

7.1 The Post-Cinematic in PARANORMAL ACTIVITY and PARANORMAL ACTIVITY 2



BY THERESE GRISHAM, JULIA LEYDA, NICHOLAS ROMBES, AND STEVEN SHAVIRO

Therese Grisham: I want to start at the most theoretical level, to find out where you position your thought with regard to the two films we are discussing, *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007) and *Paranormal Activity 2* (Tod Williams, 2010). It would be helpful if you gave a brief definition of the “post-cinematic,” or an equivalent term you work with, and include some introductory remarks about these movies as post-cinematic.

Nick Rombes: Great to be here, and thanks for this opening question, Therese. My thinking about post-cinema has certainly been influenced by Steven’s writing, especially in his *Film-Philosophy* essay, “Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate*, and *Southland Tales*” and his book, *Post-Cinematic Affect*. Particularly right-on, I think, is Steven’s phrase about how the expressive nature of post-cinematic media gives rise to “a kind of ambient, free-floating sensibility that permeates our society today” (*Post-Cinematic 2*). My own still-in-progress mapping of post-cinema would begin with this phenomenon: the totalitarian immersion of our everyday lives in the slipstream of the digital, cinematic imaginary, as captured so well in the *Paranormal* films which, at their most fundamental level, tackle the question of how to navigate the private spaces of this new media landscape.

I’d turn here to a concept used by some psychiatrists—*limbic resonance*—to describe how human beings seemingly “tune into” each other *via* neural attunement and mirror neurons.

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Post-cinema is living; as much as it generates affect in us, we generate affect in it. We feel, and it feels back. How cinema achieved this state of feeling remains clouded in mystery and needs to be theorized; to do so, we might turn to the disciplines of quantum physics and psychopathology, whose methods are (at their best) experimental in the best and most radical sense of the word.

In the *Paranormal* films, it's not the house or the characters who are haunted, but the cameras, whether they be moving and hand-held (as in the first film) or stationary and fixed (as in the second). On one level, I wonder if this deforms the reality-TV tropes that are so familiar.

Another characteristic of post-cinema relates to the avant-garde which, historically, played an important role in maintaining some critical distance between cinema and mass culture and cultivated a certain aura and mystique around "movies" in general. (Although, as Robert Ray has eloquently argued, avant-garde movements have typically been star-driven and have courted acceptance from the mainstream.) But is a cinematic avant-garde possible today? The *Paranormal* films are illustrative. Under slightly different historical circumstances, we could see them as avant-garde. Arguably, their experiments with form and constraint—especially *Paranormal 2*—are as rigorous as other contemporary films considered experimental or, at the least, challenging, such as *Ten* (Abbas Kiarostami, 2002; two mounted digital cameras), *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002; one continuous 96-minute shot), or *Timecode* (Mike Figgis, 2000; screen divided into four quadrants, each showing simultaneous action in real time with no cuts). The relationship between the avant-garde and capital is various and textured, but it should be remembered that the first *Paranormal* was independently produced and cost only around \$15,000 to make, and was directed by Oren Peli, a complete outsider to the film industry and someone who had never made a film before, not even a short one.

Post-cinema lacks diverse channels of publicity. Unlike the French New Wave or Italian Neo-Realism or the *Film Culture* movement, there is no one to claim that films like *The Blair Witch Project* or the *Paranormal* films are experimental, and therefore they are not. The folks who make these films—unlike Lars von Trier, or Stan Brakhage, or Maya Deren—are

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not also writers, critics, or provocateurs. The avant-garde has always depended on publicity to achieve and police its once-notorious place at the edges of the canon. In the post-cinema world, the proliferation of social media outlets has resulted in not more discourses across platforms, but less. Filmmakers are, by and large, publicists rather than agents of disaster. It's not that capital has thoroughly commodified cinema (this doesn't seem to be the case), but rather that post-cinema lacks the powerful meta-narrative to swim upstream against the currents of unorthodox publicity. Where are the voices that proclaim the avant-garde post-cinema as the avant-garde post cinema?

Julia Leyda: I agree with Nick that Steve's previous work on the post-cinematic is a solid basis from which to begin a discussion of the two *Paranormal Activity* movies now in release. In particular, I just want to underscore what interests me the most in Steve's elaborations in the *Film-Philosophy* excerpt from Steve's book, "Post-Cinematic Affect: On Grace Jones, *Boarding Gate* and *Southland Tales*." Mainly, I like the attention he pays to the inter-connections among technology (specifically new digital modes of production), capital, and affect. He argues that post-cinematic media productions

generate subjectivity and . . . play a crucial role in the valorization of capital. Just as the old Hollywood continuity editing system was an integral part of the Fordist mode of production, so the editing methods and formal devices of digital video and film belong directly to the computing-and-information-technology infrastructure of neoliberal finance. (3)

This rings especially true for me in these movies—maybe more so in the second one—because there is such a clear relation between the digital cinematography and editing and the way I feel myself corralled into certain perceptive modes. For example, the fixed security camera footage forces me to scan the frame continuously because I realize that the camera will not pick out action or details that I should focus on.

As you can see here, I don't usually manage to stay at a theoretical level for very long without recourse to exemplification—it's the only way I can make sense of theory, usually. But I also feel Steve's definition encourages a political reading that takes into account the

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way gender, race, and class are intricately interwoven into the movies, again especially *PA2*. Striking to me in this movie are the rapid and dangerous reversals of power relations across a few different axes. First, and most obviously, the suburban middle-class American house itself. Certainly the centuries-old tradition of the Gothic and the haunted house horror novel, and then film, lays the basis for this movie's portrayal of the defamiliarized domestic space turned into a site of terror (a nod to Therese's course on Home Noir as well). But more specifically, for this particular viewer, these movies brilliantly portray, in their low-budget verisimilitude, the twenty-first-century American real estate nightmare. Although I am American, I haven't lived in the US since 1998, so my own experience of McMansions and the kind of suburban lifestyle we see here is very mediated, but this movie felt to me like an articulation of the excess of that time and place—of personal living space, consumer products, cars, swimming pools, energy use, new-fangled financial instruments, and so on.

There is also the implication that a male ancestor in the past has made a Faustian bargain with a demon in exchange for material wealth. In that sense, I see the film in the vein of some of Romero's horror movies as well: not only the isolated home of *Night of the Living Dead* and the shopping mall of *Dawn of the Dead*, but also the rust belt desolation of suburban Pittsburgh in *Martin*. Like those and other body genre horror movies, the cause of the horror isn't tied to a particular locale like a ghost or poltergeist—it is based within the body itself. That it seems to always (so far) be a young female body might get explained more in the third film, due out in a few months. Another obvious flipping of power relations occurs between the family and their Latina maid, whom they condescendingly call a "nanny" at the beginning, implying she is exclusively a child care worker. But later, we see her cooking, doing laundry, and cleaning the house. The movie repeats the cliché that she is like one of the family until she is summarily dismissed, and then re-summoned when they realize they need her expertise. At that point, she has complete control over the family—fortunately for them, she seems genuinely to care for them and does not take this opportunity to wreak revenge on them, as oppressed people do in so many horror movies such as *Drag Me To Hell* (2009). As in the Tourneur/Lewton horror cycle and so many more, we see here a wealthy white male reject the atavistic knowledge of a female Other character, followed by his acceptance and reliance on her knowledge.

