

## *The Glitch Dimension: Paranormal Activity and the Technologies of Vision*

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*Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015) is a recent low-budget exploitation film that distorts and destroys its own images. Though such a practice is better known in gallery art, it is also found at the opposite end of the aesthetic and economic spectrum, in a crassly commercial venture like *Ghost Dimension*, whose mission to turn a quick profit is not mitigated by the aesthetic concerns of gallery art, nor even by mainstream Hollywood concerns with cultural prestige.

I cannot discuss *Ghost Dimension*, however, without considering the whole series of which it is a part. The six *Paranormal Activity* movies (2007–15) are works of what Caetlin Benson-Allott calls ‘faux footage horror’.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, they consist entirely of (fictional) found footage: video sequences ostensibly shot by the protagonists themselves, and discovered and compiled after their deaths.

The characters, settings and plots of these movies are entirely generic. Though some attempt is made to provide an overarching backstory for the series, there is no real narrative progression from one instalment to the next. Each movie follows the same predictable pattern. Strange events take place: odd noises are heard at night, and objects shift around inexplicably. At first, the disruption is fairly vague and low-key: things just don’t seem entirely right. But the incidents escalate both in frequency and intensity. The residents try to get to the bottom of whatever is going on, by recording the life of the household on video. The disturbances escalate over time, especially at night. Nevertheless, the people in the household are slow to accept the truth: that their home has been invaded by an invisible demon. Even when they finally do realise this, their efforts to resist are too little and too late. By the end of the movie, all of the characters have either been killed or possessed by the demon.

Each movie in the series is set in a single location: usually a comfortable middle-class one-family home in Southern California. As Julia Leyda puts it, ‘everything in these movies appears unremarkable, even generic – from the houses themselves, newly built suburban tract homes, to the standard bland furnishings and costumes’.<sup>2</sup> Each movie also takes place entirely in its

assigned domestic space. We never get beyond the single house and grounds – except when the demon opens up an interdimensional portal.<sup>3</sup>

Like so many low-budget horror films before them, the *Paranormal Activity* movies find ways to generate scares and thrills without resorting to complicated, high-end special effects. They work mostly by hinting at sinister processes, which are never quite shown to us directly. The movies are filled with disturbing sounds and ominous shadows. We hear creaks, bumps and crashes whose sources we are unable to discern. And we view violent effects – doors opening and closing, objects falling onto the floor, people being pushed around or dragged down corridors, even the camera itself being knocked askew – without being able to see the causes that produce them. The demon itself remains invisible. It interacts with the physical world, but apparently it is not itself physical. It enters intimately into the lives of all the family members, and yet they are never able to grasp and confront it directly.

The *Paranormal Activity* movies also create suspense by manipulating time. We always have to *wait* for the inevitable bad things to happen. We watch these movies in a state of heightened, but unfocused, anticipation. We know that there is going to be something horrible; but we do not know just what it will be, or where and when it will take place. As we wait to find out, we are compelled to sit through long sequences in which literally *nothing happens*. The shocks, when they finally arrive, are heightened by our prior unease and uncertainty. *Empty time* of this sort has rarely been drawn out to such excruciating lengths as it is in the *Paranormal Activity* series. As Janani Subramanian puts it, ‘the curious experience of watching’ these movies is that they are ‘based on a great deal of waiting and watching, a viewing experience fairly rare in mainstream, effects-driven horror films’.<sup>4</sup>

The *Paranormal Activity* movies work, quite brutally, to *entrain* us to temporal rhythms that are alien to and discordant with our own. The time of the secret life of things – or the time of *Paranormal Activity*’s demon – cannot ever be mine. Its rhythms cannot be integrated into my own ongoing sense of the present moment. I can only experience these rhythms indirectly, in the form of a diffuse physical discomfort.

Along with their reliance on indirect suggestion, their manipulation of time, and their use of boredom and shock to arouse the audience, the *Paranormal Activity* movies also foreground the very devices and procedures with which they are made. This befits their status as ‘faux footage’ films. Throughout the series, the protagonists record their experiences with handheld video cameras, home surveillance cameras, laptop webcams, phonecams and even (in *Paranormal Activity 4*) a Microsoft Kinect body-tracking rig. And these are presented as the sources of the footage that we see. All the devices being used are common consumer items, rather than high-end professional

equipment. Their employment of course adds to the (fictional) impression that the events we are witnessing really happened, and really were recorded by the people to whom they happened.

But this is more than just a matter of verisimilitude. The *Paranormal Activity* movies never let us forget that we live in a world that is permeated by image- and sound-recording devices – not to mention speakers and screens. We all own such devices, and we all consult them continually. Today, digital and informatic machines do not just keep a record of what happens; they themselves are directly involved in the events they register. There is no distinction between the real and its representation; the latter is best understood as a portion of the former, a particular way in which it gets *folded* and elaborated. And so we find these sorts of devices in action throughout the *Paranormal Activity* movies. We continually see and hear them, and we remain oppressively aware that we are seeing and hearing everything *through* them. There are even frequent scenes in which the levels or folds are multiplied, as the protagonists review their own footage by playing it back on viewfinders, video monitors and computer screens.

