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Ghost Hunting in the New Millennium: A Trans-Media Theory of Cycle Studies

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GHOST HUNTING IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM:
A TRANS-MEDIA THEORY OF CYCLE STUDIES

by

MATT BOYD SMITH

Under the Direction of Sharon Shahaf, PhD

ABSTRACT

Ghost Hunting in the New Millennium updates and expands cycle theory through an examination of ghost hunting films and television shows in the 21st Century across media boundaries. Through a comprehensive media industries framework that incorporates industrial, textual, and cultural analysis, the study examines how similar generic texts can best be understood if examined in terms of production cycles. This is especially true in the modern conglomerate-owned media environment which emphasizes ongoing production and exploitation of popular formulas in different media as a means of maximizing profits and minimizing costs across a corporation’s vast subsidiaries, and which in turn affects the spheres of independent productions and fandom. Ghost Hunting in the New Millennium provides the historical contexts for the development of ghost hunting shows and found footage horror films in their respective media,
and then puts them into direct conversation with one another as industrial and cultural products using industrial, textual, and discourse analysis. By bringing cycle studies into discussion with media industries studies, the dissertation argues, media historians can make more focused, cogent arguments about the relationships between generic texts across traditional medium-specific fields of scholarship.

INDEX WORDS: Media studies, Film and television production, Trans-media production, New media, Television studies, Genre studies, Media industries, Horror, Paranormal, Ghosts, Ghost hunting
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MATT BOYD SMITH

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in the College of the Arts

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by

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DEDICATION

For Marsha, who will never watch the shows and films written about in this dissertation.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .................................................................................................................................. V

1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................................................ 1

1.1 Ghost Hunting in the New Millennium ................................................................................................. 1

1.2 Trans-Media Cycle Studies: A Methodology ......................................................................................... 3

1.3 The Case Study ...................................................................................................................................... 16

1.4 Structure .............................................................................................................................................. 29

2 THE GHOST HUNTING FORMULA ........................................................................................................ 32

2.1 Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 32

2.2 Defining the Formula .......................................................................................................................... 36

   2.2.1 The Structure of Ghost Hunters ....................................................................................................... 39

   2.2.2 Believing is Seeing: Science, Pseudoscience, and the History of Paranormal Research .................. 45

2.3 Conclusion .......................................................................................................................................... 55

3 THE PARANORMAL REALITY BOOM ..................................................................................................... 57

3.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................................... 57

3.2 Fact or Fiction: A Genealogy of Paranormal Reality TV in the U.S. ...................................................... 58

   3.2.1 One Step Beyond: Anthology Dramas and the Beginnings of a Genre ............................................ 60

   3.2.2 Paranormal Documentaries: Realism and the Unexplainable ......................................................... 67

   3.2.3 Dare ‘em, Scare ‘em: Innovations and Reformulations in the Reality Era ........................................ 80
3.3 The Spread of the Ghost Hunting Formula on Cable TV: Industrial &
Textual Logics......................................................................................................................... 84

3.3.1 Reinforcing the Cycle: Paranormal State and Ghost Adventures ........... 89

3.3.2 “Your Cable Is Haunted”: Proliferation and Saturation ......................... 98

3.3.3 Re-Cycled ......................................................................................................................... 105

3.4 Conclusion .............................................................................................................................. 107

4 NEW WAYS OF SEEING: FOUND FOOTAGE HORROR & THE GHOST HUNTING REALITY SHOW
.................................................................................................................................................. 108

4.1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 108

4.2 “A Year Later, Their Footage Was Found”: The Blair Witch Project and
Found Footage Style .................................................................................................................. 110

4.2.1 Pioneer Production ......................................................................................................... 111

4.2.2 Selling Reality .................................................................................................................. 114

4.2.3 The Hallmarks of Found Footage Style ........................................................................ 118

4.3 Unstoppable Presence: Paranormal Activity & the Business of Found
Footage Horror ........................................................................................................................... 123

4.3.1 Changes in the Film Industry .......................................................................................... 123

4.3.2 Speculation and Failure .................................................................................................. 128

4.3.3 The Trailblazer Hit ......................................................................................................... 130

4.3.4 Cash-ins ............................................................................................................................ 134
4.4 Trans-Media Cycle: Ghost Hunting TV Shows and Paranormal Found Footage Horror Films in the 21st Century ................................................................. 139

4.4.1 Investigating the Paranormal in the Trans-Media Ghost Hunting Cycle 141

4.5 Conclusion ........................................................................................................... 154

5 A TRULY TRANS-MEDIA CYCLE ....................................................................... 156

5.1 What We Have Learned So Far ......................................................................... 156

5.2 Moving Forward ................................................................................................. 158

REFERENCES ........................................................................................................ 161
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Ghost Hunting in the New Millennium

In the letter To Sura, Pliny the Younger provides us with one of the oldest recorded ghost stories, that of Athenodorus of Tarsus. In that story, Athenodorus learns of a large home available for purchase in Athens which is haunted by the sounds of rattling chains and the apparition of a decrepit old man. After purchasing the house at a bargain rate, Athenodorus moves in and takes up his study, writing into the night. Eventually, the sounds and the apparition both intrude upon his evening. After some time, during which he steels himself and continues his work, he gets up and follows the spirit out into the courtyard, where it points to a spot on the ground. Athenodorus marks the spot, then returns inside and goes to bed. The next day, he digs in the spot and finds the bones of a man, bound in chains. He gives the remains a proper burial, and the spirit never returns, finally able to rest in peace. The story of Athenodorus as recounted by Pliny the Younger in the First Century A.D. contains elements that can be found in virtually every ghost story since, whether Gothic horror or campfire story. The cheap vacant house, the noises in the dead of night, the ghostly apparition beckoning the protagonist, the hidden sacrilegious corpse, and an end to the torment by providing proper burial and relief to the troubled spirit are all recognizable components of supernatural horror to this day.

The story of Athenodorus of Tarsus also provides us with one of the earliest examples of paranormal investigation in history. Intrigued by stories about the house, Athenodorus takes up residence and waits for the spirit to appear. When it does so, he does not flee, but rather follows it outside and discovers the reason the haunting is occurring in the first place. As a reliable witness - a known and trusted authority figure in his lifetime - his account functioned as evidence of the haunting’s authenticity, and was in turn supported by the discovery of bones in the
courtyard, the laying to rest of which resulted in the apparition’s disappearance. Athenodorus may not have been a ghost hunter, but his purpose in taking up residence in the house was perfectly in line with their *raison d’etre*: to document and analyze evidence and provide answers to people affected by the supernatural. The reality is that paranormal investigation - ghost hunting - has remained largely unchanged since the time of Athenodorus, and almost certainly since that of Pliny the Younger.

In their modern form, ghost hunters use communications and recording technologies in an effort to document encounters with the supernatural, to provide evidence that supports prevailing theories about spirits, apparitions, and demonic presences, and to uncover new information that will help humanity fully uncover the secrets of the unknown and the unknowable. The results are frequently the same however: their understanding of how such recording devices work to collect evidence about the supernatural is shaped by centuries of cultural engagement with emergent technology. These modern ghost hunters and their methodologies now populate productions in every medium, including television, film, video games, and books, which makes ghost hunting an intriguing case study. In this dissertation, we will examine the history and methodologies of paranormal investigation in relation to the ghost hunting formula that developed on American television in the early 2000s before being adapted into found footage films and a variety of other media later in the same decade. Our analysis of this popular formula’s development and transfer across media boundaries will demonstrate what I call trans-media cycle studies, a methodology that borrows heavily from media industries studies and incorporates the nascent theory of cycle studies so as to provide media historians with a means of studying how and why formulas travel across media boundaries in a conglomerate media environment. In the next section I will outline the theory and methodology
of cycle studies before moving to a discussion of our case study. We will begin by looking at the
development of cycle studies as a methodology in film studies and genre criticism, then discuss
the applicability of cycle studies to popular formulas in different media.

1.2 Trans-Media Cycle Studies: A Methodology

Trans-media cycles are production cycles which occur across the boundaries of media. They are a group of texts related through a limited formula’s repetition over time in different media, either simultaneously or in close proximity to cycles taking place in a single medium. They occur when a formula becomes so successful in one medium that it is picked up and replicated in another in order to capitalize on that formula’s popularity. The popularity of a cycle’s limited formula - the unique combination of structural, aesthetic, and thematic elements as they manifest in the text - and the way it is able to tap into and engage with the cultural zeitgeist are at the heart of this process. While this has always taken place in one way or another, the business practices of the media industries in the new millennium have made the process of adaptation and transference of formula in this way more ubiquitous. While the paranormal-themed shows, films, and other texts which comprise these trans-media cycles might still be usefully examined within the bounds of medium specificity, the reality is that they are the product of increased convergence on a variety of levels, including corporate structures and the technologies of media production and distribution. A decision made by a television network executive to produce yet another ghost hunting show might be based as much on the success of a similar show on another network as on the success of a film franchise that points to a potentially untapped audience segment. Likewise, viewers seek out programs and films which fit into their
preferred media silos, allowing producers an opportunity to capitalize on the popularity of similar texts produced simultaneously in different media.

As acknowledged in a rich lineage of work in film studies, including the work of historians and genre theorists Tino Balio, Thomas Schatz, Rick Altman, Steve Neale, and Amanda Ann Klein, production cycles have always existed alongside genre as a cost-effective method of producing films and shows which held minimal risk for the studios and production companies involved. Cycles are defined by their function in relation to industrial practice and their economic viability, and differentiated from genres by their intense focus on a limited popular formula and a short time frame of popularity and profitability. They have typically been studied in relation to a single medium, typically as part of generic evolution. This is especially true in film studies, which frequently positions generic formula as an articulation of production practices in relation to the deployment of a Fordist model by Hollywood. Throughout the classical period, from the 1920s through the dawn of television in the late 1940s, the studios churned out hundreds of films annually, using strict guidelines for the management of their production budgets, allotting a set number of prestige productions, genre pictures, and programmers per year. Film historian Tino Balio has pointed out that because of Hollywood’s strict budgetary constraints conferred upon the studios by their financiers in New York, studio bosses divided productions up into budget line items, reducing them to more or less financial equations that out of necessity translated to textual formulas, collections of thematic and formal tropes that could be easily replicated and repeated over and over in slightly different combinations.¹ According to Thomas Schatz, this led to the development of film genres, highly

formulaic groups of films that shared imagery, themes, and told familiar stories that could be marketed easily to a mass audience.\textsuperscript{2}

Schatz also tells us that a film genre slowly impresses itself on culture [through repetition of a popular formula] until it becomes a meaningful system that can be named.\textsuperscript{3} Taking a linguistic approach, Rick Altman posits that cycles become genres when they achieve stability between their syntactic and semantic elements.\textsuperscript{4} And Steve Neale notes that in most histories of the Hollywood studio system, the term “cycle” usually refers “to groups of films made within a specific and limited time-span, and founded...on the characteristics of individual commercial success.”\textsuperscript{5} These popular formulas, as currently understood in much of film history, began their life as cycles of films, small groups of genre films which sought to capitalize on the popularity of a particular theme or cultural interest within a short period of time. After a period of sustained popularity, the cycle grows large enough that its prominent themes and conventions - its syntax and semantics - are recognized as a genre. But film cycles are not merely the ur-texts of film genres. They are an important component of historical inquiry and worthy of their own study. Like genres, film cycles are tied to the mode of production in Hollywood, wherein a cycle of popular films plays a role in the formulaic practices of the studio and the development of genres to streamline the studios’ budgetary needs. Film cycles are, as indicated by Peter Stanfield, “always located within their production and exhibition contexts and are defined by charting their emergence, consolidation, and diffusion over a measurable period of time.”\textsuperscript{6} But Rick Altman

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 20.
\item \textsuperscript{4} Rick Altman, \textit{Film/Genre}, (London: British Film Institute, 1999), 62.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Steve Neale, \textit{Genre and Hollywood}, (London: Routledge, 1999), 9.
\end{itemize}
reminds us that film cycles are also defined by their textual components, especially their reliance on specific formulas to ensure future continued success. And what many of these definitions lack is a sustained discussion of why film cycles are different from trends, genres, sub-genres, and clusters.

Even studies of film cycles somewhat elide these differences by charting out cycle formulation primarily through industrial and economic analysis. For example, Richard Nowell’s engaging study of the first teen slasher cycle, Blood Money, focuses on how box office revenue influenced the textual elements of those films as they coalesced, shifted, and eventually dissipated by 1981. Nowell pays careful attention to the ways box office success translates into further imitation, articulating a version of the feedback loop envisioned by Thomas Schatz in Hollywood Genres, and enriches this analysis with a consideration of how the cycle’s texts incorporate elements audiences enjoyed while jettisoning others. He tells us that “the landscape of financially successful films is subject to shifts and changes, being reshaped constantly by new hits and misses.” This results in a very useful delineation of the different stages of cycle formation that allow us to consider individual conditions of the industry, the film market, and viewership habits for each film—including distinctions between different phases and their place in the cycle, such as “Pioneer,” “Speculator,” “Trailblazer,” and “Reinforcing Hits”—but does very little to distinguish why the study of a film cycle is different from that of a film genre.

Enter Amanda Ann Klein, whose book American Film Cycles does much work to separate film cycles from the long-established generic categories of Hollywood filmmaking. In the introduction to the book, she writes:

Like film genres, film cycles are a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes. However, while film genres

\[\text{Altman, } \text{Film/Genre, 59-60.}\]

are primarily defined by the repetition of key images (their semantics) and themes (their syntax), film cycles are primarily defined by how they are used (their pragmatics). In other words, the formation and longevity of film cycles are a direct result of their immediate financial viability as well as the public discourses circulating around them, including film reviews, director interviews, studio-issued press kits, movie posters, theatrical trailers, and media coverage. Because they are so dependent on audience desires, film cycles are also subject to defined time constraints. Most cycles are financially viable for only five to ten years. After that point, a cycle must be updated or altered in order to continue to turn a profit.\(^9\)

The differences highlighted here—a cycle’s reliance on profitability, popularity, and its use of an extremely limited formula—may seem remarkably similar to that of genre, but that is not the case. Cycles are different from genres in that they rise and fall within an extremely short period of time, with little variation between texts, exploiting their topicality. In contrast, genres can weather periods of audience disinterest unscathed, with periodic upticks and downturns in their popularity over long periods of time, because their syntax or themes “address a profound psychological need in their audiences.”\(^10\) She describes film cycles as “love at first sight” in contrast to genre’s “long-term commitment with a protracted history and a deep sense of familiarity.”\(^11\)

Because film cycles are defined by their dependence on flash-in-the-pan popularity, they complement the study of genres “by offering an even more detailed look at the pragmatics of popular cinema...providing small, detailed snapshots of that culture at a single moment in time.”\(^12\) Klein provides a concise example of this in the book’s introduction with a brief discussion of the torture porn cycle of the 2000s. She describes how the film Saw (James Wan,


\(^{10}\)Ibid., 16. Here Klein is building on the work of Judith Hess, whom she quotes on the subject: “When we return to the complexities of the society in which we live, the same conflicts assert themselves, so we return to genre films for easy comfort and solace--hence their popularity.”

\(^{11}\)Ibid., 11.

\(^{12}\)Ibid., 19.
2004) launched numerous imitators based on its massive financial success. The limited formula of “a killer with little plausible motivation for his killings, seemingly random victims, and, most importantly, extended, graphic scenes of torture and violence” was repeated again and again by producers looking to capitalize on its popularity. As much scholarship has demonstrated, the popularity of torture porn is easily linked to post-9/11 cultural anxieties fueled by the Iraq war, revelations about the use of torture by U.S. forces in Abu Ghraib, and so on. According to Klein, the filmmakers may not have been aware of these associations early on, but “as public discourses began to increasingly view this cycle as one addressing contemporary anxieties, such as the torture debate, filmmakers began to insert overt references to contemporary concerns.” The popularity and financial success of the torture porn cycle faded within five years, however, as box office receipts declined and the public developed a distaste for its exploitation of tortured bodies. As evidence, Klein presents us with the decreased box office revenue between early entries in the Saw franchise and its final entry, Saw 3D (Kevin Greutert, 2010), as well as the demonstrable growing disgust with torture porn in popular culture and the intense backlash to the marketing campaign for Captivity (Roland Joffé, 2007).

What the brief example of torture porn demonstrates is the micro-view of film genres, a method of examining industry, text, and audience in conjunction with one another that highlights the major semantics of the group of films while emphasizing the fragility of its ongoing popularity. The narrow parameters of the formula present in these films necessitated fast, continuous production before audiences grew impatient and disinterested in them and they ceased to be financially viable productions. Another thing this brief example illustrates is the

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13 Ibid., 13.
14 Ibid., 13.
15 Ibid., 14.
reasons why film cycles are not clearly defined. As with the slashers of Richard Nowell’s study, the formulaic churn of product like the 1930s gangster cycle and the Dead End Kids films in Klein’s book, and the ghost hunting media that is the focus of this dissertation’s case study, the transparent commercialism of cycles are indicative of low culture. As Klein notes, “Film cycles are simply cultural ephemera cranked out to capitalize on current events, trends, fads, and the success of other films.”\textsuperscript{16} The intensely formulaic nature of film cycles position them as an excellent tool for analysis, for their formulas and their multivalent connections to a number of industrial, textual, and cultural contexts mark production cycles as unique in their relationship to those elements when compared to genres.

Klein’s overall project is relatively narrow in its focus: she is interested in establishing the production cycles of Hollywood and its related industries (many American independent studios and production companies are included in her study in addition to the eight majors, for example) as worthy of further inquiry and setting up a comprehensive methodology by which to do so. But rather than work against itself, gazing inward at the loneliness of the singular discipline of film studies, the discussion of why film cycles are useful in such a small context actually works to the benefit of why production cycles are useful tools for analysis in other ways beyond the classical structures of Hollywood filmmaking. Indeed, by zooming in and looking at the cycles of production in other media, we can begin to understand the centrality of formula to the many functions or use values of generic texts which genre study often elides.

Mareike Jenner has recently taken up Klein’s model of cycle studies for television scholarship, examining the sunshine noir cycle of detective series that proliferated on American broadcast and cable networks throughout the 1980s and 90s. This cycle includes shows such as

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 11.
Magnum, P.I. (CBS, 1980-1988), Miami Vice (NBC, 1984-1990), Silk Stalkings (CBS, 1991-1999), and V.I.P. (Syndicated, 1998-2002). These shows, she argues, demonstrate what a cycle looks like in terms of television production, specifically juxtaposed to Hollywood filmmaking. She argues that television cycles take longer to form and develop due to the protracted nature of television broadcasting and programming. Popular formulas are slow to be replicated because individual programs last for years, and cannot have as much immediate impact on other productions because imitators will not be put into production or broadcast as quickly as a two hour film can be produced and distributed into movie theaters. Additionally, because of network programming practices, similar shows are often broadcast in ways which emphasized their similarity, frequently marketed as programming blocks that aired the same types of shows on the same night (ABC’s family sitcom block “TGIF” or NBC’s “Must See TV” campaign for Thursday nights; Syfy’s mid-2000s “Sci-Fridays”) or less-frequent attempts to create a nightly time slot for similar shows to air in (like CBS’s “Crimetime After Primetime,” which ran criminal investigation shows in the 11:30 late night time slot from 1991 to 1993), are singular to the television industry.

One of the most significant differences in production practices in the American broadcast television industry over the last thirty years is the proliferation of content across a much larger distribution system. Within what seems like no time at all, American television went from having only three major national broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS) and many much smaller affiliates and burgeoning local systems to four major broadcast channels hundreds of cable and satellite networks that began siphoning away portions of the traditional broadcast audience. In contrast, Hollywood’s annual output of feature films shrank over that same time frame (while
producing more and more content for TV). In fact, Jenner makes exactly this point about why television cycles begin to form, writing, “The implications of the increase of cable channels in the 1980s for genre products are that this environment fostered the creation of cycles; with a vast proliferation in channels and texts, several genre developments run in parallel...conveying the different directions a genre, or a sub-genre, can take.”

In light of this, Jenner sets up a hierarchical system of genre’s “levels of fluidity,” highlighting the ways that the crime genre consists of different sub-genres, such as “the gangster genre, the serial killer genre and the detective genre.” Thus, cycles are a part of sub-genres, but can also “reach across them” due to the hybridity and a limited range of variation between them.

Building on Klein’s definition of a cycle and the methods used in her case studies of film cycles. Picking up on the “blatant commercialism” of film cycles, Jenner argues that television has been viewed in such terms historically, especially in contrast to film, which has often been discussed in terms of artistry and creativity in spite of its clear commercial nature in Hollywood:

Klein observes a blatant commercialism in film cycles, but this is a quality traditionally assumed for television, most obviously via the use of commercial breaks. Broadcasters routinely ‘copy’ successful formulas, particularly relatively cheap programming like game shows, reality TV, or chat shows, until the market seems oversaturated, at which point the cycle dies down. Terms like ‘formula’ or ‘format’ are integral to television programming, implying the repetition of the conventions of other successful programmes. This ‘copying’ goes beyond following genre conventions to include specific settings, imagery, character relations, central conflicts, themes and tropes.

In highlighting the commercial impetus for the creation of cycles, Jenner both creates a through-line from Klein’s study to her own while also demonstrating that the core of Klein’s definition--

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17 See: Chapters 3 and 4.
19 Ibid., 182.
20 Ibid., 178.
the repetition of a popular formula within a limited time frame--is part and parcel of television production itself, down to the medium-specific terminology such as “format.” But what is truly interesting about her study of the sunshine noir cycle is that it actually illustrates and brings into sharp relief not just the differences in production practices between film and television as intended, but also provides a bridge over which a medium-specific analysis such as Klein’s might transfer to different media quite easily. In focusing on the role formulas play in television cycles, Jenner’s work allows us to elide the differences between the two media in some ways that prove productive when considering the similar production practices between them in spite of their different distribution models and scheduling practices.

In an essay on television melodramas, David Thorburn refers to the genre’s conventions – the reassuring conclusions and moral allegorizing – as “enabling conditions,” which open up the text to viewers; as an “instrument for seeing.”21 The formula of the melodrama - of any generic text - is an inherent part of how we make sense of it. It is tied up in convention, but also specific industrial and technological constraints as well as the needs of its audience.22 In other words, a show’s time slot, commercial breaks (whether during the show as in American broadcast television, or between programs in other countries or on some cable networks), and its proximity to other shows on the schedule creates the conditions through which a generic formula emerges, is meaningful, is successful, and is then articulated back through the industry and reiterated again. And this can be articulated in many different ways in television as the medium itself is more explicitly commercial, in addition to relying on a high degree of intertextuality for both industrial decision as well as their reception and interpretation.

22 Ibid., 599.
This echoes John Fiske’s argument that television is a “highly ‘generic’ medium,” given the commercial mandates of U.S. television and a a constant need for new product to fill the airwaves.23 Due to this, television places an emphasis on the formulaic repetition of conventions—”the structural elements of genre that are shared between viewers and audiences”—within and between television programs.24 Building on Jane Feuer’s work on TV genres, Fiske is primarily concerned with the intertextual flows between genre texts and how they produce meaning through understanding these texts as genres. He says that “intertextual knowledges pre-orient the reader to exploit television’s polysemy by activating the text in certain ways, that is, by making some meanings rather than others.”25 This emphasizes the relationship between text and audience, and how the formulas of television texts create meaning for viewers and critics. As Sharon Shahaf has pointed out, “Fiske’s description of television’s conventional form and its close reliance on reoccurring conventions and industrial formulas is remarkably similar to the way global formats are routinely described as a cost minimizing technique allowing broadcasters to create new programming using proven and tried ‘templates.’”26 In contemporary television production, these templates are known as formats, a term which has its own long history in both industrial and scholarly use.

Albert Moran defines TV formats by their ability to generate serialized programming through the use of the easily replicable qualities of the program and how they interact with the variations introduced into each episode.27 Packaged and sold to producers around the world,

24 Ibid., 110-111.
25 Ibid., 108.
formats are largely understood as officially licensed reproductions which are produced independently in a variety of locations and filled with slight variations in content defined by the culture in which they are produced, like the *Idol* or *Dancing with the Stars* franchises. But by drawing on Fiske’s concept of “formula art,” and building on Moran (and Silvio Waisbord), Shahaf concludes that Western - especially U.S. - television has always utilized what we now call formats in order to minimize production costs and attempt to garner similar audiences for programs that are made by different production companies and which trade on their formal similarities to other texts in an unofficial or unlicensed capacity.\(^{28}\) Shahaf’s argument indicates that formulas have always formed the basis of the television industry’s production and programming practices in an explicit way that goes beyond Fiske’s intertextual system or Moran’s focus on official contracts for global franchises.

More to the point, Shahaf’s forthcoming work on television formats highlights the role of formulas in generating not only imitation, but also innovative content within the constraints of popular culture. For example, she shows how the discussion of the sitcom formula highlights repetitive characteristics of formula as they reoccur over time. Shahaf points to how the words “staple” and “stable” are constantly used to describe the sitcom form.\(^ {29}\) However, using Thomas Schatz’s essay on the way Desilu invented the modern sitcom formula with *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957), Shahaf demonstrates that formulas and formula art not only allow for innovation within the text, but also within the media industries themselves, permeating production cultures. She uses Schatz to show how the specific constraints presented by industrial, technological, environmental, budgetary, and other constraints shaped the work of Desilu as they “invented” or


reformatted the situation comedy from radio and early theater and vaudeville influences into a systems of production or, better still, a system of reproduction. Once *I Love Lucy* became successful (pretty much immediately), it became the basis for a new mass production system.30

The television industry, in constant need of product for broadcast, has used copying, stealing, and imitation as its basis for production since its inception. American television in particular has not only relied on Hollywood films to fill out its broadcast schedule from very early in its history, but quickly adopted production practices directly from the studio system in order to churn out content. For much of its history in the United States, broadcast television has even been produced in and by former film studios or newly established production arms specifically for the medium. This includes the use of physical studio space on Hollywood’s lots in the 1960s onward, the establishment of studio-backed production companies, and the success of independent television studios such as Desilu, which standardized formal rules for shooting different types of programs on sound stages, especially and most famously the modern sitcom with *I Love Lucy*, as mentioned above.31 The TV industry also found a solution to its scheduling problem in porting popular programs wholesale from radio and adapting other popular formats like the variety show, the game show, and the prestige drama. The history of Hollywood and American television are thus inextricably linked through shared production practices as well as through the content of broadcast schedules themselves. And the repetition of popular formulas was central to these production practices. What is new in the 21st Century is that now more than ever, media texts target niche audiences while being designed specifically for cross-media

30 Ibid.
appeal: production cycles are now important for understanding trans-media production and consumption.\textsuperscript{32}

1.3 The Case Study

Ghost stories have been a significant part of entertainment media for a long time, and depending on one’s definition of “media,” even longer than the scope of this dissertation allows room for. They are directly related to the birth of cinema, for example, in profound ways. Magic lantern shows, phantasmagoria, and spirit photography are all precursors for both the popularity of depictions of the supernatural in film virtually since its birth in the late-19th Century. In the first century of cinema’s existence, the supernatural horror film held a place of prominence that continues to wax and wane periodically alongside the cyclical churn of popular formulas in genre filmmaking. These cycles of popularity and ubiquitous production occur in virtually every other entertainment medium of the 20th Century as well. Early radio programs like The Witch’s Tale (WOR, 1931-1938) and The Hermit’s Cave (WJR, 1930-1936) featured tales of the macabre and

\textsuperscript{32} Henry Jenkins’s concept of spreadability is quite useful for certain types of analysis within media industries studies, but focuses quite a lot on the consumption and prod-use-ing of media by fans and audiences. This is related to the study of multiple media and texts and their relationships to one another and to cultures beyond the industries themselves (while remaining inclusive of them), it produces a different type of knowledge about what texts are and what their functions are for culture than the ones under discussion in this dissertation. One reason for this is that spreadability is inherently tied up with the way media moves and is based very much in understanding media as a sort of “living” or lived object, always transforming and being re-used and re-defined by culture and audiences. For Jenkins and his co-authors/colleagues, media texts should be studied as cultural objects which exist in the present as defined by the industry and the audience. And while I agree with this assessment, and my argument herein is certainly similar, a key difference between the arguments about media consumption made in Spreadable Media and this dissertation is a question of emphasis more than rejection. What this dissertation takes as a key factor in our understanding of the culture industries is that culture is not always the pure reflection of the end user. Instead, it is very often the product (in the U.S. and Western countries more generally) of industrial concerns and processes which are foreign and incomprehensible to many viewers and users. In the conglomerate age, there is an uptick in participatory media, of course, and Jenkins is entirely correct in articulating a means by which to understand that phenomenon and the general response of the public to it. But where his work comes into contact with mine is not at the point of understanding cycles as a trans-media entity the study of which attempts to or actively negates the concept of spreadability, but at the point where the media text no longer returns to the original producer and instead enters the realm of the user entirely. What I mean is that there is no point at which the user is not reimbricated into the industrial production of a new text in the hopes of getting their own television show. This will be discussed briefly in the conclusion, but for now will have to be largely left as an acknowledgement of one further area for inquiry as concerns DIY and user-generated ghost hunting media.
the supernatural, and even appeared both internationally and, in the case of the latter, even in multiple runs on different networks between 1930 and 1947. And on television, paranormal stories were frequent topics of the one-off episodes of early anthology series like *One Step Beyond* (ABC, 1959-1961) and *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959-1964).

In the 21st Century, ghost hunting has become immensely popular in the United States and Britain alongside a very high level of general interest in paranormal subjects throughout popular culture. In the book *Paranormal Media*, Annette Hill points to the various factors that contribute to its current popularity, including a resurgent interest in Victorian Gothic and the significant number of people around the world who claim to have personally experienced some sort of paranormal event or occurrence. She also notes, “A longstanding cultural fascination with representations of ghosts and phantasmagoria shows how paranormal issues are deeply embedded in the histories of entertainment and communication.”

