

2018

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Recommended Citation

Richards, Samantha, "The Construction of Truth in Fiction: An Analysis of the Faux Footage Genre in Television" (2018). *Scripps Senior Theses*. 1197.
http://scholarship.claremont.edu/scripps_theses/1197

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**THE CONSTRUCTION OF TRUTH IN FICTION:
AN ANALYSIS OF THE FAUX FOOTAGE GENRE IN TELEVISION**

**by
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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

PROFESSOR CONNELLY

PROFESSOR WING

4/20/2018

We open on dashcam footage from a police car. The sirens blare. From an overhead angle, we see multiple police cars rushing towards the gates of an old house surrounded by forest. As the cars get closer there is another cut. Now we're viewing the arrival at the house through an officer's body camera. Blocks at the bottom of the screen identify this footage as such. The officer whose perspective we share comes upon the still smoldering bodies of two impaled and burned children. We accompany this officer into the house where she comes across several more bodies. The officer then leaves the house to find a bloody Lee Harris (Adina Porter) laying in the grass outside. Lee screams as she is approached, begging the officers to get her out of "this hell hole", and is finally escorted to a police car. Then we hear, "Jesus, there's another one". Now we see Audrey Tindall (Sarah Paulson) crawling through the brush. When approached, she asks the officer, "Are you real?", a question that has echoed throughout her ordeal. Lee steps out of the police car and voices her relief that Audrey is alive. Upon recognizing Lee, Audrey goes for the officer's gun and is almost immediately gunned down by the other officers present. This shooting is seen not from the officer's body cam, but instead from an overhead camera, placed there for the reality show both Lee and Audrey were participating in. So concludes Episode 9 of *American Horror Story: Roanoke*.

This scene is exemplary of the format and concerns of *American Horror Story* Season 6, which is subtitled *Roanoke*. The season relies heavily on "faux footage" or fictional found footage, like the officer's body camera's, to construct a hypermediated experience and fictional "reality". By calling attention to the sources of narrative information, this season encourages audiences to both invest in the narrative and deconstruct it. Lee and Audrey are participants in the reality TV series *Return to Roanoke: Three Days in Hell* (which makes up the majority of the

second half of the season) in which they were expected to stay in a haunted house and document their experience with cell phone cameras. Long before this scene, viewers are informed by the editor of *Return to Roanoke* that every participant in the series died over the three days of filming, save one. This means, from the moment that Lee and Audrey are found, viewers know one of them is about to die.



Body camera footage of Lee and Audrey being rescued from the set of *Return to Roanoke*.

Out of context, this scene is intense and dramatic: in context, even more so. Over the course of the previous episodes, Lee has admitted to killing her ex-husband and been recorded killing four more people. The last we saw of her, she had hit Audrey with a cleaver and pushed her into a cellar before overseeing the ritualistic murder of the two teenagers whose burned bodies were found at the top of this scene. From the moment Lee is found, the audience identifies her as the foretold lone survivor of *Return to Roanoke*. At the same time, the

“subjective shot,” footage from the officer’s body cam, allows us to see Lee as a traumatized woman in need of help. Indeed, throughout the sixth season of *American Horror Story* there have been many examples of how false narrative can be constructed. Viewers have especially witnessed Lee’s obsession with what I will refer to as narrative control. Here, narrative control occurs when a character is able to manipulate the general understanding of events to be more favorable to him or her. Lee’s status as the lone survivor, and the sympathetic position from which her uninformed rescuers approach her, indicates that Lee will be able to hide her crimes through this form of narrative manipulation now that no one is left to contradict her version of events. This moment creates tension for the *American Horror Story* audience, who know the “truth” of Lee’s experience and are anxious to see it communicated.

Truth plays a huge role in the faux footage portion of *American Horror Story: Roanoke*. The season is constructed in three acts. The first is a fictional reality show entitled *My Roanoke Nightmare*, in which the haunting of Lee and her family is depicted through interviews and reenactment. The second act is a faux footage compilation of recordings meant for the show’s sequel season. The final act is a compilation of falsified media surrounding the events of both intertextual television shows. It is the second act that ends with Audrey’s death at the hands of her would-be rescuers. In the faux footage sequel entitled, “*Return to Roanoke: Three Days in Hell*”, the show’s participants go to great lengths to ensure that their story is the one told. This struggle for narrative control is heightened by the hypermediated format which features footage from the show’s cameras, subjective shots taken by the participants’ camera phones, and other diegetic footage. By calling attention to the apparatus of information, *American Horror Story: Roanoke* seeks to present “real” footage from within a fictional world. Through the lens of

Caetlin Benson-Allott's *Paranormal Spectatorship*, and by drawing upon key concepts of Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation*, I plan to show the ways that "truth" is constructed in a fictional sphere through visual and narrative references. I will be looking specifically at *Roanoke*, the sixth season of *American Horror Story*, to provide examples of the way faux footage horror's unique use of the subjective shot constructs the spectator as both a witness and an interrogator, and creates an aesthetic language of truth. While being immersed in the story, viewers are simultaneously invited to consider how the narrative is being constructed, and by whom.

I have chosen to use the word "truth" despite its vagueness and controversial nature to indicate a state opposite to falseness. As I am looking at a "truth" constructed by a fictional television show I intend for the term to invoke an unaltered quality, in contrast to a more overtly constructed or produced narrative. Though many scholars have worked to redefine concepts such as objectivity and truth by accounting for the inherently non-neutral position of any subject, I will not be continuing that work here. Instead, here I use truth to describe a version of events that exists outside of a construction of one of the show's many diegetic filmmakers. Of course, all media is constructed in some form. Even our understanding of "reality" television includes an expectation of production or outright falsehood. However, the concept of truth is key to the way we understand the power of any recording device, and of film and video specifically. To explore the way we interpret the filmic image, words such as "truth", "real", and "objective" are not ideal, but necessary.

We have built a narrative around cameras that defines them as the infallible observer. Video and photo evidence is often considered more reliable and objective than eyewitness

accounts, even though they must also be interpreted. The impression that video recordings are able to capture things as they happen in real-time approximates the camera as both a human eye, and a vastly superior viewing apparatus.

Remediation

There are considerable benefits to using the camera as a way to experience an image or event. In Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*, they highlight two modes of engagement with visual texts: immediacy and hypermediacy. For Bolter And Grusin, immediacy is what they describe as "looking through". This concept of transparent immediacy proposes a relationship in which the purpose of the medium is to disappear, allowing an immediate relationship between spectator and content. This is often attempted through an immersive quality, as in virtual reality. For example, many Hollywood movies are edited to hide the mechanisms of storytelling: a method sometimes referred to as the "invisible" style of editing.

In some cases, the intent of the medium is not to disappear, but in fact to stand out. This is what Bolter and Grusin term as hypermediacy, a logic which is characterized by fragmentation and "indeterminacy and heterogeneity" (Bolter and Grusin, 31). Unlike transparent immediacy, hypermediacy makes the medium visible for the viewer, for example through the "windowed style" of a website or split-screen image in a movie. Often, this is a decision of function over form: increased usability rather than a seamless interaction. Bolter and Grusin describe it as the new media experience "born from the marriage of TV and computer technologies."

Hypermediacy can also refer to stylistic choices. When the "illusion of realistic representation is somehow stretched or altogether ruptured," spectators are similarly made aware of the medium, and thus hypermediacy is present.

Immediacy and hypermediacy underpin what Bolter and Grusin term “remediation”. Much like the entertainment industry standard of “repurposing,” or taking a “property” from one medium such as novel or comic book, remediation is a representation of one medium in another. Film does this often. The aesthetics of *Sin City*, for example, draw heavily upon the comic book world, which is the source material for the film. Though this remediation may make it more difficult to look through the medium and gain immediacy with the narrative, it provides a form of spectacle for the audience that is equally engaging.

Television has an especially strong history of remediating film. While the earliest television shows remediated vaudeville and live theater, they soon came to reflect the genres and styles that dominated Hollywood at the time such as romances and westerns. While much of television attempts transparent immediacy, it is arguably more difficult for the medium of television to disappear and allow for transparent immediacy to occur. There are a number of reasons for this. In addition to consistent interruptions by advertisers, television has historically been distinct from film due to viewing mode and location within the home. Theorist Sandy Flitterman-Lewis explains that “[f]ilms are seen in large, silent, darkened theatres... there is an enforced and anonymous collectivity of the audience because, for any screening, all viewers are physically present at the same time in the relatively enclosed space of the theatre” (quoted in Bolter and Grusin, 186). On the other hand is “the fragmentary, dispersed, and varied nature of television reception. The darkness is dissolved, the anonymity removed” (186). As a medium, television does not draw the same uninterrupted focus of a film, but it does have other strengths.

The primary strengths of the televisual medium are the possibility of liveness and an aesthetic of authenticity. Since television is capable of broadcasting events as they happen, it can

be seen as an authority on the now. The formats of news and sports broadcasting, for example, suggest an immediate connection between the spectator and the event as it unfolds. Similarly, the rise of audience sourced content in shows like *America's Funniest Home Videos* or *Tosh.0* has introduced an aesthetic that implies something “real”. These familiar formats can be useful tools for scripted content either by indicating a “liveness” through the remediation of news segments, or a “realness” through poor camera work. The remediation of television’s strengths is central to the recent development of the faux footage horror genre.

