



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR  
KULTURVETENSKAPER

# CURSED HORROR FILMS

A film analysis of ‘dangerous’ films within  
moving media

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## **ABSTRACT**

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### **SUMMARY:**

Within the field of horror films there is a subcategory of films and videos revolving around fictional horror films claimed to be 'dangerous' to the public. These works often relate to discussions around moral panics and spectatorship as well as historical viewpoints on the horror genre. This in turn connects to contemporary society and the ongoing discussion regarding culture, genre and the possibility for media to imprint views on an audience. This essay lifts these issues through an analysis of, mainly, three different works within this genre subcategory from three different decades and how they all seem to converse with earlier periods of moral panics within film history.

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*Film is magic, and in the right hands, a weapon.* Hans Backovic (Christian Bocher) in *Cigarette Burns* (2005).<sup>1</sup>

## 1.1. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE

In the horror genre there is a recurring theme of haunted or cursed videos and how these might cause horrific events in reality when viewed. This might partly be connected to a fear of media and especially new media, but it may also represent other issues such as cursed objects or the thought that what you see become imprinted on your very person. I have studied how this theme is presented in different films, how this connects to anxiety revolving around media, horror conventions but also the very thought of how the eye becomes a connection between the creator of a film and the spectator as well as the viewers perception and interpretation of film and how this connects to the fear of being imprinted on by a film. This is a large field which would be impossible to approach in this wide range, therefore I have defined and narrowed the research from start and continually through the process. The main thing of interest will be to understand how the fear and uncanniness of media and that media's impact on a person, psychological but also physical, is connected to horror films and perception.

To do this I approached the problem with these initial questions, which have been narrowed down and more precisely defined during the writing process:

- In this subcategory of films, how can fear of media impact on a person be portrayed within the conventions of the horror genre?
- Are there different or similar approaches to this theme within the horror genre?
- How can we understand this fear of being affected by the media through film- history and theory?

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<sup>1</sup> J. Carpenter (Dir.), 'Cigarette burns' [TV series episode], Episode 8, Season 1, *Masters of Horror* (Industry Entertainment ; Nice Guy Productions ; Reunion Pictures ; Starz Productions ; Showtime Networks, 16 December 2005).

## **1.2. DISPOSITION**

This essay is first and foremost an analysis of different examples of horror films and videos that revolves around the theme of ‘dangerous’ films and the fear of these films impact on the spectator. This is analyzed through different theories and previous research regarding these separate and often closely related subjects and thereafter combined to analyze these specific themes, themes that have been studied in separate but seldom in relation to these kinds of horror films in particular. The essay approaches this task by presenting the initial questions and purpose of the essay within the earlier section in combination with this disposition. Thereafter limitations to the study, empirical and theoretical starting points as method is presented. Thereafter the main theories used in the analysis and important earlier research within the field is lifted. The essay then continues to present the films and videos through analysis of the works and continues to what conclusions could be made from this study and what results have been made in the process, a summary of the essay as well as suggestions for further research within the field.

## **1.3. EMPIRICAL AND LIMITATIONS**

Since the field of horror contains a large amount of sub-genre, where some deal with the theme of haunted videos, adjacent tropes or approach the subject in different ways I have had to restrict my research further. This has been done by choosing film examples that contain these elements in particular in a way relevant to my specific purpose and questions. I have not had the time and possibility to gather information about all films in this area during my work on the essay, and therefore my first job after finding sources and material to research further was to restrict which of these sources I continued to study, both regarding written and visual material. In other words, I have made a selection of films and written sources out of relevance to my research. Furthermore, I have tried to keep in mind how I might influence the selection and thus work reflexively with this throughout the essay.

## **1.4. THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS AND METHOD**

To approach the subject I started off by gathering materials for an initial overview of the field. I began to search for text and visual materials relating to the initial questions. In this essay I use text- and film- analysis, comparison between films as well as literature studies in my

attempt to understand the field and draw conclusions in relation to the essays initial questions. Theories that have been of help through this work are genre theories within film studies, theories regarding spectatorship and gaze as well as horror and media studies in general.

## 1.5. THEORY

Within the field of horror film there is a broad variety of subcategories. One of these being films revolving around cursed items or haunted environments. I would argue that there is a subcategory within the subcategory that focuses on cursed film and media. To study how this category of films is related to the fear of media or technophobia, spectatorship as well as a fear of media's impact on the audience. I started my work with both watching films within the subcategory as well as reading previous research with relevance to the subject. Within this part of my essay I will present some of the works that have had a larger impact on the research within this field, as well as on my own study. I will then present how these theories and/or writings connect to my own work and what previous research might have missed that I have tried to include within my essay. I will divide the presentation of earlier research on the subject into subcategories. These subcategories are *Apparatus theory and cinema*, *Genre theory and horror studies* and *Moral panics and the fear of (different) media*. I will present the literature within each of these categories, how this relates to the subject as well as how my research will explore this further below each subcategory's title and in more depth in a separated subcategory on this essay's approach to earlier research.

### 1.5.1. APPARATUS THEORY AND CINEMA

JEAN-LOUIS BAUDRY

When well known film theorist Jean-Louis Baudry wrote the essay *Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic*<sup>2</sup> he laid the ground for the theory, since then, called *The apparatus theory*. Within this theory Baudry argued that the environment within a cinema reproduces ideology, that the cinematic apparatus transfers ideology in itself through concealment<sup>3</sup>.

Baudry continued to argue that the use of continuity editing and montages in combination with how the cinema hides the mechanism and closes in on the audience within a dark room

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<sup>2</sup> J. Baudry, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic". In T. Corrigan, P. White, & M. Mazaj (Eds.), *Critical visions in film theory : Classic and contemporary readings*, 35-43. Boston, USA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Baudry, p. 39.

with only the screen present conceals reality from the spectator<sup>4</sup>. Baudry also expresses a negative view of the spectator as a passive receiver of this ideology who thereby could be seen to imprint these views on the spectator<sup>5</sup>. The audience is thereby seen as small children unable to protect themselves against the filmmakers message<sup>6</sup>. This theory is used as a way to understand cinema, but since the environment around the spectator changes when film is shown in other settings than a cinema theater, the theory is mainly usable in relation to the media 'cinema' in particular. Since the majority of the films within this essay, even though they are not always released through cinema, revolves around films shown in a cinematic environment this theory will be of importance to the analysis. That the cinematic screen can not reflect 'reality' since the mirroring never becomes an exchange and the reality shown is always reworked in some way as Baudry argues<sup>7</sup>, is of course partly correct. Cinema, and film in other forms, can never truly show an entire picture of reality, what it can do is show a part of a reflection while raising awareness around certain issues and thereby contribute to a discussion around these issues since an audience actually seldom consists of human beings incapable of interpreting potential messages differently, especially when considering other types of media than cinema. This makes film as a media able to use mechanics and concealment to present ideology, but how this is done and what this means for an audience does not necessarily mean that this ideology is forced upon them in this manner, even though it might spread these views. This has of course been further explored by other scholars as different theories surrounding 'gazes', such as the 'male gaze' described by Laura Mulvey<sup>8</sup> as well as the *Oppositional Gaze*<sup>9</sup> defined by bell hooks.

### 1.5.2. GENRE THEORY AND HORROR STUDIES

To study horror films there is a need to understand the genre, different subgenres and its elements. To study the films in relation to how moral issues regarding fear of the impact media has on them have been raised in relation to technophobia within the horror genre it becomes necessary to understand how horror reflects society. Therefore the research is based

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<sup>4</sup> Baudry, p. 38 ; 42.

<sup>5</sup> T. Elsaesser & M. Hagener, *Film Theory : An Introduction through the Senses*. 2nd ed., 2015, pp. 100-101.

<sup>6</sup> Baudry, p. 43.

<sup>7</sup> Baudry, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup> L. Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Language, Discourse, Society. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989, pp. 19-20.

<sup>9</sup> b. hooks, *Black Looks Race and Representation*. London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 116-117 ; 122.

on writings on horror films that approach these themes. The selection of works used in this part has been made through what works within the field that have had a large impact on research within the subject, if research within the field has continued to go in dialogue with the works as well as how these works relate to the essays research and the essays purpose. In addition to different articles further explored in the analysis the essay is grounded with the thoughts on horror and history defined by Adam Lowenstein.

ADAM LOWENSTEIN

An essential part of the essay is also grounded with Adam Lowensteins book *Shocking representation : Historical trauma, national cinema, and the modern horror film*<sup>10</sup> where Lowenstein shows how horror film can be a reflection of historical events as well as national trauma and thereby shows in a clear way how horror as a genre can be used to both raise social critique as well as lift issues that are taboo to speak about in contemporary society<sup>11</sup>. Lowenstein calls this, when shock collides with history and creates film that connotes both horror film and art film, *the allegorical moment*<sup>12</sup>. This, of course, is something that has been stated by various scholars within the field, for example Claudia Böhme has shown how horror film made it possible to speak about homosexuality within Tanzania when this was considered taboo<sup>13</sup>. Why the essay has been focused on Lowensteins work within the field is partly because of the wide range it covers in relation to history as well as placement. This shows, in a distinct way, how horror films as a genre have a close relation to the society that has produced the work but also to social and cultural issues within that same society.

