

Recreating Realities in Horror Films: the Found Footage Effect

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Abstract: Regardless of the circumstances in which they are used, found footage insertions aim to establish for any kind of cinematographic production certain veracity and credibility in regard to the proposed themes and subjects. Given the authenticity of their aesthetics, these insertions seem to present reality as it is, leaving in most cases the feeling that there is no room for artistic interpretation. This paper aims to analyze and debate the usage of found footage in fiction film. Having its roots in pseudo-documentaries, the technique is widely known for its exploitation in horror film as it became an extremely convenient low-budget strategy to build up suspense and create the captivating universes imposed by the horror genre. Analyzing films that set the stage for the subgenre such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) or more accessible productions like *Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007), the paper presents the techniques in which found footage manipulates audiences through certain aesthetic and narrative structures. Studying the means of production and effects on audiences, the analysis intends not only to debate the psychological impact of found footage images, but also to theorize the origin of this subgenre by approaching it from a wider perspective. Recalling David Bordwell's observations on found footage horror films in his article, *Return to Paranormalcy*, it is important to insist on the niche that the subgenre unavoidably approaches through its techniques and selection of subjects. Therefore, the paper also aims to integrate the found footage film in a larger context by analyzing the character-spectator dynamic.

Keywords: found footage, horror films, audiences, authenticity, aesthetics, subgenre, social media

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Between Experiment and a New Cinematic Language

The term *found footage* places the audience in a very distinct area of filmmaking, mainly associated to documentaries or, at least, to a documentary-like aesthetic. However, this paper aims to identify the cinematographic circumstances in which found footage images are meant to create certain expectations for the viewer by establishing a very specific set of `manipulative` techniques. By approaching the horror genre, the goal would be to analyze the depths of the psychological implications that are determined by the found-footage subgenre and also to investigate to what extent does this aesthetic manage to `recreate realities`.

The history of the found footage subgenre begins in the early 1980s with the notable *Cannibal Holocaust* by Ruggero Deodato, a controversial representation of cannibal tribes through the so-called realistic point of view of a film crew whose intention of making a documentary ends in disaster. Nonetheless, the roots of this subgenre are recognizable in pseudo-documentaries (films that don't portray real events but take the form of a documentary). *Cannibal Holocaust* establishes a set of `ground rules`, mostly determined by technique and visual impact and less focused on the narrative or on the ideological level that such a film could aim to open to debate. Basically, these are: the use of unprofessional actors, hand-held cameras, a `sloppy` type of editing and no after effects or any other kind of alteration of the raw material. Therefore, by researching throughout the last almost forty years of such horror films, the experimental and in-need-of-innovation purpose of the filmmakers can intuitively be recognized as perhaps the only and most important aspect of this subgenre. As it doesn't have much to offer from an aesthetic point of view (these films are basically shot with shaky, hand-held cameras, having a poor quality image), the found footage subgenre's goal is to make use of these low budget, seemingly unprofessional editing and filming in order to access a different level of fear in the spectator's psyche.

After *Cannibal Holocaust*, filmmakers who managed to put this subgenre `on the map` approached more relatable themes and subjects in order to create the desired suspense. Two of the films that made the difference in this area, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) by Daniel Myrick and *Paranormal Activity* (2007) by Oren Peli both investigate means of building up suspense

and horror by using simple, clear and, in one way or another, predictable scenarios. Although both movies use mainly the same unprofessional types of filmmaking, a certain difference of aesthetic is to be recognized as the result of the character's motivation to film the events. As David Bordwell explicitly mentions in his article *Return to Paranormalcy*:

The problem of the pseudo-documentary is to motivate the fact that someone is filming these dramas. Various solutions have been worked out. You might make the protagonist a filmmaker exploring a subject or creating a diary. Or you can pretend that the people being filmed are celebrities (as in *Spinal Tap*). Or make the act of filming an effort to document dramatic occurrences. Filmmakers face a second problem as well: motivating how the film has been made public. You can, for instance, present it as a TV or theatrical documentary, as *Spinal Tap* purports to be. More recently another solution has been found. You can suggest that this film has been discovered after the events were over.²



Figure 1. *Blair Witch Project*, 1999

2. David Bordwell, "Return to Paranormalcy," David Bordwell's website on cinema, 2012, <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/11/13/return-to-paranormalcy/>.

In these two particular cases, the characters have one strong common motivation (that is, perhaps, even more important than the outcome of the plot), and that is to identify a number of supernatural phenomena, to understand them or at least to be able to document them. The potential paradox of this procedure stands in the mechanism which they choose to use: cheap equipment used in a sloppy manner with the one and only goal - to be able to capture something impossible to understand or perceive with rational, analytical thinking. By identifying this aspect, the discussion can only lead to one basic question that is related to how exactly the induction of fear, anxiety and suspense work for this genre's audience. In his study on the uncanny, psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch analyses the origins of the word explaining at the same time that a definition for it would be rather unnecessary, considering the fact that it can mean different things for each individual.

With the word *unheimlich* the German language seems to have produced a rather fortunate formation. Without a doubt, this word appears to express that someone to whom something 'uncanny' happens is not quite 'at home' or 'at ease' in the situation concerned, that the thing is or at least seems to be foreign to him. In brief, the word suggests that a lack of orientation is bound up with the impression of the uncanniness of a thing or incident.³

Without wishing to insist on terminology, the purpose would be rather to focus on how exactly the aesthetics approached by the found footage subgenre effect the audience by accessing that particular feeling defined by Jentsch. 'Movies get personal: this is YouTube and iMovie, ostensibly announcing the century of the amateur. Found footage movies constitute an entire narrative style of mediating amateurs, of subjective, first-impression cinema, and almost always with "realism" as the goal.'⁴ In almost every way possible, the found footage horror film managed to innovate, surprisingly by letting go of

3. Ernst Jentsch, "Zur Psychologie Des Unheimlichen," *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8, no. 22 (1906).

