The subversion of factual discourse in found footage films

A subversão do discurso factual em filmes found footage

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Abstract: This article analyzes how the textual design of found footage films subvert factual discourse in order to increase the intended horror on screen. Movies such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *The Gallows* (2015) capitalize on the blur between reality and fiction, interfering with the way part of the audience responds to the movies. The article also contends that found footage films are natural by-products of postmodern times, which is especially characterized by 'convergence culture' (JENKINS, 2008) and 'the disappearance of something real', as two prime features of this genre.

Keywords: horror cinema; found footage; claims to truthfulness; factual genres; media.

Resumo: Este artigo analisa como o design textual de filmes do formato found footage subverte o discurso factual a fim de potencializar a pretendida sensação de horror na tela. Filmes como *Canibal Holocausto* (1980), *A Bruxa de Blair* (1999), *Atividade Paranormal* (2007) e *A Forca* (2015) exploram a confusão entre realidade e ficção, interferindo na maneira como parte da audiência reage aos filmes. O artigo também parte do princípio que o *found footage* é um produto natural da pós-modernidade, que tem a cultura da convergência (JENKINS, 2008) e o desaparecimento do real como duas de suas maiores características.

Palavras-chave: cinema de horror; *found footage*; reivindicação da veracidade; gêneros factuais; mídia.

Although the presence of truth claims in fictional works is not a recent phenomenon, contemporary cinema has amplified its use. Whether this is achieved through individual talent and technological resources in the areas of special effects and make-up, or external factors such as marketing campaigns largely based on the Internet and the audience's varied and ample means of communication, responses and feelings towards films have changed. This article discusses a subgenre within horror cinema known as found footage, proposing that such change is provoked by the subversion of factual discourse, which we consider to be the most important feature in this particular format. The analysis contends that the combination between the 'claims to truthfulness' underpinning documentary film (AUFDENHEIDE, 2007) and the main characteristics of the 'convergence culture' (JENKINS, 2008) are of paramount significance for the confusion between fact and fiction intended to amplify the horror on screen. The analysis also associates the success of such strategy to John Corner's (2005) premise that viewers have different levels of criticality towards texts: some merely look *at* them, while others look *through* them.[1]

In order to exemplify such idea, we suggest four stories where such confusion between real life and the work of film of social media had some sort of consequence. In 1980, Italian director Ruggero Deodato was charged with murder and crimes against nature. The support for such an accusation came from footage in a movie he had directed the year before, whose scenes were blatant and of graphic nature – among other things, they showed a pregnant woman stoned to death, another one raped and impaled, and a group of people cannibalized. Nearly twenty years later, the mysterious disappearance of three young cinema students caused a worldwide commotion. A lot of it stemmed from a website devoted to their story and the release of a documentary by Discovery Channel, both of which containing images of the students, interviews with their family members and professors, as well as with the inhabitants of the town where they disappeared. Their faces appeared on posters where the word 'missing' could be read in bold black letters.

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[1] CORNER. Television, documentary and the Category of the Aesthetic, p. 54.

The third story took place in 2007, when confused viewers visited online forums asking whether the images in a certain horror movie were real or fake, due to their extreme realism. This time, the images showed a house and its two inhabitants suffering the consequences of what seemed to be the actions of an evil spirit. Naturally, the possibility of real horror sold as entertainment gave the picture a great deal of notoriety. Finally, in 2015, an elementary school student from Manaus, Brazil, apparently became possessed after evoking a spirit from the beyond. She and her friends managed to do so by placing pencils on a piece of paper next to the words 'yes' and 'no' written on it, and by subsequently pronouncing the entity's name three times in a row, followed by the question 'are you there?'

In spite of their different contexts, the episodes above are connected to four fictional horror movies whose textual structures toy with the boundaries between reality and fiction. The scenes in these movies depict assorted violence, haunted environments, cannibalism, evil beings and intense suffering. Despite their overwhelming character, these topics attract audiences partially due to the suggestion – the "certainty" – that the events on screen are real.