Lowenstein have also argued, in other places, that the genre often referred to as ‘torture porn’ instead should be discussed as *spectacle horror*<sup>14</sup>. This has quite a large relevance to this essay since this both partly discusses films without monsters as horror, as I have mentioned briefly, but also because of how the films discussed in this essay often use potential danger as a selling point, and more importantly the films within these films uses danger not only as a selling point but also as a recurring actual problem where the film constitutes that danger that

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<sup>10</sup> A. Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*. Film and Culture. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

<sup>11</sup> A. Lowenstein, 2005, p. 12-13 ; 142

<sup>12</sup> Lowenstein, 2005, pp. 2 ; 11-12.

<sup>13</sup> C. Böhme, "Showing the Unshowable: The Negotiation of Homosexuality through Video Films in Tanzania." *Africa Today* 61, no. 4 (2015): 63-82, p. 77.

<sup>14</sup> A. Lowenstein, "Spectacle Horror and Hostel: Why 'torture Porn' Does Not Exist." *The Critical Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2011): 42-60.



some of the advocates of using the concept ‘torture porn’ instead of *spectacle horror* to describe horror films containing extreme violence also discuss the subgenre as an expression of bad taste and a potential threat as it would ‘coarsen’ the audience view on violence instead of reflecting something of importance<sup>15</sup> which is closely connected to the view of horror as something morally reprehensible as in the case of some moral panics regarding media as we will come back to within this chapter of the essay. Lowenstein argues, and uses Tom Gunning's texts on the subject, that this, ‘spectacle horror’ have a close connection to how early film was presented as a ‘spectacle’ or ‘show’ and that this, in connection with historical moments such as the reveal of Abu Ghraib torture methods, also creates an *allegorical moment*<sup>16</sup>.

### 1.5.3. MORAL PANICS AND THE FEAR OF (DIFFERENT) MEDIA

STANLEY COHEN

Since Criminologist Stanley Cohen coined the concept of moral panics in the book *Folk devils & moral panics*<sup>17</sup> and the essay is based on this concept, even though S. Cohen does this through a sociological approach, I want to state in a clear way that this book and the concept has had great relevance throughout the essay. The essay mainly uses this term in relation to media panics, the ‘video nasties’ and work regarding these matters, but since the concept is recurring throughout the text it is important to note where the term originated. S. Cohen argues that moral panics have been recurring within society through different historical periods<sup>18</sup> and defines a moral panic as *a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests*<sup>19</sup>. S. Cohen continues to argue that these exaggerated perceptions of threat has occurred within different settings, regarding for example youth culture<sup>20</sup> and that people who act as guards of moral escalate these panics<sup>21</sup> and thereby creates so-called *folk devils*<sup>22</sup> or morally reprehensible groups, cultures, conditions or episodes. These issues have been further explored by a wide range of scholars within different fields, one of them being the literature scholar Ulf Boëthius.

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<sup>15</sup> Lowenstein, 2011, 51.

<sup>16</sup> Lowenstein, 2011, pp. 48-49 ; 50-51 ; 55.

<sup>17</sup> S. Cohen, *Folk devils & moral panics*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987.

<sup>18</sup> S. Cohen, pp. 8-9.

<sup>19</sup> S. Cohen, p. 1.

<sup>20</sup> S. Cohen, pp. 2 ; 12-13.

<sup>21</sup> S. Cohen, p. XV.

<sup>22</sup> S. Cohen, pp. XXIX ; 2.

ULF BOËTHIUS

Genre fiction have historically been distinguished from so called ‘serious fiction’<sup>23</sup> or divided into *popular culture* and *quality culture* which is evaluative words for *high-* and *low culture* which has been ways of rating culture as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ throughout history<sup>24</sup>. Culture considered to be of lower standard have often been called popular culture, such as popular literature considered poor literature, but what has been considered popular have also changed depending on the time, place and moral values in history<sup>25</sup>. To present culture in this manner is not seldom connected to *moral panics*, often pointed against youth culture as well as the working class<sup>26</sup>. In this way, the adult world, through their own moral values, have deemed culture dangerous against the lower classes, women and the youth<sup>27</sup>. In, for example, literature this has also been done within the genre fiction itself where science fiction scholars have tried to distinguish the genre from horror and fantasy while others have evaluated the status of different fiction within the own genre<sup>28</sup>. This is, of course, not only relevant in regards to literature, film scholar Steve Neale point out in his classic academic writing *Questions of genre* that one reason for why critics might have considered the *fantastic genres*, such as horror, fantasy and science fiction, less reputable might be how the genres relate to authenticity<sup>29</sup>.

Horror fiction, as all fiction, does not arise through a vacuum. Adam Lowenstein have, as mentioned above, shown this to be recurring within horror film and subgenres through how films have been affected by time and placement where the work was created<sup>30</sup>. Since horror fiction seems to have a notable ability to raise awareness and critique in a clear way by depicting dangers without the need to relate to our reality in a specific way, this gives the genre other possibilities than other fiction might have. Because of this it is important to not

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<sup>23</sup>A. Trexler, & A. Johns-Putra, "Climate Change in Literature and Literary Criticism." Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews. *Climate Change* 2, no. 2 (2011): 185-200, p. 189.

<sup>24</sup> U. Boëthius, "Högt och lågt inom kulturen : Moderniseringsprocessen och de kulturella hierarkierna." In *Ungdom Och Kulturell Modernisering*, U. Boëthius & J. Fornäs (eds.), 59-93. FUS-rapport. 1990, p. 89.

<sup>25</sup> U. Boëthius, "Populärlitteraturen - finns den?" In *Brott, kärlek, främmande världar : Texter om populärlitteratur*, D. Hedman & J. Määttä (eds.), 19-39. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2015, pp. 21-22.

<sup>26</sup> U. Boëthius, "Ungdomar, Medier Och Moraliska Paniker." In *Ungdomar I Skilda Sfärer*, J. Fornäs, U. Boëthius & B. Reimer (eds.), 257-283. FUS-rapport. 1994, p. 260.

<sup>27</sup> Boëthius, 1994, p. 257.

<sup>28</sup> J. Määttä, *Raketsommar : Science Fiction I Sverige 1950-1968* (PhD dissertation). Uppsala: Skrifter Utgivna Av Avdelningen För Litteratursociologi Vid Litteraturvetenskapliga Institutionen I Uppsala, 51, 2006, pp. 52-55.

<sup>29</sup> S. Neale, 'Questions of Genre'. In *Screen (London)*, 31, 1990, 45-66, pp. 46-47.

<sup>30</sup> Lowenstein, 2005, pp. 51 ; 112.

restrict the genre through depreciation and therefore an approach that opens up to genres otherwise overlooked is of utter importance. This could be compared with how the science fiction genre, through overly narrow definitions sometimes have excluded important works of culture<sup>31</sup>. It should be noted that this also occurs in texts that claim the importance of not having a too narrow definition of genre and that delimitations of genre works with the goal of being considered *high culture* is counterproductive. Instead the genre might convey more important issues within society by letting genres cooperate with each other without condemning any genre as better or worse. If film and literature should have the ability to raise critique against for example social issues or climate change we need a different approach within all of the humanities regarding culture in general and horror fiction in particular, which have started to change in the last years but still have quite some way to go. Not only do we have to change how genres are valued, but also the climate where elitist ideas of *high-* and *low culture* continue to grow since these distinctions undermine these cultures' potential for social critique and art in favor of moral panics. This have changed a lot in modern times where moral panics seem to peter out much faster than have been the case historically, even though there have been new moral panics connected to conservative views, ethnicity and religion in more recent times as well, which is still on the rise<sup>32</sup>. This commuting between what is considered higher culture and not has, as mentioned, changed and will probably keep changing<sup>33</sup>. This reaction from a conservative right against horror film is also very much present in today's culture where critique against racism, sexism and social injustice gets lifted by new horror films such as *Get Out* (2017)<sup>34</sup>, *Halloween* (2018)<sup>35</sup> and *Candyman* (2021)<sup>36</sup> but met a harsh criticism from the community because of potential connection to politics (see comment sections regarding the films on imdb for examples) even though, as already stated, social critique has been a large part of the horror genre for decades<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> S. Spiegel, 'Things Made Strange: On the Concept of "Estrangement" in Science Fiction Theory'. In *Science-fiction studies*, 35, 2008, 369–385, p. 374 ; Määttä, p. 33.

<sup>32</sup> Boëthius, 1994, pp. 279-280.

<sup>33</sup> Boëthius, 1990, pp. 90-91.

<sup>34</sup> J. Peele, (Dir.), *Get out* [film]. (Blumhouse Productions; QC Entertainment; Monkeypaw Productions, 2017).

