"Pickman's Model": Horror and the Objective Purport of Photographs

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Abstract

It is commonly held, even among non-Bazinians, that photographs are typically perceived as more objective than other forms of depiction. The implications of this putative feature of photographic reception for the fiction film have been relatively ignored. If photos do have an objective purport, it would explain the power of a common device used in horror movies where a monster is selectively revealed through a degraded image, usually an amateur video recording. However, I argue that a better explanation is forthcoming. It is not the objective purport of photographs that accounts for the peculiar power of these scenes, but the power of our imaginations to picture monsters far more terrifying than those that can be readily depicted. This gives us reason to be skeptical of the idea that the objective purport of photographs contributes significantly to the reception of fiction films.

1 Introduction

At the beginning of H. P. Lovecraft's story "Pickman's Model," we learn that shortly after his recent expulsion from the Boston Art Club, the painter Richard Upton Pickman has gone missing. In the weeks prior to his disappearance, Pickman raised a stir by presenting a series of terrifying portraits of hideous monsters, but he kept his best work hidden in his studio—a cheap apartment in the historic North End of Boston. The narrator recalls how he enjoyed the rare opportunity to see Pickman's private collection, and why he ultimately had to expel Pickman from the club:

> Pinned with a thumb-tack to a vacant part of the canvas was a piece of paper now badly curled up—probably, I thought, a photograph from which Pickman meant to paint a background as hideous as the nightmare it was to enhance. [. . .] Why did I drop him? [. . .] No, it wasn't the paintings I saw in that place; though I'll swear they were enough to get him ostracized in nine-tenths of the homes and

> clubs of Boston, and I guess you won't wonder now why I have to steer clear of subways and cellars. It was something I found in my coat the next morning. You know, the curled-up paper tacked to the frightful canvas in the cellar; the thing I thought was a photograph of some scene he meant to use as a background for that monster. That last scare had come while I was reaching to uncurl it, and it seems I had vacantly crumpled it into my pocket. [. . .] You know how damned lifelike Pickman's paintings were—how we all wondered where he got those faces. [. . .] Well—that paper wasn't a photograph of any background, after all. What it showed was simply the monstrous being he was painting on that awful canvas. It was the model he was using—and its background was merely the wall of the cellar studio in minute detail. But by God, Eliot, it was a photograph from life![1]

The scandal of the gruesome, demonic subjects of Pickman's paintings was not enough to revoke his membership. But photographic evidence that Pickman had a close, perhaps friendly, relationship with the monsters of the underworld necessitated his expulsion from the art club.

In the context of the story, the photograph of Pickman's model serves as nearly incontrovertible evidence that he was in league with the devil: How else could he get a sewer-dwelling monster to pose in his studio for a photograph? The question I ask in this paper is whether the technique, common to cinematic horror, of showing the audience the equivalent of the photograph of Pickman's model is any more effective because *we see* the photograph than had we merely learned of its existence, as we do in Lovecraft's story. That is, does seeing the equivalent of the photograph of Pickman's model make this technique more effective than other fictional sources of evidence of the supernatural? Alternatively, we might ask: Would a film version of "Pickman's Model" benefit from showing the audience the picture?

In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," André Bazin writes in awe of "the irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith."[2] Like many who came after, he remarks that pictures of deceased relatives in our family albums have a "disturbing presence," as our loved one's appear to be nothing less than "re-presented." Similarly, Kendall Walton argues that he can literally see his long-deceased grandfather in his cherished family portrait.[3] And, although he rejects Bazin's realism and Walton's transparency, Gregory Currie claims that "photographs seem to have an affective capacity that handmade pictures lack. [. . .] By virtue of being traces of things, they offer us special [. . .] emotional access to" their subjects.[4] Focusing on psychology rather than on

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[1] H. P. Lovecraft, "Pickman's Model." This story is available online: http://www.dagonbytes.com/thelibrary/lovecraft/pickmansmodel.htm

[2] André Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" in *What is Cinema?: Volume I*, trans. Hugh Gray (University of California Press, 1967): 9-17.

[3] Kendall Walton, "Transparent Pictures: On the Nature of Photographic Realism," *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 246-277. See also: Kendall Walton, "On Pictures and Photographs: Objections Answered" in *Marvelous Images: on Values and the Arts* (Oxford, 2006): 117-133.

[4] Gregory Currie, "Visible Traces" reprinted in *Philosophy of Film and Motion*

ontology, Barbara Savedoff claims that the power of photography, in part, lies in that we cannot seem to help but see photographs as far more objective than paintings.[5]

Whether it is because photographs re-present reality, allow us to see the past, are traces of the presence of their subjects, or because they are more difficult to forge than drawings, many photographs seem to have a peculiar power that other forms of depiction lack. I will refer to this general power as the "objective purport" of photographs.[6] It is widely thought that in virtue of this power, photographs frequently elicit emotional response more effectively than can other forms of depiction of the same subjects.[7] I am highly skeptical of this claim, but I do not intend to attack the thesis at this level of generality. Instead, I would like to test the theory on a specific technique, in a specific genre, in a specific artform where it almost begs to be applied, namely, the presentation of monsters via degraded amateur video in horror films.

I argue that although the objective purport of photographs appears to explain the effectiveness of this common cinematic horror technique, the power of these sequences is better explained by other factors. Although my conclusion does not imply that the objective purport plays no role in any cases of the effectiveness of photographs, it does give us reason to be skeptical of this general line of explanation. If the cases where it appears to be most applicable are problematic, then others are likely suspect as well. Hence, my conclusion points toward a much bolder phenomenological claim than I intend to defend here—the skeptical claim that there is no objective purport of photographs. Although I suspect that the skeptic may be right, I am not entirely convinced. In any case, since general phenomenological claims have to be built from the bottom up, methodologically, the defender of the bold claim would have to start here, with a particular technique.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I discuss a few of the more compelling explanations of the objective purport of photographs. Second, I then apply the notion in an explanation of a few strikingly effective sequences in three different horror moves: the dream sequence in *Prince of Darkness* (Carpenter, 1987), the home video footage from the birthday party in *Signs* (Shyamalan, 2002), and the principal tent scene in *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez, 1999). Third, after making the strongest case possible for the role of photographic objectivity in these sequences, I offer a more

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Pictures, eds. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Blackwell, 2006): 141-154.

