DIGITAL GOTHIC

AN INTERVIEW WITH XAVIER ALDANA REYES

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Keywords: Gothic, popular culture, digitality, horror, found footage, interview.

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Laura Álvarez Trigo: This is our first interview for the section Automata, Cyber Terror and Technocratic Realities and I am thankful to have Xavier Aldana Reyes for it. To begin with, along with our increased dependency on technology, there has been a surge in fiction that focuses on cyberculture, the digital, and the dangers of technology. I would like to set off our conversation by thinking about the position of the audience when consuming this type of content. In the last few years, we can find various instances, both in movies and video games, of productions that are—or appear to be—recorded scenes of a computer/phone screen, which has come to be known as "desktop horror." How is this "voyeuristic" perspective important in the Gothic and Horror genre?

Xavier Aldana Reyes: First of all, thank you so much for the invitation. I'm delighted to be part of this issue. To answer your questions, I would say that desktop horror is part of larger

trend, what we may call "computer screen cinema", not all of which is necessarily horrific. Desktop horror, in particular, focuses on the dark side of the connected anxieties you were mentioning (see Larsen; Hallam), and is primarily interested in the issue of human dependency on the digital world for practically everything. Giving up on social media and smartphones is increasingly unthinkable, since we now need Internet access for even minor everyday activities like catching the bus or shopping. Part of desktop horror's interest is how certain platforms and electronic gadgets are currently filtering human life, even guiding and predicting it to dangerous levels. We live through screens, through gadgets and informational flows, which breeds certain fears, like fraud or surveillance. These anxieties are key to the twentieth century and to the development of found footage.

Shoshana Zuboff has written about this topic in *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), highlighting the fact that everything we do online leaves a trackable footprint. There is what she calls "behavioral surplus" (63–97), data exhaust which is being collected and used by companies like Facebook and Google for the benefit of third parties (advertising, for example). The voyeurism you refer to demonstrates an awareness that with social media comes the forfeiting of some personal freedoms, sometimes at a bigger cost than we realize. Then, there is the nature of social media. Films like *Megan is Missing* (2011), *The Den* (2013) or the *Unfriended* films (the first one from 2014, and the sequel from 2018, *Unfriended: Dark Web*), and even *Ratter* (2015), explore similar ideas of digital platforms and media being dispossessed or taken over by someone or something (some "thing") else. They are also preoccupied with the fact that people could be recorded unawares, hunted down and threatened by cruel, opportunistic hackers (individuals or corporations). In horror that explores voyeurism, there is a sense of involvement, that the viewer is part of the horrific exchange. This is also true of found footage horror that is not in the desktop tradition. I am thinking of films like *The Last Horror Movie* (2003), for example. In the desktop horror tradition, films like *Open Windows* (2014) or *Untraceable* (2008) are interested in people signing in to watch others being tortured, and portray scopophilic anxieties also being exploited by more recent films, like *Keep Watching* (2017). Part of it has to do with our moral position: are we willing consumers of, or passive onlookers to, filmic violence? I cannot help but feel that this is related to social media and our consumption of other people's lives, and how this, in turn, forces us to alter our own behaviours and desires, consciously or subliminally.

This new digital cinema is also distinct aesthetically, and inextricable from the interfaces it uses to express its horrors. As Adam Charles Hart has posited, films like *Unfriended* encourage a new type of involvement that exceeds the cinematic and is closer to the medium being rendered "uncanny;" they foster a species of "browsing" (3) of the film image. They stimulate a searching process for clues and, where supernatural agency manifests in the shape of glitches, viruses or intrusive pop-ups, for the cause of such errors and interruptions (Daniel 151). Desktop horror is, for obvious reasons, best enjoyed on an actual laptop that can frame the action

even more realistically. Its most successful examples are a fantastic blurring of medium, product, aesthetics and cinematic affect.