<sup>35</sup> G. D. Green (Dir.), *Halloween* [film]. (Miramax Films; Blumhouse Productions; Trancas International Films; Rough House Pictures, 2018).

<sup>36</sup> N. DaCosta (Dir.), *Candyman* [film]. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; Bron Creative; Monkeypaw Productions, 2021).

<sup>37</sup> Lowenstein, 2005, pp. 83-109 ; 112-143 ; C. J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Updated Edition with a New Preface by the Author. ed. Princeton Classics ; 15. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015, pp. 114-165.

## 1.6. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

### 1.6.1. SPIRITUALISTIC FEAR OF MEDIA

The thought of ghosts within technology and the fear of media have a close connection and when combined has roots within spiritualism and to understand how these could be traced to modern day horror films and the fear of media I have also read texts on spirit photography and uncanny media. Tom Gunning's texts *Re-newing old technologies : astonishment, second nature, and the uncanny in technology from the previous turn-of-the-century*<sup>38</sup> and *Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations*<sup>39</sup> are frequently used within this field and thoroughly explains spiritualism, spirit photography and the uncanny of new media in a historical sense. Another text that delves into this field is Margarida Medeiros Article *Facts and Photographs: Visualizing the Invisible with Spirit and Thought Photography*<sup>40</sup> where not only spirit photography, but also though photography is explained which has relevance to horror surrounding imprinted media who in turn imprints the viewer such as that of the cursed video in *Ringu*<sup>41</sup>. To understand the history of technological fears from a media perspective the essay also turns to Jeffrey Sconce's book *Haunted media : electronic presence from telegraphy to television*<sup>42</sup> where the initial fears of society in relation to each new medium is explored. This fear of ghosts within the machine is recurring in films on the subject and because of this the historical aspect of uncanny media as well as spirit photography gives a broader understanding to the fear of media within the horror genre as well.

### 1.6.2. HORROR FILM, TECHNOPHOBIA AND SPECTATORSHIP

The theme of haunted media and the fear of imprinting on audiences within the horror genre as well as technophobia within horror films have been approached as a subject by scholar Benson-Allott in the book *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS*

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<sup>38</sup> T. Gunning, "Re-newing old technologies : astonishment, second nature, and the uncanny in technology from the previous turn-of-the-century." In D. Thornburn, H. Jenkins, & B. Seawell (Eds.), *Rethinking media change : The aesthetics of transition (Media in transition)*, 39-59. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003.

<sup>39</sup> T. Gunning, "Phantom Images and Modern Manifestations". In P. Petro (Ed.), *Fugitive images : From photography to video* (Theories of contemporary culture, 16), 42-71. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1995.

<sup>40</sup> M. Medeiros, "Facts and Photographs: Visualizing the Invisible with Spirit and Thought Photography." *Communication* 1, no. 4 (2015): 1-21.

<sup>41</sup> H. Nakata (Dir.), *リング (Ringu)* [The ring], [film], (Ringu/Rasen Production Committee, 1998).

<sup>42</sup> J. Sconce, *Haunted media : electronic presence from telegraphy to television*. Durham, NC : Duke University Press, 2000.

to *File Sharing*<sup>43</sup> which examines different video formats and spectatorship through the media history. The book also explore how interaction with media has changed and how media fears have been related to horror movies regarding technology such as *Videodrome*<sup>44</sup>, *Ringu* and the American version of the film *The Ring*<sup>45</sup>. Most texts on the subject where spectatorship is reviewed in relation to technophobia and media fears within the horror genre seem to revolve around the film series beginning with *Ringu*. Therefore articles and books who ground their research with this film have relevance to this field of studies, most distinctly the anthology *The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in The Ring*<sup>46</sup>, edited by Kirsten Lacefield but also articles such as Brian Hu's article *Make a copy, pass it on: The Ring Two and the Ghost of Verbinski*<sup>47</sup>, *Anamorphic Allegory in The Ring, or; Seven Ways of Looking at a Horror Video*<sup>48</sup> by Brian Jarvis, Davide Panagia's article *The Effects of Viewing: Caravaggio, Bacon, and The Ring*<sup>49</sup>, *Visual Aesthetics and Ways of Seeing: Comparing "Ringu" and "The Ring"*<sup>50</sup> by Valarie Wee and Steve Jones article *Video Nasty: The Moral Apocalypse in Koji Suzuki's Ring*<sup>51</sup>. These articles relate to this essay's subject but approaches the themes in a different manner and explores other themes through other works. A lot of these articles have relevance to other films as well, but never touches on the subject through a combination of these views and seldom in relation to newer films within the subgenre.

### 1.6.3. THE ESSAYS RELATION TO EARLIER RESEARCH

The research on parts of this field is extensive. At the same time it is quite narrow in regards to what aspects that get studied and what films are analyzed. Almost none of these studies combine these aspects in order to find the background to the fear of the audience getting influenced or imprinted on by the film medium and how this is portrayed in different contemporary horror films and videos. The studies that surround films on cursed videos

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<sup>43</sup> C. A. Benson-Allott, *Killer tapes and shattered screens : video spectatorship from VHS to file sharing*. Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> D. Cronenberg (Dir.), *Videodrome* [film]. (Canadian Film Development Corporation, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> G. Verbinski (Dir.), *The Ring* [film], (MacDonald/Parkes Productions ; BenderSpink, Inc, 2002).

<sup>46</sup> K. Lacefield (Ed.), *The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in The Ring*. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 2010.

<sup>47</sup> B. Hu, "Make a Copy, Pass It On: The Ring Two and the Ghost of Verbinski." *Horror Studies* 1, no. 2 (2010): 253-63.

<sup>48</sup> B. Jarvis, "Anamorphic Allegory in The Ring, Or, Seven Ways of Looking at a Horror Video." *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* 3 (2007): 16.

<sup>49</sup> D. Panagia, "The Effects of Viewing: Caravaggio, Bacon, and The Ring." *Theory & Event* 10, no. 4 (2007).

<sup>50</sup> V. Wee, "Visual Aesthetics and Ways of Seeing: Comparing "Ringu" and "The Ring"." *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 2 (2011): 41-60.

<sup>51</sup> S. Jones, "Video Nasty: The Moral Apocalypse in Koji Suzuki's Ring." *Literature, Interpretation, Theory* 23, no. 3 (2012): 212-25.

almost always use *Videodrome* or *Ringu* as the examples, and for good reasons, but the subgenre of horror films on the specific subject has grown and developed and therefore needs to be considered through other works, even if these two works still are important works within the field, and through a lens who combines different aspects on culture and media to understand the fear of media on a deeper level. The essay will approach the subject through earlier research but will also combine these in a way that could approach media fear in horror through a thicker lens. This, in combination with analysis through contemporary films on the subject would possibly, not only give a new way of understanding or approaching the theme of cursed films within the horror genre, but also raise the awareness of the theme as a subgenre within the field of horror film. This could, hopefully, in extension broaden the research on the subject and inspire new research between horror film and spectatorship in an era when the horror genre interest seem to have ignited and have gained new value through the various new films that explicitly questions norms within society and the genre itself such as *Get Out* (2017), *Halloween* (2018) and *Candyman* (2021). These three films are examples that challenge the genre norms at the same time as the horror genre's historical relation to social critique could be strengthened. This new interest and evolution of the genre opens up for more contemporary studies on the different themes and subgenres present within horror as well as the relation between the post-cinematic screen and the spectator in contemporary horror films. This essay aims to study one of several types of fears within horror films and how this trope or theme is used in contemporary horror, in extension I hope that this essay can, at the same time, broaden and deepen the perspective on the subgenre of cursed films and imprinting on the viewer within horror as a whole.

## 2. ANALYSIS

### 2.1. *CIGARETTE BURNS* (2005)

In the short film *Cigarette burns* (2005), an episode directed by John Carpenter and written by Drew McWeeny and Rebecca Swan, from the anthology tv-series *Masters of Horror* (2005-2007)<sup>52</sup> where different horror directors where set to direct one short horror film each, the viewer meet Kirby Sweetman (Norman Reedus) who is a cinema owner in search of a

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<sup>52</sup> M. Garris (Creator), *Masters of Horror* [TV series], (Industry Entertainment ; Nice Guy Productions ; Reunion Pictures ; Starz Productions ; Showtime Networks, 2005-2007).

(fictional) film seen as one of the most mythical and inaccessible films in the history of cinema: *La Fin absolue du monde* which translates to the absolute end of the world from French. Kirby is tasked with finding the film by a rich eccentric film collector Bellinger (Udo Kier) who believes that the film still exists, despite Kirby's belief that all copies have been destroyed. Bellinger also shows parts of the essential props from the film in his possession, this in the form of severed angel wings hanging on a wall and a broken, pale, chained figure that appears to have been previously attached to the wings, a mutilated angel (Christopher Redman). The angel tells Kirby that everyone who helped produce the film is tied to the negatives and thus the angel would know if the film was destroyed. Bellinger tells Kirby that he knows he will end up in hell but wants to see the movie, as a taste of heaven before the end. Kirby demands a certain amount of money to complete the job and Bellinger approves this amount plus travel expenses. Thus begins Kirby's search for the movie, *La Fin absolue du monde*.

