Experiencing the Digital Image in Popular Cinema: A Perspective on the Horror and Crime Genres

by

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Abstract

The discourse surrounding digital technology in popular film has usually focused on computer-generated imagery (CGI), overlooking the method of image-capture involving digital cameras. I argue that the replacement of film cameras with digital ones introduces a paradigm shift in viewer engagement. Concentrating on the horror and crime genres, this thesis makes the case that found footage horror and the digital crime films of Michael Mann, as the only genre categories of mainstream cinema which place a primacy on the digital aesthetic over the traditional filmic “look,” provide unique “testing sites” for the contemporary, culturally-aware genre fan.

While such representative films as *The Blair Witch Project*, *Trollhunter*, *Collateral* and *Miami Vice* still retain links with classical cinema in terms of narrative tropes and certain similarities of style, the dominant position of narrative is nonetheless challenged by the new cinematic spaces of these digital films. Organised around the central, controlling position of the diegetic camera, and allowing the viewer a more phenomenologically-inflected encounter with the film’s media-driven digital aesthetic, the spatial zones of the found footage horror film give the viewer scope to contemplate the extra-narrative cues delivered by the film, inviting a sensuous, rather than an intellectual, engagement. Moreover, by mapping their own real-world experience of contemporary information culture onto the digital aesthetic of the films, viewers can discover a site of enquiry to engage in totally new ways with such contemporary problems as national identity under the threat of globalisation. Mann’s crime films, on the other hand, predicated on hyperreal, digitally rendered environments containing masculinities in crisis, encode a culturally-shaped subjective experience into their digital aesthetic and offer another site of phenomenological engagement for the viewer. The very act of locating these sites signals a transformation in viewer engagement with genre cinema and indicates a new way of seeing.
Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the original work of the author and has not been submitted previously to any other academic institution. Where use has been made of the work of others, it has been acknowledged and referenced. Some material presented in chapter two has been published previously in a special edition of *Studies in European Cinema* entitled “Space and Place in European Cinema.” The issue (Volume 14, Issue 1) was published in March, 2017.

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Introduction

Experiencing the Digital Image in Popular Cinema

In *Side by Side* (Chris Kenneally 2012), actor Keanu Reeves interviews various filmmakers, requesting that they share their thoughts on the differences between celluloid and digital film in terms of both cinema practice and the aesthetics of the image. Many of the discussions and debates Reeves has with various directors, cinematographers and editors in the film are weighted heavily towards the production side of digital cinema, with the conversation returning again and again to the practical matters of shooting scenes using digital cameras instead of the more traditional and hitherto ubiquitous film cameras, and to the changes in the workflow because of digital technology; unavoidably so, perhaps, given that the interviewees are all craftsmen who work almost exclusively within the production side of the film industry. The responses given, by such cinematographers and directors as James Cameron, Anthony Dod Mantle, David Fincher, Lars von Trier and Dion Beebe cover a wide range of both positive and negative reactions to the advent of digital technology, but the general locus of interest is firmly on the difference in actual production practices that the move to digital entails. Von Trier, for example, argues that the new technology creates a different way of working with actors, who must now make certain adjustments when acting before digital cameras. He outlines the scenario where the actor is aware of the ten-minute shooting time (the length of one roll of film) when working in front of “traditional” 35mm film cameras: there is the tension of expectation on the part of the actor, who is regularly interrupted by the director calling “cut” and compelled to hit a mark several times over a number of takes. With the use of digital cameras this constraint is absent, resulting in a less restrictive working environment for the actor. Other filmmakers discuss the potential for a more democratic cinema because of the
low cost of digital cameras and other essential pieces of equipment that are now more accessible because they are digital (editing suites, DAT sound recorders and colour timers, for example). Once the film begins to focus on the reception of digital cinema, filmmaker Martin Scorsese, “framed” in the film as the paradigmatic example of the “old school” American director and one with strong links to the celluloid era, moves the debate slightly away from changing modes of practice and in the direction of aesthetics: he argues that, in the era of digital filmmaking, “the real auteur is the projectionist.” At last the film introduces some discussion on the “look,” or the aesthetics, of the digital image in comparison to chemical-based emulsion film.

This new direction in Kenneally’s film then concentrates on a selection of cinematographers offering varying views on the differences to the “look” of the film image when moving from one long-established image capture technology to the newer, digitally-based one. Dion Beebe, cinematographer on Collateral, argues that the digital camera surpasses 35mm image capture in representing night “as it truly looks,” for example; whereas Vilmos Zsigmond, working almost exclusively with 35mm cameras for fifty years and the cinematographer on such films as The Long Goodbye (Robert Altman 1973) and The Black Dahlia (Brian De Palma 2006), dismisses the images produced by the digital camera (in this particular case, the Sony Red One) as not good enough to replace the images produced using 35mm cameras. The debate on the aesthetics of the image revolves around issues of dynamic range in film (the digital camera could not match the 35mm camera for the range of contrast between black and white, according to Zsigmond) and the resolution achievable in the digital realm. However, with each new interviewee offering his or her opinion on the aesthetic worth of the digital image, the terms of this debate assume a certain ideological slant: a “master narrative” is developed which places the celluloid image in the normative position, and the aesthetic worth of the digital image is then measured against this
norm. That is, in terms of what the viewer is familiar with in mainstream cinema, chemical-based film has provided her avenue of expectations since the codes and conventions of film were first formulated in the period between 1905 and 1917 and then consolidated in the classical era. Film was “warm,” lending itself to a mise-en-scène that was comforting to the viewer. The digitisation of the image, by contrast, was distant, less alive. In terms of a familiarity developed over more than one hundred years of engagement with the moving image, film was valued much higher than its digital successor. When Kodak, the biggest provider of film stock, announced in 2012 that it was selling its film business, meaning that essentially there would be no more film produced (Whitney par. 1), reaction from the media was fairly unanimous: celluloid, the substance of cinema for generations of moviegoers, would die, taking a deeply felt cultural presence with it.¹ The overwhelming epistemological response was of a sense of loss and that cinema as we know it would be extinct very soon. But even before the news that the vast repository of films which were printed on chemical film would have no new additions, deviations from the celluloid norm were keen to explore the ideological underpinnings that conferred on film its normative position as the aesthetic standard in cinema. Jean Luc-Godard’s film In Praise of Love [Éloge de l’amour] (2001), for example, was structured as two halves, a bifurcation of image capture modes that brought the ideology of the image to the surface. The first section of the film used black and white 35mm film stock, while the following section offered a challenge to the viewer’s spectatorial comfort by being filmed in oversaturated digital video; as usual, Godard threatened the viewer’s comfort zone, establishing an unsettling dialectic between film and video. Both formats seemed to play out the narrative’s ambivalence (the French title gave a double meaning “praise,” which could also be taken as a lament) concerning love, loss and memory. According to AO Scott,

¹ In January 2017, Kodak reversed its earlier decision, announcing that it was bringing back Ektachrome film (see Frankel).
“[t]he movie suggests that the world is divided into two incompatible types of people – those who love cinema body and soul, and those who regard it as a pleasant diversion” (par. 8). The meaning is clear: within the fragile (yet revered) celluloid strip is located the soul of cinema, whereas the digital realm is home to a Cartesian sterility.

Given the primacy of the celluloid film strip as the container of film imagery for much of cinema’s history, it is perhaps inevitable that any deviation from this norm might negatively impact the aesthetic value of the digital image in its own right, relegating the positive impact of the technology to its more utilitarian advantages. George Lucas, one of the first filmmakers to adopt digital technology in his work practice, reaffirms in Side by Side the notion that digital cinema’s importance rests on its utility, arguing, for instance, that “HD capture is just another tool.” The ideological position taken up by Side by Side can be deduced from its invitation to the viewer to ask such questions as, can science have an ontology based in art and aesthetics, or can it have a heart?

Within such a framework, I would argue, the aesthetic qualities of the digital image in popular cinema, and its potential to affect the viewer in markedly different ways to that of celluloid film, is relegated to a “catch up” position in relation to the aesthetic, almost spiritual aura projected by emulsion-based film since the very first films stunned audiences in 1895.² The ethereal, ghostly qualities of moving images that are the result of filming real people in the past, creating what Roland Barthes called a “that-has-been” in the present for the viewer (15), and that imbue film with an almost mystical dimension for many people, is not carried forward into the era of digital cinema – or so the argument goes. Michael Fisch asks, “[t]here may still be entertainment but are there still ghosts? For the ghostliness of analogue media was the

² André Bazin’s film theory, as outlined in the two volumes of his What Is Cinema?, often dealt with the moving image in metaphysical, almost spiritual terms. More recently, Susan Sontag’s New York Times essay “The Decay of Cinema” mourns the passing of “the experience of surrender to, of being transported by, what was on the screen” (60).
very premise of the ghosts that haunted it” (par. 2). Fisch’s questioning of the digital image joins a discourse which posits that, in comparison to the analogue image, the digital image, borne from mathematical notation and computer logic, lacks the “warmth” of celluloid. If we are to believe this argument, then an image made up of an array of pixels can only be cold and antiseptic, two qualities that imbued the digital image with an unemotional character. Its threat to classical film could only lead in one direction: the death of cinema.  

Such aesthetic judgements, prominent in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and often accompanied by an undertone of what Scott McQuire describes as “naked technological determinism” (“Impact Aesthetics” 41), have been countermanded somewhat more recently by new theoretical analyses which successfully attach to the digital image a more aesthetic and culturally-relevant epistemological status. I will argue that the “ghostly presence” which some commentators insist is present in celluloid and is in fact an integral part of cinema’s allure, is also present, albeit with a crucial difference, in digital film. The “breath” of film, the temporal rhythm induced by the incessant mobility of the film’s grain in conjunction with the audible flicker of the celluloid passing through the projector, is of a different order when we move from the classical to the digital era. Additionally, there remains a tendency in film theory to completely almost overlook the digital image itself when discussing digital film culture. When “digital film” or “digital cinema” enters the discourse, more often than not they are markers of a time period rather than what these films are in an ontological sense. When theorists discuss the image in digital culture, it is only rarely that they are describing a digital image. This research project seeks to address this lack of

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theoretical interest and argues for the rich epistemological potential of genre-based
digital imagery as an aesthetic object; an object that offers a new gateway for the
viewer to contemplate notions of cultural identity and her place in a contemporary
media-saturated society.

It must be noted too that the historical context of the change in “ways of
seeing,” in keeping with John Berger’s use of the term (7-11), when applied to viewer
engagement with cinematic imagery is important to this research project. Writing in
1999, Scott McQuire states that “digital technology constitutes a profound revolution
in cinema, primarily because of its capacity to cut across all sectors of the industry
simultaneously, affecting film production, narrative conventions and audience
experience” (“Impact Aesthetics” 43). Taking McQuire’s final point above, the
experience of the audience is the most important one for my research. There has been a
number of technological developments in film that have impacted on viewing regimes:
the introduction of 3-strip Technicolour in 1935; the first widescreen film in 1952 and
IMAX in 1970 all had an impact on how the viewer engaged with moving images.
Georges DuFaux, cinematographer on the first IMAX feature, the short film Tiger
Child (Donald Brittain 1970), sensed that new cinema technologies, such as the IMAX
format, were being developed at a time when the “visual sensibility of the audience has
reached a new threshold of perception” (qtd. in Wollen 27). Advances in computer
technology, beginning in the 1970s and then gaining real hegemonic force in the 1980s
and 1990s, did indeed introduce sweeping changes across all sectors of the film
industry as McQuire notes, but were particularly noteworthy in the area of visual
effects. Robin Baker cites Alien (Ridley Scott 1979) as one of the first films to use
computer graphics in the main body of the film (not just in the credits sequence); the
readouts from the “Mother” computer aboard the Nostromo spacecraft can claim to be
one of the first uses of computer generated imagery (CGI) in mainstream cinema
CGI, then, the most “public” face of the digital discourse in cinema, has tended to be the main focus in the discussion of digital technology’s effect within the film industry. Stacey Abbott traces the development of CGI from *Alien*, through to *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (Nicholas Meyer 1982) and *TRON* (Steven Lisberger 1982), with James Cameron’s *The Abyss* (1989) and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991) both offering watershed moments for the success of computer technology in cinema (Abbott 92-93). In the 1990s, CGI became vital to the success of many genre films, such as *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg 1993) and *The Matrix* (Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski 1999).

The dominance of CGI led to the *fin de siècle* debate revolving around whether an increasing reliance on spectacle, an effects-dominated aesthetic which Robin Wood characterised as “more extravagant, more luxuriously unnecessary” in comparison to the classical paradigm (which was predicated on narrative realism as the strongest attraction for audiences) (*From Vietnam to Reagan* 166), would result in an impoverishment of narrative in film. Paul Virilio, in *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* and *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, makes the case that, like all media, the cinema is complicit in the creation of a world in which any event can be replaced by any view of it. But cinema occupies a privileged position in relation to the spectator: it is “the world viewed,” as the title of Stanley Cavell’s phenomenological study of film maintained (1-5). “Here’s the technology to do really dangerous work,” warns Ken Ralston, special effects guru at Industrial Light & Magic (Magid 51). “It’s been done in the past with stills,” Ralston notes, “but now, in the wrong hands, we

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4 For a comprehensive interrogation of the narrative-based realism versus spectacle debate, see Tom Gunning’s “‘Primitive’ Cinema: A Frame-Up? Or the Trick’s on Us,” “The Sum of Its Pixels” and “Moving Away from the Index: Cinema and the Impression of Reality.” Sean Cubitt also deals with this issue in “Cartographic Instruments, Narcissist Illusions, Regimes of Realism,” *Digital Aesthetics* and *The Cinema Effect*. Also see Yvonne Spielmann’s “Expanding Film into Digital Media.” Andrew Gilbert’s more recent *Senses of Cinema* article “The Death of Film and the Hollywood Response,” published in 2012, examines how current films display a sense of “loss” which relates to the transition from celluloid to digital.
have the technology to really do some scary things” (53). Another view argues that image manipulation technology is changing our perception of the world in profound ways and even “reframing” our consciousness (Jones 125). One of the main arguments put forward in this thesis is that digital technology does in fact have a profound impact on the film viewer’s consciousness – but the technology itself does not need to be used solely to manufacture CGI-based spectacle. When confronted by digitally-captured imagery in a horror or crime film, it is not so much viewer consciousness that is reframed as the viewer’s phenomenological engagement with the filmic image. While CGI has unarguably changed the imagery we are confronted with at the cinema, I argue that the use of digital cameras to capture pro-filmic events has resulted in less-obvious but still pertinent changes in the imagery itself and, moreover, has led to a massive realignment in spectatorial engagement. Most research on the use of digital technology in film has side-lined the digital camera in favour of the computer-generated image; this research project is an attempt to give nuance to the commentary around the digitally-captured, rather than the computer-generated, image.

Digital capture became a viable option for filmmakers towards the latter stages of the 1990s. After filming most of Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace (George Lucas 1999) using digital cameras, George Lucas’s Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones (2002) became the first major genre film shot exclusively with the new format. In this initial period, the take-up of digital capture outside of films which relied extensively on CGI was concentrated on a few Dogme films, such as Festen (Thomas Vinterberg 1998), Dancer in the Dark (Lars von Trier 2000) and Dogville (Lars von Trier 2003). In the US, Steven Soderbergh used digital cameras on Full Frontal (2002) and Bubble (2005). Cinematographer Claudio Miranda was nominated for an Academy Award for the mostly digitally shot The Curious Case of Benjamin Button (David Fincher 2008), filming with the Sony CineAlta F23 and the Thomson
Viper FilmStream Camera, and the first winner of the Academy Award for Best Cinematography for a film shot entirely on digital video was Mauro Fiore (*Avatar* [James Cameron 2009]).

The horror genre added found footage to its roster of subcategories in the late 1990s also, and outside of CGI-driven spectacle in the science fiction and fantasy genres, the found footage horror film contained the clearest evidence of a digital aesthetic in popular cinema. Apparent because it refused to play by the classical rulebook, the digitality of found footage horror challenged the viewer with handheld and restless camerawork in conjunction with frequent jump cuts. At the other end of the digital aesthetics scale, Michael Mann laid down a similar challenge to crime genre fans: his digitally captured, hyperreal environments seem to overwhelm the characters and genre-based narratives, and they bear a sumptuous, richly-textured visual design impossible to create with traditional film stock. In recent years, a worldwide scheme to convert cinemas to digital projection has meant that it makes sense, in terms of workflow, to use digital cameras in production. Cameras such as the Arriflex D-21, the Panavision Genesis, the RED Epic, The Sony HDW F790 (and F750, F730) HD and the Thomson Viper have been used extensively in recent years. Michael Mann has worked with the Sony CineAlta HDW-F900 (*Ali* [2001], *Collateral* [2004] and *Miami Vice* [2006]), the Thomson Viper FilmStream (*Miami Vice*) and the Sony CineAlta F23 (*Public Enemies* [2009]).

The cameras themselves do not use film stock. Digital cameras use a charged coupled device (CCD) computer chip and digital recording devices such as hard drives instead of film or video tape. Light is focused through a lens onto the CCD or sensor, which then emits electrical impulses which are converted into data. Digital capture is a conversion process rather than an isomorphic transference process (which characterises photochemical film). “Each [CCD] chip is constructed of many individual photosites
that are single light sensitive areas,” Terry Flaxton explains (63). “These then produce information, in the form of packets of data, which is in turn represented on screen by a changing luminosity and colour identity via a pixel of display” (63). These cameras are most often connected to monitors on the set so that the director and cinematographer have immediate access to the images they are recording. A menu attached to the digital camera offers a range of aesthetic and functional choices, including colour gamut, dynamic range, and recording formats (progressive scan or interlace, for example). Pixel-by-pixel flexibility has allowed image manipulation within a stylistic domain that cinematographers considered their own, namely, the “look” of the film and the consistency of that “look.” Advances in the development of CCDs in 2004 suggested that the format could rival 35mm. The use of CCDs, especially the so-called three-chip (or three CCD) cameras that used one chip each to create separate signals for the red, green, and blue colour channels, produced higher resolution images with better colour rendition than previous generations of video cameras. In 2003 and 2004, a new generation of “digital data movie cameras” emerged that were entirely digital, recording optical information from the CCD or CMOS chips directly to computer hard drives with no transformation through video compression algorithms or reduction in colour space to fit the signal onto videotape. This so-called “raw” format visual data was even more malleable than digital video, was transportable on disks, and came with a new generation of chips whose resolutions approached that of modern film stocks. The chips contain thousands of pixels which are sensitive to brightness; like the film camera, light will bounce off the chip, but the information is converted into numbers that are then read by the computer and converted into an image.

To understand what is at stake in the move from analogue to digital film for the aesthetics of the image, the difference between the two formats in terms of transcription and conversion is crucial. The film camera captures and records light
simultaneously: light passes through the camera lens and strikes the emulsion on each frame of celluloid, where it activates silver halide crystals and causes a material imprint of the scene recorded to be left on the celluloid. Holly Willis outlines how analogue video, by contrast, involves light hitting a sensor rather than emulsion:

Rather than hitting emulsion, light strikes a sensor, such as a cathode ray tube (CRT) or a charge coupled device (CCD), which momentarily captures a representation of the light. The camera then transmits an analogue signal, which is composed of continuously varying waveforms that create analogies of patterns that are then changed into other states, such as electrical signals, which are collected and held on magnetic tape. (5)

The crucial factor here is that both processes (film and analogue video recording) involve a transcription process, and the information the viewer experiences in its final form is analogous to that information in its original form. “A transfer occurs between the original information and the recording of that information,” as Willis states (5). Timothy Binkley explains the “hallmark” of an analogue medium, arguing that “[q]uantities of one kind of substance are transferred into isomorphic quantities of another according to a specified physical process” (98). Conversely, digital video, as I explained above, goes through a conversion rather than a transcription process. The camera does not transcribe a profilmic event into its material “imprint” as it were, but converts what it films into zeroes and ones “in a pattern of relationships defined by mathematical algorithms” (Willis 6). Coupled with the power and control offered by computer technology, digital film has transformed what the viewer sees on screen and how she experiences what she sees.

In The Language of New Media, Lev Manovich states that “exactly a hundred years after cinema was officially ‘born,’ it was reinvented on a computer screen” (313). Prior to digital technology, most commercial film cameras were analogue and
used photochemical film stock. Computers changed the ontology of the image in an irreversible paradigm shift. “Instead of using the constructive tools of Euclidean geometry to capture real objects the way a camera obscura does,” Binkley notes, “the computer’s virtual camera uses the computational tools of Cartesian geometry to depict virtual objects that exist for its eye only” (101). In the 1980s, an electronic medium which used video became available. Video was very quickly superseded by the digital video camera and then simply the digital camera (digital video became subsumed under the digital label). D.N. Rodowick argues that these three modes of image capture have had a huge effect on how we relate to moving images:

Our contemporary sense of the moving image has evolved from three interwoven strands of the virtual arts that engage with one another in uneven historical rhythms – photography and film, electronic imaging and transmission, and computational processes – and we need concepts that can bring these strands together while recognising the complexity of their relationships and differences. (The Virtual Life of Film 98)

In fact, I argue that found footage horror films and Michael Mann’s digital crime films – two of the more popular categories of mainstream cinema which offer viewers a different viewing experience grounded in their use of digital cameras to capture images – “conceptualise” very well the uneven rhythms of these three image modes. Many of the films discussed in this thesis can engage the viewer to the extent that generic pleasure is diminished in favour of a viewer-film text relationship involving the latter as a form of meta-visual text. For example, Ali and Public Enemies both interrogate the manner in which history is visually mediated by re-mediating it through the digital lens⁵ and allowing the viewer the extra “space” to contemplate the manner in which

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⁵ Re-mediation, in this context, has a slightly different inflection to the meaning Bolter and Grusin bestow on the term “remediation” in their book Remediation: Understanding New Media. In the context of Ali and Public Enemies, re-mediation is not the practice of new media incorporating old media (or
the films’ characters are represented through that additional “prism” of digital media technology. Now that we live in an increasingly digital and media-saturated culture, almost constantly bombarded by images, the discourse of representation itself sometimes bends in the direction of screens and screen culture in general.

In the light of this description of the new technologies involved in image creation, Binkley sums up the consequences of the move from film to digital for modes of representation: “[a]nalogue media maintain a concrete homogeneity with what they represent, while their digital counterparts transform originating impulses into heterogeneous quantifications of their sources” (96). The inherently mathematical nature of digital cinema and the unlimited malleability of the digital image initially sparked debates about authenticity and realism; in relation to digital image capture the debate focused on matters of aesthetics, with many theorists struggling to articulate exactly what was the difference between film and digital, or if there were any noteworthy difference in the first place. Writing in 2007, Wheeler Dixon states the problem as follows:

[f]ilm comes with one set of values inherently present in the stock itself (a tendency towards warmth in colour for some film stocks, or towards cooler hues in others, as well as characteristics of grain, depth and definition which are unique to each individual film matrix), while the digital video image offers another entirely different set of characteristics, verging on a hyperreal glossiness that seems to shimmer on the screen. To achieve a reconsideration of the basic states of representationalism inherent in any comparison of these two mediums is a difficult task, calling into question more than a century of cinematic practice, and a host of assumptions shared by practitioners and viewers alike. (par. 5)
Rodowick shares this viewpoint, arguing that the change from celluloid to digital may not make that big a difference to the way cinema works – “[w]ith respect to digital technologies, cinema is reinventing itself – just as it has done in previous periods of technological transition – by producing stylistic innovations while respecting narrative continuities” (The Virtual Life of Film 30). Binkley argues along similar lines:

   Digital media do not make analogue ones obsolete, since interfaces are needed to make numerical abstractions tangible, and these converters usually connect digital numbers with analogue events. The computer does not supersede its physically grounded predecessors, but rather breathes new life into them. (115)

   It is the “new life” offered to cinema by digital cameras with which this thesis is concerned. While Rodowick argues that digital technology is merely the latest innovation in film and part of a historically driven discourse, he does admit that phenomenologically there are differences between watching an analogue and a digital film that are still hard to anticipate. The discussion and argumentative line pursued in this thesis will concentrate on this phenomenological dimension to digital spectatorship and relate it to the wider digital culture.

Surface Tension: Theorising the Digital Image in Popular Genre Cinema and the Case for a Phenomenological Method of Enquiry

Two of the most significant studies on film’s relationship with digital culture, Laura Mulvey’s Death 24 X a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image (2006) and Patricia Pisters’ The Neuro Image: A Deleuzian Film-Philosophy of Digital Screen Culture (2012), examine how digital cinema fits into our screen-obsessed and media-saturated contemporary culture. As its title suggests, Pisters’ book attempts to bring Gilles Deleuze’s theory of the film image into the digital age, and it provides a compelling argument for the creation of an additional category of image, the “neuro-image,” to
work alongside Deleuze’s action- and time-image. The neuro-image, as Pisters
describes it, is a product of digital culture’s fondness for image technology. “The
ubiquity and diversity of cameras and screens,” she argues, “is a particularly prominent
aspect of this networked, ‘softwarised,’ digital culture” (9). This media-rich culture is,
according to the author, “the ‘natural’ milieu for the neuro-image” (8). She analyses
such diverse films as Michael Clayton (Tony Gilroy 2007), Fight Club (David Fincher
1999) and The Prestige (Christopher Nolan 2005), arguing that her chosen films “all
share certain elements that shape (or prefigure) the neuro-image as a ‘genre’” (25).
While the overlap of genre and digital technology is welcome in the overall debate
about the use of digital technology in film, Pisters does not make room for a discussion
on the image’s digital character. The “elements” she ties together to create a new genre
all find their origin not in the makeup of the image and how it might resonate with
visual culture but in a literary-informed theoretical approach that centralises
characterisation and narrative events that are represented in the image. The neuro-
image, which is partly characterised by “the omnipresence of media screens” (2), is a
product of Pisters’ bridge-building between the hard sciences and the humanities; the
Deleuzian time-image is examined through a neuro-scientific framework, leading
Pisters to propose that the viewer goes beyond merely seeing through a character’s
eyes (as in the time-image) to actually occupying the character’s mental space. There
is little room for agency on the part of the viewer under Pisters’ proposition, however:
“the image has explicitly become a brain-screen in the delirium of the ‘digital turn’”
(21). With the neuro-image operating directly on the viewer’s brain, there is little room
for independent thought.

Laura Mulvey, on the other hand, is willing to make certain concessions to the
image as image branch of theory. She describes the “human” quality of celluloid film
in contrast to the more “artisanal” aspects of digital imagery: “[n]o longer derived from
the chemical reaction between light and photosensitive material, these [digital] images lost their ‘natural magic’ and the painterly character of the illusions of the magic lantern, the tradition of human ingenuity, returned to visual culture” (Death 24 X a Second 19-20). Later, she illustrates the power of classical Hollywood cinema to put the viewer in the presence of the past by means of the image in and of itself (“the reality of the image”):

> Even in a Hollywood movie, beyond the story is the reality of the image: the set, the stars, the extras take on the immediacy and presence of a document and the fascination of time fossilized overwhelms the fascination of narrative progression. The now-ness of story time gives way to the then-ness of the time when the movie was made and its images take on social, cultural or historical significance, reaching out into the surrounding world. (Death 24 X a Second 31)

But Mulvey doesn’t extend this level of autonomy to the digital image. In Mulvey’s view of digital culture, agency is firmly with the spectator; remote control in hand, the spectator exerts considerable power over the image.

The “structuring absence” that links these two positions is, I would argue, the digital image itself. Film theory has always struggled with finding ways to discuss its object without invoking the legacy of literary criticism. Film’s popularity is largely narrative-based; theory, to a large extent, is drawn towards character and event in search of its propositions. What is needed, now that film’s identity is very quickly becoming almost exclusively digital-based, is a theory that is not in such a hurry to go beyond the texture of digital composition or to delve immediately beneath the surface of the image. In other words, the demotion of film form to a secondary position characterised by its supportive role in the service of narrative, and naturalised by a theoretical discourse fortified by the linguistic turn in film studies, needs to be
rethought in the digital age; the formal properties embedded in digitally-captured images demand an epistemological enquiry that centralises the ontology of the image.

Contemporary epistemological enquiries into the digital image have tended to position it within a discourse that minimises the relevancy of the image’s surface qualities – its digitality in an ontological sense – and any discussion that seeks to link the image’s surface with the wider aesthetic and cultural repercussions of cinema as a whole is seen as a near-sighted move. In other words, while film theorists such as Manovich and Mulvey among others have helped to foreground the implications of digital technology for cinema and have increased the weight of theoretical interest in the digital image, to date the urgency to dig “beneath” the two-dimensional skin of the image, with classically-honed theoretical tools used to absorb digital cinema within this or that branch of film criticism, bypasses the rich potential for theory offered by the surface of the digital image itself. Within the discourse of film theory, research which examines the digital image as an image is limited to a slight interest in the level of support lent to the content of the image by the image’s pictorial properties. Of course, a theory which limits itself to an exploration of the surface properties of the digital image, and thereby completely disregards what the image is a representation of, will bring with it another set of limitations. But this research project proposes a theoretical approach which places more weight on the ontological dimension of the digital image and proposes, in fact, that the surface of the image in digital film has a rather profound – and hitherto not fully explored – relationship with the diegesis for which it acts as a container.

I argue that this relationship between the diegesis and the material aspects of the image, characterised by James J. Gibson as a relationship between “scene” and “surface” (235), has become more mutually supportive and closely linked in their address to the viewer through the use of digital cameras. In other words, while the role
of the diegesis was to “prop up” the narrative of a film in the classical era – to become the “container” of the story (and, thus, less important) – both took up hierarchically similar positions in the move to digital. The digital aesthetic in recent popular cinema gives more power to the diegetic qualities of the image, usually manifested in the surface of the screen and often represented as the textural qualities of the image.

Additionally, the “support mechanism” offered by the image’s very digitality can allow a film’s narrative, under the spectatorial regime of the viewer, to resonate with questions of cultural identity and globalisation in contemporary digital culture in ways that rely on a media-literate spectator (in these terms, a spectator who had only been exposed to classical, or pre-digital, cinema might be regarded as “illiterate” when confronted with a film such as *The Blair Witch Project* [Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez 1999] or even *Public Enemies*). My hypothesis renders outdated the complete segregation of scene and surface, with its “perplexing duality” that has characterised the cinema from the beginning (Anderson 61). The duality Joseph D. Anderson refers to is as a result of the nature of the image. Both a two-dimensional flat picture and “a scene of living action,” as Rudolf Arnheim refers to it (26), the film image would induce an awareness of the split between scene and surface only when certain stylistic devices or pictorial anomalies became apparent on the image’s surface. Confronted by such irregularities as scratches and excessive grain, or even the stylistic application of a dissolve or a similar transitional device, the viewer’s interrupted immersion in the diegetic world of the film has historically been characterised as a stumbling block to film theory’s successful understanding of viewer engagement with moving images (Anderson 61-62).

Anderson describes the epistemological difficulties accruing from the duality of the image: “This dual nature of the image remained an enigma that frustrated film scholars and resulted in their failure to achieve the desired clarity concerning either the
nature of the image itself, or the relationship of the film viewer to the picture moving on screen” (62). However, while the duality of the image may have caused problems for viewer and theorist in the pre-digital era of film, one of my aims in this research is to show how the enigmatic qualities of the image in terms of its dual nature, discussed by Hugo Münsterberg as early as 1915 and still relevant in the twenty-first century, are central to a comprehensive understanding of how the contemporary viewer relates to the digital image. In fact, my argument is predicated on the active role played by this enigmatic duality in the restructuring of the bond between film viewer and image when that image is digital. Instead of a “split” in the viewing regime, the very enigma itself is reconstituted, losing its mystery as the duality of the image becomes central to the development of a more sensuous and haptic viewer engagement. When watching a film whose images were captured digitally, for example, there is often a sense that scene and surface fluctuate and this instability can have the effect of loosening, if not losing altogether, their duality in the mind of the viewer.

It is this threat to scene and surface, accentuated by the use of the digital camera to capture images and causing shifting patterns in spectatorship, which invites a phenomenologically-inflected enquiry into the relationship between the digital image and the viewer. “Above all else,” Dermot Moran states, “phenomenology must pay close attention to the nature of consciousness as actually experienced, not as is pictured by common sense or by philosophical tradition” (6). The digital image, as it is actually experienced in such films as *The Blair Witch Project* or *Collateral*, can involve a phenomenologically-charged engagement from the viewer. There is a sensuous meeting between viewer and image in engaging with the films under discussion here. Edmund Husserl, in his *Logical Investigations*, discusses those experiences “intuitively

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6 See Münsterberg’s *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, particularly the chapters titled “The Means of the Photoplay,” “The Demands of the Photoplay,” and “The Function of the Photoplay” for an overview of how one of cinema’s first theorists explains the nature of the filmic image (Langdale 128-65).
seizable and analysable in the pure generality of their essence, not experiences empirically perceived and treated as real facts, as experiences of human or animal experients in the phenomenal world that we posit as an empirical fact” (249), and calling for a philosophy of the senses that brought us “back to the things themselves” (252). The viewing of digital imagery in popular genre cinema, I argue, brings us back to the essence of the image in the consciousness of the viewer and opens up the aesthetic qualities of the image to our awareness. The kind of sensuous engagement afforded by the digital image resonates with another of Husserl’s foundational phenomenological concepts, that of “prepredicative experience.” Prepredicative experience, as Moran notes “was experience before it has been formulated in judgements and expressed in outward linguistic form, before it becomes packaged for explicit consciousness” (12). A pure form of consciousness, unencumbered by measured rationality, and a pure form of engagement with the world, is signalled by Husserl’s formula, and it is a mode of engagement that I argue is invited by digital imagery in genre films. Paradoxically, this uncontaminated mode of consciousness is not completely divested of rational thought. Raymond Bellour describes how the viewer can be “extracted” from her immersive engagement with a film by the operation of cues that she is in the process of watching a film, while at the same time maintaining an “investment” in the moving images and what they represent. He uses the example of films wherein a photograph confronts the viewer. Watching Letter from an Unknown Woman (Max Ophüls 1948) and Shadow of a Doubt (Alfred Hitchcock 1943), the viewer is momentarily uprooted from the film’s “unfolding” and “put in direct contact with the photograph,” Bellour argues (“The Pensive Spectator” 6-7). He believes that the representation of a photograph in these films “subtracts me from the fiction of the cinema, even if it forms a part of the film, even if it adds to it” (“The Pensive Spectator” 7). This subtraction, or distance, does not forego investment in the
film as we might expect, however. Bellour contends that the type of viewer engagement precipitated by the presence of the photograph can lead to a freer investment, an engagement with the filmic image that he describes in phenomenologically-inflected language: the momentary jolt provided by the photograph “helps me to close my eyes, yet keep them wide open” (“The Pensive Spectator” 7). The digital films belonging to the found footage horror genre and Mann’s work in the crime genre engage in this type of dialectical exchange, and extend these paradoxical moments of “invested subtraction” to provide the films’ thematic foundations. For example, almost the entire visual design of *Manhunter* (Michael Mann 1986) is built around the awareness of this dialectical engagement and not limited to the scenes showing FBI profiler Will Graham looking at photographs of murdered families.

Bellour’s use of subtraction is very similar to the idea of “reduction” in phenomenological theory. This is Husserl’s concept of suspending our natural attitude and turning our attention to how we experience things in consciousness. Maurice Merleau-Ponty advances this idea to suggest that this type of reduction, or “bracketing” of consciousness, is often neglected in favour of abstract thought and interpretation in pursuit of truth: “We never cease living in the world of perception, but we go beyond it in critical thought – almost to the point of forgetting the contribution of perception to our idea of truth […]” (*The Primacy of Perception* 3). The digital image gives back to the viewer the sensuous image as image, allowing a dialogic encounter which is very much a phenomenological one. How the “object,” cinema, is rendered “subjective” in this dialogic act of viewing characterises a branch of phenomenological film theory that has hitherto neglected to accord any real importance to the use of digital cameras in popular cinema.
Vivian Sobchack describes the subjective nature of cinema in her seminal text *The Address of the Eye*:

There are always two embodied acts of vision at work in the theatre, two embodied views constituting the intelligibility and significance of the film experience. The film’s vision and my own do not conflate, but meet in the sharing of a world and constitute an experience that is not only intrasubjectively dialectical, but also intersubjectively dialogical [...]. Cinematic vision, then, is never monocular, is always doubled, is always the vision of *two viewing subjects* materially and consciously inhabiting, signifying, and sharing a world in a manner at once universal and particular, a world that is mutually visible but hermeneutically negotiable. [emphasis in original] (*The Address of the Eye* 24)

Earlier in the same text, Sobchack comes close to suffusing her theory with Husserl’s conception of reduction:

Watching a film is both a direct and mediated experience of direct experience as mediation. We both perceive a world *within* the immediate experience of an “other” and *without* it, as immediate experience mediated by an “other.” Watching a film, we can see the seeing as well as the seen, hear the hearing as well as the heard, and feel the movement as well as see the moved. As viewers, not only do we spontaneously and invisibly perform these existential acts directly for and as ourselves in relation to the film before us, but these same acts are conterminously given to us *as* the film, as mediating acts of perception-cum-expression we take up and *invisibly perform* by appropriating and incorporating them into our existential performance; we watch them as a *visible performance* distinguishable from, yet included in, our own. [emphasis in original] (*The Address of the Eye* 10-11)
Sobchack’s understanding of the viewer-film relationship outlined above is currently most apparent, I would argue, in the found footage cycle of horror films. No other group of mainstream films incorporates the mediated nature of cinema as a self-conscious act, and no other group of films allows the digitality of its images such a vital role in establishing a more sensuous, experiential relationship – where the digital imagery is bracketed off, or involved in Husserl’s reduction, to address the viewer in terms of “image as image” – between viewer and genre. For instance, films like \textit{REC} (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza 2007) and \textit{Cloverfield} (Matt Reeves 2008), in their enunciative address to the viewer, conform to what Susan Sontag, in her essay “The Imagination of Disaster,” argues is a “sensuous elaboration” which allows the spectacle of “mutation, missile and rocket combat, toppling skyscrapers” to be rendered immediate for the viewer (\textit{Against Interpretation} 212). This digitally-driven alteration in viewer engagement has led to a renegotiation of the generic contract – the unwritten “pact” between genre film and viewer – and necessitated a renewed interest in genre theory.

\textbf{Genre Communities and the Intense Spectator}

Genre films in the digital age, while cosmically very different to genre films in the classical era, are still generally regarded as constructed through process rather than product: genre theorists explain that “ranges of influence” are involved, flowing from film to audience and back again (Schatz 691-702; Wood, “Ideology, Genre, Auteur” 717-26). Whether this participation is loaded on the side of the film (what Rick Altman calls the “ideological approach”), or on the side of the audience (the “ritual approach”), most theorists can agree that the generic process involves a “contract” between viewer and genre film (“A Semantic/Syntactic Approach” 6-10). With the replacement of celluloid by digital capture comes the requirement for new amendments and additional
clauses to be added to the generic contract, however, and this thesis will argue that the modified terms of this contract between these new genre films and their spectators represent a crucial realignment in spectatorial engagement. The analogy of the contract to describe the relationship between the viewer and the genre film is apposite; commentators have discussed the interaction between genre, viewer and technology often in these terms. “Even in film technology (the impact of widescreen on the Western, for example, or of Technicolor on the musical),” argues Thomas Schatz, “we can see that individual usage influences both viewers and other filmmakers, and hence encourages them in effect to renegotiate the generic contract” (693).

One of the most radical rewritings of the generic contract comes with the use of digital capture instead of traditional film cameras to generate moving images: the current favoured practice among a number of genre filmmakers is to use high definition (HD) digital cameras to record footage that would have previously been acquired on film. The results, I would argue, have aesthetic repercussions that are not yet fully understood. “Genres do not consist only of films; they consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and that interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process” Steve Neale argues (“Questions of Genre” 158), highlighting the crucial role of the viewer in the generic process. It is because the viewer’s complicity is central to genre formation that any analysis of digitally captured genre films must centralise the mode of address and viewing regimes involved in the genre process and examine any changes that arise through the application of the digital technology.

Theorists such as Neale, Altman, Schatz, Rick Worland and Barry Keith Grant, to name the authors currently most associated with genre research,7 have certainly laid

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7 Steve Neale’s published work on genre includes Genre (1980), Genre and Hollywood (1998) and Genre in Contemporary Hollywood (2002); his Screen article “Questions of Genre” (1990) looks back at his earlier Genre monograph in light of more recent developments in genre theory. Rick Altman’s work
the theoretical groundwork on genre cinema, but none of them has engaged with how the current move to digital production has impacted on specific genres. Altman goes furthest, calling for a theory of film genre that is diachronic and history-based. “Lacking a workable hypothesis regarding the historical dimension of generic syntax,” he writes, “we have insulated that syntax, along with the genre theory that studies it, from the flow of time” (“A Semantic/Syntactic Approach” 686).\footnote{In “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” Altman’s seminal proposal for a theory of genre based on the synthesis of two approaches, the “semantic” and the “syntactic,” proved a useful, pluralistic way of combining both the ritualistic approach to genre (which attributed ultimate authorship to the audience) and its opposite, the ideological approach (which defined a genre as a tool for manipulating audiences).}

This kind of theorising, based on the historical changes undergone by genres over a period of time, is necessary in order to determine the extent of the change to genre cinema wrought by digital technology in recent years.\footnote{Historically, technology has had a huge impact on genre cinema: the introduction of sound impacted all genres but particularly the musical and the comedy (see Feuer); moving from black and white to colour impacted again all types of genres (see Coates), and even gave rise to the neo-noir in place of film noir (see Conard); Cinemascope heralded in the widescreen epic (see Barr).} Genres do not simply sit still; all the major ones (the western, the romance, the thriller, the horror) have been modified in some way, and Schatz could be describing certain genres in the twenty-first century when he declares that some have evolved “from straightforward storytelling to self-conscious formalism” (692).

Genre conventions change “according to the ideological climate of the time” (Hayward 50), and the contemporary image-saturated, media-infested climate is certainly impacting greatly on genre films. In the twenty-first century, where film culture and digital culture are inextricably linked, viewer engagement with cinema is greatly affected by their close cultural connection. This modified engagement is
nowhere more apparent than in the interaction between genre films and their fans. Altman describes the generic logic which binds the viewer-genre film relationship as resulting from the interactions between generic pleasure and culturally-sanctioned norms *(Film/Genre* 145-51). Viewers must choose between the two – a mode of selection that Altman characterises as “the generic crossroads” *(Film/Genre* 145). In this way, genres become alternatives to cultural norms and a viewer’s counter-cultural complicity is measured by how invested she is in the genre. “Requiring constant intensification,” Altman states, “genre viewers can be satisfied only by an increasing opposition between (generic) pleasure and the (cultural) interdictions that restrict it” *(Film/Genre* 152).

**Found Footage Horror and the Crime Thriller: the “Digitising” of Genre**

If a central hypothesis of this research is that the digital image provides a more sensuous and experiential engagement for the viewer, then examining the use of digital cameras in genre cinema is apposite. The relevance of this strategy is borne out by the fact that the digitality of the image is preserved most apparently in two mainstream film genres, the horror film and the crime thriller,¹⁰ that depend on the build-up of intense affective responses from contemporary audiences in the act of viewing. These two genres, in fact, encompass the twin poles of randomness and hyperreal perfection which are the essence of the digital image. “At the heart of the perfect digital image – coded by its clean binaries – is a secret desire for mistakes, for randomness,” Nicholas Rombes argues (1): the dirty visual aesthetic of *The Blair Witch Project* provides an example of this randomness, while Michael Mann’s *Miami Vice* embodies a hyperreal

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¹⁰ The pornography and melodrama genres elicit strong affective responses from the viewer which can be stronger than those involved in the viewing of horror and crime films (see L. Williams); however, the generic tropes of melodrama have been assimilated by, and become diffused in, other genres, such as the crime thriller and the horror genres; pornography, on the other hand, is not a mainstream film genre and is still very much hidden from view.
digital perfection (Mann’s *Public Enemies* contains elements from both ends of this digital spectrum). Mann’s digital crime films are used in this research as paradigmatic examples of the digital aesthetic within that particular genre. While I am aware that a concentration on Mann’s digital films in my discussion of the crime genre could be viewed as a limitation in my research parameters, Mann is widely regarded as the only filmmaker working within the genre who has shown a determination to honour the unique digital aesthetic which digital capture brings to his cinema. The only other filmmaker who consistently uses digital cameras in the production of crime thrillers, David Fincher, favours a cinematic look which sticks closely to classical mise-en-scène. *Zodiac* (2007), *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and *Gone Girl* (2014) are all Fincher films which use classical composition and framing, and the director is quite keen to use the digital camera to replicate the aesthetics of the *celluloid* image, albeit a highly resolved one. The viewer’s awareness of the digital origin of these films’ images is levied by the “barrier” of the filmmaker’s strict adherence to classical modes of composition in the service of genre. In Mann’s digital crime films, on the other hand, the willingness to work within genre restrictions and the classical style is less important than experimenting with a digital aesthetic of which the viewer is primed to be made aware.

While the aesthetic look of both genres is unique in each case, they are bound together by their shared relationship with the viewer. Altman describes the relationship between these two particular genres and the viewer:

> It is instructive that the two genres most noted for their incremental logic – the horror film and the thriller – should be designated by terms describing the spectator’s reaction rather than filmic content, for it is precisely on the heightening viewer sensation that generic logic depends. (*Film/Genre* 153)
But in the course of this thesis I will provide evidence that, with the advent of digital capture in the production of the horror and the thriller, it is not quite as simple as Altman contends: if we look at *Trollhunter* (André Øvredal 2010) for instance, it is clear that the generic logic of that film depends on a subtle mixture of heightening sensation and appealing to the more culturally aware critical faculties of the viewer. It is as if the generic crossroads is offering the viewer a third choice, one that sees generic pleasure and cultural awareness brought closer together through the film’s digital textures.

Another aspect of digital age genre films that is affected by their digitality is the cultural “baggage” consisting of memories of other genre films that the viewer brings with her. Victor Burgin’s 2004 book *The Remembered Film* provides a very personal account of how the memory of films, and of certain scenes and images within these films, however short or fleeting (the film sequence that is almost a still image because of its brevity, Burgin refers to as the “sequence-image”), can burst forth in our everyday activities outside of the cinema and often leave us puzzled as to how such an image is related to the current event (14-29). But these connections are made internally as well. The linkage between current genre films and those it cannot help but refer back to, which certain theorists give weight to in seeking to understand the cultural significance of genre (Braudy 667-71), is easily understood. The connection between the past and present genre film, however, has also been affected by the use of digital cameras in these two genres, and in different ways to those explained by either Burgin or Leo Braudy. One obvious connection created by the viewer’s memory of seeing a genre film is that the viewer’s familiarity with a genre’s codes and conventions consolidates her expectations for the more recent genre film; a less obvious way that familiarity with the history of genre might affect the viewer’s engagement with a genre film is possible with the introduction of the digital camera, particularly when the
camera is used as part of the diegesis, as in the found footage horror film. Referring again to Anderson’s scene and surface duality, which I discussed earlier, the “ghostly” presence of previous horror films remembered by the viewer can break through the found footage screen, causing a rupture to the viewer’s generic pleasure and sometimes even causing it to break down completely. This is a rarer occurrence in the crime thriller because the relationship between narrative and film form is still very much dominated by the classical paradigm; a relationship which is “recalibrated” by the presence of the digital camera within the diegesis of the found footage horror film and is shorn of its reliance on classical codes as a result.

Focusing on how film form is challenged by the digital aesthetics of the image, the main aim of my thesis relates to providing an understanding of the manner in which both the spatial and temporal dimensions of film become “unmoored” when the moving image is built from pixels rather than the simple transference of a pro-filmic event onto celluloid. An important strand to this research thus incorporates an argument which will show that the digital image in my chosen corpus of films, representing the found footage horror cycle and digital crime genres respectively, actively reworks chemical film’s spatio-temporal modes – and this has a marked effect on the way that the viewer both thinks about and experiences filmic imagery. Manovich argues that digital technology disturbs the normal sense of chronological succession, a temporal mode of film marked by the steady rhythm of one scene being replaced by another or of one shot being usurped by the next:

The result [of digital technology] is a new cinema in which the diachronic dimension is no longer privileged over the synchronic dimension, time is no longer privileged over space, sequence is no longer privileged over simultaneity, montage in time is no longer privileged over montage within a shot. (The Language of New Media 326)
And yet Manovich was reacting to the digital image in the act of its creation rather than to the resultant image that is projected in front of the viewer. His notion that time becomes spatialised and distributed over the surface of the screen is predicated on the *a priori* involvement of digital editing suites and CGI composites. For this research project, it is how the projected two-dimensional digital image, in its finality as it were, communicates its temporality that is crucial. Babette Mangolte’s understanding of time in the digital realm, outlined in “Afterword: A Matter of Time,” is more useful. She concentrates on the ontological basis of the digital image, arguing that every film projects a sense of space and a sense of time that the viewer will accommodate in the act of viewing. “The two are inextricably intertwined and meshed into the fabric of film itself, its projected images and playback sounds,” Mangolte writes (262). But the digital image is at a disadvantage, she writes: “with no shutter reprieve, no back and forth between one forty-eighth of a second of dark followed by one forty-eighth of projected images, with no repetitive pattern as regular as your heartbeat,” digital film cannot create an experiential sense of the passage of time (263).

“Space in the digital,” argues Markos Hadjioannou, “becomes a perceptual impression of applications and operations specific to mathematical values. Spatial unity […] is not upheld in the digital because every element in the image is a discrete block or position for alteration or elimination. Incalculable variability is overturned by controlled transformations” (*From Light to Byte* 122-23). A found footage horror film such as *Cloverfield* is visually unlike the majority of the genre’s giant monster films made in the pre-digital era; the film’s frame takes on spatial properties which causes its mise-en-scène to become more geometric and fractal than the container of narrative. In every found footage horror film, the viewer is assaulted by the compositional space of the frame undergoing major upheaval. Normal laws of cinematic space are frequently abandoned in favour of decentred framing, a dirty aesthetic predicated on the
“amateur” camera stylistics, and visual intrusions like cracked lenses, timestamps and frequent fades to black when the on-screen camera becomes damaged.