LAT: So with desktop horror as a response to our increased dependency on technology, which is a form of reflecting on contemporary cultural anxieties, we see that part of that anxiety corresponds to our experience of space and time and what you were saying about our own involvement when we are online. In your work on *Horror Film and Affect* (2016), you analyze "found footage" as a way of positioning the audience as a witness. Now, let us compare this found footage with desktop horror, for instance, the movie *Host* (2020). This movie is basically a recording of a Zoom call, so as an audience member, as you watch this movie you are sitting there in your room, watching the screen as if you were actually watching a Zoom call; you are watching and experiencing the same thing as you would "in real life" so to speak. So, how does it contribute to having the audience immersed in a more realistic way, contrasting with found footage movies when you are witnessing people moving around with their cameras in the woods, or running up and down a flight of stairs in found footage movies such as *[REC]* (2007), which are very different from the physical experience than the audience member is really having? Does this physical aspect have a role in integrating the audience in the narrative? How is this sense of "being there" important in the Gothic and Horror Genre in terms of the workings of fear?

XAR: You are picking up on a really interesting area of overlap here, but also potentially on where desktop horror and found footage horror diverge. In my work, I was initially interested in the dynamics of found footage horror precisely for the reasons that you raise. How do these films place us in the heart of the action? How do they mediate events and break the fourth wall? I was interested in these discussions at the time, when I was writing about torture porn and the kind of incriminating viewing experiences of films like *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005). My conclusion was that we could not call torture porn "sadistic," since its points of view were used for maximum effect on viewers – aligning them with both the tortured and the torturer. This point was even better articulated by Steven Jones (2013), who wrote what is possibly the best defense of this subgenre in terms of its complex viewer alignments. Found footage horror normally creates a sense of immediacy and of affect through an avatar that, in cases like *[REC]*'s, becomes a proxy for the viewer. Pablo in that particular film does not really say very much; we never really see him so that we may most unobtrusively embody his position. The off-screen space here can become, as it does in first-person POV survival horror games like *Amnesia: The Dark Descent* (2010) and *Outlast* (2013) and even more so in virtual reality (VR) horror films like *11:57* (2014), a source of threat, and the camera a visual replacement that provides the illusion of immersion.

 Technically, desktop horror is very different, as the action is somewhat more static and the story can take place "live," as in the case of the zoom call in *Host*. This should render a type of horror that is more democratic insofar as, to go with André Bazin's influential view

on depth of field (35–6), one's gaze should be able to travel anywhere on the frame. In reality, we know that this not how these films work all the time. *Host* obviously directs our sight towards one video box or another as the narrative progresses. In other films, like *Unfriended*, the actions of a character guide our attention, and in films like *Open Windows* or *Searching* (2018), there are more media (news footage, for example) involved, live or not. Some of these, like most found footage horror, betrays the existence of an external editorial hand. For me, this is where desktop horror and found footage differ, even if both are interested in the "being there" pretense. One could argue that 9/11 has something to do with this; especially with the idea that iconic images of the terrorist attacks reached us before the information (see Wetmore 23–56). The digital image is now in a paradoxical position: it has massive indexical value, as we rely more and more on images and videos to chronicle and curate our lives; at the same time, it is a lot more prone to manipulation. Digital technology and software have made the distortion and falsification of images easier than ever, affecting the ontological value of the photograph, long held as *de facto* marker of reality (see Jenkins; Manovich). And in "post-truth" times (McIntyre) where alternative facts carry as much weight as actual ones, social media (now largely the conveyors of news for many people) have become havens for the distribution of misinformation campaigns and doctored images.

We are beholden to the image because it shows us reality as it unfolds; yet, it is also completely unreliable. Found footage and desktop horror emerge from this tension. I see desktop horror as a natural evolution of the aim to create an illusion of the "now." Irrespective of whether one likes *Host,* there is a certain prescient genius in deciding to shoot the film through Zoom and in releasing it in the middle of a pandemic that came to be defined by video calls after travel restrictions affected vast swathes of the world. One of the many things that excites me about horror is that it always has its finger firmly on the social pulse; it is able to capture the zeitgeist like few other genres. Desktop horror exploits the medium to tell us stories about our times and fears, which are really not that different from those of old—they are simply channeled by new, dominant technologies.

