that UFOs are probably spaceships from other worlds, and 17 percent agreed that creatures like Big Foot and the Lochness monster would some day be discovered. The 2008 Pew Forum survey indicated that 70 percent of Americans believe that demons are active in the world. In light of these numbers it is hardly surprising that many Americans were uncertain whether the found footage portrayed in films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Fourth Kind* was real.

Before the live-record genre, horror films were able to exploit popular belief in the supernatural by making films that were “based on true stories.” *The Exorcist*, *The Amityville Horror* (1979), *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005), *Fire in the Sky* (1993), and *The Mothman Prophecies* (2002) are all examples of this genre. In fact, a cottage industry formed around researching the case that inspired *The Exorcist*. With live-record horror the debate has shifted from “Did this really happen?” to “Is this really happening before my eyes?”

I would argue that even individuals who do not nominally believe in paranormal entities are nevertheless compelled by the sociophobic surrounding these creatures. Films like *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Fourth Kind*, and *Paranormal Activity* do not rely on gore or attempt to startle the audience. Instead of making audiences scream, these films instill an enduring sense of unease. Viewers sometimes report trouble sleeping for days after watching them. Freud described this inexplicable sense of dread in his essay “The Uncanny.” The uncanny, or *unheimliche* in German, is different from the fear of being stabbed by a murderer or devoured by zombies. It is a seemingly inexplicable feeling of “eeriness” in response to things that should not logically be frightening. Freud cites the fear that a doll might actually be alive as an example of uncanny dread. The fear of a door swinging by itself demonstrates the uncanny just as well. Freud’s explanation is that the uncanny is caused by the return of thoughts and beliefs that have been repressed. This can include irrational or “primitive” beliefs of how the universe works. The eeriness that follows a coincidence, Freud argues, arises because of a “conflict of judgment” between rational and superstitious theories of causation: It is precisely because modern people do not believe in fate that coincidences seem unsettling. In the same way, skeptics watching “found footage” of people being stalked by supernatural beings may experience this sort of cognitive dissonance. We know the footage cannot be real and yet it seems plausible that it is real. Deeply held cultural fears are called to the surface causing the “return of the repressed.”

#### *How Fiction Shapes Reality*

We know that the media has the power to alter perceptions. Social scientists have written on the concept of “deviance amplification” in which fears of juvenile delinquency or similar minor social ills become blown out of proportion. Deviance amplification occurs through a cycle perpetuated by the media and the audience. The media reports on the problem of juvenile delinquency and viewers become more anxious about delinquents. They may begin to notice behavior they previously dismissed, perceiving it as “delinquency.” The media then reports on rising fears of delinquency, perpetuating the cycle. Gradually, this spirals into a full moral panic. Of course, a moral panic cannot be created out of nothing. Typically, there are at least peripheral cases to set off the cycle. Deviance amplification theory has not been applied to belief in the supernatural, but there is evidence that stories of the fantastic from popular culture influence plausibility structures. For instance, Gallup polls show that while the show *The X-Files* was on the air (1993-2002), more Americans reported belief in UFOs and other psychic phenomena. I suggest that this effect

functions through a similar relationship between the media and the audience.

Just as effective horror stories hone in on sociophobics surrounding the supernatural, they frequently portray real subcultures that have formed around supernatural beliefs: *The X-Files* draws on UFO lore and conspiracy theories, *The Blair Witch Project* portrays the culture of exploring haunted areas, known as “legend tripping,” and *Paranormal Activity* reflects actual experiments conducted by “ghost hunters.” This is done, in part, to capitalize on the popularity of these subcultures, using them as a ready-made fan base. When these films are successful, they attract a subculture of their own. Modern audiences do not passively consume films, they interact with the text, evaluating it, interpreting it, and creating “fan cultures.” This is especially true of horror, science-fiction, and other genres dealing with the fantastic and the supernatural. Inevitably, the subculture of the fans begins to blend with the subculture portrayed in the film. Interested parties become engrossed in the epistemological task parsing out the fan culture, the film, and the paranormal lore that inspired the film. It is precisely here where fact and fiction appear to blur. In some cases, films may take on a supernatural significance of their own, creating a situation of “fact-fiction reversal.” For instance, conspiracy theorist John Lear has suggested that popular movies depicting aliens including *E.T.* (1982) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) are attempts by a shadow government to influence public opinion about extra-terrestrials.

Live-record horror is extremely sensitive to this cycle and often deliberately perpetuates it. The very premise of this genre is dependent on actual supernatural subcultures as these groups regularly produce amateur films in their attempts to gather evidence of the supernatural. Live-record horror also anticipates and nurtures fan cultures. This is frequently done through viral marketing, in which promotional features are presented as fact, with the hope that curious people will disseminate this material, debate its authenticity, and ultimately draw attention to the film. *The Blair Witch Project* was a pioneer in viral marketing, producing an entire faux documentary about their faux documentary, which aired on the Sci-Fi channel. In fact, the producers of *The Blair Witch Project* were accused of manufacturing the Internet buzz around their film by having marketers pose as fans. *Cloverfield* carried on this tradition, creating numerous phony websites. Pages were even created for the characters on the peer-networking site myspace.com. *The Last Exorcism* used a site called chatroulette.com in which visitors can communicate with random strangers using a web camera. Promoters created a false account, attempting to convince unlucky visitors that they were witnessing a case of possession live via web-camera.

As a case study of how live-record horror effectively exploits this cycle, consider *The Blair Witch Project*'s symbiotic relationship with legend tripping. In the United States, folklorists have coined the term “legend tripping,” to describe a practice in which adolescents visit sites of alleged tragedy, horror, or supernatural evil. These visits often occur at night, involve trespassing, and have the character of a rite of passage. The practice is self-perpetuating as legend trippers brag about the frightening experiences they had, thus inspiring others to visit the same site. Horror films have long served the folkloric function of inspiring legend trips. *The Amityville Horror* is based on a book describing a haunting that allegedly took place in a suburban home in Amityville, New York. Shortly



before the film was released, the house's owners were besieged by tourists, psychic investigators, and vandals—according to some reports up to a thousand people a day. This presents an early case of the feedback loop created between paranormal subcultures and fan culture.

*The Blair Witch Project* anticipated this cycle and adapted to it. Where *The Amityville Horror* portrayed the haunting, *The Blair Witch Project* portrayed legend tripping. But unlike the Amityville Horror, the Blair Witch legend has no basis outside of the film. There never was a town in Maryland known as Blair or a region called “The Black Hills.” Nevertheless, the film inspired hordes of legend trippers. The tiny town of Burkittsville was forced to allocate money for additional police patrols, particularly around the town cemetery. Despite this precaution, many of the town's signs were stolen as souvenirs. Several of the legend trippers stated their belief that the film was not fiction. At this point, the *Blair Witch Project* fan culture and the paranormal culture around the Blair Witch legend had effectively fused together. Finally, the fan reaction was exploited in *The Blair Witch Project 2* (2000). Although this is not a live-record horror film, it portrays the grisly demise of legend trippers who watched the first movie. The implication is that *The Blair Witch Project 2* is fiction, but the original may not have been. This move consummated the self-referential cycle. In essence, the sequel is simultaneously a film and a viral marketing ploy.

### Conclusions

We have briefly looked at how the horror genre both draws on and contributes to popular beliefs about the supernatural. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz interpreted myth as a symbol system that serves both a “model of” and a “model for” function. These stories offer a cosmology or “worldview” and an “ethos” that prescribes future behavior. Ethos and worldview reinforce one another in order to create a stable cultural system. I argue that Geertz' model can be applied to the horror genre and Western understanding of the supernatural. The films described here portray beings that are still very much alive in Western cosmology. They also prescribe a proper ethos towards these beings: Overly superstitious characters often flee early and become irrelevant to the story while debunkers and overly skeptical characters are invariably killed. Horror fans and paranormal investigators often invoke an epistemological stance similar to the protagonists, balancing reason with an open mind to the possibility of the supernatural. This, of course, reinforces belief in supernatural beings and demonstrates the mutual reinforcement of ethos and worldview. Horror has likely served this function since the birth of the genre. However, in the last few decades horror films have arisen that form a close and working relationship with actual paranormal beliefs. It is now difficult to discern which way the flow of fantastic ideas is going. Live-record horror and viral marketing are the latest evolution of this process, deliberately creating knots of truth and fabrication that are not easily untangled. It seems more than likely that the success of the genre will only encourage paranormal belief, summoning forth more ghosts and demons to re-enchant Western consciousness.

## **Bios**

Joseph Laycock is the author of *Vampires Today: The Truth About Modern Vampirism*. He holds a Masters of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and is currently completing doctoral work in religion and society at Boston University. His work focuses on the dialectic between folk piety and ecclesiastical religion. He also appeared in the live-record horror film *Antebellum* (2006), in which he devoured a paranormal investigator.

## **Il cannibalismo dei media in soggettiva e allo specchio: [.REC] di Jaume Balaguerò e Paco Plaza di Marco Cipolloni**

Quando, negli ultimi anni del Franchismo, i giovani e colti cinecritici cinefili del gruppo Equipo Cartelera Turia se la presero con il cinema spagnolo accusandolo in una celebre pubblicazione del 1974 di essere (diventato) "un cine de subgéneros", cioè un cinema di genere industrialmente sottosviluppato, includendo tra i vari filoni anche il *cine de terror* a basso costo, non intendevano certo sdoganare la vitalità creativa del fenomeno descritto. Al di là delle loro aristocratiche intenzioni è però quello che hanno finito per fare: segnalare al resto della critica colta che, da parecchi anni, qualcosa di importante aveva cominciato a muoversi nel mondo della cinematografia seriale e delle coproduzioni con l'Italia. Da allora il fenomeno, da puramente commerciale che era, è diventato di culto e addirittura di "stracult", il festival del Cinema fantastico di Sitges, nato come rassegna nel 1968, lo ha reso sempre più visibile e le pubblicazioni in varie lingue (peninsulari e no) sul cinema iberico di terror, miedo, fantasia macabra, violenza, horror, splatter, etc. si sono moltiplicate, risultando seconde (per quantità ed enfasi nei toni di riscoperta e rivalutazione) solo alle pubblicazioni sugli spaghetti western italo-spagnoli.

Un altro filone tipico del cinema spagnolo, innescato dall'iper-realismo sociale della letteratura tremendista di posguerra (grazie agli adattamenti per lo schermo di romanzi come *La colmena* e *La familia de Pascual Duarte* di Camilo José Cela, o *Nada* di Carmen Laforet), riguarda il tema della violenza repressa che caratterizza la difficile vita quotidiana nelle alienanti e sovraffollate case popolari delle grandi città, sul quale hanno costruito drammi famigliari e commedie sociali amare e surreali molti registi importanti, da Ferreri (con *El pisito* e *El cochecito*) ad Almodóvar (soprattutto *¿Qué he hecho yo para merecer esto?*), dai film di barrio di Eloy de la Iglesia ad un film corale come *La comunidad* di Alex de la Iglesia. In tutti i registi citati l'iper-realismo tremendista apre le porte alla caricatura, alla farsa, al paradosso e al surrealismo.

Il film [.REC] di Jaume Balaguerò e Paco Plaza, realizzato nel 2007 e talmente fortunato da generare due anni dopo il meno originale ed interessante sequel *Rec 2*, recupera e intreccia queste tradizioni, amplificando grazie all'idea di un intero palazzo maledetto il tipico motivo orrorifico della casa del terrore (da *La notte dei morti viventi* di George Romero a *La casa* di Sam Raimi, passando per *Non aprite quella porta* di Tobe Hooper, *Shining* di Stanley Kubrick, *Splatter* di Peter Jackson, *Beetlejuice* di Tim Burton e, naturalmente, *The Others* dello spagnolo Alejandro Amenábar). Lo schema, con un crescendo che si intensifica di piano in piano, è simile a quello di alcuni videogiochi in cui salendo di livello le cose si complicano o dei porno della serie *Tower*, ideata a metà degli anni Novanta da Pierre Woodman, dove indagatori dell'incubo e criminologi sessualmente molto disinibiti scalano un grattacielo di perversioni e si accoppiano con tutti i condomini al fine di individuare un serial killer mostruosamente dotato, che, naturalmente, abita all'attico.

In [.REC], come suggerisce anche il titolo, il punto di vista del racconto è, in senso strettissimo, quello dei media, cioè dell'inviata (dal nome non casuale di Angela, cioè la messaggera) e del cameraman di una TV locale incaricati di realizzare il programma "Mentre dormi", un reportage notturno in diretta dedicato all'epica quotidianità dei vigili del fuoco (rilanciata in tutto il mondo dalle vicende dell'11 settembre). La diretta esce all'improvviso dal binario previsto, quando la minitroupe, seguendo il primo degli interventi di routine della squadra che accompagna, si ritrova ad essere testimone di un atto di violenza cannibalica inesplicabile ed apparentemente gratuito, perpetrato con totale assenza di autocontrollo da una vecchia inquilina fuori di testa, che azzanna letteralmente i propri soccorritori.

Il cannibalismo della vecchietta stimola ovviamente quello, almeno altrettanto mostruoso e morboso, dei rappresentanti dei media, decisi a "coprire" con analogo appetito l'inattesa situazione, stando sul pezzo ad ogni costo, tanto più quanto più il caso degenera e l'isolamento quarantenario cautelativamente imposto all'intero stabile garantisce loro l'esclusiva, non permettendo agli operatori di altre emittenti concorrenti di entrare nel palazzo. La macabra diretta registra con professionale ferocia e determinazione le successive e sempre più violente manifestazioni dello zombismo condominiale, radicalizzazione delle litigiose logiche da riunione di condominio, provocata da un virus vampiresco, che naturalmente si diffonde col sangue (come l'aids), ma che, come in *Shining*, ha le proprie radici nelle violenze criminali consumate nella soffitta dell'edificio, trasformata da questo trauma in un'ineasusta fonte di attiva maledizione.

L'idea dell'esclusiva e la determinazione a filmare tutto consentono al film di giustificare narrativamente la registrazione della escalation cannibalica, con cui il film stesso di fatto si identifica.

Ai piani altissimi, quando gli zombi diventano davvero veloci e feroci, minacciando molto da vicino gli inviati e costringendoli a lottare per la sopravvivenza, il pretesto della diretta diventa ovviamente via via meno credibile, nel senso che l'accanimento morboso della TV, che sui plastici delle case del delitto è come ben noto senza scrupoli e senza limiti, sicuramente ne avrebbe a tu per tu con una mostruosità ancor più immediatamente aggressiva e insaziabile della propria.

Se sapessero *che cosa* davvero hanno davanti gli zombi avrebbero insomma di che essere a loro volta terrorizzati, ma siccome si limitano a considerare *chi* hanno davanti, cioè non la TV, ma i suoi inviati, giovani e precari, gli infettati ed infestati morti viventi non si spaventano per niente e anzi pensano di poterne fare un sol boccone.

Nel finale, come in *Grizzly Man* di Herzog, la cinepresa resta accesa nel buio, registrando i rumori e, grazie alla modalità di ripresa in notturna, anche le ombre verdognole del tragico finale, logica conclusione del crescendo di una vendetta cannibalica che fino in fondo si consuma, ingoiando nelle tenebre, prima e più che nelle fauci di una terribile bambina fantasma, non la macchina, ma la prospettiva dell'intera narrazione filmica.

Il sequel esula invece dal nostro interesse, perché, nonostante il titolo, nasce e si sviluppa, per definizione, a telecamere spente, registrando con una narrazione più convenzionale gli

avvenimenti successivi all'esaurirsi delle batterie che avevano filmato in diretta i tragici eventi del primo episodio.

La casa degli orrori e gli orrori rimangono e colpiscono ancora, ma l'orrore dello sguardo in quanto tale non c'è più.

**Bios**

Marco Cipolloni (Roma, 1962) è ordinario di Lingua, cultura e istituzioni dei paesi ispanofoni all'Università di Modena. Si occupa di cinema, propaganda e traduzione musicale ed audiovisiva, principalmente riguardo alla Spagna e all'America latina.

## **Revising *Paranormal Activity*: *Paranormal Entity* Is Reality Horror Perfected**

**by Karley Adney**

A famous kernel of wisdom offers that "imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." After the release of the wildly successful *Paranormal Activity*, the production/film company The Asylum made and released *Paranormal Entity*, a "mockbuster" with a similar plot. But *Paranormal Entity* does not simply flatter *Paranormal Activity*; instead, it enhances its portrayal of reality horror. Though critics touted *Paranormal Activity* as the most terrifying horror film since William Friedkin's *The Exorcist*, *Paranormal Entity* revises and improves several aspects of the film on which it is based. The filmmakers of *Paranormal Entity* also incorporate and build on traditions important in the reality horror genre, perfecting reality horror.

