Ecstatic Torment: The Cinematic Motus in the Horror Genre

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Abstract

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This dissertation about cinematic horror introduces the cinematic motus, a concept intended to expand scholarly approaches to the genre. The cinematic motus (from the Latin 'movere': "movement") stands for shots and/or sequences which internally "move" viewers by provoking intense psychological and emotional experiences. By giving a name to the elusive and potentially transformative encounters between viewer and filmed image, we gain the ability to recognize a disruption of our everyday reality which then can be explored and internalized. Thus, the cinematic motus helps viewers interact with films in a more engaging and personalized way, reaching a new level of enjoyment. This dissertation explores diverse styles of encounters within viewing experiences in a wide variety of horror films. Ultimately, this dissertation calls for the recognition of horror aesthetics as a powerful structure of engagement, one through which we can all experience the undervalued ecstasy of torment.

While film scholarship has embraced some of the most abject visual and thematic elements of cinematic horror, these gestures often involve an anxious justification of the scholar's interest in the genre, reliant on its association with political and/or social values. Furthermore, scholars tend to appreciate and celebrate horror films that are overtly intellectually complex, cinematically appealing, and/or professedly reminiscent of other more "reputable" genres (avant-garde and dramatic films). This dissertation contends that horror films devoid of these qualities can still produce viewing experiences that are enjoyable and deserving of scholarship. Through the analysis of shots and/or series of shots, critical readings of an assorted array of horror films demonstrate the functionality of five different types of motus (allegorical, narrative, shock, reflexive, and liminal). The widespread selection of films analyzed showcases

how motus works through the horror genre as a whole. Accordingly, this dissertation does not focus on any specific historical periods, as it is transtemporal in nature.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late baba Flora Rosenfeld, the most ardent champion of my writing and an inspiration throughout my life.

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Table of Contents

Abstract i

Acknowledgements iii

Dedication iv

Table of Contents v

Introduction 1

Chapter One: Allegorical Motus 36

Chapter Two: Narrative Motus 65

Chapter Three: Shock Motus 95

Chapter Four: Reflexive Motus 122

Chapter Five: Liminal Motus 153

Conclusion 185

Works Cited 196

Introduction

This dissertation about cinematic horror introduces and demonstrates the "cinematic motus," a concept intended to broaden scholarly approaches to the genre. Even though film scholarship has at times embraced the most abject visual and thematic elements of cinematic horror, these gestures often involve an anxious justification of the scholar's interest in the genre by associating it with political and/or intellectual values. This approach to the study of horror cinema reinforces the conservative idea that our enjoyment of the abject in media requires an excuse. Accordingly, many scholars tend to appreciate and celebrate horror films that are intellectually complex, cinematically appealing, and/or professedly reminiscent of other more "reputable" genres, specifically avant-garde and dramatic cinema. This dissertation contends that horror films devoid of these qualities can still produce viewing experiences that are comparably enjoyable and deserving of scholarship. The taxonomy presented and argued for here, that of the cinematic motus (after the Latin "movere" for "movement"), expands the range of film analyses by focusing on the diverse styles of dynamic, potentially transformative encounters that occur between film and viewer in a diverse range of horror films.

This study names and defines five cinematic motus (the plural form of the word is identical to the singular form): the allegorical motus, the narrative motus, the shock motus, the reflexive motus, and the liminal motus. The motus as I describe it here is a shot or sequence that provokes intense psychological and emotional experiences in viewers at specific moments in the films under discussion. I have classified each motus according to its dominant quality and consider each one in a separate chapter through close readings of horror films. In these readings I identify the operation of the motus on us as viewers, and its capacity not just to affect us emotionally but also to provoke in us a profound encounter with the abject. The framework of

the motus offers horror scholarship a way to describe and account for the pleasures of horror scenes, making viewers experience the ecstasy of watching torment unfold.

Horror cinema is a testing ground for this analytical concept because this is the genre for which a critique of the hierarchies of taste is most overdue. Like pornography and melodrama, the other two "body genres" explored in Linda Williams's classic article on films regarded as low forms of entertainment ("Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess"), horror draws powerfully and notoriously on the physical responses of its viewers. All three of these cinematic genres have found a place in film scholarship since Williams's critical intervention. However, horror films that are pleasant to look at and/or offer occasions for sophisticated interpretations of plot and theme receive more considered scholarly attention, which acts as a proxy for cultural value. Ultimately, this dissertation calls for the recognition and appreciation of cinematic horror aesthetics not as group of defined visual characteristics, but as a structure of viewing engagement.

Here it is important to highlight that my intent is not to criticize a viewer's search for meaning or intellectual reading of films. As Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith state in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion* (1999), "Emotion and cognition are not necessarily enemies. A cognitive understanding of emotions asserts exactly the opposite: that emotions and cognitions tend to work together" (2). The false dichotomy of emotion and cognition, which emerged in the young stages of cognitive psychology, stemmed from the "inadequacies of a strong Cartesian division between the mind and the body" (2). Plantinga and Smith suggest that emotions are caused by cognitive activity and reflected through physiological changes in film viewers. Accordingly, the experience of the cinematic motus contains varied degrees of emotional, intellectual, and physical reactions, all at once.

The early film theorist Jean Epstein provides an effective springboard for motus as a concept in his notion of *photogenie*, defined as "things, beings or souls whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction" (Epstein 293). Like the atmospheres created in his films, Epstein's descriptions are so engaging and remain accessible to us today because they rely on the emotional power of the image, enhanced by words and visuals. According to Tom Gunning, "Epstein's view of the possibilities of cinema surpassed [other scholarly] claims of a new visual language, by going beyond the linguistic model and seeking out instead a new way of seeing the world and interacting with it, based in the subconscious and the extension of our senses into new domains of sensitivity" (14). Like the idea of "art" itself, *photogénie* might seem at a simple glance to be too vague, too "spiritual" to serve as useful film vocabulary. However, as Gilles Deleuze writes, "some well-known faculties … turn out to have no proper limit, no verbal adjective, because they are imposed and have an exercise only under the form of common sense" (188). The act of reaching for new domains of sensitivity outside preconceived cultural standards of legitimacy unveils uncharted avenues of thought, as well as "faculties which were repressed by … common sense" (Deleuze 189). My approach is also inspired by Anna Powell's insightful reading of Deleuze, which brings me to the conviction that the filmed image, much like Deleuze's concept of identity, is not configured by fixed elements but rather by everchanging ideas in constant motion. According to Powell, "film theory shaped by psychoanalysis and semiology treats images as static, symbolic components of underlying representational structures. It abstracts them from their moving, changing medium" (10). By adopting societal structures of pre-assigned meanings in a search for legitimacy, especially in the case of a genre like horror, film scholarship risks closing off alternative pathways of thought that can be

exciting, interesting, and necessary to engage with the full range of intellectual and emotional exploration.

One of the ways to access these alternative pathways is through the abject, which Julia Kristeva describes as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). The encounter with the abject, she suggests, puts into question the identity of subjects and their perception of reality, driving them towards "the place where meaning collapses" (2). The abject represents that which cannot be classified within pre-existing categories, that which shakes the status quo by creating a previously unknown alternative. Because the abject is an affront to our traditional understanding of the self and its environment, the result of this rupture culminates in the creation of new meanings, represented by new language and the evolution or displacement of old language.

In its aesthetic and conceptual embracing of the abject, cinematic horror can be called an anomaly from a Deleuzian perspective: "Anomalies subvert fixed notions of subjective wholeness and undermine cultural attempts to maintain self-consistent typological and species norms" (Powell 63). What we consider "whole" is that which aligns with our familiar values and perceptions, but, as Deleuze writes, it is when we encounter the abject, "when we have difficulty in recognising, that we truly think … Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition, but of a fundamental encounter" (Deleuze 184). This is the power of the abject in horror film. It forces us to think about the aesthetic objects we value and those that we abhor, or more pointedly for my work here, the aesthetic objects and experiences to which viewers are drawn but often deny, condemn, or apologize for. The contention of this thesis is that, despite the popularity of cinematic horror and the critical and scholarly attention it has attracted as a legitimate field of study, a considerable number of leading analytical approaches

are guided by taste hierarchies that avoid contending with the visual and emotional appeal of abjection when it is expressed in ways that do not fit pre-determined standards of legitimacy.

Historical Contexts in Horror Scholarship

Exploring the aesthetics of the abject in horror film requires a description of the critical and scholarly landscape in which this work is located. This is the discursive field in which scholarly positions on the aesthetic, cultural, and moral value of horror films are adopted and defended, and in which the current project intervenes. One of the most useful entrees into the treatment of horror cinema by film scholars is through historical overviews of the genre's production and reception. These sources include repeated articulations of ambivalence, dismay, embarrassment, and even condemnation of visual content central to horror cinema, especially content that focuses on the body and permeable boundaries, what Isabel Cristina Pinedo calls "the spectacle of the wet death" of horror (61). At some crucial points, too, these writers argue for the value of horror, even explicitly gory horror, but that value is often tied to its social utility.

One influential study of horror in the British context is *A Heritage of Horror: The English Gothic Cinema* by David Pirie, first published in 1973 and revised most recently in 2024. The attitude toward British horror at the time of the book's first appearance was negative, and Pirie's efforts were motivated in large part by his desire to see commercial British films, and especially horror films, taken seriously. He notes in the original Introduction that "even in circles that are generally sympathetic to the claims of popular art, the 'horror' genre always seems to be regarded with more suspicion and scorn than, say, the western or the gangster movie" (9). In the 2024 edition of the book, Pirie elaborates on his championing of British horror and Hammer films in particular:

> I was almost less incensed by the die-hard haters of horror, who could so easily be dismissed, than by the so-called fans of the form, who in those days—unlike today—seem to have no genuine enthusiasm whatsoever, but expressed their embarrassed appreciation in picture books with endless puns and camp jokes as if they were half-ashamed of their own weakness in liking the thing at all (10).

Tracing a conceptual line from Gothic literature to horror film, Pirie locates much of the British resistance to horror in an adherence to the superiority of realism over the fantastic in British culture. But in his discussion of Hammer films specifically, he also claims that objections to so-called "sadism" in these films are actually objections to visibility, to showing too much of what should, according to some critics and BBC censors, be only hinted at. Pirie argues instead that fealty to a Burkean tradition of terror as that which remains obscured accounts for resistance to the "beauty of the horrid" (52). These objections to visibility in horror persist in both critical and scholarly commentary that regards indirection and suggestion in horror texts as intrinsically better than graphic representation, a position Pirie opposes.

An example of the embarrassment Pirie detected in discussions of horror film, but in the US context, is James B. Twitchell's *Dreadful Pleasures: An Anatomy of Modern Horror* (1985). In this study, Twitchell adopts a casual tone to describe what he sees as the continuities between ancient and contemporary cultural fascinations with horror. At the same time, he acknowledges the negative reputation of horror and suggests that readers may feel "ashamed of ourselves" for our fascination with the genre. Twitchell quotes the British critic John Simon on the topic of horror film in the first two pages of the book: "'It is the lowbrow's delight, the middlebrow's camp and the highbrow's trash,'" and adds that what is obvious from Simon's assessment is that horror is "not the stuff of scholarship" (4). After this nod to propriety, Twitchell devotes more

than 350 pages of scholarship to the subject apparently unworthy of it. His intention, he writes, is to "not distinguish the 'art' renditions from, say, the crassly exploitative ones, or those just meant to entertain" in order to show that "horror sequences are really formulaic rituals coded with precise social information needed by the adolescent audience" (Twitchell 6). Horror films, writes Twitchell, are cathartic stories much like fairytales that produce moments of "ecstatic dread" akin to the sense of awe identified by Rudolph Otto "that leads to the evolution of spiritual consciousness" (10). Twitchell's method in this book combines an unserious tone with a scholar's careful researching of horror cinema's genealogy. The analysis allows Twitchell to argue for the genre's importance, while the deprecating humour defends him against criticism for his semi-serious treatment of violent horror.

Among other extended studies of horror and its histories are Andrew Tudor's *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie* (1989), Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Human Heart* (1990), John McCarty's *Splatter Movies: Breaking the Last Taboo of the Screen* (1984). This critical legacy of writing about horror films continues to grapple with the often violent and obscene content of the genre, sometimes through a cognitivist lens that considers the so-called paradox of taking pleasure in negative emotions (associated with Noël Carroll), or with expressivist or cathartic theories of horror.

Both of these strains of analysis appear in early 20th century publications such as *The Horror Film* (2004), a collection of essays that canvasses the history of the genre from the silent period to the early 2000s in Europe and the US. In the introductory essay to the collection, "The Dark Genre and Its Paradoxes," Stephen Prince refers to both "lurid" and "highbrow" examples of the genre, with Stuart Gordon's *Dagon* (2001) as an instance of the former, and *Signs* (2002)

as an instance of the latter. Moving quickly past this early categorization of horror films by an implied appeal to taste, Prince's discussion of horror's enduring popularity ties it to its function as a vehicle for social criticism, zeroing in on the genre's central anxiety about the nature of human identity (2). "The experience of horror," he writes, "resides in this confrontation with uncertainty, with the 'unnatural,' with a violation of the ontological categories on which being and culture reside" (2). Horror retains its hold on audiences, claims Prince, because we are obsessed with the question of what must be done "to remain human," a question that can never be answered (2). For Prince, the power of horror is that it speaks to our current moment of endless danger and uncertainty but by way of a pleasurable viewing experience that partakes of the paradox theory advanced by Carroll.

Essays in this volume examine European silent horror, the classical era of Hollywood horror, the emergence of what Isabel Pinedo calls "postmodern horror," and the frank depictions of bodily violations in the films of Herschell Gordon Lewis. It is particularly in these essays that we find an explicit elaboration of the high and low categories of horror into which scholars have placed these works. Sometimes there is a critical elision between the general production values of a given film (poor lighting, cheap visual effects) and its categorization as a good or bad cultural object. But more often it is the centrality of bodily violence and the refusal to distinguish the human and the non-human, the other, the abject, that marks for a scholar like Prince the genre's descent into trivialization (Prince 9). He writes, for example, that the "graphic violence of contemporary horror . . . has helped make the genre today a very disreputable one that major filmmakers actively avoid working on," and claims that "today it is a relatively rare and startling occurrence to find the genre mined with serious artistry" (9).

Jonathan Crane's contribution to Prince's anthology offers one of the most provocative engagements with films and audiences that revel in the depiction of gore and viscera. In his essay "Scraping Bottom: Splatter and the Herschell Gordon Lewis Oeuvre," Crane begins by observing horror's "peculiar longevity and questionable character," even as he writes that it can no longer be dismissed "as an altogether guilty and worthless pleasure" (Crane, in Prince, 151). Crane's tone is reminiscent of Twitchell's as he quotes a fan's raptures over scenes of dismemberment with sardonic amusement that such delight is possible: "unlike other, more manageable canons that employ some common tenets to praise the good and worthy, the horror film is most often valorized in singular terms that lie beyond shared aesthetic norms and established standards reflecting some measure of communal accord" (Crane, in Prince 152). Crane follows this with equally wry commentary on the unease with which many scholars tackle horror, observing that "most works of bloody exegesis begin with either an implied or directly stated apology" as if these writers feel "a pressing need to atone for their willful sins" (Crane, in Prince, 152). That is, the critic needs to express regret for "taking up with foul imagery" and "offer reparations" in the form of intellectual justifications for what they are doing (Crane, in Prince, 152). Failure to match the apology with this justification runs the risk of inviting suspicion that it is enjoyment and pleasure, not something intellectually satisfying or culturally edifying, that draws the critic's gaze to blood and entrails. It is precisely this suspicion that this work challenges, and it is this space of apology and justification that I refuse to inhabit.

The current discourse on so-called "elevated horror" is another symptom of the critical and scholarly trend which seeks to justify the enjoyment of the abject. At first glance, this nomenclature implies the existence of a category of horror films that are loftier than the rest. An exploration of the term "elevated horror," nonetheless, reveals some interesting complexities.

Post-Horror, a book published by David Church in 2021, uses the term "elevated horror" to refer to a contemporary cycle of films, particularly those belonging to and inspired by the popular and successful independent entertainment company A24. He then proposes "post-horror" as a new way of referring to elevated horror, explaining that the latter "comes freighted with elitist biases" but ultimately admitting that post-horror "is also problematic, since it could erroneously imply that these are not 'actual' horror films" (3).

In *Cutting Edge*, Joan Hawkins writes about "art-horror" as a "hybrid genre" (26) between "the European art film" and "low horror" (28), situating this style of films further from their generic roots. Meanwhile, "post-horror" and "elevated horror" refer to the same production cycle, often interpreted as "an aesthetically linked cycle within the longer and broader tradition of art-horror cinema" (Church 3). Following Hawkins, Church expresses the idea that these films have a "generic distance from the larger horror genre" in that they offer a "mixture" of different genres of film, a sort of diluted horror that seemingly has more in common with "serious arthouse dramas" (21).

A comparison between these definitions reveals overt similarities. If the only difference between art-horror and post-horror is the fact that the latter refers to a current production cycle rather than to older ones (Hawkin's book was published in the year 2000), then the denomination is not distinct enough from the former to be practical for academic purposes. If the difference between these terms is, instead, the fact that post-horror is a style of art-horror that is specifically reminiscent of dramas, I believe the "post" prefix is imprecise. I will go even further and argue that post/elevated horror as a concept fails to make an accurate distinction between the cycle of films it refers to and the broader horror cinematic genre.

Stylistically, elevated horror films are said to share a special "tone" that differs from that of "more conventional" products. They "evince minimalism over maximalism, largely eschewing jump scares, frenetic editing, and energetic and/or handheld cinematography in favor of cold and distanced shot framing, longer-than-average shot durations, slow camera movements, and stately narrative pacing" (Church 11). This set of characteristics also fits a considerable number of horror films and production cycles from previous decades (for example, German expressionist cinema from the 1920s), and this weakens the term's specificity. Accordingly, Robert Eggers's *The Lighthouse* (2019) presents various instances of frantic, rapid-fire editing, and the most memorable scene from Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) involves a gory by-the-numbers jump scare. Yet, both of these A24 films are considered "post-horror" by Church, rendering the label misleading. I depart from adopting this terminology in my study, for when we talk about the horror cinematic genre through the lens of the cinematic motus as I define it, it matters not if the film that moves us is "serious" or not; what matters is that it moves us.

Conceptual Contexts

In 1926, Georges Bataille wrote a book entitled *W.C.*, of which very little is left to find for scholars and researchers. It was allegedly read by a small group of people, and shortly after almost entirely burnt by its own author. The book consisted of a description of scenarios brimming with radically obscene and graphically violent content: scandalous orgies, excrement and putrid corpses were some of the images that made famous avant-garde intellectual Andre Breton take notice of Bataille and openly revile his work in surrealist circles. One of Bataille's friends who interacted with the manuscript was so concerned about his health that he arranged for him to be treated by a mental doctor. While the "cure" supposedly helped Bataille managing his manic episodes, he announced that he would not abandon his "intellectual violence" (Stoekl

x) and fascination with the taboo. Accordingly, in 1929, he returned to the written word for an extraordinary collaboration: *Documents*, a collection of vignettes that explored and exalted the abject themes he had delved into with *W.C.* before, accompanied by illustrations, reproductions of paintings, and small texts by artists like Georges Limbour and Robert Desnos. Some of it is poetry, some of it is theory; all of it is dedicated to filth.

One of Bataille's excerpts, "The 'Lugubrious Game'," praises Salvador Dalí's infamous painting of the same name, which showcases (among the Spaniard's surreal imaginings) a man whose underwear is stained with excrement. It is a known anecdote about the surrealist movement that, in the night of the painting's unveiling, Breton was so upset at the unexpected and previously unseen level of debauchery this brown stain represented that he tried to physically destroy the painting in the spot. He would later express his aversion to *Documents* in the closing statements of his "Second Surrealist Manifesto." He found one segment of the book to be particularly infuriating: "Language of Flowers," in which Bataille mentions a purportedly true story where Marquis de Sade, while confined to a mental facility, plucked the petals of fresh roses brought to him and threw them into a ditch filled with manure. Perplexed by this presented scenario, Breton tried to justify Sade's actions using the following logic: in performative fashion, Sade could have been trying to gesture towards the elimination of traditional forms of thinking about beauty (represented by the rose) to open the doors for new ways of portraying what is fine in the world. As he concludes, after accusing Bataille of being affected by a literal pathology, "a rose, even if stripped of all its petals, is still a rose" (186). The purity of the petals, according to Breton, is such that it cannot be tainted by the excrement in his mind. These events are relevant to my discussion because, much as in *Documents*, I attempt to share with the reader a series of

moving images that belong to the abject imaginary, several of which showcase the very same elements that were detested by Breton: human fluids, putrefaction, and depravity.

Today's critical reception towards cinematic horror has become more accepting when it comes to gore, demonstrated by the several Oscar nominations (including Best Picture, Best Actress, and Best Director) that Coralie Fargeat's *The Substance* (2024) earned in the 97th Academy Awards. Nonetheless, *The Substance* only won Best Makeup and Hairstyling, a fact which makes its consideration by the Academy feel performative in nature. *Film Comment's* review of the film by Miriam Balanescu condemns *The Substance* for possessing "the stylistic trappings of this genre," by being "excessively gory." Here she goes on to complain that "neither the two-hour-plus runtime nor the intestine-spilling exercise in gross-out horror seem necessary," concluding that the film "seems content with delivering shock and awe … that rely on, rather than challenge, deep-set prejudices toward women's bodies." Setting aside her subjective opinion that the destruction and objectification of women's bodies in *The Substance* are not challenging and just questionably indulgent, Balanescu's review implies that she would have found the gore acceptable or perhaps even "necessary" if she thought the film was using them to dismantle sexist prejudices.

While *The Substance*, one of the bloodiest mainstream films of the last decade, is criticized for its gruesome content, films like *Hereditary* (2018) were specifically praised upon release for its lack of shock value and explicit violence. In a piece for *The New York Times*, Jason Zinoman describes this film as part of "a golden age of grown-up horror," the latter term referring to films which "are far more likely to blur the line between scary movie and bleak drama." He further reinforces the supposed hybrid nature of this style of horror films, linking it to their critical and financial success: "Moving into territory once the preserve of prestige

dramas, horror has never been more bankable and celebrated than it is right now." These two examples are emblematic of the mindset that drives critical attempts to justify enjoyment of the abject. This perspective follows the precept that, at least in its most uncomfortable forms, abjection should only be expressed through film when "necessary." The lack of engagement with these "trappings" of the horror genre presumably makes for more "realistic and mature" (Zinoman) films, achieved by way of amalgamation with more "prestigious" cinematic genres.

The impulse to justify the abject is deeply hierarchical at its core. The human body has served as our guide to determine what is "elevated" and important (the head, closer to gods, is where the crown goes) or despicable and irrelevant (the disgraceful ass with its nasty fluids, and the lousy feet that caress the soil). In "Language of Flowers," Bataille brings up an even more pointed example than that of the human body: the flower, and how it has been depicted culturally:

> [R]oots swarming under the surface of the soil, nauseating and naked like vermin … While the visible parts [of the flower] are nobly elevated, the ignoble and sticky roots wallow in the ground, loving rottenness just as leaves love light … [W]hat is evil is necessarily represented … by a movement from high to low. That fact is impossible to explain if one does not assign moral meaning to natural phenomena, from which this value is taken, precisely because of the striking character of the appearance (13).

Even though roots are just as essential to the plant as its most precious petals, the cultural language pre-imposed on everything around us privileges visions of upward trajectories, vilifying what lies beneath. Skin is so important that it can dictate the way we navigate life; blood is an unsightly fluid that must not be seen unless it is on the body of Christ and his saints. Poverty is in the slums; rich people live uptown. Lucifer falls, Jesus rises. But let us consider the

flower, for a moment. Something fascinating occurs when observing the cinematic horror genre from this Bataillean perspective. What may be its beautiful petals? The appealing symmetry in *The Shining* (1980)'s framing composition, the lavish, layered backgrounds in *Antichrist* (2009), the picture-perfect Italian city sights in *Don't Look Now* (1973). And what may be its roots? The never-ending realistic close-ups of ravaged flesh in *Guinea Pig: Devil's Experiment* (1985), a little piece of intestine dangling from a hook in *Saw 3D* (2010), the grainy, blurry, lo-fi vision of *Violent Shit* (1989). However, as we previously established, this issue is not black and white. There are arguably luscious shots in *Guinea Pig*, just as there are unflinching moments of explicit gore in *The Shining*. By entertaining the notion of the cinematic horror tradition as a flower, this dissertation seeks to showcase all of it, from its guts-like roots to the colourful petals. By ignoring the full picture of the plant, we are depriving ourselves of knowledge, of enjoyment, of a more diverse experience.

Perhaps due to the novelty of cinema at the time of his writings, the writings of Béla Balázs remain daringly original and inspirational for this project in their resistance to judging the visual content of cinema by moral standards. He acknowledges the emotional nature of film as the central focus of the cinematic experience, above the intellectual, and understands that the medium's strength lies in its relationship with its viewers: "The imagination and the emotional life of the people are inspired and given shape in the cinema. It is pointless to discuss whether this is good or bad" (4), he writes. Regarding medium specificity, Balázs worries that films will be judged by an arbitrary set of characteristics that do not necessarily pertain to the nature of cinema. He was, along with Epstein, witnessing the birth of film studies, and like him sought to crystallize the unique abilities of this emerging art. However, it is remarkable how his inquisitive mind reaches through time to ask the reader, prophetically, "How can you tell that a film is not

art?" He follows: "you must surely have an idea in mind of what constitutes an artistic film, a good film. My fear is that you will measure the quality of a film by a false yardstick … The aeroplane is not a bad car simply because it is useless on the roads. And, in the same way, film has different roads, roads of its own" (5).

Theoretical Contexts, Classic and Contemporary

To better understand the map that will guide us through those places, it is important to examine the path film studies has taken when it comes to cinematic horror. The sub-sections that follow discuss three bodies of critical texts that have influenced the study of horror and my own work. The first is an exploration of how societies have come to privilege positive affects over negative affects in media, ultimately assigning negative cultural value to various abject aesthetics and/or concepts. The next offers a review of two critical contexts for my study: The 1970s' "screen theory," characterized by a feminist psychoanalytical approach, and affect theory, brought to the forefront by the study of phenomenology.

1. Early Film Theory in a Modern World

Jean Epstein's approach to the filmed image is marked by a sense of the sacred. He describes the photogenic moment as the "purest expression of cinema" (293). *Photogénie* "graces" the filmed image with "holiness," it grants these objects with "the gift of life" (283). Inadvertently, Epstein's quasi-theological language has driven the discourse surrounding this concept towards the culturally subconscious values of traditionalist western Christianity; artforms that produce a congenial aesthetic and/or conceptual experience are thought of as particularly ennobling and refined. With this in mind, I call for the appreciation of a much-neglected side of Epstein's *photogénie*: the way it functions in cinematic horror. From a

scholarly perspective, it is both interesting and useful to explore the ways in which, for one reason or another, this perspective has been overlooked.

One of the true pioneers of film theory, Epstein is renowned today for his extraordinary written work, even though he was a prolific film director from 1922 until the beginning of the 1950s. This is not because his creative projects lacked integrity; far from it, his filmography, while not so often talked about, was highly influential to the art of cinema developing during this historical period. Among his innovative ideas was the use of the "free" camera, which allowed filmmakers to seek new perspectives and movements within their work. Epstein's experimental approach to the filmed image and understanding of the importance of movement for the medium became the precepts for the movement known as French Impressionism, distinguished by some scholars as the first cinematic avant-garde. Epstein's experimental approach to the filmed image and medium self-awareness (which he communicated through his published writing) inspired what is perhaps the most discussed cinematic movement in history, the French New Wave, from which better known directors like François Truffaut and Jean-Luc Godard emerged during the late 1950s. The legacy of Epstein's theorizing of film can be perceived in the creation of *Cahiers du Cinéma*, the magazine responsible for consolidating cinema as a modern discipline and the possibility of film as an academic endeavour.

Here it is important to note that the novelty of Epstein's writing did not necessarily rely on his discussion of what was considered at the time a revolutionary new medium. What captured the minds of many was his attempt to describe in words the aspects of cinema that are harder to grasp from an academic perspective, the concepts that are closer to the realm of philosophy and spirituality than to the more prominent mindset of structuralism in academia at the time. His writing, just like his films, is experimental in nature. Despite his foresight and

originality (or perhaps because of it?) the written work of Jean Epstein was not broadly considered part of the film theory canon until scholars in recent years put in the work to translate, disseminate, and analyze his texts. An example of this effort is the group of works compiled in *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, edited by Sarah Keller. From this small yet rich treasure of writings, one idea of his has emerged above the rest as the main feature: the concept of *photogénie.*

Epstein himself writes that the inspiration for his own use of the word came from a manifesto written by early film theoretician Ricciotto Canudo in 1911, "The Birth of the Sixth Art," in which he presented cinema as the titular sixth art, earning his place among the pre-established ones distinguished by Georg Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*: music, poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture. Here, Canudo differentiates between the camera of photography and that of cinema, pushing forward the idea that there was something specific to the cinematic camerawork that distinguished it from other arts, specifically from photography. It offered something new: a way of fashioning filmed images in movement, the ability to modify the audience's perception of the visual within the shot. That said, while the foundations for the medium specificity of cinema were laid, it was not until 1919 that the word "*photogénie*" started circulating among film enthusiasts throughout magazines such as *Le Journal du Ciné-club*, edited by film director and critic Louis Delluc.

Epstein signals Delluc as the author from whom he adopted the term, and briefly refers to his 1918's column "La Photoplastie au Cinéma," which seems to indicate the first use of *photogénie* in the context of film theory/criticism. In this article, however, Delluc's use of the word differs greatly from Epstein's; the former links *photogénie* with the gorgeous and exquisite, much closer in definition to the concept of photogenic. Delluc highlights the power of lighting

and framing to enhance the natural attractiveness and charisma of actresses like Francesca Bertini, transforming what is beautiful into something more: the photogenic, a superior female splendor that is only achievable by means of editing. It is worth noting that, in Delluc's expression of the word, there is no photogenic *moment*. Rather than a situation that actively occurs, *photogénie* is a quality of the filmed image. Most notable, however, is the fact that Delluc uses it to represent that which is aesthetically pleasant beyond commonality; there is nothing in Delluc that links *photogénie* with the uncomfortable, the gruesome, or the hard to classify.

In Epstein's most renowned work on the concept of *photogénie*, he strikes the reader from the start with a surprisingly grotesque, unsettling metaphor: "The cinema seems to me like two Siamese twins joined together at the stomach, in other words by the baser necessities of life, but sundered at the heart or by the higher necessities of emotion" (292). I find it remarkable that his most significant statement about *photogénie* is preceded by such a graphic, nightmarish vision; this horrific imagery, which could find its place in a David Cronenberg film, is not what most people think about when Epstein, *photogénie* and impressionist cinema come to mind. However, the deeper one dives into his theory and filmography, the more one realizes that the connection between the abject and the photogenic is a clear pattern throughout Epstein's work. While Epstein relies on liturgic vocabulary to explain the photogenic moment, he is ultimately concerned with the realm of human emotions. He does not define the "purest expression of cinema" as "purity" opposed to "sin." Rather, he uses an essentialist view to refer to the "purest" form of cinematic language: the process by which the moving image is given a distinctive character that resonates deeply within the viewer. The reason why *photogénie* is so hard (perhaps impossible) to describe in a pragmatic way is found in the effect that it produces: "a new reality

is revealed … which is untrue to everyday reality just as everyday reality is untrue to the heightened awareness of poetry" (Epstein 293). *Photogénie* is closer to the sublime than to the divine, in that its effect is not actually determined by established morality. A "moral character" can (and must, according to Epstein) be given to the filmed image. However, the nature of said moral does not have to be ennobling, and often is not.

Regardless of whether it is pursued, damaged, or destroyed, a fundamental element of horror cinema is the human body and its boundaries. When we watch the slaughter of a woman in the shower (*Pyscho*, 1960) we attend a violation of the body; every swing of the knife, every drop of dark blood reminds us of its fragility. When we look outside the window with a slasher film survivor in *Halloween* (1978), holding our breath as we hope to see the killer dead on the floor only to find nothing, it reminds us of the body's prowess and power. Horror demands that we acknowledge the body and register its vulnerability and strength. This objective is achieved through the viewers' interactions with the abject. Intrinsically linked to the human experiences of nausea, anxiety, and horror, abjection defines those elements within our lives that makes us repulsed in a way that is hard to explain, because it emerges from a re-configuration of our own understanding of reality. Our encounter with the abject comes with the realization that something we held as certain is no more. Thus, the corpse, according to Kristeva, "is the utmost of abjection" (4). When deprived of all liturgic spirituality and scientific interest, it represents that which we cannot escape yet we strive to avoid constantly: rot, decay, death. Scenes in horror films like those from the opening sequences of Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), in which the viewers are shown in a cruelly slow backwards panning shot what seems to be "a gruesome work of art" consisting of two rotting, mangled corpses posing on a tombstone, are so effective because they force us to confront the very real existence of the abject. In doing

so, we are pushed away from everyday reality and forced to accommodate our newfound awareness of its (and our own) boundaries, albeit sometimes only momentarily.

According to Edmund Burke, ideas that excite a sense of terror can be classified as sublime because they are “productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (111). In his most renowned work, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, he explains that the aesthetic of the sublime is distinctive from the beautiful; while the latter pleases, the former “compels.” If beauty reminds the human mind of love, the sublime dazzles with awe, evoking fearful respect towards the vast, the incommensurable, the incomprehensible. The encounter with the sublime is one of awe, and not of pure fear, because we are allowed to contemplate the sublime object from a distance; it is difficult to appreciate the majesty of a tsunami when it becomes an actual threat to our lives and we must run from it.

Building on this concept, Kristeva recognizes sublimation as a mental reflex which turns the abject digestible in order to “keep it under control” (11). Sublimation achieves this goal through “the possibility of naming the pre-nominal” (Kristeva 11), by attempting to identify that which escapes interpretation. The object of abjection “confronts,” while the sublime object “dissolves in the raptures of a bottomless memory” (Kristeva 12). From this perspective, it is easy to understand the repulsion we might feel towards a decaying corpse encountered in a state that is deprived of sublimation. The reaction caused by seeing an anonymous cadaver laying in the middle of the street will likely differ to the reaction caused by seeing the shrouded dead body of a family member inside a cathedral. The latter encounter can be more easily deemed “meaningful” mainly because of two reasons. First, because it aligns with our pre-existing awareness and comprehension of the circumstances surrounding the deceased. Second, because

the deceased is exalted through the aesthetics of the sacred. Sublimation "compels" us to connect the abject with reminiscences, past thoughts and experiences. If the abject makes meaning collapse, sublimation is the process through which we pick up the pieces to build a new (yet recognizable) structure of meaning. "As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it," writes Kristeva, "the sublime triggers … a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where 'I' am – delight and loss" (12). From this perspective, cinematic horror can be understood as an act of sublimation, as filmmakers project their abject thoughts and feelings into visuals that can be observed and analyzed by others. Accordingly, horror films provide viewers with the possibility to physically distance themselves from real danger without diminishing their emotional engagement with the abject.

2. Screen Theory: Psychoanalysis and Feminism

Film studies' texts from the 1970s to the early 1990s provide influential approaches to this discipline and offer useful analytical tools. Screen theory in particular foregrounded the work of mostly female scholars who engaged with horror film studies, many of them inspired by Freudian theory. Scholars associated with theory of this period wrote powerful and influential criticisms of systematic misogyny both in cinema and society at large that continue to resonate in scholarship on horror film and its viewers.

Laura Mulvey helped pave the way for film studies to interact with other disciplines at an academic level. Her sophisticated understanding of the process in which films are created and consumed gave agency to the role of viewers. Mulvey portrayed the film audience as an entity capable of significant cultural participation through the interpretation, internalization, and reproduction of media. In her famous essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," she

introduced the male gaze. This concept appeared to go hand in hand with the analysis of cinematic horror, a genre that at the time was understood as pandering only to young men. Mulvey explores the gaze both as a singular concept and also as experienced (and constructed) by filmmakers, the audience, and the system containing them. The term "gaze" applied to film is a helpful tool for scholars to analyze the many ways in which the camera frames the world, bringing up useful questions concerning authorial intent and identity. The "structure of representation" she describes as "demanded by the ideology of the patriarchal order" (37) has three layers in its fetishistic portrayal of women: the female bodies in the screen are denigrated by the filmmakers who craft the characters, by the camerawork which frames them as sexually suggestive products of consumption, and by the audience (imagined here as entirely male) who enjoys gawking at them. By centering film discourse on the objectification of women, Mulvey's work in the 1970s kickstarted a scholarly approach to cinema marked by a disdain towards the horror genre's representations of the wounded female body.

In "When the Woman Looks," Linda Williams addresses the cinematic moment in which the female victim of a horror film takes a first glance at the monster (mostly on the films from the Universal Monsters era). She acknowledges the fact that this moment is an encounter of sorts, a recognition of two "others"; monster and woman are threats to the patriarchal system in that they radically differ from the aspirational image of the traditional heterosexual cisgender male. Nevertheless, while she sees a subversive potential in this encounter of gazes, she considers this potential as not realized. Williams makes the point that when women (both within a film and in the audience) look at the monster, their curiosity is "punished." While the heroine is attacked by the antagonist, her viewers are shocked by the violence inflicted upon the female body on screen. Looking away, Williams says, is understandable and even a gesture of rebellion.

