

# Cartesianism and Intersubjectivity in *Paranormal Activity* and the Philosophy of Mind

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## Abstract:

Over the last century within the philosophy of mind, the intersubjective model of self has gained traction as a viable alternative to the oft-criticised Cartesian solipsistic paradigm. These two models are presented as incompatible inasmuch as Cartesians perceive other minds as “a problem” for the self, while intersubjectivists insist that sociality is foundational to selfhood. This essay uses the *Paranormal Activity* series (2007–2015) to explore this philosophical debate. It is argued that these films simultaneously evoke Cartesian premises (via found-footage camerawork), and intersubjectivity (via an ongoing narrative structure that emphasises connections between the characters, and between each film). The philosophical debates illuminate premises on which the series’ story and horror depends. Moreover, *Paranormal Activity* also sheds light on the theoretical debate: the series brings those two paradigms together into a coherent whole, thereby suggesting that the two models are potentially compatible. By developing a combined model, scholars working in the philosophy of mind might better account for the different aspects of self-experience these paradigms focus on.

**Keywords:** Intersubjectivity, Descartes, *Paranormal Activity*, Horror, Self

As numerous scholars have observed, the Cartesian tradition is so “central to Western philosophy” (Rozemond, 1998, p. xi) that “it is hard to think of any subsequent [Western] philosophical system...that does not

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prominently engage with some version of ‘Cartesian’ dualism” (Nelson, 2014, p. 277; see also Grosz, 1994, p. 9). The foundational nature of Rene Descartes’ work is evident within the philosophy of mind; major textbooks on the subject routinely devote initial chapters to Cartesianism, for instance, foregrounding Descartes’ influence on subsequent thought (see Carruthers, 2004; Cockburn, 2001; Crane, 2001; Lowe, 2004; Maslin, 2001; McGinn, 1999).<sup>1</sup> It seems that “the Cartesian perspective is unavoidable” in the philosophy of mind (Robinson, 2014), both in the sense of its historical importance, and also insofar as “philosophy today continues to be controlled by Cartesian scepticism” or attempts to usurp the Cartesian model (Bauer, 2005, p. 50).

Perhaps most surprising is that Cartesianism has remained so prominent within the philosophy of mind despite the criticism aimed at Cartesian postulates. Since its publication, *Meditations* (1641) has been challenged on the basis of Descartes’ methods, the progression of his logic, and his conclusions (see, for example, Husserl, 1960[1931]; Nietzsche, 1997[1886], p. 38; Williams, 2015[1978]). Subsequently, Cartesian thinking has been criticised for adhering to Descartes’ solipsistic paradigm. Within the philosophy of mind, the latest major incarnation of such criticism is an attack on the Cartesian premise that selves exist independently of others, which is contrasted with an intersubjective paradigm. This challenge has been mounting since the early 20th Century, taking its lead from, for instance, Wittgenstein’s rejection of Cartesian solipsism in favour of self-other interaction (language use), which Wittgenstein saw as being fundamental to selfhood (see Avramides, 2001, p. 214). The intersubjective outlook is a particularly significant challenge to Cartesian thinking, because it accounts for a crucial aspect of human existence that Descartes eschews: sociality. Descartes works from the assumption that each person is discrete, and that each individual has immediate, intimate access to themselves in ways that others do not.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Descartes is typically pegged as the starting point for “philosophical, as opposed to theological, solutions to the mind-body problem” (Uttal, 2004, p. 202), and as such Cartesian thinking has become a cornerstone of philosophy of mind in the largely secular age. To clarify, “Cartesian” refers to scholarship that follows from and concurs with premises established in Descartes’ work (on this distinction, see Baker and Morris, 2002).

2. Descartes does not refer to “the self” but rather to “the mind,” but he equates “the mind” with the essence of selfhood (that which one refers to when using the first-person). As Robert Solomon notes, “the self, the soul, and the mind” are “three different names for the same thing” in Descartes’ work (2002, p. 127), and there is widespread agreement on this interpretation in the field (for example, see Atkins, 2008, p. 16; Pauen, 2011, p. 85; Rozemond, 1998, p. xiii; Shoemaker, 2003, p. 146;

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Descartes presumes that there is a self to examine, proclaiming “I am; I exist: this is certain” (1998[1641], p. 65). He posits that the self is a coherent, discrete entity that can be studied in isolation. One implication that follows from this conception is that other selves – themselves independent entities – would muddy one’s investigation into selfhood. Although his approach is straightforward and intuitively appealing, Descartes’ proclamation that “I manifestly know that nothing can be perceived more easily and more evidently than my own mind” (1998, p. 69), while “all external things” may be “nothing but...bedeviling hoaxes” (1998, p. 62) leads to one of two conclusions: a) my thoughts prove that I exist, but I have no such evidence to confirm the existence of anything outside of myself (epistemological solipsism); b) the exterior world (including all objects, matter and people) only exists as representations in my consciousness (metaphysical solipsism). The latter has become particularly significant for thinkers in the Cartesian tradition, because Descartes’ “philosophical work bequeaths [a] problem to us” that he did not concern himself with: the problem of “other-minds” (Avramides, 2001, p. 21). If introspective self-access is all one can be certain of, one cannot definitively ascertain whether other people exist or have minds.

