

An Edgy Realism

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An Edgy Realism:

*Film Theoretical Encounters
with Dogma 95, New French
Extremity, and the Shaky-Cam
Horror Film*

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This book is dedicated to Werner and Elisabeth Schaefer

CONTENTS

Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Chapter Two.....	20
Notes on the Methodology of Modern Film Theory	
Chapter Three.....	41
Returning to the Maze of Early Cinema	
Chapter Four.....	65
Dogma 95	
Chapter Five.....	87
<i>Irréversible</i> and the New French Extremity	
Chapter Six.....	111
The Shaky-Cam Horror Film	
Chapter Seven.....	133
Towards a Film Theory of Transformations	
Bibliography.....	140
Index.....	160

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The night I watched *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sánchez, 1999) for the first time is still fresh in my mind. It was either at the end of 1999 or in early 2000 that a bunch of classmates took me along to watch a movie in a cinema nearby. I was only just fifteen years of age and, to be honest, I didn't know very much about the movie we were going to watch; only that the film-makers had used hand-held cameras, resulting in pretty shaky images, and that the movie had been hyped due to an ingenious marketing strategy which aimed to promote *The Blair Witch Project* as an alleged documentary film. As I hadn't informed myself about the film in any detail, I expected quite a lot of shaky sequences; however, worse was yet to come: I watched a movie without *any* film language proper. At that time, being the child of a film and TV director in his early career, I actually had a soft spot for the films of Charlie Chaplin and Humphrey Bogart. And there was nothing I adored more than the epic movies of the 1950s and early 1960s: Henry Hathaway's *Prince Valiant* (1954), William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959), David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). Additionally, having also been a child of my time, I was literally addicted to the *crème de la crème* of the special effects cinema of the 1990s: James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993), Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996). In short: I loved rather conventional Hollywood movies (and, by and large, I still do).

Viewed from today's perspective, *The Blair Witch Project* caught me on the wrong foot. Neither the story nor the film's cinematography matched with my personal notion of a "good movie" at that time. And so, after the screening had started, I instantly got the feeling that this could turn out to be a terribly banal movie on an evening not to remember. The story alone seemed trivial enough: Three ordinary young people, the film students Heather (Heather Donahue), Mike (Michael C. Williams) and Josh (Joshua Leonard), shoot a documentary film deep in the woods of Maryland about the so called Blair Witch. Using a professional Steadicam for the documentary film and an amateurish hand-held camera for the

making-of, they begin to search for the myth-enshrouded places where the Blair Witch, a witch hanged in the 18th century, ritualistically murdered numerous men and children. However, as David Banash rightly pointed out, the narrative of the film is “coordinated by the film’s central plot: *the failure of a documentary project*. It is this failure that is shown in agonizing detail as the mimetic technologies (maps, compass, DAT, video, film) break down along with the collective cohesiveness of the filmmakers” (Banash 2004: 113-114). Unable to read the map properly, the three film students get lost in a confusing territory, in dark woods fraught with danger, and soon they realize that there is something weird going on that they cannot spot:

Though they believe they are being stalked by a presence, and speculate that it may be the witch, they cannot capture it on film. This is hardly a problem of proximity. Whatever is shadowing them approaches their tent over the course of four nights, leaving totemic piles of rocks and bundles of sticks. Though they hear noises over the course of these nights, they cannot capture a single image and manage to record only the most muted and distorted clicks and rumbles on the DAT (despite the fact that they describe these sounds to one another as shouts, footsteps, and the cries of a baby). Just as they fail to master their navigational equipment, they are unable to mobilize their recording equipment to capture (and thus understand or contain) whatever is menacing them. [...] The horror of confronting a world that cannot be represented *is shown* in chilling detail. (Banash 2004: 114-115)

Today, in the age of YouTube and *Paranormal Activity* (Peli, 2007), shaky-cam horror films like *The Blair Witch Project* are widely accepted as an extremely effective and smart way of creating horror films. When I watched the movie for a second time in 2008, I was impressed by its bold decision to let the audience leave the cinema hall without knowing what this deadly presence actually looks like. Yet, back in 1999 or 2000, such a film concept still took some time to get used to. And so, not yet knowing that the lengthy introductions of shaky-cam horror films are not a narrative flaw but the “ordinary” background without which the “extra-ordinary” horror of these movies couldn’t unfold, the first twenty minutes of the screening were an extremely frustrating experience. After the introductory title card, running, “In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland, while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found”, the movie suffered a truly slow and boring start: the three students prepared their journey; went to the car, stowed their luggage in the trunk; were fond of joking and talking about rather irrelevant things; drove to Burkittsville, interviewed

some of the residents; drank a bottle of whiskey in the evening, and finally, in the morning, went into the woods. All this, which most films would have gotten over and done with in less than three minutes, lasted a solid twenty minutes. Neither did I understand the narrative significance of the scenes shown nor the movie's reluctance to stimulate the audience's interest with the help of some sort of visual sophistication. At first sight it was a film without any elaborate and seamless implementation of the continuity system, any real significance of montage techniques and without a clear and convincing camera work that subtly guides the spectator's eye through the fictional world, enriching the depicted world with the "meaning" of menacing low angle shots, masterful high angle shots and emotionally intense close-ups. Instead of being artful, everything seemed to be "literal" and, in an almost frustrating way, "restricted": a shot taken from a low angle was due to physical reasons (the cameraman, simply lying on the bed); camera moves showed no sign of a mastermind controlling it (in fact, a character, curiously looking around); and cuts implied everything but an "associative" or "dialectical" meaning lying in the imaginary field between the two images (a character, simply switching the camera Off and On again). Casting my mind back, I remember all the joyful discussions with my father on topics and films that were current at that time and notice that, while watching the first twenty minutes of *The Blair Witch Project*, I desperately missed the skilful hands of a film-maker like Alfred Hitchcock or Orson Welles who would have created suspense and meaning by choosing a specific frame or by cutting between two parallel lines of action. Instead, there were only these gritty, shaky images that were as doughy, trivial and sullen as the fictional world they originated from.

