Sickhouse and the "Snap Cinema"

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Sickhouse (Hannah Macpherson, 2016) is a feature-length horror film made solely of "snap" files: videos of up to 10 seconds, produced by smartphones and posted on the social media app Snapchat. The main character, Andrea Russett, a digital influencer with millions of followers, plays herself in the film. This allowed it to be exhibited on Snapchat as she shared movie scenes to her Snapchat Stories.[1] In this way, her followers could watch them in "real time" over the course of five days, without realizing they were watching a scripted story. Many followers interacted with the snaps, demonstrating concern with the safety of Russett and her friends as the horror events unfolded and the characters were put in apparently dangerous situations. This first version of the film was available for a very short period, since Snapchat automatically deletes each snap 24h after its posting. After this first exhibition, the snaps were put together forming a typically cinematographic block of shots, later exhibited on streaming platforms.[2] For this reason, I categorise *Sickhouse* as a found footage horror film. Rodrigo Carreiro defines found footage as a genre characterized by presenting fictional plots, however utilizing stylistic devices associated with documental verisimilitude, aiming to simulate the discovery of real footage.[3] In the case of *Sickhouse*, the "found footage" is a collection of snaps which were lost after being deleted by Snapchat.

The story begins when Russett is visited by Taylor, a cousin from another town. As Taylor does not bring her smartphone on her visit, Russett decides to share hers. From this point in the narrative the snaps are created by both characters who take turns in using Russett's Snapchat account, in an alternation which produces a constant variation in narrative focalization.[4] At the beginning of the movie, Russett explains to her followers

that Taylor had never used Snapchat before. This is how the character justifies the unusual amount of 774 snaps posted to her account over the course of five days. Most of the story is set during a camping trip in which both characters, accompanied by two friends, investigate an internet urban legend about an abandoned house in the middle of a forest. According to the story, the house, known by the name of Sickhouse, is cursed because of its use in the past for torture sessions. Those who find it should follow three rules: do not make any noise, do not enter, and leave a gift. Despite knowing the rules, the characters choose not to follow them, setting into motion a series of supernatural events.

In this text, I analyse *Sickhouse* in order to explore its aesthetic properties, which are tied to the choice of making it exclusively out of snaps. The analysis follows a neoformalist approach based on the work of Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, aiming to explain the functioning of the film: the principles and norms which rule its forms, and the cognitive effects stimulated in the spectators.[5] I suggest the snap itself acts as a formal device generating a phenomenon Thompson calls "defamiliarization": its insertion in the context of another language implicates a series of transformations of usual formal patterns. For Thompson, defamiliarization conveys different degrees of change in regular artistic forms and automated perceptions of given historical contexts. The premise of the analysis is that, by being composed only of snaps, *Sickhouse* defamiliarizes different cinematographic conventions related to the classical narrative cinema, as well as the found footage horror genre. The analysis of these defamiliarizations allows for the comprehension of a transformational process of cinematographic conventions coupled with the habituation of formal devices and particular perceptions associated with smartphones and social media, as an outcome of their central role in contemporary culture.

Figure 1: Russett and Taylor's snaps.

To understand this particular creation process which congregates two different media, resulting in two versions of the same film, I evoke the thesis of Czech philosopher Vilém Flusser about methods of information transport. For Flusser, cinema operates a discursive model of transportation: information is distributed in blocks, disabling any direct dialogue between senders and receivers. But in a social network (such as the case of Snapchat), the information is exchanged and synthesized between the users themselves, setting up a dialogic method. Although these two tendencies – discourse and dialogue – were perceived as separate phenomena across media history, Flusser remarks that they spring from the same substrate: "Every discourse presupposes dialogue, for it presupposes dialogically produced information. Every dialogue presupposes discourse, for it presupposes the reception of information to be synthesized."[6] *Sickhouse* exemplifies Flusser's thesis with precision, showing that a film can be produced and exhibited through videos posted on social media in the same way that these social media posts can be distributed in one individual block in the form of a feature-length film.

Within a neoformalist conceptual framework, the use of the snap is justified by what Thompson calls "transtextual motivation": the filmmaker's conscious appropriation of a device more typical of another medium.[7] This motivation is the basis for the creation process of the found footage genre, which defines itself by the remediation of other technological devices, such as surveillance camera images and amateur video footage. However, as Richard Bolter and Jay Grusin argue, a remediation process is always mutual.[8] We could understand *Sickhouse* as the result of a remediation by cinema of Snapchat, while research about Snapchat is describing how the "Stories" modality, by forming sequences of snaps, also generates micro-narratives resembling short films.[9] Therefore, Snapchat also engages in the remediation of cinema, and the snap behaves as a cinematographic shot: an audiovisual unity that can build different syntagmatic chains.

