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# Converging Horror: analyzing the importance of Convergence Culture on a digital audience through an examination of the conventions and politics of the horror genre

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**Converging Horror: analyzing the importance of Convergence Culture on a digital audience through an examination of the conventions and politics of the horror genre**

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Media and Cultural Studies

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## **Abstract**

This thesis draws attention to the genre of horror in new media through a close examination of various digital texts, arguing that these new texts, while built on traditional horror narratives used in cinema, are also examples of Convergence Culture, a mobile, multiplatform, participatory medium that engages professionals and amateur content creators. The thesis begins with a review of scholarly work about horror as a genre, continues with a close analysis of several digital horror texts and their online communities, and ends with the argument that these new texts are good examples of how horror has accommodated Convergence culture, morphing into a post-national space characterized by mobility, transnationalism and participation. And most importantly, this new iteration of horror continues the classical horror film tradition of mirroring inter-personal and cultural anxieties.

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## Political Horror: An Introduction

Horror is often viewed as a low-brow form of popular culture, a gory, violent, fetishistic genre. However, scholars have argued that the history and politics of horror as a popular genre are actually much more complicated than this view allows. While there are certainly low-brow narratives in popular horror, scholars have also identified horror as a discursive formation that includes political narratives. Popular horror movies in the United States have been saturated with political commentary, particularly regarding issues of nationalism and race. The national traumas that frame horror movies range from colonialism to terrorism to racism. Horror films have used their own language to deal with all of these issues and more for decades, and while not every horror film can be seen as a means of dealing with big political issues, the fact that most were produced within the context of national film industries (e.g. Hollywood and Japan) and distributed within national markets, insures their character as part of a nationalist discourse.

But there has been a shift in the ways media are produced, distributed, and consumed. Today media narratives circulate through the transnational space of the Internet, as well as in the national worlds of film and television. Further, media have become more accessible and participatory than ever before. Media convergence, as defined by the Films Media Group video *Media Convergence* and in other sources, is a system where “[mediums] that were once

separated...are coming together.”<sup>1</sup> Essentially, it is the idea that rather than a film (or television show, podcast, YouTube video, etc.) being the entirety of the content one consumes, the whole world of that thing being contained within that one piece of media, many forms of media come together to give the story/world/etc. more content.

Along with the content converging, the production aspect of media has also converged. Anders Fagerjord argues in their text *After Convergence: YouTube and Remix Culture*, “Production tools converged. Computers were increasingly used to create and edit text, images, sound, film, and television images. A large array of different media technologies was replaced by software on powerful computers.”<sup>2</sup> However, I believe the real importance of media convergence goes far beyond the advent of powerful computers. As articulated in Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide*,

Media convergence is more than simply a technological shift. Convergence alters the relationship between existing technologies, industries, markets, genres, and audiences. Convergence alters the logic by which media industries operate and by which media consumers process news and entertainment...convergence refers to a process, not an end point.<sup>3</sup>

In this thesis, I argue that the importance of this shift can be seen in the horror genre, which is becoming ever more complex with films that are cross-genre with

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<sup>1</sup> *Media Convergence*, Online video (Films Media Group; 1997.) Web. <http://fod.infobase.com/portalplaylists.aspx?wid=105033&xtid=8520.1>

<sup>2</sup> Anders Fagerjord, *After Convergence: YouTube and Remix Culture* (University of Oslo: Department of Media and Communication, 2009), PDF, 2. Communication, University of Oslo. 2009. PDF. p 2

<sup>3</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence culture: where old and new media collide* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2006), 15-16.

“thrillers” and “science-fiction,” as well as short and long narratives dealing with traumas that affect communities and individuals. This demonstration of what horror is coming to represent at this moment of convergence will be illustrated by a close examination of popular digital horror texts, including the video *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, and the CreepyPasta stories “Mereana Mordegard Glesgorv”, “Lavender Town”, and “Slender man”. In the end, the thesis will discuss how these new digital productions challenge conventional understandings of horror as a popular genre.

### **Historical Horror: Exploring the focus on national trauma in the scholarship on popular horror films**

For decades, film scholars have argued that the genre of horror has been used to deal with national traumas: the social instability produced by threats of nuclear warfare, the disruptions of immigration and migration, and other socially traumatic events have shaped horror as a genre. This section will explore a few of the many national and global examples of the narratives of horror films that have been framed by scholars as reflections of national trauma. While this history is far from comprehensive, it should provide a thorough enough background to understand the subsequent shift in narrative themes in contemporary horror media produced and distributed through methods made possible by media convergence, which will be discussed in further detail in a later section.

The films discussed in this thesis have been selected because of their importance to film scholars. Though not necessarily a result of a specific event or moment in history, one of the earliest examples of the genre of horror being used to negotiate a national “trauma,” in this case racial and migratory insecurity, is the film *White Zombie* (1932). The film, while a critical failure, set in motion an important element of many zombie films: the use of voodoo and black magic as the cause of zombification. In *White Zombie*, the protagonist Madeleine Short goes to Haiti to meet with her fiancé. While in Haiti, another man falls in love with Madeleine and goes to the voodoo master, Murder Legendre (played by Bela Lugosi), in an attempt to use his voodoo to make her love him back. The voodoo master uses a potion to turn her into a zombie that he controls. Eventually Legendre is killed and Madeleine is released from her zombification and reunites with her love. <sup>4</sup>

The Zombie has stalked U.S. popular culture since the early 20th Century, its popularity in part a consequence of its mysterious and supernatural relationship to the Transatlantic Slave Trade. <sup>5</sup> Cultural historians attribute the zombie’s persistent presence in the United States to the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Haitian culture on the United States, primarily through the export of Haitian “folklore” and religion. Many Zombie films were produced during Hollywood’s classical period (*Revolt of the Zombies*, 1936; *I Walked with a Zombie*, 1943; *The*

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<sup>4</sup> See Gary D. Rhodes, *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film* (McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 2001), for a thorough study of this film by a scholar of Bela Lugosi

<sup>5</sup> Deborah Christie and Sarah Julia Lauro, eds., *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as post Human*, Fordham University Press, 2011

*Plague of the Zombies*, 1966), each a fictionalized representation of “savage” 11 moved on, the zombie and similar “undead” monsters became staples in American culture. However, as a recent history of the Zombie demonstrates, the process of zombification has changed over time, from voodoo to other means, like radiation, reflecting insecurities growing out of the Atomic Age and the Cold War.

Historians and critics say that the Cold War produced a cycle of horror films beginning in the 1950s that reflect various national insecurities. Many films at the time used monsters or “creatures” as a means of dealing with the fear of communism and the atomic bomb. This time period is also an important moment when science fiction and horror became more intertwined narratively. Some films that explored this insecurity and threat of trauma include: *The Thing from Another World*, 1951; *It Came from Outer Space*, 1953; *The War of the Worlds*, 1953; *Them!* 1954; *Tarantula*, 1955; *Forbidden Planet*, 1956; *The Amazing Colossal Man*, 1957; and *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*, 1958.

One specific movie that came out during this period is the 1956 film *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Some historians and film critics see it as a direct response to the “Red Scare” and the investigation of “Un-American Activities” led by Senator Joe McCarthy. The novel-turned-film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, “has long been taken for granted in classrooms and newspaper columns as an

allegory (if a slippery one) of conformism amidst the Red Scare of the fifties".<sup>6</sup>

The Noir film is based on the 1954 novel "The Body Snatchers" by Jack Finney.