LAT: To expand on this idea of space and place from what you've mentioned about witnessing whatever is happening at the moment, and how it has become quite particular when thinking about the online realm; but also going a little bit more into gothic tropes, we could argue that the gothic mansion—as the liminal space—could be translated into an immaterial existence on the Internet. We have the virtual space as a non-place with no physical substance (regardless of the fact that the Internet is a physical thing that exists somewhere in the Ocean, but we don't think about that much), so the Internet is this non-place where we are not physically there. We merely have some representations of ourselves, avatars, and, possibly, some form of displaced identity that we present online. Do you think that this online realm can behave as a horror house? If so, how do you think our dependency on technology contributes

to these narratives? Does this "new immaterial horror house" want to entrap us? Or does the metaphor feel insufficient or inadequate here?

XAR: In terms of what the house normally represents in the popular imagination, it is a place of safety, privacy and reflection. This is why it is also ripe for Gothic hauntings (among many others, see Curtis; Meehan). They are the closest spatial proxy for our psychologies, which can be externalised through them. Think of Roger Corman's famous *House of Usher* (1960), where the crumbling, confusing mise-en-scène is meant to reflect Usher's descent into madness. So at a time when the boundaries between the private and the public are being eroded due to surveillance capitalism and the infiltration of social media into virtually everything we do, it makes perfect sense that the analogy of the haunted house should apply to the Internet, that it would transmute into a haunted digital netherspace. This, of course, is not a new concept; it was already thoroughly explored in William Gibson's *Neuromancer* (1984), where the mind floats freely in cyberspace while the body stays anchored, clotting in the reality of the bedroom, where time does pass physically.

The Internet, as a medium defined by flow and exchange, can also work as a threshold that lets through malignant entities. Think of *FeardotCom* (2002), with its "Do you want to see a ghost?" website that unleashes hauntings remotely with one volitional click. The Internet has become a new home for our private thoughts and the process of reflection, a door into other worlds, not always pleasant ones. We are haunted by the very social medium through which we construct our sense of self and by the avatars we invent from our bedrooms.

LAT: So, if we characterize the computer as specter and the Internet as a horror house—and you were also mentioning how we become somehow part of it—this brings to mind fictions of the automata, and specially Artificial Intelligence nowadays, in terms of how they might have a similar role to the monster in gothic fiction. Sometimes, this is a monster that is in a way enticing, attracting us, often sexually. And the sexuality of automata has been present in film for decades, mostly through men who establish romantic and sexual relationships with gynoids (a la Pygmalion and Galatea) such as *Ex Machina* (2014), to give a fairly recent example. So, thinking about affect—which you have mentioned before in our conversation—, how does the machine as a monster damage or enhance this human capacity for affect? Is the source of horror here a reflection of our fear to establish real connections with other humans? And, is there a gothic element to this, so to speak, ill-advised connection formed with the abject, liminal monster?

XAR: There is quite a lot to unpack here. Creationist fears of the machines we shape into being have an obvious and significant point of origin in the Frankenstein myth and, more generally, the mad scientist tradition – that is, the idea of the *tabula rasa* in the form of Frankenstein's Creature and the fact that the invention is always, to a certain extent, a mirror for the mind that makes it. This resonates with theorizations, like Marshall McLuhan's, of technology as "the final phase of the extensions of man [*sic*] – the technological simulation of consciousness"

(3). Fear of the machine has now passed on to AI and robots: we are concerned that machines' incremental power to think, to process vast amounts of information, will render our brains, with their organic limitations, obsolete. And we are very actively replacing human labour with machines in many industrial sectors, which generates concomitant suspicion and resentment towards automation.

Then there is the issue of the gendered nature of manmade creations. For example, in *Ex Machina,* the robot is given a female form. One of the things that this suggests, as explored in the novel *Frankissstein* (2019), by Jeanette Winterson, is that we are updating technology at such a breakneck speed that we almost cannot cope with the practical and moral implications of our actions. Our ideologies, our thinking, are not necessarily advancing as fast as our programming capacity. The prosaic example of the sex robot strikes me as significant: it is a technologically sophisticated sexual object thoroughly tied up in misogynistic and objectifying notions of womanhood. Winterson's novel critiques the gendered rise of this technology by contrasting it with a timeline featuring science fiction writer Mary Shelley and Ada Lovelace, whose famous account of the "analytical engine" made her a historically significant, if long overlooked, female scientist.

