

Lost and Found: The Found Footage Phenomenon and Southeast Asian Supernatural Horror Film

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This article offers a brief historical and theoretical overview of found footage films and their contribution to the horror genre, and focuses in more detail on four Southeast Asian productions of the kind made between 2009-2012: *Keramat/Sacred* (Servia & Tiwa, 2009), *Seru/Resurrection* (Asraff, Pillai, Andre & Jin 2011), *Haunted Changi* (Kern, Woo & Lau, 2010), and *Darkest Night* (Tan, 2012), all of which can be viewed as an alternative to the mainstream local horror cinema. The paper argues that the two most common strategies used by found footage horror films (including the four films in question) are the techniques that effectively authenticate the horror experience: inducing a heightened perception of realism in the audience and a contradictory to it feeling of perceptive subjectivity.

Keywords: found footage film, Southeast Asian horror film, realism, subjectivity, documentary film techniques

Introduction: The Rise of Found Footage Horror

The proliferation of found footage horror films over the past fifteen years has frequently been attributed to the democratization of film production, spurred by a greater availability of digital video recording devices, ubiquitous surveillance technology, and the growing popularity of the amateur film aesthetics associated with online video-sharing platforms such as YouTube. Frequently shot on tight budgets (or at least pretending to be¹), and occasionally turning a healthy profit, found footage horror films exploit horror's long-standing connection with independent filmmaking, and its desire for the authentication of the horrific experience and the affective response it generates, which has given horror its name. Indeed, it can be said that found footage horror has become a calling card of the genre in the twenty-first century, and, as Paramount Film Groups President Adam Goodman predicts—"something that's here to stay." Goodman extols: "It's a terrific medium for filmmakers. They don't see the medium as a barrier to entry. They don't care about shaky cameras. For whatever reason, it just

makes for a much more visceral experience for the audience” (Bloom, 2013, para. 1). Indeed, as Xavier Aldana Reyes (2015) concludes, “only torture porn features and remakes have rivalled found footage in the twenty-first century in terms of mainstream appeal and financial success” (p. 2)².

Found footage films are commonly understood as films that are composed of (entirely, or at least in large parts) previously shot material which was apparently “found” or “discovered,” and then edited for greater comprehensibility, or presented to the viewers in its “original” condition. It has to be stressed, however, that despite their claim to authenticity and their complete reliance on filming and editing techniques commonly associated with documenting reality, found footage films are, and will always remain, works of fiction. Some more memorable examples include an American independent film, *The Blair Witch Project* (Cowie, Myrick & Sánchez, 1999), a Paramount Pictures production, *Cloverfield* (Abrams & Reeves, 2008), or a Spanish film made with the participation of Televisión Española and Canal+ España, *REC* (Fernandez, Balagueró & Plaza, 2007). The found footage label is used rather freely and is often also inclusive of movies filmed with diegetic hand-held cameras (from professional film cameras to handy-cams and mobile phones) or surveillance cameras; recorded in the form of a video diary, internet podcasts, and even fully-fledged *cinéma vérité*³ and mock-documentaries⁴ complete with fake interviews and media documentation. While most film critics admit that the name “found footage” is slightly problematic since it was borrowed from a pre-existing filmmaking practice of incorporating material scavenged from other sources,⁵ by now this misappropriated term is so firmly rooted in popular discourse that any efforts to rename the genre are unlikely to succeed. Indeed, as Scott Tobias claims, “found footage horror” has become “a blanket term for all horror films that have a faux-documentary style” (Phipps & Tobias, 2014, para. 4).

Although found footage films do not necessarily need to be horror-themed, a great majority of them are,⁶ and the format has recently risen to unprecedented prominence within the horror genre.⁷ Most of these films tend to be independent American (US) productions, but it is safe to say that the technique has been tested in all corners of the world.⁸ In her book on found footage film and the appearance of reality, genre scholar Alexandra Heller-Nicholas (2014) tracks the history of found footage horror to educational films and road safety films, which included footage from real accidents), the mythical existence of the so-called “snuff” films, presumably showing real death for the purpose of sexual arousal, and the rise of television mockumentary forms. She relates the phenomenon to the notorious theatrical performances of the *Grand Guignol*⁹ and the historic Orson Welles’ *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast.¹⁰ At the same time, we would be equally justified to look for the origins of the format in literature,

with numerous literary narratives professing to be “found” manuscripts, private diaries, or even epistolary novels constructed from a collection of letters.¹¹ What these texts have in common is the fact that they have been meticulously constructed to serve as “archival footage” containing evidence of past events, even if the events in question never actually took place.

Although the rise of found footage horror is commonly attributed to the phenomenal success of *The Blair Witch Project* (Cowie, Myrick & Sánchez 1999),¹² that particular film was not the first of its kind. Moreover, it can neither be credited as the first found footage film that met with critical acclaim, nor as the first production that successfully terrified its audience thanks to the “realistic” documentary format it employed. Most sources mention at least eight found footage horror films made before 1999, with an Italian production, *Cannibal Holocaust* (Di Nuzio, Palaggi & Deodato, 1980) listed as the first. Made long before film went digital, *Cannibal Holocaust* utilised documentary-style footage apparently found in the jungle after the original film crew had been killed and devoured by hungry cannibals. This material, recovered by the second expedition, was meant to be edited together as a tribute to the missing filmmakers, but the horrific footage found in the cans simply proved that the crew’s untimely demise had ultimately been deserved. The film resonated with other Italian exploitation films which dominated the 1970s and 1980s European horror scene and, understandably, attracted more attention because of its graphic contents than its revolutionary format. The first critically acclaimed found footage production was a Belgian film, *Man Bites Dog* (Belvaux, Bonzel & Poelvoorde, 1993), a *cinéma vérité*-inspired intimate portrait of a charismatic killer followed on the job by filmmakers who eventually become involved in the killings. The film quickly started enjoying the status of a “cult movie” and won several prestigious awards.¹³ It was banned in several countries as excessively “brutal” and “disturbing,” which added to its notoriety but also made it less accessible to a wider audience. Finally, a British mock-documentary, *Ghostwatch* (Baumgarten & Manning, 1992), is frequently quoted as the first massively effective found footage production, capable of sending its audience into a frenzied panic. The film, advertised as a live investigation into the reports of supernatural activity at a house in North London, was screened as part of regular BBC broadcasting and anchored by several respectable British television reporters, whose presence certainly added the element of “authenticity.” It elicited a huge national reaction, with rumours of women going into labour and teenagers committing suicide from fright. All these films can be simultaneously positioned as an alternative to the mainstream horror offering at the time and a rather typical example of their genre (at least within the countries of production).