William's later take on the so-called "body genres" helps examining the ways in which society as a whole interacts with the cinematic horror genre. In "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," she establishes an insightful comparison between what she identifies as the three "gross" genres: horror, melodrama, and porn. Building on Kristeva's exploration of the abject, Williams shows the ways in which these genres thrive on the power of raw human emotion, represented by the unwanted exposure of bodily fluids like blood, tears, and semen, all trespassers of the boundaries of the body. She acknowledges the fact that these three cinematic traditions hold an "especially low cultural status" (4) because of their perceived "excessive" presentation and purposes a new, different approach to engage with the "gross" genres, one that reconsiders the violence inflicted upon the female body on screen: "To dismiss [body genres] as bad perversions … is not to address their function as cultural problem-solving" (12). This view represents the first step towards a common understanding of the cinematic abject which transcends the Freudian approach to genre and sexuality, one that is allowed to introduce the concept of active female and/or queer viewers and filmmakers.

Carol J. Clover is best known for giving a name to the trope of the "final girl," a protagonist of many horror films, but especially prominent in the slasher subgenre, where usually the sole survivor is a young woman who must face the monster in the film's final climatic scenes. Her book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, is often referred to as one of the most important texts of feminist theory applied to film studies. Skipping over the Lacanian-leaning theory of Mulvey, Clover tackles the horror cinematic genre from the perspective of classic Freudian theory, a choice that has had a lasting impact on the work of others influenced by her approach to these texts.

While the concept of the final girl has been largely accepted as part of the slasher genre both in academia and fandom spaces, and adopted as a problematic yet beloved trope, Clover's description of it reads as incomplete from a contemporary critical perspective informed by queer theory, in part because her approach to gender unintentionally complies with the erasure of queer identities. By assuming that all characters and viewers are heterosexual, Clover does not notice that the blurring of traditional female gender norms embodied by the final girl is empowering for many women and can be especially inspiring for those who are members of the queer community. The final girl's overconfident demeanor at the end, for Clover, is a way of making the character more masculine so it resonates with its supposed audience of teenage boys, a connection she makes by suggesting that knives and guns are Freudian phallic symbols, and by criticizing the generic tradition of naming the final girl with an ambiguous "male" name. Clover's analyses fit neatly into what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick considers a "paranoid reading" based on Freudian theory, one that, as a schema, "silently installs the anxious paranoid imperative, the impossibility but also the supposed necessity of forestalling pain and surprise … as the only and inevitable mode" (137). Ultimately, within its historical context, this outlook on the horror genre had the unfortunate effect of erasing queer people and women from the viewing experience as it was described by scholars focused only on the male gaze and other entailments of heteronormativity.

Only a year after the release of Clover's famous book, Barbara Creed's *The Monstrous-Feminine* popularizes the idea of the female castrator, a concept that still frames women according to their relationship to men while being, at the same time, potentially empowering. She reads the female body as that of a mother, made important through its reproductive system. However, because of her more prominent Lacanian influence, she notes that the relationship

between the audience's identities and the film is more complicated than what Clover proposes. Creed uses Lacan's concept of mirroring (the fact that we build our identities upon a reflection, upon our own personal understanding of the world) to develop a perceptive view about reception theory. She champions the idea that the ways in which we approach a film depend on many factors other than the viewer's sex; she demonstrates that different and even opposing readings of the symbolic can coexist. While her contemporaries largely focused on cinematic females as victims, Creed studied the female aggressors, helping to level the field. Her investigation of why these iconic villains and monsters are interesting gives them and analytic attention and depth that only male-coded monsters had previously enjoyed. Most importantly, she states that the reason why there are not as many female horror directors is not the fact that the female unconscious is "free of monsters," but that women have not yet been in control of the means of production in the film industry.

3. Cognitive Theory, Phenomenology, and Affect Theory

Noël Carroll writes *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart* from the perspective of cognitive theory. In "Why Horror?" he introduces what he calls "the paradox of horror": the question of why anybody would be willing to go through (and even pay for) a horror-inducing experience. Carroll seeks a specific answer, a "use" for horror that can justify the viewers' fascination with it. This dissertation, in contrast, champions the idea that we do not need to excuse our enjoyment of the cinematic abject, for the pleasures of fear are not paradoxical at all. As Julian Hanich states, referring to "Why Horror?," Carrol "denigrates the viewers' emotional experience" by situating pleasure "outside of fear" (5). We can delight in negative affects alongside positive affects.

Carroll, following the precept that “we might feel justified in demanding an explanation of what could motivate people to seek out the genre” (158), directs the reader to consider horror narratives in general as a “legitimate” vehicle for “useful” entertainment. A polite disdain towards the unapologetic enjoyment of abject media emerges in his otherwise objective statement that “many people—so many, in fact, that we must concede that they are normal, at least in the statistical sense—do seek out horror fictions for the purpose of deriving pleasure from sights and descriptions that customarily repulse them” (158). The addendum of how horror enjoyers are normal “at least in the statistical sense” is revealing of Carroll’s perception of a cultural stigma attending the genre.

The possible reason he gives for people’s enjoyment of horror is that of cognitive pleasure. Carroll establishes the idea that the horror film and its monsters are puzzles for the audience to solve. Cognitive theory sees the human mind as constantly active and capable of enjoying the unravelling of a plot, especially one that is as rich in tropes, rules, and conventions as the horror film. To destroy the threat the characters are facing, they supposedly must understand the world in which they are situated, the nature of the monsters, and the “rules” they need to follow to survive. As they investigate throughout the film, the audience comes along. The cognitive pleasure of solving the horror film’s mystery is different from the one gained when experiencing a detective film, however: because horror introduces fantasy, impossible situations and characters can be explored, adding a further layer of challenge for horror film viewers.

While his efforts to destigmatize the genre are decidedly well-intentioned, this dissertation argues that providing an ultimate reason for why people enjoy the cinematic abject is not a requirement to approach the horror genre, which yields many delights for viewers to

experience, cognitive pleasure being just one of them. A different investigation of the cognitive emotions that emerge from filmic representations of the body and its subsequent destruction is presented by Xavier Aldana Reyes. He proposes a model of viewership that considers the thematic and conceptual "usefulness" of specific gore imagery, yet he still expresses guilt, asking about *Hostel* (2005): "Was I in some way responsible for the carnographic spectacles I had witness? And worst of all, why did I want to carry on watching horror?" (1).

Hanich's phenomenological approach is particularly helpful in the production of analyses regarding the horror film. His work acknowledges and names specific concepts related to the film viewing experience which had not been defined before. Hanich's creation of new academic language and his system of classification of what he calls "fearful aesthetic devices" helps scholars elaborate a more detailed study of cinematic horror. For example, his distinction between "direct horror" (the threat is experienced firsthand on screen) and "suggested horror" (the threat is described or insinuated) is useful for discussions of cinematic subgenres and viewing engagement, as it illustrates different types of film language that can be preferred by specific audiences and employed by specific films.

Hanich indicates that there are many pleasures to be gained from the horror cinematic genre, not limited to but including 'self-fashioning' and mental 'role-playing'. Indeed, at a conceptual level, films in general provide a plethora of thought experiments. Especially relevant for my argument is his idea of horror film viewing as a metamorphosis that, although starting with the body, can ultimately culminate in a metamorphosis of the mind. Importantly, Hanich's research allows for a film studies' approach to the horror genre that does not demonize it or try to justify its existence. Rather, Hanich focuses on the ways in which audiences interact with these films and how they experience joy in the viewing experience. He ultimately argues for both a

physiological and psychological benefit of watching horror that makes it inherently useful and/or valuable: because modern culture constantly diminishes the sensorial aspect of our bodies in everyday life to privilege functionality within capitalism, Hanich argues, it is no surprise that many people seek entertainment that reminds the viewers of their own bodies, both by being at the center of the narrative they are watching and by engaging their actual bodies through emotions that produce physical sensorial reactions.

Sianne Ngai explores affect theory from a unique and innovative approach in her 2005 book *Ugly Feelings*, where she uses "affection" and "emotion" "more or less interchangeably" (27). The difference she observes between these terms, while not monumental, is an interesting one: affects transition to become emotions as they grow more structured and defined. In this work, Ngai is specifically concerned with negative affects that are not cathartic in nature. Unlike anger and fear, which illicit "grander passions" (6), "noncathartic feelings" such as irritation and stuplimity (simultaneous boredom and astonishment; dullness) are more likely to lead to emotional stagnation (9) and thus cannot be productive of societal or personal change. This perception can be used to support Hanich's statement about how cinematic horror works to "alleviate" the "persistent transformations of advanced modernity" (256): The bodily awareness brought by the filmed abject has the opposite effect of stagnant, noncathartic feelings, as the genre not only offers "precious moments of lived-body and temporal intensity," but it also "may allow for valuable instances of collectivity and belongingness" (254).

Elena Del Rio's *The Grace of Destruction* contains insightful and productive uses of Deleuzian theory. Her approach to cultural taste analysis is based on "the repudiation of transcendent systems of morality" (2); she understands that a study of affects cannot be biased in favor of positive affect. This is because affect in itself represents "a qualitative experience that is

felt, even while it might be not consciously registered" (Del Rio 2). This aversion towards "transcendent systems of morality" is intrinsically political, as regulating the feelings and experiences of people is essentially an oppression of individuality. All types of affects, positive or negative, are equally valid and should be considered when approaching art in scholarship. Affect operates as a "transitional event that marks the passage from one state of the body to another, thus bringing about a diminution or augmentation of the body's powers" (Del Rio 3). This experience is enriching because it invites our bodies to allow for change and transformation at an emotional level. However, as Del Rio points out, because of the perpetual moral push against abject art, the praise and/or enjoyment of negative affect through cinematic works is sometimes seen as deviant. I cannot help but notice that there is an effort in her writing to yet again claim that certain abject forces are better than others, "better," more "useful" to society and therefore superior forms of entertainment. She claims that there is value in extreme films because their representations of violence are not to be equated with "Hollywood" and/or "mainstream cinema," vehicles that, in her view, privilege quantity of abject forces rather than quality (a characteristic she perceives as negative). Del Rio brushes aside these types of film because she believes that the intervals in between different abject visuals allow for viewers to further engage in their own reaction: "the wider this gap, the greater the potentiality for the affective quality of forces to emerge" (15).

Although this is a brilliant explanation for a certain rhythm of cinematic horror, I do not believe that there are modes of expressing the abject that are better or more effective than others. In order to freely examine the prowess of the genre, we must admit that negative affects can be approached from different perspectives, that they are as valid in mainstream productions as they are in obscure, cult, "European" horror films. The abject can take different forms depending on

where we find it, but one colour is not inherently better than the others. That criticism aside, a horror film scholar can find great solace in Del Rio's stance, as she is not concerned with "passing moral judgement on the violent acts themselves" but rather with "the unconscious forces that trigger the affective experience of individual and social bodies" (10). Her aim to embrace Deleuze's neovitalism is inspiring and invigorating; it follows not "a vacuous fixation on negative affects," but instead "a belief that the reactive/negative forces and affects may be … productive of their own transformations" (29).

The Cinematic Motus

The concept of motus is partly inspired by several pre-existing concepts, such as Jean Epstein's *photogenie* (the deliberate attempt on behalf of the filmmakers to gift an image with "soul" and "personality"), which Gordon Sullivan describes as "a transformative force for human vision" (409) in that it is "less a property of cinema than an experience" (410). Another useful concept for my taxonomy is Deleuze's "transcendent exercise," which stands in opposition to the empirical exercise because "it apprehends that which cannot be grasped from the point of view of common sense, that which measures" (Deleuze 188). Also relevant for the conception of motus is Christian M. Keathley's definition of the "cinephiliac moment" as an "area of spectatorial experience" which "seems to draw its intensity partly from the fact that it cannot be reduced or tamed by interpretation" (9). A similar concept, that of the "emotional experience," is described by Julian Hanich as a "metamorphosis" and "a transformation of our lived body and the world we relate to emotionally" (49). This dissertation argues for the use of motus instead of these terms for several reasons, which I explain below. Like Powell, I seek to establish an interpretative method that "celebrates the dynamic, material congress of spectator and screen image rather than an abstracted cerebral detachment" (204).

When Hanich explains "emotional experience," the term that most closely resembles motus, he highlights the etymology of the word "emotion": "from the Latin 'emovere,' in which the notion of 'to move' and the prefix for 'out' are combined" (49). "Movement," applied to the viewing experience, conveys the latter's active, fluctuating nature better than "moment" or "exercise." *Photogenie*, the "transcendental exercise" and the "cinephiliac moment" (understood as an "area of spectatorial experience") align with motus in their description of a situation when the cinematic transports the viewer beyond the realm of common sense and everyday reality; they imply a lived-in occurrence that can be perceived both physically and emotionally. However, the cinematic motus differs from these terms in its purpose and practicality.
While motus is similar in its potentially transformative effects, it seeks to explore the different possible triggers for a viewer's metamorphosis rather than explain the metamorphosis itself. Once viewers can identify that they have been internally moved, the question arises of what exactly "moved" them. Instead of drawing viewers away from the screen in order to contemplate this phenomenon, motus suggests that viewers engage in a deconstruction of their intense reactions, bringing them closer to the cinematic elements of the film at hand. The cinematic motus recognizes a disruption in the viewing experience that we can then explore and internalize. As previously stated, motus emerges from a combination of emotional and intellectual reactions; it stands, however, in opposition to the act of "intellectualization." This term, coined by Anna Freud in *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, is defined by Glen O. Gabbard as "using excessive and abstract ideation to avoid difficult feelings" (27). On the contrary, motus in cinematic horror invites the viewer to address difficult feelings via "sublimation." While this dissertation also tackles the aesthetic of the sublime developed by Edmund Burke, the concept of sublimation I am referring to in this particular instance functions from a psychological approach,

described as "transforming socially objectionable or internally unacceptable aims into socially acceptable ones" (Gabbard, 28). As Gabbard explains, intellectualization is a "neurotic" defense mechanism, while sublimation is a "mature" one (27-28), the highest ranking in the hierarchy of defense mechanisms. Sublimation, like other mature defenses in psychology, "may enable a patient to manage unresolved conflicts that exist … with internal objects from the past" (25). With motus in the horror genre, individuals re-incorporate and appropriate "threatening" signifiers, helped by the safety the filmed image possesses. In other words, cinema facilitates interactions with the abject by engaging viewers in emotional aesthetic experiences. Motus, then, provides a framework in which to perceive these moments; by identifying an aesthetic source for them, we can better understand our own unique ways of connecting with the films we watch.

This dissertation will examine five different types of motus, exploring each in their own individual chapter. The filmic examples in each chapter are arranged to facilitate a cohesive structure throughout my analyses: The films at the start of chapters provide a clear representation of each motus, and the examples of motus among the next entries build upon this foundation. It is important to note here that this dissertation explores several instances of the cinematic motus woven into each film (instead of only one per film). The shot or series of shots which better illustrate the styles of motus at hand are further expanded upon, but all instances highlighted across every entry are worthy mentions as well: They reinforce, connect with, or simply exist alongside the main motus chosen as a primary focus. The order of the chapters organizes these types of motus from the most pragmatic and easy to describe to the most speculative and hard to grasp:

Chapter One: Allegorical Motus – Shots that deliver to the viewer the poetic device of allegory presented visually within the film. Here, the filmed image stands in as a signifier for

ideas or concepts reflecting pertinent themes. This is the type of motus that can be found most regularly and pointed out most easily in cinematic horror by academics, as the recognition of these types of shots date back to the beginning of film studies (weapons in the hands of killers can signify phalluses via Freud). The plots and themes of each film are explored here only as is necessary to better understand the allegorical motus exemplified in each entry.

Chapter Two: Narrative Motus – The impact of these shots is connected to the plot of the film in a meaningful way, as they represent culminating narrative moments. The narrative motus is not necessarily a visual representation, because it works cognitively more than aesthetically; it can simply be the satisfying reaching of a story or storyline's conclusion or a consummation of character development. This chapter contains more in-depth examinations of a film's plot based on its relevance for each motus.

Chapter Three: Shock Motus – These shots are edited and positioned within the visual narrative as distinctively surprising, offering a rupture from the expected. Through different kinds of build-ups, the shock motus plays a game of tension and release with an aesthetically impactful climax. In this chapter, I will include detailed descriptions of the group of shots that assemble an effective shock motus piece by piece.

Chapter Four: Reflexive Motus – This chapter covers shots that willingly make the viewers aware of the fabric of cinema as a medium, letting them peek at the actual conditions of film production through specific camera work, filmmaking imagery, and metatextuality (one common example of this mechanism is the breaking of the fourth wall).

Chapter Five: Liminal Motus – The shots analyzed in this chapter create a sense of existential uncertainty and are centered on abstract images and/or concepts. This motus moves us when it is hard to make out what we are witnessing as viewers, for example, undefined and

ambivalent images or locations. It often creates an atmosphere of confusion that invites reflection on the ineffable.

These analytical tools are focused on both the product presented and the possibilities it provides for the audience. Unlike a phenomenological approach, which would discuss the physical reactions of viewers, motus stands for different types of possible transformative encounters between viewer and artwork from a critical aesthetic perspective.

Methodology

Seeking to provide an insight into the full spectrum of cinematic horror, my scope is not limited to the genre's most influential films. Accordingly, this dissertation does not focus on any specific historical periods; rather, it is transtemporal in nature. The selection of films explored here is broad, thus helpful for examining how motus works through the genre as a whole. For this purpose, I employ a diverse set of eight characteristics for which a number of films are selected: "horror classics" (films considered an essential part of the horror canon); "elevated films" (those named as such by critics or scholars), "underrated films" (ones that have received very little to no scholarly attention), "loathed films" (films lambasted by critics or scholars), "lauded films" (those highly praised by critics or scholars), "experimental films," "gore films" (presenting explicit gore) and "no-gore films" (the ones lacking any explicit gore). I considered around one hundred films in the viewing stage of my research. From this initial group, I selected specific examples of shots and sequences according to their usefulness for representing each kind of motus.

Chapter One: The Allegorical Motus

I use the word "allegorical" for this motus because of its similarity to the poetic device of the same name, which causes the reader of a poem to veer towards meaning conveyed through described imagery. When it comes to film, there is no need for words; "For in man's evolution, images antedate words and thought, thus reaching deeper, older, more basic layers of the self" (Vogel 11). When it comes to the interpretation of visual elements in storytelling, as well as in daily life, the human brain is predisposed towards the figurative. From hieroglyphics to Indigenous stories to European fairy tales, we always find ways to imbue images with meaning and to create meaning out of images. A dove is the embodiment of peace, a volcano explodes with anger, roses stand in for fleeting beauty and romance. While culture is almost always a force in forming a sense of meaning, we also attach elements of our personal experiences to artifacts we encounter in daily life, making them meaningful. Meaning never comes solely from within; rather, it connects with culture and cultural objects that lie outside us to shape narratives. Accordingly, we ideate visual allegories not just in our surroundings, but in the media we consume as well.

The visual allegorical is one of the elements of film commonly discussed in cinematic horror scholarship; Clover, for example, specifically refers to murderous men's knives as phallic symbols, and Creed interprets knives as castrating symbols while in the hand of women. A prevalent opinion regarding the topic of explicit gore in cinema, often heard both in online fan spaces and academia, is that it is fine to corrupt the body on film as long as it is meant to represent, to signify something other than its own destruction. This urge to find meaning in imagery can be observed so thoroughly in horror film studies, in part, because Freud's theory has been influential on scholars of the genre. His popular work *The Interpretation of Dreams*

popularized the idea that even the most abstract of visions has intrinsic meaning generated by the unconscious. Elements of this approach to interpretation still have appeal, and we see this in the creation as well as reception of horror films throughout the decades, including by filmmakers who wish to artistically recreate their actual nightmares. As critic Robin Wood points out, many attempts to explore the abject result in visual representations of unspoken, underlying communal fears and anxieties. For example, we find echoes of war in a paranoid shot in *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922) when the citizens carry dark coffins along the streets in a somber parade. According to Gilberto Perez, in this shot of “uncommon intensity and implicative resonance,” the space between the grotesque procession and the POV from a high window is “exerting the pressure of a gaping void,” which “seems to be calling for someone to fill” (141-142), inviting the viewer to add significance to the emptiness surrounding the dead. This is the allegorical motus: a shot in which visuals move the viewer when they become charged with meaning in conjunction with the story told by the film. The allegorical motus is not just what an image makes us feel; it represents the complete revelation, the moment full, revelatory understanding of the connection between the image and the symbolic world of the film.

Now, whether the above-described visual metaphor of war was originally intended or not, this interpretation of the film is widely accepted. And this is the big caveat of the visual allegory: viewers bring their personal experiences of cultural moments and situations (such as war) to their interpretation of images. Nevertheless, the way this iconic shot lingers, and its unique quasi-bird’s eye view which distinguishes it from others in *Nosferatu*, tells us that it is important; its framing within the narrative effectively invites analysis. In this way, the allegorical motus is intrinsically linked to our ability to recognize both long-standing cultural signifiers and the specifics of the story being told by the plot.

There is a productive proto-description of this style of motus in Adam Lowenstein's concept of the "allegorical moment," which is defined as a "shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined (2). While the allegorical motus is not necessarily linked to historical events, the past lies with our pre-conceived historical and cultural assumptions, while the present signifies with current thoughts, feelings, and understanding of the world around us.

***The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928)**

It is no surprise that one of the most celebrated films directed by Jean Epstein feels almost entirely composed of photogenic moments. In this profound exploration of the nature of time through experimental filming and editing techniques, a dream-like fog engulfs the frame, especially in shots which exhibit natural light from location shooting, where the filmed image transforms into a black and white impressionist painting. The physical elements, the Benjaminian aura of the film, have contributed to this effect, its delicate reels deteriorated like the house in Edgar Allan Poe's dark tale. This nostalgic fog, possibly the product of dry ice, combines with the film's natural decay to blur the outlines of people and objects, all slightly blending together, all part of a whole. The atmospheric elements of the film are only enhanced by Epstein's philosophical visual storytelling, helping the viewer drift away from the mundane, transported by a feeling of ethereal beauty and melancholy. The main motus showcased through *Usher* reflects these aesthetic choices, using a visual allegory to portray the human soul as a perceivable entity. This example of an allegorical motus and is relevant because it demonstrates the level of intricate sophistication this type of motus is capable of. To fully grasp its depth, context is first necessary.

Co-written with Luis Buñuel before he directed his first film, *The Fall of the House of Usher* is an adaptation of two popular works published by Poe, resulting in a "Poesque mutation,

an offshoot-hybridity" (Catania 46). While the main plot of the film follows the events of the short story of the same name to an extent, a relevant subplot depicts "The Oval Portrait" more closely. The latter tale is about an artist so obsessed with painting a portrait of his wife that, after several weeks of focusing just on the canvas, he does not realize her health has dwindled. Once the portrait is complete, he exclaims victoriously "This is indeed Life itself!" only to discover the cold truth: she has passed away while sitting still, suggesting that the process of portrait painting has fed on the life of the subject. Accordingly, Epstein's film is a meditation on the passage of time and the possibility of life beyond the grave cinema offers. While Epstein was mainly concerned with painting life through film, in this case, he is also dedicated to portraying death.

From the opening scenes, the film exhibits a clear attention to detail when it comes to showcasing inanimate objects "whose moral character is enhanced by filmic reproduction" (Epstein 294). The dreary atmosphere from Poe's stories, imbedded in the film's landscape, also serves as foreshadowing. According to M. Soliña Barreiro: "The emotional state of the characters is somatized in the nature surrounding the house; the water floods the land and the trees have no leaves as if they were stuck in an endless fall, the season related to melancholy" (203). In a four-second shot we see a broken sign that instead of "Usher" reads "she," barely held together by the branches of a tree that is completely naked except for a few small flowers shuddering in the breeze. The proverbial house is in decay, like dwindling flora, like a word becoming shorter, signifying a female absence. In this early instance of the allegorical motus we can already envision an impressive amount of the story's conceptual core. Several shots throughout the film also present this motus, and all of them together magnify the metaphorical quality of Epstein's poetic visual language.

Roderick Usher, last of his kin, lives in a state of "strange seclusion." He is introduced to the viewer through a series of meaningful shots: an elegant robe reveals a hand in a still pose; an elaborate lion carving on a wooden chair; Roderick's melancholic glance before the rich detail on the baroque frame of a painting. He and the house he inhabits are one and the same, therefore they are showcased allegorically to us, side by side. Roderick's stagnation is exacerbated by his deliberately slow movements inside the mansion, creating a space that is "inhospitable, wide, and archaic, as if time were suspended in it" (Barreiro 199). Usher's spirit is dilapidated and, like the meager group of furniture gathered in the center of a dark room, empty. His wife Madeline, who Roderick tirelessly works on a portrait of before sickness takes her, moves through the mansion like an apparition. He is presented to the viewers as a man whose mind has been progressively taken by madness, and his mental decline is then abruptly heightened by Madeline's death.

The procession sequence, in which a few men carry Madeline's coffin through a forest for around three minutes, is marked by its experimental camera movements and editing. As Epstein wrote, "only mobile aspects of the world, of things and souls, may see their moral value increased by filmic reproduction" (294). The shots in this sequence offer the viewer a ghostly look not just into the troubled mind of Usher, but also into the realm of the unknown. The shaky, hand-held close-up shots of the group's feet on the grass and their hands holding the coffin are mixed with the glossy, dream-like long shots of the slow procession steadily advancing through a sea of smoke, dwarfed by the trees on each side, accompanied by superimposed images of burning candles that stand as high as the forest. The surreal landscape devours the group of men, just a meager shadow near the middle of the frame. Interestingly, this sequence starts and ends with an extreme long shot that lasts twelve seconds. This arrangement is particularly reminiscent of Epstein's "photogenic mobility," which implies the cinematic depiction of "all directions

perceptible to the mind." In his own words: "By general agreement it is said that the dimensions deriving from our sense of direction are three in number: the three spatial dimensions. I have never really understood why the notion of a fourth dimension has been enveloped in such mystery. It very obviously exists; it is time. The mind travels in time, just as it does in space" (294).

What better way to demonstrate the journey of the mind through time and space than the above-described example of the allegorical motus; as Roderick travels to bury his beloved in a special crypt, fearing graverobbers, he silently reflects upon what this absence means. And yet, he is with Madeline, her body remains close to him, its weight a constant reminder of what is, as far as he knows, lost. The spirituality of the sequence is enhanced through mise-en-scene by a large piece of gauze that hangs from the coffin: the train of Madeline's gown, with which her husband crowned her. The gauze, at first is dragged by the procession, soon starts flowing and twirling like a ghostly figure, from occupying almost the whole frame to almost disappearing from it.

The allegorical motus appears again in a shot where most of the frame is suddenly taken by the translucent gaze, while it dances in the wind, revealing the vast ocean and the sky behind it. Without a word, without a sound, viewers find themselves enraptured over this aesthetic moment as they understand what the gauze represents: Madeline's soul, trying to escape her physical body. The fact that we never see the gauze take flight, and that it is later shown attached to the burial place, precedes the revelation that she was buried alive. In a film that relies so heavily on symbolic figurative representations, this shot is particularly moving because of its sheer effectiveness in communicating a spiritual connotation: the appearance of souls. It is at once straightforward and exquisitely complex, providing detailed bits of narrative information

through visual allegory. Christophe Wall-Romana refers to Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* as "a radical and rearguard attempt to deploy the cinema as a modernist medium furthering the meditations of Symbolism" (42), exhibiting a fundamental preoccupation with figurative representations.

It is only after the Usher mansion is in flames that Madeline wakes from her predicament and is finally reunited with her husband, their legacy destroyed, but their bodies embracing in the here and now. Not only is their home framed in several shots conquered by fire; Madeline's painting succumbs too. And this is when we return to the tale of the obsessed painter. By concentrating solely on how his art could capture the essence of life through the creation of a still image, he forgot the human being quietly sitting in front of him. The happy ending Epstein graces the story with becomes possible because of the addition of filmic movement. This emerging form of art, he argues, is such that it can breathe new life into the inert, possess mere objects with "personality" (with an identity), with a "soul." "The cinema thus grants to the most frozen appearances of things and beings the greatest gift in the face of death: life" (295). Through Epstein's cinematography, we observe a kaleidoscope of juxtaposed signifiers that enhances the profound spirituality of the film. Our next entry demonstrates a different use of the allegorical motus, as it engages with social commentary while adopting a comedic and irreverent tone.

***The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982)**

Directed by Amy Holden Jones and written by feminist activist Rita Mae Brown, *The Slumber Party Massacre* is an underrated masterclass in horror comedy. The film leans heavily into the parodic elements that would later influence cinematic hits like Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996). Despite the slasher subgenre only recently taking shape in popular media by the time

Brown wrote her script, she was able to capture the tone and conventions of this type of film with notable attention to detail. While the final product comes across as more serious and conventional than initially intended, the comedic self-awareness of the original version still shines through and becomes *Slumber Party*'s most distinctive trait. In the main example of this segment of my discussion, a battle between the film's final girl and the slasher, which deploys both phallic and castrating symbols, the visual-allegorical parodically illuminates and/or challenges pre-existing cultural and scholarly concepts related to gender and genre.

From the very start of *Slumber Party*, which follows the misadventures of a group of teenage girls attacked by a driller-wielding maniac, it becomes clear that the film functions as a sharp, witty showcasing of relevant feminist themes and views from the era. In an early review in *Monthly Film Bulletin*, Kim Newman writes that the film "comes from the impeccably feminist pen of novelist Rita Mae Brown" and nods approvingly at the way the surviving girls kill off the male threat "without the help of any male cops, boyfriends or psychiatrists" (Newman, 307). The way in which *Slumber Party* does this is particularly clever: through visuals, plot, and dialogue, it discusses, interrogates, and pokes fun at both the slashers from which concepts like the male gaze came about, and these concepts themselves. The perspective of the film is decidedly female, feminist, and sexually empowered. Even though today *Slumber Party* it is considered a cult classic, a more thorough appraisal in scholarship is long overdue.

One reason for this lack of scholarship might be the influence of Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, in which she dismisses Holden Jones's film as another link in the chain of the cinematic oppression of women. This is the first and one of the very few instances of an academic text mentioning *Slumber Party*, and Clover quickly passes over its satire and social commentary. Especially puzzling is the fact that Jones seems to successfully understand, portray,

and criticize ideas that would be of utmost interest to Clover, such as scopophilia and the male gaze. Regardless, *Slumber Party* has been misinterpreted in most of the few and far between instances of scholarship dedicated to it.

Adam Rockoff, for example, argues that Jones as a director gave the film “a sense of purpose which while not deserved was certainly anticipated,” stating that “those who hoped for some empowering feminist statement, a scathing critique on the blatant misogyny endemic on slasher films, were sorely disappointed” (138). This sense of purpose (which according to Rockoff stems from Jones’s sex and political ideology) is ultimately not “deserved” because, to him, the film is just “a cheap but vaguely entertaining slasher” (138). Interestingly and revealingly, in a book that overwhelmingly praises and defends this subgenre’s right to be exploitative, he writes about *Slumber Party*:

> The fact that it panders to its target audience [teenage boys] while pretending to be some sort of intellectual cry for female solidarity makes it all the more reprehensible. After all, it’s a weird brand of feminism indeed which equates a tawdry high school locker room shower scene with any liberation other than that from clothing (138-139)

Ironically, for someone who is explicitly critical of Clover’s approach (Rockoff 9), Rockoff’s thoughts on Jones’s film are quite similar to those expressed by Clover about the slasher subgenre as a whole in “Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film,” where she states:

> Drenched in taboo and encroaching vigorously on the pornographic, the slasher film lies by and large beyond the purview of the respectable (middle-aged, middle-class) audience … the slasher film, not despite but exactly because of its crudity and compulsive repetitiveness, gives us a clearer picture of current sexual attitudes, at least

among the segment of the population that forms its erstwhile audience [teenage boys], than do the legitimate products of the better studios (187-188)

According to these writers, the sexually charged elements in *Slumber Party* are not "respectable" but "reprehensible" instead. Both Rockoff and Clover imagine the audience for slashers as mostly composed of adolescent males; yet, while Rockoff argues for the subgenre's legitimacy, Clover finds value in it precisely because it is not "legitimate" and thus supposedly reveals the repressed psychosexual impulses of a segment of the audience. Both Rockoff and Clover point out that the objectification of female bodies is present in most slasher films, and that it is a hallmark of the subgenre. Why, then, is *Slumber Party* judged so harshly in Rockoff's writing? One possible answer to this question is another reason for the scant scholarship on the film: that because it was created by women (feminists, no less) it is thus held to a different standard than other slashers.

It is important to note that the director's sex positive approach in *Slumber Party* does not only challenge gender norms, but also deliberately titillates. One hilarious moment that encapsulates this dichotomy as well as *Slumber Party*'s playful spirit is the locker room shower scene mentioned by Rockoff. In one swooningly voyeuristic close-up shot, the camera follows the body of one of the naked girls from her feet up to her hair (the camera's POV lingering on her behind a considerable amount of time), to then slowly pan to the right to show a large group of other naked women. This is a decisively parodic take, enhanced by the animated conversation the girls are having. Indulging in colourful language, the teenagers repeatedly objectify and sexualize male sport stars: "Hey, Linda, do you like watching basketball on TV?" "Yeah. I love all those great big guys in their cute little shorts. How about you?" and "Brian Spine is a doll" followed by "I wish he took his helmet off more often." This is a deliberate meta-narrative joke

for the audience's benefit; viewers can enjoy ogling at the girls' bodies, but the girls are sexualizing men at the same time in their own way. Words like "cute" and "doll," which we often hear in media coming from male characters, are now used by women. This perspective is strengthened by the fact that the two main characters in the movie, new girl in town Valerie (Robin Stille) and her pre-pubescent sister Courtney, both enjoy an issue of *Playgirl* magazine, an item that the younger character steals from her sister's bedroom excitedly like it were forbidden bounty. The film's feminist outlook can be also seen through the inclusion of women in traditionally male-dominated jobs: both a basketball couch and an electrician in the film are played by women and portrayed as competent professionals in their field.

The conversation in the showers evolves into slumber party planning. Diane insists that they should invite Valerie, but ultimately declines due to feeling insecure and having to babysit her sister. However, her house is right in front of the party house, so she can check on her classmates (and their sneaky boyfriends) a couple of times. All throughout the film are sprinkled many endearing moments of female camaraderie and bonding. Before the murderer arrives, a considerable amount of focus is placed on the main group of friends. Trish, Jackie, Kim, and Diane enjoy a bag of weed ("Maui Wowie. 100% seedless prime bud"), beers, and each other's company. Their dialogue and chemistry feel natural; these are characters with inner worlds and feelings, not mere bodies to destroy. The same cannot be said of the antagonist, newly escaped serial killer Russ Thorn (Michael Villella), of whom we know nothing. His weapon of choice is as subtle as his last name; the comically large electric drill that the murderer uses to attack is shot in more than one occasion from a low angle as he holds it above his crotch: an overt phallic symbol.

Along this intellectual-referential kind of comedy, absurd stoner humor flourishes as well. By the last third of the film, the killer has already taken many lives, including that of Linda, Trish's boyfriend, and an unlucky pizza guy whose body the girls manage to drag into the house. As they wait for help to arrive, Trish, Kim and Jackie (played by Andree Honore, a rare example of a POC "final girl" in the 1980s) sit against each other's backs, each one holding a knife. "How long are we gonna stay like this? My arms are getting tired." "Until help comes," says Jackie, only to then turn around saying "You know what? I'm hungry." All in agreement, the girls slowly crawl towards the dead pizza man. Under his corpse lay a few pizza boxes. "He's so cold," Kim comments. "Is the pizza?" Jackie asks, then grabs one of the boxes and opens it up on top of the man's cadaver. "Well, life goes on after all, and eating makes me feel best. And I feel bad. Boy, do I feel bad" she says before devouring a generous slice.

The care given to the portrayal of several female characters is maintained throughout the film, including Valerie's final confrontation with the killer. In a solid group effort, one girl makes the slasher trip and other hits him with a metal fire poker. Trish runs towards the laying man and stabs him in the back, but he is not dead yet and manages to give her a cut her in the stomach. Meanwhile, now fully aware of the chaos, Valerie finds a machete conveniently hanging by the wall of the family's tool shed.

"You're pretty," the killer says to us, rising, from the POV of Trish on the floor. Cut to a medium high angle shot of her looking up in terror; the long drill almost separates the frame in two segments as it stems from a sliver of the killer's pants, which can be seen on the left side of the frame. "I love you," he says with a dumb expression, "it takes a lot of love for a person to do this." He seems convinced by his own lie. "You know you want it," he continues, as Trish shakes her head, "…you love it." While she despairs, Valerie shows up branding a machete. She saves

Trish by swinging it towards the killer a few times, forcing him to retreat to the backyard. A medium-long shot of her silhouette holding the weapon high is captured by a flash of lightning, painting a decidedly cooler picture than the ones the murderer (who at the beginning on the film hides in a garbage container) is portrayed in. Taking advantage of his damaged body, she makes him walk backwards towards the pool. We then get a close-up shot of the silver drill held by a bloody hand, its outline shining against the dark background. In one sweeping motion, Valerie's machete falls into the metal; a clean cut metaphorically castrates the killer, rendering his weapon useless. The broken piece makes a "ting!" and bounces into the pool. She goes for his hand afterwards; the amputated bloody member hits the floor with a splatter. He screams in agony and looks at his bloody stump, traumatized and eager to kill, but falls into the water with a last machete slice to the gut.

In classic slasher fashion, though, Russ returns once more. By playing with the appearance of the drill and the machete as reflective of phallic and castrating symbols respectively, this significant example of an allegorical motus illustrates how even symbolism that is commonplace can be made memorable and effective. In this film, even the youngest of girls is given power to defend herself and those she loves. As the killer rises, Courtney attacks him from behind as a distraction. Finally, Russ takes a step back and leaps towards Valerie, who is lying on the floor holding the machete straight. The girls' victory coincides with an allegorical motus, in a shot where the killer is effectively penetrated by the metal, his gut wound trespassed by the blade as he dies pathetically on top of Valerie. While we are not meant to take the film's plot too seriously, the likeability and uniqueness of the characters and the expressive cinematic ways in which they are portrayed makes us root for them on both a literal level (slumber party girls versus the killer) and a symbolic one (female strength versus sexual assault).

