A Typology of Screen Presence in Sci-Fi Horror: from *The Twilight Zone* to *The Social Dilemma*

Laura Álvarez Trigo
Universidad de Valladolid
laura.alvarez.trigo@uva.es

This article explores how the presence of screens in sci-fi horror conveys technology-related anxieties that can be articulated through media studies. It proposes a typology of five forms of screen appearance: reference; *mise en abyme*; narrative element and/or character; erasure of the frame within the frame; and aesthetics/narrative technique across mediums. This study is divided into three sections. The first puts sci-fi horror narratives and media theory into conversation. Building on that connection, the classification is developed in the second section by comparing examples of screen presence in television shows and movies since the 60's and up to the present—from an episode of *The Twilight Zone* (1964) to *The Circle* (2017). In order to show the usefulness of the suggested classification, the third part of the article analyzes the docudrama *The Social Dilemma* (2020) employing said typology as a framework. Here, this work is considered sci-fi horror due to its fictional subplot and is examined as an example of the way Internet-connected screens have been portrayed recently.

Keywords: media studies; screens; sci-fi horror; media effects; uses and gratifications theory; social media

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Una tipología de la presencia de pantallas en el terror de ciencia ficción: de *The Twilight Zone* a *The Social Dilemma*

Este artículo explora cómo la presencia de pantallas en la ciencia ficción de terror transmite ansiedades relacionadas con la tecnología que se pueden articular a través de los estudios de medios. Se propone una tipología de cinco formas de aparición de la pantalla: referencia; *mise en abyme*; elemento narrativo y/o personaje; borrado del marco dentro del marco; y estética/

técnica narrativa a través de los medios. Este estudio se divide en tres secciones. La primera conecta las narrativas de terror y ciencia ficción con la teoría de medios. Construyendo sobre este nexo, en la segunda sección se desarrolla la clasificación, comparando varios ejemplos de presencia de pantallas en series de televisión y películas desde los años 60 hasta el presente, desde un episodio de *The Twilight Zone* (1964) hasta *The Circle* (2017). Para mostrar la utilidad de la clasificación sugerida, la tercera parte de este trabajo concluye proponiendo un estudio de *The Social Dilemma* (2020) a través de este marco de análisis. Este docudrama, aquí considerado ciencia ficción de terror debido a las secciones ficcionalizadas que incluye, se analiza como un ejemplo reciente de representación de pantallas conectadas a Internet.

Palabras clave: estudios de medios; pantallas; terror de ciencia ficción; efectos de los medios; teoría de usos y gratificaciones; redes sociales

It is common in popular audiovisual horror to position the screen as the locus of the uncanny and the source of the feared. There are clear traces of horror in virtually any appearance of a reflected image. This is probably most evident in mirrors, which are often included in audiovisual narratives to evoke horror and the uncanny, for instance, through their capacity to return the person's gaze and confront them with a potential break of the mimesis. In this sense, mirrors can embody the Other in a process of turning the familiar into the unfamiliar (Piatti-Farnell 2017, 179) and, consequently, they have long been cast in fiction—along with other reflective surfaces such as water— as portals between the world of the living and the world of the dead (Carrasco Conde 2017, 86). Besides, mirrors are particularly important in the context of audiovisual horror narratives due to their similarities with the cinema screen. Brottman states that, just like mirrors, "cinema allows a temporary loss of ego" that leads audiences to "forget the world" (2005, 123). Hence, these reflective surfaces can become entryways into other worlds inhabited by unknown terrors while causing audiences to lose touch with their own subjectivity and reality.

