

# Found-Footage Horror and the Frame's Undoing

by CECILIA SAYAD

**Abstract:** This article finds in the found-footage horror cycle an alternative way of understanding the relationship between horror films and reality, which is usually discussed in terms of allegory. I propose the investigation of framing, considered both figuratively (framing the film as documentary) and stylistically (the framing in handheld cameras and in static long takes), as a device that playfully destabilizes the separation between the film and the surrounding world. The article's main case study is the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, but examples are drawn from a variety of films.

Surprised by her boyfriend's excitement about the strange phenomena registered with his HDV camera, Katie (Katie Featherston), the protagonist of *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007), asks, "Are you not scared?" "It's a little bizarre," he replies. "But we're having it documented, it's going to be fine, OK?"

This reassuring statement implies that the film image may normalize the events that make up the fabric of *Paranormal Activity*. It is as if by recording the slamming doors, floating sheets, and passing shadows that take place while they sleep, Micah and Katie could tame the demon that follows the female lead wherever she goes. Indeed, the film repeatedly shows us the two characters trying to make sense of the images they capture, watching them on a computer screen and using technology that translates the recorded sounds they cannot hear into waves they can visualize. The film suggests that by containing the paranormal activity inside the borders of a screen, Micah and Katie can better understand, measure, and even control it.

The just-mentioned dialogue also encapsulates the implications of the coexistence between a documentary aesthetic and horrific events. With the found-footage horror film, the interpenetration of reality and fiction that was traditionally discussed in terms of allegory or topical references has found a new locus: the film's form. The proliferation of horror movies imitating the style of found-footage documentaries since the late 1990s has transposed the reality factor that once figured in content onto the film's form. These films display the raw cutting, elliptical narrative, and grainy, shaky, and precariously framed images that mimic the style of

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amateur filmmaking; the images are usually introduced by title cards stating that the work we see compiles footage shot by characters that have either died or disappeared.

The found-footage horror is an international film cycle whose genesis can be traced back to the Italian *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), which displayed mock found footage of the tragic deaths of a TV crew shooting a film in the Amazon within the context of a fictional narrative.<sup>1</sup> *Cannibal Holocaust* has often been categorized as a snuff movie, which involves the exploitative documentation of torture and murder.<sup>2</sup> The documentary authenticity of snuff movies has often been challenged—the retitling of the low-budget horror *Slaughter* as *Snuff* (Michael Findlay and Roberta Findlay, 1976) explores this uncertainty.<sup>3</sup> The mimicking of a snuff aesthetic can also be seen in the Japanese *Guinea Pig: Devil's Experiment* (Satoru Ogura, 1985) and in the largely overlooked *The Last Broadcast* (Stefan Avalos and Lance Weiler, 1998), which can be related in turn to a found-footage horror approach.<sup>4</sup> But *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) brought this cycle into the mainstream.<sup>5</sup> The list of horror films taking on the mode of found-footage documentary since this point includes, among others, *My Little Eye* (Marc Evans, 2002), *Diary of the Dead* (George A. Romero, 2007), *[•]REC* (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007), with its sequels (Balagueró and Plaza, 2009; Plaza, 2012; Balagueró, 2014) and its American remake—*Quarantine* (John Erick Dowdle, 2008)—as well as *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *Home Movie* (Christopher Denham, 2008), the *Paranormal Activity* films (Oren Peli, 2007; Tod “Kip” Williams, 2010; Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2011 and 2012; Christopher B. Landon, 2014; Gregory Plotkin, 2015), *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* (Dowdle, 2009), *The Last Exorcism* (Daniel Stamm, 2010), *Trollhunter* (André Øvredal,

1 The notion of cycle surpasses the generic frame, identifying similar tropes across different genres, thus suiting the discussion of films presented at once as horror and documentary, and furthermore each of the genres' various forms: sci-fi, possession, and haunted-house horror films, as well as talking-head and vérité documentary. For a study of cycles, see Frank Krutnik and Peter Stanfield, “Cycles of Sensation: Popular Media, Thrills, and Outrage,” *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 1–5.

2 See, for example, Steve Jones, “Dying to Be Seen: Snuff-Fiction's Problematic Fantasies of 'Reality,’” *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies* 19 (2011): <http://www.scope.nottingham.ac.uk/article.php?issue=19&id=1252>; and Neil Jackson, “*Cannibal Holocaust*, Realist Horror, and Reflexivity,” *Post Script* 21, no. 3 (2002): 32–45.

3 The hoaxes surrounding the release of *Snuff* involve a new ending showing the murder of an actress, supposedly by the film crew, and the hiring of fake protesters picketing the theaters showing the movie. See Jones, “Dying to Be Seen”; and Scott Aaron Stine, “The Snuff Film: The Making of an Urban Legend,” *Skeptical Enquirer* 23, no. 3 (1999): [http://www.csicop.org/si/show/snuff\\_film\\_the\\_making\\_of\\_an\\_urban\\_legend/](http://www.csicop.org/si/show/snuff_film_the_making_of_an_urban_legend/). I thank one of the anonymous peer reviewers for bringing *Snuff* to my attention.

4 A recent exemplar of what Steve Jones calls the “faux-snuff” film is the *August Underground* trilogy (Fred Vogel, 2011; Vogel et al., 2003; Vogel, 2007). See Jones, “Dying to Be Seen.”

5 Although films like *The Blair Witch Project* and the first *Paranormal Activity* were independent, low-budget productions, they generated sequels displaying higher production values and financed by studios. *Blair Witch* was produced by Artisan Entertainment and Haxan Films (headquartered at Disney's Production Studios in Orlando, Florida) and distributed by Artisan Entertainment. The *Paranormal Activity* films have all been distributed by Paramount Pictures, with the budget of around US\$15,000 estimated for the first film jumping to US\$3 million for the second film of the series. It is also important to point out that the first *Paranormal Activity* was purchased by DreamWorks (acquired by Paramount in 2005) and commercially released in the United States in 2009, after being screened at the Screampfest Film Festival in October 2007, the Slamdance Film Festival in January 2008, and the Telluride Film Festival in September 2009.

2010), *Apollo 18* (Gonzalo López-Gallego, 2011), *The Devil Inside* (William Brent Bell, 2012), the anthology films *V/H/S* and *V/H/S 2* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin, David Bruckner, Tyler Gillett et al., 2012; Simon Barrett, Jason Eisener, Gareth Evans et al., 2013), *The Dyatlov Pass Incident* (also known as *Devil's Pass* [Renny Harlin, 2013]), and *Devil's Due* (Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, 2014). Although allegorical readings of these works may still be relevant, the reality element lies less in the content of the films than in the form. If real location, grainy cinematography, and handheld camera in *Night of the Living Dead* (George A. Romero, 1968), *The Last House on the Left* (Wes Craven, 1972), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) contributed an aesthetic of realism to the horror movie, the found-footage specimen takes this to extremes by literally framing the film as factual.

Horror films' claims about the veracity of the events depicted go beyond the found-footage mode. *The Last House on the Left*, which was actually based on Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960), simply lies about the real status of the story it tells with opening credits that read: "The events you are about to witness are true. Names and locations have been changed to protect those individuals still living." *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* may have been inspired by the acts of real-life serial killer Ed Gein, but the prologue's suggestion that the film's characters were based on real people (victims of "one of the most bizarre crimes in the annals of American history") is a hoax. Other films make claims about the truthfulness of their literary sources irrespective of the veracity of the narrated experiences. *The Amityville Horror* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1979), for example, was based on the novel describing the allegedly real paranormal experiences of the Lutz family on Long Island, New York. Likewise, *The Conjuring* (James Wan, 2013) was based on an event involving real-life paranormal investigators Ed and Lorraine Warren—who had been hired to solve the case that inspired the *Amityville* book and subsequent films.