This problem – and the egoistic solipsism it entails – is embedded in Cartesianism (see Overgaard, 2007, pp. 1–2), yet it appears to be at odds with humanity’s inherently social nature. Thus, Cartesian solipsism has fallen out of favour over the last century,<sup>3</sup> and the intersubjective paradigm has flourished, precisely because – in contrast to the bounded, independently-existing Cartesian self – the intersubjective model prioritises the self’s entanglement with other persons (see Leonardelli and Toh, 2015; Slotter, Winger and Soto, 2015, p. 15). That is, other minds are encompassed as an “intrinsic [...] intimately intertwined [...] basic” aspect of selfhood within the intersubjective model, rather than being separate or problematic (Hermans, 2015: 277; see also Josselson and Hopkins, 2015, p. 225).

On this basis, the intersubjective paradigm is typically presented in opposition to Cartesianism. For example, Taipale (2015) argues that Cartesianism has standardised a flawed conception of human interaction. Rather than assuming that embodiment hinders one’s ability to directly

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Vicari, 2008, p. 140). Following this established convention, and for the sake of efficiency, I use “self” to capture the essential quality Descartes refers to when using “mind”, “soul”, or “spirit”.

3. On this decline of Cartesianism and rise of socially focused, anti-egoistic theories in philosophy of mind, see Zahavi, 2005, p. 100.

access others' minds, Taipale argues that bodies directly express mental states to others (p. 167; see also Zahavi, 2015, pp. 149–150). Others are blunter in their opposition to Cartesianism. For example, Ventriglio and Bhugra (2015, p. 369) refer to Cartesianism as a “dogma” that should be overcome (see also Guta, 2015, p. 10). Since the intersubjective model has been proffered as “an anti-Cartesian conception of mental phenomena” (Roy, 2015, p. 90), its adoption as a normative paradigm within the philosophy of mind is implied to be a usurpation of Cartesianism.

However, it is unclear whether the intersubjective paradigm can vanquish Cartesianism entirely. As Walker (2014, p. 171) observes, Cartesianism has “been repeatedly battered down since [Descartes'] own day, only to rise up again.” In spite of its flaws, the Cartesian conception of selfhood has proven to be remarkably resilient, to the extent that although “scarcely anyone” working within contemporary philosophy of mind considers premises such as Cartesian mind-body dualism to be a “live possibility [...] considerable effort continues to be spent on the construction, consideration, analysis and refutation of” Cartesianism (Shoemaker, 2003, p. 287; see also Thompson, 2008, p. 99). Indeed, challenging Cartesianism means overcoming notions that are so deeply entrenched in prevailing conceptualisations of selfhood (see Leudar and Costall, 2004, p. 602) that some attempts to debunk Cartesian thinking inadvertently rest on Cartesian preconceptions. To illustrate: despite trying to design a “non-Cartesian” model, Colman admits he “found [him]self [...] impl[ying] precisely the kind of Cartesian dualism [he] was attempting to overcome” (2015, pp. 316–7). This mistake has been observed in numerous attempts to disparage Cartesianism (see Cutler and MacKenzie, 2011, p. 63; LaVine and Tisaw, 2015, p. 32; Rockwell, 2005, p. xi).

Yet, it is difficult to assess whether intersubjectivity is sufficient to usurp Cartesianism as the philosophy of mind's standard paradigm by looking solely at the philosophical literature. The debate is comprised of arguments in favour of the proponent's particular position, and those positions are polarised. Thus, in order to compare these two theoretical stances, this article will employ a cinematic case study that represents key qualities of both models: the *Paranormal Activity* series (2007–2015).<sup>4</sup> The analysis will demonstrate that although the intersubjective model

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4. The series is comprised of six films: *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007), *Paranormal Activity 2* (Tod Williams, 2010), *Paranormal Activity 3* (Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2011), *Paranormal Activity 4* (Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2012), *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* (Christopher Landon, 2014), and *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015).

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accounts for the social aspects of selfhood and thereby counters solipsism's primary flaw, the Cartesian model still captures essential qualities of selfhood. Both are evident within and are integral to the way *Paranormal Activity* tells its ongoing story and scares its audience.