The film is mostly set in flashback as the protagonist, Dr. Miles Bennell, explains why he is being held in the hospital by psychiatrist Dr. Hill. Bennell recounts his belief that many people in the town of Santa Mira, California, were suffering from the mass-delusion that people in their lives are being replaced with identical looking imposters. While initially written off, eventually he and others stumble upon identical looking bodies being grown in pods. The group tries to alert authorities, but communications have been cut and all nearby towns have been affected by the same pod-people. Bennell runs out onto a highway and is injured after seeing a large truck carrying more of the pods. No one believes his story until a truck driver injured by large pods is taken into the Emergency Room. The film ends when the FBI is called and a plea to barricade the town is made.

Critics have argued that the film's connections to Cold War and Atomic Age fears follow two paths. The film, like the book, has been seen as either an allegory for the fear of communism or a satire of McCarthyism. Political scientist and literary and film critic Michael Paul Rogin examined the piece as satire rather than propaganda, arguing,

*Body Snatchers*...is a self-aware film; Don Siegel made it in protest against pressures for political and social conformity. Since socialization is triumphant in both McCarthyism and Communism (in the 1950s liberal view), 'the malignant disease spreading through the country, cell for cell, atom for atom' can represent either

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<sup>6</sup> Meghan Sutherland, "Rigor/Mortis: The Industrial Life of Style in American Zombie Cinema Framework," in *The Journal of Cinema and Media*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Drake Stutesman: Wayne State University Press, 2007), 65.

Danger. *Body Snatchers* could be a McCarthyite warning against communism...[or] may reflect awareness...that fears of foreign, Communist influence displaced fears of mass domestic conformity.<sup>7</sup>

The theory that *Body Snatchers* represents the fear of either communism or conformity (or both) has become canonical in scholarly interpretations of the film. It uses the conventions of horror films to articulate the fear felt by Americans that communists were infiltrating their everyday lives. Everyone is a suspect, which is evident in the narrative of the film, as the late Michael Paul Rogin suggests in his interpretation. Either way, the canonical view of the film maintains that both its narrative and its mode of consumption helped mitigate the insecurities of a nation.

*Night of the Living Dead* replaced the *Body Snatchers* as the canonical American horror film in the 1960s, according to cultural historians. They argue that it also replaced the anti-communist/anti-conformity narrative of *Body Snatchers* with an anti-racist narrative. *Night of the Living Dead* reinvents the Zombie films of the 1920s and 1930s, to deal directly with issues of racism, in line with the emerging Civil Rights Movement. The 1968 film follows a group of seven people that are trapped in a farmhouse in Pennsylvania as an invasion of undead monsters occurs in the rural town.

The film's lead, Ben, was played by Duane Jones, during an historical moment when very few American films featured a black man as the hero. The character of Ben and specifically his death has also been analyzed as a critique

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Paul Rogin. *Ronald Reagan The Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 266.

of racial relations in the United States. Throughout the film Ben survives various attacks from the undead or living dead creatures, attempts to get medical care for an injured party member, is locked out of the sanctuary by another member, and is eventually attacked by a mob of living dead creatures. His character survives all of these things only to be shot in the end by a white sheriff's deputy.

As recounted in Matt Thompson's piece for NPR titled "Why Black Heroes Make Zombie Films More Interesting," Thompson addresses the way the *Night of the Living Dead*, responded to the Civil Rights Movement in its production:

Ben was not originally envisioned as a black character. But the casting of Duane Jones in the role gave it a societal resonance that later zombie fiction would strive to recreate: Many audiences perceived the parallel between America's increasingly violent civil rights struggles — particularly the then-recent assassination of Martin Luther King by racist hitman James Earl Ray, with the suspected cooperation of the FBI — and Ben's execution at the guns of the redneck posse at film's end. Without a black actor in the lead, "Night" would still have been an innovative shocker but wouldn't have hit the cultural nerves it did”<sup>8</sup>

*Night of the Living Dead* used monsters in a unique way, as the ultimate demise of the hero is at the hand of a fellow human rather than a living dead creature. This twist, along with the extensive use of gore, allowed for a timely and important dissection of racial relations in the United States using the monsters and the genre as a tool. The film challenges racial relations by posing the black hero and the white killer, who is also a representation of the state given his position as a sheriff. *Night of the Living Dead* critiques authoritative figures in the

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<sup>8</sup> Matt Thompson, "Why Black Heroes Make Zombie Stories More Interesting," *NPR Code Switch*, October 1, 2013. Web.

United States and their role in the treatment of black Americans, challenging the idea of who the “real threat” is, the fictitious monsters or real life people.

Cultural historians in the 1980s witnessed the demise of Civil Rights as the center of horror discourse and the rise of fears of disease and contagion. As John Kenneth Muir articulates in his text *Horror Films of the 1980s, Volume 1*:

In the 1980s, Americans suffered from an ailment which can only be termed an *apocalypse mentality*. The Cold War with the Soviet Union ran hot, and figures as prominent as the U.S. Secretary of the Interior and the fortieth president of the United States publicly mulled that ours might be the last generation...The other looming fear in the 1980s involved the sudden, unexpected rise of a sexually transmitted disease, AIDS. Passed from person to person in bodily fluids.<sup>9</sup>

The theme of contagion and infection have been a part of popular since the beginning of Hollywood, and they were prominent in the anti-communist and anti-conformist films. In the 1950s films such as *Body Snatchers*, *The Blob* remake (1988) *City of the Living Dead* (1980), *Day of the Dead* (1985), and *Pet Semetary* (1989), anti-communism/ anti-conformism/and fear of disease and contagion are served together. These films explore the internal threat produced by the AIDS epidemic, and comment on the lack of response from the government. There have also been films in this period that focused on the external threat posed by the continued Cold War, like *The Terminator* (1984) and *The Dead Zone* (1983).<sup>10</sup> Another film that is emerging as canonical in this period is *Cloverfield*, which scholars argue is a response to 9/11

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<sup>9</sup> John Kenneth Muir. *Horror Films of the 1980s Vol. 1*. (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers, 2007), Ebook, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

The film takes place in modern-day New York City and is shot in the style of “found footage.” It begins as a man tries to make a going-away video for a friend, but as the party continues the party-goers and city folk realize that something very bad is happening in the city. They attempt to leave the apartment building in which the party takes place, but monuments begin to be destroyed by the unseen creature. First, the statue of liberty is attacked, then the Woolworth building, and later the Brooklyn Bridge. As the iconic images of New York City are destroyed and members of the party are being killed, the main character, the man behind the camera, and two others barely survive the many attacks. However, when the camera is left behind and the man behind it attempts to retrieve it, he is killed. His friends grab the camera and the film ends with the pair declaring their love for one another as a bomb goes off in an attempt to kill the monster, likely killing them and everyone else around them. The film then cuts to an earlier recording on the tape that took place before the events of the film that Hud was seemingly filming over. It was the couple killed in the bomb on a date and in the background an unidentified object can be seen falling into the water, though no one notices.

The film received mixed reviews, but more than anything else, critics and bloggers alike noted the connection the film had to the terrorist attacks on 9/11. People’s reactions to this connection were also mixed, though generally people either did not make that connection or were offended by the evidently crass manner in which the film used signs and symbols that related to the attack. Fox

News went so far as to tell its viewers to boycott the film, as it was “insensitive” to the attacks.<sup>11</sup> The film was made seven years after September 11th., however, as blatantly seen in this film, and more subtly in other films made in the post-9/11 era, the attacks became central to popular narratives in horror films. There was an emergence of films that centered around surveillance and used aesthetics of terrorist groups. As Kevin J. Wetmore highlights in his 2012 book, *Post-9/11*

*Horror in American Cinema:*

The filmic style and imagery of 9/11 is used even in films that are not pseudo-documentaries, but generate, develop and maintain horror through documentary technique...[eschewing] many of the techniques of narrative fiction films and [employing] the same cinema verite aesthetics in order to suggest that these things are actually happening, in order to document the horror.<sup>12</sup>

Wetmore continues to comment on various films that use these aesthetics, like *Saw*, 2004 which uses a ‘jihad’ like imprisonment to puppeteer the captured victims into committing heinous acts against themselves and others. He also mentions the first two *Paranormal Activity* films, 2007 and 2010, which utilize surveillance methods to capture the action. The resurgence of the found footage film in horror demonstrates one way that horror films have changed in post 9/11 America.

