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**The Politics and Poetics of Night Vision
in the Contemporary Horror Film**

Horror films often play with shadows, darkness and nightscapes. One need only to think of Nosferatu's silhouette creeping along the wall in F.W. Murnau's classic film from 1922 or just the title of the 2007 vampire film Thirty Days of Night to appreciate the central place of light and especially its absence in this genre. Night vision brings a whole new visual rhetoric to the horror film, however, where the play is no longer with shadows but with eerie surfaces, unnatural colours and uncanny reflections. One of the most immediately striking things about night vision is the eerie green glow that turns people into uncanny figures with opaque and shiny eyes. In a medium like film, where the gaze has often been regarded as a central site of human agency, subjectivity and desire, this

transformation is all the more disturbing. In this chapter, I will argue that the night vision aesthetic—both in the recent spate of found footage and mockumentary films and in more conventional narrative fiction films—represents a new visual language for anxiety about the status of human agents in the current global economy and more specifically registers an unease with the treatment of civilians in the recent wars defending and expanding that system.¹ It is no accident that night vision capability is a key feature of the post-9/11 American military, and the signature aesthetic of the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, during which night vision goggles (NVGs) have entirely altered the rules of the game. As the American and British publics grew increasingly uncomfortable with virtual warfare and remote assassination during the first decade of the twenty-first century, the contemporary horror film explored the poetics and politics of the new visual rhetoric of digitalized death. Ultimately, the spectral green screen constitutes a potent visual aesthetic for expressing unease with our era of the military-industrial-entertainment-gaming complex.

Night vision technology was developed from the start for military purposes and has existed since World War II. Until recently, however, it was not very effective and did not give American soldiers any significant advantage in the Korean or the Vietnam Wars. Many Vietnam War films and memoirs reveal that the night ‘belonged’ to the Viet Cong, who frequently took advantage of their greater knowledge of the local terrain to launch operations under the cover of darkness. The full digitalization of war started with the Persian Gulf War in 1990-1991, in the sense that communication and imaging technology were central to how the war was conducted and especially to how it was represented on television to American and international viewers. Paul Virilio is the contemporary scholar

who has most pointedly explored the ways in which the Persian Gulf was the ‘first total electronic war’, as he puts it (Virilio 2002, p. 44), though many other scholars have also written about the highly mediated character of this war.² In Desert Screen, Virilio argued that with the first Gulf War, war had moved from ‘a geographic *field of battle* to a multimedia *field of vision*’ (Virilio’s italics, 2002: 136). There were two signature video images of the First Gulf War: Bagdad being bombed at night, filmed and broadcast by CNN, and the endlessly repeated video clip of a laser-guided bomb, a so-called smart bomb, as it fell on its target, provided to CNN by the Department of Defense (Vasquez 2009: 92). Both used image enhancing techniques: night vision in the case of the nighttime bombing and thermal-based intensification for the missile guidance systems. The intensive use of digital video and imaging techniques led Jean Baudrillard to famously call the Gulf War a ‘fake war’ consisting entirely of simulation and images, and to assert that the Gulf War ‘did not take place’ (1995: 68). Baudrillard’s provocative claims were not meant to be taken literally (or deny that real people died), but rather to call attention to the important changes that the new media had introduced to the way war was conducted. For example, one of the striking things about the representation of the first Gulf War—and an important feature of the way the war was marketed and sold to the American public—is that it seemed evacuated of people. Targets seemed to always be buildings and military installations, and the bombing of Bagdad was always filmed from a distance. Images of the results of the war were carefully censored. No American soldiers killed in Iraq could be shown, and television viewers also rarely or never saw Iraqi soldiers, though in fact tens of thousands died.

In contrast, the war in Iraq initially seemed more conventional and more humanly inhabited, largely because of the practice of embedding reporters with troops. One result of this convention was a focus almost entirely on American military personnel, with Iraqis soldiers and civilians generally filmed at a distance, if at all. Thus, video news reports of the war were almost always subjective, shot and narrated from the point of view of the embedded reporter. Furthermore, night vision truly came into its own with the Iraq (and Af-Pak) wars. The U.S. military used highly advanced third generation night vision technology, which gave it a significant tactical advantage during the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Soldiers used it for night raids and searches, used it while driving, and while manning checkpoints. For the first time in American military history, Americans ‘owned’ the night. However, night vision also could be described as having helped render civilians more helpless and vulnerable while giving US military personnel and their private counterparts an illusion of invulnerability and omnipotence. As Antonius Robben puts it, ‘public space in Bagdad had become a chaotic environment that bewildered the monitored civilians in this multimedia panopticon of battle space with its unpredictable tactical practices under the cover of darkness’ (2012: 38). While US soldiers could see in the dark, civilians could not and would sometimes fail to perceive check points, leading upon a number of occasions to soldiers firing upon unarmed civilians and families (Robben 2012: 37-38). Night vision also rendered both enemies and innocent civilians into highly mediated and often identical objects in a derealized field of vision, literally figures on a screen. As Dave Grossman, author of On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society, puts it: “night-vision devices provide a superb form

of psychological distance by converting the target into an inhuman green blob” (2009: 170).

