Social Horror and Social Media:

The Threat of Emergent Technology in *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse*

By

Jessica Hamrick

Social Horror and Social Media:

The Threat of Emergent Technology in *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse*

By

Jessica Hamrick

Senior Thesis

Submitted to the Department of English, Vanderbilt University,

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the Major

April 2017

Thesis Advisor: Jennifer Fay, Ph.D.   Date

Second Reader: Jessie Hock, Ph.D.   Date

Program Director: Teresa A. Goddu, Ph.D.   Date

Acknowledgements

This thesis is not the product of one, but a result of the patience, hard work, and influence of many. For this reason, I would like to thank Professor Teresa Goddu for her unrelenting guidance and faith, without whom I would never have made it through Chapter I, let alone to the finish line. Similarly, I am thankful to Professor Jen Fay, who has graciously dedicated her time and expertise to my project, never allowing me to live in complacency and encouraging me to improve my argument at every turn.

To Veronica Sanchez, Stephanie Carlson, and Deann Armstrong, I owe my sanity. Thank you for your reading, your comments, and your unwavering optimism, even in the face of my often long and despairing writer's memos. Thank you to my roommates, who have allowed me to talk at length about horror films they have no intention of seeing.

Finally, thank you to my parents and siblings for giving me energy, strength, and inspiration when I had none. And to my mom, in particular, for always answering the phone when I call. This work is dedicated to all of you, and I could not be more grateful.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Social Media and the Horror of Technology: An Introduction

The horror genre has always had something of an affiliation with technology. In 1818, Mary Shelley's gothic *Frankenstein* made horrific both the scientific and industrial advancements of the early 19th century. Her now ubiquitous monster, born from the unholy union of electricity and experimental curiosity, echoed the concerns of a people barraged by the rampant innovation of the Western world. In 1897, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* – a terrifying tale of vampirism – was imbued with the language and imagery of evolving medical and communicative mechanics. Stoker's titular villain, the blood-sucking aristocrat himself, was placed within the company of then recent dynamic inventions such as the telegraph, the telephone, and the typewriter. The novel's particularly ghastly treatment of these emergent technologies, in fact, was both reprised and elevated when adapted for celluloid screen in 1922's *Nosferatu. Rosemary's Baby* (1968) also focused on technology. Released mere years after the first fetal ultrasound in 1956 and the FDA's approval of the modern hormonal birth control pill in 1960 – as well premiering on the cusp of the campaign for legal abortion – the film was rooted in an examination of developing reproductive tech. Following suit, in 2002, *The Ring* showcased the horrific possibilities of the audio/visual. As an American rendition of the eponymous Japanese film, suggested within this ghostly production was the potential for an electronic haunting through the recording capabilities of VHS and television.

What is evident within this brief compilation of works is a conspicuous relationship between the horrific and the technological. Alongside various species of monsters, ghouls, and frights these narratives each conjure a distinctive facsimile of the scientific, industrial, and mechanical objects of their time. In and of itself, of course, this relationship between technology and horror is not necessarily shocking. Though there are many acceptable definitions of horror–

a fair number of which will be explored in this thesis – in its most generic form, horror can be understood as "both an everyday occurrence (i.e. terrorism, torture) and a way of dramatizing our hidden fears and desires" (Wisker 1). According to theorist Gina Wisker, by reflecting societal fears back to society itself "horror [thus] explores the fissures that open in our daily lives" and "destabilizes our complacency about [certain] norms and rules" (Wisker 9). As they propose drastic transformations to the ways in which we communicate or work or live, the genesis of new technologies can understandably serve as a fitting source for such fissures. For example, the Industrial Revolution that whirred around Shelley's writing of *Frankenstein* saw vast progress in both machinery and electricity. For the author and her contemporaries, this progress catalyzed a dramatic shift in the operations of daily life. The creation of Frankenstein's monster at the hands of an electric shock and through the machinery of the doctor's design, then, serves as an illustrative recreation of this dramatic shift and the cultural anxieties which cleaved around it. In this way, the monstrous narrative of *Frankenstein* parallels larger sociocultural concerns about how the world changes or becomes threatening in the face of new technology. Adopting the words of critic Brian N. Duchaney in *The Spark of Fear,* the horror story "progresses the horrific idea of social advancement through technology as a way of abusing our sense of safety in the modern world" (Duchaney 5).

Now, nearly two-hundred years subsequent to the publication of Shelley's preeminent gothic fiction, a similar sentiment surrounding the affairs of horror and technology erupts. However, this sentiment, rather than focusing on more mechanical inventions like the telegraph or typewriter, centers on those networked and communicative advancements in social media. In a fitting evocation of the industrial age of *Frankenstein*, in 2012 op-ed writer Marc Benioff for the BBC went as far as to call today the "Social Revolution" (Benioff). Newly minted websites like

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat are promoted with the intent to innovate the ways in which we interact with one another on a daily basis. According to the same editorial piece, it is in fact due to the very contrivance of social media that "the world is changing at a speed we could never have imagined before" (Benioff). In this sense, our ability to access information, relay messages, and connect with one another is rapidly increasing and constantly reshaping with the continued introduction of new networked platforms. Maintaining the notion that instances of narrative horror serve as investigations into the disruption of accepted understandings of life and culture, this drastic technological deviation in how we develop community is ripe for horrific interpretation. Undoubtedly, the horror genre has responded.

Budding from the deep social cracks forged by the recent production of mediated networks is a modern generation of horror centered upon those popular applications themselves. What I have come to call "social media horror," these narratives serve as horrific expositions into the culture of computerized social networks. It is worth mentioning that these films are not necessarily representative of a new subgenre of horror cinema. Rather, social media horror exists as a propagation of and an addendum to the tumultuous relationship already established between technology and the genre as a whole. The gravity of these films, then, lies not entirely within their innovation or novelty – though of course they do innovate, in a way – but instead resides within the sheer magnitude of the socio-technological shift they comment upon. Parroting Benioff's previous statements, the rate at which we are progressing as a global community in the face of continuous digitalization is unprecedented. The way we interact with that community is now in constant, terrifying flux, and shows no perceivable signs of slowing down. The massive enterprise that social media horror undertakes, then, is to manifest the anxiety, ambivalence,

potential risks, and ultimate horror of being a modern citizen in that threatening flux of socio-technological innovation.

As a symptom of this constant innovation, chronicling the rise of the social media horror film is particularly challenging. As the technology of the past few decades remains in unceasing fluctuation, so too does our definition of social media itself. In the 1990's, for example, something as simple as shared video files or emails could be considered social technologies. Quite obviously, such examples pale in comparison to the algorithm-based networking behemoths of Facebook and Snapchat today. In an attempt to simplify the complications presented by this disparity, for the purposes of this work the term "social media" refers to any contemporary electronic technology designed to facilitate, store, and create digital social spheres. The yoke of social media, and by extension social media horror, thus prevails as the intentional communicative ambitions of the given application or website. Provided this rationale, pioneering found-footage horror films like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) or the *Paranormal Activity* cycle (2007-15) would not be considered social media horrors. Though such films are, in fact, integral to the modern techno-horror canon and will assuredly provide much needed analytical skeletons for unpacking the films in the following chapters, the distinctive lack of social schema provided in their given technologies (i.e. camcorder, surveillance camera) preclude a classification of social media horror.

In this sense, social media horror inheres in those cinematic narratives that feature websites or applications founded on the principles of social interaction. For example, in 2002 social media horror was enacted within *FeardotCom,* a detective thriller which spotlighted a Craigslist-esque page on the dark web intended to connect surveyors of voyeuristic murder or torture. 2012's *Smiley* operated on a similar principle, showcasing a monstrous urban legend who

kills teens live over Chatroulette[1] simply for, in a terrible manipulation of internet slang, "the lulz". In 2013 *Antisocial* was released to Canadian theaters. Using a fictional stand-in for Facebook called Social Redroom, a group of high school students in the onslaught of a zombie apocalypse have only the social media to communicate. And in 2015 *#Horror* presented a disturbing illustration of how a group of 12-year-old girls use Instagram and networked games like Candy Crush to engage in an ultimately murderous cycle of competition and cyberbullying. In characteristic dissimilarity to other modern technologically-based horror narratives, these films engage specifically in the challenges social media poses to our accepted understanding of the rules and regulations of social interaction. That is to say that, in conventional iterations of society the prospect of watching a demonic, masked figure murder a stranger simply "for the lulz" is unthinkable. *Smiley* (2012), however, would suggest that, through the changes made to our social landscape by sites like Chatroulette, this could be possible. Though, of course, the sociocultural reflections within social media horror are in their entirety not so straightforward and disenchanted as to simply suggest that murder is possible through the internet. However, in centering on the specific and continued innovation of mediated platforms, films like *FeardotCom* or *#Horror* do, in fact, tap into what Duchaney calls the "social discord that [arises] from a world that is now capable of moving beyond the ordinary conception of society into the much darker and undiscovered reaches of a society that [is] on the outskirts of modern progress" (Duchaney 6). Presented within this grade of modern horror, then, is a treatise of the destabilizing uncertainty and apprehension of living in an age where social technology is evolving faster than we can perhaps sustain.

---

[1] Chatroulette is a social chat website launched in 2009. Connected to the user's webcam, the site connects them via video chat to random strangers across the globe. Due to the haphazard nature of the site, Chatroulette has been the source of many controversies over the years, experiencing problems with nudity, harassment, and stalking.

Additionally, these social media horror films employ their technologies of choice in a purposefully diagnostic fashion. Akin to the ways in which the epistolary format of Stoker's *Dracula* reflects the novel's pointed consideration of mechanical advancements in communication like the telegraph and the typewriter, social media horror films regularly adhere to their preferred sites in form as well as in narrative. In fact, it is for this very reason that I have chosen to focus on horror cinema rather than horror literature. Apart from representing another layer of technological advancement – one often exploited in the adaptation process from novel to screen in examples like *Nosferatu* – modern cinematic technologies also provide new horror the capability to not simply regard social platforms as a motif but to seemingly be told through or by way of them. The technology of the modern movie permits a narrative founded in the exposition of concerns surrounding emergent media to adopt the feel, look, or visual representation of the media itself. A slanted version of what Kimberly Jackson would call "metahorror" in her 2013 work *Technology, Monstrosity, and Reproduction in Twenty-First Century Horror,* the "self-reflexivity [of these films] is itself part of their construction" (Jackson 9). The metafictional qualities of social media horror, then, are part of the mechanism by which the films make clear the conceivable hazards of rapidly changing technologies. What's more, by constructing either their entire layout or even sections of their narrative to reflect the visage of social media sites, films like *Smiley* (2012) or *Antisocial* (2013) in turn rehash these hazards onto their viewer, the very method of filming appearing to "create the monsters [and fears] that plague their human counterparts" in the use of social media (Jackson 54).

With regards to these specific thematic, narrative, and structural components, the social media horror film can consequently be understood to substantiate two distinctive types of claims about the technologically advancing world. The first, and perhaps more discernable of the two,

being any type of inquiry into or analysis of implicit or subversive anxieties concerning the prompt development and widespread use of social media sites. In this kind of assertion, the film acts as an "exposer of social and cultural deceits or discomforts," making clear by way of tethering social media to instances of horror, the larger apprehensions those sites may conjure from their users (Wisker 9). Alternatively, though often coincidentally, the second claim made by cinematic examples of social media horror is the subtler indication that mediated networks might, in turn, hold within them the promise of creating real, terrible, and unremitting occasions of horror as they continue to develop. In the chapters that follow, I attempt to unpack two of what I consider to be the most alluring recent examples of social media horror – 2014's *Unfriended* and 2016's *Sickhouse* – in order to decipher both how these claims are made and what implications they may have for the viewer, the genre, and how we understand this appearing shift in socialization as caused by the larger modern flux in communicative technology.

In Chapter One, "*Unfriended* and the Deterioration of Privacy," I argue that, by way of the film's digitized adaptation of haunting and its respective formulaic experiment, *Unfriended* is able to redraw the cinematic lines between what is considered public and private for its viewer. Provided that the physical layout of the film is made in the likeness of the protagonist's own laptop screen – the entire narrative is contained within her computer – this loss of distinction between privacy and publicity is thus attributed to the social sites of Facebook and YouTube through which the narrative is told. As such, what *Unfriended* unravels in its particular configuration of social media and horror is not only an elucidation of the fears and anxieties we might have concerning the sanctity of privacy in a digital age but also the threats of hatred,

cyberbullying, and eventual suicide or death that may result from or in conjuncture with those fears.

In Chapter Two, "*Sickhouse* and the Horrors of Mediated Spectatorship" I argue that, in an enhancement of the form of *Unfriended, Sickhouse* uses the photo-sharing application Snapchat as a device for filming, publishing, and disseminating its own horror narrative. Provided that the film was legitimately produced and streamed through the app itself, Snapchat and its facilities become elemental components of *Sickhouse's* diegetic space, calling attention to the terrifying concerns of social spectatorship fundamental to both the app and the horror genre as a whole. Given the viewer's current position as a mediated spectator of horror insofar as they are watching the film by way of the app, they are forced to reconcile the ways in which they embody the very threat of spectatorship or surveillance that is feared. In this way, not only does *Sickhouse* suggest that social media possesses a horrific penchant for our anxieties surrounding spectatorship, but it also advocates that in our use of social media, the viewer is in fact complicit in allowing that anxiety to be enacted in reality.

Finally, in Chapter Three, "Social Media as Horrific,*"* I argue that both *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse* in their particular treatment of Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat make clear that, in addition to exploring our concerns about privacy and spectatorship in this age of digital sociality, these social media sites have the potential for creating real instances of horror themselves. Using these films as cinematic reflections of the way we interact over these platforms in cooperation with actual examples of social media created horror, what is demonstrated is the ability for places like Facebook and Snapchat to produce a confounded sense of self in their users. By way of creating an online profile or persona, users on such sites put themselves at risk for developing a horrific duality of identity and ultimate feelings of abjection. In turn, these feelings lead to a

further disruption of accepted processes of sociality and community in the face of technological

innovation, a disruption that threatens us all with its ability to produce, film, publicize and enact

moments of both psychological and physical horror.

Chapter I.

***Unfriended* and the Deterioration of Privacy**

As the studio credits fade, the image of a computer desktop fills the screen. An unnamed user silently drags the cursor towards an open tab, positioning itself above a LiveLeak webpage entitled "Laura Barns Suicide." Hovering momentarily over the ominous banner, the guiding arrow descends, finding a red, emboldened link reading "continue" – it clicks. Embedded within the hypertext is a disturbing video of this same Laura standing in front of her public high school with a gun to her chest. The film's viewers watch alongside the anonymous user as the sound of a gunshot reverberates throughout the schoolyard and the grainy figure of the teenage girl collapses to the ground. Muffled screams linger in the background. With terrible urgency, the cursor closes out of the sinister recording and opens a predated YouTube clip labeled "LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF" – a humiliating exposé of the now deceased girl promoted as "the video that forced her to" commit suicide. Littered with comments and reactions, the clip has been shared over 75,000 times.

