

# Between the Mediatic and the Mediumistic: Haunted Media in Contemporary Horror Cinema

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## Abstract

The paper examines the interplay between media and the supernatural in contemporary horror cinema, focusing on the concept of haunted media—communication technologies that become conduits for meta-physical malevolence. Drawing from the theoretical frameworks of Jeffrey Sconce's media hauntology and Jacques Derrida's hauntology, it explores how films reflect societal anxieties surrounding technology and its "magical" qualities. The analysis delves into the moral panic and techno-fetishism inherent in media history, emphasizing how communication tools blur the lines between the mediatic and the mediumistic. Four case studies are analyzed: *Truth or Dare* (Jeff Wadlow, 2018) portrays a demon that spreads its curse through media, highlighting moral panic around teen culture; *Countdown* (Justin Dec, 2019) investigates smartphone dependency and algorithmic determinism; *Friend Request* (Simon Verhoeven, 2016) explores digital connectivity as both a social enabler and a source of isolation through ghosting and stalking; and *Cam* (Daniel Goldhaber, 2018) examines identity fragmentation in the age of digital reproduction and surveillance. These films, though largely genre-based, serve as mirrors of the current mediascape, where technological advances evoke both fascination and dread. They reveal the ethical and gendered dimensions of media-induced fears, situating horror cinema as a laboratory for cultural anxieties and social critique.

**Keywords:** Haunted Media; Techno-Hauntology; Digital Ghosts; Media Agency; Gendered Horror.

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## 1 Between the Mediatic and the Mediumistic

“Whether paranoid or parodic in their emphasis, such tales from the early days of television demonstrate the continuity between this new technology and the ‘occult’ powers of radio, wireless, and telegraphy. Like these other media, television presented another means of electrical disembodiment and disassociation, so it should not be surprising that the new medium would foster similar fantasies of paranormal contact” (Sconce 2000: 126).

This is how Jeffrey Sconce describes the demons that haunted the imaginary linked to the newborn television apparatus in the 1950s. Similar considerations have permeated public perception of cinema from its inception, so much so that the concept of the “phantasmatic image” has now become a consolidated metaphor (Perez 2000, Derrida 1993, Bertetto 2010), and perhaps even more: it helps us, in some way, to grasp some profound dynamics of the public’s assimilation of communication media, particularly mass media. The other, closely connected aspect is that of “magic”. Media always appear “magical,” and their development tends to foster this kind of psychosocial convergence (Eugeni 2023a, Eugeni 2023b).

The latest technological advancements increasingly allow (and will continue to allow) the realization of actions with simple hand gestures (like incantations), verbal commands (“Hey Google!”, “Alexa?”, “Hey Siri!”), or even just thoughts (the telepathic promise of *Neuralink*). Magic, paranormality, ghosts – the link between the mediatic and the mediumistic could not be stronger. This becomes clear when we interpret the history of media as part of a broader cultural paradigm in which the ancient polarization between the apocalyptic and the integrated (Eco 1964) degenerates into moral panic on one side (e.g., video games will turn *our* youngsters into violent individuals) and techno-lustful consumerist enthusiasm on the other (it seems the tendency to camp outside Apple Stores every time a new iPhone comes out has waned slightly, but some brave souls still persist).

It is within this framework that it becomes interesting to delineate a specific strand of exquisitely “genre” (the most eminently *auteur* cases can be counted on one hand) horror cinema, which thematizes communication media as vehicles, catalysts, triggers of a metaphysical link. And this has been true since the first mass media, without considering the countless narratives dedicated to black magic or cursed books (just to name one, the *Necronomicon* from Lovecraftian lore, which carries with it an entire cinematic imaginary).

In 1985, in *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Paul Kurtz wrote: “[...] for the growth of widespread belief in paranormal, pseudoscientific, and other untested claims may be traced in large measure to the distorted presentation that appears on television, in films, and in print” (359–360). The flip side is that media not only represent the paranormal but, in some ways and increasingly, self-represent themselves as paranormal (Hill 2010, Leeder 2013).

What we will do, therefore, is curate from the vast panorama of contemporary horror cinema a series of case studies that shed light on how genre cinema,<sup>1</sup> in “post-medial” contemporary life, continues to function as a mirror of the anxieties of the *Zeitgeist* and how the spirit of our time appears almost terrorized by the configuration of the current media sphere. Indeed, the theme of haunted media appears to be a recurring one, and it may therefore be understood in the perspective of “hauntology” (Derrida 1993, Fisher 2014).

## 2 Genealogies of Contemporary Techno-hauntology

Before examining contemporary manifestations of haunted media, it is useful to trace a brief genealogy. This specific form of media interpretation is in fact sedimented in some cinematic productions that have their origins in late 20th and early 21st century horror cinema, and which move from representing media as simple “channels” to gradually conferring on them a real agency.