This obsessive foregrounding of cameras and other digital devices<sup>5</sup> in the *Paranormal Activity* movies endows them with a high degree of cinematic (or better, post-cinematic) self-reflexivity. We see and hear, along with the supernatural events themselves, the activity of capturing the traces of such events (though little attention is paid to the editing process). The protagonists' obsessive need to record 'paranormal' occurrences largely drives the plots of all the instalments. Cameras and computers are themselves, in their own right, characters in these movies. Their powers determine what we can and cannot discern. In addition, the technical conditions of their use, more than any subjective considerations, motivate the very points of view from which we have access to the action. When the footage runs out, or when the cameras are turned off or destroyed, the movie necessarily comes to an end.

Precisely because the characters and plots of these movies are so generic, their modes of production are able to come to the foreground in a way that is rarely the case in more mainstream Hollywood films. Each entry in the series is centrally concerned with the processes by which its footage is ostensibly captured. Each of them is thereby a media allegory, presenting its own construction as an exemplary instance of the ways that new electronic and digital media pervade, participate in, and largely produce our social world in general.

The *Paranormal Activity* movies use two main types of recording devices. In the first place, they all feature footage taken by handheld video cameras. When such devices are used, we get lots of wobbly and jerky shots, together with frequent swish pans, hasty zooms and misframings. Motion blur is common. This sort of camerawork is usually associated, as Benson-Allott

points out, ‘with authenticity and violence in reality television’.<sup>6</sup> More generally, it connotes amateur, real-life videomaking, in contrast to the far more polished work of film professionals. It also implies that things are happening too quickly and unexpectedly for anyone to be able to record them in an orderly manner.

In these handheld sequences, the jittery movements point up the camera’s physical presence within the very locations that it shows us. We also often hear the voice of the person behind the camera, talking with the people who are in the frame. The moving video camera thus takes an active part in the action that it is recording – rather than viewing that action from a distance, or from the outside. It is much more a participant than it is an impassive observer. The handheld camera may of course be regarded as a prosthetic extension of the protagonist who is holding it; but its own formal characteristics – what it observes, and how – seem to supersede and replace the subjectivity of the human operator.

At the same time, the *Paranormal Activity* movies also prominently feature unmoving cameras, ones that do in fact observe the action impassively and from a distance. These cameras are either fitted onto tripods by the protagonists, or installed on walls, tables and other fixed locations throughout the house. They are placed in otherwise empty rooms, or set to run in the bedroom all night while the people are sleeping. Such cameras capture all their footage automatically and unceasingly. With their fixed locations, and their broad views of the rooms they overlook, they bear witness to the mechanical passage of time. Moreover, these devices do not give us any clues as to which details within the frame are most important, or most worthy of our attention. As Leyda puts it, ‘the visuals produce a particularly enervating form of suspense since the viewer must constantly scan the frame in the absence of any seeming guidance from a director or editor or even (it seems) an actual cinematographer’.<sup>7</sup> We just have to keep on looking, trying to remain alert, until something untoward finally happens. And even when it does, it may be so subtle that we do not notice it right away; or else, on the contrary, it may take place so quickly that it is over before we are able to get a proper sense of it.

It is almost as if these surveillance sequences provided a parodic *reductio ad absurdum* of André Bazin’s famous dictum that unedited deep-focus long takes are to be preferred to other types of shots and sequences, because in such long takes, ‘the viewer has a more active intellectual approach, and even makes a real contribution, to the *mise en scène* [. . .] The meaning of the shot depends in part on the viewer’s attention and will’.<sup>8</sup>

In the fixed-camera portions of the *Paranormal Activity* movies, the need for close attention is pushed far beyond anything Bazin ever imagined,

while at the same time the will of the viewer is frustrated. We do not get to choose among different elements within the frame; rather, we strain to find anything at all that is worth attending to. This odd experience is still further heightened when – as Nicholas Rombes puts it, describing a sequence from *Paranormal Activity 2* (Tod Williams, 2010) – all we get, for a period as long as six minutes, is ‘a series of carefully modulated medium-long takes from various fixed surveillance cameras the family has had installed’, with the shots alternating among six locations in a regular, repeated order: ‘The rhythm of the sequence – almost suggesting the slow, rhythmic changing of traffic lights – creates a sort of structural tension that outstrips the more generic screw-tightening of the film itself, which is fully within the haunted house tradition’.<sup>9</sup>

Here suspense seems to become an autonomous formal parameter in its own right, no longer reducible to the functional need to set up the viewer for an eventual shock. For the *Paranormal Activity* movies, just as for Bergson, duration is ontological as well as psychological. Rombes therefore suggests that ‘under slightly different historical circumstances, we could see [the *Paranormal Activity* movies] as avant-garde’ in the manner of works by Andy Warhol or Michael Snow.<sup>10</sup>