In short, in contrast to the media depiction of the first Gulf War, which focused on long-range shots of Bagdad and its streets and buildings, the most important innovation in the way night vision became diffused in the media is the ubiquitous close-up and personal use of NVG in interactions with Iraqi civilians. Night vision sequences quickly became a standard feature of images of the war shown to television viewers and have been particularly important in documentaries of the recent wars. For example, Garrett Scott’s and Ian Olds’ Occupation Dreamland (2005) features several long sequences and key scenes of night-time searches and interrogations, either of women in their homes, or men being arrested, all shot in night vision. A year later, The War Tapes (2006), made by three New Hampshire National Guard soldiers, who filmed each other during their deployment in 2005, also has several important night vision sequences, though the people seen during these sequences most often are themselves. Night vision was also used extensively in the HBO television series, Generation Kill, in 2008, which was based on the eponymous book written by journalist Evan Wright about his experience embedded with a division of Recon Marines entering Iraq in the early stages of the war.

Fictional narrative films about the war also use night vision in their quest for verisimilitude. For example, Robert Redford’s film about the war in Afghanistan, Lions for Lambs (2008), features a long dramatic scene where two young college students who have volunteered for service are shown fighting and dying during a botched night-time landing where they find themselves surrounded by insurgents. The scene is shown both in

the stark grey and black of satellite-relayed thermal night vision and in conventional film, but the scene where their comrades realize they are dead is when their blob-like shapes stop moving on the screen. An even more powerful example of a feature film that uses night vision strategically to highlight the impact of the violence of the war is Brian de Palma's Redacted (2007), which is a mix of seemingly amateur found-footage and mockumentary sequences based on a true incident of a rape and murder of a young Iraqi girl and her family by US soldiers in 2006. The scene of the rape and murder is filmed entirely in night vision with the murderers' own cameras. In short, from early on, night vision sequences became a standard feature of visual representations of the war in Iraq both in documentary and narrative film, and were strongly associated with the depiction of the most violent and disturbing moments of the films.

This is perhaps the moment to explain some of the different versions of night vision technology that are used in film and television images, each with its own distinctive visual style. The main difference is between image intensification, infrared illumination and thermal detection devices. The first two rely on reflection of photons or infrared illumination normally not perceptible to the human eye, and the third relies on infrared light released by heat (so emission rather than reflection of a type of light). Most night vision goggles, scopes and cameras use the first kind, the reflecting kind, and this is what creates the particular aesthetic of the green colour (caused by the use of phosphors in the device) or a kind of greenish grey. In contrast, thermal detection devices produce grey images in which heat appears either as a white or a red and orange glow. The most common is called Forward-Looking Infrared Radar (FLIR); battle-tanks and helicopters are commonly fitted with these devices (Vasquez 2009: 95). Night vision technology for

commercial home video cameras was developed and patented by Sony, who remains the main manufacturer of cameras with an infrared night vision function called 'Night Shot'. This feature became available in the 1990s and is still sold with all Sony video cameras. Night shot uses infrared, which reflects off human eyes and creates an uncanny opaque appearance. This particular kind of effect is used frequently in horror cinema of the amateur video/hand-held camera/found footage subgenre, and especially during the years that coincided with the Iraq war and occupation, peaking around the mid to late 2000s.

One of the first uses of night vision technology in commercial cinema was in The Silence of the Lambs (1991), when detective Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) is in the serial killer's basement near the end of the film and he turns off the lights to stalk her in the dark. The audience watches her through his point of view and even perceives the twin circles of vision as if really looking through a pair of goggles. This use of night vision is fundamentally different than the recent trend of subjective camera filmmaking, however, because it is usually the victim and not the monster that is identified *with* the camera. Hand-held camera movies like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) typically seek to insert the viewer as realistically as possible into the film, to break down the distance between character and viewer, and to make the audience identify with the frightened protagonist through its subjective and intra-diegetic point of view.³ However, although it relied extensively on nighttime scenes, Blair Witch did not use night vision. An analogous effect was created with flashlights and camera lights, which illuminate a small circle of visibility in a dark field of vision, but the film did not explore the uncanny and depersonalized effects of the infrared night shot. This trend would emerge only in the wake of the war in Iraq.