This particular entry is useful to convey the wide range of the allegorical motus and its ability to enhance scholarly concepts that the film as a whole is in direct conversation with. The allegorical motus, nonetheless, functions in yet another way when it is employed to show the mental state of a static protagonist, as in the following example. Here, rather than moving the plot along or shaping a filmic world, it offers the viewer an insight that moves us to appreciate the deeper structures of a character study.

***American Psycho* (2000)**

Mary Harron's most renowned film is an adaptation of the infamous Bret Easton Ellis novel of the same name published in 1991. Harron's work perfectly captures the atmosphere and spirit of the original work in its representation of the sick, sad world of business yuppies. That said, it also adds a dash of humour and self-awareness, creating a black comedy (Sipe 8) when Ellis wanted his story to be granted a higher level of seriousness. The film (co-written with Guinevere Turner) transcends the novel to become its own version of the story, addressing themes of queerness, mental health, and otherness with more sensitivity than Ellis, whose exploration of said themes is often laced with nihilism, cares to use. This example of the allegorical motus is interesting because it manages to explore the psyche of a specific character and, at the same time, to portray a relatable social issue: the imposition of masking behaviour. Patrick's recognition of his duplex nature echoes moments or situations in which we all experience a similar recognition: that we repress elements of ourselves in order to "pass" as "normal."

Film Patrick is afforded something his textual predecessor never had: compassion. Yes, we are meant to find Harron's Bateman pretentious and unlikeable; we do laugh at his failing struggles to fit in and his over the top, deranged demeanor. Make no mistake: this is a feminist

take on this story. Accordingly, it provides queer and female characters with more autonomy than they previously held and pokes fun at the plastic façade of toxic masculinity. And yet, we are repeatedly invited to relate to Bateman, to understand his inability to create and accept his own identity, to take his place in the world. He is the other. As Harron herself commented in an interview with Simon Bland for *White Little Lies*: "It's more like a monster movie; you have someone who is almost a deformed human being, who doesn't have normal instincts and is filled with terror and rage. How do they operate in the world? It was almost like someone from another planet trying to fit in on Earth." Critic Scott Tobias, looking back on the "divisive adaptation" of the Ellis novel twenty years after the film's release, makes a similar observation, writing that Bateman is "like an alien, only with a knife instead of a probe." This is one of the reasons why this layered interpretation of Bateman's character resonates with queer audiences, who understand what is like to be perceived as other, as someone who lacks "normal" instincts. Christian Bale's image of a handsome and cool young man is thwarted by his expertly crafted portrayal of an anxious, pathetic wannabe. The queering of Bateman in the film is reflected in the plot as well: the decision to give the story an open ending ultimately brings home the concept that he is trapped in this liminal space of not-being, possibly condemned to exist as an empty signifier of his personal conflict, never able to drop the mask. Peter Deakin, in an article about cinematic treatments of masculinity and yuppiedom at the turn of the new century, suggests that *American Psycho* presents the yuppie as "a glitch or shadow of humanity and an antagonist to our very sense of a cognizant and sentient reality" (Deakin 86). The idea of living as a shadow, constantly imitating acceptable social behaviour while lacking a real identity, can be scarier than a serial killer.

An early example of Patrick's duality, and of the film's figurative visual language, comes from the opening credits, which showcase the contrast between image and meaning. The Lion's Gate logo fades to white, but not a regular digital background colour; it is more like the slightly grayish, pleasant tone of textured paper. Echoing one of the most famous scenes of the film, the entire screen becomes a business card, where in the left side "Lions Gate Films Presents" is written in the same black stylized font Patrick uses for his. After the words disappear, a red drop passes through the opposite side of the frame; judging by the name of the film and what we know about the story's original source, we can only assume this to be blood. Similar drops keep falling aside the opening titles, and after Mary Harron's name appears, the music starts: an elegant, pompous classical piece with a light staccato which emphasizes the dropping of the red drops. We then see the splash one of them does on a white surface in which the liquid's texture can be appreciated: it is just raspberry coulis, and we are witnessing the creation of a delicate haute cuisine dish that will be served to our protagonist's table.

This early allegorical motus further reinforces Bateman's duality by introducing the idea that appearances are deceiving. Beauty and brutality can look alike, just like the red liquid can pass as both blood and raspberry coulis. The close-up shots of the food in display at the restaurant's tables are as majestic as the dish we first see; colourful flowers, intricate details, complex presentations all around. But Patrick Bateman is not happy; this is a "chick restaurant" and he much rather go to Dorsia, the place that even he cannot get a reservation for. Shortly after, him and his equally pretentious business friends (which name Patrick "the voice of reason" after he complains about their anti-Semitic remarks) put down their credit cards to pay the exorbitant price of their meals. We then cut to the line in front of a night club's entrance, where a drag queen takes money from the hand of one of Patrick's companions so they can get in.

The use of New Order's song "True Faith" on the soundtrack coming from the dance floor is highly suggestive. Not only does it fit the placement and time period portrayed in the story (1980's New York), but it also serves as a source of foreshadowing and provides some interesting insights into the mind of our main character. The lyrics, sung by Bernard Sumner with languid abandon, come from the perspective of someone who has become emotionally numb. Unable to gain pleasure from daily life, the subject of the song resorts to drugs and relentless partying in the hopes of feeling something again, paying a dark "price" for taking "too much" of "the things that cost you too much" (New Order). We also get a few references to the journey that has taken Patrick Bateman where we find him tonight, included in the book but absent in the film; the line "My morning sun is the drug that brings me near/ To the childhood I lost, replaced by fear" resonates with what we learn of Bateman's troubled upbringing, while the line about the singer's earlier companions ("Now that we've grown up together/ they're afraid of what they see") implies that something has gone really wrong in the process of growing up.

More importantly, the song contains one sentence that will be highlighted in one of the key scenes of the film and most compelling allegorical motus: "I don't care 'cause I'm not there." Throughout the plot's development, we will be shown two different facets of Bateman: his facade as a wealthy, shallow yuppy, and the hidden face of his maniacal bloodthirst. As one scholar puts it, the film provides us with "an abysmal modern equivalent" of Hitchcock's psycho, "a man whose consumer lust is transformed into blood lust" (Robinson 26). Neither the yuppie nor the killer is the "true" Patrick. The sequence in the night club also takes great care to portray a party-going crowd that would indeed attend this New Wave party; many of the extras are visible minorities and queer-presenting people. Thus, it is not surprising that Bateman, someone whose biggest fear seems to be the inability to appear "normal," is never dancing, rather focused on the

drugs at hand. After he takes advantage of the loud music to mutter violent musings to a female server, we cut to the scene which contains Bateman's iconic monologue.

As a serene yet cold piano song starts to play, we enter Patrick's living space from a stranger's POV, similar to that of a guest during a house tour. Aside from the wooden floor, the colours on display are prominently black and white. As the camera smoothly enters through the hall, we see a series of small paintings against the white wall; these are all black canvases. His home is brightly lit, most of the natural lighting coming from a huge window with an impressive view. While the name "Bateman" links the character to the infamous Norman Bates, Patrick's voyeuristic inclinations are further reinforced through mise-en-scene, as a telescope is pointing directly at the window in a nod to another Hitchcock film, *Rear Window* (1954). Even in the comfort of his apartment he is a spectator, an observer from the inside.

The camera pans to the right, where a glass table is in the middle of more white and black furniture. Cut, from the same POV, to his bedroom: aside from a white vase, empty white walls around a white bed. This POV is voyeuristic; we are an uninvited ghost exploring his empty rooms, until it cuts to a full shot of Bateman's almost naked body. This frame is divided in three sections: an empty white wall on the left, a poster of a cowboy riding a horse on the right, and a rectangle in the middle. He is standing in the black-tiled washroom, giving his back to the camera. White underwear fits tight against Bale's toned glutes, and we cannot help but stare at him as if it were an exhibition; the framing directs the eye towards his back. We cut to inside the washroom, where he starts his morning routine. As a narration in his voice begins by giving his address, name, and age, we get an interesting medium close-up shot from his shoulder, which is visible but blurred: his face reflects against a hanging poster of Cossette, the girl from the Broadway production of *Le Misérables*, combining his face with hers, from which a strand of

hair waves, painted red in this print. This is yet another subconscious attempt in his part to relate, to become human by imitation. But there is a contrast between the faces: Cosette is looking through him, not at him, and remains a more solid image than his vague reflection.

Bateman describes his skin care and exercise routine with a ludicrous amount of detail as he performs for us: first he gets a cooling eye-mask on that makes him look like he belongs in a masquerade, his eyes no longer visible, replaced by a tiny slit. In his exercises, Bale contorts and flexes his body in a myriad of tantalizing positions that emphasize his curves and muscles. We cut then to a 3/4 shot of his naked body from the knees up, lathered with soap in the black-tiled glass door shower. The camera slowly advances towards him, and he continues telling nobody in particular about his "deep pore-cleanser lotion," "water-activated gel cleanser" and "honey-almond body scrub." Later, as he prepares his skin care and exercise routine, we get a medium shot of Patrick looking in the washroom mirror. From this perspective, we see three different reflections of his body. This is the establishing moment for this segment's main example of the allegorical motus. Here, his expression is one of solemn focus as he massages his face. Cut to a close-up of his face, shiny from the liquid facial mask that he is applying at the moment. So far, the character has been quite generous when it comes to meaningless information: his entire routine and the products that he uses are thoroughly scrutinized. However, in the next shot, he tells viewers what he really thinks and feels. This contrast in the way he communicates is an indication of the relevance of the following shot, described below. This is the clearest allegorical motus in the entire film.

We get a close-up of Patrick's face in the middle of the frame, where the liquid mask has now gained a plastic texture. His brow is slightly frowning, no wrinkles showing. "There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman," he narrates in his mind as his hand rises to start peeling the mask off,

"some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me," he tells, now pulling down on the transparent latex-like film, "only an entity, something illusory." While leaving his skin, the mask reveals an identical face, yet there is a sense of struggle, of effort on Bateman's part, as if taking it off was the hardest part of this self-care routine. He peels the mask off slowly and carefully, as he narrates: "And though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours, and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably comparable," the mask is now halfway through, and he finishes taking it off completely as he ends his monologue, "I simply am not there." He stares blankly at himself, looking into the mirror, but the viewer cannot see the reflected face that Bateman sees. The angle of that shot and the denial to us of his reflection cements what he has just said to himself: indeed, he is just not there. We cannot see him.

His mask is not one that projects ugliness, but one that hides the ugly feelings inside him. When his killing spree spirals out of control later in the film, he says that "his mask of sanity" is slipping. While he does not wear an actual mask or use nicknames like many slashers from the horror canon, Bateman too is aware of his own monstrosity, and he understands that it leaks from within; it is ultimately inescapable. When he peels the mask off, what is underneath looks the same as it did when the mask was on. He has just peeled off one layer of Patrick Bateman to reveal… Patrick Bateman. The two faces look identically bland and soulless. Harron's portrayal of the dread that comes with the eternal challenge of sustaining an image of "normalcy" is achieved. By showing us Bateman's perspective as an othered figure, Harron ultimately makes this sardonic interpretation of repression into an othering experience that is both inclusive and universal. By addressing the universal necessity of self-repression she effectively expands the influence and longevity of the film, as well as that of this iconic allegorical motus.

In our last example of the allegorical motus, let us examine a pain inflicted upon humanity as a whole regardless of life experiences: that of surviving the death of a loved one, followed by grief. In Epstein's treatment of the topic, mourning clouds Usher's mind to the point where he does not realize his wife is still alive. In the following entry, however, the feeling of grief is incarnate in a monstrous figure that threatens to consume the life of the protagonist.

***The Babadook* (2014)**

The Babadook, written and directed by Jennifer Kent, represents a milestone in filmmaking. Aside from achieving tremendous success as a crowdfunded work, it contains relevant and timely homages to horror cinema's early stages as well as influential divergences from its contemporaries. According to Kim Newman, Kent created "One of the strongest, most effective horror films of recent years … and a brilliantly designed new monster who could well become the break-out spook archetype of the decade." Described by Jayesh Busgeet as a "unique Grimm-Jungian fairy tale" (212), *The Babadook* is an exploration of grief that manages to be both heartbreaking and healing while relying heavily on symbolism. Thanks to Kent's bold commitment to figurative representation, the film provides a uniquely influential motus in its resolution. As the bittersweet ending is portrayed with surrealist visuals, viewers become aware of the story's allegorical intent, partly through the filmmakers' use of colour.

One of the aspects of *The Babadook* which feels like a nod to traditional horror stories, like the many filmic works based on Shirley Jackson's novel *The Haunting of Hill House*, is that it subtly guides the viewer towards an understanding of what the central threat of the film is or represents. This narrative encourages the kind of cognitive pleasure described by Carroll, which "resides, first and foremost, in the processes of discovery, proof, and confirmation that horror fictions often employ" (148). The uncertain material existence of the monster in *The Babadook*,

as well as the visual elements in the film that construct his lore, engages the viewer through "the prospect of knowing the putatively unknowable" (Carroll 148), whether this expectation is fulfilled or not. In the end, the clues Kent gives viewers to solve the mystery of the Babadook's purpose and abilities result in an understanding of what the monster represents symbolically.

The story follows young widow Amelia (portrayed by Essie Davis) trying to raise her hyperactive son Samuel while dealing with the unresolved grief of the tragic accident that took his father: a car crash on her way to the hospital to deliver Sam is what killed her husband. Things take a turn for the worse when a disturbing children's book that speaks of a vicious monster named Mister Babadook appears one day on her doorstep, inviting the creature to feast upon the mother's already dwindling mental health, and putting the young child in danger as she progressively becomes a violent, abusive version of herself.

The monster of the story and the characters' interactions with it are surrounded by an atmosphere of mystery; while the book which tells the creature's tale is clearly framed as physical, the corporeal existence of the Babadook is purposefully inconsistent, making it hard for the viewer to decide if the protagonist is hallucinating it or not. That said, the book is monstruous in its own way. Its illustrations are described by Newman as "Seussish-with-a-nightmare-edge," but the book "still presents a memorable, almost cute logo," an odd combination that adds to the uncanniness of the creature.

This book itself is a stimulating source of cognitive pleasure as defined by Carroll: there are several "rules" about the monster's behaviour hidden within the child-like rhymed verses, which both viewers and protagonist can pick up on to gain the advantage of knowledge in the hypothetical survival game. The rhymes in the book metaphorically allude to the Babadook's need to enter a victim's house by knocking three times on the door ("Dook, dook, dook"). The

line “the more you deny, the stronger it gets” is a reminder for the character to believe in the Babadook’s existence and prepare for its arrival. It also refers to the deeper allegorical meaning of the film: the idea that ignoring trauma only results in anger and depression taking over our psyche. The link between Kent’s monster and mental illness is a common thread in scholarship about *The Babadook*. Paul Mitchell, for example, argues that the film “uses the horror trope of supernatural possession by a monstrous Other to represent the psychosomatic effects of posttraumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) on the film’s protagonist” (181). Correspondingly, Brett H. Clarke writes that “Viewed psychoanalytically, the film is an invitation to feel the intensities that drive our experiences of loss—both our destructive refusals of loss and the agonies that often accompany our struggle to mourn” (323). As if to further separate its psychological approach from stories more centered on the physical, *The Babadook* features an incredibly small amount of blood for a horror film. Apart from the scene where the protagonist pulls out one of her teeth, there is virtually no red in the whole film except what we see in the accursed book that appears on the family’s doorstep.

An element of *The Babadook* that would push forward the aesthetic of so many films to come (especially those deemed “elevated” by scholars) is its uncommon colour palette, which contrasts with most horror films released at the time of its conception. *The Babadook’s* use of low-key lighting reminds viewers of expressionist films like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) or *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922); after all, the creature seems to be clearly inspired by these sources. However, unlike contemporary black-and-white films such as *The Human Centipede 2 (Full Sequence)* (2011) and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), Kent does not strive to emulate the high contrast look of early horror. More often than not, the colours in *The Babadook* have been equally muted down to become part of the same spectrum. Rather than

vibrating, the tone of the film is strangely soothing, mirroring the apparent comfortable numbness of the mourning widow. *The Babadook*'s low contrast reveals a collection of sophisticated pastels, offering the viewer an aesthetically pleasant palette.

The pastel colors of *The Babadook*, while not unheard of, were not frequent in the cinematic horror genre at the time of its release. Lively and aggressive colors are commonplace in slasher and giallo films, agitating viewers and keeping them tense and focused. A vibrant palette allows for bright-red blood which stands out, a useful technique for subgenres where the murder scenes are key to the plot. Many films from the early 2000s, particularly those inspired by Japanese horror, deliberately rely on cold colours, embracing a dim and sharp tone for their stories. The gelid whites, blues and greens of *The Ring* (2002) submerge the film in a depressing hospital-like, nihilistic reality. The prevalence of black and red is characteristic of James Wan's filmography to this day, setting a distinctive tone for that branch of modern American gore where blood is not important but essential. Unlike other horror films that play with colours around red in order to highlight it, Kent seems to paradoxically emphasise the lack of red: even in those scenes where crimson is expected, she will rarely give it to the viewer. The killing of the house pet is an act deprived of blood in *The Babadook*: against all odds, the white fur of the dog remains pristine. In this film, red is oftentimes replaced by black: when Sam's mom literally vomits evil out of her body after a long fight with her inner demons, black is the color we get. This choice, also evident in the film's ending, emphasizes that Amelia's descent into madness is not the product of senseless violence, but that of grief: in western culture, black is the colour of mourning.

In a final confrontation with the monster, while the darkness snarls and hisses, the widow yells to it. "You are nothing!" Almost entirely shrouded by black, she holds Sam in her arms and

roars back at the Babadook, her strength reverberating in the entire room. The creature finally retreats into the darkness; a white outline of its hat and coat pops against the background, and then it falls flat and empty like a deflated prop. Mother and son stare at the remains, and while Sam is still fearful, Amelia approaches it calmly. Just when she's about to touch the top hat, we switch to a POV shot from the monster, who, now risen, stares into her face and flashes a bright, blinding light at her. The camera then turns around while she maintains eye contact with the Babadook. The latter magically descends into the floor once more, frantically moving towards the basement as fast as it can, until the door shuts locked behind it. Sam and his mother embrace again.

All throughout *The Babadook*, a recurring long shot of a tree close to the family home serves to indicate both the passing of time and the emotional state of the main character. The resolution of the story begins with this tree; the previously eerie naked branches now blooming in radiant lavender. This example of the allegorical motus gives the illusion that the Babadook was defeated, that Amelia's issues are over. However, the last sequence of the film is more complex than a traditional happy ending. Here, we find a noteworthy instance of the allegorical motus, expressed through the symbolic imagery contained within different interconnecting shots and consolidating the importance of *The Babadook*'s colour palette.

After a (surprisingly hilarious) successful visit from the social workers who earlier had judged Amelia's parenting skills ("my cousin can't come because I broke her nose in two places" a smiling Sam says), we cut to an underground shot of the soil from underneath their home. The camera tilts upwards smoothly, to reveal the widow working in her backyard, using black gardening gloves. The sun, for what it feels like the first time in a long while, lights up this moment; by taking advantage of the natural light, Kent differentiates between this scene and the

ones set inside the shadowy house, where the darkness can devour frames and characters. The shot keeps rising from the ground to slowly showcase the flowers that she is working with, first their thorny stems, and then the bulbs: black roses.

We see Amelia gathering some worms in the garden with her son, then going back to the cursed basement, where the Babadook still lives. She feeds it the worms, and after a close-up shot of her horrified face at the monster's unsettling reaction in the darkness, she is able to calm the creature down gently. She returns to the garden to celebrate her son's birthday, for the first time on the right date, as this also marked the day her husband died. It is implied that the feeding ritual is now part of their routine; when Sam asks if he can see the creature, she replies that he will one day, when he is older. Busgeet emphasises the symbolic power of this "peculiar scene" in that it "appears to resonate well with Carl Jung's quote: 'To confront a person with his own Shadow is to show him his own light'" (212). By acknowledging and internalizing her trauma, Amelia can see clearly inside her home and delineate clear boundaries.

The final clue to solve the cognitive narrative puzzle created for us by this film, the question of real vs. imaginary, is in the magic trick the boy presents to his mother: dressed as a magician, ("Life is not always as it seems!") Sam lifts a small silver dome to reveal, in a surreal twist, an impossibly white, real dove. "How did you do that?!" the mother asks laughing, but it does not matter: as they hold each other, it becomes clear that this is the film explicitly informing the viewer that they should not take what they watched in a purely literal sense. According to Barbara Creed, the film "creates its own strange uncanny logic while giving birth to an uncanny reality … The final scene of mother and son celebrating the son's birthday—for the first time—in the garden is very unexpected" (*Return*, 32). Ultimately, it does not matter if the Babadook is physically real or not, because the whole film is a metaphor for dealing with trauma. The black

roses are a sign as evident as the white dove the boy releases in his magic trick: the mourning continues, but now does so in peace. *The Babadook* reminds us, with its generative power, that "Abjection can create new forms of language, culture, hope" (Creed, *Return*, 32). What was a dark day for this family is now (figuratively and literally) a nurturing moment.

The monster is never revealed as a figment of Amelia's imagination, nor confirmed to be a supernatural agent. Instead, it remains the embodiment of the protagonist's grief and/or trauma. This unapologetic embracing of the allegorical is one of the reasons why Kent's film became one of the most popular in the modern horror canon. Indeed, *The Babadook* has been constantly referenced by films and television shows since its release. *The Simpsons*' "Treehouse of Horror XXXIII" episode from 2022 features an entire segment dedicated to Marge becoming possessed by "The Pookadook" and trying to kill Maggie, a concept that left many unaware viewers disturbed. "I know you feed on my repressed resentment towards my family, but I can swallow feelings like a python eating a baby goat," the blue-haired housewife says before absorbing the spook with a vacuum cleaner, providing an arguably more depressing ending to the story. The configuration of visual allegories, as we have seen, comes from a combination of our inner world and outer culture. This is also the case for the ways in which we express grief.

The first film explored in this chapter, Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), presents an approach to the allegorical motus that perfectly reflects its director's visionary understanding of cinema. Epstein thought of film as an art form capable of transforming our perception of the world around us. Accordingly, some of the most influential cinematic techniques that he explored and exploited in his cinematic works directly play with the viewers' perspective of the filmed image. The use of close-up and extreme close-up shots, for example, often portray people and objects from a distance that is uncommon and at times even

impossible for us to replicate without a filming device. Epstein's powerful visual language, which showcases a keen eye for the allegorical, also invites viewers to alter their awareness of their everyday reality. With his use of the allegorical motus in the gauze serving as a stand-in for the soul, he embeds the simple object that is a piece of fabric with meaning that is intrinsically connected to the story at hand, in a way that alters our viewing experience of the film. However, he is also pushing the representational ability of visual allegories to its maximum potential. When a metaphysical concept cannot be directly represented visually, the allegorical imbues the physical with meaning. By using a commonplace item to represent a concept that comes from the realm of the supernatural, Epstein demonstrates how the allegorical motus, aided by our instincts to symbolize and signify the visual, can turn the physical into metaphysical.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the following films contained within this chapter. In Amy Holden Jones's *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982), the allegorical motus is employed to portray the idea of sexual assault and the victim's fight for autonomy. Instead of crafting a story with a rapist and having characters being violated on screen, Jones made a film where the antagonist kills women using the most phallic of weapons in the slasher subgenre. This use of the allegorical motus allows for a representation of a dark topic that, in its parodic comedic tone, can be much more approachable than the alternative. Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000) manages to depict the human struggle against perceived otherness with a metaphorical mask connected to a protagonist whose appearance is his life's priority, making viewers think about how otherness relates to factors such as sex, age, and race in the process. Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) depicts another challenging concept with her visual allegory for grief, represented by a monster that contaminates our selves to enhance our worst attributes from the inside. The examples analyzed throughout this chapter demonstrate how the

allegorical motus can be used in multiple ways to express themes and ideas that are either ineffable or hard to approach. The significance of this chapter in advocating for my taxonomy is that, by placing emphasis on our reactions to the ways these concepts are portrayed visually, we can gain valuable insight into how individuals engage with film both emotionally and cognitively. “A cognitive understanding of the emotions,” write Plantinga and Smith, “helps us to pay close attention to the stimuli that evoke an emotional response” (3). If we analyze said stimuli, which in this case is a film’s cinematography, we learn both about visual media and about ourselves; how the filmed image manages to evoke certain feelings, and how personal structures of meaning are crafted.

Chapter Two: The Narrative Motus

Of all the cinematic motus I introduce and describe in this dissertation, the narrative motus has the closest relationship with the film's plot; both elements are entangled. The previously discussed allegorical motus relies more on striking imagery than on the story containing said imagery; images are transmitted to us faster than a storyline, consisting of dialogue and writing, is. The motus explored in this chapter is, instead, narrative in nature: it engages viewers in a meaningful and possibly transformative way by portraying a culminative narrative action. The narrative motus does not always occur when a film's main theme reaches its conclusion. Rather, it refers to a significant moment within a plot in which viewers appreciate the writing of the story. A revelation that unveils previously unseen elements within a film's narrative, the manifestation of an anticipated pay-off, a game-changing character transformation – all of these are examples of the narrative motus. Narrative and visual aspects of filmmaking play a role in the configuration of these moments, but they are significant mainly because of the way they are written.

Audiences engrossed by the film's plot generally encounter narrative motus when the overarching story reaches a moment of resolution or release, the culmination of forces simmering in the background finally united to create conceptual meaning. This motus can be achieved through our awareness of a film's narrative elements, which recognizes a moment's significance within the plot. The motus we can experience at the end of the rape-revenge film *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), when Jennifer disembowels her rapist as he pleads for mercy, has arguably more to do with the satisfactory character arc of vengeance and retribution than with the visual elements in the scene. It would be easy to assume that narrative motus are always in the final

chapter of a story, but the placement of this motus is less important than the ways in which it affects the specific plotline it is woven into.

***Fresh* (2022)**

Directed by Mimi Cave from a screenplay by Lauryn Kahn, *Fresh* is an invigorating look at the long-studied theme of the commodification of women's bodies through male consumption. This time, consumption occurs in the literal sense, as human beings are turned into meat. In the words of Xavier Aldana Reyes, “Cannibalism here is a mere motif that facilitates commentary on the real issue: the objectification of women” (32). Not much has been written about Cave’s “ferocious debut with a darkly comic horror” (Lee, *The Guardian*); this dissertation thus provides one of the few in-depth considerations of *Fresh*. The example of narrative motus highlighted here features a bait-and-switch regarding the film’s antagonist, whose identity is shown to the viewer long after the plot is in motion. As Benjamin Lee writes: “The believable meet-cute first act takes place entirely, audaciously, before the opening credits, a sweet 30-minute romcom that quickly switches up to reveal something sour, like biting into a succulent peach that’s rotten on the inside.” This plot point moves the viewer because it is the culmination of a narrative that has been hinted at throughout the script, incorporating dialogue and some key visuals. Before we arrive to this pivotal storytelling moment, which comes as an eye-opener for the film’s protagonist as well as the viewers, we must focus on the key scenes and shots that make it possible. Just like red flags in a romantic partner, these are more easily spotted in retrospect.

In the introduction to our main character, Noa, there is already a sense of visual dismemberment: the first we see of her is a medium shot from behind some hard to define mise-en-scene, where all that is visible is a part of her head from the nose up. We then cut to a close-

up of her Tinder-like matchmaker app (“Puzzlepiece,” yet another reference to a whole made into pieces) in which her right hand swipes left for a while. After more disembodied close-ups of her physique, we finally see Noa’s full face as she receives a call from her best friend Mollie, with whom she discusses her upcoming date ("Call me after," Mollie advises). The next day, Noah and Mollie take a cathartic boxing class, in which the former complains about how hard dating is for her and how Disney films gave her no appropriate role models; “Fuck Ariel,” “Stupid bitch left the whole sea for a man!” “Fuck the beast,” “You are the beast!” they joke.

On a different day, we see Noa through a close-up, eating baby carrots by the computer. The emphasis in her snacks is here to subconsciously make the connection between her and a rabbit, an animal both known for its sexual prowess and its prey condition. This shot gives the viewers a pre-established contrast between Noa and the handsome stranger she is about to meet, Steve, who ingratiates himself with her at the grocery store. After a couple of dates, Noa and Steve begin to see each other romantically, which sets up the film’s big twist: the kind and apparently feminist Steve (whose real name is Brendan) is actually a predator who runs a subscription box service. What he offers to his clients is the flesh of women that he kidnaps.

Mollie is immediately skeptical about Steve, especially when she mentions that he has no social media (“That's shady”). When Mollie laments a previous relationship and wonders why it ended, Noa replies “Probably because you can't be tamed... You need to roam free.” This bit of dialogue showcases Noa herself using animalistic terms to refer to another woman, reinforcing the narrative of men as hunters, as tamers of feminine creatures. A phone call also introduces a small, realistic friendship ritual between Mollie and Noa, as they end the conversation with “I love you” and “I love you more.” Later in the film, when Noa fails to reply to her best friend’s “I love you,” Mollie realizes that she is in danger.

The portrayal of this friendship is endearing, and it showcases the real support that people raised as women offer to each other. In Western culture, women's friendships are generally allowed more public intimacy and physical contact than men's friendships. This societal convention, as well as the shared struggles of gendered subjugation, create relationships that can be, as Mollie says, emotionally dependent. They also serve as a constant source of compassion and love. It is important that viewers witness moments that emphasize the tight bond between Noa and Mollie, as they will need each other's help later in the film. Throughout the story, allyship between women as means of survival becomes a significant theme. As Reyes points out, when compared to at least three other "contemporary films directed or penned by women about abusive and misogynistic behaviours," Fresh is the only one in which the protagonist "saves herself with the help of other injured women, whom she first rescues" (32-33).

Mollie's distrust towards her best friend's new partner grows when Steve invites Noa to a getaway, especially because the location is "a surprise." Ominously, once Noa arrives to Steve's place, there is no phone service at all. Rather than unique and lived-in, his house looks like something out of a trendy home décor magazine. After chatting over a couple of drinks, Steve says how he likes that, with her, there is "No pretending." Suddenly, Noa's POV shows her environment doubling and contorting. Soon, her vision becomes blurry. "Why are you sitting so far away... Come here," he says, and she falls trying to stand up. This is when the film's opening titles appear, showing in between distorted, shaky shots of different parts of the house and new details within it, including a surgical table. The real Steve, or rather, Brendan, has begun to show through the facade.

Noa awakes in a humorously chic cell, where the concrete walls are met with a fancy orange carpet, an artificial beach wallpaper on one side, and a wooden door. "I drugged you"

Steve informs a handcuffed Noa. “Are you gonna rape me?” she asks in a frantic fit of desperation, hyperventilating until he yells at her to listen. What follows is the villain’s real introduction:

> I'm gonna sell your meat. People pay me a lot of money for it. And your hair. And weird shit like that. It's a thing. So... I'm not gonna kill you... Uh, right away... Because the fresher the meat, the better, so I'm gonna keep you alive for as long as I can. Unless you act up. Alright? But listen, until then, I'm gonna take care of you. I'm gonna cook for you. I'm actually a really good cook. You don't know it yet.

Shorty after, Noa braces herself on her currently dark cell, when she hears a song pumping from upstairs. This is the beginning of a sequence that leads to a striking narrative motus, composed of different shots that provide information to the viewer. What Noa hears is an entertainingly obnoxious, energetic tune from the 1980s: “Obsession” by the band Animotion. Cut to the hallway on the main floor, on a long shot that pans left to follow Brendan, who embarrassingly emulates Tom Cruise in *Risky Business* (1983), sliding across the floor with a couple of atrocious dance moves. The camera then moves with him to the kitchen on the side; cut to a medium frontal POV where we see him grab something from a metal compartment.
That something is a human leg, which he glances at with exaggerated gusto, as if he was posing for the camera. Holding the leg tightly, Brendan twirls by the table, tries to play the extremity as a guitar and raises it in the air like a tribute to the gods above, before finally depositing it on a cutting board. Something notable here is the way the flesh is portrayed: there is no trace of blood, instead, the leg is reminiscent of the regular meat that people eat casually. From the thickest part of the thigh, where the leg ends, there is a (very pristine) big bone protruding. I do not quite consider this portrayal to be gore, and believe the choice to show the leg as clean,

edible, even desirable meat is a thought-provoking choice. Not only does it make the peril the characters are in more realistic, as their meat is extracted in a gourmet-inspired, well though-out process, but it also makes a point about the sanitation and normalization of predatory attitudes towards women.

Always moving along with the song, we see Brendan thoroughly washing his hands, after which he makes an inadvertently hilarious jig with the drying cloth. A close-up shot of a small lazy susan where a picture of a woman stands, an attractive brunette holding an ice-cream under which it reads: Melissa Dunton. The camera swiftly pans right to a short distance: a close-up of the leg's meat on the board, looking exactly like regular raw meat from the side. There is absolutely no blood. We see Brendan, still dancing like a fool, cutting a piece, then milling it until it has the width and shape of a steak, then packaging it in a vacuum-sealed transparent bag, of which he eventually makes plenty. Steve enters the living room with a theatrical jump. On top of a large table, six white boxes are opened on the top. He throws a human steak inside of each one, and then we see him gathering some lingerie, which he puts into the boxes as well as pairs of glasses and strands of brown hair. The shot that encapsulates this narrative motus is as follows: a close-up of one of the open boxes, on which we see these elements piled upon each other. On top of the pile, Brendan adds a yellow envelope containing a photograph. The envelope reads: "Melissa."

This motus is so thrilling because, during the sequence which contains it, we finally understand who Steve/Brendan really is. Before this moment, we have seen him behave in a slightly off-putting manner when explaining Noa’s situation, but he still somewhat retained the appearance of a polite, sophisticated man. This culminating moment for Brendan’s characterization, marked by an unsettling tonal shift towards dark comedy, removes his mask to

reveal nothing but a bumbling, awkward, superficial buffoon. Even the films he imitates and the music that he listens to in the year 2022, where the plot is grounded, speaks of his relationship with nostalgia in a way that strongly echoes the vapid, 1980s pop-culture fueled masculinity reflected in characters like the protagonist of Ernest Cline's novel from 2011 *Ready Player One,* a book that has indeed inspired a segment of men from Brendan's generation. He is an even more obnoxious, decidedly unpalatable version of Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* (2000), a character culturally known for being misunderstood as aspirational by men who seek to adopt the broker wannabe, so-called "grind"/ "alpha" mindset. This playful deconstruction of Bateman, unlike the version played by Christian Bale, does not leave any room for the viewer's desire, admiration, or compassion. Viewers detect Bateman's gender anxiety through his discomfort at being in a "chick" restaurant, the way he is filmed, and how he expresses himself. This portrayal shows his fear of being coded as queer or feminine, as an other. Patrick is easily overwhelmed and extremely self-conscious, obsessed with showing to the world that he is not an abject figure. Brendan, on the contrary, actually possesses zero self-awareness. He literally puts women in a box, and the film makes a clear statement that there is no world in which this misogyny can be attractive.

This is an interesting example to analyze because the narrative motus is linked directly to an antagonist, one that offers a revelation nearly halfway through the film regarding his motivation within the plot. This moment of narrative climax is unveiled for both the protagonist and the viewers, changing our perception through the disclosure of previously safeguarded information. At other times, as in the case of the next entry, the resolution of character arcs can become a revelation for the characters themselves.

***Braindead* (1992)**

While he did rise to fame with the acclaimed *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, Peter Jackson started his career as one of the pioneers of modern body-horror comedy. Written by Fran Walsh, Stephen Sinclair, and Jackson, *Braindead*'s story follows Lionel (Timothy Balme) as he searches for the courage to stand up to his abusive mother. With the help of his confident new girlfriend Paquita (Diana Peñalver), he finds love while navigating a localized zombie outbreak. Described at the time of its release by David Stratton from Variety as "one of the bloodiest horror comedies ever made," the critic goes on to applaud the "state of the art creature and gore effects by Richard Taylor and prosthetics design by Bob McCarron," prophetically stating that "the film should quickly generate a worldwide rep." Extremely memorable and quotable, this bombastic blood extravaganza somehow manages to have heart as well as being equal parts hilarious and revolting.

The motus highlighted in this segment of my study is special because, even though it represents a well-known narrative of heroic ascendance for the film's protagonist, the way this evolution happens, and the feelings it evokes in its culmination, are original and subversive in nature. In this narrative motus, Lionel becomes someone capable of killing zombies not by becoming physically stronger, but because he has gained the will to let go of his parental attachment. With his girlfriend's help, he does not become a cooler, smarter version of himself: instead, he learns to set boundaries by trusting a loved one. Accordingly, the most epic and triumphant moment of Lionel's empowerment arc, which Harmony H. Wu identifies as the film's "piece de resistance" (87), is not just the sequence of him destroying monsters with a lawnmower, but also the moment of peace that comes after. In this story, the hero does not get

the party started; he ends it. Paradoxically, an over-the-top exciting narrative moment is also calming and soothing.

In a dark over the top introductory sequence (which unfortunately showcases aboriginal representation that has not aged well) we are shown how a snobbish, exploitative white adventurer tries to capture a uniquely monstrous monkey despite the locals' warnings. As expected, he gets bitten and infected by it (his limb is amputated), but the demonic stop-motion animal makes it into a New Zealand zoo nonetheless. *Braindead* showcases early instances of Peter Jackson's signature Dutch angle close-up shots and energetic action as well as astounding practical effects; the blood and flesh are realistic in texture and weight, yet the redundant and indulgent way they are used makes up for a compelling combination of disturbing and comedic. The soundtrack, mise-en-scene, sets, and characters are decidedly campy. The plot delves deeply into some elements of melodrama, where feelings and romance do have a place among amputated arms and slithering guts. The comedy is particularly strong in a similar vein to *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), with a cast of characters presented as defined archetypes. The difference is as follows: while Little Shop offers a subversion of the world the characters live in, in Braindead the characters are subverted (and subversive) as well. Its themes of toxic parenthood, toxic masculinity, and self-acceptance are explored in a surprisingly profound and compassionate way, and Paquita shines as one of the best female horror characters ever written, injecting the film with refreshing feminist vitality.