However, as the film went on and things began to become complicated for the three students in the woods, something strange happened with me: my alienation from the movie suddenly made way for a complete immersion into the images, an immersion quite different from my former experiences with horror movies. I felt *entangled* in the web of the scenes. When watching horror films like John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) or Sean S. Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* (1980) I could always calm myself down. I knew exactly that the camera as my imaginary placeholder would never be in danger, that it would remain a safe haven. In contrast, *The Blair Witch Project* refused to offer me any reassuring distance. In the absence of any anodyne segregation between form and content, camera and scene, image and world, it seemed impossible to take one step back and reflect on what I was watching. Instead I tried to disentangle the threads of the web that were holding me firm. Yet, in a film like *The Blair*

Witch Project, Jean-Louis Baudry's clear-cut distinction between a primary identification with the camera and a secondary identification with the characters (Winkler 1992: 26) just didn't work out. Making things worse, I didn't even know what exactly I was identifying with: The shaky camera? The characters in front of the camera? The character behind the camera whose hands were trembling in fear? Or, his defenseless gaze through the viewfinder? Maybe even the recorded images? Of course, it is difficult to remember all the details, but I can still remember that by the time the story began to peak, I felt completely tangled up, tossed to and fro by unusually intense feelings. Sometimes distinct threads became apparent but most of the time they merged into inextricable knots. I was confused and had no idea what to think about it. Overwhelmed by the movie's complexity, I just abandoned myself to the scenic maze of *The Blair Witch Project*. And, after the screening, I had almost completely forgotten the frustration that had befallen me during the first twenty minutes of the film.

A couple of years later, when I was studying Comparative Literature in Munich and then Film and Television Studies at the University of Warwick, I began to wonder why a movie as popular and idiosyncratic as *The Blair Witch Project* hardly inspired any research within the field of film studies. Whenever I came across the movie in text books, monographs or collections of essays, a very limited number of words popped up again and again, including but not limited to fake documentary (Juhasz and Lerner 2006), mockumentary (Roscoe and Hight 2001; Kilborn 2003; Bayer 2006), aesthetics of authenticity (Aloi 2005; Sipos 2010), documentary conventions (Roscoe 2000; Nichols 2010), experiment in simulated realism (Castonguay 2004). It seemed as if *The Blair Witch Project* was all about faking and mocking, of deluding and bamboozling the audience—a “critical judgment” which appeared completely counterintuitive to me when I reminisced about my own viewing experience back in 1999/2000. And, after having read through dozens of film reviews published in British and US-American film journals and quality papers, I am convinced that most of the other movie-goers at the time, including the greater part of film critics, didn't find any fault with *The Blair Witch Project*. So, what started as a simple curiosity turned out to be a key issue for the question that began to haunt me (and, in many ways, also inspired me to write this book): Why had the movie such a negative resonance within film scholarship, despite the audience's enthusiastic approval?

Without giving a final answer, it seems very much related to the fact that *The Blair Witch Project* came into the picture at a time when ideology-critical and post-structuralist theories were still at their peak. Under normal conditions, a horror film like *The Blair Witch Project* would

have hardly gained the attention of those scholars engaged in the criticism of ideology. But the movie's marketing strategy had been so aggressive and groundbreaking that these scholars had to stumble upon it. The marketing department of Haxan Films had made "full use of promotional and publicity channels that surround the film proper and help prepare us for it". These included a website with "background information about the Blair witch, expert testimony, and references to 'actual' people and events, all designed to market the film not as fiction, and not even simply as a documentary, but as the raw footage of three filmmakers who tragically disappeared" (Nichols 2010: xii). In retrospect, from a commercial point of view that strategy was highly successful. The film generated over \$248 million, the original budget to get the film in the can was somewhere between \$25,000 and \$125,000 (Castonguay 2004: 80-81). However, the aggressive and at the time uncommon online marketing strategy of *The Blair Witch Project*—which was combined with the release of books like *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier* (Stern 1999), consisting of fictional pictures, newspaper articles, police reports and interviews promoting the authenticity of the story—aroused suspicion amongst those who disapprove of such zeitgeisty marketing campaigns.

James Castonguay, to name just one example, expressed the opinion that the movie "exploits, fetishizes, and commodifies the fiction of reality" (Castonguay 2004: 66). One cannot fail to see that this statement is almost brimming over with Marxist vocabulary, with fetishes and commodities and other references to today's "late capitalist culture". The mindset underlying such ideology critical mockumentary-readings will be well-known to those familiar with the close relationship between (post-) Marxism and post-structuralism: in the ideology-critical tradition of Guy Debord's *La société du Spectacle/Society of the Spectacle* ([1967] 2009) and Ernest Mandel's *Der Spätkapitalismus/Late Capitalism* ([1972] 1978), Fredric Jameson had popularized the idea that we are living in an age of "a new *depthlessness*, which finds its prolongation [...] in a whole new culture of the image or the simulacrum" (Jameson 1991: 6). While the nineteenth century had been obsessed with questions of origin, authorship, style and subject-philosophy—all of them pointing in the direction of a typically bourgeois form of self-affirmation (Bürger 1984: 47-48; Barthes [1968] 2008: 98)—the second half of the twentieth century seems to be characterized by phenomena of decentering, flatness and stylishness (understood as a simulation of styles). This form of ideology criticism gave rise to the suspicion of images becoming fetishes. According to Debord,

everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation. [...] The images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream in which the unity of that life can no longer be recovered. *Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudoworld* that can only be looked at. The specialization of images of the world evolves into a world of autonomized images where even the deceivers are deceived. (Debord [1967] 2009: 24)

A catchy example that points to this fetishization of images by indicating that the “image has ontological priority and thus *precedes* the real” (Constable 2009: 43), can be found in the widespread desire to live up to heavily fetishized—and commodified—social images of health and beauty:

All the sexual, psychic, somatic recycling institutes, which proliferate in California, belong to the same order. People no longer look at each other, but there are institutes for that. They no longer touch each other, but there is contactotherapy. They no longer walk, but they go jogging, etc. Everywhere one recycles lost faculties, or lost bodies, or lost sociality, or the lost taste for food. One reinvents penury, asceticism, vanished savage naturalness. (Baudrillard [1981] 2008: 13)

In the realm of cinema this fetishization of images found its first expression in the so called “nostalgia film” (Jameson 1991: 19). According to Jameson, a movie like Roman Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) “was never a matter of some old-fashioned ‘representation’ of historical content, but instead approached the ‘past’ through stylistic connotation, conveying ‘pastness’ by the glossy qualities of the image, and ‘1930s-ness’ or ‘1950s-ness’ by the attributes of fashion” (Jameson 1991: 19). And Jean Baudrillard added that in movies such as Sydney Pollack’s *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), Stanley Kubrick’s *Barry Lyndon* (1975), Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Novecento/1900* (1976) and Alan Pakula’s *All the President’s Men* (1976) cinema “plagiarizes itself, recopies itself, remakes its classics, retroactivates its original myths, remakes the silent film more perfectly than the original” (Baudrillard [1981] 2008: 47). Instead of referring to the real world, these images are primarily drawing on already existing images, thereby evolving into “a world of autonomized images”, a “*separate pseudoworld* that can only be looked at” (Debord [1967] 2009: 24). According to Jameson and Baudrillard, what counts in a film like *Chinatown* is neither the real world, nor is it Polanski’s distinctive style as an auteur—such a perspective would be dismissed as being profoundly “bourgeois” and “deceived”. All that matters is the film’s (alleged) stylishness, its simulation of the style of the 1930s.

The condemnation of *The Blair Witch Project* as a fake and mockumentary followed a similar line of argument. The movie's stylistic and aesthetic resemblance to the documentary film and the home movie tempted many film scholars to reduce the film to its alleged stylishness. There are quite a number of different labels that have been assigned to *The Blair Witch Project* in the last couple of years. They include, amongst others, Cinéma Vérité style, Direct Cinema style, amateur-style filmmaking, hand-held camera style, shaky-cam style, YouTube style, and so on. But the movie itself, they say, has no style: it is only stylish and the horror that emanates from it is not or does not intend to be "truthful", rather, it is the result of a gesture of faking and mocking, just as if the film would frighten only due to an introductory title card, a clever marketing strategy and the application of documentary conventions.

In the face of such reductionist interpretations, I couldn't stop asking myself: Why does almost nobody within film scholarship treat *The Blair Witch Project* as what it is made as: a film. Why is Victor F. Perkins' well-known insistence to analyze *Film as Film* ([1972] 1993) so willfully ignored when it comes to a shaky-cam horror film like *The Blair Witch Project*? It seems reasonable to suppose that the answer to this question could somehow be related to another factor: while ideology-critical film scholars were dismissing the movie, the more pragmatic, traditional faction of film scholarship showed no interest in *The Blair Witch Project* as a film in its own right. Even those film critics admiring the movie's effectiveness held the opinion that "like a cabin built entirely out of soda cans, *The Blair Witch Project* is a nifty example of how to make something out of nothing. Nothing but imagination" (Maslin 1999).

While ideology critics were finding fault with the movie's stylishness, paradoxically enough those with an affinity for more traditional methods were not even willing to detect any style at all. When considering the notion of style and stylishness in relation to other movies, it becomes obvious that, at least in this context, one should exercise caution not to compare apples and oranges. For example, there is certainly nothing wrong to speak of a hand-held camera style or a steady-cam style in relation to films like Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7/Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) or Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000). In these films the use of hand-held cameras and steady-cams is obviously due to a stylistic decision made by an auteur, as such interpreted by the audience. According to David Bordwell, style is "a film's systematic and significant use of techniques of the medium", it is "the texture of the film's images and sounds, the result of choices made by the filmmaker(s) in particular historical circumstances" (Bordwell 1999:

4). The images of *A Clockwork Orange*, to name just one example, convincingly bear Kubrick's distinctive signature: it's his way of seeing and interpreting the (filmic) world, the excesses of violence conducted by Alex (Malcolm McDowell) and his "droogs". Being familiar with Kubrick's movies, it's not that difficult to detect many stylistic patterns and formal devices that are characteristic of the director's oeuvre as a whole.

The term "style", and with it the whole auteur theory of the 1950s and 1960s (Bazin [1957] 1985; Truffaut [1954] 2008; Wollen [1969] 2004; Sarris [1962] 2004), implies a segregation between an outside and an inside: between the auteur, who produces a piece of work bearing his own unique style, and the content of the work, meaning the filmic world, the characters, and so on. This segregation becomes particularly apparent in Perkins' claim that directors should not use stylistic features as an end in itself but strive for credibility, clarity and economy (Perkins [1972] 1993: 86-87) by relating these stylistic features to the movie's world and avoiding the temptation to "impose upon it a rhetoric that it cannot sustain" (Perkins [1972] 1993: 115). By presupposing a segregation between an outside (auteur) and an inside (the movie's world), Perkins' claim works perfectly well for a film like *A Clockwork Orange*, particularly as Kubrick's steady-cam style is credibly (and in a skillful way) related to Alex as the voice-over narrator.

In connection with *The Blair Witch Project*, questions of style turn out to be much more complicated. The use of hand-held cameras is not so much a stylistic decision as an integral part of the story world itself: neither is "shakiness" *attached to* the images as a stylistic feature nor is any "aesthetic of authenticity" *borrowed from* the documentary film. It is apparent to the viewer that the images are shaky and gritty not due to an auteur and his characteristic way of using the *caméra-stylo*, not due to the "camera-pen" through which the director imprints his vision of the world on the film (Astruc [1948] 1999), but due to the fact that this *is* a fictional documentary film. In other words: while the shaky images of *A Clockwork Orange* are motivated by content, the shaky images of *The Blair Witch Project* are de facto a product of the content, or, in more precise terms, they *are* the content, since it is the *actors* that operate the camera, since it is their hands that tremble in fear. Following the insight that *The Blair Witch Project* can't have a style or film language proper due to the fact that there is no ontological segregation between the images and the story world, many film critics had to realize the impossibility of interpreting the movie in traditional ways. In this respect *The Blair Witch Project* can be seen as prelude: the same methodological problem repeated itself

whenever a new shaky-cam horror film enjoyed popularity. To name just one example: Mark Olsen, when writing a review of *Paranormal Activity 3* (Joost and Schulman, 2011), admitted that the first two *Paranormal Activity* films (Peli, 2007, and Williams, 2010) “were easier to talk about as products of a marketing phenomenon than as actual films because there frankly wasn’t much to them” (Olsen 2011).