The turning point can be identified in *Ringu* (H. Nakata, 1998), and consequently its American remake *The Ring* (G. Verbinski, 2002), where the videotape becomes the vehicle for a terrible curse. What makes this narrative innovative is not simply the idea of “possessed” media – already present in popular culture – but

1. We therefore align with the approach of authors such as Previtali 2020a.

their capacity for autonomous replication. This viral logic directly anticipates the haunted social media of movies such as those we will analyse.

Contemporaneously, *Kairo* (K. Kurosawa, 2001) explores the internet as a liminal space where the ghosts of contemporary society – isolation, depression – find new forms of existence. The film represents a conceptual breakthrough: the network is no longer just a medium, but a place of reproduction and diffusion for spectral entities, foreshadowing modern-day anxieties about virtual worlds and the so-called metaverse. The movie represents a perfect metaphor for the permeability between real and digital that characterizes our era. Nakata and Kurosawa's films are not the first, in Japan, to establish a close relationship between the imagery of possession and the new media sphere:

Before *Ringu*, the 1988 film *Psychic Vision (Jaganrei)*, dir. Ishii Teruyoshi [...] depicted a pop star haunted by ghostly images of another woman that showed up in photos. In a film often seen as a blueprint for *Ringu*, *Don't Look Up (Joyūrei)*, dir. Nakata Hideo 1996 [...]), the actual celluloid used during a film shoot appears to be "haunted" by the presence of a dead actress and a film from the past (Nelson 2021: 18).

*Ringu* and *Kairo*, however, constitute the main examples that will continue to circulate, through iterations and variations on the theme, in horror culture.

To these should be added at least a third production, *The Call (Chakushin ari)*, T. Miike, 2003), which introduces another fundamental element since it "uses the cell phone as its mechanism to transmit deadly supernatural forces" (Walker 2017: 235). Here, the cell phone creates a bridge between two different ontologies, enabling impossible communication. The film is useful because it is one of the first cases in which to the fear of the screen and the Internet is actually added the fear of the cell phone.

To sum up, these movies depict technology developing its own agency, embodying a specific media ideology that will become increasingly fundamental as we get closer to the present time. *Kairo* already demonstrates this shift: ghosts do not get "transmitted" through the internet, but live within it, exploiting its structure to spread like a virus.

This evolution mirrors changes in our relationship with technology: the mechanisms portrayed develop from being external tools to cognitive prostheses, from communication devices to existential environments. While in *Ringu* the danger comes from a physical object (the videotape) that may be destroyed, contemporary films often feature immaterial curses, infinitely replicable and impossible to erase.

### 3 Truth or Dare: Are They Just Childish Games?

*Truth or Dare* (J. Wadlow, 2018) is what we might call, with the confidence of nearly two decades of history, a "typical" Blumhouse production.<sup>2</sup> An "average" horror film (despite the production company's claim to prestige titles), it is targeted at a teen audience, featuring youthful problems and bizarre, somewhat adrenaline-pumping deaths over a good 100 minutes.

However, its "typicality" is not solely related to its hormonal tone but also to its specific positioning within a horror subgenre experiencing on-and-off surges in popularity over several decades. *Truth or Dare* is a film about curses – or perhaps "new curses" – that spread like contagion, clinging like blight, thanks to a single vehicle: communication media. Even if they do not directly originate from these media, they manifest through them.

In Wadlow's film, the formula now assumes a classic pattern: the curse, embodied by a sadistic demon with ancient and obscure origins, begins its contagion in an abandoned church in Mexico. However, the "playing field" is extended to encompass the entire lives of a group of teenagers, whose hierarchy of priorities – placing sex and post-adolescent fibs above survival even in extreme danger – reflects the moralistic undertones that

2. See also Platts, McCollum, and Clasen 2022.

have underpinned this type of film since the heyday of 1970s slasher movies. These undertones suggest a *maximum supplicium* toward the young, guilty ultimately of being young.<sup>3</sup>

Beyond this, the deeper ideological premise of *Truth or Dare* is the way the film's central narrative – aside from its intrinsic cinematic quality – represents media themselves. On the one hand, it reflects the moral panic that has historically accompanied old and new technologies. On the other, it underscores their enduring mysterious allure, as communication tools whose operations continue to appear, in some respects, “magical”.<sup>4</sup>

The protagonists of *Truth or Dare* are forced to endure unspeakable trials to save their lives after being “infected” by the ancient curse, which challenges them in turn (following another well-worn dynamic: the game that kills)<sup>5</sup> with increasingly intense trials to escape certain death. The narrative has three key didactic moments: the “beginning” with the contagion, the unfolding of the curse as it begins to claim victims, and the “resolution” (requiring a sacrifice).