Faux Footage

Televisual indicators of authenticity such as liveness and the amateur aesthetic are remediated in what Caetlin Benson-Allott terms “faux footage” horror films: scripted horror films which draw on the aesthetic language of documentary, reality television, and home video to add authenticity to what is often an entirely fictional plotline. These films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Cloverfield* (2008) are characterized by an introductory title card revealing the ultimate fate of the characters that will be the spectators primary point of identification. This not only removes the emphasis from plot and places it on spectacle, but it also states how the distributor “came across” this footage. The falsified genealogy of these films places them outside the realm of one medium (a scripted and produced film), and inserts them into another (an amateur and documentary-like experience). Benson-Allott explains, “While traditional continuity editing works to obscure mediation and the presence of the camera and thereby produce the thrilling illusion that its subjects do not know they are being watched, faux footage horror foregrounds the presence of the camera, like reality television” (Benson-Allott, 180). By referencing another medium, these films call attention to the very presence of a medium

itself and become hypermediated. Through programs like *America's Funniest Home Videos*, and their commodification of home video as entertainment, American audiences have come to associate poor camera work with authenticity. Similar to the filmic style of many of today's viral videos, faux footage films' "very flaws assure the spectator that the moments [] capture[d] are real, the[] actions spontaneous, and the outcome unpredictable" (Benson-Allott, 180). While audiences understand the "authenticity" that is communicated by this format, they simultaneously know the true context in which they're watching this film. This primes the spectator for the "parallactic" experience, that of switching back and forth between modes of engagement with the film. Audience know that they're watching a horror film, but are also following the diegetic filmmaker's quest to create something else. This diegetic filmmaker is essential to the way that the audience is constructed. As such, the parallactic experience serves as the vehicle for both investigation and progression of the plot. The role of the faux footage diegetic filmmaker is especially apparent in *Cloverfield*.

Cloverfield

Matt Reeves' 2008 faux footage horror, *Cloverfield*, constructs its diegetic filmmaker and primary point of audience identification, Hud, as both a witness and an investigator, placing the audience in that position as well. Hud (T.J. Miller) is given the task of recording his best friend's going away party. Though his initial responsibility is to record attendees farewell wishes, he soon takes on the role of an investigator, citing his duty to "document the night" as an excuse to seek out gossip. When tremors wrack New York City, Hud and his friends find themselves navigating a city ravaged by a monster and the army sent to combat it. Throughout the film, Hud

continues recording diligently, explaining his motives in an exchange with his best friend Rob (Michael Stahl-David):

Rob: “Still filming?”

Hud: “Yeah, people are gonna want to know how it all went down.”

Rob: “Well, you can just tell them how it all went down, Hud.”

Hud: “No, that wouldn’t work. People need to see this, you know? It’s gonna be important. People are going to watch this”

Here Hud is identifying two things we already know to be true: that people believe video evidence over eyewitness accounts, and that someone (us) will watch it. The belief component is important, as *Cloverfield* actively maintains the illusion of truth, but the idea of recording for an undefined future spectator is an important concept as well. Though the reasons diegetic filmmakers record often differ from the goals of the creator of the faux footage horror film, the exhibitionist nature of filming for an audience is necessary to maintain the illusion of veracity.

The formal components of *Cloverfield* construct a fictional “truth” in a number of ways that range from overwhelming to barely noticeable. On the barely noticeable side is the runtime. The film is exactly 80 minutes, the length of a long running MiniDV tape, common to the type of consumer camcorder Hud is using (IMDb). This ties into to a more noticeable choice. The film has no obvious cuts, and instead is presented as truly “ready-made”. This is made more apparent by our understanding that Hud is recording over the tape Rob had in the camcorder already. When Hud turns the camera off or puts it in playback mode, we get glimpses of a day Rob’s spent with Beth (Odette Annable), the “friend” he is now trying to rescue from New York City’s imminent destruction. These moments serve both as a contrast to the violence and danger present

in Hud's recording, but also to hypermediate the film by calling attention to the medium. The medium is quite present throughout the film as Hud is an especially shaky camera operator. This too facilitates the reading of the footage as "truth". To explain this phenomenon, Benson-Allott draws on the work of Amy West who states, "[t]he self-evident non-professionalism of footage screened under the caught-on-tape banner certifies that the represented event is not staged, because both the technology utilized and the operator controlling it lack the sophistication to fake" (quoted in Benson-Allott, 195). Obviously, the creators of *Cloverfield* have both the technical and operational sophistication to fake, but drawing upon the aesthetic language of "the real" allows not for a more immersive narrative but a more believable one.

Hud's name suggests an additional purpose he serves in the facilitation of the film *Cloverfield*. In the film Hud is short for Hudson, but HUD is also an acronym for Heads Up Display, a means of receiving information without looking away from a usual viewpoint. In *Feed-Forward*, Mark B.N. Hansen explains: "We might also think of the HUD as a digital seer that functions as a conduit not to God but to knowledge and temporalities beyond the grasp of human cognition and consciousness, granting players "indirect human access" to this realm so that it might inform their future actions" (quoted in Schull, 571). A HUD presents data for human interpretation without suggesting a clear course of action. This is Hud's role in *Cloverfield*. As the camera operator, Hud is privy to information quicker than his companions. While traversing the subway tunnels of New York City, Hud and his friends notice that the rats are all running in one direction, presumably away from something. As Rob helps Hud shift to night vision mode on his video camera, Hud is immediately able to see the monsters climbing the tunnel walls. Though Hud is able to see the threat before his friends, he isn't able to do much to

warn them of the danger they're in. That's because he isn't their heads-up display, he's the viewer's. Hud cannot offer more information than pure observation; like his namesake, he cannot interpret data for us. Instead, he gives the viewer enough information to construct their own understanding of events. Hud is the literal digital seer, but does not have the context that the film's audience does. Textually, the viewer knows that this camera is found by the government, and, and on another level, that *Cloverfield* is a horror film. Therefore the viewer knows instinctively that Hud does not survive this experience. Because she sees the events of *Cloverfield* from Hud's perspective, she understands her position of spectator to be equally as vulnerable. This subjective shot facilitates the viewing experience, directing audience members to the "data" they need to see. Faux footage depends on the reliability of the vulnerable camera operator, both as a vehicle for truth and as a guide through a complex other world.

Benson-Allott's work is primarily concerned with faux footage film. I am interested in the genre's recent appearance in television. Televisual horror faces unique challenges to film, namely the need for a narrative thread propelling the story forward in order to maintain viewer interest over the course of weeks rather than hours. This requires a change to the narrative format of faux footage horror which reveals its ending upfront. The televisual faux footage experience is most evident in the television anthology series *American Horror Story*. The second half of the sixth season, titled *Roanoke*, draws on the conventions of faux footage and adapts them for television. In doing so, the series constructs the parallax experience of faux footage horror: a spectator simultaneously immersed in the plot and questioning the veracity of the fictional narrative presented. *American Horror Story*'s preoccupation with hypermediation and the

exhibitionist qualities of the cinema of attraction makes it an ideal venue for the television debut of faux footage.

American Horror Story

American Horror Story, created by Ryan Murphy, has made a point of pushing television boundaries since its first season in 2011. The series is best known for its graphic depictions of violence, uniquely aestheticized visual style, and copious star power. Described in early advertising as “redefin[ing] a genre” and “everything you love about a thriller - nothing you expect” the series frames itself as the future of horror. *American Horror Story*’s over-the-top nature is its hallmark, as are its marketing and structure. The series has been described as the first anthological miniseries, meaning each season functions as a distinct miniseries with a unique setting, focus, and characters. These seasons are identified by a subtitle denoting their specific narrative focus, such as *Murder House*, *Asylum*, or *Coven*. In this format, seasons are more like sequels than part of a complete narrative. Although the anthologized miniseries has become more common in television, in shows such as *Channel Zero* and *True Detective*, *American Horror Story* stands apart for its ability to innovate within this format. The remediation of the faux footage model in Season 6, *Roanoke*, is one example of the way *American Horror Story* positions itself at the innovative forefront of modern horror.

One of *American Horror Story*’s trademarks is its cast. Though the series is an anthology, many cast members appear in more than one season in different roles. Actors like Jessica Lange, Sarah Paulson, and Evan Peters have become associated with the series, appearing in most or all of the show’s seven seasons. The anthologized format allows *American Horror Story* a flexibility

that, while critical in the horror genre, is not afforded series with more traditional approach to casting. Unlike in the traditional serial, in any given season or episode of *American Horror Story*, a central character could die or disappear. While in most other shows, a death indicates the last fans will see of their favorite actors, such is not the case for *American Horror Story*. The ability to have unpredictable character death unburdened by fan service has enabled the series to consistently surprise its audience, a necessity for horror. This plays a unique role in constructing the *American Horror Story* spectator. Though fans are able to engage deeply with the series, they are not able to predict its twists and turns. One of the series' most notable twists arrived in the form of a character's reappearance: Pepper (Naomi Grossman), a microcephalic woman, who first appeared in Season 2: *Asylum*. Her presence in Season 4: *Freak Show* united the seemingly disparate seasons and preceded creator Ryan Murphy's announcement that all seasons of *American Horror Story* are connected. These unique facets of the show allow for greater fan interaction. While airing, fans can further engage with the series by finding story links between the seasons. While between seasons, fans interact with the series' signature teaser trailers to gain glimpses into what can be expected in the upcoming installment. *American Horror Story* viewers were constructed as investigators even before the series adapted the faux footage model which debuted with the series' teasers for *American Horror Story: Roanoke*.

Teasers

American Horror Story's teaser trailers have been a hallmark of the brand since its origin and are essential to the construction of the *American Horror Story* spectator. These roughly ten second spots serve to introduce the season's theme through striking imagery. These teasers have no narrative, and rarely, if ever, feature the cast of the series. Instead, they serve to introduce

some of the motifs audiences can expect to see in the upcoming installment. Most importantly, they often provide just enough information to allow fans to pose theories and engage with the subject matter of the season even before the premiere episode. The subjects depicted range from the eerie but mundane-- a sewing machine or close up of an old doll-- to the overtly frightening. While the teasers for the first three seasons often subtly suggested that something was amiss, by Season 4, the trailers consisted of outright disturbing images and scenes.