### Found-Footage Horror and Selfhood

Narrative films frequently dwell on themes that are pertinent to selfhood, including self-other relations. This is most notably true of the horror genre where selfhood is something of a thematic preoccupation (see Jones, 2011), as is evidenced by various genre stalwarts; for example, *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) is concerned with the terror of identity fracture (Norman Bates internalises and “becomes” the persona of his dead mother); in *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), fear stems from demonic possession of a human body; isolation from others causes *The Shining's* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980) lead protagonist to threaten his loved ones; bodies evacuated of selfhood provide the horror of zombie films such as *Dawn of the Dead* (George Romero, 1978), and so forth. The *Paranormal Activity* series is part of this rich lineage within the horror genre.

Some of the concerns raised by *Paranormal Activity* are particular to the subgenre the series belongs to; the found-footage film.<sup>5</sup> Found-footage films consist of material shot by the film's characters. Thus, the cameras recording the footage are present within the diegetic space. In contrast to the invisible, omnipresent, extra-diegetic cameras that typify cinematic storytelling, found-footage's cameras are either mounted in position or have to be manually relocated by the protagonists in order to record the footage. Found-footage's immediate affinities with the Cartesian approach are apparent. Cartesian philosophy of mind is concerned with limited perspectives on and access to the world, based in a selfhood that is, as Grosz contends, “removed from direct contact with other minds and a sociocultural community.” Thus, the solipsistic self accesses others and the world in an indirect “mediated” fashion (1994, p. 7). Found-footage echoes this Cartesian mode of perception insofar as the audience's access to narrative events, characters and environments are explicitly mediated; they are captured only via the characters' camcorders.

For Cartesian thinkers, embodiment prohibits communion with other selves and limits one's access to the world. In found-footage film – as the analysis of *Paranormal Activity* will demonstrate – the camera frame

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5. On the influence of found-footage horror, see Blake & Aldana Reyes, 2016; Heller-Nicholas, 2014.

operates in much the same way: the horror commonly derives from what is excluded from the visual frame (off-camera events). In *Paranormal Activity*, the characters' attempts to record the eponymous "activity" are routinely thwarted by perspectival limitation. For example, a staple of the series is that a noise occurs off-screen, and although a character turns the camera to spot the source, she or he fails to do so. The footage itself is crucial in allowing protagonists to evince the demon's presence (and the threat it poses) to other characters, even though the demon itself is not directly displayed until the final film's climax. Before that moment, its presence has to be inferred from cues such as furniture being moved.

Supernaturally-themed found-footage is a *vérité* style that is ostensibly frightening because it feigns access to "reality," and so suggests that ghosts and demons are real. In practice however, such films are mainly frightening because of their perspectival limitations. Thus, for the viewer, found-footage's "frame-problem" is caused by mediated access to the narrative world: either the camera-wielder provides insufficient access to the events (failing to show the threat), or technology fails to alert protagonists to threats that are caught on camera (and so are apparent to the viewer). The lack of an omniscient narrator highlights that humans are vulnerable to threats that are incomprehensible from a limited first-person perspective.

The *Paranormal Activity* series has been selected because it is a particularly notable presence within the subgenre and within contemporary horror more broadly. The series' unadjusted, worldwide theatrical gross is over \$889m at the time of writing (*Boxofficemojo.com*). The series has also spawned an unofficial Japanese sequel *Paranormal Activity 2: Tokyo Night (Paranômaru akutibiti: Dai-2-shô*, Toshikazu Nagae, 2010), a variety of imitators,<sup>6</sup> and numerous parodies.<sup>7</sup> The series is representative of the found-footage subgenre inasmuch as the traits described above belong to the majority of found-footage films. However, the series is also unique in several ways that make it especially apt for study. First, it is the longest running found-footage series (comprising of six entries). Second, unlike the three *Blair Witch Project* films

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6. The most obviously influenced are those that riff on *Paranormal Activity*'s title; these include *Paranormal Asylum* (Nimrod Zalmanowitz, 2013), *Paranormal Captivity* (John Orrichio, 2012), *Paranormal Demons* (David Brückner, 2015), *Paranormal Entity* (Shane Van Dyke, 2009), *Paranormal Incident* (Matthew Bolton, 2012), *Paranormal Vitality* (Xavier Berraondo, 2012), and *Paranormal Xperience 3D* (Sergi Vizcaino, 2011).

7. These include *Abnormal Activity* (Jason Gerbay, 2010), *Paranormal Activity: A Hardcore Parody* (Hef Pounder, 2012), *Paranormal Movie* (Kevin Farley, 2013), *Paranormal Parody* (C.J. Goodman, 2011), and *Paranormal Whackitivity* (Roger Roth, 2013).

