
Exhuming the Past: Found-Footage Horror and National Wounds

By Duncan Hubber

Found-footage horror films express a morbid fascination with the past, often depicting geographical ventures into sites of historical discord. The earliest instances of the subgenre, including the notorious video nasty *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and the independent phenomenon *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), consist of ill-fated documentaries in search of mythic beasts or local legends, in which the characters probe forbidding aspects of their national history and national identity. These, and many other found-footage films, visualise the excavation of uncharted, abandoned and concealed spaces, as well as sites of repression and past trauma, through the lens of modern recording technologies.

Just as the focuses of these films signify disputed histories, the definition of found-footage is itself still disputed by film theorists and critics. Its brief appearance at the end of the 1990s, and exploding popularity at the beginning of the 2010s, has been discussed as a subgenre, a technique, an aesthetic, a hybridisation, and a marketing gimmick.[\[1\]](#) Its most popular moniker—"found-footage"—is lifted from the opening caption of *The Blair Witch Project*, and typically involves the discovery of a mysterious piece of camera footage, which contains imagery of an allegedly real disaster, along with the final recorded days of someone's life. The Found Footage Critic website has indexed over five-hundred titles in its database, and not all of them necessarily abide by the conventions established by *Blair Witch* – some employ a more formal documentary approach, intercutting raw footage with faux interviews, while others introduce a found-footage device within the context of an otherwise conventionally shot narrative film (for example, *District 9*, Neill Blomkamp, 2009).[\[2\]](#) While the original found-footage films belonged to horror cinema, other film genres, such as cop dramas, science-fiction, superhero, and teen comedies have also appropriated the style.[\[3\]](#)

While varying in content, tone and scope, the connecting premise of found-footage films is that they are shot diegetically, with hand-held and surveillance cameras which exist within the constructed world of the film. These cameras are claimed to have captured some kind of traumatic event that the viewer is now being given access to. Alexandra Heller-Nicholas observes that the raw, unmediated quality of the filming imbues the content with a greater sense of immediacy and immersion[\[4\]](#); that is, we as an audience are situated within the same space and viewpoint as

the characters, rather than watching them omnisciently. Because the films' aesthetic continually insist that we share the same world as the monsters depicted, the way the horror is framed and received is dramatically reconfigured. This casting of the diegetic film camera as an instrument of spatial and temporal interrogation, and as a capsule of the past, has significant implications for theorising representations and explorations of trauma in contemporary horror film.

Trauma studies in cinema are less prolific than the study of trauma in literature (as typified by the work of Cathy Caruth[5]); however, the past few years have seen a handful of publications, suggesting a burgeoning field of research. For example, in *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema* (2014), Julia Kohne, Michael Elm and Kobi Kabalek write that film is capable of visualising trauma because it can effectively depict "irregularities and anachronisms," and "transport images [that have been] repressed or denied by the social body." [6] Traumatic memory can be triggered by sensory stimuli, such as smells, taste, touch, and image, all of which can which can be translated into film – dialogue, performances, camera angles and range, lighting, juxtaposition of figure and landscape, and use of space. [7] The horror genre is a particularly valuable tool in this regard, because horror films succeed by frightening people, and collective fears are inextricably linked with social transitions and political influences. Kohn et al calls film a "prosthetic memory," serving as an "apt medium to vicariously experience global catastrophic events". [8] Citing Linnie Blake's *The Wounds of Nations* (2008) they argue that horror films are unique in their ability to "'re-open national wounds that have been suppressed, overlooked or only superficially addressed". [9] In his book *Shocking Representation* (2005), Adam Lowenstein concurs with this assessment, arguing that horror film is considered disreputable because it digs up social trauma, where other middle-brow and nationalistic narratives attempt to "[smooth] over the cracks." [10] He notes that horror is rarely labelled middle-brow, because, whether it is regarded as trashy or transcendent, it always assaults the status quo. [11] These writers do not examine found-footage horror films specifically, but their works were published around the time of the found-footage resurgence (2007 onwards), which suggests, I would argue, a growing cultural awareness among horror filmmakers and theorists concerning historical trauma and its insidious hold on the present

While it can be argued that found-footage is a framing device which is available to be utilised in any film genre, this article will be looking at its original incarnation as a subgenre of horror cinema – specifically, films which resemble the doomed documentary premise of *The Blair Witch Project* and are concerned with investigating repressed or unreconciled features of a nation's past. This strand of the subgenre stands in contrast with what might be called post-9/11 found-footage horror, exemplified by

Cloverfield (Matt Reeves, 2008) and the *REC* films (Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, 2007), which are marked by large panicked crowds and breached urban spaces, and are thematically located in the present. Notably, both strands are concerned with a traumatic event, but the former concentrates on historical trauma while the latter concentrates on the ways in which contemporary disasters are experienced and communicated. Taking inspiration from the research of Kohne et al, Blake and Lowenstein, I will be looking at found-footage horror films from three different countries—Australia, Japan, and the United States—and examining the ways these films utilise the subgenre as a way of exploring notions of national identity and national wounds. The films use the diegetic camera as a way of inserting the viewer into the shock and disorientation of the past, allowing this embedded subjectivity and probing gaze to tease out themes of colonial subjugation, rural isolation, and collective madness. The camera frame serves not merely as a window into the past, but as an open wound, festering over time and infecting the characters exposed to it.