[5] Barbara Savedoff, *Transforming Images: How Photography Complicates the Picture* (Cornell UP, 2000), pp. 7, 49, 50, 82, 84-5, 150.

[6] Savedoff calls it the "aura of objective accuracy," p. 8.

[7] For present purposes, it makes little to no difference whether photography is inherently more objective or if it is a better source of evidence than other forms of depiction, such as drawing and painting. And it does not matter if we can literately see through photos. What does matter is how photographs are experienced—how they seem and how this affects our encounters with the fiction film. Of course, how photos seem to us will be somewhat dependent on our beliefs about them.

compelling explanation. I argue that it is not the power of the supposed objective nature of photography that accounts for the effectiveness of these sequences, but the power of our imaginations to create monsters more frightening than we should ever expect to see roll off the assembly line of Hollywood's nightmare factory.

2 The Power of Photography

On the first page of *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes writes:

> I happened on a photograph of Napoleon's youngest brother, Jerome, taken in 1852. And I realized then, with an amazement I have not been able to lessen since: "I am looking at the eyes that looked at the Emperor."[8]

Here, Barthes attempts to explain a common phenomenon, what I am loosely calling the "objective purport" of photographs. We have all encountered a peculiarly engrossing photograph at some point in our lives. For many, the family photo album contains riveting pictures that appear to be windows to times past, leaving us confused as to how the pages miraculously lie flat when the album is closed.

The history of philosophical writing on photography has focused on explaining this curious power by reference to the nature of photography itself. However, there has been fairly little concrete discussion of the effect of this putative special power on the reception of photographic-based fiction.[9] I intend to test the claim by evaluating one of the most promising avenues of its application. Before we test an application of the thesis, it will be helpful to explore some of the more influential explanations of the source of the objective purport of photographs. I do not intend to settle any questions concerning the nature of photography, but merely to provide a brief, selective overview of what some think might be the source of its power. Examining the proposed sources of the power is perhaps the most effective way of saying a bit more about its effects.

I will not attempt to develop a precise account of the putative power of photography; we will not push far past the wooly metaphors of phenomenal description. But, for my purposes, it is adequate to identify a rough consensus in the literature that some such power does indeed exist.

[8] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1981), p. 3.

[9] I do not mean to overlook Stanely Cavell's fascinating, essayistic work. Due to limitations of scope, since many of Cavell's philosophical generalizations on the nature of photography are prefigured by Bazin, that is where I will concentrate.

I. Re-Presentation

A major influence on the theoretical writing on photography, through figures such as Roland Barthes, Stanley Cavell, Susan Sontag, and Gilles Deleuze, André Bazin identifies the source of the power of photography as lying in what he sees as its ability to "re-present" reality. Sometimes Bazin speaks as if we see through photos, at other times he seems to think that photos are powerful in virtue of being traces of their subjects, and at other times he seems to think that the power lies in our knowledge of the optical-chemical process by which they are produced. That is, he prefigures nearly all of the other current explanations of the power of photography. All three explanations can be found in a single paragraph from "The Ontology of the Photographic Image":

> The production by automatic means has radically affected our psychology of the image. The objective nature of photography confers on it a quality of credibility absent from all other picture-making. In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say, in time and space. Photography enjoys a certain advantage in virtue of this transference of reality from the thing to its reproduction.[10]

In an enthusiastic effort to explain the peculiar power that some photographs seem to posses, Bazin most infamously claims that

> the photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the condition[] of time [. . .] that govern[s] it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored [. . .] it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.[11]

Bazin straddles the radical suggestion that the very subject of the photograph sits before us via the photograph and the more plausible notion that the photograph is trace evidence of the model, much like a fossilized footprint records the passing saunter of a long-extinct dinosaur. The first option, taken literally, is a nonstarter: Clearly the photograph is not literally the flesh-and-blood model, and, more importantly, it is not apparent that it even seems to be its anemic cousin.[12] Although we do learn a great deal about how Cary Grant looks and how he sometimes pretends to talk from *Bringing up Baby* (Hawks, 1938), outside of moments of profound psychological disturbance, it never seems that his image, accompanied by a wire-haired terrier named George,

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[10] Andre Bazin, *What is Cinema*, pp.13-14.

[11] Bazin, "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," p. 14. I leave out "and space" from the first ellipses. The French does not support Gray's translation here.

[12] For the various problems in the alternate ways of cashing out the notion of "re-presentation," see Noël Carroll, *Philosophical Problems in Classical Film Theory* (Princeton UP, 1988) and "Uniqueness Claims for Cinematographic Representation" in *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge UP, 1996): 37-49.

haunts our living rooms looking for a misplaced dinosaur bone.[13]

We will return to the alternate suggestion that the power of photographs comes from their being traces of their subjects, but for now it is sufficient to merely highlight the phenomenal quality that Bazin is trying to explain: Some photographs have an eerie, startling quality, supposedly detectable by appropriately receptive viewers—those who, as Cavell might say, have not "forgotten how mysterious these things are."[14] Although it would be an exaggeration to say that it feels as if the subject sits before us in a photograph, it does sometimes feel as if photographs grant us special access to their subjects.