I think that these formal parallels, both to Bazinian realism and to cinematic avant-gardism, are quite apropos. But the actual ‘historical circumstances’ of the *Paranormal Activity* movies are such that they are in fact exploitation products, rather than avant-garde films or video installations. The *Paranormal Activity* movies are designed from the get-go as disposable products, with a short shelf life, equally suited for viewing in movie theatres and streaming on home devices. Because they are not sheltered by high-culture institutions from the marketplace demands of immediate profit and quick turnover, they do not exhibit any critical distance from the media glut and multiplication of devices that we experience today. They are simply one more highly self-conscious instance of this glut and multiplication. If they offer a commentary on our contemporary media situation, this is because – and precisely to the extent that – they are themselves entirely embedded within this situation.<sup>11</sup>

The duality between hand-held cameras and fixed surveillance cameras is also a split between the two deep tendencies of contemporary media that Richard Grusin and Jay David Bolter call *immediacy* and *hypermediacy*. These opposites are mutually determined by a ‘double logic’.<sup>12</sup> The hand-held cameras suggest the fiction of direct, immediate real-time experience. The surveillance cameras, in contrast, suggest an endlessly mediated mode of seeing, one that is not human at all. These cameras have a fixed physical location, but they do not and cannot correspond to any particular subjective point of view. By pulling us at once to the opposed extremes of immediacy and

hypermediacy, the *Paranormal Activity* movies elide whatever middle ground might lie between them.

In concrete terms, this means that the ‘found footage’ conceit of the *Paranormal Activity* movies leaves little room for the traditional logic of continuity editing, as it works in mainstream Hollywood films. For instance, neither camera mode permits anything like a shot-reverse shot structure. Also, while the handheld camera can zoom in or out, and the operator can physically move closer to or further away from what is being photographed, such lurching movements do not create anything as stable as the conventional alternation between establishing shots and closer shots in classical continuity editing (or even in the more recent mode of ‘intensified continuity’).<sup>13</sup> We are forced to follow the immediate reactions of the diegetic cinematographer, who is sometimes distracted, other times oblivious to what he or she sees, and still other times in a panic about it. We hear a sound, and the camera turns quickly in the direction it seems to be coming from, only to show us impenetrable darkness. Or the operator jerks the camera erratically from one place to another, desperately seeking to capture the image of something that isn’t there. These sorts of movements are too skittish to guide our gaze in the orderly manner that continuity editing does in more mainstream films. As for the fixed camera sequences, they are also obviously incapable of producing any such alternation, since their field of vision never varies; all the movie can do is to switch mechanically between them. Neither sort of camera gives us the raw material needed for the conventional continuity style. In all these ways, the *Paranormal Activity* films exemplify what I have elsewhere called *post-continuity*.<sup>14</sup>

The *Paranormal Activity* movies’ premise of diegetic cameras and other devices therefore compels the filmmakers to strip the Hollywood continuity system down to zero – and then to rebuild it from scratch, as best they can. In each film, the filmmakers can only follow the technological affordances of the particular devices that are available to the protagonists. At the same time, each instalment also strives against the previous ones, seeking somehow to alter and expand the series formula. As Bordwell puts it, ‘filmmaking becomes a kind of gamelike performance that coaxes us to ask: How will they deal the cards this time?’ Bordwell usefully works through the formal inventions that mark the first four entries in the series. The *Paranormal Activity* movies display a ‘tendency to explore, sometimes exhaustively, all the possibilities of a single premise’, Bordwell says, because of how they are ‘obliged to innovate within very tight limits’.<sup>15</sup>

The first *Paranormal Activity* film (Oren Peli, 2007), for instance, only features a single camera, which is hand-held during the day and placed on a tripod to run autonomously at night. The fixed-camera sequences, however,

feature numerous fast-forwards and jump cuts. These are made evident not only by abrupt changes in the image, but also by the ubiquitous time codes in the corner of the screen. *Paranormal Activity 2* increases the number of cameras, allowing for the sequencing of multiple static views. In *Paranormal Activity 3* (Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman, 2011) – a prequel set in 1988, and whose technology is therefore limited to VHS cameras – the protagonist sets up one of these cameras on a chassis taken from an oscillating fan. The camera slowly and repeatedly pans between the living room and kitchen. It continually follows the same back-and-forth rhythm, regardless of what is happening in either of these rooms.

The avant-garde feel (as noted by Rombes) of many sequences in the *Paranormal Activity* movies is thus a consequence of the fact that the filmmakers respect the severely constrained formal limits imposed by their protagonists' equipment. They only give us a limited number of scenes, shots and set-ups, and they often switch among the various fixed views in a regular pattern. But we could just as accurately say that these movies have an archaic feel, rather than an avant-garde one. For instance, as Bordwell notes:

[T]he distant framing of the surveillance shots revives classic staging techniques in a cinema that seems largely to have forgotten them. Instead of the barrage of close-ups and rapid shot changes we get with today's intensified continuity style, we get lengthy, static, often indiscernible images we have to scour for clues [. . .] For the most part, the static framings yield deep, dense compositions reminiscent of 1910s tableau cinema.<sup>16</sup>

It is almost as if the filmmakers, with their low budgets and limited means, were recapitulating the history of formal invention in early cinema. As the series progresses, they find ways, one by one, to reintroduce the strategies of cinematography and editing that were initially developed between 1895 and 1915. Thus in *Paranormal Activity 4* (Henry Joost, Ariel Schulman, 2012), we finally get – for the first time in the series – something like a shot/reverse shot set-up. This is possible because the teenage girl in the household talks to her boyfriend via Skype. Of course, the two people talking are not in the same physical space, and their interchange is mediated through a laptop screen. Bordwell calls this 'a sort of virtual shot/reverse-shot';<sup>17</sup> we might describe it as what Bolter and Grusin would call a *remediation* of the conventional set-up.

