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Documentary Style as Post-truth Monstrosity in the Mockumentary Horror Film

Richard Wallace (University of Warwick)
Richard.wallace@warwick.ac.uk

Abstract

This article argues that the mockumentary horror film uses its stylistic hybridity to address the ontological and epistemic challenges posed to factual media in a post-truth and post-modern age through an analysis of the film *Apollo 18* (Gonzalo López-Gallego, 2011). By adopting the visual aesthetics associated with factual media, and particularly those associated with post-9/11 surveillance culture, the form challenges the endurance of longstanding cultural structures (news, documentary, factual broadcasting) upon which our conceptualisation of the world is founded. In this respect, the boundary-crossing aesthetics parallel longstanding conceptualisation of the monster in horror. This aesthetic approach is most clearly manifested through the emulation of medium-specific textural artefacts which accrue across the film in a structured manner to create a situation in which the documentary investigation records its own destruction. The mockumentary horror film literalises the broader conceptual failure of the documentary project to work through and make sense of unresolved traumas and stand up to the threats posed by the epistemic horrors of a post-truth cultural turn.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years, the documentary form has been subjected to a series of epistemological and existential challenges that it has yet to adequately negotiate. The impact of digital technologies on the field has been profound, and in 2008 Brian Winston argued that '[t]echnology, by finally and irrevocably dissolving the connection between the image and the imaged, must therefore have a significant potential impact on the documentary'.¹ For Paul Ward, this poses 'a major theoretical and philosophical challenge to commonsense definitions of documentary as a mode',² and, regardless of the diversification of the formal qualities of documentary cinema itself over the last two decades, it remains the case that '[p]ublic reception of the documentary still turns too much on an unproblematised acceptance of cinematic mimesis'.³

This destabilisation of the conceptual fixity of the documentary image has been hastened by the global proliferation of what has come to be known as a post-truth cultural turn, wherein the

¹ Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real II: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 9.

² Paul Ward, *Documentary: The Margins of Reality* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2005), p. 9.

³ Winston, *Claiming the Real II*, p. 9.

status of evidence, data and expert testimony risk being eclipsed by feeling, emotion and belief as a guiding principle in, amongst many other fields, international foreign policy. Symptoms of this trend includes the phenomenon of ‘fake news’, which Dave Saunders has characterised as ‘mutable mass information and beliefs disseminated as fact’, and which is both a real and genuine threat to democracy *and* an ideologically constructed tool used by certain public figures to attack political opponents and the news media.⁴ Although the term ‘post-truth’ has its basis in Reagan-era political obfuscation, the phenomenon has grown most rapidly in the two decades since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York, where the factual media’s inability to make sense of the immediate and long-lasting trauma continues to raise questions about documentary’s ability to reveal truths. In combination, these destabilizing tendencies pose a particular challenge for media forms that derive their potency from an association with the empirical and evidentiary and, as Winston suggests, documentary ‘is not in a good position to counter current doubts as to its authenticity’.⁵

Laura Frost has argued that the lasting images of the 9/11 attacks have been sanitised in the ensuing decades by the removal of many of the traces of individualised human tragedy. Although this was a deliberate media strategy designed ‘to protect people from the most upsetting images of 9/11 devastation’, it did, in turn, ‘present cognitive problems that have not yet been solved’.⁶ In characteristic fashion, the post-9/11 horror film has engaged with these unresolved traumas in literal and allegorical ways. On the one hand, the excessive visualisations of the ‘torture porn’ sub-genre has re-inserted the bodily traumas erased from the 9/11 footage back into the broader contextual debate. At the other extreme, the proliferation of mockumentary and found footage horror films speaks to an attempt to engage – at an aesthetic level – with the media images of trauma associated with 9/11 and its aftermath *and* with the implications that these factual media images have for our faith in, and understanding of, the wider documentary project in a context in which its claims of authenticity are under threat.

This article contributes to a small, but growing, body of scholarship on mockumentary horror cinema; fictional horror texts that adopt the look of documentary or other non-fiction media.⁷⁸ It

⁴ Dave Saunders, *Documentary* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 25. For a more detailed discussion of fake news, post-truth politics and the mockumentary see Richard Wallace, *Mockumentary Comedy: Performing Authenticity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 165-200.

⁵ Winston, *Claiming the Real II*, p. 9.

⁶ Laura Frost, ‘Black Screens, Lost Bodies: The Cinematic Apparatus of 9/11 Horror’, in Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller (eds), *Horror After 9/11* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), pp. 15, 16.

⁷ See: Aviva Briefel, ‘Rules of Digital Attraction: The Lure of the Ghost in Joel Anderson’s *Lake Mungo*’, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* vol. 34, no. 2 (2017), pp. 130-147; Lindsay Coleman, ‘Heart of Darkness with a Wink: The Evolution of the Killer Mockumentary, from “Man Bites Dog” to “The Magician”’, *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, vol. 28, no. 3 (2009), pp. 41-46; Larrie Dudenhoeffer, *Embodiment and Horror Cinema* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2014); Neil Jackson, ‘“Cannibal Holocaust,” Realist Horror, and Reflexivity’, *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2002), pp. 32-45; Gary D. Rhodes, ‘Mockumentaries and the Production of Realist Horror’, *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2002), pp. 46-60; Jane Roscoe, ‘*The Blair Witch Project*: Mock-documentary goes mainstream’, *Jump Cut*, vol. 43 (2000), pp. 3-8; Cecilia Sayad, ‘Found-footage Horror and the Frame’s Undoing’, *Cinema Journal*, vol. 55, no. 2 (2016), pp. 43-66.