At the start of the film, the teens find themselves in Mexico, near Tijuana, during their final Spring Break before their lives diverge. This is a pivotal moment in all teen movies: pure American mythology in which the transition from adolescence to adulthood can only be marked in the context of a tamed exoticism (far from home but not too far, at the border) among rivers of alcohol and promiscuous sex. Here, the group is approached by a peer who invites them to play an “innocent” game of *Truth or Dare*, where each participant must choose either to reveal a personal secret or to undertake a challenge selected by the other players.

Unbeknownst to them, by agreeing to play the game they have unwittingly opened the door – *they have invited the demon in*, and it will stick with them, compelling them to play along. They later discover that the figure who invited them to the game was a previous victim of the curse, who, in turn, had become a player trapped in this loop. This demon has no face but spreads through material hallucinations (Loiselle 2020: 76), deforming those around the teens with grotesque smiles and using their media as a medium.

Let us examine three key moments. The first involves Brad, who is compelled by the demon to endure a terrible trial: he must confront his father, a police officer with whom he has recently become reconciled and confess his homosexuality (a secret previously revealed during another trial). Brad is forced to beg his father for mercy, threatening him with his own pistol.<sup>6</sup> To communicate this task, the demon uses the father's police radio, establishing an exclusive channel with the cursed. Why not directly possess the boy's mind instead of using a radio device? Firstly, because in cinematic terms, this solution is more effective, showing that the demon, in some way, has a hold on to the reality surrounding the protagonists (at least their inner reality). Additionally, the radio transmitter is a particular medium which, like all vocal media (including the telephone), separates the voice from its source, placing us in a state of disjunction. We hear the sound, but we lack visual access to its origin. The curse spreads through a vehicle; it requires a mediating instance, but it also exerts its most chilling fascination through this instance. This type of cinema seems to suggest that communication media signify something beyond their explicit function, and within these pockets of meaning, a malignant germ may also lurk. For the record, poor Brad fails in his task and is shot by one of his father's colleagues who arrives on the scene.

The second episode involves Markie, the protagonist's best friend, whose backstory includes a father who committed suicide. In a moment of despair, Markie sees an old video of her father on her smartphone. The scene carries the *color patheticus* to convey the girl's grief. However, something magical happens: the video, previously seen as static, takes on a new direction. Markie's father directly addresses her, speaking with the demon's voice, and imposes another painful trial on her. Again, the curse operates through a communication device – this time a smartphone.

3. This trend, which has persisted since the 1970s with varying intensity, continues into the 1990s; see West 2018.

4. The magical will is increasingly manifested through the constant rhetoric of disintermediation, presented today as the only viable and successful path in the philosophy of scientific development (from which a rich debate on the effects of hypertechnologization may emerge); see Surace 2025.

5. See also Boschi 2017 and Fuchs 2023.

6. On the queerness of the character, see Waldron 2022.

Finally, in the film's concluding moments, the ultimate exploit occurs. Markie and Olivia (the true protagonist) are the last ones left standing, and their plan to neutralize the curse has failed. All that remains is the *extrema ratio*: to spread the curse with the aim of "diluting" its effects on themselves (a sort of demonic homeopathy) by infecting as many players as possible. They choose to do this by uploading a video on YouTube, which quickly circulates globally. The "virality" of the video ensures the curse's perverse and demonic game will target all who watch it. The film concludes with a "promise" that the curse will act on a planetary scale. Thus, the demon finds its ultimate expression on the internet, the medium *par excellence* of contagion and circulation of (often bad) ideas.

The derivative structure of *Truth or Dare* is evident. Embedded within it is the idea of the curse-contagion transmitted virally through media, a theme seen in earlier films such as *Ringu/The Ring* (Lacefield 2010). Yet the movie also showcases an obsession with the internet as a place where inexpressible evil is catalyzed, as seen in *FeardotCom* (W. Malone, 2002) or *Kairo* (Lovasz 2018).

What emerges from these films – and will surface in others we will examine – is the concept of specific liminal spaces where, behind appearances and explicit functionalities, dangerous and frightening meanings lie hidden.

#### 4 Countdown: The Malware's True Intent

*Countdown* (J. Dec, 2019) is a film with a clear technophobic inclination. Released almost contemporaneously with *Truth or Dare*, it shares many of its traits. It begins *in medias res*, with a group of teenagers at a party who collectively decide to download a smartphone app called "Countdown," which has been generating a buzz among social outcasts. The app, seemingly innocuous, promises to reveal the exact time of the user's death via a timer: a macabre *divertissement* that the group does not take seriously – until one of the girls sees her timer indicating that she has just four hours left to live. Death according to a schedule, as "predicted" by the app, arrives punctually in a *cold start* prologue that provides no additional context. The prologue, as is often the case, serves as a kind of "trial version" of the main plot, merely confirming what is already evident from the trailer, or even just the official poster: "Countdown" is a cursed app, and anyone who downloads it is doomed to die (whether in 50 years or more hours, the app's timer ensures that death is inevitable once it reaches zero).