The found-footage horror, however, goes beyond such claims. The films are not presented to us as "inspired by" real events—they are supposed to constitute the audiovisual documentation of these events. What we see, we are told, are *real* people, not characters *based* on them. This combination of the work's uncertain fictional status and low production values playfully collapses the boundaries separating the depicted universe from reality, and by extension challenges the ontological status of the fiction film as self-contained object. The horror movie is thus presented not as mere artifact but as a fragment of the real world, and the implication is that its material might well spill over into it.

While considerations about reality in the study of horror usually address the possibility of a causal connection between a general mood and the tone of the films produced at a certain point in history, I here take a different approach—one that reflects on the increasingly tenuous boundaries separating representation from real life, the popularity of reality TV being this phenomenon's clearest illustration. I propose that we look at what the horror film's link with reality says about the movies' desire to at once erect and erode the boundaries separating the fictional diegesis from the world that surrounds it—understood both historically (a sociopolitical reality) and spatially (the physical location in which a film is shot). I introduce this discussion

with considerations of the territory of representation through both the violation and the expansion of its boundaries. Then, after addressing the ways in which reality has featured in the study of horror films, I explore the impact of the found-footage horror's documentary claim and style on our experience of the connection between horror and reality, using the *Paranormal Activity* series as my primary case study. My discussion is informed by considerations of the cinematic frame that draw from works by Dudley Andrew, André Bazin, Roger Cardinal, and Evan Calder Williams, in articulations that suggest the frame's expansion both through the infringement of the screen's borders and through decentered composition.

**The Borders of Representation.** The shifting relationship between artwork and the surrounding world has preoccupied practitioners and theorists for nearly a century. Across various art forms we see a movement toward “loosening” the borders of the frame—real and imaginary—that defines the territory of representation, a frame that is, in addition, understood both as a spatial and a conceptual demarcation. Jacques Derrida's assessment of Immanuel Kant's conceptualization of the frame in *Critique of Judgment* questions precisely the possibility of clearly distinguishing between the inside and the outside of a work.<sup>6</sup> The frame in painting (one of the constituents of Kant's considerations about the *parergon*) has a “thickness, a surface which separates [the work] not only (as Kant would have it) from the integral inside, from the body proper of the *ergon*, but also from the outside, from the wall on which the painting is hung, from the space in which a column is erected, then, step by step, from the whole field of historical, economic, political inscription” in which a work is produced.<sup>7</sup> The “parergonal frame,” Derrida explains, “stands out against two grounds [*fonds*], but with respect to each of those grounds, it merges [*se fond*] into the other.”<sup>8</sup>

Derrida is of course referring to the uncertain status of the material frame that ornaments the painting, but this blending of inside and outside echoes in revisionist approaches to the separation between the realms of representation and reality. In modern architecture, for example, glass surfaces incorporate the exterior space into the interior construction.<sup>9</sup> In a more abstract sense, the turning of ordinary objects into art by the Dada movement has collapsed the domains of art and everyday life. In the 1950s and 1960s the theatrical “happening” not only removed the performance from a clearly demarcated stage, bringing it to spaces other than the theater; its reliance on the interaction with the audience also breached the gap separating performer and spectator. In the theater proper we currently find practices that revise the distinction between stage and audience. In their own ways both the intimate shows

6 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1911).

7 Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 60–61.

8 Ibid.

9 See Stéphane Dawans, “Le vacillement des contours dans l'architecture contemporaine,” in *Cadre, seuil, limite: La question de la frontière dans la théorie de l'art*, ed. Thierry Lenain and Rudy Steinmetz (Brussels: La Lettre Volée, 2010), 191–210.

of the Belgium group Ontroerend Goed, often performed on a one-to-one basis to individual members of an audience, and the Catalan La Fura dels Baus's provocative "assaults" on spectators invite the public into the scenic space and put them in direct contact with actors. Other groups stretch the territory of representation by steering away from the playhouse: the Brazilian Teatro da Vertigem has performed in prisons, hospitals, churches, and tunnels.

Film has likewise moved away from the movie theater. The notion of expanded cinema refers to the practice of showing cinematic works in new venues and formats: alongside paintings and sculptures in museum installations or, as with certain works by Peter Greenaway, in the form of "projected images around city centers."<sup>10</sup> Secret Cinema, in the United Kingdom, promotes "surprise" screenings for its members in "secret" locations like railway tunnels, parks, and hospitals—communicated only to those viewers who sign up online for a screening.<sup>11</sup> We view films using our DVD or Blu-ray players, computer screens, and cell phones. Raymond Bellour's conceptualization of the "*entr'images*," in Dudley Andrew's words, describes precisely this "dismantl[ing of] the film frame, letting the cinematic lifeblood hemorrhage into a range of multimedia states."<sup>12</sup> Even within the confines of a movie theater, the film is never fully contained within the silver screen. Developments in sound first split the source for the audiovisual material between screen and speakers, until surrounding systems further decentered our experience of the movie, complemented by sound coming from different locations around the theater. The image itself has often threatened to break loose. 3D technology not only adds depth to the projected image but also plays on the idea that the filmed universe might reach out to the audience, breaching the boundaries of the screen frame. As far back as 1895, the accounts of spectators startled by the approaching train in the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* pointed to the possibility that the image might violate the limits set by the screen, however contentious those audiences' motivations may be to early cinema scholars.<sup>13</sup>

The history of silent cinema shows us also that the screening of films was often complemented by events happening outside of it, with live performances by musicians providing a score or narrators adding explanation and, in the case of the Japanese *benshi*, drama to the silent action. In the 1950s and 1960s, William Castle famously supplemented the screening of his horror movies with extrafilmic stunts such as the selling of death-by-fright insurance policies to ticket holders for *Macabre* (1958), a skeleton hanging from the cinema's ceiling in screenings of *House on Haunted Hill* (1959), and vibrating motors located under the seats in venues showing *The Tingler*

10 Dudley Andrew, *What Cinema Is!* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 87.

11 The main page of the Secret Cinema website (<http://www.secretcinema.org>) stresses, "The time is now to change how we watch films."

12 Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 86.

13 Tom Gunning, for one, has questioned the idea that audiences were fearful, claiming instead that their reactions were motivated by the thrill about the new technology of motion pictures. See Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 818–832.

(1959).<sup>14</sup> The appeal to other senses in Castle's practices (he called the vibrating devices *Percepto*) evokes techniques such as *Smell-O-Vision*—the use of scents to enhance the viewing experience. The film would not only surpass the screen; it would surpass vision itself.

These examples illustrate a desire both to expand the space of representation and to demolish the walls separating art from everyday life, an impulse somehow evoked in the found-footage horror. The false claim over the film's documentary status may constitute a gimmick playing on our worst fear—that the horrific events represented on the screen might take place in real life. But the gimmick does not undermine what this cycle has to say about the ways we generally interact with images. My entry into this area of investigation is the found-footage mode's contribution to horror's long-standing spatial exploration of the filmic frame. The frame, in horror, invites considerations about both the harboring of monsters off-screen and the dangers lurking in the dark corners of a delimited visual field. I am not, however, proposing a return to the purely visual. The false documentary claim of found-footage horror invites questions about our affective relationship to the image and, by extension, to the films' ontological status, as I discuss later.