A Mutant Gaze - The Tunnel (Carlo Ledesma, 2011)

The titular tunnel of this 2011 found-footage film constitutes both a subterranean history of modern-day Sydney, and a passage to repressed feelings of guilt surrounding the dispossession of people throughout Australian history. The film follows Nat, a current affairs reporter covering a story about the abandoned railway network beneath the city. These tunnels are so vast that they practically constitute a second hidden city, one now used by Sydney's homeless population for shelter - a forgotten place for a forgotten people. Nat and her camera crew are investigating the state government's plan to convert the tunnels into aqueducts as a supplementary source for the city's water supply; public concerns are raised over the eviction of homeless inhabitants of the tunnels, followed by alarm as a spate of homeless people go missing, and finally bafflement as the government scraps the project altogether. After being refused an explanation by government ministers, the crew decides to sneak into the tunnels themselves to see what is really going on.



[Figure 1 - Nat and her crew sneaking into the tunnel via a maintenance gate, image courtesy of Deadhouse Films Pty. Ltd., 2011]

The film emphasises Sydney's past by opening with black-and-white stills of the underground railways being built in the late 1800s; we see the soot-stained workers, including young boys, toiling in an immense quarry. These photographs are contrasted with the movements and rhythms of modern-day Sydney, including flashing traffic lights, rolling car tyres, a lattice of anonymous silhouettes, and puddles of water ebbing down a drain. The segmented framing of these shots (usually low-angle close-ups) evokes the gaze of a perplexed outsider, of someone looking up from the tunnels from a bygone era, from a past which has been washed away like so much rainwater. The sequence of the crew making their way beneath the city becomes a visual journey back in time. They pass through unused air raid shelters, complete with a massive iron warning bell; this architecture traces back to the city's World War II heritage, and is a reminder of the inherent vulnerability of the seeming invincible metropolis above. They come across the living quarters of homeless people, which contradict the state's view that the tunnels are uninhabited – though the squatters themselves are nowhere to be found. As they go deeper, all natural light vanishes, and they are forced to rely on their torches and camera lights to navigate the vast, silent labyrinth. The dwindling battery power of these lights provides a natural source of tension throughout the film, with the darkness of the tunnels constantly threatening to overtake them. Finally, they arrive at the water supply in question; named after the railway station above it, the St James Lake exposes the crew to the real, natural foundation of the city – the millennia-old ecosystem that Sydney is modestly, and perhaps only temporarily, occupying. To the viewer, such revelations of the fragility of urban structures and industrial progress are confronting, and perhaps do need

to be separated from the public consciousness.

In contrast with other horror films, in which the monster returns to society of its own volition (to assault us with our own repressed thoughts and desires[\[12\]](#)), the found-footage films discussed in this article depict the act of seeking out the repressed in its own lair. In *The Tunnel*, the monster takes the form of a pale, bloodthirsty mutant who stalks the tunnels and devours intruders. It is revealed to be the cause behind the disappearances of homeless people and the government's decision to abandon the aqueducts solution and deny public access to the project. Upon their ringing of the air raid bell (presumably, the first time in over half a century), the mutant emerges from the shadows (summoned as it were) and snatch's one of the crew members. The creature's movements are hidden by the darkness, and discernible only afterwards when Nat and the others review the recordings of a dropped video camera. Indeed, their attacker is never wholly witnessed by the characters or captured on film; just as the city above only exists as eerie segments to the mutant, the mutant is perceived by the crew as a collection of growls, snatched claws, glowing white eyes, and whispers through the walls. It refuses to be framed by the camera and flees from the crew whenever they shine their light on it. When it manages to capture Nat, it attacks her camera viciously, cracking the frame, submerging it in water, filling the speakers with a nauseating drone, and fracturing the picture to an indecipherable blur. Upon finally reaching the mutant's lair, the characters comprehend the depths of its disdain for being looked upon when they discover a collection of severed eyeballs from past victims. The mutant is not just an inhabitant of the city who has been forgotten and suppressed, it actively works to deny its existence. In horror film convention, mutation is often the result of an experiment gone wrong, pandemic disease, or the mismanagement of radiation, which would, for example, shed further light on why the government ministers had an interest in keeping the creature a secret. However, as a metaphor, the mutant's presence in *The Tunnel* suggests something different: it is not an agent foreign and therefore inimical to humanity, but rather a deformation of the known, of the human. The creature's biological distortions and ulcerated flesh serve as a twisted reflection of the Australian citizen's national identity as they wrestle with history.



