The (Blum)House Found Footage Horror Built.

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While they have been, perhaps unfairly, referred to as producing 'a ramshackle assortment of found footage thrill rides and creepy doll origin stories',[1] Blumhouse Productions have become a central player in contemporary horror cinema. This legacy has been cemented by their release of critically acclaimed horror films such as *Get Out* (Jordan Peele, 2017) and *The Invisible Man* (Leigh Whannell, 2020) and their position at the helm of the long running and extremely popular *Insidious* and *The Purge* franchises.[2] Blumhouse's synonymy with some of the most intriguing developments in horror cinema post-millennium, as well as a string of genre hits, have led journalists to assert that the company have 'reshaped the landscape of horror'.[3] With other commercial and critical successes such as *Sinister* (Scott Derrickson, 2012), *The Gift* (Joel Edgerton, 2015), and *Split* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2016) bearing the Blumhouse ident, the production house have become one of the most visible and recognisable producers of horror cinema in recent years.

An understudied element of Blumhouse Productions' rise to prominence however, is the strong and enduring connection between the company and the found footage horror subgenre. This is a curious oversight given that the initial growth of the production house can be seen as stemming from the enormous success of a film belonging to that subgenre, *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2009) and its sequels. This chapter will examine the clear and continual return to the found footage format in Blumhouse's production history, highlighting commonalities in criticisms of both the production house and subgenre before investigating how both are seemingly preoccupied by their cultural context, positioning this as a possible explanation for their close relationship. I will then track formal shifts both subtle and seismic within selected Blumhouse produced found footage horror entries and demonstrate their

connection to broader cultural shifts such as the rise in surveillance technology post-millennium, and the exponential growth of internet based communication. In order to examine the relationship between Blumhouse Productions and the found footage horror format however, is it first necessary to accurately position both within the topography of modern horror cinema, underlining their respective centrality to this field and charting their initial entanglement.

When Blumhouse found footage

Although the found footage horror subgenre has historical antecedents in *The Legend of Boggy Creek* (Charles B. Pierce, 1972) and *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980), it was with the release of *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) that this distinctive format first gained widespread attention. Despite critical acclaim, there did not immediately follow an increase in found footage horror production after the film's release, with it being noted that imitations of *The Blair Witch Project*'s format were conspicuous only by their absence.[4] Instead, the North American horror genre in the first decade of the new millennium was characterised by several concurrent cycles or movements. These included the continuation of the post-modern or 'neo-slasher' film,[5] remakes of both domestic and international narratives, and a rise in popularity of the torture porn cycle. Found footage horror did not disappear entirely following *The Blair Witch Project*, with key films such as *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) finding critical and financial success, but it did retreat from the mainstream considerably. It would not be until the release of the Blumhouse produced *Paranormal Activity* that the subgenre would again find itself in the spotlight, this time followed by a widespread emulation of the found footage aesthetic and a significant increase in production for the format.

Paranormal Activity was charged with 'instantly changing horror films for the decade',[6] with its impact reverberating through the genre clearly in the following years. Just as *The Blair Witch Project* was positioned as a minimalist salve to the dominant horror trends of the late 1990s, contrasting with the glossy production values and 'smart alecky, tongue in cheek attitude'[7] of the neo-slashers, the low-fi quality of *Paranormal Activity* was similarly noted to be an alternative to the visual excesses of torture porn.[8] As Adam Charles Hart notes, the film was something of 'a genuinely strange cultural phenomenon for its rejection of so many of the things the industry thought audiences wanted from horror in 2009'.[9] There was a discernible and undeniable rise in the number of found footage horror films produced in North America following *Paranormal Activity*. This is especially apparent if we are to compare the number of films adhering to the format in the four years previous to its release, of which there are eleven in total, to the four years following its release, where forty-one found footage horror films emerged.[10] The success of *Paranormal Activity* gave an enormous financial boost to Blumhouse Productions, with the film being created on a meagre budget of $15,000 and going on to gross over $193 million (USD) worldwide.[11] It is also a significant film within the company's production history, in that it marks the point at which Blumhouse Productions turned almost primarily to the horror genre.