Conversely, apart from the spatial upheaval taking place on screen, which arguably amounts to a paradigmatic shift in the use of cinematic space, there is a more crucial dimension to the found footage horror film’s reworking of space – the one that takes place in the zone created between viewer and image. This zone, which acts as a meta-space for the viewer, supports found footage horror’s withdrawal from the stable and comforting conventions of representation through narrative in order to allow the viewer a more primal engagement with matters pertaining to contemporary digital culture. Moreover, I would argue that the lessened impact of narrative, in fact the active hijacking of its role and subsequent demotion endorses Noël Burch’s claim that it is the diegesis rather than the narrative that controls the “readability” of a film (“Narrative/Diegesis” 16-33). Burch argues that it is a weak diegetic effect “which perturbs the uninitiated viewer” more than a weak narrative effect and this sets film apart from literature where “the diegetic effect in literature is more closely intertwined with the narrative process” (“Narrative/Diegesis” 19). A “withdrawal” of narrative from film still leaves the diegesis intact and legible; but the more liberties a film takes with narrative the more it sheds its allegiance to classical codes and moves towards experimental or avant-garde cinema. In found footage horror, this marks a progressive move on the part of a genre because it allows for the significant interrogation of contemporary culture at the level of the diegesis rather than solely at the narrative level (which even the progressive horror films of the 1970s could not do). An enunciative tactic that leans more towards a diegetic address than a narrative one, where cinematic space builds diegetically rather than narratively (as Burch points out, space is organised around a “gaze that sees” – hugely reinforced by the presence of found footage’s diegetic camera – rather than the “gaze that tells” of classical narrative
[“Narrative/Diegesis” 21]), means that found footage horror can also avoid the pastiche and nostalgic modalities of other “postmodern,” or post-classical horror films. Paul Wells points out that the postmodern horror films exemplified by *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (Wes Craven 1994) and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (Jim Gillespie 1997)

[s]peak only limitedly about the culture that produces them. This is largely because the horror genre has essentially been absorbed into other mainstream genres, or predominantly engages with ambivalent realist models which are reworkings of urban myths, translating the mythic serial killing tendencies of a Freddy or a Jason into ostensibly “real world” contexts. (97)

Found footage horror, then, by virtue of the fact that the viewer’s engagement is cued to “answer” a diegetic address more than a narrative one, sets up a zone of interaction which is a cinematic space with a reduced dependence on a narrative element. In *Trollhunter*, for example, I argue that a meta-space is created outside the frame of representation which allows the viewer to contemplate Norwegian national identity and transnationalism – and this applies to viewers who are not even Norwegian.

The digital crime thriller, on the other hand, represented by Michael Mann’s body of work beginning with *Ali*, does not create such a distance from its classical heritage in terms of how it handles space on screen. Films such as *Collateral*, *Miami Vice* and *Public Enemies* all contain hyperreal imagery, the high definition digital cameras capturing pin-sharp textures which leave the spatial composition of the frames undisturbed and logical in the classical sense. The hyperreal in a Mann film is not the kind that has a connection with a quest for realism as much as it is a visual texture that draws the viewer’s gaze to linger on the surface of the screen. Mann often slows down the action in his films to accommodate such a gaze, a scene achieving a stillness that
seems to require a similar slowing down and contemplative reaction on the part of the viewer. We will see that such moments in Mann’s cinema are not a disavowal of realism in favour of hyperrealism\textsuperscript{11} – but rather a particular kind of realism, one predicated on the requirement of a subjective dimensionality to objectivity. Moreover, in these moments, Mann’s cinema powerfully embodies what Rodowick calls “an ethics of time.” “Throughout the history of film theory,” he argues, “film aesthetics has concerned itself primarily with the analysis of space. Here, I want to suggest that what most powerfully affects us in film is an ethics of time” (\textit{The Virtual Life of Film} 73).

The digitality of the image in a Mann film is found in its enhancement of a visual aesthetic that was already present in his pre-digital films. Depth of field is increased beyond the capacities of film cameras in both \textit{Collateral} and \textit{Miami Vice}, and neon-lit night scenes attain a brilliant luminosity – but the spatial arrangements of the mise-en-scène remain balanced and classical for the most part. Where Mann’s use of digital cameras makes extra demands on the viewer is in how it influences the manner in which the films communicate the passing of time. The sensation of time passing is quite often a source of confusion for the viewer when watching films shot with digital cameras. Celluloid is tied to events that are in the \textit{past}, with the camera capturing an event that is taking place before it; the event is then projected in front of the viewer at some time in the future. The digitally-captured event, on the other hand, introduces some ambivalence into how the viewer relates to the projected imagery’s linkage with a referent that is in the past. My analysis of Mann’s digital aesthetic uncovers a tendency on the filmmaker’s part to imbue scenes with the sense of a suspended temporal dimension or of an everlasting present. An increased depth of field, coupled with a predilection for racking focus instead of utilising straight cuts,

\textsuperscript{11} While I am familiar with Jean Baudrillard’s use of hyperrealism and discuss his understanding of the concept in chapter four, my own theory incorporates such theorists as Rybin, Rayner and Wildermuth in relating the term to a “stylised realism” rather than a culture of signs.
acts to smooth out the rhythm of the films and suspend the normal chronology of successive events.

The chapters that follow will discuss the use of digital technology in two film genres and describe how the HD digital camera is now doing for cinema what photography did for Western painting: it is offering cinema a way of loosening (but not completely severing) its ties with the classical Hollywood mode, usually predicated on achieving realism, and placing more importance onto the surface of the screen rather than attempting to draw the viewer into a realistic, narrative-driven world. For example, in Mann’s digital crime films viewers are drawn, in privileged cinematic moments, to see the images as *images*, rather than as purveyors of narrative. At times during a film such as *Collateral*, the viewer oscillates between a state of complete immersion and one of critical distance. The tension between the two, however, is always controlled by the director’s stylistic balance, a dialectic coupling of genre conventions and an expressive mise-en-scène that takes its cues from digital culture. With his digital films Mann allows the two main dimensions of his cinema – the goal of realism within genre structures and the emphasis on the hyperreal texture of images – to engage the viewer in a different way than crime films which are not shot digitally (including Mann’s own).

On the other hand, the found footage horror film is characteristic of a culture moving towards the convergence of all media, foregrounding form in its content in ways that would surely confuse viewers in a pre-digital age but allows it to be completely accessible to contemporary viewers. Current spectatorship practices have become “acclimatised” to the horror film’s appropriation of the digital image. Erkki Huhtamo suggests how new technologies are “naturalised” in modern culture: “Technology is gradually becoming a second nature, a territory both external and internalized, and an object of desire. There is no need to make it transparent any
longer, simply because it is not felt to be in contradiction to the ‘authenticity’ of the experience” (171).

I have structured this thesis with two research questions in mind. The first question concentrates on the image itself and asks, is there a paradigm shift in the “look” of the cinematic image when celluloid is replaced by digital capture in popular genres? The second question incorporates the role of the viewer and asks what impact does this movement from chemical-based to digital film have on the viewer’s spectatorial regime and the sensorial engagement with cinematic images? With those questions informing every aspect of the research, this thesis is comprised of two main sections: each section has two chapters. The first section examines the horror genre. Chapter one provides a discussion of the horror film in the digital age, focusing on the found footage cycle which began with The Blair Witch Project: in this chapter I argue that the viewer’s relationship with the dense, digital images on screen allows for a more culturally aware, or more culturally informed, involvement than was possible with pre-digital horror films. In chapter two I continue my examination of found footage horror, this time narrowing the focus by providing a case-study of the Norwegian found footage film Trollhunter, discussing the sometimes paradoxical role played by the aesthetics of its digital imagery in the provision of a more media-inflected and contemporary engagement with cultural identity to the viewer across both experiential and intellectual modes. The second and final section of the thesis shifts the focus from horror to the crime thriller, and analyses Michael Mann’s digitally-captured crime films as paradigmatic examples of popular genre films that self-consciously display their pictorial difference to celluloid film stock through the use of high definition digital cameras. An examination of Mann’s developing digital aesthetic is presented in chapter three. Chapter four is another case study: Mann’s Miami Vice is examined in terms of how it reflects the findings of the previous chapter. This is
followed by a brief conclusion, where I outline how my findings on the digital aesthetic in genre cinema might help to enrich the understanding of the cultural relevance of digital film and indicate where future research on the digital image in popular cinema might lead.
Chapter 1

When Cinematic Spaces Collide – Found Footage Horror’s Digital Age Screen

In this chapter I will test my hypothesis that the found footage horror film offers a different mode of displaying horror than that provided by the pre-digital age horror film (both ontologically and aesthetically), and in fact this recent subgenre is the result of a rupture in the horror genre as a whole, a paradigm shift which may prove as consequential as that provided by Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960). After initially outlining what is at stake for the horror genre in terms of the epistemological rupture caused by the appearance of the found footage horror film, and mapping out the main contentious points through a preliminary reading of *Cloverfield*, the first section of the chapter discusses the manner in which cinematic space – even as a concept – has taken on additional reference points through the use of digital cameras. Because of the 360 degree “zone” created by the diegetic camera in found footage horror films, I argue that the viewer’s phenomenological participation in the events on the screen disturbs the very ontology of cinematic space and renders previous epistemological analyses of the concept too reductive when applied to the found footage subgenre of horror.

Moreover, in order to develop an argument that provides an explanation for the way cinematic space works in this relatively new subgenre, situating space in a historical timeline is essential, with the classical period regarded as the baseline, the normative position to which all subsequent genre variations react (either positively or negatively). The following section, then, concentrates on the classical era and demonstrates the manner in which the horror film communicates its spatial conflicts to the viewer (two Universal releases from the 1930s, *Frankenstein* [James Whale 1931] and *The Bride of*
Frankenstein [James Whale 1935] are chosen as paradigmatic examples of the way space is organised in classical horror cinema). I extend the historical discussion in the following section, presenting an analysis of the horror genre over three distinct periods of its evolution; tracking the different cinematic spaces of the horror film in the classical period (generally agreed to span the release of the first Universal horror film in 1931 and the release of Psycho in 1960), the modern period (spanning the 1960s and up until the late-1990s), and, finally, what we may call the found footage era (beginning with the release of The Blair Witch Project in 1999, up to the present), this section shows how cinematic space operates very differently in the found footage horror film compared with classical or modern horror films. Using the findings of the previous sections, the last section presents a proposed theory of found footage horror as the first mainstream meta-genre. Returning to Cloverfield in this section, my argument will consider the material discussed in the first two sections to present evidence that the found footage horror film can be read as something that is itself providing a phenomenological reading of the classical and modern horror film. After developing my argument through each successive section that the relationship between space and narrative has undergone a paradigmatic change in the movement from the classical to the digital era, the initial discussion of Cloverfield presented at the start of the chapter, which presents arguments that the film represented no real departure from the classical horror film, will be exposed as limited and based on a false assumption regarding the hegemony of narrative in cinema.

Approaching Cloverfield (2008)

Touching on certain aspects of Wood’s return of the repressed idea in relation to the modern horror film (“An Introduction to the American Horror Film” 164-200), but also using important theory from Sobchack, Andrew Tudor and others, my aim in this
chapter is to show that found footage is more than a classically-dependent narrative given a digital or new media-inflected sheen (an accusation which has been levelled at *Cloverfield* in particular). I contend that the subgenre of found footage horror transcends its genre categorisation and is, in fact, a complete re-reading of the horror film. “A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen,” Sobchack argues, “an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood” (*The Address of the Eye* 3-4). Found footage horror, which is the kind of cinema that J. Hoberman characterised as “experiential cinematic ordeals” (33), makes itself seen seeing, or gazing back at (through the POV of its diegetic camera), the classical horror film. There is a meta-cinematic element to this new direction in horror which incorporates the overlap between new digital technologies and viewing regimes.

To a greater extent than in the past, contemporary horror films now depend on technology to deliver their generic pleasures.12 The ongoing evolution of the genre is marked by a continual improvement in special effects, usually showcased in the genre’s array of visually spectacular supernatural monsters (and natural ones), who terrify audiences by performing extreme acts of violence in scenes that, as Noël Carroll points out, cause the viewer to regard these monstrous characters “not only as inconceivable but also as unclean and disgusting” (*The Philosophy of Horror* 21).13 However, the kinds of genre-based pleasures offered to the viewer of horror films today are markedly different from those of the past; as Schatz maintains, the “sustained success” of a genre is related to the appeal of the conflicts it addresses and “its

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12 The cinema has always depended on technology, of course, and would not exist without it, but the “immensely resilient” nature of horror (Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* 3), particularly in its cinematic form, is connected to its use of ever-changing technology to outdo itself constantly in its depiction of horrific characters and violent acts.

13 In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Carroll asserts that the monster must be of supernatural origin to belong to horror, and that human characters such as Norman Bates in *Psycho* and Leatherface in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper 1974) belong in a different category that Carroll calls “tales of terror” (15). I am certainly not alone in disagreeing with him on this point.
flexibility in adjusting to the audience’s and filmmakers’ changing attitudes towards those conflicts” (700). The most obvious conflict played out in the horror film is that between the normal and the monstrous; but the contemporary found footage subgenre has introduced another conflict involving the tension between what is represented and the manner of its representation. Not only do the aesthetic choices of the found footage subgenre create ambiguity in relation to the nature of the monstrous threat, but the narrative and visual modifications signal a shift in viewer awareness. This shift is best understood as the inclusion of another layer to the spectatorial address of the film, an additional “link” in the visual “chain” which connects the viewer’s gaze to the screen.

Julia Leyda, writing about *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli 2007), indicates the extra burden on the viewer of the horror genre in the twenty-first century: “digital modes of production condition the kinds of affect the movie generates: their cinematography and editing corral us into certain perceptive modes” (par. 35). In most cases, cinematography and editing are under the control of the diegetic camera, one of the key visual and narrative elements that has, through its pervasive use in found footage horror, become a convention of the new subgenre. The inclusion of a camera within the world created in the film, usually operated by one or more characters throughout the film’s running time, led some commentators to suggest that it acquires the status of a character in its own right. However, the diegetic camera, because it occupies a zone *between* film character and viewer, has a much more powerful function than any character. Colin MacCabe argues that the classic realist text is comprised of various discourses controlled and unified by a “metalanguage.” The metalanguage in cinema is often the POV of the camera, or what we *see* in the film, and it establishes the dominant discourse (“Realism and Cinema” 7-13). In found footage horror, the discursive potential of the diegetic camera proved instrumental in creating cinematic images and whole sequences that looked totally unique in popular cinema. The camera
as both the recorder of the action and participant in that action allowed the viewer a more experiential engagement with the film. The enhanced experience described here relies on the viewer becoming aware of her engagement with the film, and the scopic drive takes up a more abstract or a meta role. The experience, divorced from the normal immersive experience of classical film, does not actually disavow immersion in the digital film; rather, the digital aesthetic – embodied in those images that are texturally different from chemical-based ones and not so narratively-motivated – now becomes the site of immersion.

Another argument, taking the alleged unique qualities of the found footage horror film’s enunciative strategies as its point of departure, assumes an opposing view: the digital “look” of the film, predicated on the camera as recorder of the narrative and as a presence within the narrative, was merely the “skin” of the film, a container for a narrative that in fact remained true to classical codes and conventions. The *sui generis* status of the found footage horror film was mistaken, according to this argument, and films such as *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield* were really classical horror films dressed in the borrowed robes of new media culture. Producer J.J. Abrams and director Matt Reeves, the makers of *Cloverfield*, set out “to fit the premise of video recording to the demands of classical narrative structure and narration” (Bordwell, “A Behemoth from the Dead Zone” par. 23). Abrams’ monster movie is arguably the most paradigmatic case of a horror film containing pleasures which, it was argued, depend as much on earlier classical patterns and tropes as on the more contemporary digitally prescribed ones. Even though *Cloverfield* shows a tendency to display its constructed nature, inviting its audience to enter into an uneasy relationship with its aesthetic of digital confusion, it “is also a Hollywood movie, and it follows the norms of that moviemaking mode” (Bordwell, “A Behemoth from the Dead Zone” par. 20). In terms of the argument put forward by David Bordwell, the
progression of *Cloverfield*’s narrative is actually governed by plot developments more in line with the Proppian romantic quest type narrative than one revolving around a gigantic monster threatening a city. The film’s protagonist, Rob Hawkins, decides to ensure the safety of his romantic partner Beth after a massive lifeform wrecks havoc in New York; the film stays with Hawkins and his three friends as they travel across the city to get to Beth. What sets *Cloverfield* apart from films with a similar setup, such as *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack 1933) and *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Eugène Lourié 1953), is the camera that one of the characters uses to film all of the action we see. Along with a still from *Them!* (Gordon Douglas 1954), *Cloverfield* actually inserts stills from those two classical films at a couple of points in the film; these “ruptures” act as subliminal salutes to *Cloverfield*’s generic roots, while at the same time suggesting, as Bordwell argues, that the differences between it and its classical forebears are far less serious than the prevailing critique of the film as distinctly post-classical would claim. *Cloverfield*, Bordwell argues, is “a nifty digital update of some classic Hollywood conventions” (“A Behemoth from the Dead Zone” par. 6), and “essentially, *Godzilla Meets Handicam*” (par. 7).

Bordwell’s argument, however, starts from the position that narrative is the most powerful operating force in cinema’s enunciative strategy in relation to the viewer (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*; Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema: Narrational Principles and Procedures” 17-34); the evidence provided in this chapter, on the other hand, will show that the found footage horror film opens another mode of engagement for the viewer, a mode which causes a considerable loosening of the subgenre’s dependence on narrative for its attraction. After examining the manner in which the relationship between cinematic space and narrative – a very close one under the rules of classical cinema – is modified with the introduction of the diegetic digital camera, I will return to *Cloverfield* better
equipped to discuss its merits as a distinctly non-classical horror film at the end of this chapter.

**Classical Horror’s Mise-en-Scène: the “Pregnancy of Space”**

The articulation of cinematic space in the creation of affective narratives is certainly an integral part of cinema; Mark Cooper states that “manipulation of spatial difference ensures cinema’s narrative intelligibility” (139). An expression of spatial difference, demonstrated in the conflict of cinematic space that leads to a successful transmission of generic pleasure, is arguably more evident in the horror genre than in any other: the articulation of both light and dark zones, the traditional manner in which conflict is conveyed in the horror film, usually takes the form of opposing cinematic spaces in which the mise-en-scène is arranged in blocks of shadows and light, permitting the spectator to attain pleasure in negotiating this spatial battle. New image-capture technologies, which forego the need for celluloid-based film stock, have become crucial to this new development – in certain cases the camera has assumed a diegetic role akin to a character in the narrative. The sudden emergence of the found footage horror film established by this technology has given rise to an alteration in what Altman calls “generic discursivity” (*Film/Genre* 121), creating a subgenre that I argue has produced a new mode of address – a new discursive site – that allows the viewer to challenge the “paradigm of transparency” synonymous with classical Hollywood (Bolter and Grusin 38).14

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14 *The Blair Witch Project*, released July 30, 1999, is usually credited with starting the “found footage” horror subgenre, even though earlier films contained this found-footage element in their narratives: both *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato 1980) and *The Last Broadcast* (Stefán Avalos and Lance Weiler 1998) have many scenes depicting footage that is later found, but these films wrap them in a framing device; *Man Bites Dog* [*C’est arrivé près de chez vous*] (Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzel, and Benoît Poelvoorde 1992) has more in common with *The Blair Witch Project* in terms of its look, but it is a mock-documentary and not strictly a found footage horror film.
While the technology-driven evolution of cinematic narratives designed to terrify the viewer has been well-documented, what has not been included in the discourse is how this recent acquisition of digital capture technology by the genre, in terms of both production and as a part of the narrative, is leading the horror genre in an unfamiliar direction by treating the space of the contemporary horror film quite differently to its treatment in the classical era. It is a direction that I argue is affecting the very meaning of the horror film in the twenty-first century and, moreover, is giving rise to a modified generic exchange between filmic text and viewer.

“The spatial properties of cinema have several components,” Stephen Prince argues (Movies and Meaning 7). Arranging objects within the frame, referred to as “composition,” is one key component, but there are other considerations to take into account. The most crucial role played by cinematic space is to maintain the illusion of physical reality for the viewer, which Prince explains is a goal that unites all of the key players in the production process:

Cinema simulates an illusion of three-dimensional space on a flat screen. To do so, it corresponds in key ways with the viewer’s experience of physical space in daily life, and filmmakers create these correspondences in the design of their films. Cinematographers control the distribution of light on the set to accentuate the shape, texture, and positioning of objects and people. Film editors join shots to establish spatial constancies on screen that hold regardless of changes in the camera’s position and angle of view. Sound designers use the audio track to convey information about physical space. The spatial properties of cinema are multi-dimensional and can be expressed through many elements of structure. (Prince, Movies and Meaning 7)

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15 See Carroll, Dickstein, Jankovich, Kawin (“Children of the Light”), Telotte (“What You Can’t See…”), Tudor (Monsters and Mad Scientists) and Wells for a sample of theorists who emphasise the importance of technology to the development of the horror film.
The crucial relationship or collaboration in the articulation of cinematic space to build narrative, however, is clearly that between the viewer and the image. Hermann Kappelhoff describes how this relationship works: “in the narrative process the space/time fragments of the film combine to form an illusion of homogenous space that presents itself to the spectator as a natural relation of perception” (par. 3). Taking this a step further, Arnheim, after studying the interaction between the viewing process and the motion of filmic images to create an image of movement, states that the result of this relationship is “neither absolutely two-dimensional nor absolutely three-dimensional, but something between” (20). Stephen Heath calls this “something between” a response to the impression of reality in cinema, and he relates the phenomena to the use of cinematic space: “it is this impression, this reality that are of concern here in their implications for a consideration of space in film” (“Narrative Space” 75). He describes how space and character POV work together in classical cinema:

The drama of vision in the film returns the drama of vision of the film: the spectator will be bound to the film as spectacle as the world of the film is itself revealed as spectacle on the basis of a narrative organisation of look and point of view that moves space into place through the image-flow; the character, figure of the look, is a kind of perspective within the perspective system, regulating the world, orientating space, providing directions – and for the spectator. (“Narrative Space” 91)

How the classical system works to build cinematic spaces, to set them in motion and then to render them “legible” for the spectator, is also described by Heath:

Classical continuity […] is an order of the pregnancy of space in frame; one of the narrative acts of a film is the creation of space but what gives the moving space its coherence in time, decides the metonymy as a “taking place”, is here
“the narrative itself”, and above all as it crystallises round character as look and point of view. The fundamental role of these is exactly their pivotal use as a mode of organisation and organicisation, the joining of a film’s constructions, the stitching together of the overlaying metonymies. (“Narrative Space” 92)

In agreement with Heath’s basic principles, Bordwell argues that, “all film techniques, even those involving the ‘profilmic event,’ function narrationally, constructing the story world for specific effects” (Narration in the Fiction Film 12), and during the analogue era these “specific effects” in relation to the horror film involved a clear division of narrative spaces, the normal and the monstrous. The organising principle of the classical horror film, in terms of its conflicting cinematic spaces, was dependent on how carefully orchestrated looks and points of view set up an opposition between the normal and the monstrous with each opposing space awaiting its “birth” in the “death” of the other through continuity editing.

Frankenstein, for example, is constructed as a series of back-and-forth scenes juxtaposing the “normal” space of Baron Frankenstein’s home with the “monstrous” space of the watchtower where Henry Frankenstein defies God to create life from dead tissue. However, in current filmmaking practice the digital screen of the horror film, as exemplified in the found footage subgenre in particular, is now effacing the barrier that separates these two spaces and effectively fusing them together in a digital image that, while not disavowing Tzvetan Todorov’s fantastic space completely, is, as my argument will attempt to show, rendering it a mere presence within the normal space rather than a violation of it. This lack of a clear demarcation between cinematic spaces in horror narratives, I contend, could represent an ontological break in the genre, and in its flaunting of a digital image whose pseudo-documentary look downplays the

16 Wood agrees with Carroll that every horror film must have a monster, although he allows that it is not limited to being of supernatural origin. He refers to Norman Bates in Psycho and Leatherface in The Texas Chain Saw Massacre as monsters (“An Introduction to the American Horror Film”).
intentionality of classical mise-en-scène,\textsuperscript{17} indicates a distinct aesthetic breach at the core of the found footage horror film.

Between 1930 and 1960 the classical horror film developed a number of generic features that effectively highlighted the otherness of the monster and kept its world separate from the “normal” spaces occupied by the people it terrorised.\textsuperscript{18} Horror narratives were well suited to this bifurcation. Carroll stresses how “in our culture, horror thrives above all as a narrative form” (3). It is the narrative structure which governs the display of the monstrous element that accounts for the appeal of the genre, and not the monster itself. Appropriating David Hume’s theory of “rhetorical framing,” Carroll argues that the emotional response of the viewer to a horror film is keyed to how the events are “worked into the plot” (3). According to Carroll, there is a “function relationship” between the monster in the horror genre and the “pleasure and interest” derived from horror narratives: “That interest and that pleasure derive from the disclosure of unknown and impossible beings, just the sort of things that call for proof, discovery, and confirmation” (7). Elizabeth Cowie offers a similar explanation for horror’s successful address to the viewer. Her idea highlights suspense as a crucial element in the narrative:

The suspended answer institutes a path to pleasure in the answer to be known.

Narrative suspense introduces a structural unpleasure of the suspended answer – structural in the sense that it is not the answer that will assuage unpleasure, but the answering. Thus, to finally know the outcome – whether horrible or happy – is itself satisfying. (29)

\textsuperscript{17} In the sense that classical mise-en-scène always bears the marks of an agency of control, whether it is thought to be the director or a group of collaborators (director, screenwriter, editor, actors, and so on). Often in found footage horror, the viewer is influenced by the film’s enunciative strategies to believe the agency of control is within the diegesis itself and embodied in the “eye” of a character filming the action with a video camera (as in The Blair Witch Project, Cloverfield and Trollhunter, for example).

\textsuperscript{18} Tudor isolates the timeframe between 1931 and 1936 as the “Classic Period,” when 33 horror films were released. “This is the period in which, it is commonly claimed, Universal Pictures ‘created’ the sound horror picture” (Monsters and Mad Scientists 24).
The popular Hollywood horror film of the 1930s, in following a path to pleasure based on suspended answers, borrowed techniques from European filmmakers, expressionistic tropes in particular; this influence has been described as “one of the determinants of the transition and emergence of the horror film out of the silent era in the United States” (Wells 43). German expressionistic style, displayed in such films as Nosferatu (F.W. Murnau 1922) and M (Fritz Lang 1930), relied on stark contrast and heavy shadows both to hide their horrors and simultaneously set up a binary opposition of anomalous and normal cinematic spaces. Tudor describes how this German influence helped the American horror film to adopt a new creativity in its use of cinematic space:

This “German Style” proved highly effective in suggesting a world in which dimly seen and dimly understood forces constrained, controlled and attacked its unsuspecting inhabitants. The contrast with established conventions of “naturalistic” lighting and composition could hardly be more pointed. Where routine methods presented audiences with a frame more or less evenly illuminated, the horror-movie often left vast reaches of the image in darkness. Where standard techniques of composition sustained the illusion of “natural” space and “proper” perspective, the horror-movie denied its audience such conventional comforts. In short, the visual world of the classic horror-movie is, by comparison with the then-established conventions of film imagery, a world internally awry. (Monsters and Mad Scientists 27-28)

All of these influences assisted the American horror film of the classical period to develop its own particular approach to, and subsequent articulation of, the “pregnancy of space.”

The classic horror film manages its spaces according to its enunciation of the paradigmatic horror narrative: “instability is introduced into an apparently stable
situation; the threat to instability is resisted; the threat is removed and stability restored” (A. Tudor, *Monsters and Mad Scientists* 18). In the classical period, this threat always takes the form of an “external” monster, a creature outside the frameworks of normality. James Aston argues that the monster comes from without to act “as a metaphor that plainly delineates any transgression to the normal and civil society while conterminously justifying ‘normal’ society’s reaction to and action against the threat to its civil borders” (par. 16).

*Frankenstein* contained the first classic external monster and became Universal Studio’s first successful horror film. An adaptation of Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel, *Frankenstein* concerns man’s ill-fated attempts to imbue science with God’s power. The narrative tells the story of a brilliant scientist who succeeds in creating a living creature by reanimating dead tissue. The creature itself is rejected by society and his maker, causing it to seek revenge. But in spatial terms, the opposition emphasised in the film is articulated by spaces that represent home, family and marriage on the one hand, and isolation, death and abjection on the other (see fig. 1 and fig. 2).

![Fig. 1. *Frankenstein* (1931) – Normal Space.](image-url)
In an early scene in the film a worried Elizabeth (Mae Clarke) visits her fiancé Henry Frankenstein (Colin Clive) at the watchtower where he is working in secret and with the help of the simpleminded Fritz (Dwight Frye). “You must come home and get well again,” she pleads. “You’ll soon feel better when you get out of here,” she adds. The dialogue is just one of the ways the film presents two separate spaces: Henry’s happy home environment (the servants smile in most of the scenes they occupy), and his cold and sterile laboratory out in the middle of nowhere. There is a violent tension between the two spaces in the film. “Most horror films,” according to Grant are consistent in defining normality as the heterosexual, monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions (police, church, military) that support and defend them. The monster in these films is a projection of the dominant ideology’s anxiety about itself and its continuation, but disguised as a grotesque other. *(Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology* 48)

Many scenes in *Frankenstein* represent this ideological battle as the invasion of one cinematic space by another that is set in opposition to it. Elizabeth, who will eventually marry Henry (their matrimony representing the triumph of the normal space), invades her fiancé’s uncanny space twice (once with Henry’s former mentor,
Dr. Waldman, and family friend Victor; and again with Victor and Henry’s father); directly following the shot showing the monster escaping after he kills Dr. Waldman (Edward Van Sloan), there is a cut to a shot of an idyllic garden scene where Henry and Elizabeth discuss marriage. Later in the film, Henry himself articulates the spatial division that defines the classical horror film: “There can be no wedding while this horrible creation of mine is still alive.” The end of the film, as the majority of classical horror films must, confirms the destruction of the uncanny space; the last line of dialogue, a toast delivered by Henry’s father (Frederick Kerr), seals the victory by expressing a wish for a son to the house of Frankenstein. “In the terms of one of the genre’s conventions for expressing this ideological dynamic,” Grant argues, “victorious human heroes gaze at the destroyed remains of the monster and ruminate with seeming profundity that there are certain things that man is not meant to know” (Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology 48).

The careful bifurcation of cinematic spaces also characterises the sequel to Frankenstein. The Bride of Frankenstein begins with the discovery that the creature has survived the burning of the mill (where it was intimated that he has been killed in the first film’s climax). Henry Frankenstein is shown recovering from his injuries sustained in the same fire. While convalescing, Frankenstein is visited by the strange Dr. Pretorius, who wants him to continue with his experiments in the creation of life. Initially uninterested, Frankenstein is blackmailed by Pretorius to create a mate for his creature. The film reaches a climax when the female “monster” rejects the creature immediately on seeing him; the creature then tells Frankenstein to leave while demanding that Pretorius stay with him and his “bride.” “We belong dead,” the creature growls, before he blows up the tower, killing himself and his two companions. Earlier in the film, there is a remarkable moment when the viewer is “tricked” by a
generically playful disruption to the separation of cinematic spaces, and then induced to suffer an ontological shock when the division is restored (see fig. 3 - fig. 8).

Hounded by the villagers, Frankenstein’s monster (Boris Karloff) escapes to the woods and there encounters a blind hermit (O.P. Heggie) who befriends him almost immediately. The viewer is cued to see these scenes as representing the normal space, even though the monster is included and signified as belonging to it. Solemn non-diegetic organ music plays, they both share a meal and even have a conversation. Offered kindness, the monster’s reactions are very human. As the scene develops, spectatorial engagement “naturalises” the monster and ceases to see him as an anomaly

Fig. 3. The Bride of Frankenstein (1935) – Domesticity.

Fig. 4. The Bride of Frankenstein – Friendship.
Fig. 5. *The Bride of Frankenstein* – Uncanny.

Fig. 6. *The Bride of Frankenstein* – Domesticity Threatened.

Fig. 7. *The Bride of Frankenstein* – Uncanny Space 1.
within the spatial composition. But when this space is suddenly violated by two hunters entering the cabin and instantly recognising the monster, this provides a shock to the spectator. The jolt, followed by a momentary state of confusion, is felt at the level of the film’s enunciative address by the spectator; in this brief moment she has forgotten the creature’s monstrosity because of the ambiguous nature of the cinematic space. This ambiguity is temporary, however, and the handling of space in the shots immediately after the hunters’ entrance is designed to return the monster to its rightful space as dictated by the classical codes of the genre. A return to the established spatial relations of the genre is signalled by a tracking shot that displays increasing chaos: the cabin is engulfed in flames, children scream when they see the creature bursting through the door, and the monster’s growing rage reaches its highest pitch in the film – incremental registers of art-horror which culminate in the monster resuming its position within the monstrous space. Neale describes the generic function of a monster like the reanimated creature in *Frankenstein*:

[W]hat defines the specificity of this particular genre is not the violence as such, but its conjunction with images and definitions of the monstrous. What defines its specificity with respect to the instances of order and disorder is their
articulation across the terms provided by categories and definitions of “the human” and “the natural”. The instances where the “monster” is not destroyed but ends instead by pervading the social fabric in relation to which it functioned as “monster”, thus becoming integrated into it, becoming normalised, constitute a special option for the horror genre, testifying to the relative weight of discourse carrying the human/nature opposition it its discursive regime, relativising or even displacing entirely the Law/disorder dichotomy in terms of which violence operates in the western, the detective and gangster films. The monster, and the disorder it initiates and concretises, is always that which disrupts and challenges the definitions and categories of the “human” and the “natural”. Generally speaking, it is the monster’s body which focuses the disruption. Either disfigured, or marked by a heterogeneity of human and animal features, or marked only by a “non-human” gaze, the body is always in some way signalled as “other”, signalled, precisely, as monstrous. 

(Genre 21)

The unfolding spatial dynamics of the scene from The Bride of Frankenstein bear out Neale’s theory and explain, through the use of daring editing and mise-en-scène, why the reconciliation of opposed cinematic spaces in the horror genre is impossible (ontologically, the horror genre depends on this opposition of spaces). From this point on, the monster will only occupy the fantastic/uncanny space; he is aligned with the evil Dr. Pretorius (Ernest Thesiger) almost immediately after the scene with the blind man. By cutting directly from one scene to the other, the film honours the spatial opposition characterising their relationship. This juxtaposition has the effect of underscoring both the similarities of the scenes (the monster meets two strangers who both accept him), and their differences (the domestic cabin of the blind hermit, set in opposition to the dark crypt in which Dr. Pretorius is at home).
While I have limited myself to an examination of just two films to represent the way classical codes of spatial composition operate in the horror genre, most horror films made between 1930 and 1960 follow this pattern. Moreover, they follow this pattern because genre rules demand it. Thomas Sobchack explains that the genre film at any given time – whether western, musical, science fiction, etc. – is essentially classical and obliged to honour certain classical codes:

Bound by a strict set of conventions, tacitly agreed upon by filmmaker and audience, the genre film provides the experience of an ordered world and is an essentially classical structure predicated upon the principles of the classical world view in general and indebted to the Poetics of Aristotle in particular; in the genre film the plot is fixed, the characters defined, the ending satisfyingly predictable. (102)

Having advanced an explanation for how classical conventions effectively organise the spatial features of the horror genre, through a discussion of examples from the Universal cycle of horror films, I will now briefly outline the main features of the modern horror film, before in the next section comparing both the classical and the modern horror film with their digital age counterpart.

A Note on the Modern Horror Film

In spite of its generically defined structure and textual interplay, the horror film in the modern era offered its audience an opportunity to interrogate the dominant ideologies of contemporary society progressively. This meant placing less weight on what Neale argues is one of the salient features of the horror genre: a centralising of the monstrous physical being as a disruptive force in our natural world. Horror became more progressive, resonating with nihilistic ideas that repudiated the sanctity of the nuclear
family as well as threatening imminent apocalypse.\textsuperscript{19} The modern horror film, it is generally accepted, began in 1960 with the release of Michael Powell’s \textit{Peeping Tom} and \textit{Psycho}.\textsuperscript{20} It was from this point on that the horror film, according to Tudor, went from depicting a primarily secure universe to a paranoid one (\textit{Monsters and Mad Scientists} 5-20). Major social and cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s led to a transformation in the way film genres – but particularly horror – dealt with American society. For certain commentators this elevated the status of the horror genre above all others: discussing the 1970s horror film, represented by Tobe Hooper’s \textit{The Texas Chain Saw Massacre} and Craven’s \textit{The Hills Have Eyes} (Wes Craven 1977), Wood argued that the horror film “is currently the most important of all American genres and perhaps the most progressive, even in its overt nihilism – in a period of extreme cultural crisis and disintegration, which alone offers the possibility of radical change and rebuilding” (“An Introduction to the American Horror Film” 176). These new horror films, often called “postmodern” (A. Tudor, “From Paranoia to Postmodernism?”; Wright; Pinedo), channelled the pervasive mood of negativity that spread throughout Western culture in those decades after WWII (and which mainstream cinema preferred to gloss over).

For many Americans, Vietnam and Watergate provided a localised endorsement of these feelings and a fitting teleological climax to the decades of despair. Working \textit{within} the generic codes and semiotic sign systems, traditionally used in classical cinema to construct “a shared social reality” (Ryan and Kellner 77), horror filmmakers shattered the frontier myth synonymous with more popular genres, 

\textsuperscript{19} Wood examines the rupture of the family in horror films made during the 1960s and 1970s: see “An Introduction to the American Horror Film” and \textit{Hitchcock’s Films Revisited} in particular. Sharrett analyses the broader issue of end-of-world paranoia reflected in the horror film: see “The Idea of Apocalypse in \textit{The Texas Chainsaw Massacre},” “Fairy Tales for the Apocalypse’: Wes Craven on the Horror Film,” and “The Myth of Apocalypse and the Horror Film: the Primacy of \textit{Psycho} and \textit{The Birds}.”

\textsuperscript{20} Powell’s film was released in the UK on May 16, 1960, a month before \textit{Psycho} had its release in the US on June 16. At the time, \textit{Peeping Tom} had a largely negative appraisal from critics and did not have the same cultural impact of Hitchcock’s film.
namely the western, and abandoned their somewhat mendacious showcasing of outdated Romantic values. A tendency to demote the role of the supernatural and the revolting monster in the horror genre began in the 1960s, and became the dominant mode of the horror film into the 1970s and 1980s. Writing in 1984, for example, Dana Polan locates the contemporary fears reflected by the genre in our culture rather than in a supernatural realm:

> With an unrelenting insistence, horror films now suggest that the horror is not merely among us, but rather part of us, caused by us. These films do often continue the older concern with monstrosity as a realm of incommunicability, of dangerous silences, but the films see the failure to communicate as an inherent part of the human realm itself, not something that assails humanity from an elsewhere […]. Already dissolute, the quotidian world brings about its own further dissolution. (202)

Horror films inclined to portray narratives “in which the tensions between cinematic artifice and ‘real world’ issues are heightened, becoming more contradictory and ambiguous concerning the nature of their pleasure,” according to Wells (32), were on the other hand still concerned with portraying monsters and kept the distinction between the monster as Other and the good protagonist as representative of humanity (if deeply flawed).

Wells’ point needs contextualisation here. While the modern horror film shifted the narrative focus away from the exotic and the supernatural, and the structuring function of cinematic space to separate the normal from the abnormal was still retained from the classical era, the actual selection of narrative elements and their assignation into each spatial category was often much more problematic in the modern era than it was in the classical. In which category, for example, would the Carrie White of Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976) be placed? Does she belong to the normal or abnormal
space of horror? This problem is superseded in the digital era, when the found footage subgenre disintegrates the lines ordinarily demarcating the two cinematic spaces synonymous with the horror film.

Monstrous Evolution: The Classical Era to the Digital Age

To show the changing features of the horror film as it evolves from its classical roots (which I elaborated upon in discussing Frankenstein and The Bride of Frankenstein earlier) to the modern era (1960, the year of Psycho’s release, is the generally accepted cut-off point) and then to the ontological ruptures characterised by the current development of found footage horror, in this section I will examine three tripartite groups of films. Each group consists of films with similar narrative tropes but from three different eras of cinema production (classical, modern, and digital age). These groupings are as follows: White Zombie (Victor Halperin 1932)/Night of the Living Dead (1968)/Diary of the Dead (George Romero 2007); Cat People (Jacques Tourneur 1942)/Carrie (Brian De Palma 1976)/The Blair Witch Project (1999); and Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel 1956)/Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Philip Kaufman 1978)/[REC] (2007). The first group contains the zombie as the monster which unites the three films; the second group’s three films are linked by the importance of the female “monster” to each of their narratives; the last group brings together three films with multiple possessed characters as the monstrous element in their narratives. By tracing the change in horror conventions from first group member to the last in each group, I will then propose a new theory of cinematic horror in the digital age, one that is exemplified in the found footage horror film through the ambivalent relationship it has with its own horror content, an ambivalence which it passes on to the viewer.
The Digital Dead


All three films grouped here use distinctive enunciative strategies for the communication of their horrific content to the viewer, and additionally they each proffer different discursive sites as the loci of generic exchange. Night of the Living Dead stands as a seminal work in the genre; an extension of the assault on modern American society – and all it repressed – that began with the release of Psycho, it is described as a key film in the evolution of the horror film. In terms of genre conventions, George Romero’s film might seem a departure from the way White Zombie enunciates the classical codes of the horror film in the early 1930s; yet, by examining both films’ use of cinematic space to inflect generic conventions, connections can be made between them. Exploring what these two films have in common in spatial terms will develop my argument that found footage horror films use space in ways that even the most progressive and ground-breaking horror films could never do.

The articulation of space in the classical horror film, as I have suggested, is based on the need to depict the threat in the narrative as external to the normal space. Some commentators have asserted an awareness of a more domestic threat in Halperin’s film. White Zombie tells the story of Madeleine Short (Madge Bellamy) and her fiancé Neil Parker (John Harron), who plan to wed in Haiti. On the way to their lodgings, the coach in which the couple is travelling is stopped by a mysterious stranger. This is “Murder” Legendre (Bela Lugosi), the local mill owner and voodoo master; the mill is operated by zombies that he controls through voodoo. When the coach leaves, “Murder” picks up Madeleine’s scarf. At the behest of Charles Beaumont (Robert Frazer), who falls in love with Madeleine, Legendre turns her into a

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21 See Wood, Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... And Beyond, Wells and Worland as a sample of the literature on the importance of the film to its genre.
zombie after she marries Neil. Having “died,” Madeleine is buried in a tomb, but when Neil finds it empty he hears from Dr. Bruner (Joseph Cawthorn) that Legendre is responsible for turning his enemies into zombies and that Madeleine is his latest victim. When both Bruner and Neil go to Legendre’s castle to rescue Madeleine, Legendre orders Madeleine to kill Neil but Bruner stops her. Charles, regretting his decision to be swayed by Legendre, pushes the voodoo master off a cliff and then falls to his death himself. With Legendre dead, the zombie spell is broken and the couple is reunited.

Wells argues that “White Zombie (1932), echoing Carl Dreyer’s Vampyr (1932), co-opts the dream-like and poetic into a troubling and surreal narrative, the first to properly engage with the un-dead ‘zombie’ as a metaphor, here a nod to Depression conformity and exploitation” (50). Tony Williams reads the horror genre through Freudian psychoanalytic theory to claim that “[c]ontradictory elements can enter a narrative to subvert the dominant concepts the film attempts to project. Certain mechanisms are common to the horror genre as well as other films” (par. 3). His analysis of White Zombie admits that there is no reference in the film to the historical background involving Haiti being under US rule from 1915 to 1934, but he argues that the mill run by Murder Legendre is a dark reflection of American colonial exploitation (see fig. 9 and fig. 10).

Fig. 9. White Zombie (1932) – Closeup.
On the other hand, while the film can be read as a reaction to the socio-political disharmony of the Great Depression, whether intentional or not, *White Zombie* is certainly not as interested in progressively interrogating its socio-political context as it is in ensuring that it follows the conventions of classical horror. The enunciative strategies of the film work according to classical rules of containment, and clearly separate the normal from the abnormal spaces:

*White Zombie* is exemplary in its production of two different types of space: one, the so-called transparent, realistic, sutured space; the other, a “fantastic” space in which the marks of punctuation are foregrounded. As will be shown, this division/opposition serves a definite textual function, but it does not necessarily translate into a useful theoretical distinction. What is more crucial is the larger enunciative policy which articulates these two types of space as a difference and works to contain them in the fiction. (Lowry and deCordova 350)

If, as Edward Lowry and Richard deCordova argue, horror arises from the eruption of a fantastic or uncanny space in a normal space, and “commandeered by an ‘evil’ enunciator” (380-81), then *White Zombie* is safely within the boundaries of the horror genre, albeit circumscribed by the codes of classical cinema.
The modern horror film, on the other hand, could adopt a loose attitude to classical rules of genre. However, I would argue that classical codes and conventions can never be completely abandoned, despite the ontological ruptures felt by the horror genre when it entered its modern, and then digital, stage. Many modern horror films, such as *Night of the Living Dead*, depict ambiguous gender and race relations, thus allowing viewers the chance to unearth a critique of patriarchal capitalist society hidden in their mise-en-scène. The best examples “looked awry” at society’s positioning of the heterosexual family unit as the apotheosis of all social aspirations. Central to this critique is the ambivalent nature of audience identification, the “playing with pronouns function” that blurs the relationship of the viewer both with the “Monster” and its victims (Nash 37). The monster itself became problematic as the horror genre evolved: prior to the modern era of the horror film, it was nearly always a supernatural being whose origins were informed by the Gothic tradition and placed outside of America (Dracula is the paradigmatic example of this external threat). In progressive horror films, however, and embodying Wood’s dual concept of the repressed/“Other,” this monster became less the “exotic” non-American threat of classical Hollywood, and more a product of repressed sexuality, now wholly “American and familial” (“An Introduction to the American Horror Film” 185). Freudian repression became the new theoretical tool with which to interrogate the genre and uncover its unseen monsters, and the horror film was lauded as the genre with the most progressive potential. Spectators just had to learn to shake off their ideological acquiescence and decode the cultural malaise reflected and refracted by the genre. The horror audience in the 1960s and 1970s is permitted to discover the underlying tension between a film’s hierarchy of discourses, leading to an awareness of the ideological contradictions inherent in the film and, by abstraction, modern culture.
Romero’s debut horror film modernises Halperin’s zombies, taking them out of their historical background as monsters from exotic faraway places, and creating them anew as a home-grown, flesh-eating rotting cadavers inexplicably returned from the dead. Christopher Sharrett argues that the horror film at the end of the 1960s became involved “in a process of unmasking its own conventions while offering a powerful critique of the fundamental assumptions of much American art, including concepts such as ‘human nature’ heretofore treated as self-evident and sacrosanct by all genres” (“Myth of Apocalypse” 40). It is this idea of “unmasking” that I want to concentrate on to develop an argument for Romero’s landmark film’s success as a genre classic and why its reimagining’s more recent success is based on a digital aesthetic that has the effect of distancing the film from the classical conventions of its genre, with a resulting displacement of its reality effect.

In effect, the film begins by “announcing” its distance from the conventions of classical horror while at the same time making ironic use of those very conventions. 

*Night of the Living Dead* is also innovative in the way the opening scene seems to subsume the underlying familial tensions of *Psycho* and resolve them in a way that was not possible until the revolutionary events of 1968 altered forever the social and cultural world. Like *Psycho*’s Marion Crane, Barbara (Judith O’Dea) is shackled to the past, still controlled by a dead parent. She is the obedient patriarchal daughter who visits her father’s grave every year. In its opening scene, *Night of the Living Dead* cleverly incorporates established horror clichés as a way to distance itself from those very same conventions. Barbara’s brother Johnny (Russell Streiner) taunts her with a Boris Karloff voice, while thunder and lightning work as components that resonate with more classical conventions. When the zombie (William Hinzman) strikes, the

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22 Both *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* (Jacques Tourneur 1943) portray their undead anomalies as the result of occult practices involving foreign voodoo rituals. Both were influenced by William Seabrook’s popular book *The Magic Island*, first published in 1929, which gave an account of the mysterious voodoo practices in Haiti during that time. 

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camera frames him in closeup with lightning striking behind him, framing a quintessential uncanny space (see fig. 11); the formal qualities of the shot straddle worlds of classical convention and originality, the stark black and white photography imbuing the imagery with a documentary verisimilitude while marking an historical and culturally contextual undermining of classical codes (colour was the norm for horror films after the mid-Sixties, according to Tudor in *Monsters and Mad Scientists* [49-56]). The shots of Barbara cowering in the car, while the zombie tries to break in, are framed so that the car window provides another film frame (see fig. 12); the zombie, almost as if he is offering his own symptomatic reading of the horror-based mise-en-scène from the classical era, is smashing his way to the viewer and, in effect, signalling the film’s demolition of classical tropes (the film will leave almost all of its nods to genre convention behind in this opening graveyard scene).

Fig. 11. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).

Fig. 12. *Night of the Living Dead* – Classical Screen.
Night of the Living Dead, occupying a space between these two modes (but closer to classical than found footage horror), both historically and ontologically, uses rules of continuity editing, lighting, and point of view both to quote and subvert classical conventions. Despite its subversive reputation, Romero’s first Dead film, for much of its running time, maintains normal and uncanny spatial opposition, even if what is signified as “normal” on the one hand, and “uncanny” on the other, does not follow classical patterns (see fig. 13 and fig. 14). For example, in these two shots zombies and “normal” people seem to belong to one category or the other: in fig. 13, the blocking of the actors suggests that both zombies and townspeople belong to the
same category; and the way Ben is shown in fig. 14, with the grainy “newsreel” footage and the metal meat hook suspended over his face, suggests that he is being ironically placed in the zombie category. Despite this distinctly non-classical treatment of cinematic spaces, however, the point remains that even in such a subversive film as Night of the Living Dead, the bifurcation of normal and abnormal spaces is still maintained. This careful separation of cinematic space along classical lines established in the horror genre since the 1930s is dissolved in Diary of the Dead.