[Figure 2 - The crew regrouping after the mutant attacks, image courtesy of Deadhouse Films Pty. Ltd., 2011]

A dominant theme throughout *The Tunnel*, along with other found-footage films like *Cloverfield* and *Trollhunter* (André Øvredal, 2010), is its critical attitude to the state's attempts to mislead the public in order to enforce its own agenda. The government ministers' refusals to answer Nat's questions regarding the tunnel demonstrate a paternalistic attitude towards the public, and a want to both control national narratives and suppress diverging testimonies. Heller-Nicholas argues that *The Tunnel* can be read as an allegory for the "history wars" carried out within Australian politics from the early 1990s onwards.^[13] In particular, she draws a comparison between the disappearances and forced relocations of homeless people in the film, and the historical mistreatment of Indigenous Australians. Britain's claim of terra nullus was one of the founding rationalisations of Australian colonisation, the insistence upon the "bizarre conceit" of an empty land waiting to be populated and civilised.^[14] In *The Tunnel*, the government similarly denies that the tunnels are inhabited, and deprives the already marginalised of their shelter and safety. The film is set less than 3 kilometres from Redfern Park, the site of Prime Minister Paul Keating's famous 1992 address in which he publically acknowledged the difficulties facing Indigenous Australians because of European settlement; he confessed that: "We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practiced discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice."^[15] Drawing upon the work of Felicity Collins and Therese Davis^[16], Heller-Nicholas' analysis of *The Tunnel* points out that the invalidation of terra nullus in the early 1990s, with the Mabo decision, was a defining moment for Australia, a "watershed political event that triggered a broader crisis in the national psyche."^[17] It disrupted white Australia's comprehension of its own past, reconceptualising Australia as

a nation invaded and stolen rather than discovered.[\[18\]](#) Significantly, the locale directly above the St James Lake is Hyde Park, an historically important part of Sydney which served as the favoured playground of white affluent Australians and British authority figures;[\[19\]](#) it epitomizes the sanitised vision of colonial history, whereas *The Tunnel* contends that the dark web of haunted stone beneath—carved by convicts, immigrants and the working poor—is the reality. The mutant, with its penchant for gouging out prying eyes, becomes symbolic of this repressed, neglected past and the unreconciled trauma of colonisation. The film underscores this reading by continually attesting the limitations of the camera—the locations are often too poorly lit for it to detect images, it is continually dropped and damaged—which restricts the vision of the characters and viewers.

The dialectic invoked by found-footage horror—of one group trying to expose the past while another tries to keep it buried in favour of a more placating narrative—has potent implications for political discourse. The subversive, unauthorised gaze of the found-footage camera, as it films these secret cover-ups and concealed spaces, styles the subgenre as an accessible mechanism for presenting opposing historical viewpoints. In her book, Heller-Nicholas cites Adam Lowenstein’s analogy about horror films being “the return of history through the gut.”[\[20\]](#) This critique is evident in *The Tunnel*, not just in the viciously punctured bodies of the characters confronted by a vengeful mutant, but also in the geographical guts of subterranean Sydney. The dark, dank walls which the characters are forced to navigate are cracked with age, covered in dust and cobwebs, broken by the twisting iron spokes fastening the stone, and increasingly smeared with blood and viscera. The diegetic camera, though limited, is able to peel back the glossy cosmopolitan flesh of Sydney to expose the historical entrails within.

Voices in Your Head - Occult (Kôji Shiraishi, 2009)

As eerie as it is bleakly comic, the found-footage film *Occult* connects the emergence of doomsday cults in Japan with the delayed anxieties of apocalypse moulded by World War II. The film’s central character Shohei Eno is an unemployed man caught in a psychic struggle between blind obedience to a higher power (a mythic god)—characteristic of the ultra-nationalist conformity of pre-war Japan—and the growing isolation and spiritual emptiness of post-war liberalism. *Occult* takes the form of an ongoing documentary about a mass murder which occurred at a Japanese national park; the incident was caught on camera by a several nearby tourists and shows a man named Ken Matsuki stabbing two women to death, stabbing a frightened Eno several times, and then hurling himself off a nearby cliff. The documentary filmmakers interview the witnesses of the attack, the families of the murdered women, Matsuki’s father, and the

survivor Eno. From photographs provided by the father, they discover that the stab wounds inflicted upon Eno resemble a petroglyph-like birthmark on Matsuki's chest, which Matsuki believed was a mark from a divine being. Eno tells the filmmakers that since the attack he has been experiencing strange supernatural occurrences, such as moving objects, visions of swirling patterns and shapes in the sky, and prophetic messages; he reveals that before Ken stabbed him, he uttered the words "it is your turn," which Eno gradually interprets as a command from a god to fulfil a similarly violent "ceremony." Fascinated by Eno's experiences, and observing that he is financially troubled, the filmmakers loan him one of their cameras and agree to pay him if he can capture some of this supernatural phenomena.