As of March 2020, Blumhouse have released one hundred films, with sixty-nine of these belonging firmly to the horror genre.[12] The presence of found footage horror within Blumhouse's horror filmography is essential. Of these sixty-nine horror films, sixteen are what I will term as 'pure found footage horror', meaning that the film adheres to the found footage conceit for the vast majority of its run time. Further to these sixteen pure found footage horror films, there are also a number of films produced by Blumhouse that I term as 'found footage horror adjacent', meaning that the aesthetics and conventions of the format are used as a key narrative device during the film. An example of this would be *Sinister*, in which

the story revolves around a box of found VHS tapes and, as Bernice Murphy rightly points out, in which 'important sequences (…) are shot as though being recorded on authentically grainy 8mm (…) film'.[13] Within *Sinister*, it is fair to say some of the most atmospheric and genuinely tense moments within the film originate from this 'found footage', and its role within the narrative is crucial. If we are to isolate only the pure found footage horror films, these make up a significant 21% of Blumhouse Productions' horror filmography alone, and when this is combined with the nineteen further found footage adjacent films, this grows to 48%, nearly half of the company's overall horror production history.

If we are to compare these figures to the output of a similar production house, XYZ Films, Blumhouse's continual return to the found footage horror format becomes even more apparent. XYZ Films, like Blumhouse Productions, are a company with a focus on both low budgets and genre filmmaking, with a noticeable inclination towards horror cinema. Twenty-six of their completed sixty-one films – again, up until March 2020 – belong to the genre. Their found footage output however, is minimal. In XYZ Films' production history, only one film can be considered to be pure found footage horror, *Frankenstein's Army* (Richard Raaphorst, 2013), making up only 4% of their overall horror output. Even if we are to add the further three found footage adjacent films produced by XYZ Films, this only grows to 15%. It is evident that there is a clear and continual return throughout Blumhouse's production history to the found footage horror subgenre that has yet to be examined. It could be argued, of course, that Blumhouse's repeated return to the format and XYZ Films converse restraint may be down to a myriad of reasons, including the worth of found footage horror, as a subgenre that can be produced on very little money, to a company that sets quite strict budgetary limitations.[14] This chapter will demonstrate, however, that the links between the subgenre and the production house run deeper than financial prudence.

Blumhouse Productions and the found footage horror subgenre have a commonality in terms of recurrent criticisms that have been aimed in their direction. Although Blumhouse have been positioned as the production house poised to "save" the horror genre,[15] it would be false to claim that the company has escaped unfavourable analysis. A recurrent theme in journalistic appraisal of Blumhouse Productions is the suggestion that there is an overarching focus for the company on the quantity of their filmic output rather than the quality. This can be seen in multiple references to how they are 'cranking out' or 'churn out' films,[16] functioning as an 'assembly line'[17] for the 'best and *worst* of modern horror'.[18] There is a proposition in a great deal of these accounts that Blumhouse are not so much preternaturally skilled at spotting the next possible horror hit, but that their chances of producing one are 'elevated by sheer volume alone'.[19] Moreover, it has been argued that Blumhouse's prolific rate of production has resulted in 'a glut of lower-tier films, some of which are so lazy and uninspired […] that they threaten to give horror a bad name'.[20] There is also a suggestion here that the output of the company is limited by its (self-imposed) budgetary constraints, resulting in a persistent usage of the word 'cheap'[21] or the phrase 'cheap looking'[22] to describe the films produced by Blumhouse, even in otherwise complimentary accounts.

Found footage horror cinema has similarly been described as 'cheap',[23] in addition to being 'a grabby, artless gimmick',[24] or 'an ingenious way to excuse crap production values'.[25] Because the found footage horror aesthetic is easy to reproduce on incredibly limited budgets, the subgenre is prolific and – as I will explore below – the saturation of the format within the horror genre is perhaps one of the reasons it draws critical ire. The stylistic limitations of found footage horror have also featured in both journalistic accounts[26] and scholarship surrounding the subgenre and are positioned as hindrances to be overcome in order for the format to survive.[27] However, as the next section of this chapter will argue, it is precisely the

limitations of Blumhouse Productions' budgets and found footage horror's style and form that enable their symbiotic relationship.