As Night of the Living Dead had done at the end of the 1960s, Diary of the Dead incorporates conscious references to classical horror, particularly the Universal cycle of films that established many of the conventions of the genre in the 1930s. The protagonists are a bunch of young American film students and their English professor, who are filming a mummy-based horror film in the local woods when the zombie apocalypse occurs. The film’s narrative is similar to a road movie: after the outbreak of the zombie apocalypse, the students and their professor get in a van and first drive to the home of one of the students before ending up in the palatial home of another student. Diary of the Dead updates the first film’s nihilistic pessimism, presenting a vision of the total annihilation of society as it will be represented back to the viewer in a constant stream of remediation. It is a development that suggests that even nihilism is a wasted response to the affect caused by mass media culture; in a digital, constantly remediated world, nothing is allowed to vanish, with the constant replication of imagery in the media mirrored by the unceasing hordes of reanimated corpses. Yet even before the film establishes any kind of links with the classical horror film

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23 While Universal Pictures released horror films as early as 1923 (The Hunchback of Notre Dame [Wallace Worsley]), the cycle proper was started by the success of Dracula (Tod Browning) and Frankenstein, both released in 1931 (the former in February, the latter in November). Other titles in the series include: The Mummy (Karl Freund 1932), Murders in the Rue Morgue (Robert Florey 1932), The Old Dark House (James Whale 1932), The Invisible Man (James Whale 1933), The Bride of Frankenstein (1935), Dracula’s Daughter (Lambert Hillyer 1936), The Wolf Man (George Waggner 1941), Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein (Charles T. Barton 1948) and Creature from the Black Lagoon (Jack Arnold 1954).
(however tentative), it begins with a scene that, purely in spatial terms, positions its relationship with the horror genre as problematic. In this first sequence the film delivers its meta-real potential to the spectator immediately.

Reworking Night of the Living Dead’s first zombie attack at the graveyard for the information age, Diary of the Dead depends on a mise-en-scène composed of new media aesthetics. Mixing national news footage, YouTube video, and camcorder footage shot by the characters in the film, this opening sequence is a collage of digital registers all in the service of the master narrative of the film itself – that is to say, Romero’s film Diary of the Dead, which in itself is a presentation of Jason Creed’s film The Death of Death. Romero/Creed’s first shot presents a black screen and sirens can be heard on the soundtrack. Within the diegesis of the film a cover is removed from the camera lens and a male character sprays cleaning fluid on it; the image, as a result, “corrects” itself to present a medium shot of an apartment block, with what appears to be an ambulance occupying a position left of the screen (see fig. 15).

Fig. 15. Diary of the Dead (2007) – Mediated Landscape.
The camera pans, losing focus intermittently, before framing a police officer in medium closeup. We see and hear him talk to camera, and learn from these verbal and visual cues that the camera is used for a television news channel. A female voice speaks, occupying the non-diegetic space of voiceover (VO): “We downloaded this video off the internet.” Already, there is confusion regarding the dominant discourse of the film.²⁴ Who is speaking? Is the voice that of the TV reporter interviewing the officer? Is this internet section just a prologue before we see the main story? The fact that these opening moments comprise a section of Romero’s film, which is a section of Jason Creed’s film that uses a section of the Internet video that itself uses a section of the television news footage, is an example of the remediation of old and new media that we are so used to in contemporary culture but which at the same time threatens the primacy of narrative in the film and the hierarchy of discourse within that narrative. Gurneys are wheeled out of the building, and soon after the bodies under the sheets begin to move. The “dead” bodies rise up from the gurneys and one of them attacks the TV reporter. The cameraman panics (and this is enunciated by a series of intermittent jolts to the camera that materialises as jump cuts on screen). The VO returns, belonging to film student Debra (Michelle Morgan), informing the viewer that the footage uploaded in the first three days was useless – there was too much of it. A diegetic voice, sourced on the footage shown from the internet upload, mentions Welles’ *War of the Worlds* broadcast. “That was when it was just radio; now it’s twenty-four seven.” Another indication of the primary enunciative mode of *Diary of the Dead*, which is one of constant remediation whereby the viewer is immersed in different media registers (hypermediacy) and invited to feel that her experience is immediate and an indicator of realism. A title appears on the screen: “The Death of Death.” Then it is replaced by another title, “A Film by Jason Creed.” VO: “The film

²⁴ See A. Tudor (“Many Mythologies of Realism”) for a discussion on the dominant discourse in relation to film narrative.
was shot with a Panasonic HDX 900 and HDX 200. I did the final cut on Jason’s laptop.” Then the VO contains a line of dialogue that moves the film into meta-real territory. “I added music occasionally, in the hope of scaring you. In addition to telling the truth, I am hoping to scare you.” A classical horror film hopes to scare you by presenting two opposing cinematic spaces, articulated through the codes and conventions of the genre (even if it is to undermine those codes); *Diary of the Dead* in this opening scene collapses the normal and uncanny spaces of its narrative, forming another, more phenomenological space that signals information age cues for the viewer rather than generic cues (see fig. 16).

As we see, therefore, the found footage horror film is ontologically dependent on narrowing the gap between reality and representation. In mainstream genre films such as this one, that gap has never been narrower and is always threatening to disappear (it never can, of course). According to Sontag, the distance afforded by this separation of the real and its representation is a mark of style. She is careful to qualify this idea, arguing that the creation of distance does not necessarily mean the artwork is
involved in a movement away from reality: “But the notion of distance […] is misleading, unless one adds that the movement is not just away from but toward the world. The overcoming or transcending of the world in art is also a way of encountering the world, and of training or educating the will to be in the world” (Against Interpretation 30-31).

In contemporary culture, when our engagement with reality is filtered through the mediation of screens at an ever-increasing rate, the found footage horror film, by closing the gap between the real and representation (thus, loosening its links with genre conventions), at the same time opens up another gap, a distance from which the spectator can contemplate the relationship between the media-saturated, unlimited specularity of her world and the corresponding remediation of the generic world through which it is represented. The opening minutes of Diary of the Dead as described here is an example of the generic address that makes possible such a spectator-conscious cinematic space.

Later in the film Jason (Joshua Close) will point his camera at Debra’s laptop and film this opening scene as it is shown on the internet. In a scene set in an abandoned hospital, Jason refuses to go to someone’s aid because he needs to stay with the camera as it is recharging. “I should help them,” he whispers, alone with his camera. “But I can’t; I’m plugged in.” A mantra repeated in this film (and other found footage horror films) links the camera with knowledge: if it didn’t happen on camera, it didn’t happen. Finally, the camera becomes equated with a tool of violence rather than of knowledge. The professor (Scott Wentworth) gives away a gun, claiming it is too easy to use; in a later scene, Debra thrusts one of the cameras at the professor after a zombie attack, repeating, “Take this, it’s too easy to use.” Another scene plays intertextual games with the classical codes of cinema (see fig. 17 and fig. 18).
Debra and Jason stage a “showdown,” pointing their cameras at each other. The shot-reverse shot pattern that follows is controlled by these diegetic cameras, each cut coded as a gunshot as we are shown first Debra’s POV and then Jason’s. The dialogue reinforces the classical resonances that refuse to be buried amid all the new media and digital registers:

Jason: Who was screaming?

Debra: Me. Want me to show you how? For the camera? For history?

Debra begins screaming ironically, but then sees something out of frame and screams for real.
The constant emphasis on reality recast as representation outlined throughout *Diary of the Dead*, is aligned with a view of the world presented in cinematic terms as the morphing of Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle” into a society of dissolving boundaries. The notion that we have become “decentred and lost” among multimedia environments, to use Virilio’s phrasing (*War and Cinema* 145), is borne out by found footage horror films such as this one (see fig. 19 and fig. 20).

The remediation of horror, in which older versions of media are appropriated to create a dialectically-inflected tension with new media, and how this represents a distinct break from the pre-digital classical conventions of the genre, is given a unique “charge” in an important sequence near the end of the film. Southern “belle” Tracy

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25 Jean Douchet uses this idea to describe Michael Haneke’s interrogation of screen realism in *Benny’s Video* (1992) and *Caché* (2005) (qtd. in Frey 30-36).
(Amy Lalonde) is menaced by rich-kid Ridley (Philip Riccio) dressed in a mummy costume, the scene becoming an ironic comment on both the classical Hollywood version of the monster and the amateur aesthetic of a previous scene. Earlier in the film, Jason (a student filmmaker) is seen obsessing over the mise-en-scène of his mummy movie, featuring Ridley as the mummy and Tracy as his victim. The filming is not a success because it didn’t look “real” enough for Jason; the monster is not terrifying, and the victim is unconvincing in her distress. The professor says that Jason “has a vision,” but Jason counters unconvincingly, “Hey, I’m just trying to make a movie here.” When Ridley, now a reanimated corpse, chases Tracy for real, Jason – and Romero himself – gets the chance to align his vision with the mise-en-scène provided by reality. The play between fiction and reality is reflected in the “location” for this “shoot,” because Tracy is chased through a lightly wooded area in the grounds of the house that is very similar to the wooded area where they attempted to film their amateur horror film. Initially, Tracy doesn’t know that Ridley is a zombie, and thinks he is fooling around. Jason realises that Ridley is a zombie and turns his camera to frame the chase. It doesn’t take very long for Tracy to realise that Ridley’s convincing acting is not acting at all; her own “performance” gets more “real” at this point. In the earlier “performance” of this scene, Tracy asked why the girl always falls down and loses her shoes when being chased by a monster in a horror film; in this “real” version, she does exactly that. Jason, ensuring he is framing the action to his aesthetic satisfaction, yells out “Cut! Cut!” in an effort to distract Ridley. Tracy’s reaction is to

26 Diary of the Dead received mostly negative reviews on its release, with much of the criticism levelled at the clichéd characterisations: Tracy, the sassy blonde Texan girl; Professor Maxwell, the world-weary, alcoholic Englishman; Ridley, the student from a privileged background – all character types seen many times before in the horror genre. Another argument might see merit in Romero’s cinematic strategy as a deliberate placing of “stock” characters into his remediation of past horror narratives to highlight the tension between old and new conventions involved in such a mixture. Barbara Klinger argues that such stock characterisations can help to make a film progressive, as they “foreground rather than camouflage the representational basis through which codes of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ are constructed in the cinema” (84). Romero’s film manages to represent female characters that are much stronger and more pragmatic than the male characters.
yell, “This isn’t a movie, Jason, it’s real”; but Jason’s direction – and her own spirited reaction to it – gives Tracy the opportunity to knock Ridley down and escape in the Winnebago that brought them all to Ridley’s mansion.

The scene is presented through a number of remediating “registers.” The intertextuality of the mummy figure refers to both the 1932 Universal film, the Hammer Horror Studios 1959 version, and the more recent Universal Pictures/Alphaville Films series (1999-2008). Filmed with Panasonic HDCAM cameras, the scene often cuts to shots taken from the mansion’s extensive security camera setup, causing the imagery to alternate between colour and black-and-white registers. This scene will also be uploaded online as part of Jason Creed’s The Death of Death. The proliferation of visual registers here, and throughout the film, resonates with a digital culture seeking – but failing – to control the ubiquitous visibility of our society. Additionally, Jason’s directorial “Cut!” fails to impose any control over what he sees; his delusion that to control the individual he need only impose order on the image instead of actively doing something to stop Ridley, provides a link between the film and the real world that the viewer can think about in the gap set up by the ironic play between the film’s fictional status and its digital age markers of realism. This play operates in the spectatorial zone formed by Jason’s statement, “there’s always an audience for horror – believable horror,” and the ontological tension created by scenes like this one showing the “mummy” attacking Tracy through the different registers of Jason’s camera and the CCTV cameras around the house. “Who’s gonna believe a mummy if his makeup is all unglued?” Ridley demands, in the film’s earlier “fictional” mummy scene; now, in this “real” version, his makeup is unglued, but the conventions of found footage code the horror of the scene as genuine. Ultimately, the shock provided by Diary of the Dead is not the shock of genre-sanctioned horror. Rather, it is an ontological shock caused by the description in the film of the camera’s ability to
maintain visibility, to provide constant surveillance on the world should we want it – a description which also hides a damning critique of our real-world cultural control of such visibility: it is too easy to use. Many found footage horror films interrogate this notion of pervasive visibility, making the claim that power and control over the digital forms of visual representation is encoded in invisibility. *Paranormal Activity* and *The Blair Witch Project* are two such films; in fact, the “project” of the latter film, I will argue in the next section, is to negotiate the power struggle between the two – visibility and invisibility – in media-rich contemporary culture.

*Diary of the Dead* ends with an online video showing zombies being used for target practice, with Debra’s VO asking, “Are we worth saving?” This scene, redolent of a contemporary “live” digital culture which the viewer must interact with on a daily basis, has a more active immediate and phenomenological effect than similar shots of zombies being used for target practice in *Dawn of the Dead* (George A. Romero 1978) because of the very “liveness” of the video aesthetic. In *Polar Inertia*, Virilio asks:

> How can one fail to see here the essential characteristic of video technology: not a more or less up-to-the-minute “representation” of an event, but *live* presentation of a place or an electro-optical environment – the result, it would seem, of putting reality on waves by means of electro-magnetic physics?

[emphasis in original] (*The Virilio Reader* 57)

The scene in question, however, is more complex than Virilio might allow and calls for a nuanced reading that moves beyond the “essential characteristics” of its digital video aesthetics. It has the power to eradicate all distance between the image and the viewer, recalling Sobchack’s phenomenologically-informed idea that the film images give back to the viewer her own subjective experience where, instead of interrogating the image, the image interrogates the viewer. This notion of the image “looking back” at the viewer, or inhabiting its own subjectivity almost, is the result of the ubiquity of the
image in our culture, particularly in the digital age, and how the “live” image challenges the barriers dividing the viewing subject and the object viewed. How these final images reach toward this kind of subjectivity make them a powerful reflection on our contemporary digital culture. Contemplating these final images in *Diary of the Dead* might lead the viewer to enter a dual subjectivity with the images on screen and question – as the images seem to do in the very act of representation – the motives of people who find it necessary to capture the scenes depicted for instant uploading, or, indeed, the all-too-familiar scenes of accidents surrounded by onlookers totally invested in recording the events on their mobile phones rather than in offering help to the victims. Debra watches footage that is not live, but its aesthetic carries that essential “liveness” which Virilio sees as cutting through our sense of time and distance.

“Surely there is no escape from the tyranny of images, now,” Rombes asks (4). “They literally do not go away, or disintegrate upon duplication” (4). The constant stream of images in our culture rides on rhizomic27 temporal modes rather than linear ones. Conversely, the quotidian nature of this image overload can elevate the unseen to a high level of culturally-sanctioned significance. How the found footage horror film has managed to represent the power of the invisible informs the following subsection.

**Framing the Female “Monster”**

*Cat People (1942) / Carrie (1976) / The Blair Witch Project (1999)*

The spectator watching *The Blair Witch Project* is invited to perform an ongoing process of generic indexing that relies heavily on what the aesthetics of the camcorder stand for. The shaky frame, the movement in and out of focus,

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27 “Rhizomic” used here to describe the fractal and non-linear nature of time represented in digital culture, not Deleuze and Guattari’s “image of thought” (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*).
the inability to keep the subject within the frame borders, and the camera’s portability, all give the viewer the impression that he is watching an amateurish video diary which unfolds in an unmediated way. (Landesman 36)

The ontology of the monster in the horror genre, which Wood and Tudor showed was aligned to the movement from the supernatural to the domestic sphere as the genre entered the 1960s, became embroiled in the twenty-first century in how the monster’s discursive properties were advanced more by the codes and conventions of found footage horror rather than by the classical rules of cinematic space. For example, through a cinematic style completely dependent on the diegetic camera, *The Blair Witch Project* transfers the properties of the generic monster, the evil witch, from an unseen presence in the film (the Blair Witch herself) onto the only female figure we see once the film crew move into the Maryland woods.

In this section I will discuss the female monster, tracking how its discursive properties become altered as we move from the classical era (*Cat People*), through to the modern era (*Carrie*) – and then providing an argument that the found footage horror film relies on different conventions than either of the previous examples to create a notion of the monster that is much more ambivalent (*The Blair Witch Project*). The first two films attracted much critical attention for their portrayals of the “monstrous-feminine,” which Barbara Creed describes in psychoanalytic terms as “an implacable enemy of the symbolic order. She is thought to be dangerous and wily, capable of drawing on her evil powers to wreak destruction on the community” (76). These “evil powers” are rooted in female sexuality and must be overcome or contained in classical cinema through the mastery of the male gaze, as Mulvey describes in her 1975 essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (6-18). While there is still much debate on this topic, particularly as to the pervasiveness of the controlling patriarchal gaze in mainstream cinema which Mulvey claims, it is doubtful that Tudor overstates
his case when he argues that in the modern horror film “the major reference point for
the disordered psyche is clearly sexual” (*Monsters and Mad Scientists* 208). In
addition, he claims that

the most obvious concern with female sexuality is to be found in the seventies,
and there is a sense in which these misogynistic psychotics are the mirror
image of supernature’s lesbian vampires. Both make sense in the context of a
culture which is fearful of sexuality and in which traditional sexual roles are
undergoing change, and both articulate an essentially male view. (*Monsters and
Mad Scientists* 208)

The three films selected here are all concerned with the sexual threat embodied
in the female subject. My examination of the chosen films in such close proximity to
each other shows that there is an ontological break in how this threat is communicated
when we move from the first pair of films to the final one in this category. Both *Cat
People* and *Carrie* rely on classical-based filmic codes and carefully controlled mise-
en-scène to define the cinematic space of its horror; *The Blair Witch Project* provides a
dominant discourse on the male-centred view of female sexuality as abject and
dangerous by allowing the POV of the diegetic camera, which gives an active
phenomenological role to the viewer, to do the “heavy lifting” in terms of composition
and space.

*Cat People*, part of the cycle of horror films that Val Lewton produced mainly
in the 1940s,²⁸ famously depends on the power of suggestion rather than visual
spectacle to communicate its horror. But what is often missed in the film is how the
subtleties of its suggestive enunciation use classical codes of cinematic space to
present female “monstrousness” that is pervasive and not limited to the depiction of

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²⁸ Lewton produced nine low-budget horror film in the 1940s: *Cat People, I Walked with a Zombie, The
Leopard Man* (Jacques Tourneur 1943), *The Seventh Victim* (Mark Robson 1943), *The Ghost Ship*
(Mark Robson 1943), *The Curse of the Cat People* (Robert Wise 1944), *The Body Snatcher* (Robert
Wise 1945), *Isle of the Dead* (Mark Robson 1945) and *Bedlam* (Mark Robson 1946).
Irena Dubrovna (Simone Simon), the disturbed woman at the centre of the narrative. Irena is a Serbian-born fashion designer living in New York City. She meets Oliver Reed (Kent Smith) and they get married; but Irena is nervous about consummating the marriage due to her belief in a curse that she claims was put on her village in Serbia. The curse will manifest in Irena turning into a panther during sexual arousal and killing her partner. Initially seeing his wife’s attitude to their marriage as pure fantasy, Oliver eventually calls in the expertise of psychiatrist Dr. Louis Judd (Tom Conway). Judd seems to make some progress, but Oliver realises that he is in love with his co-worker Alice Moore (Jane Randolph). Dr. Judd is attracted to Irena himself, and when he kisses her he is attacked and killed by a panther. Irena is seen leaving Judd’s office once Oliver and Alice arrive and find Judd dead. She goes to the zoo and opens the panther cage, effectively committing suicide. The film works hard to show Irena as Julia Kristeva’s abject “Other,” culminating in a confirmation (with a certain ambiguity attached to it) that she has the ability to transform into a cat (1-32). Linda Rohrer Paige contends that Cat People upholds a discourse that women should be passive under patriarchy: “the quality of transformation not only casts women into the realm of the supernatural, but also it catapults them to the margins of society, ‘outside’ its norms. In contrast, women who lack the ability to transform pose no threat to patriarchy; it cultivates their passivity” (292) (see fig. 21).

Conversely, Alice, Irena’s non-threatening rival for the love of Oliver Reed (she is married to him in Cat People’s loose sequel, The Curse of the Cat People), also functions as a sexual threat if we read certain shots and scenes, through its classical codes and conventions firstly, but also through the lens of ideology. In a largely male-populated workspace Alice is shown both completely at ease and equal to her male colleagues in confidence and competence (see fig. 22).
She is framed in the shot at the lower right, with her back to the camera (similar to the closer framing of Irena in fig. 21). While the two men she is talking to are positioned above her, she “controls” their actions (her outstretched arm suggesting the men are mere extensions of her will and compelled to obey). Alice is representative of the “working woman,” who had to enter the workplace while the men were overseas during the war. Taking up this position in the public sphere, women also took up a threatening position *vis-à-vis* patriarchal ideology. The danger this gendered menace posed to the male psyche would be rendered generically pervasive after the war, in the form of the *femme fatale*; film noir encoded the working woman as a duplicitous, evil
manipulator of men – but *Cat People’s* suggestive aesthetic can be read as a precursor to such depictions of female power.

Alice, coded in terms of Creed’s monstrous-feminine through her relationship to the spaces she inhabits in the film, highlights another dimension to the power of suggestion – her “monstrous” nature, in terms of the film’s dominant discourse, is nearly invisible or transparent unless read through a psychoanalytic framework. John Berks segregates both Irena and Alice into the categories of psycho-sexual and socio-political threat, respectively (32-37). Moreover, if Irena’s power of transformation “serves as a semiotic marker of her hidden rebellion against patriarchy, as indicated by her released aggression toward it and its ‘agents’” (Paige 292), and the depiction of this aggression is given a “semiotic” meaning through classical codes to be read by the viewer (see fig. 23 - fig. 26), then these same codes can be read to mark out Alice as another threat to male sexuality, no matter how invisible this threat is in the economy of the film’s narrative.

Fig. 23. *Cat People* – Classic Composition (Shot...).
Fig. 24. *Cat People* – Classical Composition (…Reverse Shot).

Fig. 25. *Cat People* – Classical Lighting 1.

Fig. 26. *Cat People* – Classical Lighting 2.
The shot shown in fig. 23 is taken from a shot-reverse shot sequence, depicting Irena clawing at the bedroom door before cutting to Oliver standing outside the door trying to talk his way in (see fig. 24). The dangerous opposing forces of their respective sexualities are rendered obvious through carefully balanced composition and parallel editing. Fig. 25 and fig. 26 create cinematic spaces from light and shadow to visualise the threat posed by Irena and also to cue the viewer in terms of placing the film’s characters into the opposing categories dictated by the spatial composition. This influential use of space is described by Berks, who distinguishes between Irena’s “opaqueness” and Alice’s “transparency”:

Both the film and critical attention divert our attention away from Alice and on to Irena, and this is the function of what I have been calling Irena’s “opaqueness”; it gives the appropriating eye something to fix on. Her function in the film constitutes her as a lure, not only in the obvious sense that becomes the object of Oliver’s unnameable desire, the “trap” he falls into, but also on a metadiegetic level, she diverts attention away from a potentially more threatening recognition, enabling the film’s viewers to overlook or misrecognise the historical lesion or fault in the social fabric that Alice (seen as the true Medusa she is) would represent. Alice is transparent, both to herself and to others, including the film scholars who have written about the film. In this way is her monstrousness naturalised or at least overlooked. [emphasis in original] (39)

Irena, then, becomes the most obvious focus of the male gaze, and must be punished in the end; while a more closer-to-home threat, symbolised by Alice’s ease in the traditional male workplace, is allowed to stand beside Oliver over Irena’s dead body in the film’s final shot. Mary Ann Doane claims that in this final shot “[w]hat we
are left with is the asexual Alice, perfect and unthreatening mate for the ‘good old Americano’” (52).

De Palma’s Carrie uses functionally similar classical codes, this time aligned to a modern style based on irony and intertextuality, to present the same discourse of the monstrous-feminine. However, in the modern era of the horror genre threats posed by “monstrous” females became even more pervasive, aligning the horror film with a more apocalyptic turn in the wider culture. According to Tudor, modern horror has moved out of its “secure” phase after the sixties, often abandoning the classical trope of closure to leave the monster triumphant:

In the world of “secure horror”, traditional contrasts hold sway: life/death, secular/supernatural, normal/abnormal physical matter and human/alien. The divisions they represent are clearly marked, and, therefore, the line of defence against the unknown easily distinguished. In the contrasting world of “paranoid horror” the principle oppositions are more internal in their emphasis, whether internal to human beings themselves or to their cultures and social systems. Conscious/unconscious, normal/abnormal sexuality, social order/social disorder, sanity/insanity and health/disease all generate threats of a rather different kind. (Monsters and Mad Scientists 104)

This modern, paranoid phase, Tudor argues, results in horror films in which “victory is no longer assured, and seventies homo horrificus has become a paranoid victim” (Monsters and Mad Scientists 67). What made these paranoid horror films even more troubling was that their spaces were not the exotic European castles or supernatural sites of secure horror but the naturalistic and familiar environments of contemporary America. In Carrie, we see a young girl’s entry into womanhood coincide with the manifestation of telekinesis. Carrie White (Sissy Spacek) is extremely shy and awkward around her peers, probably as a result of her strict upbringing by her religious
mother (Piper Laurie). When she agrees to go to the prom with star football player Tommy Ross (William Katt), an elaborate and horrible prank is carried out by Chris Hargensen (Nancy Allen) and Billy Nolan (John Travolta), resulting in Carrie’s vengeance and the deaths of nearly everyone in the school. Carrie exhibits the paranoid traits of the modern horror film in its cinematic spaces of school classrooms and family homes – the sort of spaces that the classical era would create for melodramas such as Rebel Without a Cause (Nicholas Ray 1955). Shelley Stamp Lindsey refers to the discursive function around sexuality these spaces maintain in the modern horror film:

What was conventionally the terrain of domestic melodrama, familial relations and the home, has been adopted by contemporary horror and fantasy films which engage the terms of domestic drama in order to depict horrors associated with what Vivian Sobchack calls the “familiar and familial” (181). With their congruent appeal to melodramatic family structures, the supernatural, and the rhetoric of horror, such films figure the eruption of violence and sexuality into the domestic sphere through supernatural forces which invade the family home or render its inhabitants monstrous. (33)\(^\text{29}\)

However, Carrie retains a definite link with the classical horror film in the figure of Carrie’s mother, Margaret White. Her austere dress-code and long cascading hair give her a Gothic appearance. Moreover, her religious fanaticism is displayed all over the house they live in: candles burning instead of electricity, religious relics in every room, while its outward appearance marks it as a visual trope of the horror film – what Wood referred to as the “Terrible House” (“An Introduction to the American Horror Film” 183).

\(^{29}\) See Sobchack’s “Bringing It All Back Home: Family Economy and Generic Exchange,” in Waller (175-94).
Another popular seventies horror trope seen in *Carrie* is one that equates the female form with contagion; films such as *Carrie*, *Sisters* (Brian De Palma 1973) and *The Brood* (David Cronenberg 1979) represent all women as tainted with the monstrous-feminine. This is made explicit in the opening credits sequence of *Carrie*, which marshals modern filmmaking techniques, often no more than variations of classical ones, to implicate women collectively, rather than Carrie herself and herself only, in its discourse of abject feminine sexuality.

Represented as a shy and awkward loner, Carrie is introduced to her sexuality in a scene which contains an intertextual inflection of the classical codes usually associated with screen violence. Slow-motion tracking shots and dissolves through the locker room display several naked girls, but the stylish cinematography and editing code the scene as one of innocence. The following shots of Carrie in the shower also denote innocence, until blood appears on Carrie’s body. The cuts which follow this revelation intertextually refer to *Psycho*’s shower murder, and Pino Donaggio’s score momentarily emulates the shrill violins of Bernard Herrmann’s music from the earlier film’s most famous scene. Carrie’s sheltered upbringing by her religious fanatic mother means she doesn’t know that what is happening to her body is a normal stage in the female body’s development. When the camera cuts from her looking to screen right (see fig. 27) to what she is looking at (see fig. 28), the mise-en-scène codes the girls in a more demonic light; all women, the film’s dominant discourse urges, are dangerous because of their sex. Lindsey argues that the supernatural power that Carrie seems to have acquired with her first period, “clearly marks Carrie’s sexuality as monstrous by acting as a literal inscription of the violence of her desire” (37).

The patriarchal agenda of the film is demonstrated most forcefully through its manipulation of POV. As Mulvey demonstrated, whoever has control of the POV occupies the position of power in mainstream cinema. “In a world ordered by sexual
imbalance,” Mulvey argues, “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 11). Fig. 29 to fig. 32 display Carrie’s lack of control of the POV; her own gaze in these shots is in the control of a more dominant patriarchal master of the gaze. In the first shot Carrie is behind a screen door, looking up at Tommy Ross in the foreground. The position of the characters in the shot gives the dominant role to the male. When Carrie unleashes her supernatural powers during prom night, the POV is manipulated to make problematic her position of mastery. Shots of her own POV are rare in this sequence, and the split-screen shots rob her of this mastery because they show the POV of some more dominant narrating agent who looks at both Carrie herself and what Carrie is
simultaneously looking at. In this way, Carrie can be read as a male fantasy about female sexuality as monstrous. The Blair Witch Project treats POV and mastery of the gaze in conflictual terms as well, but it does so through a novel digital aesthetic.  

In The Blair Witch Project, the three student filmmakers, Heather, Josh and Mike shoot on 16mm black-and-white film and a Hi-8mm consumer video camera. Depending on whether it is Josh or Heather, and whether they are operating the 16mm or video camera, a gendered battle is waged through POV and how it relates to visibility and invisibility.
Embodying a similar attitude, and gambling on its audience possessing the adequate media-literate knowledge to comply fully with the generic contract offered in its consumption, *The Blair Witch Project*, unlike the two other films with which it is grouped, refuses to show its monster. It is a confident choice, less to do with the “power of suggestion” – a term we saw that is synonymous with the Val Lewton cycle of horror films to which *Cat People* belongs – than with claiming a postmodernist attitude to the provision of definitive answers to uncanny puzzles. A similar enunciative strategy is used in *Diary of the Dead*. In Romero’s film, one of the characters remarks, referring to the mass outbreak of the dead attacking the living: “It was all over the news. All over the web. But nobody knew what was going on.” There is an irony at work here that also infuses *The Blair Witch Project*: the dialogue is one of the many lines delivered in VO, traditionally a mode of authoritative discourse in film (MacCabe, “Realism and Cinema” 12-16). There is blanket news coverage – yet nobody knows anything; the authoritative voice over ends by questioning the human race’s authority as intelligent creatures “worth saving.” *The Blair Witch Project* avoids a controlling dominant narrative in favour of a controlling and very dominant diegetic camera. Additionally, the film’s diegetic camera finds another figure other than the Blair witch to embody the monstrous-feminine, but it does so at the cost of rupturing the hegemonic dominance of narrative in the film.
The Blair Witch Project, a huge commercial success, indulges in the recent mainstream cinematic trick of the blending of form and content that has come to be a new generic convention in the digital age. Grant’s opinion is that the film “solidified the convention of narrating through the diegetic camera and, like Cannibal Holocaust, of ‘explaining’ the film as found footage made by the filmmakers who have gone missing” (“Digital Anxiety” 157), but his idea that the camera actually “narrates” seems too simplistic in this context. It could be that the film’s immersion in the extra-textual, and distinctly non-narrative, mediascape of Internet-driven marketing, which seemed to replace the perceived lack of anything in the film itself that might provide the dominant discourse, would cause Grant to settle on the “narrating” camera as a means of recuperating the primacy of both narrative and the film object. The use of the cameras within the diegeses of The Blair Witch Project, Cloverfield, [REC], Trollhunter and so on, both draws the viewer into the action and yet at the same time serves to distance the viewer from the full impact of the horror. How the film requires such a response in order to relay generic pleasure is predicated on the distance from traditional horror narratives created by its relationship to other media. Because the film is situated in a fairly complex relationship with these other media – spectators could visit a website promoting the film, offering interviews with “friends and family” of the missing students, and they were encouraged to view a documentary (The Curse of the Blair Witch [Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez 1999]) in order to learn more about the case – commentators reasoned that its mediation took a stronger hold on the spectator than its ambitions regarding the offer of immediacy through its documentary modalities aligned with its diegetic camera (Telotte, “The Blair Witch Project Project” 32-35). Jane Roscoe states that the film “provides an excellent case study of the role that extra-textual material (such as websites, advertising, and so on) plays in constructing particular viewer positions and readings of the film” (3). The majority of
the critical analyses of *The Blair Witch Project*, in fact, inexorably position the film within this wider context of what Henry Jenkins calls “spreadable media” (Jenkins, Ford and Green 1-5). All of these extra-textual dimensions to the film minimise the role of narrative in its success. Conversely, my argument entails examining the aesthetic properties of the digital image itself within the diegesis of the film text; as such, placing the focus on the expressive qualities of the film’s images and the non-intentional manner in which they are captured by the cameras, disavows a fully-functional role for the film’s cameras in terms of narration and instead confirms *The Blair Witch Project* as the first in a subgenre that demands a new way of seeing (see fig. 33 and fig. 34).

Fig. 33. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

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31 The directors had minimal contact with the three actors. They simply put them in the woods, gave them maps with various points marked, and told them to go to specific points each day, where they would then be given further written instructions and rough scenarios to act out; much of the dialogue is improvised and many first takes were included in the final cut (see Heller-Nicholas [93-112]). However, I must also point out that the 16mm film camera is actually used with a much greater degree of intentionality than the video camera. It is paid more reverence by the three students and the footage captured with it is much more professional and carefully acquired than that recorded with the video camera.
The style and visual impact of the film represented by these shots are naturally dictated by the use of the 16mm camera and the Hi8 video camera. The faux-documentary aesthetic lends the look of the film an “ugly,” uncontrolled appearance. The clashing of video and film footage (the former uses colour, the latter black-and-white), and the juxtaposition of one with the other, serves to underscore the constructed nature of both which dissipates the gestures the film makes to being an unmediated factual discourse. Before they enter the woods, Josh is shown preparing the first slate; the shot illustrates the kind of hypermediacy that, according to Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, simultaneously invites and disavows immediacy (82). The clapper plate will be shown again, before Heather (Heather Donahue) sits on a rock, at Coffin Rock, filmed by the 16mm camera reading a passage from a book about the mysterious events of Coffin Rock (depicted in fig. 34). In colour (the video camera), a man is seen being asked a question about the Blair Witch by Heather; the film switches to black-and-white (the 16mm film camera) for the “formal” interview, when Heather repeats her question. As the film progresses, cinematic space is used not to put the normal and the supernatural in opposition, but to set up a clash between those in
control of visibility and those who are in its control. Heather wields the video camera with authority, framing Josh (Joshua Leonard) and Mike (Michael Williams) as the objects of her look, which has been discussed as part of a pro-feminist rhetoric and an answer to Mulvey’s theory of the male-centred gaze which I referred to in the last section (Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 6-18; Badley par. 9-16).

“Turn the camera off and get us home!” Josh screams at Heather, when they seem to have lost their way (but Heather will not admit it and concede authority). “No,” she answers. “I want to mark this occasion.”

However, during this battle of wills, circumscribed around notions of seen and unseen, The Blair Witch Project manages to forego classical rules of mise-en-scène and elaborate editing patterns to present its discourse on the monstrous-feminine solely through the function and POV of the diegetic camera. Having noted that, it is a mistake to believe the film is not a deliberate and carefully planned aesthetic object: as Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes, “The Blair Witch Project is not an amateur film as much as it is an independent production that employs a particular amateur filmmaking aesthetic in its pursuit of making a movie about amateur filmmaking” (97). While the “nothingness” that many saw as the film’s overall aesthetic is undoubtedly driven by its amateur “look” (Higley and Weinstock 11-36), a precise examination of the gendered gaze can be read directly from the intersection of this look with the external authority who controls the final product (the unseen external authority who cut between the colour and black and white camera registers, and who edited over 100 hours of raw footage down to 81 minutes).

“You’re still doing your documentary thing, man!” Josh yells at Heather, when they are all hopelessly lost in the woods. Using the black and white 16 mm camera, Heather assumes a coded authority, becoming the auteur and authoritative narrator through the appropriation of the documentary convention which aligns black and white
with authority. But like the Blair Witch, Heather’s control is bound up in her ability to stay *behind* the camera once they become lost. From behind the camera she can exert power and control over both Josh and Mike, who then come to resent Heather’s inability to get real in their real-life crisis. “I can see why you like this camera, Heather,” Josh says. “It’s totally filtered reality.” Crucially, Josh is filming Heather when he taunts her with these words, but Heather tries to avoid confronting the camera with her own gaze (see fig. 35). In this shot, through the control of the male gaze, unseen power of the witch is mapped onto Heather. She is the woman, like the Blair Witch, who respects the woods (she has packed many books about surviving in the wilderness, and she is more careful than either of the two men to avoid disturbing anything they find in there). Her reluctance to meet the gaze of the camera aligns her with an invisible witch who must never be seen on camera.

![Fig. 35. The Blair Witch Project – Threatened by Camera POV.](image)

*The Blair Witch Project* suggests the idea that nothing can be made sense of anymore, or at least, that making sense of things isn’t as important as it used to be, and that sensual, or a more phenomenological, experience is the source of pleasure for the
viewer. Like all found footage horror films, *The Blair Witch Project* appropriates the aesthetics of digital culture in this sense to set up a zone of interaction with the viewer. Similarly to the manner in which the final scene of *Diary of the Dead* called for a more active viewer in terms of the experiential address of the film, *The Blair Witch Project* makes use of its digital aesthetic to offer itself as a new experience in modern genre cinema, one that provides new generic pleasures in the digital age. This experience, under the guidance of the diegetic camera’s POV, links the viewer to the diegesis in a more phenomenological sense than classical film ever could. This new spectatorial awareness, coupled with a more experiential bond between viewer and image, can work at a discursive level: the viewer may question the control that Heather seems to possess because she has power over the image in the diegesis, when set against the control the Blair Witch has over the image because of its invisibility and ability (uncanny ability, perhaps) to avoid being seen by the camera.

Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez’s film remains the paradigmatic example of the paradoxical visual power of the unseen in found footage horror. Positioned between this category and the category of the “tyranny” of pervasive images (represented here by *Diary of the Dead*), is a third category: the found footage horror film whose “monster” can exist only within remediation.

**Screening Possession**


The upsetting of heterosexual and gender norms is also a feature of the three films grouped together in this section, but the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, its late-seventies remake, and the Spanish film *[REC]*, all share a larger concern: mapping the breakdown of social cohesion and communal solidarity. The manner in which the
horror genre has incorporated, and rendered through a widely divergent use of cinematic space, the possession narrative at various times in its history, illustrates how the aesthetic look of found footage horror marks an almost complete break from both classical and post-classical mise-en-scène to favour cinematic space that is created by, and exclusively tied to, the POV of the diegetic camera.

Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was made in the middle of a cycle of science fiction/horror hybrids in the 1950s. 32 When he returns to Santa Mira following a brief absence, the film’s protagonist – Dr. Miles Bennell (Kevin McCarthy) – slowly comes to realise that the strange condition which has suddenly begun to affect many of the town’s residents, leading them to believe that the people they love are impostors, might be otherworldly in origin. Although a local psychiatrist casually dismisses the affair as “an epidemic of mass hysteria,” Miles discovers that the town is actually being invaded by some kind of plant-like alien race. Quietly replacing the human inhabitants while they are asleep, these otherworldly fakes are difficult to spot because they look, sound and seem to remember exactly like the individuals they have supplanted.

Leaving aside the ideological underpinnings of the film involving Cold War suspicions and anxieties over atomic radiation for the moment, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is very classical in its style and links the enunciation of its horror content to familiar codes and conventions of the genre. Siegel and producer Walter Wanger initially hoped for a downbeat ending to the film, but Allied Artists compelled them to include a flashback framing device; the released film now ends with Bennell convincing a psychiatrist that his story is true, and the FBI get a phone call in the last

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shot (Le Gacy 291). The film thus conforms to Tudor’s stipulation that classical horror films are “secure,” ending with the monster vanquished and order restored.

The progressive nature of the shot composition in the film illustrates the increasing isolation of Miles. Beginning with a number of shots showing Miles interacting with the larger community of Santa Mira, the film communicates his growing unease by altering the shot composition. When his date with Becky (Dana Wynter) is interrupted by a summons from his friend Jack (King Donovan) to come over to his house, Miles is framed in a shot that emphasises both the closeness of this community and his growing apprehension that will end in his isolation (see fig. 36). Framed in a medium shot, the wide angle lens bunches the four characters together in the centre of the frame. This group’s friendship and solidarity is communicated visually through careful composition. However, Miles has his back to the camera and the lighting has turned him into a silhouette. His isolation is coded through the lighting and his size relative to the others in the shot. When Jack and Miles move to the pool table, they appear to be separated by the mystery body lying on the table; the mise-en-scène here semiotically indicates that the pods will drive Miles into isolation and noir-like nightmare (see fig. 37).

Fig. 36. *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956).
The trucks used to transport the pods (see fig. 38) have been linked to a particular social problem prevalent in some American towns when *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* was produced. Katrina Mann argues that the film associates the aliens with popular discourses on Mexican migrant labourers, and that

[i]n its cinematic and textual descriptions of Santa Mira’s alien residents and their attributes, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* employs prevalent postwar tropes of cultural difference [news reports constructing Mexicans as shifty, deceptive, etc.] that may have resonated in specifically racial terms among postwar audiences. (57)
The film’s resonances with the fear of atomic radiation are also well-documented, and it is lauded as representative of a genre displaying a more intellectual engagement with the socio-political fears of that era (Hendershot 26-39; Butler 167).

The 1978 remake, similar to *Carrie*, communicates its genericity through intertextual play and a modern updating of classical tropes. Produced in Tudor’s paranoid era of horror, this adaptation of Jack Finney’s novel could deliver the open ending that frightened the financial backers of the earlier film. In this version, Matthew Bennell (Donald Sutherland) is revealed to have become taken over by the alien spores, his gaping mouth seeming to swallow the camera as it moves in to leave the screen completely black.

There are knowing and self-conscious references to the original film in the remake (see fig. 39 and fig. 40). Kevin McCarthy, who played Miles in Siegel’s version, is here shown reprising that film’s most famous scene. The shot of McCarthy banging on the window of the car in fig. 40 is reminiscent of a shot in *Night of the*
Living Dead (see fig. 12), and acts as a foretaste of the found footage horror film’s obsession with screens. The most interesting aspect of the remake’s style is its disorienting camera angles and very modernist use of light and shadow (see fig. 41), which is extremely low-key throughout the film. Neil Badmington claims that these modernist techniques suggest “a sense of obscurity” in the film that was missing in the safe (because tied to classical conventions) 1956 version (15).
[REC], while maintaining a link with the other two films in this group through shared narrative tropes based on possession, has a much different enunciative scheme. Angela Vidal (Manuela Velasco), a young television presenter on the show While You’re Asleep, spends a night filming at a fire station. “We’ll see things never seen before,” she says, straight to camera. What follows is something we have seen before; but what we see has never been presented to us in quite the same way before. A team of firemen are called out to an apartment complex; Angela and her cameraman go with the team. Once inside the building, it soon becomes apparent that a rapidly-spreading deadly virus is causing victims to become possessed by a demon and turn murderous.

Very early in the film its mode of address allows for a distinctly generic playfulness regarding the ambiguous relationship between fiction and reality in found footage horror. Talking to Alex (David Vert), one of the firemen working as part of the Bravo 128 firefighters, Angela says she would like the alarm to ring – “for the TV show only, not really,” she explains. When the alarm does go off, for “real,” Angela shows delight on her face and doesn’t waste the opportunity to get some footage for the show. It is a moment that invites the viewer to contemplate the “double logic” at work here, and one which renders problematic how the realism of the film will be judged. Angela’s gleeful reaction to an alarm bell communicates the same idea to the spectator as Debra’s invocation to scare the viewer of The Death of Death, the film that is in fact remediated by Diary of the Dead, by adding non-diegetic music.

Many shots seem to build a mise-en-scène that attributes a certain zone of the frame with extra-diegetic properties even though it is a visual component of the diegesis. In other words, the organisation of cinematic space in [REC] is such that two spatial zones are created by the film’s diegetic camera in place of a single one. Throughout the film, Angela is framed in medium closeup talking to camera, while the actual horrific events unfold in the same framed shot in the space behind her. An
example of this unorthodox spatial composition occurs when the firemen break down the old woman’s door: Angela’s face is large in the frame, but the real story is the hazy out-of-focus image of the old woman in the background and the build up to her attack. The scene of the first attack is also interesting for the way it works to replace Angela’s shock with a more powerful emotion: her sheer compulsive determination to tape everything proves more powerful visually than the terror the viewer would be generically cued to expect from her in such a situation (see fig. 42). She demands the tape to be rewound so she can witness a mediated rendition of the savage attack of the old woman on the security guard. “Show it to me!” she shouts, looking at the camera screen, while ignoring the actual perpetrator lying on the ground behind her (see fig. 43).

Fig. 42. *REC* (2007).

Fig. 43. *REC* – Diegetic Camera: The “Doubled” Space.
For Angela, the scene unfolding on the tape is the real event; and because the viewer is put in a similar position to Angela in relation to what she (the viewer) sees, a more active and phenomenologically-inflected viewer engagement is offered, similar to the way I described it in relation to *Diary of the Dead* and *The Blair Witch Project*. The viewer, in collaboration with the diegetic camera, creates a zone of cinematic space from her phenomenological (in the sense of pre-interpretative, following Husserl’s reduction) engagement with the films’ digital aesthetic. Like those two films, *REC* creates juxtapositions of cinematic space that are unique to the genre and which invite a modified spectatorial address from the viewer.

Rombes argues that, “in an era when cameras and surveillance in public spaces is ever more possible and frequent, the concept of ‘the director’ – as someone who imposes an overarching vision and meaning onto images – becomes less important than the fact of recording” (134), and the found footage aesthetic bears this out. Frequently in *REC* – and in the other examples of the subgenre examined in this chapter – the shots are haphazard, the mise-en-scène dependent on the camera reacting to characters’ actions rather than the other way around. Nothing seems the result of directorial intent: the camera zooms and pulls focus, “catching up” with the characters rather than as part of the usually meticulous compositions that identified classical cinema. The film, in the way it gives the impression that it lacks a guiding hand, resonates with the pre-analytic consciousness as described in Husserl’s notion of “prepredicative experience,” which I discussed earlier. Ironically, the notion of this type of Husserlian experience is put into sharp relief by a sequence in which Angela actually takes time out from the sensational incidents she hurtles herself into without much thought and shows her complete lack of self-awareness. “We’ll do more interviews,” she tells her cameraman (Pablo). “If you don’t like something, you can cut.” In the following shot, Angela asks Pablo (Pablo Rosso) is she positioned all right
to interview a young girl; the mise-en-scène is then arranged right before our eyes on camera (see fig. 44). If we examine the shot, however, a similar discourse on gendered power in relation to the camera that I examined in *The Blair Witch Project* is available.

Fig. 44. *REC* – Wielding Camera Power.

The shot is part of an extended sequence in the film where Angela decides to conduct official interviews with some of the buildings residents. Firmly telling a child’s mother to keep silent while she interviews her daughter (the mother does not object), effectively indicates that Angela believes her role as recorder of the events gives her more authority over a child than her mother. Later, during a lull in the mayhem, Angela summons her cameraman and says “Pablo, grab the camera. I can’t sit here doing nothing.” In other words, to document the horrific event is the only option; leaving the camera and offering help to the residents is not even a consideration.

An interesting strategy employed by *REC* in its last sequence is the presentation of the final monster as ontologically ambiguous. Peering through the night-vision enabled camera, Pablo can see the horrifically emaciated Tristana Medeiros, seemingly the first victim of the deadly virus, but Angela cannot in the pitch blackness of the penthouse. There is a suggestion that the function of the camera
somehow works to materialise the monster, or that the camera is in a way complicit with its user and the viewer in the creation of the object (the emaciated and horrific looking girl), rather than having the monster’s existence dependent on classical codes of narrative and enunciation which would suggest to the viewer that the monstrous figure was already there before the film’s protagonists entered the attic space. But [REC]’s reliance on its digital aesthetics establishes a distinctly non-classical continuity whereby Pablo’s camera, along with the viewer’s gaze, seems to “think” the film’s final monster into existence (with the switching on of the night vision feature), rather than her appearance being the result of a controlled mise-en-scène. This sequence, during a passage in the film when Angela’s analytical skills are completely overcome by pure immediate sensation (which might mirror the viewer’s own phenomenological or “raw” state in front of the screen and bombarded by a digitally-driven mise-en-scène, and thereby strengthen the notion of shifting cinematic spatial zones created by the camera-viewer spectatorial relay), offers the film’s most privileged moment with regard to the shift in spectatorial engagement as a result of the move from a classical to a digital aesthetic in the horror genre.

This moment, of course, could be interpreted as a reflection on the materiality of film itself, and the whole notion of the death of cinema wrought by digital culture in the twenty-first century (Hanson; Sontag, “Decay of Cinema”). Classical cinema created its characters through the more or less transparent institutional collaboration of many craftspeople and actors; when the lights were switched on and the director called “action” the already determined character was only awaiting the actor’s interpretation as a final step. In [REC], the more or less uncontrolled aesthetic of the diegetic camera seems to the viewer to create a character in the filmic equivalent of a blink of an eye (Pablo pushes the button for night vision on his camera) (see fig. 45). This very
frightening sequence from the perspective of narrative also acts as a meta-textual
deconstruction of cinematic narrative in general.

Fig. 45. *[REC]* – Creating Cinematic Space on the Fly.