Ghost hunting in particular is bound up in a long history of using electric and electronic communications and recording devices in order to search for proof and provide evidence of the existence of the paranormal. Additionally, various cultural and religious beliefs frequently fuel assumptions about the abilities of technologies to communicate with or detect the spirits of the dead by paranormal investigators. The realm of spirit communication, once a marginalized religious practice, is now a part of mainstream culture that serves as a significant component of many popular paranormal-themed films and television shows. And while Hill rightly asserts that these beliefs are more associated with lifestyle trends rather than religious thought in popular culture, I would point out that the religious components are simply hidden beneath the surface of that lifestyle, with

35 Ibid., 11.
communications technologies and their supposedly objectively-collected evidence serving as substitutes for the blatantly subjective experiences of hauntings directly related to one’s personal beliefs.\textsuperscript{36} This is, as I demonstrate in Chapter 2, an especially salient point in relation to the ghost hunting reality show formula, which is primarily concerned with the processes and methods of paranormal investigation, and which synthesizes these cultural and religious elements into a popular formula that is a distinct product of its time but which also incorporates many different cultural and industrial histories and lineages.

A 2010 \textit{L.A. Times} story about the ubiquity of paranormal-themed television programming illustrates one instance of how this cultural interest translated into a concrete set of production trends, including different genres and several different small cycles which develop concurrently and are related to one another through intertextuality, industrial modes of production, and shared audiences.\textsuperscript{37} Connecting the success of paranormal reality shows to a broader media environment that encompasses film, television, and even DIY media production, the article indicates the development of a full-blown trans-media production cycle of ghost hunting texts, including television shows like \textit{Ghost Hunters} (Syfy, 2004-2016) and \textit{Ghost Adventures} (Travel Channel, 2008-current) and paranormal found footage horror movies like \textit{Paranormal Activity} (Oren Peli, 2009) and \textit{Grave Encounters} (The Vicious Brothers, 2011).

More than just similarly-themed, these shows and movies are linked by their engagement with documentary film and reality television style, as well as an awareness of one another as indicated in the texts themselves and in some interviews with the creative talent behind them. By the mid-2010s, this cycle would be in full bloom, with dozens of independent feature films produced in

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 12. For more on how these texts demonstrate the relationship between religious belief and scientific objectivity, see Chapter 2.

the found footage style using the ghost hunting reality show formula as their central plot device, solidifying the industrial relationship between these shows and films.

It should also be noted that these texts occur on an international level, and the cycle itself also expands transnationally, with many of these shows picked up for broadcast in a variety of different countries. Likewise, the formula is often localized for international audiences, with ghost hunting reality shows produced for broadcast in Germany, Sweden, and even Pakistan. The transnational component takes a different shape altogether, however, when considering what might be called the very first ghost hunting television program, *Most Haunted* (Living TV, 2002-2010; Pick TV, 2010-2016; Really (2014-present), which was produced for and aired on Living TV in the U.K. beginning in 2002, two full years before *Ghost Hunters* on Syfy. Given the longstanding history of mutual influence and, in particular the shared genre histories of British and American television, the relationship of the transnational to the establishment of the ghost hunting formula in the U.S. is worth consideration that is, sadly, outside the scope of this dissertation. It nonetheless presents us with yet another opportunity for future application of cycle studies to studying media texts which easily traverse boundaries in the 21st Century.

I argue that the ghost hunting formula is different from other types of paranormal reality television shows and older paranormal found footage horror films due to its unique combination of narrative emphasis and an aesthetics of simulated participation that paradoxically gives viewers a sense of distance between image and self, playing up the boundaries between reality and representation inherent in the analysis of evidence collected during a ghost hunt. The narrative emphasis is placed on the process of paranormal investigation as communicated through these aesthetics, which positions the “found” footage - or the footage of the investigation itself, as it may be - as “evidence” which has been collected by the camera and other
technologies used during the investigation. This extremely popular formula is found not only in reality television, but also in found footage horror films, video games and smartphone apps, and user-generated media content. Thinking about this formula as a trans-media production cycle offers unique opportunities for the analysis of the ways they work together across media boundaries that might otherwise be occluded from study and consideration due to their production in different media. It also allows us to discern concrete industrial, creative, and cultural relationships between generic texts that serve to ground such an analysis of generic formulas which are more closely related to one another than they are to other, similar popular formulas in their respective medium.

This is important because it allows us to examine texts across media boundaries via their cultural use values and to make more accurate and discerning claims about media history rather than simply relying on discussions of intertextuality and formalism as reasoning for grouping generic texts together. This is the central theoretical contribution of this dissertation, and will be discussed in more detail across the three chapters which follow. For now, let us note that generic formulas have always traveled from one medium to another due to the close relations between their structures and business practices in the United States. Furthermore, let us note that it is important to acknowledge this interconnected history as complex, messy, and in need of far more analysis on the part of scholars who, up until very recently, staked out rigid disciplinary claims about medium specificity. Many of those arguments may still hold true, of course, but popular genres and formulas have always transgressed that specificity. In the United States as elsewhere, for example, the film and television industries have influenced one another more or less directly since television became commonplace in American homes in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, especially as Hollywood struggled after the collapse of the integrated studio system. Even
more overt was the industrial relationship between radio and television production and broadcast operations, due to the fact that the three major radio networks - CBS, NBC, and ABC - had key roles in developing commercial television and became integral to its proliferation throughout the U.S. If we consider that production cycles are predicated entirely on the use of a limited formula over a short period of time during which that formula is popular and profitable, then our current media environment creates the conditions for trans-media cycles to occur. In so doing, it illustrates the usefulness of such a theory in studying the complex relationships that exist between generic texts across media boundaries and how and why popular formulas transfer to other media due to specific sets of circumstances. A broad trans-media cycle of production such as the one this dissertation takes up as its case study could only make sense in the media environment of the 21st Century, which is characterized by the ongoing consolidation of the media industries and the convergence of media cultures in numerous ways.

The move toward conglomeration has been the biggest trend in the media industries for the past few decades. While conglomerate ownership of media companies is not new--Hollywood’s major film studios have either been owned by large corporations since the late-1950s or became media conglomerates themselves over that same timeframe--the current period of media consolidation under diversified corporate ownership began in the 1980s alongside the rise of neoliberal deregulation policies in the U.S. and abroad. One of the defining factors of this new integration of the media industries compared to earlier mergers and acquisitions of film studios and broadcast entities is that the large companies which now own the majority of media production, distribution, exhibition in the U.S. and internationally (like Comcast, Sony, Lagardère, or Grupo Globo) are focused on the production of entertainment and leisure as opposed to the heavily diversified portfolios of earlier corporate ownership, which included
holdings in various manufacturing and energy sectors (i.e. - Gulf + Western, which once owned Paramount, or General Electric, the parent corporation of NBC Universal until 2011) or other businesses entirely (as in Coca-Cola’s purchase of Columbia Pictures in 1982, or spirits distiller Seagram’s controlling interest in Universal in the mid-1990s).

As discussed extensively by David Croteau and William Hoynes, this deregulation has had profound consequences for how media texts are produced, promoted, branded, and conceived of, largely due to the consequences of mergers and acquisitions that create large, horizontally integrated media corporations:

Companies integrate horizontally for two general reasons. First...some companies believe that they can use their diverse holdings to better market and promote their media products. Owning properties across media allows one type of media (e.g., CBS Sports) to promote and work with another type of media (e.g., CBSSportsLine.com)...The result of such efforts, corporate executives hope, is a company that exploits its synergy potential by becoming greater than the sum of its parts.38

In such an environment, films and TV shows are no longer thought of as “film” or “television” products, but rather corporate properties which can be reproduced and rebranded across media boundaries. The integration of media companies within large conglomerates afforded the opportunity for the creation of texts which could “cut across media,” manifesting as books, television series, films and film franchises, video games, and so on.39 Though each subsidiary’s day-to-day operations are largely independent of one another, the conglomerate business model envisions that these branches are functioning together to maximize profits across brands and properties, often referred to as synergy. The goal of synergy has been integral to the business

39 Ibid., 98.
practices of the media industries for some time now, envisioning a world of constant cross-promotional opportunities.

In his book *Hollywood in the New Millennium*, Tino Balio traces the changes that have taken place in Hollywood since the 1980s, including the loosening of ownership regulations, the changes in technology that have fueled the desire for corporate diversification, and the impact this has had on the output of Hollywood’s major studios, all of which are now owned by or have become major conglomerates. He characterizes this period of Hollywood history as an era of mergers and acquisitions, with corporate executives intensely focused on creating synergies between their various companies and brands in order to maximize overall corporate profits. But the studios make up only a small portion of this, and have a difficult time maintaining financial viability in their conglomerate structures, with the six major studios accounting for only a minor fraction of their parent companies’ take. But according to Balio, “media moguls imagined synergies where none existed,” resulting in disappointment and disillusionment in their investment for the parent companies. In fact, before the acquisition of NBC Universal by Comcast in 2009, many conglomerates were already beginning to sell off some of their holdings as they experienced stagnant profitability, especially in television and print media, which rely heavily on advertising revenue. NewsCorp, Viacom, and even Time Warner had been selling and spinning off certain brands it had acquired in the past decade into their own companies once again, or folding them into the parent company’s operations, effectively writing off their investment as a loss.

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41 Ibid., 23.
42 Ibid., 23.
43 Ibid., 24.
By the mid-2000s, film studios were seeking formulaic, sure-fire hits which could prove their worth in an increasingly volatile and competitive media environment. The big six increasingly turned to tentpoles and franchises, abandoning the production of smaller, mid-budget features to independent production companies and then picking them up for distribution. As a consequence, the past decade has seen small outfits—like Annapurna Pictures, which developed a reputation for auteur-focused financing when CEO Megan Ellison rescued Paul Thomas Anderson’s *The Master* (2012) after the project was abandoned by Universal in 2010, and former Miramax producer Jason Blum’s Blumhouse Productions, which took a gamble on a small micro-budget feature called *Paranormal Activity* and has continued to ride its success to even greater heights—become major players in Hollywood. This has led to an environment in which the major studios are intensely focused on only a few popular formulas and the expansion of business operations internationally, especially throughout Eastern Europe, China, and the Southeast Asian subcontinent more broadly.

In *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, Amanda Lotz calls our current period of conglomerate ownership the post-network era, writing, “Television as we knew it--as a mass medium capable of reaching a broad, heterogeneous audience and speaking to the culture as a whole--is no longer the norm in the United States.” Indeed, there are now hundreds of cable networks competing for smaller pieces of advertising revenue and hoping to attract prized demographics, especially teenagers and young adults. These networks attempt to reach those demographics via the cultivation of brand identity and viewer loyalty. Branding and targeted programming is increasingly important due to the increased nichification of audiences by cable and satellite networks in particular. As audiences are broken into smaller and smaller groups,

44 Ibid., 26.
programming strategies for networks change in order to attract audiences to particular shows which feature especially specific subject matter. In this way, television functions as a “subcultural form,” which seeks to provide information to experiences to subcultural audiences which are more diversified and specialized than the mass audience of the network era, or the public sphere mode of television production and consumption prevalent in other countries.46

This can be seen specifically in the key networks which will be under discussion in this dissertation, especially the Syfy Channel and the Travel Channel, which capitalize on their brand identity by targeting specific audiences through a variety of programming decisions such as narrowcasting. Crucially, this has implications for not only the types of texts produced for television broadcast, but also the way those texts interact with and respond to others in a variety of different media. As Lotz points out, “Viewers incorporate a television network or set of programs into a broader set of media, reproducing particular silos of specific worldviews.”47 We have already noted that the consolidation of the media industries has led to increased levels of convergence, what Henry Jenkins describes as “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted.”48 The creation of silos of experience and viewership across different types and sets of media—films, television, books, comics, video games, etc.—are thus crucial to understanding how cycles function in our current conglomerate media environment.

Given these considerations of shifts in the structure and business of the media industries over the past decade, a theory of trans-media cycle studies is indeed necessary. This dissertation

46 Ibid., 43.
47 Ibid., 43.
is an examination of how production cycles occur across media and how they can be used to make sense of the complex relationships between the production, exhibition, and reception of films, television shows, video games, and other media texts. More specifically, it is an exploration of how popular formulas travel across the boundaries of medium specificity and what that tells us about how media texts are made and used within our current conglomerate media environment. In order to conduct an analysis of such cycles, I use what might be called an integrated media industries approach. A media industries methodology is itself a combination of diverse strands of academic inquiry, including sociology and anthropology, media economics and industrial analysis, political economy and cultural studies, journalism and activism, and cultural policy studies. Under this method, the production, distribution, exhibition, and reception of film and television texts are examined alongside the texts themselves, with particular attention paid toward the operations of each respective industry as well as the broader trends of media producers and users within the U.S. and globally. This requires engaging with three primary avenues of research: primary sources and discourse analysis, textual analysis, and cultural history.

In order to fully understand the decisions made about what kinds of texts to produce, how to program and market them, and how the industry thinks about consumers and audiences, it is necessary to research primary sources as much as possible, but given that the topic of this dissertation is more or less contemporaneous, this presents some methodological problems which require creative solutions. While the discussion of business-related documents from major corporations are easy to come by, including shareholder statements, quarterly business reports,

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and so on, these are typically only available for publicly-traded companies, putting the examination of such facets of independent production in a position of near-impossibility. So, in addition to those sources, press releases, interviews, and industry press will also be examined in order to paint a portrait of the media industries’ views of its own work and how they think about their audience.

There will also be an applied focus on the texts themselves - how and why they were created, how they functioned, and what their use value was and is - and how the popular formula of the ghost hunting reality show traveled across the boundaries of media. Drawing on both film studies and television studies, I will analyze the shows *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Adventures* in some depth as central to the establishment of the ghost hunting formula on U.S. television, as well as the *Paranormal Activity* film franchise and its many imitators’ capitalization on the popularity of such shows. This includes the history of how the found footage horror film and haunted house films of the 2010s incorporated ghost hunting into their narratives and aesthetics as it became a popular activity and part of the cultural zeitgeist. The theoretical framework for this analysis is trans-media cycle studies, borrowing the term long-used in film studies and demonstrated thoroughly in that medium by Amanda Ann Klein, as discussed above. Cycle studies allows for a detailed historical and cultural analysis of film and television texts while also accounting for the differences between the two mediums in a way that allows for a focus on the production-text-exhibition loop that is intrinsic to the constitution of production cycles.

The cycle of supernatural and paranormal themed shows and films highlighted in the *L.A. Times* article demonstrates our need as scholars to reconfigure how we study media texts and their engagement with culture alongside their status as cultural and industrial products. An examination of these texts together rather than separately demonstrates two things. First, that
cycle studies is beneficial within disciplinary bounds for delineating between similar texts which may belong to the same overarching genres or subgenres. The *Paranormal Activity* franchise, for example, belongs to the broad category of the found footage horror film while also being a *paranormal* found footage horror film. While this may seem like splitting hairs, it is important to note this because cycles often form around very specific concerns and articulations of social anxieties and interests, and these films are no different. Furthermore, the generic category and the cyclical category may emphasize and address entirely different sets of concerns when considered in one grouping rather than the other. So, while using the generic categorization of “found footage horror film” to point toward the broad ways in which a group of films use aesthetics and form to engage with various issues such as the nature of truth and/or the interplay between objectivity and subjectivity, it is the cyclical categorization that allows more specific assertions about the how and why of that use value to be examined in relation to culture.

Second, the linkages between this set of shows and films are actually stronger between each other than they are between others which share their generic categorization within the same medium. This is entirely due to the different values and histories at play in their formulae. On many different levels, found footage horror films which focus on the technological investigation and accumulation of evidentiary proof of a haunting have more in common with a ghost hunting reality show than they do with *Cannibal Holocaust* (Ruggero Deodato, 1981), *The Blair Witch Project* (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999), or *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008). This is not only due to the differences in subject matter or the different ideologies at play in the texts themselves, but also with the circumstances of their production (their reason for being) and their engagement with specific cultural elements and histories within their limited time as popular texts. Viewing these texts through the lens of cycle studies is about articulation as much as
embodiment; or, put another way, it is about what they are saying as much as it is about how they are saying in relation to one another.

### 1.4 Structure

This dissertation examines the textual and industrial components of ghost hunting television shows and found footage horror films through a combined media industries methodology that places an emphasis on the study of production cycles. It traces the development of a trans-media ghost hunting cycle as it develops in these two media in the 2000s, paying close attention to how they engage in a discourse of “objectivity” and “science” in relation to emergent technologies that has been a part of paranormal belief systems and popular culture since the mid-19th Century. It is separated into three chapters, each one dissecting a different element of this trans-media cycle’s development and its ongoing cultural use value as a popular formula that engages with ongoing debates about the existence of spirits and demons and continues to promulgate such beliefs throughout different media types.

Chapter 2 is an in-depth textual analysis and breakdown of the ghost hunting reality show formula. It uses *Ghost Hunters*, the “trailblazer hit” to borrow Richard Nowell’s terminology, to highlight the key elements of the formula and how we can understand them in relation to the current zeitgeist as well as to an ongoing discourse of “science,” “reality,” and “belief” which has a much longer cultural history and which heavily informs the relationships between the shows, films, and other texts that make up the cycle. The cultural history of paranormal investigation is a key component of the ways the formula innovates across many different productions, and is central to its use of various documentary and reality TV aesthetics. As the generative text of the ghost hunting reality show formula, many of the ghost hunting cycle’s
essential components are emblematized in the formula of *Ghost Hunters* specifically, and then adapted with minor variations across many different shows and films throughout the next decade. Separated out from the industrial components which inform much of Chapters 3 and 4, this brief chapter provides a useful backdrop for understanding the ways the cycle continues to engage in these systems through its ongoing proliferation in different media using the same popular formula.

Chapters 3 and 4 form the core of the dissertation’s case study, tracing the development of the trans-media ghost hunting cycle through the formula’s genealogical roots in television and film history. In Chapter 3 we see how the ghost hunting reality show formula has its roots in TV history as far back as the beginnings of scripted television drama and televisual forms of documentary filmmaking. Through an analysis of the industry’s development in the 20th Century and the shifts in cable network production strategies, it describes the growth of the cycle across American cable television in the 2000s and sets the stage for the growth of the cycle beyond the boundaries of the medium. Chapter 4 takes up a similar project as the previous chapter, though with an emphasis on the establishment and development of the found footage style in the wake of *The Blair Witch Project*’s massive success in 1999. Picking up on the ways *Paranormal Activity* and other found footage horror films begin incorporating elements of paranormal investigation between 2009 and 2017, the chapter demonstrates the industrial and textual confluences between ghost hunting shows and the found footage style that make a trans-media cycle possible. It also briefly considers the role of audience and reception in the industry’s pursuit of franchises and further use of popular formulas across media boundaries as well as the ways that key developments in film production and distribution in an era of intense media convergence create unique opportunities for both Hollywood studios and independent producers.
In the conclusion, we will discuss what the trans-media production cycle of ghost hunting texts in film and television has demonstrated about the study of media history, and point to some of the other ways the ghost hunting formula has proliferated across media boundaries in the new millennium. Some potential avenues for further study that will be discussed include new media, particularly the use of user-generated video streaming services like YouTube as a venue for amateur ghost hunters and fakers to share their own “evidence” from investigations, and how video games and smartphone/tablet apps also engage players in narratives and operational methodologies of paranormal investigation, as well as the possible transnational implications of this study.
2 THE GHOST HUNTING FORMULA

2.1 Introduction

When *Ghost Hunters* debuted on the Syfy Channel in the fall of 2004, it was an oddity in the paranormal reality show landscape, a new formula in a crowded TV schedule. A hybrid of personality-based and experiential reality show formulas, with a strong emphasis on the latter over the former, it put viewers in the middle of a paranormal investigation, going step-by-step through the processes and methods of collecting and analyzing “evidence” of the paranormal in an “objective” and “scientific” manner. This stood in sharp contrast to the majority of paranormal reality shows, which since the 1970s have largely followed the example of documentary anthology programs like *In Search Of...* (ABC, 1976-1982) and *Sightings* (Fox, 1991-93; Syndicated, 1994-96; The Sci-Fi Channel, 1996-98). These documentary programs are constructed in a number of different ways, but they share the commonality of a traditional documentary presentation wherein a host introduces a topic and the show explores it over its duration. The shows do this via a combination of voice-over narration, testimonials and interviews from witnesses, re-enactments of the events being discussed, and other methods typical of documentary formulas. There are some exceptions in TV history, of course, with the introduction of experiential segments into some documentary programs like those featured in *Scariest Places on Earth* (FOX Family, 2001-2004), and the implementation of elements of paranormal investigation in the teen competition series *Fear* (MTV, 2000-2001). But with the introduction of *Ghost Hunters* and the shows that cashed in on its popularity, ghost hunting shows proliferated across American cable television.

In every episode of *Ghost Hunters* there is a moment when one of the members of The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) asks, “Did you see that?” This is, in many ways, the
structuring question of the ghost hunting formula, reflecting on the dichotomy between
“objective” and “subjective” perceptions of reality inherent in the act of paranormal
investigation. It exemplifies the “scientific” consideration of their collected evidence while also
demonstrating the ways that objectivity is undermined through their personal experiences during
the investigation, particularly if that experience is corroborated by another investigator. The
investigator could also be asking the viewer at home, who is “participating” in the investigation
alongside them via a unique combination of reality television and documentary aesthetics, and
who is also being taught the processes and methodologies of ghost hunting by the investigators
themselves. Whether or not they are believers in the supernatural, or, as I am, skeptical
observers, viewers are imbricated within a formula that engages directly with the dynamics of
“realism,” “evidence,” and “belief” at play in the show’s formulaic structure. The images of dark
hallways, empty rooms, and abandoned industrial settings--largely shot using low-light, infrared,
and thermal imaging cameras--which populate the show allow for their contents to be left open
to interpretation, and thus for viewers to answer questions like “Did you see that?” in either the
affirmative or the negative.

_Ghost Hunters_ follows The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS) as they investigate
claims of the supernatural at a variety of locations throughout the United States with some
excursions abroad. These locations can be public or private, big or small, notorious for their
alleged hauntings or not. What is important to TAPS is not the level of fame a particular case
has, but rather, as co-founder Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson constantly articulate in the show
and in their books about ghost hunting, that their investigations help people figure out what is
going on in their homes and businesses. A large number of their investigations which appear on
the show are cases involving disturbances at private residences, and these are presented in the
same manner and treated with equal import and rigor as those of paranormal landmarks like The Stanley Hotel in Estes Park, Colorado. While not the first paranormal reality show to take up the act of ghost hunting and focus on the investigation of supernatural phenomena, *Ghost Hunters* was the first popular ghost hunting show in the United States, and it generated a cycle of similar ghost hunting shows that appeared on American cable television between its premiere in 2004 and its final episode in the fall of 2016.

The formula, as we shall see in the next chapter, contains features of other reality show types, especially the personality-based docu-series and the documentary/informational series, but is functionally doing something quite different than those forms of reality programming. What follows is a description of the formula as set out by *Ghost Hunters*, followed by an analysis of its function. The purpose of this analysis is to provide a snapshot of the generative text of the ghost hunting formula as it coalesced in the early 2000s in order to demonstrate how the formula *on the whole* engages with the longer cultural history of paranormal investigation and the ongoing tension between science and belief as it manifests throughout the texts which are part of the ghost hunting cycle. This is not meant to imply that the formula remains static as it proliferates across American cable television and other media, but rather that each different iteration of the formula is engaged with the same material in an extremely similar way, which manifests in this particular way under very specific historical circumstances. As the cycle’s first big hit, *Ghost Hunters* offers us a zoomed-in view of this new formula as a canvas for innovation, allowing for both textual and industrial change to occur within the limited constraints of a production cycle.

*Ghost Hunters*’s specific articulation of the formula’s structure and themes also gives us the clearest view and understanding of the act of paranormal investigation, which will inform our analysis of other shows and films in subsequent chapters. By separating out the process of a
paranormal investigation into four discrete sections over the course of each episode, *Ghost Hunters* provides viewers with a simple, easy means of understanding ghost hunting’s methodologies, the technology used in paranormal investigations, and how that technology plays into the discourse between science and belief which is inherent in all shows across the cycle. It is a moment at which we can highlight the “newness” of the formula in relation to other forms of paranormal reality television *as well as* demonstrate the ways the formula engages with a much, much older cultural history that runs through all paranormal texts in a way that is unique to the ghost hunting cycle. Given that the minute shifts in popular formulas are what provides the lifeblood for an ongoing cycle, it is useful to step back and zoom in on the generative moment for a new cycle, which can then expand outward and be used to examine the multiple, longer histories which are bound up in and engaged by the formula. For *Ghost Hunters* and the other texts which are produced using the formula, this includes the history of paranormal investigation, the cultural history of paranormal interests, occulted religious belief systems, and our cultural understanding of the capabilities of emergent communications technologies manifest in the ghost hunting formula.

This chapter demonstrates how ghost hunting reality shows, even ones as ostensibly scientific in their research methodologies as TAPS claims to be in *Ghost Hunters*, often conflate “evidence” and “belief” until the boundary between them is virtually meaningless. This in-depth description and analysis of the formula’s function as articulated by the first popular ghost hunting show in the United States demonstrates the foundational elements of popular culture at the heart of the formula, and one of the reasons it resonated in the 2000s as a significant cycle of production in popular culture. As discussed in the introduction, there was an intense cultural interest in the paranormal that served as an undercurrent for the popularity of a wide variety of
shows and films with supernatural themes. *Ghost Hunters*’s blend of reality show and experiential documentary aesthetics clearly clicked with audiences looking for paranormal thrills from their television programs. This chapter will serve as a backdrop for Chapters 3 and 4, demonstrating how examining even a single text within a cycle allows historians to zoom in and out of the specifics and universalities of those texts. Those next chapters are primarily about the development of the ghost hunting cycle out of medium-specific industrial, generic, and formal histories before combining into a single trans-media body of texts centered on the activity of paranormal investigation and the unique combination of aesthetics used by generic texts produced using the formula. This deep dive into textual analysis demonstrates how cycle studies facilitates the excavation and explication of many different lineages within each production cycle, whether it is industrial or cultural, and how those elements traverse each individual text in the cycle. It highlights the ability of cycle studies to allow for a highly specific analysis of a particular moment in broader genre histories while also providing scholars with a means by which to draw out connections across those generic histories as they manifest in the zeitgeist which the cycle is responding to and engaged with.

2.2 Defining the Formula

The formula of the ghost hunting reality show as popularized by *Ghost Hunters* is characterized by an emphasis on the investigative process itself, informing viewers not only of the events of a haunting as in the documentary types of paranormal reality show that have dominated the genre on television since the late-1950s, but also demonstrating the methodologies of paranormal research. This includes frequent on-screen explanations and demonstrations of investigative strategies, types of equipment used, and evidentiary analysis which are most
effective at investigating the paranormal. Alongside this emphasis on the process itself, the ghost hunting show is presented as a simulated experience for viewers. This is a product of the ghost hunting reality show’s editing which combines footage shot by a wide variety of cameras during the investigation. In *Ghost Hunters* this includes footage shot by the TAPS team as well as that shot by a professional production crew that follows them while on investigations. The sense of participation is also a product of the episodic structures of ghost hunting reality shows. While it varies slightly from show to show, *Ghost Hunters* provides a clear delineation of each component of the investigative process into a discrete element of the formula itself, which we can use to understand the formula’s function even as it takes a slightly different shape from show to show. These four sections, The Investigation, The Analysis, The Findings, and The Reveal, serve to generate these four sections serve to generate participatory viewership, according to Alissa Burger. This participatory viewership asks the show’s audience to be vigilant and look for evidence of the paranormal as they watch the show through the team’s equipment, and establishes a discourse on amateurism and professionalism that runs through each of the segments in slightly different ways.

As Burger writes, “the combination of crew cameras and hand-held video cameras carried by individual team members simulates participation by creating a sense that viewers are positioned alongside the TAPS team members throughout pivotal moments of the investigation, ‘experiencing’ the suspense of the hunt and the thrill of witnessing paranormal activity.”

Furthermore, the show works “to create an informed and skeptical base of viewers who self-identify with the investigators they see onscreen and enjoy the feeling of simulated participation

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as they watch at home with a critical eye, debunking and debating along with the TAPS team.”

But this does not mean that TAPS and its audience are equally capable of conducting the investigation itself. The show frequently positions the TAPS team as experts, even as it portrays its leaders, Jason and Grant, as regular guys with regular day jobs who started doing this as a hobby. Early episodes of the series frequently open with scenes of Jason and Grant either at work or spending time with their families, and throughout the course of the series, viewers get to know a little bit about their personal lives as well as the lives and backgrounds of some of the other investigators. These elements are clearly borrowed from personality-based reality shows, which focus on specific people who are interesting or have some interesting quality about them, of which there are many prominent examples in the history of the paranormal reality show genre. Likewise, the experiential nature of the series has a long history in televised reality shows outside of the paranormal reality show genre, including not only the long-running series COPS (Fox, 1989-2013; Spike, 2013-2017; Paramount Network, 2018-current), but also various found footage or amateur footage clip shows, which position the television audience directly behind the camera itself, experiencing what is happening alongside the person filming or being filmed. This includes the precursors to the ghost hunting show, Fox/ABC Family’s Scariest Places on Earth, and MTV’s Fear, both of which feature pseudo-investigations of haunted locations by amateurs which are partially shot by the participants in addition to whatever stationary equipment might be set up around the location. Yet in spite of all these influences, the ghost hunting show is not clearly defined by any of them, and falls outside the bounds of their

51 Ibid., 168.
52 Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson are both professional licensed plumbers who worked full time for Roto-rooter until several seasons into the show’s run.
53 See: Crossing Over with John Edward, Criss Angel: MINDFREAK, and the recent TLC hit, Long Island Medium.
54 See: When Animals Attack, World’s Wildest Police Chases, America’s Funniest Home Videos, and many others.
generic or subgeneric categorization and even their formulas. Instead, the ghost hunting show is defined primarily by its depiction of the experience of paranormal investigation. Understanding exactly what this entails is central to understanding how a production cycle develops out of it, and necessitates an analysis of its function as a culmination of specific cultural and religious elements.