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But to continue the framework of looking at power relations and their reversals, I see the technology itself in a tenuous power relationship with the homeowners, as they buy the security surveillance system and home video cameras but struggle for mastery over their operation, and seem later to depend on them for their survival. At a certain point in each film, the audience recognizes a form of digital dramatic irony: the cameras “know” and “see” more than the characters, and thereby we do as well. The omniscience of the security cameras, however, begins to resemble a form of mastery over the people—not so much that the cameras are haunted, I think, as that the cameras are superior, all-seeing witnesses that cannot intervene, and force us also to witness helplessly. I feel an almost sadistic tone emanating from this kind of enforced and hobbled surveillance: security video as audience torture device. In this sense, the digital modes of production here appear to have influence over the kinds of affect the movie generates.

Steven Shaviro: My sense of the post-cinematic comes first of all from media theory. Cinema is generally regarded as the dominant medium, or aesthetic form, of the twentieth century. It evidently no longer has this position in the twenty-first. So I begin by asking, what is the role or position of cinema when it is no longer what Fredric Jameson calls a “cultural dominant,” when it has been “surpassed” by digital and computer-based media? (I leave “surpassed” in quotation marks in order to guard against giving this term a teleological meaning, as if the displacement of one medium by another were always a question of logical progression, or of advancement towards an overall goal. While André Bazin’s teleological “myth of total cinema” is certainly worth considering in this regard, there are many other factors in play as well; the situation is a complexly overdetermined one.)

Of course, if we are to be entirely strict about it, cinema was only dominant for the first half of the twentieth century; in the second half, it gave way to television. But for a long time, a kind of hierarchy was still in place: the “big screen” continued to dominate the “small screen” in terms of social meanings and cultural prestige—even if the latter generated more revenue, and was watched by a far greater number of people. Already in the 1950s, movies achieved a second life on television; it wasn’t until much later that anyone had the idea of doing cinematic remakes of television shows. It’s true that television news, or live broadcast, became important pretty much right away: think of Nixon’s Checkers speech

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(1952), the Nixon-Kennedy debates (1960), and the coverage of the Kennedy assassination (1963). But it's only been in the last decade or two that television drama has been seen as deeper and more relevant than cinematic drama. (In the 1970s, the *Godfather* films and *Taxi Driver* were cultural landmarks; for the past decade, the similar landmarks are shows like *The Sopranos* and *The Wire*.)

The movies only gradually lost their dominant role, in the wake of a whole series of electronic, and later digital, innovations. Theorists like Anne Friedberg and Lev Manovich have written about many of these: they include the growth of massively multichannel cable television, the increasing use of the infrared remote, the development of VCRs, DVDs, and DVRs, the ubiquity of personal computers, with their facilities for capturing and editing images and sounds, the increasing popularity and sophistication of computer games, and the expansion of the Internet, allowing for all sorts of uploading and downloading, the rise of sites like Hulu and YouTube, and the availability of streaming video.

These developments of video (electronic) and digital technologies entirely disrupted both the movies and traditional broadcast television. They introduced an entirely new cultural dominant, or cultural-technological regime: one whose outlines aren't entirely clear to us as yet. We do know that the new digital technologies have made the production, editing, distribution, sampling, and remixing of audiovisual material easier and more widespread than it has ever been before; and we know that this material is now accessible in a wider range of contexts than ever before, in multiple locations and on screens ranging in size from the tiny (mobile phones) to the gigantic (IMAX). We also know that this new media environment is instrumental to, and deeply embedded within, a complex of social, economic, and political developments: globalization, financialization, post-Fordist just-in-time production and "flexible accumulation" (as David Harvey calls it), the precaritization of labor, and widespread micro-surveillance. (Many of these developments are not new, in that they are intrinsic to the logic of capitalism, and were outlined by Marx a century and a half ago; but we are experiencing them in new forms, and with new degrees of intensity.)

Such is the context in which I locate the post-cinematic. The particular question that I am trying to answer, within this much broader field, is the following: What happens to cinema

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when it is no longer a cultural dominant, when its core technologies of production and reception have become obsolete, or have been subsumed within radically different forces and powers? What is the role of cinema, if we have now gone beyond what Jonathan Beller calls “the cinematic mode of production”? What is the ontology of the digital, or post-cinematic, audiovisual image, and how does it relate to Bazin’s ontology of the photographic image? How do particular movies, or audiovisual works, reinvent themselves, or discover new powers of expression, precisely in a time that is no longer cinematic or cinemacentric? As Marshall McLuhan long ago pointed out, when the media environment changes, so that we experience a different “ratio of the senses” than we did before, older media forms don’t necessarily disappear; instead, they are repurposed. We still make and watch movies, just as we still broadcast on and listen to the radio, and still write and read novels; but we produce, broadcast, and write, just as we watch, listen, and read, in different ways than we did before.

I think that the two (so far) *Paranormal Activity* films are powerful in the ways that they exemplify these dilemmas, and suggest possible responses to them. They are made with recent (advanced, but low-cost) digital technologies, and they also incorporate these technologies into their narratives and explore the new formal possibilities that are afforded by these technologies. As horror films, they modulate the affect of fear through, and with direct attention to, these digital technologies and the larger social and economic relations within which such technologies are embedded. The *Paranormal Activity* films in fact work through the major tropes of twentieth-century horror. First, there is the disruption of space that comes when uncanny alien forces invade the home, manifesting in the very site of domesticity, privacy, and the bourgeois-patriarchal nuclear family. And second, there is the warping (the dilation and compression) of time that comes about through rhythms of dread, anticipation, and urgency: the empty time when the characters or the audience are waiting for something to happen, or something to arrive, and the overfull time when they are so overwhelmed by an attack or an intrusion that it becomes impossible to perceive what is happening clearly and distinctly, or to separate the otherworldly intrusion from the viscerally heightened response (or inability to adequately respond). The *Paranormal Activity* films take up these modulations of space and time, but in novel ways, because their new technologies correspond to, or help to instantiate, new forms of spatiotemporal construction

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(one might think here of David Harvey's "space-time compression," or of Manuel Castells's "space of flows" and "timeless time").

TG: My second question relates to something Nick mentioned in his response, which is the difference between the post-cinematic in *PA* and *PA2* and reality TV. One criticism of these films I've read and heard frequently is that they are uninteresting precisely because they resemble TV shows involving the "paranormal," such as *Ghost Hunters* and others. Is this a valid criticism? Why, or why not?

NR: In some ways, I think the *Paranormal* films reflect deeper anxieties about reality TV and how it reflects the super-abundance of surveillance itself in American society. In response to the first question, Julia wrote about the "tenuous power relationship" between the homeowners and the camera/surveillance technology they install to keep themselves safe. I think this is a really useful way to frame what's happening in these films. We don't have much of a public conversation or debate in this country about surveillance and the corporatization of privacy, despite the fact that some fundamental notions about what it means to be a private citizen are undergoing profound transformations. Cinema has been one place where unarticulated cultural anxieties can be addressed in narrative form. I think for instance of the problems associated with the post-World War II "return to normalcy" and how film *noir* captured these tensions through the disruptive play of light and shadow.