II. Transparent Seeing

Kendall Walton agrees that, through the photograph of Jerome, Barthes did indeed "see the eyes that saw the emperor." Walton thinks that we literally see through photographs—that they are transparent. Just as we can see through eye-glasses, binoculars, telescopes, and mirrors, we can see through photographs. Mirrors allow us to see around corners, telescopes into distant space; photographs allow us to see into the past. Hence, film is much like the magical mirror in Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* (1946), except that rather than allowing us to merely see events at a great distance, film also allows us to see events across time, as they unfolded in the past. Accordingly, one might suggest that this astonishing feature of photographs accounts for much of their power. If we can see the subject through the picture, we know it was there—we "can see it with our own eyes." Seemingly, this has a pronounced effect on our experience of photographic images. Hence, one might claim that the objective purport of photographs is a product of their transparency.

There are some limitations to this explanation of the power of photography, since there are notable difference between seeing through photographs and seeing something in person.[15] As Walton recognizes, whether we call both forms of "seeing" settles little concerning the phenomenology of photographic spectatorship. Ultimately, I am not concerned with the question of whether

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[13] Of course, some Bazinians, such as Cavell, attempt to defend a literal account of the re-presentational theory. Cavell, *The World Viewed*, pp.19-20. Again, I do not intend to settle the issue here. For a critical overview of Bazin, Cavell, Roger Scruton, and Patrick Maynard on re-presentation, see Noël Carroll, "Defining the Moving Image" in *Theorizing the Moving Image*.

[14] Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (Harvard UP, 1979), p. 19.

[15] Nigel Warburton describes several differences in "Seeing Through 'Seeing through Photographs'", *Ratio* 1 (1988): 64-74. Dominic McIver Lopes argues that although we can be said to see though photos, the differences between seeing things in photos and in person accounts for the aesthetic interest we can take in photographs. See: Dominic McIver Lopes, "The Aesthetics of Photographic Transparency", *Mind* 122 (2003): 1-16; and *Understanding Pictures* (Oxford UP, 1996). Noël Carroll provides an insightful discussion of the phenomenal differences in the first chapter of *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2008), p. 28.

audiences see through photographs.[16] Nor am I concerned with whether photographs are inherently more objective than drawings.[17] What is important for our purposes, is that Walton, like Bazin, attempts to explain the feeling that we may sometimes have that photographs bring us close to their subjects, close enough to where we might want to say that it feels as if we can see them. In fact, Walton thinks we can.

III. Visible Traces

It is far different merely to hear that someone was murdered in your living room while you were away than it is to find a bloody handprint on the wall attesting to the crime. A handprint is a trace of the presence of others, in this case, a trace of the recently deceased. Bazin describes this quality of photography through a series of metaphors. He compares photos to fingerprints, death masks, footprints, and impressions in the sand. Echoing Bazin, Susan Sontag says that a photograph is "a trace, something directly stenciled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask."[18] Similarly, Gregory Currie thinks that "photographs seem to have an affective capacity that handmade pictures lack. [. . .] By virtue of being traces of things, they offer us special [. . .] emotional access to" their subjects.[19]

Indeed, this seems to be the case, but it is unclear exactly what Currie means by "emotional access." Under most plausible interpretations his statement is indefensible. For instance, if emotional access means something such as “access to what it would feel like to be in the presence of the subject,” then the claim is false. Looking at a photograph of a battle is certainly far different than looking at a battle taking place before your eyes. In response to a picture one may feel sympathy or sadness, but such reactions would be deadly on the battlefield. Something similar goes for a stampede of cows, a sleeping lion, or an alluring nude. An expressive war painting may evoke emotions more like that of witnessing the bombing of one's home town than does a clinical photo of the destruction. Nevertheless, despite its problems, Currie's claim captures the idea that photographs often have a special power to move viewers, much like finding a bloody handprint on the wall. They seem to confirm that "this really happened"—that is, they have an objective purport.

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[16] The principal objection to the transparency thesis is that one cannot be said to see through something if one does not gain egocentric spatial information. Noël Carroll develops this objection in "Defining the Moving Image." Gregory Currie also defends a similar objection in *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy, and Cognitive Science* (Cambridge UP, 1995). Jonathan Cohen and Aaron Meskin provide a sophisticated reply to Walton's rejoinder. See Cohen and Meskin, "On the Epistemic Value of Photographs," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 62.2 (2004): 197-210.

[17] Scott Walden defends the claim that photographs are a superior source of evidence to drawings, and he supplies a very good overview of the objectivity debate in "Objectivity in Photography," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 45.3 (2005): 258-273.

[18] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (Picador, 1977), p.154.

[19] Currie, "Visible Traces," p. 145.

IV. Perceived Objectivity

Barbara Savedoff argues that whether rightly or wrongly, audiences think that photographs have a "special connection with reality."[20] This belief affects the way in which people experience photographs. She argues that "we tend to see photographs as objective records of the world."[21] Given the speed at which one can take photographs, the ease at which one can easily capture visual detail, and the difficulty for most of photography's history of manipulating the image, photographs have been a great documentary source. They may only be accidentally better evidence for the perceptual beliefs one may form about what they depict than drawings, but photographs seem to be experienced as more objective. Whether photographs will retain this credibility, or what I am calling their objective purport, postdigitalization is another matter. But, to date, it certainly seems as if "we irresistibly see photographs as presenting us with a record of reality."[22]

In this section I have neither attempted to defend the claim that photographs have an objective purport, nor have I tried to settle any of the perceptual and epistemological questions surrounding photography. My goal is merely to reveal a general consensus that photographs have an objective purport. The preceding survey supports this claim.

[20] Savedoff, p. 8.
[21] Ibid., p. 49.
[22] Ibid., p. 50.

3 Horror and the Objective Purport of Photographs

The general question that I want to begin to answer in this paper is whether the objective purport—the putative particular power of photographs—lends anything of importance to the fiction film. Bazin certainly thinks so. He realizes that one can depict fantastic scenes, splice together spatio-temporally distinct events, and via the Kuleshov Effect create new meanings. But he thinks that such uses of the film do not fully realize the potential of the medium.

