The New Reflexivity: Puzzle Films, Found Footage, and Cinematic Narration in the Digital Age

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The New Reflexivity:
Puzzle Films, Found Footage, and Cinematic Narration in the Digital Age

by

Jordan Lavender-Smith

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK
ABSTRACT

The New Reflexivity:
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by

Jordan Lavender-Smith

Adviser: Professor Morris Dickstein

“The New Reflexivity” tracks two narrative styles of contemporary Hollywood production that have yet to be studied in tandem: the puzzle film and the found footage horror film. In early August 1999, near the end of what D.N. Rodowick refers to as “the summer of digital paranoia,” two films entered the wide-release U.S. theatrical marketplace and enjoyed surprisingly massive financial success, just as news of the “death of film” circulated widely. Though each might typically be classified as belonging to the horror genre, both the unreliable “puzzle film” *The Sixth Sense* and the fake-documentary “found footage film” *The Blair Witch Project* stood as harbingers of new narrative currents in global cinema. This dissertation looks closely at these two films, reading them as illustrative of two decidedly millennial narrative styles, styles that stepped out strikingly from the computer-generated shadows cast by big-budget Hollywood. The industrial shift to digital media that coincides with the rise of these films in the late 90s reframed the cinematic image as inherently manipulable, no longer a necessary index of physical reality. Directors become image-writers, constructing photorealistic imagery from scratch. Meanwhile, DVDs and online paratexts encourage cinephiles to digitize, to attain and interact with cinema in novel ways. “The New Reflexivity” reads *The Sixth Sense* and *The Blair Witch Project* as reflexive allegories of cinema’s and society’s encounters with new digital media. The most basic narrative tricks and conceits of puzzle films and found footage films produce an unusually intense and ludic engagement with narrative boundaries and limits, thus undermining the
naturalized practices of classical Hollywood narration. Writers and directors of these films treat recorded events and narrative worlds as reviewable, remixable, and upgradeable, just as Hollywood digitizes and tries to keep up with new media. Though a great deal of critical attention has been paid to both puzzle and found footage films separately, no lengthy critical survey has yet been undertaken that considers these movies in terms of their shared formal and thematic concerns. Rewriting the rules of popular cinematic narration, these films encourage viewers to be suspicious of what they see onscreen, to be aware of the possibility of unreliable narration, or CGI and the “Photoshopped.” Urgent to film and cultural studies, “The New Reflexivity” suggests that these genres’ complicitous critique of new media is decidedly instructive for a networked society struggling with what it means to be digital.
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For Luly, the best movie ever
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**Introduction: Playing “Film”**

By 1999 the writing was on the screen: motion pictures, Richard Grusin explains, had moved “away from a photographic ontology of the real towards a post-photographic digital ontology” (71). Traditional photography is *indexical* in that it supplies an evidentiary trace of whatever is in front of a camera: a “mechanized imprint of reality” (Mulvey 54) possessing an “evidential force” (Barthes, *Camera* 89). The digital image, on the other hand, is constituted entirely by modifiable pixels. Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) in cinema creates what a movie’s “camera” ostensibly captures. Consequently, writes Lev Manovich, “Cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a subgenre of painting” (*Language* 293). “Anything you imagine can be done,” enthuses James Cameron: “If you can draw it, if you can describe, we can do it” (qtd. in Parisi). Anything on screen might be created from scratch, and everything on screen, in the words of Daniel Frampton, is “fluidly manipulatable” (1). Directors change the color of an entire shot or of individual objects; they alter the position of an actor’s eyebrow; they seamlessly stitch together multiple layers of imagery. Just as “paintings needn’t picture actual things” (Walton 250), directors become image-writers who work with “elastic reality” (Manovich, *Language* 254).

The indexicality of traditional photography and film is a live debate, now more than ever as digitization encourages scholars to revisit foundational assumptions about and definitions of analog media. A basic premise of this dissertation is that digitization produces a radical break for film in its production, reception, and narrative practices. Nevertheless, my analysis is based as much on an extensive recalibration to our expectations of and interactions with film as it is on any ontological definition of a medium or media; or, rather, the widespread redefinitions of
photography and film in both popular discourse and everyday practice in the mid- and late-90s (via the marketing and success of the DVD format, the startling technical leaps of CGI blockbusters, the popularity of software such as Adobe Photoshop, the introduction of portable digital video cameras, and so on) reshaped general audiences’ sense of what film is and what it can do (or what they can do with it). It goes without saying that photographs have always been manipulable. It’s not that the digital and indexical are absolutely oppositional, only that it is fundamentally, embarrassingly easier to copy and manipulate digital information than it is the photochemical. In 1994 Dai Vaughan warned of an approaching time when “the assumption of a privileged relation between a photograph and its object, an assumption which had held good for 150 years and on which the cine-actuality is founded, will have ceased to be operative.” Changes in quantity produce changes in quality, and this dissertation examines a moment near the end of the century when these changes were felt and interrogated, a moment when anything you can think of, from the surreal to the mundane, could be (and so was) manufactured to look photorealistic. I echo Garrett Stewart’s conclusion that “even when the screen image still looks the same, or almost, it can no longer be counted on to bear the same relation to the world it once recorded and rearranged but now partly ‘generates’ from scratch, bit by digital bit” (124).

While filmmakers throughout the 90s came to grips with a medium morphing from film to file, audiences began to attain and interact with movies in novel ways. As the first “moving-image format launched simultaneously for both PCs and TVs” (Boddy 93), the DVD format’s status as a mutually enriching collaboration between Silicon Valley and Hollywood tied the

1. See Tom Gunning’s article “What’s the Point of an Index?” and Philip Rosen’s Change Mummified for arguments against absolutist claims that position the indexicality of the photochemical image against the non-indexicality of the digital image. See Lev Manovich’s The Language of New Media and W.J.T. Mitchell’s The Reconfigured Eye for thorough examinations of digital imagery’s break from indexicality.
“end-user” experience of cinema to digital technology and the home computer. By the late 80s the home video market had overtaken theatrical box-office as the greatest source of revenue for Hollywood (Wasser 171), and by the late 90s DVD players had “penetrated U.S. homes at a faster rate than any consumer electronics device on record” (Coplan 9). Cited by Variety as the “Father of DVD” (Hettrick), Warner Bros.’ Warren Lieberfarb spent the mid-90s convincing studio heads and the video industry that they “must begin teaching consumers to buy rather than rent” movies (E. Fitzpatrick). Unlike VHS, from its inception pre-recorded DVDs were aggressively marketed and sold directly to consumers (the “sell-through market”), and studios were pleasantly surprised by just how willing the general public was to buy movies for the home. The average number of DVD purchases per household with a DVD player peaked in 1998, at an astounding 25 titles (Snider). The format continued to flourish, and “By the early 2000s,” write Deborah and Mark Parker, “the end product of both Hollywood and independent production had become the DVD, not celluloid, and the final destination the home, not the theater” (xii).

The DVD was marketed to consumers as heralding a new age of computerized, interactive cinema. A movie comes home as software, as an “attainable text” (Parker and Parker viii).² In a 1997 demonstration video for the technology, Toshiba explains how the DVD format “accommodates multi-story functions, which allow viewers to interactively choose the plot of a drama they are watching. The multi-angle feature allows the video portion to be viewed from any of 9 different camera angles. Thus, DVD changes the concept of existing media” (“DVD”). Audiences watch and re-watch a film in Spanish or French or while listening to the Director’s Commentary, splitting the image from the audio, providing a palpable sense of the new digital,

² Mark and Deborah Parker name their study of the DVD The Attainable Text after Raymond Bellour’s 1976 Screen article “The Unattainable Text” (originally “Le Texte Introuvable”).
divisible quality of the moving image. Viewers instantly skip to specific “chapters” of a film; they freeze frames of astonishing clarity; in short, mass audiences were now equipped to perform the “main aim of textual analysis”: to “find the film behind the film” (Mulvey 147).

In the late 90s, CGI and the DVD were the most visible manifestations of the computer industry’s influence on film. Less apparent but just as transformative, a digital sensibility begins to characterize studios’ and artists’ approaches to narrative. Movies become data, which “is to the information society what fuel was to the industrial economy” (Mayer-Schönberger and Cukier 182). Producers build “extensibility” into their narratives, designing films as large datasets to be used, reformatted, and reused. Indeed, the “value of information no longer resides solely in its primary purpose,” but rather in its “extensibility,” its “option value,” or its potential future uses (153, 109, 104). This is precisely what digitization allows at electric speed: multiple combinations, reorganizations, framings, and extensions of a dataset.

We certainly see this logic of data extension at work with the advent of the DVD format, the home softwarization of cinema: the movie theater acts as simply the first stage of a movie’s expansion into its rich post-theatrical run. Data and its extensibility, though, begin to characterize many films’ actual narratives, most noticeably in the form of “transmedial” franchises. George Lucas’s The Phantom Menace was the first Star Wars film in nearly 20 years, launching a set of “prequels” to the original trilogy from the 70s and 80s. Terms such as prequel and reboot are familiar to moviegoers today, but most of us were hearing them for the first time around 1999. The Phantom Menace essentially goes back, replays and revises the earlier films by explaining what happened a generation before. Lucas and 20th Century Fox “repurpose” the Star Wars

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3. Marie-Laure Ryan defines the term transmedial (popularized by Henry Jenkins in Convergence Culture) as “the creation of a storyworld through multiple documents belonging to various media” (“Transmedial” 361).
“property” for the 21st century, all while keeping in mind scenes that will make good video games and characters that will make fun toys for Happy Meals. They digitally restore the older films, literally re-writing them with additional scenes and special effects, and then release the movies (and re-release them) as DVD boxed sets.

“The cinema screen is just the start of the process,” Geoff King writes, and “‘secondary’ sources of income are more important, in the longer term, than initial box-office returns” (68). King continues: “the studios are sources not so much of free-standing films as of ‘software’ that can be exploited in numerous forms” (70). This is not just an analogy—movies are now software, produced by people using software. “Films have become files” (Bordwell, Pandora’s 8), and cinema’s structures soften as the “narratively contained world of the feature film is now the exception” (Tryon, Reinventing 30). Movies become upgradeable and rebootable. They become “synergistic data” to mold into different shapes: sequels, remakes, bonus features, websites, comic books, and video games, or the seemingly never-ending stories of narrative extension. Every big-budget story pitched to studio executives is interrogated for its “viability for expansion into an intertextual, transmedia system” (Schatz 33). Transmedial franchises such as The Avengers, Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, and Star Wars illustrate a widespread industrial logic—and a narrative theory—analogous with and perhaps dependent on the specific capacities of digital media: fluidity, divisibility, transmediality, and extensibility.

“The New Reflexivity” examines two narrative styles of cinema that arrived at the end of the century, as these redefinitions of film’s material basis, creative possibilities, receptive practices, and economic logic were in full swing. In early August 1999, near the end of what D.N. Rodowick refers to as “the summer of digital paranoia” (3), two films entered the wide-release U.S. theatrical marketplace and enjoyed surprisingly massive financial success, just as
news of the “death of film” circulated widely. Though each might typically be classified as belonging to the horror genre, both the unreliable “puzzle film” *The Sixth Sense* and the fake-documentary “found footage film” *The Blair Witch Project* stood as harbingers of new narrative currents in global cinema. This dissertation looks closely at these two films, reading them as illustrative of two decidedly millennial narrative styles, styles that stepped out strikingly from the computer-generated shadows cast by big-budget Hollywood. Though a great deal of critical attention has been paid to both puzzle and found footage films separately, no lengthy critical survey has yet been undertaken that considers these movies in tandem in terms of their shared formal and thematic concerns.

“You’ve got to go back. Put in the drama.”

“We should be dead,” Jules Winfield (Samuel L. Jackson) tells Vincent Vega (John Travolta) in the third and final act of Quentin Tarantino’s 1994 crime comedy *Pulp Fiction*. Bullets seemed to have skipped right past the pair of hitmen, and Jules’ statement might remind some viewers that Vincent had in fact died in the film’s previous act. He’s resurrected on-screen, though, as the movie circles back and winds through its narrative, continually recharging and recontextualizing previous scenes. In Spike Jonze’s 2002 film *Adaptation*, Nicolas Cage plays a screenwriter, or rather the real-life screenwriter, Charlie Kaufman, the writer of *Adaptation*. He

4. See, for instance, Paula Parisi’s 1995 cover story for *Wired Magazine*, “The New Hollywood: Silicon Replaces Superstars,” Susan Sontag’s 1996 *New York Times Sunday Magazine* piece, “The Decay of Cinema,” and Godfrey Cheshire’s 1999 *New York Press* piece, “The Death of Film/The Decay of Cinema,” in which Cheshire writes that the big-budget blockbusters of the summer of 1999 mark the moment of film’s death, or its radical reinvention via digitization: “Camera, projector, celluloid: the basic technology hasn’t changed in over a century. Sure, as a form of expression, film underwent a radical alteration with the addition of sound, but that and other developments—color, widescreen, stereo, etc.—were simply embellishments to a technical paradigm that has held true since photographic likenesses began to move, and that everyone in the world has thought of as ‘the movies’—until this summer.”
is set to adapt the non-fiction bestseller *The Orchid Thief*. Charlie wants to turn the book into a meditation on flowers, a film without “sex or guns or car chases . . . or characters learning profound life lessons.” But the pressure is on, his deadline is approaching, and the film still isn’t about anything. Growing desperate, he takes his twin brother’s advice and attends a screenwriting conference. The screenwriting guru reads Charlie’s script and tells him bluntly, “You’ve got to go back. Put in the drama.” *Adaptation* itself becomes infected with this ethic, evolving in its final forty minutes into a highly formulaic Hollywood film. *Edge of Tomorrow*, *Groundhog Day*, *Run Lola Run*, and *Source Code* present narrative worlds as spaces to be encountered and re-encountered, as levels to be mastered. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* and *Inception* conflate the flexibility of mind and memory with the manipulative capacities of digital effects, as characters recode and reshape their immersive and plasmatic moving images of the self. Narrative events in these movies are in a continual process of being reentered, reframed, and revised. These millennial puzzle films treat the story world as repeatable, manipulable, and liquid—as “a soft, moist, shapeless mass of matter.”

The twist ending of *The Sixth Sense* reveals that Malcolm (Bruce Willis) had died early in the film. The movie suppresses this fact until the twist, and both Malcolm and the film’s audience are taken by surprise as we recall that Malcolm never actually spoke to anyone other than Cole (Haley Joel Osment), the young boy who can see and communicate with ghosts. M. Night Shyamalan does a masterful job throughout the film of concealing this information, but concealing it in such a way so that re-watching the movie offers viewers the pleasure of spotting an abundance of clues. These pleasures earned the film a record-shattering afterlife on DVD.

5. Opening title card from *Pulp Fiction*, citing the American Heritage Dictionary’s definition of *pulp*. 
(Iverson). Re-watching the movie, we notice that Malcolm’s wife Anna (Olivia Williams) doesn’t look directly at Malcolm during their dinner together, that Malcolm doesn’t communicate with or brush up against anyone at a funeral service he attends, and so on. The film’s ending effectively revises the film, revealing that all along its narration was not forthright and omniscient in the way of classical Hollywood storytelling, but rather deeply focalized through Malcolm’s compromised perspective.  

Malcolm’s epiphany constructs a narrative frame—an explanation of the condition or source of the narrative. But this is a frame or condition we only learn about at film’s end, and is thus a terminal frame, or a buried frame, a late embedding of one narrative level by another, or a narrative that takes the “form of a vision” from which the reader or viewer is “rudely ejected” at narrative’s end (Fludernik 29). In American Psycho, A Beautiful Mind, Cypher, eXistenZ, Fight Club, Hide and Seek, Identity, The Jacket, The Machinist, Mulholland Drive, The Number 23, The Others, Premonition, The Prestige, Secret Window, Shutter Island, The Spanish Prisoner, Third Person, Unknown, The Usual Suspects, Vanilla Sky, and so on, the central character at film’s end is revealed to be spectral, virtual, imagined, traumatized, conned, delusional, or in some other way compromised as a credible witness to, or participant in, the narrative’s events. In most of these films, what we thought to be objective narration turns out to have been thoroughly subjective, as a “deeper diegetic ground is inserted below the level we took for the baseline of reality” (Stewart 143). In several of these films we encounter the millennial trope I label  

6. Throughout this dissertation I draw on David Bordwell’s characterization of “classical narration” in Hollywood films, most succinctly articulated in Classical Hollywood (23-41) and Narration in the Fiction Film (57-63). Drawing on Bordwell’s studies and the work of Cornelia Klecker, I describe some of these characteristics in Ch. 1. The features most pressing to my analysis include classical narration’s omniscience, reliability, and immediate (or near-immediate) intelligibility.
retrospective revision: a montage sequence near the end of the movie in which we review earlier scenes, now recognizing the blind-spots, freshly cognizant of how we were deceived and how completely we should revise our understanding of the entire film. Like a transmedial franchise in which the narrative is just so much data to be used, reformatted, and reused, the ending of *The Sixth Sense* goes about repurposing the film itself, remixing and recontextualizing earlier scenes, a narrative parallel to the new fluidity of the moving image; it can go back and remix itself, even as it directs us forward to acquire and re-watch the movie in its post-theatrical life. This is a new formal logic within popular cinematic narrative: reconfiguration, revision, and remixing.

Audiences today have come to expect final plot twists to be thoroughly integrated into the structure of the film: “The ending can’t seem arbitrary, non sequitur, or tacked on; it should flow naturally and organically (if only in retrospect) from the rest of the story” (Susman). Twist movies today are often made to repay multiple viewings, to enter into a “culture of replay,” in which “the already seen and heard” becomes an “emblematic feature of the media business” (Klinger, “Becoming Cult” 4). This is a type of movie that viewers are encouraged to analyze, reflect back on, likely re-view, and perhaps even read about online in order to fully appreciate the intricacies of the story’s narration. This marks a stark departure from traditional expectations—as Charles Ramírez Berg writes, “For nearly a century now, the poetics of film narration was based on the need to be completely legible to one-time viewers” (31). Writers and producers of these films, in a “cognitive arms race” (Max) with audiences, begin to void long-

7. I deploy the phrase *retrospective revision* throughout the dissertation. I have adapted it from Steven Shaviro, who uses to it to describe the digital reflexivity of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*’s narrative: “In all these ways, [Michel] Gondry equates the processes of memory erasure with the technology of digital film itself. When there is no indexical referent to anchor the narrative, every fact and every event is up for grabs. Everything is subject to retrospective revision” (“Emotion Capture” 52).
held narrative contracts. They draft new arrangements with new rules that take into account the attainability and interactivity of contemporary cinema, or all of the digital means that encourage deep immersion in story worlds and negate the primacy of the theater. These movies are internet- and “DVD-enabled,” Thomas Elsaesser writes, their narrative structures determined in part by the technologies audiences use to consume them (“Mind-Game” 38).

Digitization produces a fluid, manipulable moving image, as there is no longer a necessary causal connection between photorealistic imagery and the profilmic situation. The traditional indexical weight of the moving image may have undermined some early attempts at claiming cinema as an art, but it also characterized the most basic epistemological position viewers watched film from—that is a real train, that lion is actually standing next to those people. The terminal frame and the trope of retrospective revision urge audiences to rethink the very nature of contemporary cinematic imagery. In this montage sequence, central characters essentially re-view earlier moments of the film from a new perspective, now recognizing their virtual condition, while effectively foreshadowing—even advertising—the movie’s afterlife in

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8. Puzzle films—though not always referred to by that name—have garnered significant academic attention. My reading of these films is perhaps most influenced by Thomas Elsaesser’s analysis in “The Mind-Game Film.” Elsaesser writes that these “DVD-enabled” films go about testing and training digital cinephiles on their ability to “remain flexible, adaptive, and interactive, and above all, to know the [changing] ‘rules of the game’” (34); they likewise illustrate Hollywood’s attempts at remaining flexible in increasingly multi-platform, global sites of reception. Throughout this dissertation I apply and extend Elsaesser’s conclusion that contemporary puzzle films and their reception point to “new forms of spectator-engagement and new forms of audience address” (16). For predominately formalist and narratological overviews of specific narrative strategies of films within this trend, see E. Anderson, Berg, Bordwell (“Film Futures” and The Way Hollywood Tells It), Branigan (“Nearly True”), Ferenz, S. Friedman, Hayles and Gessler, Klecker (“Chronology” and “Mind-Tricking”), Lavik, D. Mitchell, Panek, Richter (“Your Cheatin’ Art” and “Late Reconfiguration”), and G. Wilson. For analyses that match formalist readings with examinations of the cultural and material conditions of this trend, see Cameron, Campora, Daly, van Dijck, Eig, Elsaesser (“Mind-Game”), Franklin, Galloway (Gaming), D. Grant, Hanson, S. Johnson, Klinger (“Becoming” and Beyond), Natoli, Rombes, Schuster, Stewart, and Žižek.
remixable, manipulable code, on DVD. And, like bonus features on a DVD that explain a remarkable special effect, these montages at the end of puzzle films act as tutorials for new modes of cinematic illusion: what you thought was there wasn’t actually; what looks real might be virtual. From photorealistic dinosaurs scaring small children to dead presidents shaking hands with Forrest Gump, digitization generates new sorts of ghosts. This is, in part, what I mean by “the new reflexivity”: the terminally framed puzzle film trains us to radically revise our sense of visual evidence in film through a narrative style that structurally and thematically mimics the new virtual spaces and figures of digital cinema.

The “virtual” is a theme in many of these films, and the term itself, as Marie-Laure Ryan explains, alternates in common usage between “(1) ‘imaginary’ and (2) ‘depending on computers’” (Narrative 12). A wave of cyberpunk-inspired, “depending on computers” virtual reality (VR) movies hit theaters in the 90s and 00s—The Cell, Dark City, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, eXistenZ, Inception, Johnny Mnemonic, The Lawnmower Man, The Matrix, A Scanner Darkly, Strange Days, The Thirteenth Floor, and Vanilla Sky. Importantly, several of these films cross over onto any list of “narratively complex” (Mittell, “Narrative”) cinema and of terminally framed puzzle films, and for good reason. The depiction of high-tech VR produces multiple levels of interactive worlds, and if you’ve only seen one VR movie then you know that those levels get mixed up, entangled. Several of these films, including eXistenZ and The Matrix, directly connect the immersive illusions of VR with narrative unreliability, framing stories in ways that trick audiences into thinking they’re on one level of the story world (the outermost reality of the story world) when they’re actually on an embedded level (the virtual). Characters in these “cyberphobic films” (Young 195) typically experience that sensation of “ontological vertigo” that Robert Alter uses to characterize the enmeshed narrative levels in many works of
postmodernist fiction (6). Specifically, Brian McHale writes, much of postmodernist fiction “deliberately mislead[s] the reader into regarding an embedded, secondary world as the primary, diegetic world” (115).

The terminally framed puzzle film shares these aims with VR movies, only the terminally framed puzzle film buries or conceals the framing device (the technological device in VR films) that produces this embedded world. The coincidence and overlaps between VR and terminally framed films—as well as the high-tech novelties of viewers’ engagement—suggests that terminally framed puzzle films often stand as allegories for acutely deceptive and immersive forms of contemporary media, showcasing just how deep these cultural themes run. Indeed, the terminal frame is a fitting narrative strategy for a culture in which deep mediation is the default mode of existence, the starting point, or for a time when “Virtuality is the condition millions of people now inhabit” (Hayles, “Condition” 69). All of these films constitute what Garrett Stewart calls the “Hollywood ontological gothic,” which veer “between thrillers of the virtual afterlife (The Sixth Sense, Vanilla Sky, The Others) and what one might recognize as their sci-fi counterparts in the alternate realities of digitization” (56). This set of terminally framed films center on unknowingly embedded characters, characters that live in bubbles, or virtual spaces of time-shifting and gaps—“affective rather than technological virtuality” (Stewart 57). Several of these movies focus on a character in two places at once, one location usually dormant in sleep or death, the other action-packed and interactive. This might be the defining trope of narratively complex millennial cinema: protagonists thoroughly divided. Characters’ divisibility corresponds to the “paradoxical” “visual regime” of VR, which “couples a radically new freedom of
mobility…with an unprecedented imprisonment of the body” (Hansen 39). It’s no wonder these films arrived at the birth of the web, the phenomenal rise of video games, the DVD and DVR, the personal camcorder, or the multitude of mediating technologies that constitute what Manuel Castells refers to as the “real virtuality” of contemporary life (Rise 404), within which “the only shared meaning is the meaning of sharing the network” (“Materials” 22).

The VR movies listed above also depict VR technology in order to justify remarkable special effects, most notably in *The Matrix*. Nevertheless, the more VR looks like reality, the more believable the representation. As William Egginton writes, the “presentation of a virtual reality in film requires no special effects, since the better the illusion represented the more that reality should resemble the base reality of the film and the less need there is for technological fireworks to pull it off” (214). In this way, the light-on-special-effects virtual realities of *Fight Club, Mulholland Drive, The Others*, and *The Sixth Sense* produce narrative, formal visions of the new, non-indexical realities of nearly all cinema, in which special effects are no longer very special: through the manipulations of software, animation (the virtual) can look just like photographic reality.

Laura Schuster finds that in these contemporary twist movies, “unreliable narration always carries an ontological component, a doubt about the trustworthiness of reality and of

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9. This quote comes from a passage in which Mark Hansen glosses Lev Manovich’s definition of VR. In *New Philosophy for New Media*, however, Hansen wants to account for the active, tactile connections between user and interface.
10. In *Digital Visual Effects*, Stephen Prince offers the term visual effects as an alternative to special effects: “The shift to digital modes ended the era in which visual effects were ‘special,’ that is, were allocated to a domain of trick photography regarded as being separate from and peripheral to the main stage of production” (56).
11. In *Cinema Dreams Its Rivals*, Paul Young provides a lengthy, persuasive reading of how these VR movies reflect Hollywood’s acutely paradoxically approach to new digital media, both celebratory and anxious (though mostly anxious) (193-247).
perceptions,” and that audiovisual “technologies within the filmic world are often blamed” for this “loss of reliability” (240). “Cinema has not yet been invented” (Bazin 21): what happens when we encounter the total, perfect cinema of virtual reality, when the medium seems to disappear completely, but the disorienting effects remain? Same as it ever was: the worlds in narrative cinema have always been “virtual,” imaginary, animated, full of phantoms and ghosts, and often deeply immersive. But movies are now computer data, and “virtual reality is an immersive, interactive system based on computable information” (Heim, Virtual Realism 6). Computerization thus fashions a new virtuality for culture and “film,” producing images of a new “counterfeit three-dimensional real” (Stewart 56). The reflexivity of terminally framed puzzle films points to the effects of these foundational reversals by dramatizing the “ontological vertigo” (Alter 6) of divided and embedded protagonists. The mass movement of these VR tropes into genres other than science fiction suggests deep cultural anxieties surrounding manufactured photorealism and immersive fictional worlds, two areas of the entertainment industry that have seen some of the greatest advances through digitization.

Even more, these films encourage audiences to live in the same sort of immersive, interactive virtual spaces that they depict characters (often tragically) inhabiting. The terminal frame of The Sixth Sense invests the movie with a programmable, algorithmic logic, and re-watching the DVD allows viewers to recognize the film’s hidden narrative code: primarily, we watch and re-watch looking for bugs—certainly Malcolm speaks to someone besides Cole, right? The movie becomes something to play, to understand formally. To play a video game “means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system” (Galloway, Gaming 90-91). The implied audience is what Kristen Daly refers to as a “viewser,” both a viewer and user of the film (82). Like many video games, these movies stand as striking articulations of the first-person,
forwarding a deeply subjective, point-of-view style “that our culture has come to associate with new media in general” (Bolter and Grusin 77), and one that corresponds with and promotes an individualized, absorbed path through ludic space—as we navigate the bonus materials, as we re-watch and freeze frames, as we re-read and play film.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation looks closely at The Sixth Sense in these terms. Accordingly, I draw parallels between the “narrative special effects” (Mittell, “Narrative Complexity” 35) in the film and the properties and effects of the newly dominant forms of blockbuster filmmaking and its mass reception, namely CGI and the DVD. After detailing the narrative events of The Sixth Sense, I suggest that three binary reversals brought on by technological advances go far accounting for the rise of narrative complexity in contemporary film, and these reversals constitute a model for thinking through many of Hollywood’s late-20th and early-21st century aesthetic novelties. The Sixth Sense’s artful, muted engagement with the virtual and with electronic communication media reflexively allegorizes Hollywood and society’s transition to digital media, effectively staging these three reversals. Briefly: the fabula of a film (the narrated) is now a dependent variable of the syuzhet (the narration); the movie theater now projects a coming attraction for the home; post-production is the central stage of cinematic production. At first glance The Sixth Sense might seem to be an unusual film to connect with the computerization of culture. The film is remarkable, in part, for its apparent lack of digital special effects. Computers are ostensibly absent from the world of the film. My analysis of the relation between the fabula and syuzhet in the film illustrates the ways in which the film takes on and metaphorizes the material capacities and key signifying strategies of digital media, signaling a renewed attention to some of the formal mechanisms that classical narration (and its audiences) had long taken for granted. The chapter’s second section, on the introduction
of the DVD format, points to the film’s explicit (if post-theatrical) engagement with digital technology. Finally, the chapter’s third section, on post-production, examines Shyamalan’s intense focus on the rhetoric of the cinematic cut and suggests that *The Sixth Sense* elegizes analog media while indirectly pointing to old media’s resurrections and renewals, those made possible by digitization. Collectively, these sections showcase the ways in which the material capacities and cultural practices of new media influence texts seemingly on the periphery of such concerns, or the ways in which by 1999 the properties of digital media had become a determining force of a wide range of cultural activities.

“*Something has found us.*”¹²

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Fight Club, Memento, The Others, The Sixth Sense, Vanilla Sky*, and numerous other millennial puzzle films proved just how ready multiplex audiences were for deeply subjective, even non-classical cinematic narration. Chapter 2 considers another set of films that emerged in the late 90s that violated rules of classical narration, showcased an even greater affinity for subjective cinema, and, like the puzzle film’s engagement with the DVD, pointed to the ways in which audiences can now interact with and *do cinema* via the personal camcorder and the web.

A week before *The Sixth Sense* debuted nation-wide, *The Blair Witch Project* announced a more aesthetically aggressive version of subjective cinema. Though predecessors such as *Cannibal Holocaust* and *Man Bites Dog* had been sitting on video shelves for years, *The Blair Witch Project* premiered the fictional found footage style to thousands of theaters around the

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¹² This is the promotional tagline for the found footage disaster film *Cloverfield.*
world, inspiring literally hundreds of found footage movies since. What we see in The Blair Witch Project is the “found” video and film footage of a student documentary crew that disappeared a few years earlier. The crew consists of Heather, the director of the project; Josh, the principal camera operator; and Mike, the sound technician. They’re making a movie chronicling the Maryland legend of the “Blair Witch.” They interview townsfolk in Burkittsville before entering the legend’s haunted woods. They don’t take the stories seriously until they have to. Hearing noises in the night, they wake in the morning to strange stick figures scattered around their campsite. Lost, hungry, cold, and tired, they trek hopelessly in circles for days. Josh disappears one night. Heather and Mike search for him, eventually coming across a rundown cabin. They enter it, the cameras drop to the ground, we hear terrible noises, and the movie ends.

Because of the movie’s shaky, disorienting camerawork, some unfortunate filmgoers came to know the film as “The Blair Retch Project” (Stone, “Moviegoers”). If the terminally framed puzzle film captures one effect we often associate with VR and immersive media—the “ontological vertigo” (Alter 6) of forgetting where you are, of what level of reality you exist

13. Throughout this dissertation I use the term found footage to refer to this popular narrative style. I should note, though, that Hollywood appropriated the label found footage from the familiar practices of documentary and avant-garde films, those that present historical film and video documents, whether briefly or comprehensively, sincerely or ironically. Closely related labels include the “appropriation film,” the “collage film,” and the “ compilation film,” and key figures include Thom Anderson, Emile de Antonio, Craig Baldwin, Dara Birnbaum, Ken Burns, Abigail Child, Bruce Conner, Joseph Cornell, Cheryl Dunye, Ken Jacobs, Oleg Kovalov, Mark Rappaport, Esther Schub, Phil Solomon, and Joyce Wieland. For more on found footage as it happens in documentary and avant-garde filmmaking, see S. Anderson, Arthur, Atkinson, Baron, Hausheer and Settele, Leyda, McIntosh, Peterson, Sjöberg, Skoller, and Wees. Of course, the widespread appropriation of existent video footage only intensified once films became easily shareable and modifiable files. Specific styles of found footage practices online include “vids,” “supercuts,” “mashups,” “political remix videos,” and “anime remix videos.” For more on these practices, see Horwatt; Jenkins (Convergence); Kuhn; Lessig; Lovink and Niederer; Navas; Navas, Gallagher, and Burrough; Russo and Coppa; and Sonvilla-Weiss.

14. See Wikipedia’s extensive list (“Found Footage”).
on—many found footage films such as *The Blair Witch Project* capture another associated effect: the haptic and unsettling motion-sickness of fully embodied mediation. Many filmgoers, though, were prepared for the turbulence. Both realist and aggressively mediated, *The Blair Witch Project* underscored the democratization of moving image media, or the hyper-mediated, high-tech nature of reality itself. By the late 90s and early 2000s the widespread dispersal of video cameras precipitated new forms of subjective cinema, cinema in which the camera and its operator are an embodied presence moving onscreen—the cinematics of everyday life. We’re familiar with the scenes, whether of someone giving a soliloquy to their webcam or footage of a protest in which the camera operator speaks over what we see. Movies get personal: this is *YouTube* and *iMovie*, ostensibly announcing the century of the amateur. Found footage movies constitute an entire narrative style of mediating amateurs, of subjective, first-person cinema, and almost always with “realism” as the goal.

Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, the makers of *The Blair Witch Project*, extended the truth-claims of the “documentary” footage into the film’s marketing materials, creating a slick talking-heads style documentary for cable TV about the legend of the “real” Blair Witch. Groundbreaking at the time, they produced an enormously popular website that maintained the reality of the found footage and provided users with a rich “paratextual” space of other missing

15. Gérard Genette writes that a text is “rarely presented in an unadorned state,” but rather always accompanied by a “certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations” (*Paratexts* 1). Genette labels these productions *paratexts*. Jonathan Gray explains how “Genette argued that we can only approach texts through paratexts, so that before we start reading a book, we have consumed many of its paratexts…. In other words, paratexts condition our entrance to texts” (25). Of course, paratexts today proliferate across a wide assortment of media, and *The Blair Witch Project* was one of the first films to successfully showcase the new paratextual opportunities of the web. Gray’s analysis of paratexts and transmedial story worlds in *Show Sold Separately* answers the call made a few years earlier by Henry Jenkins in *Convergence Culture*, who writes of the need for a new hermeneutic that might approach franchises and transmedial storytelling in more suitable and productive ways
documents and backstories on the student filmmakers. Fan-made sites dedicated to sharing theories on the material begin to pop up: by the time of the film’s release the “Blair Witch webring” included nearly 70 sites (Regan). This was the first successful use of the web to generate “viral buzz” for a film. Some viewers actually believed the film was real, and they organized rescue teams to search for the missing filmmakers.¹⁶ The film’s unreliable narration spills out into the movie’s marketing materials, out into the “rhizomatic profusion” (Elsaesser, “Tales” 162) of the “liquid architecture of cyberspace” (Novak 227), drowning audiences with torrents of studio- and fan-produced material. The multimedia narration seems to select material from a vast database of amateur-produced content, in the process producing an is-this-real or is-this-fiction variety of media vertigo. As low-tech and ragged as The Blair Witch Project looks, the film’s marketing nevertheless piloted many features of the computerized, paratextual experiences of big-budget, transmedial franchises.