The above images mark the way *American Horror Story*'s teasers have evolved to better fit the series' conception of horror. The image on the left, a still from a spot advertising Season 1, is unsettling, but mildly so. The spot in question is merely a pan on the doll with music playing and a fire crackling in the background. The image on the right, a still from a Season 4 spot, shows a distinct departure. Though both teasers are roughly ten seconds and consist of a single subject with no cuts, they are meant to elicit very different fear-based responses.

These teasers can best be understood through the lens of Tom Gunning's "cinema of attraction." Gunning posits that narrative played little, if any, role in the origins of silent cinema. Rather, these short films were spectacles or "attractions." In some cases, the medium itself was enough to delight the audience, such as the likely apocryphal tale of audiences running out of the theatre in response to the Lumiere Brothers' *The Arrival of a Train*. Not unlike the parallaxic

experience of faux footage horror, the cinema of attraction constructs a spectator that is both incredulous and engaged. The film's viewers are willingly caught up in the excitement of the image, but simultaneously aware of the image's construction. Though narrative eventually overtook the cinema of attraction to become the primary style of film, "attractions" still play a major role in content today, as evident in the larger-than-life special effects in Marvel movies or action films. In faux footage, the minimizing of the plot through the expository title card allows for entire films to be little more than a vehicle for spectacle. The diegetic cameraperson is a direct descendant of the cinema of attraction, which took an exhibitionist approach to film. The *American Horror Story* teaser trailers are also vehicles for attraction. The transition from mundane but eerie to outright otherworldly spots (as shown in the above examples) illustrates an increased focus on the cinema of attraction. While early trailers inspire audiences to ask why the images are constructed in this way, later trailers inspire the question: how?

Throughout *American Horror Story*'s seven season run, certain aesthetic components have become identified with the brand. Since to Season 1, the teasers have created an eerie atmosphere by using exaggerated damage effects such as light exposure, dust and scratches, and especially "jitters." These effects are at their most apparent at the moment when the series title is revealed.





Stills from an *American Horror Story* Season 1 Teaser - exemplary of commonly used effects including visual blow-out, scratches and falsified “jitters”

Certainly, the vulnerability of the camera operator is essential to faux footage horror. But perhaps more importantly, the simulated print damage and scratches depicted in these teasers suggest the vulnerability of the medium itself. Theorist and film restorer Paolo Cherchi Usai describes “the moving image disgraced” as the “true state of cinema,” explaining that the signs of the damage film undergoes in the process of being displayed mark the film’s “presence in time and space, its unique existence” (quoted in Benson-Allott, 151). This understanding is in line with Murphy’s conception of the project of *American Horror Story*. Claiming to be simultaneously an essentialist piece of the horror genre and yet an entirely unique undertaking, the image of an original medium, warped by the power of its own viewing, feels especially applicable here. The moving image disgraced suggests a time when the medium of film itself was awe-inspiring, and the ways that film had been damaged told a story of its interaction with

audiences. The scratches, jitters and burns on the celluloid reels speak directly to the impact of the images they contained. This implication adds another layer to that of faux footage horror. The combination of these two aesthetic languages suggests that not only are these images powerful, they are real.

Murphy is of course not the first to draw upon the power of a simulated visual distortion. The anthology television series *Masters of Horror* similarly draws upon the “celluloid itself as a character” (Benson-Allott, 136) in the John Carpenter directed episode “Cigarette Burns” (2005). The episode follows Kirby Sweetman (Norman Reedus) as he attempts to procure a notorious film called *La Fin Absolue du Monde* for a collector. Sweetman is a theatre owner and is indebted to the father of his late wife. In order to repay his debts and keep the theatre, Sweetman agrees to seek out the film, which was allegedly destroyed after violence broke out at the premiere. Over the course of the hour long episode, Sweetman is brought to ruin by the power of the filmic image.

Cigarette Burns draws heavily on hypermediation and the cinema of attraction to present this story of a film capable of true atrocity. Mr. Bellinger, the collector seeking the film, identifies his investment in the cinema of attraction by describing his film collection as “the most extreme images” rather than emphasizing the films as a whole. As the episode continues, we see other examples of the medium of film as merely an avenue for attractions. Early on, Sweetman’s sole employee, Timpson (Chris Gauthier), is shown splicing a frame from a reel. It is revealed that he collects cigarette burns from horror films both for their role in film history, but also as a means of changing the viewing experience. Timpson explains that the cigarette burns left by projectionists indicated that “something is gonna happen, hold on, here it comes” and that when

“you take it out, all of a sudden it’s anarchy” (“Cigarette Burns”). Cigarette burns (also known as cue marks) are physical markers (a dot) on the print that indicate a film reel is about to end during its projection. Timpson’s removal of the cigarette burns prevents audiences from anticipating the startling events to come. However, these instances of celluloid damage play a hypermediative role in the episode moving forward. As Sweetman goes deeper into his quest for the film, these cigarette burns and other forms of film print damage follow him into his daily life, forcing him to confront disturbing memories and pieces of himself. As Sweetman is listening to an interview with Hans Backovich, the director of *La Fin Absolute Du Monde*, a cigarette burn suddenly appears. (shown below)



Though the burn appears on the recording the audience is viewing of Sweetman, he is clearly aware of its presence. He is startled and leaves the bed. In this moment, the viewer is made hyper-aware of the medium, and the warning meant by this type of damage. The promise that cigarette burns mark “something happening” is kept, as Sweetman soon finds his dead wife in the bathroom. Though this experience is revealed to be a dream, the audience has nonetheless witnessed an “attraction.”

Subsequent attractions are also heralded by cigarette burns. Many involve Sweetman’s late wife, but others surround a strange figure named Kaspar, whom Sweetman meets on his

quest. It's revealed that Kaspar is obsessed with Backovick and *La Fin Absolute Du Monde*, and attempts to replicate what he feels is the "truth" of the film. As Kaspar forces Sweetman to watch while he films himself decapitating a woman, he explains that "something happens when you point the camera at something terrible, the resulting film takes on power" ("Cigarette Burns") Kaspar feels that this mode of filmmaking is more "truthful" than that of Hollywood, explaining that "[t]he blade of a splicing table can be used to create a lie or to tell the truth, it all depends whose hand it is" ("Cigarette Burns"). He emphasizes that in his film "only one cut was made and it was to her" presenting a lack of editing as evidence of "truth" ("Cigarette Burns"). Likewise, the format of the *American Horror Story* teaser trailers which often contain no cuts invite the viewer to witness an attraction presented as a kind of "truth". Though indebted to the history of the cigarette burn, Carpenter's episode is not an exploration of the damaged moving image, but rather of the power of the filmmaker both to impact an audience, and to tell the "truth." The damage to the film, and to Sweetman's life, is not caused by repeated viewings of a reel, but rather by the power of what is recorded onto it.

American Horror Story title cards and Carpenter's "Cigarette Burns" not only replicate the uneven movement and damage caused by an old film projector, they also remediate it in the service of the themes of their projects. Both projects contain what Benson-Allott names simulacral cinematicity, or the representation of old media in new media which "denotes both the original and the copy" (Benson-Allott, 131). Because television reels were broadcast instead of traveling from theater to theater, and therefore didn't accumulate the same kinds of wear and tear, or even the intentional damage from projectionists, that film reels did, this simulacral cinematicity suggests something else about these works that ties it to past convention. Both

Murphy and Carpenter are referencing a former viewing apparatus to endow their projects with greater importance. The works call back to a time in which the mere act of viewing had the power to corrupt the medium itself. By coating the *American Horror Story* teaser trailers with falsified damage, Murphy suggests a power inherent to the images they present. This inherent power is a central theme of the series' sixth season, subtitled *Roanoke*.

Roanoke: "it's familiar, but it's different"

The first indication that Season 6 of *American Horror Story: Roanoke* would be different came through these now expected teaser trailers. For the first time since Season 1, no subtitle announced the topic of the season. Instead, the trailers were accompanied by variations of the number 6 and a question mark. This wasn't the only disparity. Without an identifying moniker like "*Asylum*," "*Coven*," or "*Freak Show*," fans struggled to unpack the potential focus of the season as presented through the teasers. Some attribute this uncertainty to the wide range of scenarios presented in the teasers, which featured images ranging from alien abduction, swamp monsters, demonic dolls and a woman with spiders crawling out of her eyes. However, *American Horror Story* has never been known to limit itself to one subject. In Season 2: *Asylum*, threats included alien abduction, demonic possession, barbaric treatments for mental illness, a Nazi doctor, and a serial killer reminiscent of Ed Gein. The same season also features a musical number. With this in mind, rather than reacting to the number of potential storylines, it is more likely that viewers were instead reacting to aesthetic differences within the teasers.



The above images are stills from three teaser trailers for *American Horror Story* Season 6. The first trailer, entitled “Sunset Stroll,” features a family with glowing eyes walking toward the camera. The image is jittery and washed out by lens flares. The accompanying logo is simple and similarly washed out. This teaser follows the conventions of an *American Horror Story* teaser, including unsettling imagery and simulacral cinematicity. It is, however, clearly visually and thematically distinct from the other trailers presented this season. The second teaser, “Camp Sight,” features an alien abduction, complete with a more sci-fi inspired logo. The third teaser, “Blind Date,” features a campy attack of a 1950’s sorority girl by a swamp creature. Accordingly, the accompanying logo draws on the “vintage” aesthetic of the teaser.

The differences between the subject matter of these three examples do not disqualify them as part of the same season of *American Horror Story*; rather, it is the unique style, and especially the unique logos, that indicate they are potentially unrelated. As the series is known for multiple elaborate threats, one could not necessarily rule out the presence of all three of the trailers' motifs making an appearance. However, with the series' history of unified branding and aesthetics, the likelihood of all of these visual styles existing within the same season is difficult to fathom. These departures from the unified style that audiences had come to expect from the teaser trailers, and from *American Horror Story* as a brand, marked Season 6 as a unique mystery for fans of the series.