*Cigarette burns* has many similarities with the more well-known film *The Ninth Gate* (1999)<sup>53</sup>, based on the Spanish novel *The Club Dumas* (2006)<sup>54</sup> by author Arturo Pérez-Reverte, especially in the opening scene where a rich person pays for a kind of archive-detective work to find a dangerous or forbidden item for that said client. Even further in the film, parallels can be drawn between these two films, although *The Ninth Gate* is about a satanic book and *Cigarette burns* revolves around a cursed film. In both cases the artifact of desire is considered to be connected to a production made by diabolical beings, with the goal of harming humanity, and in both cases the search for information and the approach to the dangerous object becomes a most unpleasant journey. The large difference can be considered to lie in what a literary work versus a film represents. The book in *The Ninth Gate* is rumored to, in a certain ritual, open and grant access to the 9th gate of hell, and that in itself is of course an experience, but the film *La Fin absolue du monde* in *Cigarette burns* is a work of visual art, created to give the audience a direct experience of darkness.

The fictional director of *La Fin absolue du monde*, Hans Backovic (Christian Bocher), expresses in the film's absolute first sentence that "*Film is magic, and in the right hands, a*

<sup>53</sup> R. Polanski (Dir.), *The Ninth Gate* [film], (Artisan Entertainment ; R.P. Productions ; Orly Films ; TF1 Films Production ; Bac Films ; Canal+ ; Kino Vision ; Origen Producciones Cinematograficas ; Via Digital ; Canal+ España, 1999).

<sup>54</sup> A. Perez-Reverte, *The Club Dumas*, (HarperVia, 2006).

*weapon*". In other words, this is significantly different from *The Ninth Gate* where the book consists of taken down information and a series of images as a secret message said to be mediated from satan, while the film within the film (an interesting meta-discussion in itself) in *Cigarette burns* is the filmmaker and his team's own work regardless of the film's further connections to a possible hell. This is not only shown through the film's first statement about the function of the film medium, but also a series of conversations throughout the film. For example a film critic who saw the film and spoke to the director at the premiere, who since the screening has been isolated in his cabin writing a new review of *La Fin absolue du monde* that seem to cover every tiny millimeter of the surface of said cabin in the form of typewriter written piles of paper, express his thoughts regarding the directors, Backovic, motif with the film, as a deliberate action to create chaos.

We trust filmmakers, we sit in the dark, daring them to affect us, secure in the knowledge that they won't go too far.

(...) Backovic was a terrorist, he abused that trust we place in filmmakers. He didn't want to hurt his audience, he wanted to destroy them completely.

In other words, the film critic believes that Backovic was a kind of terrorist, as he deliberately wanted to create an aggressive reaction with his film. This thought of filmmakers, or more precisely directors, as people who put together a vision and project it onto the audience, who receives the perspective as a homogenous group of small children without any ability to fend it off or understand the message differently through other experiences, is closely related to the thoughts surrounding Jean-Louis Baudry's *Apparatus theory* where the audience is supposedly unable to protect themselves from the filmmakers gaze<sup>55</sup>. This is, as presented in the theory part of this essay, a very negative view of the spectator as it makes the audience a passive receiver<sup>56</sup> of a message who gets imprinted on them and the theory is, as stated, mostly used in relation to cinema, which is how the film in *Cigarette burns* is presented as well. Another film theory which is closely attached to this statement is *auteur theory* wherein there lies the thought of one person as a kind of visionary creator of the entire film production and that this vision is the film's actual meaning<sup>57</sup>. Filmmakers are, according to this quote, both visionaries who force their view and/or vision onto the spectator, but also *responsible* for the audience

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<sup>55</sup> J. Baudry, p. 43.

<sup>56</sup> T. Elsaesser & M. Hagener, pp. 100-101.

<sup>57</sup> J. Naremore, "Authorship." In Miller, T. & Stam, R. (Eds.), *A Companion to Film Theory*, 9-24. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, pp. 10-11.



reactions to this vision. This would make a film possibly dangerous for the audience to view and filmmakers who create horror possibly a kind of accomplices to any upcoming violent event in direct relation to the film or the theme of the film. This view of violent films as something dangerous and in need of control were very much present during the debates regarding the so-called *video nasties* in the UK and the related debate in Sweden who became known as *videovåldsdebatten* which translates to “the video violence debate”. This was a long lingering moral panic surrounding how films which depict fictional violence presumed too ‘realistic’ would affect the spectators, especially the youth<sup>58</sup>, since the youth and women have historically been two targeted groups of worry in regards to media and moral panics<sup>59</sup>. The theme of how films got censored during this time in the UK and if this were a rational fear or not have been discussed through different horror films such as the Swedish horror comedy *Evil Ed* (1995)<sup>60</sup> and more recently in the British film *Censor* (2021)<sup>61</sup>. The debate around the *video nasties* where still a fact in 1994 in the UK where the murder of James Bulger where partly blamed (in court) on exposure of violent video films<sup>62</sup>. The weak or ‘criminal minds’ of lower classes were sometimes considered to be easier bent or imprinted on by certain films<sup>63</sup>.

In *Cigarette burns* this class and gender aspect in regards to whom is affected by the film seem to shine with its absence or more accurately take another form, there is a wide range of gender issues within the film to investigate further, since even rich men get corrupted by *La Fin absolue du monde*. Everyone who searches for the film gets affected, even before an actual screening has occurred, which is recurrently clear throughout the film but also mentioned by the film critic in his conversation with Kirby. Kirby also asks the film critic what makes the film so special, he asks: *I've seen extreme gore and it never made me crazy or violent, what is it about La Fin absolue du monde that is so dangerous?* and only get the response from the film critic that *Backovic was brilliant*. This singles out the film as something else than regular gore, the content who imprints upon the spectator is the auteur's vision and it is this aggregated work who inflict violence on the spectator. When Kirby travels

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<sup>58</sup> Boëthius, 1994, pp. 259-260.

<sup>59</sup> J. Smith, "Turn Me On, Dead Media." *Television & New Media* 12, no. 6, 2011: 531-51, p. 542.

<sup>60</sup> A. Jacobsson (Dir.), *Evil Ed* [film]. (Action Film AB ; Evil Ed Productions ; Smart Egg Pictures, 1995).

<sup>61</sup> P. Bailey-Bond (Dir.), *Censor* [film], (Silver Salt Films ; BFI Film Fund ; Cinelab London ; Ffilm Cymru Wales ; Film4 ; Kodak Motion Picture Products ; Rook Films ; Timpson Films, 2021).

<sup>62</sup> J. Petley, "In Defence of Video Nasties." *British Journalism Review* 5, no. 3, 1994: 52-57, pp. 52-54.

<sup>63</sup> Petley, p. 56.

to France in hopes of finding the film he gets opposed by the ones he asks for help who seem to have been affected by the film before. He later on gets a number to a person whom he is advised against calling since this person is described as dangerous. When Kirby later on meet the person that the phone number leads to it turns out to be a snuff filmmaker, Dalibor (Douglas Arthurs), who has had contact with the Backovic estate, the deceased directors widow, and he tells Kirby how he despise hollywood and it's lies, just as Backovic seems to have done according to an interview Kirby got from the film critic. The snuff filmmaker then seems to intend to kill both the unknowing cab driver (Lynn Wahl) who took Kirby to the meeting place as well as Kirby himself on camera. Dalibor kills the female cab driver by cutting off her entire head while holding a monologue regarding his view on film and filmmaking:

The blade of a splicing table can be used to create a lie or to tell the truth, it all depends whose hands it's in. This might be larger than an actual splicing blade, but you get the point. I believe in truth. One take, one uninterrupted shot. The only cut was to her. I turned her into art.

He then proceeds to Kirby as he continues the monologue before letting Kirby answer and thereby entering a short conversation.

*Dalibor*

- Something happens when you point a camera at something terrible. The resulting film takes on power.

*Kirby*

- No, it doesn't. Snuff isn't powerful. It doesn't reveal some hidden truth, it's just fucking murder!

*Dalibor*

- You're not listening to me my friend, you come all this way, then you don't listen. You want to understand why *La Fin absolue du monde* tore through the audiences. Backovic was an exceptional editor. He understood the value of a cut, but there was more to it. They say the movie works sublimely as you're watching. But the thing that made the film a weapon? Blood. Spilled blood. What if you got hold of an angel, a divine being with the blood of god going through its veins? And what if you sacrificed it on camera? Something that profound, that personal, it changes everyone who is part of putting it on film and everyone who sees it. The closer you get to the film, the more you'll be changed too. This was Backovic's secret. Film is magic, he said, and he was right.