The more I looked at the whole issue, the more I considered the complexity of the topic. During my time as a student at the University of Warwick, as I already mentioned before, I felt deep disappointment that *The Blair Witch Project* and other shaky-cam horror films were lingering in a theoretical and analytical limbo. Noticeably often I considered there to be a yawning gap between my own viewing experience and the methodologies film scholarship could provide. My impression was confirmed by many other movies I had carefully analyzed, especially those that shook me up like von Trier’s *Idioterne/The Idiots* (1998) and Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible/Irreversible* (2002). These movies which I had perceived as extremely dynamic and complex, overwhelmingly processual and entangling, at the same time imaginary and, in a peculiar way, material, would turn out to be almost unrecognizable in the books I read. Suddenly, all these movies were analyzed as either being texts or being perceived as texts. What most bothered me about such a textual understanding of the movies were its literary theoretical implications.

Within literary theory, the term “text” is generally used as opposed to the notion of “work”. The opposition calls attention to the difference between the text as a coherent set of symbols, which has to be deciphered by the reader, and the work, either in its physical form (book) or in the sense of an artwork that has deliberately been authored by a subject with certain intentions. What the term “text” implies is the segregation between the realm of the symbolic/imaginary and that of the material/physical. From a science-historical perspective such segregation is reasonable: it helped literary scholars to overcome the biographical and intentional fallacy of nineteenth century literary criticism (Winslow 1995: 7) and allowed them to analyze texts as texts without the necessity of reducing multi-layered texts to one authorial and closed meaning. But this “opening” of meaning came at the price of an ontological closure of the text in relation to the material. What counted were the complex relations between signs and codes, regardless of their material backdrop. The notion of the “cultural text” that has been en vogue since the 1960s hasn’t revoked this closure. On the contrary, by turning the whole world into a text it has extended this segregation to the most extreme level instead of bringing the symbolic and the material together again.

For all the advantages such an artificial segregation can provide (and there are indeed many of them), it always implies the danger of confusing the products of a methodological decision with the object(s) under study. What once had been an artificial segregation is far too often attributed to the object itself, with the result that a momentous inversion takes place (Latour and Woolgar 1979: 176-177). In relation to film, the camera is turned from a profilmic object, whose output (images) can be interpreted as a text, into a *textual effect*, a reading *hypothesis* (Branigan 1984: 53). As a result, one can *either* write about the production of a movie and its material backdrop *or* analyze it as a text. Doing both at once would, allegedly, “lead to misunderstanding about the viewer’s access to reality” (Branigan 1984: 53). However, my own viewing experience of *The Blair Witch Project* and many other (not only contemporary) movies leads me to disagree with Edward Branigan’s opinion. Don’t we usually experience a movie as both a text *and* a material thing? Don’t we perceive the “look” in *The Blair Witch Project* as both an imaginary entity (a “look”) and the outcome of a material network (a camera with a viewfinder, connected to a human being with genuine emotions and physicality, resulting in recorded images, and so on)? Isn’t the film so frightening because its horror is more than “just” a textual effect? In a figurative sense, isn’t it creeping out from the material-semiotic in-between? From what German media philosopher Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has called the “interface of meaning and materiality” (Gumbrecht 2004: 12)?

To make this point more clear, and picking up on the questions mentioned before, let me address the role the directors Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez played in the production of *The Blair Witch Project*. Their approach to film-making was obviously not so much contingent on notions of the auteur and the narrator as inspired by the very word “director”: a person indicating the direction of a project. Following this reasoning, they casted three actors, provided them with two cameras and sent them to the locations without disclosing any details of the screenplay. In the complete absence of the directors, the actors had to improvise both play-acting and shooting, guided and directed only by messages given to them in crates which they had to find via the use of a GPS system. Every message contained information about the next location and provided instructions for the improvisation and action of that day. Having full knowledge of the background and circumstances, it seems a fair bet that the actors had to go through hell to finish the film:

The unsuspecting actors did not know what awaited them as they wandered through the woods, deprived of sleep, proper nourishment, and knowledge of the production team’s plans, which included nightly harassments,

haunted images, and a bloody discovery wrapped in flannel. Sanchez says although the production team spent countless hours walking through the woods before the shoot, the tedious scouting was well worth it. Their in-depth knowledge of the woods was crucial for the nightly hauntings staged by the production team. “My favorite part was waking up the actors at 3:00 a.m. and scaring them”, Sanchez says [...]. To facilitate these supposed encounters between the filmmakers and the Blair Witch, the production team moved quietly through the woods—sometimes a mile or more in the dark—using red-lens headlamps. [...] According to Ben Rock, production designer for *The Blair Witch Project*, the actors are not doing much acting by the end of the film—their terror is real. “The actors experienced a mixture of food and sleep deprivation: At the beginning they could have what they wanted to eat, but by the end of the eight-day shoot, we gave each of them a power bar and a glass of water for the day. We made them walk through the woods all day with heavy packs of junk on their backs, and we were disturbing them every night with loud noises [...] All of us have been deprived of sleep sometimes and after a while, you hallucinate. It takes all your energy just to stand up and function. Sleep deprivation wears you down as a person, and these actors got worn down”. (Halpern 2003: 39-40)