**A Paradigm Shift: Found Footage Horror as Meta-Genre**

Having examined the evolution of the horror genre from its classical paradigms to the
new subgenre of found footage horror by tracing the differences between specific
examples from each era, I now broaden the scope of my analysis in this section
through examination of the findings in the last section and how they relate to the
viewer’s perceptual process when confronted by the diegetically motivated (rather than
narratively motivated) cinematic space of found footage horror. The horror genre, as
outlined in this chapter, has developed an altered relationship with its audience in the
digital age. The development of the horror film, particularly its absorption of new
technology and subsequent altering of its generic conventions, bears out Robert
Warshow’s argument that genre cinema is always changing. Earlier, I traced these
changes as they relate to the genre’s use of digital capture technology not only to
create its narratives but often to become an integral part of those narratives. Moreover,
the primacy of narrative itself was questioned. Cinematic space, the filmic foundation
of narrative, undergoes a transformation through the use of the diegetic camera. Space in found footage horror “stretches out” in the direction of the viewer; the latter’s participation, as part of an experiential zone created by the viewer-diegetic camera relay, creates an experience of cinematic space that is phenomenologically inflected and results in a more sensuous, or a more perceptually “raw” (one might even say “virgin” or “pre-analytical”) engagement from the viewer. The viewer, in effect, “builds” space phenomenologically while engaging with the imagery of found footage horror films. As I showed in my analysis of both The Blair Witch Project and [REC], cinematic space in found footage horror is complicated by the ubiquitous presence of the diegetic camera.

The cinematic space of found footage horror, I have argued, is constructed – in the very act of the film text’s consumption – by the active phenomenological engagement of the viewer. This viewer engagement supersedes the pull of the narrative for the modern, media aware spectator, who brings an additional layer of interest to the film based on the intersection of her genre knowledge with her immersion in new media on a daily basis. Cinematic space, in other words, does something more than create a visual and sonic narrative for the pleasure of the viewer. Paradoxically, this spectator-led construction of a new horror genre is predicated on opening up awareness, or memory, in the viewer of the familiar conventions of the classical and modern eras of the genre. “Cinema in the digital age – which no longer simply uses self-reference as a narrative device but which in fact depends upon an audience which expects it – has a sort of built-in mode of deconstruction,” Rombes argues, highlighting the more active and media-literate spectator in contemporary culture (62). But, if anything, Rombes does not go far enough here. What is deconstructed by the digital aesthetics of found footage horror is the hegemony of narrative in popular cinema under the codes established in the classical era. Entering a dialectical
relationship with classical and modern horror cinema, the found footage horror film uses its deconstructed cinematic space to implicate the viewer in a relationship with the imagery that is more phenomenological than it is narrative based. *The Blair Witch Project*’s enunciative approach, for example, is to confront the viewer with a minimalist plot and unseen abnormal presence whose cinematic space is never filled as such, leaving the viewer to find another way into the film’s meaning than through narrative. It is the type of film that eschews any and all intelligence gleaned from previous engagements with the horror genre. Moran notes that phenomenology’s “first step is to seek to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on experience in advance, whether these are drawn from religious or cultural traditions, from everyday common sense, or, indeed, from science itself” (4), and this notion of stripping away previous knowledge, while originally formulated to explain our place in the world through the lens of philosophy, has definite advantages when applied to the philosophy of film. As I have shown, a phenomenological theoretical framework is apposite in a discussion of the found footage horror film.

Rather than spend time actively following the narrative cues and clues of a film like *The Blair Witch Project* or *[REC]*, a more rewarding strategy might be to engage sensuously with the DV imagery by virtue of “a steady directing of attention to the things themselves” (Moran 5). For the contemporary viewer, bombarded by media and imagery during every waking hour, this type of engagement, while unusual in the cinematic setting, is familiar at an everyday level of media interaction – and the viewer’s real-world experience of media culture overlaps with the aesthetics of cinema during those sequences in films where the imagery is characterised by hypermediacy (in the form of found footage’s “shakycam” aesthetic and bearing all the marks of its own construction). Hypermediacy tenders no real challenge to the twenty-first century viewer; this is borne out by the findings of the previous section.
Undergoing quotidian but nonetheless comprehensive training in new ways of seeing, the viewer is now a more media-literate consumer of the horror genre; my earlier analysis of the opening sequence to *Diary of the Dead* illustrated the digital culture-driven exchange between the contemporary spectator and the twenty-first century horror film. Seeing pictorial chaos on a cinema screen, as we frequently do in the seemingly haphazard compositions of something like *The Blair Witch Project* or *Cloverfield*, poses no real problem for the viewer’s engagement with these new conventions of the horror genre; the amateur, mockumentary aesthetic is now an integral part of many modern horror films and is beginning to shape the lexicon of screen realism itself. But this new way of spectatorial engagement comes with a trade-off: there now seems to be less immersion for the viewer in the act of viewing these contemporary found footage horror films – and it could be argued that there is a dual process going on whereby the viewer now surveys the images as well as being drawn into the diegesis and being positioned by the film’s generic enunciation. This is the kind of bipolar suturing of the viewer that resonates with Carroll’s idea that any theory of classical horror must involve the curious admixture of attraction and repulsion as the real enticement for fans of the genre. Recent horror cinema does still depend on this paradoxical fascination to a large extent but, crucially, these films rely more and more on digital culture for their aesthetics. Isabel Pinedo takes into account more recent postmodern horror films when she describes the blurring of the boundaries of the genre in films such as *Scream* (Wes Craven 1996) (17-31). The arrival of digital media and convergence culture has complicated the generic makeup of the horror film even more, and the body of films represented by *Cloverfield* and others in the found footage horror subgenre reflect this. Tudor argues that his bifurcation of the genre’s mode of horror into “secure horror” and “paranoid horror” can still be applied to the “postmodern horror film,” because “the general ‘shape’ of the world presumed by late modern
horror remains that mapped out in the secure/paranoid model” (“From Paranoia to Postmodernism?” 109). However, the found footage horror film, as I argued, is not postmodern as that term is usually applied to the horror genre and, additionally, it does not adhere to Tudor’s “general shape” of the world. Reality, as we saw with *Diary of the Dead*, is often recast as representation. To take this line of reasoning a stage further, my argument leads to the conclusion that digital cameras reshape the horror genre – or, in effect, the diegetic camera “re-frames” the genre – to such an extent that the very conventions of the genre are now often recast as representation. This is the notion that certain cinematic genres, namely horror, are being driven primarily by the contemporary emphasis in our culture on media convergence and the consequent remediation of images. This remediation, as outlined by Bolter and Grusin, can be related back to some of the generic conventions on display in classical horror films.

This is the idea of the double logic that characterises digital age films such as the found footage horror film. There is a dialectic relationship between immediacy, on the one hand, and hypermediacy on the other. Compelled by this ironic logic, found footage horror, by revealing the mechanics of its post-production (the tape glitches and fractured editing in *REC*, for instance), enhance its “authenticity” and realism for a viewer invited to enter the film’s double articulation. This is a sort of postmodern exchange between the viewer and the text as a meta-text, to both give the impression of authenticity and to comment on that authenticity. Bolter and Grusin’s immediacy and hypermediacy, it could be argued, make up a digital age equivalent of Carroll’s explication of the dual nature of horror as repulsion and attraction – but whether it is immediacy or hypermediacy that attracts or repulses is left to the whims of the viewer and how she likes to “frame” her horror film in terms of the film’s relationship to past horror films and also in relation to contemporary new media culture. One of these frames involves a close alignment of narrative and formal strategies which had only
really been seen in experimental film up to now. Contemporary digital culture gives rise to an unusual admixture of form and content in modern cinema, and this unique interaction is displayed most saliently, I think, in the recent found footage horror film. There is a foregrounding of the materiality of film in these works which would have confused pre-digital age viewers. Images of hypermediacy relating to the found footage horror film would have been more at home in the avant-garde films of a Stan Brakhage or a Hollis Frampton, but are now becoming a convention of the digital age horror film, particularly in its found footage incarnation.

“Although transparent technologies try to improve on media by erasing them, they are still compelled to define themselves by the standards of the media they are trying to erase,” Bolter and Grusin state (54), and this association between old and new media can be linked to the dialectic relationship between classical codes and digital aesthetics in the found footage horror film. It is a relationship that has developed out of historically shaped and extremely robust generic conventions coming into contact with the complete upheaval of film practice introduced with the arrival of digital culture. No longer is the horror genre a set of rules and conventions that loosely govern the presentation of something monstrous, something Other, initially occupying a purely fantastical or otherworldly cinematic space, before violating the space of normality, thereby producing horror (Todorov 25-32; Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror* 42-52; Lowry and deCordova 351-84). Instead, with the creation of found footage horror, the genre is now concerned not with capturing the monster within its spatial organisation but, in a certain sense, with capturing the viewer within the zone organised by its diegetic camera. I have shown this new diegetically motivated convention of horror in my analysis of *The Blair Witch Project*. As I argued, the power play in the film for control of visibility is fought basically over the right to absent oneself from the gaze of the camera and to thereby control the cinematic space occupied by the remaining
visible characters. And yet this cinematic space, the zone in front of the camera and being recorded by it, is complemented by another zone of space behind the camera, shared by those who share invisibility. Most of the time this is Heather, who is often heard in VO exercising her authority over the two males caught in her/the camera’s gaze. All of the time this cinematic space, the zone of invisibility, is occupied by the Blair Witch. However, the viewer also sits in a position corresponding to this invisible space, setting up a very interesting clash of classical and digital conventions. The idea that the viewer could be sharing the same space as the monster gives rise to the kind of ontological shock that is found footage horror’s answer to the chills induced by the viewer’s sharing of space with a monster through the normal spectatorial engagement with classical horror. The fact that the viewer can assume such power within the diegesis, naturally completely external to the narrative of the film, by virtue of this phenomenological creation of extra spatial zones between her and the camera, shifts this categorised subgenre outside of its parent genre, where it can then come to occupy a meta (or commentary) position in relation to it.

Culturally-determined viewer awareness is triggered by the diegetic camera. The found footage horror film, I would argue, communicates an in-built meta-awareness of the horror genre as a whole to the viewer. The modern horror film that uses digital capture to create its images is not sufficiently “explained” by the notion of the spectator’s emotional reaction to the genre. The viewer’s state, while watching a digitally-captured film such as [REC], is not fully explained by reference to anxiety. Bruce Kawin posits a “mindscreen” to indicate how the viewer’s consciousness is analogous with the screen’s visual field, which allows for “self-awareness” on the part of the film (“The Mummy’s Pool” 4). Bestowing a kind of active consciousness to the horror film itself, Kawin argues that “[g]enres are determined, not by plot-elements so much as by attitudes towards plot-elements” (“The Mummy’s Pool” 5). Comparing the
horror and science fiction genres, he argues that their difference relates to “their attitudes towards curiosity and the openness of systems,” adding that these genres “tend to organise themselves” according to these attitudes. This reasoning gets closer to explaining the status of the found footage horror film in contemporary culture and how useful it can be in exploring our relationship with it; but we need to move beyond the limitations of Kawin’s hypothesis by attributing the “attitudes” not exclusively to the films themselves but to the viewer’s thoughts and feelings towards the genre. In the age of digital cinema – and to a greater degree than in the analogue era – the attitudes of the viewer become crucial determining factors in the creation of the horror genre.

This attitudinal viewer stance instigates a relationship between engagement and the process of genre formation that is much stronger than it was in the classical era. This is partly to do with genre fans in effect “naturalising” the long-gestating and established codes and conventions of the horror film and often displaying a keen loyalty to classical examples of the genre and disdain for any deviation. Horror fans may treat “anomalies” of the genre, in terms of their lack of classicism, as not members of the genre at all. With found footage horror, these attitudes work to render problematic the genre status of the film. No longer is the classic monster presented to the viewer as a figure to elicit fear; in the digitality of found footage horror, the monster becomes a figure to elicit social unease, drawing on fears predicated on our digital culture and its constant need to re-present and remediate.

When initially confronted by a found footage film, the horror fan leaves that familiar genre world created by classical Hollywood and may even view the film itself – the film as representative of a genre, not its narrative content – as uncanny. Sigmund Freud’s concept of the uncanny, “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (827), takes on a meta-textual role in the found footage horror film. What is old and long familiar to the new subgenre, what
constitutes a surmounted belief, is made up of the very codes and conventions that shaped the pre-digital horror film. We have seen how the first zombie tried to smash the windscreen of the car Barbara has taken refuge in; the spatial cues implicate the viewer as a near-victim of a diegetic rupture, with the zombie threatening to break through the frame of the screen itself. In *Diary of the Dead*, the zombies actually do force their way towards the viewer by completely collapsing cinematic space into a dispersed phenomenological space made up of a plethora of media platforms which sends out cues to the viewer establishing very strong links between the diegesis of the film and contemporary culture.

By placing classical conventions in a “second register,” then, remediating them through immediacy and hypermediacy provided by the digital camera both within and without the diegesis (as the intra-diegetic camera), films such as *The Blair Witch Project*, [*REC*], and *Diary of the Dead* make the demand on the viewer to relate this new film to her historical engagement with the horror genre. In this space, the viewer’s surmounted belief refers to her past relationship with horror films and how remediation breaks the spell – the uncanny spell – of Carroll’s art-horror.\(^{33}\) “Successful horror films,” Cowie argues, “succeed in horrifying both those who love the horror of horror films and those who loathe the horror of horror films” (26). Getting past this impasse is down to the viewer, and regardless of the expectations arising from its status as a genre film, the found footage horror film seeks to engage its audience in an ironic “play” with genre codes, leading to an exchange between film text and audience where narrative is less important than the diegetic world “zoned off” or circumscribed by the spectatorial and phenomenological link established between viewer and camera. The dominant cinematic practice displayed by the new subgenre is an example of Altman’s

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33 Art-horror, as Carroll describes it in *The Philosophy of Horror*, is the emotional effect of horror: “I will presume that the genre is designed to produce an emotional effect; I will attempt to isolate that effect; and I will attempt to show how the characteristic structures, imagery and figures in the genre are arranged to cause the emotion that I will call art-horror” [emphasis in original] (8).
generic discursivity (*Film/Genre* 121) that resonates with a digital age modification of Wood’s return of the repressed idea as applied to the contemporary horror film.

Wood argued that the modern horror film worked progressively to interrogate the surplus sexual energy that is repressed in our culture in order for patriarchy to remain the dominant ideology; however, as Wood states, “what is repressed is not accessible to the conscious mind” (“An Introduction to the American Horror Film” 167). I would argue that it is generic energy, in the form of the genre’s long-established codes and conventions, which is repressed by the found footage horror film itself. The crucial point is that it is the relay established by the diegetic camera between the film and the viewer, not the viewer alone, which marks the site of the repression. And these codes and conventions will erupt, at some point, through the formal aesthetics of found footage horror. This is the point of the scene in *REC* when the attack by the old woman in the apartment is first represented through the familiar “shakycam” aesthetic and *verité* style mise-en-scène. Immediately after this attack we are shown a replay of it, this time “framed” classically: Angela (and the viewer) gazes at the framed imagery on screen, with this representation of exactly the same footage seeming more coherent and manageable because it has all of a sudden been placed in a classical register. Found footage horror films, in fact, cannot afford not to set up some form of dialogue with classical horror; if the viewer had not something “old and familiar” returned to her in these new horror films, the generic contract would be dissolved.

**Returning to Cloverfield**

Circling back to *Cloverfield*, by way of a reverse epistemological move which discards the philosophical or scientific analysis of the film offered by Bordwell, Daniel North (75-92), Donato Totaro and others, in favour of a phenomenological reading that
engages with the film as if sight unseen, reveals how the hold of classical codes and conventions on the film is closing out a rich seam of investigation based on the viewer’s more experiential relationship to the film’s images. Arguably the most successful amalgamation of classical and new media tropes, there is no doubt that *Cloverfield* has much stronger links with classical cinema that any of the three found footage horror films discussed in the previous section. However, a reading of the film, informed by the findings of the previous section – summarised here as the notion of the unseen, the proliferation of screens, and the challenge to the narrative-diegesis threshold (to use Burch’s phrasing) – allows a more interesting relationship between the film and contemporary digital aesthetics to emerge. *Cloverfield* provides a very good testing site for the arguments developed in the previous section as it displays *all* the elements of the diegetic camera-controlled digital aesthetics: it brings together the power of invisibility, seen in *The Blair Witch Project*, with the ubiquity of screens trope that organised *Diary of the Dead*’s interrogation of media culture, as well as lending itself to a reading predicated on the see-saw effect of the narrative-diegesis dichotomy (which was uncovered across all three found footage horror films).

Fig. 46. *Psycho* (1960) – Classical Resonances.
Whereas much of the literature on the film compared *Cloverfield* to *Godzilla* [*Gojira*] (Ishirô Honda 1954), *King Kong* and any number of 1950s gigantic rampaging monster movies, my own experience of the film points towards a less obvious classical antecedent. Reeves’ highly successful monster movie is the digital age’s answer to *Psycho*’s shower scene (see fig. 46 and fig. 47). Both *Psycho* and *Cloverfield*, while sharing very little in terms of plotting and overall narrative, have more meaningful extra-textual connections. The production of Hitchcock’s film brought together the aesthetics of film and its new challenger, television,\footnote{Many of the production crew who worked on *Psycho* were regular contributors to *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* (1955-1962), including cinematographer John L. Russell and art director Robert Clatworthy.} whereas *Cloverfield* melded big budget film spectacle with cinema’s more recent challenger, new media aesthetics and the drive towards digital cinema. It is true that both films marshal different modes of realism and audience engagement, but with ultimately the same goal: to capture a society on the cusp of profound social and cultural change, and to communicate this dilemma through the extended use of the subjective camera. *Psycho* was a response to postwar anxieties and a strain of nihilism that had entered cultural and philosophical discourses in the wake of the Holocaust; Reeves’ *Cloverfield* was discussed as an obvious reaction to 9/11 (“to circumvent the limits of
traumatic representation,” Aston notes, “Hollywood has predominantly implemented fictional narratives to comment on the events of the day” [par. 13]). But whereas *Psycho*, despite its one, central scene of chaos, ultimately made sense to the viewer as a picture of post-war malaise and terrifying home truths (anyone could be the monster) through its classical signifying system (even if its artistic triumph lay more in its wickedly playful attitude to those codes), *Cloverfield*’s almost non-stop barrage of chaotic imagery makes demands on a viewer that the 1960’s audiences would not recognise. *Psycho* may have been *about* chaos, but its camera tracked forward in linear fashion, always aligned with and serving a classically honed narrative, bringing viewers along with it and positioning them inside a coherent world. The shower murder is a shocker that abruptly dislodges the viewer, the camera stopping briefly at what Mulvey called its “pivotal point” (Marion’s murder, the film’s Barthesian *punctum* embodied in the drop of water that falls from her lifeless eye), before carrying the viewer through to its self-contained *dénouement* (“Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*” 86).

In 2008, *Cloverfield* presents a strikingly similar image: a closeup of the Statue of Liberty’s “lifeless” eye. But to make sense of this image, to place it within the filmic codes of realism along with the rest of the film, the viewer doesn’t have the guidance provided by the continuity of classical film technique; because there is almost literally *nothing* to see in *Cloverfield*’s feigned amateur documentary aesthetic, just as she did when confronted by the blankness of *The Blair Witch Project*, the viewer must fall back on new, culturally-coded, perceptual and real-world correspondences to bestow a legibility on the film that is experientially satisfying rather than narratively coherent and pleasurable.

The familiar generic world of the horror fan is Hitchcockian, at the very least. Conversely, while there is never any doubt that *Psycho* is a studio-produced, self-contained property, the makers of *Cloverfield*, banking on viewers’ ever-expanding
media memory bank and familiarity with a new set of discourses around cinematic realism in the digital age, could display all those “ruptures” that would have before collapsed the realism of a classical film (tape glitches and time-stamped images are prevalent). This kind of film-viewer interaction, as I explained in a previous section of this chapter, has been termed “hypermediacy” (Bolter and Grusin 21); the term describes a sort of postmodern exchange between the viewer and the text as a meta-text. “Our culture,” claim Bolter and Grusin, “wants both to multiply its media and to erase all traces of mediation: ideally, it wants to erase its media in the very act of multiplying them” (5). This double logic of remediation, as I’ve shown, has a deconstructive effect on the horror found footage subgenre, whose key films open up a discursive site linking film and spectator to digital culture and quite often leads to questions on what makes a genre. This site, as I have demonstrated through my analysis of The Blair Witch Project, Diary of the Dead and [REC], allows the spectator a new way of seeing, involving an exchange that gives the impression of authentic generic pleasure while simultaneously offering a comment on that authenticity. Like a hall-of-mirrors, the found footage horror film is spread beyond the edges of the screen frame, englobing the horror fan in a spectatorial relay involving a subtle form of repression. Moreover, the unique enunciative strategy initiated by found footage horror involves a dangerous gamble. Films like Diary of the Dead and Cloverfield, gamble on this idea that horror fans will “go along” with the proffered new media-inflected frights on screen – rather than be “sucked in” to a narratively-alluring slice of classical horror – and remind them what they are missing at the same time.

Cloverfield’s unexplained monster, which suddenly appears in Manhattan’s skyline, has the polysemic qualities that Fredric Jameson attributed to the menacing shark in Jaws (Steven Spielberg 1975) (“Reification and Utopia” 142); but that menace was coming through a sheet of water that stood for the screen, and would fit snugly
any number of theories – Matt Reeves and J.J. Abrams’ behemoth is lost in a hall-of-mirrors remediation (just as an overall theme for Jason Creed’s film, the one point of understanding that might be buried in the incessant media barrage, is impossible to locate because of the rhizomic nature of the reports in Romero’s *Diary of the Dead*) and seems inexplicable and unresolved.

The way in which both films, *Psycho* and *Cloverfield*, begin is a good example of how the latter might still contain the ghostly presence of classical conventions, albeit as a way of establishing distance from them. *Psycho* begins with an aerial shot travelling left to right over Phoenix, Arizona. Titles appear in the middle of the screen: “Friday, December the Eleventh/Two Forty-Three P.M.” It seems like an arbitrary piece of information, offered by an autonomous camera. The shot continues before offering a slight hint of the subjective camera that will come to dominate the film and be the primary tool in the organisation of space, when the camera seems to pause and then pick a hotel window at random before entering it and showing us the interior of the room. In *Cloverfield*, all of these elements are given a media culture reversal. It begins, like *Psycho*, with a title card offering information. However, this information is not inconsequential and contains valuable clues to determining the meaning of what the rest of the film shows: “CAMERA RETRIEVED AT INCIDENT SITE ‘US-447’/AREA FORMERLY KNOWN AS ‘CENTRAL PARK’.” The footage that follows this title card (which itself follows a coded, time-stamped label designating that the tape is now owned by the US Department of Defense) is like a mirror image or reverse shot of *Psycho*’s opening shot (see fig. 48). *Cloverfield*’s opening shot of the tape shows Rob filming the interior of a high rise apartment; he slowly moves towards the window and the shot moves outwards to frame the panoramic view of New York City in the process of waking up. But from the instant the tape starts, the viewer is
getting the POV of the camera; and this diegetic camera is the controller of cinematic space in the film.

Psycho’s mastery of POV begins with the autonomous camera, before then becoming more subjective by aligning itself with, first Marion Crane’s (Janet Leigh) viewpoint, and then Norman Bates’s (Anthony Perkins). Cloverfield’s mostly unwavering POV does show slight movement during the party scene in the first act, where Hud’s (T.J. Miller) control of the camera to chart something unusual (or invisible) going on between Rob (Michael Stahl-David) and Beth (Odette Yustman) (the couple who awaken from a night of romance in the first sequence) results in the camera attempting to emulate the classical code of shot-reverse shot by Hud panning from Beth entrance at the party to Rob’s agitated reaction when he sees her arriving. By containing a scene that actually uses a classical convention to piece together evidence to provide knowledge, the film playfully acknowledges its own appropriation of the codes of classical cinema. The handheld camera roams around the packed New York apartment in an unbroken shot. Beth arrives with a date and the camera racks focus to concentrate on the couple and Beth looking nervous. In the right half of the image Rob stares at the couple. Hud adjusts the camera’s position to show a
conventional eye line match. If the viewer had not already known that Rob and Beth were involved in a secret romance, she would have been “told” about it through conventional cues a split second before Hud realises that there is something odd about their interaction at the party. Another “joke” played at the expense of classical conventions, is Hud’s death scene. Frozen on the spot as the monster looms down at him, Hud is attacked and killed. He falls to the ground, his face conveniently framed in the right foreground of the frame, mere inches away from his fallen camera (still operating). The auto focus continually shifts the focus intermittently, from his face to the leaves of grass that are between him and the camera (see fig. 49).

![Fig. 49. Cloverfield – Fluctuating Focus.](image)

The camera’s light sensor is having difficulty deciding what the shot’s focal point is. There is an authority behind the mise-en-scène; but *Cloverfield*’s enunciative strategies cue the viewer to believe it belongs to Hud’s camera. These “jokes,” included both to disavow the film’s debt to classical cinema and to acknowledge it, can also inform a reading of the film based on the unseen and my argument that found footage collaborates with the viewer to repress classical genre codes. One of the most opaque connections *Cloverfield* has to classical cinema is the intermittent stills that
appear for the duration of one frame when Hud hits the wrong button on the camera or lets it fall. *King Kong*, the most iconic classical monster film from Hollywood’s golden age, is one of the films that are used in this subliminal manner. For most viewers, Kong will remain invisible, even after multiple viewings. Are we to assume that these ruptures are the result of Hud’s prowess with the camera? If it was the Government who included the brief shots, why? Their inclusion signifies a postmodern affectation for unknowability and ungraspable truth.

*Cloverfield*, as *The Blair Witch Project*, *[REC]* and *Diary of the Dead* do before it, represent an aesthetic interrogation of the vastly changed society we are living in today through the tropes of the horror genre. One of the strategies that might help us to “make sense” of this new world of mass media and digital culture, as I have shown earlier, is illustrated by found footage horror’s shifting of the narrative-diegesis threshold to weigh more heavily on the diegesis side. The media-literate viewer’s experience of *Cloverfield*’s claim to authenticity is pushed towards an ambivalent attitude with regards to narrative, and also towards contemplation of the film as a new generic answer or commentary on the classical monster movie that threads the same territory (but with classical style). *Cloverfield* often displays a certain irony regarding its relationship with classical narrative techniques, accompanied by a self-conscious deconstruction of genre. An example of this is contained in the scene immediately following the death of Jason (Mike Vogel), Rob’s brother. Instead of the reaction we might expect, if we are cued to accept the film as an example of convention-dependent realism (perhaps Rob expressing shock and sadness at the tragic event), Rob says, “No! My battery’s dead,” referring to his cell phone. This works as a potential meta-generic moment for the modern viewer trained in new ways of seeing, but a modern viewer who will also be aware of the horror genre’s narrative-based classical history and maybe, to acknowledge the usefulness of Wood’s theory, even liable to repress
unconsciously that history in the act of viewing. The inclusion of its classic movie
stills, almost “subcutaneously” and out of the sight of most viewers, is certainly not a
narrative-based strategy.

The old stories are only required as structural elements to be plundered and
ripped apart and then remapped by digital culture. Wells, discussing how urban
legends could never stand up in the information age, taps into the idea of a
decentralisation of truth. He says that in the information age there is a “relentless
proliferation of open secrets which serve to mask any one dominant paradigm of
significance, stability, and security. Everything appears to be a lie, and the truth
seemingly unknowable” (89). Wells taps into an aspect of digital culture which was
interrogated by the visual aesthetic of *The Blair Witch Project*, namely the power of
the unseen – but he positions this invisibility, ironically, right at the centre of media
proliferation.

This notion of hiding in plain sight, which informs the digital aesthetic of
*Cloverfield*, brings together the unseen power exemplified by the Blair Witch, and the
ubiquity of images and media modalities characterised by the multitude of screens that
permeate the imagery of *Diary of the Dead*. In relation to the third aspect of found
footage’s unique characteristics, namely the weakening of narrative’s central position
of authority in cinema as an institution, it may be rather more difficult to include
*Cloverfield* under such an enquiry without challenge. Many commentators argue that
the overall aesthetic of the film, which often presents abstract compositions on the
screen for extended periods, is merely the background noise of a foregrounded quest
narrative. That opinion, however, does not stand up to scrutiny. When we look at the
important role the unseen plays in the film, and couple this with a mise-en-scène
seemingly created from the choreography of screens within the overall frame of the
composition, it is clear that both these elements actually interact to bring about the
third element (the weakened position of narrative within the overall enunciative plan of
the film).

Circumscribe the film within the parameters of what Jenkins describes as
“trans-media storytelling,” whereby “a story that unfolds across multiple media
platforms, with each new text making a distinct and valuable contribution to the
whole” (95), and the range of cues the viewer calls upon to bridge the gap between the
audio-visual display and her own extra-filmic visual and social experience becomes
vast indeed (9/11 is just one mediation event that lends itself to the film). The film’s
enunciative policy is to ensure that its mise-en-scène is informed by screen culture.
Nearly all of the fleeting glimpses of the monster are images caught on mobile phones
or seen in the corner of the screen on a television set. One of the first depictions of the
creature on screen occurs when Rob and his group go into an electrical goods store.
Passing a row of television sets, the group are startled by a news report containing
video footage of the monster rampaging through New York. Everything is presented to
us through screens; when the group takes refuge in the subway tunnels the threat of
something unseen is suddenly brought into the light when Hud switches the camera to
night vision (I discuss similar scenes in [REC] and Trollhunter elsewhere in this
thesis).

The power of invisibility infects the film at a structural level as well. The story
doesn’t present itself as a finished whole. Unlike any comparable horror film that
depicts an unfamiliar threat to a major city, such as 20 Million Miles to Earth (Nathan
Juran 1957), the creature in Cloverfield is left unexplained (although internet buzz
soon spread that the final images of the film, showing the last “flashback narrative”35
scene between Rob and Beth, contain a clue in the form of something falling from the

35 Found footage horror breaks the classical convention of using the formal device of the dissolve to
enunciate a flashback to an earlier time in the narrative. In Cloverfield this jump back in time is signaled
by a jump cut to indicate that the camera has momentarily stopped recording and is now playing a scene
it recorded at an earlier time.
sky into the sea a considerable distance from the camera). The monster’s fate is undecided, and New York’s status is uncertain (“Site Formally Known as Central Park” provides an ominous clue). The viewer’s satisfaction is constantly thwarted by being offered only partial glimpses of the CGI beast, and heavily “ironised” by dialogue that is echoed in other found footage horror films (as I showed earlier with my consideration of *Diary of the Dead* and *REC*). For example, in the midst of the chaos Rob asks Hud if he is still filming:

Yeah. People will have to know how it all went down.

You can just tell them how it all went down, Hud.

That wouldn’t work. People need to see this.

The irony is that we see without knowing. “Matt Reeves’ *Cloverfield* plays with vision and concealment, staging a game of ‘hide and seek’ between audiences and the monster it promises to deliver,” as North comments (75).

The tentative glimpses offered of the monster, and the constant thwarting of genre audiences’ expectations, allows *Cloverfield* to enter a postmodern discourse based on the status of knowledge in contemporary culture. Modern media culture does not interrogate in search of truth with any real force – it merely replicates. In *Cloverfield*, “one of the best cinematic representations of complete and utter chaos” (Totaro), this lack of knowledge is linked to its enunciative strategies in a very subtle way. The intelligence of the film is somewhat hidden beneath a classical “skin,” prompting appraisal of its undoubted effectiveness to concentrate on its Hollywood heritage. The way the film displays its theme of invisibility, for example, is discussed by Bordwell with reference to the film’s “restricted narration”:

> [Y]ou deny the viewer a wider-ranging body of story information. By contrast, the usual *Godzilla* instalment is presented from an omniscient perspective, skipping among scenes of scientists, journalists, government officials,
Godzilla’s free-range ramblings, and other lines of action. Instead, *Cloverfield* imagines what Godzilla’s attack would look and feel like on the ground, as observed by one group of victims. (“A Behemoth from the Dead Zone” par. 8) Using this kind of restricted narration, argues Bordwell, a film can “build audience involvement” by foregoing an omniscient narrator and creating suspense from the unknown factors of the story. This strategy, often articulated through restricting the point of view to just one or a few characters, offers a more immediate experience to the viewer and, hence, a smooth, untroubled exchange between the film’s authenticity and the viewer’s suspension of disbelief. But the film’s “digitising” of the unseen, in ways that forego narrative altogether, communicates something more profound than merely controlling the amount of information to which the viewer is privy. North gives a more comprehensive reading of *Cloverfield’s* treatment of its monster: referring to the “aesthetic of opacity,” North notes that “[t]he film’s obstructed views extend to the whole fabric of the movie” (76). The film is saying what all found footage horror films are saying: the truth is buried under an ocean of images.

*Cloverfield,* just like *Diary of the Dead,* *The Blair Witch Project* and *REC* – and despite the argument put forward by Bordwell – is clearly the kind of film that could only have been made from within the new media culture, and whose mode of realistic horror is shaped by a dialogue, a dialectic exchange, between that culture and certain tropes of pre-digital cinema. “Digital cinema is something new that gives rise to change, but this change is not a cut-off point from film history,” [emphasis in original] Hadjioannou argues (*From Light to Byte* 4), and *Cloverfield,* as I explained, cannot avoid this dialogic encounter with classical cinema. It is a film that also shifts the emphasis from the dialectic between spectacle and narrative as the locus of anxiety, to its more proper twenty-first century location at the nexus between spectacle, narrative, and the media-rich wider cultural world of the viewer. Manovich outlines
some of these historical resonances, revealing how the flow of the past is still encroaching on film theory in the new media-saturated information age:

In contrast to such totalising realism [in the cinema], new media aesthetics has a surprising affinity to twentieth-century leftist avant-garde aesthetics. Playwright Berthold Brecht’s strategy of revealing the condition of an illusion’s production, echoed by countless other leftist artists, has become embedded in hardware and software themselves. Similarly, Walter Benjamin’s concept of “perception in the state of distraction” has found a perfect realisation. The periodic reappearance of the machinery, the continuous presence of the communication channel in the message, prevent the subject from falling into the dream world of illusion for very long, make her alternate between concentration and detachment. (The Language of New Media 207)

This resonates with the generic irony communicated by Cloverfield.

Manovich’s last sentence could be refashioned only slightly to argue that found footage horror abandons the admittedly classically-constructed notion of horror in favour of concentrating on creating awareness in the viewer of how the monster is framed, or “spatialised,” for her perception. Or, as we saw with both Cloverfield and The Blair Witch Project, how the monster can remain largely unseen and yet still implicate the viewer in the space it occupies outside of the traditional cinematic space. This space, which I posited was behind the diegetic camera, is a site of power for the very reason that the monster’s invisibility can still reach out and connect to the viewer. The idea that the viewer alternates between narrative immersion predicated on the marshalling of traditional cinematic space, and extra-narrative engagement in a phenomenological space when watching films like Cloverfield, is explained by found footage’s status as meta-genre.
To take a wider view, I would argue that the digital culture that generated found footage horror, embodied in the hyperrealist nature of consumer society that Jean Baudrillard argued is characterised by the frenzied stimulation of desire through a pictorial bombardment in the media (*Selected Writings* 169-187), is helping to move the horror genre to a more reflexive stance which allows a more visual culture-literate viewer both to enjoy and maintain a safe distance from its meta-terrors. Classical film rarely departed from its remit of presenting the comforting illusion of “a sensorially consistent world” (De Los Rios and Davis 95). In found footage, this illusionistic quality of the diegetic world is repressed and returned to the viewer in fleeting moments, as my discussion of *Cloverfield* has illustrated.

The found footage genre, then, is an example of a recent filmmaking trend that has led to a “meshing” together of digital-driven cinematic techniques and narratives, both embodying and interrogating a new kind of pictorial reality. This salient fusion of form and content, unsurprisingly, is also providing a challenge to cinema’s creation of illusionistic reality. The diminishing role of narrative, which is almost a code of found footage horror, becomes more pronounced with the increased reliance on the diegetic camera. Taking their cues from a convergence culture rich in remediation, certain filmmakers are now fusing techniques and themes together in a way that might have been dubbed “avant-garde” in a different era of cinema. This almost structuralist approach to mainstream filmmaking – confined to the margins in a pre-digital film culture – is exemplified in the recent work of Michael Haneke, Michael Mann and Abbas Kiarostami; at least, these are a few of the directors who are willing, at the cusp of the shift from analogue to digital filmmaking, to take on digital culture on its own terms and work in ways reminiscent of New Wave filmmakers. Films like *Caché* [*Hidden*] (Michael Haneke 2005), *Miami Vice* and *Ten [Dah]* (Abbas Kiarostami 2002) are using their fundamental digital elements to challenge previous cinematic
attempts at realism. By loosening the hermetically-sealed and subject-positioning world of the classical film, these films are among the first to show a tendency towards a film-based realism that is jettisoning its dependency on classical conventions by finding new ones in digital culture.

The next chapter provides an analysis of a specific found footage horror film. Equipped with an understanding of the contemporary horror genre as a conflicted site of generic identity which I developed in this chapter, I will solidify my argument that the contemporary found footage horror film proposes a new spectatorial regime and a multi-layered experiential engagement to the viewer. The cost is a precariously positioned viewer, frozen at the crossroads of the genre, unsure which direction to take. A filmic text that invites such a response is *Trollhunter*. 
Chapter 2

Case Study – *Trollhunter* (2010) and the Exploration of National Identity Through A Digital Aesthetic

The horror genre in the twenty-first century has provided viewers with various modes of enunciative strategies, not all of them predicated on delivering Carroll’s “art horror” (see previous chapter). Morris Dickstein, for example, argues that “going to horror films is a way of neutralising anxiety by putting an aesthetic bracket around it” (69). While his argument can certainly be applied to the contemporary horror film and its reception by genre enthusiasts, in the previous chapter I explored the manner in which the found footage horror subgenre places yet another bracket around Dickstein’s one. Films such as *REC* and *Diary of the Dead* use their digital cameras to collapse their “frames,” the cinematic spaces of their filmic texts; spaces which are usually separated into normal/natural and abnormal/unnatural categories. I further argued that the representational strategies of this popular subgenre, with the digital camera as a crucial agent, place a much greater emphasis on the alignment of anxiety with the act of looking than did the horror film during the classical era. My argument described the manner in which the media-literate viewer engages with the transformed generic spaces of digital cinema; this engagement, I argued, showed a need for a renewed interrogation of the classical realist theories involving the use of cinematic space in the mise-en-scène.

The act of looking, whether performed diegetically by the film characters, non-diegetically by the viewer, or, more recently, *intra*-diegetically by means of the viewer’s point of view (POV) allied to a narratively-motivated diegetic camera, has provided rich material for the horror genre – both thematically and formally – and
many of the paradigmatic examples of the genre, from the Silent Era up to more recent
examples, place huge importance on seeing and POV. J.P. Telotte, writing before the
found footage horror film centralised the spectatorial address and became an
established subgenre of horror, argued for the cultural relevance of horror films based
on their predilection for emphasising a viewing regime which was predicated on
looking and POV:

Basically, monsters do not a horror film make; rather, the special ingredients
are an emphasis on our perceptual participation in the world depicted, often
accompanied by a “perception imagery,” underscoring the film’s concern with
the manner in which we see the world and our place in it. (“Faith and Idolatry”
145)

This “perceptual participation” provided the foundation of one of the key
claims I advanced in the previous chapter, namely that the digital image encourages a
renegotiation of the generic contract between the horror film and the viewer to include
a more phenomenologically-oriented camera-character-viewer relationship. This
feature of the genre has, therefore, undergone a transformation caused by the use of the
digital camera in ways that I believe indicate a further shifting of the genre’s codes and
conventions; the contemporary found footage subgenre moves towards globalisation
and digital screen cultures – and the relationship between these contemporary social
modes – to provide the horror film with new, more “real,” and almost quotidian,
anxieties. The weapons used in horror films to terrify the contemporary viewer are not

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36 The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene 1920), Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde (John S. Robertson 1920)
(and the 1931 version directed by Rouben Mamoulian), Cat People (1942), Invasion of the Body
Snatchers (1956), Psycho (1960), Halloween (John Carpenter 1978), The Thing (John Carpenter 1982),
The Sixth Sense (M. Night Shyamalan 1999) and Paranormal Activity (2007), for example, all contain
key sequences that centralise the act of seeing and POV.

37 Cannibal Holocaust (1980), released the same year as the publication of Telotte’s journal article, is
often named as the first found footage horror film, but it was not until the release of The Blair Witch
Project in 1999, and its subsequent development as a cultural phenomenon, that enough impetus was
provided to allow the designation of a new horror subgenre.
knives, hatchets, or chainsaws; films such as *Diary of the Dead*, *Look* (Adam Rifkin 2007), *Unfriended* (Levan Gabriadze 2014)\(^{38}\) and *Trollhunter* all suggest that it is digital culture itself, symbolised by the various cameras and visual screens that occupy and sometimes overwhelm their narratives, which provides the current weapon of choice in the genre. As Heller-Nicholas observes:

The pleasure of found footage horror in part stems from spectatorial knowledge that something we rationally know not to be true (the supernatural) can momentarily be reimagined (consciously or otherwise) as “real” because the vehicle in which that information is delivered is one we otherwise trust to provide reliable information. (22)

In addition, as Jenna Ng claims, the current practice of horror films is to include the digital camera in the diegesis, developing a subgenre which presents a visual field that “is now not only the view of something but also something *as viewed*” [emphasis in original] (par. 14).

In the following discussion of André Øvredal’s 2010 film *Trollhunter*, I will apply the theory developed in the previous chapter, placing emphasis on how this Norwegian film reflects many of the ways in which the particular visual tropes of the found footage horror subgenre have impacted on the aesthetics of the filmic image. There are two main strands to the research presented here: firstly, my examination will describe how this film creates cinematic space through the use of its digital technology in the form of the narratively-motivated diegetic camera; and, secondly, my analysis will show how the film uses that digitally-created cinematic space to open up a non-narrative zone of spectatorial engagement where the viewer can interrogate Norwegian cultural identity. The overall aim of these sections is to show how the digital camera

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38 *Look*’s narrative is told entirely from the point of view of dozens of surveillance cameras, whereas the storyline of *Unfriended* takes place completely on the laptop of one of the characters in the film as she exchanges video and text messages with her friends online.
can build and use cinematic space in new ways – ways that move the aesthetics of cinema away from Bordwell’s classical mode (Classical Hollywood Cinema 1-88) but never severing completely the link with that classical style.

In terms of generic characteristics, Trollhunter is representative of a pseudo-, or mock-documentary form that developed from the twin modes of documentary that Roscoe and Hight label the “reflexive mode” and the “performative mode” (29). Both of these modes sought to look self-consciously into the representational schemes of previous documentaries. Reflexive documentaries, exemplified by The Thin Blue Line (Errol Morris 1987) and Roger & Me (Michael Moore 1989), “make use of parody, irony and satire to raise questions for the audience concerning the taken-for-grantedness of documentary’s claim to truth” (32). Trollhunter definitely belongs to the genre which “seeks (not always successfully) to create a space where spectators can enjoy having their boundaries pushed, where our confidence that we know where the lines between fact and fiction lie are directly challenged,” according to Heller-Nicholas (4). Examining the type of spectatorial engagement demanded of the documentary genre, and also of genres that incorporate the genre’s codes, whether for parodic purposes or emulation, Sobchack argues that the immediacy communicated by the film’s blurring of cinematic strategies to represent reality on screen invokes a “documentary consciousness” in the spectator (Carnal Thoughts 261). Elsewhere, she argues that “in its modalities of having sense and making sense, the cinema quite concretely returns us, as viewers and theorists, to our senses” (The Address of the Eye 13). Trollhunter’s visual field invites spectatorial activity which incorporates both a documentary consciousness and a return to our senses.

Returning to the idea of documentary consciousness, the world of Trollhunter provides a test of all three of the spectatorial modes Sobchack adapts from French psychologist Jean-Pierre Meunier. Our attention to the objects on the screen is different
according to whether we are watching fiction (most attention paid), documentary (less attention paid), or home movies (least attention paid). The amount of attention paid is connected to how each genre overlaps with the viewer’s real-world experience: the greater the overlap (home movies), the more real-world experience and memories will take the place of the actual images in the movie so that less attention is required to make the images meaningful. Fiction will require the most attention because there is correspondingly less real-world material that can be drawn from to imbue the images with meaning (“Toward a Phenomenology” 242-246). But *Trollhunter* requires a viewer to link all three modes, I would argue, because its digital aesthetic mixes fiction, documentary and characteristics of the home movie. The film’s status as a mock-documentary adds another layer of spectatorial complexity, “by allowing audiences to enjoy a subversion of their knowledge and adherence to their already fluid subject positions” (Roscoe and Hight 22). At the centre of this confusion of viewing modes and attentive spectatorship is the handheld digital camera, removing the viewer from her traditional disassociated position.

I would like to modify Sobchack’s documentary consciousness idea slightly at this point, to give a clearer picture of the film’s address. As she argues, because we have only partial existential knowledge of objects in a documentary, we must pay more attention to the images, hence a documentary consciousness. For fiction, we have an even greater need to focus on the specific images. But the aesthetics of *Trollhunter* would seem to demand that these two subjective modes are melded in the viewer, resulting in viewer attention being directed mainly towards the Norwegian scenery – traditionally, the site of its very cultural identity. And this will work for an international audience, well-versed in new ways of seeing predicated on the worldwide ubiquity of new media that these genre horror films draw from, just as well as for a Norwegian one. For this Norwegian film’s audience, on the other hand, and for this
thesis, much of its generic and spectatorial pleasures are predicated on the sensorial experience of the digital imagery as imagery.

Rodowick claims that the digital image “is more and more responsive to our imaginative intentions, and less and less anchored to the prior existence of things and people” (The Virtual Life of Film 86). Historically, the photographic camera is tied to the monocular, one-point perspective which was institutionalised by painters during the Renaissance period using a camera obscura. The camera lens, and the viewpoint of the spectator, is thus external to the scene being viewed. The viewer takes up a transcendent position in relation to what she is viewing and remains outside the visual field. Classical cinema, and, in fact, cinema in general, honours this structure; the viewer occupies a disassociated position. The found footage horror film, however, violates the structure. The challenge to classical genre viewing structures posed by the new aesthetics embodied in digital technology is succinctly described by Rombes as a threat “to the fragility of the traditional logic of the image”; moreover, the digital “look” has an amateurish and random visual quality, “as if style was something that reality itself imposed on film” (Rombes 1, 24). All of these tropes are seen in the handheld aesthetics of Trollhunter’s digitally-captured imagery. The film’s enunciative mode demands their presence. My argument posits that the “un-classical” look of found footage, with its “ugly” aesthetic (Rombes 24), is partly responsible for the viewer’s more experiential engagement with its unfolding imagery, eliciting a response that resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s “perceptual faith” (The Visible and the Invisible 28), a phrase that he uses to express our phenomenological experience of seeing the world around us. As a concept that seeks to position visual experience as our most important experiential mode, Merleau-Ponty’s phrase can stand as this chapter’s

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39 There is an informative analysis of the history of monocular perspective in Heath (“Narrative Space” 70-90) and Crary gives a good account of the viewing habits of the spectator under such a spectatorial regime (3-35).
refrain. In other words, *Trollhunter*, despite its fantastic creatures and elements of parody, signals the viewer to examine the film’s digital spaces to locate, not the real world, but a real world; the experiential world of the images, the now of the viewer-film nexus. This experiential aspect of *Trollhunter*’s realist agenda is bound up in the notion of immediacy and communicated through a two-way relay joining film text to viewer: “the real is defined in terms of the viewer’s experience; it is that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response,” according to Bolter and Grusin (53).

In the sections that follow I will construct a theory to explain the viewer’s engagement with the digital images of the found footage horror subgenre through a close reading of *Trollhunter*. The first section will analyse the role of the camera as part of the film’s narrative – the diegetic camera – in creating a collaborative filmic space with the viewer. This viewing subject, aligned with the gaze of the camera, can avail of a more experiential engagement with the digital moving image in comparison with the analogue moving image. My argument will also entail conceiving of a viewer who, despite the spectatorial limitations induced by the diegetic camera, is still a more independent spectator than her pre-digital counterpart. The second section positions the film in a global context. *Trollhunter*’s status as a transnational text, even if a paradoxical one, “speaks” a “double-voiced” discourse; it represents a non-Hollywood genre film that nonetheless digitally “enhances” the codes and conventions of that hegemonic cinema institution to offer the viewer “something genuinely Norwegian” (Iversen, “Norway” 102). Even viewers unfamiliar with Norway, I claim, can engage with the found footage aesthetic and “experience” the Norwegian identity as the film unfolds. Moreover, through its reliance on digital modes of address, *Trollhunter* cleverly uses its diegetic camera to build a nuanced critique of the traditional picture of Norwegian cultural identity.
Trollhunter’s Diegetic Camera: Modifying Spectatorial Engagement

The film’s narrative begins by displaying the following text prior to any images being shown:

On October 13, 2008, Filmkameratene AS received an anonymous package with two hard disks containing 283 minutes of filmed material. This film is a rough-cut version of that material. Everything is shown in chronological order and no images have been manipulated. A team of investigators spent more than a year trying to establish whether this was a practical joke or if the material was authentic. They concluded that it was authentic.

Three student filmmakers from Volda College are shown following a man they believe may be the poacher responsible for the bear carcasses suddenly appearing in western Norway. They discover that Hans, the man they thought was the bear poacher, is in fact employed by the TSS – the Troll Security Service – a secret government agency that wishes not only to keep the existence of trolls a secret, but to keep them hidden from public view and confined to their own territories. We learn that he reports to Finn Haugen, who is ostensibly the head of the Wildlife Board, but is in fact Hans’ superior in the TSS. Whenever a troll breaks out of its territory, Hans must track it down and quickly kill it before anyone sees it; he must then fill out a “Slayed Troll Form” and send it to Finn. He is tired of the job, however, and decides to expose the existence of trolls and the incompetence of the Government’s bureaucracy in covering it up. He leads the crew into the mountainous terrain of Norway, gradually moving north into the frozen tundra, in an effort to determine why many of the creatures are suddenly moving out of their designated territories (the trolls are corralled in vast areas marked off by large electric pylons running in a circle). The students, Thomas, Johanna and Kalle gradually come to see Hans as an unsung “national hero,” doing a thankless but
essential job, and he is last seen in the film heading further north after telling the
students they have got enough footage and should return home.