While the pre-1999 productions have been acknowledged for their experimental formal qualities, most critics agree that it was, ultimately, *The Blair Witch Project* (Cowie, Myrick & Sánchez, 1999) that gave us the formula for found footage horror as we know it today. The story of three filmmakers who disappear in the woods near Burkitsville, Maryland, while making a documentary about a local witch, reconstructed through their recovered footage, was received enthusiastically by critics.¹⁴ In 2006, Chicago Film Critics Association ranked the film #12 on its list of “Top 100 Scariest Movies,” and in 2008, Entertainment Weekly mentioned it as #99 of “The 100 Best Films from 1983-2008.” The film’s two directors, Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, ended up on a cover of *Time* magazine (19 August 1999). The film spawned a sequel, *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (Carraro & Berlinger, 2000)¹⁵ and two mock-documentaries, *An Exploration of the Blair Witch Legend* (1999) and *Curse of Blair Witch* (1999), both directed by Myrick and Sánchez and meant to legitimize the original production through fake news reports and interviews. It inspired a series of comics, video games and young adult books. But perhaps its most significant achievement was the fact that it “turned out to be a textbook example of the immersive and unsettling effects that may be achieved by using hand-held cameras” (Aldana Reyes, 2015, p. 2) and instilled a generation of filmmakers with confidence that sometimes simply having a video-recording device (of any kind) is enough. The fact that the film proved to be one of the most profitable film enterprises of all time only helped to validate its position.¹⁶

Since not all found footage films are independent productions with limited funding, this seems to suggest that while important, low cost of production is not the only motivation behind the choice to use documentary stylistics in horror films. Indeed, many filmmakers are drawn to the format because they see it as specifically well-suited to the needs of the genre. Raw and simple, and relying on a limited perspective (first-person, or purely mechanical, when surveillance cameras are involved), constantly drawing attention to “the spooky stuff that lurks outside the frame” (Phipps & Tobias, 2014, para. 5) quasi-documentary records of horrifying experiences prove very effective not only in eliciting psychological, but also physiological responses from the body, which according to Linda Williams (1991) defines horror as a genre. Moreover, capable of “[exploiting] its own framing and stylistic devices to offer reflections on contemporary fears” (Blake & Aldana Reyes, 2015, p. 3), a found footage film:

[m]akes for an exceptionally anxious cinema, preoccupied with the dangers of digital technology, specifically its proliferation of mediated images of real-world violence, its capacity to bring surveillance societies into being, its

exposure of the user to the uninvited attentions of strangers
“from beyond” and its impact on human identity. (p. 3)

What seems to be the most significant, however, the documentary techniques employed in such movies succeed in authenticating the horror experience within the narrative.

Bruce Kawin (2012) argues that cinematic horror relies on the films' connection to the horrors and fears of the real life: “We may relate what we see on the screen to what we know of real horror, and start running through our fears of the real world even while we are immersed in the monstrous and the impossible” (Packham, 2012, para. 7). While the viewers have become accustomed to traditionally constructed films and remain acutely aware that however gripping the narrative, in the end “it’s only a movie,” found footage horror films with their immersive aesthetics allow for a “first-person experience” (para. 2) and elicit fear based on the heightened perception of realism and subjectivity they create. This, in turn, effectively allows the audience to experience horror on a deeper and more personal level.¹⁷As the genre demonstrates, the impression of reality does not actually need to be authentic to fulfil this authenticating gesture. Jaimie Baron (2014) argues that since our notion of “history” and “historical narrative” has changed over the last 50 years from a linear arrangement of real events with cause and effect to a collection of stories organised around literary tropes by historians, so has our understanding of what constitutes archival materials (p. 2). Our experience of history is shaped today predominantly by our encounters with audiovisual texts, which have become the most frequent representations of the past in the twenty-first century. Appropriating “pre-existing recorded sounds and images to serve as historical ‘evidence’” (p. 173), such texts are known for their ability to produce the effect of “directly experiencing the past itself rather than a mediated representation” (p. 173). The same can be said, according to Baron, about any film that produces the archive effect.

Baron (2014) defines the archive effect as determined by the relationship between the text and the viewer. In other words, it is entirely up to the viewers to decide which events they appropriate as part of their historical experience. As history becomes an increasingly contested territory, our judgment about the reality and authenticity of the portrayed/archived events often relies solely on their mode of representation. Viewed from this perspective, found footage movies could potentially be accepted as constructing yet another version of the past, especially a subversive, controversial version that the authorities would prefer to keep secret, although this does not mean that they are always real. But, as Aldana Reyes (2015) convincingly argues, the strength of the genre lies in its ability to “[present] staged horror as

unmediated,” turn itself into “a self-professed ‘experience’ in fear” (p. 18) in its “[establishing] pseudo-documentary as prevalent format” and continuously “[questioning] the boundaries between seeing and believing” (p. 19).

Although found footage films have been made in various Southeast Asian cinemas, their pseudo-documentary stylistic does not seem to be very popular with the local filmmakers.¹⁸ This article looks at the four core Southeast Asian found footage horror films: *Haunted Changi* (Kern, Woo & Lau, 2010, Singapore), *Seru/Resurrection* (Asraff, Pillai, Andre & Jin, 2011, Malaysia),¹⁹ *Keramat/Sacred* (Servia & Tiwa, 2009, Indonesia), and *Darkest Night* (Tan, 2012, Philippines) and discusses the appropriation of the format by the films in question.²⁰ The paper argues that these four films should be recognised for their hybridity, merging local content with imported found footage horror format, and thus offering an alternative to the mainstream Southeast Asian horror cinema, defined as a culturally-specific category, not necessarily mimicking all the conventions of the established global horror genre.²¹ Finally, it discusses the films’ strategies of simultaneously inducing the perception of realism and a contradictory feeling of subjectivity in their audiences, both recognised as effective techniques of authenticating the horror experience.

Hybrid Horror: New Format, Old Stories

When it comes to their themes, Southeast Asian horror films appear to resist change. Over the years, we have seen more than thirty cinematic reincarnations of the ghost of Mae Nak in Thailand, and have witnessed countless Thai villages battling their gut-crunching *phi pop* and *phi krasue* spirits amid scares and laughter. Melancholy ladies have a habit of turning into bloodthirsty *pontianaks* and *kuntilanak*s in Malay, Singaporean and Indonesian movies and Philippine horror films tend to breed *aswangs* by the dozens. Although recent productions reflect significant efforts to modernize the genre and make it more appealing to the urban middle classes, who constitute the largest group of consumers of media products in the region,²² the hold local supernatural folklore has on Southeast Asian horror films remains strong. The increasing digitization of filmmaking in the region has contributed to the visible improvement of production values within the industry. It reduced the cost of production and distribution, simplified the editing process, and connected local filmmakers to a vast network of festivals, film professionals, and aficionados. It has also driven some of them to experimentation with new formats and technologies.

With only six films made in five countries, found footage horror commands a minimal presence in Southeast Asian cinemas. Five of these films are currently available on DVD, most had at least limited theatrical release, played at film festivals, and one (*Haunted Changi*) has become

a rather repetitive offering on HBO Asia cable channel. While we could reasonably argue that, given their format and production methods, these films should be positioned as an alternative to mainstream horror films in the region, it has to be noted that not all mainstream productions are equally successful. Many studio-produced, star-studded commercial horror films do miserably at the box office and disappear from local cinemas within a week after opening. Many horror films are made straight to DVD and never get theatrically released in the first place. Very few Southeast Asian horror films make it to international cable TV or pay-per-view channels like Netflix (although they do get shown on local TV channels). The four films discussed in this article cannot perhaps compete with the most glamorous regional horror productions, but they certainly should be counted amongst notable examples of the genre.

It goes without saying that the makers of these films have more than a fair grasp of the format. The narrative is adequately motivated. It contains a reasonable explanation of the origin and the need for creating a digital record. In a rather typical fashion, the four films purport to be roughly edited private video diaries, or “behind the scenes” recordings documenting the routines of film production. As the portrayed characters inevitably end up dead, insane, or imprisoned, the footage, which is subsequently discovered, serves as evidence of their demise. This evidence inevitably involves some sort of otherworldly interference, since like other Southeast Asian genre productions, the films remain quintessentially supernatural. Indeed, the stories these films tell are comfortingly familiar, revolving around haunted buildings, vengeful spirits, karmic retribution, spiritual possession, magic, and shamans—all of which are rather typical of the horror films in the region. The employment of the found footage technique to tell these stories, however, has interesting consequences. Rather than simply accept ghosts and spirits as an addition to, instead of the subject of, the narrative,²³ viewers are confronted with the supernatural in the format of an obviously mediated event—a digital recording that does not pretend to be anything else but a digital recording. Objectivized through the documentary lens that captures their presence in exactly the same manner as other background elements, such portrayals of the paranormal phenomena are at the same time frighteningly realistic and make the viewers constantly question whether they can, or should, believe what they see. By forcing the viewers to make subjective judgments in order to make sense of their stories, they unsettle the passive position of the audience, require viewer immersion, and turn the films into a personal experience.