⁸ I refer, here, to ‘mockumentary horror’, rather than ‘found footage’ horror because, as Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes in their chronology of the sub-genre, strictly speaking the latter term pertains ‘only to

is primarily concerned with the ways in which the challenges posed to factual media in the post-truth era are manifested in the interplay between style, genre and meaning. Linnie Blake has argued that horror cinema is particularly effective when it addresses ‘the sites where ideologically dominant models of individuals and group identity are sequentially formed, dismantled by trauma and finally re-formed in a post-traumatic context’ and that such narratives

demand not only a willingness on behalf of audiences to work through the anxiety engendered by trauma, but a willingness also to undertake a fundamental questioning of those ideologically dominant models of individual, collective and national identity that can be seen to be deployed across post-traumatic cultures, as a means of binding (hence isolating and concealing) the wounds of the past in a manner directly antithetical to their healing.⁹

For Blake, then, alongside an attempt to engage with the experience of trauma, a primary function of horror cinema is to make visible and challenge the representational strategies through which traumatic events are mediated and contained.¹⁰ This article argues that the mockumentary horror film is profoundly engaged in interrogating processes by which real-world images of traumatic events and atrocities are captured, shaped and disseminated and the unstable position that factual media of all kinds holds within this social schema.

This functions at a micro-stylistic level, as every image is inscribed with particular textural qualities associated with non-fiction media forms, such as the excessive grain structures, digital noise and pixilation commonly found when shooting amateur or documentary footage in low-level lighting, or the motion blur that results from excessive hand-held camera movement. The emulation of these documentary textures provides a particular aesthetic topography wedded, by association, to the images of 9/11 and its aftermath which includes the global war on terror and the congruent rise of surveillance culture (with its familiar CCTV images) and torture (the graphic photographs of American atrocities at Abu Ghraib; the murder by decapitation of *Wall Street Journal* journalist Daniel Pearl). These aesthetic signifiers of ‘terror’ sit in tension with the continued erosion of epistemic faith in the documentary image to which they belong, and it is on this tension that this article will focus via an analysis of the mockumentary horror film *Apollo 18* (Gonzalo López-Gallego, 2011).

Apollo 18: Mockumentary Horror and Texture

A modest box office success (it took over \$25 million from a budget of \$5 million), *Apollo 18* is a typical example of the mockumentary horror sub-genre. It uses a range of stylistic devices with

horror films that feature material that is literally found or discovered’; Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films*, p. 13. Although an elastic definition of ‘found footage’ horror is often used within popular discourse, I use ‘mockumentary horror’ here to accurately reflect the range of factual material that can be accommodated by the form that is not limited to ‘found’ objects, and the multiplicity of different modes of engagement that such a variety invites.

⁹ Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), pp. 2-3.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

factual associations to tell the (fictional) story of a secret NASA lunar landing which took place in December 1974 and was covered up following its catastrophic failure. The plot is as follows: Mission Commander Nathan Walker (Lloyd Owen) and Lunar Module Pilot Ben Anderson (Warren Christie) descend to the Moon's surface where they find an abandoned, but operational, Russian spacecraft. They then become the focus of a series of unexplained disturbances of increasing intensity which interfere with the communications systems (including their recording equipment) and culminate in Walker being killed by a large spider-like creature which has penetrated his space suit. Anderson attempts to escape in the Russian capsule, however the rock samples that they have been collected are revealed to be the latent state of the spider creatures, and the image cuts to black as their true nature is revealed, leaving the out of control capsule on a collision course with the orbiting Command Module.

Like many mockumentary horror films, *Apollo 18* begins by setting out the aesthetic terrain across which it will operate. A series of on-screen text captions provide contextual information about the events of the film and the provenance of the material that we are about to see. The first caption provides genuine historical information, including:

DECEMBER 7, 1972 – APOLLO 17, THE FINAL OFFICIAL LUNAR MISSION,
LANDS ON THE MOON.

This is then replaced by the statement:

IN 2011, EIGHTY FOUR HOURS OF CLASSIFIED FOOTAGE IS UPLOADED
TO WWW.LUNARTRUTH.COM.

After a few seconds the words 'THIS FILM WAS EDITED FROM THAT FOOTAGE' fade into view. As with similar disclaimers at the beginning of *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999) and *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), the initial factual statement grounds the film's diegesis within our own world, and as Cecilia Sayad notes, through such statements 'the horror movie is thus presented not as a mere artefact but as a fragment of the real world, and the implication is that its material might well spill over into it'.¹¹ These captions also establish the 'foundness' of the footage, which Jamie Baron argues is 'a constituent element of all archival documents as they are perceived in appropriation films' regardless of the conditions of their discovery.¹² No further information is given in *Apollo 18* as to how the material was recovered, how and where it has been stored since 1974, how, why and by whom the material has been edited, or how it came to be made available online. A supernatural air attends the material as a result, and the footage functions in a similar way to other 'forbidden tomes' of horror cinema like *The Evil Dead's* (Sam Raimi, 1981) 'Book of the Dead' or the VHS videotape in *Ringu* (Hideo Nakata, 1998), the discovery of which unleash the supernatural forces that dominate their respective films. In mockumentary horror, however, the documentary image both brings the horror into being *and* acts as evidence that it was already 'out there' in our world, prior to the footage being viewed.

