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Attacks on 'Safe Zones': How Hollywood Horror Infiltrates Private Spheres

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This article analyzes the New Hollywood Horror's strategy of infiltrating secure places – introduced as 'safe zones' – in everyday-life. Fear is represented as a partly cross-cultural phenomenon and – by reference to Hegel – as a process of personal 'self-reflexion'¹. Following this argument, the modern perspective on cultural fear excludes the falsified theory of cathartic relief and, thus, turns to the "sensation seeker," resulting in the article's main question: What strategies will cinema be able to use to recreate fear in private places across cultures and how can film horror enter an audience's private sphere? The author follows the principles of film analysis of three (Japanese and American) horror films and selects psychological, sociological, and philosophical discourses about fear evoked through a process of self-reflexion to situate this topic within the context of 'Culture of fear'.

horror | self-reflexion | audience research | virtuality | media

The "Private Sphere" in Horror Films

Since the 1980s horror films have been considered to serve a *social* as well as *cultural* "mirror function": that is, 'to understand society we have to understand its fears', which strategists (e.g. film producers, directors...) behind the research field of the 'Culture of fear' are interested in.² And therefore film-theorists from the 1980s until the late 1990s began publishing a body of critical work about the cultural theory of horror films in order to recapitulate the 'whole' social history of the 20th century, which seems to be captured in horror films. To understand the extent of this theoretical work more thoroughly, one need only look to the massive size of Seeßlen and Jung's attempt (2006), a monograph of more than 1.000 pages.

Further attempts, e.g. by Stresau (1987), Tudor (1989), Manthey/Müller (1991), Hofmann (1992), Nikele (1996), Schneider/Williams (2005), Kendall (2005), Colavito (2008), Wheeler (2010) or Muir (2011), show that such a project cannot possibly be dealt with sufficiently by one person alone. In applause to their highly engaged achievement, I

¹ In this essay the term 'self-reflexion' will, in connection to Hegel's definition as well as the common translation of his phrase "Selbst-Reflexion" ["*self-reflexion*"], be used to refer to the process, in which one reflects upon himself or an object that refers to itself in order to become aware of the self or his/its situation/condition, and to distinguish between the term of 'self-reflection', which instead is a term of common use.

² See Altheide 2002; Archarya 2004; Semmerling 2006; Catherwood & DiVanna 2008; Svendsen 2008; Hildebrandt & Makinwa & Oehmichen 2009; Linke & Smith 2009; Nacos & Block-Elkon & Shapiro 2011.

seize upon *one special issue* in particular that Seeßlen and Jung treat in the relation between horror film, fear and the private sphere, and I will show this in the analyses of three examples from the horror genre: the Japanese film *RINGU* (JP 1998, D: Hideo Nakata), the American-Japanese co-production *The Grudge* (US/JP 2004, D: Takashi Shimizu), and the American movie *Para-normal Activity* (US 2007, D: Oren Peli). But I will begin with the first period, the 1980s, when this device is strongly emphasized, before turning to the topic's theoretical psychological background.

Seeßlen and Jung suggest that the horror films of the 1970s at the latest become engaged in the private sphere of their audience (Seeßlen & Jung 2006: 539), when they discuss 'haunted houses' in movies such as *The Amityville Horror* (US 1979, D: Stuart Rosenberg). Obviously the haunted house is the best opportunity to cast a jinx (of fearsomeness) on the private sphere – one might think. Actually the characters in such movies, though, never start to identify with those haunted houses, sealing themselves off from the menace and opening their doors to public attendants such as priests, police officers or doctors (or from an Habermasian (2008) points of view: they open their doors to a 'public debate') to overcome the external attack and plague of the haunted mansion. In this context the haunted house could be better characterized as an external threat, instead of a threat to the private sphere – the private sphere reinforces *within* this danger.

On the contrary, the private sphere was slowly taken over by another generation of movie-monsters during the next decade. In the 1980s, a variety of monstrous attacks entered the homes of many (fictional) families in such films as *Poltergeist* (US 1982, D: Tobe Hooper). In the horror films of the 1980s, family enclaves, constructed as a (atmo)sphere of trust against external enemies such as the last remaining vestiges of McCarthyism, perceived threats from the Cold War, or fear of nuclear accidents during the decades before, were infiltrated and broken open by new intruders. The *Poltergeist* finds his way into the midst of this private enclave via FM TV broadcast and kidnaps the Freeling's youngest daughter. It uses a mediatized method of infiltration in which it is simultaneously visible and invisible, as its ghostly presence lies hidden behind the everyday TV-set. Therewith *Poltergeist* once more reflects human anxiety in light of man's technological leaps in mass media.³ Sconce explains:

... television presented another means of electrical disembodiment and disassociation, so it should not be surprising that the new medium would foster similar fantasies of paranormal

³ See Masumi 1993; Mackay 2002; Glaser 2003; Aly 2010; Starker 2012; Bartholomew & Radford 2012.

contact. ... As one would expect, the addition of this extraordinary vivid quality to telecommunications had a significant impact on the popular conceptions of 'liveness' and electronic presence associated with the new medium. The introduction of electronic vision brought with it intriguing new ambiguities of space, time, and substance: the paradox of visible, seemingly material worlds trapped in a box in the living room and yet conjured out of nothing more than electricity and air. (2007: 126)

Equal to the Freeling family in the movie, a TV-set stands right before its spectators, while they watch the film on video. Their own viewing situation is reflected in the movie they are watching at the very moment they are assuming the same perspective as the film's characters. And even today, average spectators – in comparison to those of the 1980s – cannot fully understand or even explain the functionality of their own TV-set, and because of this significant gap in knowledge they are not able to cope fully with the medium's (seemingly magical) characteristics, e.g. making the familiar (white) noises and reflecting pixelated images of living things, but by those actions appearing to be alive (or vivid autarkic machines).