Once again, we are presented with a scheme *à la* Agatha Christie, in which the protagonist – the *final girl* or *scream queen* – must survive while watching her friends die off one by one. This follows the framework of what Steffen Hantke describes as the *Elimination Plot*, a structure defined by "[...] gradual, incremental elimination [...]" (2009: 19). Furthermore, the film delves into the "ghost in the image" motif discussed by Cecilia Sayad, placing *Countdown* in dialogue with other films like *Unfriended* (L. Gabriadze, 2014) and its "pandemic-era update" *Host* (R. Savage, 2020), both up-to-date examples of haunted media (C. Sayad, 2020: 2).

The protagonist, Quinn Harris, a young nurse, downloads the app after speaking with one of the boys from the initial party, only to discover that she has just over two days to live. Naturally skeptical at first, she is forced to reconsider as strange events and visions begin to occur. As in *Truth or Dare*, the app serves as a conduit for an ancient demon, which does not merely kill those who fall into its trap but first haunts them relentlessly in a hallucinatory climax. This torment often involves deceiving victims by confronting them with their regrets and guilt in the form of ghosts, leading them inevitably to their demise. To survive, the curse must once again be broken – a high-stakes mission that unfolds in the film's finale.

In *Countdown*, the smartphone and, more broadly, telephonic media, serve as both the locus of the curse and its means of propagation. Through a series of cinematic clichés, the phone autonomously switches back on, recharges itself, and generally defies the laws of physics – not to mention the user's intent. The film lightly satirizes our social contract with technology, accentuating how users accept terms and conditions without reading them. However, it remains ambiguous whether the app simply foresees the time of death for its users or actively determines it. This ambiguity opens up space for reflection on the treatment of communication technologies in similar films.

After vainly consulting a skeptical priest about demonology, the film's protagonists appeal to another cleric – portrayed in a caricatured, nerdy manner – who offers more practical advice. By convincing a drunk con-

spiracy theorist they meet at a bar to download the app in their place (a lowdown trick as it amounts to “sacrificing” him), they manage to access the app’s EULA agreements, which reveal that downloading the app constitutes acceptance of one’s predetermined destiny. This explains why, in certain moments of the film, users receive notifications warning them of breaches in their “contract,” such as skipping obligations they had prior to learning they were “dead characters walking.” Having violated their fated path, the app cannot tolerate their transgressions, functioning almost as an oracle: it foresees rather than dictates. At the same time, the curse influences the characters’ actions, steering them into confrontations that reinforce a deterministic logic.

While the film’s central theme of struggling against destiny is somewhat underdeveloped (Surace 2019a), a clear technophobic ideology emerges (Malavasi and Tongiani 2020), centered on a deterministic view of technology that can be summarized as a predictive obsession. The smartphone is no longer a neutral tool but a catalyst for shaping the future, often violently, and becomes an active participant in the narrative.<sup>7</sup>

*Countdown*, like its contemporaries, externalizes familiar anxieties about the hidden dangers of smartphones. An old theme, in a sense, but here renewed, because though it is clear that we can say similar things about David Cronenberg’s *Videodrome* (1983) or the far less known and less accomplished *Stay Alive* (W. T. Bell, 2006), in those two films the polemical totems are television and video games – media where the connection to violent content is at a “first level” (we watch violent films or play violent games). Here, instead, the smartphone represents a “second level” form of violence: more elusive, masked by custom, more insidious, but no less pervasive, as a classic movie such as *Phone* (Ahn Byeong-ki 2002) clearly proves. This subtler sort of violence is embedded in the omnipresence of social media, the tyranny of algorithms, and the illusion of choice – tropes frequently explored in contemporary media criticism.<sup>8</sup>

Far from simply delivering another technophobic horror narrative, *Countdown* contributes to a broader mythology of haunted media, incorporating new forms of technology into the ever-expanding ecosystem of cursed objects.

The “Countdown” app is therefore the metonym of the smartphone which, in turn, generates an apparently dominant world, but which, according to the ideological line of the film, isolates people rather than connecting them. Quinn soon loses her job, stops talking to her sister, and finds herself alone, only to then recover a glimmer of hope in the chance meeting with Matt, who like her has released the curse and has a rather short “expiration date” (destiny or not destiny?).

In a certain way, the app has transformed her into a monad or at least highlighted her already monadic existence. It has turned her into a ghost. Similarly to what happens in *Truth or Dare*, when in the early stages of the film Quinn searches for information to understand what is happening to her, she does two things: first, she searches online, browsing Facebook (in a movie forty years ago, we would have seen her rushing to comb through newspapers in the local library, using a microfilm reader), and then she goes to a priest. Communication media here serve as both cause and cure, both burden and delight. But why doesn’t Quinn go to a priest first?