Needless to say, no element of film language works in isolation—sound and editing, for example, contribute to choices in framing. If in this article I am focusing on the frame, it is because the continuity between film and the surrounding real finds a visual manifestation in framing's separation between on- and off-screen spaces. Sound, for that matter, has a similar function—it is an essential element in the creation of narrative spaces, expanding or reducing them through both the manipulation of their acoustic qualities (muffled sounds or echoes may suggest cluttered or empty spaces, for example) and the sound source's position in relation to depicted elements and figures (establishing distance relations, expanding the space beyond the frame when the source of sound is off-screen, and immersing the spectator in the filmed universe through surround systems). But it is the tension between containment and the uncontainable in theoretical articulations of the cinematic frame that makes it worth isolating in a study about the found-footage's impact on our perception of film's connection with the surrounding reality.

The *Paranormal Activity* movies are of particular interest to this investigation, for they address the relationship between the image and reality in ways that go beyond the adoption of a documentary *style*, dwelling also on this mode's philosophical questions: the notion that the image might explain the world and reveal what the naked eye cannot see. After all, the series features cameras set to record and help understand paranormal phenomena. This trope, in turn, calls for the exploration of the framed image both as the locus for the appearance of evil forces that would not otherwise be seen and as a fragment of a larger reality that cannot be fully grasped. If, on the one hand, the frame isolates the filmed image from the surrounding space, pointing to the filmmaker's ability to control that demarcated visual field, then, on the other hand, *Paranormal Activity*'s mode of displaying the appearance of evil forces in long takes and

14 Kevin Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business, 1953–1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 96–98.

long shots presents the frame as permeable, porous. The focus on duration that comes with this kind of framing makes the series stand out among other found-footage horror films, from which I also draw examples. The temporal structure of some of *Paranormal Activity*'s shots offers the opportunity to tackle broader questions about the relationship between film and reality, for they touch on Bazin's approach to cinematic realism, which I will discuss later. The frame, in both handheld and static shots, is as incapable of containing what exists within its territory as it is of protecting it from the invasion of what lies beyond its borders.

Indeed, the *Paranormal Activity* movies openly address questions about the ontological status of the framed image that have long concerned the study of cinema.<sup>15</sup> They at once illustrate and expand the discussion about the centrality of framing to our perception of the boundaries setting the film apart from the larger world, offering an alternative way of understanding the irruption of reality in horror films and trading content for style.

This is not to say that I believe they can be separated; nor do I propose a formalist approach to the horror film. In fact, the following analysis suggests that the found-footage mode is also symptomatic of the ways we relate to film in an era marked by easy access to both images and cameras, and by invitations to "broadcast" ourselves on websites like YouTube. The playful blurring of the distinction between fact and fiction is likewise part of the phenomenon that explains the appeal of reality shows—the turning of everydayness into spectacle. After all, reality television fictionalizes real life through depictions of family dynamics in *The Osbournes* (MTV, 2002–2005) and *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!, 2007–), just as it documents staged, artificial setups in game shows like *Big Brother* (CBS, 2000–) and *Survivor* (CBS, 2000–), and even follows investigators of paranormal activity in the British *Most Haunted* (Living TV, 2002–2010; Most Haunted TV, 2013; Really, 2014–), and the American *Ghost Hunters* (Sci-Fi, 2004–2009; Syfy 2009–2011), *Paranormal State* (A&E, 2007–2011), and *Paranormal Cops* (A&E, 2010), to name only a few. In that sense, the proposed study of framing bears both an allegorical element, as the found-footage cycle is considered a symptom of its time, and a topical one, for the act of filming one's life is widespread.

**Toward Reality: Allegory, Topicality, and Documentary.** The found-footage horror relocates to the film form references to reality that have pervaded the study of the genre in allegorical readings, which in turn elevated works dismissed as either entertainment or exploitation to the respectable category of social commentary. In the United States, the familiar interpretations of horror and science-fiction films as allegories of social and historical anxieties acquired stronger political overtones with the emergence of what critics have called the modern American horror in the 1960s. In contrast to the communist-fearing, loss-of-individuality plots of Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) and Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), which—as was typical of the Cold War period—addressed the fear of nuclear technology and invasions by alien forces, the threat in these new films resided within

15 *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015) had not been released at the time of writing and editing this article. The film is therefore excluded from detailed discussion of other movies in the franchise.



the country itself, and in some cases, within the home (the incestuous undertones of *Psycho* [Alfred Hitchcock, 1960] have been crucial to historians accounting for this shift in the genre).<sup>16</sup>

The tackling of domestic problems imbued the horror film with a more direct form of social commentary, expressed through an appropriately realist aesthetics defined by real locations, handheld camera, and grainy cinematography. The movies were considered as capturing a general mood defined by disillusionment and conspiracy paranoia resulting from the traumatic experiences of political assassinations (John F. Kennedy in 1963 and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968), the American participation in the Vietnam War (1955–1975), civil rights riots in the 1960s, and the Watergate scandal of 1972 (followed by President Richard Nixon’s resignation in 1974). Not only were some of the films referring to current events still fresh in the minds of their audiences; they would, in addition, incorporate a highly evocative iconography, which rendered the horror movie topical. Adam Simon’s documentary *The American Nightmare* (2000) uses montage to invite analogies between the horror film and the social mores of the United States, juxtaposing images of oppression in civil rights riots to the rednecks, dogs, and rifles displayed in *Night of the Living Dead*; the summary execution of a suspected Vietcong by a South Vietnamese police chief to the shooting of Mari in *The Last House on the Left*; and news footage of “no gas, bone dry” signs during the oil crisis to the empty gas station in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. Simon’s film, however, is a belated addition to a vast repertory of allegorical readings of horror in academic circles—by Robin Wood, Andrew Britton, Fredric Jameson, Robert Torry, Sumiko Higashi, Adam Lowenstein, and Kevin J. Wetmore, among many others.<sup>17</sup> Lowenstein is actually among the interviewed scholars (alongside Tom Gunning and Carol Clover) whose testimonies weave together the film and news images featured in *The American Nightmare*. Although these examples refer mainly to US cinema, the allegorical practices do not constitute an exclusively American phenomenon. Lowenstein’s *Shocking Representations* offers a detailed study of national allegories in horror films made in France, Britain, the United States, Canada, and Japan—and the list of found-footage horrors provided earlier shows the equally international range of this cycle.

16 Kevin Heffernan points out that Mark Jancovich challenges the readings of 1950s films as Cold War allegories of the American anxiety about foreignness, claiming that in these “invasion” narratives the enemy is not necessarily external to the nation. See Mark Jancovich, *Rational Fears: American Horror in the 1950s* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1996), discussed in Heffernan, *Ghoul, Gimmicks, and Gold*, 10.

17 See, for example, Robin Wood and Richard Lippe, eds., *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979); Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan . . . and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Andrew Britton, *Britton War Film: The Complete Film Criticism of Andrew Britton*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009); Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Robert Torry, “Therapeutic Narrative: *The Wild Bunch*, *Jaws*, and Vietnam,” *Velvet Light Trap* 31 (Spring 1993): 27–38; Sumiko Higashi, “*Night of the Living Dead*: A Horror Film about the Horrors of the Vietnam Era,” in *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*, ed. Linda Dittmar and Gene Michaud (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 175–188; Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); and Kevin J. Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema* (New York: Continuum, 2012). See also Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller, eds., *Horror after 9/11* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).



Allegorical and topical references may have always allowed for the intrusion of reality into fictional territory, but the found-footage horror film takes this further. The suggestion that the images seen were “found” incorporates the camera into the diegesis, either placing it in the hands of a character or turning it into a prop. The diegetic status acquired by the camera takes this intrusion to a new dimension, further collapsing the filmic and the extrafilmic, albeit predominantly at a formal level.<sup>18</sup> In what follows I explore the relationship between reality and horror in three steps: moving from the documentary claim (which refers to the film’s existential status in relation to reality) to the separation between the film and the extrafilmic (addressing the existence of film as representation, with considerations about diegetic spaces) and framing (where the distinction between the diegesis and reality is treated in terms both of spatial relations and of our relationship to the image).