2.2.1 The Structure of Ghost Hunters

Each episode of Ghost Hunters follows TAPS as they investigate a new allegedly haunted location. They use various types of recording equipment to capture evidence of paranormal activity that is then used to either support or debunk their findings and the claims made about the property. As previously mentioned, the episode is broken down into four discrete sections that demonstrate different moments in the process of a paranormal investigation. By breaking down the investigative process into its different elements and demonstrating them one by one, the structure of an episode of Ghost Hunters formalizes that process, solidifying a methodology and an understanding of scientific inquiry into the supernatural that can then be easily picked up and understood by viewers across a wide variety of texts which feature ghost hunts. Likewise, the aesthetics of the program, which feature an array of visual and aural elements from different technological devices, become intrinsic to the formula of the ghost hunting show themselves. What then, do these four segments look like and what do they teach viewers about investigating the paranormal using an evidence-based, scientific approach?

“The Investigation” is the longest part of a Ghost Hunters episode, specifically denoting the active investigation, but not the analysis of the evidence or other elements which are still part of the overall process. Virtually every episode begins at TAPS headquarters in Rhode Island,
where Jason, Grant, and other team members are given expository information about the case. This includes general background information on the property’s history and what kinds of activity are allegedly taking place. Once they arrive on location, usually after having driven there, during which time they have talked about how they plan on approaching the specific nature of that investigation, someone from the team meets with the owner or property manager for a walkthrough. This is typically Jason and Grant, though sometimes lead investigators/equipment managers (and fan favorites) Steve Gonsalves and Dave Tango join in as well. During this portion of the episode the investigators are given specific information about the types and locations of occurrences on the property. In line with the long history of informational documentaries discussed in the next chapter, these early segments serve to familiarize TAPS (and the audience) with which claims will need to be investigated closely as well as the locations in which they should focus their efforts at capturing evidence or attempting to find an alternative explanation for the activity. After their walkthrough of the property and interviews with key witnesses, TAPS begins setting up its equipment. In addition to their handheld devices - video cameras with infrared capabilities, FLIR thermal cameras, electromagnetic field detectors, and audio recorders - they also set up stationary cameras and audio equipment in those hot spots and let them run for the duration of the investigation. This is done so that if anything happens in the area while no team member is present, they may still capture a piece of evidence that correlates with one of the location’s most frequently-made claims. Once the equipment is set up and the team is ready, they go “lights out” and begin their investigation in earnest.

TAPS divides up into two or three different groups to conduct their investigations. Each team consists of at least two people, and no one ever goes off alone. This is done for a
combination of investigative as well as safety reasons. If someone else can corroborate an experience had by another investigator or serve as verification that someone did not tamper with equipment to fake results, the integrity of that evidence is not in doubt and the personal experiences hold more weight. Throughout the night the various teams each visit the hotspots on their own in rotation in order to gather evidence while other groups investigate other areas. They also attempt to debunk as many claims about alleged activity as possible by finding a probable alternative explanation for them. Shadows cast on walls may be caused by the headlights of a car passing in the distance, or doors opening and closing on their own may be caused by a loose door frame or loose floorboards. Strange sensations in the basement could be the result of a high concentration of electrical wiring causing a heightened electromagnetic field that is being experienced physiologically. Debunking and systematic investigation are inherent in the process of paranormal investigation employed by TAPS. According to Grant Wilson, “If you set out to disprove [a haunting], you’ll end up with only those things you can’t explain away.”

Throughout the investigation viewers are positioned alongside the TAPS team via a combination of crew cameras and footage intercut from the team’s equipment, adopting the experiential aesthetics of a COPS or one of the many caught-on-camera shows. This allows viewers to experience the investigation as it unfolds. This function of the show’s structure has been extensively discussed by Alissa Burger, who argues that the experiential nature of the series serves to “create an informed and skeptical base of viewers who self-identify with the investigators they see onscreen and enjoy the feeling of simulated participation as they watch at home with a critical eye, debunking and debating alongside the TAPS team.” As the heavy

56 Quoted in Ibid., 10.
57 Burger, 167.
information dump of the show’s earliest moments and the experiential element of investigative practices demonstrates, the creation of an informed audience is an important component of The Investigation that is reinforced in the other three sections of the show, all of which comprise only the final seven to ten minutes of each episode’s run time. The positioning of the TAPS team as experts within the show’s discourse is integral to the viewer’s simulated experience of the investigation and their understanding of the process. According to Burger, “TAPS members could be said to have earned their status as experts because they have set the contemporary standards for paranormal investigation and its legitimacy (especially in the way it maintains a tension with skepticism).”58 Their expertise in paranormal investigation grants them the authority to explain every aspect of their methods and results to viewers. In every episode there are numerous times in which TAPS team members appear on screen in talking head segments to explain how a piece of equipment works. For example, an electromagnetic field (EMF) recorder is used to gauge and record fluctuations in the property’s electromagnetic field, which may indicate the presence of a spirit, according to some paranormal researchers.59 Large spikes in the EMF reading may, in other words, signal the presence of an unseen force or entity manipulating the electromagnetic field in order to manifest or communicate in that area. Deviations from the base reading of a digital thermometer may indicate the same thing. Both of these pieces of equipment, however, are not indicators of paranormal activity alone. Although “cold spots” and strange feelings are often associated with claims of a haunting, they prove nothing themselves, as TAPS is quick to mention. Temperature fluctuations and changes in an EMF reading are common natural occurrences with many possible explanations. But if these fluctuations cannot be systematically disproved or occur at the same time as some piece of evidence was captured on

58 Ibid., 168.
59 Hawes and Wilson, The Ghost Files, 540
one of the recording devices, then it is possible they could be related, and that the entity or unexplained phenomena captured by the camera or audio recorder was also the reason for that fluctuation.

After the investigation is completed, TAPS packs up their evidence and goes back home (or returns to their hotel if the location is far enough away that they cannot drive back that same night). The next day they analyze their evidence. During the second segment of the episode, “The Analysis,” at least two members of the team review every bit of footage recorded during the investigation, including audio recordings and still photographs if any were taken, combing through it for visual or aural anomalies. This task is usually completed by seasoned investigators--in later seasons Steve or Dave--who are competent enough at analysis to rule out instances of contaminated evidence or notice when a piece of evidence may actually be a naturally occurring phenomena. An unexplained figure picked up on the FLIR thermal camera, for example, may be explained by comparing the footage taken on another camera at the same time which shows the anomaly is actually just a reflection of one of the investigators on some surface in the room that isn’t detected in the thermal image. This is all explained to viewers as the investigators going through the evidence frequently stop to discuss anomalies as they come across them, also debating their causes and which evidence will be presented to Jason and Grant for final examination. If it turns out something may have another explanation, it is often discarded, though sometimes it may be left for Jason and Grant just to confirm that it is not genuine evidence. Everything that remains after this analysis is left for the following segment, “The Findings,” during which Jason and Grant are called in to weigh a final verdict on what does or does constitute objective evidence. Their having final say over the evidence’s viability further
positions them as experts in the field of paranormal research. After these two segments, TAPS returns to the property and presents their findings to the owner.

“The Reveal,” the final part of a *Ghost Hunters* episode, sees Jason and Grant recounting the investigation, highlighting things they and their team experienced personally and explaining things they were able to debunk. The owner is also presented with any recorded evidence that was captured by TAPS. Afterward, Jason and Grant declare whether or not they think the location is haunted. Significantly, this declaration frequently hinges on the hard evidence they have accumulated. If their personal experiences are not corroborated by recorded objective evidence, or if that evidence is not sufficiently compelling on its own, they will not claim that the property is “haunted.” Instead, a property can only be declared haunted if there is evidence they mostly consider to be beyond reproach, especially if the activity caught on a recording cannot be easily explained away. According to Jason and Grant, this not only gives their investigations more credibility, but it also differentiates them from other groups in the field of paranormal research who rely on less objective scientific evidence and methodologies to back up their claims. This also serves to create distance for the audience, which is now learning how to disregard inconclusive evidence while still being asked to believe their own experiences (and those of TAPS) during the investigation. Each episode of *Ghost Hunters* ends with the team returning home while discussing the case with each other, offering some form of final observations about their experiences to viewers. Each episode ends with a promise of future investigations in a field which is always in search of answers to the unexplained as one of the team declares, “On to the next.”

Although reconfigured and reordered in subsequent shows and films in the cycle, the structure of a paranormal investigation as formalized by *Ghost Hunters* is an essential
component of every further iteration of the ghost hunting formula. Every show, for example, explains the circumstances of the supposed haunting to its viewers at the outset, though many of them blend elements of “The Investigation” and “The Analysis” in order to provide viewers with ongoing visual and aural confirmation of evidence as it is collected in real time rather than holding everything for the end of the episode. This is certainly the case for *Ghost Adventures* (Travel Channel, 2008-current) and *Paranormal State* (A&E, 2006-2011), both of which provide voice-over commentary and narration throughout each episode to highlight the evidence as it is captured during the course of the night as well as offer on-the-fly analysis of that evidence to viewers. These small shifts do not change how viewers understand the process of paranormal investigation from series to series, but they do provide product differentiation in presentation and structure between each text, an absolute necessity for a successful production cycle to remain popular and thus financially viable.

### 2.2.2 Believing is Seeing: Science, Pseudoscience, and the History of Paranormal Research

The influence of *Ghost Hunters* on paranormal reality television is profound. Not only did the series formalize the different elements of paranormal investigation, but it also popularized and familiarized audiences with a recognizable aesthetic formula that is shared by all ghost hunting shows to an extreme degree of similarity. The first-person experiential camerawork and openly acknowledged technological mediation of vision goes far beyond that of the most influential of these shows, *COPS*, and is far more focused on realism and the veracity of the investigation itself than its closest aesthetic antecedent, MTV’s *Fear*. While *Ghost Hunters* and the shows which adopt its formula in the wake of its success might share some similarities with other reality show types, they are nonetheless most similar to themselves, bound together by
their investigative focus and the foregrounding of that technological mediation. The technology used by paranormal investigators is thus incredibly important to how *Ghost Hunters* and other ghost hunting series approach scientific inquiry and understand how to gather objective evidence and interpret data. Jason Hawes lays out their understanding of these elements of the TAPS methodology in detail:

> In every investigation, we collect a wealth of data through different types of cameras, meters, and voice recorders, and from observations and reports of strange experiences. We sift through all of this as objectively as possible before we begin to draw conclusions. We understand that ghost hunting isn’t an exact science. We have to accept the fact that we’re working in a real-world setting. However, we’re determined to come as close to scientific accuracy as we possibly can. That’s the only way we’re going to produce reliable evidence and advance the study of the paranormal.60

In this explanation, as is evident in the series, the understanding of scientific inquiry within paranormal research is tenuous at best, though TAPS at least attempts some form of it. Alissa Burger has already written at some length about the relationship between the TAPS approach and the history of paranormal investigation, which is worth discussing here so as to demonstrate how the ghost hunting show generally engages with that history and how it continues to negotiate the tension between belief and skepticism while reifying belief in the supernatural over the objectively provable and scientific.61

The Society for Psychical Research was founded at Cambridge University in 1882 at the height of the Spiritualism boom that swept through the United States, the U.K., and Europe from the mid-nineteenth century to just after World War I. Its membership included a number of prominent philosophers, chemists, physicists, and other academics, who sought to study the paranormal in the mode of organized, scholarly inquiry. Many of the society’s early cases were

60 Ibid., 18.
61 For Burger’s account, see: Burger, 163-167. While my reading of the series is heavily informed by Burger’s assessment, I have also conducted my own research into these elements, which are notated separately.
focused on the study of psychic mediums and communication with the dead. Though simple observation was enough to disprove many instances of fakery in the Spiritualist community, especially during seances, the society and its members sought to capture evidence of the paranormal as well, especially through the use of the emerging technologies of the photograph and, later, wave radio systems and phonography which seemed to pluck communications from the ether and could be played back for examination.  

And yet, in spite of this desire, the reported experiences were key to the SPR’s mission to create a “science of religion,” as the society did not equate rationalism with materialism. Thus the experiences themselves became data which served “as the base of their empiricism.” Claims of bias have long plagued the reception of the SPR’s research, and the many instances of members believing subsequently disproven instances of the paranormal have tainted the reputations of many formerly credible scholars and researchers. To be blunt, the investigative methods of the SPR were not illustrative of hard science, and there was quite a lot of room for error in the conclusions of many of its researchers. This is because, as Jason Hawes of TAPS notes above, ghost hunting isn’t an exact science. Instead, it is a deeply flawed system of scientific inquiry into inherently non-scientific realms of human experience. The relationship between the SPR’s flawed science and its updating via ghost hunting reality shows can best be explained through examining the practice and popularity of spirit photography.

Tom Gunning has observed that historically, the dual development of “optics and psychology primarily provided the means of explaining ghosts away.” Greater photographic

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clarity and increased understanding the human mind demonstrated that ghosts were mere optical illusions or imaginings. But they also brought about the inverse possibility: that ghosts were not only real, but they could be captured on film under the right conditions, and that their visibility would prove their existence to skeptics. Organizations like the SPR and TAPS lie somewhere in the middle ground of these two strands of thought. Both groups take as their directive the desire to disprove the supernatural so that what is left is undeniable evidence (or at least unexplainable evidence using modern scientific theories). But this does not stop people, including those researchers, from glomming onto flawed evidence and treating it as valid, or more significantly, from treating unverifiable feelings and experiences with equal import as objective evidence. This is proven in virtually every single episode of Ghost Hunters as well as that of every other ghost hunting show. Despite these shows’ claims to seek only the most reliable evidence, they frequently trade on the experience of the investigation itself; on the unexplained noises and less-than-visible shadows lurking in the background of murky infrared and thermal images that build into that experience. In other words, the science of Ghost Hunters is all in the debunking of specific claims, which does nothing to negate either the evidence captured by their video and audio recordings or the personal experiences of the group while investigating. If they experienced something, it is as real as objective evidence is to the viewer and to them. How does this work? Believing you have seen a ghost is ultimately the same as being able to prove you have seen a ghost, a logic that reaches all the way back to the history of spirit photographs.

At first the public saw spirit photography for the novelty it was. Spirit photography was not taken seriously until Spiritualism began to take hold of the public consciousness from the 1840s onward, when some of its followers began to take them as further proof of the possibility of communicating with the dead afforded by emergent technologies. According to Clément
Chéroux, it is at this juncture that spirit photography began developing along two distinct strands, one for entertainment purposes and the other for its potential to provide a record of the supernatural. For Spiritualists and the SPR, this latter strand of development played into their intertwined desires to seek answers for the paranormal, creating the conflicts between science and belief that stood at the heart of their inquiries, but which also fueled skeptics’ criticism of both groups. For an example of how this tension plays out in spiritualism and in paranormal investigation, Chéroux turns to the story of Sir William Crookes, a prominent physicist and chemist who was a member of the SPR. He investigated many prominent psychic mediums in the late-1800s, including the Fox sisters, whose spirit rappings in upstate New York kickstarted the spiritualist movement, and the most famous psychic medium of his era, Daniel Dunglas Home. Crookes believed that spirit photography was not a hoax, and even when the subjects of his research, such as the medium Anna Eva Fay, recanted their performances as fraudulent, he was adamant in his belief.

“Crookes believed that, while eyewitnesses might be susceptible to suggestion by the medium,” writes Chéroux, “instruments could not be induced to err.” Furthermore, technical devices “both guaranteed the authenticity of the phenomena and made it possible to turn them into quantifiable data.” Crookes’s belief in the objectivity of the technology overrode the reality that was directly in front of him. The belief that photography and data to provide incontrovertible proof of the supernatural is thus inculcated within an aura of “authenticity” made possible because it corroborates personal experience. For Crookes and other investigators like him, the experience of the paranormal is in turn made more important than the data itself.

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66 Ibid., 47.
This can be seen in more cases than that of Crookes as well. For example, after French photographer Édouard Isidore Buguet admitted that he had completely fabricated all of his spirit photographs and explained in great detail how he had done so during a trial in the 1870s, some spiritualists persisted nonetheless in believing that some of his photographs were genuine and that he had been persecuted by the prosecution’s anti-religious agenda. The investment in personal belief overrode the evidence that had been collected by either photographs themselves, which were understood as products of manipulation by the general public and espoused as such by the photographers who had taken them.

The dichotomy at play here is inherent in the systematic methodology of inquiry espoused by ghost hunting shows, particularly the rigorous presentation of the investigative process by *Ghost Hunters* which is reconfigured and restructured slightly from show to show throughout the cycle. Communications and recording technology is at the heart of this rigor, and determines how *Ghost Hunters* configures its relationship to scientific inquiry. The abilities of the cameras, audio recorders, and other devices used by the team are all understood by TAPS within a number of extremely traditional and Spiritualist beliefs in technological possibility. If the initial disjuncture in the TAPS ideology is between an adherence to scientific objectivity and a belief in spiritual haunting, what emerges further along the line is a further disjuncture that positions technology itself as a means of both recording as well as *producing* evidence itself. This is due to a conflation of technological mediation with the mediating powers of personal experience that is inherent in spiritualist belief systems. As the organizational logic behind the ghost hunting show formula, these systems of belief use the methodologies of paranormal research to embody the fine line between the two strands of spirit photography’s dual use as both

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entertainment and evidence. The ghost hunting show formula more broadly uses the Janus of photography’s two uses in its own technological discourse in order to simultaneously mystify and demystify the paranormal. Thus, the camera can record and provide evidence, but its recording can also be manipulated to create that evidence. Viewers may watch the shows as entertainment, but they may also be understood as evidence of the events which they document. Thus the function of the ghost hunting show’s experiential nature in service of the investigative methodology fundamentally serves to create an equal stature between personal experience and belief in the paranormal with the evidence or data for or against its existence.

In his book *Haunted Media*, Jeffrey Sconce argues that the growth of the Spiritualist movement is tied directly to the development of the telegraph. The relationship between the psychic medium and the new electronic communications medium of the telegraph. According to Sconce, the belief in the possibility of electronic communication with the dead was not metaphorical in Spiritualism, but was also literal.68 The spirit telegraph, the first of many electronic media which supposedly had a foothold in the realms of the living and the dead, and which was featured heavily in séances, was a real technology for the devout, capable of literally connecting the two dimensions via the electrical impulse of the media and of the psychic medium.69 The fact that the technology was new and thus just beginning to be understood by the public was a major factor in the understanding of its possibility with regard to Spiritualist practice. Electronic communication - indeed, electricity itself - was only just beginning to be experimented with and widely understood in the mid-1800s, and to many people it was enigmatic and dangerous; wild and mysterious.70 The telegraph was not just the conduit used to

69 Ibid., 10.
communicate with spirits. It was also the means by which spirits themselves could manifest; that provided the electrical energy necessary for them to communicate with the living. This is because psychic mediums and electronic media were conflated in Spiritualism via “the intersection of technology and spirituality, of media and ‘mediums.’”\(^{71}\) This conflation is a further instance of how personal experience—in this case that of the psychic medium—is treated as equal to the objective data provided by recordings and instrumentation in spiritualist belief. The equipment used by modern ghost hunting groups to document their investigations on the various ghost hunting shows that populated American television over the past decade is treated exactly like the emergent electrical technologies that aided in the rise of spiritualism, though the investigators frequently insist otherwise. As we will see later, the degree to which a certain show disavows personal experiences and foregrounds objective evidence varies from show to show. But for the purposes of finishing the discussion of the basic formulaic elements of the ghost hunting show as they appear in *Ghost Hunters*, we will focus on that show’s portrayal of scientific inquiry in relation to belief in the supernatural.

The conflation of science and belief is not always readily apparent in *Ghost Hunters* presentation of TAPS and their methodology. As mentioned previously, TAPS frequently discounts personal experiences during “The Reveal” if they are not corroborated by a recording of some kind. They are careful to present only objectively verifiable evidence of their findings. In addition to the disavowal of their own experiences, they also do not use psychic mediums in their investigations, and when one appears on the show, they are often treated with a high level of skepticism. Even further than that, TAPS only uses certain types of technologies in their investigations, refusing to use experimental devices whose functionality can easily be called into

\(^{71}\) Scone, *Haunted Media*, 25.
question. All of this can be found in both the show as well as the various books by Jason and Grant, and in the other paratexts, such as the TAPS ParaMagazine and the TAPS website, where fans can go for further information about ghost hunting. In the September/October issue of the now-defunct ParaMagazine, for example, there is a brief write-up on the recent death of Frank Sumpton, the inventor of the “spirit box” or “Frank’s box.” The article describes the spirit box as “an experimental means of communication between the human realm and the spirit world,” that “theoretically picks up spirit voices while quickly scanning through AM radio frequencies.”

While there is no direct critique of the device in the article, it does mention that “many question the validity of this instrument,” and it never turns up in an episode of Ghost Hunters. This is no doubt because the way the box is claimed to function, to pull spirit voices out of the ether via radio frequencies, is something which has been roundly debunked and thus is not representative of objective or demonstrably effective data sets. As critics of the widely-used and accepted practice of collecting electronic voice phenomena (EVP) using audio recorders have long argued, the human brain tries to make sense out of every noise, including garbled communication. This often results in the listener’s unconsciousness being projected onto the record’s anomalies. TAPS is aware of this phenomenon.

As Jason Hawes himself points out in the introduction to Ghost Files, the limitations of technology and the need for the brain to understand what it is looking at should prompt further examination. Pictures of demonic faces and even sound recordings can often be the result of matrixing, and he admits that in his experience, “pictures that contain complex shapes and

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73 Ibid., 2.
74 Sconce, Haunted Media, 89.
variations are the most likely candidates for the overactive imagination.” Thus it is important that TAPS begin from a position of examination that attempts to account for distortion and tricks of the eye and ear. Yet in spite of this awareness of how matrixing works to make sense of images and sounds that are not clearly discernible, Jason and Grant rarely discuss their recorded evidence as recordings, but rather they talk about the recording itself as an objective data point. The evidence they present, in other words, is rarely if ever questioned as the product of a digital apparatus which may, in its conversion of visual information into a digital record, also create its own ghosts in the 1s and 0s of its encoding, exactly as early spirit photography was the result of uncleaned and reused photographic plates, or the carelessness of the photographer. Instead, TAPS simply observes their evidence, speculates as to what it may be, discusses possible correlations with their experiences, and throws that data into the column of unexplainable phenomena they could not disprove. They rarely come right out and say that a building is haunted, only whether or not they believe it is haunted based on their evidence, a savvy maneuver for undermining skepticism and allowing for personal belief and objective data points to become further intermingled while maintaining the appearance of scientific observation and analysis.

The misunderstanding of technological capability is at fault here, just as it was for the spiritualists. Ghost Hunters presents digital recording technology as capable of recording paranormal activity, yet continually privileges the experience of the activity in its discourse, whether for the investigators or the viewers in a simulated capacity. TAPS does little to reconcile its distrust of matrixing in photographic and audio evidence with its faith in the same media to provide compelling data in support of the paranormal’s existence. Additionally, much like the

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75 Hawes and Wilson, The Ghost Files, 15.
SPR before them, TAPS comes from a position of belief in the paranormal first and foremost, openly avowed in their books which have been compiled in a single volume (Ghost Files) and in the personality-based aspects of the series in which the team members discuss their backgrounds and what got them into ghost hunting in the first place, which is usually a personal supernatural experience that had a profound impact on them and made them curious to discover what was behind that experience. Ultimately, by treating their experiences during the investigation as equal to their recorded data, by refusing to discuss the limitations of their data sets as recordings themselves, and by portraying those objective recordings as experiential within the show’s editing (to return to Burger’s point), Ghost Hunters informs its viewers of the process and methodologies of paranormal investigation based not in hard science, but rather in the pseudo-scientific approaches that have dogged paranormal researchers for over a century.

2.3 Conclusion

The way that the history of paranormal investigation, pseudo-science, and religious belief systems manifest in Ghost Hunters is instructive as it plays into the tension between reality and representation at the heart of the ghost hunting formula as it proliferates across cable and other media in the 21st Century. With an emphasis on the investigation of the paranormal, and an explication of the methodologies used therein, the ghost hunting formula uses a unique combination of reality television and documentary aesthetics to create a participatory experience for viewers, as well as an educational one in which they learn how to hunt for and analyze evidence of ghosts on their own. We have seen how, in Ghost Hunters and by extension the other texts produced which use the ghost hunting formula, the boundaries between objective reality and subjective experiences of that reality are obscured by a pseudoscientific understanding of the
scientific method and deeply-held cultural understandings about the capabilities of electronic communications technologies to contact and communicate with spirits of the dead.

Moving forward, we should make note of these elements and how they weave in and out of the history of paranormal reality television, manifesting in this particular way across the ghost hunting cycle. In the next chapter, we will see how paranormal subject matter, reality television formats, and documentary style were bandied about by the industrial modes of production and distribution in different periods of that history as well. This will allow us to see how paranormal reality television shows have historically engaged with issues of “objectivity” and “subjectivity,” and how ghost hunting shows developed out of the specific circumstances of their historical moment as a culmination of various strands of this history. Along the way, we will be able to see how different paranormal reality shows have contributed to or rubbed up against that development. This will in turn inform the trajectory and story of Chapter 4, which focuses on the paranormal found footage horror film after the success of *The Blair Witch Project* and the development of the ghost hunting formula into a trans-media production cycle in the late 2000s.
3 THE PARANORMAL REALITY BOOM

3.1 Introduction

The development of the ghost hunting formula in the 2000s was due to a few different factors. The first was a resurgent general trend in popular culture toward supernatural-themed media, including numerous television shows and films featuring vampires, werewolves, extraterrestrials, cryptids, and, of course, ghosts, the likes of which had not been seen in the U.S. since the 1970s and the heyday of American horror television programming and feature film production. It was also due to the concurrent growth in and popularity of genres and styles related through their use of documentary aesthetics and structures to interrogate issues of “truth” and “reality,” including true crime, reality television, mockumentary, and found footage. Both reality shows and found footage horror owe some of their popularity to the cultural anxieties attendant to the post-9/11 expansion of surveillance and the widespread cultural awareness of mass surveillance in popular culture which manifested in a variety of genres and formulas across different media types.\(^{76}\) And finally, it was the result of a set of business practices which coalesced in an increasingly conglomeratized and convergent media environment, including an intensified interest in branding and niche programming. This provided the ghost hunting formula a perfect environment to grow into a cultural touchstone, a reference point and shorthand for a number of otherwise unrelated film and TV genres.

\(^{76}\) Surveillance culture is perhaps the least important of these reasons for the formula’s cultural resonance in the first decade of the new millennium, but the similarities between the obsession with audio-visual technologies and the ongoing ontological issues of recording and seeing/being made legible are at the heart of both ghost hunting texts and films and TV programs concerned with the growth of the surveillance society of the 21st Century. The scope of this comparison is far beyond that of this dissertation, but there will be occasional nods toward surveillance culture when discussing the prominence of ghost hunting and paranormal reality television and found footage horror films more broadly in terms of the cultural zeitgeist. For further reading on the relationship between surveillance culture and media in the 2000s, see: [LIST].
This chapter traces the development of the ghost hunting formula throughout American television history, from the precursors to paranormal reality television in the 1950s and ‘60s and through the informational paranormal documentaries that have populated American television screens since the 1970s. It uses industrial and cultural history to highlight the specific conditions of each stage in its development, showing how that history shaped its formula and its content. By examining this history we can begin to understand how and why the ghost hunting show became a popular cable television production cycle in the 2000s and how it became a uniquely trans-media phenomenon shortly thereafter. Looking at genealogical history of the ghost hunting reality show formula allows us to understand how these texts engage with the history of paranormal belief and the roles new and emergent technologies have played in these systems since the late-Victorian period. The deep dive into the developmental history of ghost hunting reality shows also sets the stage for the next chapter, which follows the development of paranormal found footage films in relation to documentary and reality TV aesthetics in the new millennium, focused on the ways the ghost hunting formula is adapted into film and forms a trans-media cycle. Overall, this chapter is meant to help us understand the ways looking at media history through the lens of cycle studies allows us to excavate new ways of seeing that history and describing the connections between popular formulas that extend beyond the intertextual and into the realm of industry, distribution, and culture.

### 3.2 Fact or Fiction: A Genealogy of Paranormal Reality TV in the U.S.

At the heart of the paranormal reality show genre is the tension between fact and fiction, and the ways that culture makes meaning in relation to both methods of scientific inquiry and religious and superstitious belief systems. These shows occur cyclically throughout television
history, and each decade since the 1970s has seen a slightly different iteration of a paranormal reality television formula, and each formula corresponds to shifts in cultural interest. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the 1970s were formative for the genre in many ways, not least of which was the genre’s place in relation to the pervasive presence of the supernatural in popular culture, a historical resonance with the 2000s and the spread of the ghost hunting formula from television to film. It was not until the new millennium that the reality show boom brought a much more diverse array of formats and formulas to American television, out of which those ghost hunting shows grew as well.

At the same time, the shape of the ghost hunting formula has been impacted by the major shifts in American television history which has facilitated the widespread growth of the genre over the previous decade. The foundational moments of the network system and the consolidation of a studio-based mode of production for it in the 1950s, the growth of national cable carriers in the U.S. and the widespread adoption of cable and satellite services in the 1970s and 80s, and the new realities of a broadcast environment that is experiencing a loss of its audience to a variety of new media, including peer-to-peer file sharing services and streaming video providers in the 90s and 2000s have each provided industrial logics for the development of new show types and cross-platform programming opportunities which will be discussed throughout the chapter.

The genre did not spring forth of its own accord, however. The roots of the paranormal reality show can be found not only in the news and informational formats of popular radio and early broadcast television, but also in the anthology dramas of the 1950s, especially those in the murder-mystery format which often deal with themes found in works of science-fiction, fantasy, and horror. One such show, *One Step Beyond* (ABC, 1959-1961), is of particular interest because
of the unique way it combined fictionalized accounts of alleged supernatural occurrences with
documentary-like truth claims. And one episode in particular, “The Sacred Mushroom,” which is
discussed in depth below, is particularly interesting in light of our examination of the origins of
the paranormal reality show.