On the one hand, it is in the nature of things that viewers don’t have the same access to the production process of a movie as directors, camera-men and actors; they won’t know that *The Blair Witch Project*’s actors suffered from food and sleep deprivation. And they presumably won’t ask themselves some of the most intriguing questions that can be posed in relation to *The Blair Witch Project*: Is the shaking of the camera played by the actors or is it a consequence of their sleep and food deprivation? Did the actors’ lack of film experience hinder the adjustment of their bodies (their muscles, and so on) to the “needs” of a camera? When the actors improvise their fearful reaction to strange noises in the dark, to what extent is such a reaction not improvised but real? What is owed to their wandering through the woods, surrounded by black night, plagued by tremendous fear and uncertainty, not knowing what the production team will do next? Where does one draw the line between the stage and the story world, the actor and the character? What about the cameras themselves? Can cameras as technological instruments play-act? Or are they just acting while the actors, carrying them, are play-acting? How does this change the images on the screen? It might be reasonable to assume that these questions won’t bother the audience members intellectually. Yet, they can see the direct consequences of the actor’s food and sleep deprivation without knowing its cause: it’s all there, on the screen. The uncertain material-semiotic noise associated with all the questions

mentioned above is still effective and *transforms* the viewer's perception of the movie. Taking this noise into account does not necessarily "lead to misunderstanding about the viewer's access to reality" (Branigan 1984: 53). Despite being only partially visible, the production process keeps acting on us—it is just that its actions are transformed and translated by other internal and external influences; by other, mediating actors, e.g. the image as screened in the cinema hall. But as long as the production process is effective (and it is all the way, even if in many different ways), it does "modify the state of affairs by making a difference" (Latour 2007: 71) and thus has to be taken into account. After all, it is only reasonable to follow Bruno Latour's recommendation that "images demonstrate transformation, not information" (Lovink 2004: 157).

Proceeding on the assumption that transformations and translations are phenomena of connection and association, not segregation and closure, it is one, if not *the* central objective of this book to demonstrate why our analyses of the movies should not so much be driven by (as I believe) false dichotomy between the textual and the material as by material-semiotic processes which can neither be reduced to the material nor to the semiotic. Such an endeavor is a great challenge, it demands a shift of perspective: from stable, ontologically segregated constructions where every actor has his more or less fixed position to the in-between, to the material-semiotic relations and phenomena of translation and transformation, to the "enactment of materially and discursively heterogeneous relations that produce and reshuffle all kinds of actors including objects, subjects, human beings, machines, animals, 'nature', ideas, organizations, inequalities, scale and sizes" (Law 2009: 141).

Crucial to this re-focusing will be the turning away from the reductionist belief that the movies are perceived as black boxes and ready-made texts. Such a mode of perception might have been reasonable in the age of classical Hollywood cinema with its heavily stabilized film language and production system and the dominance of genre films, whether they were westerns, melodramas or film noirs. Since the rise of the New Waves in the 1950s and 1960s, however, ranging from the *nouvelle vague* to the British New Wave and the *Neue Deutsche Film*, a change of perception has set in. On the ground of new political and social beliefs, the new TV and film-making technologies in the times of François Truffaut, Jean-Luc Godard, Lindsay Anderson, Tony Richardson and Rainer Werner Fassbinder allowed the new guard of directors to develop a new cinema for a new generation, thereby confronting film scholars with the challenge to develop new film theories capable of grasping the contemporary developments both in cinema and culture as well as politics

and society. After all, new forms of film-making always require new ways of thinking about the movies. Even if the perception of the movies as black boxes and ready-made texts got cracks at this time, deliberately caused by film-makers enjoying their new freedom of action and introducing new forms of representation into film art with the objective to overcome many conventions of the older generation, this never resulted in what one might call a “film theory of transformations”. It is only today, with the ongoing digitization since the 1990s and its profound influence on the production and perception of the movies that the once ready-made texts have turned out to be texts in the making, material-semiotic processes, transformations instead of information. The great divide between professional film-makers and journalists, on the one side, and marginalized amateurs, on the other, has made way for a new digital media culture, characterized by rapid technological development and triggering the impression that almost nothing is stable, that everything is moving and circulating. Thanks to mobile devices like cellular phones, smart phones and tablet computers which are globally available and omnipresent today and the associated opportunity to distribute recorded photos and videos more or less uncensored via YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr and the like, amateur films, once marginalized and in the public awareness restricted to private home movies, have become popular to an almost unimaginable extent and culturally as well as politically important. An important watershed in this context was September 11, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center complex:

Perhaps the defining historical event of our age—the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001—was collectively experienced as a media event according to the conventions of literal instantaneity (the global “real time” and “live feeds” of CNN and MSNBC); the implosion of any distinction between distance and proximity when the world is experienced so immediately as representation; and the collapse of any division between the news value of professional and amateur images that have come to define our expectations of digital media. It is estimated that more than two-thirds of news photographers on the scene in New York were shooting digitally that day, uploading their images from nearby delis and drugstores. Newspapers, wire services, and magazines selected not only from the digital work of the pros in illustrating their stories, but also from images e-mailed and posted on Web sites by a host of shell-shocked bystanders whose instinctive reaction to unimaginable catastrophe was to reach for their cameras. September 11 was “a true test of digital photography in recording history,” said one photographer, “and it definitely passed the test”. (Przyblyski 2008: 175-176)

The terror attacks of September 11, an event that had previously been considered unthinkable, became a national trauma not only due to the unimaginable extent of suffering and pain they produced but also due to its association with an unprecedented current of amateur images and films. This flood of images, undoubtedly striking in their power and authenticity, was capable to turn a whole nation into eyewitnesses of the catastrophe. Since that very day in 2001, and due to the increasingly rapid progress in the development of new technologies and the revolutionary introduction of video-sharing-websites like YouTube, amateur films have become an extremely important part of contemporary media culture. Next to the recording of natural catastrophes, as was the case with the Tsunamis that hit the coasts of Southeast Asia in 2004 and Japan in 2011, amateur films have become particularly important in the development of what is often called “mobile reporting” and “citizen journalism”, or alternatively “street” and “guerilla journalism”. Whether it concerns the demonstrations in the wake of the Arab Spring, the civil war in Syria since 2011 or the mass demonstrations on the Maidan in Kiev 2014, together with other forms of digital communication, like “tweeting”, the amateur film has not only changed the way revolutions are conducted and communicated, it has also changed our way of perception. Instead of appearing to be a more or less “detached” and “neutral” image, amateur films tend to expose the fact that they are part of a much broader network, that there are people and real political actors involved, that there are intentions and emotions that are not suppressed but often inscribed into the images themselves. Amateur films are, so to say, extremely symmetrical insofar as they emphasize the principle that nothing is superior or ontologically separate but, on the contrary, taking place within one world.