**Documentary and Fiction.** The premise of all found-footage horror films is that they represent real events documented by the characters we as viewers are about to engage with. *Cannibal Holocaust*, which, to be precise, features found-footage material within a clearly fictional framework, displays images produced by a television crew cannibalized by an Amazonian tribe. *The Blair Witch Project* takes the recovered-footage motif further, presenting the entire film as a compilation of images shot by three student filmmakers gone missing while shooting an amateur documentary on what they believe is a Maryland legend. [*REC*] offers us footage shot by a television reporter and cameraman who were attacked by the victims of a mysterious infection while producing a show on a night in the life of firefighters. *Cloverfield* is made up of images that survive their makers, all killed in an alien attack on New York City. The first of the *Paranormal Activity* films compiles the home videos shot by the two protagonists: it opens with a title card stating that Paramount would like to thank the families of Katie Featherston and Micah Sloat. The official tone of the studio’s opening acknowledgment and the fact that the film’s characters bear the actors’ real names further collapse the work’s fictional and documentary statuses (and in this particular case, also the filmic and the extrafilmic, as I explain in the next section).

Although the first movie of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise was picked up by Paramount for distribution, it was independently made and, unlike the studio-produced sequels that display a variety of cameras, was filmed with a single HDV camera operated exclusively by Sloat and Featherston. The whole action is confined to the couple’s house—director Oren Peli’s real home—and the actors improvised their lines.<sup>19</sup> The combined amateur camera work, real location (with the resulting unpolished variations in lighting and acoustics), and presumably “spontaneous” dialogue enhance the illusion of authenticity required to corroborate the film’s documentary claim.

Needless to say, this claim of truth is not in any way intended to actually confuse the audience. Film theory has taught us that a work’s documentary status lies not in its form but in the audience’s awareness of the factuality of the represented events—the

18 This is not to say that found-footage horror has not been the object of allegorical readings. Wetmore devotes a whole chapter to the cycle’s connections to September 11, 2001. See Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror*, 57–80.

19 In the commentary for the British DVD release of the film (Icon, 2010), Peli states that the dialogues were unscripted.

recognition of the film as documentary, in other words, is informed by the viewer's knowledge about the extrafilmic (as with all genres, for that matter). Audiences are at any rate very familiar with the blending of fiction and documentary in docudramas and mockumentaries. In *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, Wetmore argues that the fusion between documentary and entertainment in reality television has, likewise, naturalized the incorporation of a documentary aesthetic in horror.<sup>20</sup> The absence of any credits in the first *Paranormal Activity* film plays on the illusion that the footage has been found (the sequels that exist to date, in contrast, roll final credits). Any possibility for confusion, which in this case is improbable, is nonetheless evaded at the film's closure, with the standard disclaimer: "The characters and events depicted in this photoplay are fictitious." *The Blair Witch Project* might have misled some credulous viewers into believing the film really was a documentary in 1999, but the standardization of this practice over the past fifteen years suggests that filmmakers know spectators are aware that what is presented to them as documentary is nothing but fantasy.<sup>21</sup> Just as in early cinema the thrill of watching moving images, according to Gunning, sprang from the audience's vacillation "between belief and incredulity," nowadays the satisfaction of watching a found-footage horror comes precisely from the knowledge that the film is lying to us.<sup>22</sup> This "intertextual subcultural capital" is indeed one of the pleasures of horror identified by Matt Hills.<sup>23</sup>

The implications of the documentary claim in the first *Paranormal Activity* thus go beyond both generic labels and a visual style evocative of the spontaneous, improvised camera work of cinema vérité or direct cinema. The main characters' analysis and comments on the events they record touch on a question at the core of the documentary film: the medium's ability to help us see and make sense of reality. Micah's belief, mentioned at the beginning of this article, that by turning on the camera when an eerie presence haunts Katie's sleep he can tame and control it establishes an ironic pattern that underscores both the film and its sequels: the act of filming invariably backfires, granting the "monster" access into the characters' lives. Indeed, the nearly scientific dissection of the filmed images and sounds by Micah and Katie contrasts with the unruly nature of the entity that terrorizes the female protagonist—a demon that, as a psychic clearly points out, will forever haunt her, regardless of her location (unlike ghosts, which are instead attached to places).

Real documentaries may either long for a sense of continuity with the external world (through a concern with the accuracy of depiction) or instead highlight discontinuities (acknowledging that the act of selecting, framing, and editing inevitably isolates the filmed events from the very reality that produces them). *Paranormal Activity*'s playful collapsing of the film and the surrounding world lies precisely in this tension between contiguity with, and isolation from, reality. The first step toward connecting the two is the merging of the diegetic world and that which exists outside of it.

20 Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror*, 78.

21 Discussions about the *Blair Witch Project* hoax are addressed in Sarah L. Higley and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock, eds., *Nothing That Is: Millennial Cinema and the Blair Witch Controversies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004).

22 Gunning, "Aesthetic of Astonishment," 821.

23 See Matt Hills, *The Pleasures of Horror* (London: Continuum, 2005), 170.

**The Film and the Extrafilmic.** The playful categorization of a horror movie as documentary reflects a postmodern sensibility: it crosses boundaries, blends generic categories, and challenges distinctions between what is fictional and factual, as well as between film and reality. Indeed, the found-footage horror vaguely echoes the postmodern approach to the relationship between movies and real life found in Wes Craven's *Scream* franchise (1996, 1997, 2000, 2011), where serial killers find inspiration for crimes in horror classics.<sup>24</sup> Transposing Jean Baudrillard's concept of the simulacrum to the context of horror-film fandom, *Scream* presents characters who fuse reality with representation, to the point that they lose touch with reality and express themselves in the terms of film-industry lingo.<sup>25</sup> Billy (Skeet Ulrich) complains to the virginal Sidney (Neve Campbell) that their love affair has changed from a "nice solid R-rating on [their] way to an NC-17" to "edited for television," until she finally asks her boyfriend if he would "settle for a PG-13 relationship." Similarly, Randy's (Jamie Kennedy's) explanation of the rules of slashers to friends gathered to watch John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) foreshadows their destinies, in a process in which life is certain to imitate art. Randy's pressing of the "Pause" button on the VCR to lecture on the tropes of slashers dramatizes, on the level of the plot, *Scream*'s own "pausing" of its narrative flow for a moment of self-reflexivity. But such instances of humorous deconstruction invariably give way to the materialization of the discussed generic tropes in the characters' lives. In the narrative world of *Scream* the boundaries between film and reality finally collapse when the noises from *Halloween*'s soundtrack, which plays in the off-screen VCR, confuse Deputy Dewey (David Arquette) in his search for the killer—a gesture that also merges the boundaries between the films by Carpenter and Craven and is further enhanced by the latter's reliance on *Halloween*'s musical score to build suspense.