In any case, the *Paranormal Activity* producers and filmmakers are not averse to using the illusory techniques of the continuity system. It is simply a matter of finding the right ways to sneak them in. As Bordwell notes, the filmmakers sometimes cheat by 'using sound bridges to present the illusion of continuous time' over discontinuous shots.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to avant-garde and

high-modernist works, the *Paranormal Activity* movies are not really formally rigorous. They are opportunistic, rather than programmatic. They are not geared towards critical reflection. They simply exploit the affordances given by the new digital technologies, and reproduce the ways that these technologies are embedded within everyday life. The *Paranormal Activity* movies are simply indifferent towards structures like the continuity system, rather than seeking self-consciously to disrupt them.<sup>19</sup>

The most striking effects produced by the *Paranormal Activity* movies are therefore directly the result of their underlying commercial imperatives, as well as of the imperatives built in to the equipment that they use. These imperatives should be distinguished from the ones that characterise artistic and philosophical metacritiques (like avant-garde practices on the one hand, and Frankfurt School reflections on the other). If the *Paranormal Activity* films are radical – and I am trying to suggest that they are – this is because they are so urgently compelled, both by the pressures of commercial distribution and exhibition, and by the technical features of digital recording devices, to be (as Lenin put it) ‘as radical as reality itself’.

As Shane Denson argues, following on from media theorists like Vivian Sobchack and Mark Hansen, the most recent (twenty-first-century) digital devices display a ‘post-perceptual sensibility of the video camera that distinguishes it from the cinema camera’.<sup>20</sup> In such a post-perceptual mode, immediate and hypermediated at once, I cannot ‘identify’ with the camera as I am generally solicited to do in more traditional forms of cinema.<sup>21</sup> Instead, these movies present us with a sensibility that might well be described as ‘paranormal’, because it is ‘completely uncorrelated from human perception’, even though it remains ‘very much involved in the temporal and affective vicissitudes of our daily lives through the many cameras and screens surrounding us and involved in every aspect of the progressively indistinct realms of our work and play’.<sup>22</sup>

Leyda notes, along similar lines, that the view from fixed cameras in the *Paranormal Activity* series is entirely ‘unlike conventional horror cinema’s use of point of view [by] filming a sequence from the killer’s perspective observing the unsuspecting victim’. For the uncorrelated digital camera ‘does not represent any human point of view’ at all. Instead of standing in for the POV of the killer – as was commonly done with first-person shots in 1980s slasher films – the fixed surveillance camera remains entirely impassive.<sup>23</sup> In other words, these cameras do not lead us to identify, even ambivalently, with the demon, so much as they themselves, as Rombes puts it, ‘are agents of possession, literally: they possess those who happen into their gaze’.<sup>24</sup> By possessing us, in a monstrous or demonic sense, these cameras thereby *dispossess* us, separating us from our powers of acting or even perceiving.



This effect of dispossession and disidentification is further heightened by the way that the *Paranormal Activity* cameras – both handheld and fixed – often feature special, technologically advanced modes of seeing, like night vision, that allow them to register things that are invisible to the naked human eye. Rather than just being prosthetic extensions of human perception, the video devices in the *Paranormal Activity* movies push beyond the limits of such perception altogether. On all fronts, they work to record presences that we do not and cannot perceive directly: whether because we are not there, because we are asleep when they manifest themselves, because we lack certain sensory modalities, or because the subtlety of the physical disturbances being recorded evades our immediate direct notice.

The demonic forces in the *Paranormal Activity* movies are beyond our ken, we might say, because they have no particular points of view of their own: no angles of vision with which we might identify. There's nothing for us to model, imagine or empathise with. The demon is diffuse, nowhere and everywhere at once. In registering its actions, Leyda says, the fixed camera 'produces an uncanny sense of helplessness [. . .] An almost sadistic tone emanates from this kind of enforced and hobbled surveillance'.<sup>25</sup> The cameras watch over us in much the same way that Amazon or Google or the NSA do, accumulating data on every last one of our actions, no matter how trivial or minute. Leyda therefore suggests that we may regard the demons in these movies as 'digital forms' that 'are only possible in an increasingly data-driven, disembodied, financialized world'.<sup>26</sup> A demon is something like computer code; more specifically, like one's credit rating and other abstract financial records. It is a formal pattern, a ripple of energy, an ordering of data – but not a discrete material entity. It is dedicated to, or targeted at, *you* in particular; but it is not anything you can claim as your own, or incorporate as part of yourself. It causes trouble by instantiating itself in a specific situation and place; but it cannot be identified with, and cannot be pinned down to, the physical medium in and through which it acts.