3.2.1 One Step Beyond: Anthology Dramas and the Beginnings of a Genre

The popular ABC anthology drama series One Step Beyond aired for three seasons from
1959 to 1961. Created by Merwin Gerard and hosted by veteran actor and director John Newland
(who also directed ninety-six of the series’ ninety-seven episodes), One Step Beyond was one of
several shows that helped to create what Michele Hilmes has called the mystery-suspense variant
of the network drama.\(^77\) It was a weekly, half-hour series that aired on Tuesdays at 10pm, and
featured stories of bizarre and unexplainable events. It was the first such series to focus entirely
on the paranormal, beating the concurrently developed The Twilight Zone to air by nine months.
Though fully scripted and performed by professional actors, the stories told in each episode were
fictionalized accounts of documented cases of the supernatural, and the construction of the series
created a bridge between the concepts of dramatic and documentary realism. According to
Newland, in order for the stories to be included in the show, they “had to be real, and there had
to be proof, either anecdotal or published.”\(^78\) The burden of this proof is of course minimal, but it
grounded the series in fact and engaged in a long-standing discourse of televisual realism.\(^79\) And
it did so both within the diegesis of the story as well as Newland’s opening and closing

\(^77\) Michele Hilmes, Only Connect, 161.
\(^78\) John Kenneth Muir, “One Step Beyond: An Interview with Director and Host, John Newland,” John Kenneth
5/15/17.
monologues, wherein he would often play up the veracity of what viewers had just seen, appealing to expert testimony and documentation of such events.

The series premiere, “The Bride Possessed,” for example, tells of a pair of newlyweds on their honeymoon near a small coastal town. On their drive, the new bride Sally Conroy (Virginia Leith) begins acting strangely and demands they go to a nearby spot she knows about despite never having been outside of Louisiana before moving to California to be married. After a quick visit to a shoreside cliff, Sally runs back to their car, abandoning her husband Matt (Skip Homeier) and taking off into the countryside. Some time later, Matt is riding with a police officer looking for any sign of where Sally drove off to, and they come upon the car in the driveway of a typical ranch style home. They find Sally inside, but when confronted about why she ran off, she insists she is not Sally Conroy, but Karen Wharton, who the police officer tells us has died a couple of weeks back. Fans of Gothic melodrama know what happens next: the spirit of Karen Wharton has taken control of Sally Conroy’s body and is seeking justice for her murder, which has been ruled an accident. Once the case is settled, Karen leaves Sally’s body and the bride and groom return to their honeymoon, the mystery solved. At the end of the episode, Newland appears on screen to explain the theme to the audience, as was typical of the genre at the time: 80

There are thousands of cases of possession in the records, many of them fully authenticated by respected scientists. We’ve seen one. To whom it happened, we know. Where it happened, we know. How or why it happened…[shrugs]

In his appeals to “the records” and their authentication by “respected scientists,” Newland engages with the discourse of reality present in documentary style and form as well as the representational reality of fiction. While almost every episode of One Step Beyond is absent the markers of documentary realism - location footage, interviews, the presentation of documents,

80 Alfred Hitchcock and Rod Serling also did this in their capacity as hosts of their own series, Alfred Hitchcock Presents and The Twilight Zone, respectively.
expert commentary - these appeals situate the series into that milieu. This discourse extends into the episodes themselves further than just Newland’s monologues as well. Doctors, psychologists, and other experts are often portrayed in the series as well, offering rational commentary for the causes of the fantastic events. In “The Bride Possessed,” this expertise comes in the form of Dr. Alexander Slawson (Harry Townes), who was a friend of Karen Wharton, and who examines Sally’s condition in the local hospital. Reaching the conclusion that Sally has been possessed by Karen, he eventually assists in making sure her killer is brought to justice. His status as a physician, highly educated and scientifically-minded, is what helps Matt Conroy to accept the truth about what has happened to his wife and how she can be “cured” of her condition. Thus, the show serves as its own corroborating evidence, with its host and the experts portrayed within the various stories told throughout the series assuring viewers of their veracity and objective reality. While episode one is clearly not a strictly true document of the event of the bride’s possession, the show makes it clear that viewers are to understand it as a fully-authenticated, researched telling of a true story. The imbrication of a discourse on realism and truth that overlaps fictional and documentary modes into the formula of One Step Beyond goes farther than just its fictionalized retellings of psychical phenomena, however. On January 24, 1961 - halfway through its third season - an episode aired that brought One Step Beyond’s identity directly in line with documentary realism.

“The Sacred Mushroom” begins as always with a monologue from John Newland in which he explains to viewers the fantastic claims made about a certain type of mushroom found growing around the remote regions of Mexico. As with all of these introductions, this sets up the story to follow, giving the audience necessary bits of general information on the subject before providing them with one “fully authenticated” example of a specific occurrence. But this episode
is different from every other episode of the series. Instead of cutting to the typical docudrama after Newland’s monologue, we next see Newland himself wandering through the ancient ruins of a city in Mexico. In voice-over narration he explains that they “are in Mexico, thousands of miles away from our Hollywood sound stages...there are no actors, there is no script, for this psychic event can only be recorded at the moment it happens.” In just this minute or so of screen time, the episode evokes both the observational and expositional elements of realism inherent in documentary form, shown in the real world on location, and also asserting that the episode will itself serve as a record of the psychic event at its heart. Newland is accompanied in his investigation of the mushroom’s allegedly psychical properties by five others: Dr. Barbara Brown, a neuropharmacologist from UCLA; David Gregg, a spiritual leader from Hawaii; Jeffrey Smith, professor of philosophy and humanities at Stanford University; William Upson, a missionary and translator; and Dr. Andre Puharich, a researcher who wrote the book about the mushroom’s use and psychotropic properties from which the episode takes its title.

Their search takes them to a remote village, where they meet up with a “brujo,” Spanish for witch, who has agreed to meet with them and demonstrate the powers the mushroom bestows upon him. As the brujo claims the ceremony will only work if they are all attuned to one another psychically, everyone in the party eats some of the mushrooms, save Dr. Brown, who the brujo has agreed can partake in the ceremony without ingesting them so that there is an objective participant outside of the drug’s influence. What follows is a scene in which we see the members of the team tripping on the mushrooms, giggling, wide-eyed, and in high spirits. As this scene was filmed outdoors, the audio is of poor quality, and in a voice-over Newland apologizes for this, reminding viewers that what they are watching has actually happened. Suddenly, Newland

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81 Corner, 127.
informs us that something remarkable occurred during this ceremony, and then we hear the brujo mention that Dr. Brown’s heart is sick, referencing a personal illness no one in the group knew about beforehand. Everyone is surprised by this revelation and the brujo’s knowledge of it, especially Dr. Brown, who is sober and and seems genuinely and visibly shocked.

The second half of “The Sacred Mushroom” begins with Newland back in the U.S., three weeks later, at the home of Dr. Puharich in northern California. While speaking directly into the camera, he begins walking around, and the camera follows him, eventually revealing his small production crew, again emphasizing to viewers the different rhetorical values of realism at play between this and other episodes of One Step Beyond. “These men are our technical crew, who have come with me from Los Angeles to help us continue our search,” he tells viewers. “We’ve come to the house and laboratory of Dr. Andre Puharich...For me, personally, this next step beyond may be a large one.” It then cuts to the inside of the house, with Newland standing in the study, informing us that he will be partaking in an experiment with Dr. Puharich to personally gauge the ability of the mushroom to not only serve as a hallucinogen, but to actually increase a person’s psychic powers. A control set is conducted for the experiment, with Newland attempting to order cards according to face value, guess the images in a set of paintings, and other similar tasks while blindfolded. Following the control portion of the experiment, he eats two mushrooms and waits for their effects to take hold, just as the experts in the previous segment did in Mexico. Puharich then has Newland perform the same tasks to gauge if there is any increase in his ability to “see” the objects in front of him due to ingesting the mushrooms.

The episode ends with a panel of the experts, reassembled in the Los Angeles studio. Dr. Brown, Professor Smith, and Dr. Puharich all weigh in on their experiences and the future potential for psychical research using the chemicals contained in the mushroom. Newland then turns to the
camera and says to the audience, “When this program began, the question was, ‘Were the claims for the mushroom true or false?’ Well for those of us who made the journey, the answer is ‘true.’” The network almost canned the episode, according to Newland, only changing their minds once he made the decision to take part in the experiments depicted in Mexico himself.82 Dr. Puharich’s on-camera demonstration of the scientific process of such an experiment featuring the host of the show apparently made the episode wholesome enough for network viewers.

In “The Sacred Mushroom,” we can see how the dominant structures of television documentary in the 1960s were used to bridge the gap between the series’s fictionalized accounts of the supernatural and the exploration of psychical research in a documentary mode of interrogation. As a series, One Step Beyond was primarily a docudrama, fictionalizing supposedly true events with no known explanation. While these episodes were fully scripted, there was a strain of assumed truth that ran through them, benefitting from the tropes of dramatic realism. A nebulous concept in artistic expression, John Fiske has argued that “realism is not a matter of fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed.”83 In this context, One Step Beyond may be thought of as what John Corner has called “dramatised documentary,” wherein the primary impetus of the work - its reality and truth - has been scripted and dramatised for a greater impact on the audience.84 In context of the show’s relationship to dominant modes of dramatic realism on other network dramas of the same period, including not only the two major mystery-suspense shows, Alfred Hitchcock Presents and The Twilight Zone, but also the by-then long-standing assumptive realism that would come from other genres, including one of the most popular series of all time,

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82 Muir, “One Step Beyond.”
Every episode of *Dragnet* began with voice over narration: “Ladies and gentlemen, the story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent.” As Jason Mittell notes, the processes of producing that series included direct involvement from the Los Angeles Police Department, but also relied upon the various intertextual and generic elements of realism from the semi-documentary crime films of the post-war era as well as the rise in documentary production during the decade in general, lending the show a sense of “stylized authenticity.”  

This is certainly the case with *One Step Beyond*, with its frequent appeals to the reality of its stories, as noted above.

“The Sacred Mushroom” engages explicitly in a documentary mode, however, and its combination of fantastic subject matter typical of its scripted episodes with documentary techniques is carried forward through every paranormal reality show that follows. In this one episode Newland introduced a rhetoric of truth and realism that bridges the gap between proven fact and representational realism in paranormal shows, which is echoed in the ghost hunting formula’s positioning of their hosts as “experts” and their methodologies as objective and scientific. The construction of this rhetoric also engages with the dominant representational strategies of documentary television of the time, especially the shooting of the majority of the episode on location with the show’s host (a surrogate journalist or reporter), and the objective, unmediated gaze of the camera - with no script and no actors - that is capable of capturing the unexplained “at the moment it happens.” The combination of elements found separately in the stylized realism of the bulk of the series and the pure documentary mode of “The Sacred Mushroom” came to fruition in the following decade, with a series of television documentaries on the paranormal which were so popular that the concept was developed into the documentary

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reality series *In Search Of...* ( Syndication, 1977-1982), which ran for five seasons in first-run syndication and has run continuously in syndication since.

### 3.2.2 Paranormal Documentaries: Realism and the Unexplainable

In the mid-1970s, producer Alan Landsburg created three successful television documentaries based on supernatural mysteries: *In Search of Ancient Astronauts* (Harald Reinl, 1973), *In Search of Ancient Mysteries* (Fred Warshofsky, 1973), and *The Outer Space Connection* (Fred Warshofsky, 1975). These films were concerned with theories of extraterrestrial intervention in the development of human civilization on Earth. *In Search of Ancient Astronauts* was itself a recut version of a German documentary based on Erich von Däniken’s 1968 book *Chariots of the Gods*, narrated by Rod Serling for American television.\(^{86}\)

The central thesis of that book and of that film is that religions and technologies of ancient civilizations had been granted to them by alien visitors, who were viewed and worshipped as gods from the heavens. Based on the success of those documentaries and a growth in cultural interest in the paranormal, Landsburg decided to produce a documentary series that would explore a wide variety of supernatural and paranormal mysteries. The result, *In Search Of...* debuted in 1977 in first-run syndication and ran for 144 episodes. Each half-hour episode was devoted to a single phenomenon, including UFOs, parapsychology, cryptozoological creatures, spiritualism, and so on. Serling, who had narrated the three documentary films, was originally slated to narrate the series as well, but he died suddenly of a heart attack in 1975, forcing Landsburg to find a new host. He settled on Leonard Nimoy, who was at the time well known for

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playing Spock on Star Trek (NBC, 1966-1969). The result, according to Nimoy, was “the granddaddy...of all these reality shows you see today...along those lines.”87

As with the ghost hunting cycle of the 2000s, In Search Of... benefited directly from an interest in paranormal subject matter and the investigation of the unknown in the 1970s, which saw not only the growth of interest in extraterrestrial phenomena and the various conspiracy theories thereof, but also of various cryptids, ghosts, and other supernatural beings.88 This interest bridged both documentary and fictional entertainment, and included a wide swath of the paranormal. Bigfoot films like The Legend of Boggy Creek (Charles B. Pierce, 1972) and Night of the Demon (James C. Wasson, 1980) were part of a cycle of films that sought to capitalize on the interest in the legends about homocryptid creatures. The golden age of author Stephen King saw one hit novel after another, their subjects ranging from telkinesis (Carrie, 1974) to vampires (‘Salem’s Lot, 1975), to psychical ghost stories (The Shining, 1977), and each with a major film adaptation (in 1976, 1979, and 1980, respectively, with ‘Salem's Lot produced as a television miniseries). Television series such as Night Gallery (NBC, 1969-1973), created by Rod Serling, and Kolchak: The Night Stalker (ABC, 1974-1975), which was preceded by two television films written by horror author Richard Matheson, dealt with supernatural themes. Kolchak in particular has had a lasting influence on the fantasy-horror genre, and was a major influence on The X-Files, which debuted two decades later in 1992.89 The daytime soap opera Dark Shadows (ABC), which premiered in 1966 and aired for six seasons through 1971, detailed the lives of the Collins family, including the resurrected vampire Barnabas Collins (Jonathan Frid).

In 1977, *The Amityville Horror*, Jay Anson’s fictionalized account of the haunting of the Lutz family in their home at 112 Ocean Avenue by both the home’s previous owners, who were murdered, and a demonic presence became a bestseller, and was adapted into a major theatrical film in 1979 that was a commercial success, grossing $86.4 million at the domestic box office and becoming the second highest-grossing film in the U.S. that year. Professional paranormal investigators also became public figures in the late 1970s and early 1980s, bolstered by high profile cases like that of *The Amityville Horror*. Hans Holzer, who wrote more than 140 books on paranormal subjects and credited himself as a “scientific investigator of the paranormal,” became famous after investigating the Amityville case himself.\(^90\) The same happened for husband and wife duo Ed and Lorraine Warren, who described themselves as demonologists and psychic investigators, and who promoted themselves ceaselessly throughout the 1980s, largely based on their investigation of that case and the investigation of the infamous Enfield Poltergeist in the North London suburbs.\(^91\) The Warrens’ involvement in both Amityville and Enfield is the basis for the story told in *The Conjuring 2* (James Wan, 2016), the second in a series of fictionalized accounts of Ed and Lorraine’s cases that have been made during the most recent cycle of cultural interest in the paranormal.

It was into this milieu that *In Search Of...* was introduced, the first full-fledged paranormal reality show; a documentary series that solidified the explication and investigation of supernatural phenomena as a formal practice for TV audiences. Taking up both the observational and expositional modes of documentary realism, the show established the formal parameters of


the genre. The series also clearly engages with and perpetuates the cultural zeitgeist of the 1970s outlined above, perpetuating its mythologies by inserting itself directly into the conversations of the time. It does this through not only the subject matter of the show, as demonstrated by the inclusion of material from bestselling books such as *Chariots of the Gods*, but also through the inclusion of prominent figures in paranormal research such as Hans Holzer, who is featured prominently in an episode titled “In Search Of… Ghosts,” which details the show’s own investigation of a haunted house. Other episodes’ subjects - “...Bigfoot,” “...Atlantis,” and “...Bermuda Triangle,” also demonstrate the strong ties between the larger zeitgeist and what would become an established documentary formula.

*In Search Of...* navigated the tension between reality and fiction in much the same way as *One Step Beyond* had, assuring viewers that the stories were based in truth of some kind. The voice-over that accompanied the show’s theme informed the audience, “This series presents information based in part on theory and conjecture. The producer’s purpose is to suggest some possible explanations - but not necessarily the only ones - to the mysteries we will examine.”

Reality television has its own stylistic markers that are linked to documentary style, especially the *cinema verité* strain of practice. Jon Dovey has provided a useful list of this style’s attributes:

- camcorder, surveillance or observational ‘actuality footage’;
- first-person participant or eyewitness testimony;
- reconstructions that rely upon narrative fiction styles
- studio or to-camera links and commentary from authoritative presenters
- expert statements from emergency services personnel or psychologists

Each of these elements is present in any given episode of *In Search Of...* The adoption of legitimate documentary practice and its combination with the fantastic and sensational elements of the supernatural as demonstrated in paranormal reality television provides viewers with a

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92 Dovey, “Reality TV,” 134.
sense of authenticity for the events that are being documented. Caetlin Benson-Allot has pointed to the late 1980s reality show boom as a major turning point in the way audiences understood video footage as a particular aesthetic denotation of realism, mostly due to its ubiquitous use in many different forms of televisual reality, especially experiential series like COPS (Fox, 1989-2013; Spike, 2013-present). In paranormal reality shows, this aesthetic denotation can be found in the amateur footage of unexplained phenomena which becomes a focal point of much of the show’s commentary. The veracity of what is documented on that footage and the claims made by those who shot it are the basis for the entirety of each episode’s existence. And while evidence of hauntings and apparitions are particularly resonant with the debate of authenticity, the truth is that questions of authenticity and appeals to expertise are easily found in any episode of In Search Of... The fifth episode of season one, “In Search of...Bigfoot,” provides an example of how the show imbricates viewers in the reality being presented piece by piece, using such aesthetics alongside a rhetoric of expert knowledge that is pervasive in paranormal reality programs. It also illustrates that the ongoing tension between reality and the impossible at play in the ghost hunting show formula is at the heart of paranormal reality television more broadly conceived, and that the construction of realism is similar no matter the show’s topic.

The episode opens with Nimoy describing what the Sasquatch is in voice over narration, informing viewers that it is a creature that has been “seen many times” throughout human history. The first segment of the show dives into the history of these sightings, discussing a group of miners who, in 1924, had an unsettling encounter with a strange creature near Mount St. Helens in Washington. According to the episode, one night after working the mine, the men gathered up their things and went inside for the night, bolting the door as they always did. But

outside, something came up to their cabin and began attacking it, and the men began shooting at it until it ran off into the heavy forest around them. During this segment we are shown re-enactment footage of men picking up their weapons, and taking up arms from inside a cabin. When the attack from outside is mentioned, it cuts to shaky, hand-held point-of-view footage from outside the cabin, and strange guttural noises like grunts are heard on the soundtrack. The combination of re-enactments, location footage (assumed to be shot around Mount St. Helens), and the final piece of Nimoy’s voice-over mentioning that this location, “Ape Canyon,” is still an active site for bigfoot hunters, deploys the expositional mode of documentary realism to inculcate viewers in its reality. After a commercial break, a new segment is introduced, with Nimoy recounting the prominent history of the sasquatch in Pacific Northwest Native American folklore, going so far as to speculate that the creature traversed the land bridge that once traversed the Bering strait between Eastern Asia and the Americas at the same time the first human beings migrated across some 20,000 years ago. The show then cuts to footage of Nimoy atop a skyscraper, where he continues: “In our modern world of concrete and steel, far removed from the Indian lore of Bigfoot, it’s hard to imagine any corner of our crowded world where a giant man-like creature could roam free. Yet there’s persuasive evidence that Bigfoot is real, and that urban man may be close to his first meeting with a living legend.”

The next segment of the show focuses on physical evidence of the sasquatch, and features the first expert interviews of the episode. Dr. Grover Krantz, an anthropologist from Washington State University, is brought in to examine alleged sasquatch footprints and provide commentary on the most-debated and analyzed piece of evidence in bigfoot lore, the 1967 Patterson-Gimlin film. The discussion of the prints dissects why certain characteristics indicate a hoax, while others - like the shape of the foot, more angular and less squared - may indicate a genuine piece
of evidence. The presentation of the Patterson-Gimlin film is likewise even-handed, with Nimoy’s voice-over first providing viewers with the main criticisms of the footage before cutting back to Dr. Krantz, who notes that he believed the footage to be “authentic” based on his examinations of it and his interviews with Roger Patterson who shot the film. Viewers are shown the film as is, with a tall, hairy creature walking away from the camera operator along a stream in the woods. The footage is grainy and the creature is not well-defined. The camera is shaky and slightly out of focus, lending the film a distinct sense of authenticity. As we can see, the footage is positioned in relation to the opening story of an attack on the mining camp as well as physical evidence of the sasquatch in the form of its footprints, with commentary from an expert. The Patterson-Gimlin film is then brought in to provide unfiltered evidence of the creature in question, and leads into a discussion of its veracity and how it may have been faked, as well as serves as the lead-in to the next segments, which present further historical and personal evidence to support the existence of a seven-foot-tall humanoid cryptid living in the dense forests of the Pacific Northwest.

After the discussion of the footage (and the notable on-camera authentication of it by a respected authority figure), we are shown a newspaper clipping, which Nimoy describes in his narration. The story is that of a group of British Columbia railway workers who claimed to have captured a “strange creature” they called “Jacko” in the wilderness, published by a newspaper in 1882. 94 After a brief discussion of the “Jacko” story and mention of a flurry of other accounts published in newspapers in the Pacific Northwest, the show then cuts to a series of interviews

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94 The show actually gets more than a few details of this story incorrect, not that it really matters. The piece was published by The Daily Colonist in 1884, not 1882, and the published story actually calls the character a gorilla, but is not corroborated in any other papers from the area. A photocopy of the original article can be found on the Cryptomundo website. (Lauren Coleman, “The Story of Jacko,” Cryptomundo, web, http://cryptomundo.com/cryptozoo-news/story-jacko/, accessed 5/17/17.)
with people who have had eyewitness encounters with the beast. This segment includes both reenactments and talking head style interviews, and even has one witness who encountered the sasquatch in his car interviewed through his automobile’s driver’s side window on the side of the road. At this point the episode is just over half its run time. Already we can see the methods in which it furthers the rhetoric of truth that played out in One Step Beyond’s “The Sacred Mushroom” by employing more specifically documentary tactics rather than relying purely on the host’s involvement for validation. While Nimoy both provides narration and appears on screen at many points during the In Search Of... series, he is not a direct participant. Instead, the show relies on a wide variety of documentary techniques to present viewers with observational and expositional realism with regard to the subject being discussed.

Returning to the lineage of the ghost hunting formula, the aforementioned episode “In Search Of...Ghosts” features 1970s celebrity ghost hunter Hans Holzer’s investigation of a haunted home in the fishing village of Port Clyde, Maine. A former resident, who lived there as a young boy, recounts the story of hearing footsteps in the hallway outside his room one night and finding nothing when he gets up to investigate. Once he returned to bed, the footsteps recurred until reaching his bedroom door, at which point he began feeling something touch his arm and then pull his air. In the next segment, his sister describes sleeping one night in her parents’ room one night and waking up because of her friend’s cat rubbing on the side of her face. Once awake, she sees a light by the window, which slowly becomes more recognizably the form of a woman. She calls her friend’s name out loud, now fearful as the apparition draws near. The camera cuts to interview footage of her friend, corroborating the account, attesting to her screaming her name. During both of these interview segments, we are shown intercut footage of the home, completely empty at night, with the only source of light coming from the camera in the form of
either a mounted or handheld light. These shots are clearly meant to emulate the experiences of those telling their stories, providing viewers with the affective experience of waking up in the middle of the night, in the dark, and encountering the unknown.

After a commercial break, ghost hunter Hans Holzer enters the home with a psychic medium, and conducts a walkthrough of the property. They go through the home room by room, with her taking a “reading” of the room and providing Holzer with her results, some of which are extremely specific. During this portion, Holzer does not take any readings of electromagnetic fields or record audio hoping to capture EVPs. In fact, much of what Holzer does is record the case and conduct the cursory walkthrough of the property. But in spite of what little amount of actual ghost hunting makes it on screen, there are several elements of the ghost hunting show’s formula present in this episode. The first-person POV camera in low-light conditions, the walkthrough of a supposedly haunted location in order to gather evidence, and interviews with eyewitnesses in order to understand what allegations of activity there are all parts of the formula outlined in the previous chapter. A prototypical example of the ghost hunting formula, this episode even further establishes the influence of *In Search Of...* on the genre as a whole over the next two decades. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, there was a growth in the number of reality shows across both broadcast and cable television. These new shows influenced paranormal reality programs in various ways, as we shall see. The first significant shift in the presentation of paranormal reality was a formal one, from the long-form documentary format of *In Search Of...*, wherein a full half hour would be devoted to a single subject, to the magazine format of
presentation popularized by the first series to be referred to as a “reality” show, the long-running *Unsolved Mysteries*.95

*Unsolved Mysteries* premiered on October 5, 1988, after a successful series of specials. It ran for nine seasons on NBC, was picked up by CBS where it aired for another two, and then ended its run with two more seasons on the cable network Lifetime, where it had performed well in syndicated reruns since the early 1990s. Hosted by Robert Stack, the series profiled a wide range of mysteries, including missing persons, criminal cases, and paranormal phenomena. Like *In Search Of…*, the series presented its stories in documentary format, typically with a combination of interviews and re-enactments. Unlike the episode-length profiles of that program, however, *Unsolved Mysteries* used a magazine format, which allowed for four different segments to be presented per episode, alongside brief updates on developments in previous cases. The result was that paranormal cases were presented right alongside criminal cases, further blurring the lines between reality and entertainment and giving the unexplainable phenomena of spirits, UFOs, and cryptids the same sense of objective reality as fugitives wanted by law enforcement or historically-based legends like lost treasure. *Unsolved Mysteries* placed the fantastic on the same footing as legitimate, verifiable history, and heavily influenced several genres of reality television, including gossip, infotainment, and many others which presented viewers with a combination of documentary forms and sensationalism. For the most part, shows like *Unsolved Mysteries* are lumped into the same category as the sensationalist tabloid programs of the late-1980s and 1990s, alongside *A Current Affair* (Syndication, 1986-1996; 2005) and *Entertainment Tonight* (Syndicated, 1981-present), and are key texts which lead directly into the reality TV

boom of the 2000s. According to Misha Kavka, these tabloid shows “reconfigured news sources for entertainment purposes, shifting the focus to human interest stories, sensational events, emotional reactions and a combination of scandal and spectacle.”\(^96\)

While *Unsolved Mysteries* was a major hit for NBC, reality television as it has been originally defined flourished on Fox, an upstart network that was building its brand on edgier content and appeals to youth audiences.\(^97\) As a result of its upstart status, Fox was often more experimental and targeted in its programming than the big three, NBC, ABC, and CBS. This led to edgier content in prime time, including the sitcom *Married...with Children* (Fox, 1987-1997), *The Tracey Ullman Show* (Fox, 1987-1990), out of which launched *The Simpsons* (1989-present), and the long-running reality series *Cops*, which employed a verité style to simulate the thrill of police work. *Cops* and other sensationalist programs that aired on Fox in the 1980s and 1990s, including the *When Animals Attack!* specials (Fox, 1996-1997), *America’s Most Wanted* (Fox, 1988-2012), and the paranormal series *Sightings* (Fox, 1991-1993; first-run syndication, 1994-1996; Sci-Fi Channel, 1996-1998) used amateur footage prominently as an indicator of authenticity, which has had a lasting influence on both televisual and filmic styles, a discussion to which we will return in the next chapter.\(^98\)

*Sightings* is extremely similar to *In Search Of...* in many ways, including its opening disclaimer that what viewers are about to see is still speculative, and not necessarily entirely factual. It also began its life as a series of specials that aired on Fox in 1991 and 1992 before being picked up to series. As a paranormal documentary series, it fit right into Fox’s programming strategy, attracting the younger, hip viewers the network was targeting in its bid


\(^{97}\) Hilmes, *Only Connect*, 295-297.

for profitability in a television market that was dominated by the much larger established networks. It also hybridized the exclusive focus on the supernatural characteristic of *In Search Of...* with the magazine format of presenting multiple stories popularized by *Unsolved Mysteries* and other tabloid shows. In the second special, the series tackles “ghosts” broadly, zooming in on various stories of hauntings, claims of spirit photographs, and features a discussion of the forensics of paranormal investigation. As presented by host Tim White, a respected journalist and news anchor, the stories in this episode are given a gravitas associated with network news, further blurring the lines between information and entertainment in a way that is inherent to various reality TV types. In the introduction to the episode, White recounts a history of ghosts in Hollywood movies, and then assures the audience, “but you won’t see any Hollywood-style ghosts tonight. What you will see is concrete evidence that something is there.” After one season on Fox, *Sightings* went into first-run syndication, and was eventually picked up in its final seasons by the Sci-Fi Channel (now Syfy) in 1997 just as that network was establishing its own brand identity as a destination for viewers interested in science-fiction, fantasy, and horror programming.

While the more traditional documentary formulas of shows like *In Search Of...* and *Sightings* did not disappear entirely in the 2000s, they became increasingly hybridized. This is due in part to the prominence of reality television on U.S. networks at this time and the increased hybridization inherent to the form, but also the growth of the ghost hunting formula beginning in 2004, which generated a highly successful cycle of shows which emphasized experiential aesthetics and the investigation of the paranormal itself. Generic hybridity or mixing is one of the prominent functions of TV’s mode of production and is an inherent component of many different

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television genres, as Jane Feuer has argued.\textsuperscript{100} Jason Mittell tells us that one of reality television’s “central production strategies is genre mixing, recombinantly drawing conventions and assumptions from a range of genres in both innovative and derivative fashions,” including “a number of editing and shooting conventions that meld serial narrative, verité cinema style, and first-person confessional segments while making the apparatus of production as invisible as possible by downplaying the constructed nature of the program via appeals to the ‘real.’”\textsuperscript{101} The boom in reality television production has served to make these elements of hybridization and mixing more readily apparent.\textsuperscript{102} As we have seen, genre hybridity has been an essential component of paranormal reality programming since the very beginning, snatching elements from anthology dramas, documentaries, and informational formats as it developed over the course of some forty odd years on American television. Yet the trajectory from \textit{In Search Of...} to subsequent entries in the genre such as \textit{Sightings}, \textit{Beyond Belief: Fact or Fiction} (Fox, 1997-2002), and the Discovery Kids show \textit{Truth Or Scare} (Discovery Kids, 2001-2003) remains oddly consistent in the forms which are hybridized in order to create the generic texts which make up the corpus of paranormal reality shows.\textsuperscript{103} The specific formulation of anthology docu-drama/re-enactment and traditional documentary forms remains consistent even now, with shows that air alongside the ghost hunting texts under investigation in this dissertation--series like \textit{A Haunting} (Discovery Channel, 2005-2007; Destination America, 2012-2016; TLC, 2016-current) and


\textsuperscript{101} Mittell, \textit{Genre and Television}, 197.