The film’s plot is a modern mix of Norwegian mythology, cultural identity
facing a crisis of modernism, and clever political satire. Apparently a rough-cut of 103
minutes extracted from footage lasting nearly three times that length of time, and shot
by amateur filmmakers on the Panasonic VariCam 3700 digital camera, Trollhunter
displays most of the aesthetic codes and conventions of its genre: erratic editing that
results in many jump cuts within scenes, shaky frames, inability to retain focus during
some scenes, and a constantly moving portable camera that attempts to keep the
subject within the borders of the frame. Viewing regimes are tested by imagery which
demands close scrutiny; the spectator finds herself scanning the frame regularly to
glean what is important. Kalle, the student in charge of the camera, is seen rarely; and,
as in most other films in the subgenre, it is the camera that usurps the person
controlling it as bearer of the look. The diegetic camera in Trollhunter controls the
viewer’s spectatorial response by possessing the point of view (POV). The film’s
mise-en-scène, like every found footage horror film, is certainly curtailed in what it
can show by the formal limitations of its subgenre: it can show only what the diegetic
camera records – basically, the objects that the character in control of the camera
points it at. Directorial control seems to be with a character within the diegesis, rather
than the actual extra-diegetic director of the film. Ng describes the relationship
between the viewer and the diegetic camera:

Whatever the camera sees is generally what the camera-holding character
chooses to see (and record). Certainly, this does not happen all the time:
sometimes the character is running and the camera is left dangling, or gets
knocked out of focus. Nevertheless, for the majority of the time, the character
and the camera look simultaneously at something or someone. In turn, the
spectator, by sharing their gaze, is co-opted into the film and becomes a participant to the images: she is no longer merely looking at a distance, but actively partaking in the gaze of the diegetic camera and character. [emphasis in original] (par. 11)

However, she adds a caveat to this description: “By converging the camera’s look with the intra-diegetic look, the handheld camera, conventionally celebrated for its mobility and omnipresence, paradoxically becomes restricted, for the spectator’s vision is correspondingly confined by the limited images of the camera in the diegesis” (par. 12).

Despite the limitations of the camera-viewer POV that Ng refers to, I wish to extend her argument to include the possibility that the converging of looks (the camera’s and the cameraperson’s) can provide a more experiential, more phenomenologically-aware spectatorial engagement to the viewer, and furnish her with a certain amount of freedom as a result. In order to show how this awareness might manifest itself during a viewing of Trollhunter, I will compare two scenes from the film, and show that they both use their digital aesthetic consciously to implicate the viewer as part of the diegesis.

Both scenes involve extended appearances of the trolls, the first and last in the film respectively; however, each one offers a very different viewing experience to the viewer. My argument hinges on the final troll sequence achieving a more “classical” address to the viewer than the more digitally-driven experiential engagement allowed by the imagery of the first sequence. I argue that the scenes’ formal digital aesthetic pushes the viewer in different directions of phenomenological engagement. Moreover, the fact that Kalle has been replaced by another cameraperson for the final troll

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40 The intra-diegetic camera refers to the fact that the camera is both internal and external to the narrative. Internal in the sense that it is used by a character in the narrative; external because it is also the camera used in the production itself.
sighting is crucial to the experience of the viewer; Malica, who films Hans’ battle with the enormous Jotnar in the frozen tundra of Northern Norway, is clearly a more accomplished cameraperson and the images in this scene are better composed and seem more professionally lit than Kalle’s work on the first troll sighting. These differences, as I will show, have implications for spectator awareness.

In the first example, the three students have succeeded in making contact with Hans and agree to accompany him at night on a secret mission to catch a troll. Unbelieving at first, Thomas, Johanna and Kalle declare their non-Christian status, cover their clothes in “troll stench,” and wait in a forest clearing while Hans goes hunting. At one stage in the sequence the students wonder if Hans isn’t hiding somewhere nearby and filming them as part of an elaborate joke. The sequence I want to examine begins when they enter the alleged troll area and hang a sign with the prohibitive message “No Trespassing. Blasting Area” on the gate into the forest; almost exactly 12 minutes later Hans turns the troll to stone and the sequence ends.41

There are 84 shots in this 12 minute sequence, giving an Average Shot Length (ASL)42 of 8·5 seconds. This is long by current standards of mainstream cinema style in general, but the shot-length is explained by the handheld amateur characteristics of the subgenre. The most blatant discrepancy between the aesthetics of found footage horror and the classical style is illustrated in this sequence by the manner in which the troll is shown on screen. In classical cinema, it is usual for the scenes of spectacle to be edited in order to achieve a fast tempo in comparison to the other scenes of a film.

41 I use the Alliance Films 2012 DVD release for reference.
42 ASL is used to track stylistic trends over time. Barry Salt introduced the method in Film Style and Technology (142-47). Bordwell institutionalised the method by using it in much of his writing to explain modern, sometimes referred to as “post-classical” film style (Rushton “Post-Classical Hollywood Realism and ‘Ideological Reality’” 15-21; Thanouli 183-96). He established the term “intensified continuity” to describe modern cinema’s tendency towards faster editing resulting in shots running much shorter than before (“Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film” 16-28). In a later comment on the “intensified continuity” style, Bordwell writes “I don’t denounce intensified continuity as such; some films, most recently David Fincher’s fine Zodiac, make intelligent use of it. Still, with this as the dominant approach, the director’s range of choice has narrowed” (“Intensified Continuity Revisited”).
(Bordwell, “Classical Hollywood Cinema” 17-34; Bordwell, The Way Hollywood Tells It 104-12); in Trollhunter, the first appearance of a troll, a spectacular three-headed monstrosity, begins 7 minutes into the sequence – after 65 cuts – and the shot continues for just over 2½ frenzied minutes without any apparent cuts. Despite the quicker tempo of the first 7 minutes (the ASL is 6·3 seconds), this passage contains most of the conventional techniques synonymous with the subgenre: Kalle attempts to keep subjects centred in the frame as Hans’ jeep goes off-road on the way to the forest; the camera is constantly in motion, delivering an image that bobs and weaves before the viewer’s eyes; erratic zooms and quick pans struggle to pick out and frame the characters speaking; both Johanna and Thomas address the camera directly at various points in the sequence; the camera’s night-vision mode is used; Johanna’s sound equipment is often shown in the shot. Nothing like the carefully composed mise-en-scène of classical cinema, most of the shots in the first half of the sequence assault the viewer with rapid movement that is of a different sensorial register to the classical style.

In addition to the digital disruption of continuity techniques and the foregrounding of the apparatus, the creation of cinematic space in this film is governed by a less-than respectful attitude to the classical guidelines. This holds true for the subgenre in general, as I outlined in the previous chapter. One of the crucial components of the classical style, offscreen space, presents the viewer of found footage horror with a problem. Through its representation by means of the diegetic camera, it has a more keenly felt presence-in-absence in these intra-diegetic POV shots than it does under the rules of classical cinema. Burch argues that offscreen space has a “fluctuating existence” (Theory of Film Practice 21), but this does not account for the out-of-field in this recent subgenre. The problem for the viewer of Trollhunter is that objects outside the frame are constantly changing places with objects in the frame,
sometimes which such regularity that the constant visual variation could be said to assign a fluctuating existence to the mise-en-scène itself. The limitation imposed by the borders of the frame, an irrevocable law of classical cinema, is put to the test here. “This strategy of absence,” according to Ng, “is central to the aesthetics of handheld video: to make that which is not visible, and which lies outside the visual field, a constituent—dramatically and logically—of that which is seen” (par. 12). What meaning that can be extracted from this compositional style comes in large part from what the viewer brings to the gaze she shares with the digital camera. This description of viewer activity implies a phenomenologically-grounded viewing subject. The generic contract offered by the sequence cannot be fulfilled without a subjectivity prepared to meet its digital terms.

I will now trace the phenomenological movement of the viewer through this sequence. The co-option of the camera’s gaze in the viewer’s spectatorial engagement with the *Trollhunter* scene confers on the viewer a phenomenological status as diegetic character. The camera operated by Kalle, who is offscreen, tracks behind Hans as they move into the forest. Hans stops, turns around and leans very close to the camera lens. The viewer’s gaze is the camera’s gaze. Hans addresses the camera with dialogue that implicates the viewer as addressee (see fig. 50). Later in the sequence, Johanna will also return the gaze of the viewer, making a comment on vision (see fig. 51). There is a moment when Hans is speaking to Thomas, while the image weaves to keep Hans centred. The speech is completed, prompting the camera to leave Hans and find Thomas. A curious form of suspense ensues as Thomas stays silent. He looks at the camera and then speaks. The viewer’s satisfaction is a result of her participation in an intra-diegetic gaze that compelled Thomas to answer; his reaction suggests that he spoke to appease the camera/the viewer rather than to contribute his part of the dialogue with Hans. The night-vision function is switched on (shot 50 of the sequence)
and fills the viewer’s field of vision; Kalle seems as surprised by it as Johanna is, and the viewer shares the sense of excitement involving a new way of seeing. The appearance of the troll marks the apotheosis of the viewer/camera interaction.

Fig. 50. Trollhunter [Trolljegeren] (2010).

Beginning with erratic zooms, frantically attempting to visualise what is making the trees shake so violently, the spectatorial regime of the viewer is cued to scan the image for evidence, experiencing a shared world through the camera. The camera, for its part, darts in all directions, emulating the actions of human ocular activity. When the troll appears the camera takes off on a wild run; the viewer, tethered to it phenomenologically, has no choice but to follow. The two minutes of shaking visuals, during which Kalle drops the camera once (resulting in a lopsided framing of
his face in medium closeup), presents no problems for comprehension. Digital media has trained the viewer to be comfortable with genre films composed to non-classical standards. Bearing out Rombes’ contention that because the camera is now more mobile than ever, the exceptional moments are when the camera remains still (22), the two most unusual moments in the sequence are the perfectly-composed entrance of the Tosserlad troll (centred, with a steady frame) and the shot of Hans killing it (the troll on the left of frame, with Hans on the right). These are challenging moments for the viewer (see fig. 52 and fig. 53); having adjusted her spectatorial response to the more experiential mode of engagement offered by the film’s generic address – an address predicated on its digital aesthetic involving the diegetic camera – the viewer is confronted by a pair of classically motivated moments.

![Fig. 52. Trollhunter – Unleashing the Tosserlad.](image)

![Fig. 53. Trollhunter – Folklore Meets Modernity.](image)
These classical moments stand out here, ironically, as somewhat incongruous, given that they are well-balanced, smoothly framed shots uncharacteristic of Kalle. Conversely, these shots are overwhelmed by the surrounding digital mode of production, which “condition[s] the kinds of affect the movie generates: their cinematography and editing corral us into certain perceptive modes” (Leyda par. 36). In this early scene, the viewer is indoctrinated into a digitally-motivated alertness, which begins with what Hoberman termed “optical awareness” (43) and develops into a more sustained experiential engagement.

Fig. 54. *Jaws* (1975) – Quint and the Indianapolis.

Fig. 55. *Trollhunter* – Hans and his own “Indianapolis.”

43 An appeal to a psychoanalytic reading of these formal ruptures could illustrate how they might symbolise Wood’s Freudian (by way of Marcuse) return of the repressed thesis relating to the horror genre, with classical cinema here taking the place of sexual energy (“An Introduction to the American Horror Film” 164-200).
The second sequence is much more classical in style. It begins, in fact, directly following a scene which surely pays homage to the Indianapolis Speech scene in *Jaws* (see fig. 54 and fig. 55). Also running approximately 12 minutes (from the establishing shot of the moon in the distance, to the shot where Thomas sees the Wildlife Board vehicles coming towards them), the final troll appearance is marked by assured composition, better control of lighting, and is clearly filmed with a conscious respect for the aesthetic and dramatic possibilities of the shot. All of these improvements are the result of Malica’s involvement in a more classically-informed relationship with the camera than Kalle. She exercises more control over the camera and can anticipate and frame an interesting subject – a skill that seemed beyond Kalle. There are 142 shots in this sequence, with an ASL of 5 seconds, which is closer to the average in classical cinema. There are numerous examples of Malica’s ability to organise shots as if she were conscious of them as “set-ups,” as in the discourse of classical filmmakers, and there is a sense that the mise-en-scène of this sequence aligns itself with the codes of the classical regime. One such example is the opening long shot of the moon, which is replaced by another shot of the moon, this time in closeup with clouds drifting in front of it. These shots are so carefully composed and framed that they could be mistaken for still images if it were not for the movement of the clouds.

The effect of this contrast in aesthetics on the viewer can be seen in the different modes of spectatorial awareness induced by the two sequences. When Malica moves in for an extreme closeup on Thomas’s face after Hans tells him he has probably contracted rabies from a troll bite, and holds the shot for long enough that it registers as a dramatic moment, the viewer can momentarily see the representational strategies of the scene in play. This moment will register for some viewers as less realistic and less experientially immersive than the “shakycam” digital look of the earlier sequence. This is paradoxical; the closeup, as a formal technique, belongs to a
long history of classical realist form predicated on approaches of transparency and invisible continuity, whereas its use here takes the viewer out of the film. In this instance there is less spectatorial awareness of the camera as part of the diegesis and possessor of the intra-diegetic gaze (which is co-opted by the viewer). *Trollhunter* momentarily suspends its impression of what Stephen Mamber calls “uncontrolled cinema” (5-22), which disrupts the film’s connection to documentary conventions of realism and at the same time suspends the intensively active and experiential relationship between the viewer and the digital imagery. Moreover, *Trollhunter*’s status as a comedy-horror, or parodic film text, far from preventing any kind of engagement with realism beyond a fraudulent one, actually allows the film to collaborate with the viewer in a critique of cinematic realism. The claim that parodies offer “telling suggestions as to the importance of conventions” (A. Tudor, “Genre” 6) is illustrated by many moments in this film’s last sequence.

The actual encounter with the final troll displays a self-conscious awareness of American popular cinema, but this time inflected with tropes from the culture of video games. Framed through the TSS cabin window, the Jotnar, standing 200 feet tall, functions as a “boss” character; Hans, already given superhero status by Thomas in a straight-to-camera monologue only minutes earlier, is represented here as the archetypal classical protagonist described by Joseph Campbell. Mixing enunciative strategies in this way indicates a digital age, media-literate spectator. Malica “directs” the battle. She keeps the creature centred in the frame and zooms in for a powerfully

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44 In “The Obvious and the Code,” for example, Raymond Bellour discusses a scene from Howard Hawks’ *The Big Sleep*: while a typical viewer might suggest that the segment in question – where Philip Marlowe and Vivian Sternwood are driving to Geiger’s house after they escape from Canino at the garage – has two or three shots at most, it contains twelve. Bellour argues that twelve shots are required “to secure the economy of this segment” (7). This “economy” practically defines the classical system. “Undoubtedly,” Bellour continues, “that economy was designed not to be perceived, which is in fact one of the determining features of the American cinema” (7).

45 Mamber refers to the introduction of lightweight cameras in the 1960s, which led to greater hand-held mobility and facilitated an overhaul of the stylistic choices available to the documentary filmmaker.
affective closeup. The viewer will notice that she stays some yards behind the others, obviously to find the best camera position for dramatic purposes. In the first half of the film, Kalle wanted images as information; Malica, in the second half, has more artistic motivations. This dichotomy represents an ambivalence hidden in the film’s formal features, revealed as an unwillingness to make a complete break from the horror genre’s classical heritage. There is a formal tension in the shot showing Hans getting out of the jeep as it is chased by the troll, while the intra-diegetic gaze of the camera follows him close behind; this means that Malica too gets out of the jeep, her aesthetic ambitions to get the perfect composition conditioned, formally, by the handheld aesthetic. When Hans confronts the Jotnar to deliver the kill-shot, the scene is classical in its composition. The “invisible” continuity style of shot-reverse shot editing is used to show Hans walking away from the students to confront the troll. The film cuts to a reverse shot of Johanna and Thomas watching him. There is a long shot of Hans killing the creature, framed between Johanna’s head on the left and Thomas’s on the right. The mechanics of this series of shots suggest that Malica is responsible for the classical resonances rather than Filmkameratene’s rough cut.

The overall editing strategy employed in the film, which we must attribute to the Filmkameratene team who created the rough cut from the original found footage, elicits an initial confusion in the viewer until Malica’s active agency is allowed for and seen as a conscious ploy on the part of Øvredal to provide two contrasting film styles in the first and second halves of the film (with the dividing line coming, not at Kalle’s death, but shortly after this point, when Kalle’s broken lens is replaced by Malica’s new one). Throughout the film there are numerous jump cuts; sometimes mere microseconds are missing, and at other times larger gaps as a result of the editing. Gary Rhodes explains the effect of non-classical editing practices seen in films such as *Trollhunter*:
Editing is yet another area in which audiences have become acculturated to a different and arguably rougher style than the fictional films seen in most theatres. What might be described as both a less fluid system of pacing and a less fluid use of continuity editing marks the visual style of many documentaries. The former occurs at times due to in-camera edits, as in the case of war footage quickly broadcast on television without the luxury of time to edit it. The latter commonly occurs in verité documentaries which capture an event, but generally without the luxury of multiple cameras and camera angles. Changes in angle and composition on a single camera means that part of an event is lost, even if only a few seconds worth; the result when edited lacks the flow of continuity. (58)

Under a certain Deleuzian logic this editing strategy gives rise to the irrational cut,⁴⁶ which joins images together only as “disconnected spaces” (Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine 178). In classical cinema, by contrast, the cut is a rational interval and “the guarantee of continuity and commensurability, both in the extension of the referent into an image and in the linking of one image to another in causal chains” (Rodowick, Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine 184). In the found footage horror film these links are severed, and what the viewer is forced to think in the interstices between Trollhunter’s irrational cuts is the Deleuzian “whole” the film’s images are extracted from: the 283 minute version of Trollhunter – the second “ghost” film, as it were, is the Deleuzian whole in this case; the other film existing “underneath” the released film, supposedly found by the film-based company called Filmkameratene AS.

⁴⁶ In Deleuze’s Cinema II: The Time-Image, the author describes how the movement image was challenged by the time image after World War II, and how joining of images together became based on principles of disjunction and randomness. See Rodowick (Gilles Deleuze’s Time Machine), Bogue (Deleuze on Cinema) and Pisters (The Neuro-Image) for some interesting explications of Deleuze’s ideas on editing.
and now haunting the erratically-edited sequences which make up the subsequent
government-sanctioned release.

Analysing the editing strategy with agency and cultural identity in mind, I
would argue that Malica, by using her own in-camera cuts, is a more powerful agent in
this section of the film than the agents of bureaucracy and the government (the
Filmkameratene production company); the film, purely through its formal use of
digital aesthetics in tension with lingering classical cues (in this case, focusing on the
aberrant cuts demanded of a diegetic camera), illustrates how Malica, as a
representative of the Muslim immigrants living in Norway, uses her digital presence,
her agency through the camera, to rise above the petty bureaucracy and a government
struggling with modernity. The production company obviously made the decision to let
many of Malica’s sequences remain untouched, and she is allowed to speak for herself,
as it were. By focusing on Malica’s skill in this last passage in the film, her “voice” as
a filmmaker (rendered through Trollhunter’s digital aesthetics) adds its support to
modern Norway’s multicultural society and offers a critique of the traditional view of
the country as steeped in mythology and rural landscapes (I will examine this aspect of
the film’s digitality more thoroughly in the next section).

The first troll scene, which I examined earlier in this section, has a number of
aberrant cuts that join shots which seemingly have no logical – or narratively
motivated – relationship. There is one lengthy fade to black, which seems
unmotivated, either dramatically or technically. The viewer might be forced to ask why
the Filmkameratene technicians decided to include this moment after editing the
original footage. At other times the viewer is left wondering if the jump cuts are
inserted by the students or the result of camera malfunction. The final troll scene, as I
discussed earlier, is filmed by a more skilled camera operator. There are a few cuts,
such as when Hans is walking over to deliver the final blow to the Jotnar, which must
surely have been decided on by Malica herself because it fits in nicely with the aesthetic of the film from the moment Malica becomes the camera operator.

Fig. 56. *Jurassic Park* (1993) – Classical Resonances.

At the same time, this tension between modernity and tradition is also played out in purely formal terms: the clash between digital and classical cinematic registers reveals reluctance on the part of the filmmakers to embrace digital aesthetics fully and
become a true post-classical film. Øvredal’s answer to a question on the film’s influences, which singles out a particular shot reminiscent of *Jurassic Park* is revealing in this respect (see fig. 56 and fig. 57):

That was an homage. I love that shot in *Jurassic Park*! But also, it was a practical thing because while we were shooting inside the car, we have to shoot inside the car because that’s where the camera is. And [when] we turned around we couldn’t see out the window… (qtd. in Eggertsen)

If Dixon is correct, referring to Cocteau’s description of cinema as a “ghost language” and arguing that “the 21st century has given us a new ‘ghost language’ with its own rules, ciphers and grammar” (par. 8), then Øvredal’s answer indicates that genre directors, even ones outside of the American system, are still not willing to move too far beyond the classical sphere of influence. Or it may be the case that the digital aesthetic of the film has a relationship with classical aesthetics that Bolter and Grusin would describe as “translucent” (46). Some remediation, they claim, does not involve erasure of the old media by the new: “Microsoft, for example, wants the buyer to understand that, yes, she has bought an encyclopedia, but it is an electronic and improved one. The borrowing might be said to be translucent rather than transparent” (46). It may be that, for certain viewers, *Trollhunter*’s digital technology “covers” the classical nature of the film like a translucent sheath. But even if Øvredal is reticent to shake off that American influence, he does manage to use the digital camera as a means of uncovering the real Norway in the peripheral spaces of the image. These spaces, which often draw the viewer’s gaze away from the giant mythical beasts made real, are the subject of the next section.

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47 The debate concerning whether the use of digital technology in film means cinema has entered a post-classical age has never been settled one way or the other. For interesting arguments from both sides of the debate see Manovich (“What Is Digital Cinema?”), Eleftheria Thanouli, Bordwell (*The Way Hollywood Tells It*) and Richard Rushton (“Post-Classical Hollywood Realism and ‘Ideological Reality’”).
“Something Genuinely Norwegian”: Globalisation Becomes Glocalisation in *Trollhunter’s* Digital Spaces

In this section my aim is to show how *Trollhunter*’s diegetic digital camera, as the crucial feature of the film’s formal and generic strategies, actually explores Norway’s national character through its digitally-captured mise-en-scène. Similar to other found footage horror films produced outside of the United States, such as Spain’s *[REC]* series, *Trollhunter* is involved in an unusual relationship with its own genre conventions; required to balance generic codes and tropes imported from popular American cinema, with the requirement – often state-sanctioned – to reflect Norway’s national identity, *Trollhunter*’s commitment to reflect national culture is not so much hindered by the influence of American films as it is sometimes driven by them (see fig. 58). In the context of Irish cinema, Barry Monahan describes the benefits of small national cinemas “engaging dialectically with historically developed and inherited mainstream cinematic systems” (“Playing Cops and Robbers” 45), and Øvredal is clearly aware of the value of incorporating rather than rejecting outright the established genre codes and conventions of popular cinema. The three student filmmakers are

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Fig. 58. *Trollhunter* – Undermining Documentary Realism.
clearly aware of American cinema, and Thomas even namechecks Michael Moore, effectively aligning their project with Moore’s hugely popular exposés of American gun culture and George W. Bush’s presidency during the 9/11 terrorists attacks in *Bowling for Columbine* (Michael Moore 2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore 2004) respectively.

In fact, the digital “look” of the film, owing much to the mise-en-scène of *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield* (but more indebted to the classical and fledgling digital pleasures of Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park*, according to its director), can act as a unit of exchange in the globalisation of genre for the viewer invested in the horror film. Again, the fundamental mode of viewer engagement, accentuated through the use of a diegetic camera, is a key strategy in the global reach of this particular genre film. I am in agreement with Joseph and Barbara Anderson, who argue that the films which attempt to find mass audiences in different geographical locations should rely more on an experiential mode of address than a cultural one: “It is not our purpose,” state Anderson and Anderson, “to argue for a privileged status for the classical Hollywood style, but to point out that the problem of accessibility in motion pictures is not merely a matter of culture. It is more fundamentally a matter of perception […]” (348). I will explore this idea and hope to show how the intra-diegetic nature of the camera in found footage horror films is very adept at “charging” its realism with a palpable sense of place that, in the case of *Trollhunter*, does indeed communicate something genuinely Norwegian.

Much of the literature on the global and local interplay of genre cinema concentrates on a film’s content rather than any prolonged discussion on the role a film’s formal strategies might play in such an exchange. Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment concentrate on narrative:
[c]hanging patterns of narrative organisation and structure create opportunities for a wider range of engagements as the audience for films becomes both more globalised (in terms of standard Hollywood production and distribution) and more localised (as national and regional production continues to cohabit – albeit often unwillingly – with the Hollywood film). (x)

In one of the few articles to date that examines *Trollhunter* in terms of its relationship to transnationalism, it is claimed that the film “transcends the borders of a singular nation state, engendering a subject matter intended to mobilize a global audience” (Moffat par. 6). The film joined a small group of Norwegian films that were successful abroad: films such as *Insomnia* (Erik Skjoldbjærg 1997) and *Dead Snow* (Tommy Wirkola 2009). Each of these films, to a large extent, owes its success to the emulation of American genre conventions. *Trollhunter* also belongs to a group of films, which includes *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright 2004) from the UK and the Irish films *Boy Eats Girl* (Stephen Bradley 2005) and *Isolation* (Billy O’Brien 2005), that Monahan argues “work through, and expect the audience to enjoy, a dialogue with genre conventions” (“Attack of the Killer Cows!” par. 3). This dialogic engagement is facilitated by the films’ capacity to “acknowledge implicitly a level of spectator sophistication and the ability to recognise the genre play and the referencing of mainstream generic language” (Monahan, “Attack of the Killer Cows!” par. 3).

Conversely, Katie Moffat downplays the formal reasons for *Trollhunter’s* international impact and argues that its global success is due to the universality of its themes:

The subject themes, while they appear to bear a national weight, could ultimately be translated globally. This is the reason why Øvredal’s found footage convention is so effective; it is instantly identifiable and therefore significant on a transnational scale, helping to bring these themes to a global audience. (par. 5)
I would argue that there is an opportunity missed here to explore in more detail how the film’s found footage aesthetic itself helps to sell it to an international audience. Describing the film’s use of the narratively motivated camera as “instantly identifiable,” without actually extending this notion further and exploring the ramifications of such a claim, overlooks the implications of the experiential engagement with Norway offered by the camera’s incessant and unwavering POV. In Moffat’s own view, the conventions of the horror subgenre are merely a container for the film’s themes. This premise overlooks one important strategy that the film uses in the service of transnationalism: the found footage aesthetic aligns viewer identification more with the camera itself than with any particular character in the film. The camera, while it might often struggle to keep the characters within the frame, never fails to capture the overwhelming Norwegian landscape. This environment, filled with magnificent fjords and snow-capped mountains, takes on the status of a character – perhaps the most important one in the film – by virtue of its overpowering presence within the mise-en-scène. The viewer, aligned completely with the camera’s POV, is immersed in the Norwegian landscape throughout the film.

Norway has a unique municipal cinema system, due mainly to the Cinema Act of 1913, which made film exhibition a locally-controlled and public enterprise. Municipal councils issued licenses to cinemas for all public showings of films within their local jurisdiction. This meant that there were no private-owned cinemas in the big cities, such as Oslo and Bergen. And according to Gunnar Iversen, “being a local institution in the true sense of the word, a municipal cinema is thus seen less as a commercial enterprise and more as a cultural service institution, as part of cultural life” (“Norway” 107). I give this historical perspective because Trollhunter’s ability to

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48 One important factor to consider is that the municipal cinema system actually did not help in the production of Norwegian films – at least, initially. It was only because Norwegian films which
address both a national and a more culturally-diverse international audience is certainly partly due to Norway’s unique cinema system. During Norwegian cinema’s early years, the most successful filmmakers were the ones, like Tancred Ibsen and Arne Skouen, who mastered the Hollywood classical style. Describing one of Ibsen’s popular films, Iversen writes, “It resembled any film from Hollywood, but still contained something Nordic” (“Norway” 112).

Because much of Norwegian culture is story-based and rich in folklore, popular genres became the most viable option for filmmakers who wanted to make genuinely Norwegian films and reap some measure of financial return. The classical simplicity of Hollywood, unsurprisingly, seemed to provide the most attractive template for producers and spectators alike. But this local-global relationship came with its own set of problems, and many Norwegians in the film industry felt that their country’s identity was being suffocated by American genre tropes. When in the 1970s Norwegian filmmakers began to look elsewhere for cinematic models that might be successful in the Norwegian context, a spate of intellectual or “idea” films (as Iversen called them) was produced, but they made little impact at the box office, and filmmakers once again adapted the more commercially-attractive American models. From the 1980s onwards “there have been several production cycles of genre movies in Norway, producing movies that use genre formats from the American film industry and at the same time try to exploit these genre formulas in a Norwegian context” (Iversen, “Learning from Genre” 261). The international success of Orion’s Belt (Ola Solum and Tristan de Vere Cole 1985), and Pathfinder (Nils Gaup 1987), did finally

emphasised national character became so popular with Norwegian audiences that small support was offered by the municipalities (setting up the production company Norsk Film A/S was the first step). This changed in 1948, when the state became involved and Norsk Film A/S became a joint state/municipal venture. In 1950, the state production system made film production a national project and guaranteed continuous domestic film production. The goal was to reward artistic films; but this was largely a failure, and it was changed in 1955 to help more popular films.
place Norwegian cinema in a global context, and yet some Norwegian film
commentators felt that to become transnational these films were compromising their
sense of what it was to be Norwegian, with the occasional shot of beautiful scenery as
the only marker of their cultural identity.

This kind of cinematic national identity crisis was not limited to the Norwegian
context; the small nations of Europe who wished to build a successful film industry,
both economically and culturally, were all faced with the “elephant in the room” that
was Hollywood. For example, Duncan Petrie, writing about Scottish cinema in the
early 1990s, echoes some of the criticisms aired by those Norwegians unhappy with
the direction taken by Norwegian cinema at this time:

The emphasis is placed on the creation of a cinema rooted in narrative-based
storytelling derived from Hollywood film practice, coupled with an emphasis
on market-driven production strategies. This not only drives up costs but also
fails to address the more pressing cultural and social questions to which an
indigenous Scottish cinema ought to be committed. Indeed the bigger the
budgets, the greater the necessity that films “work” internationally, the less
they are able to address the specificity of the national culture concerned. (163)

Nevertheless, I would argue that Norwegian cinema at this time had some success in
integrating Hollywood-driven aesthetics and production practices to an overall
cinematic design whose main purpose was to promote the country’s indigenous
culture. Ironically, Norwegian filmmakers proved most adept at this delicate balancing
act by staying within the confines of genre cinema. Audiences were changing, and
filmmakers addressed the shifting demographics by finding ways to explore their
country’s cultural makeup with the aid of popular genres. Moreover, through an usual
dialectic involving the popular, that is to say Hollywood inspired, and the specific
(relating to Norway’s rich cultural traditions), Norwegian films could still honour the
kind of ideal national film culture that Colin McArthur claimed should be “manifestly rooted in the society from which it comes” (qtd. in Petrie 163). In the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, a new wave of younger filmmakers, collectively known as “Norwave” began producing genre films for younger audiences. Changes in the Norwegian state support system, which now favoured those films expected to draw a large audience, also encouraged the emergence of a genre known for its adherence to classical simplicity (even if its evolution would suggest a more complicated relationship to its classical roots).

The first Norwegian horror film was released in 2003. This was Pål Øie’s *Dark Woods* (2003), which initiated a spate of similar Norwegian genre films. Sabine Henlin-Stromme describes this development as a completely new turn in Norwegian cinema: “not only does it introduce a new genre into Norwegian cinema, it importantly proposes a new Norwegian way to represent nature as wilderness in film. In so doing, these films offer a social commentary on Norwegian identity as initially constructed by national Romanticism” (96). *Dark Woods* was followed by *Cold Prey* (Roar Uthaug 2006), which itself led to two sequels. Very much indebted to the American films *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Evil Dead* (Sam Raimi 1981), these films exemplify the global concern for the imbalance between nature and humans, but they also represent nature more specifically, in a more local context. But while Henlin-Stromme sees a certain amount of anonymity in terms of a sense of place in these horror films, a loosening between the Norwegian regions and their cultural meaning in the way these places are represented – as she says, many of the horror films at this time could have been set anywhere in Norway, as far as an international audience was concerned – *Trollhunter*, in contrast, is very keen to give the viewer a sense of specific Norwegian place.
The film begins in Volda, goes to Fjordane County, then Jotunheimen, then Dovre, as Hans and the students travel north to track the trolls – and the audience is told where they are through the intra-diegetic camera (see fig. 59 - fig. 62). When asked what are the most important aspects of Norwegian cultural and social nature conveyed by his country’s cinema, the Norwegian Film Institute’s Jan Erik Holst replied, “nature and landscape as storytelling tools” (qtd. in Grecu and Leon 109) – and these are very important tools for Øvredal. Comparing Norwegian films with those of Sweden’s Ingmar Bergman, Holst says that everything happens inside in Bergman – they are mostly chamber films – whereas everything happens outside in Norwegian cinema. “They even made a kind of film grammar from this,” he adds (qtd. in Grecu and Leon 109). In one sense, the film
grammar employed by Trollhunter is carrying on the tradition of the popular local travel films that were produced in the 1920s, which communicated what Nina Witoszek termed the “Norwegian nature meme” (qtd. in Sørensen 50-57), only in this case inflected with generic tropes on a more global scale. To this end, Øvredal wanted his film to reflect Norwegian folk legends but “with big set pieces” and used as inspiration The Fairy Tales of Asbjørnsen and Moe, a very popular collection of Norwegian folktales from the 1850s (see fig. 63 and fig. 64). Looking out over the Norwegian landscape, Thomas strikes a self-conscious pose with the branch of a tree and asks Johanna if he looks like “that painting,” referring to Theodore Kittlesen’s Soria Moria, one of the more famous illustrations used in Asbjørnsen and Moe’s collection of tales.
When released, *Trollhunter* received mostly positive reviews, and set box office records in its own country. It was successful internationally, making a healthy profit on its 3.5 million euros budget. It joined a small group of indigenous films that were successful outside of Norway; and each of these films, to a large extent, owed its success to its effective emulation of American genre conventions. However, it is its *digital* interrogation of Norwegian identity that most sets *Trollhunter* apart from the other films listed; the film’s diegetic camera bears the most responsibility for its status as an example of glocalisation in action. 49

The found footage aesthetic, as I have shown, aligns viewer identification more with the camera itself than with any particular character in the film; although Hans is a

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49 In film, glocalisation has to do with the unpredictable ways in which local audiences appropriate especially Hollywood products with a global reach but also, more interestingly, with agents’ creative assimilation and modifications of the very conventions or regulations that these films exemplify.
droll presence throughout, he is literally dwarfed – as are the trolls themselves – by Norway’s magnificent fjords and mountains. So, in Trollhunter, because we are aligned more with the camera than the characters, with the camera constantly framing the Norwegian environment, it is this environment that takes on the status of a more important character in the film than any of the students or even Hans, by virtue of the intra-diegetic nature of the camera. Ellen Rees suggests that the Norwegian emphasis on nature is predicated on a weakened conceptual opposition between nature and culture, resulting in the phenomenon of “domesticated wilderness” (48): geographical areas that would be considered as wilderness in most other European countries are “understood in the Norwegian context as domestic spaces with long histories of human occupation” (Rees 49). In The Origins of the “Regime of Goodness,” Witoszek expands on an argument first put forward by Terje Tveit that Norway is a “regime of goodness,” suggesting that the country’s cultural history, encompassing events as far back as the Viking age, impacts directly on the ethos of the present (13). She describes contemporary Norway’s “bucolic modernity” (190), with nature, rather than civilisation, as the crucial element to the country’s cultural identity. It is into this mixture of nature, tradition and modernity that Øvredal steps with Trollhunter.

Rural romanticism may have largely disappeared from Norwegian cinema in the 1930s, but Norwegian films still portrayed the landscape as important, albeit in a much more realistic vein (Iversen, “Norway” 113). It is important to put Trollhunter in this context: it is a more realistic take on Norway – the director is critical of the old romantic notion of Norway in favour of its modern and multicultural development. This can be shown even in the portrayal of the trolls, which are taken out of their mythological and romantic context and given a solid and plausible scientific basis within the film’s diegesis. During an interview with Meredith Woerner, Øvredal stated that he was on the side of the trolls (par. 15), allowing for a reading of the film as
supporting the multi-cultural society Norway has become in the twenty-first century. It is clear that the depiction of the trolls here is steeped in modernity; Øvredal offers a critique of modern Norway’s willingness to trade on its out-dated traditional cultural identity by taking his trolls out of their mythological origins and placing them in a contemporary environments and giving them a scientifically plausible biology (within the terms of the found footage realism the film creates). A scene in which Hilde, the veterinarian who assists Hans, explains why the trolls turn to stone when exposed to UV light is played straight and makes a complete break from the troll narratives contained in *The Fairy Tales of Asbjørnsen and Moe*.

In *Trollhunter*, the notion of domesticated wilderness is rendered through the diegetic camera, with the landscape of the country often tending to be too “big” to capture within the frame. This surfeit of environment, often rendered sublime by the camera (the image of Thomas that emulates Kittlesen’s painting being one example), is problematic for a filmmaker who desires to offer a criticism of Norway’s traditional cultural identity in favour of one that embraces modernity and multiculturalism. This clash between the old and new Norway, in a film that is comprised overwhelmingly of exterior scenes, leads to odd tonal moments. The scene where the group drive through the frozen North, with the unvarying environment broken only by a series of huge electric pylons – a symbol of modernity among Norway’s “domesticated wilderness” – is rendered slightly strange when Hans comments that he finds the pylons “quite pretty,” but Hans’ professed liking for the giant pylons can be read as a positive reaction to modernism in Norway. This might seem as if Øvredal is here grasping at straws, finding a way to include a positive comment on modernity, in a film which mostly uses Norwegian landscapes that haven’t changed all that much in many centuries to create its mise-en-scène. I would argue, however, that because the Norwegian landscape is so unescapable in the film, it is the formal strategies employed
in its very representation that gives Øvredal a way of aesthetically dealing with the film’s tradition versus modernity conflict. And this conflict is given its most salient cultural emphasis in the contrast between the film’s two diegetic camera operators and the two differing contemporary Norwegian socio-political philosophies they symbolise.

One cultural difference between Kalle and Malica is their respective religious affiliations, and the film uses its diegetic camera in a clever way to refract the country’s attitudes to religion through the lens of digital culture. Kalle, the camera operator in the early scenes of the film, is the controller of the POV; but he is also the only one of the group who admits to be a Christian (Norwegian trolls hate Christians), which marks him in one way as a signifier for a national identity with its roots in historical Romanticism. He is linked to a mythical and rural Norway of the past through his use of the camera, and set up as ill-at-ease with the country’s modern cultural identity – so awkward in the modern setting that he actually overlooks the ties to tradition and the past which the landscape represents. In his hands the camera wavers and drifts across the beautiful Norwegian scenery, as if indifferent to its attraction. Kalle, as a signifier of Christianity in the film, is shown to care little for contemporary Norway, and can only engage with it in a haphazard fashion through his inattentive camerawork. Existing for the most part as a disembodied voice in the film, his relationship with the Norwegian landscape is one of total mediation, with the camera acting as a device preventing him from real contact with the environment. Even when terrified by the giant three-headed Tosserlad troll, he loudly refuses to give up the camera to Thomas, suggesting that the camera offers a hiding place from the world around him.

When Kalle is killed by the trolls and Malica takes over camera duties, a striking consequence is the immediate improvement of the camerawork; Norway’s
beauty is now communicated through a camera lens that seems to have developed a more aesthetic and artistic conscience. Culturally, Malica is a Muslim and, through her attentive framings and composed mise-en-scène, she is signified as much more comfortable in the new modern multicultural Norway. Unni Wikan describes the plight of young Muslim women in modern Norwegian society: “They have been disempowered, deprived of competences and responsibilities they enjoyed ‘back home’, in part because men – with the blessing of the Norwegian authorities – have usurped their position. It happened in the name of culture, and for the best of reasons” (62). But Trollhunter empowers Malica by representing her cultural agency through her competent relationship with the diegetic camera. Her comfortable relationship with the diegetic camera instils her with a cultural agency that positions the filmmaker’s use of digital technology as significant in terms of representing cultural identity. Unlike Kalle, we see a lot more of Malica as she often lets Thomas or Johanna do the filming – and she is much braver in the presence of the trolls (the single species she encounters is the huge and imposing Jotnar). It is through this subtle overlap of form and content, as an example of how the digital aesthetic can be used to enrich the film’s thematic concerns, that marks Øvredal’s film as transcending its genre restrictions to become culturally relevant and also transnational in its reach by allowing the viewer to take part phenomenologically in the debate on national identity played out in the different digital aesthetics displayed in the film.

Apart from aestheticising the clash between traditional and modern culture in Norway, the diegetic camera is also used as a weapon against bureaucracy and covert governmental activity. Hans sees the camera as a means of protest. The Troll Security Service is an inept government body which keeps the public unaware of the existence of trolls; Hans, the “fixer” who we come to respect through the way the camera gradually uncovers his heroic status, will expose the TSS as a secret organisation run
by incompetent bureaucrats. In one scene Finn Haugen purchases bears from a group of Polish hunters to hide the evidence of the trolls, and the way these two representatives interact with Kalle’s camera is another example of digital aesthetics used to uncover tensions involving cultural identity. Both Haugen and the main Polish worker address the camera directly. The “Polsk bjornejeger” (Polish bear hunter) welcomes the presence of the camera with smiles and clearly sees the occasion as an opportunity to “perform” his role as an unquestioning employee of the TSS. “Why problem make when you no problem have you don't want to make?” he asks. Haugen, on the other hand, is offended by the camera and demands that it be switched off. Through this simple contrast, Øvredal sets up the enunciative strategy of using the camera POV to suggest the clash between a multi-culturalism that is progressive enough to embrace both traditional and modern aspects of Norwegian culture, and a rigid Norwegian governmental bureaucracy that is unwilling to compromise between both. Moreover, because the viewer, both Norwegian and transnational, is put in a voyeuristic position by her alignment with the camera in the diegesis (Ng par. 14), she can experience a sense of Norway’s cultural identity through the immediacy of the camera’s address.

In turn, the spectator, by sharing their gaze, is co-opted into the film and becomes a participant, actively partaking in the gaze of the diegetic camera and character. The spectator, by virtue of her shared gaze in shots where the characters in *Trollhunter* address the camera directly, becomes the addressee, and is thus invariably drawn into the action of the film. It is a spectatorial position that involves exploring Norwegian cultural identity as if from the inside – and, if the contemporary viewer is as media-literate as many theorists have argued, exposure to the digitally-driven

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50 Although it represents the tip of the iceberg, a selection of major theorists and their work on this topic would include Manovich (*The Language of New Media*), Binkley (“Reconfiguring Culture”),
aesthetics of *Trollhunter*’s diegetic camera will enable her to uncover an elaborate critique of the nation’s notion of itself. Alison Landsberg argues for cinema as a whole offering an experiential site which allows “people to inhabit subject positions and pasts through which they might not themselves have lived and to which they have no ‘natural’ connection” (14); the digital aesthetic of this film invites the notion that knowledge and experience have a very close relationship, with *Trollhunter* in fact offering a site for the viewer wherein experience – or experiential, phenomenological engagement – *is* knowledge. As Ng argues, our relationship with the camera in found footage films results in our becoming part of the diegesis, because “the film is for us” (par. 14).

When, in “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” André Bazin referred to the photograph’s ability to capture concrete reality “in all its virginal purity,” but also emphasised that an image photographed is “an hallucination that is also a fact” (“Ontology of the Photographic Image” 166-70), he alludes to a peculiar characteristic of the objective nature of photography which a number of theorists have taken up in relation to the digital image: namely, the subjective dimension inherent in objective photographed imagery. This chapter described a viewing subject who Bazin would surely have recognised. The found footage horror film, as a generic container for the digital image, illustrates how the spectator is asked actively to interrogate representation in the age of new media and ubiquitous imagery. *Trollhunter*’s diegetic digital camera, foregrounding the apparatus and the inner workings of cinematic construction, renders the spectator very conscious of the constructed nature of the film and how this might relate to the digital world we now inhabit. The fact that the film is

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Hadjioannou (*From Light to Byte*), Bolter and Grusin (*Remediation*), Rodowick (*The Virtual Life of Film*) and Mulvey (*Death 24 X a Second*).
a self-conscious construction is overshadowed by the enhanced spectatorial capabilities offered by the diegetic camera.

However, the evident transformation in viewer engagement with genre-based digital imagery is not confined to the diegetic camera in the horror subgenre typified by *Trollhunter*; less obvious displays of digital-based aesthetics and the apparatus, in films that on the surface seem to retain a strong classical aesthetic, can allow the spectator to become actively conscious of a film’s digitality. Even though it seems on the face of it that there is little difference to the viewer between watching an analogue or a digital film, which Rodowick counters by arguing that phenomenologically there are differences which are still hard to anticipate (*The Virtual Life of Film* 112) – Michael Mann has used digital capture on his last three crime thrillers; I will argue in the next chapter that Mann, unique among genre filmmakers, “pulls the spectator out of this imprecise, yet pregnant force: the ordinary imaginary of the cinema” (Bellour, “The Pensive Spectator” 10) and asks her to see the criminal milieu in a new light.
Chapter 3
Digitally Captured Criminals – The Hyperreal Image in the Films of Michael Mann

Digital video created images of a nighttime Los Angeles with a greater sensitivity to available source light than was possible with 35mm equipment; the twinkling, hazy lights in the background of many shots and the dark outlines of palm trees that figure against the night sky throughout *Collateral* are two of the aesthetic effects generated by the technology. (Rybin, *The Cinema of Michael Mann* 170)

The crime genre, much like the horror genre, depends on making a sensorial “captive” of the viewer, immersing her in a thrilling world which emphasises striking and often highly stylised imagery. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, high definition (HD) digital cameras, used to capture images on videotape or hard drive, have become the preferred image-capture method for a number of filmmakers working within the crime genre. David Fincher, Steven Soderbergh, and Michael Mann are the most often cited filmmakers who have favoured digital over film cameras (Gallimore, “Digital Lives”; Giralt; Willis) – but only one of them, Mann, actively uses the digital camera to create imagery that has a purposively different look to photochemical based film imagery and is helping to define digital cinema in the twenty-first century. “The current trend,” Paul Wheeler argued in 2009, “seems to be to produce high-end cameras that can use all the lenses that were so familiar to those who used to work with 35mm film or those who loved the kind of picture they grew up with in the cinema of their youth” (282). Some argued that digital cinema was not much different from analogue film; in 2002, John Belton suggested the “film look” was in no danger from
digital (“Digital Cinema: A False Revolution” 99-114). A decade later in 2012, Belton was still insisting “on understanding digital cinema as a means of simulating codes and practices associated with 35mm film in order to duplicate its ‘look’” (“Introduction: Digital Cinema” 131). Adam Gallimore was more cautious: “Like screen ratios, for instance, digital cinema is not external to what we understand; it may change how films affect us but does not always announce its presence, making these results harder to discuss but also worthy of greater investigation” (“‘We Ain’t Thinking About Tomorrow’”). And while it may be true that “although digital processes have produced many fascinating stylistic innovations, there is a strong sense in which what counts intuitively as an ‘image’ has changed very little for Western cultures for several centuries” (Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film 11), Michael Mann’s digital crime films contain images that have a different “look,” a distinctively non-filmic texture, which sets them apart from those other crime films that are celluloid based (or made to look like they are celluloid based). This chapter will argue that Mann’s application of digital technology to the crime genre is certainly worthy of investigation.

Mann invites viewers to engage critically with genre in a new way: to recognise themselves drowning in the sea of new media. What is the purpose of that one single moment in Miami Vice when everything stops and Sonny Crockett (Colin Farrell) gazes out on the ocean, if not to act as a Brechtian device, a narrative punctum which teases generic codes and invites the viewer to step back from the narrative and reflect on the shot? The term “image,” as Maya Deren reminded us, “presumes a mental activity” (63). The HD digital camera is the dream of the “camera-stylo” realised (Astruc)\(^5\): a device for creating images that paints the characters into the frame and blends them with the hyperreal environments. “The channels through which culture flows,” according to Binkley, “are crystallising into intricate lattices fleetingly

\(^5\) Originally published in L’Écran française on March 30, 1948, as an article titled “Du Stylo à la caméra et de la caméra au stylo.”
populated by effervescent informational atoms” (119), and this resonates with the
global flux which Mann’s characters must negotiate through the zeroes and ones of the
digital image. I will argue, in fact, that globalisation and late capitalism have had a
major impact on Mann’s cinema, both in their formal and narrative attributes. “Mann’s
work,” argues Sharrett, “depends on some of the realist conventions both of the plastic
arts and the European cinema to create an elegy for civilisation as it enters the realm of
postmodernity” (“Elegies on the Post-Industrial Landscape” 254).

Mann has singlehandedly created a new subgenre of the crime film through the
deployment of the high definition digital camera to capture his films’ images. As the
only filmmaker to date who has accepted the digital look as his primary visual
aesthetic in his genre work, Mann is the main focus of this chapter. His crime films are
set apart, aesthetically, from others that use digital technology in their acquisition of
imagery. While some filmmakers have given quite comprehensive answers to
questions regarding their reasons for changing from photochemical based film to
digital capture, the conversation rarely includes a discussion of the aesthetic properties
of the resulting images involved in such a move (as I discussed in relation to Side by
Side). This chapter will also present an analysis of the high definition crime genre in
terms that seek an expansion of the debate concerning the digital “challenge” to film
which concentrates on the “look” of the digital image itself and the impact of this
decidedly non-filmic look on the spectatorial regime of the viewer. As I did in the two
previous chapters, I will argue that the viewer of digitally-captured crime films must
enter into a modified viewing regime and indulge in a more sensuous engagement with
the image. As my argument showed in the previous chapters, there is now a meta-
awareness on the part of the viewer when viewing the digital image represented in
popular cinema; this awareness simply must have an effect on how the viewer engages
with these new images. I have argued that there is a more sensuous engagement with
the image. It is, in one sense, an aestheticising of the image on the part of the viewer – a spectatorial desire which is concentrated on the diegesis rather than on the narrative. And even though in Mann’s work narrative performs a crucial role in the filmmaker’s quest for a digitally-styled realism and a more experiential engagement from the viewer, films such as *Collateral* and *Miami Vice* attain some parity with found footage horror by occasionally centralising diegetic concerns over narrative needs. Mann’s films are unique genre films in that they seek to immerse the viewer completely not in a compelling narrative but in a sensuous and luminescent diegetic world constructed with digital cameras. Although the protagonists of Mann’s crime films inhabit hyperreal environments, their characters attain a realism that the digital camera has the ability to render in subjective terms. Mann’s extraction of his characters’ subjectivities by means of style has often proved divisive, drawing accusations that the existential angst of the men is at odds with the generic narratives they populate, and this disconnection impacts negatively on the films’ overall success. However, and somewhat ironically, this criticism overlooks Mann’s tendency with each new film to organise genre conventions and narrative structure loosely into delicate frameworks within which the fusion of character and environment affects the viewer in ways predicated on the primacy of the digital aesthetic over the narrative. For some viewers this affective reaction will be a negative one.