This leads me on to something else raised in *Frankissstein*: what do we do, morally, ethically, with new, complex technology? For all that our worries seem to be about robots taking over the world, at which point are we going to create conscious automated life that needs some form of legal protection? It might sound like a facetious question, but when will the life that we create be so autonomous in its thinking and power to feel that it requires its own rights? Humans will not be the only thing at risk from our technoscientific prowess.

LAT: Thinking about these ideas of the risks of technology, as well as bringing together all these ideas that we've discussed (audience point of view and involvement, the different elements of the gothic that might be present in cyberterror, our relationship to the machine/automata as a possible monster, the machines' rights…), we also find that there's been a number of quite successful recent productions in non-fiction dealing with these issues. Some of these productions play both with documentary style and fictionalized recreations of our online existence, such as the quite popular Netflix docudrama *The Social Dilemma* (2020), which foregrounds the dangers of social media and privacy by focusing on a crude dramatization of the dangerous experience, not focusing so much on discussing tangible political and economic measures that could be taken. And, quite a different example but also in the realm of dealing with some of the fears you have discussed in documentary form, we have the true crime series *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* (2019), which explores issues already present in the genre of snuff movies but with the added preoccupation of the exponential growth and accessibility thanks to the Internet. Do you see horror elements in these narratives as a form of warning, of working through our fears and anxieties (both on the part of the creators and on the part of the audience)? Are these retellings of the horrors of the digital? And, as you

were also mentioning in the beginning, there is the issue of privacy and corporate ownership so, in this sense, what is the political role of horror here?

XAR: To answer the first question: yes, both *The Social Dilemma* and *Don't F**k with Cats* essentially play out like horror films. I am not sure if they constitute a direct case of influence, or maybe of equivalence, but both examples strike me as manifestations of something that is in the air: the fact that we are aware that we are being watched, that the things that we do online leave a digital trail. There are two aspects to a documentary like *Don't F**k with Cats* that interest me. On the one hand, on a superficial level, it is about the direct dangers of the Internet as a place where harmful content circulates freely. Luka Magnotta's is a case in point: someone who uploaded videos of cats he was killing for views, and eventually went on to record the murder of a man. In that respect the documentary does raise some powerful questions about the Internet as catalyst for such material, as a captivated stage for the demented. A film like *Unfriended*: *Dark Web* (2018), which explores the "dark web," goes even deeper into the pit of unregulated content not even indexed by search engines. But there is another, equally dark, side to that documentary, and that is the zealousness of the people who hunted Magnotta down, especially how easy it was for them to track him down. It was a long process, admittedly, but they were eventually faster than the police. In effect, they were able to use the Internet against the perpetrator. Digital tracks make profiling easier than ever. To me, *Don't F**k with Cats* is a great documentary because it both feels like a horror film and raises all these issues around surveillance capitalism.

I guess this might sound a bit controversial, but to address the issue of what role the Gothic has come to play in all of this, I feel horror films about technology have become social realism. I watch a film like *Host*, a supernatural horror, and it does not feel too different from films where the killers are human, or from the documentaries you mentioned. Whether we believe, as in *Ratter,* that we are constantly being recorded and observed by people who do not have our best interests in mind, the capacity is there for people to hack into our accounts and gadgets. And that stands in for the surveillance practices of Big Tech. Everything you like, everything you click through to, leaves a record somewhere, that can be exploited by others. We need laws to stop such covert practices, as they have a direct impact not just on our privacy and the collapse of the private into the public, but, as we have seen in recent examples covered in *The Great Hack* (2019), also on the future of democracy. It is interesting that technology that was intended to offer freedom of information has been turned into a new digital panopticon. The emphasis in recent years on wearables, potentially even more intrusive forms of data acquisition, signals that this trend is not about to buckle anytime soon. And the Covid pandemic has only emboldened the tech giants, who have come out richer than ever before.

