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“It fixates”: indie quietes and the new Gothics

Joan Hawkins¹

ABSTRACT The article attempts to make several interventions. Following Jamie Sexton’s work on Independent Horror, it revisits the vexed status of horror within American Independent Cinema. Not only is indie horror frequently omitted from discussion of American Independent Cinema, but low budget, direct-to-DVD and video-on-demand indie horror titles are frequently omitted from academic discussions of horror. This has the effect of skewing our understanding of the genre. From there the article moves to consider a specific subgenre of indie horror that has been gaining in popularity: the Quiet Horror film—a category that contains the sub-genre of indie-Gothic films. Lastly, the paper moves on to a close reading of a specific low budget indie Gothic title, *Absentia*.

¹ Indiana University, Cinema and Media Studies, Media School, Bloomington, IN, USA

Mike Flanagan's *Absentia* (2011, FallBack Plan Productions; US \$70,000) belongs to a film cycle that straddles two important trends in contemporary horror: low budget independent production and the New Gothic. The fact that this film and others like it have remained outside scholarly discourse indicates a certain structuring absence in genre and sub-genre studies. To some extent, this is just another manifestation of a problem that has plagued academic film theory and history for years. As Jim Collins writes, theoretical discussions "about how a popular art form works has somehow been severed from the activity of actually going to the movies," or—as this case would have it—having the movies come to us (Collins, 1). Similarly, Gregory Waller notes that Film Studies has tended to make categorical statements about film and genre history, based primarily on urban theatrical consumption, rather than on the way many people in this country have historically watched films (Waller). This tendency limits and skews our understanding of the reception and circulation of certain films, about genres and their historical trends, and—in many cases—about audiences.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to provide a thorough corrective to our understanding of horror history. But I would like to consider how low-budget production impacts horror and, more importantly for our purposes, what the emergence of a new Gothic impulse might mean. In terms of genre and sub-genre studies, the essay is less interested in the impact that the New Gothic might have on Gothic Studies *per se*, and more interested in the way that the Gothic—as a mode of narrative—has been written out of larger horror film history. That is, since the emergence of the slasher, films with strong Gothic overtones—George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *The Brood* (David Cronenberg, 1979), *Paranormal Activity* (Oren Peli, 2007)—have been discussed primarily as something else: zombie films, slashers, body-viral horror, found footage. So students new to horror history frequently get the idea that the gothic ceased to be a popular form shortly after 1970.

The emergence of "quiet horror"—the New Gothic—provides an opportunity to re-consider the post-slasher history of the Gothic genre and to revisit Gothic genealogy. Low budget, independent Gothic horror invites a reassessment both of Independent film's predominantly prestige status and of the current horror market. Mike Flanagan's *Absentia* provides a particularly rich low budget example through which to begin this reconsideration.

Indie horror and direct to video

Horror films have been a staple of independent film production, yet, as Jamie Sexton points out, "since the 1980s they have been marginalized from discourses relating to American Independent Cinema" (Sexton 2012). They have also been marginalized from the academic world of horror studies. While mainstream indie filmmakers (Guillermo del Toro, for example) are included in scholarly horror genre discussions, low budget filmmakers like Ti West (*House of the Devil*, 2009), Zack Parker (*Proxy*, 2013), and Mike Flanagan (*Oculus*, 2013) are largely excluded from the syllabi and state-of-the-genre essays that help define the parameters of the field. Horror conference panels at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies, our international scholarly organization, largely ignore limited release independent horror in favor of the more commercial franchises that already receive substantial media attention. Even academic fans frequently know less about low-budget indie horror than they should. At least since the 1980s then, as Jamie Sexton notes, "only particular types of films" have been deemed appropriate scholarly examples of

American Independent and horror cinema (Sexton, 70). What that means for film scholarship is an impoverished and incomplete film history, and a frequently inaccurate portrayal of contemporary horror and contemporary horror audiences.

