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Night Vision in the Contemporary Horror Film

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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* (David Slade, 2007) 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 unnatural surfaces, colours and 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 British and US military, and the signature aesthetic of the invasion and occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, with filmed sequences of night raids and house searches functioning as the contemporary equivalent of the ubiquitous helicopter shot which served as the 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 subtle and ambivalent way. If the terrorist attacks naturally spawned fears of more attacks, the anxieties raised by the wars were not necessarily 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 widespread torture and abuse 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 and the 2006 gang rape and killing of a 14-year-old girl in Mahmudiyah, continued to emerge from the war. Many, if not most, feature 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 express cultural anxieties, have responded to the recent wars with an explosion of found footage productions and night vision sequences. This chapter will examine three British films which employ night vision sequences in ways that directly speak to the anxieties about military abuses of power that emerged from the Iraq and Af-Pak wars: *28 Weeks Later* (Juan Fresnadillo, 2007), *World of the Dead: The Zombie Diaries 2* (Michael Bartlett, 2011) and *Entity* (Steve Stone, 2012).

Night Vision and the Iraq War

Night vision technology has existed since World War II and was developed from the start for military purposes. Until recently, however, it was not very effective and did not give American soldiers any significant advantage in the Korean or the Vietnam Wars. In fact, 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 digitalisation of war started with the Persian Gulf War in 1990–1, with communication and imaging technology becoming central to how the war was conducted and, especially, to how it was represented on television to American and international viewers. There were two signature video images of the first Gulf War: Baghdad 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 Defence.² Both used image-enhancing techniques: night vision, in the case of the night-time bombing, and thermal-based intensification for the missile guidance systems.³ However, night vision truly came into its own with the Iraq and Af-Pak wars. The US 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, and while driving and operating checkpoints.

For the first time in American military history, Americans ‘owned’ the night. However, night vision could also be described as having helped render civilians more helpless and vulnerable while simultaneously giving US military personnel and their private counterparts an illusion of invulnerability and omnipotence. As Antonius Robben puts it, ‘public space in Baghdad 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’.⁴ While US soldiers could see in the dark, civilians could not and would sometimes fail to perceive checkpoints, a situation which led, upon a number of occasions, to soldiers firing upon unarmed drivers and families.⁵ Night vision also rendered both enemies and innocent civilians highly mediated and often indistinguishable objects in a derealised field of vision – literal figures on a screen. As Dave Grossman, author of *On Killing: the Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (2009), observes, night vision devices convert people into ‘inhuman green blob[s]’.⁶ Even in close interactions, people’s faces look dehumanised, expressionless and unreal.

In contrast to the media depiction of the first Gulf War, which focused on long-range shots of Baghdad and its streets and buildings, the most important innovation in the way night vision became diffused in the media was 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 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. Fictional narrative films about the war also use night vision in their quest for verisimilitude. 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 moment when their comrades realise the two men have been shot is when their blob-like shapes stop moving on the screen. An even more dramatic example of a feature film using night vision strategically to highlight the impact of the violence of the war is Brian De Palma’s *Redacted* (2007), which is based on a true incident of a rape and murder of a young Iraqi girl and her family by US soldiers in 2006.⁷ 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.

One of the first uses of night vision technology in commercial horror cinema was in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991), when detective Clarice Starling (Jodie Foster) ends up in the serial killer's basement 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 differs from the current trend of subjective camera filmmaking, however, because it identifies the camera with the killer. In contrast, recent hand-held camera films, such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 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 and victim.⁸ However, although it relied extensively on night-time scenes, *The Blair Witch Project* did not use night vision. A similar 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 depersonalised effects of the infrared night shot. This trend would emerge only in the wake of the war in Iraq.