First, the priest – retroactively – is unable to help her, other than by referring her to a specialized colleague. The church, therefore, has abdicated its role as a spiritual guide; in the contemporary world, anyone who turns to a parish priest to admit that they fear having been possessed by a demon risk not being taken seriously (imagine how gravely such a confession would have been received centuries ago by priests around the world). Secondly, the church appears as a last-resort solution, while the media, though “magical” and somehow the prime culprits in cases of curses like this, promise a kind of rationality, a logic, an algorithm to explain what is happening.

Something similar occurs in the already mentioned *Kairo*, where the advent of the internet fills first Tokyo and then the whole of Japan with ghosts.<sup>9</sup> The metaphor of connectivity, embodied by the nascent domestic internet, is undermined by the fact that computer monitors become spaces where people get lost and remain

7. See for a specific discourse on found footage horror see Surace 2019b; Daniel 2020.

8. On algorithmic phantoms see Surace 2023.

9. Kurosawa’s extraordinary film is considered one of the great auteur masterpieces on this subject. A detailed analysis can be found in Schmitz 2021.



alone in the labyrinth of neo-information. *Countdown* carries echoes of what now seems like an anachronistic era: in 2019 Quinn tries to rid herself of the app by throwing out the entire phone.

She then goes to an electronics store, where she interacts with a caricatured salesclerk who is presented as a kind of nerd. The entire scene comes across as laughable: stores like this certainly still exist, but the exchange between the two has a didactic and retro flavor. This is matched by the crude idea of “hacking” the app to discover that its internal code is written in Latin, containing the ancient verses of the curse.

## 5 *Friend Request: from Ghost to Ghosting*

*Friend Request* (S. Verhoeven, 2016) is a sort of “offspring” of the wave inaugurated by *Unfriended*. The plot is therefore quite similar, though here the choice was made not to shoot the film entirely in the *desktop movie* format.<sup>10</sup> A group of college friends becomes ensnared in a curse transmitted via Facebook. At the root of it all is Laura, a popular psychology student, who “betrays” her newfound friendship with Marina, a troubled young woman. The latter commits suicide on camera, posts the video on social media, and curses Laura and her friends to a hunt to the death, which always occurs only after a series of possessions and various visions.

From the ether, Marina’s ghost takes over the code of her own Facebook page and those of others (a pattern reminiscent of the Latin code of the app in *Countdown*, which is substituted here by esoteric runes), and for poor Laura there is no escape: after failing to save her loved ones, who fall one by one to the curse, she herself becomes the new Marina, reopening the loop with a new group of peers (a form of final loop that also applies to *Countdown*, which ends with the release of a new version of the cursed app, and to the curse’s viral dissemination via YouTube in *Truth or Dare*).

From an ideological standpoint, the entire film seems to offer a critique of society of social connectivity. As the curse progresses, Laura’s popularity begins to plummet (an effect emphasized by the direction) as Marina’s specter, having taken over her profile, turns her friends against her. By undermining her popularity, the ghost aims to isolate Laura, making her feel as lonely as Marina had felt in her own life, and ultimately driving her to suicide.

However, there are elements that render the film’s axiology more problematic. Laura is depicted as, for all intents and purposes, a good girl. She is not, for instance, the archetypal popular high school girl from *Happy Death Day* (C. Landon, 2017), who “deserves” the misfortunes that befall her. Laura is kind toward Marina and shows patience with her. Marina, on the other hand, embodies a social dynamic that is inherently difficult to manage – not so much because of the unsettling images she posts on her profile, which Laura finds unpleasant but tolerates, but rather due to Marina’s behavior toward Laura the moment she affords her the slightest opportunity. Marina essentially becomes a stalker, bombarding Laura with messages and, after only two weeks’ acquaintance, demanding to be invited to Laura’s intimate birthday dinner.

This behavior, which might not have been triggered without digital communication, is certainly intensified by the proxemic illusion inherent in the architecture of these platforms (stemming from the idea that by accepting Marina’s friend request on Facebook, Laura has granted her “true friendship” with a single click).

Though Laura lies to Marina, telling her that only she and her boyfriend will be present at the dinner, this is a relatively minor lie (it is not a large party and Laura, having recently lost her father, is surrounded solely by close loved ones). In short, the film presents a situation that is particularly ambiguous. This demonstrates that the film, while not particularly ambitious, has the merit of presenting us with a moral ambiguity that is asymmetric and not didactically black-and-white (Laura is not evil, and Marina is not merely a victim).

What happens to Laura is not a “clean” *contrapasso*: throughout the film, she does not appear to truly deserve her fate. This suggests that, in a certain sense, there is indeed a culprit, and that culprit is once again the medium: in this case, the social network. On one hand, this network simplifies users’ lives by transforming them into neat packages of information – discrete quantities of posts, photos, stories, and friendships reduced

10. The question of the desktop movie has been addressed in Ugenti 2020; 2021.

to brutally numerical terms. On the other hand, the rhetoric of disintermediation risks enabling and legitimizing toxic behaviors like Marina's: "You accepted my friend request on Facebook, and now you won't invite me to your birthday party?"