Most of what has been written about *Braindead* from a scholarly perspective, centers on the significance of the film for New Zealand, especially regarding the dichotomy of "high" versus "low" cinema as perceived in that country. Paul Malcolm, for example, writes that *Braindead* "positions a culturally conservative vision of New Zealand society as the central

target of his satire" (198), which ultimately criticizes "bourgeois convention and hypocrisy" (199). According to Barbara Creed, Peter Jackson's gory films (including *Braindead*) "offer a stringent critique of daily life in New Zealand's settler colonial suburbs" (64). This dissertation's discussion of *Braindead,* though, centers on the moment when its protagonist is finally able to stand up for himself. To fully appreciate the way this character development delivers a narrative motus, we must first visit some relevant scenes that lead viewers to this resolution, especially concerning Lionel's relationships, and the atmosphere of the location where the motus is engaged.

Paquita, a Spanish-speaking immigrant (vaguely implied to be Romani) works as a clerk for her family's shop, daydreaming about finding her other half. Her grandmother reads the tarot for her and declares that true love will appear when she sees the sign: a symbol of a star and a moon together. The first thing Lionel does when he enters the convenience store is to grab a lime and clumsily drop several on the floor, as well as other objects for sale. Paquita is not impressed with his timid demeanor, but then notices that things have fallen on her desk to form the very symbol of the star and moon, over which the two characters unintentionally hold hands. She then makes the first move and advances towards him with the determination of a joyful cheetah looking for prey. However, scared of his own shadow, Lionel quickly walks away, almost getting run over by a bus. His less than confident attitude (which, like the sun and the moon, is contrasted to his love interest) becomes understandable the first time we encounter Lionel's mother, Vera. This flashy old lady enters the scene brandishing a knife, energetically waving it around as she pushes her son to help her with some house chores for upcoming dinner guests. Her character is repeatedly shown as manipulative, narcissistic, and utterly terrifying, especially to our protagonist. By showing the viewer that Lionel's behaviour comes from an abusive

upbringing, this setup makes the film's most distinctive narrative motus even more satisfying. The unhealthy attachment the protagonist has with his mother is an issue that he has been dealing with for his entire life, and so it is all the more challenging for him to overcome.

After a few awkward yet sweet encounters, Paquita finally invites Lionel to a date at the zoo, where he is taken by her strong yet bubbly personality. But not everything goes well: near the monkeys' cage, the pair are shocked by the violent demeanor of sickly animal identified as the "Simian Raticus." Vera, who is secretly spying on the lovers, gets bitten by the mutant monkey. After sadistically stepping on the animal, Vera cries for her son and asks to be taken home, which Lionel complies with, sheepishly leaving his date behind. At home, she makes her son promise that "it" (dating) will not happen again.

Nevertheless, unknown to Vera, Paquita is right outside the house, yelling for Lionel, who forgot his jacket at the zoo. "I just can't see you anymore," he tells Paquita. After a tense moment of silence, before heading towards the stairs, she turns around to grab a single red rose, which she places in Lionel's hands. This moment is emblematic of the film's unconventional narrative voice, delightfully subversive in its treatment of traditional gender roles by allowing the male lead to be wooed by a romantic gift from the female lead, a kind of exchange that is largely portrayed in media as being the other way around. This gesture, which is shown as sweet and passionate rather than comedic, is what makes the momma's boy snap out of it. The couple finally embraces.

Next morning, Vera's wound is pulsating. In a series of considerably lengthy close-ups, we can see the goo and pus leaking from it as Lionel cleans the spot. As her health quickly decays and her body starts to degenerate, her son uses superglue to stick a piece of falling skin back on her cheek. At the dinner table, Vera is already talking like a zombie and behaving

irrationally. Thankfully, her guests Nora and Albert seem oblivious to the fact, so much so that they stay for dessert: a pus-looking yellow custard. Albert takes a spoonful and enjoys it with gusto. As the viewer starts imagining the flavour, a greasy pink liquid sprays from the mother's wound again, this time landing on top of Albert's "damn fine custard," which he keeps devouring ("Rich and creamy, just the way I like it"). A close-up shot of the plate shows the disgusting reddish liquid swirled into the yellowy cream, a truly sickening sight. Next, Vera's bloody ear falls right into her own bowl, and she proceeds to eat and chew it, making Nora leave for the washroom to throw up before leaving the place. These details are relevant here because they show how *Braindead* employs the absurdist combination of gross visuals and comedic dialogue that makes the film such a jaw-dropper, keeping viewers off balance about how to respond to its tone.

As she grows more violent and animalistic, shenanigans ensue, and an ambulance is called. Just as a nurse pronounces Lionel's mother dead, zombie Vera attacks her from behind, decapitating her with her own hands and turning her open throat into a fountain of blood. Lionel works hard and manages to trap his zombified mother (and the newly zombified nurse) in the basement. Unsure about how to proceed and still unable to internalize Vera's death, he repeatedly dismisses Paquita when she gets worried about him. Against his better judgement, Lionel keeps the zombified bodies. He also purchases a gigantic bottle that reads "tranquilizer" which he uses to make the zombies docile. This prop becomes the catalyst for the upcoming full-blown zombie attack in which the narrative gives Lionel an unusual triumphant moment.

After a series of disastrous events, his collection of unlikely guests starts growing exponentially: a local delinquent and a priest become his new zombified housemates; the latter has sex with the zombie nurse resulting in the addition of a demonic zombie baby. Lionel cannot

bring himself to kill and is unable to let go, so he keeps injecting all the zombies with the tranquilizer. He also starts taking diligent care of his basement family, in a state of perpetual servitude, even attempting to feed them regular food. Lionel has never looked more anxious and depressed; taking care of the zombies while keeping it all a secret is taking its toll. As if things could not get worse, Lionel's creepy and aggressive uncle Les comes to claim Vera's estate. Once he discovers the zombies, which he believes are ordinary corpses, Les threatens to call the police unless Lionel gives him the house. Knowing that the zombies would be eliminated upon discovery, Lionel accepts. Les takes full control of the mansion and immediately starts planning a massive party. And this is the setting in which an extremely satisfying narrative motus takes place.

Party time arrives with a multitude of hyperactive guests who pack the house to the brim. Paquita, out of concern for Lionel, comes into the house upon seeing the disturbance. The party is portrayed as an extremely stressful and chaotic environment, filled with nasty loudmouths, thirsty lovers, drunks, and slimy uncle Less trying to grope women. In this scenario, Lionel is bullied into a busboy role, submissively carrying food for the partygoers. To get away from Les's predatory behaviour (and after kicking him in the balls), Paquita hides in the basement, where she finally discovers Lionel's grotesque secret. He shows up just in time to help her fend off a zombie attack. "They're not dead exactly. They're... Sort of rotting," he attempts to excuse himself. "You must destroy them," she urges. "I can't. Not mum," Lionel replies, but she makes a good point: "That thing is not your mother."

In a similar approach to *The Babadook* (and following a tradition popularized by *Psycho*), the basement serves as a metaphor for the protagonist's repressed trauma: the living corpse of his mother and the zombies he tends to are visual representations of Lionel's maternal issues and the

passive and servile attitudes he has adopted as a result. Now, tenderly supported by Paquita, he finds the courage to do the right thing. Emotionally destroyed, he cries as he injects a liquid from a bottle labeled “poison” into his mother and the others. After a tight comforting hug, the couple bury the bodies right there, leaving the basement while sharing an intimate look. Unfortunately, Les is waiting for them. When Paquita stands up to him, he pushes her against the wall, at which point Lionel punches his uncle in the face. Even angrier than before, Les throws him in the basement and pulls Paquita into the kitchen with the intention of assaulting her. It is here that Lionel realizes that the bottle which read “poison” was also labeled as “animal stimulant.” Revitalized by the substance, all zombies erupt from the basement more hyper than ever. The party, already crowded and claustrophobic, becomes a massacre.

Guests quickly get infected, eating and fighting each other in a bloody hellhole. Along with the creative use of slapstick, the foley artistry for the blood deserves to be praised; it makes sounds akin to pumping oil or loud gurgling. The kills succeed each other in a frenzy: a man is killed with a garden gnome, the zombie baby is put into a blender, a woman gets electrocuted by a broken lamp, among other remarkable images. Notably, a disemboweled zombie turns into a sentient, moving pile of guts, and later falls in love with his own reflection. In the meantime, Paquita defends herself from Les and bravely helps others against the creatures, trying to no avail to save an infected woman. Interestingly, most if not all the deaths in this sequence are portrayed with a distinctive humorous angle. The absurdist comedy of the film reaches his peak here, showcasing a cascade of cultural fears and urban myth accidents, cliches, and gory jokes all at once.

Suddenly, Paquita and the group of zombies are illuminated by a shining light: cut to the front door, where Lionel is standing triumphant, holding a lawn mower facing towards them.

Close up to his face covered in blood, as he calmly and quietly grins while he says: “Party's over.” Following this cathartic moment body parts are flying, blood is spraying everywhere, and bodies turn into ground beef. The blood is so much that Lionel cannot see, and Paquita spits on zombie Les before smashing his head on a table. In a full long shot, Lionel is revving the lawn mower in the middle of the room, now empty of people, filled with dismembered bits, and entirely surrounded by blood. Silence is sweet as the party is finally over.

In this narrative motus, the feeling of being trapped at an overwhelming party after enduring impossible amounts of stress is replaced with a glorious sensation of accomplishment, of problems being taken care of. While many horror icons have exciting catchphrases (“Groovy!” by Ash Williams from Sam Raimi’s 1987 film *The Evil Dead II* comes to mind), “Party’s over” is a fitting one for Lionel, who is finally able to confront and destroy his inner and outer demons. This is a relevant example to illustrate the narrative motus because it represents a meaningful instance of character evolution that viewers have hungered for. Plus, it is also one that, interestingly, provides comfort and relief rather than an increase of intensity. Jackson and his team crafted the quirky duo of flawed Lionel and Paquita with so much love that they paradoxically make horror fans enjoy the *lack* of action, the *absence* of chaos. Jackson attended Robert McKee’s three-day seminar on story structure (alongside Walsh and Sinclair) before writing the script, and would later admit that he was “deeply influenced by the storytelling principles and techniques” (Leotta 6). However, *Braindead* does not closely follow McKee’s popular Three-Act Structure, demonstrating once again Jackson’s ability to both understand and subvert traditional storytelling.

Dealing with the paranormal, metaphorically or not, offers plenty of possibilities to come across narrative motus. The act of defeating an unthinkably evil magical power packs such a

punch because it is an *extraordinary* feat, only realized through fantasy. But what happens when the evil present in a story is mundane, man-made and realistic?

***The Purge: Election Year* (2016)**

Written and directed by James DeMonaco, better known for creating *The Purge* franchise, the third entry in this intellectual property is an action-packed campy film that also manages to be surprisingly sharp in its anti-capitalist message. In a devastatingly ironic twist of fate, the tagline that was used in advertisement posters for *Election Year*, “Keep America great,” was also incidentally used along with “Make America Great Again” by Donald Trump’s re-election campaign in 2020. Released on Independence Day during one of the most controversial years for American politics in the history of the country, *Election Year* was and still is strangely relevant, especially for a franchise produced by Michael Bay, known for his high-budget pro-military blockbusters. As Stacey Abbott writes, DeMonaco’s work is a demonstration of how “commercially driven, formula-based, graphic genre films aimed at a mass audience can nevertheless offer social commentary and moral nuance alongside high octane action and jump scares” (180). The concept of *The Purge*, which is explored from different perspectives through five films (and counting), paints a version of the United States where the all-male, all-white coalition known as the “New Founding Fathers of America” (NFFA) has implemented the following event: for one night every year, all crime becomes legal. The most prominent motus in this entry is found in the final shot of a sequence, where members of the NFFA finally get consequences for their actions.

It is implied in previous entries of the film series that, according to the authorities, the crime rate has decreased as a result of purge night. However, this claim is proven time and again to be untrue. *Election Year* is the film that delves the deepest into this issue, and the one that is

the most explicit in its subversive ideas; it is not surprising that it also contains the most rewarding narrative motus of the entire franchise so far. In a moment that combines hopeful wish-fulfillment with the cathartic release of the viewers' spite, cinematic representations of political figures responsible for poverty and injustice are annihilated in a peoples' uprising. While there is not a lot of scholarship focused on *Election Year* specifically, the film is often brought up in discussions of the franchise as a whole, and described as politically relevant. Abbott refers to it, along with second instalment of the film franchise, as "a mirroring of a United States of both the past and present under the ruling of the forty-fifth President, Donald Trump" (90). Megan A. Armstrong calls *Election Year* "a warning about the dangers inherent in the rise of reactionary politics in times of perceived crisis" (377), while Amanda Rutherford and Sarah Baker highlight *Election Year*'s connection with Black Lives Matter, as a film that "self-consciously highlights the racial tensions and social division that prefigured the rise of the so-called Alt-Right and the election of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States" (186). The scenes described in the following paragraphs illustrate these points and illuminate the plot's path towards the main narrative motus.

We follow a diverse array of characters during purge night, one of which is leftist senator Charlene Roan, who is running for president with the promise of putting an end to the violent tradition. She is going against the candidate from the NFFA, conservative bigot Minister Edwidge Owens. Due to their political leanings, it is easy to see these two characters as stand-ins for Bernie Sanders and Hillary Clinton rolled into one, versus Donald Trump, especially since Roan is herself a senator. Owens's cartoony (yet frighteningly accurate) speech feels like a call to action: "We do whatever it fucking takes! I've had it with all these idealistic pigs. They want the impossible. Everyone to have. Some cannot have. Not enough to go around." He goes further by

suggesting that this year the purge will be “spring cleaning”: not only does he call for the killing of minorities and people who live under the poverty line, which is, as shown later, the group that is the most vulnerable during purge night; this time he decidedly puts a target on Roan as the de facto face of the revolution. However, another player is introduced: Dante Bishop, a purge detractor and black activist who is quoted in the news as one of the key figures in the anti-purge sentiment who might sway the election. He also says the line “The NNFA has created predatory capitalism where profit-taking is the essence of democracy.” This is perhaps the most relevant statement in the film. Despite it having a distinct 2016 feel to it, this quote still applies to our current politics, because it directs the viewer towards capitalism as the root of societal collapse. While there are specific individuals who cause the most damage to vulnerable communities, they are ultimately cogs in a larger system which must be changed.

From the news report where Bishop speaks, the film cuts to a brightly lit black-owned small business, where people from the area discuss the current events. Among them are Joe, the owner of the store, his assistant Marcus, and their friend Laney, a woman who works as an emergency medical technician and runs an ambulance through the neighborhood during purge night with her female friend (after-purge medical services become available only at 7am). While the writing is awkward at times, especially when it comes to hokey dialogue, it is commendable that this film centered on oppressive systems has a cast largely comprised of minorities in the United States: all these characters are people of colour. This city spot is portrayed as an important and beautiful safe space in the neighborhood; there is a shelf with several books and flyers as well as a wall showcasing framed pictures of Black leaders, the most prominent of which is Martin Luther King Jr. We hear Roan speak from the television, saying to the audience that "More low-income people are killed during the purge than anyone else," followed by "the

money generated from the purge lines the pockets of the NRA and insurance companies. Any government system that relies on violence to answer its problems must be rebooted." Shortly after this scene, these claims are proven correct: Joe gets a call from the insurance company insidiously raising the price of his plan the day before the purge. This moment makes the viewer relate to the plight of these struggling characters and understand that they are part of larger communities exploited by the NNFA.

We finally arrive at the time when the dreaded tradition starts, after the iconic emergency broadcast system can be heard in every household. Due to a traitor within their own security team, senator Roan and Leo are forced to escape the premises. The squad that goes after them is composed of actual neo-Nazis who support the NFFA: their leader is shown with his back to the camera, in center frame, wearing a "white power" patch on his gear (if that signifier was not enough, all the members of this militia have a swastika patch, and not only one, but two confederate flags in their uniforms). We switch to Laney and her friend in their medical van and get to witness some of the crimes from the vehicle. One of these is a full long shot of a group of street youth in a narrow alley, surrounding a large old-style guillotine, only illuminated by an angelic light from above. They raise it up and drop it on someone who looks like a businessman. While other acts of purging are showcased in a decidedly negative light, the beam over the guillotine implies that, in this instance, the anti-capitalist sentiment of the youngsters is deserving of grace or at least consideration. This lighting choice also makes the guillotine, or what it represents in popular culture (the reckoning of hierarchies), seem like a literally “bright” idea, reminiscent of the way lightbulbs appear by peoples’ head in cartoons. This shot plants a seed in the viewers’ minds, that of a possible revolution, which will be reinforced by the next scene described below.

After helping each other in different ways, all the main characters converge at Dante Bishop's secret underground hospital, described as a "safe zone," where they tend to vulnerable people, including the homeless and disabled ("These are the real victims of the purge," he says). Leaning on her American liberal side, Roan is weary of Bishop's plan to assassinate the members of the NFFA. He tells her that "they aren't playing fair and square, so neither should we," but she replies that, if he goes through with it, "the minister becomes an angel." These words resonate with the statement by Rutherford and Baker, who recognize that the franchise mirrors our reality in that "injustice and atrocity are being masked by tropes of religious and moral fortitude" (89). The power of the church is indeed portrayed as antagonistic in *The Purge* films, and, as the next highlighted scene shows, nowhere is this clearer than in *Election Year*.

After leaving Bishop's place, Roan is captured by the conservative militia and taken to a fancy small cathedral, where the final confrontation occurs. Inside we find all the members of the NFFA, including its leaders: an entirely white, old, mostly male rich audience. They hold a "Midnight Purge Mass" where they "celebrate the night we saved this country from economic ruin," further equating religion with right-wing ideals. Together they enjoy the practice of human sacrifices, through which they attempt to "cleanse" their souls. The minister candidate is there too, as he considers this the "godly duty" of "the elders of this great country." The massacre that comes next, where a segment of our protagonists murder almost everyone inside the building, offers the viewer a series of quick shots which together form a narrative motus. We first see the characters from Joe's business, led by Leo and Laney, approaching one by one from the corners of the cathedral's gallery, infiltrating the mass quietly.

As one of the NFFA leaders is about to kill Roan, the shooting begins. While it is shot guerrilla style, the camera is still focussed enough on the good guys to show viewers that they

are serious and calm, firm in their determination. The killing of politicians and religious authorities is portrayed as a noble and justifiable action driven by necessity, unlike The Purge itself. Suddenly, the white supremacist paramilitary group arrives to defend the few members of NFFA that are left, shooting towards the gallery where our main characters now hide. We get a shot of the pews there being pierced by bullets, until, at some point, the holes stop appearing. Curiously, the sound of shooting still can be heard, followed by a moment of silence. As Leo and the others emerge from the pews, they realize that Bishop and his team have just killed the paramilitaries. In the full long shot that delivers the narrative motus, the frame is divided in two horizontal sections marked by light and shadow. On the bottom half, a man wearing a suit lies on the floor, shot to death, red circles on his white dress shirt. The upper half of the frame, where Bishop and his people are, is illuminated by a light-blue light that shines on them, blending them all in one silhouette, as one force. The light that graced the guillotine earlier in the film now reveals the dissidents as the embodiment of the ideals symbolized by this beheading machine: they stand for insurrection. The corpses of NFFA members who claimed to be divinely inspired lie in the dark, while their enemies are literally illuminated from above. This scene is so moving because it asks the viewers to imagine, even just for a moment, having the ability to kill everyone responsible for oppression, all at once. This particular shot invites the narrative motus, first, by indicating to the viewers that the protagonists have succeeded; we get, indeed the satisfaction of this fantasy fulfilled. Second, by clearly representing an idea that has been hinted at throughout the film, which is the certainty that although fascist figures claim to be righteous, those in opposition to them are morally in the right.

Election Year ultimately has Roan convince Bishop not to murder the minister, who apparently becomes the massacre's sole survivor. That aside, the joy and satisfaction of the

cathedral scene is a striking moment of clarity that sticks with the viewer. As the plot reaches its conclusion, we learn that both candidates were able to participate in the election, with Roan winning by a landslide. Most scholars recounting the plot express disappointment at the fact that *Election Year* "reverts to a liberal version of America, reconceived as a nation suddenly capable of coming to their collective senses and electing a reformist" (Grajeda 143). However, in a shockingly prophetic final shot, we see and hear on a newscast that right-wing riots are exploding over the country. *The Purge: Election Year* captures lighting in a bottle, becoming a touching and disturbing time capsule of the year of its release. Its main narrative motus, nevertheless, provides a moment of wish fulfillment that can be a source of solace (and maybe even hope) for those living under any kind of political oppression.

This example from *Election Year* showcases the range of the narrative motus and its ability to connect real social struggles to a fictional pursuit; the main source of satisfaction here comes from the development of filmic elements that viewers can recognize from their lived experiences, deeply engrained within the plot but nonetheless reflecting on past and current political crises. The next example, in contrast, emerges from the surreal and self-contained world of giallo, where motus plays with the conventions of both horror films and whodunits.

***Deep Red* (1975)**

The films of Dario Argento are distinguished by his commitment to the voluptuous aesthetic and sensual atmosphere his stories are shrouded in. He is one of the leading names of the Italian horror subgenre known as giallo, named "yellow" in its native language to reference the yellow pages of "pulp crime and mystery papers" which inspire it (Koven 79). These stories, which in many cases were translations of English works, were made by the largest publishing company in the country, Mondadori. Argento's outstanding contribution to both giallo and horror

cinema as a whole is mostly distinguished through the tone, style, and composition of his works. Despite his plots revolving around whodunit type mysteries, once the film is over, what stays with the audience (more than the satisfaction of solving an analytical puzzle) is what in colloquial terms would be described as a "vibe." Notably, throughout his filmography, almost every important moment of storytelling is punctuated by the iconic cult band *Goblin*. His films are first and foremost an aesthetic experience, as he actively makes murder beautiful: even in gruesome scenarios, his preferred mise-en-scene and frame composition are decidedly pleasant to the eye. *Deep Red*'s most iconic motus is caused by a realization viewers have near the end of the film. Around the beginning of the narrative, there is a mirror hanging on a wall filled with works of art. In a blink-and-you-miss-it shot, the reflection in it shows the mystery's killer.

The allegorical motus, guided by visual signifiers, is easier to find in Argento's work than that the narrative motus, which is ultimately linked to the cognitive pleasure provided by a strong plot. In *Deep Red*, the Italian director does both, delivering a narrative motus that is uniquely linked to the aesthetic of the film. Combined with the constant, meaningful intertextual display of works of art, Argento's filming style ultimately promotes the enjoyment, critique, and contemplation of different art forms. As Giulio L. Giusti states, *Deep Red* marks the director's "growing interest in the exploration of new professional devices," allowing Argento to "develop his mature cinematic language and technical ability, which became the trademark of the director's work up to the mid-1980s" (160). The following scenes and shots from the film explore the unfolding of his storytelling alongside visual cinematic language, laying out the foreshadowing that culminates in an intricate twist. In this whodunit, the main motus is not directly tied to the unveiling of the killer's identity, a "narrative nucleus" which, according to Mariarita Martino Grisà, "is discovered only at the end of the film, but it is introduced and

anticipated by a series of analectic narrative elements and images which retrospectively help unravelling the plot" (194). Instead, the narrative motus this segment delves into comes from the revelation that the camera shows the killer's semblance early into the film.

Deep Red follows the strange misadventures of jazz musician Marcus Daly (David Hemmings), who finds himself involved in a series of intricately staged murders which he somehow ends up investigating. Instead of following detectives or cops, which the film largely portrays as incompetent, viewers teams up with an unlikely duo. In the words of Andrew L. Cooper, Argento here develops a new brand of giallo by "replacing psychoanalysts and other scientists with art and artists as revelators" (61). Carlo, played by Gabriele Lavia, is Marcus's closeted best friend and bandmate, and serves as his lethargic, less self-centered foil. Daria Nicolodi is noteworthy as the eager, upbeat news reporter Gianna Brezz; in a performance that is both hilarious and captivating, she steals scenes and becomes the most enjoyable character.

The film starts with white credits on a black background, the stylish font accompanied by the song "Profondo Rosso," a base-heavy composition by *Goblin* that instills some stress in the viewer with its repetitive notes and eerie synths. After one minute and a half of getting accustomed to the tune, the song changes into "School at Night" by Giorgio Gaslini: a deceptively happy, mostly creepy lullaby sung in a child's voice. At first, the change does not make sense while the frame is black, but we are given context soon enough: cut to a low angle establishing shot from a POV close to the floor, a Christmas tree, a record player and an empty dinner table. A blood-curdling scream is added to the music as a large shadow is projected on the wall, taking the shape of someone being stabbed repeatedly. The shadow fades, and a bloody knife is dropped on the left side of the frame. Walking towards it, we see the legs of a child wearing high-rise white socks and shiny black shoes. We fade to black, and the *Goblin* song

resumes. What a way of gripping the viewer! The murder scene shockingly interfering with the opening credits prepares us to expect the unexpected. Accordingly, the camera in *Deep Red* seems to be always in motion, constantly trying different angles and perspectives. Maitland McDonagh describes Argento's filming style as "nervous" and "restless," two attributes that are also embraced by our protagonist. About Argento's camerawork specifically, McDonagh writes that it is "unrestrained by strictly narrative concerns," his camera reflecting "no point-of-view save its own as it creeps across the facade of a sharply angled building for a startling two-and-a-half minutes or hovers over two girls in a baroque swimming pool" (2). Nonetheless, Argento's intelligent use of visual signifiers transforms what otherwise could be beautiful nonsense into a complex narrative.

Media like literature, architecture, and visual arts, also play a significant role in the development of the story and its resolution. The very act of contemplating art is what pushes the narrative forward: all the clues that guide the characters to the murderer are inscribed in different artworks. By spending their time examining paintings, drawings, songs, books and other artistic products, Gianna and Marcus are able to find the answers that solve the mystery. Furthermore, the dialogue with cultural artistic products from diverse media is emphasised by the way the film is constructed: the considerable number of close-ups and tracking shots featured in *Deep Red* are not only intended to build suspense, but also to invite aesthetic contemplation from the audience. Argento gives us several minutes of Marcus and Carlo playing different songs. A still frame of a book stays on screen a long time for us to read. Every relevant character is connected to the arts in one way or another. The victim of the first death that we witness after the opening credits, a psychic whose living quarters are conveniently close to Marcus, is referred to as a "performer"

and a “kind of magician” by other characters. The unbelievable number of paintings in her walls reveals her as an art connoisseur as well.

The first time Marcus goes into the psychic’s apartment is prompted by him witnessing her murder from the street; while he initially runs to help her, his race seems to be over as soon as he sees the art on the walls. It is difficult to tell if he is actually looking for clues or just observing the paintings. The contemplative way in which Marcus moves through the hall, combined with a slow subjective camera, makes these tracking shots feel more like a visit to the museum than a rescue mission or the risky examination of a crime scene. The paintings are indeed quite haunting, all either portraits or assemblages of disturbing faces, reminiscent of the works of Edvard Munch and James Ensor. Most of the pictured subjects are deformed or devoid of certain human features, as if the apartment were an exhibit of faces from hell. From this moment on, Marcus insists that there is a missing painting from the psychic’s collection, and that finding it will reveal the murderer.

One of the shots which more clearly portrays the camera’s independence from the story’s subject can be spotted later in the film, during a sequence that reveals Argento’s disregard for conventional storytelling. Still obsessed with the missing painting and always searching for clues, Marcus picks up Carlo from his lover’s apartment to invite him to the bar where they play together. The transition that connects these two locations is extremely hectic: right after they say goodbye to Carlo’s man, a fast and unfocused tracking shot moves downward. It follows a series of concrete stripes with white lights in between, signifying the character’s trip on the elevator. Regardless, after this aesthetic jump-cut, Marcus and Carlo enter the frame in a crane shot. While they walk together, the composition becomes increasingly complex as the shot progressively expands its depth of field.

When Marcus lights a cigarette the camera rests for a moment. Carlo shares a not-too-subtle piece of advice, which concludes with laughter: “If I ever got the bone to do what you’re trying to do… I’d end up getting murdered myself!” After this brief pause, the two men keep walking. We, however, can no longer follow them: the camera abruptly turns around, changing its direction to focus on an old lady’s apartment, where she is watching the news. Another slow tracking shot culminates with a close-up of the TV screen. As the newsperson’s voice-off tells us that Marcus is the key witness in the murder case, the scene cuts to Marcus and Carlo playing the piano at the same time. McDonagh identifies these characters as doppelgangers: “four hands, two identical pairs, on a piano keyboard - they actually play a duet in which their respective parts are precise echoes of one another” (8). The suggestive power of this scene where the two musicians are bonding will become important for the audience’s understanding of the plot. Although it is hard to organize the delirious shots of *Deep Red* into a linear narrative, Argento manages to develop the story through visual signifiers. The internal logic of the sequences in the film is “metaphoric rather than metonymic; images proceed from one to another … by way of ‘poetic’ connections, a kind of alchemical reasoning” (McDonagh 5). This scene adds depth to the characters’ relationship. It starts with a close-up of their hands so we cannot distinguish who is who. This position of the camera tells us that the two friends have more than a few things in common, aside from their love of American jazz, being European, and the fact that they are highly insecure about their masculinity. Carlo and Marcus, the latter without knowing it, are following each other’s melodies the same way they are following each other’s footsteps. Carlo, the child from the opening murder, keeps an eye on Marcus so his mother’s crimes are not discovered; Marcus’ amateur investigation is driving him closer to Carlo.

All throughout the film, the protagonist finds himself thinking about the hallway in the psychic's apartment, where the creepy portraits hang. He thinks that he saw something there that night that could be a clue to the killer's identity, but is unable to determine what it was. As the story reaches its climax, Marcus finally decides to go back to that first crime scene. Once again, he slowly goes through the wall of paintings, looking around, searching for a buried memory. Suddenly, it hits him: one of the portraits is not like the others. A golden circular frame contains a mirror instead. And then he remembers what he saw that night.

We learn that, after committing the crime, Carlo's mother heard Marcus and hid, facing a circular mirror. Since her back was against one of the paintings, the mirror reflected her emaciated face along with those of agonizing humanoids, making her look like part of the composition. Argento has been taunting us: if we take the time to focus on the details, we will eventually get the big picture. And indeed, when we go back to watch the moment when Marcus first steps into the apartment, the killer's face is reflected at us from the mirror. This is an amazing example of the narrative motus at its most effective when it comes to enchanting and exciting the viewers; even more remarkably, it invites further reflection through multiple viewings. Argento's distinctive stylistic flourishes, combined with a self-aware narrative, provide a viewing experience that encapsulates how visual and storytelling components blend in the form of the narrative motus.

In this chapter, Mimi Cave's use of the narrative motus in *Fresh* (2022) moves the viewer through its clever writing of an antagonistic character. In this example, information is kept away from the viewer until far into the film; once the identity of the character is revealed and his villainy exposed, the rest of the story changes drastically. What started as a romantic comedy decidedly enters horror territory, not just altering the protagonist's goals and motivation, but our

viewing experience as well. The narrative thread we follow in Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (1992) also exhibits a narrative motus through character development, although by subverting the traditional storytelling path of the hero. Through Lionel's tries and tribulations, viewers are primed to encounter a rapturous moment of newfound confidence and power, where he asserts his manliness and toughness. Instead, the culminating moment of action, which he is only able to achieve though the support of his love interest, relies on Lionel stopping a commotion mainly caused by a character that openly displays manliness and toughness.

James DeMonaco's *The Purge: Election Year* (2016) presents a cathartic narrative motus within a political landscape so shockingly close to our reality that viewers doubt any force divergent from the fascist state can accomplish change. In an act of disruptive wish fulfillment, the film depicts a sequence where almost all people responsible for corruption and social inequality in the country are killed by the resistance. Dario Argento's use of the narrative motus in *Deep Red* (1975) follows the classic structure of a whodunit story; the novelty of this example comes from the ingenious way in which the director hides what would be the most relevant clue to determine the identity of the killer. As minor clues are distributed amongst works of arts from diverse media along the spaces and scenarios that the characters investigate, a clear view of the murderer's face is reflected in a mirror as soon as the protagonist enters the scene of the crime. This way, Argento makes viewers reflect on the visual quality of narrative storytelling – things that are not directly addressed by the plot and characters might escape our scrutiny, regardless of how much attention we pay to other artworks contained within the film.

By exploring these examples, this chapter elucidates the different approaches filmmakers can take to construct a narrative motus: the order in which events and information are revealed can distinctly change the course of stories, character development, and themes, as well as our

interactions with these cinematic elements. This demonstration of the narrative motus champions the necessity of considering the relationship between viewer and cinema, as it sheds light on our engagement with the writing of a film through cognitive processes. The horror story, according to Carroll, "is driven explicitly by curiosity. It engages its audience by being involved in processes of disclosure, discovery, proof, explanation, hypothesis, and confirmation (182). By focusing on writing within cinema, we become aware of how influential storytelling can be in provoking diverse reactions in viewers.

Chapter Three: The Shock Motus

Cinematic shock, above all else, serves the purpose of startling the viewer. It is not necessarily related to our perception of themes, characters, plot points, and other elements of a film's story. While the cinematic shock only centers on the startling moment, the shock motus is composed of a build-up sequence for which the last shot serves as culmination. This culminating shot, most importantly, alters the viewing experience; it changes the viewers' perception of the preceding sequence and/or the rest of the film in a way that increases our sense of fright. Thus, the shock motus adds a cognitive layer of dread to the physical reactions our bodies go through when we are startled.

We can be startled simply by an abrupt interruption of the viewing experience, similarly to the way we get startled in our daily lives by an unexpected touch or loud noise. James Wan's *Insidious* (2010) demonstrates the simplicity of cinematic shock in its opening credits, where the camera moves through an impossibly dark bedroom with a child in bed, slowly exploring the different areas of this location accompanied by a subtle, somber score. Violins are introduced to the background music as the camera approaches an even darker hallway, in which the face of an old woman is illuminated by a candle. We then cut to black, in silence, for a few seconds, only to be frightened by a loud cacophony of dissonant sounds as the title card suddenly appears in gigantic red letters. This is what Hanich calls the "cinematic shock," a "brief, highly compressed type of fear" that emerges in a response to "a threatening object or event that ruptures the situation [on screen] suddenly and unexpectedly" (127).

Hanich goes on to define six different types of cinematic shocks based upon the different threats encountered by the characters and viewers. These are the following: fake shock (when startling is revealed to come from a "bogus" source); return-of-the-dead shock (a dead villain

suddenly resurrects); 3D shock (when something simply “jumps towards the camera”); horror shock (a surprising shot of the monster, or of an act of violence); behind-the-back shock (the threat comes from behind the character); unexpected-identity shock (when villains use or discard a disguise in one shot that reveals their true identity) (Hanich 130-132). As we can see, Hanich’s concept of the cinematic shock is based on what the threat is and the ways it is presented in each film. The previously described sequence from *Insidious*, which can be described as an example of cinematic shock, successfully startles the viewer only for a moment. By creating a shift from our typical state of viewership to an altered state, which stays with us beyond the scene, the shock motus I introduce here transcends the cinematic shock. The following paragraphs explore an example of the shock motus to better illustrate this difference.

Watching *Terrifier 2* (2022), a film that is renowned for its over-the-top explicit violence, I was not shocked in the slightest to find this kind of content. I am not to be shocked by Art the clown scalping an innocent teenager with a knife. What did shock me, however, was the fact that the sequence in which he tortures this character lasts approximately five minutes, with three minutes of Art stabbing, dismembering, and even pouring bleach and salt on the body of the bloody girl completely uninterrupted. While I was expecting extreme violence, the duration and progressive cruelty of this specific representation of it did surprise me; it shocked me. And yet, none of the shots containing the action felt like the peak of a shock motus. The shot that did was towards the ending of the sequence, when the mother finds Art cutting pieces off her daughter. The mother screams, just for the young victim to turn her head towards her, showing that she has been alive throughout her torment. The deep horror reflected in the mother’s face reveals the full understanding of how the killing took place, a discovery viewers make alongside her. This revelation is more disturbing than the presence of Art himself.

I raise this as an example to demonstrate that the shock motus does not come to us through images that we necessarily find visually shocking, but rather, to argue that a shock relies on both narrative build-up and editing to deliver a shot that later adds to the film and the build-up sequence which contains it. After showcasing the worst of Art's torture, the camera leaves the bedroom for a moment to show the mother arriving in a dark house, hanging up her coat, asking about the candy bowl (it is Halloween), and realizing that one of the windows is broken. She then yells for her daughter and hurries up the stairs, throwing the viewers back into the brightly coloured, fully illuminated nightmare that is taking place. The medium close-up of the mother's horrified face is the first time in about three minutes that we see a being that is not covered in blood. The respite given to the audience by the change of location is brought to an end in the most disastrous way possible, and the anticipation built upon the mother's arrival combines with the painful knowledge that she is witnessing her offspring after incommensurable torture was inflicted upon her. The majority of the many shots during the tormenting of the girl are five seconds or shorter, creating a sense of urgency and frantic violence that we have now grown accustomed to. The scene with the mother and her realization, instead, is mainly composed of three shots of eleven, eight, and ten seconds each, either seamlessly linked to each other or divided by shorter POV shots. After she sees what has happened in the bedroom, the frantic editing is back. This is an example of a cinematic motus because, as opposed to the example from *Insidious*, this one can potentially deliver a transformative experience: the final shot of the sequence alters our perception of the latter in retrospect, thus adding a cognitive layer of dread to the physical reactions our bodies go through when we are startled.