Haunted Changi (Kern, Woo & Lau, 2010) focuses on ghost-hunting and exploration. Four Singaporean filmmakers shoot a documentary about the derelict Old Changi Hospital, arguably the most haunted location in the

city. Random street interviews reinforce two messages: that Singaporeans take their ghosts very seriously, and that indeed the hospital is haunted. The filmmakers ignore multiple warnings and stop filming only after a member of the crew suffers a panic attack. As they try to make sense of the captured footage in the editing room, the director returns to the hospital, where, it is hinted, he engages in a sexual relationship with a mysterious Chinese squatter girl. Eventually, the girl is revealed to be a ghost, the cameraman gets possessed by a spirit of a Japanese soldier, and decapitates the director with a samurai sword that has magically materialized out of thin air. The message on the screen informs us that the man is currently on trial for murder.

Despite its format, *Haunted Changi* fits well with mainstream Singaporean horror productions which often use ghosts as part of a historical allegory and national narrative. Singaporean horror abounds in stories of multi-ethnic ghosts clearly adjusted to the beliefs of the local population. Curiously, just like the living, the ghosts seem to stick together. While the city with its old shop houses and modern high-rise condominiums tends to be haunted almost exclusively by Chinese spirits (from benevolent ancestors to terrifying hungry ghosts), the surrounding jungle seems reserved for Malay ghosts and demons (from various evil *hantu* to the notorious *pontianak*, malevolent spirits of women who died in childbirth). As Kenneth Paul Tan (2010), aptly put it, these spirits “cross into the de-sacralized consciousness of modern Singaporeans who mourn the loss of customs and the values associated with them, while downplaying their own responsibility for choosing ‘temporal’ over ‘spiritual’ authority in a relentless national drive for material growth and progress” (p. 214).

Rather than merely showing ghosts haunting the city, most Singaporean horror films focus on people telling stories of ghosts instead, successfully capturing the ephemeral orality of the local ghostlore. The stories being told can be serious or amusing, but they tend to come with a warning to leave the dead alone. Singaporean horror films convince us that almost any occasion can lead to spontaneous acts of ghost storytelling: the Hungry Ghost Month (*The Maid*, Chan, Ho, Seah & Tong, 2005), a radio broadcast (*Ghost on Air*, Tay & Cheng, 2012), office gossip (*Greedy Ghost/Tan zin gui jian gui*, Alaudin & Boo, 2012), or a family reunion (*Where Got Ghost?/ Xia dao xiao*, Teck, Tong, Toong, Neo & Boo, 2009), but it seems that stories told by Singaporean recruits regarding their supernatural experiences during national service exercises are among the most prolific. Recruits lagging behind on their runs often meet with the terrifying *pontianak* in the woods (*The Ghosts Must Be Crazy/Gui ye xiao*, Neo, Boo & Lee, 2011), those trying to shirk their responsibilities face the wrath of the jungle spirits (*Where Got Ghost?*), military exercises occasionally take place on haunted ground

(*Pulau Hantu*, Tay & Sivalingam, 2008), and the soldiers are not even safe sleeping in their barracks (23:59, Go, Yeo, Au & Chan, 2011). The interviews in *Haunted Changi* are yet another chance for the locals to indulge their passion for ghostly tales. They are also an intriguing narrative device, as they allow for the framing of the entire film as yet another ghost story.

The interviews focus the viewers' attention on the historical/nationalistic aspect of the movie. *Haunted Changi* draws inspiration from the traumatic memories of the Japanese occupation.²⁴ Old Changi Hospital, used as a Japanese health care facility for the POWs during World War II, is often identified as a site of torture, medical experimentation and summary executions, and reports of its being haunted go back to the 1940s. In fact, the hospital is surrounded by so much local ghostlore that it does not need a film to legitimize its spooky reputation in the eyes of the Singaporeans. Pointing out that "the location is the real star of the show" (Jung, 2011, para 5), the film was criticized as "an attempt to capitalize on the hospital's notoriety as one of the most haunted places in all of Asia" (para. 3), but the filmmakers were also given credit for creating "a showcase of what might end up being a lost piece of Singaporean history" (para. 5). This piece of history, can indeed soon be lost, as Old Changi Hospital is currently being renovated as a French bank campus, part of Singapore's "continually redefined and therefore impermanent landscape" (Tan K.P., 2011, p. 217), which through regular demolition and development ensures that its places are "unable to anchor personal, social and even national memories" (Tan, 2010, p. 217).

Although the found footage format of *Haunted Changi* did not prove too successful with the Singaporean audience, who disputed the film's authenticity and accused it of "distastefully cheating people's feelings" (Sipos, 2013, para. 13), not all Southeast Asian found footage films were similarly rejected. In Malaysia, the documentary quality of *Seru* was praised "for its 'real' effect" (Zulkifli et al. 2012, p. 177). This tenth highest grossing Malaysian horror production of 2011 (p. 176) was seemingly filmed on a movie location and presented as "behind the scenes" footage. While making a horror film in a forest, two crew members (Sara and Julie) get possessed by unknown spirits. Sara is taken to the base camp, where she receives help from an old man who happens to live nearby and is, very conveniently, a *bomoh* (Malay shaman). Julie staggers away into the forest and is immediately pursued by two of her colleagues. Cars do not start, people go missing, and house walls bleed magical symbols. Sara wakes up as a raging zombie-like creature and effectively kills everyone around her. Julie turns into a *pontianak*/zombie monster and disposes of anyone left in the forest. Eventually, we find out that the entire incident was orchestrated by the *bomoh* who needed human sacrifice to resurrect his dead daughter. The

final scene shows a spirit reviving the body of one of the dead filmmakers, although it remains unclear whether this is, indeed, the spirit of the old man's daughter.

Seru/Resurrection (Asraff, Pillai, Andre & Jin, 2011) does not diverge from a majority of Malaysian horror movies, described by Zulkifli et al. (2012) as “Malay-centric”—promoting Malay language, characters and narratives “influenced with Malay mythology, legends, and the supernatural or mystic elements” (p. 175), and in a sense distorting the image of contemporary Malaysia as a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society. The film begins with a rather generic scene—three friends driving through a dark forest with an intention to bury a corpse see a ghost on the road. The characters in the scene (identified later as “actors”) are portrayed as overacting, as if to distance them from the actual protagonists and distinguish between commercial cinema, seen as the producer of fantasies, and the seemingly unedited footage documenting the reality the film claims to be. In contrast, the “real” characters introduced in the footage (the “filmmakers”) have been constructed as more “ordinary” or “natural,” and the fact that they manage to appear to be genuinely reacting to the horrific events makes the recording so much more believable.

Horror films are currently on the rise in Malaysia, after a 30-year ban on the genre introduced amidst the rising Islamic sentiments in the 1970s. Malaysian former Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, insisted that horror films were “a bad influence that stoked panic” (“Horror Films Rise from the Dead,” 2012, para. 26), while the National Fatwa Council called them “counter-productive to building a developed society” (para. 26). At the same time, as director Ahmad Idham Ahmad Nazri observes, horror films remain popular because “they reflect the country’s village culture and the traditional superstitions that trouble Malay hearts” (para. 9). *Seru* does not stray far from the supernatural scenarios characteristic for Malaysian horror. The events portrayed in the film are explained as caused by Malay black magic, perhaps the most prevalent theme in domestic horror productions which warn against the use of witchcraft (strictly forbidden by Islam but frequently practiced nonetheless) for boosting one’s career (*Susuk*, Zain, Ghalili & Muhammad, 2008), improving one’s chances in politics (*Dukun*, Hee & Said, 2007), or winning a man’s heart (*Nasi Tangas*, Rejab, 2014). Occasionally, black magic is used to bring people back from the dead. This transgressive act goes against all the teachings of Islam and usually has dire consequences, like for instance turning the deceased into a bloodthirsty *pontianak* (*Paku: Bila Cinta Menjadi Seram*, Punjabi & Rameesh, 2013). Last but not least, spiritual possession is often portrayed as facilitated by witchcraft (*Chermin*, Abdullah, 2007), the explanation favoured also in *Seru*.