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(1999–2016) or the four-part [Rec] series (2007–2014), *Paranormal Activity* sustains its found-footage ethos across all six films. This combination has a significant impact on the series. Although the films utilise the restricted camerawork that is characteristic of the found-footage subgenre, the saga is constituted by numerous (limited) perspectives in combination. In isolation, each film could be interpreted as being about one demon targeting a particular individual within a single family. However, as the series progresses the incidents are imbricated, highlighting the interconnections between protagonists who initially appear to be discrete, but whose lives and fates are revealed to be mutually constitutive. Without those deeper connections, the isolated paranormal incidents are inexplicable; it is only by coming to understand their relationships with other characters that the individual protagonists comprehend what is happening to them. That is, one isolated perspective cannot sufficiently convey the story. In this regard, the series leans towards an intersubjective approach; meaning is not found in one viewpoint or even one film, but in the coalescence of multiple perspectives. Although the demon's conduct provides the scares in each film, the series' overarching horror derives from the characters' shared story; from a rolling plot oriented around the sacrifice of a first-born male (Hunter), which drives the demon and dooms the protagonists. Intersubjectivity – the characters' links with one another, which are revealed across the series – is a predominant source of dread.

As the series progresses, those anxieties mount precisely because the narrative world expands outwards. The first film is set in one location. This choice is indicative of the film's small-scale production (the film was shot on a \$15,000 budget). In his director's commentary for the 2010 Icon Film DVD release of *Paranormal Activity*, Oren Peli refers to the possibility of the protagonists leaving their home and the demon following them, but reveals that he discarded the idea because it would complicate the shoot. In the final film – a much larger production with a \$10m budget – the characters are less restricted; they leave their home in precisely the way Peli envisaged. Beyond the second film each movie encompasses various locations, most notably in the fifth entry (*Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones*), which is not principally based around a single family home. As the narrative spaces become larger in each film, and the number of locations increase cumulatively across the series, greater emphasis is placed on the connections between these discrete spaces and the growing cast of characters who inhabit them.

In sum, the *Paranormal Activity* series' found-footage mode captures ways of thinking about perception that philosophers of mind would refer to as being Cartesian. Since these traits arise out of the films' formal

properties, they are intrinsic to the series. What makes *Paranormal Activity* unique among its found-footage brethren however, is its structure as an unfolding narrative; this integral aspect of the series evokes the intersubjective paradigm by emphasising that meaning is contingent on the links between people (even when the characters are unaware of the connections that bind them). Thus, the series figuratively evokes two competing understandings of self – as independent and as intersubjective – and so it offers a case study via which to compare the two models.

This is not to posit that the filmmakers intentionally embedded the philosophical comparison in *Paranormal Activity*, but rather that these competing conceptions are also integral to the way *Paranormal Activity* tells its ongoing story. In finding the films frightening, and in understanding the significance of events relative to the ongoing plot, viewers inherently engage with the same concerns that the intersubjective and Cartesian models hinge on. The combination of film and philosophy illuminates meaning; the philosophical debates cast the *Paranormal Activity* series in a particular light, and vice versa. Furthermore, while philosophical debate in this area is polarised, arguing for or against a Cartesian or intersubjective paradigm, the films evoke both models simultaneously, without imposing an argumentative agenda. As such, the series admits that both conceptions of selfhood are valuable, rather than positing that the two are mutually exclusive.

#### **Cartesianism and Intersubjectivity in *Paranormal Activity***

As is characteristic of the subgenre's form, the found-footage that constitutes *Paranormal Activity* is shot by the characters or is documented via cameras that the characters set up. As such, the narrative universe is constituted by the characters' highly limited perspectives. This overarching ethos is Cartesian in character. Frequently, shots are directly aligned with a character's first-person viewpoint (the camera captures what is in her or his field of vision). Even when this is not the case, the camera's inability to record from more than one position is redolent of the Cartesian frame-problem; the notion that the world can only be perceived from one (first-person) perspective, because humans are limited by their bodies. Using an alternative viewing apparatus (a camera) may extend one's perspectival range, but the camera's perspective is also limited since it more or less replicates the eye's restricted field of vision.

Moreover, the films replicate anxieties that are denoted by the term "frame problem" because the series' scares frequently arise out of that perspectival limitation (the restricted frame is a "problem").