¹¹ Sayad, 'Found-footage Horror', p. 45.

¹² Jamie Baron, *The Archive Effect: Found Footage and the Audiovisual Experience of History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 17.

The interplay between *Apollo 18*'s fictional material and its aesthetic performance of factuality is, to a large extent, marshalled through the careful deployment of textural elements. Lucy Fife Donaldson has argued that 'we can understand texture as constituting atmosphere or mood' and that it plays a key role in establishing cinematic space and orientating the audience at the start of a film.¹³ The opening of *Apollo 18* makes it explicit that the diegesis is to be mediated through (faked) archival footage, that we are asked to understand as having been created in December 1974 and exhumed, edited, disseminated and viewed in 2011. The visual material is not homogenous, and the use of different recording formats is signalled by the emulation of different clusters of textural elements appropriate to the recording medium. Donaldson draws attention to the link between the material conditions of film as a recording and storage format that has a 'delicate surface' that can be 'easily marked, scratched or added to' and how this translates to an image on screen that has 'too much texture' which 'spoils the clarity'.¹⁴ This is particularly the case for archival film whose age has afforded a greater opportunity for the accumulation of dust, dirt and damage. It is this sense of 'too much texture' – or the textural characteristics that exist in an image over and above the textural qualities of the recorded images themselves – that are drawn upon for affect in the mockumentary and which structures the initial aesthetic experience of *Apollo 18*.

[Insert Fig1.jpg here]

Fig. 1: An image of Walker doing pre-flight tests contains tramline scratches, speckles of dust and dirt and uneven edges in *Apollo 18*.

A brief prelude introduces us to the astronauts via talking-head interviews and footage of them completing pre-flight tests, both exhibiting the textural characteristics specific to archival 16mm film (Fig. 1). The interview footage is speckled with dust, dirt and scratches, and exhibits frame judder consistent with damaged sprocket-holes, and jumps caused by missing frames. The corners of the frame are rounded and the edges are uneven, suggestive of film viewed without an aperture plate – in other words, not professionally projected – and there is significant film grain in evidence as is characteristic of the 16mm gauge, and which Donaldson argues 'can indicate authenticity, through its association with the look of cinema verité'.¹⁵ In contrast to these 'official' images, footage of the crew at a family barbecue emulates Super 8 home movie film through the excessive colour saturation, even more accentuated grain structure, non-standard frame rate (suggesting hand-cranking or a run-down battery) and lack of sound. These shots also suggest their amateur status – and therefore their distinctiveness from the 16mm training footage – through the unstable camerawork and awkward framing which frequently dissects the people contained within them.

These textural elements imbue the image with a sense of history and suggest that what we are seeing is factual footage, shot on a variety of non-theatrical film grades at a time that is temporally and technologically distinct from the moment of viewing. The image reproduces the

¹³ Lucy Fife Donaldson, *Texture in Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 56.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 36, 35.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

various possible textures of film, a tangible historical medium ‘that displays its material qualities’ when viewed.¹⁶ In the mockumentary horror film this faking of filmic texture perpetuates the proposition that the images that we are watching are derived from physical sources that have been on a journey, both spatial and temporal, during which they have accumulated the scars, and thus the excessive textures, that we associate with old film. The damage and degradation act as textural ‘proof’ that what we are seeing is part of a historical archive, and is, therefore, factual. These medium-specific textural qualities are also marked as ‘old’, because they sit in contrast with the digital means of their (supposed and actual) dissemination: www.lunartruth.com; the home media DVD or Blu-ray; the digital cinema projection system.

The makers of *Apollo 18* are, therefore, directly engaging with – and overturning – the cultural associations that structure our understanding of what documentaries look like and how they function. The hybrid aesthetic draws attention to the way documentaries *perform* style through the deployment of recognisable aesthetic features, such as narration, hand-held camerawork and the textures of archival celluloid, that John Parris Springer and Gary D. Rhodes have called documentary’s “‘false” signifiers of reality’.¹⁷ By deploy these same ‘signifiers’ in service of a fictional (horror) narrative the film exhibits a fundamentally reflexive relationship with its stylistic source material. This reflexivity is enhanced by the inclusion of a number of short sequences showing a Lunar Module (LEM) being tested which appears to be genuine NASA footage. This complicates the otherwise straightforward ontological masquerade performed across this opening sequence; the footage adds a veneer of truthfulness to the fictional shots and conversely the dramatic context acts to fictionalise these genuinely factual images.¹⁸

Style as Monstrosity

Sayad notes that the mixing of horror and documentary conventions ‘reflects a postmodern sensibility’ in that ‘it crosses boundaries, blends generic categories, and challenges distinctions between what is fictional and factual, as well as between film and reality’.¹⁹ Thus for Sayad, the documentary-like style works in the found footage horror cycle because it collapses the fictional boundaries and suggests ‘that the horrific events represented on the screen might take place in real life’.²⁰ However, the mockumentary style isn’t only important because of the conventions of realism that it imbues in the visual style.²¹ Though I do not disagree with such a position, the

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁷ John Parris Springer and Gary D. Rhodes, “Introduction”, in *Docufictions: Essays on the Intersection of Documentary and Fictional Filmmaking*, eds. Gary D. Rhodes and John Parris Springer (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2005), p. 8.