Another cutting-edge means of infiltrating the private sphere emerged when Freddy Krueger (Robert Englund) entered the screen in *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (US 1984, D: Wes Craven).⁴ Freddy didn't stop at the glass border of the TV-screen that separates the images from the realities, but managed his way into the thoughts of the audience, straight into their nightmares. In the movie, he kills the children/teenagers in their dreams, which also means death for them in reality. In speaking of freedom of thought, this freedom found an end with Krueger's appearance. The last private sphere of a young adult caged in a room like Nancy Thompson (Heather Langenkamp), the main character in *Nightmare on Elm Street*, would be her thoughts and ideas. Freddy infiltrates them when he infiltrates her dreams to engender fear.

Normally, in real life, the audience would not fear a fictional monster such as Freddy Krueger, but even if Krueger did not appear in real life, he would rather become manifest in the audience's nightmares. At this point, the fear of a fictional character is transformed into a realistic fear of nightmares, and this is one of countless strategies of how Hollywood has managed to attack our private sphere. This strategy aims at simulating a common, global cultural habit – such as dreaming or watching TV – or sphere – such as bedroom or living room – and presents it as fearsome and

gruesome.

To help the audience feel more perceptibly the emotional state of a scare-jump and psychological horror, the *Mise-en-scène* of the film has to constitute "Liveness" as already referenced above by Sconce. "Liveness" also is a term Auslander refers to as "[r]egardless whether the image conveyed by television is live or recorded ... [because] its production as a televisual image occurs only in the present moment. ... [T]he televisual image is not only a reproduction or repetition of a performance, but a performance itself" (1999: 44). The audience in cinema or in front of a TV often reacts to scare-jumps or the entrance of a fictional monster as if it were a live performance; one can easily prove this to oneself by paying a visit to the cinema. In order to achieve such an effect, the *fictional* ghosts and monstrous figures have to cross *real* borders and have to live beyond fictional limits to cause viewers to peek under their bed, unnaturally frightened of the possibility to discover a monster. What particular strategies Hollywood Horror uses today to reach this goal will be shown in the next passages.

Sensation seeking instead of cathartic relief

Before commencing with an examination of Hollywood's tactics, we will look at horror's principal audience as well as the psychological effect that the genre relies on. In addition to the thematic changes seen in horror film history, psychology appears to have taken a parallel turn.

As far as we analyze the derivation of the term *horror*, we get to the point, where Carroll states that "[t]he word 'horror' derives from the Latin 'horrere' – to stand on end (as hair standing on end) or to bristle – and the old French 'orror' – to bristle or to shudder" (1990: 24). Carroll goes on to describe horror – or "art-horror" as he puts it –⁵ as an emotion, "that horror narratives and images are designed to elicit from audiences" (1990: 24) and he presumes "that art-horror is an occurrent emotional state, like a flash of anger, rather than a dispositional state, such as undying envy" (1990: 24). With this definition, Carroll discharges the prominent psychological theory of the 'catharsis hypothesis', which was introduced by Aristotle as the effect of a "portrayal of the imaginary [*μίμησις*]" (Aristotle 1911: 154, 1449b 21) "in dramatic ... form, indirectly through pity [*έλεος*] and terror [*φόβος*] righting [*κάθαρσις*] mental disorders of this type" (Aristotle 911: 154, 1449b 26f.) and has been upheld since the 19th century –

⁵ Carroll refers to "art-horror" as the particular emotion as a product of the horror genre, which includes novels and dramatic plays since the 19th century as well comic strips today (see 1990: 13). In general he includes any narrative of horrific fiction that intends to horrify its audience. A distinction is drawn to – what he calls – "natural horror" (see 1990: 12-14), which means everyday horror like a car crash or some 'horrific' accident.

⁴ For Freddy Krueger's cultural impact see Conrich 1997.

even after Freud dissociated himself from it (see Bushman et al. 2001: 18). Nevertheless, the catharsis hypothesis went on to become rather widely endorsed by well-known scientists such as Josef Breuer, Eibl-Eibesfeldt or Konrad Lorenz. In the 1970s, Feshbach and Singer had been proponents of the hypothesis, (see 1971) which predicates that

... angered subjects are posited to have a high level of aggressive drive which is partially lowered by perceiving a violent fantasy sequence on film [or by aggressive behavior itself]. The viewers experience some degree of drive reduction by watching someone get badly hurt in the film sequence. The resultant lowering of aggressive drive is considered to be reinforcing. (Feshbach & Singer 1971: 39)

Carroll in contrast speaks of a permanent “emotional state” created by horrifying fiction. As anticipated, the catharsis hypothesis was abandoned during the 1980s, (see Hug 2004) even Feshbach disavowed his former theory: “Most studies have found that angry impulses and hostile tendencies are not reduced by acting aggressively” (Bushman et al. 2001: 28); anyhow “it continues to be advocated in the mass media” (Bushman et al. 2001: 18). Consequently Bushman, Baumeister, and Phillips undertook research on how the mere acknowledgement of the catharsis hypothesis influenced people in their aggressive behavior, which resulted in a surprising outcome:

[W]e have found that angry people did positively enjoy some of the cathartic activities, such as hitting a punching bag. ... Aggressive activity may therefore be relatively useless at getting rid of negative affect even though in some cases it may increase positive affect. Aggression does occasionally create positive emotions, and some people may find those instances to sufficient to sustain their belief that they will feel better if they vent their anger. (2001: 28)

Knowledge itself of the catharsis hypothesis will lead, like a self-fulfilling prophecy, to aggressive behavior. That is to say, if one believes that the catharsis hypothesis works, it just might – much like a placebo.