Here the viewer gets the information that the film uses sublime messages, that the secret to why *La Fin absolue du monde* is so powerful is blood, and more specifically angel's blood. The audience also gets Dalibor's view on why the film is better than the Hollywood he and Backovic hate, he thinks it depicts the truth. At this time Kirby has already begun to be affected by the film which shows him terrible memories and visions through something that looks like cigarette burns or cue marks<sup>64</sup>. In this case, a burning version of the kind of circles that projectionists use to know when they are about to change the reel, which has been explained early on in the film for the ones unfamiliar with the term. This quote connects the film, again, to moral panics regarding media as well as the view of an auteur depicting and transferring a vision onto a passive audience, but since the film is now claimed to be 'special' it is also considered as a kind of horrific media monster in the form of an haunted artifact, a recurring trope within horror films.

Moreover, the film is considered to depict a deeper truth than Hollywood's 'lies' and death on camera without cuts that affect the film's link to the true event is considered of higher value than living beings in a fictional film. This could be considered an extreme interpretation of Bazin's theory regarding the realism of the photographic image and how photography can, and should in order to reach the medium's full potential, depict and contain, or mummify, reality<sup>65</sup>. One interpretation of Bazin's words could therefore be that cutting should be used as a way to show the filmmakers' view of the film as a whole<sup>66</sup>. Bazin was influential during the french new wave or the *Nouvelle Vague*<sup>67</sup> and since this scene in *Cigarette burns* takes place in France this could be read as a conscious interpretation of an extreme vision stemming from the french new wave ideals. This seems like a reasonable reading since the entire film seems to comment on the film industry and different perspectives on what film, and in particular horror films, should or should not be.

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<sup>64</sup> *Society of American Archivists Dictionary of Archives Terminology*. Cue Mark, [n.d.].

<sup>65</sup> A. Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image". In T. Corrigan, P. White, & M. Mazaj (Eds.), *Critical visions in film theory : Classic and contemporary readings*, 310-314. Boston, USA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011, p. 313.

<sup>66</sup> Elsaesser & Hagener, pp. 30-31.

<sup>67</sup> Elsaesser & Hagener, p. 32.

## 2.2. *DRIVE IN* (2021)

This theme of haunted or cursed films and screenings is repeated in the episode *Drive In* (2021)<sup>68</sup> of the anthology tv-series *American Horror Stories* (2021-2022)<sup>69</sup>, a spin-off series from the more famous tv-series *American Horror Story* (2011-2022)<sup>70</sup>. The episode is written by the series creators Ryan Murphy and Brad Falchuk as well as the guest author Manny Coto and directed by Eduardo Sánchez, the later where one of the creators and directors of the horror classic *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)<sup>71</sup> which have greatly influenced the horror sub-genre of found-footage films and mockumentaries<sup>72</sup>. *The Blair Witch Project* were promoted through a very elaborate marketing campaign claiming the film to be a true story which could be of interest to the production of the episode *Drive In* where the plot is largely founded on the promotion of the fictional film titled *Rabbit, Rabbit* as a very harmful film to watch. This also brings the thoughts to the film *Antrum* (2018)<sup>73</sup> who were promoted as *the deadliest film ever made* and starts with a notice regarding the audience's own responsibility in choosing to watch the film who is, according to the marketing, supposed to evoke dangerous and life threatening reactions<sup>74</sup>. But *Antrum*, in contrast to *Drive In* and *Cigarette Burns* does not, except for this notice and marketing campaign, revolve around a cursed film, instead it is claimed to be this dangerous film in itself. Therefore I conclude that the marketing of *Antrum* has more relevance to this essay than the film in itself.

In short *Drive In* revolves around a gang of teenagers who are supposed to see the (fictional) film *Rabbit, rabbit* at a drive-in theater, what happens at the drive-in when the film is shown and how two of these teenagers react to these happenings. When trying to sell an extra ticket to a friend one of the teenagers Quinn (Kyle Red Silverstein) presents the film screening as

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<sup>68</sup> E. Sánchez (Dir.). 'Drive In' [TV series episode], Episode 3, Season 1, *American Horror Stories* (20th Television ; Brad Falchuk Teley-Vision ; FX Productions ; Ryan Murphy Productions, 22 July 2021).

<sup>69</sup> Murphy, R. & Falchuk, B. (Creators), *American Horror Stories* [TV series], (20th Television ; Brad Falchuk Teley-Vision ; FX Productions ; Ryan Murphy Productions, 2021-2022).

<sup>70</sup> Murphy, R. & Falchuk, B. (Creators), *American Horror Story* [TV-Series], (20th Television ; Brad Falchuk Teley-Vision ; FX Network ; Ryan Murphy Productions, 2011-2022).

<sup>71</sup> D. Myrick & E. Sánchez (Dirs.), *The Blair Witch Project* [film], (Haxan Films, 1999).

<sup>72</sup> C. Tryon, "Video from the Void: Video Spectatorship, Domestic Film Cultures, and Contemporary Horror Film." *Journal of Film and Video* 61, no. 3, 2009: 40-51, p. 42.

<sup>73</sup> D. Amito & M. Laicini (Dirs.), *Antrum* [film], (Else Films, 2018).

<sup>74</sup> B. Miska, Fresh Trailer Unearthed for 'Antrum', the Deadliest Film Ever Made [Trailer]. *Bloody Disgusting*. 2019-08-22.

the first since it was forbidden after a major accident during a screening in the 1986 and the theories surrounding what caused the violence in the theater:

There were all these theories that someone spiked the soda machine with shrooms or a gas leak or even hallucinogenic mold. But if you read *Bloody Disgusting* or *Dread Central*, you know the other story. That the film made those people crazy. (...) The picture and the sound. Somehow, they fuck with the brain.

This puts the fictional film *Rabbit, Rabbit* in almost the exact same position as the fictional film *La Fin absolue du monde* in *Cigarette Burns*, and in a way *Drive In* takes up the torch of the theme and presents what could happen if a film such as this would be shown to a greater audience in contemporary time. The major difference between the two fictional films is how they were produced, where *La Fin absolue du monde* causes a threat to the audience and everyone who comes close to the film through a diabolic supernatural force connected to the films bloodshed of an angel as well as the editing, *Rabbit, Rabbit* focuses on the latter. The danger of *Rabbit, Rabbit* seems to stem only from the elaboration with the film and how it would affect people psychologically which puts this film even closer to the fear of manipulated images, a theme that seems to have been part of the director of *Drive In* (2021)'s earlier work as well since *The Blair Witch Project*, at least with the sequel directed by someone else as a interpretation of the first films intention, seem to imply that the material shown to the audience where manipulated<sup>75</sup>.

The quote also connects to urban legends surrounding the MK Ultra experiments<sup>76</sup> as well as the theme within *A Clockwork Orange* (1971)<sup>77</sup> regarding fears of how visual material could be used to influence the brain<sup>78</sup>. Just as in the case with *Cigarette Burns* the cinema audience in this quote becomes regarded as incapable children without the means to fend off the film's messages, a passive viewer as in the case with Baudry's apparatus theory<sup>79 80</sup>. At the same time, the setup with the new screening at a drive-in changes the environment slightly from the

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<sup>75</sup> Tryon, p. 45.

<sup>76</sup> K. Eschner, What We Know About the CIA's Midcentury Mind-Control Project. *Smithsonian Magazine*. 2017-04-13.

<sup>77</sup> S. Kubrick (Dir.), *A Clockwork Orange* [film], (Warner Bros. ; Polaris Productions ; Hawk Films, 1971).

<sup>78</sup> J. Darlington, "'A Clockwork Orange': The Art of Moral Panic?" *Cambridge Quarterly* 45, no. 2, 2016: 119-34, pp. 132-134.

<sup>79</sup> Baudry, p. 43.

<sup>80</sup> Elsaesser & Hagener, pp. 100-101.

classic cinema screenings in a theater, which opens up for other possibilities without contradicting the apparatus theory, the audience have their own room where they control part of what and how they see and hear the film from within the car. *Rabbit, rabbit* is referred to by the teenagers as “the most dangerous film ever made”, which quite closely resembles the subheading of earlier mentioned film *Antrum - 'The Deadliest Film Ever Made'* and thereby could be seen as referencing within the subgenre of horror films on the subject of cursed films.

When one of the main characters, Chad (Rhenzy Feliz), of *Drive In* tries to gather information regarding the film, *Rabbit, rabbit*, they are about to see he stumbles upon a video on the internet, a recording of the trial against the film's director after the deaths during the original screening, a conversation between the prosecutor, Tipper Gore (Amy Grabow), and the director, Larry Bitterman (John Carroll Lynch).

*Tipper Gore*

- Six people are dead, killed watching your movie.

*Larry Bitterman*

- This committee is absurd.

*Tipper Gore*

- We're Americans concerned about the effect of violent content on our society. In an interview with Fangoria magazine, you said that your film, and I quote, "would break people's souls" and that anyone who saw it would be damaged forever.