Most recently, a prime example of a horror movie that some scholars see as another paradigm shift in horror is the 2016 film *Get Out*. The film follows a black man named Chris as he goes with his white girlfriend, Rose, to visit her

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<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Winters Keegan, “*Cloverfield: Godzilla Goes 9/11*,” *Time*, January 16, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin J. Wetmore, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*. (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012), 73.

family, against the advice of his friend, Rod, who is also a black man and a TSA agent for the airport. Upon his arrival he becomes very unnerved as the only other black people he encounters are a maid, Georgina, and groundskeeper, Walter. At first he just experiences discomfort through typical microaggressions, like the white father adapting a black-vernacular when talking to him, the mother invasively questioning him about his past, and the brother telling him how his genes make him the ultimate fighting machine.

Then the movie changes its focus to a large gathering where Chris takes a photo of the one other black man in attendance who he thinks he recognizes. The flash from the camera causes a change in the man and he yells at him to “get out”. Eventually the audience discovers that the family kidnaps black people, particularly black men, and sells their bodies to the highest bidder, whose brain then is transplanted into the body and the consciousness of the Black person gets condemned to the “sunken place” via hypnosis. The man is able to escape, killing the entire family as he does so, and in the end is rescued by his friend who used his TSA skills to track him down.

The film, which has been praised critically, has also been written about extensively for its ability to portray the story of racial tensions and blatant racism in the United States. The film has been credited with bringing to light how white supremacy works, even for those who claim not to be racist, as the white characters in the film still benefit, literally, from the black bodies. The film also highlights the idea of performative allyship and the position white women

specifically have in the scheme of white supremacy through the character of the girlfriend. She is seemingly aware of racism and defends against it when an officer asks to see his ID even though he was not the one driving and later confronts her parents when they are saying racist things. There have been interpretations of the film that highlight the ability of the film to portray the feeling of isolation and paranoia black Americans can feel..<sup>13 14 15</sup>

The use of horror as a means of dealing with social issues is hardly confined to the United States. Examples from elsewhere include the Japanese film *Gojira* (*Godzilla*) franchise, the 2008 Swedish film *Let the Right One In*, and the 2005 French film *Caché* (*Hidden*). Again, while this is just a brief glimpse into the many films globally that use the genre of horror as a means of dealing with national issues and crises, included is enough to support the eventual shift in narratives through media convergence.

Godzilla, perhaps the most famous of these films, is set in Japan after World War II. After a village is destroyed by a large, unknown force, paleontologist Kyohei Yamane to investigate the cause. He discovers large radioactive footprints before seeing a glimpse of the dinosaur-looking monster in action as it escapes into the water that may have been the place of hydrogen-bomb testing. The narrative quickly establishes that Godzilla was a creation of

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<sup>13</sup> Charles Moore, "Jordan Peele's 'Get Out' is a horrifying warning about what happens when you trust white people," *Fusion*, February 2, 2017. Web.

<sup>14</sup> Alyssa Rosenberg, 'Get Out' captures how white supremacy isolates black people even from each other," *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2017. Web.

<sup>15</sup> Erin Chack, "22 Secrets Hidden In 'Get Out' You May Have Missed," *Buzzfeed*, March 3, 2017. Web.

nuclear discharge. Godzilla eventually attacks the city and is destroyed by the military. One of the most famous scenes of the film features the destruction of Tokyo. Yamane argues that this will happen again if nuclear testing continues.

However, this daring recreation of the wartime destruction of Tokyo is framed for the viewer by the presence of intermediary witnesses, a team of cameramen and a reporter on top of a television tower who continue to broadcast what they are seeing until they too are silenced by the destruction...once the reporter's words are silenced and the rampage finished, the scene ends with a long-distance shot of Tokyo in flames...the shots of the aftermath achieve a striking, weird beauty, and the presence (or imposition) of the reporters and crew foregrounds the attraction for Japanese viewers of 1954- either memories of the terror and a wistful appreciation of its sublimity.<sup>16</sup>

Godzilla uses the conventions of horror and science fiction films to recreate the trauma caused by nuclear destruction near the end of World War II. The film used the monster, a large and uncontrollable beast, as a representation of the Japan's inability to defend itself against the attacks.

The 2008 Swedish film *Let the Right One In* follows the story of a young boy named Oskar as he deals with adolescent issues like a disconnect between himself and his mother, dealing with his parents' divorce, and bullying from other boys at his school. In his apartment complex he meets a strange girl named Eli who bonds with him over his Rubik's cube. The two become friends and she even defend him against the bullies. However, it is discovered that she is a vampire, and as such must murder people to drink their blood. Initially she has a

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<sup>16</sup> David Stahl and Mark Williams, "To Make Gods and Demons Weep," *Imag(in)ing the War in Japan: Representing and Responding to Trauma in Postwar Literature and Film* (Boston: Brill Publication, 2010), Ebook, 82-83.

caretaker who does the murder and clean up for her, but after he is incapacitated she must fend for herself. She also accidentally creates another vampire when she is interrupted during a feeding and fails to kill her victim. Eventually Eli and Oskar decide to leave the town, and the film ends with Oskar on a train and Eli inside of his luggage. The film, while utilizing elements of romance and coming of age stories, sticks to many of the typical horror conventions like suspense, horror, and unsettling imagery relating to the monster protagonist.

But this film is also seen by some scholars as a narrative about immigration. As Rochelle Wright points out in her text "Vampire in the Stockholm Suburbs: Let the Right One In and Genre Hybridity," the use of coding in the vampire character, Eli, signifies an outsider. She writes:

Though she is not immediately identified as a vampire, her appearance and behaviour mark her as an outsider... visually coded as "immigrants", Eli is set apart from the clean-cut, blonde Nordic types by her tousled, dark hair and unkempt, waif-like appearance. Her divergence is particularly striking because, with one exception, all other characters in the film are ethnic Swedes...visually this image is linked in the popular imagination with the gypsy urchin. In keeping with another side of the gypsy stereotype, Eli has also squirrelled away money and jewelry, presumably acquired by nefarious means. Like cinematic gypsies, she is frequently coupled with stealth, on several occasions seemingly appearing out of nowhere, and with violence.<sup>17</sup>

Like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *Let the Right One In* can be read as either a cautionary tale against letting in immigrants, as they might lead to a violent struggle or death, or, a means of reconciling the treatment of immigrants within

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<sup>17</sup> Rochelle Wright, "Vampire in the Stockholm Suburbs: *Let the Right One In* and Genre Hybridity," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 1, no. 1 (2010), 59-60.

Sweden by making a far-fetched comparison to a violent monster that an entire ethnic group of people, regardless of appearance, are not. Regardless, the narrative of the film clearly demonstrates the national insecurity and an attempt to deal with it through the conventions of horror.