The mirror is significant when contextualizing the role of media screens in science fiction texts that heavily rely on horror elements. In a sense, both mirrors and media screens are meant—or at least, expected—to represent reality. They confront the viewer with a visual image that appears to be a whole, as opposed to the fragmentary real (see Lacan [1949] 2001). The critique of television's inadequacy to represent reality is conceptualized in a similar way to the fear of haunted or cursed mirrors. As research from the media studies field has shown, these mediums only pretend to represent reality while, in effect, they become akin to the aforementioned portals causing viewers to lose their grasp on their own subjectivities. When introducing media-related screens in the context of horror narratives, the first medium that we should turn to is photography. Although analog photography is not directly related to screens, the resulting product is achieved through the mediation of a lens, and, as such, it is a key starting point here

in that it is an embodiment of the power that screens/lenses have to carry the reflected image. The inclusion of photographs in horror narratives is quite frequent, and they have traditionally been used as tangible visual proof for the existence of ghosts and even as one of the few ways in which specters can manifest. For a while, they were even considered to be "an enduring and reviewable expression of disembodied consciousness" (Harvey 2007, 27). A further connection with horror, specifically through death, can be seen in Roland Barthes's study of photography in *Camera Lucida*. As he grieves his mother and looks at her photographs, he finds that these images "[produce] Death while trying to preserve life" and that, consequently, "[p]hotography may correspond to the intrusion, in our modern society, of an asymbolic Death" (Barthes [1980] 2010, 92). Even though we are speaking here about still images, which operate differently than moving video images, the context that they provide is still relevant.

The frightening connotations of both mirrors and photographs set the direction of the tendencies and progress that the inclusion of screen-like and screen-originated elements in audiovisual sci-fi horror would take: representing a key connection to the loss of subjectivity and alienation caused by technological advances, depicting a confrontation with the Other, standing for impending death and an uncanny encounter with a portal/threshold. Both horror and science fiction texts have proved themselves as useful genres to be read against an explicit socio-political backdrop, as they work to express the predominant anxieties of a given time and society. With respect to audiovisual narratives, there seems to be something specific about screens that causes them to naturally embody an eerie essence. To begin with, "the ghostly quality of cinema […] creates an ambivalence regarding whether what emerges on screen is present and/or absent, bodily and/or psychic, real and/or imagined, alive and/or dead" (Bronfen 2019, 169). Considering this, the present study opens with a section that aims to further the understanding of the possibilities opened up by looking at sci-fi horror narratives through the theoretical framework of media studies, as the presence of screens in the audiovisual narrative potentially doubles said ghostly quality. The analysis explores and compares the representation of technology-related specific anxieties in sci-fi horror movies and television shows that situate the screen as a central horrific element in their narrative. Focusing on the main concerns expressed in audiovisual narratives regarding audiences' response to media content and their relationship to the media object, the main theoretical background is explained in greater detail, particularly Uses and Gratifications theory as postulated by Jay G. Blumler, Elihu Katz and Michael Gurevitch (1973); Media Effects (McQuail 2005; Bryant and Oliver 2009); the work of Marshall McLuhan (1964) in relation to the medium; and Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra (1988).

In the second section, this article introduces a classification of media screen representations, which has at its heart a media studies framework. This typology helps define the underlying sociopolitical anxieties explored in the analyzed text as well as the horror elements that determine the uncanny aspects of screens. To elucidate this

classification, each category is exemplified with a set of US movies and television series that have the screen at the core of their narrative. Hence, the typology presented here is developed based on two pillars: the sci-fi horror tradition and the theoretical framework provided by various media theories.

While the second section defines and exemplifies the categories through various texts, the third section applies the typology to a specific case study, namely the Netflix-produced docudrama *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski 2020). Even though it is classified as neither sci-fi nor horror, certain elements from both genres can be elucidated in how the narrative amplifies the dangers of current technological advances and social media. The underlying objective of this section is to explore whether there is a notable difference in how television and cinematic screens have been used in sci-fi horror as compared to computer and phone screens following the development of the Internet.