By taking the place of the shot in a film, the snap provokes a series of defamiliarizations which originate from the multifaceted encounter between a cinematographic narrative and the language of social media. First, there are specific Snapchat elements such as the 10 second snap duration limit. Second, the visual composition of a snap belongs to the culture of social media, with common characteristics across different apps, such as post types, or usage of some features as memes, filters, emojis, etc. Third, on a more general level, the snap follows an aesthetic linked to smartphone technology, making the frame vertical, with greater mobility, and lesser technical quality. All these elements are incorporated in *Sickhouse*, provoking a transformation of the formal devices of narrative, mise-en-scène and decoupage, as well as their regular functions and effects.

I will start by discussing the defamiliarizations caused by specific platform affordances of the Snapchat app. Since it cannot make lengthy shots, the filmmaker chooses two different types of syntagmatic construction, in the terms of Christian Metz.[10]

In the first type, the snaps behave as autonomous shots, maintaining a unity of space and action. When that occurs, the transitions between shots occur abruptly, dividing the narrative into "micro-scenes." A second kind of syntagmatic construction takes place in longer scenes, made up of various shots. In such cases, the limited duration of the snaps establishes a metric montage based on rapid fragmentation, producing temporal intervals within the same action, in the cinematographic device known as the "jump-cut". Thus, the use of snaps makes transitions in the film vary between hard cuts in autonomous shots and multiple small gaps in longer scenes. The only moment in which the film is able to maintain classical continuity is when the character operating the smartphone switches from front to back camera, which allows a shot transition inside the same snap. This resource is triggered in regular dialogue scenes, resembling the use of shot/reverse-shot cutting. In these cases, the character alters the shot according to the exchange of the dialogue, just as in classic montage.

I define the montage in *Sickhouse* as a "parametric form". In Thompson's terms, parametric films are those "that allow the play of stylistic devices a significant degree of independence from narrative functioning and motivation."[11] Based on this concept, my argument is that the snap device acts as a formal parameter in the film: a structural principle that imposes syntagmatic constructions, justified primarily by artistic and transtextual motivations, and not by clear narrative functions. But these aesthetic choices can also be understood inside the broader stylistic tendency that Steven Shaviro has called "post-continuity". Shaviro asserts that, in this montage trend, "continuity rules are used opportunistically and occasionally, rather than structurally and pervasively. Narrative is not abandoned, but it is articulated in a space and time that are no longer classical."[12] The author cites the *Paranormal Activity* series, also of the found footage horror genre, as an example of post-continuity. Although presenting quite distinct syntagmatic constructions,

the montages of *Sickhouse* and *Paranormal Activity* films are equally structured by the formal devices of remediated technologies: snap and surveillance cameras images, respectively. It is important to note that in found footage horror movies, which aim for a greater reality effect (associated with the production of fear), post-continuity is often achieved through the long duration of shots involving spatial dislocation, simulating a non-edited amateur video, as is the case for *Paranormal Activity*.[13] In this sense, *Sickhouse* defamiliarizes classical continuity in an elevated degree, as it intensifies the post-continuity trend of its narrative genre through rapid fragmentation.

The narrative in *Sickhouse* does not feature flashbacks and flashforwards, taking place entirely in the present time, in a linear chronological progression. The parametric montage imposes on the narrative what Gérard Genette calls "anisochrony": a difference in velocity between the time of the story and the time of the narrative.[14] Anisochrony is a common option in the classical style, especially with the use of ellipses. However, the narrative in *Sickhouse* is an extreme construction of anisochrony, connecting any cut to an ellipse. Except for the cases of shot/reverse-shot mentioned above, all cuts of the film, even those internal to a scene, promote a leap forward in the time of the story. Inside the scenes, the ellipse is a small fragment that does not compromise the time orientation of the spectator. In the case of autonomous shots, the ellipses are relatively undetermined, and it is up to the audience to speculate the duration of the story gap. In the version exhibited on Snapchat, the leap of an ellipse could have been deducted by the gap in time between posts. In the cinematographic version, however, the spectator needs to remain in a cognitive state of permanent attention to the passage of time. In order to orient the spectator in time, the film segments the narrative into five parts, each identified by a day of the story. Therefore, the sets of snaps are more clearly organised into a series of temporal frames, each of 24 hours. In this manner, *Sickhouse* defamiliarizes the classic

narrative through promoting ellipses in every cut while using another device to minimally secure the principle of temporal orientation. This reveals how the defamiliarization phenomenon must not be understood as a complete rupture of stylistic principles, since a regular function can be performed in the interrelation of several formal devices.
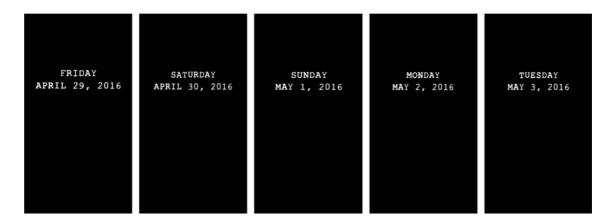

Figure 2: The five days of the story.