Reality TV seems always to be about the fact of the camera, and it very often gestures toward but does not quite critique its own function as a transformer of private desire into public commodity. The *Paranormal* films—like *Blair Witch*—even further foreground the presence of the camera and quite effectively turn the camera into an agent of horror. The evil presence in these films is invisible precisely because there is no evil. The cameras themselves are agents of possession, literally: they possess those who happen into their gaze. Reality TV works to capture authentic moments of human emotion: fear, jealousy, anger, love. But at the root of all this is possession: human beings held in possession of another's gaze, the unblinking gaze of the camera. Our transactions both online and on the streets are now not only abundantly under surveillance, but mysteriously: we don't even know when we are being watched, tracked, documented. This truly is a horror of existential

dimensions, and so what better medium than the cinematic horror genre to put into narrative form these fears, since we can't seem to address these concerns in the public sphere.

SS: I like both Julia's comment about "a form of digital dramatic irony: the cameras 'know' and 'see' more than the characters," and Nick's comment that "the cameras themselves are agents of possession, literally: they possess those who happen into their gaze." Both *Paranormal Activity* films play with the old horror-film trope that evil forces can only manifest themselves if you have in some manner invited them in, and that you only encourage and strengthen such forces when you question them and try to find out what they want. Presumably the demonic entity that "wants" to possess Katie, and does succeed in doing this at the end of both films, would be coming after her in any case; but it seems to be strengthened by the very technological apparatus installed in order to monitor its activity.

In both films, too, the husband or boyfriend installs the surveillance equipment, thinking thereby to prove that the danger is nonexistent. This is a variation on the equally familiar horror-film trope of the controlling male authority figure: a narrow-minded rationalist, and disbeliever in the supernatural, whose scorn for the woman's "irrational" fears only helps to precipitate the catastrophe. Technological rationality ironically conducts and channels the irrational force that it was supposed to guard against; an apparatus of maximal visibility works to accommodate the unseen, the invisible, that which literally cannot be seen. The demonic force is only visible in its effects (crashing furniture, slamming a door, setting a fire, dragging a body down the hall, etc.); it needs to incarnate itself in the woman's body (Katie) in order to act with full force.

I cannot help being reminded of Gilles Deleuze's formulations about forces and forms. In his book on Francis Bacon, Deleuze writes that art "is not a matter of reproducing or inventing forms, but of capturing forces. . . . The task of painting is defined as the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible. Likewise, music attempts to render sonorous forces that are not themselves sonorous" (56). Every sensation is produced by forces, Deleuze says, but these forces cannot themselves be sensed.

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Deleuze is writing about what he calls the “virtual”; but I think that his formulation works quite well, albeit inverted, for the horror genre. The evil, demonic intrusion is a force in itself impalpable, but which becomes sensible, graspable, and palpable in its effects. The force is striving, in Deleuze’s terms, to “actualize” itself. The evil force comes from Outside: not from some other empirical place, but rather from what Deleuze calls “*an outside which is further away than any external world and even any form of exteriority*” (Foucault, 96). This Outside is what forces its intimacy upon us.

Deleuze is often read as celebrating the advent of forces from the Outside; but I think that this is an oversimplification. In any case, horror treats the event of this intrusion with a full-fledged affective ambivalence. The invasion from the Outside produces feelings of dread and anxiety. This is, of course, something that goes back to Freud’s *uncanny* a century ago (and indeed, to Freud’s German Romantic sources a century before that): it’s precisely the bourgeois home, the seat of interiority, the one haven we have from a heartless world, that becomes the site where the Outside manifests itself.

In the *Paranormal Activity* films, the violated home takes the form of that middle-class California tract housing that so many Americans purchased over the last decade or so (and that many of them subsequently lost after the financial collapse of 2008). There’s something essentially anonymous about this sort of housing: it looks generic, even after you have striven to make it “yours.” I read somewhere that Oren Peli used his own home as the set for the first movie; I do not find this surprising at all. I should emphasize that I am not expressing any sort of snobbish distaste for suburban living here. (I live in a city, and far from California, but my own home is equally generic; nearly all my furnishings come from either Costco or Ikea.) But the films emphasize a prevailing norm of interior design: it’s the lifestyle that we all aspire to. Only the extremely poor (or those who have recently lost their homes to foreclosure) are deprived of it; and only the extremely rich can afford to have anything more idiosyncratic. And it’s precisely within this generic blandness, our only simulacrum of interiority, that the force of the Outside manifests itself. This intrusion is both my only claim to singularity, and something that threatens to tear me away from all comfort and all hope.

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Of course, what really distinguishes the *Paranormal Activity* movies from earlier horror films is not just the furnishings, but the technology. Everything is shot with hand-held video cameras, with the cameras built into laptops, or with surveillance cameras. Moreover, these technologies figure heavily within the films themselves. The result is a kind of collapsing of levels. In the modernist films of fifty years ago (whether of the French New Wave or of the more radically experimental avant-garde), the crucial move was to explicitly acknowledge that what we were seeing was a film, rather than reality itself. This made the film self-reflexive, and moved our observation of it to a meta-level. In contrast, there's nothing "meta" about the *Paranormal Activity* films. The use of technologies that many people already have in their homes points up the fact that these technologies are not observing us from outside, but are themselves thoroughly woven into the texture of everyday life. There's no special level of self-reflexivity; everything happens on the same plane. This is part of what makes these films post-cinematic. The technology that records the uncanny activity is not in itself the least bit uncanny.

In this way, the *Paranormal Activity* films are quite different, not only from horror films of the 1970s and 1980s, but even from their most obvious predecessor, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). That film was the first horror movie to use cheap and commonly-available video technology, presented centrally within the film as well as being used to produce it. But *Blair Witch* was still closer to more traditional cinema in its use of fragmentation, and in its reaching towards the sublime. In contrast, the *Paranormal Activity* films emphasize hyper-continuity rather than fragmentation: their footage, after all, is supposed to be that of surveillance cameras that are running all the time, or of home video cameras that are so cheap and easy to use that we whip them out at every opportunity, rather than reserving them for special occasions. Also, the intrusions recorded or produced by these cameras are not sublime, as was so often the case in older horror; rather, they tend to be banal. As Nick wrote in his earlier take on *Paranormal Activity 2*: "It is through the monotonous repetition of these familiar images [of surveillance cameras providing fixed views of various rooms] that the specter of disorder arises" ("Six Asides").

Although we have all been writing of "surveillance" videos, I think that this term is possibly a misnomer. In contrast to the classical type of surveillance described by Michel Foucault,

here there isn't anyone watching the output of the cameras; there isn't even that uncertainty that Foucault describes as to whether somebody is watching or not. Instead, we should say that only the laptop computer is watching the footage that it compiles. The laptop is not a viewer, much less a surveillance officer. Rather, we should say that it is precisely *no one*. This also means that we the audience, watching the film, ourselves are no one. There's no identification. Everything is radically depersonalized (which is what happens when everything is turned into mere "data"—which is what computers do). Therefore, I want to qualify Nick's statement that, in the films, "human beings [are] held in possession of another's gaze, the unblinking gaze of the camera." To my mind, the camera's "unblinking," that is, continuous activity is *not* anything that we might understand as being a possessive gaze—it is, rather, dispossessive. Similarly, when Julia says that "the omniscience of the security cameras . . . begins to resemble a form of mastery over the people" in the film, I want to qualify this as well. For me, the effect of the cameras is not to exert mastery, but rather to eliminate any form of mastery, to make it impossible and unthinkable.