*Larry Bitterman*

- Well, I was, uh, promoting my movie. Like you're helping me do right now.

*Tipper Gore*

- So, you think all of this attention will just increase your audience?

*Larry Bitterman*

- I think if you're not getting a check from studio publicity, you're getting ripped off.

*Tipper Gore*

- Funny you should say that, Mr. Bitterman. I did get something from the studio, but it wasn't a check. It was a letter stating they've agreed to pull your movie immediately. Not only that. They're going to destroy every print in existence. What do you have to say about that, Mr. Bitterman?

In this conversation two extreme views on the film medium are spelled out quite clearly. On one hand the prosecutor Tipper Gore argues for the film to be, not only banned but destroyed, because of the possible threat against the population the film constitutes since the film, and the filmmaker, is blamed for the deaths at the screening. Worth noting here is that Tipper Gore is a real person involved in the start up of the american organization *The Parents' Music Resource Center* who worked to give music ratings regarding if they were suitable for children or not<sup>81</sup>. The fear of how a film could *imprint* a message of violence onto an audience is raised. In the other corner stands the director Larry Bitterman's viewpoint of how all publicity in relation to the film is considered good marketing and how the censoring of art would be against all reason, that the trail is absurd in itself. The thought of how the rumors that the film is cursed would only strengthen the film's marketing campaign is recognized both with the director of the episode *Drive In's* previous film *Blair Witch Project*<sup>82</sup>, as earlier mentioned, as well as the marketing for other horror films such as *The Exorcist* (1973)<sup>83</sup> where rumors of the audience reactions of fainting or having a miscarriage at the screening might have added to the interest for the film<sup>84</sup> as well as recent horror films such as *Terrifier 2* (2022)<sup>85</sup> which, at least in Sweden, seems to have been marketed through invitations on throw up-bags sent to reviewers<sup>86</sup>. The fear of damaging the society through violent media is, again, something which brings the thoughts to the 'video nasties' in the UK during the 1980's, but also moral panics regarding media within the USA such as the fear of subliminal satanic messages or backmasking within rock music during the satanic panic of the same time<sup>87</sup>. During the satanic panic in the USA records were burnt by christian groups claiming the medium of gramophone rock records to spread satanism<sup>88</sup> which these musicians picked up on and the backmasking rumors themselves were then used as a selling point<sup>89</sup>. In the same way the lists of censored or forbidden films in the UK during the video nasties became a list for horror fans to explore<sup>90</sup>. In this way Bittermans thoughts of the film, *Rabbit, rabbit*, rumors of

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<sup>81</sup> C. Chastagner, 'The Parents' Music Resource Center: from information to censorship'. In *Popular music*, 18, 1999, 179–192, 181.

<sup>82</sup> Tryon, pp. 42-43.

<sup>83</sup> W. Friedkin (Dir.), *The Exorcist* [film], (Warner Bros. ; Hoya Productions, 1973).

<sup>84</sup> B. Kattelman, "'We Dare You to See This!': Ballyhoo and the 1970s Horror Film." *Horror Studies* 2, no. 1, 2011: 61-74, pp. 68-69.

<sup>85</sup> D. Leone (Dir.), *Terrifier 2* [film], (Dark Age Cinema ; Fuzz on the Lens Productions, 2022).

<sup>86</sup> S. Hedmark, Blodet kommer att flyta på bio lagom till jul i år. *Aftonbladet*. 2022-12-01.

<sup>87</sup> Smith, p. 537.

<sup>88</sup> Smith, p. 548.

<sup>89</sup> Smith, p. 543.

<sup>90</sup> L. Hallam, Where to begin with video nasties. *British Film Institute*. 2021-08-09.

being dangerous as a marketing plan could be seen as grounded, if the film had not been destroyed, especially since the film supposedly were first screened during the 1980's and the marketing is seen to be working when the film reappears in the drive-in theaters in contemporary time.

During the screening of *Rabbit, rabbit in Drive In* all of the people who watch even the slightest of the film seem to enter a state of frenzy where they engage in indiscriminate violence against everything and everyone. Two people, the main characters Chad (Rhenzy Feliz) and Kelley (Madison Bailey) who are on a date survives with their sanity intact because they are engaging in sexual activities instead of watching the movie, while others who do the same thing but only see a glance of the film is affected just as everyone else or killed. The turning point where the spectators become rabid killing machines is initiated by a rapid photographic cross cut between the film projector, the movie screen, a fast shot of a face with inverted colors, and a large number of eyes turning bloodshot and further into absolutely blackened. This could be seen to illustrate, in a rather direct way, how the eye absorbs the picture before it as well as how the unprotected audience sees the director's intention unfiltered and without any means to fend it off. The director's vision becomes projected onto the film screen as a representation of a cornea and into the minds of the unknowing audience through their own eyes.

In this way the audience, yet again, is seen as helpless victims to the auteurs vision as seen previously in for example *Cigarette Burns* and again very much in line with both Baudry's apparatus theory<sup>91</sup> as well as auteur theories where this vision can be seen as the entire meaning of a film<sup>92</sup>. It also demonstrates the special bond between the camera, the projector and the spectator which is recurring as a theme within a large amount of films, for example the earlier mentioned and *A Clockwork Orange*, but also within other horror films within the subgenre such as *Cigarette Burns* as well as *Ringu* (1998) and the American remake *The Ring* (2002). In all three of these films the circular form is used in a way that could be seen as a reference to the iris, such as the cigarette burns with a integrated vision in *Cigarette Burns* or the well as seen through Sadako's eyes in *Ringu*<sup>93</sup>, even though the latter does not involve a

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<sup>91</sup> Baudry, p. 43.

<sup>92</sup> Naremore, pp. 10-11.

<sup>93</sup> Panagia, pp. 1-2.



projector and therefore touches on other types of spectatorship such as piracy<sup>94</sup>. The inverted shot of a face that seems to be intermixed in the cross cut could be seen as a reference to thoughts regarding subliminal messages within film but also the specific inserted demon face from *The Exorcist* which is cut into the film and the myths surrounding these fast shots<sup>95</sup>.

When the slaughter at the drive-in theater has calmed down a bit the two surviving young people, Chad and Kelley, decide to go looking for the director of the film, Bitterman, to stop him from further screenings of *Rabbit, rabbit*. They find him in a trailer with a Rolls Royce standing outside, watching the news about the screening and claiming the result to be “film history”. They threaten him with violence to give them the original film for them to destroy, which leads to a, more or less, monologue from the director regarding why and how the film was made as well as his thoughts on the subject. He explains that the film screening was “his finest hour” and asks them to tell him of the result and seems excited when he gets the information that the “*response was 100% effective*”, that everyone who watched the film were in fact affected. Bitterman also expresses disappointment when he understands that the main characters did not get affected because they were focused on sexual activities instead of the film and how that was one of his main concerns about screening the film at a drive-in theater. He then proceeds to tell them that the film should not be seen as an experiment, but rather an experience.

- (...) It's a... It's an experience. It's a cinematic happening. A horror movie where the horror isn't on-screen. It's in the audience. Try to appreciate what I'm talking about. Come on! I mean, you two must be film buffs or you wouldn't have been there last night, so you must know about the, uh, subliminals in *The Exorcist*? William Friedkin cut two frames of a demon's face into reel six. People were throwing up in the aisles. There were cases of women going into labor. One gave birth right in the theater. People thought they were possessed, and all because of two frames, two little frames, and some creative sound. In certain spots, we mixed in the sound of an angry beehive. Oh, really got on people's nerves. Guess whose idea it was, the subliminals. (...) Second assistant cutter. We changed film forever. We should've won Best Picture that year. You know what did? *The Sting*. It was a travesty! I couldn't let that stand. I had to take it to the next level. So I raised money for my own movie. I was after the recipe, you see. The-the universal combination of image and sound that would trigger the fear center of every human brain. I studied intrusive memory formation, the CIA hijinks with MK-Ultra. Did you know

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<sup>94</sup> Benson-Allott, pp. 118-119.

<sup>95</sup> O. J. Cade, "Sifting Science: Stratification and *The Exorcist*." *Horror Studies* 7, no. 1, 2016: 61-72, p. 67.

flashes of 330 hertz can trigger seizures even in people without epilepsy? I applied everything I learned like Edison creating the light bulb. I used thousands of combinations until one day, it happened. I gave my editor some notes, and I came by to see what she'd done.

He continues to tell them of how he knew the film was ready to be shown, which the audience gets to see as a flashback, when his assistant had cut her fingers to pieces while watching the film. Then he tells them about how he got sentenced for assault after the trial where the films were decided to be destroyed since he assaulted the prosecutor and how he restored the film after he was released.

- (...) They put me away for 15 years. A society that locks up its artists doesn't deserve to survive. It deserves to burn. So, like a monk, I spent every minute of my time gathering every piece of information I could to fix and to refine the recipe. And when I got out, I applied it to a workprint that I'd squirreled away. And the rest is history. Okay. I know you're angry right now, but try to appreciate the big picture. You were a witness to history. You can retire to the lecture circuit. You'll never have to work another day. Take the win and get on with your lives.