Another film which reconciles national trauma through the use of horror conventions is the 2005 French film *Caché* (Hidden). The film, unlike many of the others mentioned, offers a retrospective look at the 1961 Seine River Massacre during the Algerian War, and attempts to explore those emotions and responsibility the French government denied for decades. The film follows a wealthy man, Georges, as he and his wife, Anne, are confronted with mysterious tapes. The tapes depict moments from Georges' childhood and footage of the couple in and around their home. Georges assumes the sender is the child of the Algerian employees his family had as a child. When their son is late returning home after school, they assume the man, Majid, kidnapped him and Majid is arrested. He is later released and invites Georges to his home, where he slits his own throat in front of him, killing himself. Majid's son confronts Georges, who denies his role in his father's suicide. In the British Film Institute magazine *Sight and Sound*, the article "Secrets, Lies, and Videotape" discusses the allegorical nature of the film, stating:

The allegory of the historical treatment of the Algerians by the French is hard to miss, foregrounded as it is by the deaths of Majid's parents. The events of 17 October 1961, when a protest against French policy in Algeria sparked a huge police operation in which hundreds of demonstrators were killed or injured, were not acknowledged at the time, nor for decades afterwards. Even today

the subject remains taboo.<sup>18</sup>

This film very obviously utilizes the narrative and aesthetics of horror films to look retrospectively at the events of their bloody colonial history, something that is hardly discussed in other mediums.

While the motives behind different narratives within the genre can drastically vary, the language articulating these traumas and insecurities all exist within the same set of generic conventions. They all use some of the generic elements like blood, bodily gore, suspense, monsters and creatures, use of music and sound effects, and more. Likewise, these films all have similar means of production and distribution, meaning they exist within the Hollywood system (or globally, systems similar to Hollywood) and were made by a crew rather than one person or multiple people acting on their own. The consumption of the films is also largely the same, as they were intended to be consumed in a group setting of a theatre. This distinction is important to make, as the way in which these films were distributed is very much linked to the narrative of these films. Overall, these moments in different national cinema histories are important as they illustrate a key feature in film as a medium; they have the potential to be consumed on a national level. The films are distributed to theatres across the nation and for a set amount of weeks, the country is able to consume this media at relatively the “same time”. And while the films can surely be consumed

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<sup>18</sup> “Secrets, Lies & Videotape.” *Sight and Sound*. British Film Institute. (February 2006). Web.

internationally, there will be different meanings interpreted in the films depending on the audience. For instance, the film *Let the Right One In* will have an entirely different meaning to a Swedish audience that is aware of the specifically Swedish issues and aesthetics present throughout. The film can be consumed by other audiences, however, it will not necessarily be interpreted or connect to the audience in the same way. It is rare that digital content is consumed in the same way, with the same communal setting, and in instances where it is consumed in such a manner, it is far more likely to be some sort of convention, where the community is based around the type of media rather than a national collective. Likewise, digital media is not necessarily posed around the nation and national signifiers, so the analysis can be applicable to different, non-geographic community.

This type of consumption is what allows for the national narrative to thrive through the use of film, and what allows for horror films to use a national trauma as the backdrop to its narrative. Through exploring the pain represented through blood, gore, violence, monsters, creatures, paranoia, the trauma is being articulated or evaluated in such a way that makes the national audience feel something. Again, while not every horror film uses national trauma as its narrative, the point is that because of the way these films are produced, distributed, and consumed, they all have the ability to portray a national narrative in a way that is being challenged by other forms of horror content being created. Because of media convergence, an all-new realm of participatory horror content

has been made. Likewise, a new means of not only creating an audience, but also uniting a community has been created and affects people in ways other than location and national borders.

### **Converging Horror: Exploring Convergence Culture**

While it is defensible that new horror content utilizes the generic conventions and political power inherent with the horror genre, as demonstrated from the scholarly analysis, there are two main differences between the two that I would also like to argue. Firstly, that the two types of media are produced and consumed in entirely different ways and secondly, that this difference in production and consumption is reflected in what the texts accomplish for the audience based on their narrative and form. A very important aspect of these new digital horror content is that they exemplify media convergence and Convergence Culture more broadly.

Convergence, as stated in the introduction is described by the Films Media Group video *Media Convergence*, as “[Mediums] that were once separated...are coming together.”<sup>19</sup> This definition is the simplest explanation of a very complex process. The two examples that will be further explored in this paper include the film *Unedited Footage of Bear*, which originally aired on television, is housed online, has an accompanying website with additional hidden content, and has many forums and communities on other sites that attempt to

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<sup>19</sup> *Media Convergence*, Online video (Films Media Group; 1997.) Web.

decode its meaning. The other example referenced are the short stories called CreepyPastas, which are viral content spread around the internet that are adapted by many, altered, have fan versions made, have drawings, short stories, videos and more made surrounding the stories, have many online sites and communities that both make and analyze these stories, and have even been the inspiration for motion pictures. Both of these examples embody the idea of separate mediums coming together.

Ithiel de Sola Pool, the “prophet of media convergence” elaborates on this definition in his text *Technologies of Freedom*.<sup>20</sup> He states:

A process called the “convergence of modes” is blurring the lines between media, even between point-to-point communications, such as the post, telephone, and telegraph, and mass communications, such as the press, radio, and television. A single physical means—be it wires, cables or airwaves—may carry services that in the past were provided in the past by any one medium—be it broadcasting, the press, or telephony—can now be provided in several different physical ways. So the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding.<sup>21</sup>

This definition of the process provides more insight into the importance of media convergence that the for which the initial definition lays the groundwork. Pool makes the distinction between personal, one-on-one media types and mass media communications, which is of particular importance in the age of the internet, in which the line between the two is irrevocably blurred. The same devices, websites, and applications in which one has direct, one-on-one

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<sup>20</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 6.

<sup>21</sup> Ithiel de Sola Pool, *Technologies of Freedom*, (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1983), 23.

communication are also used to broadcast to a mass audience or to consume mass media content. This insight is also important to the examples that will be further examined, as they exist within this context: they can be shared one-on-one, as is the case with many early CreepyPastas spread via email, or they can be commented on in a mass setting on forums or the YouTube comment section.

Henry Jenkins comments on the relationship between one-on-one media communication and mass media communications further in his text *Convergence Culture: where old and new media collide*. He states:

Convergence is taking place within the same appliances, within the same franchise, within the same company, within the brain of a consumer and within the same Fandom. Convergence involves both a change in the way media is produced and a change in the way media is consumed.<sup>22</sup>

This quotation epitomizes the heart of media convergence and *Convergence Culture*: participation and the Fandom. These elements go hand-in-hand, and are an important element of new digital texts created. In the examples *Unedited Footage of a Bear* and CreepyPastas, the texts would not exist without participation and fandom. For *Unedited Footage*, the accompanying website, though a part of the same “franchise” so-to-speak, requires participation in its consumption in order to understand the narrative further. Likewise, CreepyPastas exist solely because of the fans of horror content that create and distribute them.

Convergence culture is the culture of the digital age; it is the process by which many texts are made in the age of the internet. This means of production and consumption is very different from traditional cinema. Likewise, the way in

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<sup>22</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 16.

which is it consumed is very different, no longer is there a communal setting in which many people sit at the same time to consume the content, rather, many people in different areas consume and participate in the media online. Because of this difference, convergence Culture and new texts have created a new audience, one that is post-national, one that thrives on participation, one whose connection is not national or geographic, and one that focuses on both large communities based issues and interpersonal relationships. This aspect of Convergence Culture is exemplified in the narratives of the digital texts *Unedited Footage of a Bear* and in the media surrounding CreepyPastas.