Though described as irrelevant to the overall plot of Season 6, the variety and disconnected nature of the images in these trailers indicate the nature of the season that was to come. After some of the initial speculation about what the myriad trailers could indicate, FX CEO John Landgraf stated that, in actuality, many of them meant nothing at all. Landgraf explained, "what [they] did was they went out and made many more trailers than you've actually seen for hypothetical seasons of *American Horror Story*. Different genres, different places. I think they're really fun and funny and beautifully, artfully made... and a lot of them are accurate. The others are all misdirects" (Snetiker). It's true that Season 6 doesn't explore aliens or swamp monsters, but in another sense, these misdirecting teaser trailers give a much clearer indication of what the season is about than those considered to be the "true" trailers. Take for example the swamp monster trailer. The font, the clothing, the colors, and the monster all reference a specific era of horror, and within that, a specific film. This teaser is clearly inspired by *Creature from the*

Black Lagoon (1954), and when viewed in this context, the other trailers take on similar meanings.



Stills from *American Horror Story* Season 6 Teaser and *Children of the Corn* (1984)



Still from *American Horror Story* Season 6 Teaser and poster for *The Crazies* (2010)

Each of these “misdirect” trailers are specifically referencing another horror film. This seems to directly contradict the claims made in the first season of *American Horror Story* that the show would “redefine[] a genre, and be “everything you love about a thriller - nothing you expect”. One way of reading these claims in relation to the Season 6 teaser trailers is that the “real” trailers can be considered completely unique. This is technically the case, as the nominally “truest” trailer for the series features a nurse cutting through a windchime made of teeth with a large pair of scissors - inarguably a unique image. What Murphy accomplishes by having only one “true” trailer amidst a sea of aesthetically and thematically distinct misdirects is the introduction of the idea that there is one truth that must be discovered in the upcoming season. This early introduction to the idea of a singular truth that must be actively sought out provides a

allowing the teaser's spooky subject to traverse a viewer's Facebook page, the Maggie Roberts spot attempts a form of remediation. A viewer gains a heightened awareness of the platform, and witnessing the 'shadow' overcome the platform makes the relationship between monster and spectator more immediate.

Another Season 6 advertising campaign emphasizing *American Horror Story*'s status as the future of horror was the *AHS* Fearless Virtual Reality Experience. Presented at the 2016 San Diego Comic Con, the Fearless VR Experience attempted to present an immediate relationship between *American Horror Story*'s fans and the series' content. The experience was released online following its premiere at Comic Con, but a special site was constructed at the convention so that participants could lay down and be tucked in to simulate the feeling of being in a body bag.



The VR experience begins with the participant being wheeled on a gurney through a hallway of the *Murder House*, which is lined with jars of the mad doctor's specimens. After being left in the dark for a moment, the participant is approached by *Asylum*'s white nun, who rolls them into a mortuary cabinet. The participant is then transported to the woods, where he or she is burned at the stake as in *Coven*. The participant is entertained and finally attacked by the disfigured clown, Twisty, from *Freak Show*. Finally, the participant is wheeled down the *Hotel*

hallways on a luggage cart before falling down the elevator shaft. The end of the experience is being crushed by the elevator whose base is the season 6 logo made out of spikes. This advertisement for *Roanoke* reveals nothing about the season to come, but it does suggest that the way viewers are interacting with the series is a central focus. By using the most immediate medium, virtual reality, Murphy indicates his interest in facilitating a more immediate relationship between spectator and content.

These multiplatform teasers are more in line with Murphy's positioning of the project as the vanguard of horror. While all of this could be attributed to inventive marketing strategy, the role faux footage horror plays in this season of *American Horror Story* suggests that it is more likely that these "firsts" in a series of firsts for the show are meant to foreshadow what audiences can expect from Season 6.

Roanoke

American Horror Story: Roanoke, the sixth installment in the series, includes three distinct narrative acts. Each act engages with a specific format. The first six episodes comprise the series *My Roanoke Nightmare*, a reality television show featuring talking heads and reenactment complete with "The Following Story is Based on True Events" title cards. The next three episodes are a faux footage compilation of the events surrounding the attempted series sequel, *Return to Roanoke: Three Days in Hell*. The final episode is a compilation of various media surrounding the projects as a whole leading up to the season's conclusion. This unique format comments specifically on the nature of media and celebrity, the existence of "truth," and audience involvement in narrative.

My Roanoke Nightmare

My Roanoke Nightmare is the story of Matt (André Holland) and Shelby (Lily Rabe), an interracial married couple from Los Angeles, who move to a remote farmhouse in North Carolina after being attacked in a gang initiation which caused Shelby to miscarry. Matt and Shelby tell their story through the documentary format of talking-head style interviews. The show cuts back and forth between these interviews and reenactment. This is the standard format for *I Survived* type shows, but *American Horror Story*'s unique approach to casting makes it an adventure in hypermediation.

As mentioned earlier, *American Horror Story*'s anthological miniseries format, and the role of casting within it, allows new possibilities in the production of television. The ability to kill off characters in a horror series with the foreknowledge that fan favorite actors will likely return for the next season has allowed more freedom than is available to most shows. In *American Horror Story: Roanoke*, this tradition adds another level of detachment from the unfolding narrative. Series regulars Lily Rabe and Sarah Paulson both appear in *My Roanoke Nightmare*, and both are playing Shelby. Rabe is the “real” Shelby who is seen in the talking head interviews, and Paulson is “Shelby” in the reenactment portions of the show. The familiarity that audiences have with both of these actors operates as mode of hypermediation because it prevents fans from being fully immersed into the story. Rabe's consistent appearance in other seasons forbids a reading of her as a “real” Shelby, and therefore, this narrative as “true”.



Top left: Lily Rabe as Shelby in *My Roanoke Nightmare*. Top right: André Holland as Matt in *My Roanoke Nightmare*. Bottom: Cuba Gooding Jr and Sarah Paulson as “Matt” and “Shelby” in *My Roanoke Nightmare*

The choice to use both Rabe and Paulson in the role of Shelby is just one of many ways in which the spectator is constructed, and will be explored further later. While immersed in Matt and Shelby’s experience, audiences are simultaneously doubtful of the veracity of their story.

Over the course of *My Roanoke Nightmare*, both Matt and Shelby and their reenactment counterparts question whether they are plagued by their own imagination or by ghostly inhabitants of the area. This question is ultimately answered through the construction of a camera as an objective spectator. Soon after moving into the house, Shelby is attacked by trespassers dressed in 16th century garb. Then, while Matt is away on business, she sees teeth falling from the sky. Due to her recent trauma and lack of evidence, both Matt and the local police don’t believe her stories. Both Matt and Shelby hear strange snorting noises late at night, but he

remains skeptical of Shelby's experience. Finally, after a vivid "dream" in which he sees an old woman murdered by her nurses, Matt installs video cameras that send footage to his cell phone so he can stay apprised of the situation at the house while away. He also invites his sister to come stay. One night, while Shelby, and Matt's sister, Lee (Adina Porter ("real" Lee) and Angela Bassett (reenactment of Lee)), follow strange noises down to the basement, Matt gets an alert from the security system and sees video footage of people entering his home with torches. As Matt engages with one example of video evidence, Shelby and Lee grapple with another. Down in the basement a home video is playing on a television screen. The video shows a blurry image of what appears to be a man with a pig head. It's accompanied by frightening snorting sounds that Shelby had heard previously, and the narration of an unknown man. The video disturbs both Shelby and Lee, but upon viewing, Matt decides it is fake. This causes tension. When viewed in an immediate context, such as the live footage of people entering the house, video is an inherently truthful medium. However, Matt maintains that the intention of the filmmaker is just as important, and with the home video removed from the "liveness" of its filming, that intent can only be assumed. While Shelby sees the home video as an attempt to inform, warn, or merely capture the creature on camera, Matt assumes the intent is to scare him and Shelby enough to leave the house.

This contention is resolved when more videos are recovered, and their author encountered. It is revealed that the video that was played in the basement was the work of Dr. Elias Cunningham (Denis O'Hare) a writer working on a true crime story of the house. Elias had made a number of videos of his supernatural experiences in the house to be used initially as evidence for his book about the murderous nurses Matt saw. By the time, Matt and Shelby meet

Elias, the claims of supernatural activity made in his footage have been corroborated, both through physical signs of damage in the house and through Matt and Shelby's own experience. Due to this matter's conclusion, the presumption moving forward is that video evidence is to be trusted, and perhaps, is inherently truthful, despite potential underlying motivations. While in this instance the tension of authorial intent and what it means for the presumed "truth" of a recording is resolved, it will play a large part in the faux footage installment of the season.

These videos play several roles in setting a precedent for the next section of the show. Many of Elias's videos are blurry and of himself capturing inexplicable experiences for an undefined future viewer, either to inform or to warn. Elias' recordings of the happenings of the house, made at his own risk, define the pursuit of the truth as a goal above all else. His videos similarly introduce the aesthetics of "truthful" video evidence. One form of video "truth" is the liveness achieved through Matt's video cameras, but another is denoted by a specific visual language. Elias's blurry home videos fit easily into the faux footage standard of the "lack of sophistication to fake." The amateur nature of these recordings is defined here as the vehicle for "truth."