Such is the opening of the 2014 social media horror film *Unfriended.* The scene itself is short-lived, accounting for just over one minute of screen time in total. However, regardless of this apparent brevity, these first few moments are crucial to reading *Unfriended* as a whole. Introduced here is not only the film's peculiar format, but also the particular way in which it treats social mediation. Director Levan Gabriadze's and writer Nelson Greaves's teenage thriller is displayed in its entirety on the laptop screen of Blaire Lily – a classmate of Laura's who is revealed to be the computer's user shortly after the events outlined above (see Fig. 2). Following her activity on platforms the likes of Facebook, Skype, Spotify and YouTube as though Blaire's screen is their own, what unfolds for the viewer is a horror narrative both fixated upon and told

through these social media sites. It is by way of Blaire's desktop that the viewer is able to

observe how the horrific circumstances of Laura's death are networked. Recorded as video and

"leaked" onto the internet over LiveLeak (a website which traffics in publishing unauthorized

and often disturbing material), her suicide becomes a public and shareable piece of data. As that

data is distributed through posts or statuses it is instituted as a point of conversation or

entertainment around which the digital communities of a site like Facebook can revolve. As

indicated by the ticker in the upper right hand corner of the video's page, there already exists a

vast web of likes, comments, retweets and hyperlinks that connect the horror of Laura's final

moments to thousands of users online. Blaire, it would appear, is one of them – utilizing her net

anonymity to explore the gruesome details about this chilling death-turned-social-spectacle.

Provided that the viewers are peering into the action of Blaire's screen via the technological form

of the film itself, they, too, are accomplices in the continued digital publicizing of Laura Barns's

eerie death.
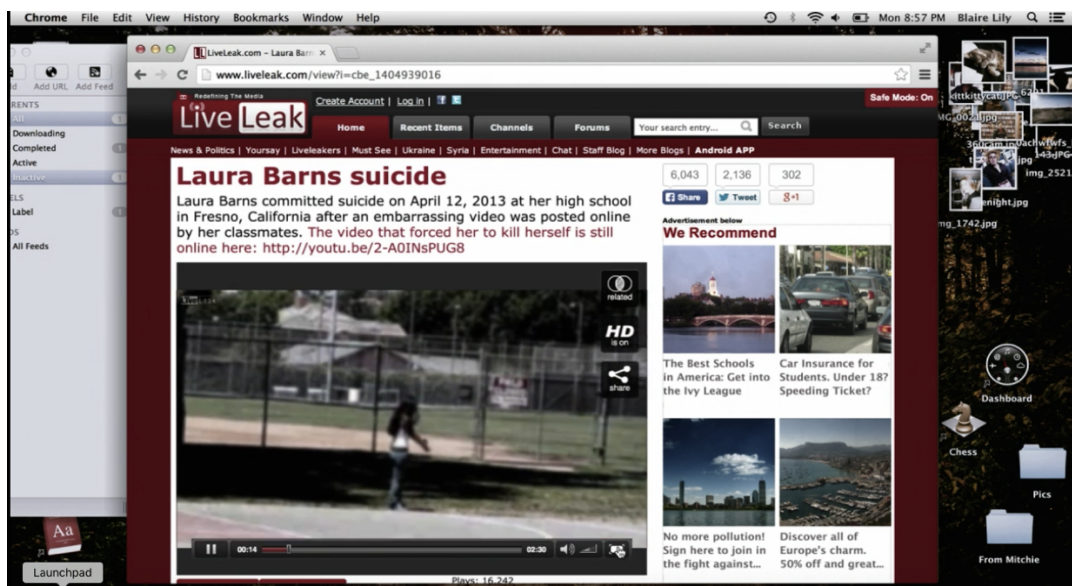
(Fig. 1, Blaire's Computer Desktop, Cinematic Screen)

More than a compelling introduction, then, what is established within the first few seconds of *Unfriended* are the ways in which both the film's narrative and provocative cinematic structure may reflect larger societal fears concerning privacy in the age of social media. Naturally, we have come to anticipate a certain level of control over what remains private or becomes public in our communication. Histories of face-to-face interaction have instilled in us the expectation that we are guaranteed some semblance of autonomy over the exchange of our private information. However, as communications analyst Derek Hrynyshyn supposes, "these expectations are at odds with the way social media [actually] works" (Hrynyshyn 148). Platforms like Facebook were instituted with the sole purpose of publishing our communications online. In fact, even when we connect with one another over the so-called private messaging systems of Facebook, the contents of our conversation must still pass through its interface and algorithms and thus remain similarly non-private. It is this "conflict" between our expectations of privacy and the actual function of these platforms "that leads to a sense of social media as a privacy threat" (148). Additionally, as social media technologies continue to rapidly develop and improve, they position themselves as one of the most explosive and pervasive forms of communication world-wide. However, alongside this persistent expansion and popularity is an escalation of the threat social media users feel the platforms pose to both the current and future state of their personal privacy.

Registering this contemporary fear, in the events that follow its opening scene, *Unfriended* uses its social media form to launch into a horrific consideration of the cultural anxieties surrounding social media and privacy. According to theorist Dennis L. White, in its most stripped down and emotive form, all horror is "based on the common fears of everyday life" (White 17). Utilizing a wide array of monsters, ghouls, and ghosts as metaphors for those

fears that burden society, the horror film acts as a comparative mechanism employed with the intention of elucidating cultural unease in a productive, albeit alarming way. In this sense, horror – and cinematic horror in particular – "can help those who experience [the film] face, and as a result, see more clearly, the nature of [those] fears brought on by contemporary society" (18). As Laura Barns's vengeful spirit returns to haunt Blaire and her friends over the very platforms upon which her death was made public in *Unfriended,* the film engages in this same kind of horrific examination. In fact, as the cultural metaphor of Laura's networked ghost is investigated through the film's particular social media format, *Unfriended* is able to blur both the cinematic and digital distinctions between what is considered public and private for its viewer. What emerges is a meditation upon both our fear of the deterioration of privacy as caused by social media as well as the risks posed to our overall agency as that privacy is lost.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Of course, a great deal of films within the horror canon are interested in configurations of public and private, interiority and exteriority, or even subjectivity and objectivity both as part of their narrative and structure. For example, *Peeping Tom* (1960) follows Mark Lewis as he watches, invades the homes of, and murders women all while recording them from under his jacket. The combination of his surveillance, voyeurism, domestic infiltration, and documentation serves as an exposition of how one's privacy may be disturbed in a modern setting. In the film's opening scene, the cinematic screen takes on the appearance of the viewfinder in Lewis's camcorder, exposing the film's consideration of privacy through its form and aligning the audience with the violations he has committed. More contemporary films like *The Ring* (2002) have a similar approach to privacy. Featuring a demon that, when a certain video tape is watched, crawls out televisions, the narrative of *The Ring* attempts to breach the private space of

the home and suggests to the viewer that their own TV – upon which they may be watching the film itself – might harbor analogous threats. Each of these examples uses its audience's position as a viewer to tap into their apprehension around technological privacy, thus simultaneously creating fear and illuminating their anxieties.

What distinguishes *Unfriended's* particular configuration of privacy from the archetypes listed above, however, is the film's exclusive structural treatment of social media as a primary form. Though *The Ring* (2002) implies that the audience's TV has the capability to produce violations of privacy, they never presume to show what that may look like[2]. And, while *Peeping Tom* (1960) does provide its audience the invasive point of view of Lewis's camera, it only does so for a brief scene, otherwise allowing the audience to disassociate themselves from the ways in which Lewis disturbs private frameworks. *Unfriended*, on the other hand, places all but the final twenty seconds of its run time upon the screen of Blaire Lily's desktop. For almost the entire film the audience is made to feel as though they are watching a group of teenagers haunted through their computers as they watch upon a computer screen themselves. Immediately, this format blurs the public and private lines that more traditional cinema like *The Ring* or *Peeping Tom* draws for its viewer. Though not quite a breaking of the fourth wall, constantly placing the viewer in the scope of Blaire's laptop invites them into the action of the film. By way of this form, the viewer is made purposefully aware that they are in front of a screen and, subsequently, that that screen may possess certain communicative functions as a representation of a computer desktop.

---

[2] It is important to note that *The Ring* does show its demon figure, Samara, crawling out of a television. What the film does not do, in relation to the format of *Unfriended,* is position the cinematic screen to look as though Samara is emerging from the viewer's *own* television. The viewer, here, is made aware of the *possibility* that the demon could infiltrate their private homes, but does not necessarily have the same effect as the cinematic form of *Unfriended*.

In particular, as Blaire and her friends are haunted over Facebook, Skype, YouTube, and Spotify, what is made clear to the viewer is the potential this perceived screen has to connect with others. It is through social media that, from the privacy of a personal computer desktop, each person has the ability to reach millions of other online users in an instant. In this way, the purview of *Unfriended* stretches out of the theater to include the vast, intangible 'public' that is the internet. In addition to the relationship between the viewer and the screen, the screen further establishes a relationship between the viewer and an unknowable number of users seemingly reachable through social media. Not only does this purview disrupt the overall movie viewing process which, in the age of digital downloads is often a very private experience, but it also again implicates the threat to privacy posed by social platforms. *Unfriended's* use of social media in its visual format thus goes beyond simply restructuring how the viewer relates to the film to implicate the loss of privacy that may also be experienced in how the viewer relates to other people through networked platforms. The distinctions between public and private that the film aims elucidate and disrupt are then twofold: those that exist within the cinematic experience and those that exist through our continued use of social media.

As it is told through *Unfriended's* digital format, the circumstances of Laura Barns's suicide and ghostly-reawakening go on to support the blurring of these distinctions and the deterioration of privacy they propose. Though it has been a year since Laura's passing at the beginning of the film, it is within its opening scene that the conditions of her death are first exposed. Referring to the description provided in the introduction to this chapter, the second hyperlink that Blaire clicks on – "LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF" – leads to a video recording of a belligerently drunk Laura. In it, she is seen fighting, allowing a friend to take a shot out of her navel, and, finally, lying on the ground covered in what appears to be her own excrement.

Posted to YouTube, the video has garnered thousands of views and shares as well as a steady stream of anonymous comments that follow the emotion expressed in the title: "kill urself", "u should just die", "no one likes u" etc. (*Unfriended*). In being published to the social site of YouTube[3], Laura's torment – the torture that brought her to the point of suicide – is made public in nature. Both the video itself and the ensuing slur of comments the viewer sees hurled in her direction are accessible, likable, and sharable.

This is not to say that a non-social media form of bullying is entirely private. Rather, the viral, communicative nature of social media serves to heighten the publicity of the spectacle that is Laura's cyberbullying. As a result, these platforms hinder Laura's ability to both control or even process her own persecution. The reach of her humiliation extends far beyond the physical confines of her friends, school, and community as the video is liked, shared, and tweeted across many social sites. Unlike the kind of classic bullying that may take place in person and in a specific location, Laura has absolutely no authority over what aspects of her humiliation are made known to her teachers, family, or even total strangers. In this sense, there is quite literally no place she can go where the presence of her embarrassment cannot follow her. Taking place over the internet, this form of bullying accompanies her into her bedroom, invading the private, domestic space of her home through her computer. It has the potential to follow her far away from her town, where, by way of its social nature, every stranger she passes on the street could possibly have seen or taken part in her exposure. By means of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter,

---

[3] As of yet there is no consensus concerning whether or not YouTube should be classified as social media. Though YouTube was perhaps not created with sociality in mind, I believe that in recent years it has developed as such. In particular, I cite the platform's use of a profile system, its connection to Google+, its comment section, and the pervasive culture of famous "youtubers" who regularly interact with fans and subscribers as evidence to its social capacity.

Laura's pain and degradation becomes part of the public cannon in that there is no longer a "private" or personal space in which that degradation does not exist.

Observing the cyberbullying of Laura develop through a cinematic reproduction of the same social media sites, *Unfriended's* viewer is thus made to feel as though they, too, are complicit in the torture of Laura Barns. As Blaire participates in the violation of Laura's privacy by consuming this humiliating YouTube video, the audience is aligned with her computer. Thus, by way of Blaire's participation, the viewer feels as though they are likewise part of the digital horde of strangers facilitating the attack on Laura. Through *Unfriended's* social media form, the cyberbullying which led to Laura's suicide exists as a narrative reflection of the threat to privacy these sites may actually pose. While in no way does the film's structural experiment lead the viewer to believe that the torture of Laura Barns is real, by incriminating the viewer through Blaire's laptop *Unfriended* makes them intimately aware of the terrible potential of their own use of social media. At once, this instance of cyberbullying showcases both the risks proposed to Laura's agency and life through the violation of her privacy and – by way of the specific cinematic distinctions the film draws between the viewer and the screen – how its audience may similarly be at risk for participating in that violation.

As a response to these risks, Laura's eventual suicide can similarly be read as a representation of the concerns society feels for privacy in the use of social media. These concerns are perhaps most obvious in the fact that Laura's death was published on LiveLeak without her consent (*Unfriended*). Immediately, this publication evokes how social media can coopt and disrupt even something as intensely personal as suicide. Of course, occurring in the parking lot of her high school, Laura's death was, at least to some degree, purposefully public. However, once the video of the suicide was leaked, the specific social and circulative nature of

17

media sites like Facebook and Twitter intensified this publicity. Provided that Laura herself did not upload the recording of her suicide to LiveLeak, we can assume that, while she intended her death to be somewhat overt, she did not intend for it be as virally exposed to the Internet as it was through social media. The publishing of this recording, then, serves to again undermine Laura's agency, even in her death. In addition to being unable to control her own privacy and the resulting torment, by way of social media the autonomy Laura felt she had over her own suicide was stripped away as well.

In fact, though horrific and terrifying, Laura's decision to commit suicide can be understood as her attempt to regain one last fragment of the authority that was lost in the violation of her privacy and subsequent online torture. To place a video of this last, defiant act on a social site functions as a last-ditch effort to eliminate any marginal sense of agency Laura may have recaptured in her death. Laura's suicide, in this manner, is inextricably linked to and characterized by the threat to privacy society fears may be enacted through social sites. In this case, the true fear or horror induced by the imagery of Laura's death is not derivative of its objective 'scariness' or shock alone. Rather, the true horror of her suicide is determined through the ways in which it exposes the continued threat we feel social media poses to privacy and agency, even in acts of defiance. *Unfriended* suggests here that, even when one may try to reclaim autonomy in the face of a crumbling sense of privacy, they still remain in danger. In the publication of Laura's suicide, social media appears to reconfigure the social norms we have come to anticipate when it comes to privacy, agency, and death. It indicates that in the age of mediated networks it is entirely possible that privacy has become defunct, no longer an anticipated part of either our lives or our deaths. Already implied to have contributed to both the

18

violation of Laura's privacy and her consequent lack of agency, this scene then solicits from the viewer a realization that their own use social media has a similar affect on their privacy.