Night Vision in Horror Cinema

Since *The Blair Witch Project*, the phenomenon of found footage horror has proliferated and mutated to incorporate CCTV, mobile phone, laptop camera and footage obtained through 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 2005. For example, horror films that use night vision in key scenes or particularly interesting ways include *The Descent* (Neil Marshall, 2005), *The Descent II* (Jon Harris, 2009), *Death of a Ghost Hunter* (Sean Tretta, 2007), *Exhibit A* (Dom Rotheroe, 2007), *[•REC]* (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007), *[•REC]²* (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2009), *The Zombie Diaries* (Michael Bartlett and Kevin Gates, 2006), *The World of the Dead: The Zombie Diaries 2*, *Troll Hunter* (André Øvredal, 2010), *Evil Things* (Dominic Perez, 2011), *Quarantine 2: Terminal* (John Pogue, 2011), *The Bay* (Barry Levinson, 2012), the *Paranormal Activity* series (2007–12) and the *Grave Encounters* series (The Vicious Brothers, 2011–12). Night vision is also sometimes used in regular feature films, as in the *Predator* films (1987–2010), which used thermal detection technology to represent the creatures' field of vision, and in military films such as *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012). One of the films I will discuss in this chapter is a conventional narrative film, *28 Weeks Later*, the sequel to *28 Days Later* (Danny Boyle, 2002), one is a found footage film, *The Zombie Diaries 2*, and the third, *Entity*, mixes the two strategies.

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 depersonalisation. 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 paradigmatic 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. *The Blair Witch Project*, *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), *Troll Hunter*, *Grave Encounters* and the entire *Paranormal Activity* series rely on this gambit. Many films even foreground the forensic element, with titles such as *Exhibit A* or *Evidence* (the title of two separate found footage films, one from 2012 and one from 2013). Moreover, night vision, because it seems to activate superhuman 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 Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), 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.

This is a conceit that permeates the use of night vision, promising 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]*, the Spanish zombie-contagion found footage film analysed by Aldana Reyes in chapter 11 of this collection. During the last minutes of the film, the most important for the horror film's climactic effects at a structural level, the two main protagonists find themselves, literally and figuratively speaking, in what Carol Clover has called the 'terrible place'.⁹ They are in an apartment full of strange instruments, both medical and religious, and they realise that this place is at the origin of the deadly contagion that has spread to the entire building. There are no windows and no light, so they first rely on the camera light, searching the creepy apartment with a small circle of illumination. Soon, even this light source gives out, and the cameraman must use the night vision function on his camera to navigate the apartment. 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 something far more terrifying: the figure is deformed, almost naked and hideously scarred. We see her only through night vision, and the film seems to imply that it is visible only in this way, since there was no sign of her when the camera light was on. In the sequel, *[•REC]²*, the supernatural potential

of night vision technology is made even more explicit when the priest who has come to find her discovers that there are doors and other objects in the apartment that are visible *only* with the night vision function of the camera.¹⁰

Night vision also serves to visually represent traumatic memory, a variation on the common cinematic device of shooting memory or flashbacks – or the past in general – in different kind of film stock, usually grainier or with different colours. Many found footage films will use multiple cameras or recording devices to differentiate between subjective points of view and temporalities. One of the most interesting examples of the use of night vision for memory and trauma is *G.I. Jesús* (Carl Colpaert, 2006), a film about a Mexican 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 fact that the spectral aesthetics of the form might invite such a usage. In fact, the ghost appears like a normal character, occupying the same reality as the protagonist. What the night vision sequences are used for, instead, is to represent the protagonist's memories, dreams and, specifically, his nightmares about his service in Iraq. Some of these nightmares are actual memories of operating 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 in a scene that closely resembles that where he kills the Iraqi man and his daughter.

The interesting point, however, is that virtually all of Jesús' memories of Iraq, including the killing, are presented in night vision. The fact that the young man is roughly the same age and has a daughter who looks very much like his own recalls the gothic trope of the double. 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 Jesús finds his wife in a hot tub with a business associate and shoots him with his service weapon. Oddly, 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, however, the film highlights the fact that the traumatised veteran will inevitably bring his violent learned behaviour back home with him. At this moment, the film presents a rapid sequence of images, mixing Jesús' personal memories with video footage from the news and internet in which Iraqis are killed, in a frenetic video montage showing how private and collective visual memories become indistinguishable. In short, in *G.I. Jesús*, 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, particularly, his troubled memories of the raid that cost a young man like himself his life.