Eno's paranoia about unidentified flying objects, and his compulsion to frantically survey the sky with his camera, is suggestive of latent anxieties about the aerial attacks carried out by America on Japan towards the end of World War II. The objects' sudden, flashing appearance and tentacle shapes throughout the film resemble witness testimonies of the atomic bombings; for example, in a recent newspaper interview, Reiko Toida, who was nine years old when Nagasaki was bombed, recalls seeing "a blinding flash of light, a huge bang, and then what looked like a jellyfish appear[ing] in the sky" above the city.[\[21\]](#) The sheer magnitude of devastation and disintegration the war engendered has remained at the forefront of Japanese consciousness, and even during American occupation and reconstruction, many Japanese citizens continued to feel crippling panic whenever a plane would fly overhead.[\[22\]](#) *Occult*'s camerawork subtly evokes this unease, particularly when Eno is operating it, as he continually uses the lens to hunt for uncanny entities above or within the city - which, once they finally do appear, shock him and convert his footage into a panicked blur. In the decades succeeding the war, theorists observed recurring images of apocalypse throughout Japanese cinema - from the effects of radiation poisoning depicted in *Black Rain* (a 1965 novel by Masuji Ibuse, adapted into a 1989 film by Shohei Imamura), to the spectre of a city-levelling monsters being conjured by nuclear testing in the *Godzilla* series (Ishirō Honda, 1954-).[\[23\]](#) Anime films, such as *Barefoot Gen* (Mori Masaki, 1983), *Grave of the Fireflies* (Isao Takahata, 1988), and *Akira* (Katsuhiro Otomo, 1988) present dystopic visions of Japan through the eyes of orphaned children, who attempt to navigate a cityscape rife with crime, disease and starvation. The Japan depicted in *Occult* is a decisive contrast - a modern, stable, peaceful country, encapsulated by the delight of the tourists at the beginning of the film, who are videotaping each other against the backdrop of a lush forest. However, this reality is intermittently punctured, first by the violent acts and parting words of the murderer Matsuki, and then by the nightmarish visions plaguing Eno, which not only re-introduce the prospect of an imminent doom, but

reconfigure it as a doom which must be fulfilled by Japanese people themselves.



[Figure 3 - Eno preparing to commit a terrorist attack, image courtesy of Creative Axa Co. Ltd., 2009]

Occult's depiction of doomsday cults has a basis in modern Japanese history. During the 1973 oil crisis, Japan (which imported 71% of its oil from the Middle East) experienced widespread panic, with many of its citizens stockpiling food and supplies. It was during this period that "new religions" such as the ESP and Nostradamus prophecy groups began to emerge. Kaoru Nishimura writes that such anxieties were an indirect transmission from the war, an ingrained fear that "the days of devastation and hunger would return."[\[24\]](#) The 1980s saw the founding of the notorious Aum Shinrikyo cult, whose members would go onto commit acts of domestic terrorism, such as the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin attack, which killed 12 people and severely injured 50 more; this made it the deadliest incident to occur in Japan since the end of World War II, particularly disturbing in that it was performed by middle-class citizens rather than a foreign enemy. Like Aum Shinyikyo's fusing of Buddhist and Christian lore with predictions of nuclear war, the mass murders prophesised in *Occult* are shaped around the Shinto origin myth of Hiruko - the name given to the deformed first offspring of the ancient Japanese deities. The documentary filmmakers venture back into the forest where the first murders occurred, and upon climbing the rock where Matsuki committed suicide, find a millennia-old shrine to Hiruko, the carving of which match Matsuki's birthmark and the pattern he stabbed into Eno's back. This

further convinces Eno that he is being directed to carry out a mass murder in the name of the gods, and thus deliver the souls of his victims to a more enlightened plane. He begins plotting a suicide bombing to be executed at a crowded Tokyo train station, which echoes the real-life sarin attacks committed by Aum Shinyikyo. His intentions are revealed covertly through his remarks to the camera, which acts as a video journal of his spiral into madness. Director Kôji Shiraishi derives much of the horror of the film from the series of rationalisations that a sane, everyday man can undergo before he commits an unspeakable act against innocent people. The diegetic camera creates a level of intimacy between the viewer and Eno, allowing us to see the world through his eyes; he discloses his private thoughts to it, confesses his vulnerabilities and frustrations, and offers us a disturbingly empathetic portrait of premediated murder.

Though not referenced in the film, *Occult* reflects the horrors of Japan's involvement in World War II, and the psychic damage war can imprint upon individuals, communities, and across generations. Catholic priest Takeshi Kawazoe, who was 13 years old when the bombings on Japan began, recalls the radical militarism of the Imperial Japanese even as defeat became inescapable: "We were training to fight with sharpened bamboo sticks and we would have been massacred if the war had continued... People were brainwashed, just like the followers of Aum Shinrikyo today."[\[25\]](#) Kawazoe is alluding to the ultra-nationalist and fascist ideologies that dominated Japan before and during the war; at this time, Japanese people were educated to believe that their sole duty was to serve the divine emperor without question, to sacrifice their lives for the nation willingly, and to attack the enemies of Japan mercilessly. The state strengthened this ideology by invoking Bushido, the ancient code of the samurai warrior, but distorted its philosophy to emphasise only martial spirit, absolute loyalty, and the dissolution of personal identity in favour of a collective will.[\[26\]](#) This submission was seen by citizens as a way of overcoming inner and outer threats to Japan; however, it also contributed to the facilitation of atrocious war crimes committed by imperial soldiers throughout Indochina and South-East Asia, including the Rape of Nanking and the systemic torture and murder of war prisoners. Nishimura writes that after the war, sections of the Japanese people felt great shame at having this mass surrender of personal identity exposed, and were overcome by feelings of hatred towards the royal family for their championing of the war. This in turn led to a generational shift—nurtured by the liberal democracy that America helped institute during reconstruction—away from "associating the value of life with contributing to the nation", and towards establishing a personal identity and "enriching one's private life."[\[27\]](#)