Since The Blair Witch Project, the phenomenon of found footage horror has proliferated and mutated to all kinds of offshoot genres (such as CCTV, mobile phone, laptop camera and other filming devices). The use of the night vision sequence in these films has also evolved and taken on new meanings and roles, especially after 2004 or 2005. For example, horror films that use night vision in key scenes or particularly interesting ways include The Descent I (2005) and II (2009), Death of a Ghost Hunter (2007), Exhibit A (2007), REC 1(2007) and REC 2 (2009), The Zombie Diaries (2006) and The World of the Dead: The Zombie Diaries 2 (2011), The Troll Hunter (2010), Atrocious (2010), The Tunnel (2011), Evil Things (2011), Quarantine 2: Terminal (2011), The Bay (2012), the Paranormal Activity series (2007-2012), and the Grave Encounters series (2011-2012). Interestingly, two of the more commercial found footage productions, Cloverfield (2008) and George Romero's Diary of the Dead (2007), do not have night vision sequences, suggesting that it continues to have a troubling edge to it that makes it unattractive to commercial studio productions even as they attempt to cash in on the hand-held video trend. Night vision is also sometimes used in regular feature films, as in the Predator films (which used thermal detection technology to represent the creatures' field of vision) and in military films (e.g. Lions for Lambs, Redacted, Zero Dark Thirty). Two of the films I will discuss in this chapter, Juan Carlos Fresnadillo's 28 Weeks Later (2009, the sequel to 28 Days Later), and G.I. Jesus (2007), an American independent film, are conventional narrative films.

Since the emergence of night vision is most closely associated with the found footage genre, the first question raised by the recent proliferation of this form is: why has it become so popular in the last decade? Admittedly, a part of the answer is economic:

they are cheap and easy to make, and more importantly, they have the highest return on investment (ROI) of any films in the history of cinema. First place belongs to Paranormal Activity, with a ROI of 1,311,211%, more than double the 2nd and 3rd place films, which are Mad Max and The Blair Witch Project, respectively. This makes the amateur video genre something of a lottery in which the profits are potentially huge for a relatively small investment.

A second and more critical answer lies in the way that the technique renewed a genre that was getting tired and overdone. Violence in the horror film had become so graphic that it was hard to up the ante by greater gore, and parody had explored and nearly exhausted the self-reflexive play of existing conventions. As Peg Aloi observes, Blair Witch shook up the game by adopting a less is more strategy based on suspense and atmosphere rather than graphic violence and shock (2005: 187). This is not to say that the graphic violence has not come creeping back, and recent films like The Zombie Diaries 2 and the REC series are as graphic and gory as anyone could want. But initially at least the found footage and mockumentary genre offered something new: a slow build-up of suspense based on subjective camera-work, a new emphasis on human dynamics and relationships in stressful situations, and the simple unpredictability of breaking out of the standard feature film mold.

In addition, the aesthetics of the found footage film, which resembled the kind of film that people were making themselves with the home cameras that had become wide spread in the 1990s, achieved a new kind of realism based on a combination of the video look and feel and the kind of backstage behaviour and dialogue that is characteristic of home videos. By backstage I am referring to the terms used by Ernest Goffman to

distinguish people's presentation of self in front-stage situations, as with strangers, from how people act in back-stage settings, with family, co-workers or friends (1959: 1-10)

Found footage always begins with dialogue that seems unedited, awkward, repetitive, self-conscious about being filmed, or seemingly spontaneous and ostentatiously informal. The point is to appear as un-professional and unscripted as possible, in order to approach the 'realism' of amateur home video or of the 'blooper' moments of professional video, when people appear to act spontaneously or believe they are not being filmed for public presentation. This is a matter of both acting style—the 'back stage' behaviour I've just been describing—as well as the visual appearance of the film. For instance, in addition to seeming unprofessional and unrehearsed in terms of behaviour, found footage horror will often include moments of grainy, shaky, oddly angled, and obstructed or even corrupted images. Thus, an important part of the appeal of found-footage horror is the possibility of creating a more effective scare by making the world of the film resemble as much as possible the world of the viewers. Horror films that resemble the kind of home video footage that people could make themselves effectively diminish the comfortable aesthetic distance that traditional horror films offer with their clearly artificial cinematic style and conventions.

An equally important cultural explanation for the popularity of the found footage style and mockumentary styles can be located in its ability to transcode contemporary anxieties into a new digital language of terror that has emerged from both the attacks on New York and the two wars that the US undertook in response. The term 'transcode', based on the work of Douglas Kellner, refers to the specific way that media adapts discourse and cultural issues into narrative and aesthetic forms (2010: 2). A number of

scholars have argued that the found footage genre taps specifically into anxieties emerging from 9/11 (Cherry 2011: 192, Wetmore 2012: 60-80), which, in the words of Kevin Wetmore, was experienced by television viewers as a ‘real-time documentary’ (2012: 57). Wetmore claims that the ‘explosion’ of this genre is a post 9/11 emergence, and significantly different from earlier found-footage films in that the recent examples tend to be presented as ‘inadvertent’ (2012: 61). In other words, the post 9/11 found-footage films are often framed as amateur video footage that was being filmed for other reasons, such as the private documentation of an event such as a wedding or birthday party or trip, and then becomes a horror film when unexpected events occur and transform the situation into something entirely different. While this is plausible, I would argue that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are also responsible for the fascination with the found-footage and mockumentary genres. As mentioned before, subjective camera reporting was the principal mode in which most people experienced the recent wars.