Widespread, computer-aided, Do-It-Yourself moviemaking was in effect well before YouTube. 1998’s super-low-budget The Last Broadcast—itself a found footage horror film—was “billed as the first ‘desktop feature film,’” as it was “filmed, edited, and screened entirely using digital technologies” (Tryon, “Video” 40). In October of 1999, fifteen year-old Norwegian Jon Lech Johansen uploaded the first software program that could successfully decrypt the copy protection on DVDs. He made his program, known as DeCSS, freely available to anyone online. Insert a DVD movie into your computer’s drive, run DeCSS, and the movie becomes a

than traditional film criticism. See Jenkins’ analysis in Convergence Culture of the outmoded critical reaction to The Matrix franchise (93-130). For narratological approaches to the question of transmedial storytelling, see the work of Marie-Laure Ryan, especially “Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality.”

¹⁶ See “‘Please Help Me; All I Want to Know Is: Is It Real or Not?’” in which Margrit Schreier examines hundreds of emails in online discussion groups to identify how audiences dealt with the “reality status” of The Blair Witch Project.
thoroughly manipulable file—one you can import, edit, burn, upload to the web, and so on.

2000’s The Phantom Edit is a “user-generated,” re-edited version of George Lucas’s The Phantom Menace. The movie is the “good film that had been hidden inside the disappointing original one.” The Phantom Edit—almost certainly made with software that Lucas himself had a hand in developing—became an underground smash: “copies of the new version began popping up all over the place. Fans would watch it in a friend’s living room or at a party, dub off a copy for themselves, download it onto their Web site and send it to other rabid fans” (Kraus). In 1996 Jennifer Ringley introduced Jennicam, a live webcam video stream of her daily life, or the first online “lifecast.” Tens of millions of people visited the site each week, heralding a culture of “personal branding” (Peters)17 and “constant capture” (Manovich, “Practice” 325). In 1998 AtomFilms launched a popular website that hosted short movies made mostly by amateurs trying to break into Hollywood, many of whom certainly used popular off-the-shelf video editing and special effects software, such as Adobe Premiere and Apple’s Final Cut, both hugely successful by the late 90s.

Computers make media instantly and easily divisible, a lightning process of numerical rearrangement. Select a bit of text or video, push Command X, and you instantly divide it: If you can break it, it’s working. Still, as we perform these operations engaging and remixing media, or even browsing The Blair Witch Project’s website, we pour ourselves into networked machines. Like the fictitious documentary crew, we become media. From lifecasts to online cookies to YouTube uploads to social media profiles to selfies to likes to geo-location check-ins, we start to divide and abstract. Each of us becomes divisible, a thousand points of data. We voluntarily and

involuntarily produce doubles, databased selves, virtual identities. In what Gilles Deleuze in 1992 characterized as a post-disciplinary “control society,” the individual becomes a “dividual”—that is, thoroughly divisible (“Postscript” 5). In this scenario, writes John Cheney-Lippold, “subjectivity takes a deconstructed dive into the digital era” (169). As people begin to “routinely produce and consume images of themselves” (Hills 115-116), found footage horror offers a vision for the possibilities of first-person narration in fictional film: the perspective of a technologized, objectified subjectivity, or the divided, cinematized self. This is, in part, what I mean by the “new reflexivity”: a form of realism that depicts a world thoroughly and inescapably mediated through data and screens, in which life itself is always abstracting, always mediated, always already “meta,” or in which “reflexivity now reflects our lived reality” (Tziallas).

Whereas the “late reconfiguration” (Richter, “Late”) of the terminally framed puzzle film usually recharacterizes the narration from objective to subjective, the shaky, embodied camerawork of the found footage movie declares its subjectivity right away. Nevertheless, someone has to find the footage, to cut it up and present it, producing what I name an unreliable omniscience, or a post-production surveillance. Though the students disappeared while filming, the footage we see is heavily edited, the image cutting back and forth between the two cameras, one a 16 mm black-and-white film image, the other a Hi-8 color video image. Within the fictional world of the film, the finder transforms the trauma into spectacle, adapting a “snuff film” “for popular consumption” (Egginton 212), mining the footage to optimize the fright. The narration here embodies the ethics of Silicon Valley, of digital Hollywood, and of contemporary aesthetics more broadly: reuse, reformat, and repurpose. Indeed, generic horror stands as the “secondary use” of the crew’s footage. The finder remodels the “documentary” material into “infotainment,” not unlike the sensationalistic use of horrific CCTV footage on the news, or the
video remix of violent terrorist attacks into a musical montage, one that might galvanize a population to war.

What happens to concepts such as narration, narrator, omniscience, point of view, and even character when fiction looks out at a world in which Google, the NSA, Acxiom, and countless other data collection agencies know as much about “you” as any human ever will? “The omniscient narrator is presumably a human being (the fictional teller is not usually an extraterrestrial or God).” Berys Gaut continues, asking, “How could a mere human being gain access to all this knowledge, often the most intimate thoughts of people which they do not tell to anyone else?” (247). This is no longer a “silly question” (244) about literary or cinematic narration. “Quite literally,” writes Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, “Google knows more about us than we can remember ourselves” (7). Every search query is a confession, and Google knows whether “you’re gay or angry or lonely or racist or worried that your mom has cancer” (Rudder 12). A company you may not have heard of, Acxiom knows the following (and much, much more) about 96 percent of Americans: “the names of their family members, their current and past addresses, how often they pay their credit card bills, whether they own a dog or a cat (and what breed it is), whether they are right-handed or left-handed, what kinds of medication they use…. the list of data points is about 1,500 items long” (Pariser 43).

“A character is nothing but a galaxy of apparently trifling data which has coalesced around a proper name or—we might add—for the visual arts, coalesced around the pictorial image of a ‘body’” (Branigan, Point of View 35). People in today’s “real virtuality” (Castells, Rise 404) are thousands if not millions of digital data points, definitively round characters secreting information from work, home, and everywhere in between. They are cut up and cross-sectioned, sorted into dynamic databases, as power seeks not to “produce order,” but to “govern
disorder” (Agamben and Emcke 23). The innumerable groups running artificial intelligence on us create profiles, richly characterizing and narrating individuals and populations. They share that information with other agencies, “staccato signals of constant information” spinning around the globe in microseconds (Simon), putting the story of you together through the simulation and virtualization of your data. They shoot your fluid, “decorporealized body” (Haggerty and Ericson 611) through complex codes of prediction to determine what ad to show, what search results to present, whether or not you are an insurance risk or connected to a terrorist group. They simulate you, put you in situations you have yet to encounter. They narrate your potential, your future.

The titans of new media want you to forget that if a service is free it’s because you are its product: “Your behavior is now a commodity” (Pariser 45). “Opting out” means that you will not “use credit, work, vote, or use the Internet” (Haggerty and Ericson 620). Thus, most of us are constantly abstracted, shedding “data all the time like dead skin cells” (Barton), multiply mediated, in many places at once, framed, embedded, and repurposed by obscure agents of mediating intelligence that exclude us from even knowing—let alone acting on—what they do with our information. This isn’t paranoia, theory, or poetry: my “data double” (Poster 97) is out there, a real virtual entity in the world, and to have an identity today means to be under surveillance, to be, in the words of Roger Clarke writing in 1994, a “digital persona.” Assemblages of software share information about me, restricting the fields, allowing or denying me access to services, spaces, and information. I leak data, therefore I am. Google, Acxiom, Experian, Double-Click, Facebook, the NSA: like the great novelists, these are our “demographers of unprecedented reach,” the world’s real-time narrators. Simply, the “data reveals how people behave when they think no one is watching” (Rudder 12).
“In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found.”

Why do found footage movies incorporate this strange narrative conceit of foundness, and thus a media collector, a narrative figure who is there but easy to forget about as you watch? Physically absent, but part of the atmosphere, a kind of “ambient surveillance” (Pasquale 14). In the *Paranormal Activity* movies and in *Cloverfield* we are led to believe that local or federal government agencies obtained the videos. So why do they edit the movies for maximum suspense and terror? We never find out who acquires the footage in *The Bay* or *Redacted*, but the sheer volume and diversity of the media we see onscreen (CCTV footage, webcam diaries, home movies, Skype conversations, any and every form of digital video) formally embodies the motto of former NSA chief Keith Alexander: “collect it all” (qtd. in Nakashima and Warrick). The narrator in these movies, to further adapt language from the NSA, is a “boundless informant.”

The goal, “beyond Orwellian,” is nothing short of “total information awareness.” The *Blair Witch Project* established a narrative style comprised exclusively of media made by amateurs and found by obscure agents of power. This fundamental conceit of the found footage film allows contemporary cinema to “displace the highly ‘artificial’…classical structures of omniscient narration into the diegesis itself in the form of a now increasingly diegetically plausible surveillant omniscience” (Levin 590). And this is what Thomas Levin means when he

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18. The name of the NSA program “designed to quantify the agency’s daily surveillance activities with mathematical exactitude” (Greenwald 30).

19. The American Civil Liberty Union’s description of the NSA’s phone monitoring practices (qtd. in Greenwald 65).

20. The Defense Department’s project under George W. Bush that would “allow federal agencies to share information about American citizens and aliens that is currently stored in separate databases” (J. Rosen).
writes of “surveillance narration” in contemporary film: the surveillant image becomes the very “condition of the narrative” (583).

This form of “surveillance narration,” I suggest, resonates deeply in audiences for whom technologies of anonymous surveillance and appropriation have been naturalized to the point of invisibility. The titles at the beginning of many of these movies act as a kind of user agreement we pass through and forget, a dropped frame. The finders resemble those new, unseen middle layers of “black box society” (Pasquale 10): those who “situate without ever being situated” (MacLeod 590). These are surveilling and data-gathering people and code of questionable values, figures of mediating intelligence that are never completely “inside” or “outside,” that erase the lines between “private” and “public,” that operate in a world in which “surveillance is characterized as slippery, smooth and encompassing of everyday life” (Best). The terminal frame of a millennial twist film such as *The Sixth Sense* produces an uneasy feeling of being embedded, in the dark, and repositioned. The twist represents a figure-ground reversal in which the subject becomes an object, or is revealed as always already an abstraction. Likewise, the conceit of an obscure agent that finds, edits, and presents the footage of amateurs provokes a queasy kind of invasion, the sense that people are essentially repurposeable media data. Both narrative styles are about protagonists virtually embedded, and both styles train us to be on the lookout for new forms of mediating intelligence, for new narrators playing by new rules.

“The remix is the very nature of the digital” (Gibson): the finders aren’t cinematic narrators as we’re used to them in popular film. Found footage movies represent a new type of sustained first-person film; simultaneously, they illustrate the ways in which amateurs’ high-tech mediation is routinely captured and circulated. The found footage film rethinks the very possibilities of cinematic narration for an age in which, on the one hand, moviemaking “has
become a part of general experience” (Lanier 144), and, on the other, “to act is to be tracked” (Elsaesser, “Digital Cinema” 38). Dubiously repurposing the media left by amateurs, the finders in found footage films are data frakkers and curators, remixing us. We may, like the students in The Blair Witch Project, voluntarily mediate ourselves, craft our first-person profiles. But how can we provide “informed consent” for the real value of our data, all of its secondary and future uses, all the profiles created on us, not by us? The “user is the content” (Pariser 47): At what point does interactivity become unpaid labor? At what point are we “paying for the privilege of doing the job”? (Bauman and Lyon 140). Reality TV, the characters (and sometimes the actors) of found footage, viral videos from CCTV cameras: in each case, the figures onscreen are unpaid or barely paid, their images and data doubles ripped away, pirated, remixed, gone viral.21

Purchased by Google in 2006, YouTube receives an hour of video every second. This is “found footage,” as in found money. Attaching ads to YouTube’s “user-generated content” allows Google to cash in on amateurs’ desire for “surveillance’s more admired sibling: fame” (MacLeod 581). As amateurs cultivate their personal brand, Google—as “global snoop” (Levy 334), as “the Stasi resource of the 21st century” (Chun 154)—makes sure that views are counted, attached to the user’s gender, location, viewing habits, search history, their likelihood to click on ads, and a million other things buried deep in the company’s black boxes, all of it escaping into “sheer inaccessibility” (Bauman 11). This data constitutes the most economically significant

21. Apparently Heather Donahue—the film’s star, co-writer, and key camera operator—was barely paid for her role in The Blair Witch Project, shocking considering how central she was to the artistic success of the film and to its marketing campaign (Heller). Even more, because the film uses her real name and tries to convince the world she died in the woods, Donahue found it impossible as a professional actress to step out of the film’s shadow, explaining in her memoir how strange it is “to be told that your name isn’t really yours anymore, that it’s somebody else’s intellectual property now” (7). For brief overviews of the low wages paid to TV stars in “unscripted” shows, see Dayen and Ross, respectively. For a more theoretical discussion, see Andrejevic (11-12, 143-172).
“user-generated content.” Repurposing data—mostly our data—is the lifeblood of these new tech giants. If “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed” (Sontag, On Photography 2), then what does it mean to live in a world of ceaselessly multiplying data images of myself—little, digital snapshots floating away? Even in this age of personal branding, I often don’t own the copyright to me. Jaimie Baron explains how “appropriation” is the “one tendency” that “can be said to characterize media production in the digital era” (142). I would add that this “tendency” to appropriate, to remix, to copy and paste, isn’t just practiced by the amateur; in fact, more often than not, it’s practiced on the amateur. Indeed, Google is nothing if not the leading pirate, “textual poacher” (Jenkins), and remixer of the world’s information, crawling, copying, and caching, combining what it gathers with your click data to remix the web into lists and ads sorted by relevance while constructing the brilliant and terrifying conveniences of its free services, “ushering in a whole new system of informatic value extraction and exploitation” (Galloway, “We Are the Gold Farmers”).

The “viral marketing” of The Blair Witch Project produced its own sort of thrills and entertainment value, as curious and confused “net-heads”22 dived deep into the film’s fictionalized and rich backstory at BlairWitch.com. Ads that are content, that don’t look like ads: Google began selling ad space in July 1999, just days before the release of The Blair Witch Project. Sergey Brin and Larry Page were reluctant at first, wanting nothing to do with banner ads and fearing any comparisons with TV. But the most common feedback to the new feature

22. “Net addiction” (Oliver), or “Internet Addiction Syndrome” (Hammond) was already a pressing problem by 1995, necessitating support groups such as “Webaholics” (Hamilton and Kalb). Some users, or “Net heads” (Wanchek), found the web to provide “a fairly reliable way of shifting consciousness” (Griffiths). Lines such as the following covered major newspapers in the mid-90s: “There’s a reason why they call it the Net” (Levesque), and “Junkies are finding the real buzz for the future is not snorting a line, but getting online” (Steiner and Hammond).
was “What ads?” (Brin qtd. in Levy 94), and within a few years Google was the largest advertising company in the world. Of course the timing of The Blair Witch Project’s marketing and the debut of Google Ads is a coincidence, but the two share a logic: make ads so good and look so unlike ads that people seek them out or consume them as content. Is this shopping or information? Is this marketing or narrative? In the case of The Blair Witch Project, the outside is inside and vice versa: the film itself looks like a “making-of” and the “making-of” cable TV special is a fictitious narrative film. Google Ads and the narration of The Blair Witch Project share an even deeper, more disquieting logic: if you’re in a position to find new media leftovers (the information-rich data trails of search, the movies in the wild of amateurs) you can repurpose the found material into relevant and purchasable content by selling it back to the same sorts of people who made it.

After detailing the phenomenal commercial and cultural success of The Blair Witch Project, Chapter 2 examines how the found footage film embodies what I name the negative aesthetics of indexicality: a rough, unfinished, surveillance-like “look of truth” (Banash 121) style that became hugely popular at just the time when photorealistic moving imagery lost its indexical bearings via digitization. This leads to an analysis of the ways that The Blair Witch Project simultaneously resisted and piloted key characteristics of digital cinema: everything in The Blair Witch Project might be “indexical,” and the film’s visceral impact might seem to rescue the indexical image at its death, but the evidentiary or documentary form is nevertheless just an artifice that found footage filmmakers play with, a construction as slippery as anything CGI can create. The movie seems to go out of its way to avoid showing us the witch, failing to provide the spectacle that high-tech Hollywood thrives on, even while the marketing of the event is exceedingly forward-looking and digital, the first film to effectively leverage the web’s un-
ending streams of fact and fiction, its waves of uncertainty. Finally, the chapter tries to locate those mysterious finders. The democratic promises of digital media are foreshadowed by the film’s first-person form and embodied by the film’s marketing, representing the proliferation of moving image media and of “symmetrical media technologies” (Bruns 24) such as the web. The horror wins out, though, as the movie points to the invasive forms of surveillance and repurposing inherent to capture culture. Found footage films represent the first popular narrative film style to deploy sustained first-person imagery, imagery that is nevertheless found and embedded by an unreliable omniscience.

The New Reflexivity

In 1993, The Critical Art Ensemble prescribed the following to writers and artists: “exploring and interrogating the wanderings and manipulations of the numerous electronic dopplegängers within the many theaters of the virtual should be of primary significance” (58). The terminally framed puzzle film and the found footage film stand as two newly popular ways of formally exploring these virtual theaters of “dividuals.” The final scene of The Sixth Sense sees Malcolm close his eyes after he realizes he is a ghost, an abstraction, a double coming to terms with its immateriality, and the “white light” of the afterlife is represented by of all things a home movie, the video image of Malcolm and his wife kissing at their wedding. Malcolm ascends to the realm of his mediated double in this final scene, is abstracted once again into a video dream, finally finding peace in his old home movie. Like the film crew deliberately does throughout The Blair Witch Project, Malcolm becomes cinema in this scene. He is found out as a ghost, just as the retrospective revision montage of past scenes and memories illustrates how nothing is lost, or how it can all be found, reviewed, and remixed, not to mention purchased, preserved, and treasured forever on home video. Both narrative styles present a form of narration
that has “unprecedented reach” (Rudder 12)—diving deep into the delusions of protagonists, finding long-lost footage of the deceased. Characters may be lost, may forget who, where, or what they are, but a mediating intelligence is there to find them, to remember. In *The Blair Witch Project*, Heather, Josh, and Mike wander hopelessly in the woods for several days and nights. Their maps prove worthless. Heather tries to comfort her crew: “It’s very hard to get lost in America these days,” she says, “and it’s even harder to stay lost.” To lose yourself, get off the grid, opt-out, begin a second act, start from scratch, light out for the territories—dreams of reinvention must now account for how everything, including everything amateur and out in the wild, is captured and found: the disappearance of disappearance. These are movies about individuals living in a “post-private world” (McKay 347), a world in which the “‘offline individual’ is merely one actualization” (Karppi) of a person, and in which “nothing’s left alone for long” (Deleuze, “Control and Becoming”). The found footage genre presents a mediated sharing culture lost to the digital, but already found, framed, and repurposed by an unreliable omniscience. “The days of losing touch are over” (Egan 203), and “The era of data is here; we are now recorded” (Rudder 240).

Movies never end. Cinematic narration pours out across the web into virtual theaters, boundlessly informing and updating contemporary cinephiles, now fans and “viewers” (Daly 82) playing movies in a “real virtuality” (Castells, *Rise* 404). The online, paratextual continuation of *The Blair Witch Project*’s truth-claims produces its own sort of “ontological vertigo” (Alter 6), as the marketers did a magnificent job connecting the unreliability of the fake-documentary genre to the pressing questions of reliability, sourcing, origins, and authorship on the web. The website and viral marketing of the film generated a new media hoax of the first order, fashioning a “filter bubble” (Pariser) for those audiences too naïve to see through the
manipulation, as well as for those audiences who just wanted to play along—or who shared a “readiness to be duped” (Stewart 103). Like Google’s co-founders Brin and Page when they created Google Ads, the creators and marketers of The Blair Witch Project registered contemporary audiences’ aversion to trite narratives and transparent commercialism, a media cynicism and sophistication certainly cultivated by long hours of cable TV, home video, video games, and the web.

As they spill out of the theater onto DVDs and the web, these two movies advertise a newly digital and increasingly common cinephilia and media literacy. Both The Sixth Sense and The Blair Witch Project—and many of the films belonging to these millennial narrative styles—promote flexibility: they bend long-standing narrative contracts, and they urge audiences to engage and re-engage the movie as one node in a computerized media ecosystem. Paradoxically, both movies offer damning critiques of a deeply mediated and media-obsessed culture. Serving up a “complicitous critique” (Hutcheon, Politics 44) of new media to a networked society struggling with what it means to be digital, the politics and anxieties of these films, like most of Hollywood’s, are decidedly, perhaps even “strategically,” ambiguous (Bordwell and Thompson 8). While they each participate in and blaze new paths for the capitalist ethic of the “‘efficient’ use of narrative material” (Thompson 100) that Hollywood had codified into a hard science by the turn of the millennium, they reflexively allegorize those developments through their narrational structures: this is a classical movie that will be repurposed as an art film in the final five minutes, a revision of every shot in the film; this is a movie of post-production surveillance, in which every image has been diegetically mined and remixed for its horror quotient. Narratively, these movies repurpose within. They back-propagate, recursively upgrading their narrative software. Regardless of whether or not they offer “coherent intellectual positions”
(Bordwell and Thompson 9), these narrative styles present a striking response, on the level of form, to society’s and cinema’s computerization.

To “call computer media ‘interactive’ is meaningless,” as it is simply “stating the most basic fact about computers” (Manovich, Language 71). Accordingly, puzzle films and found footage films announce their new media logics upfront. These are new sorts of films in which things are done to movies, in which movies become objects to control, manipulate, and re-contextualize. Put it together like a puzzle, make it yourself, or find it and present it. Both styles imply users who can sort out the films’ “jigsaw intricacies” (Zacharek). In fact, these are narrative styles named for things being done to movies, for doing media. These millennial genres structurally mimic the new “object-oriented” qualities of our engagement with films, now computer files. Through digitization, Steven Shaviro writes, everything is subject to “retrospective revision” (“Emotion Capture” 52). No phrase better captures the narrative mechanics of these twin millennial genres. Cinematic writing, revision, and manipulation occur within the narratives of these films. Each form encourages a conception of cinema as soft and flexible, as playable, attainable, and remixable.

Still, The Sixth Sense and The Blair Witch Project stand as analog films, made a few years before the majority of movies were recorded and distributed digitally, but at a time when non-linear digital editing, CGI, and digital home delivery devices such as DVD were engineering the new computerized basis of cinema. Playing in the same multiplexes as The Phantom Menace, each movie foregrounds its total lack of digital special effects, moving so far away from the aesthetics of the summer blockbuster that it becomes difficult not to read the films as critical commentaries on those aesthetics. The puzzle film and found footage film counter-balanced Hollywood’s digital mania with “narrative special effects” (Mittell, “Narrative Complexity” 35).
and self-consciously low-tech aesthetics. They deconstruct some of the basic foundations of popular narrative cinema: a movie should be completely intelligible on a first viewing, what we don’t show you between scenes is inconsequential to the narrative, editing is the “invisible art,” characters should never acknowledge the presence of the camera, and so on. Simultaneously, the movies are haunted by the future, as the logics of digital media structure their formal mechanisms, from the Photoshopped unreliability of contemporary photography to the first-person shooter rhetoric of video games. Like digitization, these movies break film, but they do so narratively, smuggling in radical procedures for popular storytelling in cinema at the time of the medium’s material upheaval.

The most basic presupposition I make in this dissertation is that the computerization of film, and of culture more generally, necessarily affects the way writers and directors approach storytelling and cinema as an art, even if these writers and directors have no hand in the technological and material developments driving the film industry. “Computerization affects deeper and deeper layers of culture,” writes Lev Manovich (Language 27), and the principles of new media increasingly appear in cultural objects, whether or not those objects are themselves the products of new media. The Sixth Sense and The Blair Witch Project aren’t art-house films. Rather, they are made for and marketed to mass audiences prepared to play cinema, remix it, reuse it—to treat cinema digitally. Writable cinema, playable cinema, remixable cinema: material changes to the medium and the widespread adoption by the public of digital media creation and delivery devices produce new definitions of and relationships with “film,” not to mention new conceptions of cinematic authorship and narration.

The simultaneous wide-release at century’s end of The Sixth Sense and The Blair Witch Project provides fertile ground for an analysis of the formal and cultural significance of what has
come to be known as “narrative complexity” in contemporary cinema. The formal and the cultural, of course, do not exist independently. The aim of this dissertation is to read the formal through the cultural and the cultural through the formal, to analyze the ways in which two contemporary narrative styles of cinema formally engage with the digitization of culture and the ways in which the digitization of culture reshapes formal aspects of narrative film. The societal shift to ubiquitous computing and digital surveillance is perhaps too seismic to be represented exclusively on the level of story content. This is a formal, structural development, one well suited to the level of discourse, the text’s global narrational activities. Movies of the puzzle film narrative style and the found footage form regularly stir up and domesticate millennial enthusiasm and misgivings about digital media, the internet, and the emerging surveillance state. They do so in three broad ways, all of which I examine throughout this dissertation: 1) explicitly, through their marketing and dissemination; 2) on the level of story, through their depictions of mediating technologies and virtual environments; and 3) formally, through their sustained attention to narrative perspective, producing technologically mediated or virtualized forms of identity.
Chapter 1: The Sixth Sense and The Puzzle Film

He’s rigged a tiny cassette player with a small set of foam earphones to listen to demo tapes and rough mixes. Occasionally he’ll hand the device to Mindy, wanting her opinion, and each time, the experience of music pouring directly against her eardrums—hers alone—is a shock that makes her eyes well up; the privacy of it, the way it transforms her surroundings into a golden montage, as if she were looking back on this lark in Africa with Lou from some distant future.

—Jennifer Egan, A Visit from the Goon Squad

Every day we are subjects of a narrative, if not heroes of a novel.

—Gérard Genette, Narrative Discourse

Media comprise the only place where you never die, where your image is preserved and reproducible again in real time. That’s a kind of metaphoric fact.

—Garrett Stewart, Framed Time

This chapter investigates the complicated position M. Night Shyamalan’s The Sixth Sense maintains on the issue of Hollywood and society’s transition to digital media. The film belongs to a cycle of popular movies made in the late 90s and 00s that scholars often refer to as “puzzle films,” a cycle that includes A Beautiful Mind, Black Swan, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Fight Club, Inception, The Matrix, Memento, Mulholland Drive, Pulp Fiction, Shutter Island, The Usual Suspects, and so on. These movies are littered with narrative “Easter eggs” and foreshadows; their plots are often full of “anachronies” (Genette, Narrative 35), temporally scrambled in ways far more crafty and complicated than the classical deployment of flashbacks; they climax in a way that forces a complete reappraisal of the metaphysical or psychological grounds of the preceding material; voice-overs or narratorial filters in these movies are often unreliable. I argue that these films stand as reflections on widespread fantasies and fears of
technology by rethinking subjectivity through virtuality, in the process rewriting the book on narrative perspective in popular film.

At the turn of the century Hollywood itself was suffering the same fevered excitement and growing pains with new media as society-at-large; the transition from analog to digital production, post-production, and exhibition was already well underway. What makes The Sixth Sense an interesting case study in these terms is its sustained attention to ubiquitous mediation, virtuality, and what we might call the *cinematization of the self in everyday life*, without being about these things in the more obvious ways of other 90’s and early 2000’s movies such as Being John Malkovich, The Blair Witch Project, EDtv, eXistenZ, The Game, The Matrix, Natural Born Killers, Scream, The Truman Show, Vanilla Sky, and Wag the Dog. The Sixth Sense shares many ideas about communication technologies and mediation with these films, but it lets them play as its surround, primarily through its narrational structure and secondary story elements. The film presupposes that audiences live in a media-sphere, one dominated by pervasive communication technologies. However, unlike the nightmarish, passive-receptor spirit of films that more explicitly treat the subjects of mediation and virtual reality—Brazil and Videodrome come to mind—The Sixth Sense offers an active-audience model of new media communication. Teaching its viewers to learn the new rules of cinema and mediation brought on by digitization, the film and its dissemination encourage a lively engagement with these new charged objects, to recognize the possibilities of their deceptions, but to be empowered enough to act as a controller.

1999 sits at a critical juncture, tipping not only towards the new millennium but also to a recalibration of (a shocking twist to) cultural assumptions, attitudes, and practices about and with media. Importantly, The Sixth Sense (and the same might be said of The Blair Witch Project, Cloverfield, Donnie Darko, Fight Club, Inception, The Matrix, Memento, and on and on)
encourages critical literacy of and community building around the digital moving image while simultaneously participating in the neoliberal program of creating new markets and desires for private, immersive experiences with digital, escapist entertainment.

“They only see what they want to see.”

Nearly 20 years after its unlikely, smashing success, The Sixth Sense stands as a beloved favorite, ranking right ahead of Finding Nemo and right below The Maltese Falcon on IMDb’s user-generated “Top 250,” continuing to provoke hundreds of discussion threads on IMDb every year and numerous reviews on Amazon. The movie has become a sort of cinematic archetype, usually the first film cited by contemporary audiences when the question comes up of “trick” endings or “twists.” While few bits of dialogue in the history of U.S. film have circulated as widely or are as instantly recognizable as “I see dead people,” everyone from mainstream film reviewers to backwater Usenet members went to great lengths keeping safe the secret of the line’s full narrative implications. Arriving a few years after The Crying Game and just a few short months after the introduction of TiVo—and in the thick of the DVD format’s market ascendancy—the film sits at the precipice of time-shifting and the “spoiler alert,” activities that have come to characterize the public’s digitally enabled consumption of and engagement with media. The movie took in $672 million at the global box office for Disney, plus countless hundreds of millions through home video and ancillary markets. Whether or not these facts count The Sixth Sense as a classic, they certainly establish it as a pop-cultural touchstone.

The film’s narrative begins with Malcolm Crowe (Bruce Willis) and his wife Anna Crowe (Olivia Williams) sitting comfortably together by firelight on the sofa, talking about the award Malcolm has just received from the city of Philadelphia for his service as a child psychologist. While supportive of the accomplishment, Anna laments that Malcolm has
dedicated so much time to his work and so little to their marriage. They head upstairs and discover their bedroom window smashed. A skeletally gaunt figure in his twenties wearing only underwear stands before the couple at the master bathroom’s entrance. Clearly a threatening sight, Vincent Grey (Donnie Wahlberg) is also nervous and passive, making a child-like image in his shaking and crying. His identity registers with Malcolm: Vincent, Malcolm remembers, was “quiet, smart, compassionate—unusually compassionate.” He had diagnosed Vincent’s mood disorder as resulting from Vincent’s troubles with his parents’ divorce. “You were wrong…now look at me,” Vincent cries to Malcolm. Before turning the gun on himself, Vincent shoots Malcolm through the stomach. The scene fades to black on a ceiling shot of Malcolm lying wounded on the bed.

Titles index the following scene as “The Next Fall…South Philadelphia.” Malcolm sits on a bench, waiting for Cole Sear (Haley Joel Osment), a troubled kid, one with a similar background to Vincent’s. The next several sequences of the film depict Malcolm’s attempts at trying to get the reluctant Cole to communicate; Cole’s loving but difficult relationship with his single mother, Lynn (Toni Collete); and Cole’s bullying by classmates at school. Audiences learn, or suspect at least, that something beyond run-of-the-mill psychological problems are afoot. As Cole is seated firmly in the kitchen eating breakfast the camera follows Lynn, scrambling from kitchen to laundry and back again; on her reentry into the kitchen she finds every cabinet and drawer wide open. This sort of thing has clearly happened before, evinced by the well-worn frustration that follows her initial shock. She wants Cole to talk to her, to tell her what’s going on, what’s troubling him. He wants to but can’t. Malcolm and Anna don’t seem to be communicating all that much either; he shows up late for their anniversary dinner, and her chilly reception confirms that their marriage is on the rocks.
Cole begins to open up to Malcolm, just as Lynn begins to suspect that something is seriously wrong with Cole. In perhaps the film’s most famous scene, Cole confesses to Malcolm the source of his troubles; he can see ghosts: “Walking around like regular people. They don’t see each other. They only see what they want to see. They don’t know they’re dead.” “How often do you see them?” Malcolm asks. “All the time. They’re everywhere.” Understandably skeptical, Malcolm dictates into his tape recorder after their meeting: “His pathology’s more severe than I initially assessed. He’s suffering from visual hallucinations, paranoia, some kind of school-age schizophrenia. Medication, hospitalization may be required.” Audiences soon learn that Malcolm is wrong; from this point forward we begin to see these ghosts with Cole. The sights are the stuff of horror films—a family with nooses around their necks, a young boy with a gunshot wound to his head, a woman covered in bloody scratches. It’s easy to see why Cole is so troubled.

Malcolm remembers that during one of their discussions Cole said something familiar, something almost identical to what Vincent said when he broke into his house—“Do you know why you’re afraid when you’re alone? I do.” Malcolm listens to old audio recordings of his sessions with Vincent. During one session Malcolm leaves the room while the tape continues to record. Now listening, Malcolm turns the volume all the way up, and it becomes quite clear: there was another presence in the room with Vincent. Now a believer, Malcolm redoubles his efforts with Cole, trying to help Cole on Cole’s terms, telling him that even the scary ghosts might just want help. All Cole has to do is listen.

The ghost of a young girl visits Cole, and, courageously, Cole doesn’t hide from her. Instead, he follows Malcolm’s instructions and listens. Malcolm and Cole go to the funeral service at the girl’s home. Cole enters her room and the girl shows him a box under her bed. Cole gives it to the girl’s father. Inside is a video, footage from a hidden camera the girl placed in her
room, recording the mother slowly poisoning her. Cole’s ability to see ghosts—and Malcolm’s encouraging Cole to listen and help them—has provided a touch of justice. Cole comes into his own, starring in the school play, clearly at peace. He finally reconciles with his mother, confessing his secret, proving it by telling her something the ghost of his grandmother told him, something only she would know.