4. Jordan Lavander-Smith, *The New Reflexivity: Puzzle Films, Found Footage, and Cinematic Narration in the Digital Age* (New York: City University of New York, 2016), 18.

everything that means technological innovation, by going back to the roots of the discovery of filmmaking – at least from an aesthetic point of view - in order to recreate a feeling of raw authenticity that was slowly being diminished by the special effects revolution. The goal to create such a realistic universe has probably to deal with a particular kind of crisis in the horror movie industry. By the late 1990s filmmakers worldwide have ‘juggled’ with an extremely wide variety of ways to access all layers of fear. From supernatural themes like *The Exorcist*, 1973, to revitalization of the slasher subgenre like *Scream*, 1996, horror filmmakers have been using not only basic repulsive, grotesque or shocking images in order to induce fear, but also complex narratives, approaching psychological levels of anxiety (like *Rosemary’s Baby*, 1968). Therefore, the use of a subjective, ‘realistic’ point of view manages to place audiences in a somewhat fragile position towards the plot and characters. Suddenly, empathizing with the character that is filming the story becomes almost an obligation or even more, an implied commitment.

As Bordwell specifically mentions in his article, *Return to Paranormalcy* “filmmaking becomes a kind of game like performance that coaxes us to ask: How will they deal the cards this time?”⁵ Expectations and suspense are obviously built in a very different manner. Although the basic narrative structures are respected, found footage horror films create yet another paradox in what expectations and fear are concerned. The term found footage itself implies the fact that the spectators will watch an ensemble of images and/or videos that have been found and not obtained in any other way. “Found” means that they have been eventually, at some point, lost or that the people filming the material have not been physically capable of delivering it. However, although spectators are fully aware of the outcome (that is the fact that probably every main character who is filming/being filmed in the movie will eventually die or go missing), they still need to find out how it all happened.

5. Bordwell, “Return to Paranormalcy.”



Figure 2. *Paranormal Activity*, 2007

Towards new perspectives on fear: voyeurism and social media

In some perspectives, the curiosity in these cases is even more pronounced: the pressure of finding out what the final act preserves is eliminated in the first seconds of the movie. Thus, the only mystery that's left stands in the 'journey'. The mechanisms used by the characters in order to capture whatever it is they're trying to document (whether it's related to legends about witchcraft or paranormal activities that take place in a domestic environment), vary from one situation to another. In movies like *Cannibal Holocaust*, *The Blair Witch Project* or *Rec* by Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007 the characters find the motivation to make documentaries about subjects that clearly impose the possibility of danger, fatal repercussions and immediate negative effects on their lives. The importance of their motivation is, evidently, insignificant in comparison to their ways of handling the subjects in extreme situations. The unprofessional style of filming is meant to create an aesthetic and psychological approach between spectator and characters/storyline, mainly because the elements of fear seem unanticipated.

After the first *Paranormal Activity*, a film that mainly uses a surveillance-camera type of filming, the found footage subgenre needed new approaches in

order to keep the audience on the edge of their seats. The downside of such an innovative and original aesthetic is that it can quickly lose its element of surprise – a rather vital one when it comes to the horror genre. As much as the idea of ghosts, zombies and witches can still frighten audiences on some level, these classical elements of a horror film rarely manage to obtain the same effects as they did fifty years ago. Therefore, when it comes to found footage horror films, the idea of perpetuating the same mechanisms that have shocked audiences worldwide would be rather counterproductive. Researching new methods of creating discomfort, anxiety and fear, one can only come to the conclusion that the technological evolution and digitalization of almost all aspects of everyday life might offer a reliable source of inspiration in what horror stories are concerned – the *Black Mirror* series (2011 – present) indicates through a uncomfortable yet authentic approach the anguish that technological progress would be able to generate in a society. For that reason, found footage horror films could begin to explore the universe of social networks, virtual interactions and `feed` on the anxieties, horrors and dread that result from the infinity of possibilities that lay behind a telephone or computer screen.

Documentaries like *Catfish*, Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman (2010) or films like *Ingrid goes West*, Matt Spicer (2017) and the short movie *Noah*, Walter Woodman, Patrick Cederberg (2013) show different perspectives on how social media can manipulate interactions and basic human perception on relationships. These productions aim to present extreme situations that can occur when using too much social media. Characters easily fall into the trap of miscommunication or end up in desperate need of social validation. While these conclusions seem rather unfortunate, there is also a strong level of authenticity from a cinematographic point of view: the fact that the spectator is given the impression that he assists in `real time` to an online conversation creates a similar perception to the one generated by found footage films. *Unfriended*, a 2014 revenge horror movie even manages to approach a disturbing issue: a girl who is presumed dead starts chatting and threatening her old high school colleagues on Skype. Like in *Noah*, spectators participate to an online massacre, all the threats, injuries and deaths being filmed by the character's laptop webcams.

The last decade doesn't necessarily represent a decline in found footage film production. There are still a few notable films like *Grave Encounters* by the Vicious Brothers, 2011, *The Visit*, M. Night Shyamalan, 2015 or the *Paranormal Activity* sequels (2010-2011). However, they rarely manage to receive mixed to positive reviews or to have box office success. The subgenre, clearly addressed to a niche audience, needs innovation either on a narrative level or from an aesthetic point of view. Therefore, exploring the social media universe (a very present level of human interaction and even existence, at some point) might be the way of obtaining the desired effect.

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