In this analysis, I have so far highlighted the syntagmatic articulations of snaps and their temporal consequences on the narrative of the film. However, it is also important to clarify that the snap composition mainly involves selections made according to the paradigmatic axis of its language, in a montage that is vertically organized.[15] I refer here to the typical visual elements of social media, such as filters, texts, stickers, emojis, and other different layers over the video surface. In the specific version of Snapchat used in the movie, the vertical montage happens mainly by means of the inclusion of text and the usage of the "brush" tool, which allows the characters to make drawings on top of images. Approximately 10% of the snaps in *Sickhouse* show at least one of these elements, and they fulfil different functions in the aesthetic of the movie. The brush is mainly used by Taylor. In the story, she is presented as an inexperienced and insecure person, with a childish personality contrasting with the independent and mature Russett. Taylor draws stars, clouds, hearts, forms that ratify the naïve personality of her character. But these graphics also fulfil a poetic function, used in moments of contemplation and pauses in the

narrative. The text tool is used by characters for direct communication with their followers on the platform. The film activates this resource to provide spectators with complementary information on the characters, who use it to expose their feelings and personal comments. But the text is also an element of emphasis, drawing the attention of spectators to information essential to the understanding of the story, such as the three rules for Sickhouse visitors.
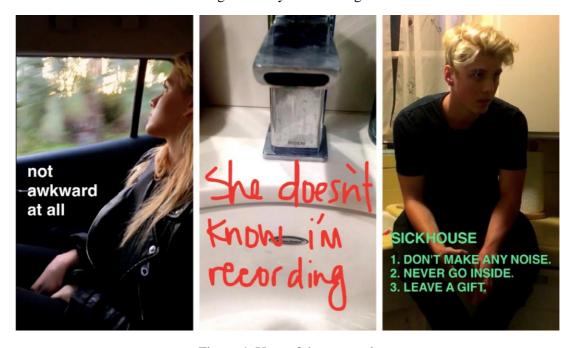

Figure 3: Taylor's drawings.

Figure 4: Uses of the text tool.

Regarding the mise-en-scène, *Sickhouse* emulates the style of a Snapchat video with high fidelity, highlighting particularly the capture of the bodies. The characters record themselves in the "selfie" framing, and also record each other in different casual situations. In this construction, the verticality of the body coincides with the vertical ratio of the smartphone, causing the body to fill almost the entire frame and to be the centre of the dramatic action in most parts of the film. As a consequence, space is frequently contracted, even in open locations, such as in the camping sequences. This contraction of space promoted by the vertical frame creates a greater tension with what is occurring in the off-screen space, thus helping to build the horror atmosphere. This is notable specifically in those instances where *Sickhouse* makes use of the "jump-scare" device, which are mostly structured in the film through the lateral entrances of bodies. Since the frame is narrower than the horizontal standard of the cinematographic image, lateral entrances become more abrupt, stimulating the cognitive effect of a sudden scare in spectators.
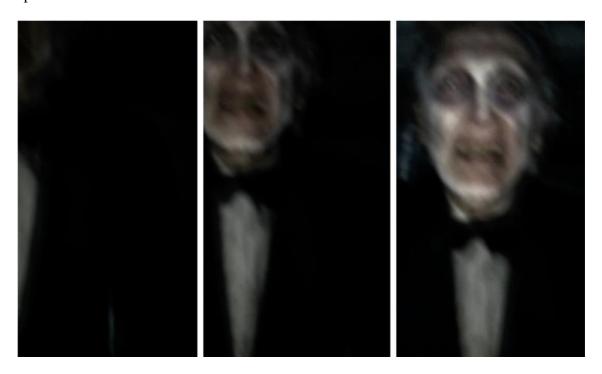

Figure 5: Jump-scare produced by a lateral entrance.