Cheap/Woke: Blumhouse, found footage horror, and cultural commentary

Perhaps due to their production of recent films that deal with socially relevant themes such as *Get Out*, *The Invisible Man*, and *The Hunt* (Craig Zobel, 2020), Blumhouse have been repeatedly framed as a production house that is acutely conversant with its contemporary cultural climate. Indeed, this awareness of the production contexts of their films has led to criticism that the company is perhaps trying too hard to produce 'woke' horror,[28] with films such as *Black Christmas* (Sophia Takal, 2019) characterised as 'less of a horror film and more of a thinkpiece, a hodgepodge of buzzwords and ideas, aiming high but crashing into the snow'.[29] The sociopolitical resonance of the films they produce appears to be a growing matter of importance to Blumhouse, as is their amplification of previously marginalised voices within the horror genre. Blumhouse Productions has, for instance, recently focused on increasing the number of films they produce by black and ethnic minority creators, spearheaded by the aforementioned *Get Out*, and including *Thriller* (Dallas Jackson, 2018), *Us* (Jordan Peele, 2019), and *Sweetheart* (J. D. Dillard, 2019). This is in addition to films which focus on groups or individuals that have previously been somewhat absent from, or caricatured by, the horror genre, for example the overarchingly Latino cast of *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* (Christopher Landon, 2014), the disabled final girl of *Hush* (Mike Flanagan, 2016), and the African American family at the centre of *Don't Let Go* (Jacob Aaron Estes, 2019). Blumhouse founder and CEO Jason Blum has been directly criticised for a lack of diversity in terms of the gender of directors that helm Blumhouse films,[30] but this would appear to be an imbalance that is beginning to be actively addressed, with the

announcement and release of four female directed horror films.[31] Of course, Blumhouse, in its function as a production company, cannot be given sole credit for the ways in which many of these films broach culturally relevant themes, but the ongoing political underpinnings of recent Blumhouse funded films is underlined by Jason Blum's inclination towards commenting on a variety of pertinent social issues in various interviews. In an interview with *Variety* magazine, Blum noted that his impetus for producing culturally resonant horror was due to his desire to highlight relevant issues, and he stated 'I'm deeply personally upset with what's happening in the world, and I look for any possible way I can try and change it. The tool at my disposal is we make TV shows and movies'.[32] Blum is also known for being politically engaged, having been removed from the stage at the Israel Film Festival in 2018 for speaking out against President Trump.[33]

The found footage horror subgenre is similarly preoccupied with its cultural context at both a narrative and formal level. As I have discussed elsewhere,[34] this fixation of the subgenre with the context it is created in manifests within its presentation of narratives as occurring in the audience's reality rather than adjacent to it, with this being achieved by an adoption of ever evolving representations of reality. The subgenre's adaptability and keen emulation of new reality 'looks' enables it to maintain an association with the audience member in their current cultural moment, an element that is key to its appeal. The found footage horror subgenre therefore includes many different 'looks' under its subgeneric banner, from the handheld style of *The Blair Witch Project*, through to the emulation of reality television in *Grave Encounters* (Colin Minihan and Stuart Ortiz, 2011), mimicking of a VICE documentary in *The Sacrament* (Ti West, 2013), and the social media aesthetic of *Unfriended* (Leo Gabriadze, 2015). This adaptability of found footage horror cinema has allowed the subgenre to engage with a variety of cultural anxieties, as well as confronting and even revisiting national traumas such as 9/11 and the Jonestown Massacre, in a much more direct way than

other subgenres. Found footage horror stands as perhaps one of the most socially aware subgenres in cinematic horror history, perhaps necessitated by its keen interest towards adopting ever evolving technologies and reality aesthetics. At the heart of many found footage horror narratives is the character's drive towards capturing evidence of the unique or unprecedented, whether this be an event, an act, or an entity. As Cecilia Sayad argues, 'the found footage cycle is considered a symptom of its time, and a topical one, for the act of filming one's life is widespread'.[35] In a society ever more impacted by and attentive to visual evidence of events around the world, the found footage horror film is a format that has a particular resonance.