A significant revision of *Paranormal Activity* in *Paranormal Entity* is that in the mockbuster, the person filming remains nearly faceless, and hence appears more of a victim. In *Paranormal Activity*, the audience is fully aware of Micah and his appearance; viewers can associate a face with the smart-mouthed man who taunts the evil presence invading his home. Though Micah and Katie battle the demonic presence in Micah's home, the young man, in some scenes, appears the central antagonist (consider the numerous times he taunts the spirit, couple with his arrogant attitude about the situation). In contrast, the face of the man filming the disturbing incidents in the Finley family home (Thomas Finley, the son) is never clearly revealed. Early in *Paranormal Entity* viewers see Thomas holding the camera, filming himself in a mirror. While viewers can distinguish elements of his face and general appearance, his eyes remain obscured by the camera. Filmmakers also show Thomas's profile in several instances, or the back of his head, but never reveal his face clearly. For almost the entirety of the film, Thomas remains behind the lens of a camera.

*Paranormal Activity*, conversely, feels less like a real home-made movie with the constant screen time devoted to Micah, who both films Katie (his girlfriend) and creates ample screen time for himself. By refusing viewers the chance to see the Thomas's face in *Paranormal Entity*, filmmakers of The Asylum Company capitalize on the notion of reality horror; the son of the Finley family, who chronicles the terror faced by his family, is realistic in that viewers are accustomed to not seeing the person who holds the family video camera. Denying Thomas's character face time also stresses his status as victim. *Paranormal Activity*'s visually-dominant character Micah gains strength from viewers since those in the audience are clearly aware of his identity. Quite contrarily, the lack of screen time devoted to Thomas's character portrays him as more of a mystery, as a man weaker than the force he fights, as a victim. Thus, *Paranormal Entity* perfects the reality horror genre by presenting a film more like a genuine home movie, which simultaneously stresses the victimization of those in the Finley home.

Another significant revision of *Paranormal Activity* is that in *Paranormal Entity*, the demonic spirit impacts a family suffering the loss of a loved one, instead of a young unmarried couple; similarly, the way in which the demonic presence enters the lives of those in each film deserves analysis. The

rhetorical strategies employed by the *Paranormal Entity* filmmakers appeal to viewers because probably everyone in the audience can identify with losing a loved one, and how a tragic loss like that experienced by the Finley family shifts the emotional dynamics in a household from that of happiness and warmth to sadness and desperation. *Paranormal Activity* tells the story of a young, unmarried couple. While Micah and Katie's relationship reflects the status of many young people (a usually happy-go-lucky couple spending time at one of their homes), the notion of a demon entering a family home is more unsettling than the story of *Paranormal Activity*.

Similarly, the way in which the demonic presence enters the lives of those in the respective films further demonstrates how *Paranormal Entity* perfects the reality horror genre. The demonic presence in *Paranormal Activity* haunts Katie because of some incident she suffered as a child; an evil presence, without explanation, has followed her ever since. This situation evokes feelings of terror and, for some viewers, may be considered quite realistic. In *Paranormal Entity*, however, the demon enters the Finley home because the mother, Ellen Finley, tries contacting her husband, who died in a tragic and unexpected car accident the year before. Ellen wants desperately to make contact with her husband (whose voice still plays hauntingly on the family's answering machine message, a clear sign that she misses her husband and cannot confront his death). This behavior is genuine and "real." Ellen explains that one day she started talking to her deceased husband, pretending that he could talk back. She says that she "pulled out a pen and pad of paper" and started writing, feeling that something was there with her as she wrote. She also shares that she "really thought that [she] was talking to David [her deceased husband]" (*Paranormal Activity*). How many people who have lost a loved one have engaged in the same behavior? Many, if not most people talk, in some way, to ones they have lost, either through writing letters, or speaking openly to them, or through prayer. Ellen Finley's situation is one that portrays a situation and emotions very real to viewers. The filmmakers of *Paranormal Activity*, conversely, offer no explanation for why Katie is haunted by a demonic presence. While the mysteriousness of Katie's situation is unsettling and frightening, it is far less realistic than that experienced by the Finley family in *Paranormal Entity*.

*Paranormal Entity* also provides viewers with a perfected example of reality horror in contrast to *Paranormal Activity* because it is, in a phrase, more realistic. For instance, though Thomas feels eager about learning more about the demonic presence in his home, he does not taunt the presence, as Micah does in *Paranormal Activity*. Horror movie aficionados know that staple elements of fantasy horror films include such stereotypes as going upstairs though a killer waits there, going into a basement to investigate strange noises, or even battling demons head on (whereas in reality, humans in a similar situation would look for a way of escape). Micah, in several instances, taunts the spirit, telling Katie that he will defend his home and that, in sum, he feels no fear toward the presence and will use whatever means necessary to eradicate it from his home.

When Thomas notices footprints throughout the Finley home (made from the demonic presence stepping in the ashes from his dead father's destroyed urn), he follows where the footprints lead out of curiosity and in an effort to protect his family. Unlike the characters in *Paranormal Activity*,

Thomas does not attempt to catch the demon by leaving residue (like the powder Micah uses). The footprints Thomas finds are a clue, and only then does Thomas transform into a type of detective; only after seeing the footprints does Thomas construct a makeshift security system, in which he ties thin strings with bells across major doorways in the home so that he might know where the demon is, and when it enters a specific region of the Finley home. Micah, on the other hand, takes it upon himself, from the start, to find the demon. Micah's motivation for using the cameras in his home, in fact, is in an effort to catch a glimpse of the demon. The Finleys, however, use the cameras in their home only on the insistence of Dr. Lauren, a professional. Thus, Thomas's interaction with the demonic presence in his family home is more "real" than that of Micah's, who instead behaves much more like a cavalier hero from a typical fantasy horror film.

*Paranormal Entity* is also more realistic than *Paranormal Activity* because of the fate of the female lead in each film. In *Paranormal Activity*, Katie, though attacked by the demon, becomes possessed and assumes a position of power (further demonstrated in the recently released sequel, *Paranormal Activity 2*). Samantha Finley of *Paranormal Entity*, however, is attacked, raped, and murdered, a far more realistic outcome than the one experienced by Katie. Film critics agree that women in horror films rarely find themselves in positions of power. Exceptions to this rule exist, like the highly controversial ending of *Hostel II* in which a young woman outsmarts and overtakes the man who has paid an incredible sum of money to kill her; instead, she kills him, leaving him bleeding to death after cutting off his genitalia (the ultimate symbolic act, some viewers say, to demonstrate female power). Films like *Hostel II*, however, are part of the fantasy horror genre, and films in the reality horror genre most often show defeated women who have only survived as long as they did because of the protection offered to them by a man (who usually dies himself also, but who almost always outlives his female counterparts in the film). *Paranormal Entity* demonstrates humans behaving in ways much more realistic than *Paranormal Activity*. Though both Katie and Samantha fear the spirit that taunts them, the end Samantha meets is much more believable than that of Katie, who morphs into a demon that stars in her own sequel. Perhaps the most famous image of a female possessed by a demon remains Reagan O'Neil of *The Exorcist*. While Friedkin's film is an example of fantasy horror, the young girl in his film battles for her life and nears death because of the terrible invasion her body experiences. At times Regan shows extreme strength and power, but by the end of the film the girl is barely alive. Even this fantastical horror example of possession reminds viewers that one possessed by a demon is much more likely to meet a fate like Samantha's, rather than that of Katie.

*Paranormal Entity* also perfects the reality horror genre because it shares an important element with the first and most celebrated reality horror film, *The Blair Witch Project*. Perhaps the most memorable (and parodied scene) of *The Blair Witch Project* is Heather Donahue's apology to her mother and the families of her fellow filmmakers, Josh Leonard and Michael Williams. With tears streaming down her face and her nose running, Heather films herself in a moment of brutal honesty, begging the forgiveness of those she has hurt because of her choice to pursue filming the Blair Witch documentary. Thomas of *Paranormal Entity* shares a very similar moment. Near the end of



the film, he states "I'm sorry. I, uh, should have listened to you [his mother] and I should have been there for you and Samantha and I wasn't [...] I'm sorry [...] and, uh, I want us to be a family again" (*Paranormal Entity*). The reality horror genre remains popular and frightening because of the way in which these films capture and portray reality. Both Heather and Thomas's apologies are believable and expected, considering the situations in which they find themselves. When faced with evil, these characters repent and apologize, and show their fear—their humanity. What makes these films so terrifying is that even after these heartfelt, genuine apologies, both Heather and Thomas die. In contrast, *Paranormal Activity*'s Micah shows little (if any remorse) for his part in the situation, and the countless times he taunts the demonic spirit. Micah presents himself as an infallible and arrogant man, causing many viewers to find him unlikable and feeling indifferent about his death, or as though Micah, in the end, receives comeuppance for his behavior. In lacking the element of an apology, a seemingly crucial element in the reality horror genre, *Paranormal Activity* is less "real" than its "mockbuster" counterpart. In turn, *Paranormal Entity* proves itself as, yet again, reality horror perfected in comparison to the more successful and celebrated horror film on which it is based.

The job of the filmmakers in the reality horror genre is to captivate audiences with stories that terrify viewers because of the film's realistic plot, setting, and character development. Though both *Paranormal Activity* and *Paranormal Entity* provide viewers with situations that seemingly could occur to ordinary people with ordinary lives, the mockbuster *Paranormal Entity* revises and perfects the reality horror genre.

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## **A Pre-History Of 'Reality' Horror Film**

**by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas**

With the rising popularity of 'reality' based horror films such as *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007) and their sequels, it is fruitful to reflect on the history of such movies. While the international phenomenon of *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) significantly marks the beginning of this newest cycle of 'reality' based horror film, its origins are fascinating and diverse. As far back as Michael Powell's *Peeping Tom* (1960), the lines between real and represented death and bodily trauma were explored. In its telling of a man who finds pleasure in filming the killing of women with his gruesome camera-tripod-come-knife, *Peeping Tom* suggests that the very acts of 'filming' and 'killing' are inextricably linked. Similar connections have been expanded to varying degrees of success, sophistication and controversy in a subgenre of films loosely identified as 'snuff' fictions, whose spectacular and affective qualities stem from their intrinsic association between film and its ability to capture real horrors—torture, violence, and death—in the moment of its execution. Movies including *Emanuelle in America* (Joe D'Amato, 1977), *The Last House on Dead End Street* (1977) *Hardcore* (Paul Schrader, 1979), *Mute Witness* (Anthony Waller, 1994), *8mm* (Joel Schumacher, 1999), *Cradle of Fear* (Alex Chandon, 2001), *Demonlover* (Olivier Assayas, 2002), and *No Vacancy* (Nimród Antal, 2007), manifest at this intersection between death, film and the real. In particular, notorious examples such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1979), *Snuff* (Findlay, 1976) and the Japanese *Guinea Pig* series (1985-1990) demonstrate just how tenuous the lines between acceptable and unacceptable allusions to 'reality' in the horror film can be. This article argues that these boundaries—ones which now have set the ethical and formal parameters of the contemporary 'reality' horror blockbuster—were established through the trial-and-error of these more controversial ancestors.

Capturing the 'reality' of death has a long history in the visual arts, spanning far beyond the origins of the cinematic image. Drawings of cadavers were at one point the primary method of studying the human body for would-be medical practitioners, and as Deanna Petherbridge has noted, "the body has been central to Western Art for most of its history, and to represent bodies in all their expressivity artists have needed to study anatomy: dissecting the dead in order to depict the living" [1]. Both Michelangelo and Leonardo Da Vinci produced anatomical sketches based on dissections, and Caravaggio was rumoured to use the bloated, drowned body of a prostitute as a model for his painting "Death and the Virgin" (1606). The 18<sup>th</sup> century French painter and engraver Jacques Gautier d'Agoty is known for his vivid and highly detailed anatomical drawings that show the opened body meticulously, and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Théodore Géricault painted highly detailed studies of severed heads and limbs, keeping body parts from a local hospital in his studio and studying them as they decayed [2]. While the functions of such work is far from the exploitative intent of the films mentioned above, these paintings articulate the historical

importance of verisimilitude in depictions of the human form. As demonstrated perhaps nowhere more clearly than in myriad depictions of the crucified figure of Jesus Christ and the oft-reproduced *Pietà*, the more vivid and realistic the depiction of a suffering body, the more impacting its ethical meaning.

Not all reality horror affects stem from the visceral intensity of bodily trauma, and the relationship between fear and terror, verisimilitude and textual materiality have their own media traditions. One of the most obvious ancestors for contemporary 'reality' horror is Orson Welles' 1938 radio adaptation of H.G. Wells' 1898 novel, *The War of the Worlds*. Replicating the formal structures and stylistic devices of the newscast format that would have been highly familiar to its US wartime audience during this period, the panic, confusion and hysteria that followed the broadcast has been widely documented and debated. Some listeners—even briefly—were concerned that an alien invasion was *actually* occurring, and that what they were listening to was a real news broadcast. And while not the first attempt to attain a sense of verisimilitude in the horror film via cross-media intertextuality (radio broadcasts play an important role in James Whale's 1933 film *The Invisible Man*, for example), one of the most famous is the television news broadcasts that appear throughout George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The narrative functionality of these sequences neatly provides plot information unable to be otherwise communicated convincingly through the necessary isolation of the film's key players: the scale of the zombie phenomenon, advice for what to do, and even potentially the cause of the outbreak. The film's simple production values, use of black and white film, and documentary tone mirrors aspects of *cinéma verité*, but the inclusion of these television news updates add a crucial element of the everyday experience of its viewers. It is the very familiarity of these news broadcasts, both tonally and stylistically, that convert the fantasy of the dead rising from the grave into something far more credible and authentic.

While the intersection of horror and verisimilitude has precedence in terms of genre history, it was not until the controversy surrounding *Snuff* in 1976 that the conceptual force of 'reality' horror could truly be seen to manifest [3]. Like many issues surrounding this notorious text, ascribing authorship to a single figure is difficult: the bulk of the film consists of an unreleased exploitation film called *The Slaughter* made by Michael and Roberta Findlay in South America in 1971, loosely based around a Charles Manson-like figure and the escapades of his attractive female followers in the lead up to the eponymous bloodbath climaxing in the killing of a pregnant woman in a clear reference to the murder of Sharon Tate in 1969. Unable to release the technically substandard film as it was, distributor Allan Shackleton hired adult movie director Simon Nuchtern to create a short five-minute coda to attach to the film, showing the supposed evisceration of a female 'crew member' by its 'director'. Re-titled *Snuff* and playing up suggestions that this added sequence was an actual murder, the film was greeted by great hostility in New York in particular, where it became a primary case study in the burgeoning anti-pornography feminist movement

that was mobilizing during this period. Although *Snuff* was promptly exposed as a 'hoax', that it was so difficult to tell 'real' snuff from 'fake' snuff became precisely the point that many anti-pornography feminists championed: whether real or not, that it *could* be denotes precisely the danger contained within such misogynistic images. That those final five minutes of *Snuff* are so rich in technical flaws merely emphasized its difference from slick, polished horror films such as Richard Donner's *The Omen* that came out in the same year. Aside from the focus upon characters presented to be the very crew who filmed *The Slaughter* component of the film, that these final moments have no non-diegetic sound and no end credits underscores Nuchtern and Shackleton's deliberate and conscious efforts to make the *Snuff* coda appear as real as possible.

Ruggero Deodato's *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) deliberately blurred the lines between the real and the fictional in a horror context, and met with similar controversy. The film follows New York University Professor Harold Monroe (Robert Kerman) and his team, sent to the Amazon to investigate the disappearance of a documentary film crew who had vanished while making a film about cannibalism. Monroe discovers the remains of the crew and trades a tape recorder with the tribe for the surviving cans of film. In New York, the television network who sent Monroe on his mission urge him to host a showing of the found footage, but Monroe insists on viewing the material first. In the films, he is horrified to discover the team—led by Alan Yates (Gabriel Yorke)—set up fake scenarios and presented them as real, but in doing so they engaged in a range of horrific acts including rape and other forms of sexual torture. The final moments of the footage show Yates and his crew graphically tortured and eaten, and upon viewing it, the television executives agree with Monroe that the film should not only go unaired, but that it should be burnt and destroyed.