Occult explores this fragmenting of Japanese identity. Eno is a product of

post-war Japan, an individual trying to earn a decent enough wage in Tokyo to live the life he desires; however, as an unemployed man with no higher education or specialised training, and barely enough money to eat, he expresses the isolation and aimlessness of one who has been rejected by Japan's modern liberal economy. Nishimura observes that because of the historical conformity of Japanese culture, the anxieties of an individual, as exemplified by Eno's feelings of isolation, can be inferred by that person as being the anxieties of the whole nation.[\[28\]](#) The allure of *Occult's* Hiruko cult—that is, mysterious signs telling people exactly what they should be doing and how important their sacrifices will be for the greater good—represents the allure of pre-war fascism. Thus, the film can be seen to communicate the horrifying prospect of the voice of fascism returning to Japan, and the secondary horror of people wanting to listen to it. Eno believes that by bombing a crowded railway station, he will not be killing people, but delivering them to a better world – a romanticised vision of the past, ordained by the gods.



[Figure 4 - The documentarians hiking to the Hiruko shrine, image courtesy of Creative Axa Co. Ltd., 2009]

Suicide also plays a significant ideological role in the horror of *Occult*; the film opens with one man committing mass murder and then jumping off a cliff to his death, and then ends with another man blowing himself up in a crowded street. This circular structure evokes Japan's complicated relationship with suicide. At around 30,000 instances a year, the country has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Sinead Roarty writes that this stems from the historical function of suicide in the

samurai code, that is, the expectation that the defeated warrior must die by his own hand, rather than his enemy's, in order to preserve his honour. This tradition was carried over into World War II, with Japanese kamikaze pilots being ordered to intentionally crash their planes into enemy vessels, and thousands of soldiers on Okinawa killing themselves after the island had been conquered or feigning surrender only to blow themselves up.^[29] Thus, Eno's planned suicide bombing can be situated within historical practices. Suicide was also socially tolerated in instances where a person was unable to pay their debts and wanted to spare their families from financial burden, or when elderly members of the community let themselves die to make room for the younger generation; it was even romanticised in folktales about lovers who were forbidden to be together in life, and thus killed themselves so that they might be reunited in death.^[30]

The film's use of forest imagery, particularly the location of the Hiruko shrine, is suggestive of the Aokigahara forest – the most popular suicide location in Japan. Roarty writes that Aokigahara's cultural association with suicide goes back centuries, to the point where many Japanese people believe it is haunted.^[31] The forest is so immense and isolated that many suicidal people simply wander into it and become lost, trusting in the elements to wear them down. Others hang themselves from trees, where they are not found for months or even years.^[32] Notably, Aokigahara is only a short distance from Kamikuishiki village, the original headquarters of Aum Shinrikyo, both of which are located at the base of Mount Fuji. The forest, a public space, becomes the stage for the most private act of all – death. *Occult* echoes this dichotomy with the carvings of the Hiruko shrine, an ancient woodland marking which is violently reconstituted onto the private flesh of the characters. This cultural connection between land, identity and self-destruction embeds suicide within the Japanese cultural memory. Suicide is a crippling social issue in contemporary Japan—especially among its young people—which the current government are desperately trying to address and prevent.^[33] *Occult* attempts to de-romanticise the practice by showing its poisonous and destructive effects on the community.

Occult addresses Japanese historical trauma in several effective and disturbing ways, creating visual links between the events of World War II, the emergence of doomsday cults, and ingrained attitudes towards suicide. The film evokes Japan's difficult cultural construction of the war, in which it must navigate its paradoxical role as both victim of unspeakable suffering and perpetrator of unspeakable suffering, while also addressing its underlying fear of destruction from without and from within.

Return to the Woods - Willow Creek (Bobcat Goldwaith, 2013)

In his 2013 found-footage horror debut, Bobcat Goldwaith reframes the legend of Bigfoot as an allegory for the apprehensions of contemporary Americans when confronted with their nation's vast and mythic wilderness. *Willow Creek*, which is shot entirely on a single HD digital video camera, follows a couple named Jim and Kelly as they travel to the Six Rivers National Forest to make an amateur documentary about the many alleged Bigfoot sightings which have occurred there, and also to learn about the culture which has flourished around the legend. The film is notable for being a found-footage entry in which the original artefact behind the legend also claims to be a kind of found-footage; that is, the Patterson-Gimlin short film, which was shot in 1967 on a shaky 16mm camera, and captures an immense furry humanoid creature striding on two feet towards the forest edge. While most scientists have dismissed the original short film as a hoax, special effects artists have pointed out that the length and shape of the creature's limbs, and the realism of its movements and musculature, would be very difficult to fake, even today.^[34] It was the first alleged visual evidence of such a creature, and forms part of centuries old American myth regarding a species of unidentified apelike men living in the wilds of the Pacific Northwest. The main characters of *Willow Creek*, Jim and Kelly, plan to retrace the journey of Roger Patterson and Robert Gimlin, in the hopes of finding new evidence, such as hair, footprints, or even making a new sighting.