It would seem then, that Blumhouse Productions, as a company that lean towards social relevance, and found footage horror, as a subgenre that lends itself well to cultural commentary and is fixated on its production context, are particularly well matched. In addition to being a subgenre that can be produced comfortably within Blumhouse's budgetary limitations, the ability of the format to adapt and respond quickly to broader shifts both cultural and technological resonate within a production house that seeks to be at the forefront of thematic and aesthetic shifts within the horror genre. Although found footage horror cinema has been termed as 'visually simplistic',[36] or more pejoratively as 'tired and lazy',[37] these criticisms discount several evolutionary shifts, both thematic and aesthetic, that have occurred within the subgenre since its inception. The found footage horror films produced by Blumhouse in particular have moved the subgenre in often startling directions. Beginning with an overview of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise and culminating with an analysis of *Unfriended*, the remainder of this chapter will chart some of the transformations that have taken place within Blumhouse produced found footage horror, and how these have connected to broader cultural and technological changes.

“Whatever happened to the little handheld?”: Subtle and seismic shifts in Blumhouse’s found footage.

Despite the fact that the *Paranormal Activity* franchise has been described as a ‘crassly commercial venture’ in which each instalment ‘follows the same predictable pattern’,[38] and has been dismissed as a series that ‘offers the same ghostly clap trap over and over’,[39] it is within these films that we can begin to discern formal innovations that act as subtle shifts within the subgenre’s format. The reception to *Paranormal Activity* was overarchingly positive, with it being hailed as a ‘new claustrophobic classic’[40] that was ‘brutally committed to simplicity’.[41] Although much was made of *The Blair Witch Project*’s minimalist aesthetic, *Paranormal Activity* managed to pull the found footage horror subgenre into even more austere territory, using only one HDV camera utilised in a handheld capacity during the day by the character of Micah and placed on a tripod facing Micah and his girlfriend Katie’s bed at night. The sparse aesthetic of *Paranormal Activity* led to it being framed as ‘formally postmodern’,[42] and as a text that presented an ‘interrogation of [the] properties of cinema’.[43] It is the static frames of the overnight footage within *Paranormal Activity* that mark the film as a significant departure from previous found footage horror aesthetics.

Albeit static camera shots had been used previously in the subgenre, it is the long duration of these sequences within *Paranormal Activity*, as noted by Cecilia Sayad,[44] which act as a departure from previous found footage horror aesthetics. The seemingly inactive frames in the franchise, particularly in *Paranormal Activity 1*, *2*, and *3*, compel the viewer to ‘sit through long sequences in which *literally nothing happens*’.[45] This encourages the viewer to scan the screen actively for information or movement, and can lull them into a sense of false complacency when nothing appears to be occurring. The effect of this is two-fold, firstly, the inaction on screen coupled with the viewer’s close attention as they try to discern anything significant intensifies the effect – and indeed the affect – of any sudden movement or noise.

Secondly, the viewer is rewarded for their close attention when they are provided with privileged visual information, such as when one of the overnight shots of Katie and Micah's bed allows the viewer to witness Katie, in a sleepwalking state, stand over Micah's sleeping form for several hours. This is an event that the characters within the film are not aware of until the following day when they review the footage. This is a notable departure from other found footage horror films up until this point, where the viewer was placed more often than not in the same distinctly unprivileged position as the character operating the camera, with information revealed to both at the same time. Despite accusations that *Paranormal Activity 2* (Tod Williams, 2010) replicated 'the exact formula of the original' film,[46] this innovative push towards more static and surveillance based aesthetics in *Paranormal Activity* was more fully realised in the sequel film. Within *Paranormal Activity 2*, security cameras are placed in various locations both inside and outside of the house of Kristi, Katie's sister, after an apparent burglary. It is from these six security cameras that the majority of the "found footage" within the film originates, with sporadic use made of a handheld camera at various points. Both *Paranormal Activity* and to a greater extent *Paranormal Activity 2*, largely eschew the embodied viewer experience that had characterised the subgenre up until this point – where the camera adopted the very human movements of its operator – and give preference to a more impassive and inhuman gaze.