One year following her suicide, Laura's ghost returns to haunt Blaire through the very same brand of social media sites that facilitated both her torture and death. Fittingly, Laura's spectral presence is not felt by cold air or seen in the flickering of lights, but instead besieges Blaire through the social mediums of Skype[4] and Facebook. For example, the first indication of Laura's fantastic presence is the appearance of an anonymous icon within Blaire's Skype page. While in a call session with a group of her friends, Laura's ghost appears as a user named Billie, and infiltrates the supposedly private call. Believing the icon to be a glitch or an internet "troll" at first, Blaire checks the unknown user's routing addresses and sees that it belongs to the now-deceased Laura. The ghost, here, is somehow supernaturally intruding upon a private session, one which it should not technologically be able to enter without being invited. What's more, the fact that Blaire questions whether or not this is actually an act of the supernatural– believing that another human could possibly have the capability of infiltrating their digital space in such a way – further points to her latent fears, as well as the general fears of the public, concerning the privacy of communication online. That is to say that, though Laura's ghost is a metaphor for the cultural anxiety felt surrounding our privacy online, Blaire's immediate reaction to her presence hints that this kind of digital invasion is already possible. While the ghost provides an alluring, fantastical explication of the ways in which privacy can be violated and abused online, those violations are apparently already achievable by everyday people. As such, the risk of someone

---

[4] Much like YouTube, the social capabilities of Skype are still being debated. The primary function of Skype is much like that of FaceTime, allowing its users to "call" or "video chat" other users. I place Skype in the category of social media for the following reasons: its connection to and use of Facebook, its referral to contacts as "friends", its ability to create specific "call circles" or digital communities, and its ability to record and post the communications of those communities to the Internet through Facebook.

infiltrating a Skype call and spying on Blaire and her friends is not just a metaphor, but a real and terrifying threat both to Blaire and the viewer, who, as a modern citizen presumably uses similar social sites themselves. Furthermore, this threat is then expedited by the way in which the viewer is connected to the cinematic screen of *Unfriended*. Peering into Blaire's laptop, the viewer is equally as "uninvited" as Laura's ghost, witnessing her Skype call without her knowledge of their presence. In this moment, the viewer is made intently aware of how they are enacting a similar violation of Blaire's privacy as the ghost. Once again *Unfriended* incriminates its audience's own connection to or disruption of digital privacy.

For some time, Laura's spirit remains silent. Much like the viewer, she is merely a spectator, watching the trivial conversations between Blaire and her friends. However, the spirit slowly begins to engage with the teenagers over multiple social media sites. Accessing Blaire's Facebook account, the ghost posts an album of photos featuring Val, one of the girls on the skype call. These photos are eerily reminiscent of the cyberbullying video of Laura herself, showcasing an extravagantly drunk Val in a myriad of revealing positions. Blaire repeatedly attempts to delete the photos, but regardless of her actions they remain public on her page, rapidly gathering a slew of stunned comments and likes. When Val discovers that the person responsible for posting these photos is not Blaire, but in fact the persona used by Laura's ghost – "Billie" – she threatens to call the police. Immediately, Val's skype screen blacks out, suggesting that Blaire's computer has momentarily lost connection with Val's. When the connection returns, Val sits motionless, leading the other members of the Skype call to believe her screen is frozen – a digital glitch in her computer or Skype account. However, unbeknownst to the teens, Laura's ghost has actually forced Val to drink bleach, effectively compelling her to commit suicide. Val's screen, then, is not "frozen" or stuck, but rather a stark, unmoving image of a now

deceased Val. It takes a few moments for Blaire and her friends to realize what has happened, and as a result, for approximately three minutes a dead girl being broadcast in their direction.

This kind of live-streamed death is, again, reminiscent of the LiveLeak video of Laura's own suicide. Here, Val, like Laura, is both unable to protect herself from the humiliation of her private photos made public and unable to control her own suicide in that it was forced by Laura's ghost. In this sense, Val's death is simultaneously caused by and projected through social media, in a way giving the platforms (by way of Laura's ghost) complete and ultimate control over what parts of her persona are made public or private, even after she has passed. Like Laura, the publication of Val's private and personal photos puts he in danger of losing her own agency which, as a consequence, puts her at risk of a death regaled through social media sites. Again, the horror of Val's death does not stem from the crude manner of her dying nor any gore or jump scare commonly associated with the horror genre, but instead is felt in direct reaction to its implication that the use of mediated networks leads to a loss of personal control or agency over public and private lines.

The ghost of Laura, facilitated through and fueled by the functions of social media, then continues to make clear to Blaire and her remaining friends the dangers these platforms enact by engaging them in horrific version of a popular sleepover game called "Never Have I Ever."[5] Laura's ghost proposes a bastardized version of the game's rules in which she first reveals something "shameful" a member of the Skype call has secretly participated in. If the player who has committed this salacious act does not admit to it, Laura posts evidence of it to Facebook. In indisputable teen-horror-movie fashion, as soon a player admits to five acts, they die. Among

---

[5] The commonly accepted structure of the game is as follows: each player begins with five fingers, moving clockwise from player to player each person reveals something scandalous or surprising that they have "never ever done", if one or more of the other players *have* committed the act they put one finger down, the first to put all five fingers down looses the game.

those private and personal secrets revealed are accusations of stealing, gossiping, and even sexual assault. By the very nature of their secrecy these revelations already play into societal concerns of privacy insofar as, the fear that privacy may be lost does not only derive from the sanctity of privacy itself, but also stems from an assumption that "there are others who would be able to exercise some power over those whose privacy is violated" (Hrynyshyn 148). Upon learning this covert information, Laura's ghost is able to achieve a certain amount of control over the other teens. By the terms of the game, not only does she have the power to literally end their lives in death, but she also has the capability to execute a kind of social death, in which those whose secrets have been revealed to the world would become subject to the consequences of their actions. In keeping with the fantastical nature of Laura's own death and newfound digital after-life, this social death reimagines the lines between the living and the not living, offering an alternative form of both life and death to the viewer and the players. Suffering an exposing social death, he lines drawn between public and private, here, track onto normalized distinctions between right and wrong. In this way, social media is shown not only to inhibit the agency of those who keep secrets, but also administer agency to those who wish to expose them.

The way social media traffics agency through privacy is made clear in the revelation of Adam who drugged and sexually assaulted a classmate. Upon his admittance, the ghost, as a metaphorical representative of social media, has garnered a certain amount of control over his life. Unmasking his crimes on Facebook or Twitter would not only likely lead to incarceration, but would also reveal him as a social pariah – hated and ridiculed for his actions. It is important to note that I am in no way advocating that an assailant deserves, or even receives, any kind of sympathy from myself or the viewer in general. Rather, what is indicated here is the potential a breach of privacy over social media has to disrupt what already tenuous amount of autonomy we

have over our lives. The ghost also dispenses power to the other players when Adam's disgusting crime is made public through media. Knowing the information that they do, Blaire and her other friends have a similar capability to strip Adam of his agency and freedom. Understandably, there is also something to be said here about the very crime of sexual assault, which in nature is based in an abuse of power and a taking of agency. In truth Adam may deserve the loss of his autonomy, as he has obviously taken it away from another person. Thus, in addition to the horrific affect the deterioration of privacy may have on our agency, social media may simultaneously present a method for social justice or retribution.

In fact, throughout the rest of game it is slowly revealed that each member of the Skype call has in some way participated in the cyberbullying of Laura Barns. Though the degree of participation varies from teen to teen – some leaving anonymous comments on the now infamous YouTube video, others simply expressing apathy towards her torture and death– they are all implicated in the violation of Laura's privacy, her ensuing loss of agency, and ultimate suicide. In reaction, Laura's ghost begins killing off Blaire's friends. Using her spectral abilities to force them to commit suicide in various, gruesome ways, Laura's ghost makes clear that, while social media has the capability to ruin someone's life (like her own) it also provides an avenue for justice. Adam, for example, takes his father's gun and reluctantly shoots himself; perhaps less believably, Ken places his hand in a moving blender. Regardless of the horrifying nature of their deaths, both Adam and Ken were complicit in the events that led to Laura's death. As such, Laura's spirit can be read here as carrying out a kind of justified vengeance, holding the teens responsible for the atrocities they committed against her through social media. The cultural anxiety triggered in this social media justice is the promise that we might be held responsible for our actions. It is safe to assume that everyone has secrets, information they would hope to keep

personal and private. *Unfriended*, here, registers our fear that, as those private secrets may become public over social media, we might also be punished for or held accountable to them.

This accountability is then actualized as, after all of her friends have been killed for their offenses by the ghost, Blaire faces Laura on her own. In the final moments of the film, Blaire believes that she has somehow "won" the ghost's game. However, despite her short-lived feelings of relief, the ghost messages her on Facebook through Laura's old profile, stating that there is "'one more thing' Blaire must admit to" (*Unfriended*). As Blaire pleads and sobs with the ghost over both Facebook and Skype, Laura's profile publishes an extended version of the "LAURA BARNS KILL URSELF" clip to Facebook. As the video plays out, it reveals Blaire as the one who recorded the tape and published it online, purposefully and cruelly ignoring the drunk Laura's pleas to keep her embarrassment a secret. When Laura posts this recording, Blaire is publicly revealed as the person who first violated Laura's privacy, who formulated her cyberbullying, and who ultimately is the root cause of Laura's suicide. Blaire's other friends and classmates see the video and begin commenting – "you're going to hell," "don't ever speak to me again", and "You killed Laura" among them.

What becomes painfully clear in these final moments is that, despite Blaire's best efforts, nothing will ever remain private on social media. In fact, just as it did with Laura's video, the community of Facebook begins to swarm and form supplemental societies around those moments of the private which are inescapably made public. The cluster of commentators thrives on the publication of Blaire's shame, taking the utopic, communal promise of social media and instead using it to both devastate another human being as well as bring her to justice. Removed is any agency Blaire might feel she has over her own privacy. As representative of the anxieties present within society, the narrative enterprise of Laura and her ghost suggests that, as Laura is

forcing Blaire's private actions to become unwantedly public, the film advocates that social

media itself possesses a similar, tumultuous power over any user's personal information. The

final comment hurled at Blaire from the internet is then, fittingly, from Laura herself stating:

"What you've done will live here forever" (*Unfriended*). Not only does this line rehash those

possibilities of an afterlife or alternative form of death suggested by Laura's ghost, it further

implicates that, within Laura's exposure of Blaire is an indication that social media not only have

this power to disrupt a personal sense of public and private, but in fact its essence may be

predicated upon that very power.

That is to say that, platforms like Facebook and YouTube might not simply allow privacy to

be violated, but may actually necessitate the revelation of secrets as part of their promise to form

communities. It is around this exposition, "calling out", or "dragging" of another person's private

information or hidden shortcomings that the powerful communities and movements of social

media are formed. As explored above, that exposition is often positive, carrying out a kind of

digital cultural justice. However, what *Unfriended* makes clear is that, in addition to creating

much needed social movements, that exploitative power of social media might also have the

potential to actualize our fears of being exposed and controlled like Laura Barns.

This fear is immediately felt by the viewer as Laura's ghost proceeds to slam Blaire's laptop

shut, forcing the audience into a first-person visual narrative for the first time in the film.

Seconds after Blaire is revealed to be Laura's online tormenter, the ghost closes what the viewer

understands to be Blaire's laptop screen, compelling them to look out onto Blaire's dark and

silent room. If the viewer is watching *Unfriended* on their own computer it at first appears as

though their own screen is closing, that the viewer is being recognized by the ghost itself. A

spectral figure then rushes towards Blaire in a final jump-shot, presumably killing her in the

process. To effectively close the cinematic screen and place the audience in Blaire's perspective equates the viewer with her positon. This has a frightening effect, in part because Blaire is subsequently murdered, but more saliently because it implies that the viewer is equally capable of committing her crimes against Laura. Though this is not the first time the particular cinematic distinctions of *Unfriended* place blame on the audience, it is the first time that the viewer is made to feel as though Laura's ghost recognizes their presence.

As participating members in the same public digital communities of the film's format, the audience is in similarly responsible for the disruption between public and private space – as well as the ensuing horror – that occurs there. Though depicted through supernatural means, this scene is ultimately an indication of the torturous power that social media possesses. *Unfriended's* distinctive use of social media communicates to the viewer that they play an intricate role in the exposition and exploitation of online personas and profiles. Relegated to the spectator is a sense that they are part of the horrific cycle and capabilities of the same sites that led to Blaire's demise. Furthermore, it suggests that, in acting within these specific digital spheres, the private life of the viewer could just as easily be made immediately and irreversibly public, registering that presupposed fear of being exposed and torn apart over social media.

Essential, here, is a consideration of what it means to watch a horror film like *Unfriended* in the private, physical space of one's computer or in the home. In her exposition of changing cinematic landscapes, theorist and historian Barbara Klinger suggests that viewing cinematic productions through new media "necessarily [breaches] the boundaries of public and private by opening the home to the outside" (Klinger 9). The interior, personal territory that is one's house, room, or even computer desktop is, in a way, invaded by the cinematic horror once the film is showcased in such a space. In using media as form, the horror of *Unfriended* no longer exists on

a distant, theatrically public plane, but within the spectators own intimate domain. In addition to the examples of ruptured distinctions between of public and private, this unique viewership experience brings the public nature of the film into the private home, along with the very public nature of the fears it represents. That is to say that "in this intricate relationship between public and private, social discourses enter the home and surround the experience of media consumption" (Klinger 10). The larger societal fears concerning private safety and unwanted publicized information represented in the horror of the film are expanded out from the narrative and brought into the viewer's personal arena by means of form and structure. In this sense, *Unfriended* goes beyond the metaphor of Laura's ghost in replicating our culture concerns of being made a spectacle or having our darkest secrets exposed. In its visual format the film goes on to express that, not only are these anxieties realizable, but the viewer has most likely already put themselves in danger of those risks simply using social media at all. The viewer's fear, here, lingers, following them as they continue to use Facebook or YouTube or Skype despite the warning, ultimately vindicating *Unfriended's* ability to challenge the way we view and experience horror, all by means of a social media lens.