\textsuperscript{103} Keeping in line with the celebrity hosting duties inherent to the formula, \textit{Beyond Belief: Fact or Fiction} was hosted by \textit{The Amityville Horror} star James Brolin in its first season before being replaced by Jonathan Frakes, of \textit{Star Trek: The Next Generation} fame, for seasons two through four. The show \textit{Truth or Scare} was hosted by child star Michelle Trachtenberg, at the time known for the role of Dawn on \textit{Buffy the Vampire Slayer} (The WB, 1997-2001; UPN, 2001-2003), and consisted largely of recycled footage from the older documentary series \textit{Castle Ghosts of the British Isles} (Discovery Channel, 1997) re-edited and made for suitable presentation to a youth audience.
Paranormal Witness (Syfy, 2011-present)–still using the form to tell their stories and engage with viewers. With the introduction of Scariest Places on Earth and MTV’s Fear in 2000, however, the formula shifts away from strictly informational/investigative and begins incorporating other elements of reality television shows, including a focus on competition and basing a series around the personalities of the participants.

3.2.3 Dare ‘em, Scare ‘em: Innovations and Reformulations in the Reality Era

The year 2000 saw the beginning of networks’ massive success with unscripted programming, the industry’s term for reality shows. The introduction of shows like Survivor (CBS, 2000-present) and Big Brother (CBS, 2000-present) demonstrated to American television networks the potential for increased profitability through a reduction of production costs at a time when scripted shows were becoming extremely expensive. Though unscripted programming has existed from the very beginnings of television in the United States, it made up a relatively small portion of the broadcast networks’ schedules in spite of the fact that shows like Cops, Unsolved Mysteries, and America’s Funniest Home Videos (ABC, 1989-present) were extremely popular and did well in syndication. The success of unscripted reality programming was also synonymous with the rise of the multi-channel transition of the 90s, which saw an increased emphasis on narrowcasting as cable networks sparred for larger portions of what was and still is a relatively small overall cable audience.104 Into this environment two significant new entries in the paranormal reality show genre were introduced in the year 2000.

Though MTV’s Fear (MTV, 2000-2001) is often credited with several key innovations in reality programming generally, and it indeed has the larger influence on what becomes the ghost

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hunting show in the United States, it is impossible to discuss its reformulation of the genre without also taking account of *Scariest Places on Earth* (ABC Family, 2000-2002), which debuted only five weeks later on ABC Family. Of these two series, *Scariest Places on Earth* adheres most closely to the traditional documentary format of the previous three decades, including a heavy mixture of new and archival footage of the locations profiled by the show and interviews with experts as well as people who had experienced the allegedly supernatural activity on the property. There is a significant departure from this formula, however, in the season finale. Over the course of the first four episodes, a brief segment setting up a family’s overnight stay in Chillingham Castle, “the most haunted location in England” was included among the other profiles of haunted locales around the globe. The disturbing and bloody history of Chillingham, an imposing medieval structure in Northumberland, was introduced in these segments by Alan Robson, a British radio personality. In these segments Robson would detail a different horror of war and torture that took place on the castle grounds, and we would also spend a little bit of time with the Olsons, the family that would stay overnight and risk encountering the gruesome specters of Chillingham’s past. The fifth and final episode of the first season features the Olsons’ overnight stay at Chillingham exclusively. There are no traditional documentary segments. Instead, the focus is entirely on the experience of the Olsons as they walk around the castle grounds performing a series of tasks like reciting “Druid chants,” lighting candles, and holding vigil for the castle’s trapped and tortured souls. This is where the series overlaps with *Fear*, which debuted on MTV a little over a month earlier, but it does not stray fully into the new reality show paradigm of unscripted interaction, and subsequent seasons continue to rely on more traditional forms of the genre to explicate the spooky histories of a variety of locations around the world with only intermittent “dare” episodes peppered throughout. MTV, meanwhile, had
had prior success with cheap, unscripted programming, and sought to innovate both their youth-oriented approach to reality shows and innovate on popular genres as well.

The format of *Fear* is in some ways presaged by MTV’s earlier reality show hit *The Real World* (MTV, 1992-present) in that it is essentially based on the same premise: put a group of Gen-Xers into the same location and film their every interaction. But instead of a highrise in Manhattan or a bohemian apartment in San Francisco, the participants are dared to endure a nightlong stay in a haunted building, many of which become standard locations for the ghost hunting shows’ investigations later in the decade. *Fear* also incorporates an element of competition in the show as the group must work together and walk away with cash after completing a succession of “dares” during their stay, including separating from other members of the group and going off into unexplored areas, staying behind for a specific period of time in a set location, or setting up an impromptu candle-lit séance in the middle of a dark boiler room and attempting to commune with the spirits. A typical episode of *Fear* begins with the introduction of the group, which will stay in a home base until they are given a dare to complete for the challenge. The various dares which make up the show’s action and provide the impetus for participants to leave their base also serve as opportunities to provide both the teens and viewers with information about the property’s history and its alleged supernatural activity, thus fulfilling an essential element of the paranormal reality show’s generic requirements.

The majority of the episode is then spent with participants as they wander around the abandoned buildings in the dark, documenting their experience directly and on some occasions bearing witness to the “evidence” they collect of the supernatural’s existence. *Fear* is the first reality show to have participants film themselves, and it is the first paranormal reality show to use infrared and thermal imaging cameras on American television. It is also the first such show
to focus its action almost exclusively on the act of investigating the paranormal, with only cursory elements of personality-based and competition shows mixed in. For all intents and purposes, it is the first ghost hunting show. But it still bears significant differences to the eventual format that became so popular in the mid-2000s, most notably the lack of emphasis on the evidence gathered. As reality shows both *Fear* and *Scariest Places on Earth* are primarily about showing the overnight stay in a *cinema verité* style, with a combination of stationary cameras placed around each property as well as the footage shot directly alongside and by the participants themselves.

While *Scariest Places on Earth* can still be seen in syndication, *Fear* has not aired with any regularity on an MTV network for at least a decade; it was abruptly cancelled after only six episodes of its second season in 2001 despite being a ratings hit. Allegedly the decision was made due to high production costs, but the same decision being made after 2004’s boom in ghost hunting shows seems unfathomable. Not only was the format partially laid out by *Fear* immensely successful when approached with a realistic tone and approach toward depicting paranormal research in future shows, the success of ghost hunting shows also ushered in a much larger trend in paranormal reality programming across a wide variety of cable networks, including a large number of more traditional documentary programs that were picked up as networks attempted to capitalize on a larger cultural interest in the paranormal in the new millennium.


3.3 The Spread of the Ghost Hunting Formula on Cable TV: Industrial & Textual Logics

Like many other cable networks in the mid-2000s, the Sci-Fi Channel’s success at growing its audience through the strategy of narrowcasting and cultivating a niche audience in the 1990s eventually resulted in the stagnation of audience growth, largely from the perception that sci-fi is largely a turn-off for viewers, barring the network from breaking into larger audience demographics. A shrinking market share for cable networks due to a confluence of problems facing the television industry in the new millennium - peer-to-peer file sharing, widespread use of social media and other web-based services like YouTube instead of traditional television, and eventually the growth of streaming video services like Netflix and Hulu - led networks to try new programming strategies, broadening their brand identities in order to garner a larger audience share. Throughout the 2000s, the Sci-Fi Channel attempted to grow its audience in a variety of ways, including the expansion of their slate of original series, miniseries events, and even non-sci-fi/fantasy properties owned by its parent company, NBC-Universal, including Extreme Championship Wrestling (Syfy, 2006-2010) and WWE SmackDown (UPN, 1999-2006; The CW, 2006-2008; MyNetworkTV, 2008-2010; Syfy, 2010-2015; USA Network, 2015-current).

Slowly the strategy began paying off, and the network’s audience expanded, especially after the success of Battlestar Galactica (BSG) (Syfy, 2004-2009) and Ghost Hunters in 2004. While BSG was the culmination of the network’s long-standing strategy to produce original scripted programming that began with shows like Lexx (Sci-Fi Channel, 1996-2002) and Farscape (Sci-Fi Channel, 1999-2003), Ghost Hunters represents a bit of a departure from the Sci-Fi Channel’s brand up to this point. Paranormal documentaries had been a staple on the

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network’s schedule since the very beginning, but the series itself came about as the network became interested in expanding its brand beyond hard science-fiction and began airing a variety of reality shows. As Barbara Selznick has noted, *Ghost Hunters* really set the network on a new path of programming possibilities, growing their non-traditional non-traditional audience by way of both younger viewers and women. In 2009, The Sci-Fi Channel changes its name to the phonetically spelled Syfy, representing the apex of the network’s rebranding strategy and attempt to garner ever-larger audiences. According to Dan Howe, then-president of Syfy, the term “sci-fi” still carried very specific connotations to audiences, bringing to mind aliens, space, and other generic elements. The original name “didn’t capture the full landscape of fantasy entertainment: the paranormal, the supernatural, action and adventure, superheroes.” The name change allowed the network the freedom to continue expanding its programming slate to include more reality programming, especially more paranormal documentaries and ghost hunting shows. The shift from a narrowcasting strategy that emphasized building a niche audience to a method of attracting a broader audience beyond the reach of genre fandom was complete. What this brief history of the network’s branding strategy demonstrates is that *Ghost Hunters* was introduced as a part of a larger initiative for the Sci Fi Channel under its parent company NBC Universal to grow its viewership in a shifting media environment which saw traditional audiences shifting from television to other related means of watching TV shows. The resulting conditions of conglomerate ownership, especially the need for the network to prove its continuing financial viability and to generate growth, resulted in Syfy and other cable networks branching out and taking calculated programming risks. One of the risks that paid off for Syfy, and which was

followed to great success by a wide variety of other channels, was the introduction of *Ghost Hunters* and the generation of a new paranormal reality show type.

TAPS was profiled in the *New York Times* in 2002, just before the paranormal production boom took hold in the U.S. According to the group’s co-founders, Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson, a number of companies approached them afterward to discuss producing a television show based on their experience as paranormal investigators.111 Though they were initially disinterested in the prospect of a TV series, they were ultimately persuaded to make the show. Hawes claims they agreed to make it because “it became apparent someone was going to make this show, and we wanted to make sure it was done right.”112 So in 2003, they signed a deal with Craig Piligian’s Pilgrim Films and Television and went into production on the show that would become *Ghost Hunters*. The first season, which consisted of only ten episodes, aired between October and December, 2004, and was a massive success for Syfy. It also pioneered and popularized a new reality TV format - the ghost hunting show - which would soon be adapted across a variety of cable networks while also fueling widespread proliferation of other types of paranormal reality programming as well, including a massive resurgence of the traditional documentary-style paranormal reality show, including Syfy’s own *Paranormal Witness*, and some personality-based series like *Long Island Medium*.

There were, of course, precursors to the *Ghost Hunters* formula. As previously mentioned, some of its style and visual aesthetics could be found on U.S. television in the shows *Scariest Places on Earth* and MTV’s *Fear*, as well as in the segments of documentary shows which included raw video or audio recordings as evidence of a haunting, especially the “Ghost” episodes of *In Search Of...* and *Sightings* discussed earlier. It should also be noted that *Scariest*

112 Ibid.
Places on Earth and Fear premiered one year after the massive success of The Blair Witch Project (Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, 1999), which launched a wave of imitators, popularized the “found footage” style of horror film, and carefully combined a fictional narrative with the observational aesthetics of documentary filmmaking.\(^{113}\) According to Caetlin Benson-Allott, that film’s representational strategy deploys amateurism in order to convey authenticity in much the same way as modern reality television.\(^{114}\) But if we apply film historian Richard Nowell’s conception of cycle development to the ghost hunting formula popularized by Ghost Hunters, we can see that these earlier programs—including the British series Most Haunted, which first aired in the U.K. two years before Ghost Hunters but not in the U.S. until two years after—are what he calls “pioneer productions.” These are productions which establish a new type of film - or in this case a television formula - but which themselves do not generate a full-blown cycle of imitators seeking to capitalize on their success. In order for the cycle to develop, there must be what Nowell calls a “trailblazer hit,” which is “seen to have been commercially successful and content-wise is seen to differ from contemporaneous hits.”\(^{115}\) Thus, a cycle is constituted once a production is commercially successful and imitated widely by other productions.

Ghost Hunters is clearly the generative text in this regard. The series premiere on October 6, 2004, garnered 1.1 million viewers, already one of the highest-rated Wednesday series in the channel’s history.\(^{116}\) The first three weeks saw its audience grow by nearly 27 percent, and the week before Halloween Syfy’s parent company, NBC Universal, decided to air

\(^{113}\) For more on found footage horror films, see the next chapter.

\(^{114}\) Benson-Allott, Shattered Tapes, 179.

\(^{115}\) Nowell, Blood Money, 46.

back-to-back episodes in primetime on their flagship broadcast channel, NBC.\(^\text{117}\) Within its first six weeks *Ghost Hunters* was averaging an audience of 1.4 million, and its season two finale garnered 2.3 million viewers.\(^\text{118}\) Syfy was ecstatic with this performance. Press releases repeatedly tout its success and the growth of its audience, as well as its contributions to the network’s brand identity.\(^\text{119}\) The season four finale brought the show its highest ratings with a recorded 2.8 million viewers, a very significant audience for a reality program on a basic cable network.\(^\text{120}\) Something about the show had clearly struck a chord with audiences, and Syfy sought to capitalize as much as possible on that enthusiasm.

In 2006, spurred by an interest in expanding its paranormal programming, Syfy purchased the cable broadcast rights to the documentary film *Ghost Adventures*, which would be developed for a series by Travel Channel two years later.\(^\text{121}\) According to producer/director/star Nick Groff, the network loved the film and “thought it would fit right in” on their schedule. It drew a 1.7 rating on its first airing, comparable to the average ratings of *Ghost Hunters* in its first two seasons.\(^\text{122}\) But Syfy ultimately passed on a series deal, instead opting to develop *Ghost Hunters* into a franchise and develop other series using the same format like *Destination Truth*


\(\text{122}\) Ibid., 96.
(Syfy, 2007-2012), which follows a team of investigators as they search for cryptozoological phenomena around the globe.\textsuperscript{123} Also in 2006, A&E debuted their own ghost hunting show,\textit{Paranormal State}, about a group of University of Pennsylvania students who conducted investigations of paranormal occurrences, mostly in local Pennsylvania homes. Syfy’s next ghost hunting show would not air until 2008, when \textit{Ghost Hunters International} premiered and launched both Syfy’s bevy of paranormal content into the stratosphere and \textit{Ghost Adventures} was becoming a major hit and rival of \textit{Ghost Hunters} on the Travel Channel.

\textbf{3.3.1 Reinforcing the Cycle: Paranormal State and Ghost Adventures}

\textit{Paranormal State} was the first ghost hunting series to air on another network after \textit{Ghost Hunters} became a hit for Syfy. The series premiere on December 10, 2007, was the most-watched series debut on A&E since 2004, delivering 2.5 million viewers.\textsuperscript{124} Over the course of five seasons the show detailed the casefiles of the Pennsylvania State University Paranormal Research Society (PRS), a student-run group founded by Penn State student Ryan Buell whose name recalls the famous Society for Psychical Research (SPR) discussed in the previous chapter. As the show’s de facto star, Buell functioned as the lead investigator and expert, providing commentary via “director’s logs,” which were featured as voice over narrations and which may or may not have actually been recorded on location. Aside from Buell, the PRS was comprised of other Penn State students with an interest in paranormal investigation, and they were often


assisted by psychic medium Chip Coffey. Each episode focused on a new investigation, during which the PRS interviewed witnesses, performed walkthroughs of the property, and consult with various paranormal experts, including not only Coffey, but other psychic mediums and demonologists as well, including Lorraine Warren, who turns up to provide assistance on cases involving demonic presences in several episodes. Throughout the series, Buell claims that he has been haunted by a demon named “Belial” and that the demon periodically appears while the team is on investigations to frighten and mess with him. The PRS also uses all of the same equipment as other paranormal groups, including TAPS, to gather scientific evidence of a haunting, though the analysis of this evidence as well as the technology itself plays a much smaller role in *Paranormal State* than it does in other ghost hunting programs. Instead, the experiences and feelings of the team, especially those of Buell and Coffey, are emphasized when determining what happened on a property.

The show’s overall presentation of the act of paranormal investigation is quite similar to that of *Ghost Hunters*, and it is treated just as seriously by the investigators. There is an emphasis on the use of technology to record and analyze evidence, and it looks much the same, frequently using low-light and infrared camera footage and a chronological structure that reveals major evidence and reaches a conclusion about the property and the haunting toward the end of each episode. This is no doubt because the show was conceived of in the wake of *Ghost Hunters*’s success, and was subsequently reformatted to the ghost hunting formula. According to the show’s executive producer, Elaine Fontaine Bryant, the series was originally pitched as a scripted series, but she thought it would make a “terrific non-fiction show.”

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“Ghost Hunters had certainly been out there and had done well for a couple of seasons by the time we launched but we have a such a different take on the paranormal.”126 As indicated by Bryant’s comment, there are significant differences in the way Paranormal State presents investigations and its evidence. One of the primary differences is the emphasis placed on more traditional spiritualist and religious beliefs, which are virtually nonexistent on Ghost Hunters. Not only does Buell claim to be haunted by a demonic presence in his personal life, but he often claims that the demon Belial shows up during PRS investigations to mess with him. Additionally, many investigations feature séances in an attempt to open up pathways of communication between the spirits haunting the property and the PRS.

In the aforementioned season one episode “The Name,” Buell and his team investigate the case of a mother and son, Jodi and Nate, who are being tormented in their home by multiple presences. Among the claims made are that they are touched by unseen beings, they can feel presences around them in the home, and that there are the ghosts of children in the basement. At the very beginning of the episode, we see Buell giving his team a briefing on this information before they go to the client’s home. Before he conducts interviews with Jodi and Nate, he has them speak to a consulting counselor, who assesses the living situation and potential emotional issues which have developed between them, which she then discusses with Buell before he undertakes any sort of paranormal investigation in the home. While interviewing Jodi, she does a few odd things, including disclosing that she found several “crystals” in her backyard and that the previous owner gave her a newspaper clipping when she bought the house. That clipping details the murder of a family on the property several generations earlier. From this interview, the show cuts to a detailed history of this murder, including an interview with a descendent of

126 Ibid.
one of the victims, who gives Buell the family’s account of what happened. During this interview, not only do we see this relative of the murdered family speaking to Ryan, but we also see images of family photographs and newspaper clippings, both of which serve to authenticate the story we are being told. After this segment, Buell calls the former owner and asks why he left the article for Jodi. “I wanted her to be aware,” he tells Buell over the phone. Buell asks him, “Do you believe this house might be haunted?” “Yes, I do,” he replies. He tells Buell that his family used to hear children downstairs, a claim which Jodi said her grandmother also made while she was living with them. After this, the team take Jodi and Nate to the graveyard across from their house where this family is said to be buried. Armed with flashlights and electric lanterns, the group finds their graves, verifying another element about the supposed history of the home. Next, the PRS heads back to their hotel for the night, but will be back the next evening to finish their investigation.

On-screen text informs us that at 3:08 AM, Buell is awakened from sleep by a dream in which he hears the name of a demon. He informs the members of his team that he has been hearing this name in his mind for weeks, possibly stemming from a case he once worked at the behest of the “Roman Catholic diocese.” With the possibility of a demonic presence in the case, he calls in “reinforcements” in the person of psychic medium Chip Coffey. When Coffey arrives, he and Buell go on a walkthrough of the property and Coffey performs a reading. He says there are two types of energy present: residual human energy in the form of a young girl, and a darker presence that is speaking like a man. After Coffey’s walkthrough, Buell declares in one of his “director’s log” voice-overs, “At this point, we’ve learned all we can through formal investigating.” This means that it’s time to perform “Dead Time,” the signature moment of an investigation on Paranormal State. During “Dead Time,” the PRS holds a séance - always at
three in the morning - and attempts to communicate with whatever spirits are already in the home. During this particular séance, they try to talk to the little girl first, but Coffey says she is hesitant because of another presence. Buell asks the girl to leave and go to a safe space, after which the bathroom door opens on its own. This event marks the first time we see any evidence presented through a recording, as we see the “PRS Motion Cam” footage of a door opening. Whether this is an actual recording or a re-enactment is never clear as we almost never see members of the PRS using cameras or audio recorders to collect evidence during their investigations. While trying to contact the dark, male spirit, Coffey says a name has popped into his head, and he writes it down and shows it to Buell. It is the same name that Ryan has been dreaming about. This is not a coincidence. Buell decides he has to call in Lorraine Warren for support. As one of the only true demonologists in the world, as Buell tells us, she is an invaluable resource. Lorraine walks through the house and feels a great deal of anger in the home, and the sadness emanating from Nate’s room. She talks about this with the mother, Jodi, who tells her about the difficulties her son has had with his biological and adoptive fathers, both of whom have left at this point. Lorraine tells Buell that Jodi has attracted a number of different phenomena to the home and that it needs to be cleansed. He agrees, and sets up both a cleansing and a counseling relationship with a priest from the local diocese. Before leaving, Buell and his team perform an interim house blessing. At the end of the episode, we are informed via on-screen text that Jodi and Nate have not experienced further activity after the priest’s blessing of the home.

From this outline of a single episode, it is obvious that the personal history and torments of Ryan Buell are the engine behind *Paranormal State*’s specific iteration of the ghost hunting formula. Buell’s relationship with the demon Belial in fact plays out over entire seasons of the
show, fitting each individual case into a master narrative that details Buell’s personal struggle with the demonic presence. It is also obvious how different in content this series is from *Ghost Hunters* while still emulating the basic investigative formula and even the aesthetics of the series. Each episode starts with a briefing on the specifics of the case being investigated, moves on to interviews with the witnesses to the haunting, some background on the history of the property and any tragic incidents that have occurred on it, and the investigation takes up the bulk of the episode’s run time, and always takes place at night. But there is a much higher infusion of religious belief in *Paranormal State*’s subject matter than in *Ghost Hunters*, which is much more subtle about the TAPS team’s understanding of the paranormal and its relationship to science, and even sometimes outright disavows certain elements of other ghost hunting organizations’ investigative practices, such as psychic mediums, because they do not represent objectively verifiable evidence. The act of the séance, which has direct roots in the religious practice of American and European Spiritualism, also ties the majority of the investigation undertaken by the PRS into religious belief systems. And all of this says nothing of the constant presence of demonic spirits in the *Paranormal State* landscape. Many episodes detail Buell’s struggles with Belial or feature hauntings which are allegedly caused by the presence of something inhuman. Prayer and blessing are frequently deployed by the group in order to cleanse homes or to protect their clients. Experts like Chip Coffey and Lorraine Warren, who claims to have deep personal ties to the Catholic church herself, ascribe religious solutions to many of the cases investigated by the PRS. “Dead Time,” the key point of the PRS’s investigative strategy, also involves no technology and we see very little recorded evidence from episode to episode. Buell will often wear headphones during the séance, which are never explained diegetically, though there is a long tradition of participants in Spiritualist séance using electronic communications technology
while attempting to communicate with or collect evidence of the afterlife, including telegraph wire, radio waves, and so on. Video cameras and digital audio recorders are just the newest iteration of the symbiotic relationship between science, technology, and belief in Spiritualism.

The best illustration of how far this technological possibility can be pushed using the formula of the ghost hunting show is *Ghost Adventures*, which has aired on the Travel Channel since 2008. Originally conceived as a documentary film directed by Zak Bagans and Nick Groff, *Ghost Adventures* follows the investigations of the Ghost Adventures Crew (GAC), which consists of Bagans, Groff, and Aaron Goodwin. The film was shot in 2005 and did well on the festival circuit. According to Groff, the idea for the film came about one night in 2004 while “watching a paranormal show on television,” but he claims that he does not remember what show he was watching. Given that only one paranormal show about ghost hunting was airing regularly in 2004, and that Groff was aware of this show in other sections of his book, the show in question is undoubtedly *Ghost Hunters*, which had just begun airing on Syfy. Syfy bought the broadcast rights to the *Ghost Adventures* doc in 2007 because, according to Groff, “SciFi was looking for programming to follow their own paranormal shows, and they loved our film. They thought it would fit right in.” But by 2006, Syfy was already developing its own slate of original paranormal programming, and it appears that *Ghost Adventures* was simply filling a programming slot that would later be filled by series like *Ghost Hunters International* and *Destination Truth*. In 2007, Groff went about trying to sell *Ghost Adventures* as a series, eventually landing at Travel Channel with executive producer Matt Butler, who had brought the British ghost hunting show *Most Haunted* over to the U.S. the year before, and which had done

127 See: Sconce, *Haunted Media*.
128 Groff, *Chasing Spirits*, 50.
129 Ibid., 96.
The series premiered on October 17, 2008, and was a big success for the network. They renewed it for twenty-six episodes the following year, which ran in programming blocks on Friday nights beginning in June. The series was and continues to be a massive success for the channel, and has frequently been the most-watched series on the Travel Channel, performing especially well with young and female audiences.\textsuperscript{131}

\textit{Ghost Adventures} adheres very closely to the structure and formula of \textit{Ghost Hunters}. At the beginning of each episode the Ghost Adventures Crew (GAC) arrives at the property they will be investigating and conducts interviews with the owners and witnesses. Based on these interviews, they mark locations on the property in which to set up static cameras, which will run the entire time they are investigating, recording everything that happens in that alleged hot spot. Once the investigation begins, they go into “lockdown,” meaning that no one enters or leaves the locations - including them - until their investigation is concluded the following morning. This is one of two major deviations from the basic formula of \textit{Ghost Hunters}, the other being the lack of a production crew following Bagans, Groff, and Aaron Goodwin around the property. The GAC shoots every bit of footage used in each episode from their own point-of-view so that \textit{Ghost Adventures} “would be more true to an actual paranormal investigation,” where outside production members could not contaminate their evidence.\textsuperscript{132}

What this translates to in practice is a much more streamlined and linear presentation of all the collected evidence within the investigative portion of each episode itself. Instead of holding all of their footage for analysis and judgment at the end of the episode as TAPS does on

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 100. \\
\textsuperscript{132} Groff, \textit{Chasing Spirits}, 125.
\end{flushleft}
Ghost Hunters, Ghost Adventures incorporates that evidence into the presentation of the investigation itself, meaning that the audience sees or hears what has been captured as it is happening on screen, introduced via frequent voice over narration by Zak Bagans, the de facto host of the program. The GAC also differs in their investigative methodology from other ghost hunting teams, “provoking” spirits and attempting to get a response from them rather than simply engaging with or communicating with them. Bagans in particular is fond of taunting spirits, especially if he believes they may be inhuman or demonic, and trying to get a rise out of them. On numerous occasions he and Groff have made claims of being possessed, scratched, or otherwise harmed by these inhuman presences. As a result, the evidence collected on Ghost Adventures is similar to that from Paranormal State in that there is a heavy reliance on subjective experience and less of an emphasis is placed on objectivity and rationality, and the line between religion and science is blurred in an explicit manner through the presentation of evidence on the show.

While both Nick Groff, creator of Ghost Adventures, and Elaine Fontaine Bryant, the producer of Paranormal State, are reticent to admit that the ideas for their shows are in any way related to the success of Ghost Hunters, the connections between the three programs and their use of a similar formula are plain to see and tease out. Not only do they frame their understanding of the paranormal in similar combinations of religious belief and pseudo-science, they also emulate the aesthetics of one another to a remarkable degree, with Paranormal State’s low-light conditions and the POV-only cameras of Ghost Adventures each effectively adopting one half of Ghost Hunters combination of footage shot by TAPS and footage shot by the production team that follows them around. This is unsurprising, given that television formats themselves are one of the underpinning logics of production throughout the medium’s history, particularly in the
United States. But because of the legal implications in terms of copyright, television producers and executives maintain and cultivate their status as original content creators, unwilling or unable to say where their ideas are generated, and with which other texts they clearly function as intertexts, or even just on the level of their target audience. Their ideas are either original, or at the very least they are very different from other programs. Regardless, the linkages between these series are crystal clear on the level of the text itself, and the industrial history of the development of each show in relation to the prior success of a similar formula.

3.3.2 “Your Cable Is Haunted”: Proliferation and Saturation

After the success of Paranormal State, Ghost Adventures, and Syfy’s own official spin-off series, Ghost Hunters International, the ghost hunting formula proliferated across American cable networks, developing into a full-blown production cycle. Ghost hunting shows became so pervasive that their seeming ubiquity on many seemingly unrelated cable channels was noted within the industry itself, the trade press, the entertainment and news press, and popular culture more generally. A 2010 article in the L.A. Times informs readers, “Your cable is haunted,” highlighting the boom in production of paranormal-themed programming on television and profiling several ghost hunting shows. The article also points to the ghost hunting formula’s connection to not only the larger proliferation of a wide variety of paranormal reality programming, but also makes connections with popular films as well, including the then-new Paranormal Activity (Oren Peli, 2009) franchise. The ghost hunting formula was so successful, that “several networks...built their lineups around ghost ghost/paranormal reality shows.”

134 King, “Your Cable is Haunted.”
is certainly true of both Syfy and Travel Channel, both of which created a strong brand identity on certain nights of the week with their paranormal reality programming. Syfy’s “Sci Fi Wednesdays” was anchored by *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Hunters International*, which aired in alternating seasons throughout the year so as to always keep some iteration of the franchise on the air with new episodes. It also featured the show *Destination Truth*, which as previously mentioned adapted the ghost hunting formula to include cryptozoological phenomena, and *Scare Tactics*, a hidden camera show that placed participants in the middle of science-fiction and horror situations.

