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The Ghost in the Image: Technology and Reality in the Horror Genre, by Cecilia Sayad. Oxford University Press, 2021, 168 pp.

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For nearly half a century, theories of the horror genre have circulated around one central question: why are spectators scared? Cognitive theories have stressed that fear is directly linked to knowledge of the film's fictional status, which allows the spectator to enjoy the scares and shocks of the genre. The experience of horror is one of generic play: by willingly and knowingly submitting oneself to generic norms that produce suspense and scares, the spectator also takes pleasure in the horrors depicted on screen (Carroll). Allegorical readings of horror, which often draw upon psychoanalysis, have linked the experience of fear to the way films reflect the historical and cultural moment of their production. For scholars like Robin Wood, the monsters on the screen stand in for the real horrors of everyday life, dramatising the social divisions, norms and biases that shape American culture (Wood and Lowenstein). Perhaps the most influential body of work draws from Carol Clover's theory of the slasher genre, which links fear to identification. Invoking psychoanalytic theories of spectatorship, many have argued horror spectators identify with a character, a monster, or the camera, placing them within the world of the film, which leaves them vulnerable to the threats on screen.

All of these approaches presuppose a boundary between the film and the spectator's reality. Cognitivist theories argue reality remains separate, as the knowledgeable spectator delights in their powerful viewing position. Likewise, allegorical readings assume the images on the screen are not real threats, but reflections or stand-ins for the social and political horrors of everyday life. While identification theory suggests a blurring of boundaries as spectators enter the film's world, at no point are the horrors on-screen considered part of a viewer's a priori reality. They can comfortably exit the film with a firm boundary between fiction and fact in place.

Cecilia Sayad's *The Ghost in the Image* questions such divisions by examining twenty-first-century works of realist horror. By turning to major theoretical works on cinematic realism and documentary, Sayad argues that recent cycles of horror media—from reality television to found footage horror, transmedia retellings of real-life events and survival horror video games—erode the boundaries between the diegesis and reality. Instead, the horrors generated through such works are tied to the blurring of reality and fiction, the possibility of the supernatural's existence in the world around us. *The Ghost in the Image* is an exciting extension of Sayad's award-winning essay, "Found Footage Horror and the Frame's Undoing", first published in *Cinema Journal* in 2016. Like the article, her book situates the horror genre in cinema's troubling relationship with reality. Across four chapters, Sayad argues the scares of realist horror are often generated through

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the ambivalent position of technology as a tool for revelation, but also one that necessarily *mediates*, distorting and obscuring the information it produces. Recent works of horror use this tension to generate fear as the boundaries that supposedly keep us safe—the film frame, an isolated work of fiction or a clear linear trajectory through a narrative—begin to break down.

Sayad's theory of realist horror media is grounded in the analysis of the genre's use of form and reflexivity. In this respect, *The Ghost in the Image* is a contribution to the recent rise of formalist approaches to the genre which pushes back on the psychoanalytic origins of the field, emphasising the reflexive and experimental style of horror. Indeed, Sayad's book serves as a useful theoretical complement to Adam Hart's *Monstrous Forms: Moving Image Horror Across Media*, which likewise focuses on the way particular stylistic techniques produce shocks and scares. For both Hart and Sayad, horror is often generated by drawing attention to the medium and exposing the powerlessness of spectators. Sayad productively links the power dynamics to the ontology of the photographic image and the epistemological status of media technologies in contemporary society.

Sayad contextualises her analysis of horror in contemporary theoretical and political debates around images, truth and documentary in the digital era. Rather than rehashing debates on the indexicality of digital images, Sayad considers how films, reality television and video games are situated within a broader technological ecosystem that shapes the status of evidence, facts and fiction. The most salient and compelling example of this comes in the book's conclusion, where Sayad uses the legend of the Slender Man to collect the theories of realism found throughout the book. The Slender Man, which began as a series of composite digital images posted to an online forum, was initially scary precisely because of the ontological status of the photographic image. The images appeared to attest to the presence of the disturbing figure in the background. However, online sharing practices and circulation systems made the images part of a larger cultural myth. The retelling of Slender Man through anonymously produced media, stories and memes helped transform a handful of images into a fully-fleshed-out story that claimed to have a basis in reality. The repeated retelling of the Slender Man across online platforms and commercial media broke down the barrier between fact and fiction, perhaps most clearly demonstrated by the use of the legend as an alibi for the murder of a young girl by her classmates. For Sayad, Slender Man is indicative of a culture where truth is no longer tied to indexical evidence, but instead, "from its perceived prevalence on the web and on social media […] than from any connection with the truth" (121). The truth status of a moving image is thus only partially tied to a direct, indexical link to a historical event. Equally important, Sayad reminds us, is the experience of particular rhetorical practices and communication systems. Recent works of realist horror capitalise on this fact, revealing the way fact and fiction are increasingly intertwined through the everyday technologies and practices of living in the digital era.