I propose that although the found footage horror subgenre as a whole grew in popularity explosively during a time of increased access to consumer grade cameras and user generated content websites such as YouTube, the *Paranormal Activity* franchise seems to speak in particular to the abundance of CCTV footage that has become common to mainstream news broadcasts. Furthermore, this emphasis on more dispassionate and disembodied cameras can be productively connected to the ubiquity of surveillance technologies post-millennium. In particular, the massive investments in various forms of security monitoring in a post-9/11

world, and the position of the franchise within an ever more mediated culture and society. As David Lyon notes, after the events of September 11th 2001, 'Already existing surveillance was reinforced at crucial points, with the promise of more to come'.[47] It is important to note that found footage horror was not the only subgenre to respond to this cultural shift, with it being proposed that torture porn also adopted surveillance aesthetics in earnest.[48] *Paranormal Activity 2* in particular constructs much of its tension and horror around this style. The six security cameras within the film are situated in high corners of rooms or doors, with their lenses looking down on the characters, and positioned in places where no human operator could logically be. This space is 'a place of impossible subjectivity'.[49] Given that found footage horror is a subgenre that had been characterised by the distinctly human movements of its camera operators at this point, this new aesthetic gives a particular sense of unease. In making this move towards a focus on operatorless surveillance cameras, *Paranormal Activity 2* marks more of a full realisation of the departure from the traditional handheld found footage style typified by *The Blair Witch Project* that *Paranormal Activity* instigated. The unfeeling, immovable gaze of its cameras allows the viewer to mediate on empty spaces and rooms, scanning them for significance without the directional input or commentary of a diegetic cameraperson.

Further instalments within the series continue the innovation shown in the first two entries, with each new film adhering to what became the franchise's model of formal innovation. For example, the introduction in *Paranormal Activity 3* (Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2011) of the 'fan cam', a camera attached to the base of an oscillating fan. Whereas the static cameras of the series thus far had presented the viewer with a more or less unobstructed view of the room they were placed in, the fan cam of *Paranormal Activity 3* obscured as much as it revealed. With the camera in constant motion, the audience is not provided with uninterrupted access to a stable view as the camera lens sweeps from side to side only

showing part of the room at any given time. This footage capitalised on a sense of unease around the off screen space, and as Steven Shaviro rightly notes, for the audience 'the sense of lurking danger is enhanced as much by our fear about seeing things as by our anxiety about what we do not see'.[50] This tension is amplified by the fan cam in several key scenes, as the viewer's vision is restricted to where the camera lens is pointing at that moment. These subtle shifts and experiments in form are continued to a certain extent in both *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* and *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015), the fifth and sixth instalments of the franchise. It is with *Paranormal Activity 4* (Henry Joost and Ariel Schulman, 2012) however, that this drive towards innovative form began to branch into the adoption of internet based communicative technology, with the inclusion of laptop webcams playing a significant role in the film's aesthetic.

In their release of the *Paranormal Activity* films, Blumhouse Productions had positioned themselves at the forefront of the burgeoning found footage horror movement, which had rapidly become the 'subgenre *du jour*'[51] of the contemporary horror landscape. It was around the time of the release of *Paranormal Activity 4* however, that criticism of found footage horror began to dominate critical engagement with the format. References were repeatedly made to the limitations of the subgenre which its films seemed, at times, unable to transcend.[52] Furthermore, films such as *Chronicle* (Josh Trank, 2012) – a non-horror found footage film – were reported to have been 'hamstrung and ultimately strangled' by the 'claustrophobic cage' of the conceit.[53] Perhaps due to the large amount of found footage horror films that followed in the wake of *Paranormal Activity*, the format was deemed a 'stylistic fad',[54] the widespread adoption of which had led the horror genre to become oversaturated with the 'tiresome' subgenre.[55] The limitations of found footage horror, such as its often shaky presentation, obscured shots and the limits of its frame – all aspects that are central to the construction of fear in the subgenre and essential to its claims of authenticity –