As has been noted elsewhere, there has always been a thriving horror video and DVD collector culture (Hawkins, 2000). And certainly from the 1980s on, studios and production companies began to use that culture to recuperate titles and give them what Linda Badley has called a "second wind." (Badley, 2010: 49). That is, films that performed poorly in the theater, or that were deemed too "dark" or "cerebral" were moved quickly to the VHS/DVD marketplace (Farely 2003 60 #14), sometimes returning to theatrical distribution after building a word-of-mouth following. *Donnie Darko* (Richard Kelly, 2001) is perhaps the best known example of this strategy, but there were earlier examples as well. And by the end of the 90s, even films that did well at the box office received a quick turn-around subsidiary market release. *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez and James Myrick) as Badley notes (49) was "one of the fastest turnovers of its time". Released in theatres on 16 July 1999, it was available on VHS by 22 October 1999, this despite enormous box office success. By the following decade, VHS and DVD sales accounted for the largest percentage of a production company's revenues. And by 2002, DVDFILE editor Peter Bracke would argue that most movies "are released theatrically only to legitimize their imminent video release", and poor box office numbers do not sentence a film to death. (#15 p. 60). This was particularly true for horror and softcore porn titles. To cite one example, *Session 9* (Brad Anderson, U.S. 2002) had a 1.5 million dollar budget. It grossed \$373,000 in limited theatrical release, yet generated over \$2 million in DVD/VHS rentals.

The biggest market shift was the emergence of Direct to Video (DTV) horror in the 1980s. Bypassing theatrical distribution entirely, DTV films still found a limited audience and pointed a way for the emergence of microbudget horror, regional horror, and truly independent production. Linda Badley cites *The Ripper* (Christopher Lewis 1985) as the inaugurating DTV title (Badley, 2010: 49). But given the decade's explosion of independent production, it is difficult to pinpoint the "film that started it all" with any precision. Early titles include *Dreamaniac* (David DeCoteau, 1986), *Tales from the Quadead Zone* (Chester Novell Turnere, 1987), 555 (Wally Koz, 1988) and Greydon Clark's *The Uninvited* (1988) all of which pointed toward a rapidly growing indie market, made possible by independent, niche and convenience store video rental outlets. By the late 1990s, DTV was what *Screen Review* calls "The Industry's fattest cash cow" with "children's video, softcore porn and horror dominating this rung of the market and filling an increasing demand" (Badley, 2010: 49). Between 2005 and 2008, the number of studio-sponsored direct-to-DVD films had grown 36%, with 675 titles released in 2007 alone. And by 2008, as New York Times writer Brooks Barnes notes, critics could point to a studio "direct-to-DVD policy" (Barnes, 2008). In the world of low budget independent horror, numbers are harder to come by. Horror websites list 167 microbudget DTV films for the same 2007-2008 period. DTV has become so profitable that DVD franchises like Redbox have themselves begun soliciting and producing titles. *The Legend of Wasco* (Shane Beasley and Leya Taylor, 2015) began when Redbox offered the creative team behind *Found* (Scott Schirmer, 2012) and *Headless* (Arthur Cullipher, 2015) \$3,000 to make a microbudget horror film. The only caveat was that it had to be about a clown. The film was released Video on Demand and Direct to DVD through Redbox, on 15 December 2015.

As the last example suggests, Livestreaming and Video on Demand are the newest platforms in a media environment that

increasingly promises consumers a nontheatrical viewing option. Companies like Curzon Home Cinema advertise films that can be streamed the very day of their theatrical release. In the independent market, filmmakers increasingly turn to sites like Vimeo to promote their movies. For the indie horror filmmaker, these are frequently the only viable platforms. “Every filmmaker wants to see his or her movie in theaters”, Videomaker writes, “but theatrical distribution is rare for a low-budget horror film. Most go straight to video or VOD” (Videomaker, 2016). And according to Stephen Follows and Bruce Nash of American Filmmarket, “horror films feature prominently on the list of top low-budget breakout successes”, especially if they gain exposure through festivals (Follows and Nash, 2016).

I have written at length about market distribution to emphasize the sheer number of genre films that tend to be overlooked in academic discussions about horror. Certainly not all these films are great—or even particularly good—titles. But they are watched—at home and in festivals. For someone truly interested in the cultural significance of the genre, DTV, VOD and festival titles need to be analyzed. Certainly writing DTV and VOD titles into American horror history provides a richer and more diverse view of the horror terrain. In the post 9/11 period, when news outlets worried about the “new sadism” associated with the theatrical popularity of gory torture porn, DTV and VOD fans were watching Asian and European films that trafficked more in ghosts and hauntings. In 2004, when James Wan’s *Saw* was released in the United States, indie lists were urging their followers to see Banjong Pisanthanakun’s *Shutter* (2004, Thailand), a film about a photographer who begins noticing ghost images in his developed prints. Other films recommended that year include *The Uninvited Guest* (Guillem Morales, Spain 2004) and an American film, David Koepp’s *The Secret Window* (2004). While these films were rated for violence and strong content, physical torture and gore did not drive the narrative. If you had to classify them, you would call them Gothic.