This brings me to the third major usage of night vision, namely, its uncanny and depersonalising effects. 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 frequently the occasion of the film's first shocks or jumps. Often, they are the moment at which the tone of the film changes from light-hearted and mundane to something darker and more uneasy. More specifically, however, the appeal of night vision as an aesthetic of the uncanny lies in the way in which it makes people appear ghostly and inhuman, because of their pale greenish skin and reflecting eyes. Sometimes eyes appear shiny and fluorescent, sometimes opaque, but always flat and strange. The effect is invariably to rob people of their human depth and individuality. Gothic scholars have often relied on Freud's theory of the uncanny, which correlates all manner of uncanniness to either castration or intrauterine 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. This is the uncanny that is produced by a confusion with the animate or inanimate nature of a given figure or object.¹¹ This is precisely the kind of uncanny effect produced by the night vision aesthetic: viewed through NVG technology, people look flat, inhuman and interchangeable. The effect is compounded by the way night vision washes out people's faces so that expressions are very hard to read and appear artificial. In addition to its cultural association with the ground reporting of the Iraq and Afghanistan war, I would argue that this is one of the most fascinating and eloquent effects of night vision.

Horror, Night Vision and the Military

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*'.¹² During the Iraq War, in turn, inhabitants of Baghdad became unreal and dehumanised 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'.¹³ 'The ensuing dehumanisation', 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'.¹⁴ Night vision is therefore an effective visual correlative for exploring this digitalisation of the field of battle and military occupation because it evokes both mimetically and figuratively the dehumanisation that occurs when a highly armed and technologically superior occupying force interacts with a civilian population indistinguishable from insurgents.¹⁵

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*.¹⁶ 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 recognise 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; the detention or prison camp in general has been theorised as the typical modern site of the reduction of human beings to pure biological life. Scholars have recently compared the condition of detainees in American prison camps such as Abu Ghraib, Bagram and Guantánamo Bay to that of the *homo sacer*.¹⁷ 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 detainees and local populations, and the digitalisation of interactions between these populations and the American military.

Three recent horror films have registered this unease with particular force: *28 Weeks Later*, *World of the Dead: The Zombie Diaries 2* and *Entity*. All are British and two are apocalyptic sequels to zombie/infection films. The first is a big-budget commercial venture with a mainly conventional narrative frame, while the second is a found footage style independent movie that was only released briefly in British cinemas. *Entity* is also independent and relatively low budget, and combines found footage with conventional narrative film techniques. All three use night vision in order to evoke a biopolitical nightmare in which people find themselves in concentration camp conditions while in the hands of their own country's military forces or defence agencies.

28 Weeks Later has only two important digital vision scenes, one with sniper scopes and one with night vision, but both are crucial to the overall impact and meaning 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, after an initial period of trying to shoot only infected people, the security forces are ordered to shoot infected and non-infected civilians alike: '[t]arget everything at ground level – no exceptions!' The safe haven suddenly becomes a death camp, where Draconian security measures transform all military personnel into mass executioners of the civilian population they were protecting up to then. Thus, the first important video-quality 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 logic of following the cruel order even as we recoil with horror at the result. This kind of ethical dilemma, or even *aporia*, is often staged as part of the gothic genre's cultural work of examining the limit-horizon of cultural norms and ethical standards. Here, the zombie-contagion

movie examines the ethical choices that extreme scenarios may create but also registers unease with the military as an institution, one whose relationship with civilians and the rest of society is not always unambiguously protective.