The introduction lays the theoretical foundation for the book, adeptly moving across centuries of philosophical and theoretical arguments about art, images and reality. Sayad begins with philosophies of reality and art, spanning Plato to René Descartes and Emmanuel Kant and then quickly contextualises such arguments in classical film theory from Sigfried Kracauer and André Bazin. This provides a foundation for her discussion of recent debates on digital images and indexicality, where she highlights the core experiential claim of photographic realism: "the having been there" of the image, which manages to suggest both presence and absence simultaneously

(9–10). This photographic ambiguity is complicated by the rise of digital photography, which can be manipulated, faked and altered, viewed at home or on a mobile device, individually or collectively. Video games, VR, online forums and fan production all illustrate a shift away from the isolated, autonomous work of art toward a more elastic, interactive encounter with media. At the same time, the capacity to manipulate a work of art reinforces the instrumental function of technology as a tool to expand the human sensorium. Digital media thus anxiously occupy seemingly contradictory positions: they promote the indexical, documentary function of technology as a means to capture and reveal reality, but they also remain haunted by the threat of digital fakery and manipulation. For Sayad, digital horror media explore this tension and exploit it to create shocks and scares: "fictional and factual representations of the supernatural stretch the image's ability to capture a certain reality, as well as its potential to fabricate aspects of reality—making this realty as malleable (as elastic) as the image itself" (16).

Chapter One expands the discussion of indexicality and contextualises contemporary realist media in histories of ghost photography. Through the analysis of the *Ghost Hunters* (Hawes 2004–) franchise, a reality television programme focused on exploring supposedly real-life hauntings, Sayad illustrates how the show capitalises on the uncertain position of emerging technologies. She turns to the work of Tom Gunning on nineteenth-century ghost photography and discourses on the intersection of science and magic to illustrate the persistent theoretical tension between the indexical charge of technologically produced evidence and the breakdowns, flaws and limitations of devices and processes of inscription. Like the ghostly traces of early photography, the audio static, erratic sensor readings and the grainy night-vision captured in *Ghost Hunters* create space for the supernatural—the information simultaneously reveals and restricts, leaving room for doubt, speculation and belief in the presence of ghosts on the screen. However, fans' online engagement with the show distinguishes the franchise from early photography. Armed with the tools to engage in debate and produce analysis in the form of videos and blog posts, fans are able to rewatch, investigate and inspect the evidence. This parasocial engagement, Sayad argues, attests to the way ambiguous evidence invites the supernatural into our reality, leading us to question the very tools we use to distinguish fact from fiction.

In the second chapter, Sayad takes a fascinating pivot away from material technologies and visual evidence to consider how seriality and repetition can likewise shape the experience of realism in the horror genre. She examines the transmedia tellings of the Amityville Horror and the Enfield Haunting, both legendary tales that have been revised, retold and debated through documentaries, fiction films, television specials, books and journalistic accounts. Rather than focusing on a specific account of either event, the chapter instead considers how the impulse to retell the story has been fuelled by the lack of evidence and the failure of technology and nonfiction films to provide the truth. However, the sheer volume of the retellings has a "double effect" that disconnects the retelling from the original event but also locates that retelling in a collection of cultural artifacts that combine fact and fiction (59). Retellings thus have the power to reshape the perception of the reality of the events, Sayad argues, as the cultural memory shifts with each new iteration. Distinguishing between reality and fiction becomes increasingly difficult as the details and documentation of the events become intertwined with media representations.