Gothic and quiet horror

As the above examples demonstrate, *Absentia* is not the only indie film that uses gothic tropes and aesthetics. The move of post-World War II American independent cinema has been largely in the direction of remaking and reworking recognizable genres (comedy, gothic horror, melodrama, noir, science fiction, slasher films), to facilitate what Levy (2001: 5) has called independent cinema’s “commitment to alternative points of view, democratic representation, and countercultural transformation”. Within this tradition of genre-makeovers, gothic horror and noir—with their expressionist language and trenchant social critique—have been favorite fallbacks. George Romero’s 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* is as much a gothic horror piece as it is the prototypical zombie film. And as early as 1975, David Lynch began self-consciously mining the language and look of gothic horror to make his independent statement. *Eraserhead* (1975) and *Blue Velvet* (1986) are both striking examples of gothic films that sit uneasily between the related genres of horror, noir and family melodrama. In the face of the AIDS pandemic, the 1985–1995 era saw a particularly interesting return to Gothic horror, as indie directors pointedly reworked the vampire tale. Some notable examples are *Near Dark* (Kathryn Bigelow, 1987), *Nadja* (Michael Almayeyda, 1994), *The Addiction* (Abel Ferrara, 1995) and *The Habit* (Larry Fessenden, 1995); but there were at least 12 indie vampire films theatrically released during the decade, and twice that many independent films that never made it out of the festival circuit (these numbers do not include studio films).

The post 9/11 period has generated another indie gothic horror cycle, one that rose up alongside the more frequently discussed

zombie and torture porn sub-genres; and that gradually displaced them in popularity. While there have been some notable vampire tales here, this cycle is dominated more by ghosts, hauntings, domestic abuse and dread than by the Undead. To some extent the new cycle is a logical American response to the popular Asian films *Ringu*, (Hideo Nakata, Japan 1998) and *Ju-On: The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, Japan 2002); their American remakes: *The Ring*, (Gore Verbinski U.S. 2002) *The Grudge* (Takashi Shimizu, prod. Sam Raimi, U.S. 2004); and European horror-thrillers like *The Possession* (Andrzej Zulawski, France and West Germany, 1983), *The Vanishing* (George Sluizer, Netherlands and France, 1988) and Dario Argento’s *Suspiria* (Italy 1977), which maintained something of a cult status throughout the 1990s.

Most frequently in these films, a family (or an individual) moves into a house with a history. Or moves back to a house or institution that a family member had once inhabited, a place still possessed by the ghosts or *geist* of past crimes. As Alice Raynor notes, ghosts are a different kind of horror monster. Unlike vampires or zombies which can be read allegorically, as metaphors for something else (sexual urgency, addiction, disease), “a ghostly double involves secrets and a return. Ghosts hover where secrets are held in time: the secrets of what has been unspoken, unacknowledged; the secrets of the past, the secrets of the dead. Ghosts wait for the secrets to be released into time” (Raynor, 2006: x).

In terms of aesthetics, the new Gothic cycle has replaced the aesthetics of fear, violence and gore that marks the slasher, and the aesthetics of pain that marks torture porn, replacing it with an aesthetics of the Uncanny. Cinematography is different here. There is more soft focus and focus pulling as beings waft in and out of shadows. The lighting is more frequently expressionistic, with bright flashes frequently washing out the frame. There is a heightened emphasis on sound perspective, as noises emanate from different parts of the house, and the smallest tonal variation can mark the presence of an entity. Point of view shots are compelling but unreliable, and timeframes are not always clearly marked (that is, flashbacks do not always announce themselves as such, and there is a sense—logical to haunting—that past and present co-exist in the same frame).

In terms of epistemology and philosophy, the gothic blurs distinctions between reality and dream/memory. In some of the most notable films, we can never be sure that the monster really exists outside the protagonist’s mind. And in all of them, we are reminded that there are different knowledges, different modes of knowing. Ghosts and phantoms, as Raynor notes, do not “so much present an ontological truth as they indicate the limits of dualistic thought” (Raynor, 2006: xii). In that sense the Gothic shares something with post-structuralist theory, as it continually interrogates the limits of the binary (this is true in vampire films as well as ghost movies, as vampires occupy the liminal space between life and death). In all the neo-Gothic films, there is the profound sense of judgement. Mothers who do not rest until their child is returned to them. Spaces that will not be still—or adhere to the laws of physics—until past crimes are expiated. Technology that is literally haunted by ghosts in the machine.