This codependency between films informs *Paranormal Activity* too, although less as a form of postmodern self-reflexivity than as a tool for establishing narrative continuity. The first four movies' reliance on the events they have each depicted is so relevant to their plots as to require flashbacks and flash forwards to the series' central events: namely, Katie's possession by a demon (*Paranormal Activity* and *Paranormal Activity 2*) and kidnapping of her nephew Hunter (played by both Jackson Xenia Prieto and William Juan Prieto in *Paranormal Activity 2*). By the same token, the first and second films of the series are constantly elucidated by each new movie in the franchise, which gives continuity to, or further explains, what was seen in previous films. This codependency is evident in the second *Paranormal Activity*, which functions as a prequel to the first movie, momentarily overlaps with it (to the point of recycling its footage), and then picks up again where the other had left off. We learn that the demon haunting Katie had first possessed her sister Kristi (Sprague Grayden), prompting Daniel (Brian Boland), Kristi's husband, to transfer it to Katie in order to free his wife from a malignant presence that, as we also learn, had haunted the sisters in their

24 On the notion of postmodern horror, see Andrew Tudor, "From Paranoia to Postmodernism? The Horror Movie in Late Modern Society," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: BFI, 2002), 105–116; and Peter Hutchings, *The Horror Film* (London: Pearson, 2004).

25 See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

childhood. After accounting for the events that lead to Daniel's act of witchcraft, *Paranormal Activity 2* quickly revisits the actions of the first movie to then show us what happens after Katie attacks Micah—thus extending the original's violent ending.

*Paranormal Activity 3* flashes back to the childhood of Katie and Kristi, bearing a more autonomous structure in the sense that, except for a quick prologue taking us back to *Paranormal Activity 2*, it does not embed events of the first and second films into its narrative. Yet the third film complements the other two, as it illustrates the childhood experiences that Katie and Kristi discuss in *Paranormal Activity 2* and that Katie alludes to in the original. The third film also expands on the relationship between the sisters, which had been explored in the previous movie. The fourth film shows us what happens to Hunter, taken away by Katie after she murders Daniel and Kristi in the second film; and the fifth, designated by the subtitle *The Marked Ones*, centers on a Mexican American family experiencing similar phenomena caused by similar acts of witchcraft. *The Marked Ones* brings the series full circle when a character experiencing events taking place in 2012 suddenly travels back in time and finds himself in the house of Katie and Micah on the fatal night also revisited at the end of *Paranormal Activity 2*. The film indeed depicts the original's most shocking action—the killing of Micah, which had been represented off-screen. The series, however, is not concluded; it resumes with the release of *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension*. Franchise rules dictate that each of the movies find a balance between closure and ending on a mysterious note that could accommodate a sequel. Abrupt, shock endings well suit a genre aiming to have the viewer leave the screening with a lingering sense of fear or discomfort.<sup>26</sup> But in the *Paranormal Activity* series this relative open-endedness also implodes the walls of the frame demarcating the exclusive territory of each of the individual films.

The sense of openness that makes the film linger on after the end credits operates also in the opposite direction, as both *Scream* and the found-footage horror create all-absorbing narratives that invariably engulf those elements referring to a world outside the fictional universe and lock them in. In Craven's film, what is seamlessly incorporated into the plot is metacommentary: Randy's slasher checklist is soon followed by the news of the killing of the school principal and the stabbing of Billy—the self-reflexive pause is not so long as to disrupt narrative progression. What the found-footage horror absorbs, however, is the extrafilmic in the form of the camera and its operator. The fact that narrative events are filmed by characters—as well as by cameras set by characters—includes them both in the story. Consequently, the rule dictating that the illusion of the fiction's autonomy is sustained by the characters' obliviousness to the camera does not pertain in the found-footage horror, as the false documentary claim places the apparatus in the diegesis. The direct address is therefore not an infringement but a norm. A character's gaze at the camera does not break the fourth wall separating the representation from the surrounding real, because the camera through which we see things is *not* external to the diegesis. So the direct

26 Narrative continuity between films in a franchise can be also seen in *Saw* (James Wan, 2004), which has thus far generated six movie sequels and can be traced back to earlier and less prolific horror franchises such as *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), with two sequels, and the aforementioned *Scream*, with three sequels—among others.

address turns the filmed events into point-of-view shots (when a character is behind the camera) and, in any case, sucks viewers—who see through a camera lens that is diegetic—into the fictional world. Not even the absence of an operator can remove the camera from the story—on the contrary, the camera stays in it as an essential prop.

Speaking of horror's use of a documentary style, Wetmore notes that the direct address does not reveal the narrative events as illusion—on the contrary, it reinforces “the illusion that what one is watching is real.”<sup>27</sup> The crucial difference between the forms of self-reflexivity found in Craven's postmodern film and the found-footage horror lies precisely in the implications of the latter's documentary claim. *Scream's* pastiche of classics packages the film as artifice, keeping the relationship between movies and reality safely locked in the realm of fiction. The found-footage movie, in contrast, presents itself as real, whereas its characteristically unstable camera work suggests that the film can neither lock things in nor keep them out.

**Framing Horror.** Generally speaking, the penetrability of a film by elements exterior to it is suggested by the ways in which spaces and figures are framed. It is usually through the abrupt intrusion of figures from off-screen or the appearance of threatening elements on the corner of the image that horror films aim to startle and disturb the audience. The sense of lurking danger is enhanced as much by our fear about seeing things as by our anxiety about what we do not see, and the generation of this uncertainty about whether or not we will see anything involves choices in framing.

The primary function of the frame is to demarcate a territory. In film, framing refers to the act of selecting those spaces, objects, and figures that the camera will capture, as well as their modes of presentation. It involves decisions about composition, lighting, camera placement (distance, angle, movement), and lenses (with their ability to either faithfully reproduce or artificially distort proportions, dimensions, and perspective). Tom Gunning defines framing as “arranging composition and spatial relations.” “The act of filming,” he says, “transforms the pro-filmic into a two-dimensional image, filmed from a particular point of view, framed within the camera aperture that geometrically divides the borders of the image.”<sup>28</sup>

In the found-footage horror these borders are made unstable by the shakiness of handheld shots, abrupt zooms, and swish pans that do not seamlessly rest on an object, requiring constant adjustments in focus and in the positioning of the camera. In fact, these stylistic features suggest not borders but their opposite: the frame's inability to contain what lies within its territory. The bodies of the characters in *Paranormal Activity* do not always stay on the screen—a medium shot of Micah frames him from below the eyes and above the waist; in another sequence we only see Micah's foot and Katie's arm as he comforts her after a crying outburst (Figure 1). Lacking a clear center,

27 Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror*, 65.

28 Tom Gunning, *D. W. Griffith and the Origins of American Narrative Film: The Early Years at Biograph* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 19. André Gaudreault deployed the term *mise en cadre* to describe the same process. See André Gaudreault, *Du littéraire au filmique* (Paris: Éditions Nota Bene, 1999). Other discussions of framing, but within horror films, can be found in Thomas S. Sipos, *Horror Film Aesthetics: Creating the Visual Language of Fear* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010); and Julian Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers: The Aesthetic Paradox of Pleasurable Fear* (New York: Routledge, 2010).



Figure 1. The frame often fails to contain bodies: we see only Michah's foot and Katie's arm as he comforts her in *Paranormal Activity* (Paramount, 2007).

behaving hesitantly, tentatively, such camera work makes it impossible to circumvent the filmed events within the frame.

The aforementioned impulses to cross borders in architecture, fine arts, the theater, and the cinema also work as reminders of the separation between representation and reality.<sup>29</sup> My very thinking of the found-footage horror as a cycle, likewise, stresses the films' topicality. Territorial transgressions notwithstanding, the primary function of the frame is to isolate the represented world from the surrounding reality. Framing therefore suggests control: it involves decisions not only about what to include within a demarcated field but also about how selected elements are to be displayed. Dudley Andrew observes, "We say that a view, a situation, a story, or an argument is framed when pertinent elements are taken together as a set, so that the positions and functions of all elements mutually determine one another in relation to the whole."<sup>30</sup>

Like classical film theory, the psychoanalytical and semiotic approaches of the 1970s treated the frame as a limit. Psychoanalytical theory's positioning of the spectator as voyeur, excluded from a film that would not acknowledge his or her presence, betrays the understanding of the film as an impenetrable territory, as unreachable, as an object of desire. Constructed as autonomous, set apart from the larger reality, and sealed off by the fourth wall, the framed image is not only off limits; it is also limited in range. Suture theory presupposes the perception of the film image as a cutout from a unified whole; it describes precisely the processes by which the spectator absorbs and makes sense of the fragments of a presumed reality.<sup>31</sup> In the "suture scenario,"

29 For a contemporary assessment of the frame and the boundaries of representation in various areas of artistic expression, see Lenain and Steinmetz, *Cadre, seuil, limite*.