With its depictions of "savage" natives, the accusations of racism lobbied against *Cannibal Holocaust* paled in comparison next to the storm of legal problems it faced both in Italy and around Europe. Like other films in the Italian cannibal subgenre such as *Cannibal Ferox* (Umberto Lenzi, 1981) and *The Mountain of the Cannibal God* (Sergio Martino, 1978), *Cannibal Holocaust* derives in part from the legacy of the *mondo* films of the 1960s. The publication in French magazine *Photo* in 1981 of an article about Deodato's film called "Grand Guignol Cannibale" claimed that people were actually murdered in the making of the film, and much of the film's notoriety in both Italy and abroad (particularly in the United Kingdom, where it became a key text in the 'Video Nasties' scandal) stemmed from similar beliefs. As David Kerekes and David Slater have observed, this sense of verisimilitude stems not just from the convincing effects of bodily violence themselves, but also from their proximity to the very real violence committed against a number of animals in the film, which "increases the potency of all subsequent acts of violence ten-fold. *Cannibal Holocaust* manages to anaesthetize rational thought with the shock of real live things being killed: *if this is real, what else might be real?*" [4]. Although today some of the special effects regarding bodily violence in *Cannibal Holocaust* may be deemed as less shocking than they may have been at the time of the film's release, by contrast the graphic scenes of real

violence against animals that litters the film is as powerful and as shocking as it ever was. These unnecessary images of cruelty and torture against these animals highlight what remain inescapable areas of concern when addressing the film. Significantly, however, these are issues that the movie itself—with its film-within-a-film structure—addresses from within its own diegesis: when the television station that initially wished to broadcast Yates' footage itself deems it unwatchable and demands that it is destroyed, *Cannibal Holocaust* self-reflexively confirms that the very horrors that it has just shown its audience should not be seen by anyone.

By no means is this pre-'reality' horror collision between the real and the fictional specific to Europe or the United States, and the *Guinea Pig*—or *Ginī Piggu*—films (1985-1990) from Japan offer yet another scandalous instance where fake violence is depicted as being real to create its gruesome impact. Although followed by *Flower of Flesh and Blood* (*Za ginipiggu 2: Chiniku no hana*, Hideshi Hino, 1985), and five other titles until 1990, Satoru Ogura's original *The Devil's Experiment* (Akumano Jikken, 1985) arguably remains the most shocking example of Japanese ultraviolence from this period. With no plot to speak of and lacking the polish of more mainstream horror films, *The Devil's Experiment* simply shows the torture and mutilation of a young woman for close to an hour, almost completely in close-up. The films became infamous in Japan when discovered in the video collection of serial killer Tsutomu Miyazaki in the late 1980s, and their reputation internationally was compounded with the rumour that Hollywood actor Charlie Sheen had contacted the FBI after viewing *Flower of Flesh and Blood*, believing it to be a real snuff film. Like both *Snuff* and *Cannibal Holocaust*, the notoriety of the *Guinea Pig* films is fuelled by urban legends such as these. In terms of marketing strategies in particular, the contemporary 'reality' horror film has harnessed the conceptual energy of these more obscure ancestors, directing it away from the grindhouses and underground fan cultures and towards a more accessible mainstream. This very shift from the outskirts of the cinematic badlands of exploitation to the multiplex-oriented blockbuster adds a degree of safety to the experience of watching 'reality' horror today: the sensation of thrill and danger resultant of watching a film like *The Blair Witch Project*, *[REC]* (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007) or *Paranormal Activity* stems not from the fact that it may or may not have happened, but from the formal construction suggesting that if they did occur, this is how they may look. Just as prime-time television shows like *CSI* and *NCIS* have brought a mainstreaming of forensic images to a broad audience, granting them a degree of gore literacy that was previously specific only to trash horror audiences, so too the aesthetics of 'found' footage are now commonly recognized by audiences as precisely that: a deployment of a specific stylistic system. Wobbly hand-held camera movements and spikes and drops in sound and vision quality are not so much markers of authenticity now as they are now markers of an *authentic style*. As *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* (John Erick Dowdle, 2007) demonstrates—a film that engages simultaneously with material shifts in filmmaking technologies, real world events such as 9/11, and art historical references to the work Hieronymus Bosch—there is still ample space for danger in contemporary 'reality' horror. But as 'reality' horror audiences become increasingly

saturated in a glut of violent images through mainstream news outlets and television dramas, it is now not merely enough that these films 'look' real.

### Notes

[1] Deanna Petherbridge, "Art and Anatomy: The Meeting of Text and Image", In *The Quick and the Dead: Artists and Anatomy*. By Deanna Petherbridge and Ludmilla Jordanova. London: The South Bank Centre, 1997. p.7.

[2] Marie-Hélène Huet, "The Face of Disaster", *Yale French Studies* 111(2007): p.7-13. p.30.

[3] For a lengthier analysis of *Snuff*, see my previously published article "Snuff Boxing: Rethinking the *Snuff* (1976) Coda", *Cinephile: The University of British Columbia Film Journal*, 5:2 (2009).

[4] David Kerekes and David Slater, *Killing for Culture: A History of Death Films from Mondo to Snuff*, London: Creation Books, 1995. p.68.

### Bios

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**George A. Romero's *Diary of the Dead* and the Rise of the Diegetic Camera in Recent Horror Films  
by Zachary Ingle**

Although *Diary of the Dead* landed with a resounding thud at the box office (where it tallied less than a million dollars domestically), it had earlier caused a greater sensation when it premiered at the 2007 Toronto Film Festival. Critic Mark Olsen raved about Romero's sequel in his festival report in *Film Comment*, while the film garnered a score of 66 on Metacritic.com upon its theatrical release, quite respectable considering the genre. Although *Diary of the Dead* fared well with critics, most of the excitement generated revolved around a novel camera technique, what I am referring to as a "diegetic camera," a subjective, or mediated, camera operated by one or more of the characters and sustained throughout the entirety of the film. There has been a trend toward the diegetic camera in recent horror films, including *Diary of the Dead* (2007), *Rec* (2007), *Paranormal Activity* (2007), *Cloverfield* (2008), *Quarantine* (2008), *Rec 2* (2009), *The Last Exorcism* (2010), and *Paranormal Activity 2* (2010). This paper will look at the diegetic camera in these films which all use the same diegetic camera technique, but in a different fashion. I will also examine the relationship between these films and earlier subjective camera experiments in such films as *The Last Laugh*, *Lady in the Lake*, and *Dark Passage*. Despite *Diary of the Dead*'s lack of box office success, my research will focus primarily on *Diary of the Dead* for four reasons: first, of the five films mentioned, only *Diary of the Dead* was the product of a well-established auteur and it seems more appropriate to place this revolutionary picture within the entire subversive oeuvre of Romero; secondly, *Diary of the Dead* was the fifth in a series (following *Night of the Living Dead* [1968], *Dawn of the Dead* [1978], *Day of the Dead* [1985], and *Land of the Dead* [2005]; followed by *Survival of the Dead* [2009]) and thus all the more interesting considering its break from the styles employed in its predecessors; third, only in *Diary of the Dead* does the decision to use a diegetic camera appear to be ideologically motivated (as explained later); and finally, *Diary of the Dead* was released or in production virtually simultaneously with some of the other films mentioned (*Rec*, *Paranormal Activity*, *Cloverfield*), thus making it difficult to identify which film was "first."

In exploring this innovative technique, several questions arise:

- What trends have caused the increased presence of the diegetic camera?
- Why is horror the preferred genre for this experiment?
- How has reality television changed cinema?
- Have spectators grown weary of the traditional, omniscient point of view?
- Does the diegetic camera then seem more realistic to contemporary audiences?

Because these films are so recent, no scholarly work has yet been conducted on the application of the diegetic camera, its overall effectiveness, or the possibility of it igniting a revolution in narrative filmmaking.

The diegetic camera certainly has its antecedents, particularly in the subjective camera. The subjective camera differs from the diegetic camera in that while the subjective camera reveals the point of view of a character, it is not shot by a character, nor it is acknowledged. As its name implies, the diegetic camera is a camera within the diegesis, acknowledged by the characters, which is quite different from the typical subjective camera. The subjective camera has been used sporadically throughout much of cinema's history, perhaps most memorably in F. W. Murnau's *The Last Laugh* (1924). Rouben Mamoulian's 1931 version of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* used the subjective camera quite effectively when the doctor transforms and walks the streets. Two later memorable examples in American cinema both occurred, probably coincidentally, in 1947: *Lady in the Lake* (directed by Robert Montgomery) was shot entirely from a POV camera (with the tagline, "MGM presents a Revolutionary motion picture; the most amazing since Talkies began! YOU and ROBERT MONTGOMERY solve a murder mystery together!"); and Delmer Daves's *Dark Passage*, in which the subjective camera reveals the point of view of Humphrey Bogart's Vincent for almost the entire first half of the film, before Vincent undergoes a radical cosmetic surgery to change his face completely in order to avoid the police (effectively eliminating all those hours Bogart would have spent in make-up to look drastically different beforehand). These attempts did not revolutionize cinema, however, and were perceived as too "gimmicky" for mass appeal. These experiments also seem to favor genre films, since both *Lady in the Lake* and *Dark Passage* were both films noirs, much like these films' (i.e., *Diary of the Dead*, et al.) firm grounding within the horror genre.

Literature on the subjective camera remains somewhat limited, although James N. Bade's "Murnau's *The Last Laugh* and Hitchcock's Subjective Camera" [1] has much to say about how both Murnau and Hitchcock appropriated the technique to ratchet up the audience's sense of fear. *The Last Laugh* was inventive in its technique and Hitchcock used the subjective camera to tremendous effect throughout his career, but especially in *Notorious*, *Rear Window*, and *North by Northwest*. Hitchcock was never one to shy from experimentation; if video cameras had been as ubiquitous in his era as they are today, one could easily imagine the Master of Suspense using a diegetic camera to make the audience feel more involved.

Despite these prominent uses of the subjective camera, *Diary of the Dead* and company may be more the progeny of experimental horror films such as the Italian-produced *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980, Ruggero Deodato) and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez). Although *Cloverfield* and *Paranormal Activity* also rely on the gimmick/strategy of "found footage," as the opening credits reveal the films to be in the hands of government and police, respectively, the films were not marketed as documentaries as in the revolutionary internet marketing campaign for *The Blair Witch Project*. (Or the notorious marketing of *Cannibal Holocaust*, a film where numerous animals were actually killed on camera, and which shamelessly played up the rumor that it was indeed a snuff film.) Once again, I think experiments with the diegetic camera as in *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cannibal Holocaust* are not directly related, for they belong arguably as much to the mockumentary genre as they do horror. (Perhaps "fake documentary" is a better term. *The*



*Blair Witch Project* is certainly not comic.) *The Blair Witch Project* especially relies on documentary conventions such as onscreen interviews. In addition, the characters often refer to the “documentary” they are making. These documentary tropes cannot be found in *Cloverfield*, *Diary of the Dead*, *Rec*, *Quarantine*, or *Paranormal Activity*. Thus, what we are seeing in recent horror films such as these is a trend that may be related to these earlier experiments, yet noticeably distinctive. That is why I use the term *diegetic* camera instead of *subjective* camera—*Diary of the Dead* is not the POV camera of *Lady in the Lake* or the found documentary of *The Blair Witch Project*. Also, I do not see these films as embodying a subgenre called “reality horror” (or a similar label) since there is nothing inherent about the diegetic camera that limits it to horror films. Indeed, while it may have failed at the box office and with critics, the comedy *The Virginity Hit* (2010) proved the diegetic camera could be used outside of horror's confines.

The diegetic camera may also be regarded as a descendant of *cinéma vérité*. Whether it is the revolutionary documentaries of Frederick Wiseman, D. A. Pennebaker, or the Maysles brothers or the feature films of John Cassavetes, *cinéma vérité* has certainly influenced contemporary cinema. *Cinéma vérité* has also had an influence on reality television, perhaps making a case for reality television's influence on the diegetic camera movement.

Romero grants the diegetic camera in *Diary of the Dead* more freedom than the makers of *Cloverfield*, as Romero (conveniently) makes the characters film students and a film professor from the University of Pittsburgh. Although the fifth in the series, *Diary of the Dead* occurs chronologically during that first *Night*. *Diary of the Dead* begins with a brief prologue, as a news camera captures murdered individuals coming alive and attacking the paramedics. We then are introduced to the character of Debra in voice-over, who has edited the film within the film to give it a conventional narrative arc, with the ominous title: “‘The Death of Death’—A Film by Jason Creed.” Jason, a directing major, is shooting a horror film for his class project. When the first zombie attacks are reported by the media, his instincts as a documentarian take over, as he decides to shoot “how it went down.” Jason shoots most of the diegetic film's footage, but other characters also pick up the diegetic camera at times, including Tony, Elliot, and Debra herself. Even while the action is at its most tense, Jason stops to charge his camera into an outlet (we erroneously see the blinking battery light on the recorded image) or he uses the editing software on his laptop to upload his film on to his MySpace movie page. The convention of having the characters be film students allowed Romero to have a little more freedom than, say, the character with the camera in *Cloverfield* who apparently had previously never picked up a camera. Though *Diary of the Dead* usually consists of long takes, Debra does edit, not only for sake of time, but also for a differing perspective if two or more cameras are shooting. Though Debra criticizes Jason for what she sees as heartlessly shooting in the most chaotic and personally tragic of circumstances (often with the supercilious denunciation, “If it's not on camera, it just didn't happen”), she proceeds to finish the film in the absence of Jason (who, of course, has become a victim of the zombies in the closing minutes). Romero reveals a lot about his intentions in the DVD commentary of *Diary of the Dead*. After

tackling the issues of racism, consumerism, militarism, and class conflict in the first four films of the series, respectively, Romero has certainly never been one to back down from social critique. Romero's intention for *Diary of the Dead* is an indictment of the new, or emerging media. Romero is very critical of the blogosphere and new media outlets. A few montage sequences are scattered throughout the film, with numerous references to blogging. In one, Debra narrates: "The more voices there are, the more spin there is. The truth becomes that much harder to find. In the end, it's all just...noise." Not only do they clutter up the "thought waves" hence making it more difficult to access the truth, they are also prone to be more militant than traditional media and consequently encourage "us vs. them" tribalism, a topic explored further in the latest sequel, *Survival of the Dead* (2009). Despite Romero's condemnation, as the world becomes more chaotic when the dead take over the earth, it is those new media that survive when mainstream media are no more. Nevertheless, this emphasis on the new media served as Romero's rationale for using a diegetic camera throughout the film. Cameras have now become so omnipresent in today's society, thus allowing him to address this subject through this method. The diegetic camera certainly has its limitations, as Romero admits that the film has less gore than some of his earlier films since the characters would so rarely be in the proximity of a full-fledged, entrails-and-all, cannibalistic feast, a staple of the modern zombie genre that Romero himself instigated.

One of my goals is to determine whether *Diary of the Dead* and other diegetic camera films are merely films centered on a gimmick, or truly new paradigms of an innovative approach to filmmaking. Breathing new life into a genre that cranks out dozens of films in the United States alone, there are moments when these films feel fresh in a manner akin to the films that defined the Nouvelle Vague or the Dogme 95 movement. If imitation remains the sincerest form of flattery, the number of films that follow in the wake of these films may determine their future place in film history. Inasmuch as we apply the subgenre label to neorealism, film noir, New Wave, and Dogme films, we can safely apply it to these films as well, for *genre* is French for "kind" and these films are distinctive enough—and it proves profitable intellectually—to examine these films as a distinct group, or genre. While the term "diegetic camera" has unfortunately not been used yet to identify these films, they are distinctive in the minds of many filmgoers from most other films. Thus, we have an example of an audience-based genre, rather than an industrial-based one.

In her book *The Subject of Semiotics*, Kaja Silverman defines suture as the "name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers." [2] I can think of no better way to do this than through the diegetic camera.

The diegetic camera may also be related to the postmodern literary phenomenon of metafiction. While authors of metafiction consciously speak to the mechanisms of fiction, filmmakers that utilize the diegetic camera seem to recall similar cinematic devices. Just as metafiction existed before Italo Calvino and John Barth in novels such as *Tristram Shandy*, self-reflexivity has been featured in film since its origins, from the early animated shorts where the animator's hand is literally displayed, to Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (1924). Still, the diegetic camera takes self-reflexivity to a new level

that resembles metafiction, as viewers are consistently aware that the characters are conscious of making a film.