Following the reveal of the videos' author, tension is again heightened when Lee, a former cop recovering from an opioid addiction, kidnaps her daughter Flora (Saniyya Sidney) from school and brings her to Matt and Shelby's home. Mason (Charles Malik Whitfield), Lee's ex-husband and Flora's father, is furious and comes to the house to find her. By the time he gets there, Flora has disappeared. Shelby, Matt, and Lee proceed to search for her, but are then terrorized by ghosts. The ghosts include the disappeared Roanoke colony led by Thomasin White or 'The Butcher' (Kathy Bates), the Polks (a family of cannibalistic hillbillies led by 'Mama'

(Frances Conroy)), a pair of murderous nurses, and the ghosts of the Chen Family, Vietnamese immigrants who were killed in the house. They are assisted by the ghost of Edward Mott (Evan Peters), the original owner of the house and a victim of The Butcher, Elias Cunningham: the writer whose videos were found, and Cricket Marlowe (Leslie Jordan), a psychic who is ultimately disemboweled by The Butcher. Though Shelby, Matt, Lee and Flora ultimately all escape with their lives, Mason does not. His burned corpse suggests to Matt and Shelby that he had been killed by The Butcher. However, Matt's video cameras record Lee leaving the house around the time the murder must have been committed. The possibility that Lee is responsible for the death of her ex-husband plays a significant role moving forward, especially since the cameras provide the only potential evidence.

The use of familiar cast members in *My Roanoke Nightmare* suggests a falseness to the “reality” narrative. Kathy Bates, Frances Conroy, Evan Peters, Denis O’Hare and Lady Gaga have all previously appeared in previous *American Horror Story* seasons in significant roles. Similarly, Leslie Jordan and Chaz Bono, who plays Lot Polk, are iconic individuals. Their presence, even as reenactors, denies credibility to the story being told. This casting decision becomes significant as a contrast to the upcoming faux footage act of the season. *My Roanoke Nightmare* effectively serves as a highly produced visual comparison point to the recordings of the events of *Return to Roanoke*. The formal differences between the two “shows” are used as an indicator of “truth” in the fictional narrative.

Return to Roanoke

Episodes six through nine are an exploration in faux footage. We are introduced to a partially new, but familiar cast of characters. Immediately, we meet Sidney James (Cheyenne

Jackson) the producer of *My Roanoke Nightmare*. Audiences are removed from the familiar and heavily produced format of *My Roanoke Nightmare*, and begin the episode following Sidney and his personal camera crew. Looking to capitalize on the show's success, Sidney pitches a sequel in which the entire cast returns to the Roanoke house for three days in a *Big Brother* style format. Matt, Shelby and Lee and are all returning, as are Audrey Tindall (Sarah Paulson), the actress who played Shelby, Dominic Banks (Cuba Gooding Jr.) the actor who played Matt, Monet Tumusiime (Angela Bassett) the actress who played Lee, and Rory Monahan (Evan Peters) the actor who played the ghost of the home's original owner, and is now Audrey's husband. The seven of them are given disabled phones on which to film their experience over the next three days: the understanding being that this footage will accompany or supplement the footage from the cameras placed around the property, and the participant's self recorded confessionals. It soon becomes clear that each member of the cast has his or her own unique relationship with the camera, and reason for filming.

Many of the characters explicitly reveal their goals for filming, and specifically, the narratives they're hoping to construct. Sidney is, of course, the producer of the show, and mandates that cameras be on at all times in order to provide as much material as possible. We see him use lies and manipulation to work towards his goal of an even more successful reality show. This is especially apparent in an interview he has with Shelby. Shelby is interested in doing said interview to defend herself from hate she's received from viewers. While he appears sympathetic at first, Sidney soon presses Shelby on her separation from Matt in relation to an affair she had with Dominic Banks, the actor who played Matt in *My Roanoke Nightmare*. When Shelby becomes distraught, Sidney tells the camera operators to stop filming, but secretly motions for

them to continue. Shelby reveals that the reason she has agreed to return to the Roanoke house for the show is so that Matt will have to talk to her. She also reveals that her return is conditional. If Dominic Banks is involved in the project, she says, she will walk. Almost immediately after assuring Shelby that Dominic won't be there, Sidney reacts gleefully to the news that Dominic has in fact been booked for *Return to Roanoke*.

Sidney is similarly manipulative in an interview with Agnes Mary Winstead (Kathy Bates), the actress who played The Butcher in *My Roanoke Nightmare*. Though initially friendly and receptive, Sidney ultimately confronts Agnes with "the elephant in the room," the fact that she had been hospitalized and diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder after assaulting people with a cleaver while dressed as The Butcher. When Agnes maintains that she's better now, and excited about doing the show, Sidney serves her with a restraining order banning her from the set. As he's leaving his interview with Agnes, Sidney reveals his hope that the restraining order doesn't stop her and she does make an appearance in the new season. In both of these instances, Sidney's machinations serve as a reminder to the viewer that television, and reality television especially, is manufactured and not to be trusted. And yet, because the viewer is made aware of Sidney's actions through video footage, it is again constructed as a vehicle for truth.

Allegedly, Sidney's manipulations will serve a higher purpose. When confronted by his assistant, Diana (Shannon Cross) about the effects set in place to scare the show's participants, Sidney reveals an additional motive. He states, "I'm interested in using horror to find justice. I want to be the guy who gets Lee Harris to admit what she did" ("Chapter 7"). In short, Sidney believes that his clearly deceitful actions exist in the service of uncovering a truth. We know Sidney believes Lee killed her husband from an exchange with a lawyer in which he asks about

liability in the event that Lee “kills again.” Sidney’s belief that the truth will be revealed through the medium of a camera is well supported in this instance. The reality of what he has done to manipulate people has been meticulously documented and represents, at the very least, a “truer” version of events that any one person could recount. As such, fiction within fiction becomes the pathway toward uncovering the truth.

Unsurprisingly, Lee Harris is the other character who has the strongest, and most overt reason for filming. In an interview we learn that Lee is also interested in defending herself, and for good reason, as there is a petition online to have her indicted for murder solely based on the footage of her leaving the house shown in *My Roanoke Nightmare*. From the moment Sidney presents the cast with the phones, Lee is diligent about filming every moment. In an exchange with Monet, who asks why she feels the need to record when the house is full of cameras, Lee responds that those are their (the show’s) cameras, “that they control and edit to tell their story. This camera is my story” (“Chapter 7”). Here Lee reignites the narrative tension in *My Roanoke Nightmare*. Does the intent of the footage change its veracity? Lee does not see the house’s cameras as objective records, but rather as tools for narrative creation. Considering that the evidence against Lee in Mason’s murder consists almost entirely of video evidence of her leaving the house, it isn’t difficult to fathom why. Because Lee understands the camera as a tool for narrative control, her constant filming, warranted as it is, can be understood early on as a means of narrative construction.

This battle for narrative control takes on an additional meaning when we learn the fate of the participants in the series. In true faux footage style, we learn through title cards that all of the participants in the production, save one, die over the three days following the start of production.

The viewer is also informed that the shown footage has been cobbled together by an unknown producer who is unaffiliated with the initial program. This clarifies the inclusion of Sidney's footage of himself in which he can be seen manipulating or lying to cast members. It also heightens the role of each individual's camera. When presented with the cameras, the cast of *Return to Roanoke* are told to put themselves in the audience's point of view. We are now aware that these videos, which serve as our primary entry point into narrative are more than likely "audiovisual remains" (Benson-Allott, 169). In *Paranormal Spectatorship*, Benson-Allott argues that the known death of the camera operator is essential to faux footage. By making the camera vulnerable, the spectator is vulnerable as well. Benson-Allott explains that "the spectator's identification with the diegetic camera and cameraperson exposes her to the physical threats that menace her surrogates in a way that conventional slasher cinematography does not" (Benson-Allott, 192). As we saw with Hud in *Cloverfield*, the subjective shot serves as both a vehicle for truth and for empathy. The jerky movements of a handheld camera and awareness that its operator will die draw spectators closer into the action rather than farther away. This relationship is central to Benson-Allott's other analysis of the role of the morbid title card in faux footage horror.

Not all of the tenants of faux footage horror apply to *American Horror Story: Roanoke*. Benson-Allott's analysis categorizes faux footage films as guerilla anti-piracy attempts to combat the phenomenon happening at the turn of the millennium. For Benson-Allott, stealing movies online is equated with the danger of consuming faux footage that has been "found." This is achieved partially through the title card indicating how the footage was found, and more importantly, that the subjects are all dead and that these documents should not be viewed. Faux

footage horror films construct their spectator as “a ghoul, morbidly consuming [the deceased’s characters’] audiovisual remains” (Benson-Allott, 169). Similarly, knowing the end of the film disrupts the importance of narrative, and centers instead a cinema of attraction, or investment in visual shock (Gunning). In the context of traditional faux footage horror, without the excuse of narrative immersion, this investment is considered to be inherently sadistic, and therefore reprehensible. However, *American Horror Story: Roanoke* subverts this notion. The knowledge that one character survives the ordeal presents narrative as an equal partner to visual horror. The viewer is now ostensibly constructed around seeing who will live rather than seeing how the others will die.

One of the primary ways *Return to Roanoke* constructs truth is through its visual contrast with *My Roanoke Nightmare*. One such contrast is found in the reappearance of Elias. Elias’s videos were shown in the original installment, and he was portrayed in the reenactments, but in the first episode of *Return to Roanoke*, the viewer learns that he or she hasn’t actually met Elias. As Sidney is getting a demonstration of the special effects set up in the house to scare the show’s participants, we see a television set turn on. On screen is an unfamiliar man yelling about the dangers of the Roanoke house. Of course, we realize, the man must be Elias. This moment creates a new understanding of the show moving forward. This “real” Elias (Ric Sarabia), unlike the “real” Shelby, is unfamiliar to viewers, allowing him to be read as actually “real.” Similarly, his decontextualized introduction suggests that the show’s participants will easily identify him, though producers know that audiences will not. By choosing not to directly address the spectator in this moment, a spectator is created who is inquisitive about the new world she finds herself in, one that seemingly was not made with her in mind. If the purpose of the *Return to Roanoke*

footage is not to entertain the audience, the audience is now in the position of determining that purpose.