¹⁸ This juxtaposition of the factual and the fictional – with each inflecting our interpretation of the other – is a particularly potent tool and is used to great effect in Barry Levinson’s ecological horror mockumentary film *The Bay*. In that film the central ‘monster’ is a mutated version of an isopod, a genuine marine organism, and many of the most striking moments are actually composed of factual scientific footage of the creatures, transformed into dramatic moments of horror through their interaction with the fictional framing material.

¹⁹ Sayad, ‘Found-footage horror and the frame’s undoing’, p. 53.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 48.

²¹ This aspect of the form is been discussed in more detail in Rhodes, ‘Mockumentaries and the Production of Realist Horror’, pp. 46-60.

mixture of visual styles has a more fundamental function within the horror than the blurring of ontological boundaries for dramatic effect; it also has much in common with current and historical conceptualization of the ‘monster’.

Noël Carroll has argued that monsters tend to be ‘interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete or formless’, and ‘involve the mixture of what is normally distinct’.²² They go on to suggest that ‘many of the most basic structures for representing horrific creatures are combinatory in nature’ and ‘transgress categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead’.²³ Taking up Julia Kristeva’s notion of ‘the abject’,²⁴ Barbara Creed has characterized the horror film monster as a crosser of borders and boundaries, functioning ‘to bring about an encounter between the symbolic order and that which threatens its stability’.²⁵ This tendency for monsters to derive their impact from their impurity allows us to make some important parallels with the mockumentary form, and to go some way towards suggesting reasons for its significance. What is most significant about Carroll’s description of monsters as ‘[composites] that [unite] attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds in the cultural scheme of things in *unambiguously* one, spatio-temporally discrete entity’, is that that they could just as well be offering up a description of the mockumentary form itself.²⁶

In the mockumentary – as in the monster – we find a combination of categorically distinct stylistic and cultural attributes: real world/fictional diegesis; non-fiction style/fictional content; documentary address/fictional characters and situations; documentary mode of engagement/fictional mode of engagement. These are brought together in one place to create impure forms that are both physically and cognitively threatening. Simon Mittman has argued that ‘the monstrous is [...] that which calls into question our [...] epistemological worldview, highlights its fragmentary and inadequate nature and thereby asks us [...] to acknowledge the failures of our systems of categorization’.²⁷ Mockumentary horror films offer a particularly incisive aesthetic vehicle in the post-truth context because their stylistic hybridity replicates the border-challenging and impure monsters that are literalised within the horror genre and take conceptual form through the attack on the structural barrier between factual images and fiction that bears intense cultural weight. The mockumentary has become a significant stylistic mode of horror cinema in recent years because it is itself a monstrosity.

Texture plays a key role in the transgression of established cultural structures. Being the main signifier of the mockumentary’s hybridity, it is also the key component of its monstrous nature. Taken to the extreme – as things often are in mockumentary horror – the genre as a whole operates through a process whereby the failure of factual enquiry is rehearsed again and again in

²² Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 32, 33.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

²⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. L.S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

²⁵ Barbara Creed, ‘Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection’, in Ken Gelder (ed.), *The Horror Reader* (London: Routledge 2000), p. 66.

²⁶ Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, p. 43.

²⁷ Asa Simon Mittman, ‘Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies’, in Asa Simon Mittman and Peter J. Dendle, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous* (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), p. 8.

different permutations and in response to a range of different supernatural pressures. One common element in these repeated iterations is the genre's almost ubiquitous failure to show the monster in any satisfying way. The withholding of the horrific is not, of course, unique to mockumentary horror. Andrew Tudor has noted the many horror films where the monsters are 'present only by suggestion or inference',²⁸ and Alexandra Heller-Nicholas acknowledges mockumentary horror's 'Val Lewton-like coyness in revealing sources of terror',²⁹ referencing what Joel E. Siegel has called Lewton's process of horror 'by suggestion' in films such as *Cat People* (Jacques Tourneur, 1942) and *I Walked With A Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur, 1943).³⁰ However, the form *does* seem to operate in a different way to what Frost has called the 'classic' horror film, because rather than the withholding of the menace being a component of suspense, which is relieved 'with the revelation of the shocking spectacle', in the mockumentary this climactic resolution rarely arrives.³¹

The mockumentary horror systematically fails to provide the revelatory spectacle, offering only fleeting glimpses or fragmented and obscured views. Texture plays a key role in this process because more often than not this occlusion occurs because the 'too much texture' of the flawed documentary image acts to hide the (more literal) monster from our sight in a deliberately orchestrated fashion that escalates across the duration of an individual film. This has become such a recognisable generic trope that the sixth entry in the *Paranormal Activity* series – *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015) – carries an acknowledgement in its promotional tagline that 'For the first time you will see the activity'.