30 Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 91.

31 For discussions on the idea of suture, see Jacques-Alain Miller, "Suture (Elements of the Logic of the Signifier)"; Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture"; and Stephen Heath, "Notes on Suture," all in *Screen* 18, no. 4 (1977): 24–34, 35–47, and 48–76. See also Daniel Dayan, "The Tutor-Code of Classical Cinema," in *Film Theory and*

Andrew explains, “the viewer, lured by what the luminous screen seems to hold, anticipates a total view and rapt engagement with revealed being, but is stopped short by the frame, an *actual* limit and a perpetual *reminder* of limits. At once goading and frustrating the desire to see, the frame parsimoniously boxes in a mere representation tied to a perspective.”<sup>32</sup> The frame came to inform discourses that called for a break with classical cinema’s ideas of autonomy and control of the depicted world. In the 1980s Deleuze’s notion of a time-image celebrated the film’s freedom from the constraints of narrative progression. To again quote Andrew, in theories of classical cinema “the frame rules time by orchestrating its flows into satisfying kinetic patterns, maintaining the representational order, and holding the spectator—to echo Stephen Heath—‘on screen in frame.’”<sup>33</sup> Deleuze was, on his part, “congenitally allergic to the frame,” understood as “a metonymy for the ‘territorialization’ he abhorred, implying borders, constraints, and rectilinearity.”<sup>34</sup> The time-image asserts precisely “the breakdown of this logic,” even if Andrew believes that Deleuze’s conception of a modern cinema has never found a “suitable terminology for the spatial effects of time in its pure form.”<sup>35</sup>

The break with conventions of narrative time thus came to define a different approach to narrative space. Deleuze was highly influenced by Bazin’s faith in a cinema prone to contemplation, facilitated by the sense of spatiotemporal integrity achieved through the combination of long takes and long shots. This privileging of continuity over fragmentation informs Bazin’s discussion of the relationship between painting and cinema, with his stress on the contiguity between the shot and the surrounding reality of which it is a fragment. In painting, says Bazin, the frame “emphasizes the difference between the microcosm of the picture and the macrocosm of the natural world in which the painting has come to take its place.”<sup>36</sup> But photography, camera movement, and editing render the borders of the film frame permeable. Bazin suggests that “the outer edges of the screen are not . . . the frame of the film image.”<sup>37</sup> If as traditionally conceived the frame severs the image from its surrounding space, in film, according to Bazin, the depicted space is perceived as “part of something prolonged indefinitely into the universe.”<sup>38</sup> That is why, for Bazin, the frame of a painting is centripetal (it isolates the depicted space from the surrounding real), while the film screen is centrifugal (inviting us to conceive of the off-screen, to imagine what goes on beyond the edges of the image).<sup>39</sup> Following up on Bazin’s discussion, Jacques Aumont argues that the film frame constantly reminds the viewer of what lies beyond its visual

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*Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 118–129.

32 Andrew, *What Cinema Is!*, 82; emphasis in original.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

36 André Bazin, “Painting and Cinema,” in *What Is Cinema?*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 1:165.

37 *Ibid.*, 166.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*



field—the off-screen, which refers to other elements, figures, or spaces existing within the diegesis, but also the extrafilmic itself, to which the camera belongs.<sup>40</sup> Absorbing the camera into the narrative world, the found-footage horror movie merges the film and the extrafilmic.

**Scanning Narrative Space.** The continuity between the film and the surrounding real in the first *Paranormal Activity* is partly due to the erratic camera work, to the frame's ability to quickly incorporate what is off-screen into the shot, just as it can easily relegate what is in the shot to the off-screen. The suspense generated by Micah's frenzied search for a sleepwalking Katie in the middle of the night, camera in hand, comes precisely from the apprehension about what the bumpy, tightly framed point-of-view shots might encounter—the fast pace with which the handheld camera moves suggests that whatever it finds is likely to invade the frame in abrupt fashion (Figures 2–5).



Figure 2. Katie enters the frame abruptly as Micah's camera meets her, out of focus, in *Paranormal Activity* (Paramount, 2007).



Figure 3. Micah's hesitant camera then adjusts distance and focus to get a clear image of her, first zooming out . . .

The resulting sensation that the frame cannot control what goes on in its territory is just as pervasive in the film's use of stationary cameras. *Paranormal Activity* features a number of static long takes captured when the camera is positioned on kitchen countertops, tables, a couch, and—most pervasively—a tripod in the couple's bedroom. The relatively long duration of these tripod shots, which frame objects from a long distance, invites the scanning of the image discussed in Bazin's conception of realism. But where for Bazin the combination of long takes and long shots calls for a contemplative attitude, in the horror film it is apprehension about what

the frame may reveal that best describes the motivation for such scanning. The takes of Katie and Micah sleeping frame the couple's bed on the center-right side and the bedroom door on the left (Figure 6). Although characters tend to attract the viewer's gaze, the expectation about seeing evidence of paranormal phenomena invites us to instead scan the whole of the frame, until the door's movements and the passing of shadows

40 Jacques Aumont, *L'oeil interminable* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 2007), 125.

invite us to stare at the image's left corner.

This awareness of what lies at the margins echoes both in Roger Cardinal's discussion of a "decentered scanning" of the film image and, more recently, in Evan Calder Williams's concept of horrible form.<sup>41</sup> Cardinal and Calder Williams analyze the implications of our attention to elements that rest, respectively, on the periphery and the background of the frame and in both cases expand and enhance our perception of the image. In Cardinal's assessment, the presence of such elements may be accidental, such as a chicken that interrupts "for scarcely a second" in the background of a "propaganda film about hygiene" conceived for an African audience, or purposefully staged, as in Antonioni framing a car of agents in pursuit of the hero in an extreme long shot including "several incidents of negligible concern," like children playing, at the end of *The Passenger* (1975).<sup>42</sup> These elements, which Cardinal deems "peripheral," exist outside of the narrative focus and at the same time move that focus away from the center and into the corners of the frame. They expand our perception of films; they



Figure 4. . . . then leaving her in the dark corner of the image as he moves right . . .



Figure 5. . . . until he finally manages to properly frame a sleepy and confused Katie, keeping her in the shot and in focus. *Paranormal Activity* (Paramount, 2007).



Figure 6. Static shots taken from the camera on a tripod are long in duration and invite us to look away from characters and scan the image for manifestations of the supernatural. *Paranormal Activity* (Paramount, 2007).

41 Roger Cardinal, "Pausing over Peripheral Detail," *Framework* 30–31 (1986): 112–130; Evan Calder Williams, "Sunset with Chainsaw," *Film Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (2011): 28–33.

42 Cardinal, "Pausing over Peripheral Detail," 113.

“flout the agreed rules of reading the image.”<sup>43</sup> In Paul Willemen’s assessment of Cardinal’s ideas, the concentration on peripheral detail frees viewers from a “literary gaze” that “reduces the audiovisual discourse to the drama of individual characters.”<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Deleuze’s time-image freed temporality from action when it added duration and contemplation to an equation dominated by narrative economy and pace.

