Mortal Cameras and Vulnerable Vision in Found-Footage Horror
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André Bazin once quipped: “When a savage headhunter is shown in the foreground watching for the arrival of the whites, this necessarily implies that this person is not a savage because he has not cut the cameraman’s head off” (qtd. in Daney 37). Here he points to the precise spot or the decisive moment at which the screen of fiction that divides the filmmaker from the material reality of what is being filmed can be dissolved. Like sex, death for Bazin denoted the limit of representation; it is obscene, unrepresentable, and marks the ultimate rupture in our perceptual realities, but he was nonetheless intensely attracted to getting as close to it as possible through filmic representation. Peppered throughout his writings is the notion that distinctly powerful images can result from the camera coinciding with and occupying the same space as the profilmic world it depicts, thereby rendering it vulnerable to the vicissitudes of a shared reality. As Serge Daney puts it, for Bazin, [t]he trip switch is therefore the death of the filmmaker. In its more anodyne guise, this is also the fetishism of ‘filming as the decisive moment,’ of filming as risk and of risk as what justifies the making of the film, which confers upon it a certain surplus value” (37).

The surplus value that comes with this kind of risk is in part what endeared the cinema verité films of Jean Rouch to Bazin. One of the early adopters of more lightweight portable 16mm film cameras, Rouch typically insisted on operating the camera himself during the shoots for his ethnographic films. In his film The Lion Hunters (1965), he comes perilously close to death (or at least severe injury) during a lion hunt with some Gow hunters in Western Africa. At one point during the hunt, the Gow with which he is traveling is attacked by a lion and
the camera is abandoned. As Rouch’s voiceover narrates, the camera stopped filming visuals but continued to record sound of the attack: the lion’s roar, the hunters’ shouts, the din of some sort of scramble. Overlaid on these sounds is a brief montage of still images consisting solely of blurry streaks of light (fig. 1). The images themselves are not moving—in the sense that they are photographic stills—but they serve as indices of a near-encounter with death. The sequence is non-figurative, abstract, resembling the traces of gestural art, and verges on one of Bazin’s decisive moments: the death of the filmmaker and the film. Still, fortunately, for the completion of *The Lion Hunters*, disaster is warded off and the decisive moment avoided: the offending lion is slain and the camera recovered, making for a successful hunt and a thrilling flirtation with mortality. Rouch was able to capture moments like this due to his willingness to move about with his cameras, which as he put it, allowed him to “penetrate into the reality, rather than leaving it to unroll in front of the observer” (“The Camera”). Comparing his mobile camera to the experience of a bullfighter with a bull (a scenario of which Bazin was also fond), the only effective way for Rouch to film was to walk with his cameras and adapt to his environment, thereby transforming it into something vital and living like its subjects. And with this vitality came an extraordinary sense of mortality—a kind of receptivity to the environment that we might call vulnerability.

So too, the experience of vulnerability has long been a mainstay of horror films, but traditionally, they have tended to horrify audiences with danger and death at the diegetic level. Many horror films involve characters who are rendered vulnerable and risk injury and/or death within the diegesis, leaving unperturbed the point of view of the camera, which typically retains some degree of narrative omniscience. Horror and cinema verité have of course developed along
Figure 1. Jean Rouch, *The Lion Hunters*, 1965.

Figure 2. Alfred Hitchcock, *Psycho*, 1960.
separate sociocultural trajectories and with different claims on reality, but one point of commonality is a shared fascination with the look and feel of susceptibility to corporeal harm and death. Made around the same time as Rouch’s forays into cinema verité, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) is widely regarded as one of the foundational films marking the transition from classical to modern horror with its heightened emphasis on bodily vulnerability. Its famous scene of Marion Crane’s murder in the shower at the Bates Motel electrified audiences with its activation of the fourth wall: the knife used to kill her appears to slash at the movie screen itself, suddenly situting spectators in the helpless position of Marion’s naked body, which seconds before was shown luxuriating under the shower’s hot stream (fig. 2). This brief sequence managed to be so terrifying because it threatens a traditional site of invulnerability in horror films: the look of the camera at the profilmic world, along with our reliance on its immortality as the omniscient purveyor of that world. Nonetheless, this threat to our primary identification with the camera is counterbalanced by the continuance of the narrative after Marion’s murder: vulnerability and death are contained within the diegesis. The influence of this scene was profound, as evidenced by the increased suturing of the spectator’s perspective to that of vulnerable characters in subsequent horror films. Especially since the slasher films of the 1970s like *Halloween* (1978) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), this type of suturing has become a staple of the horror genre, employed to induce highly visceral feelings of vulnerability.