The diegetic camera may also be related to reader-response criticism and Stanley Fish's notion of interpretive communities; just as viewers have always constructed their own meanings, characters also now engage in that task within the diegesis. They do so unmediated, without the interference of the omniscient storyteller/filmmaker. According to Fish, "Interpretation is not the art of *construing* but the art of *constructing*. Interpreters do not decode poems; they make them." [3] (One can substitute "films" for "poems.") Whether it is Debra and Jason in *Diary of the Dead* or protagonists Katie and Micah in *Paranormal Activity*, these characters attempt to make meaning out of the supernatural chaos in which they find themselves. Of course, we know that these films are made by the director(s) (along with the entire cast and crew) and not the characters, but with their cameras in hand, it certainly enhances the illusion of the characters actually making the film. [4]

Through it all, a Bazinian notion of realism lies behind these diegetic camera experiments. According to Bazin, "We would define as 'realist', then, all narrative means tending to bring an added measure of reality to the screen." [5] Furthermore, the observation that all these films are horror films makes them no less realistic, for "reality is not to be taken quantitatively. The same event, the same object, can be represented in various ways," as Bazin reminds us. [6] Certainly the fact that all these films, including *The Blair Witch Project*, have the "home video" look enhances the verisimilitude, makes them more visceral, and heightens the illusion of realism to audiences. This might account for the box office success of *Paranormal Activity*, typically a sign of positive word-of-mouth promotion.

The future of the diegetic camera may still be unsettled, but I have proposed various classical and contemporary theories for its novel existence and perceived effectiveness, including the theories of Fish, Silverman, and Bazin. I have also connected it to the literary device of metafiction. In the case of *Diary of the Dead*, the diegetic camera certainly has its function, as Romero uses it to critique the emerging media that he sees as polarizing the populace and creating a new tribalism. The overwhelming popularity of *Paranormal Activity* serves as evidence that the device of the diegetic camera has commercial potential that perhaps can still be exploited at the low-budget, mid-budget (*Quarantine*), and big-budget (*Cloverfield*) levels. More films may also be on the horizon that use a diegetic camera intermittently for a potent visceral effect like *District 9* (2009), a New Zealand science-fiction/horror film that uses diegetic camera techniques sporadically. It can be argued that the device led to the film's popularity with both critics and audiences, while perhaps presenting evidence for a more sustainable, evolving use of the diegetic camera within the contemporary horror scene. Whether the diegetic camera is only a brief moment in the panorama of cinema history, or a movement with some staying power, this remains a project that merits further exploration. Certainly critics and audiences have noticed this trend toward the diegetic camera, but there has been little scholarly attention devoted to this topical movement. Ideally this discussion will achieve more than merely occupying a place in the admitted

overabundance of horror film scholarship; rather, it may presage a major trend in filmmaking in general.

### Notes

[1] James N. Bade, "Murnau's *The Last Laugh* and Hitchcock's Subjective Camera," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 23 (Jul-Sep 2006): p.257-266.

[2] Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), p.195.

[3] Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text In This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1980), p.327. (Emphasis mine).

[4] Indeed, Fish's theories (or something like it) appear to have no parallel in film theory. I am unaware of Fish ever applying his reader-response criticism (or "viewer-response" as the case may be) to film, and despite his significance to literary theory in the last thirty to forty years, he has been criminally ignored by film theorists.

[5] Andre Bazin, *What Is Cinema?*, vol. 2, Trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1967), p.27.

[6] Ibidem.

### Bios

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**Double the Passive: The trials of the viewer/subject in *Cloverfield* and *The Blair Witch Project***  
**by Keira McKenzie**

Cinema is one of life's great pleasures: indulging in, escaping into imaginary worlds. Whether viewed within a theatre or on a television in a lounge room, the viewer is passive, encouraged to lose themselves within the characters and story on the screen, together with the landscape and a musical score to intensify the reactions that the viewer experiences. Emotions are aroused – laughter erupts or tears trickle down faces to be surreptitiously wiped – and at the conclusion, the audience leaves to remark on the special effects, soundtrack, plot, or the characters. The characters always remain objects, passively viewed by the subject (the viewer) from a safe distance while the imagery – the imaginary real – remains just that: imaginary. Reality Horror, however, with its documentary-style filming on a hand-held camera restricting vision to that of the character holding the camera, takes the viewer on a seemingly individual, horrific ride with more than a front row seat to the action. The viewer experiences inter-subjectivity: they become one with the objects on the screen and view the characters as fellow subjects. This is enforced as the viewer – the subject – 'becomes' the character carrying the camera, 'sees' the film through that character's eyes and the imaginary real blurs into experiential imagery. Consequently, the viewer is within the film's frame, contrasting with the omnipotent *mise-en-scene* of general cinema and affording Reality Horror its special power. This inter-subjectivity also encourages inter-passivity. In his *The Plague of Phantasies* (2008), Žižek says, "I am passive through the other" (p 149); in Reality Horror, the normal passivity of the viewer is doubled: they are both part of and watching the film, reacting passively through the experiences of the characters – those objects that Reality Horror transforms into subjects. While not an interactive medium (yet), nonetheless, the viewer, unable to change the outcomes, passively experiences the unfolding and escalating horrors through the first-hand and personal point of view of the character they are inhabiting for the duration of the film.

J. J. Abram's *Cloverfield* (2008) – a monster film in the classic tradition of *Godzilla* (1954), tearing apart Manhattan with its inhabitants becoming collateral damage in the fight ensuing between the military and monster – and *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) – a tale much smaller in scope of students chasing a mystery that catches them – both fall within the sub genre of Reality Horror. In both, the viewer is trapped into the confusion and horror of the narrative. The blinkered limitations of the camera/viewer's eye are the only visuals and the viewer passively experiences the untenable situations in which the characters are acted on by external forces: a monster in *Cloverfield* and an unseen, malevolent entity in *Blair Witch*. However, unlike the characters, the viewer is not subjected to the same fates, the other characters die and the viewer lives to rewatch the film.

Both films are 'found artifacts', discovered after the events they depict: in the rubble of Central Park and labelled as property of the Department of Defense in *Cloverfield*, and in a ruined house in the middle of remote woods in *Blair Witch*. There are no introductory lists of directors or first billed

stars. The films appear as believable constructions, their documentary style supplying verisimilitude complete with jerky, uneven shots, confused dialogue, frequent overexposure and lighting that obscures rather than reveals, destroying any idea of *mise-en-scene*. They are not beautiful films and lack obvious artful staging of shots, lighting or composition. *Blair Witch* is genuinely shot by the actors who keep their own names, on location with minimal scene setting (the cairns and sculptures), and there were many reports of 'sea-sickness' amongst audiences because of the jerky, jumpy nature of the footage. However, *Cloverfield*'s appearance is deceptive: locations are carefully staged, scenes rehearsed and managed, and – most importantly, the film is directed to mimic the jerkiness of a hand-held camera, though much of the footage from the camera held by the actor who played Hud (T. J. Miller) did end up in the final release. In his article, 'Grasping the Site/Sight/Cite of the Image: A Lacanian Explication', Jagodzinski says:

So, on the one hand we have a naïve notion of representation that continues to mask itself as "reality", as in absurdity of "reality television", while on the other hand we have this savvy ironic self-reflexive subject who knows that it's a constructed representation through the use of elaborate rhetorical structuring devices, which either plays with it or tries to do it one better to expose this very constructedness. (2006, p 397).

Both *Cloverfield* and *The Blair Witch Project* have these 'structuring devices', primarily revealed through the textual preludes to the film, which identifies their 'found artifact' status. Like other films in the sub-genre [1], Reality Horror attempts to cross the barrier between audience and film, to overcome what Rosemary Jackson calls "the impossibility of the verification of events" (2003, p 37), where "(p)erception becomes increasingly confused, signs are vulnerable to multiple and contradictory interpretation, so that "meaning" recede, indefinitely, with 'truth' as a mere vanishing point of the text" (2003, p 38). Despite what appears to be undeniable reality, that the camera doesn't lie (though reality horror is proof that it does), the knowledge that camera and media do not necessarily present the unmitigated truth is an accepted 'truth'. This mirrors what you could term a confabulation of Reality Horror itself, 'the elaborate rhetorical structures' revealed in the 'making of' sections included in the dvd presentations, another level of meta-narrative as the makers of the film not only entice, but 'chat' comfortably to viewers about the films: reality packaged and marketed as entertainment. This is explicit in the *Cloverfield* dvd which references the net-based intrigues common to Abrams' work (specifically *Lost* (2004 – 2010), and *Alias* (2001 – 2006), both successful television series) and the net-based or viral marketing campaigns strewn with hints and mysteries to draw in the viewer in a quasi-interactive sense. But the small 'indie' film,

*The Blair Witch Project* did all this first: it achieved fame initially by being the first film to engage with potential viewers by starting a campaign over a younger internet, enticing them with hints of the mystery to be unfolded.

The on-screen text prefaces that detail the discovery of the recordings some time after the events, situate them within a context of tragedy and mystery. These prefaces – another of those 'elaborate rhetorical structuring devices – relieve the sense of reality mainlined through the optic nerve into the brain, meager offerings to a potential world view outside the camera's gaze. They further confabulate the notion of reality as they simultaneously place the films within a cogent reality. This is the reality the viewer is drawn into through the first person camera gaze, constricting any comprehension about the events engulfing them, but that preface gives the viewer – without empowering them – the indisputable knowledge that what is about to be viewed does not end well for anyone. The essential passivity of the viewer/camera's eye (watching, never reacting) encourages inter-passivity between subject and subject-object as the character holding the camera, the character that the viewer inhabits, experiences everything up to and including death while the viewer remains unscathed. This reveals the conflation involved: how can 'you', the viewer/camera, die and this film still be viewable?

In both films, the camera changes hands and the viewer, while retaining that first-person gaze, also changes character. While the changes are fluid, the focus of the gaze changes along with the personality of the character. An excellent example in *Cloverfield* is the difference between Rob's (Michael Stahl-David) handling of the camera in the opening of the film, to Jason (Mike Vogel), Rob's brother as he records over Rob's tape, to Hud with whom the camera remains for the rest of the film. For the viewer, this flow between characters has a voyeuristic feel. Each time the film is viewed, the viewer is not only a witness of, but is subject to the escalation of horror and the ultimate deaths that are at the conclusion of each film (in *Cloverfield*, *Blair Witch* records no actual on-screen deaths). Slavjo Zizek's inter-passivity: of believing or enjoying (or being terrified in Reality Horror) through the other, that "the passive consumption of a text or work of art is over: I no longer merely stare at the screen" (2008, p 146), is true for Reality Horror. Although the interaction is minimal, and the viewer is still 'staring at the screen,' the relationship has changed through the first-person camera view: the viewer has become one of the characters the imaginary real has become experiential and the viewer is directly involved in the narrative as it unfolds around them. In inter-passivity, "I accede to the other the passive aspect", which, in Reality Horror, is that of being horrified, frightened, killed, "while I can remain actively engaged" (2008, p 149) – despite the inter-subjectivity involved in the first-person camera gaze, the viewer stays alive while all others around them die. This is Reality Horror in a nutshell: staying alive while the subjects die, vicariously experiencing all they experience, bypassing any necessity for the imagination to stir more than what is being fed. Although the characters are not necessarily passive in their reactions, they are forced into it as they are 'acted on by external forces', brilliantly explicated in *Cloverfield* when Marlene (Lizzy Caplan) dies horrifically after being bitten by a monstrous parasite. Likewise, in *Blair*

*Witch*, as Heather (Heather Donahue) unwraps the remains of Joshua (Joshua 'Josh' Leonard) outside their tent, the horror revealed in that shaky cam vision is doubled because the viewer unwraps it, just as Heather does.

The result is an almost bodiless existence. The viewer exists only in the Imaginary Real, as Lacan puts it, where the superimposed reality takes over the entire perception of the viewer. It suggests that the viewer's normal identity has been subsumed into that of the film's character, partly explaining why Reality Horror is so disturbing: "not so much the image's lack of body that is considered fatal as its utter seductiveness, which makes distance impossible and forces the viewer and the image into a suffocating unity" (Peeren, 2008, p 76). Reality Horror enforces engagement and in becoming one of the hapless characters within the film, the viewer cannot maintain distance between the events of the story and their own viewing. "(E)njoyment fascinates the subject, it reduces him to the passive gaze impotently gazing at the object" (Žižek, 2008, p 150), but in Reality Horror, the object is what the subject becomes – making of it the subject. There is no separation. In becoming key characters within the films, identity becomes slippery, destabilizing the viewer's own perception of self:

Identity as completeness is forever postponed. Subjectivity is a task yet to be completed, with the subject posited as a futurity, always still becoming in a necessarily intersubjective mode. Thus, intersubjective relations work both to circumscribe the self and keep it open-ended, both toward identity and toward alterity." (Peeren, 2008, p 74).

Not only is this alterity part of the narratives of both films, the viewer of Reality Horror also falls into a liminal space: while seeing the objects as subjects, even though they have become one of the characters, they nonetheless remain aware of themselves as viewer, as subject. They become as open-ended as the narratives which lack any sense of denouement. The stories remain essentially unfinished, as they have to considering how they ended – in uncertainty.

The liminality of the viewer reiterates the liminal spaces in both films where the 'dark other' of each film is found: *Cloverfield* directly and openly engaging as the monster tramps all that was familiar into grotesque facsimiles, *Blair Witch* strongly suggesting its presence as the Blair Witch herself is not only confused with other historical references, but is also never seen. She is the non-sense signifier holding the frame together (see (Jadodzinski, 2006, p 403). This absent/present being is the reason for the trio to be in the woods at all. Any possibility that there might've been someone from the town playing on their credibility is negated by the film's end, by the sudden cessation of screams and image and the abrupt blankness of the screen. The monster's attack in *Cloverfield* is immediate and utterly alien, its size, shape and fluidity amongst the angular skyscrapers visual pointers to its 'otherness'. *Blair Witch* is more subtle, toying with the complications of histories and myth-making, the otherness involved refers backwards to the making of the country, and the political hysteria of the seventeenth century before the country integrated, epitomised by the myth of the Blair Witch herself– a symbol of otherness, a contrivance signified by the remoteness of the



woods that is the main setting for the film. More than *Cloverfield*, *Blair Witch* utilizes the tropes of horror as the characters tangle with and are entangled by the unseen, the supernatural, its engagement with outside 'otherness'. *Cloverfield*, on the other hand, confronts the viewer with the standard world view made abruptly incomprehensible with its overt references to the attacks on Manhattan's World Trade Centre in 2001. History for both films is the meta-narrative, context for the unfolding events that viewer and characters alike are caught up in, a double meaning in the word 'reality': the familiar world and the style of filming becoming symbols for each other.

Reality Horror closes in on Lacan's *jouissance*, the 'painful principle', where excessive pleasure becomes pain. Each film contains moments when characters speak to the lens, directly to the viewer, the viewer/character as camera: in *Cloverfield* when Hud is killed, and again at the final destruction of shelter and camera (but not the memory chip on which all is recorded), and in *The Blair Witch Project* when Heather apologizes to the camera for the whole terrible project; her face fills the eye/lens and the viewer can only watch her tears, empathise with the helplessness because of the enforced passivity of the camera. The horror is becoming overwhelmingly personal and ineluctable within the camera's frame.

The experiential imagery unveiled to the eye in each film reveals little more than the immediately visible, with a fascinating exception in *Cloverfield*. There are several instances where the wider world is seen as Hud aims the camera at television screens, first in the apartment when the attacks begin, then on the wide-screen television in the looted electronics store, where the footage of the monster is finally clear, contrasting with the first-person view which barely see the monster because of its great size and the smoke and destruction around it. But it is a world-view mediated by news readers and commentary. In *Blair Witch*, no monster is visible, just monstrous results of dislocated sound, Josh's remains, and the suggestive sight/site of the old house. The viewer experiences the imagery, there is no barrier between story and recipient. The doubled passive disturbs the continuum of experience and imagination. Once or twice, Hud's friendly, gormless face appears a little too close to the lens in *Cloverfield* as he wipes blood spatter from the viewer's eye, but as both narrator and being part of both the immediate and the meta-narrative, the viewer is held in thrall, and in the passive sense, is subjected to the same fate as the subjects in the lens eye of the camera.