LAT: Yes, I completely agree with that. That is really the true horror behind this thing that we've put so much hope on for being a democratizing tool and then it has transformed into a new panopticon. So finally, could you share some final thoughts on the role of cyber horror

in popular culture nowadays? How is it going to develop in the future and how is it going to continue to play with our contemporary cultural anxieties?

XAR: It is hard to say because, in many respects, some of the aspects that I thought would characterise the future of digital horror are now its present. We will see a rising interest in policing. I think Catherine Zimmer, in her brilliant book *Surveillance Cinema* (2015), talks about surveillance as the "logic" of contemporary cinema. It is a complex argument that has to do with the dynamics of cinema itself, but her point that surveillance is a new popular aesthetic and cultural primer is interesting. It is perhaps not a surprise that all these digital Gothic texts, the supernatural ones in particular, are about the Internet and digital media taking on a life of their own that resists human control. I am thinking of *Friend Request* (2016), where Facebook becomes "haunted" and starts posting personal content following the suicide of a teenage witch. Supernatural social media are the natural next stage in the evolution of "haunted media" (Sconce) revitalised by *Ringu* (*The Ring*) in 1998. They replace analog abjection (Benson-Allott 102–31) with phobias about modern forms of image and information distribution such as streaming, browsing and downloading. These, in turn, materialise in forms of digital disruption like frozen frames and glitches (pixilation, changes in colour and other distortions), which, as Marc Olivier has put it, are "becoming to the twenty-first century what the crumbling mansion was to gothic literature of the nineteenth century" (253).

We are also going to see more films about isolation, not just because of Covid, but because of the silo-ing, cocooning nature of the Internet. *Kairo* (*Pulse*, 2001) was a great film in terms of anticipating a lot of the dangers of the digital revolution. We still have not seen everything that horror can do with the idea of the Internet as "trap" and how social media encourage a particular type of very superficial level of engagement in human communications. So, I think it is inevitable that there will be stories that begin to fantasize about isolation as a route into privacy, into escaping the noise of the hyper-activated world, rather than as an indication of personal struggles.

And finally, for the reasons that I mentioned above, we are going to see more horror stories focusing on forms of totalitarian control. We will see more dystopias in which the technology is going to play a significant part in the process of social discrimination. Currently, the greatest fear for a lot of this fictional material is that the tools that are used to collect behavioral surplus are turned against us. If you know what someone likes, if you can work out who they are from their daily digital and online interactions, you can predict where they will be tomorrow, what they may need then. In fact, you can predict what they will need before they realise this themselves. These are the type of nightmares that we are likely to encounter over the next few years, which will build upon the concerns explored by fan footage and desktop horror: technology as not just capturing, but altering and even dictating, human behaviour.

Open Q&A session

Anna Marta Marini: This just came to my mind now when you were talking about the non-fictional kind of digital documentary, on this showing and fueling this fear of the digital world. Recently I watched *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (2020)**.** This is the story of this girl that disappeared and they found their dad in the water tank of the hotel. Aside from the story, I found very interesting that a part of the documentary series was focused precisely on the found footage, basically because they found the footage from an elevator and you could see her and that sparked the attention of the public, and they really insist on this footage mystery. And then, the other interesting part was precisely what you were talking about now, the tracking of people on the Internet because this want-to-be detectives on the Internet tracked down this dude that was in Mexico at the time, so he couldn't have possibly been involved in the crime, and they accused him for some reason of being the murderer. And this guy had his life shattered, he lost everything. I liked that at the end of the documentary they interviewed him and they actually underlined this issue—even if I think not enough. So, considering this new—or renewed—passion for true crime shows, do you think there's been a sort of blending with some horror techniques or narrative strategies that are usually found in horror narratives?

XAR: I must confess I have not seen this particular documentary, but I will look it up. It sounds to me very likely that somewhere there must be videos that could incriminate anyone, just by dint of the amount of surveillance footage that is automatically generated on a daily basis. I do not know whether, in this particular case, the investigators used such material. Was it a public effort or a private one?