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 the characters head down into an underground subway station. One of them, Scarlet (Rose Byrne), a soldier, uses her night scope to help the teenaged Tammy (Imogen Poots) 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 intense uncanniness of Tammy's face rendered opaque and shiny-eyed veers into pure horror as the tangled mass of 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 seems reasonable that the infected dead would have to be disposed of quickly and permanently. It is only during the outbreak in the compound – described above – that ethical questions about the methods and priorities of the military authorities emerge. Yet, the 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 the 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 US and the UK, have themselves been reduced to pure biological life.¹⁸ Arguing that Americans must be defended at all costs, Bush and his cohorts suspended the very civil liberties and freedoms of speech that they claimed define America, thereby treating US citizens (bios) like bare life (zoe) to be managed rather than political and social beings.¹⁹

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, far more, in fact, than any other film discussed here. 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. Like the footage in *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008), the video in *The Zombie Diaries 2* is a palimpsest of several temporalities, beginning with a family recording a child's birthday during what is clearly the onset of the infection. We are told by our

video diarist that the tape was found weeks earlier, so the relationship of the main story to the initial footage of a family attacked by a zombie is clear (that is, the main story, following the military personnel, happens several weeks or months *after* the birthday party massacre). However, what is left unexplained is the sequence of shots of the biohazard workers in gas masks. These reappear periodically throughout the film, interspersed throughout the main narrative, progressing in chronological order as the faceless white-suited workers with guns capture, kill and burn a young woman in a red sweater.²⁰ The short sequences are horrific, filmed in desaturated colour, and the biohazard workers appear like inhuman monsters, evoking images from the Holocaust as they roughly push the girl to a wall and shoot her. In the last sequence, after burning the bodies, the workers pull off their masks and we discover the three main military characters we had followed in the main time frame of the movie, which we now understand must have been superimposed on top of these earlier extermination scenes (since two of these characters will die during the main narrative). This reveals that the three soldiers who appeared wholly sympathetic are, in fact, the same terrifying figures cruelly containing the infection by exterminating both the infected and the uninfected.

The film, thus, returns to the theme of the first *The Zombie Diaries* (and some of Romero's films) of the living sometimes being more monstrous than the zombies themselves. Although unexplained, the biohazard shots are explicable. They clearly precede the main story frame and take place sometime between the events of the first *The Zombie Diaries* and the main events of the sequel. Like *28 Weeks Later*, the military is shown to be involved in the containment and killing of innocent people (we do not know if they are infected or not) in a cruel and callous way. The methods of detainment, transport and elimination that we could associate with the abuses of colonial regimes or twentieth-century concentration camps are revealed being employed on British subjects in England (the forensic quality of found footage cinema is invoked here in addition to the dehumanising effects of wartime military mentality).

The most recent film, *Entity*, revisits the Cold War by setting the film in present-day Siberia. The plot revolves around a British television crew investigating an unsolved murder case in a remote Siberian forest where 34 unmarked graves had been found some years earlier. They have brought a woman with psychic powers who helps them locate the site and the nearby building where the people had been imprisoned before being murdered. We learn that the victims had all been persons with psychic powers and who were detained and experimented on by the Soviet government in the early 1980s in order to determine if their powers could be used for military operations. In order to augment their psychic powers, all were kept in darkness and isolation and were subjected to sensory deprivation, electroshock and experimental surgery. When the programme finished, they were executed. As we learn this from the Russian translator, who turns out to be the former lover of a victim, with an agenda of his own, the main British journalist (Kate Hansen)

reminds him that similar experiments, although not so extreme and murderous, were also conducted by Americans and the British. All of the victims are shown to be haunting the gravesite and the abandoned building where they were tormented, and one with exceptionally strong powers ends up possessing the psychic, who kills the two remaining crew members. In the end, all of the crew are dead and their souls or spirits imprisoned at the site.

Entity weaves its gothic and technical elements together in an effective and atmospheric way, creating a dark, sinister but also elegiac historical horror film. Night vision is given a central role in the film, which, in fact, begins with a very disturbing sequence of night vision surveillance footage of a camp prisoner in his cell in 1983. Alone, in the dark, the figure is shown to be going mad as he pleads for help, shrieks and crawls, shakes his bed, moves objects telepathically and, finally, floats in the air in a strange and eerie way. The footage carries information in Cyrillic and, later, we see the same room when the crew enters the building. They too leave a surveillance camera in the room with its night vision function activated and can therefore watch the possession of the psychic by the insane ghost (so maddened by his suffering that his is now the evil 'entity' of the title). The night vision aesthetics are directly and profoundly linked to the larger themes of the film, which include the classic gothic revenge trope. If the victims of the torture are shown as sympathetic figures, they are also shown as frightening and potentially dangerous, especially the strongest one. Having been driven mad by conditions that resemble, in many respects, the conditions that were routine in Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo (sensory deprivation, isolation, disorientation), this spirit now seeks revenge and ends up taking it out on this innocent television crew. The message that torture creates a cycle of more violence and suffering could not be starker or clearer. Night vision in the film offers the moments of strongest evidence as to how the madness is induced, hence invoking the forensic aspect of night vision footage. It also influences the way that possession itself is represented in the film, that is, by opaque and flat eyes. When the psychic is possessed by the murdered man we have seen at the beginning of the film, her eyes seem dead and grey, just like those of other ghosts in the prison.