Towards the end of both films, the 'painful principle, *jouissance*, becomes intense, as does the inter-passivity – the subject experiencing the object emoting and experiencing on its behalf. This is beautifully illustrated in the famous apology scene in *The Blair Witch Project* when Heather turns the camera on her tearful, terrified self, using the camera as a stand-in for her parents and her friends' parents. The viewer allows the camera to be itself, as it were, to become the recipient of Heather's confession. However, the 'making of' extras on the dvd has sections on the parents and their reactions; it becomes another attempt to overcome what Rosemary Jackson calls the 'impossibility of verification'.

As artifacts, *Cloverfield* and *The Blair Witch Project* have a peculiar resonance to the Japanese cult

film *Ringu* – a film detailing the misadventures of all those who view a mysterious video tape. It is a never-ending predicament, for characters must copy the tape and pass it on or they die. *Cloverfield* and *Blair Witch*, like other Reality Horror films, have a similar sense, but in the actual world. Each time they are viewed, the viewer becomes doubly passive – character and camera both. But as artifacts, the films retain their secrets; the viewer, having gained no insight into either the origins or outcomes of the stories, becomes part of the mystery. In vicariously experiencing horror and death, the viewer merges with narratives that are not precisely mimetic, nor diegetic, but an uneasy mix of both. In both films (and again, more obvious in *Blair Witch*), the narratives are difficult; apart from the textual preface that presages the end, the viewer has no overview. There isn't one. Reality Horror is in your face because your face is part of the narrative.

With each viewing, the transference of the imaginary to the real becomes less symbolic and more symptomatic of a peculiar desire to live the horrific moment, to experience what others *feel* rather than watch from a distance: *jouissance* and inter-subjectivity unrelieved by catharsis or denouement. The stories merely stop, having become experience in the worst and most unfinished ways. In *Cloverfield*, the viewer is taken briefly, startlingly, into the monster's mouth and flung away to digest the fact before being picked up by the last two doomed survivors. But of the monster's fate, there is nothing. The tape ends with previously recorded section of Rob and Beth at Coney Island months before the monster attacked Manhattan with possibilities of reasons for the monster's appearance. In contrast, the tape of *The Blair Witch Project* records nothing but suggestion, leaving the viewer literally in the dark.

### Note

[1] Such as *Paranormal Activity* which also introduces the static computer as camera eye, and the Spanish *Rec* which is the footage of a real documentary that (of course) went horribly wrong.

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**Bios**

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## **Lying to Reveal the Truth: Horror Pseudo-Documentaries and the Illusion of Reality**

**by Don Tresca**

In October 2009, I attended a special midnight showing of *Paranormal Activity* at a local theater in my hometown of Sacramento, California. I had heard from a friend that it was one of the scariest films he had ever seen, and I was looking forward to finding out for myself. The film did not disappoint. I left the theater feeling drained and worrying about how I was going to sleep that night without hearing mysterious bumps and doors throughout the house opening and closing on their own. As I walked into the lobby of the movie theater, a young girl was standing near the movie posters sobbing uncontrollably. She was surrounded by a group of other young girls who were all hugging her and attempting to console her. "It's only a movie," they told her. "It's not real."

The next morning, I did an Internet search on fan reactions to the film and found that the reaction of the young girl the night before was not that uncommon amongst first-time viewers of the film. Many left disastrously shaken, convinced that what they had just witnessed was a true record of an actual "haunting" and demonic possession of a mid-twenties California college student named Katie. They believed this despite the fact that the film's director, Oren Peli, admitted the film was a fabrication and that the two film leads, Katie Featherston and Micah Sloat, were very much alive and demon-free.

All of this brought back memories about the response to the similarly-filmed 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project*, which many people, at the time, believed was true (to this day, you can still find people posting on the Internet who remain unconvinced that the film was a fiction). I began to wonder, why do certain filmmakers choose to attempt to fool the audience into believing their fictional stories are "real" by presenting them as documentaries? How does our view of cinematic (documentary) "reality" become affected when we discover it can be so easily manipulated? When we as an audience can be so easily fooled, how do we ever trust documentary film again to provide us with an accurate and unbiased view of reality? The fairly new genre of "reality horror" provides us our best starting point for answering these questions because these films take the most unrealistic of scenarios, tales of demons and witches, zombies and giant monsters, and transform them into pseudo-documentaries of such realism that they blur the very boundaries between reality and fiction.

One of the factors that play into these "reality horror" films lies in our basic assumptions of what a documentary film is. Film scholars have argued for years about what constitutes a documentary film and about the accuracy of the documentary film in depicting "reality" for the film audience. Charles Peirce provided the basis for modern thinking regarding the documentary, describing it as an accurate reflection of reality, claiming that "the photographic image physically corresponds point by point to nature and in doing so [Peirce] described the photographic image as indexical. That is, the image and the original object are seen to be connected physically, rather than

symbolically" (Roscoe and Hight 11). This creates an assumption on the part of the viewer that the image represents something that must also be found in the real world. This can be extended to the documentary film image, which can also be seen by the viewer as containing the "real" since the image on the screen represents an actual object that exists in the real world, thus making a direct reference to the real world and, thereby, connecting, in a physical way, to that world (Roscoe and Hight 11).

At the opposite end of the theoretical spectrum, Bill Nichols described documentary as a "fiction (un)like any other" because of the way in which documentaries, like fiction films, construct narratives and employ codes and conventions (such as dramatic music and image juxtaposition) to construct stories about the social world (113). Nichols argued that audience engagement with a documentary film or a fiction film was entirely based upon how the audience perceived the film prior to the viewing experience. If an audience believes that the film they are about to see is a documentary, their minds switch immediately into what he calls "the documentary mode of engagement." Here, the audience expects to be introduced to real people, places, and situations, rather than fictional characters and issue, and to be given access to new knowledge, new modes of evidence, or new ways of understanding the world around them. The audience believes that the on-screen event would have happened, exactly as shown, whether the camera was present to capture the images or not. The audience, therefore, seeks to make a direct connection between the documentary representation and the actual events it portrays (21-25).

The "reality horror" film (and, in actuality, all pseudo-documentaries) play with both of these theories of audience expectations with documentary images. The "reality horror" film initially places the audience in the "documentary mode of engagement," creating the expectation of reality, and then undercuts that expectation by introducing elements into the film that cannot exist in reality (ghosts, giant monsters, demons, witches, etc.). These films counteract the notion that everything (or really anything) in "reality" can be captured by video image, that there are elements of the world that defy "rational and logical...explanation" (Roscoe 6) and suggesting that the very idea that documentary can present itself as a complete record of "reality" is flawed.

In each of these films, the camera, a device created to capture and present reality in as straightforward a way as possible, fails to do so, constraining the audience's understanding by restricting what can be seen. More than any other film of its kind, *The Blair Witch Project* shows the utter limitations of the camera, the sensation that the camera cannot capture the "reality" of the filmmakers' situation because the "reality" is too all-encompassing to fit into the small frame of the camera lens. "Reality" is happening all around the filmmakers, and it is impossible to capture it all (or even a small part of it). Likewise, the camera in *Paranormal Activity*, frequently strapped down to a tripod in Micah and Katie's bedroom, fails in its "mission" to provide conclusive evidence as the final showdown between Micah and the (then-possessed) Katie is conducted outside its gaze. And, in *The Last Exorcism*, the camera is ineffectual at determining the actual nature of Nell's "possession." Even at the end, when the audience is presented with substantial proof of the

demon possession theory, the camera is unable to provide any definitive evidence of anything. [1] As Daniel Stamm, director of *The Last Exorcism*, states: "...the handheld camera for horror...really adds something.... It makes you aware you're only seeing a little square on the screen, that there's a lot more going on outside the frame" (as quoted in Newitz 4). In documentary film, the evidence lies in the image, in its ability to show the audience the truth first-hand, yet in these films, the documentary mode breaks down as a result of being unable to capture the visual evidence. The camera (and, thereby, the audience) only knows as much of the reality as the person behind the camera; therefore, if the person behind the camera cannot perceive the "reality" of the situation, it will remain forever beyond the grasp of the film to capture it.

A clear symbolic representation of the breakdown of the camera's ability to successfully capture the reality of the situation is its use in these films as a weapon, either literally or symbolically. The camera, instead of becoming an instrument of knowledge and protection, becomes an instrument of destruction and death. In *Quarantine*, the camera is used as a literal weapon to beat one of the virus-infected "zombies" to death. In *The Last Exorcism*, Nell (the supposedly demon-possessed girl) takes control of the camera at one point and kills a barn cat by repeatedly beating it with the camera. In both *Paranormal Activity* and *Paranormal Activity 2*, victims are killed by being hurled into the camera with supernatural force. In *The Blair Witch Project*, Heather's constant filming of the crew as they attempt to find their way out of the woods is continually berated by Josh and Mike. In frustration, Mike literally attacks Heather and wrestles the camera from her grasp in an effort to get her to turn the camera off, and Josh bullies and torments Heather with the camera to get her to stop filming and acknowledge the danger they are all in. In all cases, the camera is both assaulted and assaulting (Hopgood 245). Many critics (such as Muir and Ford) see in Micah's persistence in filming Katie's trauma and terror in *Paranormal Activity* a clear symbol of domestic violence: "The behavior of the abuser is represented by the camera and how Micah wields it. In movies of this first person genre, whenever a man points a camera at a woman and keeps shooting her even after she has asked him to stop, she is being violated, abused" (Ford 11). The camera becomes the instrument through which Micah torments Katie and gains control over her life. He lies to her about the camera being off (and only complies with her request to turn it off once, to get sex) and ignores warnings by both Katie and the medium that the camera will "invite it in." Micah, like all documentary filmmakers, attempts to use the camera to find the "truth" behind the haunting, but his filming reveals nothing regarding the demon's origins and reasoning and eventually leads to Katie's possession and his death.

This restricting of the camera's gaze makes the audience hyperaware of the camera's presence in a way that is atypical for either fictional or documentary film but which serves to reinforce the notion of the camera's limited ability to provide a true "window on reality." However, paradoxically, many of these elements also serve to heighten the audience's perception of the film as "reality." The muted colors, grainy and (seemingly) unedited footage, and poor lighting recall similar imagery from "reality TV," a genre which lacks the polish of cinematic documentary but

enhances (for many viewers) the authenticity of the events depicted, implying the immediacy of actual events for which the filmmakers did not have the time or opportunity to plan their scenes or to make expected alterations to their footage which would suggest an imposition of artistic control (Keller 57).

Ordinarily, with horror, the fictional construct provides the viewer a certain amount of distance and control. If a film becomes too intense or too frightening for the viewer, he can leave the theater or turn off the television or DVD player and return to the secure confines of the “real world.” In this respect, at a very literal level, the horror film is safe. Also, because such texts rely on basic conventions that the audience instantly recognizes (i.e. the vampire only comes out at night, the werewolf can be killed by a silver bullet, etc.), the knowledge of these conventions conveys a certain level of comfort on the part of the viewer. It is this level of safety that these “reality horror” films seek to disrupt. When a film is deemed “safe,” this suggests that all thoughts, ideas, and emotions the film evokes in the audience are contained within the viewing experience and do not extend into the real world. This is especially true of horror fiction which can easily be dismissed due to its unreality (since the audience logically knows that creatures such as vampires and ghosts do not actually exist in the real world). “Reality horror” disrupts this safety by presenting such tales as “reality”; therefore, the audience no longer feels safe and comfortable in the real world because the films imply that such terrors exist outside the movie experience. Even though, logically, the audience understands the fictional nature of the films, the audience mindset has been conditioned to create an assumption that any film presented in a documentary fashion is reality. [2]

John Kenneth Muir theorizes that one of the reasons why these films are so popular and prevalent in our current culture is because the ambiguous nature of these films reflects “our human life and explains one reason our existence can be so scary. We don’t get answers all the time for why things happen.... In the hyper, information-overload era of the Internet and 24-hour news cycles, [these films ask] us to fill in the blanks, to imagine the horrors that our eyes cannot actually witness” (7). Rather than expose reality to us, these films resist explanation. The unknown stays forever unknown. We never actually learn what happened to the filmmakers in *The Blair Witch Project*. We never learn the origin of the giant creature decimating New York City in *Cloverfield*. We never learn why a demon has targeted Katie specifically in *Paranormal Activity*. Rather than package and define reality for us (as documentaries claim to do), these films are forthright in their admission that the answers to our questions as to why things happen remain forever elusive, just beyond our grasp of understanding.

For Sigmund Freud, the basis of all human fears is the fear of the “uncanny.” Freud argued that “an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary” (150). Freud further wrote that repetition “transforms what would otherwise seem harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable” (144). Freud’s theory of the “uncanny” serves as the primary focus for some critics for why “reality horror” is so popular and effective as a horror genre: “A fictive account that engages the active spectator

and shifts their subject position from one where the fiction is evident to one where the fictive illusions can suddenly exist in the 'real world' is a premier example of the uncanny" (Tiffée 11). Further, the plot of several of the "reality horror" films (such as *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity*) use repetition as a central device within the story's framework: the student filmmakers in *Blair Witch* walk in circles, returning to the same place over and over again; and the very structure of *Paranormal Activity* involves the same static camera shot (of the couple's bedroom) night after night as the tension slowly ratchets higher and higher [3]. It is by no accident that many of the "reality horror" films (and horror films, in general) are almost claustrophobic in their need to keep the events of the film isolated to a single location (the woods in *Blair Witch*, Micah and Katie's home in *Paranormal Activity*, the farm in *The Last Exorcism*, the sealed-off apartment complex in *[rec]/Quarantine*) in an effort to enforce repetition of location. Even the characters in *Cloverfield* are trapped strictly within the confines of New York City (the characters that attempt to separate themselves from the location (by bridge or helicopter) find their attempts thwarted by the monster itself).

In discussing the Real and the human attempt to capture it, Slavoj Žižek states there is no way to glimpse the Real head on, that it denies the forthright gaze, that it only gains meaning and form when the audience gives it meaning and form through symbolic associations. Žižek stated that the straightforward view granted by the documentary gaze distorts our view of the Real and creates "indistinct confusion" (11). Only by engaging in an imaginative flight of fantasy can the audience create the necessary skew required to actually glimpse the Real. Therefore, in many ways, it may just be through the pseudo-documentary (and through its horror equivalent, "reality horror") that we can actually achieve our glimpse of the Real through the fantasy elements inherent in the text (Lebow 235). Ultimately, it is the view of the audience, not the view of the camera, which is the crucial factor in determining the level of "reality" granted to the text. Caleb's statement in *The Last Exorcism* sums up perfectly the feelings of the nightmarish creatures in these films: "I don't care if the camera's watching. It can watch all it wants." They know, and we shall discover, that it won't make any difference at all.

## Notes

[1] The ending of *The Last Exorcism* caused a great deal of controversy, which quickly spilled onto the film blogs and chat rooms around the Internet. While many praised the ending for its ambiguity regarding whether Nell's baby was, in fact, a demon: "I'm thankful that the film didn't feel the need to explain what we just witnessed" (Young 3). Others claimed the ending did not quite fit the rest of the film: "it doesn't jell enough with how the movie feels, especially when it's courting nuance, poignancy, and ambiguity, rather than throwing an arsonist's cocktail at its own logical structure" (Scott 3). Daniel Stamm, when asked about the ending, stated, "People found the ending too abrupt, but you can't tie the story up neatly if your photographer is killed. If you and I walked into a devil worshipper mass, we wouldn't know what was going on. We wouldn't



understand where to point the camera and who the big boss is. We would never understand it" (Newitz 10).

[2] Anitra Freeman also suggests that one of the reasons "reality horror" films are so terrifying for the audience is that they tap into one of the most basic human fears: an inability to understand and control our environment, our "reality" (12). She suggests that such films bring a fatalistic viewpoint into horror, insinuating that not only can we not fully understand and control reality, but even attempting to do so will bring about our horrific downfall (20-21).

[3] In his review of *Paranormal Activity*, Simon Crook specifically states: "[*Paranormal Activity*] doesn't even do plot: just a situation, repeated over and over again, with the deadening regularity of a bad recurring dream" (2).

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### **Bios**

My name is Don Tresca. I have a Master's Degree in English from California State University, Sacramento, in Sacramento, California. I am currently working on obtaining my Ph.D. in English (with specialization in horror literature and film) at the University of California at Davis. I am also working on a manuscript in which I am studying and evaluating the new reality horror trend in both film and fiction (in works such as Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* and Max Brooks' *World War Z*).