were now considered too 'rigid'.[56] The *Paranormal Activity* franchise in particular was often reduced to being positioned as 'cheaply made mass-marketed movies that have lined the pockets of producers who chanced upon the holy grail of license-to-print-money filmmaking'.[57] Moreover, it was noted that the *Paranormal Activity* series had 'turned the concept of "found footage" from a legitimate stylistic choice to a groan-inducing mistake',[58] leaving the format without 'anywhere new to go'.[59] I have so far argued that the *Paranormal Activity* films are the site of several formal innovations within the found footage horror format, and that these were connected to concurrent shifts in broader culture towards surveillance and an increasingly mediated society. It was with the release of *Unfriended i*n 2015 however, that the potential of the internet as a site of horror, hinted at in *Paranormal Activity 4* and *5*, would be fully realised, and it is this film that stands as a seismic shift in Blumhouse Production's found footage horror production history.

Whereas the formal experimentation found in the *Paranormal Activity* series was often subtle, the aesthetics of *Unfriended* moved the found footage horror subgenre into new territory entirely. Although films such as *The Den* (Zachary Donohue, 2013) and *Open Windows* (Nacho Vigaondo, 2014) had previously used internet based aesthetics, both are distinct from *Unfriended* due to their use of proxy versions of software and applications within their diegesis. For example, in *The Den*, the character of Elizabeth is carrying out research on a social media website that teams the user with a random online partner for a video chat. Rather than featuring Chatroulette – a real life website that has this exact function – the film uses a stand in called "The Den". Similarly in *Open Windows*, the film's aesthetics are primarily formed of software and applications that either do not exist, or would not be available to the average audience member. Furthermore, *Open Windows* is presented through a high-tech, computer based imagery aesthetic, rather than as an actual computer screen.

Unfriended is constructed visually in a way that sets it apart from these films, traditional filmmaking as a whole and previous films in the found footage subgenre.

The narrative of *Unfriended*, which centres on the suicide of teenager Laura Barns, is contained within the rigid limits of a laptop screen. The story primarily unfolds through a Skype video chat between a group of Laura's friends, Blaire, Adam, Mitch, Val, Jess and Ken, on the anniversary of her death. In its use of real life software and web applications such as Google, Chatroulette, Facebook, YouTube, Liveleak, Facebook Messenger, Skype and Spotify, *Unfriended* attempts to marry its fictional narrative with the audience's real life experience of internet interaction. *Unfriended* clearly recognises the rise in streaming services and the ways in which audiences utilise various mediums to view films, and marks a profound shift in the found footage horror format in the way that it deliberately plays with the audience's perception of the media it is presented as being recorded on or broadcast through. In *Unfriended*, the viewer is bombarded with several software applications or windows of information being open at the same time. These visuals, along with common computer alert tones and the sound of fingers tapping on a keyboard, encourages an immersive experience for the audience, particularly if they are watching the film on a laptop themselves. As the director of the sequel film, *Unfriended: Dark Web* (2018), Stephen Susco, notes in relation to his own viewing of *Unfriended*, he found himself

> Watching the mouse move across the screen and feeling my fingers moving and realising I was trying to move the mouse. That was so profound about what this new movie did (…) it tapped into the fact that we all use computers, some of us for 10, 11, 12 hours a day[60]

The uploadable aesthetics of user generated content websites are continually evoked within the film, not only though the Skype call, but through elements such as a video that was

uploaded to YouTube by Laura before her suicide. The video, in which Laura holds up flash cards instead of speaking, is aesthetically remarkably similar to the pre-suicide video of Amanda Todd, a girl who committed suicide in real life after she was subjected to an extended online campaign of bullying. In addition to the use of flashcards, both girls wear black vest tops, both have long dark hair and both of the videos are in black and white. The similarities are striking and deliberate. This use of internet based aesthetics also extended beyond the film itself. Another video, showing the suicide of Laura Barns and which both opens and features within the film, was hosted until relatively recently on real life shock website Liveleak.com, where it could be accessed alongside real videos of graphic injuries and suicide. In addition, various Facebook accounts were created for the characters within the film.