<div align="center">***</div>

Mediated networks have rapidly proliferated into nearly all crevasses of our everyday lives. Given the horror genre's established propensity to reflect that which occupies or troubles the minds of society at large, it was only a matter of time until the field offered a film which capitalized and commented upon the technologies that have so drastically modified contemporary socialization. *Unfriended's* endeavor to use those digital communities of Facebook, Skype, and YouTube as both narrative and cinematic form offers a rich and verbose image of new media and the fears that it inspires. In this sense, the film proposes what theorist

Kristen Lacefield describes as "powerful intimations of the underlying discomfort or even fear that we sometimes experience in the wake of technological advancements, especially when such advancements seem to be a step or two beyond what we can anticipate and integrate (Lacefield 3). In fact, reading this particular quality of supernatural horror through a social media lens begins to expose the indiscriminant borders that exist between public and private, the watcher and the watched, and the acceptable and unacceptable in both a horrific and mediated space. In turn, the film provides an ardently alluring elucidation of the implications associated with being a viewer of, and a participant in, the critical exercises of the digital domain. The piece begins to address the utterly terrifying complications of spectatorship, anonymity, and the interconnectedness of online personas, a thematic and narrative area that demands further investigation as the use of social media continues to increase exponentially.

Chapter II.

***Sickhouse* and the Horrors of Mediated Spectatorship**

Spectatorship, as it relates to the creation of fear within the horror film, is central to the genre as a whole. According to film theorist Michele Aaron, the act of spectatorship itself is more than just one of watching. In *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On,* she posits that "spectatorship has always been bound up with [negotiations] of the spectator's activity and passivity, manipulation or resistance, [and] distance or implication" (Aaron 1). As a mode of viewing, to be a spectator thus implies the existence of a relationship between the watcher and the watched – one shaped or developed through such negotiations. It is, therefore, by manipulating the relationship between the spectator and the action of the screen that the horror film is able to instill feelings of terror or disgust in its audience. In a cinematic sense, this manipulation can be accomplished through any number of maneuvers. The jump shot, for instance, purposefully disrupts the spectator's immersion into a scene. The sudden appearance of a ghoul or monster abruptly challenges both one's position to and expectations of the film, extracting shock or fright. Whether or not this kind of maneuver is successful is thus reliant upon an understanding of the spectator's "activity", "resistance" or "distance" in relation to the film itself. The examples of social media horror explored in this thesis use particular networked platforms – a type technology intent on establishing relationships between users and content – to further exploit and comment upon spectatorship as a terrifying form of viewership.

The film perhaps most dedicated to considering the role of spectatorship within social media horror is director Hannah Macpherson's *Sickhouse*. Released under Indigenous Media late in the spring of 2016, the use of Snapchat in *Sickhouse* is a logical maturation of the formulaic experiment of *Unfriended*. That is to say that, where the latter takes on the stylistic appearance of

social media sites as its structure, the former was literally published on one. Filmed live and digitally produced over the course of five days, and only by means of an iPhone, *Sickhouse* was disseminated to viewers through the Snapchat account of YouTube star Andrea Russett, who plays a fictional version of herself in the film. When Russett's cousin Taylor unexpectedly comes to town, the two join a pair of fellow YouTube-personalities-turned-actors and take off to find the eponymous Sickhouse: a supposedly haunted cabin hidden deep in the middle of an unnamed California forest. Legend states that the Sickhouse was once home to a young man who, afraid his wife would leave him, poisoned her into a state of perpetual illness. Now, years after her death, the Sickhusband scours the woods around his house, searching for a new Sickwife to take her place. Revelers hoping to find the infamous house must solve three, cryptic riddles, and once there, must adhere to three rules: make no noise, leave a gift, and do not enter the house. As suggested by the website the filmmakers created in dedication to Sickhouse lore, breaking any of these rules leads to imprisonment, illness, and eventual death.

Though the film takes obvious narrative cues from horror-genre-giants like *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Sickhouse's* use of Snapchat thoroughly reinvents the found-footage tropes of its predecessors, foregoing the traditional film experience altogether. Unlike *Blair Witch* or even *Unfriended*, *Sickhouse* was never released in theaters. In fact, the only way viewers are still able to watch Macpherson's cinematic experiment is by digital download, upon which the footage still retains the upright and shaky camera work indicative of an iPhone recording. Despite – or perhaps due to – this reinvention of the film experience, *Sickhouse* was viewed millions times on Russett's account alone before the ephemeral recordings disappeared from the application. The film, then, is not simply a depiction of popular culture or contemporary society, but is rather an interactive part of it. Regardless of the narrative's intentional fictionality, the

process by which *Sickhouse* was shot and watched does not simply address the anxieties surrounding social media in this cultural moment, but is itself one of them.

In fact, it is from its unconventional use of Snapchat as cinematic medium that the true horror of *Sickhouse* is derived. While the film's use of riddles, haunted structures, bodily fluids, and ghosts provides a basis for its initial classification in the genre, at the core of what authorizes *Sickhouse* as frightening is its use of spectatorship by means of social media. In his review of the film, journalist Kevin Lincoln posits that "the dynamic of watching and being watched is fear in its simplest form" – it is this very fear that resonates throughout the film (Lincoln). In this way, *Sickhouse* uses Snapchat as an integral part of its diegesis in order to address issues of spectatorship inherent to both horror as a genre and social media as a cultural phenomenon. This interdependence between genre and form ultimately serves as an invocation of and reaction to contemporary fears of surveillance or voyeurism in digital spaces, forcing the viewer to confront those anxieties central to being a mediated spectator. Consequently, it is the film's reliance upon the act of spectatorship – by means of the app – that establishes the horror of *Sickhouse*.

<div align="center">***</div>

The phenomenological interjection of *Sickhouse* lies in that the specific vehicle the film employs to connect the viewer to horror – Snapchat – recapitulates the viewer's uneasiness concerning their own spectatorship to a degree inaccessible by means of traditional viewership.[6] Launched in 2011, Snapchat is an image-sharing based smartphone application for iOS and Android. The platform allows users to film and edit snapshots and short videos – colloquially referred to as "snaps" (see fig. 2). These snaps are often images of the user's daily life, regularly

---

[6] Traditional viewership, here, refers to the conventional processes of seeing a film such as going to the theater, being in public, and watching on a large screen. The distinctive quality of *Sickhouse's* publication through a social media site is unprecedented and as such abstracts the film from the average movie-going process.

featuring food, friends, selfies, and what are called *uglies,* purposefully bad photos of the sender.

The snaps are distributed one of two ways: they can either be sent directly to a single "friend" or

follower, timed to expire within ten seconds, or they can be

published to a "snap story" which, much like Facebook, is public

to all of the user's "friends." Though it has since been updated, in

order to watch a user's snap story at the time of *Sickhouse's*

release, the follower had to "click through" it, selecting each

individual app to watch in sequence. Unlike other photo sharing

websites, all photos posted to a user's "snap story" disappear from

the app within a 24-hour period, guaranteeing that those moments

captured and shared by each user remain ephemeral in nature.
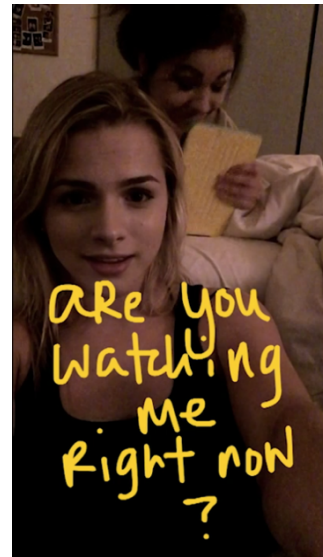
(Fig. 2, *Sickhouse*)

As a film, *Sickhouse* was recorded and published in its entirety as a snap story on

YouTube darling Andrea Russett's real account. As a popular internet personality, Russett

possesses millions of digital followers through YouTube, Snapchat, Twitter, and Vine. Due to

her celebrity, Russett's use of Snapchat diverges slightly from the app's intended purpose. In

opposition to sending snaps to known "friends" and family, Russett instead employs the story

function to circulate the content of her life to adoring fans – allowing countless random users to

follow her account and consume her stories. Though the narrative of *Sickhouse* is entirely

fictional, Russett's Snapchat followers were not immediately made aware that snaps she posted

between April 29th and May 3rd 2016 were part of a film. Rather, as *Sickhouse's* initial audience,

Russett's followers were led to believe that the horrific narrative of the film was an actual,

unscripted snap story – immediately indistinguishable from Russett's other daily postings.

In this sense, the social media form of *Sickhouse,* though in many ways unprecedented, is perhaps most analogous to what film theorist Matthew J. Raimondo terms "observational horror" (66). As a subset of conventional horror films – and, for the purposes of this work, a variation upon social media horror as well – observational horror is defined by "its appropriation of *vérité* aesthetics, which are methodically employed to cultivate spectatorial epistephilic[7] appeal" (Raimondo 66). The observational horror film uses the realistic feel of documentary or faux footage to pique the investigative interests of its viewers. As opposed to the stylized and overall "fake" appearance of other films, movies of this ilk appropriate techniques like shaky camera work and minimal costuming that are often associated with "real" footage to encourage a curiosity in their viewer similar to that felt when watching a documentary. By appearing to the audience as reality, the film summons the viewer's innate "desire to know" and authoritatively holds their attention.

Sickhouse uses Snapchat as a mode to adopt this reality aesthetic and observational nature. As of February 2017, Snapchat boasts over 150 million daily users (Carson). It is reasonable to assume, then, that *Sickhouse's* average viewer is familiar with the app itself. As such, the imagery and processes associated with Snapchat are registered as an aesthetic of reality – regardless of its fictional plot. The viewer perceives the look of Snapchat as one of digital documentary, through which users usually receive instances of real life, not fiction. For example, when Taylor records and publishes a snap of Andrea sleeping, the frenetic cinematography and the appearance of Snapchat's signature faded textbox with the caption "sleeping beauty" are instantly recognizable to the viewer as components indicative of the platform itself (see fig. 3). In fact, much of the film is composed of innocuous and ordinary snaps. Within the first few

---

[7] Raimondo's use of epistephilic, here, refers to epistemophilia, or, a particular "preoccupation with knowledge"

moments, Russett appears to be walking to the airport, narrating to her followers: "So I'm here at LAX. Why? Because my cousin called me and said, can you pick me up at LAX" (*Sickhouse*). Despite being the introduction to a horror film, nothing about this snap stands out as distinctive from Russett's typical use of Snapchat. As such, *Sickhouse* begins to establish a certain relationship between its spectator and content, one built on the feelings of conventionality or reality. It is as the film slowly interjects the fantastical imagery of the Sickhouse legend that this relationship is disrupted, calling attention to the viewer's position as spectator and the risks that position may pose.

(Fig. 3, *Sickhouse*)

However, the specific social media form of *Sickhouse* differs from the spectatorial experience of other observational horror films insofar as it uses Snapchat as more than just an aesthetic form. In addition to the film adopting the appearance of Snapchat's façade, the application was also legitimately used as the only mechanism for both its recording and publication. That is to say that the technology employed by *Sickhouse* does not simply allow the film to mimic the *look* of a real Snapchat story. Instead, the film *actually exists* as a real Snapchat story upon the app. While it could be argued that *Blair Witch* participates in a similar experiment by using an actual camcorder to record its narrative, the found-footage film was still distributed to viewers through the theater. This classical mode of dissemination upsets the found-footage nature of the film itself, forcing *The Blair Witch Project* to lose a substantial amount of its promised reality in the process of appearing on the big screen, a space we most often associate with fiction. *Sickhouse,* on the other hand, upholds the promise of watching a live recording comprised of real people on a smart phone as suggested by its Snapchat aesthetic. Though the

film's plot remains a complete fantasy, the way in which the audience accesses it further supports a sense of reality. Macpherson's use of Snapchat therefore continues to blur the distinctions between reality and film past the precedent set by other observational horrors. Uninhibited by the setting of a traditional theater, audience, or even a full-screen display, *Sickhouse* situates its spectator vastly closer to the narrative both physically and emotionally. The relationship between spectator and film, here, is transformed to a relationship more akin to a relationship between spectator and application.

In fact, by "momentarily transforming the irreal space" of the narrative into the real space of Snapchat, *Sickhouse* effectively "[persuades] the viewers to place themselves in the film" itself (Raimondo 83). In doing so, the viewers' acknowledgement of the established reality of *Sickhouse* leaves them metaphysically vulnerable to the horrific actions of the screen. For example, as Taylor Snapchats herself walking into the basement of the haunted cabin – breaking the rules of the Sickhouse – she begins by recording what are presumably sheet-covered dead bodies lying across the floor. As she pans up from the ground, the spectral figure of the bloody and crazed Sickhusband leaps out at her. The display of the camera shakes and immediately falls right, fading to black. The viewers are left to presume that Taylor has dropped the phone out of fear. Just as they would while watching in a theater, the spectators generally react to this scene with a jump, gasp, or scream. However, in using a real social media platform to regale the horrors of the film, *Sickhouse* leads its viewers to believe that they are so much closer to the danger of Sickhusband than they are in the theater.

It is admittedly unreasonable to assume that any viewer would believe that they are in true, physical danger in this moment. Nevertheless, the exceptionally intimate relationship the spectator has to *Sickhouse* heightens the degree to which this sudden attack disrupts their

expectations of the film. The guise of authenticity created by the film's use of Snapchat lulls the spectator into a false sense of reality in which the threat of Sickhusband could not possibility exist. When he suddenly attacks Taylor, the spectator is briefly made aware of the falsity of that reality and, by extension, the flimsiness of the safety it proposes. In this sense, the spectator feels threatened not because they believe the figure of Sickhusband to be real, but because the form of Snapchat makes him appear as a figment of reality – an unlikely, but perhaps possible danger that forces the viewer to recognize their complete lack of security or safety in every day life. Though logically the viewer recognizes Sickhusband as unreal, the circumstances of his appearance indicate that, in watching this film, they are still somehow at risk.

Consequently, the heightened sense of reality provided by Snapchat allows the film to form terrifying conclusions about the role of spectatorship itself. Once again, similar to other works of observational horror, the camera in *Sickhouse* exists in the diegetic space of the film. However, the fact that the camera is concurrently part of the larger socially mediated network of Snapchat suggests that the platform is not simply part of the diegesis, but rather is an actor within it. As an application, Snapchat guarantees the ability to record, edit, and publish "snaps" set to disappear. Unlike some forms of blogging or mediated publication, the upload of "snaps" does not simply send the recorded content out into the technological ether. Instead, these snippets of film are sent directly to the publisher's followers and friends. Inherent within the act of using Snapchat, then, is the affirmation that some other person is watching what is recorded. The entire sociological promise of the application is that when one user creates content, others will inevitably consume it; the content itself cannot exist without the consumer.