As a result, the catharsis hypothesis has now been replaced by the ‘inhibition effect’. “This viewpoint assumes that the angered subjects seeing the brutal fight sequence engage in fantasies concerning how they would like to hurt someone badly. These fantasies are frightening; they arouse anxiety and guilt about hurting someone. ... Affected by the aroused guilt ... their level of hostility is lowered ...”

(Feshbach & Singer 1971: 39f.). Altogether, the inhibition effect does not explain why people would watch films that evoke negative emotions such as stress and anxiety. Why are there people who want to be frightened?⁶

James Tamborini suggests some possible answers to the problem. He assumes “[w]andering imagination”, which initiates the process of empathic response, to be “a proclivity for undirected fantasizing and daydreaming that is likely to lead one to imagine the experience of others” (Tamborini 1996: 115). Under these circumstances any character in a movie possibly evokes feelings of pain or fear in an audience (see Tamborini 1996: 115). This argument matches the results of the team of scientists associated with Giacomo Rizzolatti, whose discovery of mirror neurons in 1995 (by fortuitousness)⁷ reinforces Tamborini’s idea of “wandering imagination.”

Rizzolatti and his team discovered *mirror neurons* situated in the parietal lobe as well as in the frontal lobe of the human brain, which are stimulated through the visual observations of those engaged in physical activity. As a result, the observer’s brain simulates the same motor skill. The areal of mirror neurons is activated, if one either accomplishes an action or simply observes another (see Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2008). Therefore the observed cinematic action is simulated inside the member of the audience, whilst e.g. watching a horror film. Tamborini names possible results that might occur during a horror movie:

Physiological change might take several different forms including increased arousal, muscle tension, or a sinking feeling in the stomach. The subjective evaluation should be a diffused sense of apprehension resulting from ambiguity in our understanding of existential threat. In all, the emotional response state would be one of anxiety, and could range anywhere from mild to acute. (Tamborini 1996: 118)

Certain personality types search for such emotional experiences – the so-called ‘sensation seeker’. David Zuckerman describes those personality types that seek arousal through stress: “High sensation seekers felt they and functioned best at higher levels of stimulation and arousal

⁶ This problem is known by the name of the “paradox of suspense”; see Carroll 2001: 254-270, Mikos 1996: 37-49, Zillmann 1996: 199-231 and also Vorderer 1996: 233-254.

⁷ Rizzolatti’s team was examining neurocytes of the Macaques in 1992 when making this lucky observation. One subject of research, still being wired, showed the mirror neuron function, when it watched one of the researchers feeding another monkey. A few years after this sensational finding, mirror neurons were proven to exist inside the human brain, too (see Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia 2008).

than low sensation seekers, ... the findings suggested that arousal of subcortical limbic systems ... related to positive arousal was the source of reward for high levels of stimulation..." (Zuckerman 1996: 154). And Zuckerman summarizes: "Sensation seekers prefer being frightened or shocked to being bored" (1996: 155).

Under these circumstances, one could easily follow the reasoning of why people would want to be shocked by a movie.⁸ With reference to Rizzolatti and Tamborini the most shocking experience would be the one we ourselves have encountered before. For mirror neurons apparently fire more intensely if a reproducible activity is performed, which means an activity that has been once performed by the observer himself. In this context, Hollywood has just one possible opportunity: Film-simulated fear has to become more personal. And as we have noticed before, nothing is more personal than an attack on our personal/private sphere by an external enemy: "I cannot be art-horrified by an entity that I do not think is threatening and impure" (Carroll 1990: 28). Its threat derives from its contiguousness to our own body. A vampire being 100 miles away e.g., regardless of how horrific he might look, is less threatening than a vampire standing near our (own) bed. To arouse audience empathy and, at the same time, achieve ear-piercing intensity, a movie does not only capture one's attention at the cinema, but also in one's *private* living- or bedroom.

Mark the 'Safe Zones'

Today's horror movies more consequently pursue a strategy that delivers the feeling of fear to the homes of their audience. For this reason 'New Hollywood horror' designed game plans to realize the infiltration of one's private sphere. In conclusion, this leads us to an attack on our 'safe zones'.

First of all, I have to remark that the narrative scheme, where the "art-horror" takes place is a diegetic system quite similar to our own reality: on screen, it has to look and function like our own 'real-life' reality. In general, it substantially has to be liable to the same physical laws, the same rule as well as the same potential of action and reaction, exempt from a portal that the transcendent creatures can slip through. This diegetic system contains safe zones equal to our reality.

A safe zone – in my opinion – would be a blank space, where the monster or any other nightmare could actually not intrude – quite like a 'panic room'. It comes close to a storm

⁸ "The findings on preferences in the media would seem to fit the original model for sensation seeking rather than the new one, for sensation seekers are attracted to stimuli that are arousing regardless of whether they stimulate negative or positive affect systems." (Zuckerman 1996: 155).

shelter, but also represents a special place in our everyday-life. In being so, one's own bed would align with this conception, as it has already proven in our childhood to protect us against dreadful creatures of our imagination. No monstrous presence was able to persecute us as far as to the edge of the bed. As long as we have pulled the duvet over our head, the monsters cannot reach us. Even adults sometimes still pull the duvet over their head when they're frightened or when they're trying to keep away the nightmares that take initial form from the shadowy figures in cast on a dark bedroom.