The aforementioned cases attest to the power of this permeability between reality and fiction. Deodato was plagued with personal legal problems due to the contents of his exceedingly disturbing film *Cannibal Holocaust,* which were used as evidence against him. The missing students are the protagonists of the 1999 phenomenon *The Blair Witch Project*, whereas the forum visitors puzzled by so-called real images were discussing Oren Peli's 2007 blockbuster *Paranormal Activity*, which later on became the first instalment of a series. Finally, the name ritualistically pronounced by the Brazilian kids is 'Charlie', a boy whose death is seen in the 2015 movie *The Gallows*.

The four movies in question are representative of a format known as *found footage*, which has appeared excessively in the horror movie industry over the past ten years. The expression alludes to the misfortunes the protagonists undergo while they capture on video what turns out to be the actions of weird, evil beings. The last action recorded tends to be the demise of the last cameraperson standing, thus constituting footage that has been 'lost' and is subsequently found.

This technique of resorting to a façade of truth to tell fictional stories is not a contemporary prerogative. McLane (2012) identifies

examples of documentary as an artistic form in the first half of the 20th century in media as diverse as photography, cinema, radio, newspaper reporting, and television,[2] demonstrating how art and fiction might indeed rely on the *claims to truthfulness*,[3] one of the epistemological bases of the documentary.

Particularly in the case of horror, there are significant examples in classic literature of stories surrounded by an aura of truth. Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1816) and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), for example, present a structure relying on letters, diary entries and documents. Decades later, Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) expands the concept by bringing into his novel multiple narrators and a variety of genres such as diaries, letters, telegrams, transcribed phonograph entries and newspaper clippings, all aimed at bringing "concrete" evidence to the reader of the incredible facts regarding the Transylvanian Count.

As seen, the relationship between horror fiction and documentary has been a solid one for a long time. For a better understanding of how found footage films benefit from their association to truth-telling, we must reflect upon the term 'documentary', a task which implies acknowledging that the genre simultaneously depends on and interferes with people's perceptions and representations of reality.[4] Factual genres in general rely on their 'appeal of the real',[5] namely, the illusion that the images on screen constitute real life. Thus, a great deal of the credibility underpinning these genres comes from their claims to truthfulness, their informative property (the word "document" comes from Latin "docere", "to teach"[6]), and the serious character generally attributed to them, which enhances their plausibility. This explains why the Italian Court of Justice sentenced Deodato to prison after seeing the people in his movie being cannibalized by an indian tribe in the Amazon forest. More than **looking real**, the movie was **sold** as being real footage, and, thus, considered reality.

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[2] McLANE. *A new history of documentary film*, p. 6.

[3] AUFDENHEIDE. *Documentary film: a very short introduction*, p. 23.

[4] AUFDENHEIDE. *Documentary film: a very short introduction*, p. ix.

[5] ANDREJEVIC. *Reality TV:* the work of being watched, p. 7.

[6] McLANE. *A new history of documentary film,* p. 5.

An essential element in documentaries is *actuality*, a factor Annette Hill connects to *realism* and *authenticity*.[7] If realism indeed is "the relationship between representations and a physical and social "reality",[8] the awareness that there is a difference between reality and its depictions should enable viewers to distinguish between fictional and non-fictional content. Nonetheless, this process does not occur the same way for all audience members, given that judgment value plays an important role when assessing realism. The premise that "realism can mean something can be real, it can appear realistic, and it can also feel familiar to us"[9] does not take into consideration that some people shape their references of truth based on second-hand or even third-hand experiences – for instance, someone who knows someone (who knows someone) who saw the Blair Witch, ergo, she is real. If that serves as reason to see the Blair Witch as a realistic character, then Jean Baudrillard (2002) could be right when he affirms that in the future

> [n]o one will have directly experienced the actual course (…) happenings, but everyone will have received an image of them. A pure event, in other words, devoid of any reference in nature, and readily susceptible to replacement by synthetic images.[10]

When a movie is marketed as a documentary, its aura of credibility tends to be enhanced. Spectators often believe that a documentary tells the truth also because the footage itself works as irrefutable evidence that something has happened:

> The claim that documentary can present a truthful and accurate portrayal of the social world is not only validated through the association of the camera with the instruments of science, but also depends upon the cultural belief that the camera does not lie.[11]

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[7] HILL. *Restyling factual TV*, p. 113.