AMM: The police released this footage from the elevator and, for some odd reason, later on, some people on the Internet thought that this other guy was the murderer when he wasn't even there. So, I really felt, watching this series, that it was really like a fictional horror series. It was just planned and narrated like a horror series and not like just a documentary.

XAR: Yes. They definitely speak to each other. The surveillance ethic is the same. I guess in this particular case it is being put to good service (in order to uncover a crime), but we have the incrimination of someone who did not have anything to do with it, which is worrying. I think this is the other scary aspect about cyber-life: its indelibility. But to answer you earlier question more directly: yes, I think cinema and the documentary have long influenced each other. Documentary drawing on found footage techniques is an interesting reverse of events, as found footage films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and *Cloverfield* (2008) definitely drew inspiration from the documentary format, as well as the homemade video tape, in the first place. And of course, many of the internal narrative tensions of the horror genre apply to detective films and thrillers, especially the building up of tension.

AMM: Yes, I thought it was very interesting because it exactly used those things and it was built like a horror movie. It was really building on the suspense and, in the end, the mystery wasn't really a mystery.

XAR: I find the idea of documentaries being turned into a larger mystery series quite an interesting concept. It is probably not new, but I have definitely noticed the fact that documentaries have turned into suspense stories, with their own cliff-hangers and carefully curated storylines and character arcs.

Trang Dang: I'm interested in how, when the horror occurs what is that makes us scared? Is it the idea of how non-objects and non-human objects, automata, start to act more human and to have a consciousness? How does the agency of humans, and kind of automators in cyberpunk fiction and films portrayed in these media, is something described as something that humans and the automata already intrinsically have or is it something that they develop throughout the course of the films or the fiction? Both their uncanny and human features.

XAR: I think there is a tipping point. To go back to the example that Laura was referring to, *Ex Machina* strikes me as a great example of a story where technology is okay so long as it is dependent on humans, safe and controlled. The key to the horror in that film is that the automaton has been outsmarting the human all along and abusing our capacity for empathy. I think this is the most uncanny aspect of automata, not just the fact that they walk the path between what we recognize as human and inhuman, but the fact that we never really know what they are thinking or who has programmed them for what purpose. For example, in the YouTube videos featuring Sophia the robot, an incredibly advanced humanoid activated in 2016 and the first to receive citizenship of any kind, her suggestion that humans should not fear her immediately triggers doubt. I think there is something here around control and around who gets to make decisions. I would say that it is almost natural for us to feel this way because we simply do not know what hides behind the programming, in the same way that we do not know what databases hide behind Alexa or Siri. We talk to mechanized voices that have been programmed seemingly for our benefit, but where does that information go and who uses it? I think this is what one can extrapolate to the fictional automaton. It is all about the point at which we lose control over technology, at which we become potential victims of its magic, rather its beneficiaries.

TD: Do you think that this discourages us to spend more time with technologies in a way because it makes us scared and think about the control and you know the power that technology might have upon us?

XAR: I think it is the exponential aspect of the AI that scares us, that at some point it begins to learn independently and can outsmart us. As with all things human, I think it is a question of mastery. My concern is not with automata themselves, but the fact that I feel that they are spokesperson for someone else I am not seeing. The other idea (robots dominating

humankind) seems to me still, although maybe not for much longer, more in the realm of the science-fiction dystopia. In any case, I do not think knowledge of such extant dangers prevents us from using digital technology. It has been created and perfected to be almost indispensable, so most people would rather put up with a little discomfort and fear than give it up completely. And then, of course, there is the issue that it creates psychological addiction.

Caitlin Duffy: I've been thinking a lot about surveillance capitalism but in terms of haunted house films, so thank you for recommending Catherine Zimmer's book. Could you talk a little about how you see bodies, and maybe even body horror, play into desktop horror? As you were talking, I was thinking a bit about how surveillance capitalism sort of takes our digital selves and transforms us into just data, and I was thinking too about how the Internet could be, and you talked about this, it could have been this place of freedom or at least that's how we were originally imagining it, in this idealistic utopian sense, but then there's also this loss of freedom in the way that we're broken down into data. I think this comes across too in some horror movies and even the work we do to create our digital self. I was thinking in *Don't F**k with Cats* we even see that with Luka Magnotta all the work he did to create this identity. We see it in *Unfriended* a little bit too, and also in non-horror films like the recent *Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle* (2017) remake because there was sort of a chance for body horror there. So I was thinking about this and also the return of our past selves too because this other identity we sort of have to grapple with and I think that can be a sort of body horror in a way as well.