Denis O' Hare as Elias in *My Roanoke Nightmare* and Ric Sarabia as the “real” Elias in *Return to Roanoke*

The contrast between the reenacted world of *My Roanoke Nightmare* and the “real” world of *Return to Roanoke* is explored primarily through the shows’ worldly and supernatural threats. Agnes Mary Winstead, the actress who played The Butcher in the *My Roanoke Nightmare* reenactments, has become a terror in her own right by killing multiple crew members. Oscillating back and forth between self-awareness and the delusion that she is in fact The Butcher, Agnes is thrilled when the ghosts of the original Roanoke colony come up behind her as she’s threatening to burn down the house. Soon though, Agnes comes face to face with the “real” Butcher (Susan Berger). Agnes immediately drops to her knees and exalts The Butcher for being her muse and her icon. She realizes quickly that her idol is not pleased and apologizes stating, “I’m sorry. I just wanted to be on TV” before she is unceremoniously cloven by The Butcher (“Chapter 7”).



Kathy Bates as Thomasin “The Butcher” White in *My Roanoke Nightmare* and Susan Berger as the “real” Thomasin “The Butcher” White in *Return to Roanoke: Three Days in Hell*

In the case of *The Butchers*, we see a couple constructions of truth. One is visual. The Butcher is first and foremost played by Kathy Bates, a familiar actress and *American Horror Story* alumna. This already detracts from her credibility. But this lack of credibility is ultimately what makes the “real” Butcher so believable. Susan Berger’s portrayal marks a distinct visual contrast with that of Kathy Bates, which makes her both more terrifying and more “truthful” than the reenactment portrayal. These grittier “real” versions appear for each of the original show’s threats including the Polk family, The Chens and the Pig Man, but their interaction sets them apart from being merely another visual contrast.

Agnes is a unique point of identification for the spectator, as she too has a dual understanding of the events of the series. From our first meeting with Agnes, we can see her slipping between an understanding of herself as an actress and her understanding of herself as The Butcher. After Sidney serves her with the restraining order, she begins to monologue at him in The Butcher’s cadence, promising vengeance. This vengeance is returned at the beginning of

the second episode of *Return to Roanoke*. Sidney leaves the production trailer to find a production assistant, Alissa (Chelsea Alden) struggling on the ground with her throat slashed. Almost immediately, Agnes appears and kills Sidney as well. All of this has been recorded by Sidney's cameraman who up to this point hasn't spoken. He is, her next target. When he, and therefore the camera, falls to the ground, the audience is momentarily alone. However, soon Agnes picks up the camera and speaks into it before taking it, and the audience, hostage. Back in her hideout, Agnes records herself talking about Sidney's death in the righteous affectation of The Butcher. The camera also captures her now-rare moment of self awareness in which she feels guilty for the death of Alissa, who was a young mother and Agnes's friend on set. Here the camera is being used both as a tool for narrative control and as an unintended instrument of "truth." Though Agnes is villainously justifying her actions, the camera also captures her inner struggle and fear.

As Agnes slips back and forth between herself and The Butcher, her understanding of the camera changes too. Soon after Agnes murders Sidney, Shelby comes upstairs to find a bloody camera sitting on the bed, still recording. She is soon attacked by Agnes, whose is aggrieved both by The Butcher's anger at Shelby's presence on her land, and Agnes' heartbreak at being excluded from the show. Shelby does little to fight back, instead holding up her cell phone camera to record her attacker. Though we know Agnes has brought a camera and left it recording, seemingly to capture this interaction, she is confused by Shelby's recording. Though Agnes' primary desire is to be on television, as The Butcher she allegedly isn't aware of its production. This is even further complicated when after Agnes' attack is stopped and all eyes are on Shelby, Agnes disappears with the bloody camera.



Shelby noticing Agnes' camera just before being attacked

Agnes' dual interactions with the camera, both as a content creator and object of viewing run parallel to the spectatorial construction of investigator and witness. Like the audience, Agnes is constantly alternating between modes of understanding. In some instances she takes control of her narrative, while in others she seems a victim to its production. Agnes has killed to gain narrative control, and she is killed the moment she can no longer maintain it. As soon as Agnes' claim to be The Butcher is disproved she loses her agency entirely. Thus far, the *American Horror Story: Roanoke* audience has been both enjoying immersion in the content and narrative, and seeking deeper truths as a mode of investigation. Agnes' death in Episode 7 suggests a more unified spectatorial goal moving forward. Beginning with Sidney's death and ending with Agnes's at the hands of The Butcher, the *Return to Roanoke* portion of Season 6 attempts to claim a veracity not previously possible. Because of the compiled footage, the viewer is aware that Sidney is no longer orchestrating these events -- the effects he had originally put in place have gone unused in favor of a more sinister turn of events. Agnes's death is the nail in the coffin of Sidney's manufactured threats. Quite literally, the "real" has killed off the fake. This changes the investigatorial role that the spectator has had up to this point. The cinema of attraction mode of "how did they do that?" is gone. At this point the presumption is that "they" didn't. From here on out, the role of the spectator is to question the narratives that the remaining participants are

creating and how it matches up with the “objective” content presented by other cameras. The viewer is particularly primed to suspect Lee.

Over the course of *American Horror Story: Roanoke*, Lee’s quest to prove her innocence is both accomplished and destroyed. In her battle for narrative control she becomes little more than a tool for the secondary filmmaker: propelling the story forward through her attempts to control it. Lee’s unwavering use of her own camera and understanding of the way narratives can be changed makes her a paranoid figure, but soon her ways begin to influence her fellow cast members. Hours after Agnes attacks Shelby, the trio of Lee, Audrey, and Monet set out for the production trailer in search of help. While the group travels through the dark passages under the house, they use camera phones as flashlights, which suggests that their use as recording devices is secondary. However, once they escape the tunnel after seeing a ghoulish figure charge at them near the exit, their commitment to filming each other and their surroundings becomes primary. This is the first time Audrey and Monet, the actors in *My Roanoke Nightmare*, have seen any of the “real” ghosts. Lee punctuates this with a statement made directly into Audrey’s camera, “do you believe us now? Or do you deny what you’ve seen with your own eyes?” (“Chapter 7”). Here the secondary shot is telling. Lee is presumably speaking to Audrey, but her address to the camera means she is speaking to the viewer as well. The *American Horror Story* audience is directly confronted by this question. In this case, the camera is a prosthetic eye both for the characters and for the viewers. This renewed commitment to filming following a revelation again positions that camera as a more “truthful” medium than the human eye.



Lee questions Audrey's disbelief in the ghosts of Roanoke despite "eyewitness" evidence. The use of the secondary shot here creates the understanding that Lee is asking the same questions of *American Horror Story* viewers.

This commitment to filming is upheld through the traumatic events that befall Lee, Audrey, and Monet. The cameras are on when the group arrives at the trailer to find the bodies of Sidney and the crew. They are on when Agnes charges out of the woods with a cleaver and is shot by Lee. They are on when Monet spots the ghosts of the Roanoke colony, and Lee urges the group to get off the road. Once hidden in the forest, the camera takes on another role. Audrey, looking directly into the camera, records a tearful goodbye to her husband Rory. As she does, blood falls onto her face. Monet comes to investigate, and both women stare into the camera, presumably looking at their faces reflected back at them. Finally they look (and pan) up to see Rory's body in the tree above them. At this moment the screen cuts to black. When we come back, only Lee is filming, a situation she soon rectifies. She urges both women to turn their cameras back on and keep filming. Though Monet protests initially, she picks hers up. It is clear why Lee would be invested in multiple documentations of the event. A body has been found and Lee has previously been accused of murder. However, this is also a necessary moment for the

series to progress. When Lee, Audrey, and ultimately Monet are captured by the Polk family, it is Monet's camera that records the events. Here we see a conflation of the goals of the diegetic and secondary filmmaker. Lee needs film for narrative control, and the secondary filmmaker needs film to have a narrative at all.



Audrey and Monet use the camera phone as a mirror to identify the source of blood on Audrey's head.

The moment where narrative control becomes a common objective occurs after the group's torturous experience at the hands of the Polks. After losing a chunk of her leg and her right ear, Lee tapes a confession for her daughter, Flora. In the confession, Lee admits to killing her ex-husband Mason because she knew he was going to take Flora away from her. Again, though the viewers aren't being directly addressed, the confessional style of this moment feels as though Lee is stating her guilt to the *American Horror Story* fans. Lee is ultimately able to escape, killing one of the Polks, and goes to help Audrey and Monet. During their escape, Audrey kills the Polk matriarch, Mama (Robin Weigert), bashing her head in with a crowbar long after she's been incapacitated. Though Lee and Audrey make it back to the Roanoke house, their trajectory is forever changed by the records of their actions.



Lee's taped confession in the Polk house

The events at the Polk house redefine the goals of the diegetic filmmakers, and therefore, the plot moving forward. The morning after their ordeal, Lee tells Audrey they must go back to the Polk house and retrieve the cameras placed there for the show. Viewers know Lee is desperate to recover her confession, but Audrey does not, and is quickly motivated by the goal of narrative control. Lee reminds Audrey what could happen “if the wrong people get their hands on that footage,” especially following her brutal attack on the torturous Mama. From the moment Audrey agrees to go back for the footage, the goal of these characters shifts firmly from survival to narrative control. This is made especially clear when Audrey and Lee return to the Polk house. As they escape with the footage, Papa Polk approaches and accosts them for killing Mama. Turned away from the camera Audrey is holding, he says “I’m gonna murder you real slow.” Immediately, Audrey asks “Can you repeat that,” and when he does, she shoots him. This example of real time editing proves that Audrey is now recording for an audience. She expects this footage to be seen, and also hopes it will exonerate her.