Jonathan Rayner notes that Mann’s relationship with classical genres is “unusual, and in some ways unrepresentative, within the context of contemporary Hollywood” (4). There is an unusual expressive dimension to Mann’s work that might be the result of his exposure to European art cinema; his is the type of cinema that invites a more thoughtful engagement from viewers. Moran argues that “we cannot split off the subjective domain from the domain of the natural world as scientific naturalism has done. Subjectivity must be understood as inextricably involved in the
This line of thought provides a way of understanding how Mann can manage to position his realist project in a dialectical relationship with his stylistic manoeuvres to visualise the interiority of characters in generically-motivated narratives. It is this aspect of Mann’s cinema, how it stands as a representation of the “opening out” of genre cinema, particularly the western and crime categories – those once self-contained art-forms, according to Warshow (qtd. in Hess 49) – that have attracted both criticism and applause in almost equal measure. Mann himself downplays the categorisation of his work in generic terms, suggesting that his work is indeed informed by the phenomenological idea of the suffusion of subjectivity with objectivity:

It’s irrelevant and neither accurate nor authentic to compare my films to other films because they don’t proceed from genre conventions and then deviate from those conventions. They proceed from life. For better or for worse, what I’ve seen and heard and learned on my own is the origin of this material. Maybe the film medium by nature spawns conventions, because we all build on what’s gone before, but the content and the themes of my films are not facile and derivative. [emphasis in original] (qtd. in Feeney and Duncan 21)

Arising from the interplay between digital imagery, the fracturing of generic boundaries in these films, and the whole notion of the subjective-objective dialectic, a more important argument will be developed, both here and in the next chapter, which focuses on the digital aesthetic of Mann’s crime films as an invitation to the viewer to engage at a more phenomenological level with the image. It is this altered spectatorial address, in fact, that connects Mann’s digital crime films with the found footage horror subgenre: both types of genre film demand a more sensorial and sensuous engagement.

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52 In “Movie Chronicle: The Westerner,” Warshow writes, “In the deeper layers of the modern consciousness, all means are unlawful, every attempt to succeed is an act of aggression, leaving one alone and guilty and defenseless among enemies: one is punished for success. This is our dilemma: that failure is a kind of death and success is evil and dangerous and – ultimately – impossible.” (qtd. in Hess)
on the part of the viewer. This type of engagement has the effect of allowing the viewer to see Mann’s characters less as lawmen and criminals and more as characters who blend into the digital landscape and are lost in a hyperreal sea of technologically-driven media and surveillance culture. Mann’s men are subjectivities lost in the pointillist luminescence of neon-lit cityscapes.

Before examining his pre-digital and digital crime films in separate sections, I will first evaluate the “wholeness” of Mann’s work across the digital “divide.” I argue here in favour of Mann’s digital capture crime genre films as an extension, and ultimately a realisation, of the cinema project he began with *Thief* (Michael Mann 1981), the coherence of which, as I will briefly indicate, can be identified by reference to his themes, use of music to denote character, and intertextuality. My argument will describe how Mann’s crime films have always inflected the rules of their genre, displaying a broader “fit” between elements of style and subject matter than observed in classical examples (Martin 91), even if, as Rayner argues, Mann’s early crime films work “to reiterate the premise and broaden the territory of the classical gangster film” (62). Conversely, Mann’s digital crime films have placed a much heavier emphasis on the formal properties of the image itself – and in ways predicated on the use of digital technology in the creation of the image – while at the same time retaining certain aesthetic linkages with his pre-digital crime output. Moreover, Mann’s digitally captured images not only represent a distinct break from the “film look” of chemical-based film images, but the uniquely digital visual aesthetic displayed by these films sets them apart from other digitally-captured crime films as well, challenging the expectations of viewers. Mann’s digital films seemingly do not do what they are supposed to do. Wheeler illustrates the problem posed by Mann’s use of high definition cameras to audience preferences:
High Definition is an electronic recording medium that takes on two challenges. First it should be able, either in a purely digital way or by printing the recorded images onto a conventional piece of film, to give the audience in a cinema, even the largest cinema, pictures with which they are familiar and that appear to have at least the technical quality, mainly assessed as definition, that they have come to expect. (3)

While David Fincher has been as vocal as Mann concerning his preference for shooting his crime films with digital cameras (Holben, “Cold Case” 34-35), both *Zodiac* (2007) and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2010) are Fincher films that use the technology to emulate the look of traditional film stock. Mann, by contrast, is the only filmmaker working in the crime genre who disavows the film look when shooting digitally. His goal is to achieve a look in his crime films that should not be mistaken for actual film, with an important part of this goal depending on viewer acceptance of the spectatorial “challenge” presented by the films’ digital aesthetic. The test for genre fans lies in Mann’s stylistic approach: unusual for films that are categorised as belonging to the popular crime genre, Mann’s films “display stark, painterly qualities that relish the plasticity and transparency of the cinematic image” (McMann 141).

Moreover, similar to the found footage horror film, Mann’s most successful crime films place an importance on the act of looking and the technology of surveillance in the information age, and these elements impact greatly on his style. Complementing the importance of looking as spectacle, the role of action in Mann’s cinema emphasises his obsession with the visual over the verbal in his work: “action becomes elucidation for expression otherwise absent or opaque in dialogue,” Rayner notes (9). There is a phenomenological dimension to Mann’s stylish handling of action as well. In both *Heat* (Michael Mann 1995) and *Miami Vice*, their key moments are

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53 *Zodiac*’s images are captured by the Thomson’s Viper FilmStream HD digital camera; the Red Epic is used on *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. See Holben (“Cold Case” 32-47).
rendered in slow motion to bracket a crucial decision made at the spur of the moment, in a split second of interiority, before a character erupts into action (Hanna’s split-second preparation as he takes aim before killing Michael Cheritto [Tom Sizemore] in Heat, thereby bringing the film’s central shootout to a close, and Sonny’s similar preparation before dispatching Coleman [Tom Towles], one of Jose Yero’s henchmen in Miami Vice, provide examples of this technique).

If visuality and the scopic drive are the key areas that Mann’s cinema explores across all of his crime films, there are also explicit connections between his work before and after the move to digital. Such allegiance to certain thematic elements across the entire length of his career, and surviving the bold formal move to digital capture, reinforces the idea that Mann is conscious of his filmmaking as an overall project in the making. But digital capture allows him finally to place more weight on the one aspect of his cinema that anchors all other interests (and places his digital films in a dialogue with found footage horror) – the formal properties of the image itself.

Mann develops his highly stylised images to bring to the surface the interior subjectivities of his characters. The sense of hopelessness and existential angst at the heart of both Thief and Manhunter, which one critic sees as a point of contact with 1970s horror films (Sharrett, “Elegies on the Post-Industrial Landscape” 255), continues to infect the digital crime films. Aligned with this bleak outlook is the lack of distinction between private and public spaces, or interior and exterior (Jean-Baptiste Thoret’s article “The Aquarium Syndrome: On the Films of Michael Mann” argues this point). In Thief, for example, Frank (James Caan) finds the same kind of tensions on the outside as he encountered in his eleven years in prison. This blurring of boundaries is still there in the later digital films. Crockett in Miami Vice finds it almost impossible to separate his employment as an undercover cop from his private life. The cab is presented as Max’s (Jamie Foxx) own interior space in Collateral, a safety zone
away from external reality (as soon as he sits behind the wheel and shuts the door, all external sounds from the depot stop and the regular beat of a non-diegetic piece of rock music takes over). But this space is violated when Vincent’s (Tom Cruise) first victim crashes through the windscreen as Max is flicking through BMW brochures and dreaming about the future.

The distinction between Self and Other is blurred in Mann’s work, the crime films in particular. *Heat* posits an uneasy bond between two opposites; *Public Enemies* contains a scene where John Dillinger (Johnny Depp) walks into a police station, sees his wanted picture on the wall, and asks one of the policemen grouped around a radio who is winning the game. Mann himself, commenting on *Public Enemies*, talks about “the same species, but on different sides” (referring to Dillinger and the man who kills him, Winstead). Betrayal of self, argues Timothy Shary, is the worst crime a Mann protagonist can commit (56).

There are very strong intertextual elements to Mann’s cinematic world which carry over into the digital films, reinforcing the idea that Mann’s entire oeuvre represents a single-minded project that is always in development. One of the ways each of the films shares a common thematic core is through the use of music. Mann uses compositions by Moby, The Kronos Quartet, Lisa Gerrard and Brian Eno, among others, to create a soundscape that works with the visuals to convey a particular mood or emotion. Mann often uses music, as F.X. Feeney and Paul Duncan point out, to “abstract the action, move it into the timeless” (139). The music plays into an elaborate intertextual practice in the films which can be linked to a reliance on the viewer to make connections across films, and Mann’s films rely on this kind of audience participation more than most. Both *Heat* and *Public Enemies* make use of the same
Apart from sharing musical cues, those two films also feature scenes where protagonist and antagonist meet face to face. Further enhancing the idea that Mann is building an entire world, almost self-reflexive in its inwardness, the films indulge in repeating narrative tropes of this kind on a regular basis. Frank, the safe-cracker in *Thief*, has a mentor in jail. Okla (Willie Nelson) is a father figure who passes on his code of honour to the younger man. In *Heat*, Neil adopts his mentor’s one golden rule as his own. Dillinger helps his mentor, Walter Dietrich (James Russo), break out of jail in the opening scene of *Public Enemies*. Frank carries around a photo montage of his dream life in *Thief*; Max’s dream of a limousine rental business is symbolised in his photograph of the Maldives islands in *Collateral*. Moreover, there are lines of dialogue that make it across a few of the films: *Manhunter* contains a scene depicting Molly (Kim Greist) telling Will (William Petersen) that “time is luck”; Neil (Robert De Niro) tells Eady (Amy Brenneman) something similar; the saturated, dynamic digital landscape of *Miami Vice* uses a privileged quiet moment to show Isabella (Gong Li) repeating Molly’s line to Crockett, a man who doesn’t have a past or a future, just a *right now*. In these moments of intertextuality Mann is clearly addressing a viewer who he knows will be familiar with his work; it is a filmic exchange similar to the literary one between novelist Stephen King and his “Constant Reader.” As Mann develops his digital aesthetic film by film, he expects the viewer to keep up, in effect to acquire an “authenticity” and rapport with the digital aesthetic which will allow her to accept the filmmaker’s aesthetic experiments on their own terms.

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54 Elliot Goldenthal’s piece “Hanna Shoots Neil” from *Heat* was reused for the opening prison escape sequence in *Public Enemies*; the Einstürzende Neubauten track “Armenia” was used in both *Heat* and *The Insider* (Michael Mann 1999).

55 In the sense that the film is a constant blur of movement, from shot to shot, scene to scene – the film rarely pauses for breath.
Mann’s filmography, then, clearly displays an overall cohesion and integration of thematic material. Despite the huge formal leap taken with the experimental use of digital technology on *Ali*, and the full adoption of digital capture on *Miami Vice*, Mann’s cinema is still dealing with the same problems that concerned him during the beginning of his career: notions of the Self, male identity in crisis, and the cultural upheaval wrought by surveillance technology. However, the abandonment of film in favour of digital textures, effectively changing completely the aesthetic look of the films, means that Mann’s favoured themes are now played out in vastly different environments. The reasoning behind this radical move can be traced through the development of Mann’s visual style in his pre-digital crime films; an examination of the formal properties of the image in *Thief, Manhunter* and *Heat*, I would argue, will make it clear that the digital image was less a choice than an inevitability for this filmmaker.

The remaining material presented in this chapter is comprised of two main sections. In the first section, I analyse Mann’s pre-digital crime films, arguing that visual aesthetics are key for this filmmaker and his cinema is undoubtedly a “cinema of images” (Dzenis, “Cinema of Images”). The following section examines Mann’s digital crime films and discusses the ontological and epistemological differences between Mann’s digital images and those of his pre-digital period; I will show that the visual aesthetic Mann achieves in his digital period represents a fulfilment of the cinematic objectives he set himself with the three earlier films that I discuss in the first section of this chapter. Mann’s overall objective, I argue, focuses on finding an aesthetic of the image that balances realism and character subjectivity as the twin poles of a hyperrealist cinema.
Visualising Crime: Mann’s Pre-digital Aesthetic as a Digital “Becoming”

Mann’s important thematic concerns about the image, which are displayed in all of his digital work, began to take shape in his previous pre-digital films, and consequently it will be necessary to analyse this earlier work as the precursor to the aesthetic that Mann finally arrives at with his digital films. In fact, the development of Mann’s aesthetic, as the films move from analogue to digital modes of capture, resonates with Sean Cubitt’s description of the history of modes of vision leading to “the gradual dispersal of subjectivity through the body and into its linkages with the machinery of perception” (Digital Aesthetics 30). Mann’s crime films, particularly those that use digital capture, are concerned with subjectivities in flux under the influence of new media technologies.

Style is vitally important in Mann’s work. It is focused on surrounding his characters, usually men, with visually striking, if indifferent environments, usually huge American cityscapes such as Los Angeles and Chicago. His characters are always in danger of becoming decentred and subsumed by the landscape – a very postmodern notion that reveals the core Mann idea of human subjectivity engulfed and rendered incomplete by urban structures. A Mann protagonist fights a battle for supremacy with the very environment he occupies. Collateral, one critic notes, “is a film about the beauty of the postmodern urban landscape as exemplified by Los Angeles’ anonymous incarnation, which concurrently figures the moral universe of its characters” [emphasis in original] (M. Anderson par. 9). The indifferent landscapes of modern cities, spread out “non-places” to use Marc Augé’s phrase (i), become breeding grounds for modern alienation in Mann’s world. In the digital productions the very architecture of the city comes to threaten individual identity itself.

Richard Combs, providing “an assessment of the interim nature of Michael Mann” (10), argues that the abstract style of Mann’s mid-career crime genre films,
*Manhunter* and *Heat*, lends those films a sense of incompleteness. Both films possess an anterior quality which Combs characterises as a “becoming” (10). Discussing *Manhunter*, Combs uncovers a tension in the relationship between Mann’s style and the normal constraints of mainstream cinema which would remain a noticeable feature of his work up to and including his digital crime films: “What Mann is working towards here is a true modern epic, an epic of experience that wouldn’t have to be extrapolated from the mechanics of plot, genre, or even theme, but would – rather like the hero of *The Jericho Mile* [Michael Mann 1979] – float free of those constraints” (16). However, Combs seems unaware of a very important aspect of Mann’s work. This is his treatment of cinema as a project whereby filmic imagery is used to uncover the world “anew” for the viewer, and, contrary to Combs’ argument, I would argue that Mann needs the “constraint” provided by genre to throw his images into relief for the viewer and offer her new visual experiences. There is the sense in a Mann crime film that genre and visual aesthetics have entered into a dialectical relationship, engaging in a conflict that is resolved only in the active participation of the viewer. In that sense, Mann’s filmmaking goals are very much in line with Sergei Eisenstein, a filmmaker who influenced Mann’s approach to cinema. In an early interview, Mann listed his influences: “Stanley Kubrick. Eisenstein. Dziga Vertov. And ‘Kino Eye’. I mean that’s really my limitation. So my approach to films tends to be structural, formal, abstract and humanist” (qtd. in Fox 20). Like Eisenstein, Mann is not interested in capturing a given, concrete reality; rather, his target is to allow the viewer access to a new reality. And, similar to Eisenstein, there is a tension underlying Mann’s style in its negotiation with realism. Mann, just like Eisenstein, engages in rhetorical filmmaking. Eisenstein, like Mann, was keenly interested in the link between sound and image, and how, as Cubitt explains when discussing Eisenstein’s film practice, “[t]he gradations of colour, even more than those of the grayscale in black and white film, could be recruited for a
cinematic art that would be capable of totality” (*The Cinema Effect* 114). But totality for Mann could not be achieved through an attainment of realism: this is too limited a vision, because realism for Mann is multi-dimensional, involving a stylistic transforming of concrete reality and the input of the phenomenological spectator. For Mann, realism is essentially hyperrealism.

In a similar fashion to Eisenstein’s understanding, as he wrote in *Film Form*, that an intellectual montage was essential to realise his film project (72-84), Mann is drawn to the hyperreal image – the image formed in the tension between a sensuous style and filmic realism – as the essential component in his own film project. Bazin argues, “[o]nly the impartiality of the lens can clear the object of habit and prejudice, of all the mental fog with which our perception blurs it, and present it afresh for our attention and thereby our affection” (*What Is Cinema? Volume 1* 18); Mann currently uses digital capture, in conjunction with the crime genre, to create new visual experiences for the viewer based on a more phenomenological engagement with the hyperreal imagery on the screen. But this does not represent such a huge change in his stylistic mode: from the beginning of his career Mann’s work has always emphasised the importance of the image for its own sake, and how it can be made to embody a cinematic realism which owes more to the filmmaker’s stylistic inflections than to concrete reality:

Images are central to the cinema of Michael Mann. They tell so many different stories, trying to get to the very heart of characters and their perceptions. They are about a love for the texture of the medium, for its material, plastic qualities. They also self-reflexively make us think about the way those images have been constructed and how we might read and interpret them. This is filmmaking that delights in its own processes. (Dzenis, “Cinema of Images”)

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Steven Rybin agrees on the importance of the image in Mann, and the crucial role of the visual aesthetic in the construction of narrative: he describes the emphasis Mann places on visual aesthetics through “the compelling manner in which these movies extract small details from a world and then amplify them, marking certain images and sequences as stylistic events that suddenly ask for our attention in the midst of a story, rather than as the strictly economical, self-effacing vehicles of a narrative” (The Cinema of Michael Mann 2). I would argue that these images, which “ask for our attention,” call for an engagement which both links them to narrative but also warrants a conscious contemplation of their status as images.

In “Representation, Illusion, and the Cinema,” Richard Allen discusses the twin concepts of “seeing-in/seeing-through” and “twofoldedness” as they relate to our engagement with images. These twin theoretical concepts are predicated on the notion that two aspects of an image can be viewed simultaneously:

A photograph has a pictorial surface and aspect that may enter into our perception of the object photographed in a meaningful way. In this sense, in photographs as in paintings, we can look at the object depicted and contemplate the object through the way it is depicted. However, because of the transparency of the image – the causal relationship the photograph bears to the object photographed – we are also able to view the object without registering the way it has been presented to us. The transparency of the photographic image does not preclude our simultaneous perception of the two aspects of the photograph.

(23)

Allen reserves the use of the term “twofoldedness” for representational paintings rather than photographs, arguing that when we look at a representational painting, we

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56 Allen uses Richard Wollheim’s terms “seeing-in” and “twofoldedness” here. Wollheim described these terms in Art and Its Objects (“Seeing-as, Seeing-in, and Pictorial Representation” 205-26) and Painting as an Art (43-77).
are conscious of the manner in which the surface has been intentionally marked (by the painter) in order to produce an image of the object. Seeing-in captures the essential “twofoldedness” involved in our experience of representational paintings and drawings: “when seeing-in occurs, two things happen: I am visually aware of the surface I look at, and I discern something standing out in front of, or (in certain cases) receding behind something else” (Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* 46). “Seeing-in” explains the fact that when we look at an object in a representational painting, our experience of how that object is represented necessarily enters into our experience of the object. In a photograph, Allen argues, “the object depicted has a sense of presence that is lacking in traditional forms of pictorial representation” (22). The photograph, unlike the painting, is transparent. A photograph is a recording, a mechanical imagistic imprint. But because of the transparent qualities of the image we are also able to view the object and be oblivious to the way it is presented to us. Allen explains the key difference between our engagement with photographs and representational paintings as follows:

The term “seeing-through” highlights that the pictorial surface of a photograph can enter into our experience of a photograph, but it does not enter into our experience in the same way a representational painting does. The difference between seeing-through a photograph and seeing-in a painting may be understood in the following way: The “twofoldedness” that characterizes our experience of a representational painting is intrinsic to our perception of the object of the painting. *We cannot see the object of a representational painting without seeing the way it is presented to us.* The term “seeing-in” captures the intrinsic or necessary character of this twofoldedness. In contrast, the relationship between our perception of the object photographed and our perception of the photograph as a photograph, particularly, those qualities that
index the intention of the photographer, is extrinsic or contingent. The photographer may encourage it, but it is the spectator who chooses to apprehend simultaneously the two aspects of a photograph. [emphasis added]

(23)

The argument that we cannot see a representational painting without seeing the way it is presented to us is a strong one. Applying the idea of twofoldedness to Mann’s digital cinema, I would argue, can help us to understand the “double register” that defines our engagement with Mann’s images. It is probably more apt to call the experience of viewing one of Mann’s crime films in terms of a “fluctuating register,” one that involves both seeing-in and seeing-through. This seeming contradiction, one that is indicated in Mann’s own comments quoted earlier, when he discussed his approach to filmmaking as both “abstract” and “humanist,” is hinted at in his pre-digital work but this fluctuating visual experience becomes an important element of his digital films. The contrast between “seeing-in” imagery and “seeing-through” imagery in the films is demonstrated in the difference between immediacy and hypermediacy. We have already seen how found footage horror films’ realist illusion is created through the interaction of these concepts in terms of remediation. Bolter and Grusin explain immediacy as “the notion that a medium could erase itself and leave the viewer in the presence of the objects represented, so that he could know the objects directly” (70). Immediacy also describes the psychological state of the viewer as one involving feelings of authentic experience. Hypermediacy, on the other hand, is predicated on opacity: “The viewer acknowledges that she is in the presence of a medium and learns through acts of mediation or indeed learns about mediation itself” (Bolter and Grusin 71). Psychologically, the viewer will have a feeling that the experience of the medium is itself an experience of the real.
In the pre-digital films this twofoldedness occurs during moments when Mann’s style reaches expressive heights. There are shots in all three of Mann’s pre-digital crime films which compel the viewer to register the manner of the image’s representation as if it was a representational painting. Rather like Mulvey’s viewer who goes from an unselfconscious “I see” to the self-consciousness of “I see!” (Mulvey, *Death 24 X a Second* 149), watching a Mann crime film can cause us to experience a moment of “self-conscious deciphering.” Many compositions have a graphic structure to them, which brings us back to Mann’s alignment with Eisenstein as a creator of rhetorical cinema. “The theme or image dictates a graphic structure that provides the correspondences,” Cubitt states, analysing Eisenstein’s cinematic objective on *Alexander Nevsky* (Sergei Eisenstein 1938) (*Digital Aesthetics* 42). It is a rule of filmmaking that Mann himself follows with his first film and remains truthful to it throughout his development as a filmmaker.

![Fig. 65. *Thief* (1981).](image)

*Thief*, Mann’s debut theatrical feature, opens with a scene that captures this sense of the arresting image as more of a driving force than the narrative in the film. The camera prowls the rain-swept back alleys of Chicago, the camera capturing the
luminosity of the neon-lit buildings at night. Mark E. Wildermuth asserts that this opening shot “unexpectedly anticipates the world Ridley Scott would create on film later in *Blade Runner*” (56). The camera then lingers on Frank (James Caan) breaking into a safe, highlighting the “monastic deliberation” of the typical Mann protagonist (Rayner 67). The long static shot emphasises form over narrative (see fig. 65). From this very early stage in Mann’s career, in this one shot alone, we get a sensuous, pictorial representation of a key theme in his work: work. Frank is highly skilled, knows it, and it is what drives him. All of Mann’s protagonists share these characteristics, and all of them will become enmeshed in an existential battle between their male-dominated world of work and a longed-for domesticity. The tragedy of the Mann protagonist is that he will always side with work and favour it over relationships – and Mann’s approach is always to find a way to depict this internal struggle through the texture of the image. Many of the shots in *Thief* advertise Mann’s predilection for highly-stylised, hyperreal images (see fig. 66), and it is such visual expressiveness that characterises Mann’s early crime films.

Fig. 66. *Thief* – Hyperrealism: “Seeing-In” and “Seeing-Through.”
*Thief* falls into the genre category of neo-noir; as Mark T. Conard notes, “neo-noir filmmakers are quite aware of the meaning of noir and are quite consciously working within the noir framework and adding to their noir canon” (2). The care with which Mann composes his neo-noir imagery is noted by Rayner:

The urban environment is represented as a purely serviceable and yet pictographic grid of evenly disposed light and darkness, with a geometrically determined architecture of bridges, concrete pillars, car parks, and lockups, and parallel lines of gleaming streets and lights extending to the vanishing point.

(68)

Fig. 67. *Collateral* (2004) – The “Equal Weight” of Character and Environment.

At this stage in his development, Mann is still honouring classical rules of characterisation and plot. At the same time, however, he is composing images that are almost self-consciously proclaiming Mann’s total commitment to the image as an image. Even though Frank is framed within sensuous and hyperreal images (as shown in fig. 65 and fig. 66), his identity and force of personality are still aestheticised
classically. If we compare the two shots from *Thief* with a shot from *Collateral* (see fig. 67), I would argue that there is a markedly different relationship between characterisation and visual aesthetics in the later film. Ironically, it might be expected that the shot from *Collateral* would display a characteristic of twofoldedness, because it is clearly a digital image. But Mann reverses our expectations here, showing an acute understanding of both the image’s functionality and the potential of both classical and digital composition to engage the viewer.

Fig. 66 shows Frank’s neon-lit garage in *Thief*. The scaling of the image reduces Frank to a tiny figure in longshot, occupying a position just to the right of the middle of the frame. Cars surround him and fill the lower half of the frame, with overhead lights and neon signs occupying the upper half. Initially confronted by this image, the viewer, ironically, might immediately register it as constructed image, one which invites a “seeing-in” reaction. Despite this “busy” composition, however, Frank is still the focus of the viewer’s attention. Classical pictorial codes are adhered to, drawing the viewer’s eye to Caan in the middle of the screen. The immediate spectatorial reaction from the viewer is replaced by an engagement predicated on the transparency of the image (because it is stitched into a sequence that follows classical codes of continuity) and that initial seeing-in is replaced by a “seeing-through” engagement.

The visual aesthetic of the *Collateral* shot (fig. 67), on the other hand, frames Vincent in a medium shot at the right hand side: but with its limited dynamic range and a depth of field impossible to achieve with film cameras, the shot entices the viewer to look into the depth of the image rather than focus on Vincent. The colour palette renders an equivalency between Vincent and the background, a very consistent technique on Mann’s part; he frequently sets up visual compositions where the characters “disappear” into the digitally-rendered cityscapes (as Vincent does here) in
order to find a way to suggest that the subjectivities of his protagonists are connected to their environments. The aesthetic of this particular image is designed to communicate the idea that character and environment are inextricably linked. Its uniform quality, with every pictorial object given equal weight, means that this shot will be received as a transparent one by the viewer. In this one digitally-captured shot, Mann effectively visualises a theme of the film that is flagged in the dialogue at different points in the narrative: Vincent’s story about the guy who dies on the subway and nobody notices his corpse because it effectively disappears into the background noise of Los Angeles.

Fig. 68. *Manhunter* (1986).

Fig. 69. *Manhunter* – “Twofoldedness.”
Manhunter continues Mann’s careful and meticulous representation of thematic material through pictorial composition (see fig. 68 and fig. 69). This film creates a visual aesthetic that holds on the gleaming geometrics of modern cityscapes and buildings and “forge[s] an idiom of hyperrealism, in which reality is reconstructed with painstaking accuracy, yet within a heightened, dreamlike stylisation” (Smith, “Mann Hunters” 72). Even the natural world does not escape Mann’s stylistic attention: “the natural world is figured as ambiguous, photographed in a way that lends it a hyperreal, synthetic quality, suggesting its fusion with industrial civilisation” (Sharrett, “Elegies on the Post-Industrial Landscape” 258). But Manhunter is also significant for the introduction of a theme which links this film to all of his subsequent crime films. This is the elevation of the act of viewing to a position in Mann’s work where it binds together very closely the aesthetics of the image with the narrative. Kendall Phillips argues, correctly I believe, that Mann’s serial killer film is generically unique because Manhunter’s core theme of looking is best communicated with bright and hyperreal imagery (11). This kind of visual aesthetic bears little in common with other serial killer films made in the same period, such as Tightrope (Richard Tuggle 1984) and The Hitcher (Robert Harmon 1986), which followed classical methods of using the visual aesthetic to reinforce the conflict at the narrative level rather than using stylised visuals to provide a meta-commentary on images and seeing. At one point in Manhunter’s narrative, Will Graham comes a step closer to catching the Tooth Fairy when he says, “everything with you is seeing, isn’t it?” And I would agree with Phillips’ assessment that “[t]he film’s visual statement about the visual can be considered meta-visual” (12). This suggests that Manhunter’s images will display twofoldedness and trigger the viewer’s awareness of their status as representation.

One key moment provides a good example of this meta-visual address in the film. The shot depicted in fig. 69 shows Graham sitting in an airport lounge, waiting
on a flight to take him to one of the Tooth Fairy’s crime scenes. He is frustrated at his lack of progress in finding the killer and still psychologically reeling from his visits to the crime scenes. An answerphone message we heard earlier in the film and recorded by Mrs Leeds (who is killed along with her entire family by the Tooth Fairy), is heard on the soundtrack. The source of this audio at this particular moment is Graham’s disturbed mind, leading him to see his own reflection as representing Francis Dollarhyde (the Tooth Fairy’s real identity, known only to the viewer at this stage in the film). “Just you and me now, sport,” he says, while placing his hand on the glass and touching his reflection/Dollarhyde.

Fig. 70. Manhunter – Invisible Editing 1.

Fig. 71. Manhunter – Invisible Editing 2.
Mann’s pictorial composition never loses control of this dualism (see fig. 70 and fig. 71); when Graham goes to visit Hannibal Lector, the shot composition and series of cuts making up the sequence emphasise the blurring of identities that returns again and again in Mann’s work. Combs makes the point that the identical positioning of the two men and the rapid cutting between the two has the effect of making the prison bars disappear, the resultant act of suturing causing the viewer to see the two characters as one symbolically (returning the characters to the “flux,” is how Combs describes the effect of the scene) (14). This sequence is another example of Mann’s ability to use classical film style with a slight expressionist element to render his compositions immediate for the viewer (in Allen’s sense of being transparent) and causing a more thoughtful engagement. Additionally, it also represents one of the first examples of a theme that is vital to an understanding of his digital films: the breaking down of the inside/outside dichotomy. The way the scene is cut, it is difficult to tell at a visual level who is a prisoner and who is free.

*Manhunter* also includes a conspicuous and carefully controlled visual aesthetic involving colour as a crucial component of the mise-en-scène. An example of the importance of colour to the overall design of the film is seen in the way Mann and his cinematographer Dante Spinotti use shades of green in the film. Throughout *Manhunter* green is used as an aesthetic sign for danger or tension. The shot that introduces Will Graham is bisected horizontally by a narrow band of pale green ocean, just below the centre of the frame; both Will and Jack Crawford (Dennis Farina) partially occupy this green zone (fig. 68). The blue of the sky takes up over two thirds of the frame – and blue represents romantic longing and safety across a number of Mann films – but that sliver of green is an expressive stylistic component indicating

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57 The spelling of Hannibal’s surname is changed from the “Lecter” used in the book. The Tooth Fairy’s real name is also changed: the book’s “Dolarhyde” becomes the film’s “Dollarhyde.” Perhaps this represents another way of Mann making the property completely his own.
that these men will encounter danger. After Will flees in terror from his meeting with Lecktor (Brian Cox), he leans over a balcony to catch his breath and looks down at the green grass. The grass fills the frame of the reverse shot but is out of focus; this indicates the danger to Will’s mind brought on by the Tooth Fairy case and his meeting with Lecktor. The shot of Graham in the airport lounge shows his pale reflection surrounded by green surfaces reflected from multiple sources (fig. 69).

When he finally confronts the Tooth Fairy, Graham approaches the serial killer’s house through dense woods with the colour green very prominent. Twice in the film we see bedroom scenes bathed in blue, one showing Graham in bed with his wife Molly, and a later scene showing Molly in the same bedroom when Graham’s phone call wakes her. In these scenes, Mann aligns himself with Wassily Kandinsky in their shared belief that colour can encapsulate mood and feeling.58

Characterisation can itself be colour-coded in Mann’s work. An example of this is contained in a pivotal moment in Heat: Neil McCauley’s transgression of his own code on his way to the airport and freedom is signalled by the sudden appearance of a bright white light, which engulfs his car on the freeway and fills the entire frame.

When Mann began shooting with digital cameras the role played by colour became less symbolic and took on a more textured appearance; colour in Collateral, Miami Vice and Public Enemies is often used to draw the viewer’s attention to the surface of the screen and the viewer is encouraged – often through a lull in the narrative to hold on certain shots or simply through vast depth of field – to contemplate the sensuous properties of the digital image. This spectatorial engagement resonates with Laura Marks’ notion of “haptic visuality,” which she describes in The Skin of the Film. The idea is that dense, textured images, like those that populate Mann’s crime films, divest the viewer of “habitual perception” and compel her towards the screen’s surface in a

58 See Daniel Frampton’s “Filmosophy: Colour,” Kandinsky’s Concerning the Spiritual in Art, and Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen’s “Colour as a Semiotic Mode: Notes for a Grammar on Colour.”
search for meaning (24-77). But in the pre-digital films, Mann’s formal and self-conscious manipulation of imagery is still somewhat attuned to classical narrative and generic conventions and despite his expressionistic tendencies of style, he never abandons completely the transparency which governs classical realism.

However, *Manhunter*, unlike the distinctly classical cinematic inflections of both *Red Dragon* (Brett Ratner 2002) and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme 1991), contains a meta-visual element that becomes an important component of the film in terms of Mann’s aesthetic approach; the film represents the early flowering of Mann’s cinematic “debate” on realism. *Manhunter*’s realist style includes an in-built invitation: an emotional connection to the image which, for Mann, is a means to a truth that realism – constructed cinematic realism under the influence of classical conventions – is unable to achieve. Mann himself states that realism was never the ambition of the film:

It bores me to present the events of the story in a realist style. My approach instead is to conceptualise the elements of the plot, taking into consideration the various torments of the human spirit. My aim is to exteriorise the spiritual in the Expressionist manner, and this always leads me to reject realism. (qtd. in Charlot and Toullec 47)

This statement, taken at face value, is a confusing one from Mann. In subsequent interviews he has talked about striving for realism, and he is meticulous in his attention to the smallest detail and problems of verisimilitude. On *Heat*, he used 95 practical locations and no soundstages (Feeney and Duncan 99); the budget for *Miami Vice* was very high at $135 million, primarily because Mann insisting on using real locations in Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Brazil, Uruguay and Miami. But the cinematic

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59 *Red Dragon* was the second adaptation of the Thomas Harris novel, made after the success of *The Silence of the Lambs*. Dante Spinotti was the cinematographer on both *Red Dragon* and *Manhunter*.

60 Sourced from *The Internet Movie Database*, 09 Nov. 2012.
realism promised by such practices is never Mann’s endgame; he uses the methods of realism as a means to attain his larger goal, hyperrealism. In fact, I would argue that Mann’s overall goal in his cinema is to achieve imagery that embodies both seeing-in and seeing-through qualities, and he sees the hyperreal textures attainable with digital cameras as the closest thing to what he is after. The seeming impossibility of fusing two image types that appear to be mutually exclusive is a challenge that is overcome in Mann’s films by the confidence he has in the viewer. Mann is aware that his films will be successful only if the viewer responds thoughtfully and emotionally to their images. Even as early as Manhunter Mann’s aesthetic is designed to evoke the need for an emotional investment combined with reflection on the part of the viewer – the kind of response from the viewer which recalls Bellour’s pensive spectator.

In both Manhunter and Heat mastery of surveillance technology is the essential skill which ensures victory; although in the case of Manhunter’s Graham the successful outcome is tempered by the fragility of his mind resulting from exposure to the same technology that helps him catch the Tooth Fairy. The danger is made explicit in the mise-en-scène. Graham looks at home videos of the two murdered families, attempting to enter the killer’s own scopic regime. He watches one of the videos on a monitor in his hotel room, speaking as if to the killer. The monitor occupies a third of the frame initially, and then covers half the screen while Graham gazes into the blackness of it. Overwhelmed by the mental strain of watching the everyday lives of a now dead family unfold before his eyes while attempting to channel the psyche of the murderer, Graham calls his wife and the scene cuts to Molly bathed in blue light. But the music that accompanied Graham’s surveillance of the video tapes continues to play over Molly’s bedroom scene, indicating that Graham’s interaction with the technology might be putting his own family in danger.
The opposing protagonists in *Heat*, one cop, one criminal, use the same sophisticated technology against each other. Again, as in *Manhunter*, there is an oscillation of identity that is mapped out visually in the mise-en-scène, with technology playing an important role in the visualisation of the theme. The first face-to-face meeting between McCauley and Hanna (Al Pacino) is not the famous coffee shot sit-down, but their interacting gazes across monitors of surveillance technology during the botched precious metals plant robbery. In a later scene, McCauley’s team are under surveillance as they “case” a shipping yard. After they leave, Hanna and his team walk through the yard themselves, attempting to find out what the criminals are after. Looking around at the towering cranes, Hanna has a sudden revelation: McCauley’s team has set them up, and they are now the ones being spied on. The cut from Hanna taking a bow and telling his team that they just got made to a long shot of Hanna from McCauley’s vantage point at the top of a high-rise confirms that he is right and that they both think alike. In scenes like this, Mann modernises the familiar genre construction of the “double protagonist” film: two characters on opposite sides of the law who are two sides of the same coin.

*Heat* has been compared to the western, particularly the men-out-of-their-time westerns of Sam Peckinpah, and its connection to classical genre cinema seems clear. Nick James, in his *BFI Modern Classics* monograph on the film, describes the sound created by the guns during the pitched battle between the cops and Neil McCauley’s criminal crew on the streets of LA as noise rebounding off “concrete canyons” (*Heat* 11). Grant calls the western and the gangster films the “most durable of American film genres” (*Film Genre Reader* xi), and in terms of how it relates to its predecessors in the crime genre, *Heat* calls back to two seminal crime films in its very title – *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh 1949) and *The Big Heat* (Fritz Lang 1953). But the resonances between those classical genre films and Mann’s film are confined to the level of
narrative. *White Heat* shows detective Edmond O’Brien developing a similarity to and empathy for master criminal James Cagney over the course of the narrative. In *The Big Heat*, detective Glenn Ford, like Vincent Hanna in Mann’s film, loses his family because of his single-minded pursuit of criminals. The shot showing Neil McCauley placing his gun on a table after returning to his very sparsely furnished house mirrors a couple of shots in Lang’s film where the placing of a gun in the foreground of the frame is used to introduce a new filmic space. But *Heat*, as Ramon Lobato argues, “pushes at the edges of the LA symbolic and locates a kind of urban sublime within these spaces of ostensible alienation – it offers us a glimpse of the infinite possibilities of life, a dizzying encounter with the pleasures and contradictions, experiential and aesthetic, of the postmodern metropolis” (348). This “urban sublime” is a source of tension in terms of Mann’s level of commitment to generic codes. Although Mann throws his characters into cinematic worlds of vast, quasi-infinite spatial textures – perhaps too vast for the spatial conventions of classical crime films to contain the Mann men – *Heat* nonetheless allows the viewer to contemplate its relationship with earlier crime genre cinema. The film evokes a mood of nostalgia on the part of its unstable male protagonists; a longing for an identity that, in terms of staying true to genre codes, might perhaps suggest that these troubled men belong more to the classical era of the crime thriller. But Mann’s style will always pressurise any compulsion to honour classical genre conventions. Whereas the movement through cinematic space of classical crime characters is rarely more meaningful beyond how it relates to the plot, Mann’s protagonists negotiate a spiritual journey through their environments that the encompassing narrative struggles to contain. “Mann’s style within the crime film composes space as allusion, using the experience of inhabiting space and moving through it as meaningful experience,” as Robert Arnett argues (46).
David Martin-Jones argues that the scene showing McCauley returning to his house after the opening armoured car heist and gazing out over the ocean just outside his window is important also for its use of rack focus to change the emphasis of objects in the frame (and this cinematic practice has a crucial function in *Miami Vice*) (see fig. 72). While James thinks this use of rack focus in *Heat* marks its transition from pure thriller to interior drama (*Heat* 2-9), Martin-Jones contends that it is more useful to see it as a demonstration of “the parallel narratives that exist between the people and the city’s spaces” (185). This characteristic use of technique – a signature style of Mann, and particularly when he shoots digitally – enables the viewer to see the quasi-independent existence of the environment and McCauley’s resonance with this kind of existence. Mann’s aesthetic links character and location through the mood created by his painterly palette, and McCauley becomes “someone who, confronted with a landscape he ought to contemplate, cannot avoid contemplating, ‘strikes a pose’ and derives from his awareness of this attitude a rare and sometimes melancholy pleasure” (Augé 87). This development of style to evoke a subtle connection between character
and the structures of urbanity – the non-places of *Heat*, rather than the domestic spaces of both *Thief* and *Manhunter* – moves Mann closer to the full implications of this connection in his digital films. Character is still not fully aestheticised to occupy the same formal level as the digitally rendered environments of the later films; in *Collateral*, for example, Vincent blends into the digitally rendered environments with less trouble than McCauley, and his one-word answer to Max’s question, about what he is in relation to the people he is killing, is “indifferent.” McCauley and Eady, standing on a balcony with the shimmering lights of LA sprawling below them, are completely abstracted from the environment (it is a digital composite). The viewer’s spectatorial engagement with this image, at a phenomenological level, can find it difficult to reconcile two areas of interest (see fig. 73).

![Image](image_url)

**Fig. 73. Heat – Composed Hyperrealism.**

Deleuze’s theory of the cinematic image is useful here as a means of understanding what was at stake for Mann in his move to digital capture. In the Deleuzian concept of the image the spectator subtracts what is uninteresting in the
image and focuses on the essential parts of it in the act of perception. “We perceive the thing, minus that which does not interest us as a function of our needs,” Deleuze argues (*The Movement-Image* 71). Deleuze follows Bergson to show that when the viewer perceives an image “there is never anything else or anything more than there is in the thing: on the contrary, there is ‘less’” (*The Movement-Image* 71). He explains that the viewer, in the act of perceiving, strips away from the image what is of no interest to her:

By need or interest we mean the lines and points that we retain from the thing as a function of our receptive facet, and the actions that we select as a function of the delayed reactions of which we are capable. Which is a way of defining the first material moment of subjectivity: it is subtractive. It subtracts from the thing whatever does not interest it. (Deleuze, *The Movement-Image* 71)

Classical cinema, and also the cinema that led up to the first experiments with digital cameras, offered minimal resistance to this activity of subtraction on the part of the viewer. The limitations in resolution and depth of field, and the use of mise-en-scène to “guide” the viewer towards that part of the image on which the filmmaker wanted her to concentrate her attention, meant that it was an easy task to separate the interesting and non-interesting sections of the image and discard the latter.

Ronald Bogue explains this aspect of Deleuze’s concept of the image as it relates to the spectating subject by suggesting that “perception helps the living being control its environment not by adding something to things, but by subtracting from them, selecting those features of surrounding objects that interest and concern the living being and ignoring those that are irrelevant to its existence” (30). Because of the much greater depth of field that digital cameras are capable of compared to film

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61 Deleuze refers to Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* (24) and the idea of the whole image needing the perceiver to extract what it needs from it.
cameras, the digital image can achieve a saturation and sensuous quality which can overwhelm the viewer (see fig. 74).

Fig. 74. *Collateral* – The Immensity of the Image.

This scene, if it was shot on film, would be missing the trees and lights in the distance and the purple tint to the night sky. But now a difficulty arises concerning the Deleuzian concept of subtraction in perception and its relation to the camera. Arguably, the digital camera *reinstates* what the film camera subtracts from the image; and for it to make sense to the viewer, particularly the viewer who is familiar with the codes and conventions of the crime film, what the digital camera gives back to the image is a reinforced temporal dimension.

The increased attention to the temporal over the spatial is a consequence of Mann’s abandonment of film in favour of digital, and this change of emphasis represents a deeper commitment to the ontological status of his cinema that began its “becoming” with *Thief*, even if many crime genre enthusiasts were unwilling to support such a shift (Bordwell, “(50) Days of Summer (Movies), Part 2”; Calvert). Deleuze posits an ontological break in the cinematic image after World War II; the
ubiquity of the movement-image, which followed a causal logic and was linked to a sensory-motor schema that characterised the action image, was challenged by the time-image, whereby the “doer” in cinematic narrative became the “seer” (Deleuze, *The Movement-Image* 174-78; Deleuze, *The Time-Image* 1-24). There is a new “loose” quality to Mann’s digital images, less precision and geometric balance in their composition which, it could be argued, represents a delayed reaction to the crisis in the movement image (as described by Deleuze, and then Mulvey) on Mann’s part. Mulvey describes the “crisis” for cinema:

[A] film aesthetic derived from the logic of action, fuelled and duplicated by the cinema’s forward drive into movement, would start to hesitate and find ways of responding to its surroundings, deriving images from whatever the camera observed rather than a narrative aspiration to order and organisation. (*Death 24 X a Second* 129)

Describing the immediate postwar period that gave rise to Italian neorealism, Mulvey’s words nonetheless resonate with Mann and his cinematographers’ attitude to shooting with digital cameras. Dante Spinotti, the cinematographer on *Public Enemies*, describes the relative freedom afforded by the Sony CineAlta F23 digital camera used on that production:

Shooting digitally, you see locations in a different way. When you walk into a location and know you’re going to shoot film, you have to set little rules – for example, you’ll need to get an exposure here that’s at least T2.8 at 500 ISO – but not so with digital. (qtd. in Holben, “Big Guns” 27)

There is paradoxical element to Mann’s aesthetic of immediacy, however. The scenes that most successfully communicate a sense of immediacy to the viewer through the temporal register of the digital capture mode are the action set-pieces. All of Mann’s digital crime films follow this pattern, including his most recent film,
Blackhat (2015). The paradoxical nature of the sudden outbursts of violence in the films lies in the communication of interiority or subjectivity in the way these scenes are shot. In scenes depicting bank robberies in both Heat and Public Enemies the camera sticks extremely close to the actors’ heads, the result of which is a more experiential register. There is a communication of what the robbery actually feels like to those involved, rather than a representation of a more commonplace scene that would indicate the filmmaker is more interested in eliciting excitement from spectacle and communicating the mechanics of the actions to the viewer. Under Mann’s control, time seems to be put on hold in these scenes in the service of reawakening a more experiential mode of viewer spectatorship.

Mann’s choice of location is also crucial to the manner in which the viewer is induced into an experiential mode of spectatorship and the intermittent temporal stasis which marks many of the scenes. Mann’s cinema, as Martin-Jones contends, occupies an interstitial state between movement- and time-image, with globalisation a determining factor in their in-between status. Under globalisation, the encompassing milieu of the large-form action image is replaced by a series of any-space-whatevers, with the Los Angeles of Heat and Collateral becoming a networked grid of these non-places under late capitalism (Martin-Jones 168-72). Whereas characters seem to move through these spaces with deliberation in the early films, obeying time-based schedules, the digital films show men negotiating their environments as if all the clocks were stopped.

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Deleuze categorises both large- and small-form action images. The large-form indicates an initial situation into which an action is introduced and which in turn gives rise to a changed situation. Deleuze uses the terminology SAS to indicate the set of the large-form action image. The milieu of this action image is the encompasser, an environment that acts on the characters collectively. In a western, for example, it might the Monument Valley of The Searchers (John Ford 1956) or the town of McCabe & Mrs Miller (Robert Altman 1971).

The small-form action image involves movement from action to situation and towards a new action. The set of the small-form action image is ASA. Rather than starting from an encompasser, the small-form action image film starts with a behaviour.
“Contrary to the temporal assurance of celluloid’s causal operations,”
Hadjioannou contends, “digital technology interrupts the ontological underpinnings of the image by transcoding an event into a series of numbers and mathematical associations, which do not necessarily bear any actual link to reality” (“Into Great Stillness” par. 1). While perceptual realism can imbue the digital image with a link to reality, the mathematical basis for the image can only make spatial correspondences and not temporal ones. What is missing in the move to digital is “a link to time as historical trace, as unpredictable progression, as expression of change” (“Into Great Stillness” par. 2). Sense of duration is put on hold in the array of pixels that make up the digital image, leading Hadjioannou to ask the question, “Can there be qualitative duration when the physiochemical ontology of celluloid time is translated into a calculating and calculable timecode?” (“Into Great Stillness” par. 5). Celluloid is tied to events that are in the past, but digital film is tied to ephemeral computer notation. Where is the duration, then, in Mann’s digitally rendered images when they bind the viewer’s scopic drive to numerically controlled digitographic renditions? The answer lies in Mann finding his temporal register in his bid sometimes to immerse the viewer in heavily stylised imagery whose hyperreal qualities seem to stop the films in their tracks at certain moments – or, at least, to temporarily shift the focus away from the film’s narrative in favour of its purely diegetic address. Additionally, in Mann’s visual aesthetic change is often implied by evolving gradations of colour rather than any movement designating development in the characters. The digital crime films seem to depict milieux that have been selected from a loop; while the narratives play out diachronically, there is always the sense that the events are picked out of a larger synchronic whole and that once this story is told another similar one will take its place in the world suggested by the film.
Manovich actually selects the concept of the loop to symbolise how temporality is revealed in digital film, and it works as an apt metaphor in Mann’s cinema (The Language of New Media 317). For example, Vincent, the hitman in Collateral, ends up dead on a train that goes around in a circle. The digital rendition of the final moments of the film are metaphoric in another sense too: the digital “loop” that endlessly refreshes the pixels of the image, neither here nor there, unnoticed, like the dead hitman. Engaging with a scene such as this one, or the entirety of Miami Vice, the viewer engages with the temporal register of the films in a different way to how she negotiates the chronology of non-digital films. Vincent had already told the story of the guy who gets on the MTA, dies, and travels unnoticed on the train for hours, doing laps around Los Angeles. That he himself “becomes” that guy at the end of the film is more than just an irony: the symbol of the loop permeates the entire film and informs a phenomenological engagement with it. Max begins his shift outside Annie’s law office building, and then returns to it again late in the film. Conversations between Max and Vincent circle back to the same topics again and again. After meeting Felix, the man who hired Vincent for the hits, Max reuses lines of dialogue Vincent had used in an earlier scene. Detective Fanning recalls another cab driver in another state who was involved in a similar set of killings which took place all in one night. Scenes set inside the cab are interspersed with other scenes and the framings, with slight variations, are repeated (Max occupying the right side of the frame, Vincent the left).