To have a lasting effect, shock builds on anticipation, which is established through a chain of images that set up an expectation. When that expectation is either fulfilled in an

unexpected way or dashed as the film confronts us with an unexpected image, viewers can experience a strong emotional pay-off. When this occurs, the viewer's body "undergoes a quick and sudden metamorphosis" where, after "a microsecond of unconsciousness, the body subsequently returns with a vengeance and briefly dominates consciousness" (Hanich 157). The following examples of the shock motus not only provide a "powerful corporeal experience" (Hanich 148), but also change our state of viewing, affecting our perception of each film in different ways.

***An Andalusian Dog* (1929)**

Directed by Luis Buñuel and co-written with surrealist artist Salvador Dalí, *An Andalusian Dog* can technically be considered the first explicit gore film ever released. Scholars and critics have overwhelmingly recognized its influence in the world of cinema; Ignacio Javier Lopez calls it "one of the most universally acclaimed films in cinema history" (35) and Gwynne Edwards positions *An Andalusian Dog* as "one of the most important, unique, and controversial figures in the history of cinema" (25). The example of the shock motus discussed in this segment is one of the moments in the film that have been the subject of controversy: the shot in which a man cut's the surface of a woman's eye with a barber's razor.

According to most scholarship, the themes expressed in *An Andalusian Dog* include coming of age, repressed sexuality and/or queerness. This last view is expressed in Sarah Cooper's account of the most popular approaches to the film, where she highlights Phil Powrie's "psychosexual readings of the male protagonist" (147) and Linda Williams's interpretation of the film's symbolic imagery. Both Powrie and Williams link most of these surrealist visuals to an exploration of subconscious sexual inquiries, with Williams stating that *An Andalusian Dog* is a metaphorical representation of how, according to Freud, "the function of the fetish arises from

the fear of castration" (*Figures of Desire*, 83). Just as with Dalí's paintings, it is tempting here to analyze the imagery of the film in a search for definitive meaning. Freudian theory was immensely popular with surrealists. The latter relished the existence of the subconscious, a concept that allowed for the understanding of the human brain as a spontaneous, organic art-making machine waiting to be freed from the constraints of rationality.

For the purposes of this chapter, it is worth looking at *An Andalusian Dog* from a different perspective, considering the transformative visceral effect of its most memorable scene. This remarkable shock motus introduces Buñuel and Dalí's unique editing style, providing a pattern for viewers to frightfully anticipate throughout the film. It also showcases the filmmakers' unabashed commitment to abject imagery, something the film does constantly. Their aim to utilize explicit gore with the purpose of terrifying and outraging the viewer makes *An Andalusian Dog* as a kind of horror film, one of the avant-garde subgenre. While arthouse, experimental, or avant-garde films seek to explore different styles of visual narratives, *An Andalusian Dog* cares just as much about disturbing viewers with abject imagery.

The surrealist movement championed the idea that imagery from our involuntary dreams and inner thoughts, regardless of how cryptic, should be reproduced, explored, and embraced. The value of this exercise is the creation of new meanings, born from each individual's unique repressed psyche. This is what Dalí calls his "paranoiac-critical method," a creative process in which he auto-induced a "paranoiac state" where he let himself be carried away by the fears and forces of his subconscious mind, imitating what he imagined the perspective of a psychotic person would be like, resulting in unique original associations of concepts and images. Interestingly, he believed the "symbolic language" of the subconscious to be universal in nature because it carries with it the strongest and most basic human instincts we all possess (Gordon

238). Following the surrealist method, *An Andalusian Dog* lacks a narrative structure, instead offering the viewer a series of vignettes with some recurring actors and visuals. The main characters, a man and a woman, are not named, and we are not given any specific details that could conjure up distinctive personalities for them during the film. Rather than seeking to portray specific meanings through storytelling and characterization, these filmed images serve as a starting point for our own subconscious mind to generate free associations and engage in individual signifying processes.

In this collaborative effort, the viewer's anticipation is built from the very beginning of the film, thanks to the introduction of a powerful and exciting visual element: the first shot in the film is a close-up of a man's hands sharpening an old-fashioned razor. He does this by holding the sharpener against the frame of a wooden glass door, beyond which there is only darkness. He wears a watch in his left hand. Then we cut to a medium close-up of his face, which is that of a white middle-aged man with average short dark hair, a cigarette resting nonchalantly on his lips. Back to the opening shot, where he tests the sharpness of the blade against the tip of his thumb. A close-up of his face holding a satisfied expression shows the door to now be covered by light semi-transparent fabric, and then cuts to a medium long shot of him standing in front of the door, holding the instrument in his hands meditatively. Two thick curtains frame the door as if it were a theatre spectacle; the thin curtains inside let us see the outline of some plants. The middle of the frame is illuminated in a way that the light creates a circle inside the square, with half of the man's body staying in the darkness. His cigarette is doubled by this focal point of light, its shadow-half still on the man's cheek. He opens the door to what is revealed to be a balcony. A medium long shot of him from outside shows him moving the items somewhat nervously. A medium close-up has his face turned upwards, contemplating, and we cut to the object of his

awe: a long shot of the night sky, in which a white, pristine full moon floats in the left side of the frame. There are only three stars near it, and three clouds that are vaguely illuminated by its glow. They move quickly towards the celestial body; as we cut to the previous shot of the character observing their race, a big cloud of smoke is forming from his cigarette.

Immediately after this shot, we get a close-up of a woman's face. She is wearing fashionable makeup for the era, and the dark lipstick pops on her pale skin. By her side, a striped tie hangs from a man's neck, an unknown individual. We can only see a fragment of his chest and a hand, which he moves closer to the woman's eye. She is seated, inert and apathetic as the stranger's hand spreads her eyelids apart. The other hand joins in, holding the razor. As it starts to move, the shot is interrupted for the first time to show us the night sky once again. This time, however, the clouds have passed the moon. In a slicing manner, one cloud slides in front of it, leaving a black line in the white circle. This figurative slicing makes the following shot even more disturbing, because it acts as a decoy for the anticipated culmination of the razor's movement across the woman's eye. It gives viewers some respite, almost implying that the "real thing" will not be portrayed on the screen. And here comes the shock motus: cut to an extreme close-up of the eye being cut by the razor. The gelatinous surface bends and gives in to the metal, finally split in half. A clear, gooey substance appears through the incision, globing up over the lower eyelids.

Using this sequence as the opening segment of the film makes it especially shocking: because we have only recently started watching, we are not aware of the tone and rhythm of the film. As far as we know, anything can happen. The expectation generated by this shock motus is quite thrilling, as it puts the viewer in the perfect place to be surprised and horrified again. Nonetheless, its lingering quality continues to transform the viewing experience retroactively as

viewers become aware of the underlying symbolic power of this shot within the film's surrealist ethos. While the filmmakers' intent was to shock and disgust the audience, it is fascinating that they chose to portray the destruction of an eye in what is considered the first filmic creation of the surrealist movement. This is, according to Jo Evans, "an image that continues to deliver a memorable assault on the viewer and, symbolically, on the history of visual art" (127). The rupture in the eye breaks through the viewer's preconceptions about what visual elements belong in cinema. It signifies the rupture of traditional approaches to the artistic experience, one of the main goals of the surrealist movement.

It is hard not to believe that the majority of praise and analysis this gory moment has elicited comes from the knowledge that one of the directors is an accomplished, historically relevant painter whose previous works were produced through a different medium. Isolated, the explicitly violent shot where a doe's eye is edited so well into the scene that it truly gives the impression that a human eye was harmed, could be considered snuff adjacent. It is remarkable that such a disturbing image is seen as deep and intellectual, while other expressions like the writings of Bataille and some of Dalí's paintings were regarded in their time as artistic sacrilege. By transferring the abject onto an actual human body, according to Noël Burch, *An Andalusian Dog* became "the first film capable of making aggression one of cinema's structural elements" (Talens 27). The eye shot is a relevant example of the shock motus precisely because this aggression not only comes from the abject image, but from the way its revelation is edited and presented to the viewer as the climax of an action both dreaded and anticipated. While films like *An Andalusian Dog* subtly hint at the upcoming release of an action through visual signifiers, others choose to portray this journey in a concrete step-by-step manner, directly entangling an opening shock motus with the plot. Such is the case for our next entry.

***Final Destination 3* (2006)**

Final Destination is a franchise about anxiety. Created by James Wong, who directed both the first and third entries, the world of these films is one where the order in which people die is pre-determined and held in place by invisible forces of fate. Thus, if someone who was meant to die is somehow able to skip the fatal moment, death will come back to claim their soul nonetheless. In *Final Destination*, this sets into motion a myriad of creative mundane coincidences which, once aligned, conclude in the right person dying. As Ian Conrish describes it, "victims are part of a scheme or preordained plan, and the deaths are often hyper-elaborate. These are essentially survival horrors and puzzle films, in which … victims have to second-guess a system in which the horror that awaits can be protracted and tortuous" (106). The scenarios in *Final Destination* are built upon the relatable fear that something bad could happen at any moment with no way of preventing it, instilling in the viewer a sharp sense of paranoia regarding our actual surroundings, including every object around us. One of the elements of the franchise that manages to generate anxiety in the viewer is everyday nature of the initiating incidents: the first installment has a group of people evading death by a premonition had before a plane takes off. In the second film, the protagonist has his premonition ahead of a highway accident, while the third film the main character has a vision before a rollercoaster ride. All of these locations are more or less commonplace in the real world, and, while the way in which the tragedies occur can be outlandish, similar catastrophes are not unheard of. The first sequence of *Final Destination 3*, the most darkly humorous of the group, is not only an outstanding demonstration of this precept, but also an intense, unforgettable ride that delivers a powerful shock motus.

While most scholarship written about this intellectual property focuses on the franchise as a whole, it is not surprising that the moderate amount of texts that specifically approach *Final*

Destination 3 give special attention to one of the film's highlights: its spectacular opening sequence, which culminates in a powerful shock motus. In a review for *Sight and Sound*, Alec Worley simply refers to this third entry as "an acceptable sequel," but still mentions its "ghoulishly inventive set-pieces" (52). The rollercoaster ride that starts the film is a prime example of the latter. To better examine the intricate editing that makes this shock motus so effective, the following paragraphs will consist of a detailed description of the build-up that leads to it. This scene is a relevant example because viewers can quite easily predict what is about to happen; every entry in the franchise starts with a similar setup, a scene where everything that will go wrong is first exposed to us in plain view. The shock motus, indeed, originates from this knowledge.

The film's opening shot is a Dutch angle of a segment of a Ferris wheel in the darkness, only its lights outlining its shape; an apt symbol a franchise that presents life as a cycle from which you cannot get off. We encounter a group of teens, classmates in their end-of-the-year escapade to the fair. As the camera explores the location and its various horror-themed ornaments, the bombastic soundtrack imparts a sense of fun and camp which is enhanced by the stereotypical characters: they fall upon the classic horror and teenage film archetypes popularized by 1980s comedies and the slasher subgenre, which self-referential comedic films like *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011) would later examine and problematize. Our final girl Wendy is a bit of a weirdo, and her grade twelve class includes a pair of punk kids, an annoying fool, a jock, and two vapid popular girls, as well as two bland males, Wendy's boyfriend Jason and the boyfriend of Wendy's best friend, Kevin, who becomes the final boy.

From the very start our main character is not nearly as excited as the rest of the class, overwhelmed by the busy fair and retreating into her thoughts. "I was having that feeling of déjà

vu, you know? Except for... Something that hasn't happened yet" she tells Jason. Wendy is a self-described "control freak," and Jason wants to make her try the rollercoaster because her fear might come "from the feeling of having no control." "Everyone imagines weird stuff when they get scared," he continues, "But it never turns out to be what they imagine. Never." She reluctantly accepts and they head together to the line, where a huge mechanical demon says, "You can run but you cannot hide" through a pre-recorded message.

The dialogue amongst the characters is juvenile and crass; Frankie (the fool) tries to trick the two popular girls (Ashley and Ashlyn) into getting a picture where it looks like they are "Holding the devil's balls." When they ask why, he says "Were else you ever gonna see a dick that big?." "I'm looking at one right now," is the response he gets. While the characters are unlikeable and simplistic, a few endearing qualities are given to every one of them. Even Frankie is portrayed as a pathetic loser rather than an actual womanizer; he flaunts a necklace in the shape of a naked woman and says "I like this. This is old school," to the girls annoyed indifference. Ashley and Ashlyn are egocentric and shallow, but their excited competitiveness at the fair is quite charming, and so on. These snippets of personality help the viewer somewhat care about the teenagers as the ride opens, making the multitude passing through the doors looks a little bit like cattle. Skeleton ornaments with feathers, ala *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, adorn the hallways which lead them directly to platform six (ominous). Once they are all seated, the security bars go down. Cut to a close-up of a red liquid dripping off a tube attached to the machinery. The doors close, and it is time to start the ride with a loud, uncomfortable industrial sound.

The following sequence is spectacular and extremely effective at building apprehension and suspense. From a painfully slow rise the anticipation builds into an impeccably orchestrated

series of intricate kills. The folly that accompanies every tiny thing that goes wrong allows us to watch the unraveling of events with ease, following the small details and making us appreciate better how they develop into disastrous consequences. There is no room for confusion, only the thrill of anxiety. This sequence starts with a bird's eye view, slightly panning, of the people on the rollercoaster, smiling, yelling, and raising their hands. Shortly after, the camera returns to the previous close-up of the dripping tube, now positively leaking. Close ups and medium shots of the teens build anticipation; the ride has started moving, but it has not left the ground yet. An expert moving shot captures the slow rollercoaster from the front, jumping onto the rails before it does. There is a cut to a close-up of chains in the machinery (this is a "chain lift"); then there is a cut to another close-up, this one a Dutch angle, of the rollercoaster wheels rolling on the track. Wendy looks down, nervous, and we get her POV: an extreme bird's eye view shot of the now miniscule people down at the fair, just blurry spots, the camera tilting up to reveal the city landscape. After a quick, medium high angle shot of the rollercoaster in the middle of the frame (tilting downward until it looks small on the rails), we get one of the most terrifying shots of the sequence: an extreme low angle shot of the gargantuan metal structure (called "support beams"), which occupies most of the frame and is engulfed by darkness at the top. The rollercoaster starts coming onto the suspended structure, and the shot ends when they are halfway through, still not at full speed.

Frankie is recording from his camera, which he was instructed not to bring onto the ride. After a series of close-ups where we catch up with the characters' reactions, there is another Dutch long shot of the rollercoaster before a pitch-dark sky, showcasing its hard fall from the height of the structure. From Jason's POV, the frame is entirely filled by a mess of interconnected thin, delicate metal bars which form the "framework", upon which the red tracks

swirl and swoop. As the rollercoaster moves, the tangly mess becomes more menacing, reminiscent of a spiderweb. As the music swells, the camera captures the moment in which they are about to go down for just an instant, and then cuts to a shot of the malfunctioning tube, now spraying something. This shot seems to anticipate the upcoming destruction and spillage of the characters' bodies, the spraying tube foreshadowing the blood-spilling to come. The excitement of the rollercoaster riders is contagious, but then we cut to an extreme close-up of chains from the chain lift... and see that one of them stops with a noise that suggests friction. They are about to go down.

We get a medium shot of the rollercoaster rapidly going through the rails while everybody screams, followed by a succession of quick medium and close-up shots of the characters yelling, freaking out, having a good time, all shot in a handheld fashion. There is another shot of the malfunctioning tube, about to explode. Then, a mesmerizing moving shot which follows the rollercoaster on its side from the tracks, our view passing through the support beams and framework, after which the camera tilts up energetically to capture the fall, with an unpleasant new sound. As the characters go through a loop, the camera is upside down, so we see them hanging. "Show me your titties!" Frankie screams before dropping his camera. Our camera follows the descent of Frankie's camera, falling through the dark skies on a long shot, then there is a medium shot, and finally a close-up when it lands on a piece of the track by its carrying strap, forming a loop and ending up on top of it. There is no music now.

After a vertiginous shot of the rollercoaster heading downward, we cut to a close-up where we see the wheels destroying Frankie's camera, which in return creates a series of sparks that end up damaging the track. This shot is a figurative representation of how the characters will be crushed and torn to pieces by the rollercoaster, adding once again to the viewers' anticipation.

This visual narrative style continues as the security belts go up in the rollercoaster. Some shaky close-ups of the teenagers capture the uneasiness of the moment. There is an extreme close-up of a wheel leaving the track. The carts start to fall; we get a long shot of their occupants falling to their deaths. The background music has now returned.

Lewis the jock is dangling from his seat, and the camera approaches him before a twirl front POV in which the half loops of the ride seem cruelly intense. We cut to a front POV for the most aggressive loop yet, which almost looks like the Fibonacci spiral. We gyrate with the camera, and it gyrates with the tracks. Among the close-ups of the teen's expressions, we end on Lewis's, who loses his grip when the cart wall hits him. We see his body violently crash against a support beam. As the cart piece falls further, it hits a metal tube and bends it, so it becomes horizontal. Shortly after, we see a medium close-up of a segment of the rails; they are detached and shaking. The camera comes closer, and we notice that the rollercoaster is now losing speed, and teens start falling to their deaths.

From Wendy's perspective, we watch the ground and a few broken bodies lying on it, under the tracks. The structure of the latter is engaging to look at, with one red rail in the middle and white metal framework forming a spiral when connecting with the one on the left side of the frame. There is a long shot of Wendy and Kevin, the last two people in the middle of the loop. As they grab each other and their carts, there is a close-up of the wheels moving, then stopping, then moving again as they try to rock the cart to leave the loop. Finally, they manage to make the cart go down backwards, and we get a shot from behind the framework. Kevin passes right through the horizontal metal bar, which apparently cuts his body in half. Wendy screams, and we get her POV towards the seat by her side, where half of Kevin's body lies lifeless, dark blood spurting out of his entrails. We cut to a close-up of the detached rails' segment, which then pans left to the

cart where only Wendy remains. There is a close-up of her crying face sprinkled with blood, followed by a close-up of the wheels hitting the detached segment. Then we see a very short, frantic long shot of the cart rising on impact like a cobra, and a long shot of Wendy's body finally falling. We cut to her POV, where we see rails coming closer and closer, cutting back to a slow-motion shot of her frightened expression. The last shot of the sequence is as follows: in just two seconds, a zoomed-in, shaky close-up of the rails from her POV fades to black. The colour then retreats into Wendy's pupil, the shot now pulling backwards until we see that she is still sitting on the cart. The ride has not started yet. This is just her premonition.

This is an example of shock motus because our perception of the build-up (the rollercoaster scene) is retrospectively altered with its culminating shot, in which we turn from the dark frame into Wendy's eye. The impact of the shot in which we turn from the dark frame into Wendy's eye, decidedly inspired by Hitchcock's shot of the shower drain turning into a pupil in *Psycho* (1960), is nothing short of harrowing. After this frantic sequence, our brains are startled by the stillness of Wendy sitting straight on her cart. Instead of the release of tension that would logically come from finding out none of this occurred, the viewer is shaken by urgency, by the need to yell "Get off!" to the screen. Here, the ultimate thrill comes not from the protagonist's death, but rather from the knowledge that the catastrophe we just witnessed is about to happen again, this time for real. The possibility of safety is dangled in front of us and then revealed to be futile.

When it comes to the film's plot, this moment effectively transforms the viewing experience, as now we now try to figure out the order in which the characters die alongside Wendy once death starts to claim them. What makes this such a strong shock motus, however, is that it shows that fear of death can be stronger after seeing and (cinematically) experiencing what

that death would look like. Our paranoid state becomes one of even greater anxiety after we know what to expect, and it accompanies the viewer until the end. William Stevenson approaches this franchise from the perspective of premediation, the "compulsion to remediate the future before it [has] even happened, thus preventing a catastrophic media event" (434). The rollercoaster ride revealed to be a premonition shows how, in Wong's universe, "premediation is not a process that can ever be completed, but an ongoing emergence" (449). This sequence, ultimately, is not about abject imagery, but about the anxiety caused by the anticipation.

Overall, regardless of how technically difficult it is to film, this example of the shock motus can be dissected and explained in a matter-of-fact way. But film can generate this sense of dread without employing visual elements that point at the eventual shock, as demonstrated by the next example.

***Cube* (1997)**

Vincenzo Natali's cinematic debut, despite a poor reception at the time of its release, has since grown a cult-following among fans of cinematic horror, and would go on to inspire films such as *Would You Rather* (2012), *The Platform* (2019) and the ongoing *Saw* franchise. David Christopher, for example, considers *Cube* "one of Canada's greatest horror film successes" (140). While Anita Gates criticizes the film's trite dialogue in her *New York Times* review, she also states that the story is "surprisingly gripping" and praises the actors' commitment to perform in what it is "the cinematic equivalent of a bare stage." Such is the place where we find the shock motus highlighted in the film: the dialogue-free opening scene, in which the body of an unexpecting individual is suddenly cut into bits.

The set where the characters of *Cube* are trapped is the film's only location, imagined as a real-life Rubik's cube where each piece is the size of a room. With remarkable ingenuity and

resourcefulness, Natali and his team built only one room and a half, its walls illuminated by different colours to emulate different rooms, inside a theoretical mechanical structure meticulously envisioned by a math consultant. This feature of the film makes *Cube* uniquely interesting from an architectural perspective. Karol Wysznacki, for example, explains how the set's design resembles that of minimalistic churches (which became popular during the 1990s), visually referencing "the topic of internal struggle" (194). Owen Gleiberman, however, describes the viewing experience as "more akin to that of being locked in a Skinner box" (52). Writing for *Entertainment Weekly*, he calls the film "a very Canadian thriller," which he defines as "no humor, lots of literal-minded future, shock portentousness" (Gleiberman 52). The shock motus in *Cube*'s opening sequence is portentous indeed. Aside from its intriguing and uniquely unpredictable build-up, this example of shock motus is relevant because it manages to create a deep existential dread based not on a terrifying force, but on the absence of it.

The first shot of the film is an extreme close-up of somebody's closed eye, every crevice visible, for around fifteen seconds. The eyelid opens to reveal the eye focused upwards, as if its owner was in a trance. It blinks a couple of times and then the cornea finally rests in the middle, a dark hole inside an intricate web of light blue iris. The eye blinks a few more times, changing, adjusting to the environment. This image pushes the viewer to become aware that they are actively watching, that they must keep their eyes open for what is to come.

We then cut to a long shot of almost the entirety of a bald man's body, possibly lying on the ground, face towards the viewer; this is a high angle shot in which he is placed centered near the right side of the frame. The shot makes it seem as if he was standing in an odd position like a marionette; the room he is in is so alien that there are no clear distinctions between floor, wall, and ceilings. All we see is a square metal valve-like door in the center, the same colour as the

loose clothes the man is wearing. Around the door, a series of illuminated white panels, each branded with symbols and lines that resemble strange digital circuits. One of his hands is high above him, the other resting over his chest and leaning in the side, as if he was just woken up from a frantic dance. He starts to move slowly, his head slightly turning to appreciate what is around him. There is a curious expression on his face, an unsettling smile of madness and, perhaps, of satisfaction.

We cut to a different shot of what he is observing: a corner of the room, now fully understood as a perfect cubical space. The white and dark grey tones and interesting mix of panels, combined with the absolute silence, stimulate a sense of calm in the viewer. If tension arises, it will for sure take a while. The just-woken-up body language of the man adds to this sensation; this is an establishing moment. Or at least that is what these opening shots feel like. Suddenly, the bald head of the man appears on the bottom of the frame, and as he stands we can see his body from the waist up. Once he is fully risen, he looks to the ceiling, and the camera tilts upwards following this movement, slowly rising until his body and finally his head are out of the screen. The only thing remaining is a view of the cube's inner top: every one of its surfaces is identical. The camera then tilts downwards at the same pace, bringing back the subject, who is still standing in the same position. These shots are slow, measured, contemplative. They situate viewers in a spot where we can only perceive what the character can. We are, like him, still figuring out what this is all about. The editing of the shots is restrained and placid, while the carefulness of the man's movements quietly suggests one to be alert, even if it is not clear what for. A viewer that is aware that this is a horror film probably will be expecting something, but the feeling this sequence gives so far is mainly curiosity with an uncanny aftertaste.

Cut to a low angle shot of the man, in whose gray clothes we can read "ALDERSON." The camera spins around Alderson three times while he observes the walls again. This movement is slow and organic, there is a sense of someone moving the camera, but the isolation in which the character is immersed is so strongly established that, instead, the slightly humanized grasp on the camera provides a feeling of intimacy and proximity with the subject, contributing to the scene's realistic approach. Holding his breath, Alderson approaches the valve and tries to force the lock with both hands, which he can pull twice until it opens. Behind the metal there is a squared, illuminated tiny passage, which he accesses through some metal bars on the sides. In a close-up shot of his face, we see Alderson peeking into this other room. Next, there is a long shot of the new ceiling, this time, coloured light blue. While the symmetry of the architecture is pleasant to the eye, there is a light tilt on the side of the frame that exacerbates the uncanny feeling.

In a long shot from the blue cubical room, we see the man looking through the passage, a white-lit square in the middle of blue squares. He retreats, descending back to the white room. The door goes up with a mechanical sound and quickly closes automatically. He keeps looking around. Now from a high angle shot, we see his black shoes come in contact with the metal valve that is located on the floor. We look from above as the whole of Alderson enters the frame, crouching to open it. In an almost identical shot to the one from inside the blue room's perspective, we are treated to the same composition with his white square in the middle of the next room, the panels on this one illuminated bright red. After the white and light blue room, this wall of red hits like a change of pace. Even after he closes the entrance to the passage, we keep seeing it for a few seconds, and the sensation that something is seriously wrong with this place becomes sharper. He finally enters an orange room.

Once again holding his breath, Alderson takes a look around. We get a long shot of the orange ceiling. In a close-up, we see his eyes wide open, searching for something, anything. He finally decides to take one, two steps forward. And this is when we hear a sound, that of something... Falling? Going through a surface? It is hard to tell. Cut to an extreme close-up of both his eyes, first normal, then cartoonishly wide. Cut to an extreme close-up of the name printed on his shirt; a few red lines form two squares around it, becoming thicker, bleeding through the cloth. The viewer starts to piece this shock motus together.

A close-up of the side of his face reveals two horizontal red lines, one starting right beneath his eye, the other from the corner of his lip. Red starts to drip from them in globs from different spots, growing into vertical lines. A close-up of his shoes where, in the middle, drips of blood start forming a small puddle, constantly flowing. A sound like biting on an apple accompanies the falling of two pieces from his head, which drop to the ground leaving raw flesh behind. His hand is next, fingers cut uneven, falling, now dead meat. Back to his face to show it splitting in half, then a medium shot of his body turned into identical cubical pieces, slowly separating with a series of wet noises, some of them only bloody in one side, others entirely gooey and crimson, bones and viscera in between. As the last piece falls to the ground, we hear a new mechanical sound: a flat layer composed of thin sharp metal strings like a giant tennis racquet moves backwards and then folds itself automatically. Gradual fade to white. The letters of the title form from white cubes and rectangles gradually appearing in the background.

By starting the story with an unknown point-of-view character who is promptly and abruptly annihilated, the horror of *Cube* sinks its claws in the unconscious in a way that stimulates cognition as well as affect. The carnage is disturbing, but what really sticks with the viewer is the absence, the "lack" of a perpetrator. According to Shelia Kunkle, "What the

characters experience is that they are in the 'impossible' place where the signifier reveals itself as the symbol of an absence. That is, they find themselves in that place of absence" (286). The cube, thus, fits Kristeva's description of the abject as a place where meaning collapses. Viewers of the film continue watching hoping for an explanation, for a motive, or a logic behind the cube to be revealed. However, as Christopher states, the machine remains "an ambiguous non-identity that annihilates individual subjects" (149). The fact that this shocking sequence has no significance within the plot of the film is quite appropriate in this case: according to Kunkle, "The cubes depict the endless repetitions of a life without meaning, and the horror of knowing no one, no God, no higher being may be at the helm" (283).

Like some of the best introductory scenes do, this one encapsulates the existential horror of the film quite well. *Cube* methodically familiarizes the viewers with the body of a character which will be then physically eviscerated into nothingness, without a reason. Situated at the beginning of the film, this example of the shock motus builds on our ignorance regarding the plot on a first watch. The next entry's shock motus, however, is located near the end, simple, and barebone.

***Inferno* (1911)**

Directed by Francesco Bertolini, Adolfo Padovan and Giuseppe De Liguoro, *Inferno* is the first ever Italian full-length film. This work is primarily recognized for its gorgeous and intricate visions from hell aided by luscious costumes, props, make-up, and particularly innovative special effects and framing composition. Based on the first segment of Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, as well as Gustave Doré's popular engravings for the book, *Inferno* represents an accomplishment for both cinematic horror and cinema as a whole. As John P. Welle states, the film had a "massive impact" (21) in Italy, where it launched "an important season of

expansion in film production, culminating in the so-called 'golden age of Italian silent film' between 1912 and 1914" (42). According to Nick Havely, *Inferno* was one of the latter's "most successful and influential products" (354). The set-up leading to the shock motus is established throughout the plot, to culminate in one of the film's most influential sequences and shots, which showcase Satan himself devouring a human being.

Inferno's contributions to cinema, in fact, transcend nationality. According to Welle, by adapting an acclaimed literary work, it played "a key role in gaining greater cultural prestige for the nascent film industry" (Welle 42). As he explains, "the mixture of stylistic and technical elements in this film makes it a kind of bridge between the earlier cinema of attractions and the transition toward narrative integration" (Welle 41). When it comes to horror, Christopher Wagstaff writes that, "In its iconography, this film set a trend which would dominate cinematic representations of the Inferno for the next 80 years" (221). *Inferno* also provides an influential visual representation of Satan himself, a character which is the focus of the shock motus highlighted in this segment. This example is so relevant because it is produced by seemingly simple and sporadic framing and editing techniques, demonstrating that timing is one of the essential tools to achieve an effective shock motus. To prove this statement, the following paragraphs will illustrate how the film is shot and edited in a different manner than the sequence containing the shock motus. *Inferno* gives viewers a sense of stability through its visual narrative, which will be radically disturbed later with just a few aesthetic choices.

From the start it is important to point out that the framing itself transforms the land to that of myths and legends: the second shot of the film, which shows Dante not able to reach the "hill of salvation" due to wild beasts blocking his path, is a full long shot of him in which all that can be seen around is land and rocks; no skies above. This escape from traditional cinematic linear

perception adds to the uncanny quality of the journey, as these alien lands engulf the characters and invite the viewer to experience a little claustrophobia. The next scene, set in Limbo, has Beatrice (inspired by the writer's real-life crush) asking the poet Virgil to help Dante. She is represented as a traditionally robed Madonna with a shiny contraption similar to a windmill spinning behind her head, creating the impression of a halo. Here too we encounter an uncanny background as the foreground of the frame is obscured by ominous trees rather than opening to the sky. After asking for help, Beatrice flies away in an editing trick that looks impressive for its time period. As Virgil and Dante walk the land, the landscape becomes dream-like and otherworldly; they move through immense, interminable rock formations shrouded by fog, and thus arrive at the gate of Hell.

Up to this point of the film, every shot has been delegated to portray one entire scene, without cutting or altering the camera's angle or distance. Nevertheless, the first cut within a scene happens as Dante and Virgil approach the entrance to Hell, when we cut from Virgil reading the unseen sign on the portal to his companion ("Abandon hope all who enter here") to what seems like the inside of a dark cave, where the two men walk down until they are no longer visible. The second instance of crosscutting occurs in the Acheron River, where after we see a demon lashing those souls who are late to take the vessel with a paddle. After witnessing these acts, Dante faints and falls to the floor; there is a cut to him lying on the ground in the same way, but this time in a rocky forest. Virgil, who hides and comforts him, has transported him to the next location. Back on their path, Dante and Virgil encounter Cerberus and travel through a land where naked people wriggle on the floor, tormented by an eternal rain that falls upon them. The effect produced by the ever-moving bodies is mesmerizing and strongly reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's famous triptych painting *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Pluto, a demon in

charge of the “prodigals and avaricious,” is here portrayed as a giant, and by positioning his figure closer to the camera the film achieves the effect of making the protagonists appear smaller by comparison. The result of this illusion is more horrifying than shocking. While the scale of the monster makes it more frightful, this shot does not offer the viewer an escalation of anticipation followed by surprise. Said cinematic elements are reserved for the introduction of Hell’s greatest foe, the Devil, seeking to produce maximum impact.

So far into *Inferno*, frame composition has been remarkable when it comes to the different scales of each location; people are more often than not framed as small and insignificant against the monumental, otherworldly nature surrounding them. Accordingly, some of the puppetry, makeup, and props of the film really stand the test of time. As Federico Pacchioni explains, these are “rich and pioneering special effects” for the era (28). Despite the static shots, the composition turns this journey into a visually dynamic one, providing changes of perspective for the characters and their surroundings, and placing them and their props in different spots to generate a sense of diverse atmospheres. However, virtually all shots in the film encapsulate one scene each. Viewers have become accustomed to this visual narrative style, and thus are able to anticipate the impact of following shots. This will change as Dante and Virgil approach “La Tolomea,” an icy region where human heads are trapped on the floor in a disturbing display. But what really takes the horror to the next level is Satan himself casually devouring a human in the background, a shot which marks the beginning of a sequence culminating in a shock motus.

In a long shot, behind the icy formations, Satan is portrayed as a four-winged demon with horns and hairy limbs. He looks gigantic, filling up almost all the space in the segment of the frame he occupies. He is devouring a human, holding the body with both hands and shoving it into his mouth. He keeps doing this, unfazed, for the entire time the two protagonists approach

his terrain. After a title card reads "La Giudecca" (a place for Jewish traitors), we cut to our first medium shot in the film. However, while it is a medium shot for Satan, who is in the middle of the frame chewing on the sinner, it is a long full shot for the poets, who stand in front of the huge demonic figure and walk by until they disappear beneath him. Then, without a warning, we leave the two men and suddenly cut to a medium close-up of the face of Satan, munching the top part of the body while looking directly at the camera, in front of a black background. He gesticulates and raises his eyebrows, moving his hands menacingly.

This shock motus is enhanced by the fact that the sequence showcases the only time this type of editing has occurred during the entire film. The medium close-up here is extra shocking because of the different lengths of each shot that builds up to it: the long shot with Satan in the background lasts two minutes, the medium shot only ten seconds, and the medium close-up around two and a half minutes. While the proximity of the characters to the devil is progressively shortened, the time we spend on each shot that contains him is not. By staying longer on the most disturbing image with no respite for the viewer, where not even our protagonists are there to keep us company, this shock motus feels relentless, despite it containing only long takes and still shots. The techniques used to produce this shock motus are proof of the importance of *Inferno*; when it comes to cinema, “the innovative relationship between scene and shot makes this film a key text for understanding the transition toward more developed narratives” (Welle 41). This sequence contains one of the most memorable images of the film, perhaps even the most influential one judging by posterior visual representations of Satan in films.

Through a productive and efficient approach, the filmmakers produced a relevant example of a shock motus that disrupts the viewer far beyond *Inferno*’s happy ending. At the end of the story, the poets are able to leave hell through a subterranean path, but this image of the

Devil has remained in our collective consciousness for a long, long time. Even though the peak of a shock motus often occurs in an instant, the buildup which precedes it crystallizes this moving viewing experience; by taking its time to get there, the journey becomes all the more memorable.

Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) contains a shock motus that is built-up through suggestive imagery: from the subtle image of a split moon to the tool that will be used to gauge a woman's eye out. Even so, watching the film without knowing about the explicit violence that is to come, viewers wonder how far the directors will take this provocation. After the infamous shot, viewers become aware that they will not only be surprised by this surrealist journey; they will be shocked, and possibly appalled, as the directors intended. In *Final Destination 3* (2006), James Wong causes terror by showing the viewers exactly what is going to happen, making them watch the characters' demise with much more insight than any of those afflicted by the mortal incident. The tension of this build-up is enhanced by the step-by-step showcasing of the malfunctioning elements in the rollercoaster, oftentimes portrayed through detailed close-ups and extreme close-ups, and accompanied by foley so distinct that our understanding of the perilous situation becomes even sharper.

Vincenzo Natali's build-up of the shock motus in *Cube* (1997), on the contrary, is based on the viewers' fear of the unknown – here, the anxiety and fright come from our lack of understanding of the place, rules, and situation the first character finds himself in. As a man we do not know yet navigates the surreal prison reminiscent of a giant Rubik's cube, his slow movements in complete silence build an ominous atmosphere. When a metallic fence-like grid descends to cut him into pieces, viewers do not expect it. *Inferno* (1911), directed by Francesco Bertolini, Adolfo Padovan and Giuseppe De Liguoro, is the final example in this chapter, and

presents a shock motus that relies on scale and editing. While most of the shots in the film until the appearance of Satan are on the lengthy side and include the two main characters, an unpredictable medium close-up of the devil devouring a human breaks the status quo, forcing the viewers to face the greatest foe in Hell from up close and alone.

The relevance of this chapter lies in its demonstration of how shock can be produced in the horror genre using diverse techniques that do not rely on violence or gore, but in structures of emotional engagement. In the words of Del Rio, common sense "would have us say that an image is violent when the quantity of the forces involved results in extreme or extraordinary forms that surpass the cultural threshold or boundary of normative behaviour" (14). Nonetheless, as she explains: "A consideration of quality invariably involves the differential relations in the quantities of force expressed within one image alone or in the conjunction between two consecutive images" (15). This relationship between different images in succession is what she calls the "interval between perception and response" (16), which is actually the main culprit when it comes to producing the shock motus. By identifying and analyzing how horror films are able to shock us in a way that sticks with us, viewers become aware of how important editing is for cinema.