Similarly to *Seru*, Indonesian *Keramat* also claims to be the “behind the scenes” footage documenting the production of a film, although this time the film in the making is a festival drama rather than horror. A young ambitious female director (Miea) is not happy with her leading actress (Miga), who is either sick, absent, or simply not proving very talented. Right on cue, Miga falls ill again. Inexplicably also, her lifeless body becomes too heavy for six men to lift, and when the girl wakes up she appears possessed. The spirit inside her claims to be one of Miga’s noble ancestors. She reveals she came to rescue the girl since nature is about to retaliate against human wickedness. A *dukun* (Javanese shaman) is called in to exorcise the spirit but despite the ritual, Miga’s body disappears from the locked room. The filmmakers then enter the spirit world to bring her back. They follow a path through the woods, where they get attacked and dragged into darkness one by one. The attacks are accompanied by surreal glimpses of the netherworld, represented by unrelated but highly symbolic shots of a graveyard, funeral procession, *pocong* (ghost of the dead person trapped in its shroud), dancing spirit guardians, *wayangkulit* shadow play with invisible performers, sacred amulets, etc. Only four filmmakers make it through the night. They wake up on a mountain seconds before the earth starts to shake. Press clippings tell us that they all died in an earthquake leaving only the camera behind.

The poetic and slightly surreal nature of the film clearly reflects Katinka van Heeren’s (2012) description of Indonesian horror: “Generally speaking, anything can happen in these films, and the story does not necessarily have to make sense” (p. 137). The intrusion of the supernatural into the lives of the living (represented by the possession of Miga but also by the appearance of the spiritual guardians in the material world, often in the vicinity of “sacred” places), and the implication that the living may trespass into the netherworld reflect the old Indonesian animistic belief system that recognizes the power of *semangat* (the spirit, or life force) in all animate and inanimate objects. “Intrinsic to all objects, animals, and people, the *semangat* does not disappear upon death, but rather manifests in a different source,” explains Sophie Siddique (2002, p. 26). The fascination with the supernatural and mysticism, drawing upon traditional Indonesian folk beliefs, can be seen in the premise of many classic Indonesian horror movies, whose plots revolve around the quest for spiritual knowledge and power (van Heeren, 2012). Indonesian cinema is frequently characterized through its “powerful drive toward the restoration of symbolic order” (Siddique, 2002, p. 24), achieved usually by submitting to the religious authority of a *kyai* (an expert on Islam) (van Heeren). The use of a *kyai* was certainly a successful formula for a majority of the New Order horror films (1966-1998), abandoned in the more recent films (e. g. *Jelankung*, Poernomo, Mantovani & Jose Poernomo, 2001; *Kuntilanak*, Punjabi & Mantovani, 2006; *Macabre/RumahDara*,

Tio Stamboel & Tjhanto, 2009) which depict the supernatural as “part of modern life” and make no “pretence about inserting religious elements” (p. 148) into film plots.

The format of the mock-documentary used in *Keramat/Sacred* (Servia & Tiwa, 2009) is also not completely new to Indonesia. Van Heeren (2012) writes about the development of the new formula of “horror infotainment,” initiated by the series called *Kismis* screened by RCTI television in 2001 built around interviews with people who had a supernatural experience. Horror infotainment shows like *Kismis* were all supposedly based on true stories and stressed that the depictions of the supernatural were “real” and “what was recorded or reconstructed was claimed to be authentic and not fabricated” (p. 151). The development of a horror reality show *Pemburu hantu* in 2004 took the documentary theme even further. The show introduced a team of “ghost-hunters,” including a mystic, a shaman and an Islamic scholar, who were on call to exorcise ghosts and cleanse haunted locations, and who explained the presence of the supernatural in the world. The popular appeal of these shows suggests that there may be a future for found footage horror productions in Indonesia (pp. 151-152). The inclusion of a short feature (segment “Save Haven”) by Timo Tjahjanto (one of the directors of *Macabre*, 2009), co-directed with Gareth Evans (the director of *The Raid*, 2011), in a highly successful found footage horror anthology *V/H/S 2* (Benjamin, et al. & Barret, et al., 2013) seems to confirm that theory.

Although related to reality TV, *Keramat/Sacred* (Servia & Tiwa, 2009) adheres to the standards of direct cinema, with its intrusive camera recording events as they unfold with an intention to discover a cinematic truth. The last of the films discussed in this article, *Darkest Night* (Tan, 2012), shows a more complex documentary structure involving mock television reports, reconstructions, and a video diary, with the camera occasionally turning into a surveillance device and recording on its own. *Darkest Night* is also the only film of the four, which does not involve amateur or professional filmmakers but instead puts a family at its centre. The film revolves around a story of a family that disappears without a trace during a Christmas reunion, apparently inspired by a Malaysian urban legend about the disappearance of a Chinese family in the Cameron Highlands during the Chinese New Year festivities in 2003. It is also the only production where the footage is actually *found*, as we see the videotape being recovered from the house debris together with a box containing a book of magic.²⁵ The majority of the film is supposedly the unedited recording found on this tape. The camera, originally intended to document a Christmas dinner and the introduction of Susan’s American fiancé (Ken) to her extensive family, captures inexplicable supernatural phenomena. As the family gathers at dinner, there is an earthquake and the whole world is plunged into darkness: there is no electricity, no cars, and no

contact with the outside world. People split up—some try to get help, some stay home with kids, some try to take advantage of the darkness. Strangeness follows: TV plays without power showing cryptic images, people disappear and reappear without reason, some are found dead, others have mutated into bizarre animal-human hybrids, or return as “ghosts.” Eventually Susan finds a book of magic that used to belong to an old French cult worshipping Baphomet and we learn that the events of the day have been orchestrated by the hostess (Michelle), as part of a black magic ritual to keep the family together for eternity. Susan and Ken try to undo the ritual and fail. The final images showing the family merging with the photograph of the cult members suggest that they are indeed trapped in some hellish version of “heaven.”

At the first glance, *Darkest Night* (Tan, 2012) may seem quite difficult to justify as a typical Filipino horror production. The filmmakers based their plot on an urban legend indigenous to Malaysia and in fact intended the film to be shot in Malaysia, but decided to move the action to the Philippines to avoid Malaysian censorship (“The Darkest Movie,” 2014). There is no mention of the rich Filipino folklore—not a shadow of a gut-sucking *aswang*, no melancholy White Ladies, no vampiric baby *tianak*, not even a goblin-like *duende*—which make up for the basic stock of local horror films. Instead we are presented with a foreign cult of a goat-like idol, *Baphomet* and a collection of nightmarish visions that escape specific cultural appropriation. All this, however, fits in with Patrick Campos’ (2013/2014) observation that the post-2000 Philippine horror cycle “is in a large part defined by Hollywood hegemony” (p. 617) while at the same time “[cannibalizing] and [re-animating] with half-lives the conventional iconography of ‘Asian’ (rather than ‘Philippine’) horror” (p. 617). *Darkest Night* also embodies the transnational quality characteristic of contemporary Philippine cinema. Directed by a Filipino director, Noel Tan, the film was written by an American writer, Russ Williams (whose company, Gothic Pictures International, produced the project), and featured an American actor, DJ Perry. The movie officially premiered at the FACINE International Film Festival in San Francisco in 2012 and secured distribution with Midnight Releasing, an American company that specialises in distributing independent genre films. All this is reminiscent of what Campos (2013/2014) calls “a consummation of the Filipino filmmaker’s fantasy to have the stage and the audience of the American market” (p. 613) and “the historical narrative of the Filipino diaspora: [...] the fantasy of progress in the US, associated with the grandeur of Hollywood, [which] remains primal and the basis for an ambivalent urgency for unity” (p. 619).