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For example, in *Paranormal Activity 3*, Lisa (the protagonists' babysitter) uses the camera's limited field to play a prank. Dennis (step-father to the central family) sets-up a surveillance camcorder that pans across their kitchen and living room. Lisa hides off-screen and jumps into frame shouting "Boo! Hi, Dennis," so as to scare him when he reviews the footage.<sup>8</sup> From the audience's perspective (aligned with Dennis', reviewing the tapes after-the-fact), the scare arises from Lisa's sudden appearance, which is unexpected because she hides just beyond the frame's periphery. This incident establishes that Dennis' surveillance is of limited efficacy, inasmuch as the camera can only record the area immediately in front of it. Although the camera is set up to monitor the room, emphasis is placed on what cannot be seen at any given moment. On the third pan, Lisa is depicted sitting at the dining table. Moments later, the fifth pan reveals that an anthropomorphic figure under a sheet has appeared behind Lisa. The sheet then drops to the ground (the figure-shape vanishes). Lisa does not see the event (even though the audience, and later Dennis, do) because it happens behind her. In this instance, Lisa's limited viewpoint is a source of terror: her body prevents her from perceiving the demon's presence. These limitations are fundamental to *Paranormal Activity's* horror, both because the audience access the events in the same way the characters mainly do (via the footage), and also because of dramatic irony; the cameras reveal threats of which the characters are not immediately cognizant. In *Paranormal Activity*, audio-visual information correlates with knowledge: the characters (and audience) come to understand and evidence what is happening by apprehending incidents on film.

Although the films include an iteration of the frame-problem, the series does not straightforwardly adhere to a Cartesian conception of independent, isolated subjectivities. The found-footage aesthetic might appear to mimic the first-person perspective, but the form does not offer direct experiential access, even when a single protagonist holds a camera to their eye-line. Only audio-visual data are presented. The footage cannot convey other sensory data, the protagonists' inner-thoughts or phenomenological experiences directly; the audience must infer emotion via verbal and physical cues, for instance. Moreover, individual cameras are not exclusively aligned with a single character's first-person

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8. Lisa's call to Dennis elucidates an important function of the surveillance cameras that are found throughout the series. Although they are perhaps impartial insofar as they are not directly handled by characters, they do not constitute an omniscient viewpoint. Security cameras extend the characters' ability to record footage (usually while sleeping), acting as proxies for the characters who set-up and/or review the footage.

perspective. For example, early in *Paranormal Activity 2*, Ali films her family by the pool, then hands the camera to her boyfriend Brad, who subsequently films Ali. Any one camera can stand-in for multiple perspectives. This kind of perspective-switching is commonplace in the series, so although the perspectives are limited, the frame does not exclude others (in a Cartesian sense). This is particularly apparent where characters review surveillance footage in pairs, for example; in such cases, the footage constitutes a shared perspective on the events. As the series progresses, more individuals and more cameras are involved: altogether, at least twenty one cameras (including security cameras and webcams) are used to film the series' footage, and these are operated (in various combinations) by at least twenty four individuals.<sup>9</sup> The series is undergirded by a plural, intersubjective ethos, the scale of which sets the *Paranormal Activity* series apart from other found-footage films. The number of perspectives multiplies with each sequel, and each new perspective contributes to the formation of ongoing narrative meaning.

Contra Goodenough (2005, pp. 23–24), who argues that “in the philosophical film [... w]e inhabit solipsism. Each member of the audience finds themselves located in the inexplicable space of the narrator X,” *Paranormal Activity* offers no omniscient “narrator” viewpoint; it is never revealed who is editing the footage (or for what purpose). Instead the series merges solipsism with intersubjectivity. The technology is solipsistic in that it is exclusionary. The cameras can only record footage, the monitors can only exude information. Neither technology can interact with the characters. However, the footage is a conduit for intersubjectivity inasmuch as the characters use their recordings to come to terms with their shared experiences. Moreover, the audience is invited to join in that interpretive activity in order to work out what is happening to the characters.

While each individual film seems to focus on a single family and the demon mainly directs its attention towards one particular protagonist, the series as a whole emphasises the connections between those families. For instance, in *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension*, which is set in 2013, Ryan views tapes of Kristi (one of *Paranormal Activity 2*'s protagonists) filmed when she was a child (around 1988). When Ryan's daughter Leila sneezes, Kristi responds “Bless you,” even though the tape was filmed over 20 years earlier. The footage is bounded by the

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9. These numbers are tentative (hence, “at least”) because it is unclear precisely who films and how many cameras capture *The Ghost Dimension*'s historical footage of Kristi and Katie.

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edges of Ryan's monitor, which implies that the incidents should be mutually exclusive; in practice however, the separation is illusory.