In 2009, Syfy attempted to expand the *Ghost Hunters* brand even further with the premiere of *Ghost Hunters Academy*, which combined the ghost hunting formula with a competition angle. Over the course of the show’s single season, hosts Steve Gonsalves and dave Tango, the equipment and case managers from TAPS, spent each episode teaching a different aspect of paranormal investigation to a small group of amateurs looking to win a spot on the TAPS team. “Graduates” of the training did in fact appear on the franchise’s two main series, with Adam Berry and Michelle Tate eventually joining *Ghost Hunters* and Karl Pfeiffer and Susan Slaughter moving on to *Ghost Hunters International*. Craig Piligian also attempted another spin-off series, *UFO Hunters* (Syfy, 2009), but this concept was unsuccessful and the series only aired what the network claimed was a special.135 In addition to these official franchise entries and spin-offs from Pilgrim Films and Syfy, the network also introduced a further five ghost hunting shows into its lineup over the next seven years, including *Haunted Collector* (Syfy, 2011-2013), *Haunted Highway* (Syfy, 2012-2013), *Ghost Mine* (Syfy, 2013), *Deep South*

Paranormal (Syfy, 2013), and Haunting: Australia (Syfy, 2014). These shows were produced alongside a bevy of more traditional paranormal documentary programs, including the hit series Paranormal Witness, which has been heavily influential on the genre in its own right in the years since its premiere. Each of these programs took up the basic formula of the ghost hunting show and introduced a slight modification to create enough differentiation between similar products.

Ghost Mine was about Patrick Doyle and Kristen Luman, who investigated the Crescent Mine in Oregon for potential paranormal activity. They would enter the mine and collect evidence, and then leave so that the miners could work. Patrick and Kristen would then monitor the mining team via their digital video recording (DVR) system to see if they experienced anything supernatural and then discuss those experiences and reveal any evidence they had collected at the end of the episode. Haunted Highway investigated cases of cryptid activity and alleged hauntings on roads throughout the United States. Two teams of investigators, one headed by Jack Osbourne (son of Ozzy Osbourne and former star of the hit MTV “reality sitcom” The Osbournes [MTV, 2002-2005]) and the other featuring former hosts of the paranormal documentary series Fact or Faked: Paranormal Files (Syfy, 2010-2012), travel across the country to check out these cases and shoot every episode themselves, without a camera crew. The most successful of the Syfy programs from this period, Haunted Collector, stars demonologist John Zaffis, who investigates haunted houses and other properties in order to identify and remove any objects which may trigger or be tied to paranormal activity. Zaffis then takes the items to his haunted artifacts museum, which operates from his home in Connecticut.

After the success of Paranormal State, A&E only introduced two further ghost hunting series. One was an official spin-off program titled Paranormal State: The New Class (A&E, 2010-2011), which followed members of Hoosier State Paranormal, a student group that was
mentored by seasoned paranormal investigator John E.L. Tenney. In 2010, the network sought “to one up Sci-Fi’s *Ghost Hunters* with a new series that blends paranormal investigation with law enforcement.”  

*Paranormal Cops*, a series featuring a group of off-duty Chicago police officers as they investigated alleged hauntings, particularly those which may be the result of a murder on the property. Though it only lasted six episodes, this series presents an extremely interesting variation on the *Ghost Hunters* formula, as the officers use forensic science to investigate claims as well as more traditional audio/visual technologies. In one episode, a property owner tells them that a stain on the floor is supposedly from the blood of a murder victim who died in a knife fight many years earlier. During their investigation, they use luminol, a chemical which emits a blue glow when it comes into contact with trace amounts of blood in a crime scene, as well as other forensic techniques to determine if the stain is actually blood. There is no reaction to the luminol, and they conclude that even though they cannot say what has caused the stain, it is likely not human blood. Scenes such as this serve to demonstrate the objective nature with which the group operates, as they do TAPS on *Ghost Hunters*. The added benefit of them being off-duty police officers is that they have access to other means of scientific investigation, like luminol, as well as the experience of investigating crime scenes and examining evidence in an objective manner as professionals. But the ratings for *Paranormal State: The New Class* and *Paranormal Cops* never coalesced into longevity for A&E, and both series were cancelled in 2011, with the latter only airing six episodes.

Travel Channel has likewise primarily focused on franchise-oriented productions, with the *Fear*-like “dare” show *Paranormal Challenge* created by *Ghost Adventures* lead investigator Zack Bagans airing for one season in 2011, and the successful spin-off *Ghost Adventures:*

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Aftershocks, which premiered in 2014. In Paranormal Challenge, Bagans would invite two teams of paranormal investigators to go head-to-head in a competition to see who captures and presents the most compelling evidence of a haunting. At the end of each episode, a team of judges would assess the evidence and determine who won the competition. Aftershocks revisits previous cases of the series with recaps of the Ghost Adventures Crew’s findings and returns to the evidence collected during them for further analysis and discussion. Sometimes they also return to the location and conduct follow-up interviews to see if the activity has continued after their time there. One of the strategies the Travel Channel has employed to capitalize on the success of Ghost Adventures and its related programs, as well as promoting reruns of more traditional documentary-style shows like Haunted Hotels (Travel Channel, 2001-2005) or the short-lived TMZ-style series Paranormal Paparazzi (Travel Channel, 2012) at other times on the network’s schedule, is the implementation of programming blocks centered exclusively around paranormal programming. In these programming blocks, a new episode of Ghost Adventures would air, followed by three reruns of either more Ghost Adventures or one of the other paranormal programs airing on the network. The block repeats at midnight, again with the new episode as the lead-in program. In 2011, Travel Channel introduced The Dead Files, a new ghost hunting show into the block, capitalizing on the success of not only Ghost Hunters, but also the popularity of this block of programming. Originally introduced to air back-to-back with the new season of Ghost Hunters, The Dead Files eventually took over its own status as a lead-in program, allowing the Travel Channel to schedule subsequent seasons of the show to air in alternating seasons with their flagship paranormal franchise. Effectively, this strategy meant that new episodes of one of the network’s two main ghost hunting programs aired new episodes year

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round. This Friday night block of shows was eventually added to Saturdays as well, devoting two entire days of programming on the network to paranormal shows, especially *Ghost Adventures* and *The Dead Files*. The strategy paid off in subsequent year-to-year growth for both Friday and Saturday’s ratings.\(^\text{138}\)

*The Dead Files* is an intriguing entry in the ghost hunting cycle because its investigators do not use technology of any kind in order to gather evidence. Instead, Amy Allan, a psychic medium, and Steve DiSchiavi, a retired homicide detective, investigate cases in a more old-fashioned way. Allan and DiSchiavi each go about investigating the property using their own methodologies, only discussing the case at the end of each episode when they disclose their findings to their client. DiSchiavi conducts interviews with the owners and other witnesses, then digs through local archives to see what information he can find about the location’s history; primarily he is interested in murders that have occurred on or adjacent to the property or any other events which might presage the experiences its owners are having there. The objectivity of the historical record and his one-on-one interviews with witnesses neither confirms nor denies the alleged activity, but serves as later evidence to compare to that of Allan’s findings. Amy Allan conducts a walkthrough of the property at night, performing a reading and reporting her feelings to her husband, who follows her around with a camera to record her responses to the location, and a camera crew, which shoots both of them wandering around the property. Interestingly, the nightvision camera operated by Allen’s husband is never used to try and capture evidence of a haunting, focusing instead primarily on Allan’s face as she encounters one ghastly presence after another.

The visual aesthetics of the editing in this sequence, however, recall those of *Ghost Hunters* almost precisely, with the constant cutting back and forth from the nightvision footage and the camera crew’s footage positioning viewers in a similar relationship to the visibility afforded by infrared in near total darkness. Namely, the “evidence” of the haunting - that collected and visualized on the only piece of technological equipment in the room - is solely that of Allan’s subjective experience. Technological objectivity and the scientific discourse is completely removed from the show’s methodology, though the visual aesthetics of Allen’s walkthroughs create a clear intertextual understanding of what infrared footage denotes in other ghost hunting shows. For all intents and purposes, the technologically mediated evidence the fuels the ghost hunting formula’s logic of objectivity and rationalism is simply replaced with the flesh and blood psychic medium and a basic confirmation of her experiences by the historical record. The slippages between scientific rationality and Spiritualist beliefs in how communications technology that are implied in other shows in the cycle, primarily *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Adventures*, are rendered explicit by *The Dead Files*.

Other entries in the cycle appeared across a wider swath of cable networks in this same period. These include Discovery Channel’s *Ghost Lab*, which ran for two seasons, Destination America’s *Ghost Asylum* and *Ghost Stalkers*, and most bizarrely, Cartoon Network’s *The Othersiders*, a program about five teenagers who investigated paranormal activity and then posted their findings on the network’s website. Coupled with the programming strategies of Syfy, A&E, and the Travel Channel to build on the success of their flagship shows, the proliferation of ghost hunting shows in this period corresponds with a broader restructuring of network brand identities. For example, according to Stuart Snyder, the president and chief operating officer for Turner Broadcasting’s Animation, Young Adults and Kids Media division
at the time, *The Othersiders* was part of a mid-decade rebranding operation, representing “the next phase of Cartoon Network’s ambitious, ongoing strategy to re-invent the network and and re-energize” their youth business.\(^\text{139}\) As discussed earlier, *Ghost Hunters, Paranormal State*, and *Ghost Adventures* were similarly used as rebranding material in the underpinning logic of the cable broadcast system in an ongoing bid to increase an ever-decreasing market share as cable and satellite providers expanded their coverage to include ever more niche and specialty networks, but each with a smaller percentage of subscription revenue generated by the contract. And while some networks have had a great success with long-running ghost hunting and other paranormal reality shows, especially Syfy and Travel Channel, others dipped their toes into the water in an attempt to capitalize on a trend that never coalesced into enough of a new audience to matter. And even some channels that had initial success with the formula, as A&E had with *Paranormal State*, that success did not translate into long-term franchising and programming opportunities with subsequent series.

### 3.3.3 Re-Cycled

On June 7, 2016, Jason Hawes took to his Facebook page to announce that *Ghost Hunters* would end after its eleventh season and twelfth year on Syfy. In that post he writes, “With heavy heart [sic] we want to inform everyone that we are choosing at this time to end our relationship with Syfy channel.”\(^\text{140}\) Reporting on this announcement in the *Huffington Post*, Aaron Sagers discussed the influence of the show, stating that “it is heretofore Syfy’s longest-running series,


and it ushered in an era of similarly-themed reality-TV shows,” and noting that, “arguably with
the exception of Travel Channel’s long-running Ghost Adventures, is the only one to truly
become part of the pop culture lexicon and break through to the mainstream.”141 With the end of
Ghost Hunters also comes the end of the first cycle of ghost hunting reality shows on cable
television. This has to do with not only the waning audience for these shows, but also the
changes in direction for many of the networks that produced them in the first place. Syfy has re-
oriented toward the production of science-fiction properties that fit more in line with its original
brand identity, such as Wynonna Earp (Syfy, 2016-current) and The Expanse (Syfy, 2016-2018;
Amazon Prime, 2018-current). A&E dropped ghost hunting programming after Paranormal
State: The Next Class failed to generate ratings success for the network. And although Travel
Channel continues to air Ghost Adventures and several other related projects, with the exception
of The Dead Files, they are all produced by or involve Zak Bagans in some way, which points to
a very insular and niche approach to building that programming out for the channel.

This does not mean that ghost hunting shows are completely gone, however, only that the
cycle is being reformulated and will eventually coalesce into something slightly different. The
Discovery Channel family of networks (Discovery Networks) in particular - especially
Destination America - has positioned itself as the de facto home of new paranormal
programming, picking up two shows from Nick Groff of Ghost Adventures after he left Ghost
Adventures, the short-lived Ghost Stalkers (Destination America, 2014), which starred longtime
paranormal researcher E.L. Tenney (who was also the star of the Paranormal State spin-off), and
his own program, Paranormal Lockdown (Destination America, 2016; TLC, 2017-current),
which stars Groff and Paranormal State alumnus Katrina Weidman. There have also been a few

141 Aaron Sagers, “Goodbye, Ghost Hunters!,” Huffington Post, June 9, 2016, web,
further iterations which Altogether, Destination America currently airs sixteen different paranormal reality shows, three of which are in the ghost hunting format. One of the most striking developments in paranormal reality television even from the description of the Destination America shows is how many of these series feature talent from other series, and how often stars of other series pop up as guests on these other shows. Amy Bruni and Adam Berry, known from their lengthy tenures as members of TAPS, have appeared on *Paranormal Lockdown*, which now airs on the same network as their new show, *Kindred Spirits* (TLC, 2016-current): TLC. This indicates not only an intentional effort on the part of Discovery Networks to build shows which cater to an established audience, but also to the portability of ghost hunting series within a single brand identity, even from network to network.

### 3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter we have traced the development of the ghost hunting reality show formula on American television. We have seen how it was influenced and shaped by the industrial conditions of both broadcast and cable networks from the 1950s to the 2000s, and how American popular culture has been engaged with by both reality and scripted television in different cycles of cultural interest in supernatural subjects. We have paid special attention to the genealogy of the ghost hunting formula in order to delineate its key elements and how each show in the cycle replicated it with slight variation in order to differentiate it just enough for audiences to tune in from week to week. This is important for demonstrating the malleability of the formula as well as just how widespread its popularity had become on cable television. In the next chapter we will examine the history of found footage horror films in the 2000s as they develop alongside the ghost hunting reality show formula, paying close attention to how the found footage style uses
similar aesthetics to tell ghost stories, leading to the incorporation of the ghost hunting show formula wholesale into found footage films in the last half of the decade, creating a production cycle across the medium-specific boundaries of television and film.

4 NEW WAYS OF SEEING: FOUND FOOTAGE HORROR & THE GHOST HUNTING REALITY SHOW

4.1 Introduction

At the risk of abusing a pun, paranormal found footage horror films and ghost hunting reality shows are kindred spirits. They share rather obvious aesthetic similarities, largely due to their appropriation of documentary filmmaking techniques and their diegetic acknowledgment of the camera. It is also, to a slightly lesser extent, the result of generic intertextuality which positions their use of those aesthetics and techniques as horror. This is because at their heart, the narrative structures of each are contemporary iterations of the ghost story, a rich generic tradition that, as seen in the introduction, stretches back into antiquity. The basic plot of many ghost stories is constructed around characters investigating the cause of a haunting, collecting evidence, and proposing a solution, which often involves discovering a reason the spirit is “trapped” on earth and unable to rest in peace.

The similarities between found footage horror and ghost hunting reality shows are not limited to matters of formalism; to structure and aesthetics. They are also bound together through a shared understanding of the capabilities of communications technologies to record evidence of or contact the spirits of the dead. As we have already discussed in depth regarding ghost hunting television shows, this is tied to a centuries-long cultural history that mingles religious ideology with the widespread use of emergent and developing electronic technologies. In both found
footage films and ghost hunting shows, this primarily means the camera itself, which is an acknowledged diegetic presence that both constructs the text as it occurs while also serving as evidence to be dissected and examined by the viewer. But as we have seen in the close analysis of *Ghost Hunters* in chapter 2, this extends beyond the camera, to other communications technologies, both older and newer: Ouija boards, séances (in which the spirit is manifested by a “medium” whose body is itself a conduit), radio frequencies and frequency scanners (“spirit boxes’’), and so on.

But the relationship between paranormal found footage horror films and ghost hunting television shows is not merely a function of its intertextuality, generic lineage, or the cultural and religious history of Spiritualism and spirit communication. It is also a product of media convergence and the shifting structures of media conglomerates which increasingly prioritize the production of similar texts across a variety of platforms and different media. This extends beyond the production of similar products along the lines of generic formulas in order to mitigate the risks inherent in the cost of production to the establishing of brand identities, and attempts to attract audiences to different products in as many different distribution points as possible, especially if it generates profit from those nodes throughout the conglomerate structure. This is a little trickier to parse out and navigate with limited resources and limited direct commentary from the industry, but this strategy is self-evident in the ways creative talent discuss their awareness of similar product, production schedules filled with similar content across multiple subsidiary companies and platforms owned by the conglomerate, and audience and fan engagement.

This chapter traces the development of a trans-media ghost hunting cycle by examining the various relationships between paranormal found footage horror films and ghost hunting
television shows in the 2000s and 2010s. It will generate a genealogy of the paranormal found footage horror film cycle inspired by *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999), and which began in earnest with the massive success of *Paranormal Activity* in 2009. It will use that lineage to examine the formal characteristics of the found footage style in relation to ghost stories and the haunted house sub-genre of horror. It will also highlight some of the ways the industrial logic of film and television production in the 21st century uses popular formulas across media boundaries to avert risk and to attract audiences across numerous platforms. This last form of analysis involves a large amount of inference, as due to the contemporaneous nature of the history being studied and written about there are relatively few public documents available for many of the conglomerates, their subsidiaries, or independent production companies involved in the generation of this cycle. Therefore, in order to generate an understanding of the industrial forces at play, I will use articles from trade publications, newspapers, and genre websites and blogs, interviews with creative talent and industry executives (when available), film reviews, and user comments on IMDB and YouTube’s public comments sections. This will allow for a demonstration of the various industrial strategies at play which gave rise to the trans-media ghost hunting cycle in television and film.

### 4.2 “A Year Later, Their Footage Was Found”: *The Blair Witch Project* and Found Footage Style

A year before MTV’s *Fear* aired on American cable television, and just before the pioneering ghost hunting show *Most Haunted* would debut in the United Kingdom, *The Blair Witch Project* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sanchez, 1999) was released to critical praise and a massive international box office haul. Although a number of popular and cult films had been
made in the found footage style in a variety of different genres over the years, *Blair Witch* popularized found footage horror in mainstream culture, using inventive marketing ballyhoo and a unique conceit that blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction for audiences around the world.\(^{142}\) Many of the factors that contributed to the rise of paranormal reality television in the 2000s also contributed to the development of the found footage horror film in the same period, including widespread cultural interest in the supernatural, shifting industrial conditions in film and television production which prioritized the repetition of popular formulas that could be used to turn a quick profit in a number of different media types and develop into franchise opportunities, and, a bit later in the decade, the introduction of streaming video platforms like YouTube which familiarized viewers with user-generated amateur video content.

### 4.2.1 Pioneer Production

*The Blair Witch Project* was a pop culture phenomenon, arriving at the end of a lackluster decade for the horror genre on the whole. (Note: 90s horror) It was buoyed to runaway box office success by extremely positive critical buzz leading up to its release, and a marketing campaign that deliberately obfuscated its status as a work of fiction. The film is presented as footage originally shot by a group of missing film students just before their disappearance in the woods around Burkittsville, Maryland, and edited together into its current form after the fact. The history of its release, marketing, and massive impact on popular culture and the horror genre have been the subject of numerous thinkpieces, academic articles, book chapters, and monographs. It not only popularized the found footage style in the horror genre, it “even influenced plot devices [in popular cinema that appeared over the next decade] like the hotel

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room snuff videos of *Vacancy* (Nimród Antal, 2007), the torture recorded on a camera-phone in *Eden Lake* (James Watkins, 2008), or the identity-concealing wedding reception clips of *A Perfect Getaway* (David Twohy, 2009).”

Given its importance to the history of the modern found footage horror film, this section uses *The Blair Witch Project* to highlight key aspects of the style, particularly its appropriation of documentary and reality television forms and aesthetics, and how that style obfuscates the boundaries between reality and fiction, and sets the stage for the paranormal found footage cycle that emerges late in the 2000s.

Shot by the actors themselves on two cameras (one color videotape, the other black-and-white 16mm film), the film documents the final days of three students who are making a documentary about the Blair Witch and other strange occurrences in the area. The film begins with a title card, white text on a black background: “In 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods around near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. A year later their footage was found.” This title card tells audiences that what they’re about to see is real, a ruse carried throughout the film. It also positions the film as more than a mere documentary. Rather, as Kim Newman has pointed out, the film is evidence; it is *proof* of their descent into madness and their encounter with (possibly) supernatural entities. Immediately after the title card, we meet Heather, Josh, and Mark, the three missing students, and spend time with them during their arrival in Burkittsville, where they collect stock footage and street interviews with people who live there about the town’s history, particularly the legend of the Blair witch, whose spirit supposedly still haunts the woods where the town of Blair used to be. The group enters the woods in search of several locations integral to the legend, including the home of Rustin Parr, a hermit who abducted and murdered children in the 1940s, and the site

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144 Ibid., 443.
known as Coffin Rock, where a group of men were the victims of a ritual murder in the 19th Century. While hiking and camping in the woods, they are plagued by strange occurrences and become lost while trying to find their way back to town, walking in circles for days. Slowly descending into madness and desperation, the group is finally physically assaulted one night and one of the group, Josh, runs off into the darkness. While searching for him the next day, Heather finds his shirt soaked in blood and tied into a bindle sitting near the trail. Inside is a severed tongue, assumed to be Josh’s. Heather and Mike set off to try and find Josh only to come across an abandoned house deep in the woods, and suddenly hear Josh’s voice calling out to them from inside. They enter and search around, going upstairs before hearing him call out for help again, this time from what sounds like the basement. Mike runs down first, entering the dark cellar, where the camera drops to the floor suddenly, and then cuts to Heather’s footage, shot from the other camera as she tries to keep up as he runs downstairs. Now hysterical, Heather finds Josh standing in the corner of the basement before her camera too drops to the ground and begins skipping frames as the film runs out and the movie cuts to black.

Given the reputation of the horror genre as a wasteland of repetitive, formulaic tripe, popular critics responded to the film with enthusiastic and overwhelming praise. They repeatedly referred to the film’s less-is-more approach as “original” and “terrifying,” lauding its use of implication rather than relying on explicit images to shock and disturb audiences. Rolling Stone’s Peter, in his typical hyperbolic fugue state of film criticism, wrote, “I have seen the new face of movie horror and its name is The Blair Witch Project, a groundbreaker in fright that reinvents scary for the new millennium.”145 And Roger Ebert singled out the film’s effective use of its amateurish and elusory stylistic technique to create suspense and terror by implying the presence

of something terrible just outside of our field of vision, lurking just outside the frame of the camera and in the woods just past the last bit of visible light. He wrote, “At a time when digital techniques can show us almost anything, The Blair Witch Project is a reminder that what really cares us is the stuff we can’t see. The noise in the dark is almost always scarier than what makes the noise in the dark.” Not everyone was a fan of the film, however, with detractors pointing out the film’s repetitive scenes of the three filmmakers arguing about being lost and the razor-thin narrative used to explain what was happening to them. These critics were few and far between, however, and the film became a major hit with audiences, many of whom had already become familiar with the “missing persons case” and the mythology of the Blair Witch through an aggressive guerilla marketing campaign that sought to further blur the boundaries separating the film’s ontological status as fact and fiction.

4.2.2 Selling Reality

The film’s marketing campaign is worth recounting briefly here for the connections it offers between the confluence of documentary style, reality television, and the reflexivity inherent in found footage filmmaking. In an effort to extend the narrative tension of the is-it-or-isn’t-it-real elements of the film itself, the marketing campaign used a variety of ancillary media, including a website with information about the legend of the Blair Witch, child-murderer Rustin Parr, and the missing college students Heather, Mike, and Josh. A virtual compendium of historical documents, police reports, clips, and other “evidence” that users could dig through and become familiar with, the website was crucial to expanding the film’s mythology and giving viewers the sense they were participating in the investigation of an unsolved mystery. As Peter

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Turner notes, the website “completely destabilised audience perceptions of the film as either real or fake, never giving way whether the film was ‘real’ or not.”147 He continues: “The website...framed the narrative of the film, providing context, depth, back story, and further ‘proof’ of the ‘truth’ of the film. Viewers of the film are encouraged by the lack of answers and the realistic construction to go beyond the cinema or home viewing experience and to investigate the story further.”148 This participatory ambiguity was also carried through in a “dossier” published concurrent with the film’s release. *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier*, was a companion book written by fantasy/science-fiction novelist Dave Stern, and includes a bevy of documents meant to give readers the sense that they are interacting with real artifacts from the historical record and the active and ongoing missing persons case. In an effort to frame the Blair Witch legend as true, the dossier includes a newspaper article from 1832 about strange disappearances around the town of Burkittsville, police reports, and even several pages of Heather Donahue’s journal, with notes about the film she was planning to shoot that eventually turn into her descriptions of their days lost in the woods. Altogether, the book functions to give readers the sense that they are interacting with real documents and reports about the Blair Witch that further inculcates them in the film’s realism. But the piece de résistance of the campaign was the television documentary *Curse of the Blair Witch* (Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) that aired on the Sci-Fi Channel a week before the film was released in theaters.

According to Daniel Myrick, one of the film’s directors, *Curse of the Blair Witch* was directly inspired by the paranormal documentaries from his childhood. In an interview with S.D. McDowell in *The Journal of Film and Video*, he says, “The basic idea [for the companion documentary] was those old documentaries; those old *In Search Of...* episodes that came on in

148 Ibid., 81.
the 70s,” pointing to the classic paranormal reality series as a marker for the film’s authenticity.\footnote{S.D. McDowell, “Method Filmmaking: An Interview with Daniel Myrick, Co-Director of ‘The Blair Witch Project,’” \textit{Journal of Film and Video} 53, no. 2 (2001): 143.} \textit{Curse of the Blair Witch} was thus intentionally meant to play upon audience familiarity with thirty years of paranormal television documentary history. \textit{Curse of the Blair Witch} is thus presented as a traditional paranormal documentary in the vein of \textit{In Search Of...} and \textit{Sightings}, featuring all the hallmarks thereof. The 45 minute special presentation included interviews with locals from the town of Burkittsville who provided commentary on the various rumors of witchcraft, disappearances, and the murders of children that had allegedly taken place in the era since the colonial era. The “documentary” tells the story of the town of Blair, which was cursed by a witch in the 16th Century, and was eventually abandoned, the town of Burkittsville erected nearby sometime later. It also contains a lot of information about a local hermit named Rustin Parr, who was accused of kidnapping and murdering several children in the 1940s and who claimed he was told to by a woman in the woods. All of this information is interspersed with a missing persons story about a group of student filmmakers who disappeared while making a film about the Blair Witch for their senior project - the story told by the footage in \textit{The Blair Witch Project}. Footage of the students appears frequently in the film “courtesy of Artisan Entertainment,” the distribution company behind \textit{The Blair Witch Project} and its marketing. Using the footage from \textit{Blair Witch} in this way created a further layer of documentary realism for the film, and contributed to the sense that \textit{The Blair Witch Project} is more evidence than it is document.

As this brief recounting of the ways in which \textit{The Blair Witch Project}’s marketing sold it as a true “found footage” artifact and continued to blur the lines between fiction and non-fiction storytelling demonstrates, the filmmakers and distributor were able to successfully capitalize on
the aesthetic tropes and conventions of both documentary films and television reality programming. In so doing, they not only sought to sell audiences on seeing the film and witnessing a mystery unfold through authentic footage shot by the victims themselves, but also to extend its realism beyond the film itself using audience familiarity with not only documentary tropes and reality TV, but also journalistic techniques and police reports. In other words, the marketing campaign served as further evidence of the film’s authenticity, of its actually having happened. Subsequent marketing campaigns for found footage horror films have not blurred the boundaries between fact and fiction in the same way as that of *The Blair Witch Project*, but they have continued to use websites and guerilla campaigns to achieve similar extensions of the films’ diegetic realism.\(^{150}\)

The online campaign for *Cloverfield*, for example, featured “hidden” websites that people could only find if they knew about their existence - usually just a link shared on message boards - purporting to contain files and information about the government coverup of an alien *kaiju’s* attack on New York City. And the marketing of *Blair Witch* (Adam Wingard, 2016) involved hiding the fact that it was a direct sequel to *The Blair Witch Project*, building audience anticipation of a “new” type of horror film from its lauded director, Adam Wingard, whose previous films *You’re Next* (Adam Wingard, 2013) and *The Guest* (Adam Wingard, 2015) received critical acclaim as well as widespread adoration from genre fans.\(^{151}\) Just before the film’s release in theaters, its name was changed from *The Woods* to *Blair Witch*, and it was then marketed heavily on its extension of the original film’s story, focusing on Heather Donahue’s

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\(^{150}\) The sequel was also accompanied by a companion documentary, *Shadow of the Blair Witch* (Ben Rock, 2000), which detailed a group of murders committed in Burkittsville after the release of *The Blair Witch Project*, and which allegedly inspired the fictionalized version of events in *The Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (Joe Berlinger, 2000).

\(^{151}\) On Rotten Tomatoes, the review aggregate website, *You’re Next* has a critic score of 76% and an audience score of 59% (with reviews generally more favorable from genre fans), and *The Guest* has scores of 89% and 69% in those respective categories.
brother, who receives a mysterious tape with footage of his sister suggesting she is alive and sets off to find her in the Maryland woods with a group of friends. ( Needless to say, this turns out to be a terrible idea, as they all go missing as well, leaving only their footage behind.) As the above examples illustrate, the insinuation of realism is an essential component of the found footage style. *The Blair Witch Project’s* marketing aside, we are not necessarily meant to believe these films are themselves real, but rather that they are a realistic representation of the events they depict. In the next section, we will continue to use *The Blair Witch Project* to illustrate how the found footage style constructs a sense of reality for viewers.

### 4.2.3 The Hallmarks of Found Footage Style

In the 1990s, found footage horror films were unique in a landscape that largely consisted of reheated teen slasher plots from the previous decade and occasional films with reflexive scripts and parodic turns, like *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (Wes Craven, 1994) and *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1997). Earlier mockumentaries had been released to widespread critical acclaim and even big box office returns - notably the comedies *This Is Spinal Tap* (Rob Reiner, 1984) and *Waiting for Guffman* (Christopher Guest, 1996), and the Belgian film *C’est arrivé près de chez vous* (*Man Bites Dog*, Rémy Belvaux, André Bonzal, and Benoît Poelvoorde, 1992), about a film crew following around a mob hitman as he goes about his daily routines - but *Blair Witch* was viewed as a reinvigorating film for the horror genre after a period of decline with relatively few bright spots in the past decade or so. It was also extremely successful financially, pulling in $248.6 million worldwide on a production budget of $60,000. And although studios were initially slow to exploit its popularity, by the mid-2000s a bounty of found footage horror films could be found in multiplexes and on the festival circuit. Given its importance to the history of
the found footage horror film, this section uses *The Blair Witch Project* to highlight key aspects of the style, including its appropriation of documentary and reality television forms and aesthetics, and to discuss how the style effectively collapses and interrogates the boundaries between reality and fiction, as well as between different media.