On a deeper level, the film suggests an inherent cruelty: Laura is almost entirely blameless, and yet the curse strikes her regardless. It is an Evil that can harm you without your necessarily deserving punishment, taking advantage of even the smallest breach. In this case, the breach is Laura's click accepting Marina's friend request, effectively condemning herself.

Thus, in *Friend Request*, we find themes addressing some of the most widespread media anxieties, articulated through horror and taken to their most extreme consequences. On one hand, the ghost represents the "demon of stalking," particularly invasive and "polluting" on social media. Marina, after attempting to establish too many contacts with Laura, chooses (*postmortem*) to infect her profile, posting footage of her own death and those of her friends, thereby publicly transforming Laura into something she is not.

At the same time, the film introduces a specific interpretation of ghostly activity that is especially apt today: the concept of "ghosting", defined as "the act of cutting off all communication (in person and/or online) with someone without an explanation" (Thomas and Dubar, 2021: 291). Interestingly, before Marina becomes a ghost, it is Laura who first engages in what could be called "self-ghosting", employing a modern communication strategy: not replying, deleting her own Facebook profile (a kind of digital suicide), "disappearing," or pretending she does not exist. This digital flight is also a psychological one: "You're suffocating me, so I'll act as if I'm not here."

The digital ontology does not forgive, and lying about your birthday becomes increasingly complicated when your image is no longer exclusively your own. Betraying friendships in the contemporary mediascape is, paradoxically, both easier (since the term "friendship" has been diluted and implies a broader network of connections) and much harder.

This is the enormous power of contemporary communication media: the more they expose us, the more visible they make our attempts to hide. Hence the generational asymmetry in the pragmatics and semantics of digital etiquette (what was once called "netiquette"): many have experienced varying degrees of offense when a message in a chat goes unanswered. For example, being "ghosted" by a close friend feels different from being ignored by a distant acquaintance or an institution. Every form of latency, digital silence, or ghosting carries different meanings ("They don't have time," "I'm not interesting," "They hate me," "They're mad"), and when these mix, significant misunderstandings can arise.

Social media thus create two kinds of ghosts, both of which are subject to the mediation of the internet, and *Friend Request* explores these dynamics through its horror narrative. The film incorporates – right from the initial Warner Bros logo which appears several times, as in a streaming error – connection issues and corrupted online images into its thematic repertoire, presenting them as unsettling. According to a well-worn *tópos*, glitches and distortions in streaming or video calls (such as those between Laura and Marina) create the impression that technical failures can conceal something far more sinister. For instance, when Laura's friends die, the film shows their online images first – faces horribly deformed like the cursed photographs in *The Ring* or *Shutter* (B. Pisanthanakun, 2004, and its 2008 remake by M. Ochiai). In some way, this invites reflection on the fragility of indexicality in contemporary society, where our image does not simply represent us physically but can replace us entirely.

Just as our digital images can be manipulated, so too can our bodies be possessed by ghosts. In the film, Laura's friends die due to suicides imposed by the entity, reflecting a specific modal logic: the ghost does not act upon you but *makes you act*.

The film also proposes a reflection on the central theme of the right to be forgotten, addressing this from two perspectives: the right to be forgotten (in simpler terms, left in peace) and the right to forget. Laura deletes Marina's profile when she becomes too invasive, removing her as a friend. Yet Marina returns like malware to infect her. Similarly, the app in *Countdown* cannot be uninstalled; the curse cannot be escaped even by changing smartphones. In the same way, an exhausted Laura tries to delete her own profile, only to be met by Facebook's automatic "unknown error" message.



This mirrors what progressively happens to Laura's friends, who fall victim to emotional contagion (where for example *It Follows*, D. R. Mitchell 2014, reflected a physical contagion). At this point, Laura is no longer in control of her profile – it now controls her. The media reveal their dark side, even in seemingly innocuous moments, such as when the protagonist tries to contact Facebook support for help with the strange occurrences on her profile. She receives no meaningful response, instead finding herself up against an impenetrable wall of “customer service” (who has never experienced the frustration of having to contact a call center, only to realize how almost always no effective solutions are given and one merely comes up against a brick wall?).

All these tropes – up to and including the metaphor of the screen as a “black mirror” (an inevitable echo of the renowned British TV series) – make *Friend Request* a sort of repository for anxieties surrounding the haunted media landscape updated for the 2010s. A decade later, in the transformative frenzy of this century, some of these considerations may seem naive. However, this is precisely why this specific horror subgenre deserves to be studied as fully historicized.