What I am calling the new Gothic here is generally subsumed under “quiet horror,” what the *Artifice* calls an indie “meta-genre” (Gass, 2015). This is important because it makes searches for “new gothic,” “contemporary gothic,” and “neo-gothic” more complicated than they need be. And while many “quiet horror” films could easily be considered gothic, not all of them adhere to gothic genre conventions (Gass, 2015). Sometimes termed “soft horror”, quiet horror films rely less on gore, the opened body and jump scares than on “tense explorations of our deepest insecurities” (Wise, 2016). What separates them from suspense thrillers is the intensity of the experience; the degree to which

frisson tips over into fear. As a category, quiet horror is an elastic designation that includes found footage films, vampire films, gothic films, possession films and psychological horror and suspense. In that sense, it is less a genre, metagenre, or subgenre than it is what James Naremore would call a mode, a “concept that was generated ex post facto” (Naremore, 1998: 39); “having less to do with a group of artifacts that with a discourse—a loose evolving system of arguments and readings that helps to shape commercial strategies and aesthetic ideologies” (Naremore, 1998: 11). That said, quiet films do encroach heavily on the Gothic, as they are “concomitantly bound to the place of evil, the locus horribilis...where unforgettable crimes have taken place” (Grunenberg, 1997: 195). They trade in haunted tales and specters figure prominently. “The ‘return of the repressed’, or emergence of what has been previously rejected by consciousness” is frequently the central driving plot element. In that sense, they tend to be organized around what Valdine Clemens calls “the fundamental dynamism of Gothic” (Clemens, 1999: 3).

Artifice dates quiet horror from *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which it calls a forerunner, but the cycle didn’t really gain traction until the post 9/11 period. Brad Anderson’s *Session 9* (2002) and *The Machinist* (2004) were important early titles. Production grew steadily through 2012 with such films as *The Orphanage* (J. A. Bayonna, Spain 2007) *Let the Right One In* (Tomas Alfredson, Sweden 2008) and *The Woman in Black* (James Watkins, U.K and U.S, 2012), and really came into its own in 2013 with the *The Conjuring* (James Wan, U.S. 2013). It grew through 2014 with titles like *The Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, Australia and Canada, 2014), *Goodnight Mommy* (Severin Fiala, Veronika Franz, Austria, 2014), *Creep* (Patrick Brice, U.S. 2014), *It Follows*, (David Robert Mitchell, 2014), *The Quiet Ones* (John Pogue, U.S. 2014), *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night* (Ana Lily Amirpour, Germany 2014). By 2015–16, it was a staple of the horror market with (to name just a few titles) *The Gift* (Joel Edgerton, 2015), *The Witch* (Robert Eggers, U.S. 2015), *Crimson Peak* (Guillermo del Toro, U.S. 2015), *Hush* (Mike Flanagan, U.S. 2016), *The Invitation* (Karyn Kusama, U.S. 2016), *The Eyes of My Mother* (Nicholas Pesce, U.S. 2016), *The Boy* (William Brent Bell, Canada, 2016), *Family Possessions* (Tommy Faircloth, U.S. 2016) *BoXed* (Daniel A Finney, U.K. 2016) and *Visions* (Kevin Greutert, U. S. 2016).

At the low budget end of the indie continuum, a new gothic emerged at about the same time and has followed a similar production continuum, starting with Mark Borchardt’s 1997 low budget horror film *Coven* and continuing through the time of this writing. Sample titles include:

Under the Raven’s Wing (Susan Adriensen, Blue Eyed Productions, 2007) A filmmaker films the murder confessions of three young women, who seduce him into their strange world of spiritual “dimensions” and “transcendence”. The group is led by a charismatic woman named “Raven”. Imdb lists it as a “thriller”, but it played in horror festivals like Dark Carnival (Bloomington, IN 2007). Available through Amazon.

The Wicked (Ti West short, 2001) a haunted forest tale. Available on YouTube (Accessed 20 October 2016).