### **Digital Horror: *Unedited Footage of a Bear***

One work that exemplifies the ability for media convergence to cater to a digital audience is the work *Unedited Footage of a Bear* made by visual artist Alan Resnick and the production teams of AB Video Solutions and Williams Street Productions. The video initially aired on December 15, 2014 during an early morning 4:00 AM (e.s.t.) time slot on the Adult Swim channel, a Cartoon Network subsidiary that plays content intended for an adult audience. The video is 10 minutes and 23 seconds long, and has since been uploaded to the Adult Swim YouTube Channel, where it has been viewed 3,078,120 times as of February 12th, 2017.

The film utilizes a mix of traditional horror aesthetics combined with the aesthetics of the popular video aggregate site, YouTube. The short begins with

footage of a bear in a river, focusing a mid-shot on the bear, the supposed cameraman reacting to this sight. However, thirty seconds into the film, the footage is interrupted by an “advertisement”. The ad follows the conventions of the typical YouTube ad, including a countdown and an inoperable “Skip Ad” button.

The advertisement for a fictional product once again emulates a different type of content aesthetic, this time modeling its look after common allergy medication commercials. The medication being advertised is a nasal spray called Claridryl. The fiction advertisement following the fictional YouTube clip begins as a fairly average commercial featuring a sick and tired mom struggling to enjoy the outdoors with her kids until she tries the medication. The video continues to use the format of commercials for products like the allergy medication Claritin, including the world shifting from dull and out of focus, to vibrant and full of life after she takes the medication.

However, the commercial takes a dramatic turn as the disembodied voice that was listing the many, many side effects becomes somewhat distorted and fades in and out. The woman who was once at the park with her two kids is now driving alone in her minivan with many discarded boxes of the fictional drug strewn about. She then drives past a house where a murder has seemingly taken place, the police are arresting a rabid man as others remove bags of unidentified liquids from the house. She gets past the home and sees a sweater identical to the one she is wearing in the middle of the road.

She stops the car and gets out to retrieve it. She then notices a clone of herself running rapidly towards her. The rabid, angry, disheveled clone begins to beat up the woman who eventually escapes back to her van. She rushes home only to find more versions of herself throughout her home torturing her children, hiding in her closet, punishing her, seeping into the floor or walls. The piece concludes with the woman sitting in a shock blanket outside her home at night as the police lights can be seen, similarly to the murder scene she witnessed earlier in the piece.

*Unedited Footage of a Bear* is a disturbing short film that, upon initial viewing, follows the conventions of traditional horror content. The film utilizes traditional formal elements like warped audio, a suspenseful and building soundtrack, as well as cuts and haunting visuals that all lend themselves to the horror genre. However, the film has an added layer to the horror that is not present in traditional horror media: the additional online companion site and digital community. While traditional media may have an online community, because it is not a digitally-based medium it is different as far as access and involvement of the community.

Alan Resnick and the aforementioned production companies have produced multiple converging forms of media. Another example would be the short film *This House Has People In It*, which originally aired on Adult Swim on March 15, 2016. The film is meant to look like the security footage of a house while things go disturbingly wrong for a family, as their daughter melts into the

floor, a strange figure follows their son, and the family is haunted by an unknown addiction. The video is hard to explain, and even harder to understand after just one viewing. Similar to *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, *This House* also has an accompanying website. The site is for the fictional security company that captured all of these events on the cameras. Much like the *Unedited* website, this site includes hidden content including visual, audio, and text files that give more context to the events of the original video. Many of the elements require certain actions or passwords to get to, essentially making a large puzzle for the participant, which extends the horror-world into the real world, and further puts the audience member into an active role. These examples exemplify what Jenkins calls a “transmedia story” in his text *Convergence Culture*. He states,

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best-so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics...work might be explored through gameplay...Each franchise entry needs to be contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game and vice versa.<sup>23</sup>

These texts, while existing on their own as they aired on television, are further elaborated on with digital companions, exemplifying the idea of the transmedia story as articulated by Jenkins. Another important element of these texts, both the original films and their accompanying websites are the role of the community surrounding them. The community involvement ranges from theories in the initial film’s comment section, to fan forums discussing theories behind the film, to new

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<sup>23</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 95-96.

videos being made that explain the text and analyze the work the community has done surrounding the works. Looking first to the comment section of the original upload of *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, there are the beginnings of a textual analysis that has extended over months, if not years, and is contributed by people whose identities, race, gender, sexuality, and national identity are all anonymous.

One comment that began a fairly popular thread in the comment section was written 1 year ago by username Ironballs16. They write, “Holy fuck, look in the background at 1:00-literally just down the hill. And for added creepy, compare the shoes at 2:21.” The user also links to particular timestamps in the film- the first, if you follow their instructions and look down the hill you will see the man character’s clone/antagonist in the distance, something many people do not notice upon a first viewing. The second moment occurs when the protagonist is driving past the murder scene, and the shoes they mention are the shoes of the killer and the murder victim, which seem to be identical. This comment received 584 likes and received 64 comments in response. Username Peach Crack adds to the conversation, stating, “Remember she said ‘Sometimes being a mom is like being at 2 places at 1’ That’s what she meant.” pointing out the use of dialogue to foreshadow the later events in the film. Username Magical Incompetence adds four months later, “end of 7:59, beginning of 8:00 it reads ‘call a doctor if you have someone’s face all over you, it could be permanent’” pointing out the very small text on screen that accompanies the footage of one of

the clones vandalizing the family photos of the children as they watch in fear.

Another important comment in the thread was added 6 months after the original post by username malice. They inform the thread of the accompanying website by stating, “Yes click on skip ad and then click on the house, and on everything! [Claridryl] will make it all better!” The comment, in keeping with the tone of the original work informs other viewers of the website, while also acknowledging the added content and disturbing images that are contained within the site. Beyond the comment section of the video itself, there have also been many contributors to online forums that have attempted to analyze the piece further. One such site that has been used as a place for fans and content makers alike to aggregate is the site Reddit, on which comments people enjoy or find useful are “upvoted” sending them to the top of the thread. There have been many threads created to analyze, theorize, and strategize ways of fully consuming *Unedited Footage of a Bear* and its accompanying website, however, they have been narrowed down to just a select few useful comments from two somewhat popular threads.

The first thread was created two years ago, when the film originally aired on television and had not yet been uploaded to the Adult Swim YouTube channel. The original post, written by username KatanaNomad reads, “Ummm, okay.... that wasn't what I was expecting. I think I'm going to watch something cute and not horrific before I go to bed. Goddamn it, why couldn't it have just

been a funny bear...” which received 56 responses<sup>24</sup>. Username Vaticancreeper provides a good insight into the emotions people felt when the piece initially aired, as it was just marketed as “Infomercial” and did not give the viewer any more information. Their comment states, “I honestly have no clue what I just watched. adult swim was just on in the background and I was getting up to go to the bathroom and what I thought was a regular infomercial it got weird and I sat down and just watched as it unfolded I still haven't gone to the bathroom. I came to reddit because it's only place that acknowledges this happened yet.” This comment also provides insight into the power of these aggregate sites like Reddit, YouTube, 4Chan, and more to bring together fan communities.

The thread continues to analyze the meaning of this film, with username chandlergaudet adding, “At first I was like ‘what the actual fuck,’ but then it became pretty apparent that it was a spot-on commentary on prescription drug abuse. It did a good job of portraying the more euphoric aspects (buying her kids a bunch of gifts) and contrasting them with the scarier aspects (when she kicks the shit out of herself, talks to herself, etc.). Those things are rarely (if ever) addressed in drug ads, save for the fine print.” This comment begins to discuss elements of the narrative that are important to the new type of audience to which the media is meant to connect, that being interpersonal and personal issues that can relate to many people regardless of identity and location. This will be further examined in the analysis section of the paper.