The enduring popularity of horror films capitalizing on vulnerability begs the question of why audiences willingly undergo such ostensibly unpleasant experiences. Andrew Schopp has pointed out that the prevailing theory within academic circles has to do with what he calls the “safe space.” According to this theory, people enjoy experiencing fear when there is little risk of real danger, as with roller coasters and watching movies: their bodies occupy a safe space while
their minds and senses are free to roam elsewhere. The safe space theory is then typically extended to encompass the ideological implications of horror films, whereby fear is summoned in order to defuse and contain it by way of narrative resolutions in which the source of fear is vanquished. Accordingly, subscribers to this theory believe that horror is ultimately ideologically conservative insofar as narrative containment is a dominant generic strategy. Schopp argues, however, that pleasure in horror films also resides in their proximity to risk, danger, and death, just as riders of roller coasters thrill in the chance that their car might fly off the tracks. This argument is admittedly somewhat harder to buy with regards to horror movies than roller coasters, since the safe space of the screening experience is always operative to some degree with films in general. Still, I agree with Schopp that there is a kind of pleasure—even eroticism—in the vulnerability and nearness to danger that horror films are especially adept at invoking. I also concur with him on his further point that a certain strain of what he calls “Generation-X horror” is particularly effective at manipulating the safe space, perhaps even more so than its predecessors. Among the works Schopp includes within this category are what has variously been called “found footage,” “faux found footage,” or “horror verité” films. While I will use the most commonly used term “found footage horror” for the remainder of this paper, the alternative usage “horror verité” suggests the convergence of two previously divergent modes of filmmaking around what I believe to be a common point of fascination: the vulnerable vision of a camera that is not above the fray of physical harm and produces a kind of affective intensity that exceeds narrative containment.

In 1999, plagued by overused genre formulas, excessively produced gore, and waning popularity, US horror film culture was in the midst of what many critics deemed a period of decline. Formerly censored and considered obscene, highly graphic scenes of blood, death, and
violence had by then become commonplace, and concomitantly, audiences had become (to use a much-banded about term) “desensitized.” 1999 also saw the release of *The Blair Witch Project*, a low-budget independent feature film that surprisingly went on to earn hundreds of millions on a modest budget of about $35,000. In addition to inspiring independent filmmakers, *The Blair Witch Project* inaugurated the subgenre of found footage horror for the new millennium by utilizing the deaths of the film’s makers as a central narrative conceit. Though fictional, the film banked on its marketing campaign as a record of true events; instead of being billed as a fictional piece, *The Blair Witch Project* was promoted as footage of several days in the lives of three student filmmakers making a documentary in Burkittsville, Maryland about the legend of the eponymous malicious witch (fig. 3). Found in the woods believed by locals to be haunted by the witch, this footage is all that is left of the students—Heather, Mike, and Josh—who disappeared without any other traces. Made up of black and white 16mm film takes of the students’ own unfinished documentary project—which employs a relatively conventional style of expository voiceover narration and talking-head interviews with locals—the film is also interspersed with raw video footage taken with a handheld camcorder by the filmmakers of their filmmaking process. As the film progresses, the segments of raw video increasingly take over until it is all that remains of the students’ documentation. Instead of the carefully composed shot compositions of the 16mm segments, these video sequences are characterized by frequent blurred focus, jarring swish pans and rapid zooms, shaky camera movements, low lighting and resolution, and image compression—all of which intensify as the students lose their bearings in the woods and are frightened by inexplicable noises and uncanny totemic objects. The increasing illegibility of this footage signals the students’ growing loss of control over their documentary and vulnerability to the threats in their unfamiliar environment.
What is more, the Blair witch, the horrific entity whose elusive presence so captivated the protagonists’ imaginations, never manages to materialize in any of the footage. Rather, it is their fear before an invisible threat that is most palpable through the chaotic imagery, a fear that is made all the more frightening for its coincidence with the actors’ own fears. The film’s actual makers—Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez—employed what they called “method filmmaking” during shooting whereby the three main actors were placed into situations that closely approximated those of their characters. Instead of detailed scripts, the actors were given brief outlines and scene updates at various points during each day of the eight-day shoot to foster improvisation and spontaneity. Instead of accompaniment by a production crew, the actors themselves shot both Hi-8 video and 16mm footage for the film, which they dropped off
periodically at specified locations. The only lighting used was from naturally available sources or from built-in lights on the video camera. During night-time camping scenes in the woods of Maryland’s Seneca Creek State Park, the filmmakers subjected the actors to unscripted stimuli by playing sounds through speakers and pounding around near their tents. “Our goal,” as Sánchez remarked in an interview, “was to keep them off guard…The whole point was to mess with them psychologically and have them film their reactions as time wore on” (“Behind”).