If *Darkest Night* lacks connection to the local ghostlore, it makes up for it with its religious framework. Although, unlike in Indonesian films,

Filipino horror does not usually leave the resolution of supernatural conflicts to Catholic priests and similar figures of moral and religious authority, this is not to say that religion is absent from such films. Religious worldview is manifested in Philippine horror productions through the presence of Catholic symbols and devotionalia (*Amorosa: The Revenge*, Lee, 2012), religious healing rituals (*The Healing*, Roño, 2012), wedding (*Sukob*, Roño, 2006) and funeral celebrations (*Pagpag: Siyam na Buhay*, Mortiz, 2013), but also through the notion of redemption (*Bulong*, Roño, 2011) and self-sacrifice to save others (*Maria, Leonora, Teresa*, Deramas, 2014). The religious elements in *Darkest Night* are rather clear: from the overtly (anti-) Catholic marking of the family house with what appears to be a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus with a black hood ominously strapped around the figure's head, and discourse of heaven and hell, to the Satanic/demonic cult of Baphomet—the idol allegedly worshipped by the Knight Templars, later associated with the image of the “Satanic Goat” and adopted as the symbol of the Church of Satan. The final ritual depicted in the film, involving the consummation of marriage and the castration of the husband, is equally symbolically charged as the alleged sexual orgies and virgin sacrifice at the witches' Sabbath. The return/resurrection of one of the children as a hauntingly angelic (and uncannily blasphemous at the same time) apparition also fits with the film's (anti-)religious theme.

All this allows us to see Southeast Asian found footage horror films in terms of hybrid productions—merging familiar local storylines and horror themes with a novel way of representing these themes. To clarify, this is not to say that the documentary style of filmmaking is new or unknown in Southeast Asia. At the same time, the four films discussed in this article do not model their stylistic on Asian documentaries, but rather conform to the pre-existing found footage format that has today become a staple part of global horror—after all, found footage movies tend to look very similar, regardless of their countries of production. Whether Southeast Asian horror films should necessarily aspire to achieve such “globalization” is a matter of opinion. From a local perspective, the word “global” is frequently terrifying itself. It has to be stressed, however, that global horror films do not necessarily have to be mediocre productions. The ability to create a horror film that scares the audiences irrespective of their culture, race, age and gender is a much coveted skill by the practitioners of the genre.

Between Realism and Subjective Experience

Given the documentary stylistic of found footage horror, the unique appeal of this genre is most commonly narrowed down to its realism. Torben Grodal (2009) defines realism as the sensation of “the explicit or tacit feelings through which we evaluate the reality status of our perceptions,

cognitions, and actions” (p. 250). Situating it in contrast with the abstract and the fantastic, Grodal notes that the experience of realism involves the identification of a given situation as familiar or typical, since we understand reality in relation to mental schemas and stored experiences (p. 256). Perceptual realism presumes that realistic representations relate to “real,” external phenomena (p. 254), and our perceptions are evaluated as “realistic” if we successfully manage to categorize them in the way that fits with our pre-existing comprehension of reality (p. 253). The experience of realism is further modified by our ever-growing knowledge (p. 255), which involves an analysis of the socio-cultural contexts that affect the modes of representation (p. 252).

Similarly to literature and art, realism in cinema has frequently been tasked with the portrayal of everyday life of common people. Grodal (2009) argues that a film’s realism can also be attributed to its emotional impact achieved through the inclusion of depictions of certain unsavoury elements that frequently remain unnoticed but are nevertheless perceived as real—dirt, garbage, sewers, gory details of murder and mutilation, or explicit sexual acts (p. 257). Since our experience of realism is determined by its bias towards typicality or “normality,” this practice is inherently anthropocentric. On a technical level, in filmmaking this translates into the preference for human eye-level shots and canonical angles, which make objects more recognizable (p. 257). Interestingly, fiction films seem to fare better when it comes to evoking the feeling of realism in their viewers, mostly because the viewers get immersed in the film world and experience it through their identification with the main protagonist. Non-fiction films tend to deal with the challenge in one of two ways—either by creating a simulation of the narrative form through dramatizations and the employment of the narrator, or by exposing the realism of fiction as fake and artificially constructed. This second option, emphasizing the imperfection of perceptual realism, is meant to indicate that the non-fiction films are made under “real,” i.e. non-staged conditions (pp. 258-259). Since years of exposure to live television broadcasts, satellite transmissions gone missing due to bad weather, or spontaneously-made home videos have taught the viewers not to expect perfect audio-visual quality of the materials commonly understood as real (e.g. news reports), the use of “grainy pictures, imperfect focus and framing, erratic camera movements and bad lighting” (p. 259) in non-fiction films increases the impression of realism in such productions.

One of the most obvious effects of distorted perceptual realism is the subjectivization of the experience and the stress induced in the audience, both of which can be of consequence for horror. Most fiction films create an illusion of objectivity, presenting stories without a point of origin and constructing reality through conventions of camerawork, lighting, acting

and “psychological editing”—“the process by which images are shot and ordered so as to confirm and conform to our culture’s way of viewing the world” (Sconce, 1992, p. 107). Grodal (2009) explains that the actions of the main protagonists in the movie are normally experienced as objective due to a mechanism that links perception with emotion, cognition, and motor action (p. 229). Before the viewers can identify with the characters in the film, they first identify with the film as “a self-generating reality” they are a part of (Sconce, 1992, p. 108). “The spectator *identifies with himself*, with himself as an act of pure perception [... observing] a story from nowhere, that nobody tells, but which nevertheless, somebody receives” (Metz, qtd. in Sconce, p. 108). Any potential breaks in that perception (lack of protagonists, or a distortion of the film’s visuals or sound) will inevitably lead to a more subjective experience: frequently more intense but ultimately considered less real, “because the feeling as to whether a given phenomenon is real depends on whether it offers the potential for action” (Grodal, 2009, p. 229).

Grodal (2009) lists six main factors that can elicit film subjectivity, all of which are ultimately related to distortions in perceptual realism:

1. scenes in which nothing or little happens, offering no cues as to their suggested meaning;
2. aberrant weather conditions or light (fog, rain, darkness, shadows etc.) which impede the viewers’ access to information and hamper their space-orientation;
3. use of extreme formats that make humans invisible (cosmic perspectives, or microscopic views) and prevent them from interacting with the world;
4. actions that can only be performed by super-humans, or collective identities; scenes in which the protagonists participate only passively (e.g. natural disasters); sequences that expand or compress time; scenes simulating dreams, hallucinations etc.—no individuals acting of their free will;
5. situations with a special or problematic reality status—images that the viewer interprets as metaphors; phenomena that violate basic assumptions about the world (e.g. ghosts, vampires); and
6. situations blocking “normal” empathetic feelings (subjective setting activates defence mechanisms against the full impact of what is seen, e.g. gore, garbage etc.).

Although Grodal’s (2009) analysis means chiefly to distinguish between the art film and mainstream film, the concepts of subjectivization and

imperfect perceptual realism are equally important for understanding the found footage film.