However, if 9/11 can be linked to the found footage genre more broadly, the night vision trend emerges exclusively from the wars the US and its allies undertook in retaliation for 9/11. NVG technology is the visual signature of the film and television representation of the Iraq War since 2003, with filmed sequences of night raids and house searches functioning as the contemporary equivalent of the ubiquitous helicopter shot which served as generic visual signature of the Vietnam War. It is now commonplace to understand 9/11 as a national trauma that found its way into representational practices in the years that followed, but the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also had an impact, though in a more ambivalent way. If the terrorist attacks naturally spawned fears of more attacks, the anxieties raised by the wars were not necessarily only those of being invaded

and occupied. Instead, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (and neighbouring countries) stirred complex feelings of unease and a kind of ersatz perpetrator guilt as well as anxiety about the rising military presence in American and British culture. These anxieties emerged as the wars dragged on much longer than initially predicted, and as revelations of torture of detainees, of mounting victims of so-called collateral damage from drones and accidental shootings, and of incidents such as the 2006 Al Ishaqi massacre or the 2006 gang-rape and killing of a 14-year-old girl in Mahmudiyah continued to emerge from the war. Many, if not most, films made about the Iraq or Afghanistan war deal critically with the question of civilian abuse, veteran PTSD, or military incompetence. Horror films, which tend to absorb and translate cultural anxieties, have responded to the recent wars by an explosion of found-footage productions and night vision sequences.

Thus, although night vision is a relatively new technique in the horror film, it has been adapted to perform functions that are centrally important to the gothic genre since its inception. Although the following categories are far from exhaustive, there are three main kinds of uses of the night vision sequence in contemporary horror: forensic revelation, traumatic memory and uncanny depersonalization.

The forensic function is rooted in the way night vision is a technology for investigating a visual field: it promises to reveal aspects of reality that are hidden to the naked eye. This aspect is visible in the found footage genre in general, which is often introduced as police evidence and viewed in the spirit of looking for clues and answers to what happened at an unsolved crime scene. This is the case in The Blair Witch Project, Cloverfield, The Troll Hunter, Grave Encounters and the entire Paranormal Activity series. Many of these films even foreground the forensic element with titles such as

Exhibit A or Evidence (the title of two separate found-footage films, one from 2011 and one from 2013). Furthermore, night vision, because it seems to activate super-human powers, recalls the more specific gothic tradition of supernatural revelation, in which visual media, such as paintings, portraits, sculptures, tapestries, and later, photography, are invested with magical and prophetic agency. One can think of the moving paintings in The Castle of Otranto, the seemingly magical image in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Oval Portrait' (1842), or Hawthorne's and Melville's extensive mediations on the revelatory power of images in Pierre (1852) and House of the Seven Gables (1851), respectively. The entire spiritualist photography movement in the nineteenth century depended on the idea that the process of capturing images on light-sensitive film opened itself up to interventions from non-material entities such as spirits and ghosts. Less mystically, Walter Benjamin's writings on photography and cinema also assumed that these media could reveal aspects of reality that lay below or behind surface appearance. For example, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', Benjamin writes, 'by close-ups of the things around us, by focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives' (Benjamin 1968: 236), Benjamin continues in a distinctly gothic vein: 'then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling' (1968: 236). Like many early theorists of the camera, Benjamin believed that artificial or mechanical images are able to capture facets of the real that the naked eye, subjective and limited, cannot.

This is a conceit that permeates the use of night vision, even above and beyond the obvious fact that NVG allows viewers to see more than their naked eyes could because of the dark. Night vision portends of even greater revelations than simply the physical reality that would be visible in the light. One of the most memorable forensic uses of night vision in the last decade occurs in Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza's REC (2007), a Spanish zombie-contagion found-footage film. During the last minutes of the film, structurally the most important for the horror film's climactic effects, the two main protagonists find themselves in a dark place, literally and figuratively speaking. It is what Carol Clover calls 'The Terrible Place' (1992: 31). They are in an apartment full of strange instruments, both medical and religious, and they realize that this place is somehow at the origin of the deadly contagion that has spread to the entire building. There is no light and so they first rely on the camera light, searching the creepy apartment with a small circle of illumination, but soon, even this light source gives out. After this, the cameraman uses the night vision function on his camera to navigate the apartment, while we see the female journalist left completely in the dark. It is during this sequence that we perceive a creature that looks nothing like the rabid and infected people of the earlier part of the film, but far more terrifying, being deformed, almost naked, and hideously scarred all over its body. We see this creature only through the night vision, and the film seems to imply that it is visible only in this way, since there was no sign of it when the camera light was on. In the sequel, REC 2 (2009), the supernatural aspect of the night vision feature is made even more explicit when the priest who has come to find this creature, a possessed girl, discovers that there are doors and other objects in the apartment that are visible *only with night vision*.⁴ This is made into an important plot

detail and it is the devil himself, speaking through a possessed teenager, that tells the priest to search in the darkness.