The naïveté and occasional arrogance displayed by the couple during their trip recalls the attitudes of similar cinematic city-dwellers venturing into the countryside, as seen in films like *Deliverance* (John Boorman, 1972), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven, 1977) and *Southern Comfort* (Walter Hill, 1981). Because the majority of Americans now live in cities, film has increasingly situated modern America life in urban and suburban contexts; rural spaces are thus reconfigured as foreign sites, or rather, as sites which represent a past vision of America, alternatively romantic and forbidding in their aura.^[35] Horror films (like the three cited above) have reinforced the forbidding element of this shift, casting the countryside as regressive, isolated places hostile towards outsiders. In *Willow Creek*, Goldwaith depicts a gradual transition from a vague suburban notion of Bigfoot (something akin to a Halloween cartoon character), towards something more arcane and frightening at the core of the legend. Jim and Kelly delight at the kitsch artwork of the township, such as the smiling wooden statue welcoming tourists, to the jaunty songs recited by eccentric locals. They conduct light-hearted interviews, and learn about the Bigfoot-themed tourism that sustains the local economy. They notice a large painted mural of Bigfoot helping to clear the forest and raise the town's buildings, and joke about how the creature is probably just a disgruntled labourer. Yet, underlying the mural is an ambiguous message about the civilising of the West: the exploitation of America's natural and human resources, the ideology of manifest destiny, the harnessing of

primeval energies. Read as an allegorical figure, one could construe Goldwaith's Bigfoot as a vengeful agent of pre-colonial America, or as representative of the persecuted, forgotten peoples (such as rural, indigenous, slave, and immigrant labour) who helped build America, but were excluded from its triumphs and plenitude.



[Figure 5 - Alleged evidence of a Bigfoot, taken from the Patterson-Gimlin film, 1967]

The Bigfoot iconography of the town suggests a monstrosity which has been safely contained within an accepted narrative; however, the growing sense of menace attached to the nearby forest suggests an enduring, perhaps even hostile atmosphere. For example, during one of Jim and Kelly's interviews, a local man cautions them against going into the forest, warning them of some of the strange folk who live there, such as pot-growers and survivalists, who are not fond of tourists. The same man also recounts an instance in which he was walking his dog through the forest, when suddenly the animal grew frightened and bolted, only to be found hours later torn in two. It is a reminder of the primeval dangers of the wild. Later, the couple notice a flyer for a missing person on the wall of the diner, and mistake it as part of the fantasy, which prompts Kelly to give a mock pose for her own missing person flyer. The fatalistic framework of the subgenre (as evidenced in the previous two films examined) foreshadows such light-hearted moments as future obituaries.

Finally, while making fun of the wooden Bigfoot statue, a passer-by scolds them, telling them, “It’s not a joke, you know. You shouldn’t go out there.” These moments pierce the couple’s superficial perception of American rurality – that it is something which serves merely as a receptacle for tourists to extract entertainment and experiences, something which can be safely framed and controlled through the technological representation of the camera.

The film draws an implicit connection between Bigfoot and the figure of the American backwoodsman, as characterised by Linnie Blake in *The Wounds of Nations*. Where American settlers and frontier communities were historically idealised as honest, hard-working, god-fearing folk, the backwoodsmen emerged in critiques dating back to the eighteenth century as being representative of the darker side of pastoral living.[\[36\]](#) For writers like John Hector St. John, this figure was the antithesis of a rural American utopia – instead of faithfully tending and taming the land in the name of Christendom, the backwoodsman embraced the “dark irrationality” of the wilderness by living an existence of drunkenness and idleness.[\[37\]](#) Upon arriving at the forest in the film, James and Kelly are confronted with a large hairy man who demands that they turn their vehicle around and leave, for their own good. When Jim dismisses the man’s concerns, he becomes aggressive, poking Jim in the chest and yelling at Kelly to cease her filming. Intimidated, they reverse their vehicle, hoping to find another way into the forest, whereupon the man begins to throw rocks after them. He appears to be one of the strange folk whom the interviewee had warned them about. The anger the man directs towards their camera evokes the distain for technological representation that Bigfoot seems to display in the 1967 short film – the creature offers Patterson and Gimlin only a disdainful glance as he strides back towards the forest. It marks a shift from implicit to explicit hostility at the couple’s attempt to enter the forest; it also recasts their role: they are now trespassers into a space which they neither understand, nor respect, and which has prohibited them.