These repetitions should not be lost on the viewer. But even if they are, the digital aesthetic itself, with its endlessly repeating shots of light reflected off high rises at night, the aerial shots of the cab lost in a sea of twinkling luminescent neon lights, will communicate this symbolic loop structure through a sensuous engagement between viewer and image. Similarly, Miami Vice unfolds as one long unbroken strip of time with no pauses: every scene seems to follow breathlessly from the previous
one. The sense of hyperreality coupled with this notion of presence in the here-and-now was the culmination of Mann’s development as the creator of HD digital imagery.

In the next section I examine Mann’s move to digital capture. While Ali is not a crime genre film, I feel it is important to discuss it in terms of Mann’s initial experience with the new technology. Moreover, it was on Ali that Mann began to see the possibilities for reaching a new artistic plateau in the visualising of subjective experience that was afforded by the use of digital cameras.

**The Language of Digital Capture**

At the core of the difference between silver-based film and digital is the absence of the shutter. No more flicker. No more heartbeat. The persistence of vision isn’t called to the rescue to make possible the reproduction of movement using photograms. Film is made of still photographs after all. But the digital film is not. Underneath there is a grid of pixel-size slots, and it is fixed. Somehow the pixel makes what you see an icon; it is graphic and not sensorial. In the world of digital, time is encoded in a bit-map, and there can be no entropy. In the compression algorithm of a digital image, only what changes in the shot is renewed. That which is the same in the shot stays the same in the digital image, in contrast to the constantly changing emulsion grain from one frame to the next in the film image. (Mangolte 264)

This section will present analyses of three of Mann’s digital films, with the goal being to reveal his recent HD work as a very committed renegotiation of the subjective realist aesthetic that characterises his earlier work, and to make the case that digital capture is crucial to the successful integration of his expressive style within popular genre cinema. I will argue in this section that his quest for a hyperreal exchange embodied in the spectatorial relay between viewer and sensuous image marks Mann
out as one of the few genre filmmakers to explore how subjectivity is affected by technology in mainstream cinema. “While technology never simply determines,” Mulvey argues, “it cannot but affect the context in which ideas are formed” (Death 24 X a Second 9), and it is with this in mind that I put forward my argument that Mann’s use of digital cameras as capture devices represents the culmination of his aesthetic goal as a filmmaker. The heavily textured and hyperreal images of these digital crime films do not represent a departure from the visual aesthetic developed in his pre-digital period; rather, they represent the fulfilment of a stylistically constructed realism that began with his first feature, Thief.63 In these early films, according to Harlan Kennedy, Mann uses his images to create a “stylised realism” (16). I would suggest here that stylised realism is a synonym for hyperrealism in Mann’s work, for his realist agenda is actually predicated on creating the right aesthetic look for a shot. Mann’s “realism” is malleable and, as I have shown, is also heavily dependent on the pensive spectator. The way Mann creates images, whether through the traditional lens of film cameras (which imposes the need to manipulate the environment being filmed), or through the recent digital cameras (which makes no such imposition because all manipulation can now be done in-camera), is always with the subjectivity of the viewer in mind. A key question for Mann is how the viewer will engage with the aesthetic of the image at a phenomenological level. Digital capture certainly gives him more control to achieve the kind of viewer-image engagement he is after.

Manovich argues that the use of digital technology in film, particularly the image-manipulation capabilities of computers and digital cameras, is an indication that cinema is now more like animation: “Digital cinema is a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements” (The Language of New Media 302). While digital capture technology has not severed the indexical link with

63 The Jericho Mile was made for television but released theatrically in Europe (Feeney and Duncan 20).
reality as completely as computer generated imagery (CGI) has, the practice affords many ways to manipulate the image during the time of its creation. The on-board menu and on-the-set monitoring capabilities signify a craft with similarities to painting, in the sense that the artists have more artistic control over the image using a digital camera rather than a film camera. And while the digital image is not a representational painting, it does have a connection to painting in the way it is, in its most immediate register, dependent on our being conscious of its surface being “intentionally marked” for it to be recognised as digital. The viewer, then, during moments in *Collateral* when the cab is passing swaying palm trees with oil refineries way off in the distance (and yet still visible, even at night) is compelled to “see-in,” to go back to Allen and Richard Wollheim, when looking at the screen and to adopt a spectatorial address characterised as twofoldedness.

Seeing-in, as I discussed in the previous section, featured sporadically in the pre-digital films, but this way of seeing is more essential to appreciating the aesthetic of the digital films. Reinforcing the need to engage with the images through a mode of twofoldedness is the strong overlap between Mann’s visual goals for his digital aesthetic and the realities of our modern information culture. The synthesis between the two in films such as *Miami Vice* is such that Mann’s films can be read as in-depth cultural commentary and prescient warnings about the abuse of communications technology; the link is strongest when the viewer takes a step back and self-consciously sees the image as a representation. I would argue that the use of digital capture in these films effectively represents this link between the negative aspects of information culture and Mann’s use of the technology driving this culture, both in terms of narrative and production, as a dialectical partnership; the high definition digital camera enables Mann to uncover what Patricia Pisters referred to as “the

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64 See Gunning (“What’s the Point of an Index?” 39-49) and Frank Kessler (187-97) for two different views on the subject of indexicality and the digital image.
affective dimensions of the deliriously saturated media culture we live in today” (187). With respect to media culture, it is no paradox that Mann is using digital technology to critique the ubiquitous “digitality” of contemporary culture; Mann is aware of the tensions involved, and uses that awareness to feed into his digital aesthetic. Mann’s breakthrough is in his aesthetic of immediacy; his digital acquisition of images addresses the viewer with the offer of, not the past represented in the present, but images that look like the present unfolding right now. As Rodowick explains, digitally captured images “shape a past felt to be historically present with us and to which we feel connected or embedded; in other words, they express an immediate, cumulative past that remains part of our historical present” (The Virtual Life of Film 145).

Updating the concerns with the scopic drive that was Manhunter’s main theme, Mann uses digital technology in a way resonant with Eisenstein: to persuade the viewer to engage with his images’ immediacy and see the dangers of modern communications technology through the lens of technology itself. For Mann, the only successful way to achieve this immediacy through the foregrounding of the digital aesthetic is to create imagery that merges seeing-in with seeing-through. It is a huge task for a filmmaker and it is an artistic goal that has both won Mann a loyal following and dismissive criticism.

*Ali (2001)*

Starting with *Ali*, the director began experimenting with digital cameras because it gave him greater control in the production of the kind of images he wanted (and could not obtain by shooting on film). While the film falls into the biopic genre, and is not a crime film, *Ali* is important for the experience and confidence Mann gained with the new technology; the aesthetic he created with the digital capture method here would inform all of his subsequent crime films. The digital camera emphasises the removal of
Ali, and the rest of the historical figures depicted here, from an over-familiar method of representation; the disparity between the present and our perhaps too comfortable manner of enshrining the past are also laid bare by the digital aesthetic. The grainy imagery of *Ali* is unsettling, but purposefully so. This is the aesthetic of hypermediacy – an emphasis on media presence and a cinematic enunciation based on a subjective inflection that attempts to negotiate with this presence. Muhammad Ali, the media figure whose life has been mediated through a vast range of media discourses, is here re-mediated in an act Vincent M. Gaine terms “the postmodern discourse of re-writing history” (“Re-Mediated Mann”). Mann re-presents the familiar figure of Ali but through sequences that present Ali’s unfamiliar subjectivity and experiential impression of a man. For some, this marked a slightly more mannerist phase in Mann’s career (Dzenis, “Impressionist Extraordinaire”; Thompson; Rybin, *The Cinema of Michael Mann*). Only a couple of *Ali*’s scenes were filmed digitally but they illustrate the readiness of the director to move away from classical realist strategies to portray historical events and characters. “Mann’s film emerges as an examination and critique of the processes and products of mythmaking as much as a reflection of or contribution to them,” Rayner observes (147). Instead of a life story, *Ali* delivers an impression of a life. Objectivity is not what Mann is after. “What excited me about this project,” he notes, “was the possibility of taking people inside his world” (qtd. in Dzenis, “Impressionist Extraordinaire”). The opening montage – at ten minutes, an unusual way to begin a biopic – refines the meta-visual cinematic technique which made *Manhunter* such a uniquely postmodern genre film (and which would be further elaborated in *Public Enemies*). There are many close ups of Ali (Will Smith), emphasising that the film is an attempt to visualise subjectivity. Nearly the entire film is shot handheld and with the Steadicam in order to get physically close to Smith. Miniature cameras were invented and then attached to Mann’s palms so he could get in
the ring with the boxers and shoot remarkable in-the-moment fight scenes (Holben, “Ring Leader” 38). Under the glare of the media – Wildermuth calls it the “videoscopic eye” (182) – Ali battles to hold onto the here and now of who he is. But this involves the merging together of his public and private life, a key theme in twenty-first century culture, and one that Mann would return to quite often in his later films.

*Ali* is Mann’s first real attempt to communicate immediacy cinematically: a grainy HD image introduces Ali; an actor playing Sam Cooke, and providing his voice, sings on the soundtrack. Why does the film not use Cooke’s original recording? Because from this point on Mann’s cinema will be in the present tense; or, at least, present historical events as if they are happening right now. History will be viewed through the lens of the present. The film’s task is to make history present and cue the viewer to one of Mann’s important themes: life and identity as a continually flowing process. The montage comprises a succession of shots that show what is happening *right now*. Cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki was instructed by Mann that the film should not feel nostalgic:

> He didn’t want to romanticise the past; he wanted the film to feel immediate.

> Many scenes take place during major historic events that everybody knows about, and we did everything we could to make them feel as though they’re happening for the first time on screen. (qtd. in Holben, “Ring Leader” 35)

To get the look Mann was after, Lubezki used the Sony SP900 HD camera to shoot night exteriors (see fig. 75):

> Hi-def also has a different feel because the depth of field is so completely different […]. We could never have gotten that feel with film at all. There is more depth perception. Even though there is less image in focus, the apparent depth of field is greater. It’s so soft and so real […]. Yes, the images are noisy,
but I think that look is perfect for this movie. It tells the story in the best way.
(qtd. in Holben, “Ring Leader” 38-39)

The low angle, extremely grainy shot of an American street, with Smith/Ali jogging towards the camera and the cops asking him what he is running from, addresses the viewer in the present tense. Then, an image of Ali punching the bag, memories flickering through his mind: the child Ali looking over his father’s shoulder at the picture of the blond-haired Jesus he is painting; catching a glimpse of murdered Emmet Till’s photograph in a newspaper as he makes his way to the coloured section of the bus; Malcolm X delivering a speech; meeting Drew “Bundini” Brown (Jamie Foxx) for the first time: all these memories presented to us through the immediacy of Ali’s present (February 24, 1964, the day before he becomes the champion by defeating Sonny Liston). The film, as Gaine attests, uses subjectivity and the supremacy of the individual to paint a picture of its hero that resonates deeply with the contemporary viewer; his heroic qualities embodied in his demand for everything
concerning his life to be on his terms alone (Gaine, “Re-Mediated Mann”). Mann demonstrates that there is a truth to Ali, and this truth is communicated most emphatically during the unmediated look of the HD digital footage. The past, crucially for Mann, is always part of Ali’s present experience. Ali’s is a life shaped by media culture and Mann tries paradoxically to make the viewer aware of this through the remediation of his life in the images that comprise the film.

The HD images stand out here, forcing the viewer to see their double register, both their immediacy and hypermediacy. This in-the-moment grainy footage of Ali does not belong to the collection of media images that have disseminated the meaning of the “Muhammad Ali” media persona down through the years and thus provide an extra layer for contemplation about its meaning. Because we haven’t seen these images of Ali before, they are completely unknown quantities; they draw a phenomenological interest from the viewer because of their textural difference from all the other images in the film. Rybin argues that these moments in the film are accentuated by the contrast between them and Mann’s consistent use of a more expressive style:

The expressive in Ali ensures a structural backbone to the film – a thematic and aesthetic narrative consistency that allows the film to cohere as a meaningful story and which throws into relief those moments of style which are presented in a different manner – while the mannerist draws us into the film not through an organisation of analysable meaning but through the image of a contingent, fleeting moment of perception. (Rybin, The Cinema of Michael Mann 155)

The other scene shot with HD cameras depicts Ali training on a Chicago hotel balcony. In one striking image the entire sprawl of the city occupies the right side of the frame with the side of Ali’s head framed in the left portion. Fires are shown burning in the distance. Police sirens sound. It is the aftermath of another historic moment, the assassination of Martin Luther King, and the digital mise-en-scène
communicates it to the viewer as immediate presence. “It may be set in the past,” according to Rybin, “but as a film, it is clearly happening now” (The Cinema of Michael Mann 166). And it is happening fast: a famous event from the 1960s is presented to the viewer through a modern lens, in very quick cuts. Mann is clear about the expressive nature and closeness to the viewer that the digital camera allows in these sequences:

I look for where or how to bring the audience into the moment, to reveal what somebody’s thinking and what they’re feeling, and where it feels like you’re inside the experience. Not looking at it, with an actor performing it, but have an actor live it, and you as audience, if I could bring the audience inside to experience. (qtd. in Prokopy)

This is the language of phenomenology. In Ali, Mann essentially puts forward one of the central tenets of the philosophy as the overall guiding principle of the film: “the subjective view of experience as a necessary part of any full understanding of the nature of knowledge” (Moran 21). Mann, in his Ali biopic, has found a way to convincingly aestheticise the conflict at the heart of individual identity in contemporary culture through positioning the historical past under the digital lens. Gallimore refers to the “paradigm shift” involved in using digital cameras on films that tell historical stories (“Digital Lives”). There is an accompanying shift in spectatorial experience, which occurs through the move from the presentation of historical materials to an emphasis of the experience of history. Mann visualises the experience of history to resonate with the digital culture of today, encouraging the spectator to take an actively phenomenological role in the remediation that enables this alignment.

Mann’s next film, 80% of it filmed digitally, is probably Mann’s most self-contained genre piece. As such, it follows rules of generic plotting but does so in tandem with the creation of a startling new look.
Collateral (2004)

Probably the first studio director to embrace digital for its purely aesthetic potential, Mann uses the high definition technology – in particular its ability to register a rich array of colours and tones in low light and at night – to realise his vision of the city. (Olsen, “It Happened One Night” 15)

Collateral, a multi-format production that included 35mm film, digital video (two Sony CineAlta F900 cameras), and the Thomson Grass Valley Viper FilmStream, was a work-for-hire project for Mann: he knew the narrative would be suitable for the next stage of his experiment with the digital image, and to that end he insisted on using the digital video and digital data cameras to obtain a specific “video look.” This look would capture the Los Angeles night sky in a way that film could not (see fig. 76 and fig. 77).

Fig. 76. Collateral – The “Digitality” of the Image.

65 The Viper FilmStream was one of the first digital “data cameras” that recorded image data directly to hard drives in what was called “raw” or uncompressed form. It preserves a higher resolution, greater colour fidelity and higher sensitivity to light than digital video cameras like the Sony F900. See Wheeler (269-277).
In *Collateral*, Mann’s characters almost blur into the HD rendered backdrop of LA at night, lost in “a watercolour delicacy” (Olsen, “It Happened One Night” 15) of images, one effect of this being the emphatic linking of emotion and character mood to visual texture. This was certainly unusual for a genre film, but characteristic of Mann’s style throughout his career. With *Collateral*, however, he fully integrated this style with a digital aesthetic for the first time. Speaking about the production of *Collateral*, Mann explained that “digital isn’t for directors who aren’t interested in visualisation, who rely on a set of conventions or aesthetic pre-sets if you like” (Olsen, “Paint It Black” 16). But the film is clearly constructed around generic “beats” at the level of scripting, with Mann stating that he didn’t want to in any way change Stuart Beattie’s “perfectly structured” screenplay. Conversely, Braudy states that a genre film “can step beyond the moment of its existence and play against its own aesthetic history” (668), and if we think of *Collateral* in terms of its iconography and purely visual aesthetics, we can outline the distinctly postmodern approach Mann takes by comparing it with a pre-digital work sharing some of its iconography.
Taxi Driver (Martin Scorsese 1976), like Mann’s film, has a taxi cab moving through a nocturnal cityscape and a sociopathic killer inside it. Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner describe Scorsese’s mise-en-scène:

Like a fetish, the taxi seems to transcend its surroundings and to elicit a riveting attention. Moreover, throughout the film, Travis’s experience of the city is represented through images that underscore the fragmented nature of the experience. As he drives, images of small parts of the taxi – the outside mirror, the windshield, the rearview mirror – make up the composite of his phenomenal world. The style concentrates on fragmented and isolated parts instead of wholes, and the camera is enclosed, like Travis himself; it looks out on a world that can only appear threatening from so circumscribed a point of view. The representational rhetoric of the film, therefore, is as fragmentary and fetishistic as Travis’s moral vision. It touches on surfaces and immediate street-level experiences, but it does not indicate the interconnections of the system that gives rise to the things that repulse Travis and motivates his actions. (89)

Collateral’s “rhetoric” is totally different. The first scene depicting the cab depot, while showing only extremely brief fragments of the whole – an Asian newspaper, a televised soccer game, a French-speaking cabbie – instead illustrates Mann’s filmic strategy of showing everything. This is the information age, the film announces in this scene; and it is too diverse, too decentralised to contain any kind of meaning. The scenes that follow obey a view of the world predicated on the impossibility of a single model of truth, justice, or beauty, all filtered through the HD aesthetic. While Scorsese’s New York is displayed through a “circumscribed point of view” and can only ever appear fragmented (or syncopated, like the shot of the Gene Krupa-style drummer inserted into a longer shot of Travis and Betsy on their date), Mann’s HD
camera joins the fragments together in “impossible” HD aerial shots that captures a vision of Los Angeles that is “spread out” (as Tom Cruise’s Vincent describes LA).

Baudrillard describes the way Los Angeles “condenses by night the entire future geometry of the networks of human relations, gleaming in their abstraction, luminous in their extension, astral in their reproduction to infinity” (*America* 51-52). *Collateral* does work hard to give the sheen of hyperrealism to human relations in the modern world, but it fits perfectly well with its theme of the postmodern society devoid of meaning. Mann himself said that LA has its own pattern of culture which is reminiscent of internet surfing (qtd. in Olsen, “Paint It Black” 16). “One of the first images I had in my head,” Mann explains, “was guys stalking each other as near-silhouettes against the city at night. That could not have been shot on film; the aesthetic does not exist in the photochemical realm – it only exists in high-def video” (qtd. in Tucker). And while he has discussed the film in terms of realism, it is clear that the realism Mann means is not the overall aesthetic of the film but realism in the service of the hyperreal look. For example, Mann described a goal of creating a “realistic” lighting environment inside the cab (Lucas 279). In this case, by realistic he meant both what the human eye can see but also shots that gave the impression they were not lit by any artificial source, particularly on Cruise and Foxx’s faces. The light was meant to be seen as ambient illumination, reflected from the exterior city streets or panel lighting in the taxi and, crucially, the city streets had to be visible: Los Angeles, Mann declared, was as much a character as the actors in his film. This “unlit” interior/exterior effect required considerable effort on the part of the cinematographers; they developed a new lighting “instrument,” ELD panels, built from solid-state electroluminescent lighting strips that could be pasted onto interior surfaces of the cab (Holben, “Hell on Wheels” 45). Even with these new sources, the lighting effect created an unusual and difficult situation for the cinematographers, requiring them to
over-light the actors in order to see their faces and still keep the city exteriors in focus. This “realism” resulted in a look that had never been seen before. Framings of either Max or Vincent in the cab are nearly always bisected down the middle, showing the character on one side, with the neon nightscape of LA, twinkling into infinity, occupying the other half of the frame. On a big screen, the texture of the digital footage really looks like something never seen before.

How far Mann has come in terms of a developing aesthetic can be seen in the contrasting meanings generated by the framings of characters and the shimmering lights of giant cities in two different films. The image from *Heat* depicted in fig. 73 was shot with a long lens and has the effect of separating the couple from the abstracted background. The meaning generated, through a formal choice, is that Neil and Eady are not a part of the disconnected sprawl. They are sharing a romantic moment and occupying a space only they can inhabit. It’s an exemplary cinematic moment of space defining narrative. In *Collateral*, on the other hand, the HD cameras render a completely different meaning to the relationship between character and space.

Mann was always interested in visualising how architecture can influence character – even define it – as he showed in *Manhunter* and *Heat*; the HD technology allows this aspect of his work to become more central. With the extraordinary textures and depth of field allowable by the Thomson Grass Valley Viper FilmStream and Sony CineAlta cameras, the characters are shown as inseparable from their environments in *Collateral*. Robert Lucas states that “Mann’s goal of keeping the characters connected to the city has been achieved with a remarkable deep-focus effect reaching far into the night-time background” (281); the visual aesthetic depicted in fig. 76 and fig. 77 supports this argument.

The philosophy of a sociopathic killer suggests that he actually *can* separate himself from the supermodernity symbolised by LA, and that his individual identity is
not threatened by the urban sprawl. Vincent believes he is impervious to LA’s vastness because of his ability to see the city in the abstract and to be external to it. One of the first things he says in the film is a speech criticising the city as “too sprawled out” and a place where “nobody knows each other.” He tells Max a story that explains his disdain for the “too impersonal” city: “I read about this guy. Gets on the MTA, here, and dies. Six hours he’s riding the subway before anybody notices. This corpse doing laps around LA, people on and off, sitting next to him, nobody notices” (Beattie et al. 13). But it is an early scene, and Mann’s film will spend the next two hours blurring Vincent with the flux of modernity symbolised by life in Los Angeles.

Mann’s thesis, and one that is proved by the final scene, is that Vincent actually is unable to extricate himself from the any-spaces-whatever of the global city. His indifference is no match for the indifference of LA, the city as synecdoche of the postmodern world. The HD image democratises everything in front of it, giving equal weight to people and to environment. “Within the palette of the mise-en-scène,” Gaine argues, “these figures do not stand out. The digital cinematography merges them with the indifferent environment” (“‘We’re on Flashdrive’”).

This smoothing out process infects the actual narrative too. Loss of identity is a theme that connects all of Mann’s films, as I mentioned earlier, but it becomes crucial in the digital ones. Vincent is colour-coded as grey so that he blends in to any environment his job might call for. His nondescript appearance allows him to move around unnoticed. When Vincent is staking Annie in her office building, the viewer may recall a brief shot at the beginning of the film, where both pass each other moving up and down an escalator; totally unaware of each other, they are probably closer in proximity here than at any time during their life and death struggle in the film’s last scenes. Another scene takes place in a hospital elevator, where Max and Vincent go to visit Max’s sick mother. Detective Fanning (Mark Ruffalo), a character we met earlier,
gets on and makes small talk with Vincent. They are the core characters around which this drama is unfolding but they are complete strangers at this point. The flux doesn’t need them to figure out anything, because at the end of the film the city will be exactly the same as it was at the start. The temporal aspect of the film is one based on repetition: Vincent, at the start of the film, is talking about himself at the end of the film: it is a loop, like the MTA. Nothing people do in this film seems to make any difference or help them to form connections with one another. “We’re seeing fractals, or fractions, of the whole,” Mann points out, on the DVD commentary track. At one point, Fanning meets with an FBI agent (Bruce McGill) assigned to stakeout drug kingpin Felix’s hideout in the El Rodeo nightclub, and he asks him if he’s noticed anything unusual going on. “No,” he replies. “Various people are asleep, various people are not.” Any impulsive action in this film, such as Max grabbing Vincent’s briefcase and running from the hospital, is treated as a bolt-from-the-blue moment of the greatest dramatic importance. The people Vincent kills might as well be files on a computer that he simply erases, as Gaine argues (“We’re on Flashdrive”). Contingency bleeds into the mise-en-scène. The big action sequence, the Korean disco shootout, was the only scene filmed with 35mm cameras, as if to highlight in counterpoint the link between the HD cameras and the theme of indifference in the film (see fig. 78 and fig. 79).

Fig. 78. Collateral – Luminosity.
It is this indifference, affecting the film on a number of levels, which leads to *Collateral*’s invitation of a more abstract reading of the film, one that must take into account its digital form. There is a de-emphasis at work, as I’ve shown, but it works both at a narrative level and a formalistic level. Viewing the film leads to a realisation that the digital renderings, the smooth camera moves and the dispassionate aerial shots with their vanishing points meeting somewhere near infinity, act as a mirror held up to the actions of the characters at the level of narrative. An aware viewer might reflect on the indifference of the shots, the way the digital filming merges the characters with their environment, and may begin to see the film at a more meta level, a viewing experience that seems to steer the viewer’s immersion in the film’s generic pleasures towards a sensuous contemplation of the screen’s digital surface rather than towards an emotional engagement with the film’s narrative. Mann’s cinema resonates with Siegfried Kracauer’s call for the redemption of reality and his notion that “the cinema seems to come into its own when it clings to the surface of things” (285). Todd
McCarthy’s reaction to the film resonates with a certain strand of Kracauer’s philosophy:

Compared with the rich, intense colour palettes Mann has employed in his previous work, *Collateral* has a more monochrome look that, paradoxically, combines a sense of deep darkness with a certain washed-out thinness and lack of visual weight. Punctuating this at times, though, are the pervasive lights of the sprawling city, the appearance of which justifies the use of the new technology; to be sure, the sight of a succession of planes lined up to land at LAX at night, or the spooky yellow glare in coyotes’ eyes, have never been so strikingly or realistically rendered as here. (par. 7)

The scene where Vincent tracks Annie in her office building is interesting in terms of the uniqueness of Mann’s aesthetic, here communicated through the extremities of depth of field in particular shots; they really are, to paraphrase Michael Anderson, as much about the way the shot is filmed as what it is filming. Vincent stands stock still in almost total darkness. The dark is not total because there is one single source of light: the nocturnal neon sprawl of LA beyond the window. Normal 35mm film wouldn’t be able to handle the low light levels. In the same shot we see a tiny Jamie Foxx outside the window on the street below (see fig. 77). These are new cinematic images. Gavin Smith draws attention to the otherworldly, dreamlike effect achieved by the deep focus:

Mann uses the format for maximum expressive effect, capturing a sense of depth in the darkness and manipulating colour in postproduction to generate a heightened, dreamlike liminality and an array of voluptuous visual textures. Mann’s style has always been tinged with sci-fi overtones, but *Collateral* is
something else: it looks and sounds like a movie from the future. ("Join Tom Cruise" 14)\textsuperscript{66}

The key scene I want to discuss in terms of the more thoughtful involvement of the viewer occurs as Max and Vincent have had a particularly illuminating exchange about Max “calling that girl.” They are on their way to “Fever” nightclub in Koreatown, keeping to Vincent’s plan (eliminate the fourth target, Peter Lim); they have just come from “El Rodeo” where Max impersonated Vincent and succeeded in the ruse. Vincent knows the FBI has information on his activities by this point, and he probably guesses that Felix will take steps to see he finishes the contract. The threads of the generic plot are about to converge on one point. In a classic genre film the “Fever” shootout would be that point. Immediately after a series of shots alternating between macho gun posturing from the FBI and medium shots of the cab, scored with a thumping rock song, the film cuts to an aerial shot of the cab. The music fades out suddenly as the camera dollies down towards the cab. An interior shot frames Max’s face on the left, close in to the camera, with Vincent on the right, further back, behind a glass partition with green lettering obscuring the lower part of his face. “You gonna call her?” Vincent asks Max. What follows is crucial because, with the focus now directed at Vincent’s eyes, as the camera racks focus on him and then Max when he answers Vincent’s questions, the viewer knows that Vincent is on the level (he has the same expression on his face as he did immediately after killing Daniel in the jazz club: the first time he let his guard down and showed remorse). But the camera cuts to an exterior shot depicting the drinks advert on the top of the cab, perhaps signalling the simulacrum that is Vincent’s usual identity remains in place. A cut back inside the cab, and Vincent says, “You should call her. That’s what I think.” The delivery of that line is very evocative: it is as if Vincent is finally saying something he actually believes in.

\textsuperscript{66} Richard Combs describes Heat as “a cosmic heist film” (17).
Cut to an exterior shot of the side of the cab reflecting the coloured lights of LA. Is Vincent lying again? Then all audio drains from the soundtrack with the appearance of the first coyote, and Max and Vincent are framed separately. The second coyote crosses the road in front of them and the street lights are reflected in its eyes. Vincent is framed in the centre for the first time in the sequence, and appears awe-struck by what he is seeing. The Audioslave track “Shadow on the Sun” begins on the soundtrack, and a shot of palm trees bending in the wind somehow signals a deep loss. The song hits a crescendo with the line “Never to return,” indicating that this moment outside of the flux (both for Vincent and for the viewer) was a once-off.

Perhaps no more than a minute of screen time, the sense is palpable that this is an address to the viewer to step back from the narrative, with Vincent, and to ponder the texture of shots and what they mean in their context-less state. Why are Vincent and Max framed separately when the coyotes run in front of the cab? What’s going through Vincent’s mind? In its anomalous nature, the sequence strives for a certain kind of realism, in terms of narrative; but when the viewer pulls herself out of the narrative, for that brief moment, she approaches a viewing state that is both more phenomenological and more sensuous than usually allowed by the conventions of the crime genre. In these privileged moments, Mann’s digital cinema becomes less a container for narrative than a trigger for sensorial affect in the viewer. It is moments like this one, I think, that show Mann striving quite successfully to invite the viewer to get lost in an image that is actually marked by twofoldedness.

**Public Enemies (2009)**

Mann’s films look as if they were shot on digital video rather than attempting to replicate the feel of film: the depth of field extends further, opening out the image to subjective focus, while action and movement often appear rather
jarred or fragmented. Deep staging works to amplify the focal points of the shot, with rack focusing frequently employed to subtly draw the long shot and extreme close-up together. [emphasis in original] (Gallimore, “‘We Ain’t Thinking About Tomorrow’”)

*Public Enemies*, a depiction of the gangster wars of the 1930s, contains an overlay of past and present filmic aesthetics in the service of a digital hyperrealism that should not be taken for cinematic realism; Mann, as I argued earlier, is not interested in honouring the codes of cinematic realism: he is more concerned with the texture, sensation, and tactile qualities of the digital image in the service of a textured “real.”

The director used digital cameras on this production to produce cinematic images of “stylized clarity” which would allow the audience to “see textures in detail” (Goldman par. 24). He stated he wanted to move away from film with this all-digital (except for one scene) production. According to Rayner, “Mann’s intention for the film was to create an amalgam of subjective realism (the experience of sharing Dillinger’s perspective on the narrative events) with a documentary realism (the detailed and accurate recreation of the period through concrete mise-en-scène)” (151). The goal was to produce a contemporary vision of the past, with digital technology as the driving force behind it. The subjective and documentary realisms that Rayner argues were Mann’s goals on the film can probably be collapsed down into the single concept of hyperrealism (which describes Mann’s overall aesthetic). Spinotti notes that he and Mann “believed digital would facilitate a more dynamic use of film grammar while giving us a hyper-realistic look” (qtd. in Holben, “Big Guns” 26). Similarly to *Ali*, the principle this film works towards is the remediation of a story that has already been mediated before, but this time making it unfold through a digital aesthetic that leads to what Bill Krohn described as the cinematic rendering of “an eternal present” (19). The film’s emphasis on its look, which some critics claimed drains the film of compelling
characterisation and sociological contextualising (James, “Johnny Too Bad” 26; Westwell 74; Stables 89), is, in fact, its raison d’être. The look of 1930s’ Depression-era America through the lens of contemporary visual culture is the film’s character, regardless of how much mileage Mann gets from the romance between Dillinger and Billie Frechette (Marion Cotillard). Complicating the emphasis on the visuals in Public Enemies, Mann says in his commentary for the film that he didn’t just want to portray how people looked in 1933 but how they thought. As in Ali, the main question the filmmaker is answering through his use of digital is, how does the main character see his world? The film is concerned with a recreation of experience rather than with providing an interpretation of historical figures. Gallimore argues that the distance between these two modes – experience and interpretation – gives rise to immediacy (“‘We Ain’t Thinking About Tomorrow’”). The greatest distance between these two modes, I would argue, is achieved in the action sequences. The cinematic syntax of these scenes is geared towards maximising immediacy. Establishing shots are rare, and very quick cuts accompanied by a restless handheld camera create an immediate experience for the viewer. It’s a style that Bordwell terms “intensified continuity,” and he did not miss the crucial development that paralleled the rise of the new style: “The triumph of intensified continuity,” he argues, “reminds us that as styles change, so do viewing skills” (“Intensified Continuity” 25). The viewer learns as much about John Dillinger from the brief series of shots (see fig. 80 - fig. 83), as she does from any of his dialogue or information she might take away from his scenes showing him doing anything else but his work. There is nothing to interpret; the characters are always moving, never developing. Dillinger is unaware of the future and the past (“We ain’t thinking about tomorrow,” he tells Billie when she presses him to make plans for the future).
Fig. 80. *Public Enemies* (2009).

Fig. 81. *Public Enemies* – Visualising Interiority.

Fig. 82. *Public Enemies* – The Digital Night Shoot.
Spinotti, who collaborated with Mann for the fifth time on *Public Enemies*, notes that “digital cameras read into the shadows very differently [than 35mm cameras]; there’s an incredible elasticity there […] incredible control over the image” (qtd. in Holben, “Big Guns” 26). “We wanted the look of *Public Enemies* to have a high level of realism,” he added, “not an overt period feel” (26). But Spinotti must have also realised that the choice to film in real locations is not necessarily in the service of a quest for realism. Mann’s realism, as I already noted, is based on a phenomenology-based idea of objectivity through a subjective lens. This means that the night-time shootout ending in the death of Baby Face Nelson (Stephen Graham) was filmed where it happened – in Little Bohemia, Wisconsin (Depp even slept in the same bed Dillinger slept in, on the night of the shootout, April 24th, 1934 – according to the director’s commentary); and Dillinger’s daring escape in a prison governor’s own car was shot in the actual Crown Point jail. But Mann’s purported quest for realism is in truth most fully realised when the camera closes in on the characters and captures their interior lives as digital texture. “The near focus, the extreme depth of field – those things all gave it the hyperreal sense of things,” Mann stated in interview.

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67 *Manhunter*, *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992), *Heat* and *The Insider* were Spinotti’s previous collaborations with Mann.
(qtd. in Goldman par. 5), clearly enthusiastic about the visual results. We are seeing
the real Little Bohemia, but if the hyperreal gunfight that takes place there in the dead
of night is the result of a realist agenda then it is a cinematic realism that is updated to
forge links with digital culture.

Deborah Tudor points out that the film has “a livelier look” than non-digital
films, and this is down to the images embodying the “liveness” of video. It is a quality,
Mann maintains, that strips his film of the usual nostalgic backwards look at the past
(an aesthetic quality found in most period films) to make it the product of a modern
sensibility. There is an emotional dimension to this discourse which splits cinema into
before- and after-digital camps, as Tudor explains:

Directors and cinematographers frequently use emotionally laden terms to
describe digital and analogue processes. The breakdown runs roughly along
lines of “emotional, warm, live, and organic” for analogue footage, including
analogue effects (post production). “Sterile, cold, perfect, and artificial” feature
in descriptions of digital effects. (D. Tudor par. 6)

Mann’s film, while trying hard to disavow this dichotomy, by allowing for a mixture
of romanticism (they are still gangsters, after all) and critical distance, wavers in its
commitment to honouring genre conventions alongside its aesthetic of presenting
history through a contemporary lens. Kenneth Turan states that “the beauty and skill of
the filmmaking keep you tightly in its grasp,” but he criticises the film for its sterile,
emotionless atmosphere (par. 4). This absence of emotional engagement could be as a
result of the filmmaker’s single-minded commitment to see historical fiction through
today’s cultural lens: Mann is so keen to highlight the developments in 1930s’ society
that most chime with our current society – the growth of corporate crime and the
centralising of information shown in Frank Nitti’s gambling racket – that there is an
imbalance to the film which has the effect of downgrading the more conventional
scenes (the romance between the gangster and his girl). But that is the price of the
digital aesthetic and Mann insists on paying it.

Public Enemies also develops the ongoing intertextual dimension to his digital
agenda. The film’s climax contains a visual juxtaposition that gives off layers of
meaning at a meta level, one of which allows the scene to be read as a meditation on
the shift from analogue to digital. The shots of Depp watching Clark Gable on screen
in the final minutes of the film “vindicates the close association between gangsters
whose lives are remade on screen, and movies which themselves influence the self-fashioning of gangsters” (Rayner 157) (see fig. 84). Cotillard’s likeness to Myrna Loy is played upon (see fig. 85), with the effect heightened by the sharing of Dillinger’s subjective view; the cinema screen filling our frame, with her face seen in slow-motion and closeup while Dillinger smirks knowingly.

In these shots, depicting Dillinger sitting in the Biograph theatre and watching Manhattan Melodrama (W.S. Van Dyke 1934), two competing screen realisms dialectically inform one another. On one level, it sets up a hall-of-mirrors remediation which involves on one side of it Depp as the new Gable, and on the other, Dillinger watching a film he probably inspired. Then there is Public Enemies itself as the latest in a long line of crime genre films that have Manhattan Melodrama as a precursor. On the other hand, we could read the scene the way Joshua Gooch does:

The competition between the rough digital composition of Public Enemies and the classic Hollywood aesthetic of Manhattan Melodrama vampirically drains and remotivates the older film’s realism. The construction of affective attachments within the film, this time by plot rather than aesthetics, undermines this attempt to solidify a new realist project: Manhattan Melodrama does not act as an intertext but as a screen for Dillinger’s emotional projections while he absorbs and reflects on Clark Gable’s lines. (par. 37)

If Mann falters a little in his attempt to align his aesthetic of hyperrealism with the conventions of genre, he is more successful in his development of a key thematic concern running through his entire body of work. Public Enemies continues his interrogation of male identity in crisis. John Dillinger, just like Muhammad Ali, Vincent and Max in Collateral, and Sonny Crockett in Miami Vice, struggles to hold onto his own sense of self. He sees his identity as in danger of being appropriated by the flux (in this case, the media), and then “belonging” to other people (an aspect of his
public persona that Ali also struggled to come to terms with). The character is working hard to maintain self-ownership and self-preservation while other larger forces work equally hard to take these fundamental things from him. But this aspect of Mann’s work might refer us back to his trouble assimilating large themes into generic frameworks, making them sensory experiences for the viewer rather than experiences predicated on expectation or narrative pleasure. Mann’s crime worlds become, in this sense, smaller parts of a larger whole, with a resultant erasing of generic borders; and the Mann protagonist, a character like Max or John Dillinger, is fashioned as much from our world of visual culture, our history as “a vast collection of images” as Jameson argued (“Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” 494), as he is from genre convention. It means that Mann’s notion of realism, if it is really important at all in this filmmaker’s work, hovers somewhere both inside and outside of genre:

His realism hones up to its artificiality, and in fact any trace of the “real” in Mann derives from the power generated by this very quiet acknowledgment, in the films themselves, of the artificial construction that comprises any work of art. But at the same time Mann has remained thoroughly interested in presenting the more or less realistic detail of the dramatic situations he has carefully researched and he is committed to a belief in logical character psychology. The result is rather a kind of amplification of a certain sense of reality presented within and through the bounds of genre, a reality which cannot exist outside of the image itself and which is enabled by convention, but which nonetheless has its moorings in a particular understanding of the world outside of film. (Rybin, *The Cinema of Michael Mann* 190)

Rybin’s argument here makes no reference to the role of character subjectivity in Mann’s “realism” and I think he gives too much credit to genre conventions as the
basis of the framework for that realism. I believe it is when generic support is actually threatened that Mann’s cinema becomes real for the viewer. It is in those privileged moments that the films attain a hyper-realism that is closer to the truth in contemporary culture than any more simplistic notions of cinematic realism can attain. One moment will serve as an example: the Five Hits/One Night looping narrative of *Collateral* is interrupted by coyotes in downtown LA, prompting a three-way exchange between Vincent, a digitally rendered nighttime LA washed in golden colours, and a viewer momentarily lifted out of the narrative, to communicate a truth about Vincent’s subjectivity (he’s a lost soul, and he knows it). And as shown in this chapter, Mann’s cinema is made possible by thespectatorial activity of the more aware spectator, now that the digital aesthetic has changed visual culture forever. “Just as the indexical and analogical structures of celluloid created an unconscious awareness of the image’s material connotations, the numerical structures of the digital similarly reflect on the perceptual instincts of the viewer,” as Hadjioannou argues (*From Light to Byte* 93) (Mann, in his commentary for *Public Enemies*, states that audiences, in terms of perception, are “quite brilliant”). Deborah Tudor, discussing Mann’s integration of post 9/11 themes into his film, argues that “the technological choices in *Public Enemies* serve this thematic development well by providing visual cues that move audiences away from established ways of looking at the past” (par. 31). Mann, with *Public Enemies*, moves his digital cinema into a foregrounding of the “liveness” of the moving image, attempting in one sense to present a remediated story (Purvis’s relentless pursuit of Dillinger has been well-documented and fictionalised) with a totally unmediated look, as if it was happening right now. As I’ve pointed out, it is not completely successful in this regard, and as Cyril Neyrat suggests, it may have something to do with the trade-off involved with the commitment to digital (24). With this film, however, and particularly with *Miami Vice* before it, Mann has given the
crime genre a brand new visual aesthetic; it is a new look to the genre that brings characters to the surface, their very emotions worked out in the textures of the shots.

Mann’s latest crime film, *Blackhat*, continues the filmmaker’s deliberately aesthetic response to the twenty-first century. The film’s largely negative reception, despite – or maybe, in truth, because of – its crucial ties to genre filmmaking, means that Mann has produced another digital crime genre film that makes straightforward readings less illuminating than interpretations which take into account its digital aesthetics at a more abstract level. Putting a frame around Mann’s hyperrealism, as the contemporary digital age viewer is often encouraged to do, is another way of eliciting readings of Mann’s recent films that can account for genre cinema in the new century.

With the help of the responsive viewer, *Miami Vice* can, as I suggest in the next chapter, almost reach that point where the diegesis fractures and viewer immersion is interrupted. This is true also of *Ali*, *Collateral*, and *Public Enemies*; in fact, the last mentioned comes dangerously close to vanishing altogether into a critical distance that severs any connection the viewer might have with the film on an emotional level. And this, finally, is the double logic, or paradox, of Mann’s digital cinema: the delicate high-wire act that Combs saw in Mann’s early films has now shifted outwards to include a digital age viewer who must decide what direction to take.

Does the viewer agree to be drawn into the diegesis and take up the position of classically trained subject? Or does the viewer travel outwards, away from classical notions of cinematic address altogether, and regard the film as a contemporary digital art object to be merely appreciated as such? Mann’s commitment to his overall aesthetic project in his work, I have argued here, means there is a third choice. This is one where the viewer takes up a middle position, aligning herself, much like some of Mann’s protagonists at certain moments, to balance the inner pull of Mann’s compelling cinematic storytelling with the outer demands of a culture telling us
nothing is real if everything is *hyper*-real. In the interstices of these two modalities lies the digital image – but a digital image that invites both a seeing-in and a seeing-through. I will explore this image as the result of a phenomenological synthesis of film world and viewer through a study of Mann’s *Miami Vice* in the following chapter.
Chapter 4

Case Study – Contemplating Subjectivity in Miami Vice (2006)

The garish heterogeneity of the visual style does not signal any regression in relation to Collateral, but a deepening of the specificities of HD, of which Mann makes a crude and systematic use here. The incessant changes in texture and dominant colour, for example, result from high responsiveness of digital to variations in natural light. In the same shot, a slight movement by Burnett suffices for his face to go from grey to yellow, his hands from yellow to red. There is a shot, reverse-shot between Burnett and Tubbs just before the final shoot-out: the one mostly in blue, the other in orange. Mann could have unified the image of his film: either by re-creation, during the shoot, with a homogeneous, artificial light, or by subduing the variations in post-production calibration. If he didn’t do it, it is because Miami Vice wants to expose the regime of high definition. (Neyrat 24)

In the previous chapter I referred to American filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s who worked in the crime genre tended to adapt European art cinema’s styles and themes. Michael Mann inherited some aspects of this tendency, which is reflected in his preference for plot-driven genre formats slightly modified to contain subjective art cinema dilemmas. His films’ overall style is labelled as “expressive” by many film theorists, and his work in the crime genre has been labelled film bleu – a postmodern updating of film noir – because of the many scenes depicting his characters in blue-filtered environments as distinct from the chiaroscuro environments of classic film noir (Lobato 348). Mann isn’t really concerned with subverting genre tropes, like Robert Altman or the Coen Brothers, for example; rather, as I outlined in the previous chapter, his films transcend conventions by pushing at the boundaries of genre. In the light of
his engagement with crime, what I find really interesting about Mann’s films – and
particularly *Miami Vice* – is that there seems to be a tension between upholding the
conventions of the genre, on the one hand, and a desire to bring a more expressionistic
style to both the visuals and the characters.

Moving through the techno-media landscape of Michael Mann’s *Miami Vice*,
two undercover detectives must align their true identities and existences with simulated
criminal covers in order to infiltrate the underworld they seek to bring down; a milieu
to which they risk losing their moral compass as well as their physical lives. In contrast
to *Trollhunter*’s amateur found footage digital aesthetic and its invitation to
contemplate the larger cultural issues of national identity and how such an identity can
incorporate both traditional and modern cultural characteristics, as explored in chapter
two of this thesis, the high definition digital aesthetic of *Miami Vice*, predicated on
achieving a hyperreal image, invites the viewer to engage with a more postmodern
aspect of cultural identity in terms of fractured individuality. This chapter will show
how *Miami Vice* presents, purely through its digital “look,” a picture of destabilised
identities displayed through a heterosexual masculinity that is performed rather than
embodied by the film’s characters. Moreover, confronted by these de-centred and
fractured characters, not only is the viewer’s own identification with them rendered
more complex through the very act of viewing digitally-captured rather than celluloid-
based imagery, but contemplation of the viewer’s own identity becomes part of her
engagement with the film. Mann is also interested is showing how such identities, both
the film’s protagonists and the viewer’s own, are shaped by a world dominated by
instantaneity: an era largely under the control of surveillance technologies, instant
access to information, and the idea of temporality “smoothed out” as flux, is here
shown to move the crime genre in a different direction to that of previous, pre-digital
crime films; a direction, this chapter will argue, that is predicated on Mann’s experimentation with the digital image.

In *Miami Vice*, Mann expands the tropes of the crime genre into a globalised context – and, crucially, feels the need to capture the imagery digitally – with a very apparent tension between genre and style as a result of this expansion. I would argue that the film is evidence of a filmmaker in complete control of thematic articulation voiced in and through his formal choices – whether the general audience of crime genre fans will go along with his unusual stylistic choices or not is another matter. Mann uses the crime genre as self-imposed restrictive “container,” within which the main conflict is between not two opposing sides of the law but the struggle to retain a subjective grip on reality within the hyperreal world of digital media and surveillance technology. In other words, in films like *Collateral, Miami Vice* and the recent *Blackhat*, Mann makes the bold – but entirely appropriate – choice to use digital cameras in order to visualise stories that are infused with digital age angst and characters whose actions – and whose very identities and sense of self – oscillate around the electronic flow of information and capital.

*Miami Vice* is very loosely based on the 1980s’ TV show of the same name, which ran for six seasons between 1984 and 1989 and on which Mann was executive producer. The narrative of the film borrows elements from the two-hour Pilot episode (“Brother’s Keeper”) and the Season One episode titled “Smuggler’s Blues” (Anthony Yerkovich and Andres Carranza 1984-1990). But in terms of how the film version of *Miami Vice* relates to its TV show predecessor, there is no nostalgic referencing to it at all, and there seems to be an intentional distancing from the TV show at work in the film. This is made clear in the film’s opening scene, which begins without any titles or establishing shot and introduces characters anonymously through rack focus and decentred grainy handheld shots. This is quite obviously a deliberate tactic to move the
film away from the brightly coloured 1980s’ vibe of the TV show. Mann essentially starts the film in mid flow, the opening shot designed to offer a way in to the flux which governs the actions and identities of the film’s characters.

The plot follows the conventions of the crime genre. Two undercover Miami detectives, Crockett and Tubbs, are brought into an FBI operation to bring down Aryan Brotherhood drug smugglers and flush out an informer in the FBI who has caused the deaths of a couple of FBI undercover agents and a CI (confidential informant) who worked with Crockett and Tubbs on a previous undercover operation. The two detectives assume the identities of drug transporters and start transporting loads of cocaine and heroin for Jesus Montoya, who employs the Aryans and is the head of a very powerful international drug cartel. They meet Montoya just once and deal with his right-hand man, Jose Yero, who is a counter-intelligence expert and who doesn’t trust the new drugs transporters. Crockett and Tubbs also work closely with Montoya’s business partner and mistress, Isabella, but complications arise when she begins an affair with Crockett. Meanwhile Tubbs’ girlfriend Trudy, also a Miami detective, is kidnapped on Yero’s orders and seriously injured in a trailer park explosion. The generic plot, such as it is, finishes with a gunfight leaving most of the bad guys dead, Isabella on a boat to safety, and Trudy showing signs of life in her hospital bed.