Undoubtedly, some subjects benefit from minimal editing. For instance, documentaries of magic acts should eschew editing during the tricks. The clever, seamless editing in the YouTube cell-phone popcorn videos is part of their appeal.[23] We know that magic tricks are faked, but it is no fun if we can see the wires. Similarly, Bazin argues that the effectiveness of the scene where the lioness retrieves her lost club from a toddler in *Where Vultures Fly* (1951) requires that there be no editing—that we see the lioness, her cub, and the small child in the same frame so that we know they were all in close spatial proximity.[24] Perhaps, there is no need to dispute this here, but Bazin also defends more general stylistic preferences for the fiction film. He think that the nature of photography instructs filmmakers to privilege deep focus, long takes, and nonpainterly uses of the frame—that these stylistic preferences are grounded in the very nature of photography.

I am not interested in assessing Bazin's dubious argument from the nature of photography to the stylistic preference for the deep-focus, longtakes of Jean Renoir and Orson Welles. For present purposes, this has been done well enough by others.[25] I am interested in a far more concrete, and far more plausible, application of the putative power of the photographic image, an application that eschews all Bazinian extravagances. I am interested in a particular technique used in horror films that appears to draw on the putative objectivity of photography. At least, I am fairly certain that horror filmmakers deploy this technique because they think its effectiveness lies in the objective purport of photographs. Why else would horror film directors frequently put the audience in the position of the narrator of "Pickman's Model"? They do this by allowing the audience to see a photographic record of the presence of a monster, a record bearing little evidence of tampering.

The general strategy is to reveal the appearance or presence of the monster

[23] The cell-phone popcorn videos purport to show kernels of dried corn popping under the influence of ringing cellphones. The camera pans in, the phones ring, and the kernels seem to magically pop. The trick: drop popped kernels, pick up the unpopped seeds, edit this out, and reverse the video. It will look as if the seeds pop and fly up. Virginia Heffernan discusses these videos, but does not explain the trick, in "File-Sharing Fetish", *New York Times* (July 6, 2008).

[24] André Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," in *What is Cinema: Volume I*, p. 49.

[25] Carroll, *Philosophical Problems of Classical Film Theory* and "Uniqueness Claims."

through a form of video presentation that appears to be authentic. The images typically carry several marks of authenticity. They present the monster through a display much like the home video recordings that we are familiar with—videos that our families and friends have never even considered manipulating. In most cases, the image is often poorly lit, the focus is imperfect or clumsily adjusted, the subject is badly framed, the shot is taken from an inopportune angle, and the image quality is set in stark contrast to professional cinematography. We might say that these lesser images bear the "mark of the real."

What is important for our purposes it that these sequences are often the most terrifying in their respective films. One might remember very little about these movies other than these scenes. They often have a tremendous affective afterlife; it is thoughts of these scenes that make us run to bed after flipping out the lights. The specific question I want to consider is whether the objective purport of photography is significantly responsible for the effectiveness of this technique. Indeed, it certainly seems to be the case.

The objective purport of photographs, combined with authenticity indicators, such as low-quality video, seemingly has a powerful rhetorical effect—making these scenes more horrific, uncanny, and all around more terrifying. The authenticity indicators seem to activate, or enhance, the objective purport, making this mode of presentation more effective at presenting fictional evidence of the supernatural than professional quality cinematography.[26] The explanation is not that audiences are, or even think they might be, somehow warranted in believing that monsters exist based on fictional photographic evidence. There is no need to suggest anything so ridiculous. Nor does the explanation hold that audiences in reflective self-assessment would say that they believe that the monsters exist. The theory under consideration simply holds that the best explanation for the peculiar effectiveness of this technique is that the general objective purport of photographs spills over, so to speak, into these kinds of fictional contexts, those marked off by authenticity indicators.

At the end of her discussion of the use of photography within film, Savedoff argues that "the more a film seems like an objective record […] the more uncanny the suggestion of an equivalence between animate and inanimate will seem."[27] Similarly, we might say that the more a film seems like an objective record, the more uncanny, terrifying, or frightening the presentation of the monster will seem. At least, that is the general style of explanation that I intend to evaluate. To demonstrate how plausible this explanation appears, I turn now to three examples where it almost begs to be applied.

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[26] Why the objective purport of photographs funds these sequences in particular and not all live action film, or at least not to the same degree, is something a defender of this style of explanation would explain more carefully than I will attempt here.

[27] Savedoff, *Transforming*, p.150.

4 Three Examples

I. Prince of Darkness

One of John Carpenter's lesser known movies, *Prince of Darkness* (1987) received a poor critical reception. It is plagued by predictable near escapes, a heavy-handed sound track, and over-earnest acting. Nevertheless, it contains, in total, one minute and twenty-nine seconds of exemplary, dread inspiring footage. The premise of the movie is that an ancient canister, housed deep in the basement of a church in downtown Los Angeles, has begun to stir. For thousands of years it has been guarded by "The Brotherhood of Sleep." The head of the order has enlisted the support of a theoretical physicist and an army of graduate students from UCLA to study the swirling green contents of the canister. It turns out that the tube contains liquid Satan—evil materialized in a viscous, green fluid, which until recently has been safely bottled for seven million years.

Of course, this is a relatively silly backdrop. The movie would not be worth mentioning if it were not for the powerful dream sequences. Anyone who falls asleep in the vicinity of the church has the same dream, hence, the name "The Brotherhood of Sleep." The dream is presented through a highly degraded video image accompanied by an equally rough soundtrack. Carpenter says that he "shot these sequences with a video camera and rephotographed it on a TV to give them a video feel."[28] On the soundtrack, a voice repeats: "This is not a dream." No, it is a "transmission from the future." The video is only detectable in dreams because the technology of the year "one, nine, nine, nine" is unable to "transmit through conscious neural interference." The dream has been transmitted back in time so that we might alter the future it reveals.