The demons, together with the cameras that relay their activity, might be said to constitute a new sort of post-cinematic – and post-phenomenological – apparatus. The *Paranormal Activity* movies exemplify, and allegorise, what Mark Hansen calls *twenty-first-century media*: 'networks of media technologies that operate predominantly, if not almost entirely, outside the scope of human modes of awareness (consciousness, attention, sense perception, etc.)'. According to Hansen, these media '*broker human access to a domain of sensibility*' that profoundly influences and affects us, but that we cannot grasp directly on our own account.<sup>27</sup>

In other words, the demon domain in the *Paranormal Activity* films condenses and figures what Hansen more generally calls the domain of *worldly*

*sensibility*: ‘the general sensibility of the world prior to and as a condition for impacting human experience’.<sup>28</sup> This domain constrains, influences and inflects our subjective experience, without ever being directly available to that experience. Its causal power is subliminal, and all the more effective for that. According to Hansen, twenty-first-century media allow us, for the very first time, to trace the workings of these shadowy forces that otherwise act entirely outside our awareness. But such access still remains indirect and retrospective. The devices used by the protagonists in the *Paranormal Activity* movies can only show us what the demon has *already* done; we find out by playing back the video.

However, Hansen adds a second dimension to his account: the same technologies that apprise us of these indirect effects also amplify them. The apparatus ‘adds to this domain of sensibility’, Hansen says, in the very process of recording it. ‘Revelation and intensification’ go together.<sup>29</sup> This is why – as the male protagonists of the *Paranormal Activity* movies are continually being reminded – any attempt to capture the demon’s image on video, and more generally to ask it what it wants, only encourages it, makes it feel welcome, and amplifies its power. As a priest tells the terrified couple in *Ghost Dimension*, ‘demons feed on fear. The more attention you give, the stronger it grows, the bigger it grows’. Vampires and other such old-fashioned monsters are only able to haunt us in our own homes if we have invited them in. But today, we cannot use digital devices at all without having already agreed to all sorts of intrusions and violations of our privacy. This may be why, in the *Paranormal Activity* movies, the surveillance cameras and other such monitoring devices in fact call forth and strengthen the very forces that they are supposed to guard us against.

All this brings me back, finally, to *Ghost Dimension*, the sixth and supposedly last entry in the *Paranormal Activity* series. This movie, like the previous ones, recapitulates the basic formula while offering incremental changes. For instance, at one point it offers us a perfect match cut. One shot, from outside the daughter’s room, shows the mother opening the door and going in; the next shot, from inside the room, picks up the action as she enters. In terms of conventional continuity editing, this is entirely banal; it is something that every Hollywood movie does many times. But in *Ghost Dimension* such a match is unique; and it only appears because it is made to coincide, as if by accident, with the switch from one fixed surveillance camera to another.

The advertising for *Ghost Dimension* promises one significant innovation in the series: we are told that ‘for the first time, you will see the activity’ of the demon itself. This might seem to go against the grounding premise of the whole *Paranormal Activity* franchise, which is that the demon remains invisible, and is only manifested through its effects. But of course, nothing is ever

really made explicit; our glimpses of the demon are few and far between. We only see it in passing, for a few moments at a time. And although it eventually takes on a human form and face, it remains vague and shapeless for most of the movie. The demon is still more a process than a fixed entity. We do not see what it actually is, so much as we see its ongoing activity of localising and materialising itself. The protagonists endeavour, with the help of a priest, to capture the demon and send it back to Hell. They succeed for a moment in trapping it under a sheet in humanoid form. But the banishing ceremony ultimately fails; the demon breaks free again, losing its fixed outline, as one of the characters literally pukes it out of her mouth, directly towards the night-vision camera.

The visualisation of the demon is justified within the diegesis by the introduction of a special video device. In addition to deploying his 2013 state-of-the-art cameras and computers, the main male character also uses an old VHS camera, which he finds in the basement of his house. Apparently it was left behind by the protagonists of *Paranormal Activity 3* (set in 1988). It has an odd design: six picture tubes instead of the usual three, and ‘multiple focus rings’ as well. It turns out that this special camera is able to see the ‘ghost dimension’, and thus to pick up traces of the otherwise invisible demons. Once again – and even more radically than in the earlier movies in the series – vision is thus prosthetically extended beyond human limits.<sup>30</sup>

In movie theatres, the footage from this special camera is rendered in 3-D. As one reviewer complains, every time this device is used, ‘the image goes into 3-D as ectoplasmic entrails and other random items are hurled before the camera’.<sup>31</sup> But *Ghost Dimension* is unique in the way that ‘the 3-D is diegetic’;<sup>32</sup> the output of the special camera exists within the story-world of the film, and is viewed by the protagonists. Of course, this is a fabrication. Some 3-D movies, watchable with special glasses, were in fact released on VHS tape in the late 1980s. But they were not shot on VHS camcorders, which have never had 3-D capabilities; and they were only viewable through special glasses. For the first time in the *Paranormal Activity* series, then, the story turns upon the output from a technical device that does not exist in actuality, and whose powers are not available to ordinary consumers. But this still makes sense in terms of the technological allegory of the entire series. The special camera in *Ghost Dimension* hyperbolically enacts the process by which audiovisual recording and rendering devices permeate the world in which we live. Such devices both change the nature of that world, and give us new forms of mediated access to it: and this is all the more the case when it comes to Hansen’s subperceptual twenty-first-century media.