The individual episodes and their respective characters are enmeshed in fundamental ways, even if those interconnections are not always obvious to the protagonists. This is most evident in *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones*, which initially appears to be unrelated to the series' overarching storyline. However, as the film progresses, the connections become apparent; most notably, lead protagonist Jesse finds pictures of his pregnant mother stood with Lois, the leader of the "midwives" cult who are responsible for the series' running plot (the attempt to incarnate a demon via ritual sacrifice). Jesse thus discovers that he was involved with the cult prior to his birth. This connection is not incidental; it is a key plot-point that enables the protagonists to comprehend what is happening to Jesse. Moreover, the film's climax explicitly intersects with the conclusion of the first *Paranormal Activity*: the last surviving protagonist Hector is supernaturally transported to the house in which the first movie is set, and witnesses the murder of Micah (which occurs off-screen in the first film). From an audience perspective, *The Marked Ones*' ending would be bewildering without knowledge of the first film. This sequence also retroactively shapes the audience's understanding of the first film's climax. In *Paranormal Activity*, Katie screams for Micah, but those cries emanate from off-screen: she is downstairs, while the camera is fixed on a tripod in the upstairs bedroom. In *The Marked Ones* it is revealed that Katie screams at Hector, who has mysteriously appeared in her house. Thus, despite being referred to as a "spin-off" rather than a canonical part of the series (see Barker, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2014), *The Marked Ones* shares an intersubjective, mutually constitutive connection with its antecedent.

This trait of requiring the audience to reconsider events in light of subsequent iterations is repeated across the series. In *Paranormal Activity 2*, for example, the family's household is trashed in what looks like a burglary, yet, as Ali notes, "They didn't take anything." The audience is led to believe that the mess is caused by the demon rather than thieves, and that the family have not yet understood that they are being stalked by a paranormal entity. However, in *Paranormal Activity 3*, the footage is expanded to reveal that "the only thing [...] really missing" is a "box of [video]tapes that Katie brought" into their house. Thus, a different set of motives and implications are raised: the mess was caused by burglars rather than the demon, and so emphasis is placed on the thieves' motives (why they might want the tapes). When the same box of videos is found in both *The Marked Ones* and *The Ghost Dimension*, the tapes seem even more significant and the mystery of their relocation deepens. After establishing that the tapes exist, *Paranormal Activity 3* is comprised of footage from

some of those tapes. Furthermore, *Paranormal Activity 2* and *3* flesh out the events leading up to the first film, and as such, the first film's proceedings are re-characterised as being not just unfortunate but inevitable. Taken as separate, independent entities, selves appear to be significant in a particular way. When viewed as part of a larger whole – as with the relationship between each film and the series – the entity signifies in different ways, and must be reconceived accordingly.

The series' overarching plotline foregrounds interconnection, characterising it in two ways. First, *Paranormal Activity* suggests that intersubjectivity is fundamental to selfhood. With the exception of *The Marked Ones* (which is based around an apartment complex), each film mainly takes place in and around a family home. The initial stages of each film exhibit the characters engaging in family and friendship-oriented social activities. For instance, *Paranormal Activity 2* opens with Katie welcoming her sister (Kristi), brother-in-law (Daniel) and new-born nephew (Hunter) home from hospital. The series' overarching plot is fixated on Hunter's bloodline: Hunter is the first-born male in several generations, and as such he is required as a sacrifice for Lois' (his great-grandmother's) "bargain with a demon." The latter is indicative of the second way the series characterises interconnection: as terrifying. The tone of *Paranormal Activity* is shaped by its genre, and the connections that bring the series' protagonists together also doom them. The vast majority of characters are killed by the demon or by individuals who are under its influence. The characters are endangered by their involvement with Hunter, his blood-relatives, or the cult of "midwives" who are led by Lois. However, this is not a criticism of intersubjectivity per se. As a horror film series, *Paranormal Activity's* *raison d'être* is to engender fear. By using interconnection to generate horror, the series embeds intersubjectivity into its very fabric.

Although intersubjectivity is inevitable for the series' characters, Cartesian premises are also deeply ingrained into the series' *modus operandi*. As I have already outlined, found-footage films typically draw on restricted framing in order to generate fear, either by pivoting the camera to reveal an unexpected presence in the camera-operator's vicinity, or by having an entity (human or otherwise) suddenly enter the frame from off-screen. Both techniques are employed in order to startle the audience, and both rely on the idea that humans are vulnerable to threats because our perspective is limited. Form is used to generate jump-scares that are impactful because they draw on what philosophers of mind would refer to as Cartesian premises. Simultaneously, the unfolding narrative is infused with a sense of dread that is rooted in what philosophers of mind would call intersubjective concerns.