The video involves a simple tracking shot. The camera moves to the right, outside the gate along the front of the church in whose basement the canister of liquid Satan lies. As the camera approaches the entrance, we see the edge of a dark, cloaked figure emerge from within the church. Gradually, as the film progresses the forty-five second long dream is revealed in pieces. In the closing sequence, we finally see the full contents of the dream, revealing that the future has been altered, but not as intended.

The dream sequences stand in relief to the rest of the film, both while one is watching the movie and in memory. Everyone that I have talked to who has seen *Prince of Darkness* remembers the dream, even if they cannot recall something as basic as what the canister holds. Fans have assembled the dream clips into a continuous sequence on YouTube, drawing thousands of viewers. And, an electronic musician, DJ Shadow adopts the sound track of the dream in several of the songs on his album "Endtroducing . . . ." These popular references attest to the effectiveness of the dream sequence in an otherwise little-known

[28] Gilles Boulenger, *John Carpenter: The Prince of Darkness* (Silman-James Press, 2003), p. 204.

movie.

We must ask: what is it that makes the dream sequence so very effective? An obvious avenue of explanation is that the sequence draws on the power of the objective purport of photographs, which somehow makes it more effective. It is not that we need confuse fiction and reality, or suffer from any kind of illusion, but the dream sequence seems somehow more real, more convincing—almost uncanny. It is more "believable," as we tend to say. By which I take that we mean it lacks certain barriers to imaginative engagement.[29]

At this point, one may object that the explanation is too underspecified. How exactly does the objective purport lend credibility to the dream sequence? It seems to require a dubious illusion theory of fictional engagement. More needs to be said about the mechanism behind the impact, or so the objection goes. In response, the defender of the objective purport style of explanation can rightly reply that this is an unreasonable burden. We should not require that an explanation of the power behind a particular cinematic technique settle the paradox of fiction.[30] In fact, the theory need make no commitment to any controversial solution to the paradox. One need not flesh out the explanation in terms of illusion. The claim is simply that, for whatever more precise psychological reasons, the objective purport of photographs lends these scenes a quality, perhaps an uncanny quality, that makes them more effective as fiction—more effective props for make-believe, for nonassertive imaginative entertainment, or what have you. To be viable, the explanation need not reach a greater level of detail about the psychological mechanisms behind the way people engage with fiction.[31]

Of course, if a better, more parsimonious, clearer explanation were forthcoming, that would count as a compelling objection, or, at least, reason to be suspicious. In fact, I will provide such an explanation in the next section, but

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[29] Through the notion of "credibility," V. F. Perkins tries to track something close to what we mean by "believable." See: V. F. Perkins, *Film as Film* (Da Capo Press, 1993). Key references to belief can be found on pages 63, 64, 65, 66, 67, 68, 83, 86, 94, 95, 122, 144, and156. For a critical evaluation, see Aaron Smuts, "V. F. Perkins' Functional Credibility and the Problem of Imaginative Resistance," *Film and Philosophy* 10 (2006): 85-99.

[30] There are at least two puzzles that fall under the banner of "The Paradox of Fiction." Radford's original problem concerned the rationality of our responses to fiction. A second, perhaps, less interesting psychological question has taken center stage. Much of the current debate revolves around the psychological problem of accounting for why we seem to respond to fictions with genuine emotions.

For more on the rationality question, see Colin Radford, "Fiction, Pity, Fear, and Jealousy," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*) 53 (1995): 71-75, p. 75; Derek Matravers, "The Challenge of Irrationalism, and How not to Meet it" in *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Blackwell, 2005); Richard Joyce, "Rational Fear of Monsters," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40.2 (2000): 209-224; and Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 216-227.

[31] For an accessible recent summary of theories of fictional engagement, see chapter six of Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2008).

first, two more examples.

II. Signs

Few would say that *Signs* (Shyamalan, 2002) is a noteworthy horror movie, but many would agree that it contains at least one very memorable sequence. Six years after the movie was released, I asked my philosophy of film class this question: When do we see the aliens for the first time in the movie? Nearly everyone who had seen *Signs* remembered the details of the sequence. But almost no one could recall any other specific sequence.

The existence of the alien invaders is confirmed about thirty minutes into *Signs*. Merrill Hess (Joaquin Phoenix) sits alone watching the evening news. The newscaster warns the audience: "What you are about the see may be disturbing." On the TV screen, we see a home video taken that day at a birthday party in Brazil. Dozens of children run around in an excited group. The camera passes over the cake, sitting on a table in the yard. The operator attempts to focus the image on the tall hedges that fence the lawn. The video goes in and out of focus. The camera moves back, inside the house and over to a window where the children have gathered. The window reveals a concrete path that runs perpendicular and to the left of the hedges. Again, the image goes in and out of focus. Finally, the camera rests, just above the heads of the children peering out the window. For two seconds we wait, and then we see it, not quite in focus, but clearly anthropomorphic: A green bipedal creature with a reptilian head slinks across the path. The TV broadcast rewinds the video and freezes the frame on a blurry image of a green humanlike shape. This fuzzy glimpse of an alien invader is by far the most frightening moment in the movie.