By publishing the entirety of the film on Snapchat, then, *Sickhouse* engages in this promise. As the application is integrated into the narrative fabric of the film, so to are the

processes and systems it relies upon. Through the means of publication on the app, the diegesis of *Sickhouse* conceivably expands past the literal lens of the Snapchat camera to include the socially connected networks that support it. In other words, *Sickhouse* and its characters are purposefully aware of their viewer and, in fact, recognize them as an integral part of the film. Divergent from the passive nature of the traditional film experience, Snapchat acts as a very real communicative liaison between the perceived reality on the screen and the collective audience. In this instance, social media is a two-way street upon which the film and its spectator willingly interact with one another. For instance, throughout the film Andrea and Taylor often react to direct Snapchats or Tweets sent to them in reaction to the action of the film. On account of the film being released in real time, when the actors respond to these messages, they can be seen as having a conversation with their audience. As such, spectatorship becomes both narratively and physically intertwined in *Sickhouse*: narratively in the sense that the characters are cognizant of and respond to their viewership and physically in that in order for the film to exist upon the application at all, the viewer must "click through" and watch it.

Apart from generating a more realistic horror film, *Sickhouse's* particular use of Snapchat also serves to make the viewer more acutely aware of their role in this spectatorial process. Again, the literal function of Snapchat is predicated upon the creation and consumption of content. Though perhaps not stated explicitly to all who own and use the app, the intention of recording and sending snapchats and snap stories is that they will be watched. Effectively, Snapchat exists as a tool for spectators and voyeurs, its only true purpose being to allow a user to easily access and view the lives of their friends. The way *Sickhouse* purposefully utilizes this Snapchat spectatorship as a vehicle for horror – in adjunct to film's own consciousness of its

connections to spectatorship as outlined above – ultimately calls attention to the viewer's own spectatorial presence.

In fact, as the characters casually chat about Snapchat's existence as a kind of "online diary," the viewer is made privy to their own role as an onlooker (*Sickhouse*). The use of the term diary specifically serves to conjure notions of privacy and secrecy. To peer into one's diary would be to subvert such notions, to become a third party witness to another's private life. Connecting this level of privacy to a Snapchat story, albeit somewhat misplaced due to the user's ability to pick and choose what content to publish on the app, equates the watcher of said content to a kind of peeping tom. This is especially true considering Russett's role as a celebrity which implies that, given the sheer number of followers she possesses, she does not know each of them personally. Though she knows that she is being watched, she is not necessarily cognizant of by whom and under what circumstances that watching occurs. Understanding the film's presence as a Snapchat story itself, the inclusion of this metafictional line thus implies the same of its own viewer. *Sickhouse,* here, uses Snapchat to make a self-referential critique of its own audience, forcing them to confront the potential anxieties of their distinct position as the spectator of another human's life. Here, the threat sensed in the sudden materialization and attack of Sickhuband is revealed to be that of the risks proposed in the audience's own spectatorial position.

As a matter of fact, it is the film's incredibly complicated treatment of the spectator and spectatorship from which the true horror of *Sickhouse* emerges. Apart from the obvious aesthetic and narrative attributes of conventional scary movies, the legitimate, substantive horror of *Sickhouse* derives from its use of Snapchat to emphasize the misgivings of modern spectatorship.

While the the ghostly plot line of the film is admittedly creepy, actual cinematic horror does not stem from such imagery. According to Raimondo, it is rather that:

> Simultaneous revelation and concealment are the business of horror. Fear in horror is derived from the suggestion of something horrific, how much is actually revealed about [that something], and the narrative and stylistic rendering of these two elements (Raimondo 66).

Horror, then, emanates from a film's implication of the terrifying, not from the viewer's confrontation with the terrifying itself. While jump-shots and eerie music are most definitely a component in a film's ability to create such an implication, they are by no means at the root of the film's horrific properties. For *Sickhouse* the essence of its horror lies not necessarily with its plot, but with its use of Snapchat to hint at the utterly frightening possibilities of spectatorship. In using the platform itself to establish a sense of reality, build an interactive relationship between spectator and spectacle, and then make the viewer aware of their own anxious positioning in that relationship, *Sickhouse* suggests that there is something inherently horrific about the process of watching and being watched online. This ominous implication is displayed to the viewer by means of online social communication itself, further destabilizing the viewer's position as a spectator and begging them to question the horrific possibilities of participating in such a space at all.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

In its treatment of spectatorship, *Sickhouse* introduces a much broader consideration of the human anxieties surrounding social media. Implicit within the film's warning about the horrific capabilities of watching through Snapchat is an examination of contemporary fears associated with both being watched and watching others in a digital space. While compelling the

audience to confront their own unsettling position as spectator, *Sickhouse* concurrently implores them to confront those anxieties which surround mediated spectatorship. In particular, the film begs the viewer to examine those cultural and personal concerns of voyeurism, surveillance, and stalking as they relate to being a part of the Snapchat community.

Among these anxieties, *Sickhouse* candidly explores how Snapchat spectatorship could evolve into voyeurism. Though an unquestionably wide array of horror films address voyeurism as both a narrative tool and analytical concept, *Sickhouse's* deviating use of Snapchat implores its viewer to face their own plausible lapse into voyeurism as a spectator. Admittedly, this concept is complicated by Russett's ability to decide what is and is not published onto her story. In doing so she could easily be regarded as a kind of exhibitionist rather than the subject of voyeurism. However, as briefly touched on earlier in this chapter, the interface of Snapchat actually accounts for this complication. Insofar as Russett exists as a celebrity, she has made her snap story public to more than just her friends. These "followers" are thus able to watch her postings in almost complete anonymity, with Russett aware only of the number of people who have viewed her snaps. Moreover, Snapchat's promised ephemerality also supports a voyeuristic reading. Provided that, at the very longest, all of Russett's snaps will disappear within 24 hours, the voyeur only has a certain window of time to partake in the enjoyment of watching her. Suggested here is that Russett is allowing for the possibility of voyeurism, but not necessarily expecting it. This particular approach thus puts the onus of the perversion not on the actions of the person being watched but rather on the person watching. Though a clear variation upon voyeurism, the application of the theory, here, clearly elucidates both the risks in and fears of social media spectatorship.

That is to say that, in addition to being voyeuristic in a cinematic sense, the film's method of production and dissemination also suggests that its viewers may be construed as voyeurs in a mediated quality. In an attempt to understand the intricacies of such a suggestion, scholar and theorist Clay Calvert defines mediated voyeurism as:

> the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of the mass media and Internet (Calvert 2).

In this manner, as *Sickhouse* displays "revealing" or sexualized snaps of Russett, Taylor, and their friends Lukas and Sean, it subsequently allows the spectator to slip into a form of spectatorship comparable to voyeurism. The viewer's characteristic placement as a Snapchat spectator already establishes a level of inappropriate intimacy and an air of breeching privacy – as though the viewer is peering into the "unguarded" lives of others, to use Calvert's terminology. Thus, adding sexuality to this formula would function to enhance feelings of intimacy and to further break down the walls of privacy social media users like Russett still purportedly still have. As such, the social anxiety of being watched or watching implicit in *Sickhouse's* use of Snapchat is expanded to include the anxiety of being watched having sex or watching others have sex, an expansion that suffices to heighten the viewers discomfort and anxiety altogether.

In what is perhaps the most salient example of *Sickhouse's* use of sex to address issues of mediated voyeurism, Taylor loses her virginity to Lukas while looking for the haunted cabin. As soon as Lukas leaves their tent, Taylor publishes a small part of the events to Russett's story. Given the ephemeral nature of Snapchat data, it is not uncommon for users to post supposedly

scandalous material to the platform. The promise that the content will disappear within 24 hours allows such snaps to retain some limited form of privacy or secrecy. However, Taylor's publication of something as intimate as her first time having sex is, in fact, uncommon. Cultural norms surrounding sexuality, and female sexuality in particular, predicate that a woman losing her virginity is an intensely personal and fiercely emotional moment. While the basis for this conceptualization of female virginity is truly rooted in deeply misogynistic sociopolitical and religious beliefs, the concept that it is somehow "special" or "a gift" is still a widespread cultural conviction. Therefore, many viewers see Taylor's post to Snapchat not simply as a publication of her sex life, but as a publication of her most private, "special" moment. These viewers, then, are not only spectators to Taylor's every day life, but also voyeurs to her most personal and confidential exchange. This distinction, like that between surveyor and spectator, takes on a more sinister connotation. In it, the audience is privy to information that, apart from Taylor and Lukas, society suggests no one else should be privy to. Inherent within the undertones of the term is that the voyeur is downright *wrong* or vulgar for watching the content.

In keeping with this thought, *Sickhouse* then forces its viewers to confront their own anxiety over being a kind of voyeur by means of its mediated platform. Following her triste with Lukas in the tent, Taylor turns the camera on herself, still wrapped half-nude in a sleeping bag, and takes a selfie with the caption "not a virgin anymore" (*Sickhouse*). The addition of this snap and its placement immediately following the sex scene calls explicit attention to the viewer's spectatorial – and by extension, voyeuristic – presence. The archetype of conventional voyeurism requires that either the subject not know or not recognize their position as being watched. If they were to do so, the voyeur would be made profoundly cognizant of their actions and the social prescription of immorality that comes with them. In posting this image to Snapchat, Taylor

purposefully acknowledges the very public nature of the particular way she lost her virginity and in fact communicates that acknowledgment to the voyeur themselves. This, in turn, shatters any semblance of privacy constructed by the sexual content that was posted, the cultural beliefs that surround female virginity, or even the transitory properties of the platform itself. In doing so, the film's distinctive use of Snapchat makes the viewer contemplate their own morally compromising position as a voyeur as well as those social anxieties that surround voyeurism as it exists as part of the mediated spectatorial process.

In fact, *Sickhouse* goes on to explore how this form of casual spectatorship could come to be something more akin to surveillance. Amid the application's ability to record just about anything is the possibility that those recordings may not only be watched, but examined and tracked as well. The distinction between spectatorship and surveillance is admittedly precarious. Though the intention behind each act is disparate – being a spectator implies a certain amount of passivity where the surveyor is always active – when applied to the properties of Snapchat as it is used in *Sickhouse* the two begin to bleed into one another. This is particularly the case when we consider Andrea Russett's position as a YouTube star. In opposition to the average person's use of Snapchat, Russett's snaps are not only sent to her personal friends and family, but to a vast legion of anonymous followers as well. The fictional version of her person displayed in *Sickhouse* has approximately 500,000 followers; The real Andrea Russett has well over a million. To be an unknown "follower" of Russett's Snapchat account is to shift one's intention from being that of passive spectatorship to active celebrity surveillance. Even the term "follower" suggests a more sinister, investigative position. For Russett, this suggests that millions of unidentified and largely untraceable people pursue her movements everyday.

As a film, *Sickhouse* uses its social media form to force the viewers to grapple with how their current position as a spectator could also be a mode of surveillance. For example, before their journey to find *Sickhouse*, Russett decides to take her visiting cousin Taylor to Venice Beach. While there, Andrea's celebrity is recognized by two teenage girls – played by actresses – and she is asked to take pictures with them. In reaction, Taylor questions, "Do you get recognized a lot?" Russett responds, "Well, you snapped where we were going to be" (*Sickhouse* 2016). The implication, here, is that because Taylor – who is using Russett's phone for the time being – published a recording of her and her cousin at Venice Beach on Snapchat, Russett's followers were aware of her current location. Though the two girls were indeed part of the narrative, their presence within *Sickhouse* is an embodiment of the capabilities afforded to real "followers" of Russett's account. What's more, the properties of Snapchat give these "followers" the ability to literally and physically follow Russett to any location. Understanding that the entirety of the film was published live over Snapchat, any of *Sickhouse's* initial viewers have a similar ability to find Russett in person. The metafictional quality of this scene, then, begs the viewer to recognize their own position as a Snapchat "follower," as well as the inherently investigative and threatening potentialities that position affords them.

In fact, *Sickhouse* explores one such potentiality in depicting how social media surveillance could be analogous to a contemporary form of stalking. If there exists an innate, human anxiety around being observed, there is perhaps an even stronger fear of being genuinely and physically followed. In its attention to such anxieties, *Sickhouse* suggests that Snapchat spectatorship - and by extension, Snapchat surveillance – are in fact precursors to actual stalking. Most saliently, this is evident by some of the terminology used to describe the capabilities of social media – both by the characters of the film and in reality. For example, amidst a discussion

44

concerning the reality of online profiles, Russett supposes that, with social media, "you literally

know everything about someone else before you meet them, I mean, you can just creep on them"

(*Sickhouse* 2016). The use of the word "creep" here is not specific to the film, but a

colloquialism common to discussions of social media. In this context, to "creep" means to scroll

or tap through another person's account in order to learn about them. Apart from its obvious

horrific connotations, to "creep" literally means to approach something stealthily or slowly.

Russett's particular use of the word suggests that media profiles like those on Snapchat provide

followers with the ability to digitally stalk users without their knowledge. Given the viewer's

current position as a spectator themselves, the appearance of this conversation in *Sickhouse*

suggests to its audience that their proclivity towards watching can easily evolve from spectator to

surveyor and even to stalker, as well.

In turn, the possibility of this evolution is highlighted by the reappearance of the

"followers" from the beach towards at the end of the film. Again, Russett's teenage fan-girls use

the videos uploaded onto her Snapchat account to find and track her to the Sickhouse itself. With

the intention of playing a practical joke, the "followers" surprise Russett and Taylor as they are

inside the haunted cabin at the height of the film's drama. Believing them to be Sickhouse's own

resident ghosts, Russett and Taylor scream upon seeing them (*Sickhouse* 2016). Of course, the

fans immediately reveal themselves to the frightened teens. The shocking return of these

"followers" not only acts as a classic jump scare for both the characters and audience alike, but

further begs the viewers to question at what point digital "creeping" or stalking becomes real,

actualized stalking. Understandably, it could be argued that the separation between cyber

stalking and literal stalking comes with the physicality of "real" stalking. However, considering

the viewer's existence as online followers of Russett themselves, they are, in some ways, aligned

with these fans. Before the fan-girls took the initiative to legitimately follow Russett and her friends, they were presumably just like the audience – clicking through the Snapchat app and watching Russett's every move. The reappearance of these "followers," then, begs the audience to reconsider this distinction between social media "creeping" and literal stalking. While the physical manifestation of these two actions may remain separate, it appears as though the intentionality behind cyberstalking and literal stalking may be the same. In fact, if the promise of Snapchat is to create a live, digital community, then digital stalking within that community would, conceivably, be no different than physical stalking in a physical community. Drawing upon the innate, human anxiety of being watched and/or followed, this scene then uses the interesting positioning of the viewer as mediated spectator to question how those anxieties of surveillance and stalking transfer into a digital space.