The 'too much texture' associated with documentary cinema and archival film more generically is an essential component of the mockumentary horror film, because it is within these textures that the monsters are hidden. Frequently this occurs as a result of the feigning of the practical restrictions placed on documentary filmmakers: the diegetic camera might be looking in the wrong direction; the threat is captured only fleetingly in the corner of an image; a hand-held camera produces an unsteady image which fails to provide a clean and clear view. Sayad addresses the issue of composition and framing in the found footage horror film, noting that:

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 colour, movement, or quality.³²

However, this is exacerbated by the impact that such framing and camera movement has on the textural qualities of the images themselves. A whip pan in any filmic scenario doesn't just reorganise the frame in a rapid and potentially disorienting way, it also momentarily fills it with extreme motion blur and the smeary textures of movement through which it is difficult to discern any clear detail, even when paused (Fig. 2).

[Insert Fig2.jpg here]

²⁸ Andrew Tudor, 'Why Horror? The Peculiar Pleasures of a Popular Genre', *Cultural Studies*, 11(3), p. 457.

²⁹ Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films*, p. 195.

³⁰ Joel E. Siegel, *Val Lewton: The Reality of Terror* (London: Secker & Warburg Limited, 1972), p. 31.

³¹ Frost, 'Black Screens, Lost Bodies', p. 14.

³² Sayad, 'Found-footage Horror', p. 60.

Fig. 2: An unstable hand-held camera in *Apollo 18* converts a view of the lunar surface into the directionally smeary textures associated with rapid camera movement.

Individual camera movements, shots and archival sources exhibit distinct and specific textural qualities at a micro level and can be deployed in a structured way across an entire film text. *Apollo 18* does not exhibit a consistent instability of image. Rather, there is an escalation of textural elements across its duration, causing the clarity of the overall image to deteriorate in a structured and progressive way. The sequences in *Apollo 18* that cover the prelude to the mission are composed of the film's clearest and most stable images and the 'documentary' textures found here represent the 'base-line' onto which additional artefacts are built as the film progresses. This incremental shift begins after the commencement of the Apollo 18 mission (represented by more repurposed NASA footage, this time of a Saturn V rocket launch). The style shifts to a combination of 16mm film (usually implied to be handheld) and a variety of video sources.³³ Some of these are manually operated by the crew, others are fixed in position on the lunar surface and in the spacecraft. This has the effect of imitating the popular memory of the aesthetics and textures of genuine Apollo missions, made familiar through their appearance on television news and in numerous documentaries since the mid-1960s. The familiarity of the live television broadcasts of the Apollo missions, and particularly the footage of Neil Armstrong's first steps on the surface of the Moon during the Apollo 11 mission, have ensured that the Apollo programme is associated in the popular memory with a low-resolution video-based, textural quality. 'Space footage' therefore, has a particular generic aesthetic that can be identified and imitated.³⁴ Although this might not reflect the reality of most genuine footage from the Apollo programme, *Apollo 18* contains an *idea* of authenticity derived from its resonance with the Armstrong footage, which is, ironically, one of the poorest of the Moon-derived images. It also has a direct impact on the overall visual style of the film which takes the murky and distorted video footage as its basis. As the film progresses and the supposed conditions of shooting deteriorate further, the base-line texture of the image shifts to something that is – on average – less distinct than the introductory film sequences: interlaced images recorded on the Moon (Fig. 3) offer vastly reduced definition and shots recorded within the LEM demonstrate significant spatial distortion from a fisheye lens.

[Insert Fig3.jpg here]

Fig. 3: The video image from the moon replicates the quality of 'space footage' associated with the Apollo 11 moon landing.

³³ All of the real Apollo missions included a 16mm film camera, and at least one Westinghouse television camera among their inventory of camera equipment and the latter is specifically referenced in *Apollo 18* dialogue.

³⁴ The reality of NASA-held 'moon' footage is somewhat different. Much of the film material shot on or on the way to the Moon, is of a very high quality, and the photographs taken by the 70mm Hasselblad cameras are often breath-taking in their clarity. See the documentaries *For All Mankind* (Al Reinert, 1989) and *In the Shadow of the Moon* (David Sington, 2007) for examples.

This ramping up of texture, and the concomitant deterioration of the image, continues in a systematic fashion that over the course of the film becomes intertwined with the crew's (and the camera's) proximity with the alien threat. It is an almost ubiquitous characteristic of mockumentary horror that as the engagement with the monster becomes more intense and intimate, the 'documentary' investigation begins to break down as a result of the ever-worsening filming conditions: lack of light, space, and direction, amongst other things. The conditions for capturing a clear image of the monster is, therefore, already compromised by the evocation of, and commitment to, the visual qualities of documentary footage filmed in challenging conditions. The first time we see one of the spider creatures in *Apollo 18* is when it crawls over Walker's face at the half-way point of the film. It takes up such a small portion of the screen, comes as such a surprise, and is visible for so short a time (less than one second) that by the time the movement of the creature has registered, there is little time left to assimilate what is being shown to us. Even when paused, the film grain, poor lighting, reflected sunlight, and the two panels of glass through which the image is shot – plus the visible textures of Walker's face – make it difficult to adequately make sense of the image. We get the visceral impression of a large spider, and nothing more.