## **No Country For Old Cannibals: L'amazzonia di Deodato e i Mondo Movies di Marco Cipolloni**

Le crescenti fortune, produttive, commerciali e, sia pur con qualche imbarazzo, anche critiche, del peculiare filone-sottogenere di cui qui ci si occupa affondano le loro radici nella storica sensibilità del genere horror per il contenimento dei costi di produzione e per gli effetti di ripresa collegati alla soggettiva. Tuttavia queste forti ragioni di budget e di linguaggio non bastano da sole a spiegare il boom del fenomeno. Per provare a capire come mai questo tipo di film sono diventati sempre più numerosi, visti e significativi occorre, a mio avviso, collegare il filone alla evoluzione (anche tecnologica) dei media e del discorso sui media.

Il primo gradino riguarda la celebrazione/demonizzazione del proverbiale cannibalismo mediatico, a suo tempo inaugurata da *Citizen Kane* e dai numerosissimi film sul cinismo dei giornalisti e della TV e sulla necessità di costruire mostri per "sbatterli in prima pagina". Tale dimensione patologica, morbosa e "cannibalica", ben riassunta dallo slogan "E' la stampa (o la TV), bellezza", a più riprese portata in primo piano dalle carriere americane di autentici geni del cinema espatriato come Lang e Wilder, ma documentata anche in Italia, grazie a numerose produzioni ispirate a notissimi e controversi casi di cronaca nera ed alle relative variazioni farsesche (come quelle proposte da Totò, Villaggio e Benigni in film come *Fifa e arena*, *Fracchia, la belva umana* e *Il mostro*), è evocata con canonica e sovrabbondante regolarità dai film sui super-eroi dei comics, spesso fidanzati con giornaliste (di solito così negate per il loro mestiere da non riuscire a riconoscere in culturisti in calzamaglia di taglia XXL i loro fidanzati di taglia XXL senza occhiali), ma altrettanto spesso osannati, messi in croce e/o minacciati (nella loro fragilmente doppia identità) da giornalisti ambiziosi e carrieristi.

Anche nella fantascienza, nei film catastrofici e nella cornice politico-mediatica di geniali giocattoli come *Lo squalo* il motivo è stato così profusamente usato e abusato da diventare quasi uno stereotipo, in grado di alimentare un fiorente e proliferante sottotesto.

Su tutto questo si inserisce, come potente acceleratore narrativo, quello che, strumentalizzando (da buoni ultimi di una lunghissima serie) il nome del cineamatore che filmò la morte di JFK, potremmo chiamare "effetto Zapruder", cioè la coscienza che le ridotte dimensioni delle cineprese, delle telecamere e, ancor più, delle videocamere alimentano e rendono narrativamente possibile e credibile l'immagine e il mito del recording, dello shooting amatoriale e del film-making indipendente, aprendo al racconto filmico e alla sua retorica nuovi e sempre più ampi orizzonti (non solo di controdocumentazione e denuncia).

Su questo effetto di sguardo vergine e smascherante, degno del re nudo di Andersen, John Carpenter ha costruito il geniale apologo di *Essi vivono*, 1988, dove un vero e proprio signor Nessuno (il protagonista si chiama John Nada, misto anglo-ispánico di John Doe/trovatello e Giovanni senza terra/re nullatenente e dei nullatenenti) scopre, grazie ad occhiali trovati per caso,

di vivere circondato da una casta di dominatori alieni che ha riempito il paesaggio urbano di messaggi subliminali che incitano al conformismo e alla sottomissione. Ovvio che la soggettiva dopata dagli occhiali diventi subito un gesto rivoluzionario e resistenziale, alimentando una vera e propria macchina della verità. Carpenter a parte, anche altri registi notissimi e dalla cifra molto autoriale come Antonioni, Coppola o De Palma ci hanno ricamato sopra, elaborando raffinate trame metacinematografiche e metadiegetiche, costruite per lucrare tensione, ambiguità e suspense sulla retorica e gli effetti della registrazione, della diretta e della differita. Oltre gli orizzonti cervantini, di distopia, sdoppiamento critico e smascheramento metanarrativo delle ingiustizie e delle contraffazioni del reale, esistono e sono ovviamente pertinenti anche degli orizzonti più shakespeariani, tipici di registi più interessati a teatralizzare con tinte forti passioni e violenze, in modo da amplificare al massimo la forza scenica delle ambiguità, delle follie e degli eccessi che caratterizzano, nel segno di una varia e disincantata uniformità, la solo in apparenza multiforme realtà umana.

In questa direzione, l'ampliamento degli orizzonti non si limita al rapporto (di corto circuito) tra livello narrativo e metanarrativo, ma coinvolge anche quella che è stata la via maestra della globalizzazione educational e dello infotainment populista, cioè il mondo del documentario naturalistico e antropologico e, in particolare, la messa in scena dell'atto stesso del documentare e del rapporto estremo che si stabilisce con "la realtà", quando si va a filmarla senza troppi filtri in zone remote e/o isolate del mondo o calandosi nel profondo di inesplorati abissi sociali e psicologici. Sempre per restare al cinema d'autore, non è difficile leggere da questa shakespeariana angolazione buona parte del materiale filmato da Werner Herzog in quasi quarant'anni di carriera, da *Morgana*, 1970, alla celebre registrazione di tragedia attorno alla quale ruota *Grizzly Man*, 2005, passando naturalmente per le miticamente avventurose ed estreme riprese realizzate dal grande regista tedesco nelle foreste, nei deserti e sulle montagne di buona parte del mondo.

L'idea leopardianamente paganeggiante ed antiromantica della natura matrigna, indifferente e/o insofferente rispetto alla presenza dell'uomo occidentale e civilizzato (cioè cristianamente represso) e dei troppi mostri partoriti dal suo inconscio disegna a filo di orizzonte la linea di un "estremo confin del mare" dal quale, annunciato ed evocato da un operistico "fil di fumo", finisce per apparire il fantasma interculturale e transculturale di una inevitabile "have bianca", inquietante variazione (anche cromaticamente del tutto degna di due maestri dello horror letterario come Melville e Poe) della *stultifera navis* dei morti senza pace che popolano la nostra coscienza malata (di questo e non d'altro disincanta le gesta con acrobatica ironia la commercialmente fortunatissima serie dei *Pirati dei Caraibi*).

Il fatto che aprendo e dilatando l'orizzonte l'atto non neutro e non neutrale del documentare possa generare immagini false (tanto di falsa serenità come di falsa violenza) rovescia il paradosso dello *snuff* (cioè della violenza vera, registrata dentro un film a soggetto). La contraffazione mediaticamente interessata della violenza della natura e/o di quella delle popolazioni di interesse etnografico e dei loro riti (su tutti il cannibalismo rituale, ma anche le sevizie e le mutilazioni rituali,

etc.) moralizza in senso sadiano ed erasmiano lo spazio e il senso delle riprese, facendo dell'uomo occidentale che guarda, vede, filma e rivede, con uno scandalo che sta quasi tutto nello sguardo e quasi per niente nelle cose guardate, il vero regista del proprio inconscio, capace non solo di generare le immagini che desidera e teme, ma persino di uccidere e/o morire nel e per generarle.

Su questo paradosso di un Candide che rovescia sul mondo le proprie follie per poi andare a trovarle, prenderne le distanze "a ragion veduta", proclamarsi libero da esse e tornare, rassegnato e tranquillo, a "occuparsi delle rose del proprio giardino" si costruiscono, in piena Guerra Fredda, le controverse fortune dei cosiddetti "mondo movies" (dal titolo di *Mondo cane*, di Cavara, Jacopetti e Prospero, che inaugura il genere nel 1962). Non è un caso che l'idea nasca e parta dall'Italia repressa e iperconformista degli anni Cinquanta e dei primi anni Sessanta, un mondo ipocrita di parrocchiette e compagnucci (della parrocchietta e di tutte le altre ideologiche parrocchiette del tempo), che però si specchia nel caso Montesi (provocato da alcuni, ma seguito con pruderie da tutti), nel successo dei primi fumetti sadici (Satamik, Dianòik, Kriminal, etc.) e nella pubblicazione autocensurata ed a puntate del rapporto Kinsley e de *I peccati di Peyton Place*. In apparenza i mondo movies si presentano come film di montaggio, risultato di un eterogeneo *found footage* etnografico e naturalistico, volto a sbugiardare e sputtanare i (falsi) miti della natura buona e dei buoni selvaggi, evidenziando con sequenze di feroce (iper)realismo l'onnipresenza della crudeltà e della violenza in tutto il mondo, ma soprattutto nel "terzo mondo", allora più che mai ansioso di decolonizzarsi e mettersi "in via di sviluppo". Da questo punto di vista i mondo movies sono un sottogenere periferico, voyeuristico e quasi postumo del discorso razzista e colonizzatore, espressione tarda e paradossale, degradata e radicale, di un codice scientifico-ideologico della visione come atto peculiare dello sguardo colonizzatore e come pratica funzionale alla coscienza e alle ragioni (storiche e antropologiche) delle potenze coloniali in ritirata.

E tuttavia la loro polemica e controversa popolarità, rilanciata nella seconda metà degli anni Ottanta dai remake di Stelvio Massi e Gabriele Crisanti, con film come *Mondo cane*, *oggi* e *Mondo cane 2000*, non si collega tanto a questo piano del dibattito, quanto ai dubbi sulla "genuinità" delle sequenze selezionate, cioè all'accusa di non ritrarre veri riti, ma farse etnografiche confezionate ad hoc (dai registi e/o dagli indigeni) per soddisfare aspettative ed esigenze del mercato occidentale, calibrate cioè non sui riti e le tradizioni dei popoli altri, ma sulla domanda commercialmente sempre meglio quotata di sequenze sempre più morbose e violente, sdoganate e sottratte alla grinfie della censura grazie alla licenza etnografica e al pretesto dell'interesse documentario. Non possiamo farvi vedere uomini e donne che muoiono o fanno sesso, ma possiamo mostrare la morte e la copula degli animali e degli umani visti non come ed in quanto umani, ma in quanto oggetti di studio (un po' come accade per il nudo più che integrale dei manuali di medicina, capace di spingersi impunemente fino al limite del nudo scheletro, senza pelle e senza polpa). Il risultato è una specie di etnopornografia della violenza, radicalmente commerciale e customer-oriented come ogni pornografia seria e degna del proprio nome è e deve essere.

Le polemiche, l'indignazione, i tagli e i sequestri protraggono per quasi un quarto di secolo la declinante fortuna di una formula messa in crisi, già nel corso degli anni Sessanta, dalla progressiva liberazione dei costumi, dal terzomondismo e dal fatto che, specie per le giovani generazioni, cappellone e pacifiste, il sesso era per definizione liberatorio, non violento, non morboso e collegato a "pace e amore", invece che a controllo, violenza e potere.

Col senno di poi è facile dire che entrambe le visioni sono macchiettistiche e banalizzanti, che violenza e sesso sono cose ambigue e complesse, in cui si coniugano necessariamente violenza e non violenza, amore e morte, potere e anarchia, controllo e spontaneità, repressione e liberazione, turbamento morboso e appagamento rasserenato e/o rassegnato. La canzone è bellissima (per un recente numero speciale di Rolling Stone, addirittura la terza migliore di ogni tempo), ma il mondo di "Imagine" è senz'altro una palla (nel senso di una frottola), se non quasi due (nel senso che è con ogni probabilità anche un po' noiosetto).

Fin dai tempi del celebre saggio "Sui cannibali" di Montaigne i paradossi del relativismo ci dicono che i nostri costumi non sono poi migliori di quelli altrui, che il cannibalismo fa quasi sempre parte di un rito e che, a ben guardare, anche il rito eucaristico evoca un atto di cannibalismo simbolico. Tuttavia la nostra coscienza quotidiana si ostina comunque a percepire che, anche per un non cristiano, sbafarsi il cosciotto di un cristiano non è proprio come andare prendere la comunione.

Il cannibalismo dei media è assai meno simbolico di quello del rito eucaristico, tanto che ha regole di cucina e tempi di cottura stabiliti con una precisione da forno a micro-onde (dal "trattamento Boffo" a vallettopoli, dagli scandali sportivi ai calendari con le veline nude o seminude), ma resta comunque una cosa diversa dal mettere la nonna nel forno.

Con il tipo di cinema horror di cui stiamo ricostruendo sottotesto e genesi, il cannibalismo mediatico viene quindi spostato fuor di metafora e messo davanti ad uno specchio esotico. Il mostro non è solo una proiezione o una produzione, ma un vero e proprio doppio della macchina mediatica e della sua intrinseca mostruosità. In ogni film si confrontano e fronteggiano le macchine da presa accese e i mostri e, per chi guarda, non è davvero facile stabilire chi è più brutto, chi più vittima o chi più carnefice. Oltre a quella cannibalica, l'altra dimensione costitutiva del patto diegetico che legittima la retorica enunciativa del mondo movie è infatti quella olocaustico-estintiva. Il mondo movie regge e giustifica l'idea di catturare riti violenti e violenze naturali a partire dalla considerazione che tali riti e tali violenze e o i popoli e le specie che a ciò si dedicano sono a rischio di estinzione. Il *mondo-movie-maker* asserisce di filmare una rarità e di farlo appena prima che i riti e le specie documentati scompaiano per sempre (spazzati via dall'effetto combinato dell'aggressione esterna, oggi diremmo della globalizzazione, e del potere catabolico ed autodistruttivo della violenza stessa). Nel mondo del secondo dopoguerra, sopravvissuto al genocidio di massa e all'atomica, evocare la dimensione olocaustica della violenza, come pratica capace di estinguere non solo vite, ma forme di vita e varietà culturali, aggiunge al gesto del documentarista (sia autentico che inautentico) un plusvalore ed un potenziale che sono forse impliciti, ma sicuramente costitutivi nella coscienza del suo fare: Flaherty e Kurosawa sono grandi

artisti, ma è evidente che *Nanouk l'esquimese* e *Dersu Uzala* ci interessano anche perché sono o crediamo siano gli ultimi (o, almeno, tra gli ultimi) a praticare il rispettivo modo di vita. All'effetto Zapruder si aggiunge dunque un effetto Calza di Cuoio. I documentaristi dei mondo movies cercano istintivamente l'ultimo di ogni possibile genere di Moicani. Sono cioè interessasti non a filmare un mondo, ma a filmare la fine di un mondo o, per dirla in altri e più imbarazzanti termini, hanno tutto l'interesse, se possono, ad accelerare la fine del mondo che filmano, così da fare del loro film l'atto definitivo, apocalittico e annichilente del mondo documentato. Per istinto e per calcolo vorrebbero cambiar genere e trasformare il loro mondo movie in un capitolo della saga della Mummia o di quella di Indiana Jones. Partiti documentaristi, vorrebbero tornar dall'Africa o dal Sudamerica in veste di archeologi, primi e ultimi testimoni di un mondo ormai scomparso.

Le immagini violente del mondo altro che scompare devono insomma essere raccolte ad ogni costo, anche a costo di violentarlo e "aiutarlo" a scomparire. Come diceva Hearst (il magnate della stampa popolare che Welles ha utilizzato come modello per Kane) ai suoi disegnatori, mandati a Cuba in tempo di pace per realizzare schizzi sulla guerra di Cuba, all'epoca oggetto di una accesa campagna interventista destinata a spingere il governo statunitense a dichiarare e vincere la guerra ispano-americana del 1898: "Voi pensate ai disegni, che alla guerra penso io. Voi disegnate e la guerra ci sarà". Con i mondo movie i due significati di shooting ("ti filmo" e "ti sparo", ti metto nel mirino di una macchina da presa o di un fucile) cominciano ad avvicinarsi pericolosamente. Il cinema si appiattisce più che mai sulla definizione di Cocteau: è e vuole essere "la mort au travail", la morte in presa diretta.

Proprio sulla trasposizione ed esplicitazione in immagini di tutto questo, dalle polemiche alla curiosità per i cannibali, dalla sindrome (controdocumentaristica) di Zapruder a quella (olocaustica) dell'ultimo dei Moicani, si incardina il filone dell'horror cannibalico, inaugurato e sviluppato negli anni Settanta da Umberto Lenzi, con trame esotiche piene di riferimenti al Vietnam, al sadismo dei missionari ed al traffico di droga. In questo filone si inserisce anche Deodato che, dopo *Ultimo mondo cannibale*, 1977, elabora, con arte e scienza dello scandalo, il provocatorio e provocatoriamente cruento discorso metacinematografico e metamediatico del suo *Cannibal Holocaust*, 1980, sviluppandone poi alcune implicazioni di critica radicale al giornalismo nel non cannibalico (se non nel senso del puro cannibalismo mediatico) *Inferno in diretta*, 1985.