Unsurprisingly, the 3-D effects are not replicated in the digital streaming and DVD versions of *Ghost Dimension*, which are the ones that most people

will eventually see.<sup>33</sup> But even in these cases, the special camera is marked. Its footage is far grainier, and also a bit darker, than that from all the other devices. It is sufficiently low-resolution that you can see the scan lines; and it often displays the interference patterns typical of analogue videotape. In both theatrical and home-release versions, then, the special camera's magical power to see beyond the humanly visible also entails a pronounced disruption of visual representation altogether:

between the natural murkiness inherent with the [3-D] process, the attempt to recreate the sometimes smeary look of early-90s VHS technology, and the fact that all of these sequences take place at night with minimum lighting at best, there are long stretches of time when the on-screen results are almost literally unwatchable.<sup>34</sup>

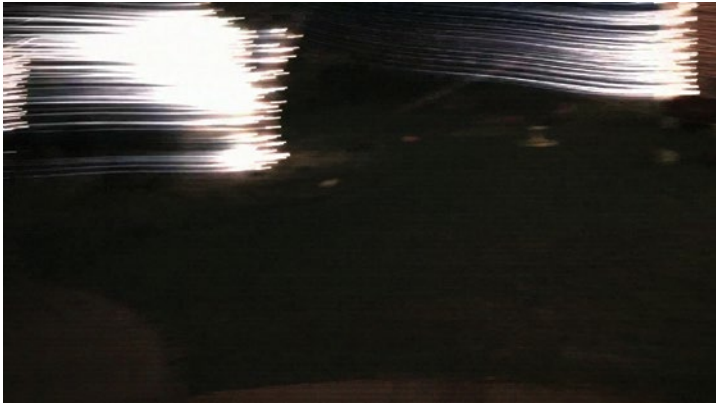
In other words, the special camera's feed consists of glitches and interruptions, more than it does of solidly rendered objects and deep, three-dimensional space. The demon first manifests itself in the form of scattered, transparent, swirling patterns that seem to overlay, or permeate, the whole field of the image. The characters themselves wonder as to whether this is an actual ghostly manifestation, or 'just a camera glitch'. Subsequently, the demon appears in the form of dark blotches that ooze across the frame, expanding slowly, bulging outwards, or extending tentacles through the space. It is only after this that the blotches take on a roughly human shape, although its outlines usually remain indistinct. Several times, the special camera shows us a fuzzy mass of darkness that lurks behind, and then passes through a human character: the victim does not see this mass, but *feels* its passage as a blow, or as a wrenching, horrific squeeze.

In *Ghost Dimension*, distortion of the image – interference or 'noise' – is not confined only to the output of the special camera. Many details of the night-time scenes are barely visible in high definition, and lost entirely if the movie is watched at a lower definition. (I confirmed this by watching both the 'high definition' and 'standard definition' digital streams of the movie.) In addition, the balance between the multiple output sources differs from that in the earlier entries of the series. Compared to *Paranormal Activity 2* and *3*, *Ghost Dimension* is much more 'shaky-cam-laden',<sup>35</sup> and does not have anywhere near as many sequences switching among the output of multiple fixed cameras. This stylistic alteration is explicitly signalled at one point, when the special camera, fixed at the foot of the stairs, is knocked over by the demon. Murk flows towards the camera, engulfing the whole image; after a moment of violent shaking and banging, the murk disappears and the image is now askew.

There are also more jump cuts, and more uses of sound bridges to cover over these cuts, in *Ghost Dimension* than in any earlier instalment. The images



*Figure 18.1* *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015)



*Figure 18.2* *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015)



*Figure 18.3* *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015)



Figure 18.4 *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015)



Figure 18.5 *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015)

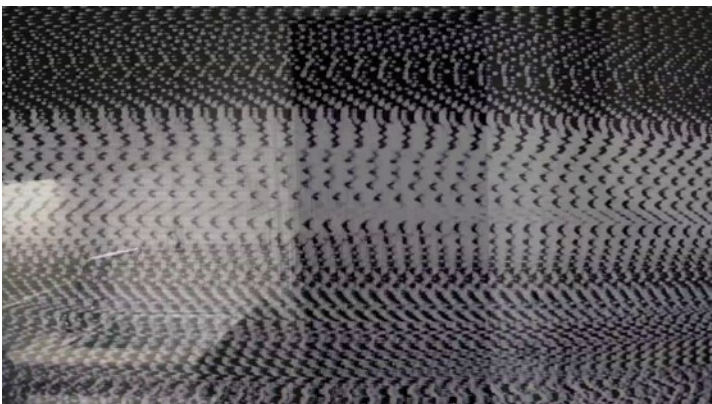


Figure 18.6 *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015)

are darker and shakier as well, and more prone to be disrupted by static. At times, it becomes hard to tell just where the moving, hand-held camera is located. In addition, what I have metaphorically called ‘noise’ in the video image is often accompanied by (literal) noises on the soundtrack, like low electronic rumbles, that are hard to identify: we cannot even answer the question as to whether these sounds are diegetic or non-diegetic.