In short, the *Paranormal Activity* films are not about surveillance, but rather about what the futurist Jamais Cascio calls *sousveillance*: "a recent neologism meaning 'watching from below'—in comparison to 'surveillance,' meaning 'watching from above.'" Cascio describes what he calls a "participatory Panopticon," reversing the model that Foucault described. Rather than being an intrusion of Big Brother, this new form of data collection is actualized by "the millions of cameras and recorders in the hands of millions of Little Brothers and Little Sisters." Cascio holds out a certain degree of utopian hope for this process: it has the potential to make data freely available to anyone, instead of its being monopolized by big corporations and the state security apparatus. And I must say that I vastly prefer Cascio's take to that of, say, Baudrillard, who obsessively denounced the "obscenity" and lack of privacy and secrecy in "postmodern" society. Baudrillard always comes across to me as the last of the old-style European intellectuals, horrified by the "vulgarity" of American popular culture. However, I think that the *Paranormal Activity* films offer us something quite different: a sense of horror that is proper to the world of *sousveillance*, a world that is infinitely "flat" (Thomas Friedman), and that is best characterized by a "flat ontology" (Manuel Delanda).

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JL: I'm intrigued by Steve's point about there being no one watching, because the laptop or the cameras are digitizing the life of the subjects, thus turning something we might call reality into data and thus a kind of nothing. I also like his use of the term *sousveillance*, which certainly has a more optimistic premise than Baudrillard's or even Foucault's, in a sense. But that makes me wonder why I do feel the footage is somehow ominous, as if the camera stands for a sinister observer or viewer. This might come from my (over)familiarity with conventional horror movie cinematography, which we could term "stalker-cam" or "voyeur-cam," in which we see the characters from behind a tree or through the window, implying a hidden or distant secret observer who, in a horror movie, has malicious intent. Seeing the characters from a particular POV that we cannot attribute is disconcerting.

Maybe the absence of an embodied evil in the movie also adds to my tendency to invest the stationary video cameras (the camera on the tripod in *PA* and the security cameras in each room in *PA2*) with some sinister overtones. This reconnects with our earlier comments about the cameras, and reminds me of the familiar horror convention of de-familiarizing the home as haven and flipping it to make it a site of terror and the uncanny. Specifically, security cameras are ideally supposed to make us feel safer, yet these constant tape loops make us and the characters more anxious by revealing what Katie can never see firsthand: herself sleeping and what goes on while she sleeps. Not only does the camera have that "outside" view of the sleeping person, but so does the demon—the sleeper can never see herself from outside, yet the demon can inhabit her and then look out from inside her body, her consciousness.

The mobility and invisibility of the demon, its ability to move around the home and also to inhabit Katie's body, echoes the insidious mobility of finance capital, which ultimately caused so many couples like those in the movie to be foreclosed—possessed? Just as the demon demands payment of an ancestor's contract, the predatory mortgage allows an outsider to take away the very home and hearth (as generic and characterless as it is). Therese suggested the term "undulating," and I think it fits here: the digitization, mobility, and decentering of financial systems and instruments make them harder to fight or resist. When we see evidence of the demon on Katie's body it takes the form of bite marks in a bruised, lacerated circle—it looks to me like a lamprey bite might look if lampreys bit

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humans. The lamprey is a sea creature who feeds by sucking on other fish, just as the demon depends on Katie's body to give it form, and, well, I don't have to explain the obvious metaphor with the mortgage industry or even finance capital more generally. But the blood-sucking metaphor wouldn't be as effective if it were a vampire; the movies use the demon as a more elusive, disembodied yet personalized evil entity. The fact that it can and will follow the sisters throughout their lives makes it more frightening than a ghost or poltergeist, and it means that moving away will not allow them to escape.

TG: I want to finish our discussion with three questions, one for each of you and what I find to be your interests. I direct my first question, which has several related parts, to you, Nick.

In "Six Asides on *Paranormal Activity 2*," published in *Filmmaker Magazine*, you are very much concerned with *PA2* as an "avant-garde" film, and you think of Tod Williams as an avant-garde auteur. You have even co-written "The Fixed Camera Manifesto," which you originally posted on your blog, in order to help create the conditions for considering auteurs who use a fixed camera—such as Andy Warhol in *Empire* (1964) and Bong Joon-Ho in *Influenza* (2004)—as avant-garde.

Why is it important to you to create this context? Is the avant-garde, which is usually applied to modernist films, still a viable category? I note that the conditions of production for *PA2* and *Empire*, for instance, are radically different. You consider *PA2* post-cinematic. What about the other avant-garde films on your list? Also, where does the first film, *Paranormal Activity*, which was made using a hand-held camera, fit in your consideration of a current avant-garde?

NR: The cinematic avant-garde has always been highly self-aware, that is, aware of itself as a counter-narrative. However, two related late-modern developments have eroded the viability of the avant-garde. First, the speed by which marginal cultural productions move into the mainstream has destroyed the avant-garde's ability to remain avant-garde. In fact, there is no real distinction today between the pop/artistic mainstream and the pop/artistic marginal, but not because of the much-commented-on collapse of distinctions between high and low, but rather because the aura of the avant-garde evaporates once consensus builds

around it, and that consensus builds more rapidly now—across the internet—than it did previously.

Second, many cultures have become “meta,” enmeshed in images of their own being. Our digital technologies and mediums are not something to-be-looked-at, but something which, themselves, “look” back at us, recirculating our gazes in perfect loops with no generation loss. I think in a previous question I mentioned how the cameras in the *Paranormal* films were in fact haunted. They are haunted with our own images, staring back at us. We are now surveillers of ourselves. This intense, narcissistic self-reflection means that one of the signatory outposts of the cinematic avant-garde—a relentless survey of its own practices, which separated it in important ways from the “invisible” style of mainstream film—has now been so thoroughly colonized that it ceases to exist, unless it is called into existence.

As to why it’s important to create an avant-garde context for films like *Paranormal 2*, I understand that this is, at its core, a conservative gesture, an effort to recuperate and restore a “tradition.” In fact, the cinematic avant-garde has often looked to the past, as canonical figures like the Lumière brothers, Edison, Méliès, Muybridge and others have inspired avant-garde movements as diverse as structural films and Warhol’s screen tests. It is this conservative, nostalgic nature of the avant-garde that is its most radical contradiction, its most radical secret. Indeed, this recursive dimension allows the most “advanced” avant-garde films—such as Michael Snow’s *Wavelength* (1967)—to refer back to the most “primitive” of cinema. Likewise, the fixed cameras with their single takes in *Paranormal 2* rely on the Lumière films not only for their formal constraints (one shot, no edits) but also for the relationship they create between the subject and the camera. For, like the people in the Lumière films, the Rey family in *Paranormal 2* know they are being filmed, and on two levels: as characters they know they are being taped by the surveillance cameras they themselves installed, and as actors they understand of course that they are being filmed for a movie called *Paranormal 2*.