Chad and Kelley proceed to threaten him to get hold of the film, and when they do, they burn it together with the trailer and Bitterman himself who is laying damaged on the floor. He shouts as they leave that this will not be the end. That “*My name will go down in cinema history. Kubrick! Coppola! Spielberg! And Larry fucking Bitterman!*”. The episode ends with the film shown to have reached streaming services and outside the entire city becomes full of violence and burning buildings.

Most of the episode's plot is spelled out in the last minutes through these speeches. Bitterman explains the connection to the very much real subliminal theories surrounding *The Exorcist* himself and how this is related to MK-Ultra as well as his intentions of becoming something more than a “second assistant cutter”. In this matter the episode binds together the story in a kind of critique against auteur theories and spectatorship within the new formats of digital film and thereby transfer the fear of the film medium itself and potential imprinting on the audience onto contemporary home video in the form of streaming services and fear of modern internet based technology. At the same time, the ending implies a kind of irony against moral panics surrounding the media since the disaster is blown out of proportion in regards to what a film could actually do to the audience and a kind of critique against the relevance of apparatus theory in regards to spectatorship in contemporary society.

### 2.3. *LA RAGE DU DÉMON* (2016)

*La rage du Démon* (2016)<sup>96</sup> and *Antrum* (2018) are two films with such similar plots that some people seem to have called the later and more famous one, *Antrum*, an unauthorized copy. The plot surrounding the films and the mockumentary parts are indeed very similar, but the similarities end there. Where *La rage du Démon* focuses on the mockumentary part about an old, lost film who seems to be cursed without showing the content of said film, *Antrum* uses the mockumentary as a frame for the major part of the film which is a film that is claimed to be dangerous. This makes *Antrum* a longer film, but it also takes the film outside of the metadiscussion surrounding "a film within a film" for most part. *La rage du Démon* instead focuses on making a mockumentary so close to reality that it could be interpreted as real which makes the film short but effective and might be considered more relevant to the subject of "films about cursed films" even though both of them use the possibility of danger as a marketing point. This, together with how *La rage du Démon* pre-dates *Antrum*, is also why I have chosen to focus on the former rather than the latter in this essay even though the marketing campaign regarding *Antrum* has been mentioned above as this was done on a larger scale.

The mockumentary regarding the (fictional) film *La rage du Démon* or *Fury of the Demon* is a talking head documentary where real people from within the film industry play themselves talking about actual film history fused together with fictional elements. The fictional film of interest is described as a short silent film from the early 1900's that is supposed to make the audience violent and therefore is mentioned as "dangerous". The film also seems to disappear after some screenings, once in a screening in 1939 and again after the "latest known screening" in 2012. *La rage du Démon* is supposedly created by the known (real historical person) stage magician and film creator Georges Méliès or, as it seems more likely, the (fictional person) Victor Sicarius who is described as a spiritualist, occultist and spirit photographer, something Georges Méliès were known to work against in favor of magic shows, illusionary work and films<sup>97</sup>. Though within this fictional scenario, Méliès is supposed

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<sup>96</sup> F. Delange (Dir.), *La rage du Démon* [Fury of the Demon] [film], (Hippocampe Productions, 2016).

<sup>97</sup> P. Cherchi Usai, "A Trip to the Movies Georges Méliès, Filmmaker and Magician (1861–1938)". In M. Solomon (Ed.), *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination : Georges Méliès's Trip to the Moon*, 25-30. New York, NY : State University of New York Press, 2011, pp. 27-28.

to have had indulgence with this since Victor Sicarius is described as his friend who was able to work with Méliès and within his studio. This is supposedly the reason for why the film has production logos resembling Méliès early work and why the films style could be interpreted as Méliès own. Some of the persons portrayed as talking heads within the mockumentary are said to have been part of the 2012 screening of the film where violence erupted in the audience and some of the people invited to the screening were killed. They describe the happening as an invitation to see a lost Georges Méliès film found by an American film collector and how the short film changed the entire atmosphere in the room from excitement to anger and a need to commit violent acts. The mockumentary is presented, except for the talking heads, with short material from actual films revolving around spiritualism as well as chosen video segments of Georges Méliès works accompanied by a mix of real and fictional photographs, letters and supposedly used surroundings. The film of interest, *La rage du Démon*, is never shown in the 60 minutes long fictional documentary.

The mockumentary was first shown at the Brooklyn Horror Film Festival in 2016<sup>98</sup> and looks a lot like documentaries made-for-tv, but got released as a stand alone film. Facts and fiction are blended together in a way that makes it hard to know what is real or not without some knowledge about film history. In this way the film adds to its own reliability through a frame of historically correct statements that makes the fictional history elements seem credible. This is the only film in my research that does not show even the slightest pictures from the fictional film mentioned, instead the silent film is covered in mystery. It touches upon subjects known to correlate with the fear or uncanniness of media such as spiritualism and spirit photography, the invention of film and the first film screenings connection to magic shows as well as the first filmmakers resistance against séances with mediums and other arrangements who claimed to be real but usually contained illusions as well.

When new mediums have been established such as film, or for that matter photography, it has almost always come with a feeling of uncanniness<sup>99 100</sup> and in the early years of cinema the

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<sup>98</sup> Kurland, D. 5 Indies From the Brooklyn Horror Film Fest That You Need to See!. *Bloody Disgusting*. 2016-10-19.

<sup>99</sup> J. Peters, "Phantasms of the Living, Dialogues with the Dead." J. Peters, *Speaking into the air : A history of the idea of communication*, 137-144. Chicago, Ill. : Chichester: University of Chicago Press ; Wiley, 1999, p. 139.

<sup>100</sup> T. Gunning, 2003, p. 47.

presentation of the film medium were very much like a magic show, where the audience did not get any information regarding how the illusion or the apparatus function<sup>101</sup>. The film medium was also commonly used by magicians as a proof of another kind of illusion as well as a way to raise the argument that the *spiritualist movement*<sup>102</sup> and their séances used illusion in a similar way that the magicians did.<sup>103</sup> Mockery versions of spiritualistic séances, often called pseudo-spiritualism, were created by illusionists and shown as a part of film screenings<sup>104 105</sup>. This could also be seen as a reaction to the use of spirit photography, photographs where what could be interpreted as spirits were seen in the resulting photograph which were seen by spiritualists as a proof that the camera could show us things in our presence that the eye could not see<sup>106</sup>. The reasoning behind how a camera could show something we could not perceive with our own eyes were similar to how we today know that an x-ray camera could show us the inside of our body,<sup>107</sup> but where the x-ray could be shown to work as supposedly spirit photographs have been proven to often be results of double exposition or montages<sup>108</sup>. The magicians who worked with film would therefore underline both the magic atmosphere of a film screening as well as the importance of a skeptical audience<sup>109</sup> who knew this to be an illusion, just as with stage magic.

In this respect *La rage du Démon* evokes this known schism between the spiritualist movement and stage magicians to substantiate the fictional character of Victor Sicarius as a counterpart to the known real magician and film enthusiast Georges Méliès<sup>110</sup>. Méliès were also known to use a lot of cuts<sup>111</sup> and theatrical compositions similar to magic shows within his films as a filmic style to take the spectator on fantastic fictional trips<sup>112</sup>. This could be seen

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<sup>101</sup> M. Solomon, *Disappearing tricks : silent film, Houdini, and the new magic of the twentieth century*. Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010, p. 11.

<sup>102</sup> C. Gutierrez, "Spiritualism". In C. Partridge (Ed.), *The occult world*, 197-206. New York, NY : Routledge, 2015, p. 197.

<sup>103</sup> Solomon, p. 15.

<sup>104</sup> Solomon, p. 14.

<sup>105</sup> S. Natale, "The Cinema of Exposure: Spiritualist Exposés, Technology, and the Dispositif of Early Cinema." *Recherches sémiotiques / Semiotic Inquiry* 31, no. 1-2-3 (2011) : 113–129, pp. 115-116.

<sup>106</sup> Gutierrez, p. 203.

<sup>107</sup> Medeiros, p. 12.

<sup>108</sup> T. Gunning, 1995, p. 65.

<sup>109</sup> Natale, p. 117.

<sup>110</sup> Cherchi Usai, pp. 27-28.

<sup>111</sup> A. Gaudreault, "Theatricality, Narrativity, and Trickality Reevaluating the Cinema of Georges Méliès". In M. Solomon (Ed.), *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination : Georges Méliès's Trip to the Moon*, 31-47. New York, NY : State University of New York Press, 2011, p. 41.

<sup>112</sup> Gaudreault, pp. 34-35.

to contradict the thought of film as a representation of reality where illusionary tricks should be used only to heighten the realism within the film, since Méliès films used illusions in a theatrical way to put the spectator in a place of fantasy where realism instead became an art to manipulate. Of course, the cuts in the film were also used to heighten the fictional reality or universe, but since illusion as a theatrical element were an important component these films did not strive after realism with low amounts of manipulation in the way that for example André Bazin advocated as a way to use the film medium in its full potential<sup>113</sup>.