The example I would like to explore for a moment here is somewhat subtler and does not involve subterranean creatures or supernatural revelation. Like most found-footage films, it relies heavily on the uncanniness of the utterly mundane and ordinary going wrong. Dom Rotheroe's Exhibit A (2006) is an independent British film that uses the usual gambit of pretending to be the amateur video footage found at a crime scene and seized by the police. It portrays a typical middle-class family, living in Yorkshire, struggling with the kinds of financial pressures that would become endemic with the economic crisis two years after its release, thus eerily anticipating the financial anxiety that was just around the corner for many more families, but which had already become commonplace with the neoliberal economic policies of many countries including the UK and US. The film follows the 'inadvertent horror film' formula, beginning by being a kind of video diary made by the teenaged daughter, and ending with the murders of the mother and two teenaged children by their father. Along the way, the video becomes a harrowing portrait of a white middle-class man's mental unraveling in the face of real and social financial stress (by social, I am referring to the cultural expectation that men be providers of an increasingly higher standard of living for their families).

As I have already suggested, night vision is used precisely for the scenes where the first signs of trouble become visible, beginning with the daughter accidentally discovering her father furtively smoking in a garden shed in the back yard as she films from outside the shed window. In addition to acting like a diary, the camera allows Judith to imagine her videos as digital letters to various possible audiences (sometimes her

neighbour, sometimes herself, sometimes her family), and so while filming her father she speaks to him: ‘Dad, why are you hiding?’ Continuing to film in the green night shot mode after he returns to the house, she discovers a hidden stash of lottery tickets in the shed, the first concrete sign that the father has financial troubles—perhaps has not had the promotion the family has just celebrated—and is desperately looking for a solution. The effect of discovering the bag of hundreds of scratched out lottery tickets is comparable to the moment in Stanley Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980), when the protagonist’s wife discovers the hundreds of pages of manuscript typed by her husband are actually covered with only one sentence, typed over and over again. The two moments produce an intensely uncanny effect by revealing that a character is not what or who they appear to be, and is hiding some sort of madness. Clearly thanks to her camera, Judith is the only member of the family that has noticed that something is wrong, and she determines to use her video in order to show him his own behaviour. ‘I have to make you see’, she says to the camera, addressing her father as we see him from inside her bedroom window frantically digging a hole in the backyard to make a pool in order to drive up the value of their house. ‘I have to show you how much you’ve changed’, she continues, counting on the revelatory powers of the video to bring her father back to himself.

In addition to being used for the scene where the first signs of trouble are revealed, night vision is also used for a rather long scene that firmly confirms that the father has become a deranged potential predator and menace to his family. This sequence begins with the father turning off the fuses in the home and setting off the smoke alarm with a lighter, then watching his wife and children groping their way down the stairs while he silently films them—using the night shot function—from mere inches away.

The scene recalls The Silence of the Lambs, and seems to constitute a throw-back to the era before the current convention of victim-centred subjective camera, since it is the father holding the camera, yet the film as a whole implies that he is a victim as much as the rest of his family. He is a victim of predatory financial processes at his workplace and in contemporary British society in general. In this respect, the film can be said to read as a critique of neoliberal economic policies and their consequences on the lives of ordinary people. We gather that the father's status in his workplace is precarious and he is subject to capricious promises of promotions that do not materialize. At the same time, the family is in thrall to the neoliberal myth of ever greater financial acquisition and expansion, longing to leave their perfectly satisfactory home for a bigger one by the seaside, leading the father to not dare tell them of his failure to be promoted.

The scene with the family groping in the dark while the father films continues in night vision after he turns the lights back on. He has locked the doors so no one can leave, and then forces them to sit in the living room and talk with him. With the light on, everyone's eyes are black, which looks equally disturbing as when they are shiny and reflective. The conceit of revelation continues in this scene, as the father claims to have perceived the mother's preference for her son over the daughter in knocking on his door first, a detail that will precipitate disclosures of family secrets that lead to the father's complete mental breakdown. Although he plans to kill only himself, he ends up killing all the members of his family first. In the final minutes of the film, the father places the camera on the ground where it records him smothering or shooting his wife and children one by one.

Another use of night vision is to visually represent traumatic memory, a variation on the common cinematic device of making memory or flashbacks—or the past in general—in different kind of film stock, often older and grainier stocks. For instance, in found footage, the past is commonly represented through different kinds of footage, such as closed circuit TV. Or else, many found footage films will include the conceit of multiple cameras or recording devices, thus differentiate between different subjective POV and temporalities. One of the most interesting examples of the use of night vision for memory and trauma is the film G.I. Jesus (2006), by Belgian-born American director Carl Colpaert, a film about a Mexican-American US Army soldier who returns home to his wife and daughter and finds himself haunted by memories, nightmares and the ghost of a man he killed in Iraq. Curiously, the ghost does not appear in the night vision sequences, in spite of the spectral aesthetics of the form that might invite such a usage. Instead, the ghost appears like a normal character, occupying the same reality as the protagonist. Instead, the night vision sequences are used to represent the protagonist's dreams and specifically his nightmares about his service in Iraq. Some of these nightmares are actual memories of manning checkpoints or conducting raids, and some are anxious projections of his troubled bad conscience, such as when he dreams of his own family in night vision. The status of these sequences is complicated by the fact that it turns out that most of the film is a dream Jesus has on his flight home, and so the night vision scenes are actually dreams within a dream.