Entro il distanziamento reso possibile da una cornice narrativa piuttosto sofisticata (almeno per il genere), *Cannibal Holocaust* impagina immagini davvero forti, estremamente violente e, in più di un caso, intenzionalmente disturbanti, il che è un bene per chi ama il genere, ma può lasciare come minimo perplesso un ipotetico spettatore casuale, a dir la verità più ipotetico che reale, dato che il film non è (ormai da molti anni) di facilissimo reperimento e le probabilità che qualcuno lo veda per sbaglio e/o aspettandosi qualcos'altro sono davvero bassine.

Violenza e scandalo a parte (con il prevedibile e calcolatissimo coacervo di proteste, censure, sospetti e accuse di *snuff*, etc.) la trama è svolta con una prospettiva così radicalmente

fenomenologica e metacinematografica da risultare quasi wendersiana. Il protagonista, il professor Harold Monroe, viene mandato in Amazonia (l'area più miticamente vergine e pericolosa del Nuovo Mondo, inaccessibile luogo di ubicazione moderna di mille miti, dalle Amazzoni all'Eldorado), sulle tracce di una troupe scomparsa, composta da reporters e cineoperatori desiderosi di usare tutto il potere e il privilegio dello sguardo e della tecnologia per filmare testimonianze probanti sulla sopravvivenza del cannibalismo in una regione di insediamenti tribali molto isolati. Dopo un lento viaggio di avvicinamento denso di segnali enigmatici e di momenti iniziatici, destinati a trovare spiegazione solo più avanti, Monroe raggiunge finalmente la zona della scomparsa. Nonostante enormi difficoltà, ambientali, linguistiche e culturali, gli impediscano di capire bene come sono davvero andate le cose, Monroe riesce a localizzare i cadaveri dei membri della precedente spedizione, evidentemente trucidati dai pur pacifici indigeni. Sul posto recupera anche il materiale girato dalla troupe massacrata e con esso torna, non poco turbato, al mondo che crede civile, con l'ingenua illusione di avere riscattato l'eroica testimonianza di un manipolo di martiri della cinepresa, tragicamente deceduti per e sul lavoro. L'incontro con i parenti dei reporters scomparsi e la proiezione dei loro filmati rivela i contorni di una vicenda assai più inquietante, in cui il mito dello sguardo impassibile e coraggioso sulla violenza si rovescia nell'esaltazione sadica della violenza non solo provocata e/o praticata, ma anche occultata attraverso la menzogna di una falsa attribuzione a coloro che ne sono stati vittime. Grazie al montaggio, il carnefice si autoassolve, travestendosi da testimone ed accusando dei propri crimini quanti invece li hanno patiti. L'ipocrisia appare a Deodato assai più criticabile del sadismo in sé.

Se i disegnatori mandati a Cuba da Hearst non avevano trovato traccia di guerra, neppure la troupe spedita in Amazonia dai produttori della rete TV aveva infatti trovato tra gli indigeni le agognate efferatezze, ragion per cui, con una delirante escalation di violenza si era data con sadico zelo all'osservazione partecipante, sostituendo l'Olocausto al cannibalismo e seviziando e sterminando davanti alla cinepresa gli innocenti abitanti della regione, fino al punto di provocarne la violenta e vendicativa reazione (considerata anch'essa come interessante oggetto di ripresa). Evocando ad arte tutti i fantasmi delle vecchie polemiche sui mondo movies (in parte richiamate anche dagli attacchi al film), la rivelazione della scomoda verità mette a nudo sia la crudeltà insita nell'eredità culturale del colonialismo, sia il cinismo assoluto dei media, avidi di immagini sempre più forti ed esplicite, ottenute non importa come. Pochi anni dopo Deodato tornerà ancora sulla questione, mettendo sotto la lente, con *Inferno in diretta*, gli eccessi del giornalismo investigativo dedito alle inchieste sul narcotraffico tra America Latina e Stati Uniti.

Gli espedienti finzionali usati e abusati in *Cannibal Holocaust* per produrre effetti di realismo sono, soprattutto per la seconda parte, relativa al girato recuperato, particolarmente sofisticati e numerosi: dall'assoluta scorrettezza politica delle riprese di violenza su animali, all'alternanza tra riprese a 35 e a 16 millimetri, dall'intenzionale danneggiamento dei materiali "ritrovati" (cioè del girato a 16 mm) all'espedito di filmare chi fotografa e fotografare chi filma, per non parlare dell'inserimento in postproduzione di dettagli di sceneggiatura apertamente volti alla manipolazione psicologica dello spettatore, come le scritte che, sui titoli di coda, danno falsa



notizia di presunte conseguenze lagali patiite da membri della troupe per indebite sottrazioni di immagini dal contenuto particolarmente forte.

Come si è detto, il film di Deodato non è l'unico a scegliere, nel corso del periodo, le locations ispanoamericane, che, rispetto ad altre, presentano un ottimo mix di scenari naturali di grande impatto visivo, costi contenuti di produzione e personale abbastanza esperto e qualificato (soprattutto grazie al consistente monte ore girato per la TV: basti pensare a fenomeni di successo planetario come le telenovelas). A Santo Domingo, in Colombia, in Brasile, nello Yucatan e in Venezuela vengono in effetti girati nel corso degli anni Settanta e Ottanta numerosi film legati a vari generi del cinema seriale, come il dramma storico, il film erotico, l'horror, il film di azione e avventura, la commedia bocaccesca, lo spaghetti western, etc. Rispetto a questi occasionali compagni di strada, a mezza via tra una picaresca compagnia della forza e una metacinematografica Armata Brancaleone, i film del filone cannibal e in particolare quello di Deodato, girato nell'Amazzonia colombiana, spiccano e si caratterizzano anche come caricaturale autoritratto e come radicale esplicitazione della violenza culturale ed economica sottesa all'intero processo del loro *making of*, involontario esempio di cannibalismo industriale transnazionale. L'immagine dannata del film maledetto, nasconde, tra le altre cose di cui abbiamo detto, anche uno straordinario documento su un'epoca di estrema (in ogni possibile senso) e disperata totemizzazione dello sguardo coloniale dell'Occidente, colto in una fase di drammatica ritirata dal "mondo cane" che aveva per secoli considerato come *backyard* del proprio immaginario e scarica del proprio inconscio.

### **Bios**

Marco Cipolloni (Roma, 1962) è ordinario di Lingua, cultura e istituzioni dei paesi ispanofoni all'Università di Modena. Si occupa di cinema, propaganda e traduzione musicale ed audiovisiva, principalmente riguardo alla Spagna e all'America latina.

### ***Zero Day and Cloverfield: Shooting America's Scars***

**by Peter Turner**

Contemporary horror cinema of the last decade has seen a notable rise in the use of the mock-documentary format. Between 2001 and 2010, at least seventeen horror films have been produced using a first-person approach to the shooting of either the whole film or the majority of the film. Characters involved in the narrative and situated within the diegetic space are supposedly in control of the camera and the audience only sees what was recorded by them. In a recent article, James Rose notes 'they are presented to the audience as a work of fact, a recording of real events' (2009, p.49).

Current horror filmmakers are using recent events to create narratives about modern monsters. Wood suggested 'the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses' (1984, p.171). In 2001, America was attacked as the world watched (and recorded) the loss of nearly 3000 lives. In 1999 two Columbine High School teenagers killed and injured over thirty people in a shooting spree that was partly captured on the school's CCTV and the killers left behind home made videos that attempted to explain their actions. *Zero Day* (Coccio, 2003) and *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008) have tackled these tragic and horrifying events, attempting to make audiences recognise and confront occurrences they may have tried to repress. Waller maintains 'the horror film has engaged in a sort of extended dramatization of and response to the major public events and newsworthy topics in American history since 1968' (1987, p.12) and these films demonstrate the continuing struggle of horror filmmakers to reflect the times in which their films are produced.

The style of these films creates realism using a faked observational and interactive mode of filmmaking. Bill Nichols argues 'realism in fiction relates primarily to sensibility and tone; it is a matter of an aesthetic' (1991, p.166) and this can be applied to *Zero Day* (2003) and *Cloverfield* (2008). These films push for an incredible level of realism with their characters-with-digital-cameras aesthetic. Rose notes:

such films exploit the visual qualities of the documentary mode to heighten its false sense of realism-hand-held camera work, raw and uncut footage, poor sound and image quality, unscripted dialogue. When combined with a horror narrative the resulting film effectively deceives the audience into believing what they are viewing is actually real. (2009, p.49)

*Zero Day* (2003) tackles the Columbine High School shootings by creating the fictional video diaries of two teenagers (Andre and Cal) as they plan their crime. The opening credits feature footage of a birthday party and a home movie clearly captured on consumer digital technology without tripods or signs of editing or careful framing. This aesthetic is generally maintained throughout the

film. Some shots in the film, particularly those when both of the protagonists are in the frame, use a tripod and therefore are framed evenly and the camera remains static. The audience even sees the tripod as the camera is being placed on it for the first time in the film. This anchors for the audience the protagonists' use of fairly amateur equipment and that they are filming the events themselves.

Attention is also drawn to the recording equipment and lack of professional editing by the use of jump cuts. Night vision is also used on some occasions and as the camera is given to one of the protagonists on his birthday, he experiments briefly with the other in-camera effects such as sepia and solarise. These are common features of many domestic camcorders and will be recognisable to audience members who have had experience with such products. The camera changes hands at many points in the film and camera operators regularly talk from behind the camera addressing those characters on screen.

A common feature of these first-person films is the persistent use of dialogue to confirm for the audience why everything is being taped. In *Zero Day* (2003), the killers directly address the camera, stating 'when we're done, we're going to bequeath all our information to a third party source. Probably media.' They discuss who to send it to (CNN and Wolf Blitzer) and film themselves putting the tapes in a safety deposit box so they will not be found. They even address the authorities; 'we want to make this clear' and explain that their cousin knows nothing of their plot. They call the audience of the film (supposedly whoever first discovers their footage) the 'privileged few' and gloat that 'everyone else will see it on the news'. They show awareness of their legacy with dialogue such as 'the media will scrutinise this footage' and therefore prove Bazin's statement that photography is 'man's primitive need to have the last word in the argument with death by means of the form that endures' (1974, p.196).

*Zero Day* (2003) switches to CCTV footage as the teens enter the school. It is clearly coded as CCTV footage as it is all shot from a high angle in black and white, the camera is totally static and the date and time are on the bottom of the screen. The CCTV cuts between different cameras in the library (shown by the LIB 1, LIB 4, LIB 2 and LIB 6 printed next to the time and date) and all show different angles of the massacre. This directly references the actual CCTV footage (used in documentaries such as *Bowling for Columbine* (Moore, 2002) and freely available on the internet) captured in the school on the day of the real massacre and emphasises the reality of the events represented.

The mise-en-scene and narrative of the film clearly reference the Columbine High school shootings of 1999 with an early shot showing the teens in front of their school declaring it their worst enemy. Cal observes in his first 'Zero Day video diary', 'we're going to leave you all behind'. Their attack on a football player's house is their 'first act of war'. This idea of targeting bullies for revenge can

clearly be seen in the amateur videos of the two real Columbine killers. *Zero Day* (2003) also juxtaposes the normality of the teens' lives with their shocking actions. In one scene Andre is called by his mother who is checking he will be home for dinner. This emphasises the nature of the real killers and their ability to hide their intentions from everyone around them. The protagonists are seen practicing with guns echoing real footage of the actual killers which can be found on Youtube. Cal wears a Marilyn Manson t-shirt in one scene hinting at the moral panic that was created in the aftermath of the real killings. The characters burn all their books, video games, cd's and films in an attempt to stop the media from blaming their actions on the influence of such products. In the climax of the film, where the perspective shifts to the CCTV cameras, the only audio is from a call made from the mobile phone of a victim. The police responder is heard as are the gunshots and the shouts and taunts of the killers. This also echoes the real life events with a number of phone calls made by victims in Columbine High school at the time of the shooting being made available to the public through the media and internet.

Similarly, *Cloverfield* (2008) deals with post 9/11 fears of mass destruction in New York and also uses the increase in consumer-owned digital technology to capture this scenario in a modern, realistic style. The film opens with vertical colour bars on screen, a timecode at the bottom and a high pitched sound on the audio. It gives the audience the impression of the start of a low fidelity tape being watched. Some words on screen anchor that this is a piece of found footage about to be played. The titles are 'digital SD card' and 'camera retrieved at incident site'. The footage itself then begins and a voice can be heard from off camera. With the movement of the camera (clearly handheld), the date and time in the corner of the screen and the voice, the audience can establish that someone is filming this footage for themselves and describing what they can see.

*Cloverfield* (2008) then introduces a new element to the style of the film, as the footage distorts and jumps to a totally different scene in terms of location and characters. The audience can also see the date and time on screen, a common feature of home videos, filmed on consumer digital technology. The date is May 22<sup>nd</sup> anchoring for the audience that this new scene is filmed at a very different time to the previous one (April 27<sup>th</sup>). These temporal jumps are continued throughout the film. At many points during the narrative, the film cuts back to April 27<sup>th</sup>. The audience comes to understand that two of the protagonists of the film (Rob and Beth) had a day out together where Rob took Beth to Coney Island and they took the video camera with them. This was recorded on the digital SD card but is now being recorded over with the events of the night of May 22<sup>nd</sup>. Audiences of the film who have experience with video cameras will know that there can be jumps in the tape. These glitches in the tape where the recording technology may have cut out can leave a moment of whatever was recorded on the tape previously showing through. This occurs after a voice off screen (the camera operator) says 'I don't even know how to work this thing'. This character has previously asked 'is it on?' and filmed his own feet while walking (a

common indication that the camera has been left on without the camera operator's knowledge). His erratic zooming and filming of his own face also suggest he is not familiar with the technology he is using. The idea that the April 27<sup>th</sup> Coney Island footage was already on the tape is later anchored by Rob (the owner of the camera) saying to the camera operator 'is that my camera? Did you switch the tape 'cause I had a tape in there?' As the night progresses, so does the footage from April 27<sup>th</sup>. The first time the audience sees the footage from April 27<sup>th</sup> it is 6.42am and the couple are discussing going to Coney Island. Later there are very short shots of their train trip at 11.23am and 11.33am. The final time the tape jumps like this, it cuts from the protagonists on the morning of May 23<sup>rd</sup> as they are rocked by explosions (and presumably killed) to 6.17pm on April 27<sup>th</sup> as one of the characters declares 'I had a good day'. This creates dramatic irony and pathos as the audience is reminded of the protagonists' carefree day out, just after they have filmed the end of their lives.

Attention is drawn to the video recording technology in a number of other ways throughout the film. When Hud (the main camera operator in the film) is given the camera, the strap is visible as it is put around his neck. This anchors that he will be connected with the camera for the majority of the film. His lack of experience with the camera is clear as he begins by shooting very short shots where the camera is not focussed and pans around a room very fast. His shots then get more steady and meaningful as he trains the camera on specific subjects and records them for a reasonable length of time. He uses the zoom to spy on a girl he likes from across a room. Therefore the audience can learn something of the camera operator's feelings through his use of the recording technology. The camera is also used to record private conversations. One character says she will not tell Hud 'a secret' while the camera is on. The camera then cuts and the next shot is taken from a low angle to indicate that Hud has pretended to switch the camera off as he is not holding it at eye level and is therefore not looking through the viewfinder.

The camerawork in the film is often extremely shaky and clearly anchors the fact it is all handheld. The camera often misses important occurrences as it is so shaky and the character holding it is clearly not concentrating on what is being filmed. This often happens as the characters are running for their lives. Shots of feet running, the sound of heavy breathing, people running past and bumping the camera all help to demonstrate the chaotic nature of the filming circumstances and remind the audience of amateur 9/11 footage. Similarly to *Zero Day* (2003), the characters use night vision and the light on the camera. On two occasions the camera is dropped and left static on the ground as Hud falls over or has to help the other characters. In these shots the static camera can create fear in the audience as they cannot tell that Hud is alive as he is not being active with the camera. The film ends with the protagonists holding the camera pointed at themselves, directly addressing the camera and audience. The characters know their death is imminent and, like *Zero Days'* murderers, want to remain in existence through the use of the

camera and tape.