1. TELEVISION AS THE LOCUS OF FEAR AND THE CONTEXT OF MEDIA STUDIES

It is very common to find representations of television and media technology in horror and science fiction narratives. Television has a key role as an interface, and it still is the most common form of screen found in audiovisual horror narratives. Many specific elements of the connection between horror, reflection and sight—windows, mirrors and photographs—maintain their symbolic role when speaking of the television screen: being trapped, the audience and/or the supernatural being breaking the glass or screen to enter another world, touching the liminal threshold and actively and purposefully destroying it. The television screen often operates—both literally and metaphorically—as the portal to the other world, providing viewers with a sense of liminality. Television breaks the familiar mimesis of the mirror, and many audiovisual narratives play with that implied fracture of both space and time. The television screen, often through some supernatural intervention, allows the spectral image to access the physical present, as happens in the well-known *Ringu* (Nakata 1998) as well as in its US adaptation *The Ring* (Verbinski 2002).

Television has had a very important role in making audiovisual fiction widely available and establishing a coherent sense of mass media culture. Also, due to the great impact that it has had on society, including public opinion, it holds an important position as an object of academic inquiry. Hence, when studying audiovisual horror, special attention needs to be paid to the aesthetic resources and symbolic representations used in contemporary narratives that deal with screens and media technology. The theoretical context regarding media that this study is built upon is based on four central pillars. The first of these is Uses and Gratifications theory—UGT from here onwards—, which focuses on categorizing the reasons why audiences consume media and identifies their possible motivators, such as seeking information, identification with others, entertainment, social interaction or escapism (see Blumler et al. 1973). The second and most important part of the theoretical framework is the study of media effects and whether they are direct, indirect or negotiated. That is, to what extent audiences may or may not emulate the behaviors and/or accept the

values represented in the media content they consume (see McQuail 2005; Bryant and Oliver 2009). Recent academic debates often highlight the unfair tendency to generalize when considering audience behavior and identity. It is worth noting that concerns about media effects, along with a poor understanding of the diversity of individuals comprising an audience, have been, and continue to be, a central argument used to justify censorship. This is a particularly relevant issue regarding horror since the genre often involves violent content, a key matter in the study of media effects (Barker and Petley 2001). Although current research has often pointed out the lack of evidence for causality between the consumption of violent media—especially video games—and violent behavior (see Markey et al. 2015), the idea still prevails in the collective imagination. When speaking of media effects here, this text does not refer to the capacity of actual audiences to respond to and negotiate the intended textual meaning. On the contrary, it focuses on how a given media text reflects upon and imagines audiences. In this sense, audience response is always conceptualized from the assumptions and point of view of the mediated text.

The third theoretical pillar is Marshall McLuhan's proposition that the medium is the message. The key idea behind this theory is that every medium has strengths and weaknesses that affect the audience's interactions with them as well as their response. Consequently, the approach holds that communication research should focus on studying the medium rather than its messages because it is what determines the potential of mass media to influence societies' customs and values. According to this theory, the medium chosen to represent a specific concern in relation to mass media has implications for and effects on audiences, hence, the present interest in comparing contemporary representations of computer screens with those seen on television in the past. The final element pertains to the concepts of simulacra and simulation as theorized by Jean Baudrillard. Simulation, defined as the imitation of the workings of reality, is reminiscent of the processes of horrific doubling which are characteristic of reflective surfaces in horror. In this sense, media technologies create similar uncanny feelings to those evoked by changelings, *doppelgängers*, the loss of subjectivity and alienation.

Looking at the contexts in which these theoretical approaches were developed, it can be seen that certain similar preoccupations are shown—explicitly or implicitly—in popular culture texts that include television and mass media as plot elements. There are two examples from well-known television shows from the 60s' that are helpful to elucidate this: one from *The Twilight Zone*, "What's in the Box?", and a second from *The Outer Limits*, "O.B.I.T.". In these two episodes, we can easily discern the fear of media effects and compare how the two narratives relate to various media theories as well as to the media horror tropes outlined above. A close reading of these two narratives will contribute to foregrounding the usefulness of categorizing the inclusion of screens in audiovisual narratives to critically approach the topic.