This very brief moment establishes the template through which we are given access to the creatures. We know that the intensity of the horror is likely to intensify as the film progresses. However, we also know from the generic conventions of mockumentary horror that this escalation goes hand-in-hand with the tendency to conceal, even during the climax. This is, of course, one of the key structuring devices of the form and the proximity of the monster adds an additional – insurmountable – pressure to the filming process, which works ultimately to overcome both the operators and the technological capabilities of the recording equipment. This effect is exacerbated in *Apollo 18* by the inference that the spider creatures are themselves the cause of much of the extraneous interference to the video and radio signals, and as their implied presence becomes more sustained during the second half of the film, so the instances of visual distortion become more numerous. By establishing that the spider creatures have a catastrophic effect on the recording apparatus, the threat is seen to obfuscate itself and we are denied the possibility of *ever* seeing them clearly. At one point, a tripod-mounted shot of the lunar rover is overtaken by a violent burst of video noise (Fig. 4), imbuing the image with the textural qualities of the electronic video medium: visible tracking lines; tape dropout; and frame edge distortion. The densely-textured image could contain an impression of the spider creatures within its frame and we would be unable to tell. In *Apollo 18* we are never permitted an unobstructed view of the menace, and we only glimpse the alien creatures in a handful of shots totalling around thirty seconds of the film's 84-minute running time.³⁵ Instead of the anticipated monster reveal, there is a(n) (anti-)climactic eruption of texture which saturates the image as the 'documentary' infrastructure collapses.

[Insert Fig4.jpg here]

Fig. 4: The image of the rover is severely distorted by the presence of the rock creatures. *Apollo 18*.

³⁵ This is also, of course, a product of the low-budget nature of many of these horror films and the mockumentary style is a cheap and convenient aesthetic device used to reduce the amount of money necessary to create a suitably terrifying monster,

Larrie Dudenhoeffer has forwarded the argument that the *Paranormal Activity* series collapses the distinction between technology and monster; that we see a ‘demon-as-camera’.³⁶ However, we can extend this analogy by suggesting that it is the recording medium itself – the film strip, video tape, or memory card – rather than the apparatus in its totality that becomes monstrous. It is the specificities of these recording media that are exhibited through their particular textural qualities. Although the ‘too much texture’ that erupts during these alien encounters might seem to act as an obscuring presence, seen from another perspective the textural bursts become manifestations of the creatures whose presence can be implied – paradoxically – by the overwhelming experience of their absence. There is, therefore, a direct connection between the monster, the materiality of the recording medium, and the visual manifestation of that medium in the image through its associated textures that resembles the literal, metaphorical and perceptual ‘tissues’ of horror cinema. The film strip (or video tape, or memory card) becomes emblematic of the ‘skin’ that both separates the human body from the monstrous *and* acts as a site of haptic sensory transposition, as detailed in Jennifer M. Barker’s notion that in the horror film the ‘smooth and clean surface’ of the skin comes into contact with, or is displaced by, ‘disgusting and disturbing textures’ and horrific ‘eruptions and oozings’, much as the stability of the video image is ruptured by the alien presence and infested (or infected?) by alien texture.³⁷ At such moments in *Apollo 18*, the hybrid mockumentary style literally displaces the monster within the drama and texture becomes a visual manifestation of the threat, and in doing so effectively *becomes* the monster. The distorted image of the lunar rover doesn’t need to contain a picture of the spider creatures to signify their presence because they are already manifest in the image through their embodiment as textural distortion.

Monstrous Style and Documentary’s Failure

There is a profound paradox at work here, because the documentary form’s perceived function is turned on its head. Instead of the documentary-like textures signifying a process of showing and illuminating, here they act to disguise and distort. Even taking into account the ‘too much texture’ acting as a signifier of alien presence, in a post-truth context the documentary enquiry’s function has shifted from one of evidence gathering to the generation of an emotional reaction. The elicitation of terror superseding that of understanding is both a post-truth signifier and returns us to Donaldson’s idea that texture is important in connoting mood. This is taken to its extreme here, where the careful manipulation of documentary’s familiar textures plays a key role in instigating this shift from the empirical to the emotional.

An obvious comparison is Michelangelo Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966) in which Thomas (David Hemmings), a photographer, discovers that some of his photographic enlargements appear to show a murder taking place. However, as Antonioni himself has stated, in attempting to enlarge

³⁶ Larrie Dudenhoeffer, *Embodiment and Horror Cinema*, p. 154.

³⁷ Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), pp. 49, 48.

the images to gain more clarity ‘the object itself decomposes and disappears’.³⁸ What at first appeared to be the torso of a murdered man deteriorates into an order-less series of blotches. The camera’s historical association with other scientific instruments of truth-telling – the vestiges of which still underpin documentary’s status as a reliable media form – is critiqued in *Blow-Up* through the failure of the photographic image to stand up to the forensic weight placed upon it.³⁹ A partially-formed hypothesis gives way to grain, texture and noise, and so it is in the mockumentary horror in general, and *Apollo 18* in particular, where the obstruction of a clear, forensic view of the alien creatures is symbolic of the documentary’s failure in the face of the existential challenges of post-modernity and post-truth.