The interesting point, however, is that virtually all of Jesus' memories of Iraq, including the memory in which he kills a young man and his daughter, are presented in night vision. The fact that the young man is the same age and has a daughter who looks

very much like his own evokes the gothic trope of the double. Even more disturbing and uncanny is the scene where his own wife and daughter are seen at the dinner table in night vision, positioned exactly like the man and child he killed. We do not realize at first that this is a dream, rendering the scene all the more bewildering and strange for the viewer. Ultimately, however, it becomes clear that this night vision scene is the work of his unconscious, and specifically his troubled conscience, which is guiltily imagining his own family as if they were the family that he shot. The film's critique of the war and specifically its concern about the psychological trauma sustained by soldiers in Iraq comes to a dramatic climax in a scene where Jesus finds his wife in a hot tub with a business associate and is about to murder him with his service weapon. Like the memories of Iraq and his nightmares about his family, this scene is also filmed in night vision, but of the thermal kind, giving it a slightly different look than the dreams and memories generated by his bad conscience. As he pulls the trigger, demonstrating that the traumatized veteran will inevitably bring his learned violent behaviour back home with him, with terrifying results, the film presents a rapid sequence of images, mixing Jesus' personal memories with video footage from the news and internet in which Iraqis are killed. Jesus wakes up and finds himself on the plane, as at the beginning of the film, about to land in LA. His arrival and reunion with his family uncannily resembles the earlier one at the beginning of the film but the gothic dream work of traumatic memory and imagined consequences has done its job and Jesus is no longer repressing the memory of killing the young Iraqi father. Instead, he has decided that the green cards (representing legal residency) for his family that initially motivated his enlistment are not worth the damage that his is doing to himself and to others in Iraq. When he is called

back to service, he goes AWOL and takes his family to Baja California instead. The film suggests, quite subversively, that the so-called American Dream is not worth the price soldiers are being asked to pay by serving in Iraq. This is an especially pertinent issue for so-called 'green card soldiers', young people of Mexican or Central American origin who are asked to enlist in order to acquire citizenship (a key element of the Republican-sponsored Dream Act). In G.I. Jesus, the night vision sequences are used not for realism, as is often the case in military films, but for psychological depth, as a visual correlative of the soldier's moral unease about his actions in Iraq and specifically his bad conscience about the raid that costs a young man like himself his life.

Most found footage films, however, use night vision above all for its uncanny effects and atmosphere. The green or grey look of these sequences can immediately create a spectral visual feel that adds emotional texture to a film. Night vision sequences are therefore often the occasion for creating the first shocks or jumps. They are also often the moment that the tone of the film shifts from light-hearted and mundane to something darker and more uneasy. In the eco-horror film The Bay (2012), for example, the cheerful reporting of Fourth of July festivities suddenly shifts into a more ominous mood when night vision is used to show the Chesapeake Bay at night, as the narrator begins to speak of the deadly pollution of the bay and the political corruption that encouraged it. The next night sequence is even darker and more disturbing as we see a scene from the chicken factory that is dumping dangerously large amounts of poultry manure into the water. Like many found footage and mockumentary films, the scene deftly navigates between comedy (bordering on self-parody) and horror, with the enormous piles of fecal matter ready to be thrown into water that we have seen people drinking and swimming in.

The core of the appeal of night vision as an aesthetic of the uncanny, however, is the way it makes people appear ghostly and inhuman because of pale greenish skin and reflecting eyes. Sometimes eyes appear shiny and fluorescent, something opaque, but always flat and strange. The effect is invariably to rob people of their human depth. Gothic scholars have often relied on Freud's theory of the uncanny, which correlates all manner of uncanniness to either castration or intra-uterine anxiety, and which favours the kind of uncanny that is produced by ambivalence between the familiar and seemingly unfamiliar. Yet there is another kind of uncanny that Freud mentions only briefly in his discussion of Ernst Jentsch's work, and which is far more common and relevant today, especially in the context of contemporary virtual warfare, and this is the uncanny that is produced by a confusion about the animate or inanimate nature of a given figure or object. In other words, the uncanny effect that is produced by automatons, clones, robots, digital images and other lifelike and humanoid objects. This is precisely the kind of uncanny that is activated by the night vision aesthetic. Viewed through NVG technology, people look flat, inhuman and interchangeable. This effect is compounded by the way night vision washes out people's faces so that expressions are very hard to read and appear artificial. As a result, people in general become as opaque and depersonalized as their eyes literally do.