Unfriended is a narrative that clearly engages with its contemporary context, as Laura's suicide is framed within the film as a result of an internet shaming campaign against her which, it becomes apparent, was led by her supposed friends. 'Shaming' in this context, is when an individual is targeted for humiliation through use of social media, or through videos/photographs shared in online spaces. Internet shaming often plays a significant part in cyberbullying, with several cases leading to suicide. For example, the death of Izzy Laxamana, a thirteen year old girl who took her life after her father uploaded a video showing he had cut off her hair as a punishment.[61] Other cases, such as Tyler Clementi, Audrie Pott and Amanda Todd – mentioned above – have resulted in teenagers killing themselves due to extended cyberbullying campaigns. *Unfriended,* in its inclusion of this theme, and its adherence to the aesthetics of online interaction and social media, provides a filmic space for investigating these emergent cultural anxieties around social media, cyberbullying and the threat of digital anonymity. These references to internet culture are however presented as less of a critique of social media, or of a generation that has been said to be 'addicted to the

internet',[62] but more to build a sense of realism through incorporating visual aspects that viewers may be familiar with and as a response to our increasing enmeshment with the internet in everyday life. In an age where our experience of the world is mediated often through social media and bystander footage, such as the death of George Floyd, who was killed during an arrest in Minnesota in 2020,[63] *Unfriended* marked the next logical step for both a subgenre that strives to connect with the cultural moment, and a production house that endeavours to move forward in its engagement with sociopolitically relevant themes.

The films this chapter has engaged with are all centred on the supernatural. This is perhaps no surprise, due to the growing dominance of supernatural narratives within the horror genre post-millennium. Todd Platts and Mathias Clasen have suggested this kind of horror narrative found popularity in this period 'because of a cultural and psychological climate particularly hospitable to such films'. As they go on to highlight however, the growth of this thematic strand cannot be explained by cultural relevance alone, and they note that a key reason for this rise also stems from the fact that supernatural horror films cost considerably less money to produce than other types of horror films. This may be due to their tendency to suggest at monstrous forms rather than present them directly through the use of expensive visual effects, making this type of horror film 'particularly attractive to emerging low budget production companies such as Blumhouse Productions'.[64]

This cost effectiveness makes supernatural narratives particularly well suited to both Blumhouse Productions and the found footage horror subgenre – which similarly emphasises suggestion rather than overt depictions of horror – but I would argue that it is perhaps the cultural resonance of these films that is key to their appeal to audiences. As Annette Hill proposes, popular representations of the supernatural 'tend to be located in moments of political and social change', and that these changes can be related to 'War, religious and political unrest, violence and mass trauma, new scientific developments [and] challenges to

orthodoxies'.[65] In addition, Adam Charles Hart takes his cue from Jeffrey Sconce's concept of haunted media,[66] in arguing that 'Our anxieties about media inspire our horror stories, and our ghosts take on the forms and qualities of our media'.[67] This would suggest that there is more at play within these films than the need to appropriate new media and technology in order to maintain a relationship with audiences purely for positive financial return.