Sickhouse, recognizing its position as an interactive part of the Snapchat community, uses its own problematic digital capabilities to then force its viewers to confront their horrific potential as social media stalkers as well as spectators. As soon as the followers expose themselves as non-ghosts, the film instantly launches into its final, grotesque sequence. Having broken the rules by entering the cabin, Russett, Taylor, and the fans all begin to vomit violently. Confused and scared, the followers fall to the floor. As Taylor runs out of the room in an attempt to find Lukas, it becomes clear that the two young fans are going to die (*Sickhouse* 2016). In this scene, the viewers watch as the followers are promptly punished for their crimes of surveillance and stalking. Understanding these girls as a reflection of the terrible potential of their own position, the spectators are forced to watch a fantastical interpretation of the ramifications of their own surveillance. As the vomit begins to turn red, indicating that the followers have begun

vomiting blood, the viewers experience a visceral reaction. It becomes clear, here, that this is a

supernatural representation of the risk the spectators run in participating in social media.

By employing Snapchat as a mode of filming, circulation, and publication *Sickhouse*

engages in a diegetic enterprise centered upon and told through the horrific properties of

mediated spectatorship. In doing so, the film reciprocally uses the spectatorial properties of the

application itself to demand the viewer confront not only their position as a spectator, but the

deeper and vastly more disconcerting anxieties that position introduces. *Sickhouse* in this manner

compels its viewer to grapple with their own potential to become surveyors, stalkers, and

voyeurs by means of being a mediated spectator. Moreover, the film equates these potentialities

with horror – showing them alongside haunted cabins and ghosts – and consequently constructs a

narrative more securely fixated upon the horrific qualities of Snapchat and social media than a

simple ghost story.

<div align="center">***</div>

Ergo, it is through *Sickhouse's* peculiar utilization of Snapchat to invoke the anxieties of

its own viewers' social media spectatorship that the actual horror of the film emerges. In other

words, that which makes *Sickhouse* scary is not, in fact, the spectral narrative itself, but the

horrific properties of being a Snapchat spectator suggested by the film's form. Harkening back to

Raimondo's definition of horror provided previously in this chapter, *Sickhouse* artfully "reveals"

and "conceals" certain information to the viewer about their own terrifying capabilities as

mediated spectators and the anxieties that surround them (Raimondo 66). This applies

particularly to those concerns of media surveillance, stalking, and voyeurism insofar as the

scenes explored above could be construed as the film's method of revelation to the viewer. Apart

from these moments, *Sickhouse* allows the viewer to continue watching without recognition of

their own spectatorial position – in fact, purposefully concealing from the viewer their own horrific potential as spectators. What the inclusion of Russett's "followers" and Taylor's sex scene does, then, is further reveal to the viewer their spectatorship, and by extension, make them intently aware of their own proclivity towards stalking or voyeurism respectively. *Sickhouse* employs Snapchat as a means of both creating and commenting upon the horrors of spectatorship and then subsequently uses it to force its viewer to confront these horrors within themselves.

As a social media application, Snapchat is a popular-culture-based, pithy, communicative digital structure that not only lends itself well to the aesthetic properties of horror as a genre, but, in turn, also reflects that genre's capabilities within *Sickhouse*. In this way, social media can be understood as a kind of theory of horror – an analytical tool through which the horrific properties of the film are elucidated. Though *Sickhouse* deals in the ghostly and the vulgar by means of narrative, it is the process of "reading" this narrative through a Snapchat form that makes the film horrific in nature. In addition to an explication of those human anxieties which arise from the practice of mediated spectatorship, what becomes clear within *Sickhouse*, then, is an indelible connection between the horror genre and social media as whole. A connection ironically supported by Snapchat's ghost-shaped icon – a symbolic indication of the cultural facets of social media horror.

Chapter III.

Social Media as Horrific

In its rise to universality, social media has somehow found itself to be the chosen structural and demonstrative form of a number of recent horror films. It is, in fact, by means of those very capabilities which supposedly construct the idealized communities of social media that films like *Unfriended* (2014) and *Sickhouse* (2016) recount their respective terrifying tales. Though each movie admittedly possesses a certain level of horror in its narrative alone – *Unfriended* in its ghost story, *Sickhouse* in its haunted-cabin-lore – it is via the films' particular application of websites like Facebook and Snapchat through which their actual horror is enhanced. In direct opposition to the visionary potential such platforms declare, then, these films draw indelible connections between the horrific and media itself.

These connections exist in direct opposition to the productive possibilities that social media advocates. As an appendage to the larger body of digital media, social media couches a specific set of promises concerning both the present and future of communication. Within the infancy of the internet, many "extolled not just the potential, but the reality [it presented] as an agent of an unprecedented social transformation" (Carey 445). The subsequent development of platforms like Facebook, Skype, Twitter and Snapchat thus touts guarantees of instant connection, unrestricted information, and the creation of meaningful online communities disentangled from the complications of their physical counterparts. By way of computerized profiles, we are allegedly uninhibited by the limitations of face-to-face interaction. Through each user's ability to like, save, share, and comment upon published material, a seemingly utopic communal interface emerges. This interface is presented as an expansive and inclusive social

sphere that will, purportedly, only grow wider and less restrained as its given platforms evolve over time.

While to some degree these promises are being fulfilled by our use of mediated networks, presented within *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse* is a consideration of the alternatively horrific potential of social media. In addition to providing a compelling explicative lens for modern horror *through* social sites – as explored in the previous chapters – *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse* concurrently procure a telling theorization of Facebook and Snapchat as seen *through* the genre. In other words, the use of horror within these films is a kind of analytical tool for understanding and unpacking the potential ramifications, risks, and threats of using these websites. As a generic and aesthetic property, horror thus becomes a method of reading the mechanisms of mediated platforms as technological instruments instilled with the power to create, promote and facilitate very real specimens of terror and fear. *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse* are cinematic rebuttals to and rebukes of the idealistic space social media and its functions allegedly inhabit –their specific treatment of social sites helping us to reflect on how social media itself is a place of horror.

The function perhaps most useful to revealing these alternatives is the online profile. As an ingress to sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat, understanding the online profile is crucial to understanding the horror of social mediums in their entirety. Given the pervasiveness of the online profile, it is unsurprising that both *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse* offer their own analytical representations of how the creation of something as simple as a "handle" or "page" could harbor inherent horrific possibilities. The films suggest that, by placing a digital recreation of the self in exchange with the communicative networks of social media through an online profile, the user exposes themselves to the risks of confounded selfhood, the creation of a dual

identity, and ultimately the facilitation of personal horror. Moreover, these risks stand

diametrically opposed to the utopic atmosphere such mediated sites allegedly support, indicating

that, while we may become more connected, social media may also challenge the way we

recognize and categorize ourselves in an evolving society.

<p align="center">***</p>

As a terminological stand-in for what individual platforms may refer to as simply a

"profile," "user handle," or "page," the online profile is perhaps the most ubiquitous

characteristic of social media sites. Regardless of whether a platform is accessed by application

download or web address, the first exercise all users are asked to perform is the formation of a

profile. Often composed of a mixture of personal information and photos, it exists as both a

digital representation of the user as well as the portal through which they are introduced into and

are set to interact with the interface of social media. To establish an online profile might entail as

little as devising a user name or handle, as is the case with Snapchat, or be as laborious as filling

out something akin to an autobiographical survey, such as with Facebook. Despite these apparent

differences, practically every platform requires the user to establish a kind of digital self in order

to participate in their given communities. Employing an online profile is, in this way, an essential

step in the process of engaging with social media itself and as such, an equally essential

ingredient in how social media may produce both feelings or instances of horror.

Unfriended explores the horrific potential of the online profile largely through a

consideration of protagonist Blaire Lily's disparate Facebook and YouTube accounts. Within the

film, Blaire uses social media both as a means of "self-presentation" in her public Facebook

profile and "self-disclosure" in the private, anonymous YouTube account used to bully Laura

Barns. These two terms – self-presentation and self-disclosure – though commonly employed in

<p align="center">51</p>

a psychological context, are adopted by media theorist David R. Brake in his 2014 book *Sharing our Lives Online: Risks and Exposure in Social Media.* Here, Brake suggests that self-presentation exists as "the process by which individuals attempt to control the impressions others form of them in social interaction" via social media, whereas self-disclosure refers to a more "mindless" means of allowing the self to be "known to others" over the use of certain platforms (Brake 43). The distinction between these two phrases lies in the disparity of their intent. That is to say that, a user's self-presentation stems from the intention to shape a specific online profile to the expectations of others while the image procured through self-disclosure simply emerges over time. As Blaire uses two social platforms and two separate online profiles as a method of both purposeful self-presentation and irresolute self-disclosure, what becomes clear is how her own self-image is horrifically disoriented by the existence of each. She establishes two contrasting versions of her identity – one purposefully "presented" over Facebook, and one shamefully "disclosed" through YouTube. In doing so Blaire begins to generate a certain digital duality that poses terrible ramifications for her sense of self.

Of course, these processes of self-presentation and self-disclosure are not exclusive to social media alone. Social psychologists Roy F. Baumeister and Debra G. Hutton suppose that self-presentation is frequently used both as a method of matching the self to a given "audience's expectations and preferences" as well as a means of aligning one's persona with the "ideal self" (Baumeister 71). In this sense, we are always engaged in the conscious formation of selfhood, constantly adjusting the parameters of our identity to fit the sociocultural expectations of our surroundings. For example, the self demonstrated when speaking to one's superiors is different than the self offered to a group of one's peers, the self introduced when meeting new people often vastly discordant from the self expressed around old friends. In this way, the actual

mechanism of self-presentation is an anticipated function of everyday life, and, each of those versions of oneself may never be representative of the self one expresses in the privacy of their own home.

It is therefore when self-presentation is enacted through social media profiles that it can, in fact, be implicated in creating moments of horror. For instance, it is the specific technological programs of a Facebook profile that allow the act of self-presentation to threaten the security of one's overall identity. On Facebook in particular, the profile consists of an archived history of the user – the interface logs every post, like, photo, or comment the user has ever made, storing them within and upon the interface. More than just a digital-extension of the user's persona, then, self-presentation through Facebook lacks the flexibility one experiences in face-to-face interaction. Here the user is unable to adapt, alter, or revamp themselves based on a particular audience. As opposed to in-person self-presentation, one's friends, coworkers, employers, and grandmother are all exposed to the same iteration of the self through Facebook. As such, the public profile must be cultivated to suit the expectations of every potential audience, and, consequently, present the most socially acceptable version of the user at all times. Obviously this rigidity of presentation is somewhat complicated by the user's ability to delete or alter certain postings made through the profile. However, as *Unfriended* suggests in its contemplation of privacy, despite one's limited ability to edit a Facebook profile, once something is published through social media it very rarely disappears completely. In this way, if one hopes to be received positively by others – as most do – their self-presentation over platforms like Facebook must be cultivated carefully. If something unseemly or socially unacceptable about the user is made public, they are placed at risk of being forever held accountable for that action. For this reason, self-presentation over the online profile creates a much more constrained and

uncompromising self-image than those created in in-person communications. By way of social media, the stakes of one's self-presentation are raised and thus it becomes a much riskier endeavor.

Blaire can be seen engaging in this same brand of rigid and dangerous self-presentation through her idealized Facebook profile in *Unfriended*. As the viewer watches her scroll through her own page, what becomes clear is the perfect "good girl" image Blaire has constructed for herself upon the site. Her profile is littered with cheery pictures of friends, bight-eyed and wide-smiled snapshots with her boyfriend Mitch, and a lovingly written post mourning Laura's untimely death (*Unfriended* 2014). Within the archive of these posts and photos our protagonist has carefully cultured – or self-presented – a digital likeness of what she believes others expect her to be. This profile prevails as a socially constructed version of Blaire, one that showcases only the outwardly positive and subjectively virtuous aspects she feels will be deemed acceptable by all who view her page. Through the Facebook profile she digitally manufactures an idealized self image, void of any flaws or faults that could be considered unacceptable or undesirable. Should anything of this ilk be distributed about Blaire through social media, this perfect self would crumble. For example, if the truth about Blaire's cyberbullying of Laura were made public through Facebook – as, of course, it eventually is – both Blaire's reputation and her precarious sense of self would be at risk for immediate collapse. In that moment, the vast public society of Facebook would no longer see her as the ideal self she has created and she would thus be exposed to the risks of ridicule, shame, and self-reckoning.

It is in understanding this threat to her idealized self that Blaire creates a separate, anonymous YouTube account in order to cyberbully Laura Barns. The ideal digital persona Blaire presents in her Facebook profile exists in direct contradiction to the alternative and

malevolent persona she discloses in her position as an online bully. In order to post the recording that led to Laura's death – "LUARA BARNS KILL URSELF" – Blaire creates a YouTube profile that, instead of using her own name, adopts the moniker "laura exposed" (*Unfriended* 2014). This online account, in opposition to the one discussed above, does not play host to friendly photos and touching eulogies. Rather, it is through this page that Blaire is able to viciously and monstrously attack Laura without being exposing her polished Facebook identity to threat. In addition to the original video, it is through this sinister online version of herself that Blaire continuously berates Laura with cruel public messages like "kill urself," "everyone hates u," and "u should just die" – messages she would never be able to send over her Facebook profile without fear of retribution (*Unfriended* 2014). Again, through the capabilities of social media, this YouTube account exists as a digital embodiment of Blaire. However, unlike her Facebook profile, this online representation exemplifies the objectionable, more perverse features of herself. Though admittedly anonymous, this arguably "evil" profile exists just as much as a mediated variant of Blaire's self as her purposefully public Facebook account, and is similarly unforgiving and inflexible in its representation of her. Disclosed in this anonymous "evil" profile is a networked portrait of the aspects of Blaire's selfhood she perceives as improper, as unwanted. In this sense, there exists two, digitally manifested variants of Blaire – one that she promotes publicly to be herself due to its acceptability, and another unacceptable self that hides behind anonymity.

Blaire's creation of two contrasting online profiles can therefore be seen as a method of self-separation. In person, these two forms of Blaire's self are able to exist within the same body, each coming to the forefront of her personality depending on her audience. However, the particular interface of social media allows Blaire to technologically – and thus somewhat

physically – separate the unwanted elements of her personality from the wanted ones. In order to maintain the idealized version of herself projected through Facebook, Blaire digitally distances her public Facebook profile from her anonymous YouTube account. Rather than reconciling these two divergent selves, Blaire utilizes mediated networks as a filter through which she can divorce her ideal self from her flawed self. It is in part due to the rigidity and wanted perfectionism of online profiles that Blaire makes the unacceptable portions of her personality secret. Though in reality both online profiles exist as digital recreations of Blaire, placing them on social platforms in this manner gives her the ability to purposefully ignore or reject those personality traits which she does not consider part of who she should, or perhaps, intends, to be.