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<sup>24</sup> “Unedited Footage of a Bear Discussion,” *Reddit*, accessed February 1, 2017.  
[https://www.reddit.com/r/adultswim/comments/2pgcty/unedited\\_footage\\_of\\_a\\_bear\\_discussion/](https://www.reddit.com/r/adultswim/comments/2pgcty/unedited_footage_of_a_bear_discussion/)

Another thread that was written a year after the airing and the film was uploaded to YouTube allowed for a more in-depth analysis of the piece.

Username NuclearCorpus began the thread with the comment “[Request] What was going on in ‘Unedited Footage of a Bear’ by Adult Swim?”

which received 36 responses.<sup>25</sup> Two responses that provided insight into the narrative of the piece include one comment from user Sanity0004 one year ago, which received 54 points. They write:

Haven't seen it in a while, so I could be off or just overall wrong, but I'll give it a shot from what I remember. The woman is taking the pills from the advertisement and as a side effect it is creating another crazy version of her (or alternate personalities). You see while she's in the car there is a lot of bottles and pill packaging indicating she's been over taking it. At the beginning, still during the commercial, you see the other her in the background. Also while she is driving she passes a crime scene where this has all happened to another family. The person crying about the body is wearing the same shoes as the dead body. By time she realizes what is going on (the sane part of her calling on the phone) it's already too late and the crazy part of her is starting to take over and trying to kill the other part of her. Then it starts showing the flashbacks of other times the crazy side has been in control or past times she's taken the pills and has been out of it. I'm pretty sure that's basically the gist of it, but I could be off on some specifics.

This statement highlights the ability of convergent media to exist archivally. The comment is written months after the initial post that began the thread, but still

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<sup>25</sup> “[Request] What was going on in ‘Unedited Footage of a Bear’ by Adult Swim,” *Fan Theories* on *Reddit*, accessed February 1, 2017. [https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTheories/comments/3f5rz0/request\\_what\\_was\\_going\\_on\\_in\\_unedited\\_footage\\_of/](https://www.reddit.com/r/FanTheories/comments/3f5rz0/request_what_was_going_on_in_unedited_footage_of/)

contributes to the conversation surrounding the text. Likewise, the use of forums and online communities created in Convergence Culture are able to use collective intelligence to examine and reexamine the texts in a streamlined way, as the content and the conversation all occur online. This concept of collective intelligence will be further examined in the section "Analyzing Horror". This particular thread has another interesting comment that highlights a strength of convergent media. Another user, rcveeder, responds to this thread adding:

I think part of the narrative is the idea that the woman's paranoia (paranoia that probably led her to abuse the drugs, paranoia probably exacerbated by abuse of the drugs) is causing her to hallucinate. The image of the crime scene where a person is crying near what appears to be their own dead body catalyzes the ensuing hallucinations of a murderous doppelgänger. The fact that the doppelgänger shows up earlier on would seem to "disprove" this view, but I think the narrative intentionally supports both interpretations. The tension between two equally awful "realities" is central to the surreal terror of the overall narrative. In fact, given that the story deals with a woman trying to protect two children, I wouldn't be surprised if the creators of "Unedited Footage of a Bear" were drawing inspiration from *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James.

These comments differ slightly from the previous comments on the other threads mentioned, as they have the benefit of time in their analysis. Much like a retrospective look at a film in film studies, the archival nature of forums and online content lends itself to further in-depth analysis with time from the original creation or post of the content. These examples also indicate the importance of community, as the thread allows for participants ranging from a vague understanding to an in-depth analysis to contribute to the same thread.

Another means of production from the media consumer that relates to the initial text are the various videos created by different content creators that react to and explain the events inside the film and its website. These videos also exist on the same platform as the original, and like the film *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, allow for the communities surrounding those channels and those YouTubers to participate in the story as it is explored and the discussion of its analysis. Some of these videos include the 33:45 video “Unedited Footage of a Bear: Explained [Video & Website]” which was uploaded one year ago and has since received 307,369 views as of April 6, 2017. The channel, Night Mind, is a popular channel that analysis different horror web series and has 141,370 subscribers. Another popular video uploaded is “Unedited Footage of a Bear: EXPLAINED”, the 13:16 video with 200,136 views, was made and uploaded a year ago by the popular channel YouTube Explained, which has 263,446 subscribers currently. Another video that was made explores one particular aspect of the *Unedited Footage of a Bear* website. There are also smaller YouTubers who still use the platform as a means of content creation and analysis. The video titled “Unedited Footage of a Bear SECRET PAGE easter egg”, is an example of a smaller YouTuber. The video was uploaded by StressedYeti, a small channel with 85 subscribers, yet still managed to garner 19,157 views on the 9:40 video. These videos achieve a similar goal as the forum posts previously discussed, however with an added layer of textuality, as they produced their own videos, which in turn have their own comment sections

and communities based around the channel. This spiral of content-reaction-content-reaction, all being housed in the same cyberspace is an important element of Convergence Culture. The production of new medias based on an initial concept is central in the next example, CreepyPastas.

### **Copy-and-Pasted Horror: The CreepyPasta**

Another example of digital texts created from convergence that are examples of the new, digital audience, are the short viral stories called “creepypastas”. The term Creepypasta is a derivative of the term “Copypasta”, which was created in 2006 by the aggregate site 4Chan, as a term to describe content that is spread digitally via copy-and-pasting.<sup>26</sup> According to *The New York Times*, the stories hit peak popularity in 2010, but they still live on.<sup>27</sup> These stories are essentially modernized, digital urban legends that have been spread via email, YouTube, and other social medias. They can be found archived on sites like Creepypasta.com, the Creepypasta Wiki, Tumblr, the SCP Foundation website, and Microhorror.<sup>28</sup> The stories are often a combination of text, videos, photos, and other elements often made by multiple people all contributing to the same story, once again demonstrating the transmedia storytelling outlined by Jenkins in *Convergence Culture*.

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<sup>26</sup> Jessica Roy, “Behind Creepypasta, the Internet Community That Allegedly Spread a Killer Meme,” *Time*, June 3, 2014. <http://time.com/2818192/creepypasta-copypasta-slender-man/>

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Creepypasta,” *Know your Meme*. 2010. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/creepypasta>

One example of a creepypasta that has been widely popular and has existed in multiple forms of media is the story of Mereana Mordegard Glesgorv. Initially uploaded to YouTube on April 19, 2008 by user erwilzei, it has since been viewed over a million times and has been reuploaded in various lengths and formats, including satirical views that use the same aesthetics but with a different subject. The initial video is a 20 second clip of a man who smiles at the end of the video. The visuals are highly edited to be extremely red and dark. On various 2:00 versions of the video, the description includes the text portion of the creepypasta, which reads as follows:

There is a video on YouTube named Mereana Mordegard Glesgorv. If you search this, you will find nothing. The few times you find something, all you will see is a 20 second video of a man staring intently at you, expressionless, then grinning for the last 2 seconds. The background is undefined. This is only part of the actual video.

The full video lasts 2 minutes, and was removed by YouTube after 153 people who viewed the video gouged out their eyes and mailed them to YouTube's main office in San Bruno. Said people had also committed suicide in various ways. It is not yet known how they managed to mail their eyes after gouging them out. And the cryptic inscription they carve on their forearms has not yet been deciphered.