Therefore, all safe zones constitute a space for security and, according to that, provide safety. In a particular safe zone, we can be untroubled by external ascendancies: in the bed, under the duvet, under the shower, in the comfortable armchair in front of the TV, at our place of employment, even our own body, and our own thoughts represent such a safe zone – maybe our thoughts represent the ultimate safe zone, but also the easiest to be seized by horror films, as we have seen in the paragraph before. Those safe zones are refuges and no serious, perilous endangerment will ever disturb the daily routine there, where we could shield ourselves from monstrous attacks.

The safe zone must also be examined in its narrative function. It is a safe place to continue the story line, whereas the action during an attack of a monster will simply be to survive, and therefore serve as an instance of aesthetical imagery within one narrative device, but not an instance of plot. Equally, the image of a safe zone speaks of a metaphorical protective barrier, e.g. if we imagine the security blanket or even the TV screen as taking on the characteristics of a dividing line.

The art historian Frank Baumann in his argument develops the idea of a metaphorical barrier, when he states:

Die Wirksamkeit des Phantastischen verdankt sich der Tatsache, daß es auf der Grenzlinie zwischen dem Wirklichen und dem Unwirklichen angesiedelt ist. Die Wirklichkeit des Alltags ist gemeinhin nicht sonderlich bedrohend, die phantastische Welt ist es ebenso wenig, weil ihr die Qualität des Realen fehlt." [*"The effectiveness of fantasy derives from the fact that it lies on the border between the real and the impossible. Everyday reality is generally not particularly threatening, nor is the world of fantasy, especially since the quality of reality is missing."*]⁹ (Baumann 1989: 71)

Only the commingling of both narrative systems in the

⁹ Translation by author.

intermediate range will bring with it an emotional state of horror.

As is clear in this line of reasoning, there must be a borderline to be crossed, which stands between the two states of reality and transcendence. This borderline becomes a concrete representation in films. In *King Kong* (US 1933, D: J. A. Creelman) a massive rampart separates the fantastic portions of the narrative, the mysterious exotic island where King Kong and other creatures exist, from the realistic portions, where the civilized indigenous people live. In most of the Godzilla-movies, an ocean or a mountain range (often both combined) is used. In *Halloween* (US 1978, D: J. Carpenter) the door of a closet, which Michael Myers (Tony Moran) has to break through in order to reach for his sister Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis), serves as the border. In the case of *Dracula* (or any other vampire) it is invariably the lid of a coffin, and in today's *RINGU*, it is the physical boundary of a cathode ray tube that separates the 'fictional behind the monitor screen' from the 'reality on the other side'.

To close this section, we can now easily map the described safe zones behind those walls – or rather borderlines – onto the clashing narrative systems, which comprise the reality. More to the point, a safe zone implies security in the shape of a conceptual space wherein threats and anxieties are staved off in our everyday-life.¹⁰ But horror could not be horror if it would try to assail us where and when we await it; it would strike where and when we are unready, unaware. For this reason “art-horror,” especially ‘New Hollywood horror’, displays a predilection for infiltrating those safe zones. The film industry's strategy would be firstly mapping the safe zone, marking it, and secondly sending forth a monstrous creature to attack it.

This often happens as we've seen in examples played out by Freddy Krueger or the Poltergeist, but ‘New Hollywood horror’ in the 21st century – as we ought to see in the analysis of *RINGU*, *The Grudge*, and *Paranormal Activity* below – appends a distinctive feature to the level of proximity. It *infiltrates* the safe zones, and transforms them into the creature's home base. The monster is effectively pulled out from under the bed, and thrown right in the middle of it, to fulfill Carroll's requirements for threat and impurity.

How Hollywood attacks our ‘safe zones’

As ascertained diegetic reality and diegetic transcendence, both overlap the sphere of the borderline between both of these narrative systems. This clash can develop anywhere, at any place in the diegetic reality, for the borderline can be discretionary and transferred into any place

¹⁰ To offer a counterexample: A hard-fought battlefield would definitely not serve as a safe zone.

(or object) the screenwriter can think of. During the past decade, places that especially represent the protagonist's safe zones are under attack from the uncanny. In the course of the following discussion, I will provide three examples of these safe zone attacks. I'll therefore antecede in chronological order, in succession of these films' releases, starting with Hideo Nakata's *RINGU* (1998).¹¹

Nakata – who directed the Japanese sequel (1999) as well as the American sequel (2005) – in *RINGU* (1998) presents a threat to the viewer in particular, for he presents a “terrifying scene”, in which “the ghost of the dead child [Sadako] emerges from the television set in the ... living room” (White 2005: 40). Through this performance, the usual boundary between monster and audience vanishes. Hanich comments: “The ontological distance implies the viewer's physical absence from the scene of action, and thus provides us with a form of safety: we are not threatened by the serial killer or the monster Freddy Krueger *in the same way* as their victims are” (2010: 87). But if, as it is the case in *RINGU*, the “ontological distance” is annihilated by an action, that exclusively suggests the disintegration of such borderlines – like the TV-screen symbolizes – the threat is directly geared to the audience.