From such meager beginnings, *The Blair Witch Project* went on to earn a box office profit of over $100 million and garnered widespread critical acclaim. Critics also marveled, whether with pleasure or disdain, at the raw quality of the video footage, as well as the apparent authenticity of the protagonists’ expressed fear. As some reviewers pointed out, even if they went into screenings knowing the film’s fictional status, the film’s raw aesthetic gave an unprecedented impression of unrehearsed reality. The sensational success of *The Blair Witch Project* has since given rise to numerous imitators in the found-footage vein, especially by independent filmmakers with minimal budgets and limited production values. The growing popularity of YouTube, mobile phones, and other user-generated content further familiarized audiences with the lo-fi visuals and slapdash camerawork of an aesthetic associated with spontaneous recording conditions and an amateur DIY storytelling approach. What these years also witnessed was the cooptation of this raw video aesthetic by Hollywood production companies seeking to capitalize on the popularity of subgenres like found footage horror. A prominent instance of this is *Cloverfield*, another highly lucrative found footage horror film released in 2008 and produced by J. J. Abrams and his Bad Robot company, which also produced the popular television series *Lost*. Hardly a product of industry outsiders and made on a budget of $25 million, the film nonetheless appropriates the raw, handheld video aesthetic of its
lower-budget counterparts. Adopting the characteristic conceit of found footage that somehow survived the death of its camera wielders, *Cloverfield* pretends to be a posthumous chronicle of the increasingly precarious circumstances of its subjects as they become aware of and seek to escape a gigantic monster ravaging the streets of New York City. Coming nearly a decade after *The Blair Witch Project*, the appeal of this film is doubtless less about its credibility as an authentic document than it is about its creative melding of the found footage aesthetic with the computer-generated imagery used to visualize the monster and the large scale of its destruction. Here, as some critics have remarked, a productive tension is generated by the restricted view of a diegetic video camera and camera operator struggling to navigate a city reduced to near rubble by a skyscraping monster—constituting a novel departure from the wide shots and omniscient viewpoints of more stylistically conventional monster and disaster films.

The creative merits of *Cloverfield* notwithstanding, I cannot help but feel as if something has been lost from what some might consider an unholy union between an aesthetic born at least initially from the economic necessity of independent filmmaking and the vast resources of Hollywood. I do not have any particular attachment to the hardscrabble backstories behind early found footage horror successes like *The Blair Witch Project*, but the difference between Myrick and Sánchez’s film and *Cloverfield* seem to me to be quite telling. For all of the critical praise of its aesthetic restraint, *Cloverfield* appears to me to show too much, to be too polished and too clear even during moments of maximum narrative chaos, when the diegetic cameraperson along with the camera itself is placed in mortal danger. Visually, the two films are quite similar, but their contrasts can be sensed at an affective level. To take a case in point, both films make abundant usage of the “shaky-cam” aesthetic—a style of cinematography involving extremely volatile camera movements that are often mapped back to handheld cameras wielded by
nonprofessional camerapersons. Audiences of both films reported experiencing nausea from their respective shaky-cam sequences—a common effect of this aesthetic. The widely-held physiological explanation for shaky-cam-induced nausea is that it derives from the contradicting signals between our visual and auditory processing systems: our visual sense of shaky-cam sequences gives us the impression of moving through space, while the fluids in our inner ear tubes (which give us a sense of physical balance) indicate that our bodily position is not changing vis-à-vis other objects in our material surroundings. For some spectators, the bifurcating signals from both systems result in the disorientation and the discomfort of nausea.