I would argue that this is one of the most fascinating and eloquent effects of NVG, drawing artists and filmmakers to use night vision in addition to its cultural association with the ground reporting of the Iraq war. In Desert Screen (2002), Paul Virilio argued that with the first Gulf War, war had moved from 'a geographic *field of battle* to a multimedia *field of vision*' (Virilio's italics, 136). During the Iraq War,

inhabitants of Bagdad became unreal and dehumanized spectres in the night goggled eyes of their occupiers. As Antonio Robben puts it, ‘battle space became a sensorium of generative mediation—a composite of mediated combat realities that transformed human targets into virtual targets and soldiers, literally, into killing machines that were able to suspend natural darkness and fade out moving images with lethal force’ (Robben 2012: 40). ‘The ensuing dehumanization’, Robben continues, ‘turns the shooting of human targets into spectacle that contains an emotional and visual contradiction between the virtual reality of eliminating mediated images and the violent death of actual human beings’ (40). Night vision is an effective visual correlative for exploring this digitalization of the field of battle and military occupation because it evokes both mimetically and figuratively the dehumanization that occurs when a highly armed and technologically superior occupying force interacts with a civilian population indistinguishable from insurgents (Robben 2013: 143). In Iraq, the conditions were particularly conducive to violent over-reactions by American servicemen because of their inability to communicate with civilians. The local population was literally opaque to US soldiers, as occupying troops were not taught Arabic and translators were thinly distributed among ground forces. Another factor to add to this equation is that many soldiers train using virtual gaming environments, or were already fans of single-shooter war-themed video games before they enlisted, and their reflexes in highly digitalized situations such as those created by urban military occupation, including search and raid missions, and the manning of military checkpoints, have been learned in wholly virtual interactions with fictional enemy targets (Turse 2008: 134-135).

A number of scholars have discussed the situations created in Iraq as a result of these practices in terms of Giorgio Agamben's theory of biopolitics and the homo sacer (Agamben 1998: 8). Drawing on archaic Roman law, as well as Foucault's work, Agamben uses the figure of the homo sacer, the man who can be killed but not sacrificed, a creature reduced to pure biological life, stripped of civil and political rights, to describe the condition of people in the grip of power that does not recognize their human and civil rights under existing laws (and sees them, effectively, as exceptions to the law). The most striking example of this phenomenon would be concentration camp victims during the Holocaust but scholars have recently compared the condition of detainees in American prison camps such as Abu Ghraib to that of the homo sacer, or zoe, pure life.⁵ While the civilian population of Iraq was not reduced systematically to the status of detainees in military camps, it has often been treated in a disturbingly cavalier manner. Not only have civilian casualties of drones and missiles often been ignored or denied, or worse, dismissed, but the interpersonal interactions between American military personnel and Iraqi civilians on the ground have often been shaped by racism, ignorance and lack of respect. Physical abuse, humiliation, assault, rape, unwarranted searches, ransacking of homes, and similar problems appear to have been commonplace. In other words, Iraqi civilians are often treated as beings of a qualitatively different order than Americans.

It is my contention that the night vision aesthetic serves as a kind of visual code to allude to and explore the unease that the recent wars have awoken, especially with regards to the status of local populations and the digitalization of interactions between these populations and the American military. Two horror films of the past ten years have registered this unease with a particularly graphic force, Juan Fresnadillo's 28 Weeks

Later (2007) and Michael Bartlett's World of the Dead: The Zombie Diaries 2 (2011).

Both are apocalyptic sequels to zombie/infection films set in England. The first is a big-budget commercial venture with a conventional narrative frame, while the other is a found-footage style independent movie that was only released briefly in British cinemas.

Both use night vision in order to evoke a biopolitical nightmare where people find themselves in concentration camp conditions in the wake of a zombie epidemic. 28 Weeks Later has only two important night vision scenes, but both are crucial to the overall impact of the film. The first is when the rage-like infection breaks out in the compound on the Isle of Dogs where all the protagonists are staying, and the security forces are ordered to shoot infected and non-infected civilians alike. The safe haven suddenly becomes a death camp, where Draconian security measures transform all military personnel into the executioners of the civilian population they were protecting up to this moment. The first night vision scenes occur when soldiers look through their sniper's scopes as they shoot into the panicked crowd. From a distance, the infected and the uninfected look very similar and we are invited to see the temptation of following the cruel order even as we recoil with horror from the idea. This kind of ethical aporia is often staged by the gothic as part of its cultural work of exploring the limits of cultural norms and ethical standards in the face of new technologies and situation.