All four films discussed in this article have succeeded in producing subjectivized accounts of reality, even if their methods of doing so are different. Three out of four productions claim to be related to authentic events: *Keramat* uses the Bantul/Yogyakarta earthquake that affected Central Java in 2006 as a background to the story; *Haunted Changi* is shot on location in the actual Old Changi Hospital, a heritage building and a documented site of World War II atrocities; and last but not least, *Darkest Night* claims a connection with the case of the Ma family disappearance in Cameron Highlands in Malaysia on 1 February 2003. Although there is no official confirmation that this incident actually happened, the story has crystallised into a popular Malaysian urban legend and is therefore instantly recognizable to the locals.²⁶ In a similar fashion, the hit-and-run accident leading to the death of the shaman's daughter and his subsequent revenge in *Seru* may have actually been inspired by a real accident, although the film does not provide enough details to identify it. At the first glance, the supernatural events portrayed in the films may seem unrealistic, but since animistic practices are very much embedded in the popular belief system throughout Southeast Asia, the spiritual world is also frequently conceived of as real. Not are the ghostly presence and related phenomena acceptable to the films' domestic audiences as potentially authentic experiences, but the inclusion of the "believers" and ghost storytellers, such as the people interviewed in *Haunted Changi*, similarly conforms with the typical perception of reality in the region.

If realistic movies tell stories of common people, then *Darkest Night*, depicting everyday life of a middle-class Filipino family (or rather an unexpected aberration of this life), does exactly that. The film has been criticized for confusing the viewers with an unnecessarily large cast, but then the size of the extended Reyes/Espino family is not unusual by Philippine standards.²⁷ The complaint that the large number of characters hinders comprehension of the story (Leggett, 2013) may seem valid, since most found footage horror films tend to be rather small-scale limited-cast productions, but again, Southeast Asian horror films commonly feature an extensive cast of characters, many of whom could easily be considered redundant if we were to apply the rules of Hollywood scriptwriting. Besides, if the overabundance of characters may result in distorting the viewers' perception and add to their stress, this should hardly be seen as a disadvantage, since found footage horror thrives on the subjectivization of experience. Although still relatively middle-class, the protagonists in the remaining three movies may appear slightly more extraordinary thanks to their status of professional (or semi-professional) filmmakers and their

familiarity with the line of work which, to many viewers, seems akin to magic. Those unfamiliar with the reality of film production may find it more difficult to evaluate the realism of these representations. Those who have had a glimpse of Southeast Asian filmmaking in action, however, will likely find the depictions of the job routines convincing. Not surprisingly so, since the creators of the films have the first-hand experience of the world their films represent. In fact, in *Haunted Changi* and *Keramat*, the filmmakers are supposedly the same people as the characters in their films.

The emotional impact of the four films is rather difficult to evaluate, because the deliberate distortion of image and sound as well as the lack of coherent narrative structure aim to impair reception. However, the subjective format certainly generates a lot of anxiety in the viewers. The anthropocentric perspective is guaranteed by the genre since most of the recordings serve as personal video-diaries and the camera is either directed at the people (often in an act of self-representation), or represents the character/filmmaker's point of view. Since the camera is mostly hand-held and frequently films while its operator is in motion, the shots are often blurry and erratic, and frequently also missing canonical angles. The preference for low angles suggests filming the events in a hurry, or in secret (with a hidden camera), occasionally the footage is captured automatically by the camera that has been dropped onto the floor, or left on top of a table. High angle shots are significantly less frequent, as they would typically require camera mounts or cranes and are more difficult to justify when using a hand-held camera, apart from shots focusing on the floor. In found footage films, high angle shots are most commonly used to imply a surveillance camera, but none of the four films have any need for that.

As it has been mentioned before, realism favours naturalistic acting, while non-naturalistic acting significantly increases film subjectivity. At the same time, since a great majority of the characters in the four movies are not supposed to be actors, it is expected that their behaviour in front of the camera may be awkward to a certain extent. Two movies, *Seru/Resurrection* (Asraff, Pillai, Andre & Jin, 2011) and *Keramat/Sacred* (Servia & Tiwa, 2009), introduce "professional actors" amidst other characters but in each case their supposed acting skills are clearly marked. Interestingly, in both cases the portrayal of "actors" seems to suggest that Southeast Asian filmmakers have a rather negative opinion about local talent. In *Seru*, the three actors shooting the car scene in a horror movie are overacting, often terrorized out of their wits for no apparent reason, in *Keramat* the leading lady, Miga, is extremely passive and publicly castigated by the director for lack of acting skills. The actors in *Seru* leave the forest before the massacre begins, while Miga (before she gets kidnapped by her ghostly ancestor) seems decidedly less lethargic as a person than as an actress. The remaining characters

deliver a performance expected of the people who are not accustomed to being in front of the camera, in a manner typical of amateur vlog entries and home videos. Their awareness of being filmed also accordingly disappears when they begin to get preoccupied with the unfolding events. This allows the viewers to accept the portrayal of characters in the films as realistic despite the poor quality of the image and imperfect performance of the cast. In fact, while the same level of acting skills would likely lead to a criticism in a fiction movie, within the found footage framework it adds to the film's authenticity.

The subjectivity of each film is achieved through a number of premeditated strategies and techniques. All the films exhibit what Grodal (2009) calls a "special reality status" (p. 244), since they feature a variety of supernatural events and phenomena: ghosts (*Haunted Changi*, *Seru*, *Keramat*, *Darkest Night*), magic (*Seru*, *Keramat*, *Darkest Night*), possession (*Haunted Changi*, *Seru*, *Keramat*), and spiritual migration (*Keramat*, *Darkest Night*). The characters portrayed in the films lack agency, since the situation unfolds spontaneously and without their volition. Things just happen to them; their actions become simply a reaction to external circumstances. Magical spells, spiritual migration and possession also imply passivity, as the human mind and body are taken over by another entity. The spiritual/mystical dimension of the films allows for the distortion of time and space. This is particularly obvious in *Darkest Night* (Tan, 2012), where the family is trapped in a limbo-state between the worlds; and in *Keramat*, where the filmmakers enter the netherworld through an invisible gateway on an ordinary beach. However, it is also hinted at through the shots of labyrinthine underground tunnels in *Haunted Changi*, and endless forest paths in *Seru*. *Darkest Night* and *Keramat* also feature multiple scenes simulating dreams or hallucinations, where things are not what they seem and people who are assumed dead suddenly reappear. Scenes like that favour complex visual metaphors and generally lack clarity, raising the viewers' frustration but also inspiring interpretation.

Clarity, or even comprehensibility, is further impeded by frequent disruptions in the narrative, the addition of unrelated material or characters, becoming less the focus of the story, lengthy scenes where nothing (or very little) happens, and lack of resolution of scenes and scene sequences. *Haunted Changi* is supposedly documenting the making of a film project on a haunted hospital, yet we are excluded from seeing the director return to shoot the movie on his own. The opening shot of *Seru* is a heart-breaking message from the last man alive to whoever finds the tape. In the final scene of the film, the camera – now shooting on its own, as its operator is dead – captures the resurrection of the shaman's daughter. At the same time, the found footage we are supposedly watching includes material shot by

two different cameras and by two different groups of people. The journey through the netherworld in *Keramat* is punctuated with symbolic visions making it difficult to keep up with the story. The abundance of characters in *Darkest Night* is responsible for the fragmentation of the main narrative, and since the single camera documenting the events of the night cannot possibly follow everyone at the same time, most things tend to happen off sight.