More fundamentally, creating an avant-garde context for fixed-camera films like *Paranormal 2* demands a different, more experimental way of writing about film. In a previous answer, Steve mentioned several critics he preferred to Jean Baudrillard, and yet Baudrillard’s

importance has much to do with the surprising, poetic, aphoristic style and structure of his writing, a writing which overpowers its own “content.” This is also true of avant-garde film, where the “ideas” of a film are often secondary to technique. In writing, however, we still tend to think of an over-focus on technique as gimmicky, as if realism were in fact natural rather than a historically constructed aesthetic, or as if it were the best conduit to generate knowledge, a subject tackled with eloquence in Robert Ray’s *How Film Theory Got Lost and Other Mysteries in Cultural Studies*. How might we generate, then, a different sort of knowledge about the questions Therese has asked? Well, we fail. We fail trying. Only in the security of failure can we proceed with confidence, that everything will *not* be all right, that the houses we dreamed were haunted really were haunted, that in order to justify this we made cameras, and in order to justify the cameras we turned them on ourselves, all to prove that the haunted spaces really were haunted, because history isn’t real if it isn’t haunted, except—in a twist no one saw coming—it turned out the cameras themselves were haunted, stuffed with our own circuitry, creators and consumers of images, devouring images, a final and fatal Turing-decidable recursive language.

Here, then, is the most honest answer I could give to these questions, in the form of sixteen quotes which, taken together, offer the secret history to “Six Asides on *Paranormal Activity 2*” and “The Fixed Camera Manifesto.”

1. “As for ideas, everyone has them. More than they need. What counts is the poetic singularity of the analysis. That alone can justify writing, not the wretched critical objectivity of ideas.”
2. “My new poems are a strange sort of thing. I am submitting the book this week. The title is *Transformations* and the subtitle inside the book will read ‘Transformations From the Brothers Grimm.’ They are kind of a dark, dark laughter.”
3. “I have the greatest respect for him [Jorgen Leth]. He’s been part of the avant-garde since the ‘60s and he’s still at it. But most of those who tried their hands at something in those days are all dried up today—they’re afraid, they’ve become big-shots, they’re in charge of everything everywhere—while Leth keeps on trying new things.”
4. Booth: Yr Best Customer, he come in today?
Lincoln: Oh, yeah, he was there.

Booth: He shoot you?

Lincoln: He shot Honest Abe, yeah.

Booth: He talk to you?

Lincoln: In a whisper. Shoots on the left whispers on the right.

Booth: Whatd he say this time?

Lincoln: "Does thuh show stop when no ones watching or does thuh show go on?"

Booth: He's getting deep.

Lincoln: Yeah.

5. "The camera's on a tripod. I sit alongside. You look at me, not at the camera. I use available light. Is there noise from the street? We don't care. This is primate filmmaking. The dawn of man."
6. "Both Burgin and Everett locate the non-narrative strategies that have developed out of the digital within the traditions of the avant-garde, within an aesthetic of the synchronic or even the achronic. Similarly, the digital 'freeze-frame' recalls the importance that reference to the single frame of film has had in the avant-garde tradition."
7. "the video you left for me was blank
But I watched it anyway, mesmerized,
until a back-draft in the chimney
filled the room with ash, filled it with snow."
8. "Yeah, but a failure can be a figure, can signify. Maybe poetry can fail better than other art forms, because poems can point to what they can't contain—that desire for something beyond what's actual. That's part of what Benjamin is arguing about Baudelaire, I think—that he makes a lyric out of lyric's impossibility in modernity. Or you might say that even the failed attempt to write a successful poem makes us aware of having the faculties, however atrophied or underdeveloped, for such an undertaking in the first place, and so keeps us in touch with our formal capacities for imagining alterity even if we can't achieve it."
9. "Not even B finds it [U's voice] unpleasant, although for him that tone of voice has strange associations: it conjures up a silent black-and-white film in which, all of a sudden, the characters start shouting incomprehensibly at the top of their voices, while a red line

appears in the middle of screen and begins to widen and spread.”

10. “I turned around yet again. Two men who’d walked out of a café next to the tyre shop were looking at me. I realized that I was jerking back and forth like paused video images do on low-quality machines. It must have looked strange. I felt self-conscious, embarrassed.”
11. “There’s a late-night horror movie on TV, but no one is there to watch it.”
12. “Protect your family and home using video surveillance. Peace of mind comes from knowing there are cameras strategically placed inside and outside your home.”
13. “If doubt attaches to an indistinct element of the dream content, we may, following the hint, recognize in this element a direct offshoot of one of the outlawed dream thoughts. It is here just as it was after a great revolution in one of the republics of antiquity or of the Renaissance. The former noble and powerful ruling families are now banished; all high positions are filled by upstarts; in the city itself only the very poor and powerless citizens or the distant followers of the vanquished party are tolerated. Even they do not enjoy the full rights of citizenship. They are suspiciously watched.”
14. “Due to their low cost and the ease with which they can be installed, standard monocular fixed cameras are widely used for security surveillance purposes. As the recorded location is static, it is easy for operators monitoring in real time to notice unusual situation. The fact that the cameras are static also makes isolating the subjects from the background a relatively simple task to implement in software and, generally speaking, one which can be performed with a high degree of accuracy. However, fixed camera systems have some major disadvantages: if the system is not well designed the monitored area may have large blind spots and the number of cameras required grows quite large as the area under surveillance increases.”
15. “I shot the last four frames. I steadied the camera on the edge of the desk so that my shaking hands wouldn’t ruin the exposure. Even so, I knew the images would be blurred. Like when you’re outside shooting the moon without a tripod—no matter how hard you try to remain still, you move, and the moon moves, and the earth moves. And the camera captures everything.”
16. “Target data can include other important factors for collateral damage considerations. Poststrike HUMINT sources equipped with a cell phone, radio, or camera can provide an initial battle damage assessment in near real time.”

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TG: Steve, you discuss “accelerationism” in your book. At the same time, you are at pains to distinguish accelerationist politics from aesthetics, in part because politics and aesthetics are incommensurable. Are they, however, related? If so, in what ways? Here, it would be interesting if you would discuss these two films with reference to your argument. What is the value of an accelerationist aesthetics of/in film for us as viewers? Also, I’d like to hear about the *Transformers* movies from you, which you touch on in your book, because they are clearly post-cinematic. What are the distinctions between films such as *Transformers 3* and the *PA* films in terms of the post-cinematic?

SS: I need to take a roundabout route in order to answer this question. This is because I think that the political significance of the *Paranormal Activity* movies resides more in their form, and in their use of new media technologies, than it does in their explicit content. So I want to start with the functioning of video cameras, and of the computers in which the output of these cameras is stored. In our discussion so far, Nick, Julia, and I have all pointed to the ways in which the video cameras themselves seem to work within the films as conductors, or facilitators, of demonic possession. This is a consequence of the way that the films dramatize their own technological means of production. The video cameras in the *PA* films amplify and concentrate the very forces whose effects they are supposedly only there to record. These devices are performative: they make things happen, in addition to recording whatever happens.