The only thing that needs resolution is Malcolm’s stormy relationship with his wife. Cole tells Malcolm to talk to her while she’s asleep; she’ll listen to him. Malcolm comes home to find Anna asleep on the couch, their wedding video playing. In her sleep she tells him she misses him. “Why did you leave me?” “I didn’t leave you.” She drops a wedding ring, and it rolls beneath his feet. She’s still wearing her ring. In voice-over we again hear Cole’s confession about seeing dead people. Malcolm’s face registers his realization: he was shot and killed by Vincent Grey. After the initial shock subsides, he goes back to Anna, still asleep: “I think I can go now. Just needed to do a couple things. Needed to help someone. I think I did. I needed to tell you something. You were never second. Ever. I love you. You sleep now. Everything will be different in the morning.” “Good night, Malcolm.” “Good night, sweetheart.”

**Syuzhet > Fabula**

That Malcolm dies in the film’s first scene forces us to revise our reading of the entire film. Is it really the case that we never saw anyone speak to Malcolm, other than Cole? Though the bulk of the story does not take place in a computer simulation as the same year’s *eXistenZ*, *The Matrix*, and *The Thirteenth Floor*, the film’s final twist nevertheless reveals that since his death Malcolm was living in the world virtually, existing immaterially while his physical body remained immobile. How can we describe the twist in narratological terms, and what are the implications of its global, or total revision to the movie’s preceding events? The *fabula* of a
narrative indicates the chronological events that are real within the world of the story, or the diegetic world. The *syuzhet* is the narrative arrangement and presentation of that material. The difference is often described with the terms *story* and *discourse*, or a narrative’s *what* and its *how* (Chatman, *Story and Discourse* 19). Throughout *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell argues that a viewer’s reconstruction of the fabula from the syuzhet constitutes a central activity of cinematic narration. Historical changes in film narration can be at least partially measured by what the producers of a film assume audiences can fill in about a story without needing to explicitly show them. Today’s viewers don’t need to see a character get in her car and drive to work to understand how she gets from point A to point B, even though producers haven’t always presumed as much (Chatman, *Story and Discourse* 53). As is the project of many art films, *The Sixth Sense*’s twist disrupts several decades’ worth of Hollywood’s advancements in audience conditioning, advising viewers to become freshly cognizant of their active role constructing action between scenes, or building fabulas from syuzhets.

Of course, every syuzhet withholds information from audiences, to drive the narrative forward, to create suspense, or perhaps to mislead. Drawing on the work of David Bordwell and Meir Sternberg, Cornelia Klecker presents three binaries for thinking through various forms of informational gaps in narrative, or information about the presented world that the presentation of events withholds: temporary/permanent, diffuse/focused, and flaunted/suppressed. Klecker suggests that for a film to register as a “mind-trick” narrative it must “involve a temporary and focused gap,” but one that is “suppressed” throughout most of the film, a “surprise gap” in which “viewers do not even know that there is some relevant thing they do not know” (“Mind-Tricking” 131). Of course, the surprise gap in *The Sixth Sense* is Malcolm’s death, occurring right after Malcolm is shot and right before titles index the following scene as “The Next Fall.”
This is when we would have learned about Malcolm’s death if the syuzhet weren’t so busy misleading us. For Klecker, “What is important is that mind-tricking narratives depend on an extreme case of a surprise gap … one that causes a radical correction, or inversion, of hypotheses once the gap is disclosed at the end of a film” (131).

Shyamalan hides this gap in a way that encourages audiences to re-watch the movie with a laser-focus on the film’s narration, advancing from an attention to the film’s fabula to an attention to its syuzhet, or to the interplay between the two. These pleasures bolstered the film to a higher than average theatrical box office business from repeat ticket-buyers and to an astounding, record-breaking run on home video (W. Friedman; Iverson). The surprise gap revealed by the twist, or the terminal frame of the film (a frame identified at the end of a narrative), forces audiences to revise their conditioned hypotheses about seemingly normal narrative events. So, for instance, when a scene in which Malcolm meets Cole at his home begins, Malcolm and Lynn sit in chairs opposite one another. Cole enters his home seconds after the scene begins, and most first-time viewers assume, consciously or not, that Malcolm and Lynn have been speaking about Cole for a while. Foreshadowing the activity of re-watching that many viewers of the movie participated in, after the twist the film presents a montage of retrospective revision, a series of flashbacks to earlier scenes, including this scene between Malcolm and Lynn, now directing viewers to notice that they never actually saw the two speak.

At film’s end, many first-time viewers probably thought that Shyamalan had “cheated,” that surely they would have foreseen the twist if everything was above board; they probably suspected, Daniel Barratt writes, that the post-twist flashbacks “are not representative and that the filmmaker has conveniently forgotten certain contradictory scenes.” This desire to know whether or not Shyamalan cheated, according to Barratt, motivates audiences to see the film
again. On a second viewing, audiences learn that “Shyamalan is ‘honest’ and ‘true,’ or at least as honest and true as he can be given that a narrative of this type is never going to be completely watertight” (63). What viewers watch on a second viewing, then, is their own mistaken construction of the story from the film’s discourse, the very active and creative role they play in what might appear to be passive spectation, or their direct involvement in cinematic narration, as Bordwell would have it.

Some audiences and scholars, though, identify what they believe to be a fatal plot-hole in the film, suggesting that Shyamalan does in fact cheat. In his edifying article on recent films that break implicit contracts between storytellers and audiences, David Richter articulates the problem well: “It is all right for us viewers to be deceived by these tricks; the problem is in the implicit assertion that [Malcolm] is deceived by these things as well, that he has not noticed that no one ever speaks to him but Cole, or that taxis aren’t stopping for him any more.” Thus, for Richter, the film upends the typical relation between fabula and syuzhet: “Normally the syuzhet of a film is a subset of the fabula, a dependent variable: it represents a sequence of scene, dialogue, and summary crafted so that we fill gaps in ways that optimize the potential impact of the fabula. But here the fabula seems to depend on the syuzhet; there are no gaps to fill because Crowe’s awareness is apparently limited to precisely what the audience of the film is supposed to know” (“Your Cheatin’ Art” 16). If we put Klecker’s and Richter’s readings of the narrative gaps in The Sixth Sense into conversation, we might say that the surprise gap at film’s end effectively deletes all of the more narratively normal gaps between scenes, thus reversing the directional force of fabula and syuzhet: on a second viewing, we learn that, in Malcolm’s case, presented events coincide perfectly with their presentation, or that the fabula is determined by the syuzhet.
There may be a diegetic explanation for Shyamalan’s cheat. Recall Cole’s important speech to Malcolm: the dead only see what they want to see, and they only hear what they want to hear. We might say that Malcolm exists in a filtered state, on a different perceptual key: he moves from scene to scene, either unaware of events between scenes, filling gaps in a way similar to the film’s audience, or simply projecting forward from one important moment to the next. Complete in its psychoanalytic, cinematic, and narratological senses, the term *projection* goes far describing Malcolm’s sense of things. He sees what he wants to see, repressing both his own death as well as life between scenes. As soon as Vincent shoots Malcolm, Malcolm begins to treat Cole, who has all of Vincent’s symptoms. That which Malcolm looks away from (his failure with Vincent, his death), he projects onto Cole Sear, first and foremost a *seer*. Malcolm’s conscious activity resembles classical narrative cinema (and its inherent quasi-interactivity) in that Malcolm’s world is projected to him as it is for the film’s audience—not quite real, not quite not-real, with all of the inconsequential moments rubbed out, a sort of “mindscreen” (Kawin). And like Malcolm, we only see what we want to see, blind to all of the assumptions we make about action between scenes. The film is terminally framed: the narrative’s perspectival framing is revealed only at film’s end. We realize we were as in the dark as Malcolm, and what we thought was objective narration was thoroughly subjective. In his account of point of view in film, Edward Branigan usefully labels deep subjective perspective of this sort “mental projection” (123).

In these ways, rather than think of Cole’s description of ghosts as Shyamalan simply covering up a plot-hole, perhaps it points to the film’s most compelling twist, a bug that’s actually a feature: Malcolm’s afterlife looks and feels a lot like narrative film, with all of the gaps between action edited out, an inversion of Buster Keaton’s shocked but aware projection.
into the framed, cutting screen world of *Sherlock Jr*. Malcolm doesn’t seem to notice that no one ever speaks to him, precisely because his perception is dictated by discourse; he doesn’t exist between scenes, only in them, a fictional character *par excellence*. To borrow a phrase from Jennifer Egan’s novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (quoted more completely in the epigraph to this chapter), Malcolm’s consciousness might be best characterized as a “golden montage” (65), or as “immediated”: “both immediate and mediated” (Galloway, “Fonts”). Malcolm is abstracted: where he once existed in the diegetic reality, presumably engaging with the world outside of its narrative descriptions, once dead Malcolm exists only on the level of discourse. Malcolm, writes Aviva Briefel, suffers from “spectral incognizance,” and these gaps in his experiences align closely with those of the film’s viewers. Indeed, Malcolm’s “fragmentary experience calls to mind the spectators’ own view of life when mediated by the film screen” (98).

In the remainder of this section I ask how we might read this strange reversal of the fabula/syuzhet dynamic in thematic terms, while suggesting that *The Sixth Sense* offers a framework for thinking through some of the key expressive capacities and rhetorical logics of new media. A deconstructive reading of such a fabula/syuzhet reversal would hold that in a fictional narrative the fabula always already depends on the syuzhet. In literary fiction, as in fictional film, we might say that the impetus to *tell a story worth telling* generates the story itself. For the story to be worth telling, on this account, it has to be successfully organized, behave in certain ways, trigger certain effects. Reading *Oedipus*, Jonathan Culler writes how “Oedipus’s slaying of Laius…is not something given as reality but is produced by a tropological operation, the result of narrative requirements. Once we are well into the play, it is clear to us that Oedipus must be guilty, otherwise the tale will not work at all.” In this way, instead of saying “that there
are events which took place and which the play reveals in a certain order and with certain
detours, we can say that the crucial event itself is a product of the demands of signification”
(“Fabula” 30). To my knowledge this is the broadest deconstruction of the fabula/syuzhet binary
available, one situated firmly within generative and receptive practice, and it maps on as easily to
fictional film as it does to literature, showcasing one way in which narrative is a “deep structure
quite independent from its medium” (Chatman, “What Novels Can Do” 121).

On a slightly different register, though, the presupposition readers make that the story
pre-exists its own telling is simply a conceit of narrative fiction, is itself the foundational fiction
at the heart of storytelling. In Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction,
Patricia Waugh writes how “descriptions of objects in fiction are simultaneously creations of
that object” (88). Thus, every utterance in a work of literary fiction is a performative, creating
what it ostensibly describes.23 Linda Hutcheon puts it succinctly in Narcissistic Narrative: The
Metafictional Paradox: “In literature words create worlds.” Hard as some novelists might try to
convince their readers, they do not point a camera at objective reality. In literary fiction, words
are not “counters, however adequate, to any extraliterary reality. In that fact lies their aesthetic
validity and their ontological status” (103). Fictional worlds don’t actually exist, but the
distinction between fabula and syuzhet often depends on our pretending they do, imagining that
the world of the fiction exists independently of its telling. This isn’t to say that scholars and
theorists who deploy the distinction aren’t sensitive to this condition of fiction. Bordwell, for
one, explains how a syuzhet (and its audience) actively constructs an image of the fabula. Richter
deliberately and effectively draws on the terms fabula and syuzhet to summon the implicit
contract between an author and reader to suspend disbelief. Though one can certainly locate

23. See Culler, “Philosophy and Literature: The Fortunes of the Performative.”
outliers, novelists of the 19th century largely efface the performative condition of fictional language; postmodernists and metafictionalists often foreground it, underlining, in the words of Waugh, the “creation/description paradox which defines the status of all fiction” (88).

Destabilizing the distinction may be the narrative gesture that most clearly establishes a work as formally postmodernist for literary scholars, the feature that scholars often point to in older novels as anticipating postmodernist fictional practices. These works attend as much to the act of narration as to the narrated, often deliberating over or voiding long-held contracts between authors and readers, self-consciously recognizing that “mimesis in words can only be mimesis of words” (Genette, Narrative 164). As should be clear by the quotes from Waugh and Hutcheon above, a running theme in the energetic literary scholarship following the rise of meta- and postmodernist fiction in the 60s and 70s is the idea that this sort of self-reflexivity makes explicit “the essential mode of all fictional language” (Waugh 6)—that is, fiction’s inherent performativity.

Brian McHale’s rich taxonomy of postmodernist fiction echoes this sentiment, elaborating on the performative characteristic of fictional language by drawing on the phenomenological work of Roman Ingarden, who writes that in narrative fiction, “It is always as if a beam of light were illuminating a part of a region, the remainder of which disappears in an indeterminate cloud but is still there in its indeterminacy” (218). In this sense, McHale writes, “presented objects in fiction have ontological gaps, some of them permanent, some filled in by readers in the act of concretizing the text” (31). McHale deploys the term gaps on a different octave than Bordwell, Klecker, and Richter. “Gaps” in McHale’s characterization result from the performativity of literary language, in part because of the practical limits of literary description. The possible range of descriptive details one might choose to articulate in ordinary language
about an object in the world (or, for that matter, an object in a photograph) is “indeterminate”; “the number of details that we could note is potentially large, even vast,” writes Seymour Chatman (“What Novels Can Do” 125). We might say that authors provide certain details about an object and omit others, but this report of authorial activity implies that the object exists prior to its description. It would be more accurate to say that authors create fictional objects through descriptions in language; these objects and the surrounding diegetic space are conditionally fuzzy, full of gaps, are the not- or never-exhaustively-described. Whether or not readers consciously mind the gaps, in concretizing the text they must confront them: by filling them, repressing them, or falling into them.

The material differences between language and photography complicate any attempt to neatly map these accounts of literature’s performativity onto film. The analogic fact of photography—“A photograph is always a photograph of something which actually exists” (Walton 250)—precludes it from Waugh’s description-creation formula. The profilmic reality exists whether or not the camera captures it, and so the worlds depicted by photochemical film can’t ever be as indeterminate as literary worlds in Ingarden’s characterization. Instead, The Sixth Sense’s destabilization of the fabula-syuzhet distinction is a reflexive move decidedly of its moment and materials, staging analog film’s encounters with computer media, in which the language of code is executable and performative—code “does what it says” (Kittler, “There Is No Software”).

24. Nevertheless, much of The Sixth Sense’s reflexive force is characteristic of self-reflexive postmodernist fiction, which has been variously described as “an undisguised skepticism about the status of fictions” (“self-conscious fiction”) (Alter 3); “the exhaustion, or attempted exhaustion, of possibilities—in this case literary possibilities (“the literature of exhaustion”) (Barth 30); “a species of criticism in fictional form” (“reflexive fiction”) (Boyd 23); “fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction” (“surfiction”) (Federman 6); “fiction which draws attention to itself as artifact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality”
While much of this dissertation takes up the question of cinema’s encounters with digital media, I begin here by organizing the digital production of moving images into three, sometimes overlapping categories, in an attempt to think through digital media’s performativity and the potential implications for a narrative theory of the digital moving image. An analysis of each of these three acts of new media production sheds light on the industrial and creative possibilities confronting contemporary “film” producers: the digital recording of real-world sights and sounds (production); the digital rendering, compositing, and editing in post-production of cinematic materials (post-production); and the digital creation—more or less “from scratch”—of moving images (post-production/production).

This final case is certainly the most materially extreme, but by 1999 it was already a regular practice in Hollywood, the cutting edge and industrial engine of cinematic innovation. As with ordinary language, for a completely digital representation there need not be a real-world referent: Computer Generated Imagery (CGI) in narrative cinema creates what the movie’s “camera” ostensibly captures. Thus, on this specific register, digitization acts as an entrance for photorealistic cinema into the performative, the computer-generated image realizing the postmodern deconstruction of the fabula-syuzhet reversal, in which “descriptions of objects in fiction are simultaneously creations of that object” (Waugh 88). Consequently, writes Lev Manovich, “Cinema can no longer be clearly distinguished from animation. It is no longer an indexical media technology but, rather, a subgenre of painting” (Language 293).

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(Gass 25); “a mimesis of process” and not just “a mimesis of product” (“metafiction”) (Hutcheon, Narcissistic 5); “fictions which examine fictional systems” (“metafiction”) (McCaffrey 5); fiction that “points to its own mask and invites the public to examine its design and texture” (Stam 1); a work that “simultaneously create[s] a fiction and . . . make[s] a statement about that fiction” (“metafiction”) (Waugh 6).
This performative characteristic of animation has been around as long as cinema itself, but the verisimilitudes provided by CGI and the sweeping, near-total industrial transition to digital production and post-production make cinematic imagery always potentially animated in a photorealistic way. The promises of this new medium, its new material capacities (evinced by many CGI blockbusters from the early 90s such as *Jurassic Park* and *Terminator 2*), fundamentally redraw the medium’s limits of signification, its horizon of expectations for both creators and audiences. The hub of creative energies shifts from the profilmic and the fabula (the raw material) to the performative syuzhet (the presentation of raw material, or the manufacturing of referents). 1995’s all-CGI *Toy Story* marks the centennial of film and “the end of cinema as we know it” (Jon Lewis). Along these lines, in *Death 24x a Second* Laura Mulvey writes, “the digital, as an abstract information system, made a break with analog imagery, finally sweeping away the relation with reality, which had, by and large, dominated the photographic tradition. The sense of the end of cinema was thus complicated aesthetically by a crisis of the photographic sign as index” (18).

David Richter writes that audiences are more likely to say a film “cheats” than they are to say the same of a novel employing equally deceptive narrative strategies. He suggests that the medium’s long-sustained indexicality contributes to this tendency: “It may be that, to the extent that films present the ‘reality’ of a narrative with clarity, specificity, and apparent objectivity in ways that prose fiction cannot match, cheats become a more serious problem. This may be only another way of saying that films make stronger and less ambiguous claims about the world they show” (“Your Cheatin’ Art” 12). Consequently, changes to the indexical properties of moving images result in new capacities to deceive, or to get away with cheating. Friedrich Kittler expands on this point: “Now, for the first time in the history of optical media, it is possible to
address a single pixel in the 849th row and 720th column directly without having to run through everything before and after it. The computer image is thus . . . forgery incarnate. It deceives the eye . . . with the illusion or image of an image, while in truth the mass of pixels, because of its thorough addressability, proves to be structured more like a text composed entirely of individual letters” (qtd. in Hansen 73).

The rise in the late 90s and early 00s of a series of movies in which characters and realities are understood at narrative’s end to be virtual, spectral, or imagined speaks to the epistemological uncertainties surrounding the computerization of culture and digital imagery’s capacity to cheat, its new emphasis on creative telling, creating what it ostensibly describes. The narrative twists in these films dramatize the new perspective or epistemological frame through which audiences must begin to view moving images; they train us to recognize the prominent roles that framing and narrative discourse play for digital cinema. Misled by cinema as they live in it, both Malcolm and the implied viewer must shuck their assumptions of ontology, recognize the new order of things: Malcolm needs to throw out the DSM and consider the possibility that ghosts are real; the implied viewer must recognize that cameras can lie, to be wary of the possibilities of post-production, or the ways in which post-production now exists in new, creative ways within and alongside the profilmic.

Indeed, the drama that Shyamalan stages climaxes in a recognition by both Malcolm and the viewer of these things without any visible signs of the supernatural—Malcolm doesn’t see other ghosts, and we don’t see anything that photochemical film couldn’t capture. Just like Malcolm, the film looks away from that which gives it its new immaterial existence. Shyamalan’s movie acts as a training ground for being more suspicious and careful with everyday media that might mislead us into thinking something is there when it isn’t, or
something isn’t there when it is—to be cognizant of the full range of photography’s new-found performative capacities. The moving image’s untethering from indexical reality is the generative force behind this millennial cycle of misleading, unreliable, or cheating cinematic narratives, reflexively thematizing the industrial and cultural shift to the new digital episteme. This cycle of films, in other words, showcases the ways in which the digital, by century’s end, had become a cultural dominant, its material capacities becoming the language and themes of culture.

As opposed to the continuous, gapless nature of analog recording, as well as of the human’s five senses, the digital record of profilmic events is a discontinuous sampling of images and sounds, instantly abstracting light and sound waves into numbers, or ones and zeros: “negation and zero, which are abstract, are integral to digital processes,” writes John Lechte. The digital is inherently abstract, full of gaps: “while there are no gaps in the analog continuum of reality, digital forms depend on ‘gaps’ and ‘absences’ (the notion of no-thing).” Like the alphabet or ordinary language, the digital is “binary, differential, and a code”; it is an abstract set—neither the referent itself nor its icon or index (64). It is the how of representation, not the what. The digitization of continuous analog material entails sampling, or discontinuities, and, Lev Manovich writes, “The frequency of sampling is referred to as resolution. Sampling turns continuous data into discrete data, that is, data occurring in distinct units: people, the pages of a book, pixels” (Language 28). Traditional celluloid film, of course, also samples profilmic reality, slicing moving time into 24 discrete frames per second. However, unlike still photography—the constituent element of each of those 24 frames—the digitally recorded image is at its base a sampling of the pro-photographic, and captured objects have ontological gaps. Granted, at high resolutions these gaps are indiscernible to the human eye, but that’s just the point when we apply this deep material logic to The Sixth Sense and Malcolm’s perception: the world for Malcolm is
photorealistic but has conditional blind-spots. The living, analog people in the film’s diegetic world, we are to believe, experience the continuities of daily life, or all of the in-between stuff the syuzhet doesn’t show us. Malcolm, in his death, is abstracted, re-ontologized as immaterial, virtual, and conditionally full of gaps, a digital, contactless perception of an analog world, but a perception that can’t tell the two apart. The film stages the encounter, the now imperceptible differences between analog and digital imagery.

Manovich writes that the key difference between older forms of discrete media (such as celluloid film) and new media is that in older forms “the samples are never quantified,” whereas in digital recording the units are rendered mathematically, and are thus subject to “algorithmic manipulation”: “In short, media become programmable” (Language 27). This programmability, Manovich suggests, is “the most fundamental quality of new media that has no historical precedent” (48). In this way, digital recording instantly looks forward to its software-enabled manipulations in post-production. The raw data it captures is nonsensical to human perception without software to interpret it or the body to frame it in some way. Following digitization, Mark Hansen writes, “the image becomes akin to a text composed of individual letters, one that is, strictly speaking, unreadable” (72). If decipherable as an image, the data must have been programmed, decoded, constructed. Data—1s and 0s—must pass through a filter, a screen, or a projection of sorts to be rendered intelligible. The algorithms of this software might filter the image in a number of ways, none of which can be privileged as a more real or accurate description than any other. Hansen continues: “Regardless of its current surface appearance, digital data is at heart polymorphous: lacking any inherent form or enframing, data can be materialized in an almost limitless array of framings” (34). With new media, writes Manovich, it “becomes possible to separate the levels of ‘content’ (data) and interface,” and a “number of
different interfaces can be created from the same data” (Language 37). This distinction between data and interface echoes postmodernists’ deconstruction of the fabula and syuzhet. Raw data is simply unintelligible without some sort of framing agent to activate it as perceptible. The materials affect the aesthetics, as framing and perspective stand as the central narrative concerns of this millennial genre of puzzle films; these films point to a new sort of post-production intelligence, a late reframing of everything. The digital image’s conditionally expansive manipulability and programmability moves dominant cinematic aesthetics from an attention to the framed to the now primary act of framing, from production to post-production, from the indexical to the fluidly photorealistic.

Digital editing and compositing were the norm by the late 90s for studio films. In this process, celluloid footage is scanned into a computer. Rendered numerical, it sits alongside various other forms of inscription, from still images to text to digital images made from scratch. Non-linear editing (NLE) software such as AVID, Apple’s Final Cut, and Adobe Premiere allow filmmakers to cut footage digitally, not damaging the source material. Editors can access specific footage instantly, footage that is no longer arranged sequentially but rather according to metadata. Compositing software such as Adobe After Effects allow filmmakers to combine all of the various source elements and add special effects. Thus, a final “shot may consist of dozens, hundreds, or thousands of image layers. These images may all have different origins—film shot on location (“live plates”), computer-generated sets or virtual actors, digital matte paintings, archival footage, and so on” (Manovich, Language 152). Electronic keying was around for a good while before digital compositing: when a box of moving image or text appears next to a newscaster’s head, or when it crawls along the bottom of the screen, this is an example of keying, or image layering. A major goal of Hollywood since the late 80s has been to create
homogeneous, photorealistic spaces in which layers blend together. In this way, writes Manovich, “Digital compositing exemplifies a more general operation of computer culture—assembling together a number of elements to create a single seamless object” (Language 139): this is the great accomplishment of The Abyss, Back to the Future II, Independence Day, Jumanji, Jurassic Park, Terminator 2, Titanic, and a whole host of other digitally composited blockbusters from the mid-90s.

By 1999, though, the logic of image layering had burrowed deep into the fabric of Hollywood production and the culture-at-large, manifesting in ways more subtle and structural than the obvious extravagances of these special effects films. 1990 marks the commercial introduction of Adobe’s Photoshop software, and by 1996 the name was being used as a verb by *The New York Times* to indicate the digital manipulation of an image. Photoshop is popular commercial software, not just for professionals, and while “Photoshop did not invent image fraud, it has made us all potential practitioners” (C. Rosen 34). Like the blockbusters named above, the application went far showcasing to the general public the untethering of photorealism from the indexical, or the capacity of new media to create seamless, photorealistic spaces that combine the digitally manufactured with the real, producing what appears to be an “irreducible simultaneity” (Deleuze, *Cinema 1* 153).\(^\text{25}\) In a culture overrun by media, these possibilities and

\[^{25}\text{This phrase comes from a passage in which Gilles Deleuze glosses what André Bazin names \textit{montage interdit}, or “forbidden montage”: “Bazin showed that if two independent actions which coincide at the production of an effect are amenable to montage, then in the effect produced there must be a moment where two terms confront each other face to face and must be seized in an irreducible simultaneity, without the possibility of resorting to a montage, or even to a shot-reverse shot. Bazin cites as an example Chaplin’s The Circus: all trick shots are permitted, but Charlie really has to go into the lion’s cage and be with the lion in a single shot.” The basis of Bazin’s prescriptive aesthetics is the transparency or indexicality of the photographic image. Bazin writes that it is “simply a question of respect for the spatial unity of an event…when to split it up would change it from something real into something imaginary” (50). For more on forbidden montage and digital compositing, see Lefebvre and Furstena.}^\]
processes of media production become dominant cultural themes, finding creative outlets in new forms while also being exploited for their revision to media and verisimilitude, from Forrest Gump shaking hands with John F. Kennedy to a digitally compositied picture of the war in Iraq in *The Los Angeles Times.*

In *The Sixth Sense,* Malcolm exists as an image layer in a composite, and the same might be said of Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt) in *Fight Club,* Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving) in *The Matrix,* Betty Elms (Naomi Watts) in *Mulholland Drive,* Grace Stewart (Nicole Kidman) in *The Others,* and so on. Malcolm and first-time viewers believe that he is part of a continuous, coherent world. We must be trained to assume otherwise, which is the very effect of these films—to reset cultural defaults about both narration and photorealism. Representing a creative reckoning with the myriad new agents and objects of intelligence that aren’t “really there” in the world, these films acknowledge the false sense of ontological cohesion in digital compositing and, even more generally, the false sense of global cooperation promised by enthusiasts of network culture. Peeling apart the image layers, the twists in these films attempt to come to grips with the varieties of “ontological vertigo” (Alter 6) offered by new media, through which post-production becomes the hub of creation and binary codes create worlds.

After Malcolm’s journey in between worlds has come to a close, after he has helped Cole, come to terms with his own death, and communicated his love for Anna, he closes his eyes and the image flashes to white. What viewers see in the film’s final seconds, and by implication what Malcolm seems to see as he closes his eyes, is moving image, a shot from Malcolm and Anna’s wedding video of the two kissing. The presentation of the shot suggests that the settled

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26. Brian Walski was fired from *The Los Angeles Times* in 2003 for digitally altering a photograph he took outside of Basra. See the “Editor’s Note” published two days later.
afterlife resembles an ideal and unmediated video dreamscape: like *The Sixth Sense* itself, Malcolm settles into a video afterlife.

![Image 1.01-1.04. The closing moments of The Sixth Sense.](image)

Now fully aware of his condition, he can simply close his eyes and *be cinema*; thus, Linda Badley writes, “death, far from being irreversible or inconceivable—or hellish, or heavenly bliss—will be a virtual form of consciousness ‘just like a movie’” (Badley 12). As soon as he realizes he’s dead, that his is a discontinuous, performative subjectivity and not a constative one, the film image begins to explicitly relate what Malcolm thinks. We see flashbacks to earlier scenes, as if he’s remembering them—life is like video footage. He closes his eyes to enter into the next stage, activating his video memories. This retrospective revision montage is the most discursively marked event in the entire film, the film’s most obvious manipulations of time and space, and it’s no coincidence that they occur as and after Malcolm becomes aware of the new order of things.
Malcolm identifies all of those discontinuities, those gaps in digital existence, and the quick succession of instantly accessed flashbacks/memories shows that he is now capable of performing the “‘cut-and-paste’ command, the most basic operation one can perform on digital data” (Manovich, *Language* xxxi). The moment might be thought of as a companion to Neo (Keanu Reeves) realizing his full potential to manipulate the computer-modeled world near the end of the first Matrix film, released four months before *The Sixth Sense*. A paradigm shift, the film nevertheless ends on a positive note; Malcolm, Shyamalan suggests, is now capable of communicating with the analog material world while controlling the image in a way characteristic of digital media, as the act of framing and reframing become second nature. Instantly accessing his memory archive in these moments of retrospective revision, Malcolm effortlessly remixes, samples, and peels away the various image layers of his cinematic subjectivity.

Malcolm’s final recognition that since his death he had filled gaps in the way typical of both classical Hollywood narration and digital media’s discontinuities asks us to see his journey as a movement from one sort of narrative standard to another, even from one medium to another (though they still share a name in popular discourse). Audiences always play an active part constructing fabulas, but the primacy of framing in digital media means we need to negotiate new contracts as audiences, learn new rules and procedures—the new how—for engaging with the moving image, no longer necessarily assumed to present the material world. No question, this is an “industrial revolution,” writes Michael Allen, “the like of which cinema has not witnessed since the coming of sound” (“Case Study” 75). Is it any wonder, then, that filmmakers in the late 90s and early 00s would begin to explore the diegetic possibilities of the new medium, its capacity to tell as much as show, to create as it describes? The rise of narrative complexity in
contemporary popular cinema is an attempt to do on the level of discourse—mainly through screenplays and editing—what James Cameron, George Lucas, and Robert Zemeckis attempt on the levels of production and exhibition: aspire to the condition of the digital. The industrial and cultural transition to digital media gave producers an excuse to rewrite and rethink old media heading into the 21st century, to recharge cinematic narration with possibilities and potentials not customarily active in the classical Hollywood model, to make palatable a “kind of fiction that tries to explore the possibilities of fiction” (Federman 6). Fortunately for Hollywood, this reinvigoration also tethered audiences to the new media technologies that would make digital Hollywood both possible and prosperous.

Home > Theater

Where do The Sixth Sense’s materials place it in cinema’s transition to digital media? For Hollywood, 1999 is one of a handful of years in which the material condition of the moving image was radically hybrid in analog/digital terms. Most movies were still shot on photographic film. They were edited, by and large, on non-linear digital editing systems, most commonly AVID. They were projected in theaters as film. Finally, they ended up on both analog and digital home video formats, VHS and DVD. The Sixth Sense followed this pattern, and was released on home video in March 2000. The DVD itself: a degradable physical object carrying a message made entirely of non-degradable (losslessly duplicable) 1s and 0s, numbers representing a digitally edited (easily and instantly manipulable), analogically recorded (what you see is what you get) fictional narrative event, as well as bonus material—hours worth of non-fictional and promotional paratextual video, still imagery, and text. The title “Between Two Worlds,” one of

27. Raymond Federman’s 1975 characterization of “surfiction,” or metafiction, which for Federman is “the only fiction that still means something today” (7).
the making-of documentaries on the disc, aptly describes the movie as material artifact, as a convergence of multiple forms of inscription, sitting at the intersection of the death of “films” and the birth of “files.”

This section analyzes a few scenes in *The Sixth Sense* that directly treat the subject of video mediation, reading these scenes through the film’s industrial and cultural contexts. Specifically, I consider the role that the DVD format played in generating and tapping into new forms of cinephilia. Much like VHS, the DVD’s novelties fastened the popular reception of movies to the viewer’s ability to manage and interact with systems of advanced technology. Unlike the VHS, the DVD player was from its inception bound up with the materials and organizational logics of the personal computer. Users learn to navigate the DVD interface, to engage new media in order to experience old. As I began to articulate in the previous section, *The Sixth Sense* expresses a vision of new media through the metaphor of ghosts—a coupling with a long and storied tradition in the popular imagination. Both materially and metaphorically, the film seeks to re-animate old media, which are not “dead” so much as passing through to their next, less material instantiation. Still, this act of re-enlivening resurrects promises of old media long-buried by industrial practice: animation moves from the periphery to the center, special effects and post-production become the primary activities of cinematic creation. The development and marketing of DVDs encouraged home audiences to purchase, not merely rent, their personal favorites, celluloid reformatted as binary code. Movies’ travels from theaters to homes stage a walling-in and personalization of cinematic spectation, an advance in society’s decades-long march toward ubiquitous mediation. New contracts form around new expectations: the entertainment industry encourages us to make movies our hobbies, to become collectors and online cinephiles; we expect the entertainment-industrial complex to let us cinematize existence,
to build gadgets and narratives that reward deep immersion and repeated engagement, to continue to develop home theater technologies that aim for “total cinema” (Bazin 20). The “new reflexivity,” then, indicates a narrative turning back on itself, thinking of itself, but in terms of new media, of the new phenomenological experiences of ubiquitous moving image media that are created, stored, viewed, and discussed through the meta-medium of the computer.

The film’s final shot and Malcolm’s perceptual equivalence with narrative discourse firmly establish *The Sixth Sense*’s thematic reflexivity. Yes, this is a film about ghosts, divorce, and interpersonal communication. Just as pointedly, though, and perhaps more interestingly, it is a movie about minds stuck to media, media that are changing. Malcolm moves from real life (the fabula) to a state of projection (as narrative discourse) before finally settling into the afterlife (pure video). The implied viewer watches the movie more than once, moves from an immersive shock in the story during the projection of the film to an investigative attention to the discourse on home video, the first act taking place in one century and the second in the next. *The Sixth Sense* sits at a pivotal juncture, clearly looking forward to the digital promises of the 21st century while reflecting back on the interactive potential of old media—both an elegy and a resurrection. The movie forcefully reminds us that classical narration was always already interactive; likewise, old media come alive in the world of the film, in each case toward the production of new knowledge, empowering characters.