Peter Bradshaw wrote in his review of the film that Crockett and Tubbs have no inner selves; their friendship is subordinate to professional interdependence and their inner selves are utterly subsumed into the job, and the same goes for their romantic and sexual lives (par. 8). In fact, the nearest thing they have to an inner life is provided by the false identities assumed for the undercover adventure. And it is something they will do again and again: when Sonny Crockett asks Trudy the details of the false identities, she answers that they are “the same fabricated fundamentals as before.” These are not underdeveloped characters so much as people whose real selves
have been subsumed in the electronic flux that controls their environment. And their environment, this time, goes beyond Mann’s characteristic Los Angeles setting (as seen in *Heat* and *Collateral*) to embrace what Virilio calls a globalitarian world (qtd. in Armitage 45). But however conventional this crime genre narrative sounds, the film collapses this content with its formal register so that the film can be interpreted, and, more important, can be experienced as something else entirely. Rybin describes the rather unique manner of Mann’s formalist approach to his work:

*Miami Vice*’s exquisite formalism also incorporates a kind of on-the-fly, handheld-camera aesthetic that grants the images a sense of immediacy, especially effective during those moments in the narrative when the cops need to leave behind their systems of surveillance and communication to perform more improvisatory and risky undercover work. This approach, while distinctive from Mann’s previous films, nonetheless contains a recurring interest in presenting realistic and carefully researched dramatic situations while amplifying those situations through a highly controlled and expressive style. (Rybin, *Michael Mann: Crime Auteur* 216)

Mann sets up a tension in his films between moments of sensation and the drive of the narrative, and this offers an opportunity for the viewer to disengage from the forward thrust of the narrative and explore the manner in which the film digitally renders globalised crime as a constantly flowing system. McQuire describes the implications for subjectivity that this system creates:

What emerges is a new mode of being in the world in which the *extensive* revolution sustained by dynamic transport technologies which supported global trade and global migration is counterpointed by an *intensive* circulation of images and information, a virtual movement in which the human body is
potentially reduced to a node within a network. [emphasis in original]

(“Blinded by the (Speed of) Light” 146)

This is the system we are thrust into – along with the film’s protagonists – in the cold opening of the nightclub stakeout that begins the narrative in media res, before the undercover operation is abandoned in the blink of an eye (or the movement of a digital camera tracking from an interior club scene to the exterior of a high-rise rooftop in one unbroken shot). The digital imagery drives the notion of the environment and the characters existing as part of a continuum, and the digital “affect” actually invites the viewer to contemplate her own identity and subjectivity in terms of this continuum. Miami Vice argues for identity as a continuing process, never fully formed or arrived at its destination; it presents this argument through digital image textures that have never been seen before. It is the digitality of the image itself which then opens up a path to contemplative engagement with notions of subjectivity in the digital world.

The mise-en-scène predicated on the high definition video aesthetic is crucial to a film like Miami Vice, because the whole look of the film is telling us, more than the characters themselves, that these characters cannot escape what Thoret calls the “flux” – the vast flow of capital, the ubiquitous electronic images from surveillance cameras, radar and computer screens – which impacts on the characters’ subjectivities and which impacts on the viewer’s own subjectivity through their digital rendering. The fact that this flow, this vast electronic finance-driven flux, will remain essentially unchanged at the end of the film and continue on beyond the parameters of the film narrative (Thoret par. 2-4), provides a connection between the film and the viewer’s real-world experience. It is this flux, this unmooring of temporality from a cause-and-effect succession to a series of events that do not as much succeed as seem to replace each other in the film, which Mann’s digital camera unveils. Mann is not interested in ensuring Miami Vice looks like it was shot on film – he wants to expose the regime of
high definition and show how apposite such an aesthetic is to an examination of the individual’s relationship with contemporary digital culture. The film effectively uses the conventions of the crime genre to examine subjectivity and self-hood in the twenty-first century.

While there is a certain irony involved in a filmmaker using digital technology better to visualise a critique of subjectivity formation in and through contemporary digital culture, this chapter argues that the use of digital cameras in *Miami Vice* results in a provocative examination of our relationship with digital culture in terms of how that culture impacts on our sense of self. Moreover, similar to the manner in which the found footage element in *Trollhunter* offered a new way to engage with national identity predicated on its digital aesthetic, the very different hyperreal aesthetic of *Miami Vice* invites the viewer to contemplate her own subjectivity and sense of self as it is assailed and in turn shaped by a digital culture overrun with media and surveillance technology; all while she is watching Sonny Crockett engage in a similar engagement on screen.

**Miami Vice’s Flux and the Hyperreal Self**

The “flux” of *Miami Vice* incorporates the overlap of a digitally driven temporality with the simulation of identity, by which the two detectives flow back and forth from one identity to another in the course of their undercover work. In the course of the film, the modalities of time and identity, already characterised by fluctuation, are acted upon by a third element of flux: the flow of capital facilitated by highly developed technological systems in our increasingly globalised world. Mann’s digital capture method of producing images forces the discursive examination encouraged by the enmeshing of these three systems of “flow” in the film – temporality, identity and capitalism – to find interesting answers in the aesthetics of the imagery, particularly in
the unusual surface details and unique textures Mann acquires with the HD digital cameras. Another “flow” that can be related to the film is the one generated for the viewer. In a similar fashion to the manner in which *Trollhunter*’s digital aesthetic allowed the viewer a level of active participation in the film’s debate on national identity, bypassing the tropes of the horror genre in the process, *Miami Vice* exploits its own aesthetic to send the viewer on her own journey of self-discovery through a culture of omnipresent media technology, a journey which is never overpowered by the codes and conventions of the crime genre. In this case, the film’s digitality is displayed in ultra-sharp imagery and immense depth of field, rather than the amateur “shakycam” imagery of *Trollhunter*.

The film’s imagery has a double-edged hyperrealism. It is, firstly, hyperreal in terms of the surface sheen of its projected images: pin-sharp resolution characterises the texture of the film’s daylight scenes, while often the nighttime sequences have a heavy, grainy texture predicated on how the digital cameras handle dynamic range. Most of the film was shot using Thomson Grass Valley Vipers, Sony CineAlta T950 CCD Block Adapters, and Sony CineAlta F900s. Cinematographer Dion Beebe had worked with Mann on *Collateral* previous to *Miami Vice*, but the later film was a much different experience for Beebe. “We went back down the digital path, but we weren’t looking to reproduce the look of *Collateral,*” he argues, and describes the challenges presented by the 2006 film:

> We used the experience we gained shooting nights on *Collateral* to develop the night look on *Miami Vice*, but this picture has a very different look. We went for more contrast with hard light, as opposed to the soft, wraparound look we did on *Collateral*. We also had to deal with daylight, which was a new challenge for me in HD. (qtd. in Holben, “Partners in Crime” 53)
There is a second way that the film exhibits its hyperreal dimension. Dipping below the surface of the image, the viewer can also engage with the manner in which *Miami Vice* also imbues its imagery with hyperrealism in the Baudrillardian sense of the term. Baudrillard argues that we are living in a state of perpetual simulation. Reality is replaced by the simulation, which he terms “hyperreality”:

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory –precession of simulacra – that engenders the territory, and if one must return to the fable, today it is the territory whose shreds slowly rot across the extent of the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges persist here and there in the deserts that are . . . ours. *The desert of the real itself.* [emphasis in original] (“The Precession of Simulacra” 453)

I would argue that the film presents the characters as negotiating a reality that is in free-flow, that reality is another part of the flux which the digital aesthetic delivers as the film’s overall world. Not a fixed reality, but instead a technological simulation, created for Sonny and Ricardo by the imbrication of the technology of mass media and the flux of digital information which blurs the inside-outside dichotomy that separates their “false” undercover identities and their barely glimpsed “real” identities. Under such conditions, reality cannot be pinned down; it is a continuum and in a continual state of flux. The two detectives’ simulated existence is a hyperreal existence which becomes, in a sense, more real than real; the simulation overrides the reality, and the detectives are so engulfed by their “performed” identities that the real is no longer operational or even essential. The hold this hyperreal world has on the characters is shown in the dilemma Sonny faces in the film. Given the chance to step away from this Baudrillardian existence, by leaving with his lover at the
end of the film, he is compelled instead to fall back into the flux in *Miami Vice*’s final moments.

Mann takes his examination of the hyperreal elements of the film’s narrative to another level, however, by bringing the discourse at the core of its storyline right to the surface of the screen. The separation of form and content in *Miami Vice* is diminished by its digital aesthetic, offering a more intimate engagement with the film on the part of the viewer. Moreover, similar to viewer activity with *Trollhunter*, this engagement is predicated not so much on the attraction of the genre itself but on the links the film establishes between its generic elements and the viewer’s own world. The central premise of my argument in this chapter is that the Baudrillardian aspect of the film’s hyperrealism is absorbed by its digital aesthetic, and its discourse on contemporary culture communicated effectively through the digital textures of the image as a result. This communication, this enunciation of the film in relation to the viewer, leads to a merging in the viewer’s engagement between genre-based pleasure and the more phenomenologically-charged pleasure revolving around culture-based personal identity. There is a marked Bergsonian and Deleuzian element to this integration of cinema-based pleasures. Again, Deleuze’s subtraction comes into conflict with Mann’s richly textured digital imagery. The digitally-produced hyperreal images of *Miami Vice* make this subtraction much less straightforward. Confronted by such an immense depth of field and the texture of hyperreality given to the images by the cameras in the film, the viewer might be so overwhelmed by the visual field that subtraction becomes problematic. Manohla Dargis writes that “the film shows us a world that seems to stretch on forever, without the standard sense of geographical perspective” (par. 10). This sense of perspective is not just confined to the way the digital aesthetic configures the objects within the image; the viewer’s perspective needs to be recalibrated. Rybin describes the visuals in *Miami Vice* in terms that suggest the problems the film might
hold for subjectivity: “Almost every object in every frame seems visible and almost tangible, whereas many shots in *Collateral*, a more intimate drama, register background detail with a more opaque luminosity” (*Michael Mann: Crime Auteur* 216). When the viewer engages with an image like the shot of Neil and Eady on the balcony in *Heat*, it is relatively easy for her to strip away what is not of interest and focus on the couple as the central focus of the scene (see fig. 73). But confronted by shots like these (see fig. 86 and fig. 87), the viewer finds it more difficult to subtract what is “uninteresting” in the image because the digital means of producing the images has imbued them with an overloaded richness. As Dargis writes, “it’s as if the world were visible in its entirety, as if all our familiar time-and-space coordinates had dropped away, because they have” (par. 10).

Fig. 86. *Miami Vice* (2006).

Fig. 87. *Miami Vice* – Twofoldedness: Seeing-Through…Seeing-In.
Fig. 86 is a shot that is, on the face of it, very similar to the one taken from the balcony scene in *Heat*. But as I noted in an earlier section, the *Heat* shot is a composite, a combination of a computer-generated background with a separate shot of the actors in the foreground. The viewer will phenomenologically separate the couple from the “city of lights” background. The *Miami Vice* shot makes this more difficult. It is not a composite shot; the actors and the background occupy the same space in front of the camera. Here, character and cityscape vie for the viewer’s attention because the digital camera affords them “equal weight.” Similarly, in the other shot (fig. 87) from a later scene in the film, this almost abstract composition (not possible with film cameras because of the lighting restrictions involved in night-time shooting) draws the viewer’s gaze in all directions.\(^{68}\) The actions of the characters, usually the main area of focus in the crime genre, are rendered as hierarchically on the same level with the rest of the image’s pictorial elements in terms of viewer engagement. The images in the film break down the normal hierarchy of filmed images (rather than digitally-captured ones) and are presented as textured hyperreality enshrouding both characters and their environments. In fact, one of the effects of the digital aesthetic in *Miami Vice* is that it often allows the characters to become pictorially or texturally immersed in the environment (the physical cityscape *and* the equally important virtual environment in the film); an aesthetic effect that Mann might have sought in his pre-digital crime films.

\(^{68}\) On his blog, David Bordwell uses the science of mapping viewer’s eye movements while watching a film to argue that classical mise-en-scène, always serving the narrative of the film, influences the amount of time the viewer spends looking at different parts of the screen in a given shot. In his blog entry entitled “The Eye’s Mind,” Bordwell quotes filmmaker Robert Zemeckis: “Generally speaking, in blocking and framing a shot, the most important thing is to make sure the audience is looking where you want them to look” (Holben, “Sole Survivor” 40). In cognitive theory, “saccades” (the rapid movement of the fovea part of the eye) can be tracked to determine the area of an image that holds the most interest at a given time. In a follow-up blog entry, “Watching You Watch *There Will Be Blood*,” cognitive scientist Tim Smith is enlisted to show how staging can “control” the saccadic eye movements of the viewer watching a film. To guide the viewer’s gaze, Smith argues, filmmakers can co-opt “natural biases in our attention: our sensitivity to faces, hands and movement” (par. 1). Demonstrating how viewers are influenced to look at certain areas of the image instead of others even in relatively static scenes, Smith highlights how Paul Thomas Anderson stages a scene in *There Will Be Blood* which draws viewer attention to the actor’s hands and faces. How the “Hollywood style of moviemaking” works to influence the viewer’s gaze across *edited* moving images is discussed in a later Smith article (Smith et al., “A Window on Reality” 107-13).
but only succeeded in delivering when he switched from film to digital cameras. With films like *Heat* and *Manhunter*, Mann could not offer the viewer that extra layer of phenomenological engagement provided by the suffusion of character and environment (again, physical and virtual) that digital image capture afforded.

By necessity, the pre-digital films favoured a foregrounding of character; the protagonists of *Thief, Manhunter* and *Heat* were cast into relief by their environments, rather than pictorially embedded in them through the democratising power of the pixel. And while those pre-digital films also concerned the battle for subjectivity in a criminal milieu, it accorded a much weaker role to the environment in this battle. The struggle for characters to hold on to their sense of self in the earlier films is often rendered in terms of an outside-inside dichotomy which is played out in terms of the characters from both sides of the law being two sides of the same coin. In other words, the site of the existential struggle, which Mann in his digital films extends to include hyperreal environments, is confined to characters’ subjectivities involved in a fluctuating movement that was always resolved by action. In the later films, and particularly in *Miami Vice*, the fluctuating movement now involves the hyperreality of information culture and surveillance technology, and character subjectivity is unresolved by action and seen to be still part of the flux at the end of the film.

Martin-Jones argues that in *Heat* and *Collateral* characters oscillate around the “dividing line of the law whose struggle explores exactly which form of professionalism will most effectively serve the environment of any-space-whatevers (Los Angeles as gateway city)” (162). Each film is “a story about international trade flows which Mann later transfers to Miami and South America in *Miami Vice* (2006)” (Martin-Jones 164). But Martin-Jones, while admittedly developing his argument from the starting point of globalisation and the gateway city, fails to mention how the digital aesthetic itself becomes almost a character, a character resulting from the collapse of
the character-environment barrier we see in the digitally-captured crime films. Martin-Jones does argue an interesting point concerning Augé’s theory of non-places. He states that the narratives in these earlier films seem sometimes to consist of “a semi-autonomous movement of world” (162) – because of the any-space-whatevers (ASW) – which is reterritorialised as environment by the sensory-motor actions of the characters. And one of the ways Mann renders this environment as an ASW is the “affective aesthetic of coloured lights” which turns Los Angeles into “an expressionist shimmering any-space-whatever, an amorphous sea of lights at the heart of which is situated the action crystal” (162). In Miami Vice, on the other hand, the milieu of the ASW is not so much the gateway cities of the globalised drug wars as the purely virtual environment created by the information and surveillance technology used by both Sonny’s team and the actual drug runners. Moreover, Mann’s choice of digital capture effectively situates the characters within these virtual environments, both given equal weight by the mathematical notation which results in the pixels making up the image; and even if it is, in truth, merely a metaphorical positioning, the digital aesthetic provokes a phenomenological engagement from the viewer which goes some way towards literalising this metaphorical merger.

Miami Vice’s Immense Depth of Field: Constructing Subjectivity in the Viewer
That barrier separating the real from the hyperreal; the blurring of subjectivities negotiated by the film’s protagonists (Sonny, in particular); the film’s interrogation of the inside-outside dichotomy which is represented by the characters’ real and fabricated identities threading a path through the real and the hyperreal, are all effectively represented in Miami Vice by the manner in which the digital cameras handle depth of field. Deleuze states that depth of field is an advancement that has

allowed “a multiplication of independent data” in the cinema image (15). Historically, depth of field has been used by filmmakers to “democratise” the image, keeping background and foreground both in sharp focus. Conversely, even though pictorially there was a lack of emphasis, with every object on the screen given equal weight, filmmakers in the classical era could draw the viewer’s eye to particular areas of the frame by staging in depth. Arranging the mise-en-scène through staging in depth could attract the viewer’s gaze to the background of a scene, such as Dana Andrews talking on the phone in the depths of the image in *The Best Years of Our Lives* (William Wyler 1946). Conversely, Hollywood filmmaker Robert Altman used depth of field in conjunction with carefully controlled staging in depth in a manner that destroyed the hierarchy governing foreground and background; viewers engaging with an Altman film such as *McCabe & Mrs Miller* (1971) are confronted by an image where the idea of principal and secondary pictorial zones is largely abolished.

Mann *does* use his digital cameras to give equal weight to objects on the screen, but the way the dual action of depth of field and staging in depth is used in the film is very different to anything seen in pre-digital mainstream cinema. While the narrative follows familiar patterns, the uniqueness of its formal patterns, in terms of how the film chooses to represent a world in flux through a depth of field which renders everything – the characters, their sense of self, the environment within which they operate, the technological surveillance systems – as existing in a continuum, is signalled by the opening scene. The characters of detectives Crockett and Tubbs are introduced while they are performing their identities in their simulated world. Undercover in a flashy nightclub, operating a sting to capture a known major drug dealer by assuming the identity of drug dealers themselves, Crockett and Tubbs’ world is already presented as a false, or simulated, one. For the viewer, this opening scene presents challenges that are unusual for the genre. Mann uses the digital camera to
make it difficult to tell which side of the law the characters belong to. The scene puts a
digital inflection on the classical guidelines of composition to delineate characters on
opposite sides of the law in the crime genre. Mann’s digital aesthetic subtly calls
attention to itself through such means as the occasional lack of establishing shots,
which leads to extreme closeups and the exploration of the aesthetic values of the
surfaces of the worlds on display in his films. Because there is no establishing shot,
there is a sense that Mann is stripping the viewer of her familiarity with the genre and
actively seeking to realign her engagement in terms of generic expectations.

Sonny and Trudy are seen at the bar, with Tubbs standing nearby; but because
the dialogue exchanged by Sonny and Trudy is obscured by the music which blankets
the entire scene and because of the use of the digital camera’s depth of field and the
way the scene is staged, it looks like Jamie Foxx’s character may be their actual
surveillance target. In subsequent shots, Crockett and Tubbs colleagues, Gina
(Elizabeth Rodriguez), Zito (Justin Theroux), and Switek (Domenick Lombardozzi),
are shown engaged in different activities in the same location, with Switek’s identity as
a detective working undercover not immediately apparent and only confirmed later in
the scene. Instead of the traditional shot-reverse rhythms familiar from classical
cinema, Mann allows himself the luxury of using rack focus (because of the digital
camera’s immense depth of field) to pick out characters from the vast textured
environments the cameras are capable of rendering. From the first few minutes of the
film, Mann introduces his theme of existential crisis and identity through the
deliberately blending of the real and hyperreal worlds the characters must negotiate,
both in terms of their work and in terms of their subjectivities. Digital aesthetics shape
the filmmaker’s style to develop, in turn, the film’s thematic content. The high
definition images in this scene rely on focus racking to introduce characters, rather
than developing relationships through cutting and eyeline matches. And this scene’s
use of HD cameras to give everything, in effect, an “equal weight” by disavowing the connective tissue of classical spatial relationships, plays into the major concern of the film, which is contemporary crises of male identity played out in hyperreal images that represent contemporary digital culture (see fig. 88).

Fig. 88. *Miami Vice* – Ricardo, Sonny and Trudy.

Fig. 88 shows Ricardo Tubbs (Jamie Foxx), Sonny Crockett (Colin Farrell) and Trudy Joplin (Naomie Harris). In terms of how the narrative is represented through the visuals, Mann does not make it easy for the viewer. Perhaps Mann would trust his audience to be familiar with the television show and know that Foxx was playing Ricardo Tubbs here. These three characters have eyes on a major criminal called Neptune (Isaach De Bankolé). In Neptune’s company is a character the viewer learns later is a member of the Miami detectives’ task force. The simulated reality of the undercover operation is momentarily halted when Crockett receives a call from the “real” world, the world where Crockett’s identity ties him to legitimate, transparent detective work, and he goes to the roof of the building to talk to one of his informants (fig. 87 is a shot taken from this scene).
There is a complex relationship between Mann’s digitally-driven style here and the thematic concerns of *Miami Vice*; the immense depth of field that can only be captured digitally often includes extreme closeups which then become long shots through the combination of rack focus and depth of field, suggesting the irony of characters trapped or enclosed in the vast open spaces of a city tied to globalisation. The arrangement of these shots, and the way a closeup can oscillate with a vast wide shot with no cut or camera movement to trigger the change in shot perspective, offers Mann a means of linking subjectivity with the hyperreal immensity of the environment that is not possible with film cameras. A later sequence, showing Sonny and Ricardo catching up with a troubled informant on the Miami freeway, contains a passage of shots which shows this linkage between subjectivity and environment (see fig. 89 and fig. 90).

Fig. 89. *Miami Vice* – Mann’s Digital Virtuosity 1.
These two shots define Mann’s visual aesthetic as it relates to the “digitisation” of subjectivity. Fig. 89 displays the immensity of the depth of field of which the digital camera is capable. All of the lights in the background are in focus and pin-sharp. “We wanted to satisfy ourselves that what we could achieve in digital was not something we could simply produce on 35mm film,” explains Beebe (qtd. in Holben, “Partners in Crime” 53), and this shot is an example of what he is talking about. Beebe says that he wanted to exploit the attributes of HD technology, “a key one being increased depth of field,” and to take advantage of the high sensitivity in the “low end,” which allowed the cameras “to really dig into the shadows” (qtd. in Holben, “Partners in Crime” 53-54). The vividness of some of the test shots really stood out, according to Beebe:

This result was a combination of the increased depth of field, the exposure settings, colour timing, and something in the nature of the medium itself. The clouds and the people were so vivid it really excited us. It’s not necessarily
something you’d identify unless you were looking at film and digital side by side, but this was the kind of effect we were looking to achieve. (qtd. in Holben, “Partners in Crime” 54)

Beebe and Mann, working with colourist Stefan Sonnenfeld, were after a high contrast look, with a stronger colour palette than they had on Collateral. While fig. 89 and fig. 90 have similar amber and brown visual tones that characterised the look of Collateral, Miami Vice’s harder contrast allows the viewer to see a lot more in the image. Fig. 90 is a shot taken from the perspective of Alonzo (John Hawkes), the informant working with Crockett and Tubbs. In the moment before the one captured in the shot, Tubbs is in focus telling Alonzo that he does not need to return home to pick up his family before going on the run. The implication is that Alonzo’s family members are already dead. Then Mann racks focus, blurring Tubbs in the foreground and bringing the vastness of the Miami freeway into sharp focus (with sharply defined lights that are miles away but clearly visible). The viewer sees what the character sees moments before he walks into oncoming traffic. Predicated on the use of digital capture rather than film cameras, the visual information in the foreground of the frame is thrown out of focus in favour of a deep focus on the contours of background planes in the image. This shot, capable of being captured digitally only, also emphasises the link between landscape and affect which is present in nearly all of Mann’s crime films – but it is only through a digital aesthetic that Mann is able to engage the viewer to make a connection between subjectivity and environment. This kind of filmmaking, as exemplified in these shots from Miami Vice, inflects Mann’s digital cinema with the postmodern notion that even though these characters are bearers of the “look” or the “gaze” (which links them to their classical counterparts in previous crime films), they are at the same time moving through worlds that are rendered too vast and hyperreal to
be fully grasped because of the HD-captured depth of field. Rybin puts forward a similar argument:

The fact that Mann repeatedly pairs extreme close-ups and other types of visual abstractions with shots possessing an immense depth of field suggests a bifurcated intent to immerse us in the psychological world of the detective work performed in the film while constantly reaffirming a Vertovian depiction of an immense, contingent, and, in the end, ungraspable world. (*Michael Mann: Crime Auteur* 214)

The type of shot represented by fig. 90 is the most important one in relation to shifting the phenomenological engagement of the viewer. In a way, the success of the image as an example of twofoldedness that also incorporates immediacy is borne out by the often voiced claim that an image such as fig. 90 is not that different from a photochemical-based one. But a film camera cannot produce an image exactly to match this digital one. Mann creates crime films that encourage the viewer to look more critically at cinematic images and, as Sharrett maintains, he has created a group of crime films that, in a Bazinian sense, delve beneath the façade of the existing order of things (“Elegies on the Post-Industrial Landscape” 253). For Mann, the goal is an interrogation of personal identity as it struggles with the façade of hyperreal digital culture; and he does this through the “microscope” of his digital camera.

In terms of subjectivity and personal identity within contemporary culture, Mann’s digital crime films support the notion of “becoming” or identity as always in formation. Stuart Hall describes this theory of cultural identity as one that “does not signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already ‘the same’, identical to itself across time” (17). Because identities are always constructed within discourse, Hall argues, there is a need “to understand them as
produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive
formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies” (18). When the concept of
identity is applied to the discourse of cinema, it becomes clear that essentialism is hard
to avoid, and identity is superseded by the concept of identification. In other words, the
discourse of cinema puts forward an “already-there” subjectivity or identity engaging
in a process of identification with a character or characters on screen. While Mulvey’s
“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” was very influential in shaping the discourse
around viewer identification, its limitations soon became apparent. In seeking to
demonstrate the patriarchal dimension to the representation of just one gender,
Mulvey’s argument set up rigid structures of spectatorship. According to Mulvey’s
theory, men identified with male characters on the screen and women identified with
female characters, and women were moreover the passive recipients of the active male
gaze (“Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” 6-18). John Ellis found this too
restrictive and argued for a more fractured or dispersive mode of identification in his
book Visible Fictions:

[I]dentification involves both the recognition of self in the image on the screen,
a narcissistic identification, and the identification of self with the various
positions that are involved in the fictional narration: those of hero and heroine,
villain, bit-part player, active and passive character. Identification is therefore
multiple and fractured, a sense of seeing the constituent parts of the spectator’s
own psyche paraded before her or him. (43)

The structures of identification Ellis argues for involve a more layered and less
rigid spectatorial engagement between viewer and character than Mulvey’s. The digital
representation of film characters, I would argue, adds a further layer to this process. An
invitation to identify with its characters extended to the viewer by Miami Vice, I would
argue, actually shifts viewer engagement towards the contemplation of her own
identity. My reasoning here is that the viewer’s identification with the characters on screen must be influenced by the digital hyperreal environment the characters move through and the digital textures through which this character-environment interaction is presented, which in turn causes her to phenomenologically connect that environment with her own. The ubiquitous digital environment of *Miami Vice*, despite its criminal setting, is one well known to most members of society who will engage with information technology, probably on a daily basis.

**Miami Vice and the Reconstructed Viewer**

One of the key themes of the film, as I discussed earlier, is that in the culture of ubiquitous media and endless information a sense of self is difficult to maintain. In N. Katharine Hayles’ *How We Became Post Human* (1999), she describes the reconfiguring of the human body in conjunction with information technology. This is a dangerous proposition, not least because everything in our world – including the human subject – can be reduced to disembodied abstract information. But Hayles strikes a positive note when she describes the future of humanity’s interaction with technology in positive terms:

If my nightmare is a culture inhabited by posthumans who regard their bodies as fashion accessories rather than the ground of being, my dream is a version of the posthuman that embraces the possibilities of information technologies without being seduced by the fantasies of unlimited power and disembodied immortality, that recognises and celebrates finitude as a condition of human being, and that understands human life is embedded in a material world of great complexity, one on which we depend for continued survival. (5)

While *Miami Vice* does not include anything specific to tie it with Hayles’ notion of the posthuman, her yearning for a more aware human in the future, one who
is not seduced by the promise of technology, is close to the film’s own overall agenda of offering the viewer a phenomenological space to think about the dangers of having her subjectivity hijacked by technology. In terms of subjectivity, the separation of our public and private selves, the marking out of interior and exterior dimensions to our lives, is increasingly at risk in digital culture. Surrounded by images and screens of all shapes and sizes, sometimes the only means of maintaining our subjectivities is to

Fig. 91. *Miami Vice* – Screen Culture.

Fig. 92. *Miami Vice* – The “Aquarium Syndrome.”
step back temporarily from the flux, from the flow of digitally disseminated visual excess (see fig. 91 - fig. 94). An irony here is that the very act of engagement with *Miami Vice* can offer the viewer a temporary respite from the flow of digital culture and a means of recalibrating her sense of self.

Rybin notes that the shot of Sonny gazing out to sea during a heated conversation between his team and Nicholas (Eddie Marsan), the go-between that will set him up with the drug smuggler Yero (fig. 93), displays Mann’s fascination with
capturing the workings of subjectivity on screen through style: “As Crockett begins to desire transcendence from the circumstances of his world, Mann’s aesthetic design – a design that suggests both a free agency within a familiar social milieu and a sense of entrapment within the borders of Mann’s carefully composed film frame – becomes a source of drama” (Michael Mann: Crime Auteur 214). The drama Rybin sees within Mann’s film is echoed somewhat in the viewer’s phenomenological activity which creates parallels between the film world and her real world. “Ours are cinematic societies,” argues Virilio (qtd. in Armitage 27), verbalising a resonance in our culture that a film like Miami Vice helps the viewer to understand more. The film’s aesthetic representation of globalisation, demonstrated by the flow of drug money linking Miami with various locations in South America, recalls Virilio’s globalitarianism which ran through Heat and Collateral. But Miami Vice is a further development of this idea. Because nothing matters but the maintenance of the flow through electronic surveillance and virtual information exchange, the human components involved can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time (see fig. 95 and fig. 96) and “images have turned into ammunition” (qtd. in Armitage 45).

Fig. 95. Miami Vice – Surveillance Culture.
Virilio explains the negative effect of hypermodernism as represented by the speed of digital technology and the instantaneity of virtual communication:

[I]t is no longer necessary to make any journey: one has already arrived. The consequence of staying in the same place is a sort of Foucauldian imprisonment, but this new type of imprisonment is the ultimate form because it means that the world has been reduced to nothing. The world is reduced, both in terms of surface and extension, to nothing, and this results in a kind of incarceration, in a stasis, which means that it is no longer necessary to go towards the world, to journey, to stand up, to depart, to go to things. Everything is already there. (qtd. in Armitage 39-40)

Whereas Virilio’s philosophy is quite close to the discourse on technology contained in *Miami Vice*, his theoretical mission, “to conserve ‘life’ and the human against the juggernaut of technology” (Kellner 120), is more pessimistic. In line with Virilio, Mann centralises the human; but whereas Virilio’s human has a subjectivity that is fully formed before being culturally embedded in technology, Mann shows how a phenomenological engagement with technology, by the viewer watching *Miami Vice*, is also an exercise in the formation of an identity that is always in the process of
becoming. Just like Sonny taking a break from the hyperreality of his world to turn a contemplative gaze towards the sea, the viewer takes time out from enjoying the generic pleasures of the film to contemplate her own relationship with the technological world.

Cubitt argues that Virilio’s theory that subjectivity happens before mediation is mistaken. Identity/subjectivity, according to Cubitt, is ephemeral and constructed through mediation. “Individuality is then an end product of the mediation process, not its foundation,” he argues (“Virilio and New Media” 132). This process of identity formation is boosted by the digital aesthetic in Mann’s film, as I have shown. The viewer’s engagement with Miami Vice is the practical application of subjectivity under the theories of Hall and Cubitt. What is being forgotten, according to Cubitt, is the active role played by technology (through mediation) in the formation of identity:

Where Virilio sees only the diminution of and vanishing of subjectivity, the theory of suture allows us to understand subject formation as always already ephemeral, the always temporary and contingent structure of the self in the experience of media. What is being lost in the acceleration of communications media is only a historically specific mode of subjectivity, not subjectivity as such. (“Virilio and New Media” 132-133)

However, the suture theory is problematic when confronted by Miami Vice’s digital aesthetic. While the viewer might find herself in the position of subject of the film text, as a culturally aware and media literate member of society, closure for the film text is prohibited by the manner in which its digitality conveys its temporal mode.

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70 Cubitt explains the theory of suture as a film text achieving closure through the process by which the viewer of a film text becomes the subject of that text, and in doing so completes the film’s absences (marked by framing and editing) by becoming present as spectator (“Virilio and New Media” 128). See also Jacques-Alain Miller, Daniel Duyan, Heath (“On Suture”) and Jean-Pierre Oudart.
The Temporality of *Miami Vice* and A Return to Genre

If, as I argue, the film has no real beginning, in that it begins *in media res*, it has no real ending either. *Miami Vice* utilises its digital aesthetic to make the viewer experience the events on screen as unfolding in a perpetual present tense. The characters go from one incident to the next, one geographical location to the next, without a pause in between (there are very few establishing shots), reinforcing their environment’s sense of manufactured hyperreality that will go on despite the best efforts of these undercover cops. At the end of the film, we get the feeling of having witnessed a small part of a much larger series of events. Montoya is not apprehended and is still at large; the FBI informant is not found; Crockett goes back to working undercover, having sent Isabella away, so nothing really has changed. Montoya will undoubtedly hire more personnel to fill the vacancies caused by the final shootout. Very little is revealed about the characters or even the finer details of the plot, and the viewer is never made aware of their histories. These are hollowed out characters, whose characteristics are communicated through bursts of pure action, always unfolding in the present moment. For the viewer, the film’s visual aesthetic emphasises the feeling that the events in the film are not so much succeeding one another, with regular intervals in between, as belonging to one long uniform period of time. Mann is interested in what these guys are doing in the present, not what they have done in their past.

Miami is just one of the cities used as a setting in the film; it is a hub for globalised dealings in drugs, weapons, laundered cash and human flesh. The film moves from Miami to Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil and the Dominican Republic, and the characters move between these locations as if time was not a factor (see fig. 97 and fig. 98). We get the sense of all these characters, on both sides of the law, as operating within a capitalist-driven flux with their activities translated into commodities to
ensure the constant flow. The any-space-whatever and the flow of international trade are the key points here. The Miami depicted in the film looks very similar to the Los Angeles of Collateral, emphasising how cities in the late capitalism era resonate with Augé’s notion of the any-space-whatever which separates people from their identity; in Mann’s case as expressionistic and amorphous seas of shimmering lights. Martin-Jones characterises the cities in Mann’s films as non-places designed “to facilitate the frictionless flow of people and trade under globalisation” (177). This “frictionless flow” suggests an arrested temporality, on the one hand, and the workings of hyperreality on the other.

Fig. 97. Miami Vice – Arrested Temporalities: “Time Is Luck.”

Fig. 98. Miami Vice – Arrested Temporalities: The Collapse of Distance.
As discussed earlier, *Miami Vice’s* reality is hyperreality; everything in the film is determined by the economy and trade of the product – the loads of heroin and cocaine – which in turn is determined by the electronic surveillance on the side of both parties. The only real concern is who is in possession of the drugs, who can transport it on a global scale, and how much they can sell it for. In *Miami Vice’s* reality, economic interests and the financial flux are the driving forces of this global environment. As long as these elements are ticking over and always running, time stands still. The world inhabited by Crockett and Tubbs, Yero and Montoya, and everyone else involved, is a virtual one, a simulacrum that Mann “ironises” somewhat by presenting it through the medium of digital image capture. The state-of-the-art ultra-technology that reproduces and perpetuates this simulacrum, both as part of the narrative and as part of Mann’s formal methods, is what connects it all.

In a sense, it all amounts to keeping score of a virtual game, with the cops on one side and the criminals on the other. But it is a game with no end. This is a world that goes nowhere fast, as Thoret intimates. There is no endpoint or goal, even, beyond the acquisition of profit. There are the simulations of movement (money and product changing hands), of progress (business being done better and more efficiently after Crockett and Tubbs take over drug running functions for the cartel), and of accomplishment (tasks completed, deals made, and businesses built), but ultimately all that ever changes is the size of the bank accounts. It is a never-ending simulacrum in which there will always be a drug trade, and there will always be cops trying, with varying levels of only fleeting success, to interrupt it. Nor do the good guys ever hint at any moral impulse for their actions. No one seems to care. Drugs are just the “product,” and the only issue is their delivery and the exchange for money. It is a point that is often used to criticise Mann’s work in the crime genre; that his films are all surface with little to no character development. But, taking a film such as *Miami Vice,*
this misses the point. Mann is interrogating our digital age society and using the crime genre to suggest that it is pretty much all surface. And by engaging with the film at a phenomenological level, as I have shown, the viewer can gain an understanding of how this digitally rendered crime world of hyperreal technological transactions mirrors her own.

The viewer sees images in *Miami Vice* that, in terms of content, are similar to those in films like *Manhunter* and *Heat* before it. Surveillance technology is centralised in all of these films, and many sequences show people keeping tabs on other people through the use of technology. In *Miami Vice*, Yero and his high-tech crew attempt to maintain the flow of the drug trade and maintain their affluent lifestyles, whereas the undercover detectives Crockett and Tubbs try to stop these flows moving smoothly using the same intelligence, technology and military power at their command. And the flux, which unites all this electronic surveillance and the flow of economic trade, as already indicated, dictates everyone’s direction and is left relatively undisturbed by the film’s end. As previously mentioned, Montoya is free at the end of the narrative, with just an abandoned mansion next to a Brazilian waterfall to leave a clue to his whereabouts.

Attempting to step outside the flux is futile or temporary at best. Crockett’s gaze out to sea in the middle of setting up their undercover operation using Nicholas as the go-between, and which Mann imbues with importance through framing and editing, is one such failed attempt. His romantic interlude with Isabella in Cuba is another. For this sequence, the whole film seems to stop and catch its breath; but, again, this is shown to be only a temporary respite, and the characters consciously know this. But, in terms of structure, these pauses are vital. By their very juxtaposition these scenes accentuate the iconography of mass transport that saturates the film’s imagery in the scenes that enclose these ones, giving added weight to both. As Arnett
suggests, “The implication is clear: the networks of the drug organisation and the networks of law enforcement will re-negotiate the meaning of a few intersecting spaces and then continue as before” (49). Arnett, in fact, sees Yero as a viral infection within the network of non-places that stitches the flow of the narrative together, the kind of metaphor made even more explicit in Blackhat, where there is sequence depicting the flow of electronics inside a computer in a shot which begins the film.

Fig. 99. *Miami Vice* – The Final Shot: A Return to the Flux.

Fig. 100. *Blackhat* (2015) – The Final Shot: Escaping the Flux.
Despite its critical panning, *Blackhat* represents a further progression of Mann’s thematic concerns and their expression through a digital aesthetic. Dealing with cyber-terrorism through computer hacking (so not all that different to *Miami Vice*), *Blackhat* presents a lead character, computer hacker Hathaway (Chris Hemsworth), who seems more self-aware than Crockett and actually wants out of this world, the flux, wherein everything is like data flowing and functioning in a system; he is an imprisoned hacker who says he just wants to fix televisions when he gets out.

The final shot of *Blackhat* shows Hathaway walking towards the camera, together with his partner and lover, which is a marked difference from the final shot in *Miami Vice*, where Sonny Crockett is shown in long shot with his back to camera, heading back into the flux (see fig. 99 and fig. 100). It might indicate a new positive attitude in both Mann himself and his characters, but we still get the sense of characters lost in a postmodern landscape that bleeds them of their humanity. But the progressive aspect of Mann’s work, as I show in this discussion of *Miami Vice*, is how the digital aesthetic opens up a zone of engagement for the viewer wherein she can work through her own subjectivity by contemplating the characters’ technologically troubled subjectivities.

At the same time, perhaps there is a yearning at the heart of *Miami Vice*, a nostalgic longing caused by the film’s very digital aesthetic, despite the demands it makes for a more contemporary and culturally-aware engagement from the viewer. The price of the viewer’s more lively subjectivity under the film’s digital spell is the concomitant weakening of its generic pleasures. The polarising element in Mann’s cinema, beginning with his exclusive use of digital HD cameras, is something that must be endured as long as he continues to highlight digital aesthetics within crime genre frameworks. Mann throws his male protagonists into cinematic worlds of vast, quasi-infinite spatial textures that reflect back to them their fractured selves. Perhaps
containing cinematic spaces that are too vast and visually dense, going beyond the capabilities of the spatial conventions of classical crime to provide adequate economy of style, Mann’s digital films, and in particular *Miami Vice*, nonetheless resonate with earlier crime genre cinema. Evoking a mood of nostalgia on the part of their unstable male protagonists, there is a longing for an identity that could perhaps, to take a meta-textual view, be satisfied only if these men stalked the hallways of a Hawks’ film rather than floating through the neon-lit concrete infinities of Mann. A return to such a mode of filmmaking, however, would leave the viewer bereft of a more sensorial, and even more intimate, engagement with Mann’s work that is entirely beholden to the digital camera and its ability to create cinematic images anew.
Conclusion

My study of the horror and crime genres’ use of digital cameras enters the discourse at a time when digital technology has become the dominant “tool” of popular cinema. While there was little time wasted before film theorists turned their collective attention towards the impact of the technology on cinema in the early years of this century – and there has certainly been plenty of theoretical energy spent on examining the impact of digital modes of production during the following years – in comparison, very little interest has been shown in what is the final result of these new production practices, namely the image itself. Attempting to steer philosophical enquiry back to the surface of the image, I have in the previous chapters presented an argument that the aesthetic of the digitally-captured image, in its textures and in its new media modalities, provides a gateway for phenomenological engagement. In his essay, “David Lynch Keeps His Head,” David Foster Wallace heralded Blue Velvet (David Lynch 1986) as “first-rate experimentalism,” a film that allowed the viewer to tap into rarely called upon ways of engaging with cinema. Lynch’s film, Wallace argued, delivered a message to the viewer: “that the very most artistic communications took place at a level that not only wasn’t intellectual but wasn’t even fully conscious, that the unconscious’s true medium wasn’t verbal but imagistic” (201). The use of digital cameras in popular film can engage the digital era viewer in a similar manner. The hypotheses presented in my research here leads me to conclude that I have discovered new ways of seeing involving a phenomenological element in two specific genres; a non-intellectual engagement with cinematic imagery that honours the imagistic above the verbal.

In the first part of the thesis, I explained how the viewer enters into a relationship with the diegetic camera of found footage horror, an exchange that is
completely at odds with the spectatorial connection between viewer and film text prevalent during the classical era. Audiences have changed, and culturally, the world has become a very different place. *Lady in the Lake* (Robert Montgomery 1947), a film noir experiment in single-person POV, exposes the huge gulf between what would – and would not – be accepted by filmgoers in both eras. Montgomery’s film, like the majority of found footage films, is filmed from a single person’s perspective. The POV from start to finish belongs to Private Eye Philip Marlowe (Montgomery): the viewer sees him on camera only when he passes in front of a mirror. There are awkward and very laborious camera pans to signal that Marlowe is adjusting his line of sight, or getting up from a chair and so on; the viewer herself takes up an extra spectatorial burden and very uncomfortable position right in front of Marlowe.

*Lady in the Lake* is an interesting failure, but it could never be said that it was a film ahead of its time and was only awaiting the cultural upheaval provided by the rise of new media and digital technology to find its perfect audience. As Burch notes when discussing Montgomery’s experiment: “the establishment of a literal equivalence between the narratively subjective camera (the institutional camera is *always* diegetically subjective) and the novelistic first person, re-introduced effects that were profoundly disruptive of the diegetic process” [emphasis in original] ("Narrative/Diegesis" 24). The effects that Burch notes were reintroduced in the film centre around the practice of film characters looking directly at the camera lens and causing a disturbance in a viewer expecting to be “positioned” in her usual passive role by the invisibility of the classically-motivated camera. With everyone on screen looking at the viewer/Marlowe, how was it possible, Burch asks, “for ‘me’ to occupy ‘my place’ if ‘I’ am no longer invisible, if all those people keep looking ‘at me’?” ("Narrative/Diegesis" 24).
We recall that Heather had the same problem, but from the other side of the lens as it were, during a particular tense period in *The Blair Witch Project*: Josh robs Heather of her agency by taking the camera and turning it on her. She avoids the glare of the lens, never meeting its “eye.” Ironically, it is Heather’s defiance in *not* looking directly at the camera (and the viewer) which most troubles the viewer; the same mechanism is employed here as the one which produced an identification process involving the unseen as an agency of power. The classical spectator’s invulnerability, her ability to remain external to the camera’s address (to stay hidden from the narrative/diegesis threshold), is proven false in the face of diegetic commotion (the kind of disturbance exemplified by Montgomery’s film) and collapses. But the invulnerability of the viewer engaging with the diegetic camera of found footage horror is of a very different order. No longer frightened by clashing narratives and diegeses, the contemporary viewer now has agency within the diegesis itself. The nexus of camera-viewer-character creates new cinematic spatial zones in which the viewer’s phenomenological conference with the digital screen can open up new ways of cultural enquiry. I mapped out this process in my chapter that analysed the discourse on national identity which is afforded by the digital aesthetic of Øvredal’s *Trollhunter*. Naturally, the danger inherent in this kind of filmic dialogue, and one that I perhaps could have given more attention to here, is that a phenomenological engagement with genre along the lines I discuss in the first part of my thesis steers the viewer in other directions than the path leading to generic pleasure. Perhaps this observation contains the seeds of an answer to the question of why horror fans seem to be disengaging from the found footage subgenre in recent years. More research might be required to explain the reason for the negative discourse which has grown around the found footage horror film. What makes this a really interesting development, in the wake of this study, is that Michael Mann’s more recent films seem to be getting a similar reaction.
In the second part of the thesis I discussed Mann’s digital project. I posited that the digital image in Mann’s work allows his crime films to become aesthetic “laboratories” wherein he tests the limits of representation while staying within the confines of genre codes and conventions. The striking and often unique imagery of *Collateral*, *Public Enemies* and *Miami Vice* is designed to offer the viewer an immediate experience through the obvious representational strategy circumscribed in capturing images with digital cameras. Whether truly successful or not, Mann’s attempt to bring his characters’ subjectivities to the surface of the screen delivers an invitation to the viewer: engage thoughtfully with the hyperreal textures of the digital environments. The confusion regarding cinematic realism and hyperrealism, of which Mann seems to be guilty in some of his discussions of his work, is actually the key to his use of digital cameras to achieve an original aesthetic within the crime genre. The paradoxical situation which sees Mann evaluated as a filmmaker of convincing realism while he himself declares that he has no interest in realism can be explained by reference to the respect Mann has for his audience and the dyadic structure of cinematic realism as either photography based or perceptual. Prince argues that a perceptual model of realism “may produce a better integration of the tensions between realism and formalism in film theory” (“True Lies” 28). Perceptual realism gets around the impasse regarding indexicality and the lack of it in digital images. Of course, Prince is referring to computer-generated images here, and Mann’s digital images do have indexical referents as they are recordings of profilmic events. Another thing to remember is that realism itself is a discourse. Colin MacCabe notes that film is “constituted by a set of discourses which […] produce a certain reality” (“Theory and Film” 182). Prince adds to this, noting that “indexically based notions of cinema realism exist in tension with a semiotic view of the cinema as discourse and of realism as one discourse among others” (“True Lies” 31). These discourses can be divided
along realist and formalist lines, with the realist theories espoused by Bazin symbolic of the former and that favoured by Sergei Eisenstein symbolic of the latter. Perceptual realism gets around the essentialist stumbling block of both Bazin and Eisenstein by designating a relationship between the filmic image and the viewer.

It is clear to me that Mann’s digital films deal in a cinematic realism that manages to meld photography-based notions of realism with perceptual realism. Mann’s hyperreal images are the result of both a formalist and a Bazin-influenced realist approach. The final arbiter is the viewer, who will choose to get lost in the immediacy of a clearly formalist digital aesthetic (to see-through an image exhibiting twofoldedness), or decide that such a route is too large a threat to the generic contract. Again, like the current situation with found footage horror, Mann’s cinema seems to have sent genre fans down the route of generic pleasure, unwilling to break the terms of their contract with the crime thriller.

Might other genres benefit from a similar type of study? I would imagine that the benefits of researching the intersection between viewer engagement and the use of digital cameras in the war film, the science fiction film, or the musical (taking just three of the most popular ones), where the imagery could pass for celluloid film without too much difficulty, could not hold much interest for researchers. My own study was predicated on researching films that maintain the integrity of the digital aesthetic rather than attempt to emulate film; the digital image offers something new and unique to the viewer, and I wanted to learn exactly what was so original about it in comparison to its photochemical ancestor. I see no real epistemological advantage to a study which looks at the viewer’s experiential rendezvous with film-like images. Research dealing with that aspect of cinema has been carried out many times before,
by such eminent film philosophers as Christian Metz and Bazin. Perhaps future scholars might decide to take a look at the crossover between found footage horror films and the avant-garde in terms of the use of media technology to produce abstract images. The use of abstraction itself in genre cinema could be examined in terms of viewer engagement (or disengagement). Coming back to my own findings in this thesis, perhaps there are other culturally relevant topics beyond national identity and subjectivity, and perhaps they can be found by looking again through the digital lens of found footage horror films and Mann’s crime thrillers. A more comprehensive interrogation of gender issues within those genres might offer one avenue of enquiry. Clearly, the digital image demands further theoretical attention. I look forward to other theorists shaping the discourse of digital imagery in the future and I welcome further findings that might broaden the scope of this study.

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See Metz’s *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema*, “The Fiction Film and Its Spectator: A Metapsychological Study” (with Alfred Guzzetti) and “The Impersonal Enunciation, or the Site of Film (in the Margin of Recent Works on Enunciation in Cinema)” (with Béatrice Durand-Sendrail and Kristen Brookes).


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