[8] GRODAL. The experience of realism in audiovisual representation, p. 68.

[9] McLANE. *A new history of documentary film*, p. 113.

[10] BAUDRILLARD. *The transparency of Evil*, p. 80.

[11] ROSCOE; HIGHT. *Faking it*: mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality, p. 11.

Precisely because of the fallacy that the camera does not lie, many found footage movies have main characters involved with the production of factual genres such as documentaries (*The Blair Witch Project, Noroi – The Curse*, *The Last Exorcism*, *The Taking of Deborah Logan, The Atticus Institute*), reality shows (*Grave Encounters*) or news reports (*[REC]*, *Quarantine*). In some cases, the aura of credibility derives from footage commissioned by governmental branches, such as the US Department of Defense (*Cloverfield*), or simply from the idea that currently many average individuals capture everyday life events such as birthday parties, road trips and social engagements (the *V/H/S* saga), a vacation (*La Cueva*), or, in a world gone mad, the zombie apocalypse (*Diary of the Dead*).

Authenticity, on the other hand, deals with the essence of facts and beings. It pertains to something being genuine, true or authorized by the originator.[12] When it comes to found footage, however, proving the genuineness, truth or originality of something becomes difficult, given that the events and creatures captured on camera are often supernatural and dangerous, which makes their essence virtually unknown. Also, the makers of these videos rarely survive and, finally, the stories in these movies are fictional. The last point should suffice to invalidate the previous ones. Nonetheless, the blur between reality and fiction somehow remains, and as the cases previously mentioned prove, audience members sometimes look *at* a fictional piece disguised as a factual one, rather than *through* it. When the former happens, there tends to be a quicker audience response to the aesthetics of the movie, which can impede a higher level of criticality.

In their analysis of mock-documentaries, Roscoe and Hight (2001) see *The Blair Witch Project* as a film critique of 'factual' genres for three reasons: firstly, the movie uses the documentary form to parody or satirize an element of popular culture. Secondly, the text is designed to appropriate documentary aesthetics in an ambivalent way, leading to a tension between "an explicit critique of documentary practices and practitioners and an implicit acceptance of the generic codes and conventions".[13] Finally, when analyzing the role constructed for the

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[12] HILL. *Restyling factual TV*. p. 113.

[13] ROSCOE; HIGHT. *Faking it:* mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality, p. 73.

audience, Roscoe and Hight point out that viewers with higher levels of critical thinking – those who look through the text rather than at it – are capable of exploring the format's latent reflexivity while appreciating the parody or satire proposed.

The truth claims particular to factual genres are essential for found footage movies, insofar as reliability, actuality, realism and viewers' perceptions come together, potentially interfering with the audience's reaction. This is only possible due to some of the textual features of the films, such as the filming character/intradiegetic narrator. As already stated, the plots of these movies frequently involve camerapersons, documentarists, reporters or researchers. Nonetheless, filming has ceased to be the prerogative of professional filmmakers alone. Since the final years of the last millennium, our relationship with the contents and stimuli available has changed dramatically. Technological advancements – the Internet above all –, the social network culture and people's larger access to recording equipment have led to a scenario where all sorts of materials can be socialized online, discussions happen globally and information exchange happens quickly. These advances have led to a change in the audiences' involvement with the works produced in a way that, according to Jenkins (2008)

> Storytellers now think about storytelling in terms of creating openings for consumer participation. At the same time, consumers are using new media technology to engage with old media content, seeing the Internet as a vehicle for collective problem solving, public deliberation and grassroots creativity.[14]

This shows we are experiencing what Henry Jenkins (2008) calls *convergence culture* – an overwhelming flow of contents in diverse media platforms and means of communication, with increasingly participative audiences who mold their entertainment experiences according to their convenience, blurring the boundaries between producers and receivers of content, characterizing the *participatory culture*.[15] The recurrence of the 'shaky camera' technique somehow corroborates this: anyone is a potential recorded, and sometimes the quality of the footage is not good.