Photographs, audiocassettes, pen and paper, TVs, portable music players, radios, phones, VCRs, camcorders, books—though radio, phone, and portable music only cameo, the other media listed here each play a starring role in *The Sixth Sense*. On the surface, this engagement with media underscores the prominent theme of communication throughout the film: Malcolm must learn to communicate with Anna; Cole with his mother; Cole must listen to the ghosts he
sees, to treat them as a two-way medium and not recoil as a passive spectator; Malcolm must learn to approach Cole on his own terms, not to prejudge Cole’s disorders. Likewise, as Linda Badley points out (9-10), media objects throughout the film awaken, liven up when people interact with them more attentively: Lynn discovers that in each of Cole’s pictures on the family’s wall of photographs a crystal of light appears next to Cole, only remarkable taken in their accumulation across the entire set; she runs her finger across several of the pictures as she begins to notice what else they’ve captured. She wears headphones, a portable music player of some sort, suggesting that she’s thoroughly inside media, creating a montage experience for herself as she moves from still image to still image of Cole, this cinematization of the self allowing her a glimpse into Cole’s gifts. In his home basement, Malcolm listens again to his cassette recordings of meetings with Vincent, and Shyamalan makes sure to provide close-ups of Malcolm rewinding the cassette, as well as two separate close-ups of his moving the volume dial up, until Malcolm can hear the faint sound of another voice amid the white noise. What recorded media allow is repeatability, the opportunity to re-experience, to see and hear anew. Their information is there for the taking; it’s up to the viewer or listener to immerse and interact.

28. See Laurence A. Rickels for a brief reading of this scene as a reflection of the viewer’s engagement, and more careful re-engagement, with The Sixth Sense, and thus with its ghosts.
In these terms, the DVD offers what VHS couldn’t quite: lossless repeatability. The twist made viewers want to see *The Sixth Sense* again, to see and hear the ghost *as a ghost* that was there all along, to interact with the film in a novel way for Hollywood filmmaking. By the late 80s the home video market had overtaken theatrical box-office as the greatest source of revenue for Hollywood (Wasser 171), and by the late 90s the DVD format was closing in on VHS. In fact, “DVD players and pre-recorded films penetrated U.S. homes at a rate faster than any consumer electronics device on record,” and DVD players were in “70% of American TV households a mere six years after commercial introduction (2003)” (Coplan 9), thanks “in no small part to [the format’s] considerable corporate backing” (Benson-Allot). The speed of the technology’s market penetration makes sense in light of William Boddy’s reminder that the “DVD represents the first moving-image format launched simultaneously for both PCs and TVs” (93). Desktop computers were sold with built-in DVD players, and by 2000 both Microsoft’s Xbox video game platform and Sony’s PlayStation 2 were equipped with the new format. Indeed, “Unprecedented cooperation from the computer industry, music companies, Hollywood studios, and consumer electronic makers made the introduction of DVD a possibility” (Sedman 49). In these ways, according to a Toshiba demonstration video for the technology, “DVD rises above the heretofore disparate media of Television, Audio Equipment, and Personal Computers, to meet the needs of the age of multimedia” (“DVD”). Refashioning old media, making them
new again, the DVD in the late 90s was “The ultimate in digital technology”—like the personal computer, a new meta-medium.

The format represented a surprising boon to the movie industry at the end of the century, as comprehensively examined by David Waterman in *Hollywood’s Road to Riches*. Costing less than VHS tapes for studios to “manufacture, package, ship, and hold in inventory” (92), DVDs “command higher effective retail prices than VHS, both in the sales and rental markets,” and “studios earn more per transaction from both DVD sales and rentals” (88) than they do from VHS. By 2000, Hollywood “was growing and prospering at a pace not seen since the 1940s,” writes Bryan Robert Sebok, and “driving this success was the profitability of ancillary markets, particularly new revenue streams from home video” (1). Chiefly, the studios developed an aggressive “sell-through” market for DVD titles. That is, unlike most VHS titles in the early years of the format, pre-recorded DVDs were priced to sell—not just to rent—to consumers. DVDs became Hollywood’s most profitable source of revenue, its “cinematic end-product” (Parker and Parker 42). 20th Century Fox was as cognizant of this new model as any of the studios, sinking countless hours and millions of dollars into a special edition DVD release of the narratively complex box-office bomb *Fight Club*, which found its way “into the black” and to its position as a classic shortly thereafter (Gertner). The Newmarket / Sony puzzle film *Memento* was a surprise hit by art-house standards, but within its first fifty days on DVD had generated nearly $50 million, or twice as much as it had at the domestic box-office (Molloy 21).

The rise of home video stages an undoing not completely unlike the fabula-syuzhet turnabout: what was once primary (the fabula / the movie theater) makes way for that which had long been its dependent variable, its abstraction or aftermarket (the syuzhet / home video). The reversals relate: now built into the theatrical experience of the film, the desire to sustain a
movie’s afterlife, to tell a story worth telling (twice), generates the movie’s narrative structure; for its explicit “narrative special effects” (Mittell, “Narrative Complexity” 35), The Sixth Sense needs to be watched more than once. In this way, the theatrical screening of the film remediates its “culturally more durable and economically more profitable afterlife” (Elsaesser, “Mind-Game” 39) by turning back on itself in its final moments during the retrospective revision montage, drawing on digital media’s effortless archival access as Malcolm re-views and recontextualizes losslessly repeatable footage. Writing about Mike Figgis’ Timecode, though decidedly applicable to narratively complex films that Hollywood released during the DVD boom years, Richard Grusin suggests that, “rather than seeing the DVD as a second order phenomenon in relation to the theatrical release,” it is “more accurate to consider the theatrical release [of Timecode] as the second-order phenomenon in its attempt to reproduce or remediate the interactivity of the DVD” (80).29

2000 marks the year of Napster and the crash of the music industry, and so it’s no surprise that the studios were encrypting DVDs with the Content Scramble System (CSS), an early form of Digital Rights Management (DRM) that sought to prevent people from copying a disc’s content. Additionally, Disney’s policy of forcing trailers onto viewers of The Sixth Sense DVD—home viewers weren’t allowed to skip past or fast forward the coming attractions, an action always possible with VHS—speaks to the studio’s anxieties about the digital transition and its desire to lock down the new medium. The DVD contains an “Easter Egg,” bonus material

29. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation as the “representation of one medium in another,” a “defining characteristic of the new digital media” (45). In Bolter and Grusin’s model, newer media forms typically take on the signifying practices or rhetoric of older media forms (film remediates theater, television remediates radio, etc.). In this case, however, Grusin suggests that the formal structure of the theatrical screening (the old media form) of Timecode (and, I would argue, many puzzle films) looks ahead to and remediates some of the key formal characteristics of the DVD. See Ch. 2 for more on remediation.
that isn’t labeled on the DVD menu, of a movie Shyamalan made when he was 11. From forcing trailers to burying treasures, the disc’s dynamic range of user-control enacts the schizophrenic logic characteristic of many corporate-artistic adventures in digital media. While grumbling about Disney force-feeding them previews, audiences made good on the movie’s charge to be watched more than once: an estimated one out of two households with a DVD player at the time rented or purchased the movie (Bleiler).

What did they find? An examination of Usenet, Amazon product reviews, and IMDb message boards reveals an interest in identifying clues, foreshadows, problems and solutions to the film’s story-discourse logic, accounts of whether or not viewers foresaw the twist, connections to other movies, earnest discussions of the film’s themes; many people writing on message boards justified their interpretations by pointing to the revelations of the film’s director and producers in the making-of features on the DVD. While most Usenet participants generously labeled their threads on *The Sixth Sense* with phrases such as “SPOILER ALERT” and “MAJOR SPOILERS” (Gregory K.), others weren’t as kind: “BRUCE WILLIS IS A GHOST IN SIXTH SENSE!!!” (Asianflow). Viewers noticed that the color red always appears in the mise-en-scène when Cole feels threatened, that Malcolm only wears clothes we saw him wearing on the day he was shot, that Cole’s initial reluctance to talk to Malcolm has nothing to do with Malcolm’s profession (as most everyone assumes on a first viewing), and, of course, that Malcolm never communicates with anyone other than Cole. Re-viewers subject the film to what Robert Alter, writing about self-reflexive fiction, calls a “continuous ontological scrutiny” (Alter 98), putting themselves in Shyamalan’s shoes, keenly aware of the role that editing, directing, and production design played in their being misled. They now watch Malcolm as a ghost, as a fallible filter, as

30. See, for example, David Youd’s Usenet posting: “Annoying Trailers on Sixth Sense DVD.”
an image layer, and they do so through the latest artifact of digital technology, the cultural impact of which gives the film its thematic force.

The film’s twist and invitation to be watched again transform what was assumed to be conventional cinematic narration into something less transparent, more subjective and authorial, shuttling audiences from standard Hollywood practice to more cinephilic fare. David Bordwell locates five key aspects of cinematic narration in the fiction film and suggests that major cinematic movements evince different calibrations of these registers. In classical Hollywood cinema, the narration’s range of knowledge is omniscient, its self-consciousness is moderate, its communicativeness to viewers is high, the narrator is invisible, and the author is effaced (Narration 57-63). *The Sixth Sense* depends for its narrative effects on convincing viewers that the film is classically narrated, or that the “norm of narrational transparency” is in place (G. Wilson 90); the twist, though, necessitates the viewer’s reappraisal of the entire film, and on a second viewing the five levels adjust so that they accord with Bordwell’s definition of narration in the art film: the knowledge is restricted, the self-consciousness is high, the communicativeness is low, the narrator is foregrounded, and the author is present (Klecker, “Mind-Tricking”).

Bordwell may have outlined the different narrative practices, but he nevertheless maintains that most narratively complex Hollywood films over-compensate for the challenges they pose to spectators through expositional redundancies; in his own words, Bordwell insists “on the ways that daring films make themselves accessible” (*The Way Hollywood Tells It* 103).

As expected, nearly every critic writing about these trends notes that overtly unorthodox narrative structures exist throughout popular cinema’s history. Among other filmmakers, Luis Buñuel, Alfred Hitchcock, Akira Kurosawa, Fritz Lang, Nicolas Roeg, and Orson Welles made films containing unreliable narration, the unusual use of flashbacks, a non-linear presentation of
the story, ambiguously subjective scenes and plots, twists at the end that alter the grounds for nearly all of the preceding events, characters with split personalities or who exist in multiple times and spaces, the same actor playing multiple parts, etc. And so to deflate some of the critical hyperbole that might identify these contemporary films as groundbreaking, David Bordwell and Kristen Thompson, respectively, highlight the long history of such unorthodoxies as well as the ways in which all of these popular experiments rely heavily on the semiotics of classical Hollywood filmmaking, or of narrative more generally. Though Bordwell acknowledges this contemporary movement as such, answering his question “why did narrative experimentation surge back in the 1990s?” by pointing to the success of Pulp Fiction, he also insists on the ways in which the narrative gymnastics on display in films such as those directed by Christopher Nolan or Quentin Tarantino are always met with a high degree of expositional redundancy (The Way Hollywood Tells It 73). Challenging the rules of classical cinema in one area, then, requires the director to overcompensate and simplify in others, according to Bordwell.

This issue begins to divide critics. While many scholars pursuing this trend may not wholly disagree with Bordwell and Thompson, they often redirect the critical emphasis toward an analysis of how these films represent a very particular historical trend, one worth noting for its differences from classical antecedents and its ties to contemporary viewing practices.31 When Kristin Thompson isn’t pointing to the ways in which a film such as Groundhog Day is thoroughly conventional, she suggests that narrative oddities such as Mulholland Drive or Pulp Fiction exist only on the fringes of popular production. Elliot Panek finds that “Thompson’s claim that the work of Lynch or Tarantino amount to little more than inconsequential anomalies

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31. See, for instance, Buckland, Cameron, Elsaesser (“Mind-Game”), Panek, Shaviro (Post-Cinematic), Telotte (“Rounding Up”), and Thanouli.
seems less and less true each passing year” (65). He admits that all of the films he dubs “psychological puzzle films” exhibit many of the characteristics emblematic of classical narration such as continuity editing, local causal logic, and a high degree of verisimilitude” (66). Importantly, though, “these texts clearly do not promote narrative clarity in the way that is typical of Hollywood fare, and thus call upon different sense-making procedures on the part of the audience” (66). Thompson fails to account for the sheer quantity of wide-release films that invite viewers to work hard at reconstructing a film’s story from its unconventional, often fragmented discourse. Panek, meanwhile, should note that these movies do promote narrative clarity, even if in unconventional ways: an important aspect of these films is their decipherability along the very “classical” lines that Bordwell and Thompson define and defend. Today’s experimental narratives are solvable puzzles, closer to An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge than to Last Year at Marienbad. Even David Lynch’s Mulholland Drive, as N. Katherine Hayles and Nicholas Gessler illustrate through a minute-by-minute diagram of the film, is in many senses narratively stable. This isn’t to suggest that Lynch’s film isn’t thematically ambiguous, but only that its fabula is reconstructable from its syuzhet.

Cornelia Klecker has gone furthest bridging these positions, suggesting that The Sixth Sense is neither anomalous nor part of the avant-garde, but a “hybrid of classical Hollywood and art cinema narration” (“Mind-Tricking” 139). The self-reflexive force of a second screening of The Sixth Sense fills each of the five registers in Bordwell’s definition of art cinema narration, as the viewer’s attention necessarily “shifts or extends from the narrated to the narration itself” (Klecker, “Mind-Tricking” 140). The mini film-school seminar of supplements on the DVD, the invitation to see the film through the eyes of its creators, the film’s movement from classical to art cinema narration, the attention-to-detail required to simply get this blockbuster—regardless of
whether or not all of this adds up to *complexity* in a deep, multi-faceted sense, it certainly presupposes a level of cinematic engagement and sophistication among general audiences all but impossible to assume before the advent of cable TV, the VCR, the camcorder, the World Wide Web, and, maybe most importantly, the DVD, or all of the ways in which the movie theater is not where most movies happen. This shift from one type of narration to another occurs only on a second viewing; the twist acts as a warp zone into the next viewing, on the next medium, on the next narrative register, in the next century—at home. Two films in one, *The Sixth Sense* is a cinematic gadget, one that disassembles general audiences’ narrative conditioning only to offer its second, cinephilic viewing as a tutorial on the rhetoric of digital media (as image layering, as virtual immersion, as framing and performativity), through the devices of digital media.

While certainly interesting in and of itself, had the film been a commercial failure or only a modest hit this phenomenological shift from one sort of narration to another, from one aesthetic impulse to another, might not say too much about widespread changes in the production and reception of cinema and cinematic narration. As it stands, though, *The Sixth Sense* is a billion dollar movie for which the implied viewer is a cinephile, an “armchair narratologist” (Denson), or, in Kristen Daly’s terms, a “viewser,” someone who performs a “multitude of interactions” with the film across a variety of media platforms (82). The narrative structure of *The Sixth Sense* depends on the viewer’s ability to *own* the movie, to bring it back home and make it part of her life. *Fight Club*, *The Matrix*, *The Others*, *Vanilla Sky*: these are just a few of the many films often cited by scholars as illustrative of the rise of narrative complexity in Hollywood film, that imply a second viewing, that promote what Jason Mittell calls “forensic fandom” (“Lost” 128).
and an “operational aesthetic” (“Narrative” 35), and they were released at just the time when Hollywood was going to great lengths persuading audiences to purchase, not merely rent, losslessly repeatable movies for the home.

_The Sixth Sense_ reflexively highlights the powers of re-watching, of immersion in video, of bringing smart media into the home. An ostensibly minor scene worth a close investigation in these terms occurs 35 minutes into the film, well after Malcolm’s been shot but well before he learns he’s dead. The first of the scene’s eleven shots is of Malcolm entering his house and is from the spatial point of the TV in the living room, though only identified in shot two. A voice calls out, “Malcolm, sit your cute butt down and listen up.” After a strange moment of suspense, we learn in the second shot that the voice belongs to a woman on the television, speaking directly into the camera. We gather right away that this is Malcolm and Anna’s wedding video, that the speaker is a bridesmaid (played by Lisa Summerour) making a virtual toast to Malcolm. For a moment, though, as the sound of her voice bridges shots one and two, we briefly misapprehend the figure on the TV screen to be directly communicating with Malcolm in his living room. Shot three shows Malcolm sitting down, following the bridesmaid’s instructions. Thus, besides Cole, and Anna in her sleep at the film’s final twist, the bridesmaid is the only character in the film after Malcolm’s death we can rightly say addresses Malcolm directly, even if in an unorthodox way.

32. Mittell borrows the term _operational aesthetic_ from an account by Neil Harris of audiences’ experiences with the spectacles of P.T. Barnum.
33. Linda Badley registers this moment as a reference to the haunted TV of _Poltergeist_ (9).
It’s not all that unorthodox, though, when we take into account just how pervasive the motif of haunted and otherworldly media is throughout the film. The motif recharges old media with the spectral intensities they carried when they were new, or even with their pre-corporate,
more open promises of communication: “Electronic techniques recognize no contradiction in principle between transmitter and receiver” (Enzensberger 15). The TV, the movie subtly suggests, is doing new things, fulfilling old promises. As Linda Badley points out, The Sixth Sense is part of a cycle of ghost movies that consistently deploy the motif of electronic communication technology and virtual reality: “as various technologies made distinctions between life and the absence of life, between memory and identity, reality and virtuality increasingly difficult to discern, ghosts acquired a renewed fascination” (6). From cable TV to the DVD player to video games to the World Wide Web, the public’s invitations into the home of spectral, non-, or quasi-human agents of intelligence multiplied to an unprecedented degree in the 80s and 90s.

Along these lines, in Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television, Jeffrey Sconce tracks the introduction of new media, analyzing how the public often imagines new communication technologies through three images of the paranormal—ghosts and disembodiment, a separate plane of sovereign existence Sconce calls the “electronic elsewhere,” and the anthropomorphization of non-biological, mechanical objects (57). These depictions of “paranormal media are important,” Sconce writes, “not as timeless expressions of some undying electronic superstition, but as a permeable language in which to express a culture’s changing social relationship to a historical sequence of technologies” (10). The Spiritualist movement of the 19th century tethered itself to the new medium of telegraphy, one example of how “metaphysics are apparently most convincing when supported with some form of mathematics” (44). From the techno-salvation work of Ray Kurzweil to the “simulation argument” of Nick Bostrom, it’s quite clear that contemporary society hasn’t transcended the spectral and spiritual as structuring metaphors for conceiving of advanced technology. Indeed, as Sconce explains,
fantasies of “a complete absenting of the body and entrance into a more rarefied plane of existence have definitively shifted from the metaphysics of the church to those of the computer chip” (20).

*The Sixth Sense* is worth thinking of in these terms. The film articulates popular millennial fantasies of the re-inscription of old media by new, or of the new, spectral intensities of the digital, now underlying and rewriting all forms of technologically mediated communication. Why, in this media-obsessed film, does Shyamalan choose to not depict the computer? The film came out a year after Google’s debut, well after Yahoo’s and MSN’s, at a time when nearly half of U.S. adults were regularly using the web; the Nintendo 64 and Sony PlayStation were massively popular, contributing to the $5 billion generated by video game sales in the U.S. in 1999, a sizable portion of the revenue coming from Cole’s demographic group. In fact, “in 1998 video game sales equaled theater receipts for the first time” (Rodowick 27). By 1999 the computer—as the World Wide Web, as video games, as a number-crunching and word-processing device—was no longer just a technological marvel: it was a booming economic and cultural phenomenon. The web became popular culture during the dot-com bubble of 1997-2000, writes Brad Stone in his history of Amazon: “In the late 1990s, the Web evolved from the province of geeks to the stuff of front-page newspaper stories, day traders, and regular folks who were venturing for the first time into what was then popularly called cyberspace.” Indeed, “Computing is not about computers any more,” concluded Nicholas Negroponte in 1996, “It is about living” (6).  

34. See Garrett Stewart’s *Framed Time* for a thorough reading of what he calls the “Hollywood ontological gothic film” (*Jacob’s Ladder, The Others, The Sixth Sense*, and so on). Throughout *Framed Time* Stewart writes about the ways in which contemporary twist films deliberately avoid representations of the very technologies that shape their narration: “the culture of interface, as well as of digital simulation, can pervade a narrative idiom even when not spelled out by it”
All of the media that fit into film appear in *The Sixth Sense*. The missing medium is the computer, the medium that film now finds itself fitting into, and not only in the sense of transmission (as was the case with TV), but in a generative sense as well. Like Malcolm, who projects his failures with Vincent onto Cole (failures that essentially kill Malcolm, that give him his immaterial existence), *The Sixth Sense* projects its identity outward, seeing in other media those characteristics that give it its own digital identity. The computer is decidedly absent from the film, but it is nevertheless everywhere present: in production and post-production, or in its digital editing and post-profilmic material revisions; in its post-theatrical exhibition and receptive experiences, from DVDs to online message boards; thematically, in the film’s marked interest in reawakening the potentials of old media. Is it any wonder that Shyamalan would take such an interest in the interactive potential of old media, both in their practical uses and in their more hallucinatory effects, at just the time when new digital media begin to rewrite these old media, to recharge them as even more manipulable and interactive? As marketed and used by consumers beginning in the late 90s, the DVD format encourages re-watching, the spectator’s movement from passive immersion to active investigation, in the process transforming the TV, making it more like the personal computer. Photography becomes something we have to examine more closely for digital trickery. Computer generated imagery in movies easily misleads us into thinking two actors are in the same room when they really aren’t, one or both digital phantoms. This is the spectral presence in *The Sixth Sense*—the re-inscription of photographic realism as image layered and otherworldly, ghostly apparitions remaking recordable media.

(156). These films offer new, “ad-hoc conventions that seem to be growing up around the digital unconscious of not just a wired globe but a now only residually mechanical medium” (3).
Like anyone might when they address a camera as if it were a person, the bridesmaid presupposes a distance, her audience’s absence, the camera standing in for the identity of the addressee: the bridesmaid was always already speaking to a phantom. Malcolm now is a phantom, and as photographs and home movies let the long dead communicate with the living, the ostensibly living bridesmaid in the video communicates here with the dead. The temporal and ontological reversals this communication stages positions the video record as bi-directional: not only do camcorders allow normal people (i.e. non-celebrities) to make themselves into TV images, but as such they also allow the video-recorded speaker to directly address her presumed viewer in a way impossible or impractical by broadcasting. Our initial misapprehension that Malcolm is directly addressed by a person in the diegetic present—“sit your cute butt down and listen up”—in fact, I argue, is not a misapprehension at all. Rather, the moment accords with Malcolm’s medially, his position between worlds, his exceptionally cinematic consciousness, his final condition as pure video. It signals the film’s global conception of death and the afterlife as media fantasy, as interactive movie, as total cinema. The confusion recharges TV and recorded video with the bi-directional valences of wonder and suspicion they carry for small children and the paranoid, reminding us of a more primal horizon of expectations for moving image media. As is the case with the spectral photographs in Lynn and Cole’s house and the audiocassettes of Malcolm’s meetings with Vincent, and as is the case with the movie’s reminder of the inherent interactivity of narrative, the video communication in this scene enlivens what in 1999 were old media, by re-identifying their interactivity and re-mystifying their ontological ambiguities.

These are the very themes DVD manufacturers drew on to advertise their new home theater device, offering up “self-serving fantasies of the new product’s domestic consumption
with a polemical ontology of its medium and an ideological rationale for its social function,” in the words of William Boddy, writing about “the commercial launch of any new communications technology” (1). In a 1996 Panasonic video that served as a demonstration in stores of the cutting edge digital format, the announcer intones, “The magic island of Tahiti comes alive,” followed by an extended montage of blue beaches and skies. “Feel like you’re there? That’s the idea. And random access lets you jump right to where you want to be, over and over again.” Verisimilar, interactive, personalized, losslessly repeatable, all happening in the comfort of your home: each technological iteration of moving image media unquestionably moves us closer to the long-held dream articulated here by Panasonic of total cinema, of virtual reality, of life inside a “golden montage” (Egan 65), but “It’s not in the distant future. You’re watching it right now. And it’s here for you.” Toshiba’s “You’ve Got Senses. Use Them.” campaign warns that the DVD is “coming to your senses soon.” Commercial spots show a family inserting a DVD and then literally holding onto their seats, close-ups of pupils dilating as apparitions of light shoot out from the screen and dance through the living room. The DVD transforms the house, resuscitates the TV. In a Toshiba demonstration DVD, potential buyers learn that with the new technology, “You don’t just hear sound, you’re right in the middle of crystal-clear dialogue.” Bryan Robert Sebok paraphrases the rhetoric of Samsung’s ad campaign depicting a human figure with DVD parts for organs: the “DVD should be understood as an idealized and futuristic technology capable of perfecting human perception” (249).

Verisimilar, but also interactive: these were the twin desires of the movie and computer industries when they developed the DVD. The computer, as everyone knows, is good for you, and it’s good for your children. It’s not TV. It will make you smart: “an opportunity for learning that we’ve never had before.” You can be immersed without being a couch potato: “Ask
questions. Compare and contrast and analyze” (Apple). For the computer industry, writes Sebok, “Superior audio and video quality was thought to be insufficient.” Rather, the industry required “interactivity that would include internet connectivity, random access functionality, and the capability for functional menu buttons” (72). In another Toshiba ad audiences are told that, “The possibilities are endless. Movies with options.” Presaging viewers’ desire to watch *The Sixth Sense* through the director’s eyes, of being a smarter consumer of media, Toshiba advertises “selectable screen aspect ratios, so you can watch the movie the way the director intended it to be.” “You call the shots with the remote control,” Panasonic tells us. “DVD will forever change how you are entertained, how you and your family learn and play” (Toshiba, “You’ve Got Senses”). Puzzle films such as *The Sixth Sense* take this dictate seriously; their narratives are video games, encouraging recursive learning and exploration, training audiences to become digital cinephiles. The DVD interface allows viewers to go “behind-the-scenes” in a non-sequential (personalized) route, choosing from various menu options and taking control of the narrative’s arrangement and presentation. In this sense, the reflexivity of *The Sixth Sense* DVD is overdetermined: on one level the text reflects back on its own artistic creation through featurettes about the film; on another it asks audiences to pay attention to narration in a way unusual to mainstream film; and on yet another it actively trains audiences to manage and interact with digital media, or the new home of the moving image.

As Malcolm watches the bridesmaid’s virtual toast, shots four through eight zoom in on each of their faces, allowing the spectator to come into closer virtual contact with each figure, removing most other elements of the mise-en-scène: faces, and almost exclusively faces, occupy the frame from cut to eyeline-match cut, as if the figures now occupy the same space. The image moves so near the wedding video that the 4:3 aspect ratio of the TV no longer acts as a frame.
Just as Malcolm responds to the TV’s directions, the zooms and cuts register an engulfing, inter-communicative model of video spectation, of personal address, writ large at home in widescreen. Simultaneously, though, the distance line of what the camera captures lengthens, as the parallel zoom moves us closer to each face and farther from their equidistant point: the physical cameras (or our mental image of them) filming Bruce Willis’ face and the TV on the studio set move away from each other as the images of Malcolm and the video narrow in, beginning to resemble each other more markedly. Though quite common to the rhetoric of narrative cinema, the spatial complexity of the parallel zoom in this case resonates with sustained ideas of the work: namely, Shyamalan’s reckoning of the afterlife as resembling moving images, as an eternal video dream, a living movie, verisimilar and interactive; the technique foreshadows Malcolm’s final, post-epiphany condition, in which he closes his eyes and becomes video, into the blue again, removed entirely from physical space as the profilmic itself comes to an end and the credits roll.
Recently, the parallel zoom resonates with Shyamalan’s less subtle interest in various forms of communication, whether live and interpersonal, tele-, or paranormal. The latter two forms account for the closing in of video image and phantom, whereas the live and interpersonal—that mode that Malcolm can no longer maintain—recedes into the distant physical. The crowded auditorium cuts out and zooms into the Dolby-surround sanctuary of the home, individual viewers now armed with the post-Gutenberg pleasures of the novel, the “leisure to reread and freedom to skip,” “in privacy” and at their “own tempo” (Alter 34), “glancing back through the text to see what [they] have missed or forgotten” (Hayward 135). Home theater equipment is marketed, writes Barbara Klinger, as “a fortress technology. It provides a domestic version of the public movie theater that saves the individual from the trouble, if not the risk, of going out” (Beyond 242). Panasonic asks us to “imagine” a system “with audio that brings movie-theater Dolby Digital surround sound into your living room. Imagine movies that may offer soundtracks in up to 8 languages, or subtitles in 32 languages, opening up a world of
foreign movies to your collection.” Like Malcolm, who only learns at film’s end that his existence is filtered, that his physical body is immobile even if he thinks he’s exploring the world, DVDs and home theater systems offer the pleasures of interaction and exploration, but from within a fortress, a bubble, a surround sound of immobile, personalized, virtual immersion.

The bridesmaid tells Malcolm that “Anna is like my sister, and you better make her happy. And I’m not talking about no ‘mmm, this tastes like real butter kind of happy.’ I’m talking about ‘Julie Andrews, twirling around like a mental patient on a mountain top kind of happy.’” The ideal marital state is one characterized by cinema, the dizzying lunacy of song-and-dance spectacle: make life like a movie; become cinematic. Even the counter to The Sound of Music itself comes from media, the cheesy stuff of commercial advertising. Both media texts that the bridesmaid alludes to are regularly re-watched by audiences, the “I Can’t Believe it’s Not
Butter!” ads passively and begrudgingly, *The Sound of Music* actively and passionately. In fact, Myra Franklin of Wales reserved a spot in *The Guinness Book of World Records* by watching the film 940 times (Klinger, *Beyond* 141). One text is smart media, elevated, inviting aesthetic immersion and sing-a-long mastery. The other is dumb media: old, banal, repugnant TV, the “idiot box,” a “toaster with pictures” feeding a vast wasteland of passive couch potatoes.

Following the bridesmaid’s dictum, *The Sixth Sense* inspired reactions similar to those for *The Sound of Music*, becoming, according to Linda Badley, “an addiction”: “the film not only brought spectators to the theaters but brought them back for repeated screenings…. Remaining in the theaters for months, *The Sixth Sense* became a sort of ritual” (8). Barbara Klinger writes extensively about home theater technology and the experiences of re-viewing a film, finding that the “repeated text becomes a launching pad for experiences” of both “mastery” and “solace” (*Beyond* 156). Surveying her undergraduate media students for several years, Klinger found that those movies students most often watched more than once are puzzle films, or movies that require an “explicit labor of decipherment” (159): *Pulp Fiction*, *The Sixth Sense*, *The Usual Suspects*, and so on. 35 Though Klinger finds that narrative “mastery” motivates viewers to re-

35. Klinger labels the puzzle film a “supergenre” (*Beyond* 157): the puzzle film group style manifests in neo-noir thrillers (*Memento*), romantic comedies (*Sliding Doors*), action films (*Run, Lola, Run*), domestic dramas (*Premonition*), dark comedies (*Pulp Fiction*), and science fiction (*eXistenZ*). In each case the filmmakers and studios presuppose an audience interested in the how of the narration, in the pleasures of discourse. The most cursory glance through IMDb message boards or Amazon product reviews of puzzle films reveals that audiences—at least those audiences who contribute to such online discussions—enjoy these movies as much for the mechanics of their telling as for the stories they tell. Repeat customers made up a greater proportion of *The Sixth Sense*’s theatrical audience than is normally the case for more classical Hollywood fare (W. Friedman), supporting Klinger’s finding that the movies young adults regularly watch more than once often belong to the puzzle film supergenre: “The viewer becomes a detective who tries to find clues, missed in the first screening, that will reveal the film’s enigmas” (*Beyond* 158). This “operational aesthetic” provokes viewers to “not just get swept away in a realistic narrative world (although that certainly can happen) but also to watch the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics” (Mittell
watch films, “cinema’s therapeutic potential drew students back to favorite titles” almost just as much (163). Like family and friends, movies watched over and over again provide “viewers with a road map through their lives, autobiographical landmarks that represent points of orientation to the past as well as to the present” (175). Is it any wonder, then, that “Psychologists have increasingly adopted cinema as a means of helping clients deal with their problems”? Viewers medicate with movies, providing a “predictable celluloid cure” (164): make movies your life. The wedding video was playing when Malcolm entered the house, and again at the film’s climax. Of course, on a first viewing we believe Anna watches the video to recall the days she and Malcolm weren’t so detached, the dreamier days of newlyweds. On a second viewing we realize she watches and re-watches the video “not in estrangement but in mourning” (Stewart 93), as a temporary video cure, safe in her domestic fortress. Anna is not in the living room when Malcolm enters the house, but presumably upstairs in bed; she’s asleep in front of the TV the second time the video plays. For Anna, the video is the surround sound of the domestic space, the video apparitions invited and re-invited into the home, playing on her unconscious as she sleeps.36

Along these lines, the bridesmaid’s address stands as a moment in which a video image tells a phantom or narrative trick whose consciousness is determined by narrative discourse to be

35). These pyrotechnics often reside on the level of syuzhet, of the innovative arrangement of story material, whether in the case of Memento’s reverse-chronology structure or Pulp Fiction’s anachronic, intersecting organization.
36. Though not concentrating as much on the “domestic fortress” aspects of Anna’s engagement with the video, Linda Badley writes insightfully of these moments, suggesting that the video signifies “love that continues spectrally beyond death”; the video “alludes to the haunting and haunted quality of cinema itself, which on some level is the sixth sense” (9). Similarly, Aviva Briefel connects Anna’s repeated viewings of the video to our own experience of watching and re-watching The Sixth Sense; but, whereas Anna’s “spectatorship of the video conveys her desire to revive the deceased, our repeated viewings of The Sixth Sense consist of an intellectual detachment in which we compulsively search for clues of his death” (99).
more like one sort of media (the repeatable widescreen classic, the sort of film *The Sixth Sense* aspires to) and less like another (the TV advertisement), all while the zoom moves so deep into the image of the bridesmaid that we begin to see its distortions, the speaker beginning to ghost. Perhaps most remarkable about the forceful reflexivity of this scene is our capacity to look past its multiple remediations, its allusions to pop culture, its marked cinematic style. This is a film the first time through that depends for its narrative tricks on conventional illusionism, not for alienating techniques that might draw attention away from the story and onto the discourse. The film takes it as a given that this sort of reflexivity won’t draw attention to itself, that the once mimetically disruptive or fourth-wall breaking techniques of allusions to pop culture, of TVs on film, and of a speaker in a video directly addressing her spectator on the other side of the screen won’t jolt audiences out of their suspension of disbelief.

If on the one hand the casual reflexivity of this scene goes unnoticed, on the other hand the film implies a second screening in which the viewer’s attention is trained to the discourse as much as the story; this is a classical film that transforms into an art film, a film that was always already a DVD. Re-watching *The Sixth Sense* in studious attention to every shot, to see how she was misled, the implied viewer (the investigative viewer) turns the film into, if not a fully interactive media object, then one far more interactively charged than previous eras’ supernatural thrillers. Crucially, but not paradoxically, this implied viewer closes in on both the film as film and the film as lived experience: make life like a movie and make movies your life. The movie as DVD becomes the viewer’s surround, an explorable virtual environment, the physical not gone but perpetually going, almost entirely constituted by clicks of thumbs and fingers. This is a narrative reflexivity that is by definition *new*: only a viewing public steeped in pop-culture, one that regularly makes movies and TV and mass media part of its daily existence, part of its
conversations and psychotherapy, the content and structuring agent of its thoughts and dreams, could possibly think these allusions and remediations mundane and mimetic enough to not be jolted out of their occupation in the story on a first viewing; only a viewing public technologically equipped to peruse and explore the film on their own terms and time can be expected to reap the rewards set aside for the film’s implied, re-viewing audience: “Our life is lived in, rather than with, media” (Deuze 138).