This would also speak to the thought of how a film could hold power and therefore become dangerous as in the case with how the fictional films ‘*La rage du Démon*’, ‘*La Fin absolue du monde*’, ‘*Rabbit, rabbit*’ is presented. All of these films, *La rage du Démon* included, is said to possibly use subliminal messages to imprint feelings onto the spectator. The spectator is, again, seen as a passive victim exposed to the gaze of the filmmaker<sup>114</sup>. The potential to manipulate a film and through this affect the audience negatively becomes established yet again with the connection between *La rage du Démon* and Georges Méliès filmic style. The fear of negative impressions affecting the audience have been, as earlier mentioned, recurring in media history which have raised moral panics again and again, this was also the case in the United States during the 1915’s and all the way to 1952 when movies finally gained the protection of the First Amendment of the Constitution<sup>115</sup> since a moral panic regarding the potential for film to affect, especially women and children, negatively were present<sup>116</sup>. This could be seen, as later film theory regarding spectatorship in the form of apparatus theory, as a way of raising suspicion against cinema as something powerful and potentially dangerous through the use of illusions<sup>117</sup>. In this instance *La rage du Démon* again goes all the way back to the classic cinema as a medium to make use of subliminal messages, just as in the earlier mentioned films as well as other fictional works such as the novel the *Flicker*<sup>118 119</sup> and the connotations this novel's name gives to the original meaning of the term within cinema, of

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<sup>113</sup> Bazin, p. 313.

<sup>114</sup> Baudry, p. 43.

<sup>115</sup> T. Gunning, "Flickers: On Cinema's Power for Evil". In M. Pomerance (Ed.), *Bad Infamy, Darkness, Evil, and Slime on Screen* SUNY Series, Cultural Studies in Cinema/video, 21-38. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004, p. 22.

<sup>116</sup> Gunning, 2004, p. 23.

<sup>117</sup> Gunning, 2004, p. 26.

<sup>118</sup> T. Roszak. *Flicker: A Novel*. New York: Summit Books, 1991.

<sup>119</sup> Gunning, 2004, p. 35.

flickering lights and optical illusions<sup>120</sup>. The film itself and its creator becomes a potential for evil and the spectator the unknowing victim.

This fear of films in general and cinema in particular is here shown to, again, be an effective trope within the horror genre since it is connected to the actual historical fear of media. But the use of old media to enhance this effect, such as in these cases where the ‘evil’ resides within the format of cinema or as in the case with *Ringu* (1998) and *The Ring* (2001) and the VHS tape as a bearer of evil where the videocassette becomes a symbol of horror<sup>121</sup>, is recurring even when used through digital techniques as we have seen with *Drive In* (2021).

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

#### 3.1. FINAL DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Within the film genre ‘horror’ there is a subcategory of films revolving around a meta discussion on potential danger of horror films. These films are few, but there are enough of them to sometimes ‘converse’ with each other as well as the film- and genre- history. The three films and/or videos examined within this essay all goes back through history to the cinematic experience to express this potential danger, which evokes discussions regarding the cinematic apparatus and Jean-Louis Baudry’s apparatus theory regarding whether or not the spectator within a cinema can shield themselves from the ideology imprinted on to them from the film creator through the cinematic apparatus. It also reawakens questions of media and moral which have been present within different eras where moral panics have been raised against new media, but especially the horror genres heritage of moral panics against the ‘video nasties’ and the local forms of the same panic as well as the widespread fear of different media during ‘satanic panics’ and the more recent fear of ‘torture porn’ or *spectacle horror*. It is clear that moral panics in different forms, even though they might have changed, will rise up repeatedly as a historical pattern and that media continues to be one of the instances who awaken these panics recurrently. Through these films, where the fear of media and an imprint on spectators are lifted, the history of moral panics against as well as rejection of the horror genre can be processed and the recurring fear of films' potential of subliminal impact is discussed. This is a theme that has a rich history within the genre to reflect on and

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<sup>120</sup> Gunning, 2004, p. 32.

<sup>121</sup> Benson-Allott, p. 140.

through shocking content or discussions of shocking content horror fiction creates a meta version of what Lowenstein calls *the allegorical moment*<sup>122</sup> when approaching both the horror genre and art film, but often in combination with the popular horror subgenre of mockumentaries or found footage horror and thereby also raising discussions regarding horror film and marketing where the marketing by ballyhoo-techniques, or marketing by daring the audience to see what is presented, of the 1970's<sup>123</sup> as well as marketing claiming films to be documentaries in more recent works within the genre such as the *Blair Witch Project*<sup>124</sup> or perhaps even in more contemporary films such as *Paranormal Activity*.

These films becomes a meta discussion of the horror genre and its history while raising awareness of how the fear of media is still present today and still is used as a marketing tool much like how spectacle shows as well as early cinema were presented<sup>125</sup>. The films also raise questions regarding moral panics against horror cinema, could horror really be 'dangerous' and what would be needed for films to actually be a threat? What is needed, according to these three examples, is clearly for films to plant subliminals which awaken anger within the audience or a supernatural connection to an evil force, creator, evil deeds or Satan himself, none which are very likely to be true and thereby the credibility in troublesome moral panics within the horror genres, past as well as potential new panics, regarding the genre as something 'dangerous' becomes unlikely as well. The fear of media and the genre seems to often be portrayed as a fear of ideology being imprinted on the spectator, often through the cinematic environment as argued by Jean-Louis Baudry through the apparatus theory<sup>126</sup>, even though the theme also seems to be presented in relation to more contemporary media by using anthology tv-series as publishing medium or including how this fear could be transferred into new media such as streaming, seen in the most recent entry in this study, the *American Horror Stories* episode *Drive In*.

The fear of media, which is the foundation within this subcategory of films, historically often seems to stem from the fear of losing control over different groups within society<sup>127</sup> which

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<sup>122</sup> Lowenstein, 2005, pp. 2 ; 11-12 ; Lowenstein, 2011, p. 43

<sup>123</sup> Kattelman, pp. 64-65.

<sup>124</sup> Tryon, p. 42.

<sup>125</sup> Lowenstein, 2011, pp. 44-45.

<sup>126</sup> Baudry, p. 39.

<sup>127</sup> Sconce, pp. 153 ; 163.



also seems to be a recurring issue when culture is regarded as high- or low<sup>128</sup>. Horror film has been exposed to moral panics regarding it as low culture as well as something ‘dangerous’ because of potentially imprinting the spectators and creating violent individuals such as the fear during the ‘video nasties’<sup>129</sup>, which makes the genre doubly affected by negative criticism and very much considered, together with the fans of the genre, as a kind of *folk devil*<sup>130</sup>. This might have changed in recent years when the genre seems to have increased in reputation, within certain subgenres at least, but the problem is recurring.

The genre thereby could be seen to use these sub-category of videos to repeatedly raise the discussion regarding these issues within the genre and in relation to society which, again, becomes a meta discussion of horror since this reinforces the argument that horror has unique possibilities to bring forward discussion and social critique.

### **3.2. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

This essay has delved into and examined three examples from the subcategory of horror films revolving around horror films and what these films might express through this theme. The essay started off by examining text materials and films on this subject and formulating questions of relevance and has tried to find answers to these, which have in many aspects been found. Because of limited time and space the essay have had to define which of the material is most relevant to the study and sort out a large amount of aspects which could have been examined further, for example the contemporary society when each of the films or videos examined where published and a deeper explanation of media history then the essay has room for. Since the essay tries to approach the theme of ‘dangerous’ films within films through a lot of different angles the research has sometimes gone far and wide and therefore have had a problem with how these, very closely related subjects, should be intertwined in a way that clearly explains the findings and conclusions and a lot of extra material have had to be sorted out here as well to make the essay as clear as possible, but this could probably always be done even more. There is a lot more potential to the subject and further research regarding gender issues within these films as well as how the films are affected by

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<sup>128</sup> Boëthius, 1994, p. 257.

<sup>129</sup> Petley, 1994, pp. 52-54.

<sup>130</sup> S. Cohen, p. XXIX.

contemporary society would be of great interest to further understand the subcategory but also how the *allegorical moment* arises within such horror films.

### 3.2.1. OTHER WORKS WITHIN THE THEME

These three films discussed in the essay are of course not the only horror films that approach the subject of 'dangerous films'. As seen within the essay there are a couple of films which have been studied in previous research, mainly *The Ring*, *Ringu* and *Videodrome*, but also films that have not been studied as much such as *Evil Ed*, *Censor* and *Antrum*. These films, and others not mentioned here, within the subcategory could with advantage be studied further to see if the similarities become more clear or if the sub-category changes and thereby approach a meta discussion within the meta discussion, but this is something left unexplored within this essay.

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