Although not depicted in such an explicit way, such a forensic engagement with similarly tantalising ‘documentary’ material offers the unfulfilled promise of knowledge about the monster in *Apollo 18*. Their longest sustained appearance occurs during the climax, when a possessed Walker attacks the capsule (Fig. 5). This footage has been manipulated by an unspecified mediator – a device that Aviva Briefel has called the mockumentary’s ‘virtual camera’ – in order to make the aliens more clearly visible.⁴⁰ The footage has been slowed down to mitigate against the unsteadiness of the 16mm hand-held camera, and enlarged by opening out the standard 1.33:1 aspect ratio to 1.85:1. However, the image remains far from clear: enlarging the frame magnifies the film grain even as it brings the creatures closer; vertical and lateral movement caused by the hand-held action (and Anderson’s panic) is not eliminated and the smeary textures that are produced by sudden camera movements are even more visible when slowed down. These factors combined with the moving mass of creatures, means that very little is discernible beyond a series of circular grey blurs and flailing legs.

[Insert Fig5.jpg here]

Fig. 5: A mass of spider-like creatures can be glimpsed inside Walker’s helmet. *Apollo 18*.

This brings us to the aspect of the mockumentary horror film that might be its most reflective and contentious: the persistent failure of the ‘documentary’ approach to provide either a satisfyingly monstrous, or a reassuringly closed, resolution. Discussing *The Blair Witch Project*, Jane Roscoe notes that ‘within the film, documentary seems the mode of enquiry capable of revealing two truths; that of the myth of the Blair Witch [...] and the fate of the students [...] yet, here documentary fails on both accounts’.⁴¹ This is a common scenario in mockumentary horror. The questions are almost always identical: what explanation is there for the situation we see unfolding?; and what happens to the central characters? By its very nature, the found footage sub-genre depends on the footage having been ‘lost’ in the first place, and it is frequently implied (though rarely explicitly stated) that those responsible for shooting the footage that we are watching do not make it out of the situation alive. *The Blair Witch Project, Cloverfield, Paranormal*

³⁸ Seymour Chatman, *Antonioni: Or, the surface of the world* (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 1985), p. 141.

³⁹ For an overview of the links between the camera and scientific enquiry, see Brian Winston, ‘The Documentary as Scientific Inscription’, in Michael Renov (ed.), *Theorizing Documentary* (New York; London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 37-57.

⁴⁰ Briefel, ‘Rules of Digital Attraction’, p. 140.

⁴¹ Jane Roscoe, ‘*The Blair Witch Project*’, p. 6.

Activity, [REC] (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007) and *The Last Exorcism* (Daniel Stamm, 2010), amongst others, all conclude with their protagonists apparently dead or disappeared, their recordings left in an unknown state ready to be discovered.

Many mockumentary horror films also explicitly depict the destruction or failure of the recording apparatus, which is inscribed through yet another textural layer. In *The Tunnel* (Carlo Ledesma, 2011), which takes place in a network of underground railway tunnels in Sydney, the digital camera is dropped and the screen is severely cracked. This further reduces the comprehensibility of what was already an extremely dark and indistinct image. The same camera is then exposed to water, presumably damaging both the internal electronics and the digital video tape, and filling the recorded image with digital noise, dead pixels and dropout which, alongside the cracked screen, obliterates any underlying image in bursts of extreme texture (Fig. 6). Although still recording, the camera ceases to function as an instrument of documentary record.

[Insert Fig6.jpg here]

Fig. 6: The camera technology fails in *The Tunnel* and the image is overtaken by the textures of digital noise and a cracked screen.

A similarly destructive climax occurs in *Apollo 18* as Anderson's capsule seems to collide with Grey's Command Module following the final transformation of the spider creatures, but we see neither event occur. Instead, the image cuts out at the moment the floating moon rocks begin to transform, alternating between short shots of Anderson's convulsing face and arms, and Grey frantically directing his crewmate to slow his ascent. As the capsule fills the viewing window, we see one final image of Grey before the screen goes black, indicating that both ships (and both cameras) have been destroyed. We are left with neither narrative closure nor horrific climax. Although we assume the astronauts have been killed in a collision, the recovery of the cameras implied by our viewing of the existing footage leaves open the possibility that they may have survived. Neither are we given the satisfaction of seeing the monster in any prolonged and clear way, as the image fails at the second a sustained reveal seems about to become a possibility. A short coda only serves to heighten this lack of resolution, providing the 'official' explanation for the deaths of the three men as being killed during military manoeuvres.

As well as leaving significant questions unanswered, *Apollo 18* contains a coda which heightens this irresolution further. Audio of Kennedy's polemical 'We choose to go to the moon' speech, delivered in September 1962, is accompanied by text captions stating that:

APOLLO MISSIONS BROUGHT 840 POUNDS OF LUNAR ROCK SAMPLES
BACK TO EARTH.

HUNDREDS WERE GIVEN AWAY TO DIGNITARIES OF FOREIGN
COUNTRIES.

MANY OF THOSE "GIFTS" WERE STOLEN OR ARE NOW MISSING.