Reading user comments on message boards and reviews for the DVD, one can sense peoples’ excitement, and not just for the film itself, though there’s plenty of that, but for the phenomenological novelties and twists to what had seemed a stable and familiar form. The material capacity and narrative invitation to pause, rewind, replay, cite, explore, time-shift: these are not, writes Vivian Sobchack, “functions of the material and technological ontology of the cinematic; rather, they are functions of the material and technological ontology of the electronic, which has come to increasingly dominate, appropriate, and transform the cinematic” (149). In this way, writes Lev Manovich, “digital media redefines the very identity of cinema” (“What is Digital Cinema?” 173). The film’s twist is a gateway, a “repurposing,” an invitation to purchase, obsess, and interact, all from the comfort of your home: to become, in other words, a digitally enabled, 21st century cinephile.

Post-Production > Production

Still, when we do leave the house, we take movies with us. It’s difficult to think of new forms of moving image interactivity, and especially of bringing movies into the home, without taking into account personal camcorders and the role they have played and continue to play in the mediation and cinematization of society. The Sixth Sense directly addresses this form of interactive, user-controlled, home movie making, letting the technology serve as the film’s most
telling and explicitly rendered focus on the material possibilities and cultural impact of developments to moving image media. Malcolm attends two of Cole’s school plays, the first of which Cole acts in a minor role and the second of which he stars as the hero. In perhaps the strangest shot of the entire film, as Malcolm watches the first performance most every member of the crowded auditorium of parents simultaneously pull out and aim their camcorders at the stage. This moment of choreographed videography makes little tonal sense, striking in the film for its satirical amplitude. The moment resonates thematically, though, echoing Shyamalan’s sustained interest in video mediation and crystallizing an image of a culture that experiences life through video, a culture now equipped to render everyday life cinematic by transforming commonplace experiences into home movies. Those camcorders in 1999 were bulky, and many of the parents shut the eye not looking through the viewfinder. The parents seek to memorialize experience, but also to be fully mediated, to approach the other side of the presentation-representation divide, or to experience life first and foremost as its own video representation.
During the second play Shyamalan doesn’t relent, cutting throughout the scene to shots of the audience in which nearly every adult points a camcorder at the stage. Visually, Malcolm stands out for not aiming a camera. An immediate reading would say he’s not a relative of anyone in the performance. A reading that keeps in mind Shyamalan’s attention to deeply mediated lived experience might say that Malcolm doesn’t need the camera because he’s already living on the other side of the screen. His is a post-production perspective, entirely syuzhet. He lives at an ontological and technological remove from the parents, who have to strap on their bulky camcorders to begin to approach the cinematization of the self that comes so easily to the recently deceased in *The Sixth Sense*. The scene’s satirical thrust loses its velocity if we look forward just a few years, to a time when a person is as likely to have a video camera in their pocket as they are to have a pen, and moviemaking “has become a part of general experience” (Lanier 144).
While both sections of this chapter have already begun to examine the ways in which the post- (as post-production and post-theatrical reception) occupies an increasingly prominent place in cinematic creation and engagement, I focus specifically in this section on how Shyamalan’s film directs and redirects spectators’ attention to the cinematic cut. Editing, of course, has long been central to the work of post-production. The reinvention of cinema as computer file, as composites of image layers, encourages us to consider the new spatial dimension of montage (cuts happen within scenes as often as between them) while it also renders obsolete certain structuring metaphors of editing that still circulate in the public imagination (“the cutting room floor”). Shyamalan’s film misleads us through editing, but it is editing of a decidedly contemporary sort, embodying the logics of spatial montage offered up by new media. These scenes of the camcorder-parents at the play register a full faith in moving image media’s capacity to capture reality. *The Sixth Sense* points to such convictions, but within a larger, structurally unreliable narrative that mimics the death of the transparency of the moving image. In the process, Shyamalan implicates the cut as the locus of cinematic manipulation while redefining its manipulations through the metaphor of spatial montage, or the various forms of compositing and image layering made possible by digital media, those that go furthest untethering the image from its century-long indexical grounding.

The ghost of a girl (played by Mischa Barton) points Cole to a video containing hidden camera footage she recorded of her mother (Angelica Page) poisoning her. As the mother prepares lunch for her bed-ridden daughter she spoons furniture polish into the girl’s soup. Like the scene of the parents at the play, this moment underscores the film’s powerful reminder of the reinvention of cinema as ubiquitous and surveilling, as an inter-generational activity of contemporary culture. The girl’s father (Greg Wood) watches the tape, and we imagine that the
footage will eventually find its way to the police, to the courts, and that the girl’s mother will be punished. It’s the presumed transparency of the moving image that gives the video its legal standing. If *The Sixth Sense* had been made just a few years later, the girl would almost certainly have used a webcam to record the activity, and the defense attorney, under a 2006 amendment to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, would have the right to “request electronically stored information in its native format, including its metadata” (Parry). Increasingly, photographs and moving images used as evidence in court must be subjected to the “nascent field of image forensics—the analysis of digital images to determine their origin, editing history, and authenticity, or to reveal latent details that might be hard to discover with the naked eye” (Fourandsix). The fact that the footage is just a single shot, that the video was under the deceased girl’s bed in a locked box, that it’s a VHS tape and not a DVD, that as viewers we are privy to the tape’s chain of custody, that any post-production tampering is absolutely nowhere evident—these are the reasons why the footage stands as evidence. Now files on computers, movies are unhinged from any single or coherent context; if the file isn’t compressed, duplicates are identical to the original; the file, whether the original or the duplicate, is easily transferrable from one computer to another; as simply a series of numbers, the image on file is fully addressable, fundamentally less trustworthy.
1.19-1.22. Video evidence in *The Sixth Sense*.

The way we see the girl reach away from the device as the footage begins, the immobility of the camera as it sits behind dolls and a TV, the single-shot continuity of the image, the camera’s clearly articulated existence within the footage: this all adds up to what I name the *negative aesthetics of indexicality*—an aesthetic, with permutations, on display in “found footage” horror films, reality TV, mock-documentary sitcoms, and police surveillance shows. These manufactured, self-reflexive forms of realism aim to recover for the moving image its pre-digital capacity to trace the real. Of course, photorealistic moving images can and often do capture the real; they just don’t have to anymore. The next chapter on the found footage cycle examines how pervasive the moving image is as a record of real objects in real space, from surveillance cameras to “user-generated” traces of both the remarkable and trivial. Nevertheless, our approach to photography and the moving image undergoes a radical revision as the image becomes digital, as we begin to suspect the “end of photography as evidence of anything” (Brand), no longer “forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced” (Bazin 13).
Further still, as it stands in Shyamalan’s film, the realistic footage illustrates just how easy it is to stage this sort of indexicality, how it registers as an aesthetic, one easily mimicked.

The footage of the mother poisoning her child rhymes with another embedded video in the film, the aesthetic opposite of the crime footage. Cole’s bully at school, Tommy (Trevor Morgan) is an aspiring child actor, regularly bragging to his classmates about his accomplishments. He stars in a cough syrup commercial, one that begins at night as he wakes his parents, letting them know he doesn’t feel well. The mother spoon-feeds him medicine at the kitchen table. The commercial then cuts to the next morning, the mom looking out the window at her son playing and smiling. The presentation of the commercial clearly means to deflate Tommy’s obnoxious posing by parodying the tired conventions of TV advertising—the bad acting, the clichéd transitions, the conservative representation of family life, the “step right up” remedies. Recalling the bridesmaid’s cinematic advice, this commercial sits comfortably on the “I Can’t Believe it’s Not Butter!” end of the aesthetic spectrum. The cut from night to day within the ad transitions as a clockwise wipe, conventionally indicating time passing. In a film that goes far re-mystifying the potentials of the cinematic cut, the marked amateurishness of the clockwise wipe stands out (even on the commercial’s first viewing) as a post-production trick, a routine form of manipulation taken on by advertisers. It’s a form of “golden montage” (Egan 65)—of cinematizing something as banal as the common cold—only it’s one that has lost its impact, drawing too much attention to itself as manipulation.
The film’s twist is a terminal frame, or a frame only revealed at the end of the narrative. A foreshadow of this global terminal framing, the cough syrup commercial segment ends when Cole throws his shoe at the TV screen: only then do we realize the narrative occasion for the presentation of the commercial. The commercial segment, in Edward Branigan’s terms, ends with a “discovered” or “delayed” POV (113). Cole certainly takes an active-audience approach to the televisual intrusion into the home of his school bully. That is, he is as active as the one-way medium allows. Cole, though, needs to begin to treat the ghosts he sees as two-way media, not to recoil in horror as a passive spectator. Once he does, he has the confidence to play the hero in the second school play the film presents, his bully Tommy now playing the village idiot. Cole learns to be an active participant, learns to become a medium. Rather than avoiding his access to the supernatural, to the image layers that only he can see, he begins to experience them more completely, to dig into their metadata, their motivations and unfinished business. Cole must travel to recover the girl’s video, hidden in her bedroom in a sealed case, whereas the
commercial invades Cole’s home. Unable to take control of the image, to productively do anything about it, he throws his shoe at the screen. Cole’s engagement with each text matches their aesthetic sensibilities. He reacts aggressively to one sort of moving image practice (one many of us want dead) and takes special care with another (one we’re afraid is dying, or dead already). Like the bridesmaid’s address about *The Sound of Music* and “I Can’t Believe it’s Not Butter!,” Cole is positioned between two texts, in this case one that is re-viewed laboriously and another that desperately needs to be re-viewed. Aesthetically, these texts differ most markedly on the question of reality and the cut. One is a continuous shot of a mother feeding her child that Shyamalan makes sure to identify stylistically as the truth; the other is of a mother feeding her child that Shyamalan clearly marks as staged and in which the clockwise wipe stands out for its naked manipulations. In order to overcome the bullying text, Cole must seek out and actively engage with the other.

1.27. Throwing a shoe at the TV, *The Sixth Sense*. 
Considering how central editing is to Shyamalan’s narrative tricks, it is quite remarkable that the director makes story points of editing on these two occasions, inviting our derision at the terrible cutting of the cough syrup commercial and convincing us of the crime footage’s authenticity by its single-take continuity. Each of these opposing texts within the film reminds us of how literate we are of traditional editing strategies; these two moments position audiences as experts on the rhetorics and effects of the cinematic cut in old media. The crime footage works because of the complete coincidence of fabula and syuzhet. In real-time, the syuzhet’s temporality is the fabula’s temporality, and vice-versa, what Gérard Genette refers to as the “zero degree” of a “perfect temporal correspondence between narrative and story” (Narrative Discourse 36). This footage represents the ideal coherence between the presented and its presentation: they can’t be separated for the footage to have any evidentiary weight. The cough syrup commercial does nothing but separate. We know that Tommy is completely unlike the sweet little kid we see onscreen; further, the instant transition from night to day, from sick to smiling, illustrates the easy-to-spot shortcuts producers take as they rely on decades of audience conditioning.

Cuts in The Sixth Sense, though, are up to something else; they exist outside of these rhetorics. Encouraging audiences to develop a more evolved sense of cinematic manipulation, Shyamalan’s movie illustrates how a cut might mislead in material terms, but without being recognized on an initial viewing because of audiences’ default assumptions about editing and narration. Shyamalan’s is a trick of post-production, of finding just that beat in a scene at the very edge of giving the secret away, the sort of editing sleight-of-hand that doesn’t bear down on the audience in the way of the commercial’s clockwise wipe. The twist revises the preceding material, reminding even the most naïve spectator that a post-production presence was always
present within the frame. We review the film knowing this, and our attention focuses on all of
the narrative information obscured by the cuts, on how manipulative and misdirecting the film is
throughout. The separations these cuts entail between the presented and the presentation are
assumed to be traditional organizations of the fabula by the syuzhet. On a second viewing, the
cuts in *The Sixth Sense* are decidedly reflexive, drawing attention to themselves as
manipulations. What we notice on a second viewing is that cuts between scenes obscure the fact
that they’re not obscuring anything; rather, the separations happen within scenes and shots as
much as between them.

*Whereas in temporal montage, “separate realities form consecutive moments in time,”* Lev Manovich writes, in spatial montage, or “montage within a shot,” “separate realities form
contingent parts of a single image” (*Language* xvii). Image layering and compositing in digital
cinema are built on the logic of spatial montage, of creating a seamless space that consists of
anywhere from a few to thousands of separately rendered objects—a “palimpsestic combination
of data layers” (Rodowick 168). We might think of Malcolm’s post-death (or post-production)
scenes throughout the film as metaphorical renderings of spatial montage, of the new logic of
editing in digital systems, in which cuts within the image aim for total invisibility.

*The Sixth Sense*, like the strategy of keying, “presents a hybrid reality, composed of two
different spaces.” Manovich continues: “While traditional film montage privileges temporal
montage over montage within a shot—technically the latter was much more difficult to
achieve—compositing makes them equal.” Along these lines, Manovich asks us to consider the
user interfaces of popular video editing applications used by Hollywood in the late 90s, such as
Alias|Wavefront Composer, in which “the horizontal dimension represents time, while the
vertical dimension represents the spatial order of the different image layers making up each
image. A moving image sequence appears as a number of blocks staggered vertically, with each block standing for a particular image layer” (Language 155). Thus, the two dimensions are given equal standing, redefining the very nature of cinematic montage, which is now as readily spatial as temporal. Cole has the capacity to see these image layers as such, which is exactly the goal of the viewer upon review: to tease out the separate realities, to see the ghosts as ghosts. Certainly, Shyamalan’s trick asks us to pay careful attention to the elisions between scenes. It also, though, asks us to scrutinize the elisions within scenes—to notice that Malcolm and Lynn never address each other, that we never see any characters besides Cole look Malcolm in the eye or try to get his attention, and so on.

Re-watching the film with an attention to such matters is not unlike the experience of re-watching a scene after learning that it contains a special effect; that, say, actors in the scene weren’t actually walking around Manhattan during production, but in fact performed in front of a green screen, the cityscape composited in during post-production. Knowing this, the viewer might recognize how actors don’t interact with objects in their presumed setting, that the size of objects relative to the actors is just a little off, that passers-by don’t ever glance at or in anyway acknowledge the actors. This is an incredibly common practice: the new location-shoot, inside computers. Knowledge of this sort defamiliarizes the individual scene just as it begins to reset popular default settings about all moving images, reminding us that cuts increasingly happen within, and not just between, images. Decidedly instructive, the twist in *The Sixth Sense* admits its manipulation, captioning the picture and encouraging us to look at it again a bit more carefully, to peel away its image layers. The twist acts as a caption, an index, a re-categorizing and re-framing of the preceding narrative. As such, it awakens audiences to their most basic assumptions about cinematic narrative and editing. If a viewer is to make any sense of the film’s
narrative, she is forced to confront the authorial manipulations of post-production, to consider and reconsider editing along with the more common receptive focuses on acting, story, and so on. Taking into account Shyamalan’s interest in media, in the possibilities of cinematic narration, and in revealing things as not-there that appear to be (and vice-versa), is it any wonder that *The Sixth Sense* was edited by Andrew Mondshein, on the vanguard in electronic and computer editing, the first editor to “cut a feature film on a non-linear system”? (qtd. in Begley). The principles and effects of new media act as the structuring logic of this unreliable narrative, which asks us to rethink cinematic narration as the computer industry and Hollywood materially redefine the medium. Even if the film doesn’t contain much in the way of computer-generated imagery, the implied audience awakens by film’s end and on review to the logics of spatial montage, or to the new deceptions of photography, which no longer acts as a “certificate of presence” (Barthes, *Camera* 87), or in which “montage is no longer an expression of time and duration; it is rather a manipulation of the layers of the modularized image subject to a variety of algorithmic transformations” (Rodowick 173).

The staging of the scene between Malcolm and Lynn as they wait for Cole to come home resonates in these terms. The two sit opposite one another, and the shot is centered, so that the front door to the home equally divides the left and right sides of the living room. Bruce Willis and Toni Collette almost look at each other, but never directly—something is just a little off. What Shyamalan achieves with this near-glance between characters is clear on a second viewing: we assume on the first viewing that they are speaking to one another, that the scene begins in a conversational pause, and we realize on the second viewing that they aren’t looking at each other directly, that they never exchange any words. Even more subtly, though, what the blocking of the scene resembles is one in which two actors are filmed separately, only to be cut together in post-
production to make it seem as if they share the same space. This is a common technique, for
instance, of making mimaetically viable the same actor playing two parts onscreen at the same
time, but it’s a technique that is also regularly used when a scene requires a visual effect of some
sort, such as the overlay of animation or computer generated imagery. For a long time (especially
before the digital creation and manipulation of verisimilar moving imagery became economically
workable for studios), the easiest blocking conditions in which to produce spatial montage of this
sort in a medium two-shot was to make sure that the actors do not cross two-dimensional paths
on the image’s surface; better yet, to seat them on opposite sides of the image and have them stay
still: this is the rhetoric of “static frontality” (Allen, “Digital Cinema” 64) that characterizes
electronic keying and early work in CGI. What audiences see is a split-screen, but one that has
been masked, made to look like a single shot—spatial montage.

Of course, there’s no reason for Shyamalan to employ the trick here; Cole simply enters
through the door, bridging the two halves of the frame. Nevertheless, even a casual filmgoer has
been trained to register such blocking as warning of an imminent visual effect. The blocking
generates the intuitive pang of the uncanny many audiences register when a blue- or green-screen
is employed imperfectly (quite common to films made in the late 80s and early 90s), suddenly
depth and movement taking on an inexplicable but felt difference from ordinary profilmic space,
the outlines of actors just a little off. This scene is blocked for a visual effect, only there is none.

The special effect of the scene, the reason Shyamalan refers back to the scene when
Malcolm learns he’s dead, is of a narrative sort: Malcolm isn’t actually in the room with Lynn, or
is only sort-of in the room with her. Unlike digital compositing of the kind mentioned above, in
which actors are filmed separately though their characters in the finished film appear to occupy
the same space, here Shyamalan films Willis and Collette together even though we finally learn
that the characters occupy separate spaces. Thus, while George Lucas “films” The Phantom
Menace, doing everything in his arsenal to make it seem as if Liam Neeson actually looks
directly into the eyes of Jar Jar Binks, Shyamalan and a whole host of puzzle filmmakers go to
great lengths staging scenes in which actors must never acknowledge each other. In this way,
puzzle films such as The Sixth Sense draw on and invert the new operative compositing logics of
digital moving images, twisting in such a way so that protagonists awake to the no-place of their
virtual existence, or to the new spectral landscapes of cinema.

I remember re-watching this scene for the first time with great scrutiny—to see the
staging, to see how long the silence in the room lasts before Cole enters. Perhaps my feeling that
a visual effect was in the air was simply collateral damage from my energetic attention. That
attention is something Shyamalan absolutely intended, and the thematics of my misperception
accord with central ideas of the film: visual media might capture spirits, might come alive in
uncanny ways if we look closely, might mislead us into thinking something or someone is there
when they aren’t. On a second screening, we become acutely aware of the creators’ presence within and around the frame, the ways in which post-production draws the contours of this scene’s deceptions. The film directly addresses the reinscription of old media by new; though the film doesn’t explicitly depict computers, it renders digital technology as spectral, as a post-production, afterlife presence, re-writing and re-wiring the ontology of the moving image.

“Never finished with anything.”

As digital editing became standard practice in the 90s, the ease with which filmmakers could construct imagery, remix it, and add special effects encouraged new formal and material experiments with the moving image. Production acts as simply the “first stage of post-production” (Manovich, Language 303) as blockbuster filmmaking becomes a “post-production-based medium” (M. Pierson 151). Actors perform in front of green screens, detached from the supposed materiality of the diegetic world, only to be composited into that world (one often built from scratch using software) during post-production. Visual effects departments regularly begin working on special effects long before production commences. Films, cycles, and genres are generated from filmmakers’ desire to be on the cutting edge of the digital, to let the capacities of the computer determine the content of films. Movies are made with the knowledge that viewers can interact with the film long after its theatrical release, and so many are made to be repeated, are puzzles full of Easter eggs, or foreshadow events from sequels years off.

_Avatar, The Avengers, Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, The Matrix, Star Wars, Twilight_—Hollywood pays the bills making movies for obsessed fans, for people willing to continually engage with a “property,” properties that are “repurposed” through sequels, merchandising, crossover sagas, video-game adaptations, and so on: the post- or meta-theatrical is where most of the economic action happens for Hollywood. Puzzle films such as _The Sixth_
*Sense* build this invitation for repeated engagement, for post-theatrical reception, into their own narrative structures. In their final minutes, many of these films go about repurposing themselves. This act is socially and politically ambivalent. On the one hand, “DVD-enabled” (Elsaesser, “Mind-Game” 39) cinema certainly encourages digital literacy. Further, the puzzle film repurposes itself in a more aesthetically enriching way than Happy Meal tie-ins, endless sequels, and novelizations of films that were themselves adapted from young adult fiction, or all of the objects of convergence and franchises—the “parasite industry” (Hayward 153). Finally, puzzle films, like video games, offer a more sustainable model of media consumption than these other forms of repurposing—one disc or download offering long-term pleasures. On the other hand, of course, “digital literacy” can be thought of as a central program of neoliberal culture, one in which we are “never finished with anything” (Deleuze, “Postscript” 5), in which we use the same devices for work as we do for pleasure, learning how to become better employees and consumers as we ostensibly enjoy cinema. As justifiably encouraged as we might be about online community building through message boards and social media, it’s obvious that the trails we leave behind are tracked, gathered, and sold to the highest bidder. Conversely, but just as alarmingly, home theater devices are marketed in a way that taps into our desire to wall-off the outside world, to make media consumption a deeply private, time-shifted affair. Puzzle films certainly encourage personal, commoditized engagement with the moving image, even if, as *The Sixth Sense* illustrates, they also train viewers to be more active and alert watchers of new media, to understand and appreciate their range of deceptions.

Digitization signals the potential disappearance of the indexical, and *The Sixth Sense*’s twist thematizes these developments: like Malcolm, viewers should know that the world has changed; what was known to be inevitable but thought to occur sometime in the future (death,
digitization) is here now, if in a limbo or hybrid form. The DVD format’s commercial introduction as a meta-medium, its industrial status as a profitable partnership between Hollywood and Silicon Valley, fastened the “end-user” engagement with cinema to digital media and the home computer. Puzzle films, films that repay review, arrive at just the time when Hollywood begins selling home videos in earnest. “Viewers” (Daly 82) grow more familiar with the web and the rhetoric of digital technology the more they engage with these films. By necessity, cinephiles today are digitally literate. Nevertheless, simply knowing how to operate a DVD player or post a message on IMDb sets a low bar for digital literacy, if a significant one to cross.

Perhaps more instructively, the puzzle film cycle rethinks cinematic narration, letting the logics and practices of digital media shape its structures of signification. The digitization of film moves the medium a bit closer to the performative possibilities offered by literary fiction. Further still, an intense attention to framing, perspective, and point of view establishes this cycle as literally and narratively ambitious. As Morris Dickstein reminds us, film’s “recognition as an art form was slow and laborious, partly because it became suspiciously popular but also because, like photography, it seemed little more than a mechanical reproduction of the given, a low-grade form of mimesis” (98). As films become files they become conditionally manipulable; this is an aesthetic shift from capturing to rendering, from recording to creating. Digital data must be framed in some way if it is to be intelligible to human perception. The phantoms in these films articulate the new “ontological vertigo[s]” (Alter 6) associated with framing the immaterial, the necessary levels of mediation that now exist between viewers and photorealistic space, and the new, indiscernible obscurity of the moving image as it becomes digital. This attention to syuzhets, to a narrative’s discourse, follows from both technical developments and cultural
activities with new media. It is simply much easier for editors to “remix” a film than it was prior to the invention of non-linear editing systems. “The cutting room floor” is an anachronism, now just a dying metaphor for the interfaces of editing software. Culturally, the films uncover widespread fantasies of virtual subjectivity, of the immaterial or materially hybrid selves manifested by those quasi-human avatars we encounter and operate in videogames and online. Many puzzle films attempt to narrate these new forms of virtual subjectivity, twisting in such a way so that the virtual figure wakes up to a level of material existence they overlooked, precisely because of how convincing and compelling the virtual world feels. Most of these puzzle films are terminally framed, the perfect narrative condition to represent a culture deeply immersed in media, or even a culture unaware of inhabiting virtual spaces of time-shifting and ontological gaps; audiences atomize, and new subjectivities emerge as media become more private and personal, but also more addressable, more explorable, more virtual. This is the new reflexivity: a narrative aesthetic and its dissemination that allegorize digital immersion while encouraging audiences to become digital.
Chapter 2: The Blair Witch Project and The Found Footage Film

“The days of losing touch are over” [...] Bix hesitates, like he’s held this secret so long he’s afraid of what will happen when he releases it into the air. “I picture it like Judgment Day,” he says finally, his eyes on the water. “We’ll rise out of our bodies and find each other again in spirit form. We’ll meet in that new place, all of us together, and first it’ll seem strange, and pretty soon it’ll seem strange that you could ever lose someone, or get lost.”

—Jennifer Egan, A Visit from the Goon Squad

It’s very hard to get lost in America these days, and it’s even harder to stay lost.

—Heather, The Blair Witch Project

Two weeks before the wide release of The Sixth Sense, a micro-budgeted smash made its first appearance in limited release across the U.S. The Blair Witch Project debuted in 27 theaters on July 23, 1999, breaking “the house record in every one” (Amir Malin qtd. in McCollum). It shot out to 1,100 spots around North America the next week, averaging $25,885 per screen, besting the record-setting averages of films such as Schindler’s List, Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace, and Titanic. “Raking in money faster than Bill Gates” (Andrews), The Blair Witch Project continued to expand, eventually collecting $140 million at the North American box-office and nearly $250 million in total worldwide grosses, a startling number considering its production budget has been reported as low as $20,000.37 Earning $10,000 for every $1 spent, the movie quickly became the most successful ever in terms of cost-to-revenue ratio, the sleeper hit of the century.

37. This number is shaky. Reports usually fall between $20,000 and $60,000, though once Artisan purchased the movie at Sundance they certainly spent hundreds of thousands of dollars prepping the movie for wide-release.
Clearly a different sort of spectacle, *The Blair Witch Project* is a fictional movie made by real amateurs, a home video playing on the same screens as the big-budget behemoths of spring and summer. This is ostensibly the “found” video and film footage of a student documentary crew that disappeared in the Maryland woods in 1994. The crew consists of Heather, the director of the project; Josh, the principal camera operator; and Mike, the sound technician. They’re making a movie chronicling the Maryland legend of the “Blair Witch.” They interview townsfolk in Burkittsville before entering the legend’s haunted woods. They don’t take the stories seriously until they have to. Hearing noises in the night, they wake in the morning to strange stick figures scattered around their campsite. Lost, hungry, cold, and tired, they trek hopelessly in circles for days. Josh disappears one night. Heather and Mike search for him, eventually coming across a rundown cabin. They enter it, the cameras drop to the ground, we hear terrible noises, and the movie ends. Eduardo Sánchez, the film’s co-director, summarizes the plot: “they were looking for the witch and then bad things happened” (qtd. in Whipp).

Independent film producer and best-selling author of *Spike, Mike, Slackers, and Dykes: A Guided Tour Across a Decade of Independent Cinema*, John Pierson created and hosted the TV series *Split Screen* in the mid-90s. Airing on IFC and Bravo, Pierson’s show chronicled various goings-on in the independent film community. In August of 1997 *Split Screen* debuts an 11-minute short called “The Blair Witch Project.” This was the “investor trailer” that had been sent around by Haxan films, the tiny Orlando-based production company that consisted of *The Blair Witch Project*’s co-directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, along with the film’s producers Robin Cowie, Gregg Hale, and Michael Monello. Taking the form of a talking-heads style documentary, the investor trailer begins with a true history of witches and their persecution in America before turning its attention to the legend of the Blair Witch and to the missing student
filmmakers. The short film explains how the police investigation has reached a dead-end. The police will soon release the students’ “found footage” to the families of the missing, who have hired Haxan films to wade through it, looking for explanations. The episode of *Split Screen* becomes an instant hit. People watching at home think it is real, or are seriously confused, flooding Pierson’s website with comments and messages. A private investigator in New York sees the episode and is determined to search for the missing filmmakers: “He was obsessed with the idea of reopening the case and finding these students,” explains Gregg Hale (qtd. in Whipp). Sensing something special, Pierson’s Grainy Pictures invests in the project, putting up $35,000 for Haxan films to create a feature about the found footage. Over seven days and nights in October of 1997, Haxan shoots what would become the raw material of *The Blair Witch Project*. In April of 1998, 8 minutes of the footage appears on *Split Screen*. The show doesn’t identify the work as fictional. The episode becomes a hit, airing and re-airing throughout the summer.

After months editing the 20 hours of footage down to 90 minutes, Haxan premieres *The Blair Witch Project* at the Sundance Film Festival in January 1999. Scalpers charge “$50 a seat for Blair’s midnight screening” (Posner), easily the “festival's hottest ticket” (Puig, “Is It Real?”). Artisan Entertainment, a small studio previously known as LIVE and best known for the indie hits *Pi* and *Reservoir Dogs*, purchases *The Blair Witch Project* for a little over a million dollars, even though the film, Eduardo Sánchez says, “cost about as much as a new Ford Taurus with all the options” (qtd. in O’Sullivan). Artisan invests in re-edits, going as far as post-dubbing most of the film’s sound. The movie goes to Cannes in May, winning the Young Filmmakers prize, the only American movie to receive an award that year. At Cannes, Sánchez keeps “running into people who were wearing more than [his] movie cost” (qtd. in Moore).
Haxan sets up a simple website expanding on the legend and the investigation into the filmmakers’ disappearance. At Sundance, the small production company posts “missing person” fliers for the student filmmakers around Park City. Once they purchased the movie, and following Haxan’s lead, Artisan decides on a number of inexpensive and novel approaches to getting the word out about *The Blair Witch Project*. They choose not to advertise on TV prior to the film’s release. Instead, the company sends 100 young interns—“community trendsetters” (Puig, “Is It Real?”)—to college hotspots such as clubs, cybercafés, and coffeehouses. They pass out missing person fliers of the student filmmakers, along with T-shirts, soundtrack music, and a Blair Witch “dossier” (Beale). This sort of “guerilla marketing” had been popular in the music industry for a while, but was rarely practiced so aggressively by a studio to promote a film (Beale). All of the paraphernalia points people back to the website, which Artisan had turned into a rich interactive experience with sections such as “The Mythology” (about the legend of the witch), “The Filmmakers” (about Heather, Josh, and Mike), “The Aftermath” (about the failed police investigation), and “The Legacy” (about the release of the movie).
The film’s success should be credited in part to the film’s online marketing, the first case of a studio fully realizing the potential of the web to produce “viral buzz” for a film, and one of the earliest examples of “transmedia marketing and storytelling” (Perren 222). *The Blair Witch Project* acted as the perfect pilot for such a project, as the film itself illustrated cultural anxieties quite similar to the general unease many of us had at the time about online information: Where did this material come from? Is it reliable? Is this real or fake? Of course, many websites had

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2.01. “Missing Persons” promotional flyer for *The Blair Witch Project*. 
clear and obvious authors. Most movie sites at the time resembled digital press kits, the source of the information always quite clear. A studio would present materials of a transparently marketing-directed nature: descriptions of the making of the film, brief behind-the-scenes featurettes, glowing cast and crew biographies, plot synopses, and so on (Boyar). The producers of *The Blair Witch Project* saw viewers’ expectations of movie sites as an opportunity, offering instead an expansion of the narrative world, never admitting the fictional nature of the film. Police reports, an elaborate and convoluted backstory on the legend of the witch, biographies of the missing student filmmakers: all of this material extended the truth-claims of the “documentary,” allowing visitors to generate and share theories about what really may have happened and to actually participate in the investigation (or in the fictional narrative, depending on one’s awareness). By July 25th of 1999, the site had received 21 million hits. Prior to the movie’s wide release in theaters, the site had received 54 million, cracking the top 50 in worldwide web traffic. By the end of August it jumps up to 80 million. Visitors spend an average of 16 minutes on the site, and many people spend hours, far longer than most movie sites, and even longer than visitors were spending on average at CNN.com. Fan sites dedicated to sharing theories on the material begin to pop up: by the time of the film’s release the “Blair Witch webring” includes nearly 70 sites (Regan).

The Sci-Fi cable channel debuts the Haxan-Artisan hour-long movie *The Curse of the Blair Witch* on July 12th. Sci-Fi didn’t want to air a “making of” or “behind-the-scenes” feature, but rather a stand-alone film that would treat the film as factual. Blurring the lines between marketing and art, *Curse* is a talking-heads style documentary about the legend of the witch and the investigation into the disappearance of the student filmmakers, successfully priming audiences for a feature comprised entirely of the students’ found footage. The show becomes a
huge hit for the channel, re-airing 10 times throughout July and August. On August 9th, Penguin-Putnam releases the book *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier*, which becomes an immediate bestseller. Like the website and the cable special, the book dives deep into the backstory of the legend and the police investigation into the filmmakers’ disappearance. The website, the cable special, the book: all develop and strengthen the idea that these events are real, a full and complete case, in which the feature film is simply the most visible manifestation.

In mid-August, the film’s directors hit the cover of *Time* within a few days of the cast appearing on the cover of *Newsweek*, the simultaneous publications standing at the time as the “Holy Grail of publicity” (Harry Clein qtd. in Lyons, “Season”). This was a strange new phenomenon, one that newspapers and magazines had to cover. Look at all of the interest in this movie online. Look at the 60-plus fan sites dedicated to the film. People will want to read about this. The hype begins to generate hype. By the time it was released nationally, the film had transformed from “indie oddity to full-blown media phenomenon” (Lyons, “Blair”). Within days of the film’s release, parodies begin appearing on TV. *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, *Late Night with Conan O’Brien*, and World Wrestling Federation’s *Smackdown!* spoof the film’s signature look (Ramirez). Promoting their September 9th Video Music Awards, MTV creates a series of *Blair Witch* parodies, including one in which Janeane Garofalo, Method Man, and Chris Rock arrive at a campsite with a film crew, only to discover “a hundred film crews all there to do their own parodies” (K. Johnson). Within weeks, short and feature-length imitations begin to circulate: *The Bigfoot Project, The Blair Hype Project, The Blair Princess Project, The Blonde Witch Project*, and *The Watts Bitch Project*. Indie studio Trimark Pictures purchases a number of these spoofs to run as a series on their new video site CinemaNow (Variety). Certainly, *The Blair Witch Project* displays an immediately identifiable look—the shaky image, the young woman
“sobbing and snotting” (LePage) directly into the camera, the grainy video shots of leaves, trees, and complete darkness. Nevertheless, the speed at which the film goes from an unknown entity to the center of popular culture to the shared familiarity required by parody underscored the shocking new rate at which media churns through “content.” The movie speeds from theaters to home video as fast as any blockbuster ever. *The Blair Witch Project* is released on VHS and DVD on October 22nd, less than three months after the movie’s theatrical debut. At this time, movies were typically released for rental prior to being sold directly to consumers. Artisan skips this step, hoping for a permanent place in living rooms while the film was still red hot.