Throughout the *Paranormal Activity* series, the manifestations of demonic activity extend beyond the limits of what can be registered by natural (or ‘normal’) perception. Such manifestations can only be detected by non-human (or indeed, superhuman) audiovisual devices. But in *Ghost Dimension*, there is something new. It is no longer just a matter of prosthetically extending the range of our senses, in order to capture images and sounds that subsist beneath, or stretch beyond, the threshold of our unaided senses. Rather, paranormal forces are now *negatively* registered by the movie’s audiovisual devices. That is to say, they are evident as failures or breakdowns of the image (and of sound as well). Even the special camera does not capture images and construct representations of the demon, so much as it finds its images and representations disrupted and distorted by the activities of the demon.

In the digital era, film and video makers often deliberately include glitches, and artifices of the production process, within the final product. Paradoxically, this self-conscious acknowledgement that the images are constructed becomes a way of signalling the supposed ‘authenticity’ of the work. For instance, think of all the films that digitally incorporate lens flare, in order to (falsely) suggest that the scene was really recorded by a real camera. In a similar way, as we have seen, the *Paranormal Activity* movies connote their ostensible realness by using – often in ostentatiously unprofessional ways – devices that are present within the diegesis. But *Ghost Dimension* goes even further than this. Instead of using occasional glitches to authenticate the medium, it pushes glitches to the point of a breakdown and incapacity of the medium.

Where the previous *Paranormal Activity* movies seem to emulate late-modernist self-reflexivity and minimalism, then, *Ghost Dimension* rather displays an affinity with the more recent experimental trends of glitch art and machine art (or with the so-called ‘new aesthetic’, which involves collecting and displaying ‘the failures of machine processing, and failures of machine displays built for human vision’<sup>36</sup>). If the earlier films in the series were about the real phantoms that are generated by surveillance and self-surveillance technologies, *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* is correspondingly about the real phantoms that are generated by the intrinsic limitations and inevitable breakdowns of these technologies. In both cases, of course, the *Paranormal Activity* movies seek to *exploit* the very tendencies that experimental

works rather seek to elucidate and critique. However, as I have been suggesting all along, the explicit display of our entanglement with new (and often oppressive) technologies may well offer us more comprehension, and more opportunities for change, than critical reflection on these technologies does.

In any case, *Ghost Dimension* reorients the *Paranormal Activity* series, offering us something that was not present in the earlier instalments. For the film suggests that, contrary to what we are often led to believe, the data technologies that encompass and circumscribe our lives today are not ubiquitous, and not flawless. We are affected (and oppressed) as much by their glitches, gaps and limitations as we are by their successful operations. Indeed, the film suggests that such media malfunctions are not a bug, but a feature. The ghost or glitch dimension surrounds us and engulfs us, whether or not we are made aware of its intimate more-than-presence.

## Notes

All URLs referenced accessed 29 January 2017, except where noted.

1. Caetlin Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens: Video Spectatorship from VHS to File Sharing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), p. 168.
2. Julia Leyda, 'Demon Debt: *Paranormal Activity* as Recessionary Post-Cinematic Allegory', *Jump Cut*, 56 (Winter 2014–15), <https://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc56.2014-2015/LeydaParanormalActivity/text.html>.
3. The movies provide variations on a theme. The couple in the first *Paranormal Activity* movie (2007), for instance, do not have children. The fifth movie in the series *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* (Christopher B. Landon, 2014) – described as a spin-off, rather than a sequel – has Latino characters instead of whites who live in apartments rather than single-family homes. But the generic characteristics remain mostly the same throughout the series.
4. Janani Subramanian, 'Fairly Normal Activity: Horror and the Static Camera', *Flow* (December 2010), <http://flowtv.org/2010/12/fairly-normal-activity/>.
5. *Paranormal Activity 3* is a prequel that takes place in 1988; it therefore features analogue VHS cameras and videotape, instead of digital devices. VHS tapes from this earlier episode also play a crucial role in *The Ghost Dimension*; the protagonist discovers them in his house, and watches them on an old VHS player. He even points out how this is an anachronism, by remarking that his eight-year-old daughter cannot possibly have any idea of what VHS is. The technological self-reflexivity of the *Paranormal Activity* movies is not just a matter, therefore, of digital versus analogue; the earlier historical shift from the mechanical technology of film to the electronic technology of (even analogue) videotape also needs to be taken into account. I discuss these distinct moments of transformation in 'Splitting the Atom: Post-Cinematic Articulations of Sound and Vision', in Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (eds) *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer, Sussex: Reframe Books, 2016).