Episode 9 of *American Horror Story: Roanoke* introduces us to a new set of diegetic filmmakers. Sophie (*American Horror Story* veteran Taissa Farmiga), Milo (Jon Bass), and Todd (Todd Connors) are fans of *My Roanoke Nightmare* who have tracked down and arrived at the property in order to get footage for their fan site. The three teens are comically stocked with cameras and clearly understand their audience. Sophie gets a photo of herself next to a no trespassing sign for “ironic juxtaposition,” and when the three find the body of a woman, their fear is ameliorated by the knowledge that they will certainly go viral for their discovery. The teens call the police to report the body, and are interviewed by an officer. The viewer sees these interviews from cameras in the interrogation room and through Todd’s helmet camera, which he’s intentionally left on. Through these interviews, the viewer gets an understanding of the way both diegetic fan characters and actual viewing fans are meant to interact with the content. The three teens admonish the officer for not believing them, stating that this experience is just like every other horror movie in which the cops don’t believe the claims until it’s too late. They also cite their video evidence as proof of their veracity, despite the fact that no corpse was found in the location they reported. Sophie, Milo, and Todd leave the station with no intentions of heeding the police’s firm warning not to return to the house. These characters serve as our primary identification for the majority of this episode, and therefore, our spectatorship is constructed through their perspective. We are meant to acknowledge the familiarity of this situation, but also press on in order to find the things others have missed and document them. Similarly, Milo’s claim that “[t]he best way to get more followers [is to] be authentic” establishes their footage as authentic exploration rather than construction (“Chapter 9”).

As expected, the teens' journey to the Roanoke house soon takes a dark turn. As they travel through the woods, our point of view shifts from the characters' helmet cameras to their selfie sticks and back again. When the group finds Lee Harris standing alone in the dark, we see her through the camera on Todd's helmet. So when Lee cuts his throat with the cleaver she's holding, the audience is right there as well.

Sophie and Milo, horrified by the fate of their friend, run through the woods until they find the production trailer. Once they step inside it, another layer of hypermediation takes hold. The two are now filming the CCTV set-up in the trailer which is displaying live footage from the cameras set up for the show. Sophie immediately engages in fan-like behavior, admonishing Audrey and Monet for smoking cannabis and taking painkillers in this moment where they need to be sharp. Unlike other fans, Sophie has the ability to act directly and decides to do so after seeing Lee approach the house on camera. Persuading Milo to join her she exclaims that "[Monet is] gonna kill Lee [meaning Monet, the actress who played Lee in the reenactments]" to which Milo responds "what are you talking about, that is Lee" ("Chapter 9"). This exchange solidifies Sophie and Milo's roles as HUDs. They are only familiar with *My Roanoke Nightmare*, and not with the footage that the audience of *American Horror Story* has seen thus far. At this point, Monet has been developed as an entirely separate character, and Sophie and Milo's conflation of the two reminds us that these characters cannot interpret the upcoming events for us, but merely witness them.

Sophie's attempt at narrative formation is cut short by another faux footage title card. As she and Milo disembark from the trailer, Sophie addresses the camera in confessional style. She begins by stating her name and saying "I'm here to bear witness" before detailing the events

leading up to her and Milo's decision to lead a rescue mission. This format is undercut by the title card appearing near the end of the episode, which states, "What you are about to see was recovered from an iCloud account registered to Todd Allan Connors. It is presented in its raw form. The images are graphic, violent and deeply disturbing. Sensitive viewers should refrain from watching." ("Chapter 9"). This title card serves the key purposes required to faux footage. It presents where the footage came from, indicates the death of those who had a hand in its creation, and constructs the spectator as a "ghoul" watching not for the narrative, but for carnage. But the title card also lies. This footage is clearly not presented in its raw form, as there are consistent cuts between Sophie's and Milo's cameras. By the time these two characters have been impaled and immolated, they have even further solidified the distance between their goals as diegetic filmmakers (those who recorded the actual events) and the goals of the secondary editor (who assembles and presents faux footage for the audience). Sophie and Milo intend to rescue, the footage presented is pure spectacle.

What follows is the scene described at the opening of this paper. Lee's status as lone survivor of Return to Roanoke is cemented, and with that come questions of how her story will be told in the "real world." To answer these questions, *American Horror Story* dives further into a hypermediated format before dropping its pretense altogether. The final episode of *American Horror Story: Roanoke* is the most explicit in its commentary of how we understand what is true.

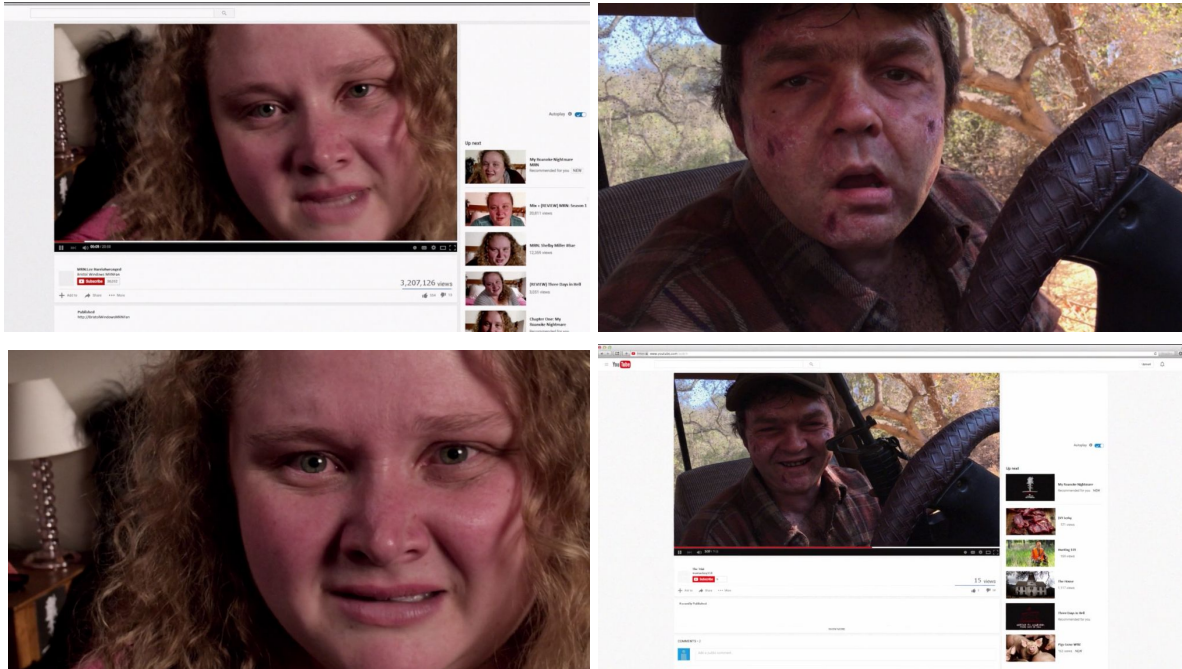
Chapter 10

The final episode, or third act, of *American Horror Story: Roanoke* adopts a new format to establish a fictional "truth." Chapter 10 comprises redistributed media including footage from a panel, YouTube videos, and television shows. Unlike the previous episodes, there are no

intertitle cards to identify this compilation of footage as a television series. For the first time, we can assume that this episode is created solely for the benefit of the *American Horror Story* television audience as opposed to the diegetic audience of *My Roanoke Nightmare* and its sequel. The episode begins at a panel for the cast and producer of *My Roanoke Nightmare*. A title card informs us that this footage is from Paleyfest in 2016, marking is as directly before the events of *Return to Roanoke*. Coming off the surprise success of *My Roanoke Nightmare*, the cast members answer questions and vie for attention. Their bravado is in significant contrast to their experience in the second season which we've only just witnessed. This consumption feels even more morbid than that of their time in the Roanoke house, now that we know that only Lee survives. Everyone else is merely "audiovisual remains." The panel scene introduces Bristol Windows (Danielle Macdonald) a fan of the series. She expresses solidarity with Lee, who "has had some nasty unfair things said about her online," and the crowd agrees, cheering loudly as she goes to give Lee a painting she made of Lee and her daughter Flora. Of course, Lee is guilty of what she's been accused of on the internet, but Bristol, and the series' fans, don't know that yet. Like the majority of *My Roanoke Nightmare*, this moment sets up a counterpoint that "proves" the veracity of the second season.

The second section of this episode consists of YouTube videos meant to set the happenings of both *My Roanoke Nightmare* and *Return to Roanoke: 3 Days in Hell* in a "real" and familiar universe. The first video is by Bristol. She speaks directly into the camera, almost uncomfortably closely, and explicitly states information about *Return to Roanoke* that has thus far only been implied. She states that the second season was "exploitative" and "crass," confirming that what *American Horror Story* audiences saw as episodes 7-9 were in fact

produced and released as a television season. As Bristol speaks, the new and entirely unidentified secondary filmmaker zooms in on the screen until the video is no longer seen in the context of YouTube, but rather as another uncomfortably close confessional. The point of this video is made quickly. Bristol discusses the ratings of *Return to Roanoke* and the myriad Reddit threads surrounding its claims of truth. In response to the latter she exclaims: “They did die, didn’t they? And now they want to put Lee on trial for murder” (“Chapter 10”). This video confirms that in the world in which Bristol resides, the events of *Return to Roanoke* are perceived as real enough to inform a murder investigation. This moment, though presented by an upset fan, is triumph for *American Horror Story* viewers. Lee, the lone survivor of the production, was not able to control the narrative, and will face justice for her actions. Immediately following this revelation is a counterpoint. Lot Polk, confessing to the camera, reveals that he plans on taking matters into his own hands should the Polk family not get justice. In direct contrast to Bristol’s tearful reveal that Lee will face consequences for the footage from the show, Lot believes a different miscarriage of justice is likely: one in which Lee faces no consequences for her role in the deaths of his cannibalistic family members. As Lot speaks, the secondary filmmaker zooms out, revealing this threat to be another YouTube video. The vacillation between immediacy and hypermediation allows viewers to consider not only the implications of what’s being said in relation to what they know, but also what the dissemination of these videos across the internet means for the truth of this story.