![Image of magazines](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

2.02-2.03. *The Blair Witch Project* captures the “Holy Grail of publicity.”

People convinced by the reality of the film, or those just wanting to know more, trekked out to Burkittsville, Maryland, a hamlet of 200. Of course, it’s not just that the student filmmakers were all actors playing parts; the legend of the “Blair witch” was itself a complete fabrication, an elaborate charade. Joyce Brown, Burkittsville’s mayor, had to change the
answering machine at her office: “This is the town office, Burkittsville, Maryland. . . . If this is in regards to ‘The Blair Witch Project,’ it is fiction . . . ” (qtd. in Burger). Outsiders stole the “Welcome to Burkittsville” sign that appeared in the movie, and they “trampled the graves” in the town cemetery (Burger). People insisted the stories were real and that the town was engaged in a massive cover-up. Sergeant Tom Winebrenner of Frederick County’s sheriff’s department, which patrols Burkittsville, hadn’t ever seen anything like it, confused by visitors’ desire to camp in the nearby woods: “These people believe this stuff is real, but they still want to come up and get killed by it” (qtd. in Towle). The town wasn’t prepared. They had no way of knowing what a monster film *The Blair Witch Project* would turn out to be. They regretted that they couldn’t cash in on the movie in some way (there aren’t any shops in Burkittsville). However, a few clever townsfolk begin to make “mini stick men” to hawk to the “avalanche” of visitors (Norman). An 8-year old sells “Witchaid” from her front porch (Burger).

Generally, print advertisements and TV commercials cost thousands if not millions of dollars, whereas the web enables everyone to have “access to the world of marketing and media spin” (Hammersley). Patrizia Dilucchio at *Salon* discovered that many of the film’s “fan sites” were set up by Artisan or by people with direct connections to the filmmakers. Dilucchio quotes an anonymous industry executive: “‘The Blair Witch Project’s filmmakers are using their friends to generate their fan sites’”; this is “‘an organized effort. What happened is that they tricked the press.’” At the time, fan sites were a “cyberspace metric beloved by the traditional media.” (Dilucchio). Accordingly, in early summer 1999 MTV News runs a story trumping up the online action. Newspapers and magazines quickly followed, anxious to stay relevant in an increasingly digital and entertainment-centric news environment. Many of the “Blair Witch webring” sites were certainly made by actual fans; people with no connection to the movie spent countless
hours investigating the case on the film’s website. Nevertheless, traditional media outlets began covering the film precisely because of the seeming authenticity of its online presence, a presence that Dilucchio explains as mostly manufactured. Trying to stay hip to what’s happening online, newspaper and magazine editors turned a “small buzz” into a “large roar” (Hammersley). Quite simply, the more the media covered the story, the greater the pressure to cover the story.

Once the film went viral, everyone began to weigh in on what it meant, what the film’s hype and success had to say. Having first presented the concept to a national audience, John Pierson concluded that, “There is no good lesson to learn here. It’s not an independent-film phenomenon. What you really have here is a convergence of old and new media” (qtd. in Lyons, “Season”). Paul Campbell, “director of field operations” for Artisan Entertainment, says the “Web site is a level playing field…Whereas with TV, you have to spend as much money as you can possibly spend” (qtd. in Boyar). To be sure, there are numerous ways of turning this little movie and its novelties into popular cultural analysis, and the mainstream media pounced. The Blair Witch Project represented almost too much: the rise of indie film and the power of Sundance, the democratization of video cameras, the real-world economic effects of internet buzz, the ethical implications of this strange new genre of “reality” and “found footage” programming, the effects on Burkittsville and the importance of new media literacy, the desire for a novel cinematic aesthetic separate from the economic excesses of high-tech computer-generated blockbusters, the distressingly leaky boundaries between marketing and narrative, the new and radical “first-person” possibilities of hand-held cinema, the ridiculous speeds at which a movie goes from low-budget gimmick to internet sensation to theatrical blockbuster to parody to home video to yesterday’s news. The film was a “cult hit before it premiered” (Eisenthal), the “hottest independent picture in years” (Wolgamott), the “perfect marriage of movies and the
web” (Puig, “Legacy”), “an intensely imaginative piece of conceptual filmmaking” (McCarthy), the “scariest movie of the decade” (Dean), and “a celebration of rock-bottom production values” (Ebert, “Blair Witch”).

This chapter enters into many of these conversations about the film and its novelties, but from a distance of nearly 20 years. By the early 2010s, the “found footage” horror film had become a staple of studio output, “something of an industry over the last decade” (Clark). Fictional films that are usually presented as documentaries or as spectacular footage caught on camera by an amateur filmmaker, found footage movies such as The Blair Witch Project, Cloverfield, and the endless string of Paranormal Activity films contain camerawork that is intentionally poor, as the tenets of classical Hollywood filmmaking make way for what Amy West refers to as “amateur-cam” or “low-tech realism” (88). Standing in stark contrast to the gloss and sheen of computer-generated imagery in Hollywood blockbusters, found footage films engage in what I name the negative aesthetics of indexicality, or the “look of truth” (Banash 121) that became a popular style at just the time when the live-action image began to lose its indexical bearings via digitization.

Stylistically, found footage horror movies articulate an oppositional stance to the seamless construction of photorealistic space available to computer-generated imagery and compositing. Narratively, they dramatize the ease with which video in contemporary media environments can be surveilled, copied, leaked, de-, and re-contextualized. Found footage films identify themselves as just that, video footage found and presented in a raw state. A question rarely asked of these films in critical scholarship is, “who finds and presents the footage?” The Blair Witch Project begins with brief titles, provided anonymously: “In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a
documentary. A year later their footage was found.” Even though the students disappeared while filming, the footage in *The Blair Witch Project* is heavily edited, the image cutting back and forth between the missing students’ two cameras. This narrative level of anonymous titles and editing is easy to overlook, but I suggest that the finder’s various acts of editing, remixing, and surveillance resonate deeply in audiences for whom technologies of anonymous surveillance and control have been naturalized to the point of invisibility. While a number of terminally framed films in the late 90s and early 00s (such as *eXistenZ* and *The Sixth Sense*) showcase the “ontological vertigo” (6) of living simultaneously in a virtual environment and reality, found footage films underscore the possibility that unnamed forces might abuse our immersion in media; they might capture, collect, repurpose, and exploit the data we emit.

Throughout this chapter I pay special attention to how *The Blair Witch Project*—and found footage more generally—articulates new concepts of cinematic narration and point of view. The film “mimetically motivates” both first-person and omniscient narration; that is, the film’s various experiments with point of view are resolutely inspired by the real-world possibilities, uses, and effects of moving image media.38 Storytelling in cinema has always depended in part for its development on technological advances. An entirely new class of narrators emerges as the technical base and everyday experience of moving imagery undergoes

38. I borrow “motivation” in this sense from David Bordwell, who adapts the concept from the Russian Formalists. Motivation is how a “classical film unifies itself.” Each element of a film—its story, editing, music, costumes, etc.—can usually be accounted for by one or more of what Bordwell identifies as the four major types of motivation: “compositional motivation” (or causal, story-based motivation), “intertextual motivation” (usually star- and genre-based), “artistic motivation” (technical virtuosity for its own sake, and/or self-reflexivity), and “realistic motivation” (in which elements “are justified on the grounds of verisimilitude”) (*Classical Hollywood* 18). My argument throughout this chapter is that the dynamic narrational condition of *The Blair Witch Project* (both its subjectivity and omniscience) is realistically, or mimetically motivated.
the radical upheavals of the digital transition. As low-tech as it might first appear, the film points to the alarming ways in which our contemporary high-tech media environments produce new forms of mediated subjectivity—footage that is immediately captured, remixed, and repurposed.

**Shaky Realism, or The Negative Aesthetics of Indexicality**

The very first shot of *The Blair Witch Project* begins blurry, zoomed too close to register much of anything. A woman’s voice, one we soon learn belongs to Heather, quietly speaks the film’s first lines, “It’s already recording.” We start to make out Heather’s unfocused figure as she and the camera operator speak simultaneously, stepping on each other’s lines. Heather: “This is my home”; camera operator: “You look a little blurry. Let me zoom out.” As Heather comes into focus and the image zooms out we see Heather and her living room.

![Images of The Blair Witch Project](attachment:image1.jpg)

2.04-2.07. The first shot after the opening titles, *The Blair Witch Project*.

We recognize immediately that this is a movie behaving badly: characters breaking the fourth wall, a croppy 4:3 aspect ratio, unprofessional images best characterized as rubbish, or the unfocused remains that typically clutter the cutting room floor. Indeed, *The Blair Witch Project*
seems to show us everything it can, everything it has, including the raw footage usually edited and prettified for the big screen. Amateur filmmakers par excellence, Heather, Josh, and Mike make a movie filled with nauseatingly shaky camera work and blur, unbearable scenes of total darkness, critical moments haphazardly shot from odd angles, and jarring variations in sound magnitude. The effect on many of us is electric jitter, if not outright motion sickness.

By any measure, this is an extremely ugly movie. “This is my home” Heather says at the same time as the camera operator says, “You look a little blurry.” This is our home for the next 90 minutes: motion and blur, false starts and miscues, spatial disorientation. We know right where we are: we are in the camera, in the image. We have no clue where we are: there are no establishing or master shots to provide us with a spatial context. The Blair Witch Project forces audiences to confront the means of cinematic production in a rare way for wide release films, except perhaps those spots in which home movies are briefly embedded within classically narrated films. We learn immediately that this movie offers no such narrative or affective relief, no comforting release from media turbulence. We may begin in Heather’s home, but the movie’s form suggests no space, no breathing or living room, outside of shaky, embodied mediation. We are fully embedded by moving image media; this is media suffocation.

“The Blair Retch Project” (J. Stone, “Moviegoers”): theater managers warned audiences they might get sick, offering refunds if the patron requested one within the first 30 minutes of the show. The “new face of horror” reads The Montreal Gazette, “lurks under theatre seats and in the aisles after a screening of the critically acclaimed fright flick The Blair Witch Project” (McKeen). Some papers considered it a civic duty to instruct potential viewers about how to avoid nausea: “Sit a ways back from the screen so the movements aren’t so dramatic. Glance away from the screen once in a while to get your bearings. Ensure you’re not dressed in hot,
heavy clothing. Don’t go for a heavy, fatty meal before the movie, and watch the amount of buttered popcorn you eat” (McKeen). The Associated Press warns that symptoms may also include burning lungs and panic attacks.

On thousands of screens during the summer blockbuster season, *The Blair Witch Project* sat nervously in an aesthetic environment of high-tech wizardry and live-action animation. I imagine someone at a multiplex in August 1999 making a double-feature out of the digitally composited, meticulously crafted *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace* and the self-consciously, forcefully imperfect-looking *The Blair Witch Project*, being pulled apart to the fresh extremes of moving image aesthetics, as wide a chasm as modern, wide-release theatrical cinema has screened. *The Blair Witch Project* adamantly resists the visual protocols beginning to dominate Hollywood in the 1990s, an image-ethic summed up well by Roger Ebert, who surmises that during the nearly 20-year stretch between *Return of the Jedi* and *The Phantom Menace*, George Lucas was “waiting until computers got fast enough and cheap enough to allow him to create any image he could dream up” (Ebert, “George Lucas”).
“It’s what you don’t see,” says Daniel Myrick, co-director of *The Blair Witch Project*. “The scariest movies that affected me, like *The Shining*…had very little effects. There was just this unseen horror affecting the characters.” Myrick and Sánchez insisted that effects not be “the star of the movie.” “It’s like having a new toy,” Myrick says of video software: “The technology is getting cheaper and cheaper and cheaper, and more and more people have access to CGI…What was considered state-of-the-art a year ago is now on desktop systems, and you can buy it off the shelf. It’s so attractive. It’s like, ‘I’ve got these tools now, so I’ve got to throw them on the screen.’” Just as the witch proves elusive to the camera’s gaze, the very first shot of Heather is a blurry failure, representing an inability to capture the subject—an ethic absolutely anathema to CGI specialists. While CGI-rich movies such as *The Phantom Menace* and *Jurassic Park* depict with perfect photorealistic clarity fantastic creatures that never stood in front of a camera, *The Blair Witch Project* fails to reveal the supernatural figure that this “documentary” attempts to convince us really does exist. Along these lines, Robyn Warhol defines the “supranarratable” as that which “can’t be told,” finding that this type of “unnarrated” act occurs “primarily in horror movies, where the inability to see the terrifying object can still be scarier than even the most vivid special effects.” Unlike the delayed visions of monsters in most horror films, though, *The Blair Witch Project’s* deployment of “supranarration” is the very condition of the film. *The Blair Witch Project*, Warhol writes, refuses to ever “narrate the source of the
horror” (230). This refusal—much like the film’s shaky, retching camerawork—thus stands as an extreme, aesthetically aggressive counterpoint to the fantastic creatures and beautiful imagery of big-budget CGI.

In *The Blair Witch Project*, the cast is the crew. Heather, Josh, and Mike actually operate the cameras and sound equipment during the shoot. No lines were written for the actors. They were told to improvise, to record everything. In other words, Heather Donahue, Josh Leonard, and Mike Williams starred in, shot, and wrote the dialogue for this movie. Myrick, Sánchez, Gregg Hale, and a couple of other crew members weren’t with the actors as they recorded the movie, but trailed behind and out of sight in camouflage and night-vision goggles. They provided the actors with a GPS device so they could get to the next day’s “way point”—spots with food, notes left by the producers explaining character motivation, brief descriptions of plot points, and so on. The actors left the footage they recorded at these spots. The producers wanted to keep the actors surprised, to let them feel lost, even to frustrate them, break them down. The food rations grew scarcer each day. Myrick, Sánchez, and Hale would make noises near the actors’ tents at night, shaking and spooking them, each night more frequently and violently than the last. By the time the shoot was over, the actors were a “broken lot” (Whipp). Gregg Hale had U.S. Army experience, and had gone through a prisoner-of-war training camp in Special Forces, where “participants would be blindfolded and led through the woods, and they’d do everything to them but kill them. They’d wig ’em out” (Longino). Robin Cowie, another producer of the film, says that “Gregg thought even though (our actors) would know it’s not real, they’d end up being petrified” (Longino). For the actors—hungry, cold, and haunted—the shoot amounted to “seven days of hell, 168 hours of real-time improvisational torment” (C. Wilson). Myrick and Sánchez referred to this as “method filmmaking” (Hornaday) and as directing by “remote control”
(Moore). “We didn’t set up shots, we set up situations.” Sánchez continues, “The prime directive of the film was natural, realistic performances. They couldn’t be encumbered with dialogue and blocking. We wanted them to be natural. It was very much an experiment” (qtd. in Persall). The form would produce the content, and everything was just waiting for post-production, when Myrick and Sánchez turned the 20-plus hours of footage into a 90-minute feature. It’s not just that Myrick and Sánchez avoid special effects; they do everything they can to make the movie look as unconstructed and gritty as possible. Heather, Josh, and Mike had no professional training as filmmakers, and it shows. Myrick and Sánchez provided the actors with short tutorials explaining how to operate the machinery, believing that the imperfect look they were aiming for would be the natural result of amateurs with cameras. If CGI specialists spend innumerous hours deliberating over each and every pixel of the image, Myrick and Sánchez head to the other end, toward the accidental image.

Moving image aesthetics hurtled to extremes during the late 80s and 90s. Just consider two of the most widely viewed “movies” of 1991: *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, with its luscious, photorealistic liquid cyborg; and the terrifying, rocky camcorder record of LAPD officers relentlessly beating Rodney King. In the public imagination, that harrowing footage both resembled and counteracted *Cops* (1989 - Present), a show filled with hand-held images of real police officers chasing and arresting people (usually minorities), always portraying the police as everyday heroes. The same year that *Cops* premiered, ABC introduced *America’s Funniest Home Videos* (1989 - Present), each episode containing dozens of home movies recorded and submitted by people with camcorders, capturing pratfalls and body humor from around the house. Some of the most visible illustrations of the “domestication of video technology” (Jagodzinski) in the 90s, *Cops* and *America’s Funniest Home Videos* stand as two of the longest
running shows in U.S. television history, finding success well into the age of YouTube and online viral videos. In between the debuts of those series in 1989, James Cameron’s *The Abyss* and Robert Zemeckis’ *Back to the Future Part II* broke new ground in computer generated imagery, illustrating the radical possibilities of compositing multiple layers of photographed and graphical images into a seamless whole. In March of 1995, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg write “The Vow of Chastity” and the “The Manifesto,” or the defining documents of the “Dogma 95” film movement. Von Trier and Vinterberg create a code for the production of contemporary cinematic realism, drawing on and adapting for fictional films many methods made popular by the practitioners of cinéma vérité: “shooting must be done on location”; “the camera must be handheld”; “optical work and filters are forbidden” (von Trier and Vinterberg). Eight months later, Pixar and Disney release *Toy Story*, the first feature-length film consisting entirely of computer generated imagery. Finally, in 1999 *The Blair Witch Project* makes “home video panic-cam an official, approved technique in mainstream productions” (Seitz).
The widespread use of computers to create and modify “old” media necessitated a revaluation of distinctions between forms, hence some of the electric buzzwords of the 90s: “multimedia,” “convergence,” “digital cinema,” “new media,” “hypertext,” and “e-” everything.

Writing in 1999, Peter Lunenfeld sums up these sweeping changes: “in an astonishingly short
period of time, the computer has colonized cultural production; a machine that was designed to
 crunch numbers has come to crunch everything from printing to music to photography to the
cinema” (“The Real” 3). Or this from Bruce Sterling, three years earlier: “In the year 1996,
everything aspires to the condition of software. Art, politics, music, money, words-in-a-row,
even sex wants to be digital and on a network. Everything aspires to the nebulous and liquid
quality of moving digital information.” By the end of the 90s it was quite clear: a computer is “a
machine that expertly represents a range of earlier media” (Manovich, Software 59); it is not a
medium as much as it is a medium replicator and generator, drawing and redrawing the borders
of any given “medium,” a term irretrievably trapped in scare quotes because of “softwarization”
(46).

The language we use to describe and identify media is anachronistic: what we often call
“film” today has no material existence as celluloid.39 In the meta-medium of the computer,
“film” is thus simulated film. From the introduction of Adobe’s After Effects to Apple’s Final
Cut Pro software, the 1990s mark the “foundational period when many fundamental ways of
combining media within the single computer platform were invented” (Manovich, Software 165).
In fact, by the end of the decade, “multimedia” (as both a buzzword and as a quality of media
objects) had “become so commonplace and taken for granted that the term lost its relevance”
(166). Rather than holding only one kind of data such as a camera recording” or a “hand
drawing,” the moving image, Lev Manovich writes, becomes a “hybrid which can combine all
different visual media invented so far.” No longer just a “flat plane—the result of light focused

39. Or mylar, as David Bordwell notes in 2011’s Pandora’s Digital Box: “First, let’s remember:
it’s not digital projection vs. celluloid projection. 35mm motion picture release prints haven’t
had a celluloid base for about fifteen years. Release prints are on mylar, a polyester-based
medium (198).
by the lens and captured by the recording surface,” the moving image is now “a stack of a potentially infinite number of separate layers” (295). This is the algorithmic image, or the manifestation of “media after software” (335) regularly screening in theaters by the mid-90s: layers upon layers of endlessly manipulable imagery, composited into a single, seamless whole. Manovich continues: “by the end of the 1990s digital compositing had become the basic operation used in creating all forms of moving images, and not only big budget features” (281).

While on the one hand turn-of-the-century audiences of moving image entertainment were buying into Hollywood’s ethic of “show me the money,” on the other we were insatiable for imagery that looked real, raw, and cheap. Any desire for authenticity necessarily stems from encounters with what we perceive as the inauthentic. CGI redraws the contours of photorealism, forcefully detaching “live-action” moving imagery from its causal bond to the material world. The rise in the mid and late-90s of low-tech fictional films that mimic the look of documentaries, home movies, and direct cinema attempt to recover moving imagery’s capacity to act as a trace of the real, even if—especially if—this leads to the production of an imperfect trace. The Blair Witch Project (the movie shown in theaters, at least) is the most visible case in this period of a movie pushing back against the softwarization of cinema. As it proffers “implied authenticity over seamless artificiality” (Aloi 187), the film establishes a countervailing aesthetic, an aggressive response to big-budget, CGI Hollywood.

Still, the film is certainly not alone in its stylistic resistance to digital perfection and in its overtly affected sentiment for a pre-digital moving image. For instance, the 2007 Quentin Tarantino and Robert Rodriguez collaboration Grindhouse mimics exploitation B-movies of the 70s. Among other stylistic nods, the pastiche contains an excess of “filmic artifacts” (Prince, “Emergence”), or degradation to the “film stock”: “pops and hisses on the screen,” missing
frames and reels, or all of the evidence of a “scratchy print” (Rombes 9-10). The “artificially manufactured technical difficulties” of *Grindhouse*, writes Chuck Tryon, “evoked deeply felt expressions of nostalgia for a film culture irretrievably lost to digital technologies that appear distressingly sterile in comparison to film’s decaying materiality” (*Reinventing* 62). A striking aesthetic case of what Linda Hutcheon names “complicitous critique” (*Politics* 44), many of the impressive visual effects of *Grindhouse* were painstakingly created via software; the movie resists digitization through digital media. Jay McRoy characterizes *Grindhouse* as “a big-budget exploitation film *about* low-budget exploitation films that deploys high-end digital technologies to (re)create a low-tech analogue experience” (226).
The simulated flaws in *Grindhouse* are nostalgic, self-reflexive gestures; they point virtually to the material degradation of film—a vanishing object-aura in an age of digital reproduction. Though hardware may accelerate at the speed of “Moore’s Law,” our cultural expectations of visual media are a bit slower on the uptake. What we see in much of *Grindhouse* is not degradation to film stock, but an algorithm coded to produce the illusion of degradation. The visual effect is a fitting symbol for millennial cinema and culture, or the intermediary condition of the analog-to-digital transition: we are resolutely digital, but also stuck to the past. At 2000, the computer’s clock will read 1900. To be sure, the pops and hisses to the film stock in *Grindhouse* are not technically necessary; however, they are also not empty, momentary

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40. Gordon E. Moore’s 1965 theory that the number of transistors in a computer will double every 2 years.
gestures, or simply shorthand for “old.” Tarantino and Rodriguez express a deep appreciation for the experiential qualities of a worn-out medium, including those phenomena we may once have thought annoying, now a memorializing visual effect as we lose touch of film.

The effects in *Grindhouse* are residual traces, techno-allusions, shout-outs, callbacks, the remnants of an old logic—they are **skeuomorphic**. A “skeuomorph,” writes N. Katherine Hayles, is “a design feature that is no longer functional in itself but that refers back to a feature that was functional at an earlier time.” Hayles continues: “The dashboard of my Toyota Camry, for example, is covered by vinyl molded to simulate stitching. The simulated stitching alludes back to a fabric that was in fact stitched, although the vinyl ‘stitching’ is formed by an injection mold.” Ostensibly functionless, skeuomorphs render new objects and interfaces familiar by imitating a necessary or functional design feature of an older object or interface. Skeuomorphs, according to Hayles, “visibly testify to the social or psychological necessity for innovation to be tempered by replication” (*How We Became 17*). Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin explain how new media “remediate” attributes of older forms, even if these new media objects no longer necessitate such features. “Remediation” is the “representation of one medium in another,” a “defining characteristic of the new digital media” (45). Like skeuomorphs, which are a particularly acute form of remediation and, according to Hayles, “are so deeply characteristic of the evolution of concepts and artifacts that it takes a great deal of conscious effort to avoid them” (*How We Became 17*), remediation “might seem at first to be an esoteric practice,” but is actually “so widespread that we can identify a spectrum of different ways in which digital media remediate their predecessors” (Bolter and Grusin 45). Perhaps most famously, the “desktop metaphor” introduced by Alan Kay in 1970 makes the Graphical User Interface (GUI) of a computer’s operating system resemble an office and desk, complete with filing cabinets, folders,
a trash bin, and so on. The remediating visual metaphor of a GUI’s “desktop” may be a contrivance, but it continues to assist innumerable people in their transition from the analog to digital workspace.

Producers of state-of-the-art moving imagery regularly mimic time-tested conventions of cinematic style and narration, those with which audiences and producers alike are familiar. Many of these conventions were established precisely because of limitations to old media. Vibrant and stunning CGI films such as *Toy Story* remediate techniques of classical live-action cinema, including motion blur and cuts between shots. The camera, however, is artificial, always already virtual. Motion blur is simulated. Likewise, there is no film reel that needs to be changed during the “shoot,” and thus no technical reason for a cut. Producers of digital moving imagery recreate artifacts and defects of photography and film that audiences have come to associate with real cameras recording real things. For instance, Nintendo’s *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* deploys a “lens flare” effect, or “the most overused special effect in video games” (Towell).

Artist-designers spend countless hours perfecting code that will imitate what many of us might consider a defect of lens-based photography, simply to make it seem as if a real camera is on the scene of the video game’s action. Pixar’s completely computer-generated movie *A Bug’s Life* contains a blooper reel during its end credits—“outtakes” of the CGI insects forgetting their lines and playing pranks on each other as the “cameras” continue to roll. Silent and black-and-white films are still made, but usually through the gimmicky tint of pastiche or parody. Apple’s iBook application for iOS devices such as the iPhone and iPad graphically mimics the flipping pages of a physical book. At some point soon this will seem passé.
2.17. Motion blur in *Toy Story*.

2.18. “Blooper reel” from *A Bug’s Life*. Note the boom mic in the upper right corner of the framed image.
2.19. Lens flare effect in *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time*.

2.20. The flipping page effect of Apple’s iBook application.
“Film” is not just a material; it is a set of cultural and artistic practices, a heritage and a
grammar. Contemporary cinema remediates cinema. More precisely, the digital moving image
remediates the technical capacities and cultural expectations of film. In this sense, “digital
cinema ‘emulates’ photographic cinema as one of its possibilities….but it obeys different
logics.” Thomas Elsaesser continues, concluding that this “new ‘logic’ invades a system and
takes over, retrovirus like, by leaving appearances intact but, in the meantime, hollowing out the
foundations—technological as well as ontological—on which a certain medium or mode of
representation was based” (“Digital Cinema” 37). The CGI cut, the lens-flare effect, the blooper
reel, and so on: are these functionless skeuomorphs, simply ornamental hangers-on that will
eventually die alongside film culture? Are these attempts at “managing the force” of “future
shock” (Rodowick 175)? Is this the “techno-nostalgia” (Prince, Digital 4) of a society
irreversibly lost to the digital? Or are these manifestations of a lasting cinematic grammar, a key
ingredient in the “deep remixability” of new forms of “hybrid media”?

What counts as an
unimaginative, conservative, or condescending regression into the logics of old media (which is
how many tech writers would characterize a GUI’s “desktop” and Apple’s iBook interface), and
what counts as an artistically motivated incorporation of and continuity with the various
languages and cultural traditions of analog media? Is there a line somewhere between
“skeuomorphism” and “hybrid media,” or between “skeuomorphism” and what Elsaesser
affectionately refers to as “the poetics of obsolescence”? (“Digital Cinema” 37).

41. In Software Takes Command, Manovich points to two crucial ways that digital media
remediate older media, contrasting “multimedia” with “hybrid media”: whereas in “multimedia”
distinct media objects co-exist but maintain their individual properties, in hybrid media the
“languages of previously distinct media come together. They exchange properties, create new
structures, and interact on the deepest levels” (46).
Finally, what should we call these passages of inter-media traffic when they move in the other direction—that is, when the rhetoric and logics of new media begin to invade old media objects? In *The Anxiety of Obsolescence*, Kathleen Fitzpatrick writes that it “is no longer sufficient to examine the relationship of a writer to his precursors, because these precursors are no longer perceived to be anywhere near as threatening as what’s coming next” (6).

A PowerPoint chapter in a printed novel; endless endnotes in gargantuan novels that would be more practical as websites with hyperlinks; multiple windows and streams of information on the nightly news; the virtual realities and *interpassivity* of re-watchable twist movies such as *The Sixth Sense*: these might all be characterized as forms of *reverse remediation*, as computers find ever novel ways of colonizing culture. Even if Bolter and Grusin’s definition of remediation as “the representation of one medium in another” doesn’t specify the direction of remediation, the entirety of their book covers many of the ways in which new media incorporate and attempt to transcend certain logics or practices of the old (the world wide web as a never-ending, interactive newspaper or encyclopedia, etc.). Still, the authors briefly allude to “retrograde remediation,” in which old media draw on the formal behaviors of the new (147). In *Cinema by Other Means*, Pavle Levi adapts the concept toward an analysis of how certain avant-garde works self-consciously aestheticize their failure or incapacity to remediate newer forms (42) (or, in the words of Friedrich Kittler, “the white noise no writing can store”) (*Gramophone* 45). Similarly, N. Katherine Hayles deploys the term *reverse remediation* to describe ways in which “digital media can be simulated in print texts” (“Print is Flat” 73). Finally, Andreas Huyssen identifies *remediation in reverse* as those moments in which an older medium “reasserts itself by critically

42. Hayles suggests that Bolter and Grusin use the term “reverse remediation” in *Remediation*, but they don’t.
working through what the new medium does and does not do,” marking both “affinity and difference” between forms (11).

Still, there is a crucial difference between, on the one hand, early 20th century literature reverse remediating cinema and, on the other, contemporary literature or cinema reverse remediating digital media—cinema now is digital media, and “no longer film in the ordinary sense of the term” (Rodowick 31). “Digital cinema is a particular case of animation that uses live-action footage as one of its many elements.” At its core, the found footage style is death and decay: it registers what many cinephiles would characterize as the horrific moment when “film” and indexicality become the stuff of the past, the stuff of fiction, and it marks this moment by violating nearly every rule of classical cinematic style. The whole mess is hollowed out and skeuomorphic, if only because, in the words of Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, everything we “think of as ‘essential’ about cinema” has “become one of the ‘special effects’ of the digital” (173). 43

*The Blair Witch Project*’s reverse remediations push theatrical cinema toward a post-cinematic future: the “first-person shooter” videogame rhetoric of its point of view; the “gamified” aspects of its production, a film directed by “remote control”; the hand-held and surveillant image so strikingly representative of the democratization of moving image technology but so aggressively subversive to nearly a century of classical narration practices; the dismissal of traditional TV and print advertising, everything online and viral; the rich paratextual

43. Also see Paul Young’s rich history of film remediating new media and thus allegorizing spectators’ definition of and relationship with film, *The Cinema Dreams Its Rivals*. Young identifies the fundamental stakes for Hollywood in addressing new media: “the maintenance of the Hollywood cinema as an *institution* that is and will remain distinct from competing media institutions” (xxii). I supplement Young’s thesis with a question: What happens to the concept of remediation when cinema—materially, industrially, discursively—becomes its “rival”?
narrative world, forwarding the increasingly common and profitable procedures of a digitally enabled “cinema of interactions” (Grusin). Nevertheless, *The Blair Witch Project* can also be characterized as violently skeuomorphic, a full-fledged embodiment of the “poetics of obsolescence” (Elsaesser, “Digital Cinema” 37). It returns the repressed connection between the world and what we see onscreen, but in an extreme, stylistically aggressive way. And as *Grindhouse* deploys digital media to create many of its analog effects, *The Blair Witch Project* romanticizes old media at a price. The found footage narrative style transforms the indexical capacities of cinema into an *aesthetic choice*: the “caught on camera” *look*, the fake documentary. While clearly standing apart from the digital perfection of *The Phantom Menace* or *The Matrix*, the movie nevertheless generates a similar effect as those CGI blockbusters, establishing yet another dimension of distrust toward what we see onscreen. *The Blair Witch Project* went as far as any popular film of the 90s showcasing the “extensive borrowing of the ‘documentary look’ by other kinds of programs,” thus contributing, in the words of John Corner, to the “weakening” of the “status” of actual documentaries (263), and leading, in the words of Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight, to the “exhaustion of the documentary genre itself” (189).44

The extent of this horror film’s success relies in large part on Myrick and Sánchez’s expectations of audiences, or on the degree to which viewers equate certain appearances with the documentary form. Many of us instinctively trust “the bond between image and reality, camera and truth” (Higley 105), especially when the image comes across as crude and un-composed. The directors of *The Blair Witch Project* attempt to convince us that what we see is real and unmanufactured, and that the reality the film depicts exists independent of its recording. Though

44 Of course, nothing weakened the legal force of the indexical image in the popular imagination as quickly and disgracefully as the 1992 verdict in the Rodney King trial.
this has always been a goal of classical cinematic realism, traditional methods fail to do the trick in an age of photorealistic dinosaurs and alien invasions: if producers can make nearly anything appear “perceptually realistic” (Prince, “True Lies” 32), then viewers’ long-term investment in the “bond between image and reality” fails to pay off. Further, if “the difficulty of modifying images once they were recorded was exactly what gave cinema its value as a document, assuring its authenticity” (Manovich Language 307), then the digitization of the moving image and the consequent ease of its manipulation devalues the image’s stock in the real. Writing about the use of surveillance footage in contemporary cinema, Thomas Levin suggests that if the “unproblematic referentiality” of photographic cinema is “under siege,” then “it makes great sense to start appropriating a type of imaging characterized by definition (at least according to a certain popular understanding) in terms of its seemingly unproblematic, reliable referentiality” (585). Indeed, writes Mary Ann Doane, “the indexical itself has attained a form of semiotic sovereignty in the face of its imminent demise” (129). What we see in Dogma 95, found footage horror, and even the “infotainment” of surveillance footage on news programs is a fetishization of indexicality, an attempt to reclaim or reassure us of authenticity, or of the “certainty that such a thing had existed” (Barthes, Camera 80). “It is no coincidence,” writes Nicholas Rombes, that the Dogma 95 movement, “with its preference for disorder, for shaky, degraded images, for imperfection,” arrived “at the dawn of the digital era, an era that promised precisely the opposite: clarity, high definition, a sort of hyperclarified reality” (1). The fake documentary, the aggressively simulated index, the fetishization of imperfections, and “film” in scare quotes: these seem to be some of the growing pains of digitization. In the words of Mitchell Stephens, “We rarely trust the imposition of a new magic on our lives, and we rarely fail to work up nostalgia for the older magic it replaces” (32).
This is what it now takes for some audiences to momentarily suspend disbelief in an age of photorealistic fantasy: a full-throttle recognition of the apparatus and its flaws. The images we see come from two different sources, a Hi-8 video camcorder and a black-and-white 16mm film camera. Myrick and Sánchez purchased the Hi-8 camcorder at a Circuit City for $900, and they returned the beaten-up device for a refund after the shoot. Hale, one of the producers of The Blair Witch Project, explains: “They have a 30-day policy and we did it on about day 28. It wasn’t like we were trying to (bilk) Circuit City, but we needed the money and we had the camera and the receipt. So . . .” (qtd. in Persall). As we watch the movie, it is always clear which camera we look through: the black-and-white, grainy, but slightly richer and less mobile 16mm, or the washed out and shakily embodied video camcorder. The aesthetic represents a return of what classical cinematic narration had long suppressed and what digital cinema literally virtualizes—the presence of the camera. We know moving image media is becoming virtual and disembodied; found footage films forcefully establish the camera as a material fact, but they do so virtually, in fiction.