### A Combined Paradigm

Although some scholars within the philosophy of mind have hailed the intersubjective paradigm as a viable alternative to Cartesianism, there is reason to be sceptical that it will render the Cartesian model entirely redundant. As my analysis of *Paranormal Activity* demonstrates, the Cartesian concept elucidates aspects of selfhood that the intersubjective model alone does not. Using the found-footage mode, *Paranormal Activity* depicts the world as audio-visual data, which stand in for “reality.” As Wartenberg (2007, p. 60) observes, one of the continuing appeals of Descartes’ work is that he raises doubts over the legitimacy of using senses (rather than reason) as “accurate guides for determining the structure of reality.” This is especially pertinent to the found-footage horror film, which riffs upon the notion of distilling reality on film and discerning what is real; the subgenre intentionally plays with conventions of documentary realism in order to portray fictional (in this case, supernatural) events as if they are plausible. As the *Paranormal Activity* series progresses – as the budget increases, and as the films seek to offer novel thrills to entice theatre-goers back into the cinema – the films place greater emphasis on spectacle at the expense of realism. The series thus tests the audience’s willingness to suspend disbelief.

Despite the apparent unreality of these films, they nevertheless attracted an audience who were willing to pay for and be scared by contrived supernatural incidents. The continuing appeal of the series and other such found-footage films attests to how reliant we are on sensory – particularly audio-visual – information as a source of knowledge, and how deeply entrenched that reliance is. Indeed, as Descartes realised during his meditations, negating “one’s customary ideas [...] is not as easy [...] as it might seem” (Wartenberg, 2007, p. 60).

There is a parallel to draw between Descartes’ realisation and the *Paranormal Activity* films here. Just as Descartes’ project in the *Meditations* is to uncover the nature of reality using reason rather than sensory data, the story of each film is that the characters eventually come to realise that their former understanding of reality (derived from what they “see” and “know”) is insufficient; it cannot account for the demon’s presence and influence. Most of the characters fall back on their preconceptions, even when those notions are challenged. In *Paranormal Activity*, for instance, the demon blows Katie’s hair while Micah looks directly at her. It is apparent that the demon is invisible (Micah cannot see the demon), yet Micah nevertheless searches for it in adjoining rooms, as if the demon would need to hide from him. Micah relies on his ontological preconceptions in spite of contrary evidence, because he cannot comprehend the alternative; his incomprehension is signalled by his

repeated use of “what” questions during the sequence (“What the fuck is that? [...] What the hell? [...] What are you talking about?”). Such incomprehension is evident throughout the series; for example, in *Paranormal Activity 3*, Dennis’ assertion “there’s something there” and his question “what does it want?” are also indicative of the characters’ struggle to understand what the demon is because it challenges their presumptions about existence and the forms beings can take.

Although the series’ characters stubbornly cling to their preconceptions when challenged, they eventually come to realise their folly. In *Paranormal Activity 2*, for example, it takes the majority of the film’s run-time for Ali to persuade her sceptical father (Daniel) that they are subject to a demonic visitation. It is not simply the videos that sway him; Daniel is persuaded by Ali, who uses the footage as a means to an end. Daniel reacts to his revelation by turning to others for advice, enlisting his spiritually-minded ex-housekeeper Martine to help banish the demon. For Descartes, “self-deception is a very productive tool in the struggle against false certainties, since it expands our ability to free ourselves from our own convictions” (Frogel, 2016, p. 94), but in *Paranormal Activity*, false certainties are not only defeated by rumination: they are overturned via communion and consensus with others. By relinquishing his preconceptions about the fundamental nature of existence, Daniel attains an understanding of what is happening to him, yet that also entails realising that he is reliant on others (here, Ali and Martine). The same is true of the audience’s understanding of the series, which is facilitated by taking in the series as a whole – adapting one’s understanding based on subsequent facts as they are revealed – rather than contemplating each film in isolation. The latter is akin to a Cartesian view (ruminating on the individual self in isolation), and the former is an intersubjective ethos (comprehending the individual via its relations with others).

This is not to suggest that one view should be abandoned by adopting a seemingly antithetical position. Indeed, the story *Paranormal Activity* weaves over the course of six films is that no single definitive interpretation is available: rather, the audience is required to continually negotiate and reinterpret events as the series progresses. Even the final film (*The Ghost Dimension*) raises further unanswered questions about the demon and the cult, despite its tagline promising that “every secret will be revealed.” This lack of finality illuminates a crucial aspect of the philosophical debate at hand: no model of self is final. Ongoing debate will continue to be shaped by future contributions within the discipline. This proclamation might seem to signal a victory for the intersubjective model insofar as intersubjectivity a) envisions the self as

complex and context-mutable; b) looks outwards towards the world and others (rather than inwards towards oneself); and c) invites further debate, implying that the theory will have to adapt according to future contributions from a network of scholars. It might appear that the opposite is true of Cartesian introspection inasmuch as the Cartesian model presents the self as discrete, finite and locatable. However, the Cartesian model is imbued with a spirit of scepticism – arising out of Descartes’ original project – that also eschews finality. As a thought-experiment, Descartes imagines that his perceptions might be produced by a demon intent on deceiving him, meaning that his most fundamental presumptions about existence and sensory perception might be false. Descartes’ demon is the haunting presence of inquiry that cannot be sated because it is sceptical inquiry personified. *Paranormal Activity*’s demon embodies a similar ethos, not only because it causes the characters to reconsider their preconceptions, but also because the appearance of the demon in the final *Paranormal Activity* instalment inspires a similar level of incredulity, leaving viewers uncertain as to the character’s fates, the cult’s goals, and the demon’s desires. It also leaves the series open for another possible sequel, since the demon is not eradicated.