House of the Devil (Ti West, Constructovision and Glass Eye Pix, 2009), originally released VOD before getting limited theatrical release). This is a hybrid, since it does have slasher elements, but the main genre inspiration is Gothic. A girl takes a babysitting job under mysterious circumstances, only to find herself in a possessed locale.

The Innkeepers (Ti West, Dark Sky Productions and Glass Eye Pix, 2011). During the final days at the Yankee Pedlar Inn, two employees determined to reveal the hotel’s haunted past begin to experience disturbing events as old guests check in for a stay.

The Sacrament (Ti West, Worldview Entertainment and Arcade Pictures, 2013) a contemporary horror riff on the People’s Temple Tragedy as a Vice-Style news team trails a man who travels into the world of Eden Parish to find his missing sister, where it becomes apparent that this paradise may not be as it seems. Available through Amazon.

The Proxy (Zach Parker Along the Tracks, FSC Productions, 2013) A pregnant young woman joins a support group after she suffers a vicious attack, an attack she might have staged in order to abort. Sometimes called the spiritual successor to *Rosemary’s Baby*. Available through Amazon.

The 2014 Diabolique International Film Festival, a festival devoted to indie horror, was dominated by Quiet Horror. The feature films included a mini Ti West retrospective: *House of the Devil*, *The Innkeepers*, *The Sacrament*, and Zack Parker’s *The Proxy* (all described above), all of which would be classified as quiet horror; along with two days of 37 short films that were low on gore and high on Gothic dread (approximately 85% of the films shown would qualify as quiet horror). Quiet horror has become such a marketable label in the low-budget market that Mike Thompson (2015) has started an Indie Go Go campaign for his first feature length horror film, to be called simply, “The Quiet”.

There is not enough space in this essay to attempt a full cultural explanation for the increasing popularity (at least gauged by the number of titles) of quiet horror. In part, of course, it is simply the generic desire for something new in a gore-sated market. But its emergence as both a popular literary genre and a popular film genre in the post 9/11 era also has sociohistorical resonance. Of all the many things that can be said and argued about the 9/11 attacks, one thing is clear: they profoundly challenged America’s sense of an inviolable identity. And in the terror history of the succeeding years, Western identity as a whole has been frequently interrogated in the pages of the press and in the increased militarization of our cities; our sense of security is under siege, as the once-repressed ghost of colonial history has seemed to return, with violent intent.

As noted above, the mode of quiet horror embraces the Gothic, and even subgenres like found footage films encroach heavily on Gothic territory. As Valdine Clemens notes, Gothic novels grew out of the tradition of the ghost story, and “emerged with the development of the urban-industrial world; they serve as a kind of anthropological time-line, suggesting how young this type of organization is, how long the more dangerous, precarious hunting and gathering life lasted, and how the past continues to shape the psychic realities of the present” (Clemens, 1999: 4). As Rosemary Jackson argues, the Gothic introduces “oppositional strategies” into a repressed social order (Jackson 179). In a sense, it is the perfect analogue for low budget indie film production, which also seeks to disrupt moribund structures and to identify “a gap between official ideology and actual reality” (Clemens, 1999: 6).

Absentia

Absentia’s production and distribution history places it directly in the low-budget, indie-horror category. It opened on the 2011 horror festival circuit, winning prizes at Fantasia, Shriekfest, Sonoma, and Toronto After Dark. It was later acquired by Phase 4 Films for North American DVD and Video on Demand distribution. In 2013, *Fangoria* magazine named it Best Limited-Release Direct to video Film. It currently has a 75% approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes and is available through Amazon and iTunes.

The film is a well-written and beautifully-shot story about loss and mourning and atavistic myth. Tricia’s husband, Daniel, has been missing for seven years and she is preparing to declare him

legally dead in absentia. Her sister, Callie, arrives to help and to give moral support. And moral support is definitely needed, as Tricia battles guilt and unease. She has met someone else and is visibly pregnant, and she keeps seeing her husband, who seems hell-bent on dragging her away with him. Her therapist calls these visions “lucid dreams”. “When the mind can’t deal immediately with trauma, with grief, with guilt, it’s sometimes easier to create something to help us process”, he tells her. “It’s you, Tricia, it’s you, not him. And you’re telling yourself how you feel”. It makes sense that Tricia is negotiating what Freud termed melancholia, the unconscious grief for an incomprehensible loss, while simultaneously consciously wishing to get on with her life. But this is a horror movie, and so it is equally plausible that Daniel might be a *real* ghost; not some specter drawn from Tricia’s guilt and grief, but a real entity that has issues of his own. Certainly, in the early part of the film, he moves like a horror film ghost—standing across the room at one moment before suddenly appearing beside her, whispering in her ear. So this film initially seems to be about haunting presences, that will not rest.