These revolutions and watersheds within contemporary media culture have already attracted much attention by film and media scholars around the world and so, in recent years, a considerable amount of research has been and is being conducted in the fields of amateur film (Zimmermann 1995, Moran 2002, Ishizuka and Zimmermann 2007, Rascaroli 2009, Rascaroli, Monahan and Young 2014) as well as citizen journalism (Mc Caughey and Ayers 2003, Allan and Thorsen 2009, Buckingham and Willett 2009, Burgess and Green 2009, Allan 2013). Yet, despite a strong consciousness for the fact that September 11, as a media event in its own right, and the ongoing importance of amateur film have profoundly changed cinema (Dixon 2004, Rombes 2009, Hoberman 2012), modern film theory has struggled to cope with and conceptualize these developments; and even more despite the fact that many contemporary artworks, especially the films associated with Dogma 95, the New French

Extremity and the shaky-cam horror film, heavily reflect on the possibilities, limits and effects of amateur film-making on a perceptual and emotional level and, in the end, indicate that these films are very much children of their time in this respect. Modern film theory fails to understand that it needs to find new answers to the challenges of today's media culture which has resulted in a form of film-making that might be described as an "edgy realism" where the movies and the images are not perceived as texts but *textualized things*, as material-semiotic phenomena in the making, where the images appear to be not asymmetrical but the contingent product of the networks they are embedded in.

In recent years Phenomenological and Deleuzian approaches have already attempted to do this through a philosophical shift of perspective. And for a long time there has been a strong interest in the relationship between the semiotic and the material within the post-structuralist theories, especially concerning Jacques Derrida and his reflections on the relationship between materiality, writing and language (Derrida [1967] 1976) or Roland Barthes and the grain of the voice (Barthes [1972] 1977). Yet, the strength of all of these post-structuralist and phenomenological approaches is also their weakness when it comes to the realm of film: being *either* philosophy and therefore allowing an analysis of the realm of the phenomenological and other philosophical questions *or* "hard-core" semiotics, and therefore being so obsessed with signs of all kinds and their relations that it is difficult to see any clear and helpful statement about the material through this fog of always floating signs, these approaches are not particularly suited to convincingly answer questions in the field of film theory and analysis and it is obviously no coincidence that these approaches have not contributed very much to film analysis in the closer sense of the word.

Even if the present book intends to avoid these shortcomings and develop a film theory of transformations that is both pragmatic and ambitious and takes the common sense of film studies as a discipline with its own methods and dynamics into account, it seems reasonable to emphasize something I have already alluded to without explicating it: within the scope of this book, I won't—and I don't want to—provide a full-fledged and all-embracing film theory of transformations, or whatever you want to call it. In this respect I am sympathetic with Noël Carroll's assessment that "where film theory blurs into film criticism, there is the ever-present danger that theoretical premises will be taken as given—as effectively inoculated from film criticism—and, once so assumed, then used to generate 'interesting' interpretations" (Carroll 2005: 14). This danger, which film theory seems to be particularly prone to, is closely linked to the

fact that, for a long time, film theory had been understood as a “singular”. A film theory was generally thought of as a pretty “comprehensive instrument that was supposed to answer virtually every legitimate question you might have about film”, a “unified body of ideas with certain core propositions from which conclusions about concrete cases follow in various ways, once certain empirical possibilities are considered” (Carroll 2005: 12). What Carroll instead called for was “thinking in terms of film theories rather than in terms of film theory” (Carroll 2005: 12) as “film theorizing [...] should proceed at varying levels of generality and abstraction” (Carroll 2005: 13). And he cites the following reasons:

Since we can ask so many different kinds of general questions about film, there is no common feature that all of our answers should be expected to share. Some theoretical questions about film—for example, about cinematic perception—may have answers that primarily advert to cinematic forms and structures, whereas other different answers to different questions might refer to economic forces. That is, some theories may be formal, while others may be social. Our collection of film theories may very well comprise a mixed bag. There simply is no reason to think that every film theory will have something to tell us about the same subject—such as the way in which each and every aspect of film figures in the oppression or emancipation of the film viewer. (Carroll 2005: 13-14)

The structure of the journey undertaken in this book reflects Carroll’s assessments. It is guided by the intention to add something to the mixed bag of film theories that is valuable and modest, valuable because it allows us to ask new questions and modify older ones and modest in the sense that it shall not replace existing methods but give them new impulses. I cherish the hope that it might even be able to build some bridges between different (at the moment rather discriminating) film theories, because it calls attention to complexity and entanglement where most of the already existing methods within film scholarship tend to see textual *or* material, in any event *closed* black boxes. In this respect, a film theory of transformations is very definitely intended to reflect its own object of study—the in-between, the relations and transformations—on a methodological level.

Following this line of argument, Chapter 2 will focus on methodical questions of past and present film theories. The notion of “text”, and its implementation in the ideology-critical “apparatus theories” (Rosen 1986) as well as the “good-science” approach of neoformalism, will be used as a background against which a film theory of transformations shall assume methodological shape.

Chapter 3, then, will turn to a specific field of research within film studies where the foundation for such a film theory of transformations has already been laid: the New Film History movement, associated with the likes of Tom Gunning and Miriam Hansen. The two film historians' field of research, the early cinema, will be the ideal point of departure for such an endeavor. The early years of cinema form an important point of reference, at that time the movies hadn't become ready-made texts yet and the film-makers were still struggling to figure out what to do with these material-semiotic things called "the moving pictures". By recapitulating both the early film-makers' insight that textualization was the way to go and the New Film Historians' attempt to bridge film history and modern film theory, it should become apparent that talking about the movies as textualized things and something in the making is less eccentric than it might sound at first sight, on the contrary, that it is deeply entrenched within film history itself and has already been conceptualized by the New Film Historians themselves.