The second night vision scene in 28 Days Later is placed near the end of the film and serves as backdrop for the discovery of a mass of dead bodies as three characters head down into an underground subway station. One of them, Scarlet, a soldier, uses her night scope to help 16-year old Tammy navigate down the escalator shaft. The scene recalls the classical trope of the descent into hell as Tammy looks back at Scarlet with

fluorescent green eyes before stumbling onto the mountain of corpses and falling on top of them. The uncanniness of Tammy's face rendered opaque and shiny-eyed veers into pure horror as the tangled mass of dead bodies is revealed in the darkness. Besides activating collective cultural memories of concentration camp victims bulldozed into mass graves, this disturbing moment also echoes earlier scenes in the film, where white-suited biohazard-protected workers stacked (presumably infected) bodies before burning them. While these scenes are troubling, it would seem reasonable that the infected dead must be disposed of quickly and permanently. It is only during the outbreak in the compound—described above—that serious ethical problem questions about the methods and priorities of the military authorities emerge. Yet these fears, that during a crisis, the military would be permitted exceptional and extraordinary powers, such as killing civilians in order to protect themselves or a higher imperative, have forcefully emerged in the wake of the state of exception introduced by the Bush administration in the last decade. The suspension of civil rights in the US and the outright abuse of human rights of detainees and civilians abroad have stirred anxieties far more subtle and profound than the fear of terrorist attack. According to Donald Pease, these actions have awoken a fear that the populations of the nations leading the war on Iraq, namely the USA and UK, have themselves been reduced to pure biological life, zoe, on the pretext of being protected (2007: 71).

The independent film World of the Dead: Zombie Diaries 2 takes this conceit a step further by showing brief scenes of uninfected people being rounded up, transported, executed in cold blood and then stacked and burned. These scenes are not shot in night vision, though the rest of the film contains many long NVG sequences. In fact, the status

of these harrowing scenes of biohazard-protected workers exterminating clearly uninfected people is not clear from the start, as it appears that these scenes were recorded *before* the events that are filmed by the soldier who is keeping a video diary. They reappear periodically throughout the film, interspersed throughout the main narrative, progressing in chronological order as the face-less white-suited workers with guns capture, kill and burn a young woman in a red sweater.⁶ The scenes are horrific, filmed in desaturated colour, and make the biohazard workers appear like inhuman monsters, as they roughly push the girl to the wall where they will shoot her. After burning the bodies, they pull off their masks and we discover the three main military characters we had followed in the other time-frame of the movie, which we now understand is superimposed on these extermination scenes, since two of these characters will die during the main narrative. This reveals that the three soldiers we had followed in the main narrative and who appeared wholly sympathetic are in fact the same terrifying figures cruelly containing the infection by exterminating infected and uninfected alike.

To conclude, the gothic genre has served from its inception in the eighteenth century as a kind of cultural laboratory where anxieties about technological and social changes have been visualized and explored. The recent trend of using night vision aesthetics in horror films continues the traditional cultural work of the gothic—of staging thought experiments about ethics and epistemology—by expressing unease with the current political and military order. Specifically, found footage, mockumentary and subjective camera horror films have explored the creeping colonization of private life by commercial media and the ease with which society as we know it can collapse into violence. In the last decade, night vision sequences proliferated in the horror genre as the

war and occupation of Iraq dragged on, transcoding and exploring anxieties about the dehumanization of civilians, soldiers and viewers alike.

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Filmography

28 Weeks Later (2007, Dir. Juan Carlos Fresnadillo)

Exhibit A (2007, Dir. Dom Rotheroe)

Generation Kill (2008, HBO)

G.I. Jesus (2006, Dir. Carl Colpaert)

Lions for Lambs (2007, Dir. Robert Redford)

Occupation Dreamland (2006, Dir. Garrett Scott & Ian Olds)

REC (2007, Dir. Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza)

REC 2 (2009, Dir. Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza)

Redacted (2007, Dir. Brian de Palma)

Silence of the Lambs (1991, Dir. Jonathan Demme)

The Bay (2012, Dir. Barry Levinson)

The Blair Witch Project (1999, Dir. Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick)

The War Tapes (2006, Dir. Deborah Scranton)

World of the Dead: The Zombie Diaries 2 (2011, Dir. Michael Bartlett)

¹ Although Al Qaeda is often portrayed as a religious adversary, the war in Iraq was more about influence over the Middle East and access to oil reserves than about religious difference or even capturing people responsible for the 9/11 attacks. According to Andrew Bacevitch, the recent wars in the Persian Gulf must be understood in the context of a larger struggle that began with the Carter Doctrine in 1980 (Bacevitch DATE : PAGE). He proposes that we view the series of military actions on the part of the US in the Gulf since the 1980s as a fourth world war (after the Cold War, which would be the third).

² See, for example, Jefford and Rabinovitz 1994.

³ An important precursor of the current found-footage genre is Ruggero Deodato's Cannibal Holocaust (1980), which follows a team of unscrupulous and predatory

journalists as they make their way into the Amazon to film indigenous tribes. The film depicts them as both perpetrators and victims of violence so it straddles the earlier and current uses of subjective camera.

⁴ A similar reliance on night vision, though less explicitly supernatural, occurs in the many found-footage films that involve creatures that live entirely or primarily in darkness, such as the trolls in The Troll Hunter, the blind mutants who live in the caves of the The Descent films, and the humanoid creature encountered in the abandoned underground passages of The Tunnel.

⁵ For example, see Pease 2007.

⁶ The image of the woman in the red sweater appears to be an allusion to the famous ‘girl in red’, a Jewish child in a red coat who appears in Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993).