Conclusion

It is not my intention to propose that formal and thematic innovation in the found footage horror subgenre can only be found in films produced by Blumhouse. Recent examples of the ever evolving nature of the format can be seen in its movement across different mediums, for example in the emergence of what could be described as 'found audio' podcasts such as *The Stroma Sessions* (Nicolas Jackson, 2016) and *Video Palace* (Ben Rock, 2018), and the use of found footage aesthetics within video games such as *Outlast* (Red Barrels, 2013), *The Final Take* (HUSH interactive, 2016) and the augmented reality mobile phone game *Night Terrors: Bloody Mary* (Imprezario Entertainment, 2018). From the subtle innovations present in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise to the revolutionary shift within the subgenre seen in *Unfriended*, found footage horror has deftly adapted to emergent technologies and reality looks. This has not only enabled maintenance of a connection with its audience but has allowed an engagement with emerging cultural anxieties. This chapter has repeatedly placed the self-reflexive subgenre as an apt vehicle for Blumhouse Productions, as not only can found footage horror be created on a limited budget, but it has a distinct leaning towards sociopolitical commentary. In closing, I would note that despite a drop in Blumhouse's found footage horror production since 2015, a seventh *Paranormal Activity* film, *Paranormal Activity: Next of Kin* was released in 2021.[68] The ever evolving found footage format will return again to the house of Blum.

[1] B. Webb, 'Horror specialist Blumhouse has quietly become 2020's most exciting film studio', *NME*, 14 May (2020). Available at: *https://www.nme.com/features/horror-specialist-blumhouse-has-quietly-become-2020s-most-profitable-film-studio-2668647* (Accessed 21 May 2020).

[2] The *Insidious* franchise includes *Insidious* (2010, Wan), *Insidious: Chapter Two* (2013, Wan), *Insidious: Chapter Three* (2015, Whannell), and *Insidious: The Last Key* (2018, Robitel). *The Purge* franchise is made up of four feature length films, *The Purge (*2013, DeMonaco), *The Purge: Anarchy* (2014, DeMonaco), *The Purge: Election Year* (2016, DeMonaco) and *The First Purge* (2018, McMurray), along with the television series *The Purge* (2018 -). A fifth film, *The Forever Purge* (2020, Gout) is yet to be released at the time of writing

[3] R. Fletcher, 'How Jason Blum Changed Horror Movies', *DenofGeek*, 3 March (2020). Available at: *https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/how-jason-blum-changed-horror-movies/* (Accessed: 4 May 2020).

[4] R. Gilbey, 'Commission us: 'found footage' – the discovery that disappeared again', *The Guardian*, 14 October (2010). Available at*: https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2010/oct/14/found-footage-blair-witch-project* (Accessed: 25 June 2020).

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[12] The last film I have included in this number is *The Hunt*, which was released on online streaming services due to the 2020 Covid19 pandemic. I would also note that this number excludes some releases that have strong horror overtones but cannot be placed squarely within the horror genre, such as *Upgrade* (Whannell, 2018) and *Bloodline* (Jacobson, 2019). Interestingly, *Upgrade* is directed by Leigh Whannell, who is primarily known for his work within the horror genre.

[13] B. Murphy, '"It's Not the House That's Haunted": Demons, Debt, and the Family in Peril in Recent Horror Cinema', in M. Leeder (ed.) *Cinematic Ghosts: Haunting and Spectrality from Silent Cinema to the Digital Era* (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 235–51. p. 238.

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[15] For example, see M. Peikert, 'Why Jason Blum Loves Making Horror', *Backstage*, 22 October (2015). Available at: *https://www.backstage.com/magazine/article/jason-blum-loves-making-horror-9432/* (Accessed 21 June 2020) and J. Humphreys, 'The Haunted House That Blum Built – How An Indie Producer Saved Horror and Changed Hollywood', *Cineramble*, October 20 (2018). Available at *http://cineramble.com/2018/10/the-*

haunted-house-that-blum-built-how-an-indie-producer-saved-horror-and-changed-hollywood/ (Accessed 21 June 2020). Many directors and subgeneric movements have been charged with being the horror genre's saviour throughout cinematic history, although as an ever popular genre what it needs saving from is not clear.

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[18] B. Parsons, 'The Blumhouse Model: Factory filmmaking or artist's dream?', *The Boar*, 20 September (2020). Available at: *https://theboar.org/2020/04/the-blumhouse-model-factory-filmmaking-or-artists-dream/* (Accessed 6 May 2020), emphasis added.

[19] B. Parsons, 'The Blumhouse Model'.

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