Chapters 4 to 6 will then be dealing with different movements and genres of contemporary cinema where—due to cultural and technological shifts—the textualization as a precarious process has become visible again, thereby forming an important element of our perception of these movies. As already mentioned above, these examples range from *Dogma 95* (Chapter 4) to the New French Extremity (Chapter 5) and the shaky-cam horror film (Chapter 6). Instead of "blurring into film criticism" and "generating 'interesting' interpretations", which means: instead of forcing theoretical premises on innocent movies, I intend to listen sensitively to the processual noise of these movies in order to trace some—but certainly not all—of the transformations and translations that make them so peculiar. In this respect, I will draw very much on the material-semiotic toolkit of actor-network theory which proceeds on the conviction that you can describe actor-network theory *in abstracto*, however, "this [actually] misses the point because it is not abstract but is grounded in empirical case studies. We can only understand the approach if we have a sense of those case studies and how these work in practice". In a similar way as in the natural sciences "theory is embedded and extended in empirical practice, and practice itself is necessarily theoretical" (Law 2009: 141). What comes into focus when running this path is a kind of material-semiotic complexity as Latour has described it in relation to theatrical performances:

it's never clear who and what is acting when we act since an actor on stage is never alone in acting. Play-acting puts us immediately into a thick imbroglio where the question of who is carrying out the action has become

unfathomable. As soon as the play starts [...] nothing is certain: Is this for real? Is it fake? Does the audience's reaction count? What about the lighting? What is the backstage crew doing? Is the playwright's message faithfully transported or hopelessly burgled? Is the character carried over? And if so, by what? What are the partners doing? Where is the prompter? If we accept to unfold the metaphor, the very word actor directs our attention to a complete dislocation of the action, warning us that it is not a coherent, controlled, well-rounded, and clean-edged affair. By definition, action is *dislocated*. Action is borrowed, distributed, suggested, influenced, dominated, betrayed, translated. (Latour 2007: 46)

This approach—with its material-semiotic mindset as developed by Latour, John Law and Michel Callon—will prove fruitful in relation to the movies where the imbroglio of the theatrical performance is even more complicated by the fact that cameras and cinematographers, film reels and editors, movie projectors, projectionists and light-rays, sometimes even marketing departments, act as actors, able to—but not always—change the material-semiotic perception of the movies.

Knowing all too well that it would be pointless to attempt to provide a map covering all the actors and actions in operation, I decided to concentrate on a rather small, yet still overwhelmingly complex section of this imbroglio, namely the intricate network made up of looks and gazes, viewfinders and images, invisible observers and visual narrators, cameras and operators. While the advantage of such an approach is obvious—it becomes possible to detect the finer threads of the section under study—one should always bear in mind that the isolation of a specific section is always a methodological, artificial decision and that numerous threads are pointing to actors located outside of this section, to actors whose actions are nevertheless highly effective and transform the look, the camera, and so on, in sometimes surprising ways. To give just one example: in relation to *The Blair Witch Project* it would be complicated enough to speak about the “imaginary” look in terms of a material-semiotic imbroglio of looks, images, cameras, bodies, performances, and so on, but this imbroglio is in a strange way connected to the directors themselves. When the directors and their production team sneaked through the woods at night-time, woke the actors up to terrify them and lured them through noises in the direction they wanted them to go—aren't they actually playing the part of the witch? Being an invisible, nevertheless ubiquitous presence haunting and intimidating three young people whose task is to shoot a film? But what does it mean to our appreciation of film when the directors are not so much auteurs as (powerful) actors entangled in the web of the stage performance? When they perform the role of that invisible character,

pulling the strings of the story without, however, being able to control any aspect of cinematography, such as the shooting according to a script, the setting of the lighting, and so on? Doesn't it turn all our conceptions of direction and the segregation of spaces inside out when the directors are not *writing with* the camera but are *acting on* the camera as actors entangled in the scene? In this respect, Myrick and Sánchez behave less like auteurs and more like what Latour has described in relation to warfare:

it is obvious [...] that an army's command and control center is not "bigger" and "wider" than the local front thousands of miles away where soldiers are risking their life, but it is clear nonetheless that such a war room can command and control anything—as the name indicates—*only as long as* it remains connected to the theater of operation through a ceaseless transport of information. So the right topography here is not to include the front line "into" some overarching power, but to *localize* both and to *connect* through some sort of well-fed cables what in French is called *connectique*. This is what I mean by flattening the landscape. (Latour 2007: 181-182)

Thereby "action should [...] be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies that have to be slowly disentangled" (Latour 2007: 44). This way of thinking, summarized by Latour with slogans like "localize the global and distribute the local" (Latour 2007: 219), "no place dominates enough to be global and no place is self-contained enough to be local" (Latour 2007: 204) and "there is no information, only trans-formation" (Latour 2007: 149), will return in many different facets throughout this book, especially when the perspective is shifted from questions of authorship and the textual towards phenomena of *connection* and *transformation*, towards the material-semiotic *in-between*.

It goes without saying that the final chapter, then, attempts to explain what the approach described above might be able to accomplish in relation to millennial cinema and today's media culture with its "YouTube-ification of things" (Keegan 2008), and where the methodological limits of a film theory of transformations have to be located; thereby always bearing Perkins' words in the last chapter of *Film as Film* in mind: "We have a duty to ourselves to ensure that our standards are as clear and consistent, as perceptively applied, as we can make them. Individually, we can do no more but we should not do less" (Perkins [1972] 1993: 192).