## 6 Cam: Artificial Ghosts

The contemporary mediascape captures within it the “otherness” of individuals, both through social media and through the alluring yet unsettling new professional frontiers it opens up. The world of live pornography, represented by platforms like OnlyFans and camgirl sites, is today partly normalized and partly still subject to heavy stigma (Surace 2022). This is the focus of *Cam* (D. Goldhaber, 2018), a sort of cinematic autobiography of screenwriter and former camgirl Isa Mazzei.<sup>11</sup> The film “[...] poses the horrific possibility of complete loss of autonomy on screen, as it follows the story of [...] a camgirl that goes by ‘Lola’ [...] whose image becomes independent, constituted as a virtual doppelganger” (Lindvall 2021: 101).

The protagonist, whose real name is Alice (a name that semantically recalls the perilous adventures of Lewis Carroll's character through the looking glass, 1871), embodies a series of contemporary crises. First of all, two different identities coexist within her: Lola on the screen, catering to a growing community of fans, and Alice off-screen, the girl-next-door. Being both at once – representing a fluid identity – seems impossible to her, although we later discover her mother is extremely understanding (indicating that Alice's fears are largely the result of social pressures rather than family ones). She also embodies a kind of conflict between life – as a young and vibrant rising star in the pornography industry – and death, with her cam performances featuring extreme acts such as shockingly realistic simulated suicides. Furthermore, she represents, in a sense, the intersection of the inner conflicts that define the self-realization journey of new generations; these conflicts come crashing down on her with the arrival of her virtual double, gradually draining her identity completely.

A contemporary take on the theme of the double within screen-based society, *Cam* portrays the world of chatrooms as a labyrinth of mirrors: simultaneously anonymizing yet also constituting a place of hyper-exposure. Here, the logic of a kind of collective hypnosis prevails. In the film's prologue, Lola performs for her fans, who are not content with just seeing her naked. They always want more, craving blood and demanding that she slit her throat live on camera.<sup>12</sup> The direction, far from banal, captures this peculiar communicative context in a non-didactic manner. It remains unclear who truly holds the power: the greedy content creator manipulating her community to gain more tokens and raise her site's popularity rankings, or the community itself, which knows Lola's desires and sadistically pushes her toward extreme acts. This creates a maddened horde where individual responsibility is dissipated, and power becomes a negotiable object. Desire is no longer personal but becomes a kind of shared territory where reciprocal interests collide.

Lola rises to prominence as a sex worker, extracting cash from her users, while also becoming a sacrificial victim – forced to endure physically painful stunts (such as riding a giant dildo) to stay atop the rankings. Simultaneously, her body multiplies across a maze of screens until it escapes her control entirely. This theme

11. Coinciding with the release of the film (2019), the screenwriter also published a memoir reconstructing her story as a sex worker in the context of live streaming.

12. It is a solution that closely flirts with the cinematic mythology of the snuff movie. See Jackson, Kimber, Walker and Watson 2016; Previtali 2020b.

of an image acquiring autonomy is in some ways ancient, but in *Cam* it is reinterpreted through the lens of identity theft.<sup>13</sup>

On one level, the film is a mystery. The audience is paradoxically drawn into discovering the identity of the profile thief, following Lola's failed attempts to seek assistance from the platform's customer service – a futile effort reminiscent of *Friend Request*. Once again, the theme of the *black box* media system emerges, with opaque bureaucratic processes that ultimately lead nowhere. The narrative explores the possibility that the entity behind Lola's identical digital face may not even exist, while her public and private life is drained and destroyed. A kind of digital ghost of herself emerges – a parasitic projection or a “digital zombie” (Gilmore and Rosler 2023).<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the film can also be interpreted as *speculative horror*, where themes like deep-fake technology and non-consensual reproduction of intimate material serve as a surface layer for deeper semantic explorations of glitches. These glitches, initially technical, open the door to a socially and politically unsettling dimension where fantastical dynamics blend with real-world anxieties. In the life of Alice/Lola, there is some form of error (technology becomes a synecdoche for the social) that festers and metastasizes.

The protagonist becomes the victim of a descent into her personal underworld, following a logic of punishment or *contrapasso*: “You profited from your image, and now your image will profit from you.” The home Alice purchased with her earnings from sex work acquires a hostile quality – a place of disquiet rather than refuge. The screens that once connected her with her friends now turn against her, becoming her enemies in a carefully constructed *mise en abyme*. The final duel between Lola and her double unfolds not only as a confrontation with herself but also as a spiritual battle. In this climactic showdown, a viewer's comment in the chat reads: “Get rid of demon Lola,” leaving the audience unsure whether the comment refers to the “real” Lola or her “false” digital counterpart.

Alice's psyche is already fractured from the start, as is evident in a scene where, whether due to malice or to error, her old broadcasts replay without her knowledge. Alice cannot recall whether she has actually performed the actions seen on screen, raising the unsettling question of whether she is truly in control of herself. Forced, like many content creators today, into a cycle of self-exploitation,<sup>15</sup> she works tirelessly, streaming for hours on end as though she were a puppet version of herself. This echoes the *mystery man* from *Lost Highway* (1997), as Alice meticulously records all her online activities in a ritualistic calendar.