Then one night the living Daniel returns, wearing the very same clothes he wore when he disappeared, wallet still in his pocket. X-rays show that he has animal bones in his stomach; other tests show signs of “abuse” (the investigating cop hesitates before using the word and never specifies what kind of abuse it is). It’s clear that Daniel is suffering from shock and fear. When he returns home, he creeps into his sister-in-law’s bedroom, afraid to stay in his own room, he says, because he hears something—“it”—in the walls. Tricia finds him at least once cowering under a desk. When asked where he’s been, he says very little—only the one word “underneath”. The little bit he does say, he says to his wife’s sister, Callie. A recovering junkie, Callie had herself once disappeared during a critical family crisis time, “chasing a guy and a few dragons”, she tells her brother-in-law. And he feels that as a bond. “How did you get out?” he asks. The question confuses her, since she never thought about “getting out” only away. But Daniel is desperate and clearly terrified. He is especially terrified of places. The sight of the tunnel near their apartment causes him to wet his pants and he is fascinated by the Three Billy Goats Gruff book that Callie bought as a gift for Tricia’s baby, with its representation of the “underneath.” It is while looking at the book that Daniel tells Callie “it” does not really look like a troll. “More like an insect”, with skin “like a silverfish”.

Callie seems to be the lynchpin here. On her daily runs, Callie is continually drawn to a tunnel near her sister’s home, a tunnel that connects the street to a park. Homeless men appear there and ask her for help, but when she returns later to bring them food, they are gone—sometimes leaving a shoe behind, sometimes disappearing without a trace. Once she leaves food in the tunnel. The following day, the plastic container is missing and a pile of trinkets (old spoons, keys and watches) are there in its place. The trinkets later appear on her sister’s doorstep and finally in her own bed. “You traded with it”, Daniel tells her. “I wish you didn’t trade with it. It fixates”. Certainly it is fixated on Daniel. One night it returns for him, dragging him to some subterranean place. Eventually it comes for Tricia and, finally, seemingly takes Callie too. We never get a full shot of It. We see an occasional insect leg—long, spidery, fuzzy. Signs of insect life are foregrounded in the spaces it inhabits (the tunnel, Tricia’s home). At the tunnel entrance, the camera frequently focuses on spider webs and the bugs caught within them. Callie is alarmed one night when a silverfish (skin like a silverfish) inexplicably appears in a pristine bathroom sink. But the main sign of Its presence is sound. We hear it chittering, and through the tunnel walls we hear muffled echoes, screams and cries of the people it has captured.

As with *Babadook* (Jennifer Kent, 2014 Australia), sound is used throughout the film to unsettle the audience and to let us

know that all is not right. But it operates differently here (no banging or loud noises). Ryan David Leack provides an ominous electronic score—present throughout—that seems to hint at some underground energy or dangerous electric impulse. On the few occasions when a recognizable song comes on the soundtrack, to open things up and override the claustrophobic droning dread, it is diegetic sound; the scenes and songs are interrupted as soon as Callie takes off her headset. Similarly silence is used effectively here. For a film set in an urban environment, *Absentia* is preternaturally quiet. Very little diegetic sound occurs: only Callie’s music, the washing of dishes, the singing bowl that Tricia strikes at the beginning of meditation, and the sound of Callie’s feet hitting the pavement as she runs. No traffic sounds. No booming hip hop. And even though Brian stresses that the neighborhood is unsafe, there are no sounds to indicate the presence of a thieving subculture. Even spoken dialogue is frequently muted. Callie speaks in a full throated way, but Tricia’s voice is soft and strangled. And the detectives—while not as soft spoken—seem unable to complete a full sentence, their thoughts trailing off into a sotto voce mumble as they tap a notebook or leave a card. The lack of sound keeps the film within budget, of course. But it also works with the electronic score to heighten dread. It’s as though people don’t want the creature to be able to track their movements or presence. As though they’re hiding.