Nick links the uncanniness of seemingly mundane surveillance cameras to the ubiquity of surveillance as a taken-for-granted reality in our society today. Whatever we do, we are always acting *for* the cameras. Nick also suggests, in his previously published essay on *Paranormal Activity 2*, that the affective power of the film comes to a large extent from its “creative restraint”: its aesthetically productive use of carefully limited means. Nick compares this to the minimalist and structurally rigorous practices frequently encountered in avant-garde and experimental cinema. Thus, *Paranormal Activity 2* features footage from fixed surveillance cameras. The shots from these cameras are sequenced, over and over again, in the same order, moving cyclically from one view to the next. Also, long sequences

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of the film consist entirely of these fixed surveillance shots, one after another, without any dialogue. Nick argues that “the static surveillance shots are the ultimate expression of *mise-en-scène*, inviting viewers to scan the screen for information, for clues, for the slightest of movements. We become complicit in the visual interrogation of domestic space: the banality of hallways, kitchen cabinets, family room sofas, closet doors.”

This is indeed true to my experience of *Paranormal Activity 2*. For instance, whenever the film returns to the nighttime output of the surveillance camera that overlooks the outdoor swimming pool, I find myself compulsively singling out the slow, undulating movement of the hose in the pool. I find it impossible to tell whether the hose is just moving randomly, or whether it is being propelled by a demonic force. The film establishes that, every morning, the hose has somehow emerged from the pool, which defies conventional explanation. And every morning, Daniel puts the hose back in the pool again. Nonetheless, the nighttime surveillance shots do not actually show the hose being pushed out of the water.

At another point in the film, something on the stove suddenly goes up in flames. This is shown entirely in another nighttime surveillance-camera long shot. The fire takes place in the distant background; there is no close-up to call attention to it. As a result, the first time that I watched the film, I didn't even catch the precise moment when the fire started; by the time I noticed it, it was already in progress. As Nick points out, this sort of filmmaking forces a special mode of attention upon the viewer: one more common in avant-garde than in commercial cinema. Think, for instance, of the moments in Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* when we suddenly notice a slight variation in Jeanne's otherwise monotonous household routine. Or think of the ways that we are forced to wait, and to notice oblique details, in some of the recent experimental work that Nick explicitly mentions (like Kiarostami's *Ten* or Sokurov's *Russian Ark*).

There is an important difference, however, between these examples of avant-garde film practice and that of the *PA* films. In *Jeanne Dielman*, the fixed camera functions as a formal rule of aesthetic construction, imposed *a priori* by the director. The same can be said for Sokurov's 99-minute continuous (although heavily composited) single take, or for Kiarostami's placement of the video camera on the dashboard of the car in which the entire

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film takes place. These are all surprising and innovative ways of using the given cinematic equipment. In *Paranormal Activity 2*, in contrast, Tod Williams's guiding formal principle can be entirely attributed to the intrinsic nature of the technology being used, and to its default mode of operation. To say this is not to deny that Williams has deliberately set up the film in this manner, "employ[ing] constraint as a creative force," as Nick says. But *PA 2* still follows standard practices for the use of surveillance technology in a way that is not the case for Akerman, Sokurov, or Kiarostami. Surveillance cameras are generally set up in fixed locations; their image quality is not great. The cheaper, and more common, ones cannot pan or zoom. And it's common practice to view the output of surveillance cameras by repeatedly cycling through the multiple views in a fixed order.

In any case, I think that Nick's remarks on *PA 2*, culminating in his "Fixed-Camera Manifesto," only give us one side of the story. Julia's comments give us the other side. (My own reading, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to establish a sort of dialectic between Nick's position and Julia's.) Where Nick focuses on stasis and fixed space, Julia points instead to mobility and nonlocality. Nick writes that "our shaky era demands a steady camera"; this suggests that the practices of "slow cinema," much discussed in the blogosphere in recent years, may be seen as forms of resistance to the extreme speed, the mania for flexibility, and the ADD-levels of twitchiness and discontinuity that increasingly characterize mainstream commercial culture.

Nonetheless, I give equal credibility to Julia's observations about the uncanny sense of displacement that arises, precisely, from unmoving and unblinking security cams. Julia notes that the surveillance camera feeds in the *PA* movies are "disconcerting," precisely because they offer us "a particular POV that we cannot attribute" to any character. The camera, like the demon, can see Katie "from outside," which is something that Katie herself is unable to do. Human beings (and animals) can only see from the inside; it is only as grounded in my own inside that I can discern the outsides of others. In contrast, the absolute 'outsideness' of the surveillance cameras, their refusal of any 'inside' perspective whatsoever, makes them spooky or demonic. The implication, in other words, is that the cameras' POV is not only distinct from any other subjective POV within the film, but is irreducible to any form of subjectivity whatsoever. These cameras' output does not conform

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to any conceivable phenomenology. Although each surveillance camera—whether on a tripod, as in the first film, or embedded in the walls, as in the second—literally has a fixed position within the house, the view extracted from these cameras is in effect a view from nowhere. It's a viewpoint that we cannot "identify" with. What links the POV (if we can still call it that) of the cameras to that of the demonic force is that both of them are "outside" and inhuman; the latter remains so even when it possesses Katie and looks out at us from "inside" her body.

Following this, Julia goes on to suggest that "the mobility and invisibility of the demon . . . echoes the insidious mobility of finance capital." And she links this mobility, in turn, to the real estate boom and bust of the past decade. There's a resonance between (property) foreclosure and (demonic) possession: "just as the demon demands payment of an ancestor's contract, the predatory mortgage allows an outsider to take away the very home and hearth." What's most intimately mine (whether my subjectivity or my "home and hearth") is given over to the forces of the outside. All that is most solid (the "real" in "real estate," or the bedrock certainty of the Cartesian "I am") melts into air. Critics and audiences alike have long had a sense that cinematic imaging—or better, cinematic capture—amounts to a sort of dispossession. Think of Benjamin's account of how mechanical reproduction shatters the aura; or, more generally, of the supposition (usually disavowed and projected onto strangers or "primitives") that taking one's picture is equal to stealing one's soul. This process takes on a new, intensified form when digital reproduction replaces mechanical reproduction.

Marx famously wrote that "[t]he wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an 'immense collection of commodities'" (125). In our current circumstances, this wealth takes the form (among other things) of an immense collection of data. Surveillance cameras stockpile everything that happens in front of them, and dump the resultant data onto computer hard drives. Information is also gathered from browser cookies, credit card statements, mobile phone tracking records, and so on. It isn't always clear who "owns" all the data. Google and Amazon have more information about us than we do about ourselves; and they "monetize" this information in all sorts of ways. In this way, the data gathered about us are nonlocal—just like the demon in the *PA* movies. As Julia

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notes, in the *PA* films the demonic force “can and will follow the sisters throughout their lives”—much as a credit rating does (or, for that matter, a rude photograph or intemperate remark that was once posted on Facebook). Since the demonic force is ungrounded, and not associated with any particular house or location, it can follow us anywhere and everywhere. In contrast to traditional haunted-house movies, in the *PA* series (as Julia puts it) “moving away will not allow escape.”