This is a style that exaggerates and fetishizes the indexical image’s “privileging of contact, of touch, of a physical connection” (Doane 142). The flaws in The Blair Witch Project are intentional, constructed; they are as purposeful as a CGI blooper real, as deliberate as a lens flare in video games. Quite simply, they are unnecessary, even for low-budget moviemaking in 1999. In that year, “After Effects 4.0 introduced Premiere import, Photoshop 5.5 added vector shapes, and Apple showed the first version of Final Cut Pro—in short, the current paradigm of interoperable media authoring and editing tools capable of creating professional media without special hardware beyond the off-the-shelf computer was finalized” (Manovich, Software 47). The Blair Witch Project hurtles recklessly toward the total softwarization of cinema as well as to
cinema’s indexical, analog past. By setting their film in 1994, Myrick and Sánchez preempt critical developments of digital cinema, including the groundbreaking release by Sony, JVC, and Panasonic of the DV (Digital Video) format in 1995, as well as Sony’s massively popular Digital8 camcorder in 1999. While not as crystalized an anachronism as the digitally generated effects of analog deterioration in *Grindhouse*, the five-year gap of *The Blair Witch Project* allows the film to precede the centennial of cinema by a year, for the footage to have ostensibly been captured prior to *Toy Story* and the digital onslaught, for this to be the first “Dogma 95” film, for the movie to be unquestionably analog; in other words, the fabricated gap suggests the film to be just that much more indexical and trustworthy as a document.

You have the funny feeling you’ve seen this all before. “I’ve never seen anything like—it looked just like a movie.” These are the frantic first words we hear from Jennifer Oberstein, the leadoff call-in guest on *The Today Show* after the second plane hit on September 11. The hijackers that day killed real people in real places; at the risk of sounding insensitive, they also attacked our “image addiction” (Bukatman 17), our relentless desire to capture and destroy icons onscreen. Aliens eviscerate the Empire State Building and the White House in *Independence Day* (1996); the Statue of Liberty collapses under the weight of a tidal wave in *Deep Impact* (1998); the Chrysler Building is destroyed by Godzilla in May of 1998, only to be torn to shreds by a meteor shower two months later in *Armageddon*, a movie that also featured the obliteration of Grand Central Station. All of it looked real, and so the real begins to look “just like a movie.” For many of us, the digitally generated photorealism of 90’s cinema fundamentally reconstructed the epistemological grounding and affective impact of any and every moving image. CGI begins to establish confusing new defaults about the traditional cinematic image—it’s computer-generated until we’re sure it isn’t. The images on 9/11 felt “spectacularly immediate yet
simultaneously unreal” (Tanner 59), as the attacks deconstructed the logic of America’s most visible cultural export: this can’t possibly be indexical, but it is. The attacks are authentic, barely caught on tape; the images act as an indexical horror show, shocking snuff footage that immediately recalibrates the surveillance practices and war energies of world powers.

“In a society that’s filled with glut and repetition and endless consumption, the act of terror may be the only meaningful act” (DeLillo 157). As low-tech and analog as the film might first appear, *The Blair Witch Project* confronts the damage to media and referentiality wrought by digitization. The movie participates in the negative aesthetics of indexicality: it is ugly and “authentic”; it forcefully reminds us of the presence of a real camera in a real space, with all of the accompanying limitations, if only because “the truth, as we all know, is out of focus” (J. Stone, “Devil”). Like the skeuomorphism or deep remixability of big-budget CGI endeavors, *The Blair Witch Project* is fundamentally nostalgic for a time prior to the gloss and sheen of digital imagery. However, unlike those CGI movies and games, which supplement the digital with digitally created traces of the analog, the found footage movie is at its core an attempt to revive—or to collect and cash in on the remnants of—our sense of the powerful “bond between image and reality.” In an age of beautifully composited and computer-generated images “shot” by virtual cameras, found footage is an aesthetic of ugly imperfections caught by forcefully actualized cameras. At just the moment when blemishes can be erased, *The Blair Witch Project* revels in them. This is an aesthetic of destruction: destruction of the perfections of digital imagery, of the separation between “fiction” and “documentary,” and finally of the indexical itself, which is now a skeuomorph, an aesthetic, no longer a necessary material fact.
“Camcorder Subjectivity” and Cinematic Authorship

If *The Blair Witch Project* stands in stark contrast to the high-tech look of *The Phantom Menace* and *Toy Story*, it nevertheless describes an increasingly high-tech culture, one in which the general population regularly captures moving images and invests a good deal of faith in their veracity. Fictional found footage films direct us to these extremes, this “vacillation between our simultaneous faith in and fear of the truth claims of documentary images” (B. Grant 170). Indeed, at the very moment audiences begin to seriously suspect computer-generated and Photoshopped images on the big screen and in magazines, or the necessarily “fake documentary” qualities of all still and moving image media, they also begin snapping and shooting an unprecedented number of images themselves—digital records of the real, mediated memories.

Why do characters in found footage movies continue to film even though they are in danger? Fans, movie critics, and academics alike regularly criticize the narrative style on these grounds. Jonas Koch identifies the problem as the characters’ “unrealistic documentary eagerness”: “It often seems improbable or inappropriate that the fictitious producer should go on filming while getting involved in agitating action, e.g. the extinction of relatives, friends and hometown by an alien monster” (69). In a review of the found footage movie *Chronicle*, Vanessa Farquharson echoes this sentiment: “In reality, if buildings started blowing up, or there were strange noises in the woods followed closely by abductions, most people wouldn’t have the instinct to turn on a video camera and start moving toward the life-threatening situation.”

What is most surprising about these comments is that they were published in 2011 and 2012, a full decade after the events of 9/11. Certainly more amateur and freelance footage exists of the Twin Towers’ collapse and the ensuing, hazy chaos than professionally shot video; much of what we saw on TV that day came from people on the streets trying to capture what they
could. For the first few hours after the attack, TV “networks had to make do with fragmentary shots of the crashing planes,” and it was only after “they found and assembled footage during the first couple of days” that “continuity editing” became possible (Bolter 10). These particular complaints about the realism of the characters’ “documentary eagerness” appear years after CNN’s 2006 introduction of iReport, through which the cable network asks viewers to submit photos and videos of breaking news that the cable network isn’t yet on the scene for. By 2011 the feature had 750,000 registered users (CNN). Further still, these articles were published in the midst or the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring; most of the video coverage for several days came from amateurs willing to risk their cameras and themselves to document protests and government brutality. Search for “natural disaster” or “epic fail” on YouTube and you will find thousands of movies made by amateurs on the scenes of “agitating action.”

Way back in 1999, Heather tries to explain why she always reaches for the camera: “I woke up, all of a sudden, and shit’s going down. All I can think is, I gotta get it, I gotta get it all. I want it on sound. I want it on 16. Anything. If we can see anything I want to see it on 16.” More than her cohorts, Heather is seduced by the cameras, unwilling to stop recording even when tempers begin to flare. Mike protests angrily: “I don’t know why you have to have every conversation on video.” Heather responds, “Because we’re making a documentary.” Mike: “Not about us getting lost. We’re making a documentary about a witch.” Heather: “I have a camera. And it doesn’t matter, because we’ll all look back on this and laugh heartily. Believe me.” The “documentary eagerness” of the filmmakers in these movies embodies the very real desire for collecting it all, for public exposure, for sharing and linking, for followers and friends. This is the age of confession: the Oprah Winfrey and Jerry Springer 90s, the reality TV 00s, or a time and society “in which almost everyone who isn’t famous considers themselves cruelly and unfairly
unheard” (Chris Heath qtd. in Klosterman 19). Heather’s documentary eagerness and the sacrifices she makes for her “image addiction” (Bukatman 17) illustrate both the democratization of moving image media as well as the stupid heroics amateurs go to tilt the balance of media power a bit, to have a presence and go viral. Koch’s and Farquharson’s criticism of found footage makes an intuitive, practical sort of sense, but it fails to account for just how willing many people are to put themselves and their equipment in the line of fire.

The millennial surplus of found footage films heralds a moment when the presence of moving image media technology could justifiably remain visible within the aesthetics of popular cinematic realism. The presence of the camera onscreen is a *mimetically motivated form of cinematic reflexivity*. “There is no need to make [technology] transparent any longer,” writes Erkki Huhtamo, “because it is not felt to be in contradiction to the ‘authenticity’ of the experience” (171). Moving images, write Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, have become “so common and ubiquitous” that we “take them for granted: no longer a ‘window on the world’, an ‘interface’ to reality, but the very face of it” (176). Steven Shaviro suggests that “Today, the most vivid and intense reality is precisely the reality of images” (*Post-Cinematic* 38). Or, in the words of Don DeLillo, “In our world we sleep and eat the image and pray to it and wear it too” (37). *The Blair Witch Project* attempts to make “signs that do not look like signs” (Barthes, “Introduction” 265), even if, paradoxically, it draws an inordinate amount of attention to its mediating technologies: “found footage” movies are fictional narratives that try to convince us they are non-fiction by directing our attention to the all-too-familiar technologies of image reproduction. *The Blair Witch Project* signaled a desire for a new sort of cinematic realism. The result is a style that cashes in on the sheer quantity of camcorders in everyday life, or on the ways in which by century’s end we were all becoming amateur filmmakers through the “people’s
medium” of video (Sherman 161). No fabricated sets, no well-known actors, the acknowledgment at every turn of the cameras—this is self-reflexive realism, new to wide-release cinema.

Moving image modes of discourse and narration that do not mask the presence of the camera circulate to unprecedented degrees in this period. Even a naïve spectator watching surveillance footage of a convenience store robbery on the news recognizes the quality and positioning of the low-grade, ceiling-stationed video camera. They feel and know the physical fact of the camera’s movement through air space via helicopter as they watch police follow a white Ford Bronco. They understand that the white noise or the cracked image after a ball hurdles toward them in *America’s Funniest Home Videos* means that the camera itself took a bump. The relative cheapness by the mid-90s of consumer-grade video cameras, the development of lightweight and high-resolution mobile cameras used by news and documentary crews, and the popularity of what would later become known as “user-generated” content such as home movies, webcam life-logs, and surveillance footage on broadcast TV—all of this produces a general awareness about the material capacities and constraints of cameras, their points of view and restrictions of field. This familiarity constitutes a common baseline for contemporary moving image literacy. Myrick and Sánchez expect audiences to know what it means to operate a camera, to have at least a cursory or second-hand understanding of concepts like focus and coverage, to know that lighting is not always optimal and that much of the recorded footage might not make a final cut. As the creators of what they were hoping to be a popular horror film, the directors certainly did not intend characters’ reflections on the apparatus to dissuade viewers from identifying with the depicted world. For the movie to make narrative and emotional sense, audiences needed to know these things about cameras, or to learn them on the fly.
In *The Blair Witch Project* the two cameras forcefully exist in the world of the movie, providing a narratively motivated and consistently deployed “point of view” of the action. As people begin to “routinely produce and consume images of themselves” (Hills 115-116), found footage horror offers a vision for the possibilities of first-person narration in fictional film: the perspective of a technologized subjectivity, the cinematized self. This is what I mean by the “new reflexivity”: an aesthetic of realism depicting a world thoroughly and inescapably mediated by moving image technology, in which the reflexive is a reflex, in which life itself is always abstracting, always mediated, always already “meta.”

Conceptions of cinematic “point of view” necessarily undergo a radical reformulation under these conditions. Writing about cinematic narration and Mike Nichols’ 1967 film *The Graduate*, Alan Nadel notes how even a film “that is completely focused on the experiences of one character with whom the audience is encouraged/expected to identify completely, a film that shows only scenes and episodes in which the central figure, Benjamin Braddock, is present,” nevertheless continually “lets us see something Benjamin does not: Benjamin.” Furthermore, “we always see what is behind [Benjamin], whether he is aware of it or not” (438). Movie stars are movie stars because audiences see their faces—“I’m ready for my close-up.” Nadel articulates one of the central roadblocks of trafficking the designation “first-person” narrative perspective from literary studies into film: in completely sustained first-person literary fiction, there is no relief from the metaphorical “point of view” of the narrator; their “voice” is often all we have access to. Fredric Jameson explains how “filmic ‘point of view’ is less realistic than the other, written kind, since it shows us the viewer along with the viewed and has to include the viewing subject’s body in the contents of the allegedly subjective experience, as if to mark the latter as seen by someone” (115). The practices of classical Hollywood narration inhibit an
unbroken attachment to the central character’s physical perspective: the establishing shot often depicts the narrative world from a point in space impossible or impractical for a character to occupy; the shot-reverse-shot technique, often deployed during conversations, allows us an approximation of what the central character sees, but also the approximate perspective of her conversant. Nadel continues: “Hollywood style cues us to imagine Benjamin as existing not in a physical reality shared by the camera, but in an imaginary elsewhere that is devoid of the camera while still retaining the gaze that camera allowed” (438). Often when the image cuts we see the precise point where the camera filmed the previous shot. The camera is voided, made manifestly invisible, absent, and virtual.

In films such as Chinatown or The Graduate audiences access the film’s events almost exclusively through the experiences of a central character. Further, these movies contain dozens of over-the-shoulder shots that let us see what the central character sees from their approximate location. Even the point-of-view (POV) shot, in which we see what a character sees from their precise location, is “nothing more than an approximation of a character’s vision. It is not an exact re-creation of that vision, for it does not resemble human vision in any physiological or subjective sense” (Galloway, Gaming 41). The “subjective camera,” however, is a traditional, if slightly “marginalized” (43) and “exceptional” (Barthes, “Introduction” 269) means of providing an image from the precise location of a character’s eyes and attempts to capture the physiology of vision; these shots are “subjectively inflected” (G. Wilson 85), occurring most often in moments of disrupted or disturbing views (blinding light, drunkenness, rage, etc.). Roland Barthes insists that “there is no relation between the grammatical ‘person’ of the [literary] narrator and the ‘personality’ (or subjectivity) which a film producer may incorporate into the presentation of a story: the I-camera (continuously identifying with the eye of a character) [the
continuous subjective shot] is an exceptional case in the history of movie-making” (“Introduction” 269).

The vast majority of subjective shots in Hollywood cinema, Alexander Galloway writes, “represent the vision of aliens, criminals, monsters, or characters deemed otherwise inhuman by the film’s narrative. Thus it should come as no surprise that the horror genre uses this convention relatively often” (Gaming 50). In horror movies other than found footage, the subjective camera technique briefly provides audiences with the perspective of the film’s villain or monster: we are momentarily in the uncomfortable position of the killer, seeing the fright on the face of his next victim. What we see in The Blair Witch Project is not the Witch’s POV or subjective vision, nor Heather’s POV or subjective vision, but the subjective vision of the diegetic camera itself, or more precisely the subjective vision of the diegetic camera as operated by Heather or Josh—what Galloway names a “camcorder subjectivity” (Gaming 49). Heather, Josh, and Mike regularly discuss the devices, in both practical and philosophical terms: “I see why you like this video camera so much…it’s totally like a filtered reality. It’s like you can pretend everything’s not quite the way it is.” This virtualization of real space for real bodies in that space produces a kind of “hyperunrealness” (Herzog): not quite real, not fully virtual, but an appendage, a filter, a way of being in the world—a “hybrid agent (a body-sensor)” (Eugeni 19), or a “camcorder subjectivity.” Though dizzying, The Blair Witch Project’s style generates stability, if of a claustrophobic sort. These are diegetic cameras, cameras as real physical objects in the world of the movie; they forcefully announce themselves as our only access to the depicted world. The cameras in The Blair Witch Project act as prosthetics, felt extremities, the skin of this strange cinematic experience. Hardly an “imaginary elsewhere that is devoid of the camera,” this is an ostensibly real place we know we only access because of real cameras operated by the central
figures. Thus, the differences between found footage and classical uses of the “exceptional” subjective camera are two-fold: the subjective camera technique is sustained throughout found footage (the norm rather than the exception), and the camera itself is diegetic, an object in the narrative world (actual rather than virtual).

Galloway writes that the most “successful use of the subjective shot is when it is used to represent computerized, cybernetic, or machinic vision.” For instance, in “The Terminator, to underscore the computerized artificiality of his cyborg’s visual cortex, James Cameron includes four shots where the Terminator’s eyes and the camera lens merge.” In this way, being “cybernetic…provides a necessary alibi for the affect of the first-person perspective” (Gaming 56). The machinic perspective in The Blair Witch Project, or the human-machinic hybridity that characterizes its “camcorder subjectivity,” is a form of subjective cinema that is both narratively and culturally motivated by society’s cinematization via consumer-grade mobile video cameras—a “necessary alibi” writ large. It is an academic commonplace in scholarship and theories of cinematic narration to suggest that Robert Montgomery’s 1947 Lady in the Lake and its through-the-eyes-of-the-protagonist version of first-person cinema was a total failure, an “overliteral approach to first-person cinema” (Kawin 44), or a “wrong-headed gimmick” (Burch 27) utterly foreign to the essential “language” and effects of narrative film. By the late 90s and early 00s the ubiquity of cameras and widespread dispersal of moving image media had readied audiences and “prosumers” for new forms of subjective cinema, deeply focalized cinema, livable and writable cinema, cinema in which the camera and its operator are an embodied presence onscreen. We’re familiar with the scenes: people speaking soliloquies into their webcams, or footage from an event in which the camera operator speaks over what we see. This is iMovie and YouTube.
2.21. Subjective shot from the killer’s perspective, *Halloween*.

Theories of cinematic narration must begin to account for how movies today are thoroughly subjective, authored by amateurs. In *Image and Mind*, Gregory Currie draws a distinction between *embedded narrators* and *controlling narrators*. In literature, a controlling narrator is a narrator who is responsible for the text as such. That is, within the fictional world of the narrative, we imagine that this character actually puts pen to paper or pounds the keys to write the work we read—Sal Paradise in *On the Road*, or Watson in many of the *Sherlock Holmes* stories. An embedded narrator, on the other hand, may tell the story to another character, or they may recount the story to themselves, but within the fictional world they do not actually write the text—Janie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, or Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*.

Embedded narrators, Currie writes, “are common in film: think of all those conflicting accounts in *Rashomon*, the bits of Charles Kane’s life told by various folk in *Citizen Kane* and Walter Neff’s disillusioned narrative in *Double Indemnity*” (266). Voice-over narration in film typically produces, in Currie’s terms, *embedded narration*. Currie suggests that it is a mistake to conflate a voice-over narrator with a controlling narrator, one who is medially responsible for the images onscreen. Jonas Koch shares the conviction: “verbal narratives do not, of course, consist of moving images. Their media-specific difference from film results coercively in an inequality in content.” Koch continues: “Since it is impossible to give an exhaustive verbal description even of a single frame, a verbal discourse provides but a draft for a filmic discourse, shaping of which requires, at any rate, a significant enrichment of mimetic content” (68).

Voice-over speakers in classical Hollywood narratives almost never acknowledge that they narrate a movie as such, if only because it is impossible to verbally communicate a movie as a movie. Most novels, of course, are composed exclusively of words, and a narrator in that medial context might at some point suggest that they have written the words we read. Little is
lost in that translation. This leads Brian Henderson to characterize the voice-over “narrator” in classical film as a “puppet of the narration. One might say the same of character-narrators in fiction but they at least are always onstage and are built to withstand observation; they also serve all the functions of the narration.” Voice-over narrators, however, “are jerked on and off stage in a manner that is quite undignified. They may have integrity as characters but they have no integrity as narrators, no resistance to the demands placed upon them; they are nothing but the functions they serve.” In effect, voice-over narrators are “ludicrous stand-ins for the novelistic ‘I’” (16).

In her book-length survey of the voice-over, Sarah Kozloff comes to a similar conclusion about the speaking “narrator” in David Lean’s *Doctor Zhivago*, who “is introduced only to be ignored most of the time and then abruptly and illogically jerked in to patch up a transition” (6). Kozloff continues, echoing Henderson’s argument: “If it is most common and feels most ‘natural’ for first-person narrators of novels to have written their stories down—thus forging a match between the narrative pose and the actual textual medium, then one might expect that the most common pose for a voice-over narrator would be ‘filmmaker’” (53). Of course, this is not the case: “because of the strangeness and ambiguity involved in ‘telling a film,’ it is extremely rare for a homodiegetic narrator [a character-narrator] to encourage us to believe that he or she is narrating through celluloid” (53). Though I find it difficult to concur with Kozloff that it always “feels most ‘natural’” to assume that first-person character-narrators in fiction have written the text (that the majority are *controlling narrators* in Currie’s terms), it is often mimetically plausible to assume that they may have written the text: most literary narrators are presumed literate, and we can usually imagine that they have access to a pen and paper. Writing in 1995, Currie suggests that there “is something awkward—indeed, something close to incoherence—
about the idea of a controlling narrator in film.” Whereas in “literature it is often natural to imagine that what one is reading is a true account of certain events witnessed or otherwise known about by someone, who then went to the trouble of setting it all down for us in writing,” it is “implausible” to assume the same for film, in which “the person in the know has gone to the trouble of recreating it all for us on camera, spending millions of dollars, employing famous actors and a vast army of technicians” (267).

Clearly, these theories of cinematic narration require revision: the found footage film is a popular narrative style composed completely of images that are produced by characters within the fiction. An entirely new class of wide-release cinematic narrators emerges from the widespread dissemination of the means of moving image production. Making a “film” today is more like writing than ever. At first this might sound counter-intuitive: as movies rely so completely on advances to high technology, they necessarily move further away from the relative simplicity of the hand, a pen, and the written word. But moving image production is now almost as ubiquitous as writing itself. Certainly today, when a majority of Americans own smartphones with HD video camera capabilities, many of us are as likely to have a video camera nearby as a pen. In 1953, Cesare Zavattini predicted that “when films cost sixpence and everybody can have a camera,” the cinema will “become a creative medium as flexible and as free as any other” (68). By 1999, the rise of relatively cheap moving image recording devices was in full swing: most public places had CCTV surveillance cameras of one sort or another, and the personal camcorder market was booming. In the late 90s and early 00s it was clear that moviemaking was becoming “a part of general experience” (Lanier 144).

“Film is twentieth-century theater, and it will become twenty-first-century writing”: Ridley Scott’s declaration in 1992 points to the writable near-future of cinema, and this is a
crucial ingredient in the rise of new forms of cinematic narration at the turn of the century—a multiform reconfiguration of cinematic authorship (qtd. in Matthews). “Controlling narrators” are plausible now precisely because of the novel (and novelistic) ways producers can author moving images. Simply put, authors produce narrators; new technologies of cinematic authorship have produced new types of cinematic narrators.

At the expensive corporate level, cinematic authorship takes place largely on “virtual backlots” and in software environments. Sometimes the effects are startling and otherworldly, though they appear photorealistic. Whether or not producers of CGI movies continue to deploy cuts, blur, and so on, it is simply a matter of fact that they do not have to anymore, that much of the “language” of cinema, born from necessity, is now optional—a menu selection, a filter effect, under authorial control. Cinematic “language” becomes truly arbitrary, in the way of the alphabet or the signifier. Point, shoot, and print becomes code, render, and export. Post-production becomes production. Just as “paintings needn’t picture actual things” (Walton 250), directors become image-writers who work with the “optionally real” (Barthes, Camera 76) and with “elastic reality” (Manovich, Language 254).

George Lucas helped pioneer digital, nonlinear editing systems, enabling directors and editors to “cut and paste images, much as a writer cuts and pastes text on a computer” (Bouzereau and Duncan 134). Lucas digitized the entirety of The Phantom Menace, and nonlinear editing allowed him, he says, to “actually create shots and scenes in the editing room, rather than just cutting them.” He can “move things around, cut people out of one shot and put them in another, change sets, or take a scene from one location and put it in another.” In other words, Lucas was able to “completely reconstruct and rewrite the story in the editing process” (Lucas qtd. in Bouzereau and Duncan 135). “Non-linear” in this context refers to the technical
process of attaching metadata to imported files—scenes, shots, etc. The metadata allows the
digital material to be instantly called up and modified in a way that does no damage to the
original source. Everything can be undone and revised: “Edit/Undo.” “Non-linear” resonates
aesthetically as well: it is no coincidence that the “Atemporal cinema” (McGowan), or “Modular
narratives” (Cameron) of 21 Grams, Babel, and Memento emerged when they did, as nonlinear
editing makes it much easier to play with time via the cut-and-paste command, or the “the most
basic operation one can perform on digital data” (Manovich, Language 258).

Concurrent to the full digitization of big-budget Hollywood production and post-
production, the introduction and marketing of the DVD format presented movies as objects for
the shelf, a new sort of book, one replete with audio commentary by the director and other
creative participants, as well as behind-the-scenes features beatifying the authorial genius of the
film. These supplements, concludes Jonathan Gray, typically “calcify the director’s version of
how to read a film,” thus establishing the medium’s “adherence to a pre-Death of the Author
world” (101). DVDs and their bonus features “tell viewers that they should in fact look at the
man behind the curtain,” suggests Joshua Greenberg, thus shifting the “nature of movie watching
from immersion in an experience to the abstracted analysis of a text” (153). Supplemental
features on DVDs fortify the “author function” (Foucault 108) for popular, institutional cinema.
When DVDs debuted Hollywood began marketing a new set of auteurs, a concept that
“rematerialized” in the late 90s as the “commercial performance of the business of being an
auteur” (King 115). Darren Aronofsky, James Cameron, the Coen brothers, David Fincher, Peter
Jackson, Charlie Kaufman, Spike Lee, Christopher Nolan, Robert Rodriguez, M. Night
Shyamalan, Kevin Smith, Steven Soderbergh, Quentin Tarantino, the Wachowski siblings: these
are just a few of the millennial auteurs, stars in their own right, each as central to the marketing
of their movies as any individual actress or actor. The DVD allows viewers, or users—or “viewers” (Daly 82)—to freeze frames with crystal clarity and jump around instantly from “chapter” to “chapter” of a film. When you can “control the timeline,” movies become “like books,” according to Christopher Nolan (qtd. in Quinn). For Laura Mulvey, this experience of interacting with a movie via DVD produces “pleasures reminiscent of the processes of textual analysis” (28). Online message boards abound, inviting viewers to sort out what a movie or director “really” means: in this case, the birth of the author is also the birth of the reader.

Directors become painters. Movies become books. The author function becomes central to a movie’s marketing and popular reception. Society cinematizes via camcorders, video editing software, DVDs, and online message boards. The variety of new ways of authoring and subjectively engaging with moving images produces fresh perspectives, both about and within the “medium.” Just as multiple cross-sections of society enter into strange new relationships with moving image technology and the institution of cinema, in their respective ways both glossy digital movies and works participating in the negative aesthetics of indexicality refigure the material and narrative role of the camera and of point of view. In video games and in completely CGI films such as Toy Story the camera is virtual, always already a simulation. In The Phantom Menace cameras certainly record events in real physical space, but the footage is nevertheless digitized and made thoroughly manipulable. George Lucas inserts photorealistic objects into the image that the camera did not record, applies a wide array of filters to the image, rearranges the spatial coordinates of the real things the camera captured, and even changes the camera’s positioning. The real camera becomes a virtual camera during post-production, now the central stage of big-budget cinematic creation. Indeed, “Digital compositing allows for the seamless insertion of 3D computer-generated models that were not present in the original scene.
Conversely, the objects that were present can be seamlessly removed from images,” and, in “some cases, it is even possible to re-render a film sequence as though it was shot from a different point of view” (Manovich, *Software* 157). Once imagery is digitally rendered in three dimensions, “point of view” becomes a choice, one unconstrained by real-world physical limitations. In Jonathan Crary’s terms, the digital image relocates “vision to a plane severed from a human observer” (1), and yet, the computer-generated image is now authored in the way of painting or literature, and thus “in fee to an inescapable subjectivity” (Bazin 12). Digitized, the image de-motivates: no longer indexical, but also no longer necessarily stuck to a particular point in space. The connection between what was shot and what we see becomes arbitrary, an abstraction, simply one of innumerable ways of seeing data, as directors practice the ubiquitous computer operation of “view control.”

While digital moving images often simulate perspective and indexicality, *The Blair Witch Project* actualizes and forces these qualities on us, to the point of claustrophobia and motion sickness. Digital cinema’s capacity to change a shot’s point of view in post-production and for point of view to be gravity-less, a choice: nothing could be further from the decisively enworlded cameras of *The Blair Witch Project*. Nevertheless, the de-motivated point of view of digital cinema reconfigures the very notion of cinematic point of view, making it an authorial choice rife with possibilities—from the completely virtual and physically impossible to the controlled, restricted, and subjective. If on the one hand the big-budget digitization of the moving image de-motivates “indexicality” and “point of view” while making each pixel writable, on the other hand the high-tech cinematization of mass culture produces “user-generated” movies that are trusted as indexical and that are perspectively grounded, that manifestly contain first-person, “controlling narrators.” The “I-camera” becomes much more than an “exceptional” or
“marginalized” mode of cinematic discourse; it stands firmly as a mimetically motivated option among an unlimited number of virtual perspectives. Just as visual aesthetics accelerated outward to the extremes in the mid-90s via the negative aesthetics of indexicality and the glossy high-tech sheen of CGI, the digitization of motion pictures and the commercial popularity of mobile movie cameras provide new limits for what constitutes narration and narrative perspective in “film.” When live-action moving imagery can be completely controlled and revised, “perspective”—like motion blur, like the lens flare, like the cinematic cut—becomes just another element a director can tinker with; they might offer a long-shot of Earth from outer space that clearly and beautifully zooms into a blade of grass. Everything you can think of is true, made visible.

*The Blair Witch Project* “solidified the convention of narrating through the diegetic camera” (B. Grant 157), providing a decidedly telling case of first-person fictional film, a sort that audiences didn’t seem to think of as a “wrong-headed gimmick” as we once did of *Lady in the Lake*. This is a fresh narrative perspective motivated entirely by society’s new, personal, and quotidian relationship with movie production. Like the negative aesthetics of indexicality acting as a response to CGI, it seems as if the controlling, first-person perspective of found footage is a reaction, a way of re-grounding narrative perspective. The result is a thorough and haunting depiction of what life in the first-person often feels like today—a mediated, technologically determined “camcorder subjectivity.”

**Finding the Footage and Motivating Omniscience**

1997’s “Bad Day” stands as one of the first short videos to become an internet sensation, a “viral video” that spread via the networks of email, hyperlinks, peer-to-peer software, webpage embedding, and so on. It depicts a heavy-set, middle-aged man sitting in an office cubicle. The image we see is from a surveillance camera, shot from a static vantage looking down on the
action. Sitting behind his computer, the man seems confused by something displayed on his monitor. He types in new inputs and looks back at the screen. He’s not happy. He reaches out and loudly smacks the side of the monitor. The freeze or glitch on the computer doesn’t relent. The man pounds the keyboard with closed fists, stands up, and smashes the keyboard against the computer monitor, which falls to the ground outside the cubicle. He leaves the cubicle, walking almost completely out of frame. We can see enough to know he’s kicking the monitor. The video is about 25 seconds long.

I remember watching this video as a teenager, sometime in the late 90s, laughing at the poor schlub’s aggressively pointless frustration. Who sent it to me? Did they email me a link? Did I come across it on Napster? Did a friend come over and type in a website address? I’m certain I passed it along to others, one way or another. This guy looked like someone my parents’ age, a scruffy and disheveled baby boomer with a Magnum P.I. mustache and a beer-gut, not
quite fit enough to keep up with the constant upgrades of computer culture. He’s the sort of guy who probably wouldn’t see this video, if only because he spends his leisure time in front of the “idiot box.” He looks like Super Mario, but he might not catch the reference. As condescending as my attitude and laughter may have been, it was also easy to recognize just how common and present his frustration was. Americans were buying desktop PCs at a phenomenal rate, and millions of people at home and at work were pressured to learn a strange new vocabulary and set of behaviors: the World Wide Web, Excel spreadsheets, URLs and hyperlinks, keyboard shortcuts, .doc vs. .wp vs. .pdf vs. .txt vs. .rtf, operating system upgrades, RAM vs. ROM, email attachments, local networks, dial-up vs. DSL, viruses and phishing and spam, and on and on and on. Frustration was in the air, producing a “permanent state of exhaustion and bewilderment” (Kroker), or a “social fever characterized by wide mood swings between utopian fantasy and hateful cynicism” (Heim, “Cyberspace” 25). The cubiced twenty-somethings working on the Y2K bug in 1999’s Office Space use a baseball bat to beat the holy hell out of a Xerox machine. Ben Stiller and Owen Wilson’s male-model characters in 2001’s Zoolander don’t quite understand the language of a “file” being “in” the computer, thinking they have to smash the device apart to get at a document inside.

Where did “Bad Day” come from? Is it real or staged? Is this a “silicon snuff” film or “a clever hoax?” (Delio). When was this shot? Is that really a surveillance camera? The camera seems to move just a bit. Is this too perfect, too wonderful to have actually happened this way? Yes. The clip was part of a larger piece made by the surveillance firm Loronix Information Systems, a fact lost on nearly everyone who has seen the video. The company filmed a series of vignettes in order to promote their digital video recording system, an “extra-sharp corporate spy cam” (Judith Lewis). The worker was played by Vinny Licciardi, Loronix’s shipping manager.
The idea was to showcase a scenario that employers would want on record, but once the promotional CD began to circulate Loronix found that they had created something else entirely: “Loronix staged Licciardi’s bad day to demonstrate the possibilities of employee vandalism, and ended up demonstrating why employees vandalize.” Indeed, most people shared this clip precisely because of its cathartic effect, as it smashed through the palpable angst of corporate computer culture. LA Weekly’s Judith Lewis sums up the scene: “The apoplectic man works in the kind of drone space that drives people buggy, surrounded by fabric-covered gray barriers that he’s decorated with one spare poster. There is next to nothing on his desk…Worse, he’s being captured on a security camera, a spy machine installed by corporate honchos who mean to keep track of his activities. How much more inhumane does the work environment have to get before all our machines explode in the great millennium-bug crash?”