III. The Blair Witch Project

In "Cinema and Exploration," Bazin attempts to explain what makes Thor Heyerdahl's short documentary *Kon Tiki* (1950) so effective. *Kon Tiki* is an account of Heyerdahl's attempt to cross the Atlantic on a small raft. The footage is a bit shaky since the crew of amateur filmmakers shot the documentary at silent speed to save stock. And, since the film was incidental to the voyage, it lacks much of what we have become accustomed to in documentaries of sea voyages, such as expansive contextualizing shots and overhead footage. Its biggest flaw, however, is that it lacks footage of all the interesting events. Bazin explains:

> Whenever something of significance occurred, the onset of a storm for example, the crew were too busy to bother about running a camera. The result was that our amateur filmmakers simply wasted endless reels filming their pet parrot and the rations provided by the American armed forces. But when an exciting moment arrives, say a whale hurling itself at the raft, the footage is so short that you have to process it ten times over in the optical printer before you can even spot what is

> happening.[32]

However, Bazin claims that *Kon Tiki*'s greatest flaw is also its greatest virtue:

> How much more moving is this flotsam, snatched from the tempest, than would have been the faultless and complete report offered by an organized film, for it remains true that this film is not made up only of what we see—its faults are equally witness to its authenticity. The missing documents are the negative imprints of the expedition—its inscription chiseled deep.[33]

The makers of *The Blair Witch Project* sought just this aura of authenticity. Similar to *Kon Tiki, Blair Witch* purports to be footage from the making of a documentary. Most of the movie is composed of color footage shot with a home video camera. The video is interspersed with 16 mm black-and-white film stock of strikingly superior quality. Undoubtedly, the filmmakers use this contrast to make the video appear more authentic. Two years before the film was released, the distributor launched a viral marketing campaign, spreading a rumor that the film was nonfiction, spliced together from found footage taken during an actual disastrous documentary project. The characters are even given the same names as the actors. It is hard to imagine that many people saw *Blair Witch* thinking it was nonfiction, but undoubtedly some took the bait.

The movie purports to be footage shot by three film students who set out to make a documentary about the legend of the "Blair Witch," a supernatural, hairy, child-stealing, female monster that lives deep in the Maryland woods. On the first night in the forest, the campers hear strange sounds. On the second night, they awake to more sounds, which the group is able to successfully record on digital audio tape. The next day the filmmakers become hopelessly lost in the woods, accidentally circle back, and have to set up camp in the same spot as the night before.

Whatever was making the sounds returns the third night and begins to push on the sides of the tent. From footage taken with a home video camera, we see the sides of the tent as they are violently shaken. The unseen force is big, noisy, and very angry. In a panic, the filmmakers take off running. A lamp attached to the video camera serves as a flashlight as they make their way through the dark woods. They survive until daybreak, but things just get worse. On the subsequent night one of the team, Josh, disappears. The next morning, they find his broken teeth, or minor organs and bones, wrapped in a piece of his shirt rolled up in the middle of a pile of sticks. The remaining two students never manage to make it out of the woods. The last thing we see is one of the pair standing in a corner in the basement of an abandoned house whose walls are covered in children's handprints. The home video camera falls to the ground and the screen goes dark.

The Blair Witch Project is something of an extended exercise in the general

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[32] André Bazin, "Cinema and Exploration" in *What is Cinema?: Volume I*, p. 161.
[33] Ibid. p. 162

technique of filtering evidence of the existence of the supernatural through degraded video images. Admittedly the technique is somewhat different from those considered above, since in *Blair Witch* we never see the monster; instead, we merely see the effects of its presence: the sticks, stones, and broken bones it leaves around the campsite and the impression it makes on the tent. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the film appears to be a product of the objective purport of photography enhanced, or activated, by familiar authenticity indicators. What makes it scary, the explanation goes, is that it "seems so real."

As convincing as this line of explanation may appear, I think that the objective purport of photography does very little to explain the power of these sequences. I turn now to offer a rival account that can do a better job of explaining a wider range of phenomena.

5 Suggestion

The objective purport of photographs provides a compelling explanation of the power of many successful sequences of monsters caught on degraded home video footage, but we also need an explanation for why the technique frequently fails. I noted three exemplary instances of the technique in action, but there are also numerous failures. Steven Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* (2005) contains two. When the tripods first rise from under the streets of Jersey City, the aliens reduce scores of spectators to dust. One of the onlookers holds a video camera. It falls to the ground when the alien's laser incinerates his body. Spielberg adopts the point-of-view from behind the fallen camera, revealing the alien tripod through the viewfinder. Although the technique is similar, the effect is not. We see the alien tripod filtered through the grainy display of the viewfinder, but there is nothing particularly riveting here. The shot leaves one no more stimulated than before.

Similarly, later in the movie, we learn that the aliens are not just trampling New Jersey, but that an army of tripods is devastating the entire country. After leaving his basement hiding place, Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise) surveys the wreckage of a plane crash. He spots a film crew. They take him back to their van and play back a few clips of a host of tripods marching over an eastern metropolis. Both the image quality, and the source—reliable, unbiased network TV—attest to the authenticity of the image. But the impact of these shots is unremarkable. Even though they bear the same marks of the real as does the alien footage in *Signs*, the videos in *War of the Worlds* are neither shocking nor memorable.

The failure of these sequences and the contrasting power of my examples can be explained by a far more familiar mechanism, one common to a wide swath of horror in different artforms and especially prominent in Lovecraft. The photograph of Pickman's model confirms the fictional existence of the monsters depicted in the picture, but what do these monsters look like? If you are familiar

with Lovecraft, then even without reading the story, you know that the monsters are unspeakably horrible. The narrator tells us: "There's no use in my trying to tell you what they were like, because the awful, the blasphemous horror, and the unbelievable loathsomeness and moral foetor came from simple touches quite beyond the power of words to classify." Of course, Lovecraft eventually gives us a few more details, but they are largely suggestive:

> The madness and monstrosity lay in the figures in the foreground—for Pickman's morbid art was pre-eminently one of demoniac portraiture. These figures were seldom completely human, but often approached humanity in varying degree. Most of the bodies, while roughly bipedal, had a forward slumping, and a vaguely canine cast. The texture of the majority was a kind of unpleasant rubberiness. Ugh! I can see them now! Their occupations—well, don't ask me to be too precise. They were usually feeding—I won't say on what. They were sometimes shown in groups in cemeteries or underground passages, and often appeared to be in battle over their prey—or rather, their treasure-trove. And what damnable expressiveness Pickman sometimes gave the sightless faces of this charnel booty! Occasionally the things were shown leaping through open windows at night, or squatting on the chests of sleepers, worrying at their throats. One canvas showed a ring of them baying about a hanged witch on Gallows Hill, whose dead face held a close kinship to theirs.