Of course, it is also the case that—as has so often been observed—the incessant accumulation of data does not, in and of itself, contain any intrinsic meaning. It remains open to the vagaries of interpretation—and also to practices of appropriation, recontextualization, and redeployment. The data in themselves are multivalent and ambiguous; what matters is the way they are used. We see this when the male heads of household in the *Paranormal Activity* films remain unable to understand the evidence that their machines have so assiduously gathered for them. In the second film, Ali shows Daniel the past night’s video feed, in which she was locked out of the house, in order to convince him that supernatural forces are indeed at work. But he simply rejects her claim: he insists, for instance, that it was only a gust of wind that slammed the door shut. Even with all the accumulated footage, there is no way to “prove” anything different.

In other words, the demon’s mobility, like the mobility of financial flows, resists and exceeds any form of fixed representation. And the demon’s influence, like that of the financial system, is as impalpable as it is vast. This is most memorably demonstrated, in both *PA* movies, when living bodies are literally dragged across the floor by an invisible force. Julia notes that “the digitization, mobility, and decentering of financial systems and instruments make them harder to fight or to resist.” I would add that it makes them almost impossible to identify, to get hold of, or even to point to. The material accumulated by the security cameras, however massive, consists only of traces and effects. The forces that leave these traces, or that produce these effects, are everywhere and nowhere. They lack physical presence.

Just as David Hume noted about sense impressions, we may say about the data captured on video, that we can see the “constant conjunctions” of certain happenings, but not any force

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that could necessitate these conjunctions. Hume concluded that causality only exists in the mind and its habits; the skeptical male characters in the *PA* movies similarly conclude that there is no actual supernatural force, but only the credulous fear of it. The greatest trick the devil ever pulled, it is often said, was convincing the world that he doesn't exist.

If the *Paranormal Activity* films are “accelerationist”—or if an accelerationist aesthetic is at work in post-cinematic production more generally—then this is because, in order to present us with impalpable demonic forces, these recent films are compelled to adopt, and adapt to, the most cutting-edge tendencies of actually existing capitalism. It has often been suggested that classical Hollywood continuity editing instantiates the same logic as Fordist-Taylorist industrial mass production. I think that, similarly, the editing practice of contemporary film and video production instantiates the same logic as does the post-Fordist regime of flexible, just-in-time production (best described by David Harvey). Under this regime, David Bordwell's “intensified continuity” has hyperbolically extended itself, and thereby mutated, into what I have called in my book “post-continuity.” The classical norms of smooth narrative development and intelligible scene construction are no longer in force. Indeed, throughout contemporary film production, these norms are violated in opposite directions at once. In the post-cinematic, we find both excessive movement (shaky cameras), and excessive stillness (fixed cameras). We find both baroque narrative elaboration and complexification, and the abandonment of narrative or causal logic altogether. And we find both an exceedingly literalistic psychology of character development, in which every last tic and affectation must be given a “plausible” motivation, and the complete abandonment of any sort of character development or motivation whatsoever. Both extremes are affirmed at the expense of the classical norm or mean.

It's for this reason that commercial film production today—both at the obscenely expensive Michael Bay level and at the ultra-low-budget level of films like the *Paranormal Activity* series—so often seems to approach the aesthetics of the avant-garde. To take one particularly resonant example, classical continuity editing is violated alike by Michael Bay's ultra-frenetic cutting, and by the *arte povera* fixed-camera long takes of the *PA* films. Bay's editing does not aim at the precise articulation of action in time and space (as was the goal both of classical editing and of the vibrant action editing of genre filmmakers like Don

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Siegel, Sam Peckinpah, John Woo, and, still today, Kathryn Bigelow), but rather at producing the maximum possible number of jolts and shocks in the spectator. At the other extreme, in films like the *PA* series, the use of surveillance-camera-based long shots and long takes, and the consequent withholding of expected close-ups and reaction shots, intensifies the dread and anticipation, which are the conventional affects of horror.

The *Paranormal Activity* films also frequently use mobile handheld cameras. The handheld sequences are usually motivated within the narrative: they are supposed to be taken in real time by one of the characters in the film. These sequences don't use conventional continuity editing either, because they have the look and feel of amateur home-video footage. The camera jitters or slides from one character to another, instead of relying on shot/reverse-shot setups. Both this handheld footage and the fixed-camera footage often feature jump cuts. But these are not really expressive, since there is no background of "correct" editing against which they might stand out. Rather, as we watch the films we tend to attribute these jump cuts to the video-recording apparatus itself; we are all aware of how we can discontinuously turn the camera on and off. In place of conventional editing, the *PA* films also often use techniques that are never seen in traditional film, because they are only possible with video technology. Here, I am thinking especially of the (simulated) fast-forwards that we find so frequently in the nighttime scenes in the first *PA*.

Let me try to sum up my observations. Cinema has often been credited, or taxed, with providing visible evidence of the world. The highest aim of cinema, André Bazin wrote, is to "recreate the world in its own image." But capital accumulation, like other instances of the demonic, is a force and a presence *without an image* (and without a sound as well). It cannot be found anywhere within the vast accumulation of images and sounds that makes up the *Paranormal Activity* films. And yet, demonic capital is not transcendent or otherworldly; for it is nothing more, or other, than this *vast accumulation* itself.

This is why I consider the *Paranormal Activity* films to be narratives (or perhaps I should say cartographies, following Fredric Jameson and Jonathan Flatley) of capitalism as it actually exists today. They envision, or take for granted, a world in which the incipient or emerging tendencies of globalized, neoliberal capitalism have definitively imposed themselves. The

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two poles of presentation that I have been describing—the fixity that Nick discusses on the one hand, and the nonlocality that Julia discusses on the other—are both necessary to the *conjuring* of a force that fills space ubiquitously without manifesting itself at any place in particular, and that works relentlessly toward its goal of absolute possession, without seeming to have any particular sense or direction. I use the word “conjuring” here advisedly; for its primary meaning (in both English, and in the French *conjurateur*) of calling forth or invoking is shadowed by its secondary meaning (in French, at least) of exorcising or casting out. The *Paranormal Activity* films are neither celebrations nor critiques (which is why an ideological reading of them doesn’t work very well, or tell us very much). They are conjurings in the double sense I have just used; or better, perhaps, they are *demonstrations* (in the sense that a mathematical proof is the “demonstration” of a theorem: QED). And I think that their demonstrativeness is what makes them so affectively compelling: so creepy, so disquieting, so well attuned to the low-level dread and basic insecurity that form the incessant background to our consumer-capitalist lives today.