This is not to dismiss the nausea reported by some spectators while watching *Cloverfield*, but one of the striking aspects of the film for me as well as some other critics was the odd sensation that the shaky-cam segments could have been more discomforting than they actually were. Visually similar shaky-cam sequences from *The Blair Witch Project* had and continue to leave me more intensely affected—more fearful, disoriented, and ultimately feeling more vulnerable. The most chaotic shaky-cam passages in *The Blair Witch Project* are virtually abstract in their indecipherability, as the frenzied motion of the protagonists is registered in the camera’s inability to focus. The most commonly reported nausea-inducing moments involve the camera operator running through the woods at night, unable to see much if anything at all (fig. 4). Here the straining of the camera to see effectively transmits the camera holder’s inability to find purchase in the dark woods, as well as the actors’ own fear amidst their visually obscure and not-altogether-predictable environment.

Moments of maximum narrative and aesthetic chaos in *Cloverfield*, on the other hand, are marked by an uncanny capacity to focus on key narrative details and characters. For instance, in

Figure 5. Matt Reeves, *Cloverfield*, 2008.
a scene when the main characters run frantically through city streets trying to escape the monster’s rampage, assorted flying debris and explosions are clearly visible lighting up the night skyline. At one point, we are even treated to the spectacle of the Statue of Liberty’s decapitated head shuttling through the air and landing mere feet from the camera’s viewfinder (fig. 5). In these scenes, actors playing frightened characters gesticulate wildly and twist their faces into semblances of distress, as if to distract from the overlit clarity of the visuals and the dissonant juxtaposition of digitized large-scale destruction with the limited views of handheld cameras. What is more, such dissonances recall the phenomenon of the “uncanny valley” in which computer-generated figures that appear nearly identical to real human beings inspire discomfort and unease in viewers. A similar kind of unease is generated, at least for me, from the concurrence of digitized danger and the sight of actors’ flesh and blood bodies—a feeling that I believe derives in part from the conjoining of two separate spatiotemporal registers: that of actors attempting to look scared before a green screen and the computer-generated scenes of destruction that we are supposed to see as the source of their fear.

_Cloverfield_’s raw aesthetic was influenced by the horrific images of 9/11—some of the most powerful of which were recorded by witnesses and consumer video technologies. Many reviewers pointed out the resemblance between the frenzied scenes of mass chaos and panic captured by 9/11 and the shaky-cam sequences of _Cloverfield_, though some tended to emphasize the film’s less-than-convincing simulation of rawness and risk. As critic Grady Hendrix observed, “There’s never a moment in ‘Cloverfield’ when it feels like all bets are off, that the safety net has been removed, that anything could happen […] faking realism is an art, and the bigger the screen, the easier to tell when the creators are lying.” I would even venture that the
film overall serves as a kind of collective safe space—one which reminds its audiences of the horrors of 9/11 as they were recorded by eyewitnesses, only to defuse them by way of computer-generated images of a colossal monster and its massively destructive effects.

The difference between *Cloverfield* and *The Blair Witch Project*, then, does not lie just in the former’s greater visual clarity and computer-generated imagery, but also in something that is nearly ineffable which I take to be a kind of truth or verité quotient. Both films are essentially simulations of first-person encounters with precarious realities, and thus both can be said to lie, to disclaim the status of documentary truth, but cinema verité as it was practiced by Rouch and theorized by Bazin is less about truth as an objective value than it is about the surplus value of a filmmaking practice that opens itself to risk. By allowing filmmaker, camera, and their filmed subjects to coexist within shared spatiotemporal realities, a cinema verité film can be the conveyer of inimitable affective intensities. Most assessments of found footage horror view it as but one mode by which horror films have attempted to simulate the dissolution of the safe space between the real and the fictional, but we can also productively view it as a variant of cinema verité, which defines itself as a practice founded on the mutual capacity of filmmaker and filmed subject to move and be moved. The greater affective intensity of a film like *The Blair Witch Project* over *Cloverfield*, I believe, attests to the survival of a kind of cinema verité truth that cannot be simulated—a truth quotient or excess, if you will, that can only result from precarious shooting conditions. And, despite how much found footage horror and shaky-cam aesthetics are considered trite, old-hat, and trendy stylistic affectations today, it is my contention that our ability to sense the shades of precariousness in images still holds, and with this, endures our capacity to moved by some more intensely than others. That *The Blair Witch Project* continues to out-horrify its Hollywood counterparts indicates the potential of filmmaking practices that
render themselves vulnerable to worlds where the usual divisions between performance and reality, and truth and fiction shift and dance about, like the improvised ballet of a bullfighter who risks everything for the show.
Works Cited


The Lion Hunters. Dir. Jean Rouch. 1965. Film.