As such, this digital methodology of self-separation can be understood as an invocation of the horrific double or the doppelganger. The doppelganger, according to horror theorist Robin Wood "functions not simply as something external to the culture or the self, but also as what is repressed in the self and projected outwards in order to be hated and disowned" (Wood 199). In disclosing her "repressed" traits over an anonymous YouTube account, Blaire is able to project them away from both her physical body and the ideal self endorsed through her Facebook profile. In doing so, she can abstract her evil YouTube profile from what she believes is her "actual" persona, and alternatively classify it as something "external" to herself, despite the fact that it maintains some quality of being her. In creating this digital duality or double, Blaire is thus able to condemn the bullying of Laura, despite being at the origins of her torment. Once properly situated in the digital double of her YouTube account, Blaire is allowed to hate and shame those who caused Laura's death without implicating herself or feeling remorse. The ability to create both public and private profiles through these platforms allows Blaire to live within this continued and anxious state of simultaneous self-creation and self-rejection in which

56

she has dictated a clear "Blaire", whom she can celebrate, and a hidden "not-Blaire", whom she can denounce.

Moreover, the demarcation of this evil online-doppelganger serves to reiterate the expected boundaries of what is acceptable by sociocultural norms. Though Blaire is not bodily transformed into what the viewer might understand as a traditional double[8], by way of her disparate social media profiles she is, in fact, creating a digital monster who exists as a representation of those parts of herself that are socially unacceptable. Mediated networks are thus imbued with the technological functions necessary to recapitulate social standards of being good or right while concurrently providing a separate space in which those aspects of oneself that do not fit these standards may live out. Through Facebook and YouTube Blaire creates a righteous "self" and a wrongful "other", characterized only by what the larger audiences of social media consider valuable or satisfactory. Pressured by the social systems of networked media, Blaire is able to separate even the smallest blameworthy portion of herself into a digital profile, casting it away from her person in the hopes of fitting in to those held standards of acceptability. Yet, regardless of this action, Blaire's evil other still exists very much a part of herself. The capability for Blaire to be at once ideal and evil through these sites thus raises questions of what it means to truly be acceptable or unacceptable, ideal or unwanted, and oneself or an other in using social media. The properties of Facebook and YouTube, as they are illustrated within *Unfriended* at least, would suggest that such distinctions are perhaps not as reliant on the physical or assumed reality as we might assume. Suggested within the act of profile creation, then, is the notion that

---

[8] The phrase "traditional double" is used to refer to those film's and narrative's in which the horror of the double is more bodily in nature, creating a physical manifestation of a monster or a doppelganger. In *Unfriended* this double is technological and thus digital rather than physically embodied

digital communities have the horrific power to redefine – or at least readjust – what it means to understand selfhood and social acceptability in the digital age.

Complicating this horrific power, the form of self-othering offered in profile creation could certainly be considered a method of social media survival. Upon the "laura exposed" account, Blaire is able to live out the socially undesirable parts of her persona without tarnishing her public presentation and thus being held responsible for her actions. She is, in some way, using her ability to create an online profile as a method of protecting herself from the threats of exposure as expressed in the first chapter of this thesis. By allowing the evil aspects of herself to become an online-other Blaire could be understood as liberating herself from the risks of being publicly wrongful. The online profile, here, would become a purposefully freeing means of delineating the self and allow Blaire to more securely fit in to the established boundaries of social acceptability.

However, despite this possibility, Blaire's self-othering is ultimately not met with feelings of liberation, but rather those of horrific abjection. When the idealized representation of Blaire is challenged by the digital presence of Laura Barns's ghost, she is no longer able to reject or denounce her anonymous YouTube double. Haunting Blaire with the intention of punishing her for her responsibility in Laura's death, the specter forces her to confront both the duality of her selfhood and the falsity – or perhaps, impossibility –of the ideal, socially acceptable variant she has produced through Facebook. Here, Blaire is not permitted to survive or live through the potential liberation of dual-profiles. She is, instead, made to reconcile with the unwanted version of herself. This translates into a moment of abjection insofar as, according to Kristeva, "the abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. [It is the recognition of something that is] not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A "something" that I do not

recognize as a thing" (Kristeva 2). Blaire, here, is made to recognize her YouTube enabled

double as something which confounds the boundaries of her selfhood. This monster, this

doppelganger, can no longer be ignored or repressed or hated, but is instead a "something" which

is concurrently a representation of her and not-her. Not only is Blaire confronted with a digital

ghost – who, simply in being a ghost, serves to disrupt the confines of accepted reality[9] – but she

is also made to confront how her use of online profiles similarly disrupts her own definition of

self and of her acceptability. The reappearance of Laura, here, acts as a catalyst, a horrific

mechanism through which Blaire is made to acknowledge how she is at once both ideal "self"

and evil "other", both "acceptable" and dreadfully "unacceptable".

As an immediate, physical response to this acknowledgement, Blaire begins to sob

uncontrollably. Through her tears she pulls up old photos of her and Laura on Facebook,

repeatedly apologizing to the ghost in one last ditch effort to preserve the good-girl, idealized

veneer she has so passionately clung to for survival (*Unfriended* 2014). While her apparent fear

and distress in this reaction can, in some regard, be understood as a recognition of her own

imminent death, it can also be seen as a visceral response to reconciling the disparate segments

of her selfhood and the horrific power she has accessed through her use of social media. This

reaction, then, further registers with Kristeva. Abjection, as a feeling of horror, results in a

physical response – often bodily and violent in nature –to being confronted with that that has lost

the distinction between me and not-me. It describes the human reaction to the separation of "the

self" from "oneself," a mechanism that launches the individual into a psychological and

corporeal trauma which ultimately displaces the subject from what is known. This specific kind

---

[9] Ghosts exist in a liminal space in between life and death. They are not living, yet not dead, and as such confuse
two of the most basic definitions we use to delineate ourselves as human beings. Being confronted with a ghost
would suggest that these definitions may no longer be accurate, and, thus further call into question the barriers to our
existence.

of a horror is felt by Blaire not only in the face of Laura's ghost and her eventual supernatural death, but also in reaction to her own evil profile – a disembodied representation of herself that is, at once, both her and not-her. In reconciling her two online profiles, Blaire realizes that she is not the idealized person she has purported herself to be, and reacts with panic, fear, and eventually dies. As a resolution to abjection, this moment also exists as a point of recognition in that the idealized self which was displayed in Blaire's Facebook profile, in addition to being inaccurate, may be completely unattainable. Through the immense power of Laura's ghost – who is, in fact, a cinematic representation of the power of social media as a whole – the perfect self is revealed as an utter impossibility. Reflected in Blaire's moment of reckoning, then, is a suggestion that our hopes of idealism are not achievable, even by way of seemingly utopic social media platforms. This is the crushing "weight of meaninglessness" that Kristeva describes as a result of confronting the abject – it is the implication that, despite our anticipation that the development of social media might bring us closer to perfection, perfection is ultimately not part of our reality (Kristeva 2).

Provided the particular computerized format adopted by *Unfriended*, the film then largely implies that the viewer is at a similar risk of duality, self-othering, and abjection through their own use of social media. Just as Blaire was made to recognize the horror of her online profiles, so too can the average audience member. In the final, poignant moments of this recognition, the creation of a Facebook or YouTube profile can be understood as challenge to the physical and social constructs of selfhood and idealism. That this challenge is then presented over a film that adopts the stylistic look of a computer screen, is largely watched by way of personal laptops and digital download, and whose primary audience is constructed mainly of teenagers and young adults, allows this message of the horrors of social media to extend to its viewer. The audience is

forced by way of the film's format to confront not only the uncertainty of their own sense of self and social acceptability as it is confused by the use of online profiles, but also the identity and potential risk of every profile or digital interface they interact with.

In fact, these horrific potentials of and risks to identity can be understood as more than just a possibility, but a reality in the story of Amanda Todd. According to a 2012 article in *The New Yorker,* Amanda Todd was just thirteen years old when she was first exposed to unrelenting harassment over various social media sites (Dean). Though multiple anonymous profiles were implicated as her tormenters, one public account in particular intimidated the then fourteen-year-old into baring herself to him over a webcam, took a screenshot, and then preceded to blackmail Amanda for well over a year with the threat of posting the nude image to multiple platforms. Amanda eventually made a video explaining the details of her cyberbullying, posted it to YouTube, and subsequently took her own life. The horrible circumstances of Amanda's death were due, in fact, to her bully's ability to project a certain self-image, one that Amanda thought was reliable enough to engage with, at least at first. Through the functions of the online profile, this user was able to establish a friendly and approachable persona, despite being capable of committing terrible crimes. Although this kind of deceitful self-presentation is possible in face-to-face interaction as well, here, Amanda was lured into believing that this user's idealized profile was legitimate because of the way it was presented by digital means. Unlike Blaire's evil account, this user's profile adopted his real name and he posted regular photos of himself and friends. Conditioned by her own use of social sites, Amanda was lead to believe that these traits were indicative of the reliability of her soon-to-be bully: a nice guy, a good guy, someone she should not be scared of. By using the technology of social media profiles, this person was able to adhere to expectations of social acceptability while still existing as a horrible person and, as

61

such, used these expectations to threaten, attack, and enact violence against Amanda. In this way, her assailant saw the potential for dual-identities over social media as a means to disguise his own unacceptability, self-present an idealized persona, and execute crimes against another human being.

In reaction to these threats, Amanda herself experienced a kind of self-othering and horror through her mediated profiles. Threatened with the violation of her privacy and the exposure of her own body, Amanda's interaction with this evil person forced her feel as though she had no agency over her own self-image. Both how she viewed herself and how others viewed her were in the hands of another user and, understanding the online profile to be a representation of her persona, her cyberbully had the ability not only to ruin her reputation, but also to destroy her own sense self. At an incredibly young age, Amanda's personal hopes of idealism were rendered, in her mind, totally insurmountable. Additionally, even if the screenshot were never made public, she would always be aware of what she felt was an imperfection, something that made her unworthy in the nude photo. Amanda Todd's story thus suggests that the online profiles make us at once aware of both what we must aspire to be in order to be considered acceptable and ideal as well as the fact that we can never fully meet those impossible aspirations. The ability social media has to establish this kind of confounded identity – a dual-self which falls on the lines of social acceptability and unacceptability –thus allowed Amanda to be both personally attacked through these sites as well as suggested to her that, once revealing images of herself were publicized throughout the internet, she would no longer be socially acceptable or ideal, and thus should no longer exist at all. The horror of social media, in this way, serves as both a reaffirmation of the demanding sociocultural and political boundaries which supposedly

keep us in check, while simultaneously reprimanding or punishing us for not being able to always fit properly into them.

The duality constructed through online profiles is thus one of societal acceptability (the ideal) and individual unacceptability (the imperfect) – wherein the user is synchronously made to feel as though they must conform to the ideal while knowing that it is impossible to meet due to an inherent, human imperfection. This dichotomy can, as an expansion upon its presence in Blaire's profiles throughout *Unfriended*, be subsequently traced onto the use of Andrea Russett's Snapchat account in *Sickhouse*. More than an idealized persona, the self presented through Russett's online profile is one of celebrity. As a figure of fame she is lauded for the degree to which she is able to adhere to the social standards proposed by media sites. Through her Snapchat stories, Russett's followers are shown a particular self-image, one at such a level of cultural approval that she has garnered millions of followers across multiple platforms. In this way, Russett does not simply fit into the norms delineated by social media sites, but due to her acclaim and popularity, actually aids in their creation and propagation – her persona is the socially acceptable ideal that her followers seek to emulate. Therefore, by using Russett's influential Snapchat account to film and disseminate a scripted narrative of horror, *Sickhouse* brazenly addresses this self-image, calling into question the validity of Russett's idealistic celebrity persona and, by extension, the viewer's own sense of self.

Unlike Facebook, the construction of a digital self over Snapchat does not include an archive of carefully refined comments, posts, and likes. Rather, the properties of Snapchat are those of an immediate and seemingly ephemeral kind self-presentation. Though the Snapchat account retains much of the same rigidity of the Facebook profile insofar as one's posts to the

app can still be saved and stored,[10] the essential functions of Snapchat are much more about instant connection and communication. In this sense, where the creation of a computerized persona over Facebook is enacted through the cultivation of data, profile creation on Snapchat is achieved by the process of sharing itself. Sociologists E. Gomez Cruz and H. Thornham elucidate this difference in theorizing that:

> It is precisely through the staging, shooting, choosing, sharing, posting, commenting, liking through digital mediations that the performance of the image-self [or self image] becomes meaningful. Not as a single image, but as a complex process of practices that performatively construct the self through their normativity (7).

In this way, the ideal or acceptable self is created over Snapchat in the apparent normativity of the snaps that are posted. This normativity is derived from the application's promise that these postings are simply quick "snapshots" of the user's life, that they are instantaneous and capture the essence of a user's actual daily activities. Of course, the interface of Snapchat allows for a certain level of photo editing and priming. Yet, due to the promises of its operation, the application's user's anticipate, that without the obvious archival functions of Facebook or YouTube, the Snapchat self-image is somehow a more accurate version of the online profile.

Adopting Cruz and Thornham's terminology, Snapchat thus allows its user to put on a constant performance of self through both individual snaps and stories. The user is permitted, by way of the app, to produce a kind of live act which showcases their idealized self in the starring role. Though, again, self-performance is not unique to Snapchat alone – like self-presentation it is intrinsic in every way we communicate –the ways in which the application allows its user to re-record and live edit this particular performance enhances the level of drama or ceremony far

---

[10] Snapchat both allows for users to take screenshots of certain snaps and, as a company, archives most stories for up to 30 days for legal purposes upon their main servers.

past that would be experienced in face-to-face interaction. *Sickhouse's* innovative choice to

utilize Snapchat as a cinematic form, then, emphasizes the self-performativity of Andrea Russett

and her superstar status. If we are to understand all snaps and snap stories as a performance, in

simply using the app at all, Russett's self-image could be considered less-than-genuine, as part of

a show. Russett's celebrity, in this case, persists as another form of idealized self, a projection of

the most positive factions of her personality performed with the intent to draw in and accumulate

followers. By way of Snapchat's interface, Russett is able to establish a dual identity in which

there exists her public, beloved celebrity persona as well as a hidden, presumably more authentic

self that her followers – and *Sickhouse's* viewers – are not permitted to see.

This apparent division between Russett's celebrity figure and her concealed "real"[11] self

is exacerbated in that – in addition to performing through the Snapchat interface – Russett also

performs as a fictional version of herself throughout the film. In the narrative of *Sickhouse*

Russett portrays a scripted character, a further fabricated rendering of her own celebrity image.