The dialogue in *Cloverfield* (2008) is also used to explain why the camera remains on and the characters keep filming. Hud is given the task of filming the party the characters are at and soon turns the camera on himself to declare he finds filming 'actually kind of fun'. This explains his motivation for keeping the camera running at the start of the film. His voice off screen can often be heard telling other people 'look out I'm documenting' and he even pushes through the crowd at the party shouting this as if he has a privileged position due to his role as camera operator. Later in the narrative, as the characters are in increasing danger, Hud is asked if he is still filming, to which he replies 'yeah people are going to want to know how it all went down... people need to see this... this is going to be important, people are going to watch this' a sentiment that echoes the thoughts and off-screen voices of all the people who grabbed their cameras to film the events of 9/11.

This reference to 9/11 is continuous and apparent in many elements of the style and narrative of *Cloverfield* (2008). The film is set in New York with iconic locations such as Central Park and the Brooklyn Bridge being used. When the monster first attacks, there is confusion. Distant roars and explosions are followed by shots of people crowding around the television. The news declares there has been an earthquake. This could be a reference to the news media's confusion and lack of information when the first plane hit the two towers. The news broadcast conflicting reports of what had happened to the tower as it was not widely known at first what had caused the explosion. Also amateur footage on 9/11 showed people standing in Times Square staring at screens that were playing news footage of the events as they unfolded. As Dixon notes, 'no disaster in history has been as well documented, with a variety of news cameras and amateur camcorders. Literally thousands of hours of footage exists of the events of 9/11' (Dixon, 2004, p.24).

The characters run to the roof and the mise-en-scene is filled with strangers talking to each other. Conversations can be overheard as people discuss the 'shaking', the 'tremors' and whether it is 'a terrorist attack'. This is reminiscent of the amateur videos recorded on 9/11 where people discussed the events in the streets. The mise-en-scene of exploding buildings, people running in corridors and down stairs and the sounds of screaming and crying are all familiar from Youtube videos of 9/11. The Statue of Liberty's head is another use of the iconography of New York as it falls damaged into the street. This refers to the destruction of another iconic New York landmark, the World Trade Centre. Hud captures footage of this moment and people with phones and cameras immediately surround the statue's severed head. This focus on amateurs capturing the unfolding events is another reference to 9/11.

This is followed by the collapsing of a huge building and the image of an ensuing dust cloud. The characters take cover in a shop. This directly references videos captured on 9/11 of people running from the dust cloud as the towers collapse and the camera operators seeking shelter in

shops and buildings or even just between cars. The producer J.J. Abrams is quoted as saying 'I was thinking about the effect of YouTube. Today, if you look online for two minutes, you can find video... of people hiding in a store or hiding under a car, watching other people's reactions. We wanted that true sense of realism.' (Emerson, 2008).

Next Hud films the aftermath with dazed and dust-covered people walking around dust-covered streets. The sound of people coughing can be heard and people are sharing bottles of water. People gather in the street to discuss what happened and what people have seen. There is a shot of bits of paper floating in the air. All this references the amateur and semi-professional footage of 9/11. The characters decide to 'get the hell out of Manhattan' and attempt to use the Brooklyn Bridge. Footage and photos from 9/11 show the people of New York doing exactly this.

The style of these films makes the characters and situations feel more real to the audience and also promote increased identification as the entire film is seen from one or two characters perspective. The 'unstated convention of fiction films [is] that point-of-view shots develop around characters with whom we come to identify' (Nichols, 1991, p.179). These films take the use of point-of-view shots to a modern extreme. Like with genuine documentary makers, the realist style emphasises 'the filmmakers limited power over the world with which he or she engages' (Nichols, 1991, p.185). The character with a camera in *Cloverfield* (2008) has very little control over events as he flees the destruction of New York by a giant monster. On the other hand, the characters of *Zero Day* (2003) are in control of their own actions and have a far more composed and interactive style. Hight states 'Mockumentaries 'work' because of the assumptions and expectations that we as viewers have of representations of reality. When we see a text that looks and sounds real, we tend to begin reading and responding to it as factual' (Hight, 2001). This highlights the appeal of this realist style for horror filmmakers. The fear an audience feels should be more genuine because of the intimacy created with the characters. Also the films will affect an audience more due to their recognisable reference to actual crimes. As Rose argues 'the horror of these films may indeed be fictional but the horrors they actually represent and symbolise are very real indeed' (Rose, 2009, p.52).

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### **Bios**

Peter Turner graduated from Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College in 2005 after writing a dissertation on the representation of the family in American horror films of the 1970s. His interest in film, and particularly the horror and documentary genres, continues to grow. Peter is currently teaching Film and Media at Bracknell and Wokingham College and frequently contributing articles to Media Magazine.



**Blood, evil and videotapes. L'orrore senza fine di Rec.  
di Miguel Ángel Pérez-Gómez e Milagros Expósito-Barea**

I registi Jaume Balagueró e Paco Plaza sono i responsabili di quello che è forse il successo più importante dell'horror iberico, il dittico cinematografico *Rec* (2007) e *Rec2* (2009). I due autori sono riusciti a creare un prodotto che prendendo spunto da format televisivi, incrementa il proprio *potenziale terrorizzante*, veicolandolo in maniera più diretta allo spettatore, attraverso le forme del reportage televisivo.

La collaborazione tra Jaume e Paco nasce con il film musicale *O.T La película* (2002), a cui fanno seguito i film-tv della serie *Historias para no dormir* (2005-2006). Lavorano entrambi per la casa produttrice Filmax, di Julio Fernández, che scommette forte sul cinema di genere (horror, giallo e fantascienza), con capitale al 100% spagnolo, puntando su registi esordienti, dotati di uno stile personale ma comunque esportabili. La Filmax avvia negli anni novanta un progetto chiamato *Fantastic Factory*, dedicato esclusivamente a produrre fantascienza/exploitation. Paco Plaza e Jaume Balagueró, sotto la supervisione di Julio Fernandez e Brian Yuzna, realizzano per *Fantastic Factory* le proprie opere prime, due adattamenti da opere dell'autore britannico Ramsey Campbell [1]: *Nameless - Entità nascosta* (*Los Sin Nombre*, 1999) e *Second Name* (*El Segundo Nombre*, 2002).

Alla fine degli anni Sessanta Barcellona diventa la capitale spagnola del cinema d'avanguardia, per la sua capacità di legare stili eterogenei e interpreti di diversa formazione; negli anni Novanta torna a ricoprire un ruolo centrale nel rilancio dell'industria cinematografica, ma questa volta con il cinema di genere. Alcuni giovani registi, che abitano a Barcellona, raccolgono lo spirito ribelle degli appartenenti all'antica *Escuela de Barcelona*, e decidono di affrontare il cinema da una prospettiva estrema, con un occhio alle tendenze *underground* sia americane sia europee. Si crea una sorta di asse tra produzioni horror di Barcellona e quelle di Madrid: nella capitale catalana i registi si concentrano sul genere in modo autoriale e innovativo, cercando nuovi meccanismi per esprimere la paura, nel secondo caso i film di genere è realizzato nei canoni del mainstream, come nel caso di *The Others* (*Los otros*, 2001) di Alejandro Amenabar.

È quindi possibile parlare di una *Nueva Escuela de Barcelon* [2], composta principalmente da tre registi: Nacho Cerda, Paco Plaza e Jaume Balagueró. La carriera cinematografica di questi registi è in parallelo: negli anni Novanta esordiscono nel cortometraggio e nel primo decennio del XXI secolo trovano il loro spazio nel mondo dei lungometraggi. Tuttavia, ciò che ci permette di considerare questi registi come una scuola è lo spirito millenarista delle loro opere, che affrontano con una estetica lugubre e rozza, in cui prevale il buio, tematiche radicate nei meandri dell'animo umano: la morte, i riti ancestrali, l'impossibilità della società moderna di gestire ciò che non può spiegare. Caratterizzati da un'estetica prevalentemente *underground* di ispirazione marcatamente anglo-sassone, da una continua sperimentazione delle possibilità che offre il mezzo, i film di questi registi rivitalizzano il genere horror cercando di allontanarsi dallo spavento facile e dai finali ovvi, distinguendosi per una cifra autoriale che li differenzia dal panorama

nazionale, e porta a riconoscere in Nacho Cerda, Paco Plaza e Jaume Balagueró gli eredi della *Escuela de Barcelona* originale.

*Horror in presa diretta. L'exploitation del reportage televisivo*

Negli anni Novanta comincia ad emergere nella televisione spagnola un nuovo modo di raccontare l'attualità, che avvicina la notizia allo spettatore, sia per un maggiore focus sull'informazione locale, sia per l'utilizzo del reportage e della copertura in diretta (on-site). Avvicinare lo spettatore alla notizia, conferisce credibilità alla stessa.

Nel 1993 va in onda il programma televisivo *Madrid Directo* (Telemadrid, 1993). Il programma si rivela un successo, un esempio la cui formula sarà adattata a nuovi settori e argomenti, in programmi e notiziari in cui l'immediatezza e la vicinanza agli eventi è più importante della compiutezza formale e della cura realizzativa. Questa estetica diventa un canone di veridicità, una garanzia di fedeltà al reale.

Questi format televisivi, il cui titolo finisce con la parola *Directo*, colgono i loro primi successi in ambito regionale. Gli argomenti trattati si concentrano prevalentemente sulla cronaca, la denuncia sociale, la gastronomia, la meteorologia e le feste tradizionali.

Ma è a partire dal 2005 con il successo di *Callejeros* [3] (Cuatro, 2005), l'edizione nazionale di *España Directo* [4] (TVE, 2005) e *Españoles en el Mundo* (TVE, 2005) che in Spagna comincia una vera rivoluzione televisiva: ogni network nazionale ha il proprio programma *Directo*. Alcuni, come *Callejeros*, si concentrano sul *wild side* più decadente della società spagnola; è pre-registrato ma punta all'immediatezza con l'utilizzo della camera a mano manovrata dal reporter stesso. A partire dal 2005 i programmi d'informazione di questa tipologia, che in ambito accademico viene definita *tele realtà*, si moltiplicano. Oltre a quelli già citati, altri titoli rappresentativi sono *Comando Actualidad* [5] (TVE, 2008), *Vidas Anónimas* [6] (LaSexta, 2007), *Repor* (TVE, 2007), o *docureality* come *U-24* (T5, 2004) o *21 Dias* [7] (Cuatro, 2009).

Balagueró e Paco Plaza Jaume si ispirano al reportage televisivo per enfatizzare le sensazioni spaventose generate dal cinema horror. Gli spettatori percepiscono al cinema la stessa forza, la stessa prossimità che sentono nei programmi televisivi, nel soggiorno di casa, qualcosa che sembra ancor più reale di quello in cui si imbattono ogni giorno per strada. In questi film lo spettatore non è passivo, è parte del film, grazie all'estetica veridica mutuata dalla presa diretta televisiva, in cui il montaggio ed il controllo dell'inquadratura sono ridotti al minimo nel tentativo di coinvolgere il pubblico in una esperienza di orrore diversa, da vivere più che da guardare. Questo risultato è perseguito anche attraverso uno specifico modo di lavorare con gli attori, a cui viene data una sceneggiatura estremamente ridotta, un canovaccio sul quale improvvisare, mirando ad una destrutturazione interpretativa che conferisca maggiore intensità ai momenti di acme horrorifico. Inoltre gli interpreti provano senza che ci sia l'operatore, in modo che le interazioni siano più spontanee e libere al momento della registrazione. Infine, quanto al casting, si preferisce la selezione di attori poco conosciuti, il cui volto anonimo contribuisca alla sensazione di non essere

davanti ad un film, ad una rappresentazione del reale, ma davanti ad una pura e non mediata registrazione dei fatti.

#### *Realtà mediata al servizio del millenarismo*

*Rec* e *Rec 2* sono del resto stati influenzati anche da quella che Adam Parfrey ha definito come Cultura dell'Apocalisse, generatasi negli anni Novanta ai margini della cultura ufficiale, nei circuiti intellettuali più alternativi e che era immersa nella disperata attesa del "simulacro cristiano previsto per la fine del mondo" [8]. Un universo popolato da artisti estremi, leader della 'conspiranoia', sette religiose ultra, ecc., a cui Plaza e Balagueró contribuiscono con un cinema buio, apocalittico, esteticamente e concettualmente disturbante, con una fascinazione per la morte che riecheggia l'immaginario del lavoro del fotografo Joel-Peter Witkin. Come il fotografo americano, questi registi fanno un ritratto patologico della società contemporanea attraverso una trasmutazione iconica che crea una *tavolozza* di dolore dalla quale attingere per tratteggiare l'orrore che permea gli anfratti della contemporaneità.

In questo senso *Rec* e *Rec 2* possono essere considerati un dittico horror, che combina i format televisivi più attuali, lo sguardo-soggettiva tipico dei videogiochi (l'influenza è più evidente a *Rec 2*) e i grandi temi affrontati da questi registi nel corso della loro carriera: la morte, il male, la famiglia, la comunità, la religione.

In entrambi film è evidente la confluenza di questi temi. Nel caso della morte si stabilisce una transizione che porta ad una nuova incarnazione della persona. I film di questi registi ruotano attorno una comunità configurata come un clan, in cui il male, attraverso una sorta di parascienza ritualistica legittimata da un uso strumentale della religione, viene raffinato e concentrato nella sua forma più pura con l'intento di sradicarlo, poi, in maniera definitiva. Ma, in un film horror, il percorso verso la salvezza non è mai così scontato. La rappresentazione del male in questi film è legata all'oscurità, al buio, che richiama l'ignoto, l'invedibile, il caos, la paura atavica della morte, l'inizio della notte primordiale ma anche l'origine dell'universo e della vita, immaginario ricorrente nelle credenze religiose più diverse [9]. Dal punto di vista filmico il buio, il nero vengono inseriti nella narrazione attraverso quelle imperfezioni tecniche, quell'estetica dell'errore legato alla presa diretta: scarti di luce, variazioni di tensione elettrica diventano un meccanismo stilistico costante. Altro elemento ricorrente in *Rec* e *Rec2* è un certo feticismo religioso, evidente nella ripetuta presenza del crocifisso, insieme ad altre sculture o immagini sacre, inserite in un contesto malsano, maligno, per evidenziare come l'uso deviante della religione diventi esso stesso terreno fertile per la propagazione del male.

#### **Note**

[1] *The Nameless* (1981) y *Pact of the Fathers* (2001)

[2] Questo termine è stato coniato dagli autori di questo articolo a M. Expósito-Barea e M. A. Pérez-Gómez. "Balagueró, Plaza y Cerdá. La Nueva Escuela de Barcelona". Presentato al I Congreso de

Cine Español de Málaga (2010).

[3] <http://www.cuatro.com/callejeros/reportajes/>

[4] <http://www.rtve.es/television/edirecto/reportajes/>

[5] <http://www.rtve.es/television/comando-actualidad/reportajes/>

[6] [http://www.lasexta.com/programa/ver/vidas\\_anonimas/509](http://www.lasexta.com/programa/ver/vidas_anonimas/509)

[7] <http://www.cuatro.com/21-dias/videos/>

[8] A. Parfrey (Ed.). *Cultura del Apocalipsis*. Valdemar. Madrid. 2002 p. 23

[9] A. Navarro. "La Fantastic Factory. Terror Made in Spain" en C. Aguilar. *Cine fantástico y de terror español 1984-2004*. Donostia Cultura, San Sebastián. 2005 pp. 221-258.

## Bios

Miguel A. Pérez-Gómez è Laureato in Comunicazione Audiovisiva e dottorando del Dipartimento di Comunicación Audiovisual, Publicidad y Literatura de la Universidad de Sevilla, membro del gruppo di ricerca ADMIRA, lavora sui seguenti temi: Fandom, cultura partecipativa, manipolazione dell'immagini, Web 2.0, videogiochi, cinema di fantascienza. Attualmente lavora alla pubblicazione di un e-book sulla serialità televisiva intitolato *Previously On*.

Milagros Barea-Expósito è Dottoranda del Dipartimento di Comunicación Audiovisual, Publicidad y Literatura de la Universidad de Sevilla. La sua attività di ricerca principale si concentra sul cinema Thailandese, in particolare il Nuovo Cinema Thailandese, su cui ha scritto numerosi articoli e pubblicazioni internazionali. E interessata anche in altri cinematografie *marginali* e ha scritto diversi articoli relativi alle serie tv.