Within this quiet world, Callie is something of a disturbance, a change agent. She is the one who finds an apartment for Tricia, who sees the signs in the tunnel and who ultimately pieces the story together. Like all supernatural horror, *Absentia* emphasizes the limits of the rational. But while medical and legal discourses fail to explain what is happening, they do provide records, the means by which Callie can piece together a history of disappearances at the site of the tunnel, going back over 100 years. “The tunnel wasn’t there 100 years ago”, Tricia tells her. But there was a natural sink hole, Callie answers. And over that sink hole they built a footbridge and on that footbridge people went missing. Walter Lambert went missing in 1995. He was declared dead in absentia in 2002. But he’s the homeless man Callie saw in the tunnel that day. His son still comes to the tunnel and leaves bagged animals—live puppies and cats—at the entrance. When Walter’s dead body is finally found in the tunnel, near the end of the film, there seems to be some credence to Callie’s version of the facts.

It’s also Callie who posits a connection between local disappearances and the larger cultural significance of the monster, who—in this story—comes not from the world of scientific experiments gone awry (like the ants in *Them*; Gordon Douglas 1954), but from the primordial, preindustrial world of myth and legend. “There are 109,000 active missing person cases in this country,” Callie tells her sister. “Guess how many disappeared in tunnels?” When Tricia objects, Callie reminds her that “every culture in the history of our species has had mythology about creatures that spirit people away, that take them into some unreal underworld, enslave them, brutalize them”. Scandinavian troll legends, the banshee, the wendigo, Egyptian insect demons.

It is never clear if the film wants us to believe It is truly an insect demon. We know that the icons of Judeochristianity and Buddhism do not protect people from the creature. Callie has become Christian in her quest to beat drugs, and she hangs a crucifix on the wall of the guest room the first night she stays at her sister’s. Tricia is a Buddhist, who keeps a statue of the Buddha, incense and a singing bowl in her room. But none of these things keeps the insect at bay. If anything It reveals how close to ancient mythology contemporary religion actually is. The Church says there are victim souls, Callie tells Tricia at one point, people who are literally given to the demons by God; souls born

to be tormented (spirited away, enslaved, and brutalized). But, she adds quickly, they have a wonderful reward in heaven.

In a way, the archaeology of the creature, of It, is the archaeology of the human mind. It comes from the same world of myth and legend that Freud used to understand human subjectivity and the emergence of civilization from the primitive. It comes from the world of the unconscious, the Id. Its most human quality is its tendency to fixate, its inability (as in melancholia) to let go of attachments. The mise-en-scene of *Absentia* is cluttered with signs of human inability to let go. Poles with missing person fliers and fliers advertising missing pets litter the urban landscape. Almost always shown in the far left of the frame, they become that part of the environment that hovers always in peripheral view—a constant reminder of loss. People switch out the fliers, replacing them with new ones whenever they get too tattered. Walter's son visits and revisits the tunnel, bringing his father offerings. And when Daniel returns, Brian, the logical detective, tells Tricia that he is "devoted"; that he will never leave her or the baby and that he will always protect them. Whether she can leave Daniel or not.

The opening shots of *Absentia* introduce the main thematic elements and teach us something about the film's strategy. Sound precedes image here, as the ominous electronic score comes up even before the credits—plain white letters on a flat black background—roll. The first image is a long shot of an urban tunnel. Then the title, "Absentia" appears in the lower left of the frame. Fade to black. Then a medium shot of a wooden pole (situated at the far left of the frame) that features a tattered missing person (Daniel) flier. Tricia enters from the right and carefully replaces the tattered flier with a new, clean one. The end of the film shows Brian, stapling a Missing Persons flier (Tricia and Callie) to the same pole. As he turns, he thinks he sees Callie standing at the mouth of the tunnel. But then she is gone. The following reverse, over-the-shoulder, shot shows Brian from Callie's point of view. She seems to be looking through a scrim or membrane. And as she stands there, a long insect leg reaches up to her shoulder.

As noted earlier, *Absentia* is one of a group of quiet horror films that I am deeming the New Gothic. The film works well in horror classes to complicate what the term "Gothic" can mean. For students, whose ideas of Gothic iconography are drawn largely from early Expressionist and Universal horrors (see Browning, 2014), and refined through their familiarity with Tim Burton, a Gothic read of *Absentia* can be a hard sell. While place seems to be a major theme in the film, neither the tunnel nor Tricia's apartment looks particularly Gothic. No dark corners, no ruins. The "underneath" where the creature lives is never represented in the film. It is an unknown zone, one that undergirds civilization and remains coterminous with it. An urban space that has more to do with the horrors you find in basement crawlspaces (the bones of animals, trapped creatures, insects, trinkets) than in Dracula's castle. And while the beginning of the film traffics in haunting tropes, once Daniel reappears, students argue, the ghost theme dissipates.