Screenshots of the “YouTube” videos made by Bristol Winters and Lot Polk. The zooming in and out on the part of the secondary filmmaker is a literal vacillation between immediacy and hypermediacy.

The majority of this episode comprises television series providing other examples of the way “true” stories are presented in the media. The first of these shows is *crack’d*, a *Snapped* style exploration into the life of Lee Harris. Consisting of footage from *Return to Roanoke*, *My Roanoke Nightmare*, and separate reenactments, interviews, and court sketches and recordings, *crack’d* details the events of Lee Harris’ murder trial. The court case again explores the role of the camera in identifying the truth. Though there is video evidence of Lee killing at least four people, the jury finds her not guilty on grounds of diminished capacity. This theory is also formulated based on video evidence, as jurors were required to watch Lee’s torture at the hands of the Polks. This moment calls the idea of guilt into question. Though Lee killed multiple people, she is deemed not responsible based on the trauma she endured. However, the first murder Lee committed, that of her ex-husband Mason, cannot be justified in the same way. This leads to another trial, specifically for the Mason’s death. In addition to the security camera

footage of Lee leaving the house around the time of the murder, and her taped confession while at the Polk house, the prosecution provides an eyewitness: Lee's daughter Flora. While on the stand, Flora describes seeing Lee attack her father while his back was turned, and watching her hit him over the head with a rock. This is a murder of Lee's that we have not seen, unlike every other that was recorded in detail. This puts us in the same position as a jury, trying to determine based on what's been presented whether or not Lee is actually guilty of this crime. Interestingly, what discredits Flora to the jury here is what convinces us as viewers of her story's veracity. Following Flora's questioning by the prosecution, a sobbing Lee leans over to her lawyer and whispers in her ear, suggesting that the line of questioning that follows is her idea. Lee's lawyer asks Flora who she was with the night she witnessed this murder, and Flora replies that it was Priscilla, one of the ghosts from the Roanoke colony. Though we are aware at this point that the ghosts of the Roanoke colony are "real," this destroys Flora's credibility as a witness by framing her as an imaginative child. Lee knows the ghosts are real, but also knows how to spin the narrative. Knowing that Flora's first-hand experience at the Roanoke house will discredit her, she sets up her daughter to protect herself. In this instance, the popularity of the show helped Lee prove herself innocent. Our dual spectatorship of reality television, and especially our understanding that it is not always "true," proves room for reasonable doubt. As one juror explains, "I know the Roanoke show was a popular show, but I couldn't send a woman to jail based on ghost stories" ("Chapter 10"). Even with the collected video evidence, Lee finds unique ways to gain narrative control drawing upon the tools inherent to the medium.

The next television episode of Chapter 10 draws upon the idea of "liveness" to present truth. *The Lana Winters Special* starring Lana Winters (Sarah Paulson (again)), a character from

American Horror Story Season 2: Asylum, claims to be “unedited, unfiltered, live on television” (“Chapter 10”). Lana Winters has come out of retirement for an exclusive interview with Lee Harris. The interview progresses uneventfully until Lana reveals that Flora has been missing for more than an hour. Here, the liveness is central to the feeling of authenticity. Though Lana has clearly built up to this moment, Lee’s confusion and attempts to leave come across as unscripted. This liveness is furthered when gunshots are heard outside. As Lee and Lana stand to get a view of what’s going on, the cameras follow, revealing the crew and set of the television show. As before, the calm and perfect shots of Lana and Lee before this interruption make the disjointed images of boom mics and craft services appear more real in contrast. This moment of hypermediation also allows for a subjective shot, as we now follow one cameraman as he documents Lot Polk’s entrance into the room. Lana reminds Lot that they are on live television, and Lot responds, “I could give a shit about your TV, this right here is justice,” a reference to the fact that although Lee was filmed committing murder and that footage was shown on television, she still escaped any legal consequence (“Chapter 10”). Lana offers Lot the opportunity to “tell his truth” to the people watching live, an offer Lot declines by hitting her over the head with his gun. Just as he is about to kill Lee, he is shot by police. We see the spectacle of Lot’s shooting, the blood and his body hitting the ground, but immediately after we are greeted by the colored bars of a “technical difficulties” screen. The liveness of the Lana Winters special is a tool to present this depiction of events as truthful, and allows the spectacle of violence through the vehicle of narrative progression.

The next episode included in Chapter 10 begins with a faux footage title card, again, using the conventions of truth. The title card reads, “After much consideration and the approval

of surviving members, this network has decided to air the controversial November 18th episode of *Spirit Chasers*.” At this moment, the television show *American Horror Story*, the second act of which was a faux footage television show, is introducing another faux footage television show based around the first. *Spirit Chasers* is in the style of *Ghost Hunters* and draws heavily on B roll and night vision camera shots. Introducing the episode, Spirit Chaser Bob Kinnaman (James Morosini) claims that “The Roanoke house... is either the greatest modern day proof of paranormal activity or the biggest fraud since Bernie Madoff” (“Chapter 10”). This quote both centers the Roanoke debacle in our universe with the Bernie Madoff comment, and puts forward that the show may disprove the existence of paranormal phenomena in the house. The show recruits Ashley Gilbert (Leslie Jordan) the actor who played the spiritual medium, Cricket, on *My Roanoke Nightmare*, but he’s not the only series star they encounter. While the *Spirit Chasers* document the paranormal activity in the house, they encounter Lee Harris, who has been missing since her interview with Lana Winters. Lee has returned to the Roanoke house to look for Flora. Again, the faux footage format confirms that the ghosts are real, through the quality of recording and contrast to previous reenactment. *Spirit Chasers* also serves as a plot vehicle to move Lee forward in the quest of finding her daughter. At the end of the episode, we see Lee and Flora reuniting on the second floor of the Roanoke house through an infrared camera.

After the *Spirit Chasers* episode, footage from a number of news channels airs, which again present truth through the construction of liveness. Bouncing from channel to channel, the viewer learns that Lee and Flora have been inside the house for at least fourteen hours and that it’s being considered a hostage situation. Even when news channels are conducting interviews rather than reporting directly, the scrolling tape at the bottom of the screen provides constant

updates on the situation. The news station format is perhaps the most hypermediated thus far.

Logos, title cards, and the multiscreen format for each commentator emphasize the dissemination of information rather than an immediacy toward it. This draws a noticeable contrast to the final component of Chapter 10, and *American Horror Story: Roanoke* in whole.

In a significant departure with the rest of the season, the final ten minutes of Chapter 10 are not contextually remediated. Immediately following the news footage comes a static screen and the sound of a TV turning off. This moment sets up the following events as outside the television construction that's existed thus far. When the scene opens up on Flora and Lee upstairs, there is no justification given for how these events are being filmed. The shots are dramatic and colorful. There are consistent cuts as well as pans and zooms, aesthetic conventions that we have not yet seen in the season but are consistent with the majority of scripted television series. Through these images we learn Flora has come to stay with Priscilla and protect her from the Butcher, a task that she cannot do while alive. Lee decides to take Flora's place, and as Flora walks out of the house into the waiting crowd of reporters and officers, Lee sets the house on fire and assists Priscilla in ending Lee's life. Sitting in a police car, wrapped in a blanket, Flora sees her mother and Priscilla standing near the edge of the forest. Now we realize that Lee is not the lone survivor of the events at the Roanoke house, Flora is.

Conclusion

American Horror Story: Roanoke adapts the faux footage format for television, priming the viewer to invest in the events unfolding and investigate the intention behind the images on screen. By centering the active construction of narrative and providing diegetic sources for the footage shown, *Roanoke* calls attention to its own production, yet also allows for greater

immersion. Throughout the season, characters try and fail to hide reality from the cameras and control the way that reality is perceived. Agnes' claim that she is The Butcher is undone by the very footage she records, and Lee too succumbs to the inherent power of the camera when she explicitly reveals her guilt. The rejection of Flora's eyewitness testimony solidifies the camera as a superior observer. Presenting recorded footage as a vehicle for truth creates viewer expectations that keep the viewer questioning what he or she sees. To encourage this questioning the series also utilizes an "aesthetic of truth." *American Horror Story* uses the subjective shot and an amateur recording style to exploit the viewer's preconceived notions of what truthful footage looks like, and develops visual contrast as a tool for narrative immersion. By adapting the faux footage model, *American Horror Story* positions itself at the vanguard of modern horror.

American Horror Story: Roanoke builds itself around constructing the spectator. *Roanoke* is made for an audience living in the age of increasingly cinematic television--an audience that is distrustful of overly produced narrative. By drawing on the faux footage horror genre, the series encourages viewers to play a more active role in uncovering the "truth". In contrasting the "real" with the "fake" as early as the season's advertisements, *American Horror Story* acknowledges the manipulation inherent to reality television, and constructs itself in contrast. Ironically, this example of cinematic television is drawing on the remediated strengths of television itself: liveness and an aesthetic of authenticity.

The tools utilized in *American Horror Story: Roanoke* present solutions to the problems facing serialized horror television. The need to maintain interest over months (rather than hours) coupled with a need for constant visual and narrative shock are difficult to balance. By presenting a season in three acts, each adding layers of information and deception to the next,

Roanoke creates a spectator obsessed with uncovering the truth. Similarly, by allowing characters to construct themselves and their worlds through subjective and reflexive shots, viewers gain a more immediate relationship with the content presented. Through its unique approach to the construction of both character and narrative, *American Horror Story: Roanoke* recommends a path forward for serialized televisual horror.

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