In the inimitable moment, when Sadako (Rie Ino'o) emerges from the TV-set, the medium is left behind her and with it the symbol of the borderline that separates the real from the unreal. This becomes a haunted moment of compelling ‘transparent immediacy’, of what Chapple and Kattenbelt call: “Immediacy or *transparent immediacy* aims at making the viewers forget the presence of the medium, so that they feel that they have direct access to the object. *Transparency* means that the viewer is no longer aware of the medium because the medium has – so to say – wiped out its traces” (Chapple & Kattenbelt 2006: 14). Sadako's status in the diegetic system of the film is altered from fictional to a non-fictional form. The problem is that the fictional character has crossed the protective barrier, which Hanich claims provides the fact of reality that represses the fictional world.¹² Confronted with this scene, the audience sitting in front of a TV watches Sadako climbing out of it and crawling right towards them. The members of the audience find themselves in the same situation as the fictional victim. Her passing through the screen represents a crossing of the medial border. From this moment on, Sadako performs in reality or,

¹¹ For a plot summary, see White 2005, and for more background information, see Kalat 2007.

¹² Whereas on the contrary the Poltergeist in Hooper's film resides in the mere fictional system, whereby no borderline is crossed. At most the border is crossed when Carol Anne Freeling (Heather O'Rourke) is drawn into the ghostly world of the monster, but in this way the fictional world does not approximate the viewer, instead the distance is enlarged.

more precisely, in a virtual version of reality.

As Sadako abandons the world of fiction, obviously – not in comprehension of an immersed viewer though, but from a more reflective viewpoint – she cannot be situated in the ‘real’ reality.¹³ In what place does she ultimately remain? She is caught between reality and fiction and therefore – in my opinion – exists in a status of ‘virtuality’.

In light of this virtualization between the fictional and the real situation (with the latter I respond to the viewer’s situation), the audience is confronted in particular: When Sadako climbs out of the TV, she leaves fiction and climbs onto the floor of the living room. Compared to the audience’s situation, watching the film at home,¹⁴ the ghost in this moment is no longer fictional. Ideationally, the ghostly figure enters the same room. By passing through the screen, the barrier, which had always existed to secure the viewer from those monstrous creatures, has been shattered. Even the safe place in front of the TV-set then is under attack from Hollywood’s new ghosts.

This marks the exception of Hanich’s argument of the screen being a barrier, (see Hanich 2010: 87) but only because this barrier is permeable.

Users of this film strategy are aware of the longevity of the “ontological distance,” which “implies the viewer’s physical absence from the scene of action, and thus provides us with a form of safety: we are not threatened by the serial killer Henry or the monster Freddy Krueger *in the same way* as their victims are” (Hanich 2010: 87). In contrast to the situation of fear in the already mentioned film *Poltergeist*, Hanich is right in every way for, as the protective barrier is maintained, *RINGU* easily breaks through this wall. The safe zone, better known as TV armchair, has been annexed by Hollywood horror. But Hollywood does not stop at the ‘border’ of the living room.

Remember being a child and pulling the duvet over your

¹³ Following Luhmann, who talks of a ‘real reality,’ which is being created by media, auto-reflective (media as ‘observer of the observers’), so as to the world, the mass media comes up with, equals a ‘fictional reality’ built up of media content, but based upon facts out of reality – even close to the idea of virtuality. As this is the reality we’re confronted with daily, we should name it ‘real’ reality; see Luhmann 1996, or for a discourse of Luhmann’s assumption applied to the field of virtual horror see Krautschick 2011.

¹⁴ Most notably *RINGU* was spread all over the world in an early form of bootleg. There had been no DVD-release of the Japanese original, not before the release of the American remake. Users (this term is used instead of ‘audience member’ to express the incorporation of the passive recipient and the productive activity he displays when he *uses* the movie and starts to spread its content all over the world’s surface) all over the world distributed the movie themselves on video tape (see Kalat 2007: 5-7) Therefore the main percentage of the audience never watched this film at a movie theatre but mostly at their private homes (in the living room).

head so that the imaginary monster could not reach you? Takashi Shimizu’s *The Grudge* aims exactly for this ‘No. 1 safe zone’. “*Ju-on: The Grudge* is a film that disallows its characters and, by extension, its audience, access to those conventional ‘safe spaces’ to which people most commonly retreat when the tension escalates or becomes too much to take” (McRoy 2005: 181).

During one scene, the character Susan (KaDee Strickland) flees to her bedroom in fear, pulls the blanket over her head and is shocked to be confronted by the ghostly appearance of *The Grudge*’s monster, Kayako Saeki (Takako Fuji), right under the blanket. Kayako even pulls Susan under the duvet so that the fright and horror unfolds where, as children, everyone else has sought to hide. Would anyone seek safety in his bed unstressed after watching this scene? But where should we hide then? As a matter of course, the bed in horror movies has always been a place where horrific creatures hang about, standing nearby the bedside, bending over their victim like for example *The Body Snatchers* in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (US 1978, D: Philip Kaufman) or – more popular – *Dracula* (US 1931, D: Tod Browning) and its iconographic device: the vampire. But, referring to those movies, their screenplays kept the monster out of the bed. *Dracula* always stops at the bedside and never enters this safe zone, in opposition to Kayako.¹⁵ As long as *Dracula* does not enter the safe zone, pulling the duvet over your head will work for defeating him – but not against Kayako: “instead, [the story] reveals that the monster you most fear has been in the bed with you the whole time” (McRoy 2005: 182).