In the action sequences, when the characters are in danger, fleeing, or scared, the style of the mise-en-scène shifts. Snaps present faster camera movements and feature constant deframings. The frame stops capturing coherent bodies and crops random fragments of location, such as the floor or empty spaces. Moreover, the camera of the smartphone is not capable of maintaining a clear image when there are abrupt movements and low luminosity. Not by chance, these action sequences happen during nighttime or inside the Sickhouse itself, a poorly illuminated place. All these components produce spatial disorientation with blurred, distorted images, low visibility, and lack of any relevant narrative information. This style of mise-en-scène follows a genre convention for found footage horror, that uses the materiality of the remediated technological device to amplify fear and disorientation of the characters for viewers. In *Sickhouse*, this convention is further intensified by the vertical format of the smartphone images, the rapid fragmentation of the montage, and the higher mobility of the camera in comparison with other technologies.

Thus, as this analysis has demonstrated, the defamiliarization in *Sickhouse* that results from the encounter between the devices of cinema and Snapchat generates a particular aesthetic, made of a parametric montage and an extremely anisochronic narrative, centred in a profusion of ellipses. This aesthetic is also connected to smartphone technology, which imposes a vertical staging, privileging the relationship between character bodies and the camera. The technological materiality of smartphone images is also used to create an ambience of fear, contracting spaces, and producing frequent deframings, results of the high mobility and instability of the camera. To conclude, I suggest that the defamiliarizations promoted by the film utterly disarticulate the most common cinematographic space-time constructions, and intensify the post-continuity style of found footage horror films, but do not compromise the communication of the

story, which is very simply understood, has a causal progression of the events, and repeats clichés of the horror genre. This easy comprehension of the story reveals how, in a transtextual relation, several cinematographic conventions interact to secure stylistic principles. But the different degrees of defamiliarization described in the analysis, especially in the narrative and decoupage conventions, reflect how formal devices of smartphones and social media redefined the forms of representation and perceptions of time and space.

Notes

[1] On Snapchat Stories, snaps are available for all followers over a period of 24 hours.

[2] The film is currently on exhibition in platforms as iTunes, Amazon Prime and Vimeo.

[3] Rodrigo Carreiro, "A câmera diégetica: legibilidade narrativa e verossimilhança documental em falsos found footage de horror." *Significação* 40, no. 40 (December 2013): 226.
https://doi.org/10.11606/issn.2316-7114.sig.2013.71682

[4] Gérard Genette, *Figuras III* (São Paulo: Estação Liberdade, 2017), 265-266. In Genette's narratology, the notion of focalization refers to the angle through which the diegetic universe is structured. In the case of *Sickhouse*, the focalization is internal and variable in the characters of Russett and Taylor.

[5] Regarding the neoformalist approach, see: Kristin Thompson, *Breaking the glass armor: neoformalist film analysis* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988); David Bordwell, "Historical poetics of cinema," in *The cinematic text: methods and approaches*, ed. Barton Palmer (Atlanta: Georgia State Literary Studies, 1989).

[6] Vilém Flusser, *Pós-história: vinte instantâneos e um modo de usar* (São Paulo: Duas cidades, 1983), 58.

[7] Thompson, *Breaking the glass armor*, 18.

[8] Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, Remediation: understanding new media (London: MIT Press, 2000).

[9] Sarah McRoberts, Haiwei Ma, Andrew Hall and Svetlana Yarosh. "Share first, save later: Performance of self through Snapchat Stories". *CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 2017.
https://dl.acm.org/doi/pdf/10.1145/3025453.3025771

[10] Christian Metz, *A significação no cinema* (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1972), 120-122. In Metz's semiotics, the concept of syntagma points to the horizontal axis of the language, in the sequential articulation of shots.

[11] Thompson, *Breaking the glass armor*, 247.

[12] Steven Shaviro, "Post-continuity: an introduction," in *Post-cinema: theorizing 21st-century film*, ed. Julia Leyda and Shane Denson (Sussex: Reframe Books, 2016).

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[13] Carreiro, "A câmera diegética," 237-241. For Carreiro, one of the stylistic patterns of found footage horror is the massive use of lengthy shots. According to the author, this option aims to create a reality effect, which generates a stronger emotional response in the audience, by producing feelings of fear and danger.

[14] Genette, *Figuras III,* 151.

[15] Metz, *A significação no cinema*, 120-122. Differently from syntagma, the paradigm constitutes the vertical axis of the language, in the selection of different elements that compose a frame. Sergei Eisenstein's concept of vertical montage also problematizes these vertical relationships between different film components. Regarding the concept of vertical montage see: Sergei Eisenstein, *O sentido do filme* (Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2002), 55-58.

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Author Biography

Alex Damasceno is a Professor at the Federal University of Pará (UFPA, Brazil), in the Postgraduate Program in Arts, and in the Graduate Course of Cinema and Audiovisual. He has a PhD in 'Communication and Information' from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS, Brazil). His current research spans through contemporary audiovisual poetics. At the moment, he is investigating the format known as screenlife, screen movie, or desktop movie.