XAR: I think there are two types of body horror that are connected to digital horror. One of them has to do with our dependence on digital media. In *The Social Dilemma*, this is actually portrayed with both kids being so reliant on their phones that they cannot go without them for extended periods of time. Another great example is the "Nosedive" episode of *Black Mirror* (S3 E1, 2016), which is really a *reductio ad absurdum* or grotesque exaggeration of similar rating practices and apps already in wide circulation that articulate our social interactions and perceived socioeconomic and personal worth. It may seem like an overreaction, but the point about dependence is based on research that has proven that young people show all the withdrawal symptoms of addicts when their smartphones are removed for a day or more (Zuboff 446–7). This dependency translates in some films into the melding of the system with the user. *Sequence Break* (2017) and *Peripheral* (2018) illustrate interdependence through Cronenbergian body horror. In one, a console the gamer is playing starts fusing with his own flesh; in the other, the writer gets inked up and becomes part of the intelligent software facilitating the writing of her novel. These films explore our digital subservience. We lose ourselves in the process of constantly checking for updates, of validating ourselves through others' performative appreciation of us.

The other issue is the capacity of social media to dictate lives. We are sold the illusion that, because we have a Facebook profile that is ours, or an Instagram profile, we have the freedom to project whom we are, or even who we would like to be. But of course this is not

the case; we succumb to peer pressure in the same way we do socially. And this technology is always a potential means of extortion and bullying. What worries me, and what maybe some of the new horror films mentioned in our conversation are beginning to capture, is how we never really are who we think – and old Gothic trope that has traditionally found a fictional embodiment in the figure of the double. Online, we become the person that pleases our followers the most or who will garner the most attention and acceptance. There is something of our personality that gets inevitably lost in the process.

Films like *Unfriended* also seem to be exploring "revenge porn" and the illicit sharing of other people's private images. This is not just about a lack of consent, but about the erosion of the private and personal. The cause of the haunting in *Unfriended* is a girl who is humiliated publicly on Facebook and who wants her own back. It is the same for *Friend Request*. Someone who has been humiliated comes back for retaliation. It strikes me that these are the three things that body horror does in the digital realm: it explores Internet dependence, the artificial construction of ourselves under social pressure, and the impact of other people sharing private data, especially data that has not been consciously passed on or that is recorded and used without our agreement.

Heather Lukins: My question is about what you were talking about regarding digital desktop horror. With the current rise in Zoom, Teams and work from home in the current Covid-era, I'm looking towards the post-Covid era. Would you say this is sort of globalized and, at least in the western world of understanding of desktop horror, or is there still something that you would classify about the genre as being sort of quintessentially American, or is it this just because the prevalence of American-based companies in terms of big data, Facebook and Twitter?

XAR: I would say a bit of both because Zoom has strong links to China, as does TikTok. But yes, all the Big Tech has traditionally "lived" in Silicon Valley, in the US. I would say, though, that with Google, Microsoft and Facebook all having a global presence, issues easily escalate into worldwide problems. Where we might still see a difference is in Europe, thanks to GDPR (General Data Protection Regulation), which has gone some way towards visualising the vast amount of information retrieved and sold without express consent. I really hope that the implementation of GDPR in 2018 marks the beginning of a turn towards a harsher take on the regulation of personal data.

Host was able to appeal to all of us because it was not exclusively about the technology. It was also about human contact during the Covid pandemic. This is probably what makes it a film that is not, strictly speaking, nationally specific. It is clearly a text about connecting with significant others during a time of enforced isolation, and the horrors that lurk within this mediated setup. If one believes that the Internet ultimately isolates people as much as it connects them, then *Host* becomes its own critique of how the very platforms supposed to bring us together can have unexpected negative consequences.

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