Chapter Four: The Reflexive Motus

I have chosen the word "reflexive" for this motus after learning about Bill Nichols's classification of different modes of documentaries. Nichols defines the "reflexive mode" as the one in which filmmakers engage with viewers "not only about the historical world but also about the problems and issues of representing it," signaling Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) as a fundamental example of reflexivity because it "deconstructs the impression of unimpeded access to reality and invites us to reflect on the process by which this impression is itself constructed" (Nichols 125). Accordingly, the cinematic reflexive motus happens when films purposely expose their own artifice and material mechanisms. The reflexive motus exposes the filmic elements that encourage our suspension of disbelief, peeling off layers, revealing the skeleton behind the flesh. This reflexivity can take the form of showing workers who are typically behind rather than in front of the camera, revealing a stripped-down set design, or tampering with the materiality of film, scratching its surface, for example. The reflexive motus can also add distinct layers of artifice to the film to remind us of what lies beneath (like dressing up a skeleton in a skeleton costume). Fourth wall breaking, self-referential and meta-cinematic elements also belong to this category of reflexive elements.

Overall, the reflexive motus challenges the trust established between viewers and the cinematic medium, deliberately reminding viewers that the filmed world they are immersed in is, in fact, a fictional artistic product. This knowledge induces in viewers a unique kind of thrill. An explanation for this phenomenon can be found in Christophe Wall-Romana's exploration of Epstein's first book (*La Poésie d'Aujourd'hui*). There, Wall-Romana highlights Epstein's view of fatigue as a permanent state of "exhaustion and pent-up feelings" that is characteristic of the individual in modern society:

> Because we are exposed to constant sensorial jolts in our means of transportation and repetitive tasks in our workplaces, our bodily capacities naturally become blunted, like the diminishing response to an ongoing stimulus. And because we belong to a systems-central industrial world that streamlines our experiences, our affective capacities are rarely solicited in their fuller spectrum and thus appear dormant, diffuse, or dammed up (19)

So, to heal this “sensorial and affective anaesthesia,” Epstein suggests that we embrace the (at the time) new art of cinema. As Wall-Romana explains, “the intermittency, shock and speed that cause fatigue and sensorial erosion in the first place are, as it were, native to the film apparatus” (20). Epstein argues that, because the cinematic medium contains these elements, it works as a homeopathic remedy to reanimate our minds and bodies. The reflexive motus reveals the cinematic apparatus in a thrilling act of intermittency that goes beyond the film’s fictional world. The reflexive motus actively shakes up the status quo, suddenly colouring the viewing experience with awe and existential self-reflection. One could assume that exposure to the cinematic apparatus would always result in a diminishment of awe, but that is not the case. This specific way of showcasing of a film’s artifice is done deliberately. A small portion of a microphone captured in a random shot, from a film that makes no attempt to breach the fourth wall, is most likely a mistake by the filmmakers. The reflexive motus, on the contrary, is included in a film for a purpose, be it for the tone, story, characters, or themes. Here, the previously established understanding of a film as a transparent rendering of its world is ruptured to reveal new, more complex meanings within its fabric; this is what causes awe in viewers. The reflexive motus is akin to a piece of canvas left untouched within a painting, making a point to showcase its physical configuration. The area of the canvas deliberately left unpainted

undermines the viewer's illusion that they are staring at a landscape; it reminds them of the concept of art itself and our own participation in the artistic process.

A great example illustrating this idea is the famous painting by René Magritte shrewdly entitled *The Treachery of Images*, which depicts a brown pipe over a hand-written text that reads "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (translated as "this is not a pipe"). This image is, indeed, merely a representation of an actual pipe, in reality no more than paint, canvas, time, and labor. The popularity of the painting, especially shortly after its first exhibition in 1929, was in part fueled by the absurdity of its premise, a description of an object that negates the very existence of said object while simultaneously presenting it to the observer in a seemingly matter-of-fact manner. The main exercise *The Treachery of Images* invites those who gaze upon it to indulge in, however, is more than just a zany conundrum. This work of art dares us to internalize the inherent absurdity in our complicit understanding of art itself. By insistently pushing the viewer away from its enchantment, Magritte's painting allows for self-reflection through the interrogation of our own perception of reality, just like the reflexive motus does. By undermining the conditions of cinematic representation we adhere to when watching a film, this motus takes away the sense of familiarity, like pulling a rug from under our feet.

We might return to the film and re-initiate our suspension of disbelief, but cinematic reflexivity destabilizes normalcy in a way that pairs with Kristeva's thoughts on uncanny encounters with abjection: "A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome" (2). This momentary otherness trains viewers to use critical thinking to imagine divergent modes of being and constitutional possibilities. This catharsis and expulsion from the film's world, like the abject, results in the "rejection and reconstruction of languages" (Kristeva

45). When the reflexive motus momentarily dismantles our suspension of disbelief, it is up to us to reconstruct it. This divergence from our viewing experience allows us to mentally deconstruct our perception of cinematic reality in a film and, by extension, to question and examine our perception of reality.

Her Name Was Torment II: Agony (2016)

Her Name Was Torment (2014) and its sequel, *Her Name Was Torment II: Agony (2016)*, both directed by Dustin Mills, are exactly the kind of films that Amos Vogel wrote about in his classic *Film as a Subversive Art* (1974). Here, in a way that is reminiscent of Bataille's *Documents*, Vogel shares with the reader a collection of curated films that have one important thing in common: they are largely considered taboo, controversial, blacklisted. It is "their affinity to trance … the subconscious, and their ability to influence masses and jump boundaries, that has forever made the cinema an appropriate target of the repressive forces in society – censors, traditionalists, the state" (11). In the case of *Torment*, which jumps boundaries in many different ways, no attempts to censor have been initiated; most people have never heard of this franchise. This is a series of low-budget independent films that is hard to find and mostly discussed in forums online. This dissertation is the first time the *Torment* duology has been written about from an academic perspective. The only two websites that contain full reviews of these works by Dustin Mills are *Ginger Nuts of Horror* and *Horror Society*, non-refereed outlets that specifically focus on taboo horror films and/or novels. The next example of the reflexive motus is relevant because Mills plays with the classic technique of switching colour palettes in a new and particularly grotesque way: by displaying the splicing of a human head on screen. With just a gradual visual change, he conjures up a masterpiece of expectation and delivery that throws viewers off and, at the same time, draws them in towards the gory action.

Her Name Was Torment does not follow a plot. Rather, it uses one central concept as a focal point to project visions of torture, mutilation, murder, and necrophilia. The prism from which these ghastly visions emerge is the disjointed story of a female patient in a high security mental ward, where a psychiatrist records interviews for what appears to be a personal project. Our main character is serial killer Torment (played by Alison Egan), a young woman identified by the psychiatrist as "patient 394" who apparently suffers from overwhelming episodes of dementia where she believes some people are celestial beings sent by a despotic god (the "overseer") who compels her to dissect and conserve their physical bodies. Her face is never revealed to us, as she wears a mask whenever her face is not blurred by editing. Said mask looks like a piece of crude beige leather from nose to forehead on top of a second bright red mask resembling freshly skinned human flesh, with two ominous dark holes for eyes. Unlike Leatherface's famous masks, which are made of skin, this one looks like an elaborate product made from non-organic materials, perhaps even purchased at a specialty Halloween store. Instead of expressing herself through her appearance, as the iconic villain from *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* does, Torment finds an outlet for her creativity through the act of torture itself. She explains to the therapist that her victims' body parts should be kept in receptacles for her (seemingly imagined) celestial beings, but follows no specific instructions when it comes to mutilate and dismember, only guided by her whims.

Despite the grim tone, there is a strong focus on eroticism all throughout the *Torment* films. The necrophilia scenes, in which Torment achieves climax while engaging with an almost skeletal corpse, are shot from a distance that showcases the attributes of her tattooed body and her sexual enjoyment of the act. The two films featuring Torment lean in heavily on these erotic elements. These films understand what they are and who they are made for: anyone who is

interested in the mix that results from exploitative violence and sex dominated by a woman. During these films, Torment is not victimized herself. This is not a story of revenge; we are never shown her character occupying the role of the tortured. Watching a half-naked woman psychologically and physically destroy several men of different stripes is weirdly thrilling and satisfying in its reversal of the more typical staging of a man torturing a woman.

Aside from the over-the-top brutality of the gore scenes and the explicit sexuality on screen, the defining feature of the *Torment* series is its experimental editing, reminiscent of a collage of various, at time contrasting, aesthetics. At least half of the shots in the film serve an emotional, sensorial purpose rather than a narrative one in any way. Dialogue is only present during the interviews conducted by the psychiatrist, while most of the sound during the rest of the scenes comes in the form of grunts, moans, and screams, with brief intervals of subtle electronic music. That said, some of the dialogue is surprisingly interesting and poignant. In one of her interviews with the doctor in the first film, Torment says "the angels took me apart, and they didn't know how to put me back together," a sentence that seems to echo not only the fragmentation of the body she subjects her victims to, but also the fragmented nature of the film itself. As per her mention of God as “the overseer,” it is up to us to decide if this nickname is a sly reference to the director or the viewer; maybe neither, maybe both.

Throughout both films, the use of lighting and post-production editing are exploited to their maximum potential to give each scene a distinct look and feel, turning them into vaguely connected entries, individual tales of Torment's endeavours. The use of black and white and coloured filters is part of the director's toolkit as well, and they particularly shine in *Her Name Was Torment II: Agony* (2016). Entire segments are made to look as if they were ripped right from a cheap, glitchy security camera; other ones are bathed in ethereal neon greens and blues;

others feature sepia tones that slightly darken around the frame, looking like a cheesy representation of an antique love letter. In this way, the entirety of the film can be described as an experience exemplary of the reflexive motus: the clashing of the found-footage aesthetic with the hyper-stylized, dream-like sequences constantly shakes viewers up, reminding us that we are indeed watching a fantasy. In the case of this one specifically, elements such as plot and character development, while initially introduced as potentially significant, are ultimately less meaningful than other aspects of the film.

A significant example of the reflexive motus comes from a segment in which we witness the collaboration between Torment and her newfound "sister," presumably called Agony. According to the therapist, Torment "empathized with her" and "even loved her." Perhaps this is why she decides to recruit Agony, who joins her as another masked, half-naked woman in her mission. "Everyone needs a job, a purpose," Torment confesses to the camera in one scene. This black and white scene, only accompanied by slightly ominous synths, is set in a dingy basement where a long-haired naked man is tied to a chair. The two women approach him slowly, theatrically, and stand before him until Torment gives her sister a head signal to move forward. The hand-held camera travels between Agony's masked face almost touching the man's face, and close-ups of the surgical tools Torment is picking up at the back of the room. She chooses a few, and scalpel in hand, she proceeds to roughly cut out a nipple out of his chest. Black blood drips in an extreme close-up of the wound, which Agony soon starts picking at with the tip of her finger. The torture continues for around six minutes, with the women lovingly bonding over every piece of flesh removed from the restrained victim. They cut his tongue out, crack his fingers, and then laboriously remove a couple of them off using the tiniest pair of scissors, which would of course make this a very slow and painful process.

Torment gives her sister a long machete, which, after admiring in slow-motion, they both hold with one hand. They hold it above the man's head carefully, and Torment takes a few steps back, letting Agony do the work this time under her vigilant gaze. As Agony raises the machete, the viewer waits for the money-shot. All of the "practical effects" (those created physically on set) up to this point have excelled technically. For this reason, the viewer expects to lament the fact that this one action will be shot in black and white; the colours of gore and texture of blood are some of the most adrenaline-inducing and hard to get elements of graphic violence. Cutting a head in half and making it seem realistic is a gargantuan feat, and it makes sense that the film will play it safe by using a monochrome palette… except it does not.

The reflexive motus begins as colours start slowly coming back to the screen. As a hand-held shot moves from a medium close-up to extreme close-up on the face of the terrorized man, we become aware of his pale skin, the dark red marks on his face, the dried blood dripping from his mouth as he looks up in disbelief. One second later, a shot of Agony about to slice his head open is rapidly followed by a close-up of his semblance divided by a red line, and suddenly a shot of it parting in two halves with the loud sound of a juicy fruit squashed open.

These two shots are quick, but extremely effective; sticky threads of blood connect the two pieces of head together, revealing a treasure of wet, shiny gore inside. Yes, the sisters do explore and revel in the head's contents, but the pinnacle of gory joy happens when the colour is returned just before the slicing, which makes my heart yell with anticipation and euphoria. It is like the director winking at you, telling you that you are about to enjoy this moment in full colour. It creates a connection between viewers and the film, enabling and encouraging engagement. At the same time, it betrays our expectation that the colour format we started with is the one that will persist. Instead, we experience a version of the iconic transitional moment of

sepia-to-colour in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and realize that our experience of colour has been in the hands and control of the director all along. The change of colour palette in *Oz* is meant to signify a different location and/or reality, but the burst of colour also serves to thrill the viewers, who are unaccustomed to the vibrancy. This scene from *Oz* evokes an ecstatic feeling, and so does the scene from *Torment*. Viewers who wish for explicit gore take the role of Dorothy and marvel at a wonderful surprise, as Mills abandons colour continuity to incorporate and highlight our own cinematic enjoyment.

This reflexive motus causes an electrifying sense of temporary detachment from the plot that makes for a potentially transformative viewing experience. This is because, unlike films that use the same tone and colour palette throughout, *Torment* disrupts our immersion in the story to force our focus on this gory shot alone, almost separating it from the narrative. As a result, the rest of the film becomes more enjoyable from a purely aesthetic perspective, as we pay special attention to the practical effects that follow the transition from black and white to colour. This move perfectly embodies the film's preference for its carnographic spectacles over narrative, inviting us to consider different modes of viewing and fostering an appreciation for the craft behind the scenes. In the first film of the supposed trilogy (part three has not yet seen the light of day), the therapist says that he is intrigued by Torment because he is trying to "find out what broke her." The cause of her madness is never found. The film is not an exploration of mental illness, or an attempt to say something deep about anything. This is an indulgence of the senses for bloodthirsty horror fans. Torment remains beautifully broken, and there is no need to fix her.

This example of the reflexive motus is noteworthy because it shows how a creative and skillful use of colours and editing filters can make viewers pay attention to the film mechanisms at play. This is especially true when a variety of filming styles are employed, as a few might

stand out from others. When the entire film is shot in the same exact style, however, other evocative techniques can be used to move the viewer in this manner.

***August Underground's Penance* (2007)**

The *August Underground* trilogy, which nonchalantly follows the murdering lifestyle of its protagonist (Peter), is mainly known among horror fans for the unforgiving detail and realism of its practical effects, which a significant size of the runtime showcases. Fred Vogel provides the film's metaphorical soul as its director, co-writer, and star; Jerami Cruise tends to the film's (equally important) body as its special effects supervisor. Cruise's work with Vogel led to the birth of ToeTag EFX (once a modest joint based in Pittsburgh, then a Los Angeles company), and his work can be seen now in Marvel blockbusters like *Black Panther* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). It is a shame that these latter films rely so heavily on CGI, because the almost naturalistic, medical-like precision Cruise brings to explicit gore scenes is the kind of art that only a passionate, dedicated human using physical materials can create. His props and make-up feel like they have weight, texture, smell; he embeds his work with aura. The exemplary instance of the reflexive motus from this film, however, is disturbing without including a lot of blood on screen. In it, a quiet Christmas night turns into snuff-like found-footage through Vogel's unforgiving camera.

Reviews of these films can only be found in specialized websites, a clear indicator of their word-of-mouth fame. Zoë Rose Smith from *Ghouls Magazine*, for example, calls it "The most disturbing franchise ever made." When a Limited Collector's Edition Blu-ray/DVD of *August Underground* was released in 2023, *Severed Cinema* states that, 20 years later, the filmmakers "have taken the underground horror community hostage," while Corey Danna writes for *Horror Geek Life* describes it as "incredibly vile and nauseating, yet at the same time, it's a

fascinating film." This dissertation is the first example of scholarship on these abject cinematic works.

While Shellie McMurdo does not write about *August Underground* in her 2022 book *Blood on the Lens: Trauma and Anxiety in American Found Footage Horror Cinema*, she names the trilogy in a filmography recommendations segment. She explains the reflexive tone of the found footage subgenre in a way that inadvertently resonates with Vogel's films, where the commitment to certain documentary aesthetics "serves to place these narratives within the audience's reality" because "[the] kind of visuality we associate with documentary truth encourages us to read these films as having a relationship with the 'real' too" (41). Unless we are lied to for the purpose of a prank, we know that horror films like *August* are not real found footage, but that they are "attempting to create a very specific type of realism; one that is based on the viewer's perception of other media forms such as documentary and home video" (Turner 73). Found footage films are reflexive in nature; as Peter Turner states, "they are marked by their own artificiality" (68). Nonetheless, the aesthetic authenticity of the trilogy's first instalment (*August Underground*, 2001) and its sequel, aided by Vogel's snuff-like filming style and aesthetic, once culminated in the filmmakers' detention while in the Rue Morgue Festival of Fear in Toronto. "The first response from the film was, 'Is it real? Is it not real?'," he describes in an interview with *Variety*, "Even when I showed it to a few of my very good friends, a few of them wouldn't talk to me for a few months." With that in mind, it is not surprising that *August Underground* is often praised for its practical effects' prowess. *Severed Cinema* calls the look of the films "as realistic as it gets." Smith writes that, "by focusing on hyper realistic gore special effects, you begin to sense that you can actually smell this film." As Danna says, "The effects work is stellar, and using the home video style to shoot the picture expertly hides any

imperfections in them, adding to the realistic nature of the piece." However, the film is much more than a technical demo reel; the infamous place it occupies in the cinematic horror canon owes just as much to Vogel's dedication and sense of style.

The example of the reflexive motus analyzed in this segment is noteworthy because its commitment to realism is twofold. On one hand, the raw quality of the filming style closely emulates the work of a person with limited film experience, while the editing seems random in a way most found footage films decidedly avoid, introducing casual snippets of non-snuff in between the explicit depravity. On the other hand, the mundane, non-romanticized portrayal of serial killer/torturer Peter offers the viewer a believable representation of what people capable of making snuff films are like; he feels more like a mediocre human than a serial killer character. Peter is largely played as an average guy with an average life outside the murder basement. He is not a crime genius, nor an artist, nor a tragic tortured soul. The realism of the filming style combines with this almost naturalistic portrayal to create a reflexive motus which effectively blurs the line between reality and fiction. From this perspective, the reflexive motus explored in this segment uniquely explores the link between nostalgia and reflexivity. The sequence which contains it specifically adopts the aesthetics of home movies in a Christmas setting, portraying a familiar scene with a sardonically dark tone. In doing so, it forces viewers to acknowledge both their desire to engage with nostalgic narratives, and the ultimately fragile nature of these narratives. Svetlana Boym defines nostalgia as "a longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed," and also as "a romance with one's fantasy" (xiii). This sequence violently disrupts the fantasy of an idyllic family environment, inviting the suggestion that the home from our childhood memories, perhaps, never existed. After examining different scenes and shots

from the trilogy that play with the disruption of nostalgia, the next segment delves into the Christmas home video sequence in the third film, *August Underground's Penance*.

The trilogy opens with a content warning followed by an out of focus, VHS aesthetic close-up shot of a beer bottle that the camera person is dumping on the concrete floor. Afterwards, the camera rises to meet a chubby white guy dressed in ordinary clothes who approaches the person filming. His dark hair and ear piercing vaguely follow the fashion of the early 2000s, spiked like a more relaxed version of Guy Fieri's hairdo. This is Peter, our protagonist, who soon invites both his friend and the audience to enter a shed that secretly leads to an underground area. "You are going to love this," he tells us as we all go down the dingy stairs, in a slightly excited innocent tone that makes him sound more like a YouTuber in a geeky unboxing video than a serial killer. The way Peter behaves towards the camera, fully aware of its presence, constantly reminds us that are watching a film. At the same time, however, his characterization as someone who severely lacks self-awareness makes the film feel as it is made from actual found footage. This is because the horror cinematic genre often provides fictional serial torturers and murderers with a certain pathos and theatricality that stems from specific goals and/or explanations of how they came to be, a practice that viewers are accustomed to. Art the Clown from the *Terrifier* films is driven by a demonic force; Tony Todd's *Candyman* from the 1992's eponymous film seeks vengeance. Jack from *The House that Jack Built* (2018) is presented as a textbook psychopath from an early age, while the slasher from *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (1986) seemingly endured an extremely traumatic childhood. So, what is Peter's motive? We never know, and it does not matter. He does not engage in snuff for money either; he does it for his own enjoyment, because he can. His crimes are not informed by backstories or

reasoning and thus exist in a vacuum. Like actual snuff films, *August* does not come with explanations.

Most importantly, rather than coming across as a ruthless psychopath and therefore an archetypical horror villain, Peter's attitude is more akin to that of an edgy loser. For example, in a scene that happens in the basement where he keeps his victims, he quickly gets nauseated by the smell and starts gagging and coughing, asking his friend to stop the recording. Another scene in the basement shows his interactions with a bounded, tortured woman. In a particularly grotesque and disgusting bit, Peter's friend films his free hand grabbing a piece of magazine from the floor, dipping it into the excrement. "Do you think I can make her eat her own shit?" "Fucking go for it, dude. That's disgusting," the main character replies before releasing a hilariously high pitch, earnest giggle. The lack of expressivity from the victims and the fact that their faces are rarely shown makes the viewing experience a less empathetic and more detached one. Instead of the reactions of the victimized, who are gagged and blind-folded most of the time, we get Peter coughing pitifully and almost vomiting while he is half naked, sweaty, and arduously cleaning the mess left by a corpse in a bathtub. The viewer can almost smell the excrement and rot as he finally pukes into the blood-and-shit covered toilet. His friend zooms the camera in to focus on his naked belly, hanging out from his white underwear as he kneels by the toilet. The accumulation of these kinds of shots throughout the trilogy, paired with the fact that Peter does not care about how he is perceived in the recordings, only adds to the authentic feel of his persona.

The third installment is framed as a couple's journey. We follow Peter and his girlfriend Crusty as they commit crimes together and film each other. Even though their partnership is broken at the end in an extremely nihilistic way (with Peter abusing Crusty and she ultimately

killing herself by self-asphyxiation), there is something weirdly charming and at times even adorable about their relationship. For the first time, the link between the characters feels engaging; it adds an interesting tone to the film as these two criminally insane individuals bond over other people's suffering. Their antics are somewhat silly in a way that the franchise had not let itself fully explore before, making this entry an honest embracing of the grotesque yet simple fun that these films offer, possibly alluding to the playful tone of Oliver Stone's *Natural Born Killers* (1994). This delightful touch of levity in the film's mix of tones culminates in the most entertaining crimes yet committed by Peter. This is also the film in which the footage showcases the most diverse locations, allowing for a refreshing change of lighting and scenery from the usual basement setting. The most engaging part of the film comes when they sneak upon a family home on Christmas night. This is also the sequence that contains the trilogy's most effective reflexive motus.

Crusty and Peter pass each other the camera to showcase every step of the way, from their spying through the window to their entrance, where Peter greets the father with a hammer to the head. Crusty enjoys filming Peter as he violates the corpse of the mother while the dad chokes on its own blood. Crusty terrorizes the daughter while laughing. As the little girl bites her arm, she grabs a package from under the tree and mockingly yells "MY present!" "What did you get?!" Peter asks enthusiastically when Crusty, still struggling with the child (whom she soon strangles), gets her hand stuck in a cardboard box and shakes it in the air. Crusty, who has put on the lavender coloured sweater that belonged to the girl, sitting on top of her corpse, grabs the biggest box: a green and red wrapped one, which she opens delighted as Peter films. She gleefully tears off the paper. "I like your shirt. Is that new?" he asks. "It is, I just got it for Christmas" "Sweet!" Inside the box is a huge brown teddy bear. "I love this!" she hugs the

stuffed animal, “What's his name?” “Ruff!” She proceeds to hug the half-naked mom and kiss her chest “Thanks mommy. Thank you! I love it!” “Mom gives the best fucking gifts!” Peter adds.

The shots in this sequence express the reflexive motus not only by engaging with the viewers’ perception of snuff/found footage but also by activating (and messing with) their very own memories. This example of found footage-like recording style is a twisted, depraved take on good-old Christmas home videos. While the sequence from *August Underground’s Mordum* will probably resonate more with western audiences, and specifically north American audiences who celebrate Christmas, the act of recording a family event is pretty much universal, especially for those born between the 1970s and the 2000s. One of the reasons these scenes work so well is the fact that nostalgia is related to reflexivity: in order to relive the past within our minds, we can only look inwards. Nostalgia arises from the viewers’ position of watching moments from the past and feeling the loss of that time. As Boym writes, “A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface” (xiii-xiv). *August* takes advantage of this involuntary emotional reaction; it infects the imagery from the past, so that our attempts to pair it with the present result in a potentially transformative experience where we wonder if the frame was broken all along. The tone and mise-en-scene of this home invasion sequence, during a moment in which people celebrate joy and innocence, reaches deep into our own personal nostalgia, tainting childhood memories with the killers’ profane energy.

In the first two examples in this chapter, we have seen how the reflexive motus can disturb the viewer while enhancing the explicit gore and abject elements of the films in different

ways. Now let us explore an example of the reflexive motus where the defining element is something entirely different: dialogue.

***Scream* (1996)**

The influence of Wes Craven in horror cinema and film in general cannot be overstated but is well documented and explored. His contributions span different horror subgenres: from rape revenge in *The Last House on the Left* (1972), to so-called hicksplotaition in *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), to slasher in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), a film which saw the birth of infamous demonic killer Freddy Krueger, and which kick-started one of the biggest cinematic franchises to date. Craven's versatile exploration of sub-genres continued in the 1990s, with his foray into horror comedy, *The People Under the Stairs* (1991), and the self-referential metanarrative of *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994). However, one of his most popular films, which spawned a second franchise, would come later in that decade: *Scream*, from 1996. As Calum Waddell states, the director is "best known to even the least dedicated follower of horror cinema for his work on the blockbuster Scream series … or as the father of Freddy Krueger" (1).

Described by Kim Newman as "the most self-aware, self-reflective slasher ever made" (53), *Scream* represented a "deconstruction of the genre" (Turnock 241) in its subversion of slasher tropes, while still embracing the suspense and violence that characterizes this style of films. One moment in the film that is emblematic of this deconstruction is productive of the reflexive motus. This is a scene in which a character is almost killed, which includes references to an existing horror film as well as the actor who portrays the endangered, and oblivious, character.

The legacy of *Scream* and its sequels has been examined from diverse angles; Alexandra West, for example, focuses on the films' decidedly feminist protagonist Sidney Prescott, arguing

that their popularity "stemmed from the fact that these films called into question the very rituals which were thought to make up a slasher and subverting them, but also because these films focused on the young women at the center [of the narrative]" (1). David Greven approaches the film from the perspective of queer studies, stating that *Scream*, "in its winking, deconstructive synthesis of the horror and comedy genres, places its focus on the male body, figured as the site of violation, homoerotic play, and homophobic rage" (72), focusing on the relationship between Stu and Billy, the teenagers behind the killer's mask.

What all these observations have in common is the acknowledgement of the franchise's most distinctive feature: its self-awareness. The reflexive motus examined in this segment is defined by this feature and shakes viewers up by playfully interfering with our following of story events. This motus alludes to the cinematic elements of production behind the screen, becoming productive of a potentially transforming viewing experience as it causes a temporary rupture and reset of our suspension of disbelief. However, this example not only references actual people involved in the creation of *Scream* (in this case, one of its actors), but also other existing horror films. This moment recalibrates the viewer's perspective while indulging in the sense of belonging that comes with complicit fandom and the ability to identify intertextual references. The segment that culminates in a reflexive motus, of course, involves Randy Meeks, a character who, as Newman mentions, "spouts non-stop slasher movie trivia" (53). Indeed, this teenager played by Jamie Kennedy uses his knowledge of horror film conventions to survive the slasher, while also engaging the viewer from a meta-narrative perspective.

Because serial killer Ghostface (a nickname that refers to the eerie, iconic mask worn by the killer) is still on the run after his latest murder, classes are suspended at Woodsboro High School. To celebrate the occasion, the desensitized teens plan a party to which many of the

suspects and potential victims, their classmates and friends, are invited. The chance that the mysterious slasher will attack once more is so high that even the iconic reporter Gale Weathers (Courteney Cox) makes an appearance at the house of the gathering, being able to sneak in a hidden camera while searching for information, hoping to see some bloody action. She soon gets her wish granted, as Ghostface is indeed hiding amongst the attendees.

In the scene, a bunch of teens are gathered around the couch in front of a TV playing John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). In one of several early instances of the reflexive motus, Randy delves into his famous description of "the rules" one must supposedly follow to not get killed in a horror film. They serve now as a small collection of the tropes that were most commonplace until, more or less, *Scream*'s release: "sex equals death," never do drugs or alcohol, and never say "I'll be right back." The film itself helps make these rules outdated when, among other subversions, it overwrites the notion that the final girl is always a virgin. Nevertheless, Randy is not wrong in this instance: They are currently all in danger, and being drunk, high, and getting frisky provides the perfect distraction to forget about it. From her news van, Gale watches him explain the rules thanks to her hidden camera. This is a screen on which the teenagers are being recorded from the perspective of the TV, adding yet another layer of meta-narrative to the scene.

A bit later that night, only a small group of Woodsboro students are still watching *Halloween* with Randy when he receives a call. His drunken face mutates from apathy to somber shock as he receives the news that the school's principal (unforgettably portrayed by Henry Winkler) has been found dead. However, after he tells his classmates that "he was gutted and hung from the goalpost on the football field" their reaction is to rush to their cars, happily and excitedly, to check out the corpse. Randy is disappointed because the film was "just getting to

the good part." Not aware that Sidney was just barely able to escape Ghostface, who is on the second floor at that very moment, he lies down and resumes his watching of the Carpenter hit.

We get a medium close-up of the TV screen showing Laurie, played by Jamie Lee Curtis, carefully opening a door expecting to find Michael Myers. The cold blue aesthetic of the film, made fuzzier than its original version by the 1990's screen within a screen, contrasts with the colourful yellow curtains of the party house behind. "Oh… watch out" a sluggish Randy says while lying on the couch, in a full shot that starts with him in the middle of the frame and suddenly tilts sideways into a Dutch angle where his body seems to be dangling. Just when the film on TV makes the characteristic sound that *Halloween* does when Michael Myers appears, Ghostface shows up behind Randy, staying for a moment by the doorframe.

We are taken back to the medium close-up of the TV, where Randy's silhouette is reflected on the grave of the slasher's sister. We are then shown a medium shot of Randy hugging a pillow, his eyes focused on the screen. "Jamie, look behind you" says the character being played by Jamie Kennedy, as darkness grows behind Randy, still oblivious on the couch, caused by Ghostface's closeness to him. "Behind you… look behind you… turn around" he insists as the camera tilts again, twisting upwards. After one more shot of Randy's reflection on the TV, another long shot of the couch moves slowly to form another Dutch angle, this time with Ghostface standing behind it, stopping when the two bodies appear to be horizontal in the middle of the frame. We get a medium close-up of the killer raising his knife with both hands, ready to deliver the killing blow to Randy, who says "Jamie, turn around." In that same moment, however, Sidney's screams alert Ghostface, who flees without Randy ever having noticed his presence.

This example of a reflexive motus is relevant because of its unapologetic embrace of the genre's culture; it creates a connection between viewers and the film, enabling and encouraging fandom engagement. However, unlike previous examples of the reflexive motus in the films discussed earlier in this chapter, *Scream*'s reflexive motus is based upon external knowledge viewers have of the slasher genre and of the *Scream* franchise in particular. The impact of the scene is such that, in his review for *Sight and Sound*, Newman refers to it despite not being pivotal to the plot, writing that it provides a "scene-within-a-scene sense of infinity" (53). This motus makes us want to look behind us; if the abject breaks the fourth wall this forcefully in the film we are watching, it might as well breach the separation between that world and ours – or so we feel.

So far, we have explored reflexive filming as well as its conjunction with the use of reflexive elements within films. Regardless of how close these entries dare to portray and approach our reality, we have not yet encountered an example of the reflexive motus that is directly based on real-life events. The next entry in this chapter, however, fits that description.

***The Wolf House* (2018)**

The Wolf House is a film that hurts. Directed by Cristóbal León and Joaquín Cociña, and co-written with author Alejandra Moffat, this Chilean production tells the story of a young girl escaping a cult colony where she is abused. Every second recorded is composed of several stop-motion frames, except for the opening segment, which lasts around three minutes. The most outstanding attribute of *The Wolf House* is indeed its marvelous animation, which features ever-changing paintings on different surfaces as well as moving props, puppetry, and other unique mixed media narrative devices. It took León and Cociña five years to complete the project, which was filmed in a peculiarly reflexive fashion; they shot in different museums around the

world as a live performance, where the audience was able to observe their process without getting the full picture until the film's release. As Nina Siegal writes for *The New York Times*, the filmmakers used "life-size models and sets that are in a constant state of evolution," which they set up in "temporary studios within art gallery spaces and museums from Chile to Amsterdam, creating the film with art aficionados as their witnesses." But there is another major element in the making of *The Wolf House* that invites the reflexive motus: this harrowing story is based on real events. In the example of the reflexive motus this segment, we watch how a young victim of abuse unravels not just mentally but physically, revealing the stop-motion animation behind the character and thus connecting viewers with the material reality of generational trauma.

The motus explored here is relevant because it plays with the relationship between actual historical events and the story at hand, which is largely portrayed without actors appearing visually. These are not facts about the horror genre or film production, but about one of the most traumatic displays of repression in South America. The tension between reality and fiction manifests in the duality of film's appearance, both intriguing in its creativity and disturbingly uncanny. As Julián Saldarriaga states, "the harrowing narrative and formal structure of *The Wolf House* blur the lines between internal and external, repulsion and fascination, recalling the destabilizing effects of abjection" (107). Along with Saldarriaga's, mine is one of the first significant critical discussions the film has received. Here it is important to point out that this reflexive motus operates in a different way for someone who knows Chilean history when compared to viewers who do not have that knowledge and therefore do not know what to expect. The following paragraphs will delve into this context while leading to the sequence productive of reflexive motus, to then highlight instances within the film in which the "aesthetic of handcrafted

body horror" (Saldarriaga 108) aids the representation of generational trauma, moving the viewer without a word.

Colonia Dignidad ("Dignity Colony") is a real place. Located in the south of Chile, now under the name Villa Baviera, this isolated, segregated German commune was founded in 1961 by Paul Schäfer, a minister who fled his country to avoid charges for child sexual abuse. He served the Nazi party in World War II and became a sect leader afterwards; when he arrived in Chile, he had with him a number of followers as well as kidnapped German children, which he continued to bring into the colony for decades. Under the disguise of a puritan and virtuous agricultural commune, innumerable atrocities and crimes against humanity were committed in the area. People living there were kept inside the premises for life against their will, forced to only speak in their native German, mentally and physically punished by a system led by Schäfer. People of all ages were exploited for labor to the point of slavery. Children were separated from their parents and regularly assaulted. The commune functioned as a torture centre under Agusto Pinochet's dictatorship in the 1970s, as stated by Carlos Basso in his book *La Secta Perfecta* (*The Perfect Sect*). These facts along with the wider story of Colonia Dignidad have been documented in English by outlets such as the *BBC* ("Secrets of Ex-Nazi's Chilean Fiefdom"), *Al Jazeera* ("The Colony: Chile's Dark Past Uncovered"), *Reuters* ("German Sect Victims Seek Escape From Chilean Nightmare Past"), and the *European Center for Constitutional and Human Rights* ("Colonia Dignidad Remains a Dark Chapter of German Legal History").

Despite the testimonies of the very few people who managed to escape in the earlier decades after its inauguration, the Chilean government did nothing to stop Colonia Dignidad until the 21st century. Schäfer was only convicted in 2004, and several accomplices of his were not convicted until 2010. He and his cohorts accumulated immense wealth through agricultural

products like honey and bread, which one could purchase at some grocery shops well into the early 2000s. The organization also produced its own propagandistic filmed media, where idyllic videos portrayed the colony as an Amish-like, harmless collective.

The Wolf House's introductory segment features a pastiche of one of those videos. Its rhetorical accuracy and early television look are so spot-on that just a few details make it distinct from the real thing. These are, namely, the use of certain shots whose darkly evocative power would not have been approved by the propagandists (such as the forceful smile of a nurse), and the fact that, at the end, it is said that the following picture was restored thanks to the efforts of Cristobal León and Joaquín Cociña to preserve the legacy of Colonia Dignidad. This meta-narrative device is aided by Rainer Krause's voice; self-described as the "Shepherd" of the community, his narration is used through the entirety of the film as well as in the introductory video, thus imbedding the overall tone with a sense of legitimate continuity. This character has the final word as well, presenting and concluding the story as if it was a morality tale to indoctrinate his followers.

The core of the story is told from the perspective of the fugitive Maria (voiced by Amalia Kassai), who finds refuge in an abandoned house from a seemingly all-powerful wolf, also voiced by Krause. These two conflicting and contradicting narratives perfectly illustrate the dissonance between the façade erected by a powerful abuser and the confused recounting of his young victim. Maria's voice is fragile and vulnerable. The Wolf's voice is textured, mellifluous, disgustingly seductive. Both speak mostly in broken Spanish with a strong German accent and occasional German words. Krause's voice in particular has a chilling, haunting effect on the viewer. The way he extends certain sounds and words creates an uncomfortable feeling of

controlled and covert depravity that is hard to shake. Even though Maria is seemingly free from the wolf, he still exists as a disembodied presence in her life; she can always hear him nearby.