YouTube will periodically put up the first 20 seconds of the video to quell suspicions, so that people will not go look for the real thing and upload it. The video itself was only viewed by one YouTube staff member, who started screaming after 45 seconds. This man is under constant sedatives and is apparently unable to recall what he saw. The other people who were in the same room as him while he viewed it and turned off the video for him say that all they could hear was a high pitched drilling sound. None of them dared look at

the screen.

The person who uploaded the video was never found, the IP address being non-existent. And the man on the video has never been identified.<sup>29</sup>

Within a day after the initial video subsequent videos with the pasted text began appearing, viewers took to various online forums and discussion pages to piece together meaning or a possible explanation behind the content. Similarly, to *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, the meaning behind this CreepyPasta became a debate, with users posting their own theories behind the legend and origin of both the fictional story and the actual video footage. Eventually, the hoax was revealed and the source material made public, but the community still made fan art, tribute videos, reworked videos, and parody videos around the initial video and story.<sup>30 31</sup>

Another CreepyPasta is one centered around the game Pokemon Red and Green. The story involves the music in a certain version of the game that was released in Japan. While the game is real, the supposed story surrounding the game is not. The claim of the CreepyPasta is that:

After the first few days after the release of Pokemon Red and Green in Japan, there were over 100 suicides among children ages 10-15. During the investigation, the detective concluded that the music that played in Lavender Town, thanks to a secret code included in 104 of the original cartridges, was driving children to kill

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<sup>29</sup> Mereana Mordegard Glesgorv, "Know Your Meme." 2010.  
<http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/mereana-mordegard-glesgorv>

<sup>30</sup> "Mereana Mordegard Glesgorv," *Creepypasta*. April 20, 2008.  
<http://www.creepypasta.com/mereana-mordegard-glesgorv/>

<sup>31</sup> "Mereana Mordegard Glesgorv," *Newgrounds*. April 20, 2008.  
<http://www.newgrounds.com/bbs/topic/895599/2>

themselves.<sup>32</sup>

Since its initial upload there have been many videos created in an attempt to build off the story created. Content ranges from simply the story being read aloud and recorded, to a fan version of the game “Escape from Lavender Town” being created that includes disturbing imagery and jump scares, departing from and building off the original story. The video “Pokemon Blue/Red - Lavender Town” by username pokemonmusicmaster was uploaded 9 years ago and has garnered over 7 million views after the popularity of the CreepyPasta increased.<sup>33</sup> Some videos explicitly state their connection to the CreepyPasta, like the video “Lavender Town ORIGINAL Binaural Frequencies” which was uploaded 3 years ago by username Reitanna Saishin and has received 817,538 views. The description of the video reads:

this is the lavender town song's binaural frequencies. CAREFUL, this is the original japanese green version of the theme, and it will possibly affect you more strongly. listening to this one actually made me nearly throw up, whereas the other one just makes me nauseous.<sup>34</sup>

This video specifically was created in an attempt to make the story seem more real. It claims to be the actual audio and suggests that listeners will be affected by the sound. While it strays from the idea that the listener will kill themselves if they listen to it, the watered-down claim is an attempt to make the idea that the

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<sup>32</sup> “Lavender Town,” Know Your Meme. 2011. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/lavender-town-syndrome-creepypasta>

<sup>33</sup> pokemonmusicmaster, *Pokemon Blue/Red- Lavender Town*, Web video (Uploaded to YouTube March 11, 2008) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNJJ-QkZ8cM>

<sup>34</sup> Reitann Seishin, *Lavender Town ORIGINAL Binaural Frequencies*, Web video (Uploaded to YouTube April 24, 2013) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMPW5n-vreo>

music affects the listener seem more realistic, with nausea being the side effect instead.

While there are many more examples of people attempting to add context and textuality to the story, there are others still that attempt to trace the legend. One particular video is “The Lavender Town Theory” uploaded by username TheGamerFromMars 5 years ago, which has received 1,888,551 views. This creepypasta is an interesting example not only of media convergence, but of the concept of “remix culture” that is present in Convergence Culture. The fact that the original story is centered around a pre-existing piece of popular culture is a commonality of fan culture and is something that Convergence Culture foregrounds, as will be discussed further later.

One of the most popular CreepyPastas is the story of Slender Man. The story of Slenderman is that he is a

mythical creature often depicted as a tall, thin figure wearing a black suit and a blank face. According to the legend, he can stretch or shorten his arms at will and has tentacle-like appendages protruding from his back. Depending on the interpretations of the myth, the creature may cause memory loss, insomnia, paranoia, coughing fits (nicknamed “slendersickness”), photograph/video distortions and can teleport at will.<sup>35</sup>

This story is perhaps the most textualized creepypasta that exists. It has spawned movies, YouTube series, an innumerable number of videos reiterating

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<sup>35</sup> “Slender Man,” *Know Your Meme*, 2010. <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/slender-man>

the story, forums, photos, fan art, and video games all made in response to this story. The supposed origin of the Slenderman occurred in June of 2009 when the forum Something Awful posted a paranormal photoshopping contest. The user Eric Knudsen, username Victor Surge, posted two photos containing the image of the “Slenderman” and a brief story about how it stalked children.<sup>36</sup>

Another popular media created based on the story is the YouTube series Marble Hornets, which follows two film students trying to make a film as they notice strange things happening to one of the characters, as he is tortured by “The Operator” or the Slenderman. The series, beginning in 2009, has garnered a decent following including a quarter of a million subscribers.<sup>37</sup>

The story was also turned into a videogame called Slender: The Eight Pages. The game is a first person perspective puzzle game in which the user attempts to get all 8 pages in order to solve the mystery. The pages are strewn about in the woods and abandoned buildings nearby and the user is constantly being hunted by the Slender Man, who, if he sees you, will distort your vision and kill you.<sup>38</sup>

Slenderman has also inspired many, many fan art drawing and photo manipulations, many of which can be viewed on the art aggregate site DeviantArt. The story has been recontextualized in many mediums, all of which

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Night Mind, *Marbel Hornets: Explained- Season One*, Web video (Uploaded to YouTube July 20, 2015) [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D\\_sACgfX50g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_sACgfX50g)

<sup>38</sup> “Slender: The Eight Pages,” *Giant Bomb*. Web. <https://www.giantbomb.com/slender-the-eight-pages/3030-39028/>

attempt to strengthen the lore of the original creation.

### **Analyzing Horror: Examining digital texts in relation to traditional media and Convergence Culture**

There are two main ways through which to analyze the digital texts; first, through their generic conventions and narrative relations to traditional horror cinema, and secondly, their role as examples of Convergence Culture. Looking first to the narrative of the digital texts, *Unedited Footage of a Bear* clearly utilizes a traditional horror film aesthetic. The film uses blood and gore as the result of violence in a similar fashion to traditional horror films, as a result of an apparent murder and when the clone runs over the protagonist with the vehicle. The film also uses disturbing imagery like clones talking to themselves, time warps in the speed and audio of one of the clones, suggested hatred as one of the clones mocks the children by vandalizing their pictures, and bodies seeping into floors and walls. These images, along with an effective use of a score that emphasizes the chaos and pain the protagonist and her family experience at the hands of her clones, all work together to create the feelings of fear, dread, and suspense felt in the typical horror film.

However, unlike the typical narrative, this film emphasizes the self as a monster with the use of clones, and puts the viewer in this role even further by putting the setting of the film into first-person perspective in the website created to accompany the film. As many of the fans and forums suggest, it is likely that this film is meant to be an allegory of addiction and medication dependence,

demonstrating the effects on the family and the self. This narrative focus is different than that of the national narrative, wherein the threat is catastrophic or affects the broader national community. However, because of the way this media is consumed, the form and content are highly suited for one another.