Through these motifs, *Cam* introduces an intriguing contradiction: while the popular narrative around content creators often paints them as manipulators or plagiarizers of their communities, the film flips the script, highlighting instead the exploitative nature of the media ecosystem and opening a broader discussion about the relationship between the mediascape and mental health today.

## 7 By Way of Conclusion: the Gendered Ghost and the Agency of Techno-Images

Mitchell has demonstrated how images are never passive, but exercise genuine agency over the world: “[...] the most interesting consequence of seeing images as living things is that the question of their value (understood as vitality) is played out in a social context. We need to ponder that we don't just evaluate images; images introduce new forms of value into the world, contesting our criteria, forcing us to change our minds” (Mitchell 2005: 92).

The analysed films manifest a perverse radicalization of this way of conceiving the agency of images. That of techno-images is a life whose intentions are evil, oriented towards the replacement of people, threatening to our identity, our well-being, our existence. In *Cam*, Lola's image achieves complete emancipation from

13. Without delving into the history of cinema's impact, one could cite the film *Der Student von Prag* (Stellan Rye, 1913), a story inspired by Adelbert von Chamisso's *Peter Schlemihl* – a tale of a boy who sells his shadow to an enigmatic figure with unsettling consequences.

14. On the commodification of digital ghosts see Tanner 2016.

15. On this, it is naturally worth reading the considerations of Han 2010.

its creator; in *Friend Request*, Marina's Facebook profile becomes an autonomous entity; in *Countdown*, the app develops a predetermined logic beyond human control. Techno-images manifest a gravitational weight that significantly modifies the geographies of our culture, which seems to suggest contemporary horror in its hauntological perspective. The technical multiplication of the possibility of producing images makes visible what was previously unvisualizable (Parikka 2023), giving the ghost the possibility of a renewed ontology.

This agency of images peculiarly intersects with gender issues. The female protagonists are not simply persecuted by media but forced to become their accomplices: Alice must compete with her digital double; Laura is compelled to participate in viral social media logic; Quinn must accept the app's rules to survive. As in Donna Haraway's classic *cyborg theory* (1991), the boundary between human and technological dissolves, but with profoundly different outcomes for men and women. In this sense, an effective fusion between gender and genre is reified, and contemporary horror cinema manifests itself as particularly receptive to issues that are pressing in contemporary times.

It is evident, in the case studies we have explored, that a series of clear isotopies emerges, with the central element being not just the ghost itself. Specifically, we are referring to the fact that the protagonists of these films are all young women. While horror cinema has long upheld this tradition – dating back at least to the slasher film era to evidence this predominance – it is also true that this renewal of the *final girl* trope highlights an underlying sociopolitical subtext.<sup>16</sup> Haunted media are, in fact, also *gendered media*. Evil manifests itself with particular intensity in relation to female figures, burdening them with a dual responsibility: enduring the greatest suffering (while men also die, their deaths are less painful and more *en passant*) and bearing the weight of resolution. This is demonstrated by two college students in *Truth or Dare* and *Friend Request*, a nurse in *Countdown*, a camgirl in *Cam*, and, we could add, a teenager in *Talk to Me* (D. Philippou and M. Philippou, 2022), a psychiatrist in *Smile* (P. Finn, 2022), or even a personal assistant in the auteur film *Personal Shopper* (O. Assayas, 2016). Add to these a newlywed bride in *Ready or Not* (M. Bettinelli-Olpin and T. Gillett, 2019), where the cursed medium is a game; a college student in *Smiley* (M. J. Gallagher, 2012); a journalist in *Phone...* the list is extensive. Once again, as with the ghost itself, the “monstrous-feminine” resurfaces as a site of otherness (Creed 2022), entering into a dialogue with the Lacanian *great Other* represented by contemporary communication media.

In today's horror cinema, gender, especially (but not only) when tropes that have to do with a certain media ideology are involved, is not simply a *theme*, but rather a precise, problematized, discussed, and centrally placed axiological dominant (even in surreptitious ways) (Holland et al. 2019). In conclusion, present-day horror cinema once again demonstrates its capacity to function as a sociocultural laboratory, using its semiotic tools to dissect the themes underpinning these films. Through the lens of haunted media, these works not only dramatize anxieties tied to technological advancements but also reveal how communication media become potent metaphors for broader social dynamics. The aesthetics of haunted media are intrinsically linked to an ethical orientation.

The theme of the gendered ghost, intertwined with the tradition of the monstrous-feminine, further amplifies these reflections. The persecuted and tormented female figures in the films embody both the trauma of femininity and the empowerment that horror cinema has long celebrated. This empowerment is reinterpreted in an era where the boundary between human and technological becomes blurred, navigating complex logics of cultural interpolation.

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16. Some of the most significant and updated lines in this regard are in Bocchi 2024.

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