“Bad Day” is an early viral video, the sort of short movie that began to spread and infect us through the net in the late 90s. Nothing in the clip indicates who is responsible for its presentation or dissemination. It registers as CCTV footage, a humorous if slightly disturbing moment of a cubicle man “going postal.” It looks real and un-staged, familiar from the countless clips on TV of robberies, animal attacks, workers behaving badly, and so on. It makes sense why such footage might exist, as worker surveillance via security cameras and computer monitoring had become the new normal by the late 90s, perhaps the most insidious manifestation of society’s cinematization. Internet surveillance of workers was on the rise: “if you surf the Internet from work, the hacker you should fear most is your boss,” reads a 1997 article from The Globe and Mail (Crosariol). Just a few years after Peter Steiner’s “On the Internet, Nobody Knows You’re a Dog” New Yorker cartoon from 1993, companies such as Anonymizer.com began to offer services that would strip “identifying information out of e-mail and Web
communications” (Kanaley). By the late 90s it was clear we had entered an age of ubiquitous, computer-enabled surveillance. Hot items by 1998, “Kindercams” and “Nannycams” allowed parents using personal computers to keep video tabs on their child, pointing directly to the domestication of video surveillance and to the PC as a personal snooping device. In 1997 New York City began its video surveillance program, setting up “twenty-four-hour remote surveillance in Central Park, subway stations, and other public places” (Brin 5). In fact, the 80s and 90s saw an “exponential increase in the use of closed-circuit television (CCTV) systems by police and private security companies for monitoring urban areas, workplaces, retail outlets, banks, casinos, roadways, airports, and other settings” (Gates 244). By 1997, 300,000 surveillance video cameras blanketed the United Kingdom. Some CCTV systems were even “smart,” capable of automatically identifying the “faces of known offenders,” or those people with criminal backgrounds (Lyon 17). David Brin sums things up in his 1998 book The Transparent Society: “No matter how many laws are passed, it will prove quite impossible to legislate away the new surveillance tools and databases. They are here to stay…Light is going to shine into nearly every corner of our lives” (9). Cue the sun.

While it clearly contains a controlled camera’s gaze, one that is part of the world it depicts, “Bad Day” is also anonymously let loose, left to relentlessly and uncontrollably zip through cyberspace. The clip we see has been decontextualized, removed from the other short clips on the CD, mined for its humorous and shocking content by whoever first compressed the video down to a manageable file size in order to share it. It begins to appear on webpages along with other funny videos, or sent by email with a heading like “how I feel today,” or “Mondays.” What looks like a private moment on the job becomes the stuff of internet legend, discovered and watched and re-watched and interacted with and mashed-up and re-edited millions of times,
almost exclusively on computers. Embedded on websites by people and organizations that had nothing to do with its production, it drives traffic, sells banner ads. It will eventually be copied, cached, and made searchable by Google, a legally authorized pirate of “the world’s information.”

Writers and directors of puzzle and found footage films routinely approximate and highlight restricted, subjective forms of narration. The most basic narrative tricks and conceits of these movies—terminal frames or twists and the diegetic existence of the camera—necessarily produce an unusually intense engagement with narrational boundaries and limits, thus undermining the naturalized practices of classical Hollywood narration. A terminally framed movie such as *The Sixth Sense* contains a twist in which what we thought was classical, objective narration turns out to have been thoroughly subjective, a screened filter of the protagonist’s mind. Found footage films present only the literal point of view of characters, those who record the events of the film. Still, while *The Blair Witch Project* is stuck to its “camcorder subjectivity,” the film also dramatizes how easily first-person video data leaks out, how quickly the personal becomes the public in digital culture. At the very moment when controlling and first-person cinematic narrators materialize as culturally motivated they simultaneously become embedded and incorporated by quasi-omniscient, shadowy narrative agents. Interactivity and the “user-generated” become big business—“The User is the Content” (Pariser 47).

Within *The Blair Witch Project*’s first shot, the TV in the living room stands nearly as tall as Heather. Several electronic boxes sit beneath it, ostensibly a VCR and video editing

45. Google has built its business around making “copies of all kinds of copyrighted material. For years, it has been making cache copies of the Web pages it indexes, because its search function cannot operate without a cache index. In two cases, courts ruled that this practice does not infringe copyrights” (Vaidhyanathan 166).
equipment. Behind Heather’s left shoulder stands another black rectangle, a darkened fish- or reptile-tank of some sort. Like whatever is trapped in that glassed-in nature, Heather and her companions will venture in circles, lost in the woods—all of it viewable from the other side of screens and glass. The *found footage* genre implies a *finder*, a mediator between the film’s audience and protagonists. “In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found.” What a perverse use of the passive voice: the anonymous presenter(s) of this movie, or those parties responsible for this “non-fiction” footage’s dissemination, refuse responsibility for what we see onscreen. They are the movie’s nameless, invisible intermediaries—a middle layer that we never quite see or know, but one that purports passive objectivity. In the terms of narrative theory, the finders are not the *historical* or *actual* authors of this text. That designation would certainly apply to Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sánchez, Haxan Films, and Artisan Entertainment: these are the real people responsible for writing, producing, and releasing *The Blair Witch Project*. We might call the narrative agent who diegetically “finds” the footage the inscribed editor, collector, or even repurposer. What we see onscreen is footage that has been cut for maximum suspense and horror, far from a sober documentary of actual missing people. Certainly, the subject of the film changes when the students go missing: this is no longer exclusively Heather’s documentary about a folk legend, but instead a piece about a failed film project, about missing student filmmakers. Thus, all of the material that Heather, Josh, and Mike recorded is potentially pertinent to audiences trying to understand who these people were and what went wrong. Nevertheless, the inscribed editor never seems quite as interested in understanding and locating the crew as in sensationalizing their disappearance.
The film’s first five shots are from the perspective of the Hi-8 color camcorder. Conceivably, the cuts between these shots could be the result of the camera operator pushing stop or pause, thus producing a diegetically motivated cut. The sixth shot of the movie, though, is from the perspective of the black-and-white 16mm film camera, operated by Josh. Josh records Heather as Heather records Josh. This is the first cut that indicates a post-production presence, installing the past tense of “found.”


Soon after the crew enters the woods, Heather stages an opening scene for her documentary about the legend of the Blair Witch. She sits on a rock, opens a book, faces the 16mm operated by Josh, and begins reading about the legend. As she speaks, the image cuts to other shots taken by the 16mm film camera—to trees and to “Coffin Rock.” The editor seems to make an effort to guess Heather’s documentary aesthetics, or those of the voice-over and establishing shots. Of course, the movie we watch is not the documentary Heather intended, and the diegetic editor is fully aware of this; the crew will have gone missing well before the editor takes to the footage. This attempt to mimic and mock Heather’s conventional aesthetics produces a terrible tension. Everything we see has been recontextualized by the movie’s opening titles as a vision of the missing, the dead. The editing becomes frantic during the film’s climax. As Heather and Mike enter a dilapidated building they think might house the witch, the image cuts quickly between cameras, ratcheting up the suspense. We hear frightening commotion as Heather’s camera falls
to the floor. The movie ends. There are no titles explaining how the editor may have found the
footage, or what police may have uncovered in their investigation, or to what purposes the film’s
proceeds will go. Rather than letting us exhale, the implied editors end the movie at its highest
pitch.

_The Blair Witch Project_ was the first wide-release film resembling the wild new moving
image media we began to encounter or hear about online as culture became digital: the illegal
cinemas of piracy and snuff, the first-person cinema of life-logging and much of YouTube, the
mysterious and seemingly authorless viral video, the quasi-realities of comedy news and reality
TV. Simultaneously, the film showcases how these wild images are often tamed and reoriented
for the generic commercial structures of new media conglomerates. The movie is palatable to
general audiences precisely because of the terrible ways in which the finder harvests the student
filmmakers’ material to create a horror film, with all of its generic frights. Just imagine “finding”
mysterious footage such as this, and then editing it in such a way as to squeeze out every ounce
of terror, adapting a “snuff film” “for popular consumption” (Egginton 212). This editor is a
palpably absent agent of intelligence and control, an unseen figure contextualizing the material
with captions at the film’s beginning, and then slicing and dicing it up throughout. We do not
just see what Heather, Josh, Mike, and the cameras see, but also what this surveilling,
repurposing agent of editing and exhibition sees: vision at a distance. Importing snuff and
exporting horror, the diegetic editor repurposes the indexical images into popular entertainment.
The negative aesthetics of indexicality necessarily blur the line between fact and fiction,
mimicking the look and feel of the unconstructed or accidental image. Likewise, the diegetic
repurposing of Heather’s documentary participates in a widespread softening of generic borders:
Is this a documentary or a horror movie? Is this news or entertainment? Is this work or play?
Why have a diegetic editor at all? What would general audiences have thought about *The Blair Witch Project* if there weren’t titles at the beginning of the film indicating that this had been “found”? Why did Myrick and Sánchez find it necessary or productive to supply a narrative explanation about the origins of the onscreen images for this movie when we don’t require it of any other? On a certain register, this implied finder might not have been necessary for Myrick and Sánchez, as the movie would still scare without the framing device. What the strategy accomplishes is both practical and artful. First, it only strengthens the notion that this is “real” footage, footage that exists in our world and that had to be found if we are to see it. More interestingly, though, the finder resembles those new, unseen middle layers of network society. These are the surveilling and data-gathering people and code of questionable or obscured values, agents that are never completely “inside” or “outside,” that see no distinction between “private” and “public.” These are the agents tuning in on you—the data gatherers, the leakers, the curators, always watching, editing, and arranging in a world in which “profits are extracted from the whole texture of our lives, not just from the specific hours we pass working in a factory or an office” (Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic* 97). The conceit offers a formal vision of how power operates in contemporary media environments: amateurs produce first-person content that is collected and repurposed in ways claiming objectivity.

If on the one hand the digitization and cinematization of society lead to greater authorial control over the moving image, on the other hand the numerical rendering of media data flattens films into files, recoding movies as transferrable bits, bits that are easy to decontextualize by algorithms, bots, and human-software collectives that had nothing to do with the film’s production. Well before 1999, remixing and repurposing had become central activities of digital culture. Obscure, quasi-human intermediaries had emerged to guide us through and into content.
This content is so effortlessly remixed precisely because it is digital; it can be copied and rearranged endlessly at little cost and without degradation. John Lechte explains how a key feature of digital culture is “the increasing speed at which everything is becoming, or is potentially, decontextualized” (66). In 1995 Nicholas Negroponte was already suggesting that the “challenge for the next decade is not just to give people bigger screens, better sound quality, and easier-to-use graphical input devices,” but to “make computers that know you, learn about your needs” (92). Negroponte imagines “a future in which your interface agent can read every newswire and newspaper and catch every TV and radiobroadcast on the planet, and then construct a personalized summary. This kind of newspaper is printed in an edition of one….Call it The Daily Me” (153). Artificial intelligence that screens out the noise, personalizes information, and effectively creates a “filter bubble” (Pariser): this is an adequate description of the projects of Google, Yahoo!, and AOL in the late 90s. Digital filtering agents arrive as the new intermediaries between people and information: they algorithmically collect, de-contextualize, edit, curate, re-contextualize, personalize, and present information; they remix big data; they “organize the world’s information and make it universally accessible and useful.”46 By the late 90s, it was clear that we were “entering the Recommendation Age” (Frog Design, qtd. in C. Anderson 107), and that the new media giants were writing software insisting on the idea that “consumers must be given ways to find niches that suit their particular needs and interests. A range of tools and techniques—from recommendations to rankings—are effective at doing this” (C. Anderson 53). Indeed, from the very beginning Jeff Bezos envisioned Amazon not as a

bookseller, but chiefly as an artificial intelligence company, one “powered by algorithms capable of instantly matching customers and books” (Pariser 25).

This is a logic of capturing, filtering, and personalizing, of treating people as profiles: the process, writes Sidney Eve Matrix, “constructs the user’s data body by recording their content choices, establishing a set of perimeters around the subject, which act as information filters and nodes to which other digital content providers can link, to further push personalized media.” Software begins hailing us in these ways, and the results are “marketing campaigns and products that utilize the prefix ‘my,’ such as My AOL, My Yahoo!, My Netscape—and on Microsoft’s Windows desktop—My Computer, My Documents, My Files” (56). In order to make recommendations, the software needs to know us, to record and cut us up, to compare little bits of us to cross-sections of populations and preferences. Just one of many big-money attacks on privacy in recent history, the billion-dollar merger of the online advertising company Double-Click with the consumer data collection agency Abacus Direct in 1999 combined “Double-Click’s ability to follow online surfers around the Internet with Abacus’ vast database of names, addresses and phone numbers collected from direct mail vendors.” “Leading privacy advocates” “blasted” the merger (Pressman); they must have missed the decree issued earlier that year by Scott McNealy, chairman of Sun Microsystems: “You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it” (qtd. in Sprenger).

Today, super-human intelligence and omniscience are mimoetically motivated narrational strategies. An establishing shot from an outer space satellite captures my image as I write this on a framed screen half an inch below an HD camera lens staring back at me blankly. For all I know I have a keystroke-recording form of malware installed in the deep recesses of this machine’s code, allowing someone or something to experience the action on my screen in real time. The
NSA can easily tap into this smartphone sitting next to me, turning it into a mole and listening to everything I say. Jonathan Culler’s sense that God is not “the only alternative to a human’s partial knowledge” (“Omniscience” 26) is now a fully developed, omnipresent fact of contemporary life. Quite simply, the world is now inundated with not-quite-human, not-quite-metaphysical agents of intelligence. These minds spend a good deal of their energies describing us, profiling us, nudging us, and sharing stories about us, from our self-delusions to our private fears to our social and historical relations. Your mind is a radio.

The “informational composites” of “market profiles, credit histories or even character settings and preferences for online games” have become “the lifeblood of new forms of informational capitalism and e-governance” (Whitson and Haggerty 574). With this data, writes Juan Enriquez, “any electronic archaeologist, sociologist, or historian examining our e-lives would be able to understand, map, compute, contrast, and judge our lives in a degree of detail incomprehensible to any previous generation” (311). For that matter, any narrator of contemporary life must realize that a person or character is a decentralized bundle of data, monstrously and yet comprehensively re-constructible. Their story is already out there, already being told. “Digging through the Egyptian pyramids will look like child’s play compared to what future scholars will find at Google, Microsoft, the National Security Agency, credit bureaus, or any host of parallel universes” (312). This is what Manuel Castells names “real virtuality”: “a system in which reality itself (that is, people’s material/symbolic existence) is entirely captured.” He continues: “All messages of all kinds become enclosed in the medium because the medium has become so comprehensive, so diversified, so malleable that it absorbs in the same multimedia text the whole of human experience” (Rise 404). Raw experiences become instant discourse; fabulas become instant syuzhets. Our information is found, edited, reconstructed,
repurposed, and put to all sorts of ends we have no control over. The individual becomes the Deleuzian “dividual” (“Postscript” 5) and the dividual is data: “the data body is like a virtual double, an avatar, a cyber trace, a placeholder in the matrix, but one over which the subject has limited control” (Matrix 30).

The found footage horror film directly embodies this logic of “data doubles” (Poster 97) and “surveillant narration” (Levin), offering a new sort of narrator for a brave new world. As collaborative and multi-authored a process as filmmaking almost always is, in the case of *The Blair Witch Project* the “found footage” is chopped up and organized in a way that Heather, the director, had absolutely no say over. It arrives to us opaquely from some unknowable agent of intelligence and transmission, one that claims passive objectivity in the opening titles but that slices, dices, sutures, and repurposes throughout. We see the film and video that Heather and Josh record, but we receive it repurposed in the form of post-production surveillance, or unreliable omniscience: that is, when a diegetically inscribed, surveilling authorial agent embeds and repurposes mediated lives for power, profit, entertainment, control, or just because they can. Without the editor to find and shape this material into a dramatic syuzhet it would remain pure fabula, an “unvectored chaos” (Altman 16). This is a “database narrative,” and every “database or archive is designed for a particular kind of knowledge production with specific goals, and the decision of what items to include or exclude, and what categories to use as structuring principles, and what metadata to collect for later retrieval—all of these decisions serve master narratives with ideological implications” (Kinder 59). Within the framed narrative of *The Blair Witch Project*, Heather, Josh, and Mike are nothing but disordered media data. They are fully cinematized doubles of themselves, edited to fit into a genre, repurposed as entertainment masquerading as news.
It is the film’s form of “surveillant narration” (Levin) that qualifies *The Blair Witch Project* as a prescient, profoundly horrific film. This was the first wide-release film to deploy a sustained narrative logic of captured, amateur-produced media, even if found footage films since *The Blair Witch Project*—most notably *Cloverfield*, *Open Windows*, and *Redacted*—make stronger, more direct connections between the finders and the institutional practices of technological surveillance and control. Regardless of how deliberately Myrick and Sánchez engage these themes, the back-grounded presence of the diegetic media-finder stands as the most quintessentially modern narrative strategy in contemporary cinema, the narrational representation of a form of surveillance that “works at a distance in both space and time” (Bauman and Lyon 5). Reality TV, found footage, viral videos of hidden cameras and surveillance: Is it any wonder that these new forms of aggressively mediated and surveilled life have found such success in recent years, especially among younger audiences who have “no memory of a world without such electric definition”? (Wallace, “E Unibus” 43).

A media-surveilling presence of intelligence that’s there but that we can’t see, a mediated following: *The Blair Witch Project* captures this ubiquitous cultural presence in a way that many audiences might not immediately recognize. We have been trained well enough to know that this is first-person film, that what we see comes from real cameras in real spaces. We must learn to think critically about how we receive this information, how it’s translated as it leaks out, and why and to what ends it appears in the first place. *The Blair Witch Project* offers two new perspectives on and within popular moving imagery: the “camcorder subjectivity” that is so

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47. I follow Catherine Zimmer’s call for a fresh approach to the relations between cinema and surveillance: “the field of cinema studies has overwhelmingly distilled the discussion of complex and dynamic surveillance formations into either psychoanalytic accounts of voyeuristic pleasure or the Foucauldian model of panopticism” (427). For a brilliant, “post-panoptic” reading of the *Paranormal Activity* found footage films, see Tziallas.
palpable, disorienting, and yet familiar from moving image experiences outside of popular cinema; and the “surveillant narration” of the finder (Levin), a force we were beginning to recognize as real, paranoia proven, as we learned about these new information-based identity markets in which “Power can move with the speed of the electronic signal” (Bauman 10). The witch is simply the old-fashioned analog threat, a stand-in for a more ubiquitous, invisible presence we were all beginning to feel: the “unseen horror” that collects cookies as we learn about the legend online; the directors who terrifye the actors by “remote control”; the figures that capture and sell our first-person profiles. The Blair Witch Project is remarkable in this regard, as it motivates both its first-person narration as well as its omniscience, effectively urging audiences, authors, and critics to reconsider foundational principles of narrative as society mediates and digital power collects.

“A double spooks the world, the double of abstraction” (Wark 1). Both The Sixth Sense and The Blair Witch Project enter a culture of abstraction, aggregation, of everything “meta.” Jaron Lanier characterizes a governing ethic of the web as “the race to be most meta”: “If a design like Facebook or Twitter depersonalizes people a little bit, then another service like Friendfeed…might soon come along to aggregate the previous layers of aggregation, making individual people even more abstract, and the illusion of high-level metanness more celebrated” (28). Collectors, remixers, aggregators: these are some of the new “authors” of digital culture, and they operate so effectively because of the effortlessness of “copy-and-paste,” “sort,” “edit-undo,” and “view control.” Everything becomes numeric, abstract, and mixable. Fantasy sports (games based on the abstracted data of professional sports games), mash-ups of songs and video clips, sampling and rap, news shows based on news shows, the “virtual value” (Kroker and Kroker 9) of tech companies during the dot-com bubble, the meta-money of derivatives and
futures: as we learned during the economic crash of 2008, a “lot of such layers become a system unto themselves, one that functions apart from the reality that is obscured far below” (97). In the cases of *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Sixth Sense*, the obscured reality is dead in the ground. These are movies about characters in two places at once, one an abstracted and mediated afterlife—pure discourse, pure doppelgänger—the other 6 feet deep. In both films, it is the abstracted and mediated version of characters that we encounter throughout; these are movies that represent the new primacy of the second-order, the centrality of the syuzhet, or the constant and instant discourse produced by contemporary existence, in which “to act is to be tracked” (Elsaesser, “Digital” 38). The new reflexivity: fiction that showcases a world in which social life itself produces instant discourse and in which individuals and quasi-omniscient collectives capture, profile, share, and narrate contemporary life as it happens.

In *The Sixth Sense* our central focalized character is perhaps a bit “slow on the uptake,” failing to recognize for quite some time that he is deceased. Whether or not Malcom stands as the narrator of *The Sixth Sense*, it is certainly the case that during his scenes the film’s narration is firmly attached to his fallible perspective. The film’s narration is unreliable in that it underreports key events and consistently misdirects our attention. What we thought was objective narration is subjective. We’re in a “filter bubble” (Pariser). We think we’re reading *The New York Times* when we’re reading *The Daily Me*. *The Blair Witch Project* is unreliable in a number of ways: this is a movie that at every turn purports to be real, to be a documentary. The film convinces audiences that it isn’t fabricated by creating a “real virtuality” (Castells, *Rise* 404) of supporting documents online, a supplemental talking-heads documentary for cable TV,

48. Ansgar Nünning, in an overview of the scholarly application of Wayne Booth’s concept of the “unreliable narrator” (211), clarifies the differences between “ethically or morally deviant” narrators and “‘normal’” narrators who are “just a bit slow on the uptake” (Nünning 93).
missing persons flyers at Sundance, and so on. It is unreliable in the way of Orson Welles’ “The War of the Worlds” broadcast: it’s a media hoax, a fundamentally untrustworthy transmission that cashes in on the cultural legitimacy of the generic forms of news and non-fiction, but in ways that showcase just how pervasive and all-encompassing our mediation has become. In this sense, the film is unreliable from the outside in, as the paratextual materials point to the fiction as fact. The Blair Witch Project is also unreliable from within: the implied editor of the footage sensationalizes what the film suggests is real, reconstructing this ostensible snuff footage as a rollicking terror ride. This isn’t a misinformed narrator so much as an “ethically or morally deviant narrator” (Nünning 93). Its values reflect the pervasive cultural ethic of “infotainment” that found a home on cable TV in the 80s and 90s. This is the horror the film depicts with such clarity: “The problem is not that television presents us with entertaining subject matter but that all subject matter is presented as entertaining” (Postman 87). The Blair Witch Project is a fictional film that pretends to be real, but within that reality the footage is repurposed to resemble the entertaining generic structures of a horror film. The total effect is a smoothing, a leveling out; the inside acts like the outside and vice versa.

“Once upon a time,” Manohla Dargis writes, “you might not see a film again after it left theaters, which made movies a sometimes evanescent object of obsession, adding to their mystique and power.” While this mystique evaporates as movies become purchasable and palpable objects, the digitization of cinema nevertheless abstracts the indexical and analogical into code. Though DVDs and “found footage” promote a vision of movies’ tangibility, movies today are as immaterial as ever; unlike celluloid, no matter how closely you look at a disc or at code you will not see the movie there. It is abstract, waiting to be translated by software. A film, now a file, “is just a collection of codified binary data, which ‘mean’ nothing. If the system does
not ‘know the rules’ needed to decodify those data, it will not be able to assemble images from the film” (Gonring 51). Digitized, “the basic materiality of the film becomes unknown and invisible, a complex code known only to programmers and engineers. In this regard, all film today is abstract” (Rombes 32). *The Blair Witch Project*’s diegetic world spills outside of itself, out into the digital ether of the web by its programmers and engineers. If on the one had *The Blair Witch Project* is “found footage,” or an “attainable text” (Parker and Parker viii), on the other it embodies the “spreadable media” (Jenkins, Ford, and Green) that characterizes control-society cinema, or “transmedia storytelling” (Jenkins, *Convergence* 20); it stands as a very early and successful example of what Richard Grusin names the “cinema of interactions.” Whether or not audiences make movies as Heather does, the film itself nevertheless asks us to not simply watch cinema, but to do it, interact with it, and spend time within the “hypercontext” of the narratively rich website and paratextual materials (Lunenfeld, “Myths” 384).

You don’t have to, though. The cinema of interactions allows multiple entries into a narrative world. Paratexts, writes Jonathan Gray, “can be consumed, dabbled in, and/or actively avoided as a way to chart different paths through a text” (153). The greater the number of paratexts, the more personalized an individual’s encounter with the media “property.” One chooses from a menu of paratexts: “I’ll visit the website, but I won’t watch the cable TV special until I’ve seen the movie.” A culture of “spoiler alerts” is necessarily a culture of self-imposed bubbles and ignorance, of curating and editing, the cultivation of a “personal information space” (Deuze 139). What do we miss with *The Daily Me*? The invisible codes that govern how and what information we receive produce what Eli Pariser refers to as a “filter bubble,” one in which personalization makes us “overconfident in our mental frameworks,” removing “from our environment some of the key prompts that make us want to learn” (84). *The Blair Witch Project*
was a trailblazer in “viral marketing” mainly because of the innovative rhetorical maneuvers it deployed on the web. Sánchez says that they were “very careful to put information that couldn’t be checked up on, data that couldn’t be revealed as false” (qtd. in Norman). They list Heather, Josh, and Mike as “deceased” on the actors’ IMDb pages, blurring the lines between these actors’ real lives and the lives of their mediated doubles. They post missing persons fliers around college campuses months prior to the film’s release and in Park City, Utah before the movie’s premiere at Sundance. From perusing the box-office rankings each week in the newspaper to feeling like an insider via *Entertainment Tonight, Entertainment Weekly,* and the “film school in a box” rhetoric of behind-the-scenes features on DVDs (Mark Rance qtd. in Parker and Parker, 169), a good portion of 1999’s film-going audience was hip to at least the corporate-sponsored version of film production. Myrick, Sánchez, and Artisan must have realized that “with everybody peering behind Hollywood’s curtain, cinematic illusions had to become more and more elaborate” (Hanson 20).

How did they do this? By exploiting those increasingly leaky boundaries between the real and the virtual, between existence and mediation. But also by letting people inhabit a curated, filtered world, one that seems to index evidence in the real world when it only indexes itself, a massive “multimedia text” of “real virtuality” in which everything—including obituaries—is “entirely captured” (Castells, *Rise* 404). J.P. Telotte explains how the movie’s website, “rather than pointing to the entertainment industry…lures visitors into a world that is, on the surface, deceptively like our own, and even anchors us in that realm of normalcy with maps, police reports, found objects,” and so on (“‘Blair Witch’” 36). It’s easy to miss things inside of filter bubbles, to receive information out of context. No wonder so many people trekked out to Burkittsville: this was a new media hoax that demanded digital literacy, that directly equated the
film’s unreliable narration with the unreliability of the web. And the concerned and curious who went to search for the students weren’t the only dupes: the popular press may have known the film was fictional, but they nevertheless bought into the “Blair Witch webring,” turning the online, underground buzz (manufactured by Artisan) into a cultural phenomenon. Indeed, like the diegetic finders, Artisan recontextualizes and recharacterizes the content of amateurs, in this case the authentic sites produced by fans. By the late 90s, the institution of cinema was in a tight spot. It had to keep up with new media. The Blair Witch Project helped explain how: not with a digital press-kit, but by extending the film’s narrative world, by letting people track a personal path through the “project,” to encourage “viewers” (Daly 82) to enter and stay in the bubble before and after the film, and not by popping the bubble with “facts.” As cinema softens via digitization, the diegetic world of The Blair Witch Project spills out, and its marketing looks nothing like marketing. Artisan cashed in on the uncertainties of the web: this was a wild new virtual space of fact and fiction, an unending network containing pages of obscure origin and credibility. They create fake fan sites that look just like the real thing, manipulating traditional media outlets into covering the online frenzy, which provokes actual fans to begin producing sites. In all, they guide us through this curated world of fiction masquerading as fact, producing a space large enough to get lost in.

Nevertheless, we’re all already found. “‘The days of losing touch are over’” (Egan 203): How many hundreds of planes went missing without causing a media firestorm prior to 2014’s infamous Malaysian Airlines flight? Things that big can’t fall off the grid. Mad Men ironically romanticizes pre-Civil Rights white patriarchy, but it also centers its narrative around Don Draper (Jon Hamm) taking on the identity of a fallen comrade in the Korean War—the beautiful fantasy of reinvention all but impossible in network society. Today, “remembering has become
the norm, and forgetting the exception” (Mayer-Schönberger 52). Like the rash of memory movies that accompanied society’s transition to digital media,\(^49\) *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Sixth Sense* are both about characters that get lost, or forget something crucial. But things catch up; the days of losing touch are over. Cash, analog recording equipment, paper maps, dumb gadgets that don’t connect—these are the final dying gasps of a culture already lost to the digital, already “found” and archived and recontextualized by a post-production surveillance. The student filmmakers were never in the wild, not really, because the “difference between ‘close by’ and ‘far away,’ or, for that matter between the wilderness and the civilized…has been all but canceled” (Bauman 11), and because “rigid mechanisms of enclosure are giving way to supple ones that have lost none of their power” (Bogard). Society seems to beg for this brave new world, to live in a space of total and relentless confession, to craft personal profiles, to record all, to never stop experiencing the thrills of “archival voyeurism” (Baron 81). This is “DIY Profiling” (Bauman and Lyon 131): “If you see something, say something” acts as the mantra for both anti-terrorism propaganda and for the “participatory panopticons” (Cascio) of social media networks such as Twitter and Facebook, in which “secrets are lies,” “sharing is caring,” and “privacy is theft” (Eggers 328). These were the promises of early digital life and of cyberspace: “‘We’ll rise out of our bodies and find each other again in spirit form. We’ll meet in that new place, all of us together, and first it’ll seem strange, and pretty soon it’ll seem strange that you

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\(^{49}\) Wendy Hui Kyong Chun explains how “The major characteristic of digital media is memory. Its ontology is defined by memory, from content to purpose, from hardware to software, from CD-ROMs to memory sticks, from RAM to ROM” (154). In 1986, Friedrich Kittler prophesied that, “Once storage media can accommodate optical and acoustic data, human memory capacity is bound to dwindle. Its ‘liberation’ is its end” (*Gramophone* 10). *50 First Dates, Dark City, Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind, Finding Nemo, Inception, The Machinist, Memento, Total Recall*, and many other millennial memory movies literally and/or metaphorically reflect the widespread outsourcing of human memory into digital bits, bits that “are malleable,” that “can easily be changed, and thus history altered” (Mayer-Schönberger 126).
could ever lose someone, or get lost” (Egan 203). Heather, Josh, and Mike get lost, but from the start of *The Blair Witch Project* they were always already found, remixed, and repurposed.

**Already Meta-**

Fake-documentaries and unreliable twist movies are first and foremost entertaining media literacy lessons. Kristen Daly, in her article “Cinema 3.0,” suggests that the structures and borders of these cinematic narratives indicate a demand in “globalized, networked, digitized society” for a “new cinema form based on interactivity, play, searching, and nonobvious relationships” (83). Paratextual cinema, ludic cinema, puzzle cinema, unreliable cinema, “smart” cinema, “narrative complexity”: the experience of these movies “is more like a project and a piecing together of disparate parts, some perhaps contained in the movie text itself and some which may be found in other media” (86). Both found footage and the puzzle film “reverse remediate” the new gaming and computational logics of digital culture, effectively training us to develop an algorithmic view of narrative, to rethink cinema as interactive software, and to delete any remaining hard distinctions between “work” and “pleasure,” or “home” and “theater.” Both the puzzle film and found footage encourage play, but play of a particular sort. We must learn the rules of these films: other actors do not acknowledge Bruce Willis’ presence, the color red appears when danger is near, characters get visibly chilly when a ghost is close by, and so on. A found footage film that provides a traditional establishing shot that one of the diegetic cameras could not have captured “breaks the rules” of the narrative style. Viewers often watch found footage for mistakes, for giveaways that the “documentary” is actually a work of fiction. Watching these movies is a matter of discovering and validating the code that governs their narration. In short, we watch for the narrative algorithm. The terminally framed puzzle film, or what Alexander Galloway refers to as the “epistemological reversal” film, offers a “challenge to
the audience: follow a roller coaster of reversals and revelations, and the viewer will eventually achieve informatic truth in the end” (Gaming 94). This is a form of “hard fun” (Negroponte 196), not unlike Myst or SimCity, popular and difficult video games of the mid-90s. A video game is never played the same way twice. A single game might provide dozens or hundreds of hours of work-pleasure. This is what cinema faces: a generation of kids sitting “in the living room raised by Nintendo” (Sterling). The puzzle film and found footage film crack narrative wide open, invite multiple viewings, encourage interaction and play outside of the theater, and directly create and imply multiple types of divisions within and among viewers (the dupes, the paranoid, the first-timers, the second-timers, the in-the-know).

Jan Simons interprets the rules-based Dogma 95 movement not as a re-articulation of modernist principles of artistic integrity, as many scholars have, but as a rules-based ethic that “turns filmmaking itself into a game”: “a completely new conception of film that owes more to new media and computer games than to the classical and modernist cinema” (187). For the stunt film Borat, in which Sacha Baron Cohen plays the titular fictional character interacting with non-fictional “real Americans,” the “screenwriters wrote permutation upon permutation so that Baron Cohen would have options for whatever might happen, more like the programming of interactive video game software than the writing of a traditional script” (Daly 87). If this, then that: algorithmic cinema. Paul Greengrass and the creators of the Bourne movies work with an “embryonic script,’ the plot fully taking shape only in postproduction” (Gates 257). Myrick and Sánchez direct Heather, Josh, and Mike by “remote control,” offering only the thinnest skeleton of a plot, knowing that the movie can be constructed in the editing room (Sánchez qtd. in

Persall). Compare this to M. Night Shyamalan’s project in *The Sixth Sense*, in which every shot has to be planned perfectly so as not to reveal the secret narrative code that governs the film. These movies *play* cinema, rewriting the rules of production and narrative as the medium goes digital.

The supporting materials for the films (the DVD and its bonus features in the case of *The Sixth Sense*, and the rich narrative world provided by the plethora of paratexts for *The Blair Witch Project*) recontextualize each film’s narrative, offering hours of personalized enjoyment beyond the movie’s running time. These movies are gadgets, offering two films in one: the implied and extremely enjoyable second screening of *The Sixth Sense*; the multiple layers of watching, rewatching, repurposing, and interaction inherent to the found footage form. “The demands of technology,” writes Joseph Tabbi, “cannot be separated from the modern writer’s need to find a new style for each project…to create ever novel mechanisms of literary form” (11). What we see in contemporary forms of “narrative complexity” are novel *digitizations* of cinematic form, as writers and directors treat recorded events and narrative worlds as remixable and upgradeable, just as Hollywood digitizes and tries to keep up with new media. Fabulas here are soft, flexible, and modifiable; they are the products of dynamic, just-in-time syuzhets. While this may act as a description of the digitization of cinematic narrative, it also stands as a definition of contemporary life, of the ways in which to “act is to be tracked” and to live is to instantly abstract. This is the *new reflexivity*: fiction for and about a world that is already meta-.
Works Cited


Media, 2014. Film.