The film can be compared to other haunted insane asylum films that have emerged in recent years (*Grave Encounters, Session 9* (Brad Anderson, 2001)), but the Siberian setting of the story requires a different approach, one that frames the crimes that are uncovered in the film as part of a larger recent practice of detaining and disappearing people (a practice that is as much a part of the history of the US and its allies – Honduras, Argentina, Chile – as it is that of the former Soviet Union and present day Russia). The frame evoked by the film is, thus, explicitly Cold War and emphasises the insidious way in which the US-Soviet arms race often made the two antagonists resemble each other in uncanny ways. The background history that informs the film is the history of experiments and research into brainwashing techniques, as much as it is the shorter history of research into the

paranormal. Both the Soviets and the US (and UK Ministry of Defence) have at some point or another spent money researching the possibility of paranormal psychology and, specifically, remote viewing. The film conflates the tactics used in the far more destructive research on brainwashing developed by the CIA in the context of the MKUltra program in the 1950s with paranormal experimentation. For example, the techniques mentioned in the film – imprisonment, sensory deprivation, prolonged isolation, darkness, lack of clothing and other individualising accessories – are all techniques that were developed in experiments by Dr Ewen Cameron between 1957 and 1961 and, subsequently, in 1963, codified into a CIA torture manual (the *Kubark Counterintelligence Interrogation* manual) used in Central America and in Iraq. The photos that emerged from Abu Ghraib in 2004 owe many of their sinister details – hooding, humiliation, nakedness, threat of electroshock – to this research.²¹

To conclude, the recent night vision aesthetic trend 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, night vision horror proliferated in the first decade of the twenty-first century as the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and neighbouring countries dragged on and evidence of US-military-inflicted horror began to emerge. These films reflect discomfort with the military digitalisation of death and the concomitant dehumanisation of civilians, soldiers and viewers alike in highly mediated, digitised and visually alienating virtual environments. Most of all, however, the films reflect unease with contemporary neoliberal militarism, as it has produced a species of return of the concentration camp, this time run by a ruthless and impudent US military. Night vision horror offers a taste of what the logic of the black site might lead to and what horrors it might already have generated.

Notes

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 the capturing of 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. See Andrew Bacevitch, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 179.
2. Jose N. Vasquez, 'Seeing green: visual technology, virtual reality, and the experience of war', in Alisse Waterson (ed.), *An Anthropology of War. Views from the Frontline* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), pp. 87–105 (p. 92).
3. There are three main kinds of night vision technology that are used in film and television images, each with its own distinctive visual style: image intensification, infrared

illumination and thermal detection. The first two rely on reflection of photons or infrared illumination not normally perceptible to the human eye and the third relies on infrared light released by heat (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. Night vision technology for commercial home video cameras was developed and patented by Sony, who remains the main manufacturer of cameras with a night vision function called 'NightShot'. This feature became available in the 1990s and is still sold with all Sony home and professional video cameras. NightShot uses infrared, which reflects off human eyes and creates an uncanny opaque appearance, and is used frequently in horror cinema of the amateur video/hand-held camera/found footage subgenre.

4. Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 'The dead of night: chaos and spectacle of nocturnal combat in the Iraq war', in Koen Stroeken (ed.), *War, Technology, Anthropology* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), pp. 34–44 (p. 38).
5. Robben, 'The dead of night', pp. 37–8.
6. Lt. Col Dave Grossman, *On Killing: the Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society* (New York: Bay Back Books, 2009), p. 170.
7. For a case study of this film, see Mark Freeman's contribution to this collection (chapter 8).
8. 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.
9. Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chain Saws* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 31.
10. 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 *Troll Hunter*, the blind mutants who live in the caves of *The Descent* films and the humanoid creature encountered in the abandoned underground passages of *The Tunnel* (Carlo Ledesma, 2011).
11. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 135–6.
12. Paul Virilio, *Desert Screen: War at the Speed of Light*, trans. Michael Degener (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 136. Italics in original.
13. Robben, 'The dead of night', p. 40.
14. Ibid.
15. Antonius C. G. M. Robben, 'The hostile gaze: night vision and the immediation of nocturnal combat in Vietnam and Iraq', in Neil L. Whitehead and Sverker Finnström

(eds), *Virtual War and Magical Death: Technologies and Imaginaries for Terror and Killing* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), pp. 132–51 (p. 143). In Iraq, the conditions were particularly conducive to violent overreactions 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 digitalised 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. See Nick Turse, *The Complex: How the Military Invades Our Everyday Lives* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2008), pp. 134–5.

16. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 8.
17. For example, see Donald Pease, 'Between the homeland and Abu Ghraib: dwelling in Bush's biopolitical settlement', in Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller (eds), *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism* (London and Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2007), pp. 60–87.
18. Pease, 'Between the homeland and Abu Ghraib', p. 71.
19. American cinema has also registered this fear but less in the horror genre and more in the science fiction, thriller or action genres: *The Island* (Michael Bay, 2005), *The Hunger Games* (Gary Ross, 2012) and *Elysium* (Neill Blomkamp, 2013) are all examples of American films that address a fear of a majority of American citizens being reduced to bare life, like concentration camp victims. The thriller *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007) also addresses this fear by imagining the German citizen (Khalid El-Masri), who was kidnapped by the CIA and tortured for months in a case of mistaken identity, as an Egyptian-American Green Card holder.
20. The image of the woman in the red sweater seems to be an allusion to the famous 'girl in a red coat', a Jewish child in a red coat who appears in Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993) and who is based on a real photograph of the Krakow ghetto. Available at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/oct/16/film.features> (accessed 10 April 2014).
21. See Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2007), pp. 35–58. For Soviet research on parapsychology, see Michael Jura, 'Soviet research into remote viewing', *Learn Remote Viewing* (undated). Available at <http://blog.learnremotelyviewing.com/?p=1562> (accessed 10 April 2014). See also US and UK testing, 'Stargate Project', *Wikipedia* (undated). Available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stargate_Project (accessed 10 April 2014) and 'MoD defends psychic powers study', *BBC News* (23 February 2007). Available at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/6388575.stm (accessed 10 April 2014).

10

Nightmares outside the Mainstream: *August Underground* and Real/Reel Horror

James Aston

'We must wake people up. Upset their ways of identifying things. It is necessary to create unacceptable images.'¹

'Nothing could be more legitimate than [the cinema's] lack of inhibitions in picturing spectacles that upset the mind.'²

'[*August Underground*] is real. Well, as real as I could make it.'³

There has been a proliferation of American horror films in the new millennium that are marked by a move to the extreme. The majority of the focus has been on examples circulated in mainstream outlets, either through theatrical exhibition or DVD releases, and which have come under the rubric 'torture porn'.⁴ Here, the range has extended from the numerous remakes of controversial horror films from the 1970s and 1980s, such as *The Last House on the Left* (Dennis Iliadis, 2009), *I Spit on Your Grave* (Steven R. Monroe, 2010) and *Maniac* (Frank Khalfoun, 2012), to lucrative horror franchises such as *Saw* (2004–10). A considerable body of academic work has likewise appeared, from studies tracking how the rise in explicitly violent content coincides with fears and anxieties circulating in society, to anthologies situating the diverse cultural impact of the *Saw* franchise.⁵ Yet, despite the commercial popularity of twenty-first century horror (the *Saw* franchise has grossed in excess of \$870 million worldwide) and related academic discourse,