She is, in this way, not merely displaying an ideal self, but legitimately *acting* as one. She is

playing the *part* of Andrea Russett, internet celebrity. This added layer of performativity

increases the degree to which Russett's famed Snapchat profile can be understood as distorted or

inauthentic. The choice for Russett to play a characterized version of herself implies that, in

order for the film to fully capitalize on her celebrity status and garner attention, Russett must be

edited and enhanced. Even the "real" Russett, here, cannot live up to the celebrity self-image she

has created, and thus requires scripts and direction in order for her character in *Sickhouse* to feel

like the persona she performs in her daily snaps. Reiterated in the further fictionalization of

---

[11] Though I hesitate to use it, the word "real" refers to the not-ideal, or relatively unedited persona. It is not my intention to presume that there is one "true" version of the self that has more validity than others, rather that the ideal self projected through Snapchat is both vastly distorted and, as such, poses significant threats to a person's fragile sense of self.

Russett's identity is the sense of an impossible social ideal seen in both Blaire's use of Facebook and the Amanda Todd story. Not only, then, does this example serve to help create and support the duality between Russett's celebrity and "real" self, but it yet again suggests that the very same self-image may be utterly unattainable – even for the woman who portrays her.

This perspective of Russett's Snapchat profile as one of inaccessible, irreal celebrity is perhaps most arresting when it is addressed by the figures of *Sickhouse* themselves. As Russett and her friends begin their haunted journey, they launch into a conversation concerning the downfalls of digital celebrity. When Taylor blatantly asks Russett if she believes her account is authentic to her actual person, Andrea responds that she "thinks [she is] the most real on Snapchat" and that the application is "more personal" than other mediated accounts (*Sickhouse* 2016). Provided Russett's current position as a fictional character – in the sense that she is at once both mediated through a digital Snapchat profile and scripted – this statement is absolutely absurd. To be fair, *Sickhouse's* original viewer was made to believe that the five-days-worth of snap story that encapsulated its narrative were not part of a film. To this initial audience in particular, this discussion of the "reality" of one's online profile, while still telling, may not have been as striking. However, in understanding both her performance both as actor and as Snapchat auteur, Russet can be in no way seen as projecting her "most real" self in this moment. Rather, her real self has been purposefully concealed from the viewer through multiple complex layers of editing, scripting, and acting. To claim this version of Russett is "real" considerably minimizes the extent to which her celebrity is one performance or the ideal. What's more, the presence of dialogue concerning the reality of social media within a film so dedicated to exploring the risks of the sites themselves showcases just how aware *Sickhouse* and its production team are of the implications of posting and sharing online. In a metafictional quality akin to its treatment of

spectatorship, the film calls out to its viewer in this scene. Toying with those who are unaware of its existence as a film, *Sickhouse* challenges its viewer to recognize Russett as a performer, to see her persona as fictitious. For those that do so, this invocation of the viewer's position encourages Russett's dual identity, further separating her ideal online celebrity from her imperfect reality. For those that do not, the implication that Russett's celebrity self is her at her "most real" makes the socially acceptable ideal of her persona exceedingly out-of-reach.

In this way, the social media horror most evident in *Sickhouse's* attention to the Snapchat profile is related to the viewer's own selfhood. As an echo of the type of duality enacted through Blaire Lily's divergent accounts, the doubling of Russett's celebrity identity and "real" self is used as a narrative device to extract feelings of personal inferiority, unacceptability, and anxiety in its viewer. In challenging this viewer to recognize the disparity between Russett's performed ideal and presumed reality through the exchange examined above, the film makes them intently aware of both their inability to reach that ideal and their own deception through social media accounts. *Sickhouse*, here, suggests that Snapchat provides its user with a glimpse of what they would look like as the best possible and most acceptable versions of themselves, what they would look like as a celebrity like Russett. The application promises an almost fantastical mechanism of self-creation and performance in which, through its technology, the user is allowed to digitally align with the social standards at play, if only for a brief moment. *Sickhouse* exposes this as a false promise. Forcing the viewer to confront that this performance is, indeed, a performance and not reality, the application indicates that the same idealism can never be achieved. There exists within Snapchat, then, a certain kind of duality additional to the one betwixt celebrity and reality – one in which the user is simultaneously allowed to imagine what it would be to be accepted, but is simultaneously made aware that there will always be some part of

them that is unacceptable. Once again, this kind of self-division evokes the "weight of meaninglessness" that is abjection (Kristeva 2). In implicating that the viewer's dreams of being accepted or wanted or ideal are, in reality, never going to come to fruition creates this horrible, annihilating sense of dread, in which the Snapchat user is no longer sure what their purpose or ambitions should be.

In this way, Snapchat itself can be considered a site of horror. Despite its guarantees of instant connection and community creation – guarantees that are in many ways being fulfilled – the application is shown here to possess the technological functions necessary to entirely confound its user's sense of personal identity. As film theorist Toni A. Perrine suggests, horror "deals primarily with the individual in conflict with society or with some extension of the self" (Perrine 25). Snapchat, it appears, places its user at odds with both: the self inasmuch as it displays a figment of its user's ideal persona and complicates their sense of identity, and society in that the platform asks the user to somehow place that uncertain self in the context of their surrounding culture. By way of celebrity accounts like Russett's and other interactive functions, Snapchat attempts to connect its users already confused sense of self with the larger public of social media. However, if both the ideal-self and real-self are supposedly invalid, it becomes unclear just how one is meant to understand and situate themselves among the social norms and regularities that helped to establish their identities in the first place.

Social media like Snapchat thus poses a horrific question of what must be done to remain aspirational or even acceptable in a culture where one's selfhood is no longer secure. Digital social platforms have, in readjusting how we understand ourselves, similarly readjusted how we understand our placement in given communities and what expectations these spaces may hold of us. In reaction to this readjustment, people can be seen committing horrible crimes through social

sites. For example, in the fall of 2014, two people kidnapped and brutally assaulted a fourteen-year-old girl behind an elementary school (O'Brien). Though he did not take part in the attack, instead of calling the police, another teen at the scene recorded and posted the video to Snapchat. As of the summer of 2016, all three assailants have been criminally charged. While it is impossible to speak for the teenager who recorded the incident, psychologists have logically presumed that the reasoning for displaying the rape over Snapchat was for notoriety or attention. This horrible and atrocious decision can, in some ways, be read as this particular attacker's attempt to garner some kind of digital celebrity, to reaffirm both his identity and placement within his social sphere. Snapchat, in its ability to delegitimize one's sense of self encourages its user's to re-discover it by any means possible – indicating that if they get enough views or followers or likes they will be rewarded with the security and idealism of a celebrity like Russett's.

In fact, social media personalities like Hunter Moore have built an entire online persona out of publicizing or committing acts of horror. Up until his sentencing in 2015, Moore's primary cause for fame was the posting of "nude or compromising photos [of non-consenting women], uploaded [to him] by angry exes seeking revenge (Ohlheiser). Violating these women in a similar manner to how Amanda Todd was violated by her own assailant, Moore's identity was validated as acceptable or ideal by the millions of viewers who viewed his disgusting content and supported his actions. Trying to avoid the meaninglessness of self social media has the power to create, Moore instead turned to trafficking in horror to establish a clear and – at least in the minds of his equally abhorrent endorsers – seemingly ideal identity.

<div align="center">***</div>

As a result of the capacity Facebook and Snapchat have to disturb their user's own selfhood, social media has a similar capacity to rattle what is largely understood as acceptable and unacceptable, moral and amoral, or even natural and supernatural.[12] Though many of the functions of social media serve to preserve and control established sociocultural and political norms, they also possess the inherent capability to distort our sense of society just enough to allow instances of horror to slip through. Blaire's cyberbullying of Laura, the violation of Amanda Todd, and live streamings of rape, violence, and death have all found digital spaces to both survive and thrive upon mediated networks despite being overwhelmingly understood as wrong. The rapid changes to our understanding of self and others generated by the rapid changes to communication technologies have disarranged some of the defining social perimeters and thus allowed these moments of horror to persist through social media itself. Though many of these perimeters required rearranging, and through the disruptiveness of social media many traditionally marginalized peoples and groups have found voice and power and platform, we must be wary that along with this amazing and needed social change comes the additional threat of horror.

These platforms, while intended to revolutionize social and communicative structures, have also prompted a reevaluation of the self interior to society that suggests that, despite the illusion of strong community, we might truly be alone. In actuality there may be no rules or norms or regularities which govern or morality or acceptability and we might have to find a way to fend for ourselves. In social media's attempt to show us the utopia of digital existence, not only are we made aware of the unsatisfying and isolated nature of our embodied existence but we

---

[12] In his 2013 article "Facebook of the Dead" Alexander Landfair explores the lack of distinction between supernatural and natural through Facebook's algorithm. Social media, in its creation of cybernetic communities, has drastically altered the physical forms of our life. While far to grand to bring into this argument now, his theories offer compelling evidence for the furthered connections between horror and social media.

70

are also given a glimpse into a better, computerized life that we are yet technologically unable to attain. In this time of great technological flux, we are both given a representation of what our future society may look like and simultaneously made horribly aware of the failures in our current one. We have failed others by not recognizing their identities and rights, we have failed our communities in being complicit and complacent in cyberbullying and violation and murder, and social media has made us aware of those failures.

Accordingly, the pointed use of social media in recent horror films *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse* exists as more than just a cinematic method of modernizing or making relevant the genre as a whole. Rather, each film's particular consideration of platforms like Facebook and Snapchat serves to make clear to their respective viewers the horrific potential these platforms have for disrupting one's sense of self and sense of society in the larger scope of digital networks. In addition to the well-publicized threats of deteriorating privacy and spectatorship that social media poses, these films reflect the truly horrifying implications of engaging with particular communicative networks in and of themselves. These moments of horror stand in bold-faced defiance of the quixotic space social media was intended to create. Though the predictions of advanced interconnectedness, an unprecedented flow of and access to information, and the unparalleled speed of interaction proposed by pundits upon the inception of such sites have undoubtedly come true, they are accompanied by a new set of threats concerning what it means to survive in the age of digital communication. While *Unfriended* and *Sickhouse* stand merely as recreations of these sites, what they propose is nothing less than a horrifying theorization of how these threats have infiltrated, and will presumably continue to infiltrate, our now near constant use of social media as we attempt to navigate our newly digitized world.

Works Cited

#Horror. Directed by Tara Subkoff, Lowland Pictures, 2015.

Aaron, Michele. *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On*. Wallflower Press, 2007.

Antisocial. Directed by Cody Calahan, Black Fawn Films, 2013.

Baumeister, Roy F. and Debra G. Hutton. "Self-Presentation Theory: Self-Construction and
    Audience Pleasing." *Theories of Group Behavior,* 1987, pp. 71-87.

Benioff, Viewpoint Marc. "Welcome to the Social Media Revolution." *BBC News*, 11 May 2012.

Beware the Slenderman. Directed by Irene Taylor Brodsky, HBO Documentary, 2016.

The Blair Witch Project. Directed by Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sànchez, Haxan Films, 1999.

Brake, David. *Sharing Our Lives Online: Risks and Exposure in Social Media*. Palgrave
    Macmillan, 2014.

Calvert, Clay. *Voyeur Nation: Media, Privacy, and Peering in Modern Culture*. Westview Press,
    2000.

Carey, J. W. "Historical Pragmatism and the Internet". *New Media & Society,* vol. 7, issue 4,
    2005, pp. 443-455.

Carson, Biz. "Here's Everything You Need to Know About How Many People are Using
    Snapchat." *Business Insider,* 2 February 2017.

Cruz, Edgar Gomez and Helen Thornam. "Selfies Beyond Self-Representation: The (Theoretical)
    F(r)ictions of a Practice". *Journal of Aesthetics and Culture,* vol. 7, 2015, pp.1-11.

Dean, Michelle. "The Story of Amanda Todd." *The New Yorker*, 17 July 2014.

Duchaney, Brian N. *The Spark of Fear: Technology, Society and the Horror Film*. McFarland,
    2015.

FeardotCom. Directed by William Malone, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2002.

Hrynyshyn, Derek. *The Limits of the Digital Revolution: How Mass Media Culture Endures in a*

    Social Media World. Praeger, an Imprint of ABC-CLIO, LLC, 2017.

Jackson, Kimbery. *Technology, Monstrosity, and Reproduction in Twenty-first Century Horror*.

    Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Klinger, Barbara. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. University

    of California Press, 2006.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez.

    Columbia University Press, 1982.

Lacefield, Kristen. *The Scary Screen: Media Anxiety in The Ring*. Ashgate, 2010.

Landfair, Alexander. "Facebook of the Dead." *The Missouri Review,* vol. 36, no. 3, 2013, pp. 80-

    97.

Lincoln, Kevin. "The Horror Movie Sickhouse, Shot Entirely on Snapchat, Introduces a New

    Kind of Fear." *Vulture*, 6 June 2016.

Nosferatu. Directed by F. W. Murnau, Prana Film, 1922.

O'Brien, Sara Ashley. "Two People Found Guilty in Snapchat Sexual Assault Case." *CNN Tech,*

    19 July 2016.

Ohlheiser, Abby. "Revenge Porn Purveyor Hunter Moore is Sentenced to Prison." *The*

    Washington Post, 3 December 2015.

Paranormal Activity. Created by Oren Peli, Blumhouse Productions, 2007.

Peeping Tom. Directed by Michael Powell, Anglo-Amalgamated Film Distributors, 1960.

Perrine, Toni A. *Film and the Nuclear Age: Representing Cultural Anxiety,* Garland Publishing,

    1998.

Raimondo, Matthew J. "Frenetic Aesthetics: Observational Horror and Spectatorship." *Horror Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, April 2014, pp. 65-84.

The Ring. Directed by Gore Verbinski, DreamWorks Pictures, 2002.

Rosemary's Baby. Directed by Roman Polanski, Paramount Pictures, 1968.

Sickhouse. Directed by Hanna Macpherson, performance by Andrea Russett, Indigenous Media, 2016.

Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft. *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*. Lackington, Hughes, Harding, Mavor, & Jones, 1818.

Smiley. Directed by Michael Gallagher, Fever Productions LLC, 2012.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. Archibald Constable and Company, 1897.

Tryon, Chuck. "Video from the Void: Video Spectatorship, Domestic Film Cultures, and Contemporary Horror Film." *Journal of Film and Video,* vol. 64, no. 3, University of Illinois Press, 2009, pp. 40-51.

Unfriended. Directed by Levan Gabridaze, written by Nelson Greaves, Performance by Shelley Hennig, Universal Pictures, 2014.

White, Dennis L. "The Poetics of Horror: More than Meets the Eye." *Cinema Journal*, vol.10, no.2, 1971, pp. 1-18.

Wisker, Gina. *Horror Fiction: An Introduction*. The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005.

Wood, Robin. "An Introduction to the American Horror Film." *Movies and Methods: Volume II*, edited by Bill Nichols, University of California Press, 1985, pp. 195-219.