Alexandra Heller-Nicholas argues that the found footage style deploys “a specific stylistic subsystem familiarized through camera phone and webcam use” to create a sense of “make-believe reality.” In order to create this stylistic system and construct a believable diegetic realism, these films appropriate observational, participatory, and interactive techniques from documentary filmmaking, including a variety of camera techniques which are intended to both simulate the experience of participation as well as provide us with an “objective,” unmediated point-of-view in relation to the action, much like the camera work in ghost hunting reality shows. As Heller-Nicholas hints, the style’s popularity in the 2000s also coincides with the widespread use of DIY media production and consumption, namely in the form of new communications technologies such as the smartphone and webcams, as well as the launch of the user-based streaming video website YouTube, video chat services like Skype - used to great effect in the paranormal found footage film *Unfriended* (Leo Gabriadze, 2014) - and the growth of social media platforms Myspace, Facebook, and Instagram. The impact of these developments have made the ubiquitous presence of the camera in found footage filmmaking innocuous, mirroring the everyday experiences of viewers who are well acquainted with the constant documentation and sharing of their lives.

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153 Ibid., 14-19.
As for the documentary legacy of found footage films, they resemble *cinema verité* and observational documentaries most overtly. As a documentary mode, *cinema verité* seeks to remove all elements of artifice from its subject, constructing their narratives, such as they are, purely based on the events captured by the camera as they happened, with little to no outside interference from the filmmakers. Strange as it may seem given the disjuncture between the low object of horror cinema and the exalted status of art cinema and documentary traditions, the direct historical antecedents of found footage horror films are such acclaimed films as *Man With a Movie Camera* (Dziga Vertov, 1929), *Titicut Follies* (Frederick Wiseman, 1967), *The War Room* (Chris Hegedus & D.A. Pennebaker, 1993), and *Jesus Camp* (Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing, 2006), among many others. Found footage films also share a legacy with the compilation film tradition as well, a form in which pre-existing footage is edited together for a different purpose than originally intended, “an aesthetic technique for encouraging the spectator to remain conscious of film’s material, cultural, and political history.” (Benson-Allot, *Killer Tapes*, 172.)

Heller-Nicholas, Caitlin Benson-Allott, and Peter Turner also each use *The Blair Witch Project* as an example to draw attention to the role of reality television programs in constructing the style’s sense of realism. Benson-Allott argues that the film’s “terror-ridden” shaky cam aesthetics “constitute a second representational strategy [the first being documentary professionalism], one based on amateur videography’s contemporaneous association with authenticity and violence in reality television.” 154 (Benson-Allott, 180) Linking the film’s cinematography to the pioneering reality television program *COPs*, she argues that the flaws in the camerawork “assure the spectator that the moments they capture are real, their actions spontaneous, and the outcome unpredictable.” (Ibid., 180) This point is echoed by Turner, who

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says “the responses of the [film’s] protagonists are close to the genuine responses of amateur handy cam operators who capture the kind of footage that ends up on ‘caught-on-tape’ reality television.”¹⁵⁵ Taking the connection between reality TV aesthetics and the sensation of a participatory experience in these films a step further, Heller-Nicholas argues that the boom in found footage films in the mid-2000s was fueled in part by the launch of YouTube in 2005 and its success in 2006, which allowed users to upload numerous videos shot on their home video cameras and new smartphones to the web and share them with others.¹⁵⁶ The widespread dissemination of DIY content further collapsed the boundaries between professional and amateur content, and between the internet, television, and film, a project that would continue over the next decade with the introduction of streaming video services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Hulu. The ties between YouTube, personal websites, and the ghost hunting cycle will come into further relief in the conclusion to the dissertation, as we briefly discuss the role of DIY media and the rise of amateur ghost hunting groups in the wake of these TV shows and films.

The combined effect of these aesthetics is to further blur the lines between different media as well as that between reality and fiction by simultaneously erecting and deconstructing those boundaries through simulated participation and a critical, knowing distance created between text and audience. The affective conditioning and identification with the camera (and the cameraperson) in the found footage style goes hand-in-hand with the horror genre, which is obsessed with the collapsing boundaries of the body, the natural order, and reality in a very general sense. As Caitlin Benson-Allott points out, found footage “spectators experience themselves as objects (specifically cameras) within [the films’] diegesis, rather than detached observers of its story,” echoing the “simulated participation” of the first-person POV camera in

¹⁵⁵ Turner, Blair Witch, 37.
¹⁵⁶ Heller-Nicholas, Found Footage Horror, 9.
ghost hunting reality shows discussed in Chapter 3. But as is also the case with the ghost hunting show’s experiential aesthetics, there is also a critical distance created for viewers inherent in the formula, where they are made fully aware of the outcome of the story before it even begins, and wherein the style is presented as evidence (to be examined) from the outset. The footage would not be “found” if their creators were still alive or not missing, and as the introductory title screens of so many of these films tell us, that is simply not the case for the vast majority of them. They are “evidence” of a crime: of missing persons cases, homicides, and of hauntings themselves.

Given their narrative focus on victims of mysterious circumstances, it should be no surprise then that found footage horror films often concern paranormal subjects, a broad category which we should recall from Chapter 3 also includes cryptozoological creatures and alien lifeforms. In fact, “found footage horror’s frequent mission to capture the elusive and ethereal paranormal grant it a useful position to interrogate the often hazy lines between reality and representation.” The supernatural and paranormal are quite literally that which occurs or exists outside of the natural order and are typically viewed as external threats to that order. Heller-Nicholas argues that “the intangibility of the supernatural and the fact that it is so difficult to capture that makes found footage horror so adept at challenging the truth claims of documentary” filmmaking. As we have seen in previous chapters and will discuss more below, the ghost hunting formula is particularly adept at using technology to transgress and disturb these boundaries, which makes its transfer to cinema in the mid- to late-2000s a logical evolution of both the ghost hunting formula and the style of the found footage horror film. In the next section we will consider Paranormal

158 Heller-Nicholas, Found Footage Horror, 21.
159 Ibid., 21
Activity’s role in kick-starting a small cycle of paranormal found footage films that increasingly incorporated elements of ghost hunting television shows to become a trans-media cycle of ghost hunting texts. To effectively trace the business of paranormal found footage horror in the 2000s and how the development of this cycle was even possible, we must first examine why The Blair Witch Project failed to generate such a cycle, or even an effective follow-up hit.

4.3 Unstoppable Presence: Paranormal Activity & the Business of Found Footage Horror

4.3.1 Changes in the Film Industry

David Cook, Tino Balio, and other film historians have pointed out that by the 2000s there were essentially three types of productions coming out of Hollywood: high concept blockbusters and franchise films, mid-budget dramas and comedies, and low-budget genre fare, the latter two of which are typically produced by independent production companies or studio subsidiaries (such as Fox Searchlight) and distributed by the studios. The stratification of productions into these categories is the result of the shifts in Hollywood’s business practices over the last thirty years, but is particularly reinforced by developments in the new millennium. The ongoing conglomeratization of media companies has created the need for blockbuster franchises which are capable of not only attracting audiences to theaters every two to three years, but which are “recognisable and exploitable across all platforms and all divisions of the company.” A successful franchise would thus not only consist of a big budget studio film capable of generating an enormous amount of revenue that can sustain a studio’s operating budget for the year, but would also include ancillary opportunities through licensing rights and spin-offs, including video games, comic books, and further films not directly attached to the ongoing

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storyline of an established series of films. Recent examples of this strategy include the production of *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (Gareth Edwards, 2016), the first *Star Wars* film not tied to the “saga” storyline of the main series’ characters, Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, Han Solo, and Darth Vader (or further plot developments directly connected to their original exploits), and *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* (David Yates, 2016), a spin-off of the enormously successful *Harry Potter* franchise based on a character only mentioned in the original films a handful of times and which Warner Bros. hopes will become its own franchise now that the *Harry Potter* films have ended. With a sequel on the way this year, it appears as if *Fantastic Beasts* is on its way to standalone success and may lead to further exploitation of author J.K. Rowling’s “Wizarding World.”

By the mid-2000s, many of the smaller independent producers and distributors were being shuttered while many of the larger ones were bought up by the studios themselves, as indicated by the purchase of Miramax by The Walt Disney Company in 1994.161 In the scaled economy of big budget blockbuster production there is less room on the studios’ release schedules overall for films with marginal returns on investment. This resulted in a split market, with an emphasis placed on either big budget productions with potentially massive box office receipts which justified not only the cost to make and market the film, but also could sustain the studio’s bottom line even if one or two releases per year failed to make their money back. Low budget pictures were and are still produced by studios and independents, of course, but formulaic repetition is just as important for low budget pictures, especially genre fare. Some of the new independent producers, like Blumhouse, have essentially translated low-budget genre

productions into a massively successful business model of their own, reifying the franchising opportunities of the blockbuster model on the lower end of the production scale.

The on-demand video market, including streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime, the self-service DVD rental kiosk company Redbox, and pay-per-view cable increased the exposure of these lower-budget films to audiences, especially good for productions that would receive no or only limited theatrical distribution. Streaming companies in particular have become an important distribution outlet for such productions as the DVD and Blu-ray market has become so small as to be virtually non-existent, especially for non-theatrical films. Streaming video services like Netflix and the horror genre-specific Shudder, in constant need of new content, are able to fill out their libraries with these films for small licensing fees, while others like Amazon Prime and Apple’s iTunes platform are available for producers to upload their content directly, ready to rent or purchase for a fee, a portion of which goes to the company providing the platform. This business model has led to an increase in the number of independent productions in circulation, and an increased ability for audiences and fans to seek out content similar to other films, shows, and other media that they enjoy. It has also led to a decrease in differentiation between types of media, as television programs and films, as well as non-fiction and fictional content appear side by side in keyword and genre searches, as well as through user-generated algorithmic recommendations unique to specific viewing habits.

These shifts in Hollywood’s production and distribution models are important for the development of a trans-media production cycle in many ways. First, the increased reliance on franchise filmmaking creates the conditions for increased replicability of a popular style over a short period of time. This is true for low budget films just as it is for blockbusters, and

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independent producers took notice. In addition to the six sequels for the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, all produced by Blumhouse and distributed by Paramount Pictures, low-budget producers like The Asylum had long been producing “mockbusters,” which used blockbuster formulas as their jumping off point to often develop the company’s own franchise properties (and which were frequently released as cash-ins on the major studios’ franchise entries they were ripping off in the first place). It also means that production companies have actively sought to replicate the success of popular formulas in other media, with conglomerates attempting to exploit multiple markets with similar content in a bid to attract audiences across media boundaries. For example, the franchising of properties beyond sequelization has already begun taking place for low budget films, with both *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* franchises including video games and, in the case of the former, books and other ancillary media as well. The 2012 series *The River* (ABC), was an attempt for Paramount Television at capitalizing on the success of both their found footage blockbusters and the expansion of reality television shows in the 2000s.

The closure of many of the mid-budget production companies in the 2000s has also facilitated the rise of low budget independent film production in general, as the studios’ distribution wings seek demonstrably profitable genre films to push out into theaters before and after awards season. This has led to the rise of production companies such as Blumhouse and A24, both of which initially made their marks with the production and distribution of low-budget horror and science-fiction films, a market they continue to exploit to a high degree of success even as they have begun shifting into more mid-budget projects alongside the new mini-majors Annapurna Pictures and Lionsgate. Some companies, like Blumhouse, have used their most popular films to create a distinctive brand identity. After *Paranormal Activity*, for example,
Blumhouse produced a slate filled with found footage and paranormal horror films, eventually even launching a book publishing imprint, Blumhouse Books, which (of course) specializes in horror novels.

Finally, the widespread use of user-generated content and online streaming video services has expanded production and distribution opportunities for independent filmmakers as well as for fans to find products they are interested in. With a large number of outlets which allow producers to monetize content on their own, and the use of crowdfunding websites like IndieGoGo and Kickstarter, producers and fans can find one another and support one another easily through direct monetary transactions. With services like Amazon Prime, any title can receive distribution, albeit mitigated by the policies of the company providing it, including any service fees and costs associated with uploading the title and housing it on their servers. Websites like YouTube have allowed for fan interaction with ghost hunting texts in fascinating ways, by debating their evidence, creating their own fan videos and “best of” moments, and even uploading their own ghost hunts and found footage horror short films. A very large number of films which are part of the trans-media ghost hunting cycle are available on websites like Prime and YouTube, pointing toward a dominant distribution strategy for the lowest-budget productions in the cycle, which will be related to more prominent content like Paranormal Activity and even Grave Encounters via those websites search algorithms. This will allow users to find and view films and shows related to those they are already fans of.

We should keep in mind that these shifts in film and television production and distribution have provided the conditions by which a trans-media cycle of ghost hunting texts could take place. As we trace the development of the trans-media ghost hunting cycle through the history of paranormal found footage horror films in the rest of this chapter, we will see the
ways these conditions interact with popular formulas to create a confluence between industry, text, and culture that can be understood as a production cycle.

4.3.2 Speculation and Failure

These changes were just over the horizon in 1999. Blockbuster filmmaking and franchising were already going strong, but media conglomerates were not quite so large, and the largest were just beginning to acquire different types of media companies, such as occurred with the NBC Universal merger after the dissolution of Vivendi-Universal. But studios were already beginning to exercise an abundance of caution with original concepts even on the lower end of the budget sheet, and cash-strapped independents like Artisan Entertainment had to do even better, managing already-minimal profits on riskier content, unable to rely on the steady flow of cash from big budget tentpole productions that would keep them afloat. This does not mean that they did not attempt to exploit popular formulas, however, which has long been and continues to be the bread and butter of low-budget genre filmmaking.

Almost immediately, Artisan Entertainment greenlit a sequel to be released the following year. *The Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (Joe Berlinger, 2000) abandons the found footage conceit entirely, telling the story of a group of fans of *The Blair Witch Project* who go to Burkittsville hoping to visit some of the now-famous filming locations. The film’s director, Joe Berlinger, initially seemed like a perfect fit for a follow-up to *Blair Witch* given his reputation as a documentarian known for films that explored dark subject matter like the award-winning HBO film *Paradise Lost: The Child Murders at Robin Hood Hills* (Joe Berlinger and Bruce Sinofsky, 1996). But his chops are completely wasted on the formulaic plot and the lackluster attempt at a more classical filmmaking style. Although there is some interesting carryover in some of the first
film’s ideas about the nature of our perception and conceptualized reality, the film devolves into a poorly-acted variant of the teen slasher formula. *Book of Shadows* failed to find an audience and was critically panned. David Ansen of *Newsweek* wrote, “There was no way [*The Blair Witch Project*’s] success could be duplicated. But why would anyone think *this* was the way to carry on its name?”\(^{163}\) An attempted cash-in, *The St. Francisville Experiment* (Ted Nicolau, 2000) was released by Lionsgate Entertainment direct to DVD that same year, but was met with equally dreadful reviews, many noting that despite the film’s assertion that the characters are alone, multiple shots are impossible without the presence of an extradiegetic cameraman. (See: JoBlo Review) In spite of this, the film is worth noting because its plot revolves around a group of students who spend the night in an old haunted mansion in Louisiana, using camcorders and other “scientific” devices to collect evidence of the paranormal. Only a year after *The Blair Witch Project* stormed the box office and ignited mainstream interest in found footage horror films, its success appeared to be a fluke that neither the studios nor independent producers could reproduce. Given Artisan’s loss on *The Book of Shadows* and the failure of even direct to DVD fare like *The St. Francisville Experiment* to successfully capitalize on *The Blair Witch Project*’s hype, it is no surprise that producers were not champing at the bit to put out a full slate of found footage horror films. But as Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes, “found footage films...grew bigger and bigger and more common throughout the early 21st Century,” particularly as more films came out that demonstrated the versatility of the found footage formula even within its rather strict stylistic parameters.\(^{164}\) By the time *Paranormal Activity* finally received theatrical distribution in 2009, the landscape had changed yet again and found footage films were beginning to be seen as both creatively viable and economically reliable.


4.3.3 The Trailblazer Hit

Oren Peli produced *Paranormal Activity* for only $15,000, paying actors Micah Sloate and Katie Featherston $500 apiece for their work, and saving a significant amount of money by shooting in his own suburban California home and purchasing a consumer grade Sony Fx1 video camera. Inspired by the experiences he and his fiancée had after moving in together--A large, heavy plastic container left on a bottom shelf was found across the room, they began to feel vibrations in their bed, and his fiancée had a “persistent feeling that someone was whispering in her ear”--*Paranormal Activity* is a haunted house story told through the found footage style, about Micah’s ongoing attempts to document, analyze, and understand the activity occurring in his home.165 Using *The Blair Witch Project* as his main source of inspiration, Peli produced a loose outline and short script for the project. The production of the film heavily mirrored that of *Blair Witch*, including the casting of unknown actors, Micah and Katie, who used their own names in the film, improvised much of their dialogue, and also shot most of the footage themselves. In 2007, the film was acquired in the festival market by former Miramax executive Jason Blum and placed at Dreamworks, then co-owned by Paramount Pictures. The studio originally planned to shelve the film and reshoot it with a higher budget, but after test audiences responded well to the film, they decided to release the original film theatrically with a new ending.166

The plot of the film is a simple variant on the traditional haunted house story, with some modern updates. Plagued by strange activity in their brand new suburban California home,
Micah Sloate and his fiancée Katie Featherston use a video camera to record themselves sleeping. Each morning, Micah analyzes the footage from the night before and uncovers new pieces of the mystery, moving closer and closer toward an answer for what is happening to them. Along the way, the story hits several familiar beats, including the consultation of a psychic medium who warns the couple of a “dark presence” (demon) in the home (and whose advice is discounted and ignored by the man in the relationship), an increasingly violent attacks as the presence grows stronger, and the final desperation of trying to leave the home but making that decision much too late, after Katie’s soul is at stake. But whereas a typical haunted house film would see the characters uncover a solution for what is happening to them and allow them to defeat the demon (or lay the spirit to final rest), the found footage style requires missing or unidentified people who originally recorded the footage. Thus, in the vein of The Blair Witch Project, Paranormal Activity (and each subsequent entry) ends with the deaths of almost everyone involved and title cards which relay any final details about the case to viewers.

Critics praised the film for its restraint and the creation of a suspenseful atmosphere that didn’t rely on special effects or gore. Roger Ebert remarked that the film “illustrates one of my favorite points, that silence and waiting can be more entertaining than frantic fast-cutting and berserk f/x.” Others were not as enthused, but nonetheless acknowledged its effectiveness. A.O. Scott called the film “a crudely made, half-clever little frightener,” remarking that “the most entertaining thing about the movie was the audience.” Referring later to the film’s screening he attended as a “communal experience,” Scott’s review hints at the cultural force

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surrounding the film as it tapped into the zeitgeist and intrigued audiences around the world.169 Paranormal Activity’s eventual success was propelled by an ingenious marketing campaign that saw sold out midnight screenings at a handful of colleges and universities turn into powerful word of mouth using trailers focused on audience reactions and the website Eventful, where users could “demand” screenings in their local theater.170 While much of this strategy is standard fare--the audience reaction trailer has been used since at least the heyday of William Castle’s ballyhoo and was even part of the Psycho (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) campaign--the “Demand It” campaign on the Eventful website is indicative of broader shifts in media production and distribution strategies in the new millennium such as crowdsourcing, which are typically used for smaller productions and targeted toward fans of specific properties or with particular interests.171 After going into wide release, the film grossed $194 million worldwide. It also kickstarted Jason Blum’s genre-focused low-budget production company Blumhouse, which has subsequently turned into a powerhouse in the film industry, and which has produced a significant number of paranormal horror films that will be discussed later as part of the much wider field of influence the ghost hunting cycle had on popular horror cinema. The dual success of Paranormal Activity and Cloverfield were big enough hits that the found footage horror film finally coalesced into its own cycle, with a great many paranormal found footage films produced and distributed by independent outfits and major studios over the next few years.

After several low-budget attempts and false starts in the wake of The Blair Witch Project, the style was finally a marketable, known quantity to producers and audiences. At a time when

169 Ibid.
the studios’ blockbuster tentpole budgets were ballooning, the found footage horror film offered them a low-rise, high-profit-potential formula. And the behind-the-scenes story of *Paranormal Activity*’s success offered yet another rags-to-riches story for independent producers, who did not fail to notice the gargantuan amount of money Peli and Paramount Pictures made on the film. Soon the U.S. theatrical and home video market was flooded with found footage horror films. These films were produced domestically as well as internationally, including *District 9* (Neill Blomkamp, 2009), *Troll Hunter* (André Øvredal, 2010), *The Last Exorcism* (Daniel Stamm, 2010), *Apollo 18* (Gonzalo López-Gallego, 2011), *The Fourth Kind* (Olatunde Osunsanmi, 2011), and *The Devil Inside* (William Brent Bell, 2012). As this brief list demonstrates, found footage horror films cover many different sub-genres, including the paranormal, but also possessions and exorcisms, UFOs and abductions, monster movies, and even zombies.172 Paramount Pictures in particular reaped the rewards of this new cycle of found footage horror films, having distributed both *Cloverfield*, which grossed what then seemed like an astronomical $170 million on a budget of $25 million, and *Paranormal Activity*, which would eventually dwarf even that return on investment. By the end of its theatrical run, *Paranormal Activity* had become the most profitable independent film of all time based on budget and gross, and it would go on to earn another $21 million in DVD and Blu-ray sales. Paramount immediately put a sequel into production and set its release date for the following October, hoping to replicate the success they experienced in the week before Halloween, when the film reached the number one spot at the box office. As of this writing, there are six films in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, as well as an unofficial spin-off/sequel to the first film, *Paranormal Activity 2: Tokyo Night*

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172 During the zombie boom of the 2000s, there was in fact a full cycle of zombie found footage films as well, that spanned studio, independent, and international productions, including *Diary of the Dead* and the [*Rec* series (both mentioned above), a Hollywood remake of the latter, *Quarantine* (John Erick Dowdle, 2008), *The Zombie Diaries* (Michael Bartlett, 2006), and portions of the *V/H/S* anthology film series.
(Toshikazu Nagae, 2010), that was independently produced and distributed in Japan just before the release of *Paranormal Activity 2* (Tod Williams, 2010), but has never been released in the United States. So far the franchise has generated $889.7 million in worldwide box office revenue with a combined budget for all six films of only $28 million.

### 4.3.4 Cash-ins

*Paranormal Activity* provided producers and distributors with a new successful formula that was ripe for exploitation. Combining elements of traditional ghost stories, haunted house movies, and the trendy found footage style, the film was able to latch onto a moment in our cultural zeitgeist when people were extremely interested in true stories of hauntings and the act paranormal investigation. The first of many productions to capitalize on this formula was *Paranormal Entity* (Shane Van Dyke, 2009), which came out a mere three months later, in December, 2009. It was released direct-to-DVD by the ultra low-budget production company The Asylum, known for their various “mockbusters,” which they regularly produced to capitalize on the success of or interest in the big budget blockbusters put out by the Hollywood studios.

Titles like *Transmorphers* (Leigh Scott, 2007), released on DVD simultaneously with the theatrical release of Michael Bay’s *Transformers* (2007), and *Almighty Thor* (Christopher Douglas-Olen Ray, 2011), released alongside Marvel’s *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), are prime examples of the shamelessness with which the company attempts to sell their films to audiences. Like their other mockbusters, *Paranormal Entity* varies only slightly from the basic story elements of its studio-released counterpart *Paranormal Activity*, ditching the character of Micah Sloate and centering the film around a woman who moves into a new home with her teenage daughter only to discover they are under attack by a demonic spirit. The basics of the formula
remain the same otherwise, including many of the story beats and of course its aesthetics. The Asylum subsequently produced three “sequels” to the film, *8213: Gacy House* (Anthony Fankhauser, 2010), *Annaliese: The Exorcist Tapes* (Jude Gerard Priest, 2011), and *100 Ghost Street: The Return of Richard Speck* (Martin Wichmann Andersen, 2012). Though they are unrelated on the story level, each film in the *Paranormal Entity* series was released in order to capitalize on the first three *Paranormal Activity* sequels, and depending on the market, the films were distributed as *Paranormal Entity 2, 3, and 4*, especially internationally.

After 2010, the floodgates were open, and dozens of cash-ins were released theatrically, direct-to-video, and on the many streaming platforms that had come to dominate the home video landscape. What is interesting about the post-*Paranormal Activity* cycle these films, however, is that a great many of them position themselves as “lost” episodes of doomed ghost hunting television shows, or the “lost footage” of paranormal investigators, merging the two styles seamlessly and pushing the formula of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise into the area of full-blown paranormal investigation. In films like *7 Nights of Darkness* (Allen Kellogg, 2011), *Back to the Beyond* (Kevin DiBacco, 2011), *Grave Encounters* (The Vicious Brothers, 2011), *Muirhouse* (Tanzeal Rahim, 2012), *Spirit Stalkers* (Steve Hudgins, 2012), *Haunted* (Steven M. Smith, Zane Casablanca, Svenja Quazzani, and Zane Quazzani, 2013), and *Ghostfinders* (Luke Hill, 2015) paranormal investigators go missing again and again, leaving only their footage behind as evidence for what happened to them. As most of these films were produced and distributed independently, there is very little information available about their finances. Press coverage of *Back to the Beyond*, for example, mentions that it was produced for a budget of
$25,000, but there is no report on box office revenue, video sales, or streaming numbers from online platforms.\textsuperscript{173}

Checking the IMDB ratings for each film reveals something about viewership patterns that provides useful context in the absence of solid financial information. Reviews for \textit{Spirit Stalkers} discuss the film’s connection to ghost hunting reality shows with clear knowledge of the formula, demonstrating that, at least in some capacity, similar audiences were interested in both those shows and in found footage horror films. User Pumpkin Man calls the film “a mix of ‘Ghost Hunters’ and ‘The Conjuring’!!!”\textsuperscript{174} Two user reviews of \textit{Haunted} draw comparisons to the British ghost hunting reality show \textit{Most Haunted}, with one stating they found the film’s medium character “not as irritating” as the show’s psychic, Derek Acorah.\textsuperscript{175} Another for the same film also considers it in relation to the most successful of these follow-ups, \textit{Grave Encounters}, stating that \textit{Haunted} makes movies like \textit{Grave Encounters} “look like masterworks in comparison,” again demonstrating that audiences are on some level aware of the intertextual connections between paranormal found footage horror movies and the ghost hunting reality shows those films were referencing in narrative shorthand.\textsuperscript{176}

In addition to paranormal found footage horror films, the cultural interest in paranormal investigation and the influence of ghost hunting reality shows can also be found in more traditional, formally classical haunted house films of this same period. This perennial sub-genre


of horror has increasingly incorporated paranormal investigation into their narratives, either as plot devices or as main characters themselves. This is the case with the *Insidious* and *The Conjuring* franchises, which tell stories centered on paranormal investigators themselves, and which allow sequels to be produced using those characters in different cases rather than following new characters who encounter the same demons and spirits (or masked killers or whatever else) as common in the structure of many series. These two franchises which have been extremely lucrative for their studios. *Insidious* and its three sequels have so far generated $549.3 million in worldwide box office revenue for production company Blumhouse and their distributor, Sony Pictures.\(^{177}\) Meanwhile, *The Conjuring* has crossed over into full blockbuster franchise status for Universal Pictures, so far comprised of four films (with a fifth and sixth on the way) with a total gross of $1.19 billion globally.

*Insidious* (James Wan, 2010) turns many of the haunted house sub-genre’s conventions on their head, but includes the requisite late-in-the-film visit from Elise Rainer (Lin Shaye), a powerful psychic medium called in to assist the beleaguered couple in keeping a demonic spirit from possessing their son’s body while in a coma. Elise not only returns in the sequel, *Insidious Chapter 2* (James Wan, 2013), but becomes the main character in the franchise’s next two entries, *Insidious Chapter 3* (Leigh Whannell, 2015) and *Insidious: The Last Key* (Adam Robitel, 2018), both of which detail her early working relationship with her partners, Specs (Leigh Whannell) and Tucker (Angus Sampson), who have a popular ghost hunting series on the internet called *Spectral Sightings*. In each film, Elise, Specs, and Tucker feature some form of

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\(^{177}\) Blumhouse has become a powerhouse production company specializing in low-budget horror films. Propelled to massive success by producer Jason Blum’s acquisition of *Paranormal Activity* in 2007, the company has produced hit after hit in the horror genre, and has begun branching out into mid-budget prestige productions, such as the award-winning *Whiplash* (Damien Chazelle, 2014) and the upcoming Spike Lee film *BlacKkKlansman* (2018), which won the Grand Prix award at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival.
ghost hunting technology developed specifically for their jobs as paranormal investigators. The first film features a gas mask modified as an isolation chamber which is worn by Elise while in trance communication with spirits in “The Further,” the series’ purgatorial vision of the afterlife. The mask is attached via a long tube to headphones worn by Specs, who writes down the conversation he hears between Elise and the spirits. In *Insidious Chapter 3* and *Insidious: The Last Key* we see footage shot by them on their video cameras, including their glasses, which are outfitted with small cameras that send a signal directly to a hard drive.