6. Benson-Allott, *Killer Tapes and Shattered Screens*, p. 179.
7. Leyda, 'Demon Debt'.
8. André Bazin, *What is Cinema?*, trans. Timothy Barnard (Montreal: caboose, 2009), p. 101.
9. Nicholas Rombes, 'Six Asides on Paranormal Activity 2', *Filmmaker Magazine* (10 May 2011), <http://filmmakermagazine.com/23766-six-asides-on-paranormal-activity-2>.
10. Therese Grisham, Julia Leyda, Nicholas Rombes, and Steven Shaviro, 'The Post-Cinematic in Paranormal Activity and Paranormal Activity 2', in Denson and Leyda (eds), *Post-Cinema: Theorizing 21st-Century Film* (Falmer, Sussex: REFRAIME Books, 2016), p. 842.
11. It is worth noting that Paramount distributed *Ghost Dimension* under very different conditions from those of the earlier movies in the series. For *Ghost Dimension*, Paramount offered cinema chains a portion of the revenue from digital streaming, in return for allowing this streaming to occur only a few weeks after the movie's theatrical run, instead of the usual six months. Several major cinema chains refused the deal; as a result, the movie opened on far fewer screens than its predecessors. While its opening-weekend earnings per screen were high, it therefore earned far less on its opening weekend than any of the earlier films in the series. At this writing, it still remains to be seen whether Paramount will recoup the lost revenue from digital rentals and sales (Todd Cunningham, 'Paranormal Activity: *Ghost Dimension* Suffers Worst Opening in Series History – Blame VOD', *The Wrap* (25 October 2015), <https://www.thewrap.com/paranormal-activity-ghost-dimension-has-worst-opening-in-series-history-blame-vod/>). If nothing else, this shows how high-speed internet streaming is changing the conditions under which movies become available, and arguably also changing the movies themselves. *Ghost Dimension* was released in cinemas in 3-D, but this is not available when the movie is streamed at home.
12. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 5 and passim.
13. David Bordwell, 'Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary American Film', *Film Quarterly* 55.3 (Spring 2002), pp. 16–28.
14. Steven Shaviro, 'Post-Continuity: full text of my talk' (26 March, 2012), <http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1034>.
15. David Bordwell, 'Return to Paranormalcy' (13 November 2012), <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2012/11/13/return-to-paranormalcy/>.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. 'It is not that continuity rules are always being violated or ignored; nor are the films made in their absence simply chaotic. Rather, we are in a "post-continuity" situation when continuity *has ceased to be important* – or at least has ceased to be as important as it used to be.' Shaviro, 'Post-Continuity'.
20. Shane Denson, 'Crazy Cameras, Discorrelated Images, and the Post-Perceptual

- Mediation of Post-Cinematic Affect', in Denson and Leyda (eds), *Post-Cinema*, p. 202.
21. The classic discussion of 'identification with the camera' is of course that by Christian Metz; see *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and Cinema*, trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 49–51. Part of my larger argument here is that the forms of identification that organised classical and modernist cinema are no longer active in the same way in post-cinematic media.
  22. Denson, 'Crazy Cameras'.
  23. Leyda, 'Demon Debt'.
  24. Rombes in Grisham et al., 'The Post-Cinematic in Paranormal Activity and Paranormal Activity 2', p. 850.
  25. Leyda, 'Demon Debt'.
  26. Ibid.
  27. Mark B. N. Hansen, *Feed-Forward: On the Future of Twenty-First-Century Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), p. 5.
  28. Ibid., p. 6.
  29. Ibid., pp. 5–6.
  30. The creation of a technology that makes it possible to see invisible, monstrous dimensions whose space overlies our own is a staple of the horror genre. The most famous example is H. P. Lovecraft's story 'From Beyond' (1920), later made into a film (1986). But the concept already appears in Lovecraft's likely inspiration, Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894).
  31. Peter Sobczynski, 'Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension', review, *Roger Ebert.Com* (23 October 2015), <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/paranormal-activity-the-ghost-dimension-2015>.
  32. Jason Shawhan, 'Why Is It So Hard to See *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension?*', *Nashville Scene* (23 October 2015), <http://www.nashvillescene.com/countrylife/archives/2015/10/23/why-is-it-so-hard-to-see-paranormal-activity-the-ghost-dimension>.
  33. The movie is available in 3-D on Blu-ray, for a price well above the normal Blu-ray edition. Equipment for home 3-D viewing, too expensive and cumbersome to be widely adopted, has remained a niche market. In a recent development, all major TV manufacturers have opted not to continue with the production of 3-D-capable sets.
  34. Sobczynski, 'Paranormal Activity'.
  35. Shawhan, 'Why Is It So Hard to See *Paranormal Activity?*'.
  36. Bruce Sterling, 'An Essay on the New Aesthetic', *Wired* (2 April 2012), <http://www.wired.com/2012/04/an-essay-on-the-new-aesthetic/>.