In the work of social anthropologist Joy Hendry, another derangement is literally explicated – a cultural clash *The Grudge* utilizes for its strategy. As Hendry points out in “Japanese society the distinction between *uchi* and *soto* is an example of ... deeply held part of the system of classification” (1995: 43). Since “[*u*]*chi* and *soto* translate roughly as ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ respectively” (Hendry 1995: 43) those categories “are associated with the clean inside of the house, and the dirty outside world” (Hendry 1995: 44). That also is why at Japanese places the ‘contaminated’ shoes – contaminated by the outside-world – have to stay ‘outside’, but the “distinction between the physical inside and outside of the house is reinforced by the use of ritualized phrases” (Hendry 1995: 45).

In this context, the ‘outside’ relates to a threat or danger through germs, illness, dirt or “with a danger of falling as well

¹⁵ Whereas in other genres the simulated terror – or natural horror – often enters the bed. Consider *The Godfather* (US 1972, D: F. F. Coppola) as an example: The severed horse’s head is found blood dripping in the bed of Jack Woltz (John Marley). It seems as though ‘unnatural’ horror had for a long time ‘feared’ entering this particular safe zone.

as with possible infection..., but for practical reasons it will be more likely be concerned with traffic and the anonymity of the city streets” (Hendry 1995: 45). By this, the outside world is established as a threat to life as well as a place of fear in contrast to the safe enclave of the inner family circle.

This association of the outside with danger and fear is actually encouraged in some families ... perhaps partly because it seems to work as an effective means of keeping a child close at hand. ... Thus threats may be made about demons [!], policemen and passing strangers, and a severe punishment is to put a child out of the house altogether. (Hendry 1995: 45)

The deprivation of family contiguousness, e.g. to be lost in the woods on one’s own, or the impudence of a stranger when a child is vulnerable come close to the sort of endangerment that citizens in every society fear.

Shimizu takes advantage of this mentioned ‘intercultural’ fear. In the process of (demonic) seizure through the ghosts of Kayako and her son Toshio (Yuya Ozeki), he intermingles *uchi* with *soto*. Although the ghosts are parts of *uchi* in every case, for they died at that house, and even their curse haunts those who cross the doorsill, the transformation of the haunted house’s interior (rather a safe zone according to the previous description) appears to be a gradual infiltration by *soto*. This infiltration process begins with the first step of every family/person entering, crossing the threshold, of which Hendry states is a symbolic border (of safety) to the outside (see 1995: 44).¹⁶ All residents undergo the same transformation: At first they begin in a clean home, but after a while the same place gradually becomes a mess. The wallpaper seems to have become fuliginous, so does the entire interior; clothes, dirt, and even things we cannot identify form up in a full-blown chaos. Simultaneously, the enclave of the family bursts, when a woman kills her spouse, an old lady is left alone in her excrements, etc. The disruption of home correlates with the movie’s key issue: domestic abuse, as it becomes clear when the secret is lifted, that Kayako had been killed by her husband, because she presumably had fallen in love with someone outside the family enclave.

Last but not least, we turn to a short example given by a movie, namely *Paranormal Activity* (2007). The safe zone infiltrated here can be obviously located amidst the private sphere. I say ‘obviously’ because the whole film is set to provide an insight into the private life of Katie (Featherston) and Micah (Sloat) by portraying the filmic image in the mode

of an ‘American home video’. The entire movie has been shot in DV/HDV with help of a Sony FX1 – a camcorder intended for domestic use. Therefore the video – even projected to the cinema’s screen – looks like an American home video. Watching the movie, one will encounter a (fictional) private video of a home infiltrated by a ghostly presence that we will never actually see in person, so to speak.

Through the occupation of the home video, another object of privacy is infiltrated by horror. Ordinarily, we chronicle our private lives, often felicitously, in moments on videotape, since the official marketing of Super 8 mm and the M2 (and rather M4) camera, both – film and camera – released by Kodak in 1965. This private habit of keeping records of private incidents, a process generally associated with intact family’s customs, now is cast as a threatened tradition. In *Paranormal Activity* the infiltration of the private home from its inside becomes the seizure of an intact family in bliss.

Everyone will understand that the occupation of one’s body has a long tradition in horror film history and, therefore, is no longer a surprising aspect of cultural fears, as it has been already established as a common narrative device. The early *topos* of the *Parasite* (US 1982, D: C.Band) like in the *Body Snatchers* (earlier version in 1956), or like the sexually arousing *Shivers* (CA 1975, D: D. Cronenberg), as well as *The Thing from Another World* (US 1951, D: C. Nyby & Howard Hawks), of which a second remake has been released in 2011, show how reliable but also familiar this motif seems to be.¹⁷ In this context, we are able to locate the particular currency of fear the horror films work with. The audience, fully aware of a cultural memory, automatically distinguishes previously observed motifs of horror from recent and innovative horror motifs. Already established horror is not frightening enough. To scare everyone to death, one needs to present “art-horror” in an actual and present context to simulate (and thereby create) a situation of horror in the everyday-life of its audience. “Fearful emotions,” as Hanich observes, “are more than something lived through and thus more than simply happening *to* me. Instead they often imply an experiencing *of* the self. Against the backdrop of a culture of disembodiment, the cinema of fear awakens our slumbering bodies by literally *moving* them into an awareness of aliveness” (2010: 234).

Self-reflective Fear - A Thin Line between Real Life and Virtuality

According to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, as the source of inspiration for Søren Kierkegaard’s *Begrebet*

¹⁶ For more information about the hybridity of *The Grudge* see McRoy 2005.

¹⁷ In almost the same manner the motif of mind control can be found in early horror movies e.g. in the shape of Bela Lugosi in the film *White Zombie* (US 1932, D: Victor Halperin).