*The Conjuring* and its sequel are based loosely on the case files of Ed and Lorraine Warren, who assisted on some of the most famous haunting cases of the 20th Century, including Amityville and the Enfield Poltergeist. *The Conjuring* also provides us with an interesting example of how far the ghost hunting show’s aesthetics have spread. In one particularly intriguing segment, just as Ed and Lorraine are setting up their equipment - a few stationary cameras with motion detectors, audio recording devices, and a 16mm camera - a motion detector is set off, triggering one of their cameras. The basement door has opened on its own, and is need of investigation. The film abruptly switches from the classical third-person point-of-view to the first-person POV of the Warrens’ 16mm camera. Ed is seen standing at the top of the stairs holding a unidirectional microphone which is attached to a reel-to-reel tape recorder hung over his shoulder. He is lit with only a central light from the camera, the edges of the frame filled with shadow. The soundtrack is muffled, composed of only the sounds from Ed’s unidirectional mic. Ed, Lorraine, and the other investigators head down into the basement and attempt to contact whatever opened the door at the top of the stairs. The look and feel of this sequence is that of a ghost hunting show, complete with the low light filming conditions of the basement. By foregrounding the use of technology in paranormal investigation, the film creates an instance of the found footage style’s
“make-believe reality” in a classically-shot studio horror film. It also further demonstrates the collapsing boundaries between film styles and genres, as well as between reality television formulas and popular cinema, bringing the act of paranormal investigation as depicted in traditional haunted house cinema into direct contact with the evidentiary aesthetics of ghost hunting reality shows and paranormal found footage horror films.

4.4 Trans-Media Cycle: Ghost Hunting TV Shows and Paranormal Found Footage Horror Films in the 21st Century

Found footage films have been produced in a wide variety of genres in the two decades since The Blair Witch Project, including science-fiction, fantasy, and even war films. For example, Redacted (Brian De Palma, 2007) is a dramatization of an event that took place during the Iraq War in which U.S. soldiers raped an Iraqi girl and then murdered her and her family, Chronicle (Josh Trank, 2012) is a superhero origin story, and Into the Storm (Steven Quale, 2014) is a disaster/survival film. The horror genre, however, seems inextricably linked to the style, with its roots extending as far back as back as the seminal Italian gore film Cannibal Holocaust (Ruggero Deodato, 1980) and even further into the “mondo” documentaries of the 1960s and 70s—Mondo cane (Paolo Cavara, Gualtiero Jacopetti, and Franco Prosperi, 1962) and Africa addio (Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi, 1966) are prime examples of the form—which are at the very least horror-adjacent, with numerous segments featuring, among other things, ritualistic animal slaughter, political killings and criminal executions, and other atrocities committed by humans living in different countries around the world. And while found footage horror films are produced in numerous sub-genres, including zombie and serial killer films, paranormal subjects are by far the most prominent.
This may be because, as noted by Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, Cecilia Sayad, and others, found footage films use non-fiction forms and aesthetics to tell fictional stories, thus granting them a unique position of both constructing and disturbing the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction filmmaking, as well as the lines between different types of media. In the horror genre, which is primarily concerned with liminal spaces and the slippages that exist between them, the found footage style allows for the possibility that their contents might “spill over” into the real world. This possibility, or threat, is a perfect fit for paranormal sub-genre of horror, wherein spirits and demonic presences threaten the sanctity of the home and body by manifesting in the world of the living. The diegetic camera of the found footage horror film, like that of the ghost hunting reality show team, or the spirit communication boards and telegraphic apparatuses used during séance by the Spiritualists, functions as a conduit through which the represented reality might become real--which is already presented to the viewer as real--and through which the spirits which normally exist outside the realm of our perception might become visible and audible.

As discussed above, the massive success of *Paranormal Activity* launched a production cycle of other paranormal found footage horror films which were attempting to cash in on the film’s popularity. Many of these films are essentially fictional, feature-length episodes of ghost hunting reality shows, taking that popular formula as the justification for their plots. In many ways, they fit the exact definition of a production cycle, capitalizing on the popularity of a limited, highly repeatable formula, over a relatively short period of time, with only slight differentiation between either aesthetics or structure. They are also bound to paranormal reality shows in a very concrete way. *If The Blair Witch Project* used paranormal reality television for marketing

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purposes, then these new films were using it for their *raison d’être*. Films like *Grave Encounters*, *7 Nights of Darkness*, and *Spirit Stalkers* take up the ghost hunting show formula wholesale, transferring it into found footage fiction filmmaking and collapsing the boundaries between the two media in the process on an intertextual level. But given the immense profitability and popularity of these films, particularly the *Paranormal Activity* franchise and *Grave Encounters*, which is surely the most-viewed and -watched independent film produced in this cycle, we can also understand them as being related industrially, as cash-grabs by producers and by corporations to reach audiences interested in similar content in different media.

### 4.4.1 Investigating the Paranormal in the Trans-Media Ghost Hunting Cycle

Kim Newman has called *Paranormal Activity* “a synthesis of the contemporary ghost story,” an assertion based on the ways the film both adheres to and deviates from the narrative and structural traditions of literary and cinematic haunted house stories.\(^{179}\) The film combines many of the hallmarks of that sub-genre - the old dark house, a new homeowner, a dark and dangerous spiritual presence that they must rid themselves of, occult rituals (séances, exorcisms, invocations), and, increasingly in the modern age, paranormal investigators in the form of psychics, demonologists, and ghost hunters - into a found footage take on well-worn material. The found footage component introduces a unique bent to the plot, foregrounding the camera and other diegetic equipment in its plot. If we understand ghost hunting television shows to be a part of the haunted house tradition as well, building up viewers’ fears and anxieties through unseen presences just outside the edge of the frame, or not viewed until later during evidence review,

then we can understand the entirety of paranormal found footage films produced in the wake of *Paranormal Activity* as part of the same lineage.

The night-day-night structure of the film, in which the spirit is especially active overnight, stems from thousands of years of ghost stories and superstition in which spirits and other supernatural beings are more powerful at night, unnoticed and unimpeded by the living who are fast asleep. The spirit in story of Athenodorus of Tarsus discussed in the introduction, for one ancient example of this trope, only appears at night. Additionally, Micah’s use of the camera to film their bedroom every night and review the footage each morning also provides a narrative structure for the film’s plot as a back-and-forth between investigation and analysis. This mirrors the episodic structure of ghost hunting reality shows, where investigations are conducted at night and the teams review their collected evidence afterward. And Micah’s refusal to take the psychic medium’s (or Katie’s) advice about what is happening to them and heed the warning to stop investigating is based entirely on his insistence that the activity must have a rational explanation, an assertion that numerous ghost hunting shows make regarding a majority of the cases they investigate. The Atlantic Paranormal Society (TAPS), the team from *Ghost Hunters*, enters each investigation attempting to disprove the haunting, pointing toward the high likelihood that a paranormal experience has an alternative explanation than the existence of a spirit, for example.

The film is a slow-build to a frenzied climax, largely focused on creating as realistic a situation for its characters (and thus relatable to the audience) as possible. In spite of its outlandish plot about demonic possessions and occult rituals, the film’s numerous scares work as an extension of how the film constructs its realism, using both the found footage aesthetic and by
creating a sense that this could happen to anyone, anywhere. This was an essential part of the film’s (and the eventual series’) concept, according to Peli:

One of the things we were trying to do is to make the families and the characters feel as relatable as possible. Make them seem like they were regular, ordinary, average people that weren’t asking for it. They weren’t ghost hunters that went to a remote haunted castle in Scotland or something like that. They were just ordinary people, going about their lives, living in their normal homes, and then something just happens to them without them even asking about it. And that, I think, makes it scarier, because people can think, “Wow, that can happen to anyone. It can happen to me.”

It was important that the story not just take place in a creepy Gothic mansion on the hill or the secluded tract of land with a plantation home in the middle of nowhere, which are of course always available for an unbelievably good price on the market. Peli has also commented on the way the house appears in the film, reiterating that he wanted viewers to keep their own ordinary lives in mind while watching the film. He says that he “was never tempted to do anything to make the house look creepy...so the audience thinks, ‘If it can happen in a normal house, maybe it can happen in my house.’” The emphasis on the normalcy of the space in Paranormal Activity did not go unnoticed by critics, either. In his review of the film, A.O. Scott refers to the home as “nondescript.” Entire articles in The New York Times were dedicated to the innocuous nature of the house. One was focused on the remodeling and decorating that took place before the film’s production, especially focused on the replacement of wall to wall carpeting with hardwood floors and a new carved wood bed to serve as the film’s centerpiece in the upstairs bedroom. Another article looks at the larger trend of common, suburban homes in the sub-

182 A.O. Scott, “Ghostbusters on a Budget.”
genre of haunted house cinema, and featured commentary from media studies professor John Tibbetts, who remarked on the status of the home as a “sanctuary” for people, and the unsettling nature of anything that violates our sense of safety at home.\(^{184}\) The theme of “ordinariness” and “everyday” commonality carries through in more than the home itself. The everyday nature of a haunting and the impact it can have on individuals and families is a common element of many of the television ghost hunting shows. Part of TAPS’s stated mission, frequently repeated by Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson on *Ghost Hunters*, is to help people. In *Paranormal State*, the student investigators from Penn State spend almost every episode helping people and their families at their suburban and rural Pennsylvania homes.

While not explicit in its appropriation of ghost hunting themes and formulas - the ghost story has always consisted of some investigative aspect, if we recall the story of Athenodorus of Tarsus - *Paranormal Activity* does effectively demonstrate the ways that ghost hunting television shows and paranormal found footage films both use documentary aesthetics and various recording technologies to engage with supernatural themes, and to elide and obfuscate the differences between representation and reality. These themes become more resonant in later films in the franchise, especially with regard to the use of the camera by the various protagonists. In each film except the final entry, *Paranormal Activity: The Ghost Dimension* (Gregory Plotkin, 2015), the cameras are consumer grade in their quality, though as the series continues more and more types of cameras are introduced into the mix, as are more elaborate riggings, such as the oscillating camcorder in *Paranormal Activity 3* that constantly pans back-and-forth between views of the living room and the kitchen.

\(^{184}\) Kurutz, “No Rest for the Eerie.”
The first film uses only the Sony camera, the second a series of surveillance cameras installed after a “break in” at Katie’s sister’s house, an older video camera in the 1980s that records the younger Katie and her sister in the third entry, web cameras and laptops in the fourth, and a number of different cameras and smartphones in the spin-off/sequel *Paranormal Activity: The Marked Ones* (Christopher Landon, 2014). In each film the cameras function as evidence-gathering devices which the characters use to play footage back and review things that have happened to them, serving as proof that can be used to convince themselves and others that what they are experiencing is real. The narrative of each film is primarily concerned with the characters’ search for the truth and a way to rid themselves of the spirit’s presence. While most found footage horror films are structured by a quest for answers—many are, after all, positioned as the last record of documentary film crews or of people who have encountered unique situations they were trying to find a way out of—the answers in *Paranormal Activity* seem to come through the various communications technologies themselves. As in the history of Spiritualism recounted in previous chapters, the word medium can be used to describe either a technological or human vessel through which spirit energies can manifest and communicate. The camera in the *Paranormal Activity* franchise is a medium in both senses.

Characters in each film in the series comment on the fact that the demon gains strength from the attention given it through recording and direct interaction, an assertion with corollaries in a variety of different cultures and religions. In the West, which is heavily influenced by Catholic ideology with regard to spirits, demons, and rites of exorcism, the idea that demons become more powerful by interacting with it is bound to superstitions about occult and satanic rituals. These superstitions not only manifest as warnings against demonic forces, but can also be found in modern paranormal research as beliefs about how electromagnetic fields and electrical
currents allow the spirit to syphon their energy and use that energy to interact with physical objects and even become corporeal. In *The Ghost Dimension*, the last film in the franchise, both the demonic and benign strands of this belief are taken to their logical conclusion as a group of new homeowners discovers an odd-looking camera that was developed specifically to visualize and record spirit energy. This allows the characters (and the audience) to view the ghost dimension of the title and interact with and respond to the demon’s presence in real time. In this instance the camera is no longer just a means of recording, but also new technology developed specifically for paranormal investigation which is capable of collapsing time and space. This is similar to the spirit box discussed in Chapter 3, that continuously scans AM radio frequencies in order to pick up attempts by spirits to communicate with paranormal investigators in real time rather than through EVP playback after the fact; to create a conduit to the other side and tune into spirit voices from the ether as so many emergent technologies have done before it.

*Grave Encounters* picks up ghost hunting shows and brings the implicit connections between previous paranormal found footage films like *Paranormal Activity* (and other derivatives thereof) and these shows into explicit relief in terms of the cycle’s ongoing popularity and marketability. According to Stuart Ortiz, the idea for the film came to them while watching episodes of *Ghost Adventures* and *Paranormal State*. The fit with the current found footage boom clicked automatically.\(^{185}\) He says, “at some point we just looked at each other and thought: ‘This would make a great movie!’ [It] would make a great found footage movie in particular--because the whole appeal of those is that maybe people will actually see something. But, of course, the reality is that you never see anything.”\(^{186}\) This indicates that Minihan and Ortiz were

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\(^{186}\) Ibid.
also cognizant of the similar uses of off-screen space to generate fear in these texts, where the activity is implied more than shown. Of course, the entire point of both shows like *Ghost Hunters* and of *Paranormal Activity* is to show the activity if it can be captured on camera, which they frequently do. What Ortiz really means is that they want to show the source of the activity, the ghosts. And show them it does.

Released in 2011, *Grave Encounters* presents itself as the final “lost” episode of a ghost hunting show which shares its name with the film. The film reworks the tropes of ghost hunting television shows through reflexivity and parody, highlighting their status as “constructed” reality, all the while following through on the promise of found footage horror to show its audience something beyond true documentary representation. It begins with an introduction by the show-within-the-film’s producer, Jerry Hartfield (Ben Wilkinson). Sitting in front of a video editing bay, Jerry informs us that what we are about to see is the final footage shot by the crew of the reality television program *Grave Encounters*, unedited except for time. This opening fits firmly within the found footage tradition of establishing a lineage for the footage, assuring the audience that what they are about to see is “real,” and serves as evidence of the fate that befell the protagonists. After this introduction, we are taken on location to a supposedly haunted asylum where the group of investigators will be spending the night. The show’s host, Lance Preston (Sean Rogerson), introduces the property and begins detailing its dark past, which is filled with the mistreatment and deaths of patients, many at the hands of the medical staff in charge of the hospital. We are taken on a tour with the property’s manager, and are shown interviews with locals and eyewitness which are typical of any ghost hunting television show. Many of these scenes call attention to the ways those shows are edited together to present a constructed reality.
The characters - host Lance, investigators Sasha and T.C. (Ashleigh Gryzko and Merwin Mondesir), equipment tech Matt (Juan Riedinger), and psychic Houston Gray (Mackenzie Gray) - are all professed skeptics, with Lance in particular extremely cynical about the show they are making. At one point, when the gardener is asked to describe any strange activity he has witnessed, and he answers that he has never seen anything strange, Lance asks Sasha for some of the petty cash, and pays the gardener $20, which is followed by a smash-cut to an earnest testimonial about spirits haunting the asylum. A similarly comedic moment occurs when Lance introduces and the psychic, Houston Gray, are walking through some of the hotspots detailed on the tour earlier. Walking into an area where a woman reportedly committed suicide, Houston picks up on “a deep well of sadness,” informing Lance that the girl slit her wrists in the tub. Lance responds, “The caretaker said a girl killed herself right here. Houston that’s incredible.” When they cut from the scene moments later, they start laughing, and Houston asks, “Was that too much?” Through the incorporation of moments like these, the film is working to construct its own diegetic realism while deconstructing that of the ghost hunting reality show. It works as an inside joke about the constructed nature of ghost hunting shows while also signifying the film’s “make-believe reality,” which will actually show us that which the TV shows never do: real evidence of a haunting.

Once the characters enter the asylum and their lockdown begins, however, there is a tonal shift, and the rest of the film plays out more or less like a typical investigation from one of the many ghost hunting shows. As the crew enters different areas and uses different technologies to collect evidence, they explain how each piece of equipment works. Even then, there are jokes. Early on, Lance uses a camera to take still photographs, telling the viewer, “If there was something standing right behind me, we won’t know until later.” Before long, however, things
start to happen. At first it is only small things, unseen and unnoticced by the crew: a window on an upper floor opens on its own, a wheelchair appears in a previously-explored hallway and moves while T.C.’s back is turned. But soon there are slamming doors, loud noises, and Sasha is touched by something captured on camera. Shaken by her experience, Sasha begs Lance to let them leave, so they decide to pack up their equipment and leave a couple of hours early, only to find that they cannot. The door they entered the asylum through no longer exits to the outside, only more hallways, and they soon discover they are stuck inside with real spirits in an unending purgatorial nighttime. Slowly the asylum’s spirits come out to play, blood-soaked, white-eyed, gape-mouthed ghouls who appear in the shadows and chase the team down corridors, picking them off one by one.

After receiving attention on the film festival circuit, the film was picked up for distribution by Tribeca Film, a small company affiliated with the Tribeca Film Festival. One of many such companies that appeared in the 2000s, such as Magnolia Entertainment, IFC Films, and Sundance, Tribeca Film’s mission was to provide theatrical, on-demand, and home video distribution to independent films. During its theatrical run, Grave Encounters grossed $2.15 million, turning a solid enough profit to generate a sequel, Grave Encounters 2 (John Poliquin, 2012), which also received a brief theatrical release but barely made $500,000 at the box office. As the highest-profile film of these cash-in productions, Grave Encounters provides the clearest articulation the ways ghost hunting shows were incorporated into found footage films in the new millennium.

When Grave Encounters was released in 2011, the ghost hunting boom on cable television was in full swing, and Ghost Adventures had just become an anchor program for its
network, Travel Channel. Given that the Vicious Brothers point to *Ghost Adventures* particularly as one of their inspirations for the film, it is not surprising that the fictional show-within-the-film closely resembles that show in both structure and in the tone and style of its presentation. Lance Preston is pretty clearly a send-up of Zak Bagans, the Vegas dudebro host of *Ghost Adventures* known for his machismo, his controversial method of provoking spirits during investigations, and his penchant for wearing Ed Hardy-style muscle tees and flat-billed baseball caps. The investigators also shoot the footage themselves, and are not followed around by an external film crew hired by the production company a lá *Ghost Hunters* and *Paranormal State*. Once the investigation begins, the film is also edited the same way, with cutaways to playback of footage, on-the-fly reviews of video and audio recordings during the investigation, and constant explanation of what the technologies the team is using allegedly measure and record as well as the underlying theories behind those assumptions about technological capability. Even the type of spirit activity is similar to that on *Ghost Adventures*, as Sasha is scratched at one point in the night, and we see a visible red line up her back, recalling the countless number of times Zak, Nick, and Aaron claim to have been scratched on the show. But the way the film mimics the show, especially with an eye toward parody and, in later scenes, the credulity of ghost hunting shows’ capacity for representation, is an interesting development in the cycle, especially when considering it as part of a trans-media continuum of a popular formula.

As a trans-media text, *Grave Encounters* is a cash-in on two popular formulas in different media, adapting the ghost hunting formula into a new medium almost wholesale, retaining its investigative structure, its understanding of technological possibility with regard to the supernatural, and its adherence to an articulation of reality *vis-a-vis* recorded evidence, which is

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187 See Chapter 3.
also at the heart of the found footage style. It is indicative of the direction the paranormal found footage horror film took after the *Paranormal Activity* series. We have already seen how that film incorporated well-known tropes of paranormal investigation, and perhaps unwittingly replicated the structure of ghost hunting television shows. But in *Grave Encounters* and the films which followed its path forward, the ghost hunting show’s evidentiary aspects collide with those of the found footage film, which necessitates an ending that justifies the “found” status of the film’s presentation, often the death of the protagonists. The turn in the last half of *Grave Encounters* toward a full-on spook show differentiates it somewhat from its ghost hunting show origins, leaning heavily into the tropes of the haunted house film, particularly the show-rather-than-just-tell variant exemplified by films such as *The Legend of Hell House* (John Hough, 1973), *Poltergeist* (Tobe Hooper, 1982), *House* (Steve Miner, 1985), *Insidious*, and *The Conjuring*. These moments also push against the carefully constructed sense of realism in other found footage films which are less forthcoming in their visual representations of spirits themselves, relying more heavily on the lack of clear visibility (or at least a lack of action within the frame itself) to generate fear in the viewer.188 This is exactly what the directors were going for, positioning themselves within a lineage of such representations of reality in ghost hunting texts. Co-director Colin Minihan has said, “With ‘Paranormal Activity’ and ‘The Blair Witch Project’...there’s always the implication that ghosts are haunting the place, but you’re never really going to see [it] on camera.”189 This is the same in shows like *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Adventures*, where the draw for viewers to tune in week after week is the promise that seeing a

188 Sayad, “Found Footage Horror and the Frame’s Undoing.”

The appearance of *Grave Encounters* at a time when the truth-claims of ghost hunting shows were increasingly scrutinized by viewers, and after a glut of found footage films had been released in cinemas was fortuitous. Its parody of ghost hunting shows and its abandonment of the reserved, “less is more” approach of many found footage horror films represents a development of the formula in tune with the shifting zeitgeist that found audiences increasingly skeptical of the shows’ realism and devotion to collecting actual evidence. In 2009, after an unceremonious departure from *Ghost Hunters*, former cast member Donna LaCroix appeared on the *GhostDivas* podcast, and accused the show of fabricating reactions to off-screen “activity” through creative editing. And in 2011, *Ghost Adventures* in particular came under intense scrutiny after several real-life paranormal investigators began taking issue with how its hosts played fast and loose with the “facts” of their investigations, including getting details about various locations like the Stanley Hotel incorrect and making assertions about why spirits would be attracted to the property that had nothing to do with their collected evidence or even scientific fact. In this sense, the continuation of the ghost hunting formula was refreshed through parody and by the open acknowledgement of its constructed status, with allegations of fakery elided through the film’s abundant “evidence” in the over-the-top finale.

The film also provides us with a glimpse of the audience overlap for this trans-media cycle. The *Grave Encounters* trailer, which was a viral sensation in 2011 with 30,000 views on

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190 Alissa Burger, “*Ghost Hunters,*” 163.
YouTube, contains many comments from users who immediately recognized the film’s send-up of *Ghost Adventures* in particular. “Spirit M.” said, “Uhm, Ghost Adventures much?” Echoing the sentiments of The Vicious Brothers when the idea for the film struck, “exodous02” wrote, “I was expecting this movie like 10 years ago with shows like *Ghost Hunters*...They never find anything in those shows and I always thought it would be cool if they found something and something actually happened.” And “Leah Buckman” commented, “They have the X’s and everything!” This sampling of comments on the trailer points to the existence of an overlap in viewers of both ghost hunting shows and paranormal found footage films, many of whom would be perfect targets for a project such as this.

Paramount Television certainly thought the popularity of ghost hunting shows and their film studio’s success with found footage horror demonstrated a potential overlap in their target audience when they partnered with Oren Peli to develop *The River* (ABC, 2012), a scripted found footage show that aired for eight episodes on ABC. In an oblique reference to ghost hunting shows and similar investigative reality shows, Oren Peli told the *L.A. Times*, “The audience has been so embracing of the reality format over the last 10 years...so there has been a resurgence of found footage movies that the audience has embraced, but there hasn’t really been any TV show that was scripted found footage.” Peli’s reference to “the” audience points toward a unified conception of viewer overlap for reality programming and found footage films with paranormal subject matter. Furthermore, there is an implied assertion that “reality” and “found footage” are themselves similar conceptually, as this chapter has argued.

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At least conceptually the show was a further instance of the ghost hunting formula adapted into found footage style, though this time reinstated to its televisual roots. A well-known travel show host has gone missing in the Amazon. His family, desperate to find him, embark on a mission to discover exactly what happened to his expedition, financed by a reality show production team on the condition that they are allowed to film everything that happens on the trip. Though ultimately unsuccessful, cancelled after one season, the show represents an attempt by a major Hollywood studio to capitalize on both its success with found footage horror films (including by partnering with the creator of the Paranormal Activity franchise) as well as the ongoing popularity of paranormal reality shows, and investigative ones in particular.

4.5 Conclusion

Paranormal found footage horror films still come out on a regular basis, though very few are about ghosts and haunted houses anymore. After Grave Encounters, there were many independent paranormal found footage films which made use of the ghost hunting formula released direct to video and on streaming video services. 7 Nights of Darkness, Spirit Stalkers, and many similar titles have continued to incorporate ghost hunting into their narrative structures. While most of these are obvious cash-ins, and many of them more amateurish than others, they are nonetheless part of the trans-media cycle, produced based on the formula’s popularity in an attempt to attract an overlapping audience between paranormal reality TV and found footage horror films. Recent films in the trans-media ghost hunting cycle have begun incorporating new media forms as well. Paranormal Activity 4 and Unfriended both use webcams and laptop interfaces to generate their ontological realities, hinting at the possibilities for the continuation of the formula in not only future films, but in those other media themselves,
some of which may already exist on websites like YouTube and LiveLeak. Moving forward, it will be interesting to trace how the formula continues to grow cinematically, as further iterations of the cycle continue to trickle out in the medium. While the cycle has slowed down, more continue to come out, with *The Blackwell Ghost* (Anonymous, 2017) being one of the latest examples of the found footage style’s blurring of lines between fact and fiction as it does not list any cast or crew in either the film or on IMDB.

If, as described in the introduction, a production cycle is predicated on a series of hits and misses which solidify a popular formula and generate imitators through sustained success of a modified formula, as argued by Richard Nowell, and if that formula’s repetition with minor variation over a limited period of time is the most concise definition possible, as used effectively by Amanda Ann Klein, then the cycle under study here is one that does all of that in addition to having the formula proliferate in a number of different media at the same time, using a similar text (or texts) as its starting point. In this chapter we have traced the development of a trans-media production cycle based on the ghost hunting reality show formula. We have seen how the paranormal found footage films since *The Blair Witch Project* have increasingly incorporated elements of paranormal investigation intertextually, with *Paranormal Activity* serving as a prime case study in the widespread cultural acceptance of spiritualist belief systems in relation to the existence of ghosts and the abilities of cameras to capture and produce evidence of that existence. We have also seen how the style of found footage films highlights the constructed nature of realism in documentary filmmaking and, by extension, reality television shows. And finally, we have seen how a film like *Grave Encounters* functions as part of a trans-media cycle, articulating not only intertextual connections across television and film texts, but demonstrating elements of overlap between the two industries and the mitigation of risk by carrying a popular formula over into a
different medium, attracting the interest of potential viewers through its trailer on YouTube who appear to be fans of both ghost hunting shows and found footage films. The popularity of the ghost hunting show formula and the widespread cultural interest in ghost hunting as an activity have also generated other trans-media texts, which will be discussed briefly in the conclusion to this dissertation as one of several possible directions with which to expand the study of this production cycle.

5 A TRULY TRANS-MEDIA CYCLE

5.1 What We Have Learned So Far

The notion of a trans-media cycle does not end at the borders of film and television, nor does it necessarily begin there. This dissertation has used a single formula - that of the ghost hunting television reality show - and the history of its development and translation from one medium into another as a jumping off point to argue for the versatility of cycle studies in addressing media history beyond the medium-specific boundaries that often confine it. Over the course of this dissertation’s five chapters, I have argued that in order to study why and how popular formulas proliferate simultaneously in a variety of media, we should use cycle studies as a methodological lens. This is because as a naturally delimiting process - cycles are only active for a short period of time according to rather strict industrial conditions for media production - it allows us to avoid the pitfalls of purely textual logics in the study of generic formulas and generate more comprehensive, concrete media histories. We have primarily looked at the development of the ghost hunting formula on American cable television in the 2000s and its transference to paranormal found footage film style later that same decade, though there are of course many different avenues to consider for further research and explication, some of which will be discussed below. Overall, this dissertation has served as an example of what trans-media
cycle studies might entail in practice as much as in theory, using a combination of industrial, textual, and cultural elements to tell the story of the ghost hunting formula. In the three body chapters we have been able to see exactly how and why this formula engaged with these three nodes of history.

In the introduction, we laid out the theoretical foundations of genre and cycle studies in film and television history. Then, using the work of Amanda Ann Klein as a jumping off point, we prescribed a methodology by which a study of production cycles across the boundaries of film and television could be undertaken. Each of the chapters have emphasized different elements of this approach while keeping our focus on the interactions between the ghost hunting formula, popular culture, and film and television history. In chapter 2, we analyzed the ghost hunting formula through deep textual and historical analysis, laying out its essential elements and its cultural use value. This analysis demonstrated how the formula engaged with popular culture, religious thought, and the issues of “reality,” “evidence,” and “objectivity” which exist at the heart of not only paranormal research, but which are also central to the construction of “realism” in the production practices of the ghost hunting cycle.

This was used to undergird the construction of an elaborate historical genealogy of the ghost hunting formula on U.S. television in chapter 3, which allowed us to trace the development of the formula through shifts in television production and distribution, as well as through the horror and reality television genres. We were also able to make nods to the greater cultural history of paranormal investigation and documentation, especially in relation to the paranormal boom of the 1970s, which shared a number of overlapping cultural anxieties with the 2000s, and which made a lasting impression on generic texts. And in chapter 4, we saw how the ghost hunting formula was able to transfer from television to film through the vein of found footage.
horror films which were popular and developed a similar set of aesthetics and thematic elements around the same time. We were also able to see how the film and television industries in the United States took advantage of their overlapping aesthetics and thematics in order to capitalize on the ghost hunting formula’s popularity in a variety of media.

5.2 Moving Forward

The notion of a trans-media cycle does not end at the borders of film and television, nor does it necessarily begin there. This dissertation has used a single formula - that of the ghost hunting television reality show - and the history of its development and translation from one medium into another as a jumping off point to argue for the versatility of cycle studies in addressing media history beyond the medium-specific boundaries that often confine it. Over the course of this dissertation’s five chapters, I have argued that in order to study why and how popular formulas proliferate simultaneously in a variety of media, we should use cycle studies as a methodological lens. This is because as a naturally delimiting process - cycles are only active for a short period of time according to rather strict industrial conditions for media production - it allows us to avoid the pitfalls of purely textual logics in the study of generic formulas and generate more comprehensive, concrete media histories. We have primarily looked at the development of the ghost hunting formula on American cable television in the 2000s and its transference to paranormal found footage film style later that same decade, though there are of course many different avenues to consider for further research and explication, some of which will be discussed below. Overall, this dissertation has served as an example of what trans-media cycle studies might entail in practice as much as in theory, using a combination of industrial, textual, and cultural elements to tell the story of the ghost hunting formula. In the three body
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