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[14] JENKINS. *Convergence culture*: where old and new media collide, p. 169.
[15] JENKINS. *Convergence culture*: where old and new media collide, p. 3.

The Blair Witch Project utilizes that in order to amplify the intended sensation of realism: while the three documentary filmmakers do a lot of walking and running, the footage they capture while doing so is full of intended imperfections. *Paranormal Activity*, on the other hand, expands this technique by capitalizing on the premise that surveillance equals safety: when Katie and her boyfriend Micah experience weird situations she believes are the result of a supernatural activity in their house, they decide to have cameras installed all over their house. The final cut of the film intertwines the steady images captured by these cameras and homemade footage taken by them.

An analysis of *Paranormal Activity* allows us to connect it right back to both *Cannibal Holocaust* and *The Blair Witch Project* due to the quality of its visual effects and the casting of unknown actors who use their real full names. In contrast, the perspective offered by surveillance cameras brings more stability and the higher image and audio quality expected from a fictional movie shot in a studio. *Paranormal Activity* is also the first found footage movie sponsored by an important company. It starts with an opening message in plain white font on a black background that reads, "Paramount Pictures would like to thank the families of Micah Sloat and Katie Featherston and the San Diego Police Department". It is difficult to determine how effective that was, but the fact is that when searching the terms "Micah and Katie" today, Google suggests as continuations "real or fake", "2006 case", "real story", "death", "san diego". When the search is in Portuguese ("Micah e Katie"), the order of suggestions is "história real", "morreram" ("died"), "wikipédia", "verdade" ("truth").

The seemingly endless reproduction of forms and the museumification of banal things are only two characteristics of the *disappearance of the real*, one of the key concepts in Jean Baudrillard's views of the postmodern world. If reality no longer exists, that means we are free to create our own reality – the more real than real, or *hyperreality*.[16] In found footage films, that appears through the audio and video imperfections created on purpose to increase the sense of realism.

Found footage only has a *raison d'être* because the primary level of its truth claims lies on the real, concrete habit people have of recording their lives – after all, "thanks to the media, computer science

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[16] BAUDRILLARD. *The transparency of Evil*: essays on extreme phenomena, p. 18.

and video technology, everyone is now potentially a creator".[17] The abundance of images is a feature of the virulence in the circulation and distribution of information in a wide range of media, whose forms "are viral – fascinating, indiscriminate – and their virulence is reinforced by their images, for the modern media have a viral force of their own, and their virulence is contagious".[18]

What potentially makes these movies terrifying is the premise that they somehow make threats visible. We may have heard of haunted houses, witches, or cannibals, but found footage actually delivers them. Since these movies are more real than real, what they give us is cruelty, dread, and disgust in their most perfect forms. This means the appeal in these films derives from their apparent *referentiality* and *evidentiality*,[19] that is, referring to facts and proving they actually happened. In contemporary times, the moving image seems to be the best way of doing so, and the four cases mentioned in the opening of this article corroborate this. The participatory culture, the abundant production and sharing of content, the viralization of information and the aesthetization of daily life, all combined with the subversion of factual discourse, have provided the necessary structure for the contemporary spread of found footage films. It seems that the ultimate 'lie disguised as truth' found footage tells us is that it reveals to us some of evil's most dreaded faces and works. The 'reality' is that, unfortunately, those who captured such special images are no longer among us.

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[17] BAUDRILLARD. *The transparency of Evil*: essays on extreme phenomena, p. 16.

[18] BAUDRILLARD. *The transparency of Evil:* essays on extreme phenomena, p. 36-37.

[19] ROSCOE; HIGHT. *Faking it:* mock-documentary and the subversion of factuality, p. 16.

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