Angest (1844), which Kierkegaard actually begins with a criticism of Hegel, fear is – as Hanich states – “an experiencing of the self” (2010: 234). To Hegel, fear means “[d]iese reine allgemeine Bewegung, das absolute Flüssigwerden alles Bestehens, ... das einfache Wesen des Selbstbewußtseins, die absolute Negativität, *das reine Fürsichsein*, das hiermit an diesem Bewußtsein ist [transl. see footnote]”¹⁸ (Hegel 1986: 153). As in Hegel’s thoughts “das Bewußtsein darin *für es selbst*, nicht das *Fürsichsein* [ist] [transl. see footnote]”¹⁹ (Hegel 1986: 153), the consciousness, can only be raised up to the level of “being-for-self” – Miller translates *Fürsichsein* this way –²⁰ by a process of producing an object, “[indem] das ... Bewußtsein sich darin als reines *Fürsichsein* zum *Seienden* wird [transl. see footnote]”²¹ (Hegel 1986: 154), because in a Cartesian way of thinking, the producer becomes aware of his own work, or of himself by that work as he is the one working.

Hegel reveals: “in fear self-existence is present within himself” (Hegel 1966: 239) – but why is that? Generally, Hegel’s idea, explained above, is shown using the example of a “sovereign master” and his “bondsman” (Hegel 1966: 237). While the bondsman in his work gives “self-existence” to an object, by “shaping or forming the object” (Hegel 1966: 238), “the bondsman feels self-existence to be something external, an objective fact” (Hegel 1966: 239) in relation to the master. “In fashioning the thing, self-existence comes to be felt explicitly as his own proper being, and he attains the consciousness that he himself exists in its own right and on its own account (*an und für sich*)” (Hegel 1966: 239).

Thinking of Freud and how he understands the meaning of the term “*Gedankenarbeit*,” in the meaning of ‘mind-work’,²² his idea could easily be compared to the process Hegel describes. Consider one member of the horror film audience. While he watches the movie, he becomes frightened because he (as we’ve seen above during the brief digression into Rizzolatti’s discovery of mirror neurons) feels horrified by what he witnesses during the process of ‘immersion’. This emotional state can only be achieved by two interrelated operations, which can also be found in Hegel’s argument:

¹⁸ “[T]his pure universal moment, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple, essential nature of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self*, which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness.” (Hegel 1977: 117)

¹⁹ “consciousness is not therein aware that it is being-for-self” (Hegel 1977: 118)

²⁰ Baillie uses the phrase “self-existent” (Hegel 1966: 238) instead.

²¹ “[for] in it the pure being-for-self of the ... consciousness acquires an existence” (Hegel 1977: 118)

²² My translation would be ‘mind-work’, as it actually refers to psychological workload of one’s mind, which is mentally reprocessed.

The *first* operation is the one of ‘mind-work’ or the activity of “shaping or forming” (Hegel 196: 238). The audience member must focus on the horrific images and put together the synaesthetic piece of art, consisting in his mind of soundtrack, score, *Mise-en-scène* et cetera, to get the synthetic impression of fear (a process of ‘complement’). By this active process of *Gedankenarbeit* he also forms and shapes images on his own, associations and connotations corresponding to his own everyday-life, e.g. his own safe zones. This is where the *second* operation of self-reflexion, or even fear-reflexion, begins: The audience’s world and the diegetic world of fear finally correspond to each other, as the viewer forms them into one and because in this particular moment fear is part of his ‘mind-work’, this emotional state allows him to exist in the same state as his fear, that in this situation is clearly fictional – for this reason one could possibly speak of fear-reflexion instead, as the spectator’s fear is reflected by the spectator himself and projected onto the diegetic reality. This auto-reflexive process functions as Hegel defines:

“For this reflexion of self into self the two moments, fear and service in general, as also that of a formative activity, are necessary: and at the same time both must exist in a universal manner. Without the discipline of service and obedience, fear remains formal and does not spread over the whole known reality of existence. Without the formative activity shaping the thing, fear remains inward and mute, and consciousness does not become objective for itself.” (Hegel 1966: 239)

The audience usually executes both operations to be exposed. Following this thesis the emotional state of fear is released by fiction(al horror) and tends to be self-reflexive, as the audience has to actively adjust the diegesis to reality or vice versa. Therewith one’s own situation of fear has to be cognitively reflected. This idea fully contributes to the process of ‘immersion’, according to that which we get lost in, a virtual reality (as I would call it) that can be achieved through diverse cinematic strategies.

“One of the standard horror movie procedures is the ‘resignification’ of the objective into the subjective shot (what the spectator first perceives as an objective shot...). However, this procedure is to be supplemented with another reversal, when in the middle of a shot unambiguously marked as a subjective, the spectator is all of a sudden compelled to acknowledge that *there is no possible subject within the space of diegetic reality who can occupy the point of view of this shot*. So we are not dealing here with the simple reversal of a subjective into an objective shot, but in constructing a place of *impossible* subjectivity, a subjectivity which taints the very objectivity with a flavor of unspeakable, monstrous evil.” (Žižek 2009: 35 f.)

Again this “place of *impossible* subjectivity” (Žižek 2009:

36), a place of auto-reflexion, is bordered by an imaginary wall, Žižek, in his Lacanian attitude as well as in his function as a film-theorist, calls “suture”²³ (see Žižek 2009: 31-54). This theoretical term aligns with the idea of the separation among the real and the unreal that the monster in horror film is confronted with. For in its metaphorical corporality, the suture embodies a thin line between diegesis and reality, a transcendental shape can easily slip through. This thin line additionally decreases if the monstrous creatures draw closer to private spheres in real life – such as safe zones.