TG: Julia, in the horror genre, evil is typically embodied, whether as a body from outside or one from inside the body itself. Generally speaking, the demon/monster is a “foreign body,” eventually rendered visible. Here, as you write, the “constant tape loops make us and the characters more anxious by revealing what Katie can never see firsthand: herself sleeping and what goes on while she sleeps. Not only does the camera have that ‘outside’ view of the sleeping person, but so does the demon—the sleeper can never see herself from outside, yet the demon can inhabit her and then look out from inside her body.” The demon leaves traces (such as the mark of its “bite”), but it is—so far, at any rate—untraceable as a body. Its location depends on perspective and the consequent shifts and reversals of categories, such as inside and outside, subject and object. How do you think of the *PA* movies in relation to body-horror movies? Are gender, race, and class elements germane to our understanding of the demonic force at work here?

JL: Unlike many horror movies, the first two *Paranormal Activity* movies are not, in my view, part of the “body genres” of horror, pornography, and melodrama. As I understand Linda Williams’s formulations, these are “trashy” movies that provoke strong physical responses from the audience. Those three genres also invest heavily in the audience’s conceptions of

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gender, among other things, albeit in wildly different ways. This concept has been very productive for me in thinking about Darren Aronofsky's films *The Wrestler* and *Black Swan*, for example, and Steve's writing about those movies has helped me work through and make sense of some of my visceral and aesthetic responses to them (see Shaviro, "Black Swan"). Yet aside from one or two good startles in each, these movies don't entirely fit into that grouping. In fact, in many ways these movies are almost the opposite or negation of the usual body genres.

So I began to wonder why that might be, and whether there is something here that is in fact related to gender and the woman's body. I do agree with Steve's point that an ideological reading doesn't get us very far, but maybe there is something else we can do to tug at this thread a bit harder, without letting go of the importance of form, which is central to studying these films as Steve and Nick have so convincingly argued. Here I want to look more closely at the woman's body as the site of horror and the entirely domestic setting of both movies and the way the films' form may inflect the representations of gender in the films.

Unlike the slasher movies of the 80s, and their extreme gross-out descendants today (the *Saw* franchise), there is almost no blood at all in *PA*. Even ghost and haunting movies over the past 40 years have often included gore and bodily abjection as part of their horror. Yet these movies feature a few shots of the bite marks, scenes of characters being dragged by their feet, and precious little else. In some ways, the unseen horror harks back to the classic Val Lewton cycle of B horror movies: the purring or growling of the off-screen panther in *Cat People* (1943) leaves more to our imagination, which is almost always scarier.

There is also very little sex in these films, often at least a small component in the slasher and other horror films and a definitive focus in pornography. In the first *PA* movie, Micah sets up the video camera on a tripod in front of their bed and makes jokes about taping their lovemaking, but doesn't. What the camera does record is mostly them asleep, startled awake, or Katie physically controlled or possessed by the demon.

As for melodrama, these movies have almost none. The characters are flat and undeveloped;

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we aren't encouraged to care about them as individuals, nor to worry about their relationships. We can see that the male partners are condescending and dishonest with the female partners, which does build some narrative tension, yet it's hard to get emotionally involved in such superficial, undeveloped characters. I couldn't even tell Katie and Christi apart during my first viewings. This is partly because they are supposed to be sisters and thus look a bit alike—both have longish, dark hair and are close in age—but also because they are pretty shallow and vapid. Their names sound similar, they live in similar generic-looking houses, they dress in similar clothes. They have no memorable identifying characteristics and, unfortunately for my comprehension of the plot, they were for a while interchangeable.

Although the two sisters are hard to tell apart, the one distinguishing characteristic that is clearer in the second movie is that Christi has a baby and Katie doesn't. Thus while neither woman seems to have a job, one of them at least does, along with the "nanny" (maid), participate in reproductive labor. Yet this very human relationship—the mother and infant—also feels somehow shallow. We see her caring for and worrying about the baby, but, perhaps because of the distancing effect of the video footage—lacking in conventional Hollywood continuity editing that would show us close-ups and shot/reverse shot sequences of the loving mother and child—I don't feel much mother-ness in Christi's character, compared, for example, with how choked up I always get watching classic maternal melodramas with the misty-eyed, emotional close-ups of Barbara Stanwyck as she suffers and sacrifices out of love for her children. (I don't want to even mention the mother character in *Tree of Life* at this point....) With the addition of the "nanny" there is also an almost interchangeable mothering role, with the white middle-class woman as a biological mother to one (but not both) children, and the Latina woman as the paid carer. As we learn more about the demon, the baby in the second movie is revealed to be the demon's object of desire, the currency with which it can be paid off. So even the baby—the material result of the woman's (and the maid's) reproductive labor—is in a sense transformed into an object of exchange.

Unlike other kinds of horror that emphasize the excessive wounding of the flesh, I wonder if the body of the woman (whether Katie or Christi) is *not* mutilated or tortured much because

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it is a kind of empty, generic vessel or shell, even perhaps a digital shell? I agree with Steve that the movies themselves, and the “real” video footage in them, is a digitization of the characters and their bodies and their pain—unlike celluloid, there needn’t have been an actual material body before the camera interacting with light to make a physical imprint on a negative, and the images are reduced to, literally, data and digits. That abstraction away from materiality is in itself scary; maybe if there were more conventional gory visuals the movie would feel more grounded in material, concrete, or fleshed-out ways. Instead we are left with what Steve calls “the low-level dread and basic insecurity that forms the incessant background to our consumer-capitalist lives today.” The safety and security of the mother-child relation appears to be somehow flimsy and insubstantial, similar, I imagine, to the thin walls of the cheaply made suburban house that offer no real protection (from the demon, from the digitization, from finance capital—let’s keep Steve’s phrase “demonic capital”) to the family inside.

The houses in these movies are as similar as the sisters, and as devoid of real character, as we’ve discussed. Unlike the Gothic house movie, there is nothing remarkable at all about these structures, other than their (to me anyway) excessive size. But there are some continuities with the horror conventions, as we’ve discussed a bit already. Both movies take place entirely in the domestic spaces of the suburban California home: the kitchen and bedroom in particular are sites of horror rather than love and nurture. As in classical Hollywood “home noir” and Gothic house movies, we can interpret this claustrophobic restriction of setting as a familiar iteration of the implicit horror inherent in the heteronormative American lifestyle: the male partners work outside the home (as a day trader and a restaurant franchise owner), while the female partners don’t work but stay home and care for the home and children and supervise the help. The women are both relatively powerless in the relationships, economically dependent on their male partners, and in both films the men make consequential, unilateral decisions with which they know the women would disagree: Micah buys the Ouija board and Dan performs the ritual with the photograph to transfer the demon’s attention. We even see a bit of this echoed in Ali’s relationship with her boyfriend. In their passivity and dependence, it is all the more striking to see these female characters echo so closely their Hollywood foremothers despite all the successes of feminism and movements for social change.

But the thing that is truly scary, to me anyway, is the very invisibility of the demon—this can be linked to the mobility and ethereality of finance capital, as we’ve said, but it also reminds me of the way white heterosexual middle-class identity is “invisible” yet centers on particular individuals. In these movies the invisible force can possess and kill. So although I concur with Nick and Steve that the key to understanding these films as post-cinema lies in our close attention to their form, I also want to suggest that an ideological approach can support and extend the interpretations we’ve been working out in our theories about their formal properties. Even in post-cinema, identity matters.

TG: This has been an inspiring discussion. Thank you, all.

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Notes

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