The third chapter builds on the tension between technological devices of inscription and the presentation of facts, truths and control by focusing on the use of the film frame in

contemporary found footage horror. Sayad places Bazin's work on the frame in dialogue with Evan Calder Williams and Roger Cardinal's discussion of depth and decentred framing to analyse the *Paranormal Activity* (Orin Peli, 2007) franchise. She begins by attending to the realist conceit of the genre, which claims to be a material document of real-life horrors, fundamentally challenging the "assumption that seeing is understanding and that understanding offers a solution to the problem" (63). The first *Paranormal Activity*, in particular, usefully dramatises this tension, as the characters use the camera as a tool for documentation and revelation, which ultimately fails to produce any sense of clarity, control, or understanding. The franchise's use of decentred framing and long takes draws attention to this fact and reminds us that the film frame both fragments a world, offering an isolated and ordered look, while simultaneously pointing outward, alluding to that which lies just out of view. In other words, the film plays with the tension between "containment and the uncontainable" by creating the illusion of realist continuity of space and time through long takes and long shots, which leaves viewers scanning the corners, edges and depth of the frame, building suspense, anxiety and fear. For Sayad, this experience expands the edges of the frame, suggesting a limitlessness to the horrors depicted on screen. The later films dramatise the boundlessness of horror by incorporating the extrafilmic into the fictional and suggesting a sense of interaction between the documentary footage, characters and spectators, "corroborating the idea that technology can invite the supernatural into the natural world and also expanding the frame to incorporate the space inhabited by spectators" (86).

The final chapter of the book examines interactive media to show how reality and horror have become increasingly intertwined and indeed may exhibit a true merging of fact and fiction. In order to show the novelty of contemporary video games, VR and AR, Sayad contrasts such media with the theatrical practices of mid-century "gimmick horror", which uses actors, mechanical systems, costumes and, more recently, apps to extend the universe of the film into the viewer's reality. The lively history of interactive media practices describes how films have attempted to engage the senses beyond vision and hearing to create the illusion of participation. But in the end, Sayad reminds us of the limits of such experiments: the film can never respond in real time and will never change upon repeated viewing. Live cinema, horror video games, VR and AR attempt to overcome such limits. She ends by turning to survival horror video games, such as *Zombies Go!*, *Layers of Fear* and *Outlast*, which place players directly into the horror world but give the sense that they have the power to shape the events on screen. The game space responds to player actions, creating a sense of continuity between the player and the images on the screen. As the player's body becomes incorporated into the world of the film, through their interactions with the controller and game world, the point of view and restrictions of the mediated perspective leaves them feeling physically vulnerable to the gamic threats, effectively collapsing reality and fiction. However, Sayad reminds us that the conditions of play will always allow for a sense of security, or separation. While a player may become sensorially absorbed into the world, they are never in real danger due to the material restrictions of the controller and the physical distance between the player and their television screen. She ends by suggesting VR may be the place where the boundary really blurs, as the headset obscures the surrounding environment, and interactive platforms like Twitch incorporate everyday distractions, like push notifications, into play experience. These emerging fictional worlds "not only bring the monster closer to the viewer or player—it engulfs the augmented auditorium we exist in" (211).

Sayad's arguments as a whole are convincing, and they expertly demonstrate how questions that have persisted across the history of the medium of cinema continue to shape the style, narrative and discourses around media. The book makes a strong case for the importance of classical film theory in understanding new media and the way it both returns to and revises the specificity of the film viewing experience. However, Sayad's final claims about VR and her adept use of Bazin throughout the book did leave me wondering about the role of the "myth of total cinema". Sayad's book illustrates how the myth—"to recreate reality in its own image", or a desire to merge cinema and reality—has indeed persisted in contemporary horror media, which turns to emerging technologies to get closer to the real (Bazin 21). And in some ways, the end suggests that perhaps we have achieved a kind of "total cinema" in VR. But I cannot help but feel "total cinema" remains unreachable, driving innovation, but never reaching completion. In the case of VR, the physical presence of the headset, the feel of the controllers in one's hands and the coded limits of the game will *always* present a boundary between fiction and the real world. In other words, the material conditions of media will continue to draw a line between reality and diegesis. Nonetheless, I think *Ghost in the Image* helpfully demonstrates how horror remains a place where that limit is pushed, explored and exploited to terrifying effects.

Ghost in the Image will serve as a useful teaching tool for many instructors. Every chapter provides clear summaries of critical debates in film theory and documentary, alongside descriptive case studies. The chapters are truly excellent models for anyone teaching courses on film and media theory, the horror genre or documentary theory.

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