Perhaps. But although there are no ghost-characters in the film, signs of mourning and grief are everywhere. People are haunted by the images of loved ones they have lost and possibly betrayed ("lucid dreams"). People who return—even temporarily—from the underneath remain haunted by the experience, victims of severe trauma. The dark shadows remain beneath Daniel's eyes, no matter how much he sleeps. The amount of time he has spent in the darkness gives him a vampiric pallor and—a doctor notes—a touch of porphyria. The day after he is declared dead, he appears—not exactly at a crossroads, but at a tunnel—come back from the "other side". And the place he comes from, the tunnel—

is an archaic site where "secrets are held in time" (Raynor, 2006: x).

On a less poetic note, the film deals with transgression, death, patriarchy and the supernatural; the tried and true mainstays of Gothic (Williams, 2007: 13). Like the new Gothic that has emerged in the art world, here traditional themes "are combined unselfconsciously" with Romanticism, science fiction, drug culture, and the mythology of the West (Callie's account of her road trip to see Tricia)—"all without concern for the contradictions and anachronisms therein". In sum, the Gothic is "more atmospheric than neatly defined." (Williams, 13, 14). But while some of *Absentia*'s tropes are not neatly defined Gothic, it has a Gothic narrative logic—the logic of the Uncanny and the eternal return. The plot here is not linear; it is one of continual repetition, as people escape and are reclaimed, and as fliers advertising missing persons are posted, replaced, and increased. *Absentia* deals with the quintessential Gothic notion of the abject: "two things that should have remained apart- are brought together with terrifying consequences." *Absentia* "involves the unraveling of a hideous mystery" (Williams, 14).

Conclusion: the underneath

This essay begins with an observation that low-budget indie horror is frequently left out of academic horror and scholarly independent film discussions. In that sense, it remains the "underneath" of horror and indie studies, a foundational element that often goes unacknowledged and under-analyzed. What that has meant for horror studies is an impoverished and frequently inaccurate view of horror film history—one that too readily maps sub-generic eras: the Fifties become the decade of sci-fi horror, the Sixties see a rise in Gothic supernatural only to be replaced by the Slasher and so on. Clearly this is not unique to horror history. As Hayden White notes in his now-famous *Metahistory*, "deep structures of historical imagination" (White, 1973: 2) tend toward neat narratives that "lead from inaugurations to (provisional) terminations of social and cultural processes" (White, 1973: 6). As he also notes, this is ideologically problematic, giving rise to historical narratives of continuing progress and, for our purposes, generic development; narratives that tend to privilege the conscious over the unconscious, public sociohistorical concerns over personal politics, and linear thought over cyclical repetition. The term "the new Gothic" is not meant to name a new period in horror history, then, but rather to identify some subtle shifts in a narrative *mode* that, as I have tried to show, has continued to resonate across multiple sub-genres.

What the absence of indie-horror has meant for academic studies of independent cinema is a bit more complicated—a mapping of a certain taste culture onto the term "independent", so that "Independent Film" has taken on prestige genre markers quite at odds with its own history in *both* avant-garde and exploitation production ("independent film" here meaning independently financed). Low-budget horror is particularly troublesome to the notion of "independent" as a prestige marker, since it by needs hews to low production values and includes films which can be quite gory, films easily marginalized as trash. But it also includes some of the best "quiet", New Gothic films available. And as the *Absentia* case study demonstrates, DTV films are often as thematically and formally rich as their higher budget indie counterparts.

Like the best of Gothic cinema, the New Gothic indie cycle pulls toward "the inspiring of dread", taking us into a world possibly "created by the circle of ...[the protagonist's] own fears and desires, in a state of enthrallment both thrilling and destructive" (Grunenberg, 1997: 49). A marginal practice in itself, it gives expression to viewers' "fears and anxieties about their fragility and vulnerability" (Grunenberg, 1997: 49).

It trades in hauntings, guilt, the expiation of past crimes, and the problems inherent in the patriarchal family; and it does so in frequently inventive and beautiful ways. You have to watch for it carefully, because it is usually not coming to a theatre near you.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this paper as no datasets were analysed or generated.

Additional information

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