Along with casting the country as increasingly foreign to American audiences, film and television have perpetuated the stereotype of the backwoodsmen (also using variations such as “hillbillies” or “rednecks”), depicting them as everything from good-natured eccentrics to genetically deficient predators. This culturally implied friction between civilisation and savagery aligns with the perpetuation of the Bigfoot myth – a half-man, half-animal, embedded within the American wilderness, whose possible existence is both beguiling and repulsive to American society. Ironically, the backwoodsman asserts the freedoms of the American citizen, in that he demonstrates the freedom to reject the state—its values, its rhetoric, its authority—and to live independently and self-reliantly.[\[38\]](#) Whether he was forced out of his community or departed

voluntarily, the backwoodsman claimed the American wilderness as a home beyond the reach of government and church. Thus, as a stereotype—despite embracing the liberty that urban Americans have conceded the limits of—he became associated with lawlessness, deviance and violence; his otherness was communicated through recurring image of unkempt hair, wild eyes, and rotten teeth, as though to express a personhood which was fundamentally diseased.[\[39\]](#) Still darker interpretations have equated the backwoodsman with rapacious sexuality, most famously in the film *Deliverance*, in which a group of men from Atlanta take a weekend trip to the Georgia wilds, only to have one of the men set upon and brutally raped by a pair of snarling, toothless locals. *Willow Creek* links its monster with similar sexual violence, by implying that the woman from the missing person flyer has been kidnapped by Bigfoot as a “forest bride,” and thus placing Kelly as another potential victim. Representations of rural communities became synonymous with cultural backwardness – as the broken-down collections of citizens who had been left behind or forgotten by a modernising, progressive and globalising nation. [\[40\]](#) The stereotype of the backwoods symbolises not just the darker implications of freedom, but a contestation of America’s national narrative and unity.

Willow Creek exhibits the dread of the modern American at encountering the dark irrationality of the wilderness in its climactic sequence – a twenty-minute unbroken shot inside the couple’s tent during their first night in the woods. The scene begins tenderly, with Jim taking the occasion to propose to Kelly, and stationing his camera to capture the moment. Unfortunately, the romance of their embrace is interrupted by ominous sounds emanating from outside the tent. At first these are faint—the crunching of leaves and long animalistic vocalisations—but as the sounds become louder, the couple grows tense. Framed by the Bigfoot myth, these disparate sounds of the wild are assembled into a single menacing presence. By aligning our subjectivity with the camera, we are essentially positioned as a third character, trapped in the same tent as Jim and Kelly, paralysed by the same fear and threatened by the same monstrosity. Goldwaith derives horror from the interplay between the cryptic soundscape beyond the tissue-thin canvas and the couple’s body language – their strained attention (which echoes our own), their worried expression as the sound escalates, their relaxation as it subsides, their whispered attempts to reason out the situation beyond their field of vision, and finally Kelly’s blind panic and screaming as monstrous growls emerge just outside the tent. The tent walls, which we have viewed as static for 20 unbroken minutes, are suddenly interrupted by rocks and poking limbs (harkening back to the hostile man’s warnings). This intrusion provokes Kelly to bury her head in Jim’s lap; this response, combined with her childlike shrieks and the womblike shape of the tent, suggests a primal nightmare, composed of sense rather than language.

The lack of cuts makes this sequence unbearably tense, and demonstrates the feelings of claustrophobia and vulnerability that found-footage can generate. Indeed, it bears a strong resemblance to the nightly camping scenes in *The Blair Witch Project*; like that film, the monster in *Willow Creek* is never actually documented by the camera. The trauma of the encounter is located in absence, in the subjective camera's inability to frame or comprehend what is tormenting it, in the sensorial rush of terror that assaults that subjectivity from a wholly inconceivable source. The concealed menace of this particular encounter conjures the broader possible traumas that underlie the formation of America, which Jim and Kelly are compelled to investigate, and punished for their efforts. Found-footage allows Bigfoot to break out of the mummified past of songs and statues and murals, and to claw its way into the present.

Undead History (Conclusion)

Historical trauma, by its nature, is largely inaccessible to the public consciousness. It exists as an unstable gap in cultural memory, a gap which haunts people with its incompleteness and the vague but indefinable feelings of dread tied to it. Found-footage horror films, like nightmares, depict a collision of the past (the footage of what has happened, but cannot be spoken) with the present (the secluded aftermath), reinserting the viewer into a traumatic moment through the assaultive images and panicked rhythms of the subgenre. Correspondingly, there is no future in found-footage horror, no forward gaze – there is only the fluctuating space between living a disaster that you cannot escape or survive, and watching that disaster re-enacted without the power to alter or intervene. The interplay between performer, viewer, mode, and aesthetic disorganises the world and scrambles our perceptions of time, much like trauma.

Testimony—the act of bearing witness to traumatic events—is crucial to confronting trauma itself. The subjects and viewers of found-footage horror are cast in the role of investigators (or archaeologists) sifting through the past in search of some buried sorrow. The films examined in this article—*The Tunnel*, *Occult*, and *Willow Creek*—engage with the historical sorrows of their respective countries. Linnie Blake and Mary Ainslie write that horror does not flinch from or skirt the borders of trauma – it works through its feelings and sensations, often in expressly repulsive ways. It is therefore the ideal framework for exploring trauma because it is the most self-consciously disturbed and disturbing of all film forms.^[41] According to Adam Lowenstein, horror cinema assaults the foundations of history, at once acknowledging the pain of trauma, while challenging the citizens and communities of the world on their inherent complicity in its perpetration.^[42] As we view found-footage films, we are compelled to scan the screen for clues, to probe the visual evidence of the

footage in search of some buried truth. The camera becomes the visualisation of that search for the repressed, while the collated nature of found-footage evokes the psychic fragmentation which trauma provokes.