To be sure, *Paranormal Activity* is miles away from the art-cinema practices discussed by Cardinal—not only in its cultural status but also in its adherence to the narrative economy centered on the eventful lives of individual characters. The at once distracted and contemplative viewer attracted to peripheral detail is, furthermore, the direct opposite of the horror-film viewer, who expects to be unsettled and scared. But in both art cinema and horror this decentered mode of framing defies those rules of composition dictating that the looker’s attention ought to be guided by a certain positioning of the elements in the frame, the amount of space they occupy, their color, movement, or quality (i.e., human beings—especially stars—tend to attract our gaze).

Calder Williams proposes a similar approach to the framed image, which unlike Cardinal’s pertains to the horror film. He suggests that we move away from the correspondence between filmic plot and real events that informs allegorical readings—something I echo with my proposed focus on framing. Instead, says Calder Williams, we should let “our eyes be drawn to background patterns and flows, to aberrations of form and intrusive details.”<sup>45</sup> In a compelling study of the last struggle between final girl and killer in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, Calder Williams draws attention to the moment in which “content gets swallowed by the depth of the field” (Sally and then Leatherface disappear in the distance, captured in extreme long shots), and the glare from the sun setting behind Leatherface as he frustratedly twirls his chainsaw in the air obscures our view: “the surface of the frame is stained with lens flares, blinded by what comes from behind our prancing villain.”<sup>46</sup> He proposes that we pay attention to details that “threaten to throw off their role as backdrop,” which in my mind invites an analogy with Cardinal’s discussion of a frame “rich to the point of overflowing,” a frame understood as “a window onto a reality which now extends undiminished beyond the limits of the screen.”<sup>47</sup> This suggested malleability of the image’s borders at once expands Bazin’s notion of the centrifugal screen and informs a different articulation of it—one in which the permeability of boundaries lies not in the interpenetration between on- and off-screen spaces but in the potential of elements relegated to the image’s periphery (Cardinal) and background (Calder Williams) to subvert the rules of composition. It is in any case this instability of the image that makes framing relevant for my proposed approach to the relationship between horror films and reality.

43 Ibid.

44 Paul Willemen, “Postscript: Terms for a Debate,” *Framework* 30–31 (1986): 131.

45 Williams, “Sunset with Chainsaw,” 32, 33.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.; Cardinal, “Pausing over Peripheral Detail,” 127.

**The Illusion of Control: Time, Space, and Narrative Perspective.** Compensating for the sense that the frame can neither contain its components nor keep out what lies beyond its boundaries, *Paranormal Activity* toys with our ability to, on the contrary, control the filmed events. This illusory empowerment of the spectator results from the film's coverage of space, manipulation of time, and changes in narrative perspective: it moves from the subjective points of view of individual characters to the neutral eye of the camera left alone, resting on immobile supports. Borrowing Wetmore's term for recording devices that are either abandoned or dropped by characters in distress, I refer to these cameras as "operatorless."<sup>48</sup>

Because the rendition of an action in an uninterrupted take is presumably less prone to manipulation and omission, continuity plays an important part in our access to narrative events—time and space are therefore intricately connected. The static shots discussed in the previous section feature a time-stamp clock at bottom right, contributing yet another element requiring our scanning of the frame. These clocks reappear throughout the series, constituting the franchise's signature, and their specification of time is not only key to controlling the temporality of the unfolding action but also to spatial continuity. This is especially true in the sequels to Peli's film, which display multiple cameras, thereby covering multiple spaces. *Paranormal Activity 2*, which takes place in the house of Katie's sister (Kristi) and her husband (Daniel), feature security cameras aimed at the house's doorstep, swimming pool, entrance hall, living room, kitchen, and the room of their toddler son Hunter, capturing the images from a high angle and from a long distance. *Paranormal Activity 3*, which flashes back to the childhood of Katie and Kristi in 1988, uses various camcorders positioned on tripods, desks, and the oscillator of a fan, the latter making the camera pan left and right, covering the kitchen and living room with a single camera and in uninterrupted takes. *Paranormal Activity 4* takes us to the house of a different family, who come to adopt Katie's nephew Hunter (here played by Aiden Lovekamp) a few years after the events in *Paranormal Activity 2*. Its coverage of different spaces resembles the practices of the second and third in the series, but unlike them the fourth movie resorts to hidden DV and computer cameras. *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* does not really display operatorless cameras—the closest it gets to them is when characters leave the camera on the floor. However, unlike the other films, the space coverage in these shots is fairly limited.

In the first four films of the series the shots captured by operatorless cameras are introduced by a title card attributing a number to the night in question ("Night #1," and so forth) and stating the date (the paranormal activity always occurs between the months of June and October, but the years vary across films: 2006 in the first and second, 1988 in the third, 2011 in the fourth, 2012 in *The Marked Ones*). Adding temporal precision to each of the scenes is the camera clock's depiction both of the exact time at which the abnormal phenomena take place and of their duration. If the viewers' experience of the real duration of an action is so powerful as to be "felt" in their bodies, here duration is, in addition, understood rationally and objectively. On the one hand, the camera clock's quantification of the lengthy duration of some scenes offers a numerical rendition of suspenseful delays. On the other hand, these

48 Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror*, 78.

clocks expose the artificial manipulation of time, as their numbers reveal the seconds, minutes, and hours that are skipped both at each cut and at each artificial speeding of the image. They inform us, for example, that in her sleep Katie stood by Michal's bedside for almost two hours—and they do so by artificially fast-forwarding the image (as characters would in subsequent viewings) without cutting and without, nonetheless, forcing us to experience real duration.

The visual display of time in the frame empowers the audience, echoing the aforementioned illusion of control suggested by the computer's translation of the monstrous grunts captured by Michal's microphone into sound waves. In the *Paranormal Activity* sequels, access to time is matched by access to space: the scattering of cameras across different spaces in the houses grants us a much larger coverage, with each shot taking us to a different room. What is more, in *Paranormal Activity 2*, *3*, and *4* the camera clocks work in perfect synchrony with editing, as every cut to a different space has the maximum duration of a second—so a cut at 12:48:20 is immediately followed by a shot registering either the exact same time or 12:48:21, as if to make sure that when traveling in space the spectators do not miss a single moment of the awaited action, and that if they do, they are aware of the elapsed time. The visualization of different spaces, however, is offered in shots presented successively, not simultaneously. We may be led to believe we see all, but we are not, strictly speaking, given an omniscient point of view (Figures 7 and 8).



Figures 7 and 8. Not even a second elapses when we move from living room to bedroom, but spaces are still shown to us successively, rather than simultaneously. *Paranormal Activity 3* (Paramount, 2011).

So the audience's advantageous standpoint over the paranormal activity comes less from the illusion of control associated with spatiotemporal continuity than from the antecedence of viewing: we witness sounds of footsteps, a moving door, banging and thudding, lights switching on and off, passing shadows, and floating sheets before the characters, who need to wait until the next morning to watch the recorded footage (which they do even when these events are witnessed as they happen). Although this pattern is

sometimes broken—we do not perceive the grunts captured by Micah’s microphone until his computer translates them into sound waves—*Paranormal Activity* establishes a system by which images captured by individual characters limit our range of knowledge to theirs, while those images from operatorless cameras give us an advantaged viewpoint. It follows that the absence of a person behind the viewfinder grants us a neutral point of view on the action, detaching us from optical identification with characters and widening the range of our knowledge.