It is important that we do not learn precisely what these monsters look like, and that Lovecraft slowly reveals these few details of their appearance. If one were to make a film version of the story, it had better not show the paintings too clearly. And most importantly, it better not show the photograph, at least not in focus. Any movie would surely suffer from additional detail.[34]

It is a common mistake of many works of fiction about artists to show their art. Woody Allen nearly ruined *Husbands and Wives* (1992) by letting the audience hear one of the clichéd stories of his protagonist, a revered author. Unless you have the virtuosity of a Nabokov, it is best merely to suggest works of the fictional master. In order to show the work of your fictional artistic genius, you have to create a work of genius, and well, that is not so easy to do unless you have exemplary talent yourself.

Something very similar holds for horror, but in the case of horror, the audience's imagination is likely a far more ingenious producer of monsters than all the make-up artists, claymators, and CGI programmers in Hollywood. Of course, there are terrifying monsters in the genre, monsters that we see in clear focus, in bright light, but often, perhaps typically, the appearance of the monster is anticlimactic. They seldom live up to their promise. I suspect that this is one of the principal reasons why the ambiguous fantastic and other kinds of horror fiction that eschew direct evidence of the existence of monsters are so very

[34] Sadly, Rod Serling's series *Night Gallery* ineptly adapted "Pickman's Model" for television. The adaptation displays one painting clearly and several others in soft focus. The show omits the photograph altogether; instead, we see an absurd wrestling match between Pickman and the model, witnessed by a patron.

effective. To name just a few examples, witness the lasting effectiveness of *The Haunting* (Robert Wise, 1963), M. R. James' "Casting the Runes", Le Fanu's "Green Tea," Robert Hichens' "How Love Came to Professor Guildea," and William Harvey's "The Clock."

The technique at issue—partially revealing the appearance of the monster through degraded video—allows the filmmaker to also partially conceal the monster. It functions to confirm the existence of the monster while allowing the audience to imaginatively supplement the suggested images—to fill in the missing shade of dread. Barthes' distinction between pornographic and erotic photographs is revealing: "The erotic photograph [. . .] does not make the sexual organs into a central object; it very well may not show them at all; it takes the spectator outside the frame, and it is there that I animate this photograph and that it animates me."[35] Just as the erotic photograph works via the suggestion of what is sometimes more exciting to imagine than see, so does suggestion of a monster through a partial view and degraded image. It is not the nature of photography, but our imagination that animates these sequences.

This helps explain both the cases where the technique works and those where it fails. In the case of *War of the Worlds*, the failure of the technique can be explained by the fact that the audience already knows what the aliens look like. Merely seeing them through the viewfinder of a home video camera or on the monitor of the TV crew's truck serves no purpose other than to show us how the aliens rode the lightning. We learn from the video that there are more alien tripods than just the one that attacked New Jersey, but we already knew that something terrible was on the way; we knew that similar lightning storms struck various major cities around the world; and, most importantly, we already knew what the aliens looked like. The degraded video images, complete with the full suite of authenticity indicators, fail to affect the audience as does the dream sequence in *Prince of Darkness* or the birthday party video in *Signs*. It fails because it cannot conceal what has already been revealed.

Not only can my explanation help account for such failed uses of the technique, it does a better job at explaining the successes. The dream sequence in *Prince of Darkness* is partly effective because it merely suggests a rough outline of the monster, slowly teasing the audience with just a bit more information in each subsequent dream. But the power of the dreams also comes from what we learn. Remember the dreams are transmissions from the future, sent for the purpose of changing the past. The dreams give us good reason to think that liquid Satan will manifest itself in roughly human form inside the church at the turn of the century. That does not bode well for the team from UCLA.

The alien home-video footage in *Signs* functions similarly. The footage reveals the general appearance of the aliens, but we are not yet permitted a close

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[35] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p.59. Roger Scruton argues that photography is "incapable of being an erotic art, in that it presents us with the object of lust rather than a symbol of it." Roger Scruton, "Photography and Representation", reprinted in *Philosophy of Film and Motion Pictures*, eds. Noël Carroll and Jinhee Choi (Blackwell, 2006), pp. 19-35.

inspection. Later in the movie, when the protagonists battle the alien home-invaders in their living room, we get to see the monsters up close. They look like men wearing green leotards. The birthday party footage is effective partially because it conceals the details of the appearance of the monsters, and also because it confirms the existence of extraterrestrials. The plot is structured according to the onset-discovery-confirmation-confrontation pattern that Noël Carroll identifies as common to much horror fiction.[36] The movie draws out suspense by prolonging the discovery phase and finally shocks the audience with the birthday party confirmation.

Shyamalan could have confirmed the existence of the monsters in clear film footage, but this would not have been as effective for a couple of reasons. First, as previously noted, this would have made it difficult to conceal the exact appearance of the aliens, which are not nearly as frightening once you get a good hard look. And second, it would have been very difficult to explain how the protagonists could learn of the existence of the aliens without staging a face-to-face encounter. This would have put the characters in immediate danger, precluding the tension of delaying the confrontation. By confirming the existence of the aliens on TV news footage, shot in a country half way across the world, Shyamalan is able to establish a global alien presence that will soon be a direct threat to the characters that we care about. This helps create suspense and stokes our imagination. As we wait for an attack, we wonder just how awful these creatures might be.