Deviant types of light used throughout the films also hinder perception. Many scenes are filmed using the night vision mode, distorting shapes and colours, and resulting in a distinctive flattening of space (*Haunted Changi, Seru*). *Darkest Night* is shot with minimal light, creating very atmospheric images but often making it impossible to distinguish between the characters and see whatever it is everybody is reacting to. Scenes shot outside the house are similarly constructed, only this time visibility is disrupted by fog. This technique – a combination of darkness and fog – is also used in *Keramat*. Last but not least, all the four films use formats that consequently make humans invisible. Whenever the camera is used as an extension of the human vision it effectively eliminates people from the picture. The camera is also seen as filming on its own, liberated from human agency, its automatic mode bringing it one step closer to perfect realism (*Seru, Keramat, Haunted Changi*).

It seems obvious that the four films discussed in the article are not accidents but rather premeditated productions. Although low production costs may have been a factor in deciding to adopt the found footage format, it is safe to say that the filmmakers also had other, more artistic motivations. The writer/producer of *Darkest Night*, Russ Williams explains: “I wanted the film to be a cinénavérité recording of the way reality looks during a nightmare, specifically my own nightmares as a child. These nightmares never had great production values or looked beautiful. They were always dark, fragmentary, claustrophobic and chaotic” (“The Darkest Movie, 2014”). On the surface of it, a combination of reality and nightmare seems rather contradictory. Nightmares, after all, belong to the dream world which replaces the real with the symbolic/fantastic. On the other hand, dreams, or nightmares, can be seen as the ultimate subjective experience, a subjectivized version of reality, experienced as real in the moment of its perception. Not surprisingly then, horror, being “the stuff of nightmares,” feels right at home with the found footage format that simultaneously manages to appeal to the viewers’ sense of realism and their subjectivity.

Conclusion

Jeffrey Sconce (1992) credits Bertolt Brecht’s concepts of “distanciation” and “anti-illusionist aesthetics” as responsible for the radicalisation of film

practice. Together with the realisation that subjectivity and “reality” are socially, culturally and historically produced, comes the awareness that cinematic representations of the world serve various ideologies. By focusing on the politics of representation rather than simply being absorbed by the film’s “reality,” the viewers can distance themselves from the film and engage with it on a more critical level (p. 109). To induce such distancing, Brecht advocated a self-reflexive turn in filmmaking, drawing attention to the artifice of film through the use of non-naturalistic sets and lighting, acknowledging the presence of the camera, or experimental editing, the purpose of which was to resist conventional spectator identification and encourage the questioning of the viewers’ relationship with the film instead (pp. 109-110). Although Brecht did not live to see a found footage movie, his theories have proved inspirational to the generation of digital filmmakers and contributed to the creation of this peculiar type of a fiction feature film that does anything it can to appear as non-feature and non-fiction.

As the four discussed films demonstrate, experimentation with the found footage format can result in a change of perspective and breathe new life into even the most fossilized themes and representations. By engaging the viewers through constantly challenging their perception, using of immersive tactics, and requiring subjective validation of the realism of the stories, found footage films can potentially offer a deeply personal experience in fear. The decision to “[pass the] generic conventions through the machinery of an amateur, found-footage aesthetic” (North, 2010, p. 85) should not therefore be downplayed as an easy way out, or as a method to save money, but appreciated, instead, as brimming with possibilities.

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Endnotes

- 1 Despite their raw and “amateurish” look, quite a few found footage horror films have been in fact made by well-acclaimed commercial directors and produced by large Hollywood studios. Some examples include *The Bay* (2012), directed by Barry Levinson (whose previous credits include such top-billed productions as *Good Morning Vietnam* [1987], *Rain Man* [1988], *Sleepers* [1997], and *Wag the Dog* [1998]) and *The Visit* (scheduled for release in late 2015), directed by M. Night Shyamalan (the director of *The Sixth Sense* [1999], *The Village* [2004] and *The Last Airbender* [2010]). The budget of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise (2007-2015) (original movie directed by Oren Peli, 2007) saw a dramatic increase from 15,000 to 5 million USD in five instalments of the series (the budget of the sixth movie is also rumoured to be 5 million USD); the American remake of *REC – Quarantine* (Dowdle, 2008) – cost 12 million USD; and the monsters of *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008) hiked its production budget to 25 million USD. Although pretending to be accidentally-made digital recordings of real events, five out of six *Paranormal Activity* movies (beginning with the second film in the series) and *Cloverfield* were, in fact, produced by Paramount Pictures, the latter under the careful supervision of none other than J.J. Abrams of *Star Trek* fame.
- 2 Page numbers quoted in this article refer to the pagination in the unpublished manuscript. The article will be published in the forthcoming issue of *Gothic Studies* 17.2 (November 2015).
- 3 *Cinéma vérité* is a style of filmmaking popularised in the 1960s’ French cinema, which purported to show the “truth” by filming people in natural everyday situations with authentic dialogue and made use of pre-taped conversations and interviews. Examples include Jean Rouch’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961) and Chris Marker’s *Le Joli Mai* (1963).
- 4 Mock-documentaries, or *mockumentaries*, are films that have been shot and edited to look like documentary footage, although the events they portray are fictitious. Some recent examples include *Mermaids: A Body Found* (Wilkins & Bennett, 2011) and *Mermaids: New Evidence* (Bavetta, 2013)—two mock-documentaries on the evolution of mermaids as a distinct biological species and government conspiracy to hide that fact from public knowledge. The films, shown on Animal Planet, a channel known for its nature documentaries, dramatically improved the ratings of the network but also stirred up a lot of controversy when they were revealed to be a hoax. Most mockumentaries openly admit that their contents have been fabricated by the filmmakers for the purpose of the production. It has to be noted, however, that the extent to which reality is manipulated in regular film and television documentaries (where using scripts and creating emphasis through various production and post-production techniques has become a standard) makes one doubt whether at present any documentary form can truly claim to document reality.
- 5 In his blog post on “Return to Paranormalcy,” David Bordwell opts for the name “discovered footage” instead, while Linnie Blake and Xavier Aldana Reyes abandon the term altogether for the sake of introducing a broader category of “digital horror”—a range of horror films that “articulate generically our period’s core anxieties and most traumatic events, and incorporate the stylistic markers that most insistently signify the technological innovations of our globalised age” (2015, p. 2).
- 6 An IMDb fan-made list of found footage films (Complete List of Found Footage [genre] Films, <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls052694809/>) lists 413 titles (July 2015). 379 films on this list can be classified as horror films (within that group, 346 films are officially labelled as horror in IMDb genre databases and the remaining 33 films can be categorized as horror based on their titles, synopses, fan reviews, or association with horror film festivals). The most typical topics of such

films include encounters with the supernatural (ghost hunting, demonic possession, exorcisms, spirit sightings, mythical monstrous creatures), satanic cults and devil worship, monsters (extra-terrestrial, prehistoric or secret government experiments), natural and man-made disasters (storms, earthquakes, virus outbreaks), violent crime (serial killers, gang-related violence, rape and murder), and exploitation (torture, cannibal killers, cannibal tribes, mutants, etc.). 15 films on the list can be classified as Science-Fiction, although nine of these films feature strong horror elements since they tend to depict encounters with extra-terrestrial entities as dangerous and terrifying or deal with murderous conspiracies. The remaining 19 films which do not have significant horror content tend to be action movies, or mock-documentaries dealing with social and political issues, or documenting war. Although the completeness of this list may be disputed, it clearly demonstrates that horror is by far the most common found footage genre.