As for the virtual status of Sadako, after climbing out of the TV, a monster in this virtual reality is even closer to reality as if it were still acting on a fictional level. Virtuality is situated close to reality and, because of that, both are often conflated and confused. As shown in the case study of *RINGU*, fiction can quickly be transformed into a kind of virtuality; the only thing that must be reconsidered in order to excite such a transformation is to reduce the medium’s presence until it is forgotten or can be declared invisible. Once the presence of the medium – the film and its cinematic characteristics – has vanished from the consciousness of the spectator, the screen offers an ‘open gate’ leading from one world into another. Horror films employ this stylistic device for the evocation of fear.

Conclusion: “It’s not ‘just a movie’ anymore!”

Žižek traces the self-reflexive effect back to Hegel, when he remarks: “In Hegelese, the elementary matrix of suture functions as the ‘concrete universality’: as the particular element out of which one can generate through variations all the others, although this element is very rarely encountered in its purity” (Žižek 2009: 33). And I myself can’t help, but to subjoin an assumption in the end: Why is it that horror films arouse feelings of fear and threat across cultures? Is it because fear always works in a self-reflexive way? Or do those safe zones represent some underlying universal standards?

It has become quite clear that horror films tend to refer to metaphorical or even direct images of walls, borders, or sutures, so that their fictional and horrific inhabitants have to cross over such obstructions. And, it has also been explained how – after this approach – monstrous creatures contaminate the real safe zones and thereby enter the last private spots left to recover. Sensation seekers especially look out for films of such content to preserve horrific moments at home: they look for films to be frightened of, films that evoke the feeling of fear *in* the sensation seekers themselves in order to feel a ‘live threat’.²⁴ Perhaps this tendency squares with the

ultimate use of horror films in a self-reflexive way – and it will work. So to say: ‘To understand ourselves, we have to understand our fears’; and therefore cathartic relief won’t work, as in contrast to the process of self-reflexion, cathartic relief is directed toward an external action. The emotions are thrown into a fictional operation, whereas in a self-reflexing process they are ‘reflected’ onto oneself, thrown back from the screen, and therefore have an impact on one’s internal condition.

But art-horror only works as a function of agitation, because its narrative devices can be relocated in reality. Horror films have to integrate our common daily routines in their storylines. To horrify, they need subject matter that we can identify with and – in reference to us and/or our habits – automatically reflect on our situation. This is possible because parts of our reality are shown in horror films, e.g. the analyzed safe zones. Self-reflexion is stressed distinctly by these safe zones. As is understandable, we associate the common objects of daily use, the things we handle each day, more quickly and more easily with ourselves. Fear is evoked by the imagery on screen, but contemporaneously the audience member (self-)refers to himself, when trembling with fear. The fictional threat (in a movie) is taken as an imminence for the viewer’s situation, as his projected fear (on the screen) is reflected back (to the audience member). In this way evoked fear augments felt fear.

Safe zones by now represent a prevalent strategy in New Hollywood Horror, for they guarantee a certain process of projection and identification with reality. As they do seem to be commonly used across cultures – for horror films evocation of fear and threat work all over the world and we will find e.g. the equal version of a bed infiltrated in both, the Japanese (2002) as well as the American, versions of *The Grudge* – I tend to define those delineated safe zones as universal. In any case, the function has to be cross-cultural, as this argument points out. But I cannot tell for sure if they are universal in context of fear or of safety, because the term’s hybridity in combination of both feelings creates a paradoxical pleonasm. On the one hand, a safe zone surely is a place of absolute secureness, but on the other it is exactly this attribute of hermeneutic seclusion, that provokes screenwriters, directors or producers (of e.g. horror movies) to send forth the monsters, ghosts and other creatures to infiltrate the safe zones of its audience.

“One obvious and often-cited example of such cross-cultural horror exchange is the impact of German Expressionism on the aesthetic of classic (‘Universal’) U.S. horror. Less well known is the case of Italian *giallo* auteur Mario Bava, whose ... [films] anticipated by some years the key formal and narrative conventions employed in the

²³ For the film theory’s origin of the term ‘suture’ see Oudart (1969).

²⁴ A threat evoked by the outcome of ‘Liveness’ (see Auslander

1999)

popular American 'stalker cycle' of horror films, ... initiated by John Carpenter's indie sensation *Halloween* in 1978. ... In sharp contrast is the case of *The Ring* (2002), Dream Works' big-budget remake of *Ringu*, the 1998 film that stands at the forefront of the horror genre's current resurgence in Japan." (Schneider & Williams 2005: 2f.)

A ghostly specter like Sadako, whom we can't quite decide whether she is fictional or not, will proceed to evoke fear even in real life (outside the movie theatre, maybe at home). Given Sadako's close association with such common technology, the TV, the audience members' strategy of reminding themselves again and again "that it is just a movie anyway" won't work anymore.

Hollywood has realized that after entering our private spaces in guises as poltergeists or characters such as Freddy Krueger, the next step can only be to conquer our last safe zones, where we actually recover from watching horror, where we once used to feel secure. Additionally, there is no more force in the 'wise' parental explanations that "no monsters are hiding in our closet or in our bed", if we have watched a movie right before, where a monster actually is sitting beneath or yet in our bed. In reference to the process' (of 'attacking the safe zones') meaning within the research field of 'Culture of Fear': This process is just one new strategy of positioning potential threats in our daily routines for the purpose of evoking and feeding our fears, which invariably means we may have to be on the lookout for others.

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