Beginning with a series of title cards set to the recognizable music of a military marching band, we are presented with a fairytale view of the plot: Maria was a girl in the colony who “spent time dreaming and playing with the animals instead of working.” One day she was “disobedient,” and let three pigs escape. As punishment, she was ordered to spend one hundred days and nights without communicating with anyone. “It's not fair,” she thought, “I don't want anybody to tell me what to do.” She ran into the forest looking for a place to hide, the written narration concludes, right before we hear Maria's voice for the first time as she mutters “The wolf is close” in German.

We now enter the story from her POV. When opening the door to the abandoned house, the drawn gray background turns into a real door. “Hola,” she greets both the possible inhabitants and the audience. These new dark walls come alive with stop motion paintings of windows, furniture, and decorations, almost all in white, until colour starts to spread slowly into the picture, first by some actual clothes hanging from a rack, followed by the face of our protagonist. Breaking the POV, she appears as a painting on a real door: a tired blonde girl with blue eyes. “Are there any Chileans here?” she asks, “I need refuge.” But it seems at first that she is alone in this place. “Don't tell on me. I'm good” she informs the void.

What follows is an interesting, intricately detailed interpretation of what life in isolation feels like. Maria's figure transforms just as much as the house does, turning from painting to paper mâché to a puppet, often contorting in unsettling ways until finding the appropriate shape for the moment. The oppressive atmosphere of the house is stark, with electric lighting often dwindling, always giving the impression that there is a growing number of dark rooms and

corners to get lost in. The claustrophobic world of Maria is marked by this lack of natural light; the artificial, shrouded light emanating from bulbs give the already unsettling models an even more uncanny quality.

Things take a turn when Maria finds two pigs huddled in the washroom. She quickly becomes a friendly caregiver of them; "You are so brave," she shares, "How did you escape the wolf?" and "Don't have fear, I don't want to eat you. I promise you. I told you that I'm not like the wolf." She sings to the animals and consoles them as if they were babies, in the process soothing herself too. She sings them a German lullaby while the walls make grotesque sounds at every change in the nature of the house. They watch TV and she meditates, "I don't miss anyone. Here I can play and sing. I'm going to transform my piggies into beautiful creatures that will never leave me ... a magic ball will help me and nobody will punish me." We observe the girl and her pigs all sitting in a couch in the middle of the frame, a full shot of the found family from the POV of the television set, yet in a slightly shaky hand-held manner.

An outstanding reflexive moment occurs as we hear the voice of the opening narrator once again. He is both the founder of the colony and the wolf that children fear. This notion does not become clear immediately, but the way in which he describes this scene, talking directly to the audience, is remarkable in its voyeuristic tone. Absorbed in her own thoughts and distracted by the screen, Maria does not hear the subtly sensual voice calling out to her. Or does she?
He speaks slowly, with measured contempt and malice: "Here is Maria. She looks so happy and calm building her home." Right after this remark, the girl's hair disappears, the painted colour leaves her face, her smile turns into numbness. One of the most grotesque and disturbing moments of the film occurs when he starts a call that will recur throughout the film:

“Mariiiiiaaa...” he says, and the colour drips off the girl until she is all white. “Mariiiiiaaa...” he calls again, and her figure loses all defined characteristics, her face leaning to the side to reveal the puppet’s raw material, here portrayed as gooey, unstable paper mâché. The previously cozy couch folds into itself and turns coal-black, sliding the pigs to each side until only she remains seated.

Maria's face starts unraveling. The material twirls into itself, eliminating her features completely, reducing her head to a shriveled amputated stump. As The Wolf/Shepherd lovingly talks to her in German (“My beautiful little bird...”) Maria is no longer human. She has become a mummy-like disheveled being, her arms succumbing to the same shrivelling process that overtook her head, her body held together by scraps of material. But her body does not stop its self-destruction; from the top down, she dissolves into an even less stable form, where a pink interior made of soft materials is revealed. The pieces start becoming smaller and smaller, until she's just a pile of slightly gory-looking fabric, which then finally disappears.

“Can you hear me?” He asks, apparently now to all of us. The room we see onscreen becomes progressively darker and more expressionist as we now observe it from The Wolf's point of view. A 180-degree shot of the place shows the shadows growing. “Mariiiiiaaa...” he calls to her, getting ever closer to the TV, which glitches until it occupies the entire frame, showing a wolf in the woods. “I would like you to be happy. What is your house made of? Did you close the doors and windows? Remember, a stranger shouldn't come into a real house.” He is talking to us as well as to her, a move that makes the viewers empathize even more with Maria and feel just as threatened. The Wolf is after everyone who listens. His voice actively breaks into her and into the house. The next scene, which transitions from the TV screen, starts with Maria turning it off in a different room. She tries during the story to not listen to The Wolf’s constant

remarks, and instead focus on his piglets, who start morphing into human children, with several abominable versions in between changes. She names them Ana and Pedro and interacts with them like a mother. She heals her injuries after a fire in the house by covering them in honey; this turns the malformed pig-children into idealized, Aryan versions of themselves. She explains to them how, where she lives, the honey was hidden under earth and the Shepherd chose who to give it to. “The brown children begged for it, but he wouldn't give it to them. They’re dumb, he said. They’re lazy, he said. They punished me in a dark room. There were many secret doors. I was not allowed to cry.”

At the end of her made-up children's journey, when the food in the house runs out, the humanoid pigs turn on Maria and try to eat her alive. She prays in German for them to stop, “Dear Wolf, I need you. Wolf, I implore you... help me ... Eat Ana and Pedro, don't let them eat me ... Huff and puff, and break these walls.” The Wolf's voice soon comes to her: “Huff and puff and erasing your sorrow. Huff and puff and drawing your smile.” In this language, he makes it clear that Maria is “transcending her own selfhood and assuming a role assigned by him” as he forces her “to exist within the confines of an alien power” (Saldarriaga 111). The Wolf reveals her as a puppet under his control, a vulnerable child that he gets to shape into whatever form he pleases. “It’s me,” the voice says again, “I’m here. I have been here all the time. Inside of you. I was always inside of you. All the time. I was always inside of you. All the time.” His final narration tells the viewer that Maria was “rescued” and able to “recover her servicing spirit” in the colony, where she spends her days taking care of children to be “educated and healed.” In one last provocative moment, the Shepherd/Wolf once again turns to the viewers directly. “And you, little pig, who has seen our dreams and your reflection in the water... Do you want me to

take care of you?" The gates of the colony, drawn in black and white, resemble those of a concentration camp.

The Wolf House is masterful in its portrayal of the uncanny, its horror psychological and harrowing. The artistry displayed in the film is at once gorgeous and grotesque. This example of the reflexive motus is relevant, in part, because of how it reminds us of the physical, irreplicable human artistry that exists at the heart of stop-motion cinema, where every physical form in the frame must be moved independently and manually, touched by its creators. This film is particularly strong in doing this, because it was crafted in a way that allowed for innumerable imperfections, an element of production that the filmmakers fully embraced. As León told *The New York Times*, by constantly changing locations, "Our studio is really organic, really changing every day, really dirty and sometimes ugly and sometimes beautiful, and we like that. We would like our films to be like that." Ultimately, this motus is noteworthy because it is able to express the dehumanization imposed on members of the colony without human bodies on screen, invertedly illustrating Lowenstein's allegorical representations of generational trauma: "a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined" (2). This reflexive motus draws attention to this collision, transforming our viewing experience into a meditation of the ways art can be used to heal, or at least attempt to heal, historical wounds.

In one of her good days during her entrapment in the house, once she openly decides to attempt to ignore the wolf, Maria describes a dream in which she ate a red apple and felt "as if I was strong, and had the will to get up... A strength to create beautiful things with my hands and my spirit." This description perfectly encapsulates the film. Despite the horrors it reveals, it is a beautiful thing, made with people's hands and spirit. This example of the reflexive motus serves

as a worthy representation of the depths it can reach, as it examines not only the material reality of the film, but also the real circumstances that inspire it.

When it comes to the reflexive motus, the examples in this chapter address the different ways in which our suspension of disbelief can be broken, and the diverse effects that this might have on our viewing experience. The reflexive motus in Dustin Mills's *Her Name Was Torment II: Agony* (2016) is engaged through the use of colour, subverting the viewers' expectations with an unexpected and decidedly purposeful transition. The layer of fiction that is removed in this case is the autonomy of the film as an individual story; the colour change reminds viewers that there is a director responsible for this artistic product, one who is quite aware of our enjoyment of carnographic spectacles (so much so that he can tell the exact moment in which the inclusion of colour will offer maximum payoff). Fred Vogel's *August Underground's Penance* (2007) plays with reflexivity in a different way. Its hyper realistic visual approach through practical effects and the film's dedication to found footage aesthetics are used to enhance an attack on nostalgia, resonating closely with the childhood memories of a considerable part of the audience.

Wes Craven's use of the reflexive motus in *Scream* (1996) edges closer to reality by making references to existing films that viewers are aware of. The film pushes the boundaries of metatextuality by juxtaposing the name of one of its actors with that of a famous actor in a different, existing horror film. Cristóbal León and Joaquín Cociña's *The Wolf House* (2018), conversely, take reflexivity one step further in a two-pronged approach: by referring to actual historical events whose consequences still can be felt, and by crafting the unique animated aesthetic of the film as an artistic performance witnessed by people around the world.

In his book *At the Edge of Existence: Liminality in Horror Cinema Since the 1970s*, Brandon West showcases an approach to liminality that, paradoxically, fits quite well with the

reflexive motus. This is because he observes liminality from a philosophical and narrative perspective rather than focusing specifically on the filmed image. Philosophically, “liminality is inherent to all horror, even if not all horror is liminal horror” (4). This statement comes from West’s belief that cinema is inherently liminal, as it often presents the audience with a fictional reality that is parallel to theirs. Narratively, liminal horror films consist of “select horror films whose narratives stand on the threshold between fiction and reality” (4); that is, those that exhibit substantial elements of metatextuality. West refers to William Egginton in this context, and how he speaks of a “bleeding” between “base reality, and a representation of reality within the already representational reality of the film” (West 6). His view resonates with my explanation of why this chapter is important to the development of my taxonomy; studying how our perception of reality can be explored through cinema has interesting uses in philosophy and brings viewers closer to understanding how films can craft a reality of their own.

Chapter Five: The Liminal Motus

Cinematic shots invite the liminal motus when a visual element in them blurs or transforms to the point that it becomes hardly recognizable. The idea of liminality, which is at the center of this concept, was popularized by the work of ethnographer Arnold van Gennep. During his research on aboriginal rites of passage, he found that many of them were based around the concept of reaching adulthood, becoming whole, or moving into a higher social/cultural status; in short, a microcosmos following the passage through the cycle of life. He observed that typically these rites were constituted of three parts after the growth of the individual: preliminal, liminal, and postliminal. The liminal state of being sits in the middle as the moment in which the subject has started the rite but not yet finished. They are in between, not fully formed yet amid transformation. In this context, there is often a test for the individual that marks the passage through puberty. The moment in which the test is happening is liminal; as the child is in the process of becoming an adult, puberty can be defined as a liminal state.

The term would be later expanded to encompass much more than age and include other markers of identity; androgyny and bisexuality are liminal concepts within the sex and gender spectra, and people who are mix-raced or are transitioning between cultures can experience liminality throughout their lives. The concept of liminal spaces has gained newfound popularity in online cultures, represented by images of traditional locations that are halfway built or half-destroyed, serve no purpose or utility, and spark a sense of eerie loneliness: a hotel hallway, an abandoned mall, an empty convention centre. This idea is encapsulated in a popular internet urban legend that originated from the influential "creepypasta" (online short story) message entitled "Backrooms," in which an anonymous 4chan user describes the picture presented (an endless, desolate labyrinth of office-like spaces where mysterious beings might roam) as a place

where you end up if you "noclip out of reality" (Anonymous, *4chan* (May 13, 2019)). In the context of videogames, "noclip" is what happens when a playable character glitches, becoming suddenly able to pass through environments otherwise programmed as solid. This occurrence allows characters to navigate the realm of the game in a ghost-like fashion, as if existing in a different, superimposed dimension. This glitch can either be engaged purposefully to reach a desired spot in the game without obstacles slowing the player down, or be encountered entirely by accident. In some cases, noclipping persists until the game is restarted, extending the video game experience of liminality. Dan Erickson, the creator of the extraordinary Apple TV show *Severance*, cites the urban legend of the backrooms as one of his main inspirations (Francisco, *Inverse Entertainment*); the prominent location in the show is an apparently infinite, barren set of interconnected office rooms. Along with this location-based concept of liminality, I propose that we consider the liminal which is brought to us by abstract filmed images.

Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche state that pictorial art is "based on conventions of resemblance between the work and that which it is a representation 'of'" (1). Abstract works exist in opposition to traditional ones, as they "adopt alternative modes of visual representation, or breakdown and reconfigure the mimetic conventions of pictorial art and sculpture" (Crowther and Wünsche 1). Even when they contain or are composed of figurative images, artworks are defined as abstract if the element portrayed is "dislocated from its usual visual contexts and functions" (1). Abstract images in film are liminal in that they are not fully defined and recognizable or coherent. We encounter the liminal motus when a shot "unsettles" us because we cannot make out what it portrays, arousing feelings of confusion and uncertainty. The films discussed in this chapter focus on shots and scenes that use stylization, simplification, and other strategies of abstraction that produce the unsettling effect of the liminal motus.

***Begotten* (1989)**

Conceived as a re-imagining of the book of Genesis, this film was written, produced, edited, and directed by E. Elias Merhige. There are only three characters named in it: "God Killing Himself," "Mother Earth," and "Son of Earth/Flesh on Bone." They do not interact through words but by expressive, visceral body language. It has been said that *Begotten* is more of an experience than a mere film (by Amos Vogel no less). Due to its low-to-zero mainstream appeal, it has been relegated to a small group of individuals who spread its name online as they would the photo of a legendary cursed painting. The acts of self-mutilation, disemboweling, ritualistic rape and necrophilia depicted in the film become disturbing in a new way thanks to *Begotten*'s unique aesthetic: The uncanny movements of the actors, and the lack of noises coming from the tormented, make these scenes particularly nightmarish, consolidating *Begotten*'s status as an experimental horror film. That said, the film is also capable of disturbing viewers in scenes without any actors, as demonstrated in the example of the liminal motus which this segment examines. In this case, the act of being born is represented as an abject event. Through abstract imagery, *Begotten* successfully illustrates an intra-uterine point of view.

The film's development began in 1984, taking more than five years to complete, as Merhige tells Scott MacDonald in *A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers*. Filming alone lasted over three years in several different locations, using a 16mm camera to record footage that was later rendered to look old and withered. This process included running the negatives through sandpaper and hand-painting images on top using black ink, as still unsatisfied with the overall effect, Merhige decided to use an optical printer, but he was unable to find one within the budget. He then constructed one himself using old spare parts that

he acquired from camera stores and special effect productions (*A Critical Cinema 3: Interviews with Independent Filmmakers,* 286).

Begotten does feel, indeed, like an ever-moving painting; Richard Corliss, for example, writes that it was "filmed in speckled chiaroscuro so that each image is a seductive mystery" (69). Every cell was painstakingly and carefully transformed to contain only black and white with no tones in between. As Ernest Mathijs writes about Merhige's process: "in a painstaking, time-consuming procedure each frame was rephotographed until grey tones were washed away and only starkly contrasting black and white remained" (20). For this reason, it has been compared (both by Merhige and others) to a Rorschach test, as filmmaker Ted Knighton mentions in a piece for *Film International*. Despite following (albeit loosely) a narrative thread, the film's latent interpretative power grows along the shapes on screen which interact with each other. At the same time, the horror elements in the film are strong, distinctive, disturbing, and memorable, so much so that a music video for depressive/suicidal black metal band *Silencer* was composed only of clips from the film ("Sterile Nails And Thunderbowels"). Even though Merhige's name might not be widely recognizable, the iconography he created certainly is; Marilyn Manson took inspiration from it in the 1990s for live performances, and even hired Merhige to direct music videos for his second album.

Begotten has grown a cult following, including people in academia: praises from scholars like Susan Sontag and Amos Vogel were proudly attached to the film's trailer. Sontag called it "A hallucinatory masterpiece that invades our subconscious and compels us to experience rather than witness," while Vogel referred to the film as "brilliant, unbearable and unforgettable… an extraordinary original accomplishment." The opening frame of the film shows a quotation in white letters over a black background, the last sentence from which could have been written by

Epstein himself: "Language bearers. Photographers. Diary makers/ You with your memory are dead, frozen/ Lost in a present that never stops passing/ Here lives the incantation of matter/ A language forever." Before the film's characters even appear, we are reminded of the transcendental power of cinema and how it can tell a story without dialogue. The moving image, like a primal prayer, is a universal and eternal language.

The motus examined in this segment is relevant because it visually represents one liminal moment that most people have experienced, yet one that we are unable to remember: our existence on the verge of being born, still inside a pregnant body, suspended between life and death. Cinema is the medium that perhaps is closest to reimagining this moment thanks to the moving image, which allows for a compelling representation of the frantic journey from the dark uterus to the bright outside. The result is a series of shots that move the viewer through its ability to seemingly offer insight into one of the most inscrutable stages of human life. The following paragraphs will describe the events that lead to the birth of the main character, initiated from an allusion to the creation of life itself.

The very first shot of the film is liminal in nature: we are greeted by a black shape moving in conjunction with another shape extending throughout the top of the frame like a banner, except it is soft, breathing, organic. Is the shape a human? Possibly, but it is hard to tell. The vaguely human-like form extends two "arms;" could it be a hand? The bright white background makes the dark figures pop. As the camera moves slightly downward, a sort of body appears connected to the main shape, like the bottom half of a person with an abnormally thin waist. It looks as if the figure was holding up the shape on top. The location of this shot within the introductory segment of film creates a sense of birth, as if the figure was about to exit from a uterus. The title card appears. There are no sounds except the music in the background, but

calling it that would be inaccurate; what we hear is more of a droning collection of natural noises repeated ad infinitum in a continuous loop, occasionally mixed with evocative synth sounds. While the film begins, thus, with humanity's origin story, no specific individuals are presented yet to the viewer.

The first time we see a character is in the scene where God Killing Himself sits inside a small shack, face covered by a flimsy mask, his eyes and bleeding mouth impossibly dark and wide. He wriggles while uses a knife in his trembling hands to cut his body in various places; a splash of blood can be seen on the white wall. He pokes at his own insides in a repetitive, almost instinctual manner, with irregular movements. The black hole in the middle of his body grows and expands after this action. It is a gruesome spectacle, and when his convulsions finally stop, he dies. The next character we encounter is that of Mother Earth, a woman wearing a Colombina mask over her eyes, who touches the remains of God and then caresses her naked stomach, placing his blood over her pubic region at the end of the shot. A black coffin appears in an otherwise empty rocky forest. Mother Earth touches her pregnant belly while she contemplates the new structure as if she was looking in a mirror. The next scene, which portrays the moment of birth of the main character, takes the viewer further into the story while portraying the act of being born in an abstract, liminal way. As previously mentioned, abstraction often relies on stylization, on a distance from what viewers accept as 'realism,' and in this way, abstraction partakes of the liminal: the state of being not quite one thing and not quite another.

Encircled by an iris shot, Mother Earth once again places one hand on her engorged abdomen, a circle within a circle of light, contrasting with the darkness that engulfs the frame. Her face is not visible, but is covered by her hair and the mask she is wearing. The iris fades to a frame that effectively looks like an actual Rorschach illustration. A trail of black in the center has

a liquid quality to its texture, framed by two plant-like shapes that seem to spring from each side, giving the composition a vaguely uterine look. We cut to black, then cut again to a shaky camera shot in which different abstract shapes in black succeed each other rapidly. In between, we see a white background, a shot that looks like a white fabric half-died black, a cave, moving faster, faster, just for four seconds, culminating in a shot of more plant-like forms that appear to be spermatozoa, but underwater. We get a dark shot where we see a skull through x-rays for less than a second. We are shown a different, undefined part of a human skeleton, for the same amount of time. The camera returns to the quick shots in succession, each one feeling different and unique. The final shot of the sequence lasts for longer, however: a white cloud (or is it a hole?) opens in a bucolic background, something like sunshine comes through it. In the next scene, a grown human is on the ground. We no longer see Mother Earth.

Is there anything more liminal than our existence during birth? New are not in uterine life, nor outside it. Here, the state of "non-being" is portrayed through abstract imagery to better approach the sensation of being born, of becoming a "being," an event that we have no recollection of experiencing. *Begotten* imagines what this transition feels like and presents this sequence from that perspective, moving us towards the sensorial beyond what intrauterine photography can achieve. As Cristian Paşcalău states about Begotten: "the blurry boundaries between reality and illusion are strongly acknowledged, accentuating the theme of non-being. The imagery becomes more abstract, invoking a dreamlike quality which challenges the audience's perceptions" (172). What this sequence of liminal shots shows the viewer is the very existence of liminality, a process we must experience to become human.

This concept is reinforced by the many moments of powerful liminality during transitional moments in *Begotten*. We see one when "Son of Earth/Flesh on Bone" wanders alone

in the dessert: there is a long establishing shot of a few black lines by the bottom of the frame, their consistency reminiscent of sand. In the white background, a black figure crawls near the middle of the frame, writhing, making his way forward tortuously. It looks vaguely like a person inside a sack; like the act of being born, this image represents a person on a journey, that of life, death, and rebirth.

I bring up this example for several reasons, the main one being its relatable resonance: it connects the viewer to a liminal stage in life that, even if we cannot remember, we have all experienced. The universal power of this abject imaginary is confirmed by *Begotten*'s aesthetic influence, celebrated by important figures in scholarship and within popular and underground cultures. Cinema is a useful vehicle for the rendering of transitional moments we have no memory of. In those cases, we accept the power of the representation for the moment itself, and these representations become particularly powerful through the liminal motus. However, this kind of visual representation can also be used to portray a disembodiment from our own experience, and even a transition towards ways of thinking and seeing the world that exist beyond our own: somebody else's perspective, shaped by different life experiences. This possibility is explored in the next entry.

***Strange Days* (1995)**

The reason why *Strange Days* is part of my selection, even though it is often described as purely sci-fi or "cyberpunk," becomes clear as the plot progresses. Kathryn Bigelow's imagined world is bleak in its violence, monstrous, and contains deeply abject subjects; this is horror sci-fi (or sci-fi horror) as far as I am concerned. More than thirty years after its release, Bigelow's *Strange Days*'s influence is far-reaching, and can be felt in renowned titles like *The Matrix* (1999) and in ongoing series such *as Dark Mirror* (2011-present). *Strange Days* has also inspired

a fair amount of scholarship, despite resulting in an economic loss for the studio that released it. As John P. Garry explains, it "received mixed reviews and disappointing financial returns upon its release in 1995 and is vaguely remembered by viewers today. But the film has proven to be fertile ground for textual analysis and has become a minor academic cult film" (37). Anna McFarlane corroborates this statement, writing that while the film "was not commercially successful," it can now "be considered a cult film" (235).

Bigelow's films, as Caetlin Benson-Allott states, are often "celebrated for their radical representations of race and gender as well as their innovative cinematography and action sequences" (33). The liminal motus analyzed in this segment is a demonstration of both Bigelow's portrayal of malleable identities and her commitment to embrace emerging technologies to explore new cinematic avenues. In the world of *Strange Days*, futuristic technology has adapted to become the most escapist entertainment imaginable: SQUID, the Superconducting Quantum Interference Device, is a headset that allows its users to record their experiences neurologically (it was initially "created by the feds"). Unlike a camera, the SQUID device can record the audiovisual aspects of an experience as well as the physical sensations that attend that experience. While the eyes of the subject serve as the POV for the clips, the recording itself happens in the brain, allowing users to transfer every detail of their experience into a SQUID disc.

The discs can be shared with other users, who can "play" the recording while wearing the device. In the film, this activity is called "being wired," and the effect is portrayed, as Steven Shaviro puts it "like being literally inside someone else's mind and body" (160). This provides intense and extremely intimate sensations for the "viewers", since they actually "live" through a recording just as if they were occupying the body of the person who made it. The example of

liminal motus taken from this film consists of a few very quick shots that nonetheless achieve notable impact. This is possible because they portray a literal change of perspective, in which characters transition from their lived experience to somebody else's, becoming potentially transformative moments not just for SQUID users, but for viewers as well. The value of this representation is reinforced by the concept of the device itself, which the next paragraphs will explore before delving into the motus. It is also reinforced by the arc the protagonists go through, and so this aspect of the film will be examined in the latter part of this segment.

The story is set in 1999, when the city of Los Angeles is a tech-noir landscape brimming with riots. It is noticeable that Bigelow was inspired by the political climate of that era; she has talked openly about her involvement in the 1992 Los Angeles riots as a moving experience: "the riots were a real emotional time for anybody living here," the director says, "and I participated in the cleanup. Being on the streets with burned-out shells of buildings and the National Guard milling around suggested a lot of the film's visual basis. You became inured to it very quickly" (*Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews*, 132). Almost every shot of the streets contains visual reminders of the people's anger and the abuses committed by the police, mostly in the form of aggressive cops taking on protesters and the latter trying to protect themselves. One of the focal points of the film is the political relevance of the character Jeriko One, a black activist and rapper whose songs carry a strong anti-authoritarian message, including lyrics pointing out that the drugs and weapons which afflict black communities "came from your ships". His murder, showcased on TV under mysterious circumstances, strangely resembles the real-life death of Tupac before that event even happened. Lenny Nero, the protagonist, sees himself involved in said mystery when a SQUID recording of a witness of that murder ends up in his possession.

The technical elements of all SQUID segments in the film are quite impressive: the POV really feels like we are looking through the user's eyes. This effect is achieved by actual years of coordinating choreographies, but also by the visionary implementation of new tech: Bigelow combined helmet cameras and steady-cams with new multi-faceted cameras that were built just for the film (Benson-Allott, 38; Stepovich, 152). Emma J. Withers writes that these sequences themselves "perhaps constitute the most innovative and remarkable technical feature of Strange Days" (280), while Romi Stepovich describes them as "some of the most ambitious in film history" (152). Because the rest of *Strange Days* is shot and edited like a traditional action blockbuster, these sequences stand out as unnervingly authentic, despite being highly stylized. While it might sound contradictory, I mean "authenticity" not as realism in visual terms, but rather as the powerful rendering of a compelling experience, which makes viewers viscerally feel that the experiences recoded with device actually occurred. And this is why it is noteworthy that every time a character gets on the SQUID device, when we take on their POV, a series of very quick abstract liminal shots are presented to the viewer. These shots form a liminal motus, which occurs near the start of the film.

The very first shot of the film is a quick extreme close-up of an open, unblinking blue eye. The screen fades to black to reveal an unknown POV, which we embody as we enter the plot. We are then greeted by a liminal motus: a moving shot of the inside of a car, blurred in a pixelated way that makes it look like an abstract painting. The lights from the street coming through the window transform into bright blue patches of colour, the rest are grays and blacks. As the POV moves, the image switches to a different spot in the car, then settles in a higher definition. Immediately afterwards, we witness a realistic scene in which the POV character robs a restaurant and escapes to the top of a building. His final shot as the SQUID he wears stops

working comes when the criminal falls from the building's wall, shot by police. We inhabit his body, in a sense, as he dangles, looking at his (our) feet, then up at a colleague who tries to help him (us). After these shots, we get a quick POV from the man rapidly approaching the ground. First, we cut to red. Then, for one second, we see two distorted lines reminiscent of an old TV malfunction. The lines turn yellow, orange, red, and then there is another second of the shot. Our main character, Lenny, takes the device off.

These final shots of the sequence suggest that there is a moment of confusion and dislocation of identity before SQUID viewers jump into others' lived experiences. To enter somebody else's perspective, then, we must break through the liminal. This is a powerful concept that makes the viewer understand the intensity of SQUID technology swiftly. These moments are still always presented from a lived-in perspective; we can only use our human senses to convey the liminal. Nonetheless, some liminal spaces can be used to establish a type of transition that is external to the characters in a film, yet still related to their internal processes and realizations. The ways in which *Strange Days*'s portrayal of the liminal space connects to the intricacies of plot and character development are subtle, but the moment when viewers make that connection is tinged with a powerful sense of catharsis. This is because the stress built up inside the viewer, caused by the negative connotations of witnessing other peoples' intimate moments, is released with the realization that these glimpses into the lives of strangers (and thus our viewership) have value beyond voyeurism. Later in the film Lenny is able to piece together the crimes committed by the LAPD by using the SQUID device, but he has gained something just as valuable in the process. By experiencing the way marginalized individuals look at the world, and getting to physically feel their struggles, he slowly builds up the courage to risk his life to fight against the police force he once was a part of.

Regardless of the many positive uses that such a technology could have for our society, SQUID devices (along with the discs carrying other people's recordings) are framed as an addictive and destructive drug. In *Strange Days*, SQUID discs are sold in secret by shady characters hidden in crowded bars or dark street corners. The most common discs offer immersive porn scenes made by hired sex workers. There are also SQUID clips of criminal acts recorded by the criminals, and even snuff clips. Through this conceptual and visual element Bigelow not only explores voyeurism and the gaze within the cinematic medium, but also problematizes these issues while exposing productive avenues of interaction with them. As Catherine Zimmer writes, through this fictional technology, "the film asks us to trace the possible intersections of individually embodied experience and systematic intervention in technologies of mediation and political structuring" (303). One of the main concerns of the film is the existence of different perspectives, and how events are interpreted differently depending on the individual's own experiences. Accordingly, one of the techniques the film uses to address how experience shapes perception is through the contrasting portrayal of its main characters' inner lives, as well as the different ways in which they navigate the world.

The film follows the misadventures of ex-cop turned SQUID dealer Lenny (Ralph Fiennes) and his best and only friend, expert bodyguard and limo driver Lornette 'Mace' Mason (iconically portrayed by Angela Bassett). Lenny is presented as someone who has abandoned almost all of his ties with reality. Obsessed with his ex-lover, a punk singer named Faith, Lenny keeps rewatching their old SQUID clips, vicariously maintaining the memories of a time where the two were still in love. He is now addicted to his own product and maintains only a handful of relationships. He drives through the streets ignoring the riots and police brutality, struggling to stay blissfully unaware. Mace, on the contrary, strongly opposes the SQUID device, noticing the

damage that the product has caused to Lenny. She is the divorced, single mother of a young boy, and an active member of her community. Scenes of Mace around her neighbourhood are marked by an atmosphere of camaraderie and support. She relies on a friend to watch her son when necessary, or drives the kid to her brother's house. At a block party the latter hosts, adults know and take good care of Mace's son. Even the car she drives for work says a lot about her lifestyle: an impeccable bulletproof black stretch limousine, which demonstrates her commitment to safely transport others while maintaining a professional appearance. In contrast, Lenny's car is an average dirty vehicle, which gets towed when he is so lost in the world of SQUID he forgets about parking tickets. Even Lenny himself cannot rely on his own method of transportation, showing that he is not able to care for somebody else.

The contrast between these characters echoes the contrast between the underground world and privileged society, portrayed here in a struggle for visual dominance through people's clothes and overall appearance, the places they inhabit and the mise-en-scene that surrounds them. This element of opposite forces, as Anna McFarlane explains, is a fundamental element of cyberpunk, the genre *Strange Days'*s aesthetic best represents: "By expressing these tensions through the costumes, juxtaposing femininity and violence, blackness and whiteness, classical music and urban chaos, the film shows the interplay between opposites that lies at the heart of the genre" (240). This technology becomes the place where this interplay can occur, used to portray a bridge between these contrasting factions. Indeed, the SQUID device, according to Emma J. Withers, is "repurposed as a means to bear witness to socio-political inequalities" (288).

The fact that the lives of the two protagonists are so different from each other becomes particularly interesting because they must make the choice of getting involved in a massive political plot which could have disastrous effects on the local black community. While Mace's

drive to fight the injustices of police corruption comes from a growing desire to defend marginalized people, Lenny's initial motivation is to rescue his missing ex-girlfriend, whose manager seems to be part of the sketchy operation. At the start of the film, neither character is directly involved with the social movement unfolding before their eyes; while a self-absorbed Lenny chooses to live in the past through his present vices, Mace avoids engaging to protect her hard-earned social status and security. By the end of the movie, however, Lenny and Mace come to the same conclusion: holding the LAPD accountable for their heinous crimes is a priority.

It is remarkable that the two main characters end up in the middle of a riot: they move from driving through it to participating in it, all in order to expose a disc which records the murder of Jeriko One by the police. As Withers describes, the film is "crucially concerned with embodied perception in relation to the act of seeing: with how technologies impact not only on the visual, but the perceptual apprehension of the world" (280). The SQUID device stands in for the will and eagerness to witness that which can only be experienced rather than described: a liminal state of being, reached while adopting someone else's point of view. The next entry explores a liminal motus which, instead of a state of mind, is represented by a physical location.

***Audition* (1999)**

Takashi Miike's genre-bending gem can be a challenging watch for those unacquainted with his work. This drama of a widower raising his son alone is complex and realistic. The romantic comedy of a father finding love again with a younger model as his kid becomes a teen is funny and touching. The unspeakable horror of an abused woman carrying out revenge through the torture of older men who take advantage of her is harrowing, devastating, profound, and unforgettable. *Audition*'s example of the liminal motus gives viewers an interesting depiction

of a liminal space, but it also subtly foreshadows the true intentions of said abused woman, introduced through an audition for an acting role.

While Kim Newman gave the film five-stars, he also called it "intense to the point of unbearability" (*Empire*, 48). This sentiment was shared by critics such as Alan Jones, who referred to *Audition* as "excruciating to watch" amidst his glowing review (*Film Review*, 36). Daniel Martin identifies the film as one of the first examples of Asia Extreme, a label for "extreme" horror created by *Audition*'s distribution company, Tartan. Because of its explicit content, he explains, "*Audition* had a polarising effect on those who wrote about it. There were as many positive reviews as negative ones, and the tone was rarely less than passionate" (42).

In his discussion of the criticism received by the film, Martin describes how its marketing campaign relied on ambiguity and was shrouded in mystery, using a poster and tagline that did not give away the film's plot or tone. In it, a story which starts as a drama switches to romantic comedy, to take a disturbing turn towards horror in its final third. These unexpected and almost contrasting tones are embodied by the film's antagonist, an enigmatic young woman that viewers first encounter inside a liminal space. As Kathryn Hemmann states, "Directly linked to Audition's presentation as either a home drama or a horror movie is the presentation of Asami Yamazaki" (109). The liminal motus explored in this chapter moves viewers by confronting them with the unknowable and undefined through the portrayal of a liminal space, the audition room, in conjunction with the character introduced in it. The uncanny uncertainty this location evokes is possible because of a few key scenes leading up to it. These scenes, described below, delineate the theme of duplicity applied to sex and gender, which later recontextualizes the liminal motus in retrospect.

The subject of women as sexual and romantic companions is introduced in the first scene our protagonist, Shigeharu Aoyama, shares with his teenage son Shigehiko as they fish together. “I'm only going after the big ones!,” Shigeharu says, to excuse his lack of bounty. “I prefer real-life girls to imaginary big fish,” his son mocks him, before being told that he will understand once he is older. This moment subtly lets us know that the widower is chasing something he cannot reach, that he strives for an unattainable conquest. Shigehiko, who has not yet internalized his father's womanizing ways, is more content with “real-life” girls. Shigeharu is also sharing his subconscious belief that becoming an old man inherently makes one prone to desire things we cannot have. This theme is reinforced shortly after, as both dine on the fish they finally caught. At the dining table, Shigeharu asks his son if everything is okay, concerned that he has not invited friends home in a while. Avoiding the question (and perhaps inadvertently answering it), the youngster shares some fishing trivia: “Did you know that all black sea bream are born male?” He adds that, when they become a certain length, some of the fish grow female genitalia. When the father asks about the sex of the fish they are eating at the moment, Shigehiko replies: “Didn't you see the ovaries when we cut it?” The son is aware that they are consuming a female (and previously discarded its gendered organ), while Shigeharu is completely ignorant of the fact. The fish dominates many of the dinner shots and is provided with “soul” and “personality”; the act of devouring prey is linked with that of cutting flesh, of castrating, of torturing. However, this scene also points to the fact that the son is currently seeing someone and experiencing hormonal teenage love for the first time. “Why don't you get remarried?” he suggests to Shigeharu as a viable way to fulfill his inner void. Soon enough, his father decides to give this idea a shot.

One of Shigeharu's colleagues, a woman around his age, is clearly attracted to him. At the TV studio where they work, she lies about getting married just to gauge the widower's reaction (a very insensitive "congratulations"). She comes across as busy, desperate, competent, and real. Simultaneously, Shigeharu toys with the idea of getting married only to avoid loneliness and get help around the house, things that, judging by the devoted demeanor of his office colleague, she would have no qualms about. But he is not interested in "real-life girls," and ignores all her advances. Later, he talks to a male coworker at a bar, expressing his ideal situation while discussing the option of an arranged marriage:

> "No, that's not my style... I wish there was a very nice woman hiding somewhere"
>
> "What kind of girl are you looking for? Preferably young?"
>
> "Not too young"
>
> "Possibly she has a job?"
>
> "And has some skills..."
>
> "Skills?"
>
> "For example, playing the piano, singing, or Japanese dance…"

After admitting that his wife used to excel at those hobbies, his friend continues the conversation and listens to him some more. "She doesn't have to be a successful professional," Shigeharu adds, "I don't want to fail at marriage at my age. I'd like to have enough time to get to know her. I want to meet as many girls as possible and choose my ideal one." His friend, who oversees the casting at the studio, comes up with an unethical plan: preparing a special audition for the widower just to find him a new wife among the cast of interviewees.