Our identification with the equivalent of a heterodiegetic narrator notwithstanding, those neutral perspectives do not remove us from diegetic space, because the camera remains within the depicted world—and is invariably acknowledged by the characters. What sets the *Paranormal Activity* movies apart from most found-footage horrors is that these shots are used in a more systematic fashion than in *The Blair Witch Project* or *Cloverfield*, for example, where the images captured by operatorless cameras are accidental, more sparse, and obscure (a hanging body is barely seen in the background of *Blair Witch*’s final shot, and when a camera in *Cloverfield* rests on fragments of a helicopter wreck for more than thirty seconds, we can barely distinguish what we see or where we are). Speaking of the recording of an alien invasion by a camera that falls to the ground in Steven Spielberg’s *War of the Worlds* (2005), Wetmore claims that this kind of shot further enhances the illusion that what we see is real. In his words, the operatorless camera “shows how the image is everything. No one needs to be filming, the events are ultimately filmed themselves.”<sup>49</sup> This sensation is nowhere more palpable than in *Cloverfield*’s shot from a camera whose operator, Hud (T. J. Miller), has just died, as the automatic focus nervously racks between three planes: the background explosions caused by the monster attack, Hud’s face, and the grass on which he has dropped the camera. That is the illusion created by the found-footage horror: if actions unfold independent of a subject’s will to record them, the film is not just an artifact detached from reality. The image, we are playfully led to believe, is not artificially staged; it is the unmediated record of reality in the making.

**Concluding Remarks: What Lies Beyond.** Night #20, October 7, 2006. The time-stamp clock registers 4:31 a.m. The camera on the tripod frames Katie and Micah in a long shot as they sleep. A moving shadow passes through the open door, almost imperceptibly. An invisible presence then drags Katie out of the bed and away from the bedroom by her feet. The door slams shut as Micah jumps out of bed, reopens the door, and runs toward an opposite room, separated by a relatively spacious hallway, to rescue his girlfriend. Through the doorframe we have a glimpse of Micah far in the background, struggling to free Katie from the grips of what we now know to be a demon, but we cannot see any of the action (Figure 9). We are actually left alone in the room, from where we hear the couple’s screams, until they run back toward the static camera, which now frames Micah sitting on the ground holding a howling, terrified Katie in his arms.

*Paranormal Activity*’s staging of this action far into the background directs our gaze to a vanishing point. This event might be staged off-center, but unlike the elements

49 Ibid., 78–79.



Figure 9. The action takes place in the dark background, directing our gaze to a vanishing point and leaving the room empty of figures. *Paranormal Activity* (Paramount, 2007).

tion in a space framed by a long take and a long shot, and from a static camera, as well as in this action's relative invisibility. Still, by attracting our gaze to a corner while foregrounding a space devoid of character and movement, this shot expands the frame's territory by bringing the background into relevance.<sup>50</sup>

The found-footage horror film also offers more radical ways of decentering our gaze and expanding the frame. *Paranormal Activity 4* forces us to stare at an empty bedroom through the eyes of a laptop camera, which in this case is also Ben's (Matt Shively's) view, when his girlfriend Alex (Kathryn Newton) leaves the computer chat—and the frame—for forty-eight seconds. The laptop camera, which rests on a bed, frames the borders of the mattress, a pillow, a cushion, a toy shelf, and an open door. Ben gets nervous and starts calling Alex's name from off-screen—to be precise, from behind the computer camera. The absence of visible characters and the immobility of the frame build up suspense, until we see the silhouette of a child run past the door, and then, after a few more seconds, we see Alex jump back, startling Ben—and probably the audience (Figures 10 and 11). Where in the attack on Katie our gaze may not have been able to focus on the main action but was still directed at a specific corner, in this scene from *Paranormal Activity 4* we are left to our own devices as we are invited to scan the whole of the image for a sign of the extraordinary (or do the opposite: focus on a specific corner so as to avoid the signs of a monstrous presence). Here it is not only the background that acquires relevance but also every single corner of the image. The frame's territory is further expanded.

Although I have treated the frame's elasticity and permeability from an optical perspective, the impulse to break loose from the image's borders has often been articulated in terms that go beyond visual perception. Sound, as discussed earlier, is essential for defining and expanding the space of the action: attributing acoustic qualities to specific spaces, widening or shrinking spatial dimensions, and extending the space beyond the screen (i.e., surround sound). The *champs vide* (empty frame) described earlier might

that decenter the framing in Calder Williams's discussion of a crippling background coming into prominence and unlike Cardinal's emphasis on peripheral detail, this attack constitutes the scene's main event. Thus, the action's marginality lies not in its narrative relevance but in its physical location

50 Hanich discusses a similar type of framing when describing the abrupt intrusion into the image by something that "hurdles or jumps towards the camera and thus seemingly in our direction," calling it the 3D shock. Hanich, *Cinematic Emotion in Horror Films and Thrillers*, 136.



have decentered our gaze, but when the lights go off in the apartment of an infected resident in [*REC*], the darkness that covers the screen for twenty-seven seconds offers nothing to our gaze, depriving us of any objects or figures to rest our eyes on and leaving us with nothing but the screams of the reporter and cameraman in distress. Here, the frame is not so much expanded as it is taken away from us, completely removing sight from the center of the viewing experience.

Horror, in the end, is a body genre—Linda Williams’s category for those works eliciting physical reactions.<sup>51</sup> The emphasis on tactility and the decompartmentalization of our senses suggested in Cardinal’s attention to peripheral detail, and subsequent phenomenological approaches to film, also remove sight from the center of the filmic experience—the “visual language,” in Sobchack’s words, “is also tactile.”<sup>52</sup> This privileging of other sensorial experiences is evident in the centrality of affect in current film scholarship. The “turn to affect,” to use Eugenie Brinkema’s phrase, focuses on “the body, sensation, movement, flesh and skin and nerves, the visceral, stressing pains, feral frenzies.”<sup>53</sup> Cardinal had articulated this connection between decentered framing and our sensory experiences when he stated that “any encouragement to attend to what lurks at the fringes of normal sight is equally an encouragement to summon



Figures 10 and 11. The *champs vide* is long in duration and invites us to scan the whole of the frame, until Alex jumps back into shot and startles Ben (and probably the spectator). *Paranormal Activity 4* (Paramount, 2012).

51 See Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (1991): 2–13.

52 Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 9. See also Angela Ndalanian, *The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses*. McFarland: Jefferson, NC: 2012.

53 Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), xii. On affect, see also Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Ropley, UK: Zero Books, 2010); and Bruce Isaacs, *The Orientation of Future Cinema: Technology, Aesthetics, Spectacle* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).

up the resources of the sensory system over and beyond the visual.”<sup>54</sup> The expansion of the frame suggested by details otherwise perceived as peripheral (Cardinal) or intrusive (Calder Williams) is therefore matched by an expansion of our sensorial experience of the film.

However flexible in some of the practices and theoretical articulations revisited here, the frame is still the element that splits the visual field into an inside and outside, into on- and off-screen spaces, into what is seen and what is not. The frame is therefore a key device in the horror film’s generation of fear. The genre may invite us to anxiously scan the image for threatening presences as often as it may force us to do the opposite: to look away from certain elements in the frame, even from the screen itself. If the requirement for scanning the image decenters composition, expanding the frame, then the found-footage horror’s documentary claim and expansive diegesis further stretch the frame out to at once break loose from generic demarcations and incorporate the extrafilmic into the fictional universe. This suggested malleability of the frame evidently goes beyond our visual perception of filmic spaces—it hints at our understanding of how horror films stand in relation to the surrounding historical world: how they exist apart from it while also merging with it. It is in this way that framing offers an alternative way into the study of how reality irrupts in the horror film. \*

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54 Cardinal, “Pausing over Peripheral Detail,” 126.