CHAPTER TWO

NOTES ON THE METHODOLOGY OF MODERN FILM THEORY

Moving towards a film theory of transformations, and thereby bringing those material-semiotic relations into focus that remain a blind spot in contemporary film theory, will only be a valuable and modest endeavor as long as one conceives what exactly this approach promises to contribute to the methodological toolkit of modern film theory. The most effective way to achieve this goal is to use the limits and strong points of other methodical approaches as a background against which such a film theory of transformations can assume clearly defined shapes. In the previous chapter I illustrated ideology criticism and the auteur theory's methodological shortcomings concerning the complexity of shaky-cam horror films and their blood-curdling authenticity. Yet, what I provided up until then were only broad brush strokes, concerning questions of stylishness and the relation between the auteur, the filmic form and its content. Aimed at emphasizing the complexity of the movies and our perception of them, these brush strokes were obviously too broad and isolated for a thorough understanding of the ambitions associated with the theoretical ideas I intend to put forward in this book. They will look pale and forlorn as long as they aren't localized within their broader methodological context, more specifically the notion of "text" and the way it is used in modern film theory. After all, the "text" is a methodical tool whose implications are so far-reaching that following them is enough to recognize the shape, or silhouette, of the film theory of transformations in question.

Eager to accomplish this situating movement, I will first trace the use and methodical function of the notion of "text" within modern film theory: from the early days of the auteur theory in the 1960s until the apparatus theories in the 1970s and 1980s and up to David Bordwell's and Kristin Thompson's neoformalism in the 1990s. Upon closer examination, the reader will soon realize that this process of shaping against the (sometimes well-calculated, in other cases unintentional) shortcomings of modern film

theory is very much inspired by Latour's and Law's actor-network theory (ANT), a material-semiotic toolkit, actually developed within the field of Science, Technology and Society (STS). In recent years, however, actor-network theory has become increasingly popular in other fields than sociology, especially in such disciplines as, inter alia, anthropology, health studies, geography and, not least, media studies. Due to the fact that actor-network theory has already been introduced to media studies (cf. Becker, Cuntz and Kusser 2008; Engell, Vogl and Siegert 2008; Seier 2009; Döring and Thielmann 2009; Engell 2010; Wieser 2012; Thielmann, Schüttpelz and Gendolla 2013), at first glance it would seem quite natural to build on media studies' adoption of actor-network theory, with the objective of "transferring" it to the field of film studies. Yet, I consciously avoid using such adoption, or transfer of the second order, since in that scenario the *Eigensinn* of the field of media studies would act very much like a "mediator" who "transform[s], translate[s], distort[s], and modifie[s] the meanings or the elements [he is] supposed to carry" (Latour 2007: 39). Instead, I intend to remain within the traditions of film studies by refining and re-evaluating existing film theoretical approaches, with the clear objective to shape a film theory of transformations that is directly acted upon by actor-network theory with as little modification as possible resulting from a detour over the field of media studies. However, as for the future, such a decidedly film theoretical shaping should be seen as only a first step that might easily be followed and modified by film historical, film analytical, film philosophical, but also media theoretical considerations (and indeed I believe the latter to be a particularly promising direction).

The notion of "text" in (post-)structuralist film theory

The idea to compare film with language and other sign systems is almost as old as film theory itself and found its most popular expression in the context of early formalist film theory (Beilenhoff 2005) and the Soviet montage cinema of the 1920s (Eisenstein [1942] 1970; Pudovkin 1958). But a systematic application of the term "text" to cinema didn't occur before the late 1960s when, mirroring the history of literary theory, film theory was in desperate need of overcoming the auteur theory's intentionalism and developing a method that would permit the analysis of film as "an autonomous object, obeying its own inner logic, rather than simply the intentions of the author" (Pearson and Simpson 2001: 630).

During the late 1950s and early 1960s the auteur theory had struggled against the screenwriters' and producers' claim to artistic responsibility and, instead, argued the case for the authorial status of the director. At that

time, eager to prove the authorial status of directors like Fritz Lang, Akira Kurosawa and Howard Hawks, auteur critics such as François Truffaut, Eric Rohmer and Claude Chabrol began to develop the methodical toolbox of textual film analysis. In this context, Truffaut's interviews with Hitchcock are certainly one of the most striking examples for the analytical strength of early auteur theory (Truffaut 1969) that evidently inspired a whole generation of film critics (Wood 1968; Cameron and Wood 1968; Perkins [1972] 1993). No matter from which angle it is looked at, Truffaut's analysis, revolving around Hitchcock's unique way of creating suspense and implementing plot devices like the famous "MacGuffin", was always meant to prove the influence of the director: "Because he exercises such complete control over all the elements of his films and imprints his personal concepts at each step of the way, Hitchcock has a distinctive style of his own" and so he is "one of the few film-makers on the horizon today whose screen signature can be identified as soon as the picture begins" (Truffaut 1969: 22).

Even if such intentionalist readings are an essential part of any writing of film history, it was (as so often in film theory) the dose that made the poison: the political nature of the auteur critics' struggle led to a form of auteur-intentionalism which completely overstated its case when "the praise of the auteur" led to a "negation of the film" (Bazin [1957] 1985: 258). In the face of this pretty old-fashioned apotheosis of the author, a strategy which literary theory had already renounced a long time ago, it was only a question of time until a less intentionalist and more (post-) structuralist notion of "text" would be introduced to film theory. This transition happened most famously in the context of auteur-structuralism, which grew out of the intellectual left in Great Britain in the late 1960s and

employed a theoretical sophistication and analytical substance lacking in auteurism. With its emphasis on the importance of systematically analyzing a body of texts, auteur-structuralism conceive[d] of the author as a set of structures identifiable within a director's film. In the words of Nowell-Smith, whose book on Luchino Visconti was virtually the first instance of auteur-structuralism, "the purpose of criticism becomes therefore to uncover behind the superficial contrasts of subject and treatment a structural hard core of basic and often recondite motifs. The pattern formed by these motifs, which may be stylistic or thematic, is what gives an author's work its particular structure, both defining it internally and distinguishing one body of work from another". (Crofts 1998: 315)

In one of the key works of auteur-structuralism titled *Signs and Meaning in the Cinema* (1972), Peter Wollen argued against author-intentionalism