The Blair Witch Project is effective for similar reasons. Our perspective is restricted to the point-of-view of the characters. Neither they nor we know if the source of the sounds, the thing that pushes on the tent, and what knocks out Josh's teeth, is human or supernatural. More importantly, it does not matter. Either way, it is dangerous and is cause to get out of the woods as quickly as possible. Early in the movie, before they enter the forest, the students interview a woman who is reported to have seen the Blair Witch. She gives a description nearly Lovecraftian in its vagueness. As a child she awoke from a nap and saw a tall hairy woman hovering a few feet above the ground. Based on this description, and a reputation for child snatching, the audience is primed to imagine the worst. It is hard to think that *Blair Witch* would have been improved had the monster been captured on film at any point in the movie. The movie's effectiveness is a testament to the power of our imagination, not photography.[37]

Why not both?

At this point, the defender of the objectivity view might reply that although I

[36] Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror: or Paradoxes of the Heart* (Routledge, 1990).

[37] *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008) purports to be found footage, much like *The Blair Witch Project*, but it shows far too much of the monster too often and quickly loses its effectiveness.

have given good reason to think that suggestion is part of the explanation of the power of the technique, I have not shown that the objective purport plays no role. Rather than to just suggestion, the objection concludes, we should appeal to both suggestion and the objective purport.[38]

Indeed, I have not decisively shown that objectivity plays no role. But I have provided good reason to be suspicious of the claim. I began by showing that the objective purport is not sufficient. There are cases such as the fallen video camera in "War of the Worlds" that adopt the technique, but fail to have an effect on audiences. So it is not sufficient. However, if the objective purport were at play in degraded video footage complete with authenticity indicators, then we would expect to have at least some reaction to instances of the technique. But we feel none. This not only shows that the objective purport is not sufficient, it suggests that it plays no role whatsoever.

The defender of the objective purport might reply that it simply plays no role in this particular shot in "War of the Worlds," but it is likely playing a role in my three examples. Again, we have good reason to be suspicious of this claim. If one extracts the particular scenes from their narrative context, as some fans have done with the dream sequence from "Prince of Darkness," the scenes lose their effectiveness. If the objective purport were responsible, we would expect an isolated clip to be effective for viewers unfamiliar with the larger context. But the dream sequence is not effective out of context. My explanation has a much better time accounting for why this is the case.

The narrative context creates a reputation, so to speak, for the monster. It stokes curiosity. The mere suggestion of a random monster is not so frightening. But when it is embedded in a story where the monster has been threatening to do some damage, where we are primed to imagine the worst, then suggestion can be effective. The narrative primes the imagination, which is then allowed to do its work, filling in the merely suggested monster. Hence, my explanation can account for both why the scenes are effective in context and why they leave us flat when decontextualized.

Further, my suggestion, unlike the objective purport can explain the effectiveness of a technique common to both literary and cinematic horror. We do not need to appeal to objective purport to account for the literary instances, and we do not need it to account for the cinematic either. Of course, this does not mean that the objective purport plays no role, only that we do not have any good reason to think that it does.

To answer the question: Why not both? We have reason to be suspicious of the claim that objectivity plays a role in the effectiveness of the technique, and we do not need to appeal to objectivity. So, there is no reason to appeal to both.

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[38] Inn correspondence, both Gregory Currie and Kendall Walton, defenders of the objectivity view, raised this concern.

6 Conclusion

Although I suspect that there is no special power of photography arising from its putative objective purport, I have not offered any argument for such a strong claim.[39] Nor have I offered an argument that the objective purport of photographs, if it does indeed exist, has no effect on audience reception of the narrative fiction film. I argue for a much more specific conclusion: The effectiveness of the common technique in horror films of presenting evidence of the existence of a monster through degraded video footage is better explained by the power of our imagination to supplement suggested demonic forms than by the putative objective purport of photographs.

If the objective purport were the predominant, or even just a prominent, source of the effectiveness of this technique, it would be odd to find numerous visually similar sequences that leave audiences flat. We would expect at least some frisson from intrafilmic video footage of monsters, but we often feel none. My solution does not suffer from this explanatory imbalance, since it can account for both the successes and the failures. The technique typically fails when we the film has already revealed the appearance and confirmed the existence of the monster, and it typically succeeds when it is able to conceal some visual detail while also confirming its existence. The degraded form of the presentation helps to conceal the monster, not authenticate the image which we know to be fictional.

In addition, my solution helps account for a much larger range of phenomena than simply this one technique in the fiction film. It also helps account for the effectiveness of psychological horror and the ambiguous fantastic—subgenres that many find far more frightening than those that display their monsters pried open for all the world to see.

This does not mean that the objective purport does not play any role in the success cases, only that at this point we have no good reason to think it does. In fact, the failures give us good reason to doubt that the objective purport plays any role whatsoever. Although my conclusion is limited to a technique of the horror film, it does give us reason to be suspicious of other explanations that make recourse to the objective purport of photographs. Perhaps more importantly, it suggests that what the audience's imagination adds to fiction can be as important as what a work of fiction brings to its audience.[40]

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[39] Although not entirely convinced, I suspect that there is no special power of photography. The frequency of examples involving family albums is telling. My family had no portrait painters on staff. Photos are typically the only documents we have of the way our grandparents, parents, and other dead relatives looked. They typically carry a tremendous amount of visual information, and, accordingly, are incredible aids to memory. For most of us these are the only documents that supplement our memories of the appearance of dead relatives, so it is no surprise that they are powerful images. Further defense is out of scope.

[40] I thank Heidi Bollich for reading multiple drafts of this paper and for emphasizing

the relevance of Lovecraft to the problem. I also thank the members of my philosophy of film class at Temple University (Fall 2008) for their lively discussion of my key examples. In particular, I appreciate Thomas Curry's feedback on a previous draft of this paper and for his spirited defense of Gregory Currie. I thank Noël Carroll for his insightful discussion of my principal examples during our weekly Chinatown bus rides. I also thank Scott Walden for excellent feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. Gregory Currie and Kendall Walton also made helpful suggestions.

The snapshot above is from the dream sequence in *Prince of Darkness.*

The snapshot above is from the TV footage in *Signs*.