The implication is that the threat remains at large at the film's conclusion. Tanya Modleski has noted the tendency of horror films in the second half of the twentieth century to be 'increasingly

open-ended in order to allow for the possibility of countless sequels' and 'delight in thwarting the audiences' expectations of closure'.⁴² This is another nihilistic convention of the horror film that is exacerbated by the mockumentary. The 'Blair Witch' killer is not identified, and the demons of *Paranormal Activity*, *[REC]* and *The Last Exorcism* remain threats. This failure to contain the monstrous, and the format's reluctance to answer the fundamental questions that drive the narrative, returns us to the notion that the mockumentary form is itself monstrous. The mockumentary horror sub-genre overturns the notion that documentary technology and practice have a privileged relationship with 'the truth', and that the mere act of filming is enough to provide satisfying answers, or even a straightforward account of what has occurred. As Roscoe notes about *The Blair Witch Project*, 'documentary's claim to capture truth is shown to be a claim it cannot live up to'.⁴³ Rather than capturing visual evidence of the threat in a suitable horrifying way, mockumentary horror's various climaxes instead document the destruction of the recording apparatus and with it the promise of documentary revelation. This itself becomes the climactic horror of the sub-genre; in the same way that the monster is replaced by the textural qualities of the documentary, the climactic monster reveal is replaced by the catastrophic failure of the documentary form. Mockumentary horror privileges only one kind of closure: the end of the documentarist's attempts to capture evidence of the supernatural, made visible through the sight of the apparatus's destruction in a final burst of texture; often a completely blank screen.

Conclusion

Cecelia Sayad has suggested that the allegorical reading of horror films that make up a large quantity of criticism on the genre is not necessarily the best approach to the hybrid mockumentary horror film, and that it is the collapsing of boundaries between the fiction and the real world that is of particular significance. However, I would suggest that these two elements are intertwined. In the fictional documentary form's inability to contain the threat or provide any answers, we see a mode of popular fiction working through wider cultural issues that affect our understanding of factual representational forms and, in particular, their relationship with traumatic events that move beyond the boundaries of horror itself. When the conventions of the horror genre overwhelm the documentary mode of enquiry in the mockumentary horror film it doesn't just present the possibility that monsters walk among us. Rather, we are left with the disturbing notion that our representational systems, and the technological infrastructures that underpin them, are themselves fallible. The open wound that remains at the end of the mockumentary is emblematic of unresolved traumas still being worked through in everyday life; Linnie Blake's flawed cultural 'binding' processes that were mentioned at the start of this article.⁴⁴

It is not a co-incidence that a number of broadcast mockumentaries including Orson Welles's 'War of the Worlds' or the BBC's celebrated *Ghostwatch* (1992) reach their dramatic climaxes with the implied destruction of their respective broadcasting systems as the Columbia Broadcasting

⁴² Tanya Modleski, 'The Terror of Pleasure: The Contemporary Horror Film and Postmodern Theory', in Ken Gelder (ed.), *The Horror Reader* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 289.

⁴³ Jane Roscoe, 'The Blair Witch Project', p. 7.

⁴⁴ Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, pp. 2-3.

System and the BBC fall off the air in the face of supernatural interference. The sound of these institutions playing out their own destruction is horrifying because it hypothesises a systematic attack on the most comprehensive source of information about ourselves and the world around us: our systems of factual communication. As Jeffrey Sconce argues, ‘in the age of mass media, audiences learned very early that the seamless net of corporate broadcasting would be torn for only a few extraordinary events – perhaps nothing less than the end of the world’.⁴⁵ The recent cycle of mockumentary horror films rehearses this proposition, but refracts it through the framework of the ontological attack on documentary posed by the digital, the unresolved traumas of post-9/11 America, and the epistemic limits of documentary practice in a post-modern, post-truth, age.

Rather than the ‘big reveal’ of the monster, then, it is the failure of the documentary form to satisfactorily expunge the effects of trauma through comprehension that acts as the true climax to each of these films; the mechanics of factuality are literally destroyed before our eyes and the climactic encounter with the monster is deferred to an encounter with the precarious status of non-fiction forms of media. Such films form part of a larger pool of horror cinema with pessimistic, nihilistic themes, which themselves create a certain kind of terror (and attendant pleasure). However, the mockumentary horror film is particularly effective because its allegorical intent is encoded within its style rather than its narrative. Tapping into the aesthetics and political concerns of sensationalist 24-hour news reporting, digital image manipulation, a post-9/11 culture of surveillance, and the rise of a ‘post-truth’ political culture, the sub-genre’s greatest strength is that its form is as monstrous as the horrors that it contains, and that that monstrosity is inherently embedded within our everyday lives.

It is ironic, therefore, that the intangibility of the visual textures that characterise the mockumentary horror re-positions the allegorical threat as something more concrete. Aviva Briefel and Sam J. Miller argue that ‘[t]he particular context of 9/11 [...] demands a critical rethinking of allegory because it scrambles the relationship between the real and the imaginary’ and that ‘[w]e thus need new models through which to reconsider the complex relationship between the real and the allegorical in a post-9/11 context’.⁴⁶ A more detailed engagement with the textural qualities of the horror cinema might provide one such model. In deploying texture in a deliberate and sustained way, the mockumentary horror aesthetic doesn’t just give the impression that the horror might ‘spill over’ the frame’s edge and escape from the fictional world; it suggests that, like *Apollo 18*’s nefarious moon rocks, the threat has already been here for some considerable time.

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