This effect is also seen in the examples of the CreepyPastas as the narratives are meant to personally attack you as the reader or viewer. You will be the one to gauge your eyes out, you will be the one attacked by Slenderman, you will be the one to commit suicide as a result of the videogame error. These narratives, though utilizing classic elements of horror through instances of monsters, legends, and disturbing imagery, are focused on the individual.

Overall, these texts, due to the ways in which they are produced and consumed, lend themselves to a narrative that focuses more on personal and interpersonal relationships, something that is key to a post-national audience, and differs greatly from cinema, which is one of the only types of media that still has the potential to be consumed in a national setting. The relationship between the audience and the media also differs between traditional forms of media and media created in convergence culture.

Firstly, in general, cinema is a fairly one-sided experience for consumers, as their role is limited to an audience member. However, as Jenkins points out in his text *Convergence Culture*, with the advent of convergence,

Participation is more opened, less under the control of media producers, and more under the control of media consumers...the web has become a site of consumer participation that includes many unauthorized and unanticipated ways of relating to media

content. Though this new participatory culture has its roots in practices that have occurred just below the radar of the media industry throughout the twentieth century, the Web has pushed that hidden layer of cultural activity into the foreground, forcing the media industries to confront its implications for their commercial interests. Allowing consumers to interact with media under controlled circumstances is one thing; allowing them to participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods-on their own terms-is something else altogether.<sup>39</sup>

As he points out, participation, even with media content like traditional horror films, is not new. There has always been dialogue, reviews, fan fiction, and other modes of participation regarding media content. However, it was not until the internet began to converge these texts did the participation become evident. Meaning, the discourse seen around the film *Unedited Footage of a Bear* is not necessarily new, however, it is now an instantaneous, everyday occurrence that exists across national borders and among people with a variety of identities. The last line of the quote, which discusses the ability for consumers to “participate in the production and distribution of cultural goods” is exemplified in the CreepyPastas, as they are the result of horror fans creating and distributing original and derivative content.

This fan culture present in the examples of the CreepyPastas is an indication of another element of Convergence Culture that Jenkins outlines. He states:

Fans have always been early adopters of new media technologies; their fascination with fictional universes often inspires new forms of cultural production, ranging from costumes to fanzines and, now,

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<sup>39</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 133.

digital cinema. Fans are the most active segment of the media and audience, one that refuses to simply accept what they are given, but rather insists on the right to become full participants. None of this is new. What has shifted is the visibility of fan culture. The web provides a powerful new distribution channel for amateur cultural production.<sup>40</sup>

Similar to the existence of participation made visible by the internet and convergence of media, the existence of fan culture has always existed to an extent, but is fostered by the internet and has become a tight-knit community globally as fans no longer have to exist in the same location or go to the same place to indulge in their fan culture. The point of amateur cultural production is also an important element to both CreepyPastas generally and convergence culture broadly.

Still looking at the communal aspect of Convergence Culture, Jenkins writes about the use of “collective intelligence”, something that is key understanding *Unedited Footage of a Bear* and its accompanying website. He writes, “Collective intelligence refers to this ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members. What we cannot know or do on our own, we may now be able to do collectively.”<sup>41</sup> The creation of forums, YouTube videos, tutorials, and other content meant to explain the meaning behind *Unedited Footage* is a prime example of the converging element of “collective intelligence” at work. When many users comment on threads,

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<sup>40</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 131

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

explaining what they know or think about the work, they are able to collectively piece together the narrative and underlying message of the piece. Moreover, they actually create new work, with expanded boundaries, new content, and radically different meanings.

It would seem that convergence and new media have allowed for a dramatic increase in participation, given the means of production have shifted to far more user-friendly and widespread technology like computers and smartphones. Tyrone Chick explores this claim in his text *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Convergence*. He states, "It also helps promote a larger narrative that identifies digital media as a potentially utopian system that allows anyone the opportunity to become a successful filmmaker".<sup>42</sup> However, as has been seen in many forms of media content creation after the advent of new technology that in many ways makes it easier for more participation, there are still barriers to entry that exist and participation is not equal. As Jenkins highlights, those that are most likely to participate in content creation and consumption

in this country... are disproportionately white, male, middle class, and college educated. These are people who have the greatest access to new media technologies and have mastered the skills needed to fully participate in these new knowledge cultures."<sup>43</sup>

In line with other forms of media technologies, new media technologies still follow

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<sup>42</sup> Chuck Tyron, *Reinventing Cinema: Movies in the Age of Media Convergence*, (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 94.

<sup>43</sup> Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 23.

the same general trends of participation and should not be simply thought of as equalizers for all content creators. While convergence and new media have allowed for a lot more participation and different perspectives and types of people to participate, it is far from the “utopia” Chick describes in his text.

Overall, it is clear that *Unedited footage of a Bear* as well as the Creepypastas embody many elements of convergence culture, allowing them to be examples of participatory, transnational, and transmedia storytelling.

### **Converging Horror: Conclusion**

Horror as a genre has been used as a means of displaying political and social insecurities and traumas. This can be seen on a national level throughout cinema history from *White Zombie* epitomizing the infantilization and exotization of the Transatlantic Other to *Get Out* examining the effects of both overt and subtle racism in the United States, to *Caché (Hidden)* dealing with the collective guilt caused by its identity as colonial oppressor. Cinema lends itself to this type of narrative, as it is, more so than any other type of media, still consumed in a communal setting, for a set amount of time, and is largely still distributed by Hollywood and similar studio systems globally. This differs from new media in convergence culture, as they are produced and consumed in entirely different ways.

Digital texts are made by a variety of people, from professional filmmakers and artists like Alan Resnick, who had a production team and funding as well as

a limited distribution on television, to amateur content creators, like those that made the CreepyPastas “Mereana Mordegard Glesgorv”, “Lavender Town”, and “Slenderman”. These stories and the subsequent media produced that piggy-backed off the original story were made by people of many ages, in many places, and with a range of abilities. This concept is central to media convergence. No longer is the media tied to a location or national community, but to a community of people organized around common interests, in this case, the genre of horror. Likewise, *Unedited Footage of a Bear* utilized this type of community in the dissection of meaning in the complicated narrative of the text and its accompanying website. This element of participation, regardless of identity and location, is also reflected in the narratives of the new content.

For *Unedited Footage of a Bear*, rather than emphasizing a national insecurity that threatens the safety or affects the history of a nation in the same way colonialism, the threat of terrorism, or nuclear warfare does, it emphasizes personal issues and interpersonal relationships. The film utilizes familiar conventions, like warped audio, blood, gore, and violence, a dramatic score, and disturbing imagery and situations to create a dialogue about drug dependence and the impact of addiction on the self and family. The film is a very introspective work, as it literally makes the self the monster. Similarly, in the various CreepyPastas, the narratives of the story are happening to an individual. The disturbing image causes the individual to gauge their eyes out, or causes them to go insane, or even kills them. These consequences affect the individual rather

than a collective, like Godzilla or the pod-people. However, they are also meant to be spread virally, so they still relate to interpersonal connections regardless of location.

These texts, as well as others, exemplify the idea of Convergence Culture, the culture that allows for transmedia, transnational, participatory storytelling, it should be noted that it is not a content-creation utopia, there are still barriers to entry and people who wield more experience, money, influence, and ability than others. However, no more so than traditional means of media production. The form content takes in this culture and the means by which is produced highlights the importance of the phenomena, which is reflected in the narratives of digital horror content. Overall, it is clear that these new texts created in a converging culture are exemplary of a post-national audience because of their mobility, transnational and participatory nature, and their expression of inter-personal and cultural anxieties.

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