Not only does this friend go through the motions to conduct the audition, but also makes up a fake script untitled *Looking for Love* ("It'll be a romantic story"). He comes up with the

casting call: “The heroine is supposed to be in her early 20s to early 30s. One of the requirements is that she is skillful at something.” He calms Shigeharu’s nervousness by telling him that, if they can find the funding, the script could eventually become a real film. “Am I going to marry the lead girl of this movie?” “No, any girl that could get the lead wouldn't marry you. They aren't the marrying type.” Explaining the process of elimination to find a lead actress, in which ten finalists are picked from a sample of one thousand, he entices the single father further: “They are quite attractive. Smart and well-bred. Obedient and well-trained. The kind you'd want your son to marry.” When Shigeharu asks why his “chosen” actress would not get the lead, his friend replies that they should pick a happy person as his bride, and “unhappy people can act well.” He has no idea how spot-on this theory is revealed to be, in the universe of the film.

Shortly after the call for auditions has closed, the casting director asks our protagonist to choose thirty applicants based not only on their pictures (those cannot be “trusted”) but also on an essay written by them too. While searching through the candidates' applications, one catches Shigeharu’s eye: Asami Yamazaki (played by Eihi Shiina). “Piano, classical ballet for twelve years,” are the highlights of the description, and her essay follows the sad tale of a professional ballerina who broke her hips at eighteen, exactly when she was planning on continuing her studies abroad. Asami writes that she will not be picked for this role, but that she liked the story, nonetheless. “Ballet was my top priority, so my dream died.” The last sentences Shigeharu reads make him remember his dead wife: “It might sound like I'm exaggerating, but it's like accepting death. Living is another way of reaching death.”

In a film that delves so intensely into the theme of reality versus performance, it is of particular interest that the scene of the audition itself contains a powerful liminal motus. As Hemmann explains, “one of the film’s major themes is how people present certain images of

themselves and how willing others are to accept these constructed images as real" (109). The way this liminal space encapsulates the dualistic tone of the film is quite impressive; it affects the viewing experience with purposeful dissonance, signaling a moment where we are shown Asami's facade without becoming yet aware of it.

The location in which the audition is conducted is in a needlessly large room, in which the light flows from four big rectangular windows. The first we see of this room is a long shot of a single black chair right in the middle of the frame. The walls are white and the curtains above the windows are black like the chair. A replica of each window is reflected on the light wooden floor. The camera remains still as the black curtains are activated with a mechanical sound; they descend smoothly, covering all the windows at the same time. Five seconds later, we get a medium shot of the chair. As the curtains begin to reach the last third of the windows, their reflection in the floor transforms accordingly. During this moment, through these shots, the room becomes a liminal space.

Without any given context, we do not know where we are. This place does not look normal; its minimalist mise-en-scene sticks out in a film where every other location is filled with numerous domestic props and details that make rooms feel distinctively lived-in, grounded in time and space. The function of this location is liminal too: actresses perform to be cast in a fictional romance, unaware that their intended role is in a real one. Whoever they choose to become during their auditions stays in limbo. Asami Yamazaki, the human embodiment of liminality in the story, somewhat resembles this room. All of her clothes when she enters the scene, including her shoes, are immaculate white, and her long black hair is perfectly straight. She is a representation of someone stuck between reality and performance, a stranger to the room yet fitting in it perfectly, as if she belongs there. Viewers do not know this yet, but behind her

performance at the job interview in front of Shigeharu there is another performance: the ideal bride is a persona she adopts while already performing as a sane person. As viewers will see later, her living conditions and the way she acts when not observed tell a different story.

Shigeharu, immediately taken by Asami, brings up the quotation about death from her essay. In what could possibly be an effort to flirt with her by offering comfort, he tells the ex-ballerina that everybody goes through situations like that: “There is always something beyond our control in our lives. You just have to accept it. I think that's life. I mean... I was amazed a young girl like you understands that. I think you've been taking your life very seriously.” He nervously takes a sip out of his coffee mug, and we cut to Asami. There is a medium shot of her from the waist up. Her body, shrouded in white, appears positioned in the middle of a white cross on the wall made by the negative space in between two blacked-out windows. Her glance is impenetrable, but after a moment she gives Shigeharu a subtle smile and thanks him. She is only twenty-four. “She made me nervous,” his friend comments later; “She made me want to smoke a cigarette,” and “There's something I don't like about her.” When the single father asks him to explain, he replies “I don't know what it is. I can't explain exactly what's wrong. Something bothers me.” Nevertheless, now sitting on the chair shown at the beginning, Shigaharu cannot help but grin: he has made his pick.

On their dates Asami is shy, soft-spoken, delicate and reserved. She seems insecure, often looks down while speaking, but there is something strangely calculating about her personality. Her outfit for one of their first post-audition encounters is a pair of entirely white pants and shirt with a huge, bright-red fur coat. She is seen wearing the latter on the street but takes it off inside while talking to Shigeharu. This gesture serves to foreshadow the duality in which Asami exists: while performing as a submissive and bashful young lady, inside she is haunted by a history of

traumatic abuse and sexual assault, which she exorcises by torturing, mangling, and killing men whom she perceives are using her for their own benefit. When Shigeharu starts suspecting something of her double life and decides to investigate, he finds out that the owner of the bar she worked at was mutilated: she took from him three fingers along with one ear and his tongue. Secretly, she keeps a disfigured man trapped in a sack at home; by feeding him her vomit on a dog's plate, she makes him an animal. As a young girl, Asami was raped by her uncle who also was her ballet instructor. The scene where the viewers are shown this event, while not explicit, feels unforgiving when it comes to cruel detail. When he hurts her with a scalding metal stick pressed against her inner thigh, we witness the burn almost from her POV. We only see a little bit of her on screen, so we can remember that she is a child the moment her (our) legs are forced open. As an adult, Asami kills her uncle by slowly strangling him with a piano wire, telling him "I never felt unhappy... because I was unhappy all the time."

While Shigeharu has not physically abused Asami, she still sees him as untrustworthy. Even though her breaking point occurs upon discovering he still keeps his wife's picture, the widower raised red flags from the start. He loses interest in her shortly after having sex with her, when she asks him to love "only" her. Earlier, he had dismissed Asami's trauma on a date, when she tells him about living with her uncle (in a "terrible place") and that she "used to have many scars." Instead of offering support or even paying attention, Shigeharu veers away from the topic and says, "If it's too painful, you don't have to talk about that." Perhaps most troubling of all is the glimpse we get of his affinity for younger women. During the first night they spend together, Shigeharu gets an erection from imagining Asami turning into his teenage son's high school girlfriend, uniform included.

Thus, the ballerina who was not able to dance because of arduous torture enjoys making those who use her immobile: her uncle needs a wheelchair and the man she keeps in the sack can never walk again. Near the end of the film, Asami "paralyzes" Shigeharu by drugging his liquor and cuts off one of his feet. Before he is rescued by his son, Shigehiko (who stands for a more positive representation of masculinity), she starts reciting to the father some of the lines she employed on their dates. Despite her real heartbreak over the end of the relationship, it had been a performance all along. Like the spirit of Sadako in Hideo Nakata's *Ring* (1998), Asami is forever trapped in a liminal space. Like Sadako, Asami is one of the most tragic and interesting female slashers in the horror canon. After being thrown into a well to die, young psychic Sadako is able to return as a vengeful spirit by cursing a videotape; she can only become a corporeal entity to kill those who have glanced upon the cursed filmed images. Both Asami and Sadako were abused at an early age and are now stuck repeating a cycle of revenge. Their backstories turn these characters into sympathetic figures; they have been so unfairly treated that, rather than death, we want them to find peace.

Audition is a noteworthy example of the liminal motus because it enhances the theme of deceptive performance, which Asami represents, by showcasing a space presented as liminal and being, at the same time, nothing more than a casting room. But how would the liminal motus work in a film that is entirely shot in a liminal space, one that does exist within its own reality? The next entry provides an answer to this question.

***Skinamarink* (2022)**

Kyle Edward Ball's directorial debut, an experimental horror film, rose to unexpected fame after a leak from an unnamed European festival turned it into an internet viral sensation. Isaac Feldberg, in an interview with Ball for *Roger Ebert*, mentions how *Variety* called

Skinamarink “the Internet’s new cult obsession,” while *Fangoria* referred to it as a “viral nightmare.” Chris Dart from CBC describes it as a “word-of-mouth sensation via platforms like Reddit and TikTok.” Regarding the reason why the film did so well in the latter platform, Jessica Balanzategui states that its virality “was characterized by an interplay between the film’s aesthetics and themes of nightmarishly corrupted childhood nostalgia” (2). Indeed, *Skinamarink* follows two child protagonists while adopting their perspective as they attempt to survive in a house that has become a liminal space. But there is another reason for the nostalgia Ball’s film evokes; As Feldberg explains, it was shot “in extremely low light, at a high ISO—then graded intensely, with this artificial analog grain distorting the images.” As a result, it gives viewers the impression that they are watching a recording from an older decade. At the beginning of the film, we are shown the number 1995, a year that matches the sensibility of the grainy, VHS-like quality of the filming. A very realistic "aging" filter adds to the liminality of the experience, as it blends the shadows in the background with the outlines of objects and furniture, creating a sense of existing within a disorienting nightmare.

The portrayal of motus examined in this segment is relevant because of how committed the film is to embrace liminality for its entirety. Unlike *August Underground*, which disturbs the concept of nostalgic family filmmaking, *Skinamarink* expands the disturbance to encompass the notions of family and home. Next, instead of one specific instance of the liminal motus, a series of scenes and shots will be analyzed in chronological order, showcasing how *Skinamarink*’s ambiguous plot and visuals create an overwhelming yet engrossing atmosphere by relying on the uncanniness of liminality.

While not much has been written about Ball’s cinematic debut, critics note the uniquely unsettling aesthetic it embraces. Jeannette Catsoulis, for example, wrote for *The New York Times*:

"Ingeniously evoking a child's response to the inexplicable, *Skinamarink* sways on the border between dreaming and wakefulness, a movie as difficult to penetrate as it is to forget." Feldberg mentions its "uncannily warped atmosphere," while fellow horror film director Jane Schoenbrun told the following to William Earl from Variety: "the liminality of reality can be an utterly terrifying experience … *Skinamarink* is a movie that commits so fiercely to that feeling and trying to create an experience for viewers that that destabilizes and breaks reality." Aside from its filming style and visuals, this liminality extends to the vague story at hand: For one hour and forty minutes the viewer attends a series of shots and scenes that are very loosely linked by character and plot. Most remarkably, we are never shown a single (normal) human face. What connects the struggles of young siblings Kevin and Kaylee is the dark house they inhabit. There they sleep, play, and watch old cartoons along with what seems like the lingering phantoms of their neglectful parents. Meanwhile, paranormal events escalate around them.

Interestingly, while the footage that we witness is definitely the product of a camera, this is not a found footage film. These moving images are just given to us; the existence of a camera person is never addressed, as we are meant to ignore logical explanations and instead take in the atmosphere. Many shots include low camera angles, allowing the viewer to experience the overwhelming scale of the poorly lit house along with the children. In this regard, it is notable that the lighting in the film is all artificial, coming from lamps or, more often than not, the TV's glow rather than from the sun shining through a window or an open door. Another type of shot that successfully conveys the protagonists' feelings of helplessness are the several POV shots from their perspective. We also see another type of shot here, long takes that seem unmotivated and unconnected to any living being in the house; these are high angle shots of corners in the ceiling, slowly moving shots of the upper part of each room, or just extended periods of pure,

absolute darkness onscreen. There is, from the start of the film, a sense of being observed by some sort of strange entity, and the house itself becomes possessed by it as doors and windows start to disappear.

The way shots are edited in this film is random, with abrupt cuts from a still of one side of a room to another. Viewers, just like the main characters, lose all sense of time, and progressively, of reality. In the stillness of this almost-silent world, soft sounds and very scarce pieces of dialogue become sources of disturbance. The siblings whisper as if hiding from an unknown threat; the film uses this overwhelming false calm to execute several jump scares in which nothing usually happens. The dread instilled by the slow pace of the film is so engaging that every little thing has the potential to generate panic and anxiety. One of the first instances of dialogue is a cryptic phone conversation in which we hear only the disembodied voice of the father: “So... he's fine... but Kevin fell down the stairs and hit his head. Mmmh... No. They didn't even need to do stitches.” We then cut to different shots of the house in diverse states of precarious lighting. One of these shots is of a black background in which the only “distinguishable” element is a rectangular opening near the center of the frame, from which a blue light emerges, only to be engulfed by darkness before reaching the edge. Is this a window? Is this the entrance to a hallway? We never know. We stay on this shot for nine seconds, during which we hear the father speak “Kaylee says he was sleepwalking.” This is the last that we get of this character in a demonstrably physical form; he is soon nowhere to be found despite Kaylee’s efforts. Scared of the (even darker!) upper floor, the children decide to sleep downstairs on the couch, feeling slightly safer through the comfort of cartoons. Slowly, the content of the shots starts to become harder to identify.

Early on the film there is a gorgeous shot of what is probably the ceiling split between two different rooms: illuminated by a pale pink light, the framing is divided into two differently sized triangles, one of which, thanks to the lighting's angle, looks three-dimensional. The way colour spreads through the light is satisfying to look at, adding surprising texture and depth to this abstract image. This shot, which comes at us right after the TV is turned on, is the first traditionally pleasant visual we witness, and prevents viewers from becoming fully accustomed to the darkness. Shortly after, Kaylee insists that she cannot sleep with the lights on, and the two kids are now lit only by the screen. They say "I love you" to each other, and less than a minute afterwards, even though nothing has changed, Kylee says to her brother: "I think it is time to get up." Day and night barely work in this house as anything other than as concepts. The uncertainty of the children turns their existence into a permanent state of liminality, as the routines they previously relied on for a sense of normalcy are all gone, and yet, Kevin and Kaylee are still there. Worse than not knowing which day or time of the day it is, they do not know where their parents are, or if they will even return. In their family home, the children are both safe and unsafe at the same time.

As mentioned before, there is little to no dialogue in this film. There is no music, either, except when it is coming from the old-timey cartoons the siblings have available on VHS. Open doors inside the house spread looming darkness about, resembling otherworldly avenues to bleak dimensions. The silence is paralyzing and terrifying when Kaylee goes to the shadowy washroom, the camera gradually panning, glimpsing what could be a deformed face behind the furniture. Then, Kaylee's POV tilts upwards to find one of her Barbie dolls hanging from the ceiling. After Kaylee looks up for a moment, the doll falls to the floor and the girl releases a

high-pitched scream. Soon, more of the children's toys become unhinged, appearing in weird places and appearing to move on their own.

A particularly scary moment occurs as Kaylee hears a voice calling for her. She goes upstairs into their parents' room to find it shrouded in darkness. A seemingly human figure has its back turned to her, seated on the opposite side of the bed. "Dad?" Kaylee asks. The camera stops near the figure's pajamaed legs for what feels like an eternity, until a low voice says: "Look under the bed." Never these four words have produced more dread in a film. Against the viewer's primal instincts, Kaylee does as instructed. Through her POV, we peer into this treacherous zone; thankfully, there is nothing there. "I can't see anything," Kaylee informs the immobile person whom she believes is her father. The girl dives under the bed again, and when she rises up from the floor, a new, long-haired figure now sits on the opposite side of the bed, the previous one no longer visible. "Kaylee?" a motherly voice asks, and Kaylee turns around for a moment. "Your... Your father..." A door slams somewhere in the house. Kaylee looks at the shadows beyond the door. "We love you and Kevin very much." The voice continues after a moment, "I need you to close your eyes. Please."

The tension has become unbearable in this three-minute shot, only now interrupted by a black screen representing the closed eyes of the child. When she opens them again, there are no figures in the room. Only creaking, whispers, and moans. Suddenly, we hear the sound of bones breaking, accompanied by a high-pitch yell. We immediately cut to the living room, where Kevin watches a video cartoon monster attacking Felix the cat on the screen. Kaylee asks her brother to move the couch in order to block the passage to the stairs, but a mysterious voice keeps calling her after a while. "Hello?" Kevin asks back, briefly pausing the VHS animation, but the answer is silence. When he investigates, he sees, amid the darkness, the face of a woman without a

mouth. This startles the viewer as well as Kevin, who goes back downstairs, panting. After he calms down, there is another abstract shot of the ceiling, where this time two black squares (walls?) turn the middle of the frame into a crooked shape. The low-key light is deep blue, which turns light blue as the TV plays cartoons again. “Kevin,” another voice calls in a different scene. “Put the knife in your eye.” We hear a painful scream somewhere in the house. A splash of blood spreads on a wall, the first and only time we see it in the film.

Eventually, even the cartoons from the video tapes playing on the tv set begin to distort, glitching in one image as the music warps. By the last third of the film all the lights are off, except for a faint blue glow. Kevin tries to call 911, explaining that he is hurt, and whoever answers promises to send “grownups to help.” When asked about his location in the house, he says “I’m downstairs but the door is gone.” At the lack of a reply, Kevin drops the phone. Darkness eventually takes over the frame. The silence is absolute except for the voice, now more unnatural than ever. “I can do anything” it says at some point, “Kaylee didn't do as she was told... she said she wanted her mom and dad... So I took her mouth away.” Like Maria in *The Wolf House*, Kaylee finds herself at the mercy of a disembodied voice who seeks to silence her. Afterwards, the voice instructs the small boy to go upstairs; “It’s okay. I will protect you.” From a screen full of brown-orange static, we cut to Kevin's POV from the ceiling. He is walking on the ceiling. His world is upside down.

Later on, *Skinamarink* provides a notable example of a liminal motus, where the filmed image mutates before our eyes into the impossible. This backwards dolly shot moves at a lethargic, almost imperceptible pace. We start with a medium shot of the ceiling, where a monumental amount of Lego pieces, with some other toys in between them, are attached to each other. A doll house hangs from the colourful yet dimly lighted pile of toys, only attached to it by

a string (perhaps a strand of the cassette coming from a toy recording machine lying by its side). A cryptic message appears over the screen: "572 Days." The familiar cartoon music starts to play from afar, and then we cut to the same shot, except this time from a farther away. Positioned in the middle of the frame, the toys hanging from the ceiling collide with a pillar of shadow. Shadows stem from the wall toys hang from, and soon grow dense until the image becomes a long shot, with the hanging doll house barely visible. Soon the ceiling looks even further away, the mountain of toys now practically lost in the distance, the wall behind it a black narrow passage. Darkness emanates from the bottom of the frame. The ceiling is a downward light-blue triangle replicated by a dark one underneath. The background melts together so the bottom triangle looks like a person with their arms extended, and the upper triangle a light source coming from its head. This sequence lasts approximately two minutes.

While the location transforms into a liminal space, the entire visual character of *Skinamarink* is also liminal in nature. What is being altered here is the children's perception, warped by their melancholic reality. The parents, going through a rough patch in their relationship, exist liminally too; they are voices and distorted bodies only, never human beings whose existence can be proven. Matt Konopka from *Dread Central* wrote an intimate column for their official website, entitled "Trapped in a Changing Home: How *Skinamarink* Captures the Terror of Divorce Through a Child's Eyes." In it, he describes how his parent's own troublesome divorce (a liminal process of separation from one civic entity into two separate ones) was akin to the ominous presence in Kaylee and Kevin's home, "distorting everything that used to bring you comfort as a kid." Such is the strange liminality of *Skinamarink*, a void where images are born that stimulate our creativity and curiosity, offering in return nothing but an incomprehensible absence. As the director told CBC, he grew up in the house we see in the film and even played

with some of the toys used as props. This made for an uncanny filmmaking experience, one that especially resonates with Freud's concept of this word in "The 'Uncanny'" as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (219), something "old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it" (240). It is impossible to point out the exact moment in which young kids are no longer children, and, as a child, it is impossible to grasp the reasons for the traumatizing events happening around us. The liminal atmosphere of *Skinamarink* is a reflection of this uncertainty, and another demonstration of how the liminal motus serves to represent unspeakable moments and thoughts.

In this chapter, E. Elias Merhige's *Begotten* (1990) showcases an example of a liminal motus that is representative of a specific moment. Through surreal and expressionist aesthetics, the film is able to portray human existence at birth, when the subject is effectively traversing from the womb to the outside world. This is an experience we all go through yet cannot remember; cinema can illustrate this lapse on time in which everyone, regardless of external factors such as sex or race, has been at the edge of existence. Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) represents another liminal motus which corresponds to a moment hard to portray; the act of being inside someone else's mind, of becoming a different person. This thought experiment conducted by the director explores the idea of existing as two beings with different perspectives, as well as the possibility of change through experiencing other worldviews.

The liminal motus in *Audition* (1999), by Takashi Miike, takes the form of a liminal space. Tracing a parallel with its antagonist, an actress whose main persona is a performance of the protagonist's ideal woman, the film introduces her in the audition room, a place that stands up from every other location as distinctively barren and minimalistic. In this room, one after another, actresses perform for a role that does not exist, all to get picked to play the role of the

main character's partner. The audition location, like Asami, exists in a state of liminality. In *Skinamarink* (2022), Kyle Edward Ball turns the film's sole location into a liminal space; the uncertainty of childhood and its possible end correlates to the uncanniness of a home where the concepts of time, space, and light lose all their logic. The parents of the main characters are portrayed only sporadically, through voices, unreliable images, and supernatural phenomena – in their bodily absence, their parenthood becomes liminal.

This chapter is relevant to my overarching take on cinematic motus because exploring specific instances of liminality in film also brings attention to the concept of abjection, thus making a case for the horror genre having the ability to be as creatively challenging as any other style of film. In a sentence that echoes the liminal moments evoked by *Begotten*, Kristeva writes: "Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (10). Another statement, which resonates with *Strange Days*, is her explanation of how the abject can disrupt our sense of identity: "Obviously, I am only like someone else: mimetic logic of the advent of the ego, objects, and signs. But when I seek (myself), lose (myself) … then 'I' is heterogeneous. Discomfort, unease, dizziness stemming from an ambiguity" (10). From this ambiguity, according to Kristeva, a space is born in which meaning collapses; it is from this liminal place that signification generates new meanings. This chapter, ultimately, demonstrates how abjection can kickstart self-actualization and an evolution in our comprehension of the world around us. While this is only one of the many effects that our interactions with horror cinema can have, it is useful to undermine the idea that the genre cannot be productive of complex introspective activity.

Conclusion

[W]hen man seeks to represent himself, no longer as a moment of a homogenous process
– of a necessary and pitiful process – but as a new laceration within a lacerated nature,
it is no longer the leveling phraseology coming to him from the understanding that can help him:
he can no longer recognize himself in the degrading chains of logic, but he recognizes himself, instead
– not only with rage but in an ecstatic torment – in the virulence of his own phantasm.

Georges Bataille, "The Pineal Eye"

It is film that will have the ability to raise up and make visible once more
human beings who are now buried under mountains of words and concepts.

Béla Balázs, "Visible Man"

The cinematic motus allows viewers to more clearly point out and recognize shots that deliver emotionally moving and potentially transformative experiences. In doing so, it opens the door to a new level of viewing enjoyment. Because it prioritizes the individual's intimate encounter with a filmic work of art, those who engage with motus can approach cinema from their own perspective. Through definitions of common types of potentially transformative cinematic experiences, viewers can form a more insightful and engaged relationship with the films they watch. I showcase motus through the horror genre because scholarly approaches to the abject filmed image tend to follow hegemonic hierarchies of taste, favouring concepts and aesthetics that induce positive affects in the viewer over those that cause negative affects. Horror films that are pleasant to look at and/or serve sophisticated scholarly interpretations are considered more artistically valuable than those which do not. This disposition demonstrates the need for a new taxonomy, one that considers every kind of affect as equally meaningful.

As I began looking for theories and scholars who could help me write about the pleasures of horror and the attractions of the abject on screen, I came across an interesting yet unsatisfying

trend. Rather than assistance, much of what I found was a curious kind of apology, self-conscious distancing, or reliance on symbolism and politics when it came to discussions of horror as a genre worthy of aesthetic regard. The so-called "paradox of horror" serves as an encapsulation of this issue. This concept was popularized by Caroll, an emblematic author when it comes to self-consciousness in scholarship. He established the idea that enjoyment of the cinematic abject is intrinsically paradoxical, as viewers "seek out horror fictions for the purpose of deriving pleasure from sights and descriptions that customarily repulse them" (158). I was perplexed by his puzzlement, because seeking and gaining pleasure from art which evokes negative emotions is something that feels natural to me, and many others, as cinematic horror viewers. I was baffled by his statement that scholars "might feel justified in demanding an explanation of what could motivate people to seek out the genre" (158), and his conclusion that horror is enjoyable only because of the cognitive pleasures it provides seemed reductive to me. I was looking for an exploration, not a justification.

In my research, I kept encountering scholars that uphold and articulate this supposed paradox of the horror genre in various forms. This apologetic urge has culminated in scholarly texts arguing for horror to be "useful" in order to be considered a legitimate artistic vehicle. I was surprised by scholars' insistence that features such as violence and gore always stand for something else, something noble or political that explains their enjoyment of a horror film. The popularity of this tendency is reflected in terms such as "elevated horror" and "post-horror," which favour films deemed intellectually edifying over the rest of the genre. I became frustrated at the absence of scholarship that treats the aesthetics of horror as seriously as the aesthetics of drama, and at the reluctance or avoidance in tackling precisely the elements of horror that its dedicated viewers enjoy and seek out.

Within the process of thoughtful consideration of horror scholarship that led me to the concept of the cinematic motus, I found solace in the early works of film studies, particularly from Epstein and Balázs. Refreshingly, the latter writes that a discussion of the supposed goodness and badness of artistic products is "pointless" (4), especially when it comes to film. This is because Balázs sees intrinsic value in the emotional connection between viewers and cinema, which he describes as "a social art, one that in a sense is created by the audience" (8). His statement that "An understanding of film is not incompatible with an uninhibited enjoyment of childlike pleasure" (7) felt like an antidote to the apologetic, moralizing scholarship I encountered. I was also guided by Epstein's unselfconsciousness and openness. He welcomed the experience of *photogénie* without trying to judge its value on moral or political grounds, and defined what he saw as the "three most sacred sentiments" we can feel as "respect, fear, and horror" (180). It is from that same desire to find and account for the amoral and apolitical joys of horror that I began looking closely at films to identify and describe their visual characteristics in ways that would do justice to their emotional power. It is this process of close examination, assisted by thinkers and writers who have also sought to describe the attraction of intense, emotionally provocative imagery, that led me to identify the motus, an element of these films that bypasses moral judgement and attends directly to the often extraordinarily abject content of horror, as well as its transporting power. The works of scholars like Hanich and Kristeva directed me towards the awe of the abject, demonstrating how the content of horror does not need to be neutral or ennobling in order to be appreciated. The abject, a central feature of horror, is itself beautiful and awe-producing in its emotional effects.

For this dissertation, I decided to turn to close readings of selected horror films (or films that, in their renderings of the obscene and the abject, can be classified as horror) in order to

study how these films produce the emotional effects they do in viewers. That close study led me to devise diverse categories into which I have grouped image/sound chains that operate to shots and sequences. I aim to pinpoint and describe how these sequences and shots operate, how they make our eyes widen, our minds race, our hearts thud, according to the intellectual and emotional response they provoke. Through my critical readings of an assorted array of horror films, I demonstrate the functionality of the cinematic motus as means to describe how the filmed image can move the viewer into different aesthetic experiences. I distinguish five varieties of motus based on the distinct ways they engage with diverse elements of cinema, and have dedicated a chapter to each one, as follows.

The allegorical motus defines shots that make the viewer connect a series of visual signs to form a relevant signifier alluding to the themes explored within a film. Through my discussion of Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), I show how the allegorical motus highlights elements of significance to the plot, such as a piece of gauze becoming a proxy for a character's soul; by retrospectively incorporating these images into the narrative, the viewer can experience a sense of awe and elation, now able to peek beyond the story's surface. In Amy Holden Jones's *The Slumber Party Massacre* (1982) the allegorical motus is employed to enhance the parody and social commentary the film develops, unapologetically embodying Freudian discourse to challenge and subvert our expectations. Mary Harron's *American Psycho* (2000) displays an allegorical motus that, rather than primary reflecting upon the world around our protagonist, lets us take a deep look within his inner world, making the viewers further understand the underlying theme of otherness in the story. In Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* (2014) the process of grief is portrayed by the monster and its relationship with the characters.

This example of a broad concept manifested through motus becomes particularly interesting, as the film acknowledges its own conceptual allegory through surrealistic visuals.

The narrative motus stands for shots which showcase the culmination of important narrative actions, highlighting the work established by the plot, dialogue, and story structure for a satisfying resolve. In the example from Mimi Cave's *Fresh* (2022), a narrative motus can move the viewer by unveiling sensitive information about a character in a rewarding manner. With Peter Jackson's *Braindead* (1992) we witness a gratifying narrative motus that embodies both a breakthrough for the protagonist, and the end of a slow-burn, anxiety-inducing action. James DeMonaco's *The Purge: Election Year* (2016) goes one step further, offering the viewer an intense narrative motus that reflects our political landscape, culminating with engaging and subversive wishful thinking. Dario Argento's *Deep Red* (1975) achieves an impactful narrative motus using both subtle and explicit visual cues connected to the world of art, ultimately eliciting cognitive play and contemplation.

The shock motus is an explosion of surprise and fear that requires a specific build-up to succeed, just like its narrative counterpart. However, build-up in this case is understood conceptually and typically constructed through editing; shock is more emotional than intellectual. Jump-scares, for example, will only engage our affects when they come unexpected, a reason for which establishing an atmosphere of calm before the storm is key. Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *An Andalusian Dog* (1929) provides one of the most influential examples of a shock motus ever put to film, one that is possible due to both conceptual and editing efforts. James Wong's *Final Destination 3* (2006) carefully constructs a build-up and release example with an unexpected twist. While Vincenzo Natali's *Cube* (1997) crafts a superb shock motus by

relying in the inexplicable, in *Inferno* (Bertolini at al., 1911), we get an innovative shock motus that engages the viewers through wisely timed shots and an escalating perspective of scale.

The reflexive motus, inspired by Bill Nichols's concept of the reflexive mode, is used to highlight the sense of catharsis one experiences when a film purposefully reveals its own cinematic techniques to the viewer, thus inviting the realization that we have been immersed in a fictional world from which we can be expelled in several ways. The enchantment can be broken, and existential self-reflection often comes from this knowledge. Because our perception of reality is based on both societal and individual imaginings, we question to what extent what we call "reality" is imposed onto us, hiding in plain view. Dustin Mills's *Her Name Was Torment II: Agony* (2016) explores a reflexive motus in which the colour palette and editing uncovers a layer of fiction to showcase the enjoyment of the macabre. Fred Vogel's *August Underground's Penance* (2007) provides an example where the filming style and aesthetic are used to tap into our supposedly safe subconscious for a gnarly viewing experience. An entry where the reflexive crosses boundaries is Wes Craven's *Scream* (1996), by blending fiction and reality with its breaking of the fourth wall. Cristóbal León and Joaquín Cociña's *The Wolf House* (2018) showcases a reflexive motus that includes the film's very own production, resulting in a demonstration of what human hands can accomplish.

The liminal motus is expressed in film through the concept of the liminal space and the abstraction of images. It refers to those shots in which the viewer is unable or has trouble to understand what is exactly being showcased. In the case of a location, we call it liminal when we cannot make up where the characters are or what the place consists of. In the case of an abstract image, we do not comprehend what is being filmed. E. Elias Merhige's cult-classic *Begotten* (1990) provides us with an example of the latter, where vaguely evocative shapes allude to the

liminality of a being existing while not yet born. Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995) offers an example of the liminal transition between one point of view and that of another person. *Audition* (1999), by Takashi Miike, plays with the liminal space to reflect upon the antagonist of the film and the nature of performance. In *Skinamarink* (2022), Kyle Edward Ball expands the concept to engulf the whole film, giving viewers an experience marked by visual uncertainty.

In *Doubting Vision: Film and the Revelationist Tradition*, Malcolm Turvey offers the reader an insightful demonstration of how our ideas about cinema and its utility have developed over time, tracing some of the common ground between early film theorists with a focus on Epstein and Balazs (as well as Dziga Vertov and Siegfried Kracauer). Here, Turvey comes up with a complex notion about the "revelatory power" (4) of the filmed image, taking great interest in how filmmakers' interpretations of the natural world revealed through film "differ considerably from the sort of empirical phenomena … that are normally discovered and observed using visual technologies" (12). He distinguishes between observing film as an art versus as a technology and ends his book by stating that both ways of viewing are equally important. However, he remarks: "Taking film as an art seriously involves clarifying what sort of knowledge it gives us" (130). What I am suggesting in this dissertation is that we consider another factor: the enjoyment that cinema brings us. The power horror films have to elicit strong emotions of joy, ecstasy, and other feelings of transporting pleasure, justifies my close attention to their visual operations and details. The experience brought by the cinematic motus is valuable in and of itself. In naming and explaining how it works, I hope to have added to the critical vocabulary we can use to describe the pleasures and transporting joys of horror cinema.

According to Balazs, "Creating meaning is our way of defending ourselves against chaos. If an elemental force becomes so powerful that we can neither withstand it nor change it, then we

make haste to discover a meaning in it lest we be engulfed by it" (4). While this fight against an opposing force can be used to describe most stories put to film, it becomes especially relevant in cinematic horror. After all, Wood's definition of the genre's most traditional narrative is the formula 'monster disrupts reality,' which is easily extrapolated into 'an othering force disrupts environment' (71). One of cinematic horror's primary appeals is its ability to illustrate personal interactions with the abject, regardless of how indescribable they might seem, or how buried they might be in our subconscious mind. Horror deeply connects with viewers through its representations of the abject. Different horror films move people of all walks of life in diverse ways. There is no fixated formula for "successful" representations of the abject, because we cannot forcefully decide which artistic expressions resonate with each of us. Thus, some horror films remain permanently effective for certain individuals regardless of their context, budget, or decade in which they were created.

In conversation with Xavier Aldana Reyes, Murray Leeder highlights Reyes's statement that "horror can eventually lose its affective qualities either because its special effects, makeup, etc. look less believable than contemporary works … and/or because of overfamiliarity rendering once-disturbing conventions rote and predictable." Leeder is not convinced by this reasoning for two reasons: "later techniques are not necessarily more verisimilitudinous (more advanced special effects sometimes resonate as less realistic than simpler ones)," and "conventions need not become ineffective due to their familiarity" (135). The story of a disobedient child getting lost and encountering a dangerous stranger, for example, is a constant throughout fairy tales all around the world; what makes each one unique is the way in which they are told. Horror is always culturally relevant, for what scares us may change, but abject narratives adapt thanks to the genre's "flexibility" and "its ability to bend to new social and technological milieus" (Leeder

88). At any given time of human history, there is an infinite number of things we can fear. And, as Hanich states, when "[a]dopting an aesthetic attitude" to experience cinematic horror, "I temporarily set aside the goal-oriented, instrumental attitude of everyday life and allow myself to be sensitive and vulnerable to what the aesthetic object might 'do' to me" (53). If we fully embrace our vulnerability while interacting with the cinematic abject, the viewing experience becomes much more engaging. Feelings of terror assault us in the present as we are watching horror films, activating our instinctual reflects. The changes in bodily sensations mirror our emotional reactions, punctuating the transformative quality of the cinematic motus.

By positioning viewers in the abject, "the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 2), cinematic horror provides transformative viewing experiences where we can confront inner chaos and create new meaning from it. The negative affects that stem from cinematic horror are similar to what Del Rio mentions as "active forces," which she describes, employing Deleuze's reading of Nietzsche, as those which (unlike reactive forces) "are identified with an act that discharges or externalizes the affects and thus allows these to be created anew or transformed" (9). By externalizing, we paradoxically internalize. The ways in which cinema emotionally moves its viewers have the potential to change how we perceive artistic products, ourselves, and the world around us, regardless of how abject they may be. My engagement with early film studies through the theory of Epstein and Balázs, in conjunction with contemporary scholars such as Hanich and Kristeva, helped me understand that by looking closely at films I could pinpoint the shots and sequences that provoked certain responses. Their contributions, combined with a fascination for the abject, brought me to the moment that inspired my idea for the cinematic motus.

The first time I watched *Psycho* (1960) on 35mm through an old projector I became enamoured with the sequence in which Marion drives under the pouring rain. In it, we receive her POV but are deprived of her hands or reflection. For a significant amount of the sequence, all we can see in the shots is a blur through the windshield, an eclectic amalgamation of gray tones somewhat akin to a Jackson Pollock painting. I realized that the joy I was experiencing from this sequence was not only a product of the story at hand and the context of the scene; there was something else, something raw about the way these shots impacted me. Yes, this sequence might be interpreted as a projection of Marion's troubled mental state, as a representation of her confusion, stress, and doubt. *Psycho*'s powerful visual language is a one of the film's most recognized and applauded features: the symbolism of its imagery is present in a substantial amount of scenes and shots alike. These cinematic moments have been often approached as figurative; their underlying meanings have been endlessly analyzed by scholars. Indeed, meaning can be extracted from the windshield sequence I adored, but this moment of expressionist abstraction had also transformed my viewing experience in a different way. In a film where so many visual elements were charged with meaning, this series of shots invited me to lose myself in the image, in its grittiness and texture. If the film was like being submerged in a body of water, these shots felt like taking a breath, to then dive underneath once more. This experience inspired me to expand my understanding of the value of filmmaking beyond the conceptual, and to consider the raw power of the filmed image.

It was this close examination that led me to group different shots and sequences into motus, a term attractive because it captures the simultaneity of thinking and feeling, eyes widening and mind engaged, as a part of the film unfolds before us and moves us away from everyday reality. Identifying and describing these moments unveiled for me the deep pleasures of

horror spectatorship, a spectatorship in which joy plays as much a part as it does in any other genre. The ideation of motus confirmed my belief that attending to horror is valuable not because it can lead to certain intellectual benefits, but because it is art and, like all art, it can bring ecstasy and joy to us when we turn our eyes to the screen. That is all art has to do.

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