The possibility that the demon (and the series) may return again elucidates another parallel between *Paranormal Activity* and Descartes’ proclamation about entrenched beliefs. The reason “long-standing opinions” are so hard to forsake is because they “keep returning again and again, almost against [one’s] will” (Descartes 1998, p. 62); indefatigability implies that persistent ideas endure because they contain some truth that refuses to be suppressed. It is revealing that Descartes struggled to escape the grip of seemingly irresistible ideas. This is precisely the struggle that characterises contemporary anti-Cartesian thinkers’ attempts to exorcise Cartesianism from its dominant position in the philosophy of mind. No matter how frequently Cartesianism is challenged or rejected, it returns “again and again.”

One might argue that the resilience of Cartesian premises is the product of habit, indicating how deeply entrenched those notions are, rather than how accurate the model is. However, I contend that the reason Cartesianism continues to maintain a prominent position in the field is not only due to its historical significance. Rather, Cartesianism persists because it articulates certain key aspects of selfhood. To reject Cartesianism is to deny the impact that perspectival limitation has on self-conception and to neglect the fundamentally private, internal nature that characterises so much of our self-experience. Admitting those premises does not invalidate intersubjectivity. As the textual analysis illustrates, the intersubjective model underlines how crucial the social

aspects of selfhood are. The Cartesian model, as I have established, fails to account for sociality's significant role in self-conception. Thus, neither paradigm seems to offer a picture of selfhood complete enough to encompass the ways in which selfhood is conceived and represented outside of the philosophy of mind. Anti-Cartesian thinkers do themselves a disservice by presenting intersubjectivity and Cartesianism as incompatible. Indeed, the project of separating the two models is somewhat at odds with the spirit of intersubjectivity: by bringing the models together, by finding consensus, the philosophy of mind might be enriched.

The "problem" of self is that it appears to be "paradoxically, both autonomous and interdependent" (Tsekeris, 2015, p. 1). However, this supposed "paradox" stems from stripping away some aspects of self while overemphasising others. Some degree of independence is necessary in order to maintain that humans are capable of autonomy, of making self-directed intentional choices, and of taking moral responsibility for those choices, for instance. Functional sociality is based on these presuppositions, which balance independence (responsibility for one's actions) with other-oriented considerations (responsibility to not harm others via one's actions, for example). Sociality is a normal aspect of human existence: social relations are often complex, but the idea that sociality causes ontological paradoxes is peculiar to a philosophical mode of interpreting human existence. As Turner et al. have it, "group relationships exist socially and psychologically and therefore it is necessary [...] to define oneself in [those] terms" (1994, p. 460).

Furthermore, entities and objects are routinely conceived of as occupying two seemingly distinct roles simultaneously without contradiction. A hand can be perceived as a meaningfully distinct object, but it is also usually part of a larger whole (a body), and the two are not mutually exclusive. So it is with intersubjectivity; a person can be identified as an individual and as part of a grouping such as a family concurrently. This involves accounting for the relations between an individual and the larger structures involved: there is no paradox. The way one perceives, interprets, and engages with the individual might alter in various relational contexts (since a particular context reveals specific characteristics or traits), but that perspectival shift does not change the individual themselves. In fact, one's understanding of the individual is augmented by recognising the relational contexts the individual belongs to, and acknowledging the multitude of characteristics that are highlighted as being significant in differing relational contexts.

Although *Paranormal Activity* does not offer a theory of selfhood per se, it does present an inductive analogical argument in support of consensus



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between the two paradigms. The films capture core elements of both the Cartesian and intersubjective models of self. The series also provides a further feature: via the films' formal and narrative structures, the series brings those two paradigms together within a coherent whole. The two models emphasise different aspects of the texts and selfhood, but they are not incompatible; they co-exist. *Paranormal Activity* thus demonstrates that it is plausible to bring these two models together in a cohesive way. Rather than presenting intersubjectivity as incompatible with Cartesian thinking, it would be productive to find ways to retain the pertinent aspects of both views, and to unify them. Such theories may already exist in embryo. Recall that some thinkers accidentally incorporate Cartesian premises into their supposedly anti-Cartesian models. The flaw here arises only from the quest to design an anti-Cartesian model; if the aim were to generate an integrated paradigm, these extant theoretical arguments might instead be considered successes.

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