- 7 Following the financial success of *Paranormal Activity* (Blum & Peli, 2007), which made almost 108 million USD in the USA alone (data from Box Office Mojo), today many found footage horror movies are competing with large studio productions at local multiplexes. Box Office Mojo lists 20 found footage films that grossed over 15 million USD in the US, many of them produced by well-established Hollywood studios, such as Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros, or Fox, which demonstrates that the format has achieved certain legitimacy among film professionals.
- 8 Out of the 346 titles from the IMDb Complete List of Found Footage Films which are clearly labeled as horror, a great majority are American films (USA) and American co-productions (247 films). Three other most common countries of production are the UK (33 films), Canada (14 films) and Australia (10 films). The remaining listed productions were made in a wide range of countries: Japan (7), Spain (4), Ireland (4), Italy (3), Germany (2), Italy (2), India (2) and single productions from Belgium, Sweden, Slovakia, Poland, New Zealand, Hungary, France, Norway, Greece, South Korea, Singapore, the Philippines, Uruguay and Puerto Rico. The list also mentions four non-US co-productions (Czech Republic/Ukraine, UK/Poland, Spain/Mexico and Iceland/Finland). A different fan-made IMDb list (Found Footage Horror Movies, <http://www.imdb.com/list/ls050908444/>) mentions only 173 titles but includes, for instance, two Malaysian productions which are missing from the first list. Although the authenticity and completeness of both these lists can be disputed, they certainly demonstrate that found footage horror is an international phenomenon.
- 9 *Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol* was a French theatre, operating from 1897 to 1962 in Paris, which specialised in macabre naturalistic performances which included graphic depictions of violence.
- 10 An episode of radio drama based on H.G. Wells' novel *The War of the Worlds* (1989), directed and narrated by Orson Welles, which aired over the Columbia Broadcasting System radio network in 1938 and allegedly created mass hysteria in its listeners.
- 11 Some notable examples can include Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), or Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748).
- 12 According to Box Office Mojo, *The Blair Witch Project* remains the top-grossing found footage film of all times, having generated over 140.5 million US dollars at the US box office and almost 250 million US dollars worldwide to date (July 2015).
- 13 The awards included SACD award for best feature and special award of the youth at Cannes, French Syndicate of Cinema Critics Award, and the Belgian Film Critics Association Award for best film.
- 14 It needs to be mentioned, though, that the film also won or was nominated for several awards for the worst picture, worst acting (20th Golden Raspberry Awards in 2000—nominated for the

worst picture of the year, and a win for the worst actress—Heather Donahue), and the biggest disappointment of the year (22nd Hastings Bad Cinema Society Stinkers Movie Awards in 1999 – nominated for the worst picture, worst actress, and worst screen debut, and a win for the biggest disappointment of the year). See also Mike D'Angelo's (2014) "15 Years beyond the hype and hatred of *The Blair Witch Project*" on the rising anger from the film's audiences who were "[p]romised the most terrifying movie ever made, [but] instead got three annoying people wandering through the woods being terrorized by piles of rocks and bundles of sticks" (para. 3).

- 15 Although sometimes considered a found footage production, the sequel only partially fits this label thanks to the inclusion of some CCTV footage into what mostly looks like a regular feature film utilising more conventional shooting techniques.
- 16 With the initial investment estimated at 35,000 USD (the directors quote the shooting budget of 20,000 USD although some sources list the final budget as between 500,000-750,000 USD), the film made almost 250 million USD worldwide. This phenomenal success was partly due to the film's reputation as a "must-see" production based on the recommendations from its original festival audience (the film opened at the Sundance Film Festival in 1999), but also largely due to its ingenious promotion and marketing that created the hype of reality around the movie (and cost its distribution company 25 million USD). The film may have predated social media but it "went viral" just like so many "amateur" YouTube videos made in its wake.
- 17 This has nothing to do with the quality of such movies. As Keith Phipps puts it: "when found-footage is good, it's really good. But when it's bad, it's just the *worst*, a headache-inducing nightmare to watch from start to finish" (Phipps & Tobias, 2014, para. 7). Still, if by definition horror film are meant to elicit the desired emotional response (fear, horror) through a bodily reaction (shudder, revulsion, goose bumps, nausea) then found footage films can definitely succeed as horror films.
- 18 In the course of this research I have managed to unearth only six Southeast Asian found footage productions to date, although obviously there is a possibility that some other films have simply not been theatrically released or did not manage to secure a DVD distributor and are therefore less accessible.
- 19 The second Malaysian production, *Penunggu istana* (Alaudin, Onah, Zaih &, 2011), a group exploration of an abandoned and possibly haunted house, was excluded from the article mostly because it does not bring anything new to the discussion. The sixth film, *The Lost Tour: Vietnam* (Kiet & Tran, 2014), a story about two friends on a trip to Vietnam who get lost in the jungle and encounter zombies, was released after this paper had been completed (and does not seem to be available on DVD at the moment). The film is listed as a Vietnamese production and it opened in October 2014 in Vietnam, although the director is Vietnamese-American and the main actors are actually American/Vietnamese-American. Still, given the fact that the Vietnamese government has only recently lessened its censorship (or effective ban) on horror films, the release of a found footage film amongst the first wave of Vietnamese horrors is quite significant.
- 20 Of all the Southeast Asian cinemas, Thai horror films can boast the largest international fan base. It is therefore significant that not a single found footage film has been made to date in Thailand, the closest being *Hashima Project* (Wattaleela & Choopetch, 2013), which includes several found footage sequences but resorts to more usual cinematic techniques throughout most of the film. Some sources mistakenly identify *Ghost Game* (Komanuwong & Wichiansarn, 2006) as found footage horror but the film utilises only a few surveillance camera shots which go with its premise

of a TV reality show. IMDb also mentions a foreign found footage film shot in Thailand, *Cam2Cam* (Huber, Komine & Soisson, 2014).

- 21 While it could be argued that the mainstream horror genre was largely shaped by American and British movies, I believe it is possible to suggest the existence in the current age of a ubiquitous category of "global horror" which encompasses films made anywhere in the world, built around very general themes and utilising globally acceptable icons of fear. Although such movies can be criticised as "bland" or repetitive (after all, a Japanese zombie movie is rather similar to a Cuban one), they appeal to horror fan audiences worldwide because they eliminate ambiguity and employ effective, if unoriginal, tactics to scare anyone, anywhere.
- 22 For a more detailed discussion of this process in Thailand see my article on "Spirits in Suburbia: Ghosts, Global Desires and the Rise of Thai Middle-Class Horror" in *Horror Studies* 5.2 (2014): 233-247.
- 23 For a discussion of this long tradition of portraying the supernatural as part of reality in Thai horror film, see Mary Ainslie's article on "The Supernatural and Post-War Thai Cinema" in *Horror Studies* 5.2 (2014): 157-169.
- 24 *Haunted Changi* is not the first Singaporean horror film which deals directly with the aftermath of World War II. Perhaps the most obvious example, Kelvin Tong's *1942* (2005), takes us back to the Battle of Singapore. The unfolding sequence of events, however, is not the historical account of the battle but rather a vision of hell, in which the fallen Japanese soldiers, trapped within the moment of war, are destined to repeat their deaths for eternity.
- 25 *Keramat* mentions that the camera with the recording was recovered after the earthquake through the newspaper clippings presented at the end of the film, but neither *Haunted Changi* nor *Seru* explain how their footage was "found." Since the cameraman in *Haunted Changi* got arrested for killing his friend, we can assume that the recording resurfaced as evidence in court, but with all the filmmakers dead in *Seru* there is no explanation whatsoever as to the fate of the camera and its contents.
- 26 For one such account see "Ghost Encounter at Ruins of Old Mansion." <http://www.yourghoststories.com/real-ghost-story.php?story=16030> (Jasonypw, 2012).
- 27 In 2013, the Philippines ranked first for total fertility rate (the average number of children born per woman = 3.1) amongst emerging markets. <http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/stats/People/Total-fertility-rate>.

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