Notes

[1] See: Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2014), 3–28; Xavier Aldana Reyes, “Reel Evil: A Critical Reassessment of Found Footage Horror,” *Gothic Studies* 17 (2015): 122–136; Neil McRobert, “Mimesis of Media: Found Footage Cinema and the Horror of the Real,” *Gothic Studies* 17 (2015): 137–150.

[2] *Found Footage Critic*, accessed March 12, 2017, <http://www.foundfootagecritic.com/>

[3] Examples include: *End of Watch* (David Ayer, 2012), *Europa Report* (Sebastián Cordero, 2013), *Chronicle* (Josh Trank, 2012), and *Project X* (Nima Nourizadeh, 2012).

[4] Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films*, 8–9.

[5] See: Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

[6] Julia B. Kohne, Michael Elm and Kobi Kabalek, *The Horrors of Trauma in Cinema: Violence Void Visualization*, (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 9.

[7] Kohne, et al., *The Horrors of Trauma*, 10.

[8] Kohne, et al., *The Horrors of Trauma*, 12.

[9] Linnie Blake, *The Wounds of Nations: Horror Cinema, Historical Trauma and National Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 9.

[10] Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation: Historical Trauma, National Cinema, and the Modern Horror Film* (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2005), 159.

[11] Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 150.

[12] Robin Wood, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film.” *Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Barry Keith Grant and Christopher Sharrett (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2004), 107–144.

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- [13] Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films*, 182
- [14] Paul Keating, "Redfern Speech" (speech delivered at Redfern Park, New South Wales, December 1992), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mKhmTLN3Ddo>
- [15] Keating, "Redfern Speech."
- [16] See: Felicity Collins and Therese Davis, *Australian Cinema After Mabo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).
- [17] Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films*, 183.
- [18] Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films*, 183.
- [19] Heller-Nicholas, *Found Footage Horror Films*, 184.
- [20] Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representations*, 52.
- [21] Philip Wen, "Survivors Determined to Tell Horrors of Nuclear Bombing that is part of Japanese Psyche," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 6, 2015, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/survivors-determined-to-tell-horrors-of-nuclear-bombing-that-is-part-of-japanese-psyche-20150805-gis8z0.html>
- [22] Sarah Stillman, "Hiroshima and the Inheritance of Trauma," *The New Yorker*, August 12, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/hiroshima-inheritance-trauma>
- [23] Ted Goossen, Japan's Literature of the Apocalypse," *The Globe and Mail*, March 25, 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/japans-literature-of-the-apocalypse/article4266802/>
- [24] Kaoru Nishimura, "Unresolved Trauma and Japanese Identity after the Second World War," (paper presented at the International Congress of Group Psychotherapy and Group Processes' *Exploring the Transgenerational Footprints of War* symposium, Rome, Italy, August, 2009), 5.
- [25] Ben Hills, "Forgotten City Faces the Truth: The bomb Fifty Years of Fallout," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 5, 1995, 26.
- [26] Nishimura, "Unresolved Trauma and Japanese Identity," 2.
- [27] Nishimura, "Unresolved Trauma and Japanese Identity," 3.

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- [28] Nishimura, "Unresolved Trauma and Japanese Identity," 9.
- [29] Sinead Roarty, "Death Wishing and Cultural Memory: A Walk Through Japan's 'Suicide Forest'" (paper presented at the 3rd *Global Conference Making Sense of Suicide, Salzburg, November 2012*), 2-3.
- [30] Roarty, "Death Wishing," 5.
- [31] Roarty, "Death Wishing," 7.
- [32] Rob Gilhooly, "Inside Japan's 'Suicide Forest'," *The Japan Times*, June 26, 2011, <http://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2011/06/26/general/inside-japans-suicide-forest/#.WNBtSqlIH4Y>
- [33] Leo Lewis, "90 Suicides a Day Spur Japan into Action," *The Times*, November 12, 2013, <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/asia/article2852762.ece>
- [34] David J. Daegling, "Bigfoot's Screen Test: Analysis of the Patterson-Gilmin Film of Bigfoot," *Sceptical Inquirer*, 1999, http://www.bigfootencounters.com/articles/SI_99_daegling.htm
- [35] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 130.
- [36] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 128.
- [37] John Hector St. John, *Letters From an American Farmer* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), 44.
- [38] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 131-132.
- [39] Blake, *The Wounds of Nations*, 143-144.
- [40] See: Dwight B. Billings, Gurney Norman, Katherine Ledford, *Back Talk from Appalachia: Confronting Stereotypes* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000).
- [41] Linnie Blake and Mary Ainslie, "Digital Witnessing and Trauma Testimony in Ghost Game: Cambodian Genocide, Digital Horror and the Nationalism of New Thai Cinema," in *Digital Horror: Haunted Technologies, Network Panic and the Found Footage*, ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes and Linnie Blake (New York City: I.B.Tauris, 2015), 71-72.
- [42] Adam Lowenstein, *Shocking Representation*, 14.

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