"What's in the Box?" is a 1964 episode of *The Twilight Zone* series. At its start, the narrator introduces Joe, the protagonist, as a "TV fan" (Bare 1964, 00:04:15-00:04:25). Before this, Joe is seen arguing with his wife, although he is more concerned about

the television set getting fixed than about his wife's accusations of cheating. After a suspicious man fixes their television, Joe can pick up Channel Ten, which they had never gotten at their house before. However, what he sees is not the actual channel but his own life: an accurate past encounter with his mistress and a yet-to-come row with his wife in which he ends up murdering her. This puts Joe into a nervous state that causes his wife to call a doctor. The doctor connects Joe's apprehension at seeing himself on television murdering his wife to an article he has read and consequently attributes his patient's delusions to excessive television watching. Since his wife has described him as a "TV addict", the doctor reasons that it has come to a point where Joe does not know "whether he is watching or he is participating" (Bare 1964, 00:12:55-00:13:40).

The underlying issue the episode tackles is twofold: on the one hand, the protagonist's discontent with his life and his escape through watching television and, on the other, the potential grave danger of the psychological impact of excessive media consumption. Throughout the first five minutes, the episode is clearly reminiscent of the escapism category established by UGT. Joe escapes from confronting his wife about her suspicions of infidelity by going to the living room to watch television. As further glimpses of Joe's life are shown in the seemingly cursed television set, it becomes clear that he not only escapes from his wife and his work but also from his lover's desire for a steadier relationship. The confusion between reality and the televised also alludes to simulacra. Baudrillard criticizes audiences' passive responses to media content, arguing that they receive the information and reject its meaning. He contends that this "is equivalent to returning to the system its own logic by doubling it, to reflecting meaning, like a mirror, without absorbing it" (1988, 59). Such a reading of audiences' passivity and non-reception is very useful here. As seen in the quote, the uncritical reception of media messages is intertwined with the uncanny doubling effect of screens discussed in an earlier section.

The doctor's diagnosis spells out concerns about audiences being easily influenced by media content. Interestingly enough, be it a self-fulfilling prophecy or an actual curse, Joe ends up reproducing every single thing that he has watched his future/alternative self on television doing. Although the protagonist's perspective can be recognized as the base reality given the nature of the show, it is worth considering the overall context. Since only Joe can see the future on television—when he tries to show his wife, she can only see and hear white noise—through Joe's behavior the episode suggests that there exists a notable media influence on society, or at least that viewers familiar with *The Twilight Zone* would recognize such media manipulation as being possible.

The second example is the episode "O.B.I.T."—an acronym for The Outer Band Individuated Teletracer—of *The Outer Limits*. In this episode, the use of a computer that can show video of real-time activity of anybody at any time is defended with what might feel like a very familiar argument: "[P]eople with nothing to hide have nothing to fear from O.B.I.T." (Oswald 1963, 00:21:40-00:21:50). This specific concern not only speaks to the ubiquitous worry about the direct effects of media content but also

more openly deals with the powers behind media technology. The person who utters that sentence, Mr. Lomax, turns out to be an alien in charge of implementing O.B.I.T. on earth to control human society. As opposed to the previous example, here, in a series that leans more heavily towards the sci-fi genre, the danger is more likely to be embodied by a computer screen rather than a television set.

It is important to note that the perceived danger goes beyond the fear that those who control the computer have the capacity for constant surveillance. It focuses on how the computer has the potential to operate as a panopticon, with those in power attempting to convince the average person that they are surveilling everybody for a greater good. Colonel Grover, who was in favor of O.B.I.T. in the beginning, admits that he has come to realize that it is in fact a "hideous creation" because "no one can laugh or joke. It watches!" He recognizes that "the worst thing of all is I'll watch it. I can't not look. It's like a drug. A horrible drug. You can't resist it. It's an addiction" (Oswald 1963, 00:40:05-00:40:45). Evident concerns with addiction to mass media consumption were also on the rise during the 60s'. In terms of the horror and the symbolic meaning of screens in this narrative, their existence entails a loss of privacy, as people never know who might be watching them.

Although these two examples are categorized as science fiction/thriller narratives, they present some aspects common to the horror genre, particularly in terms of how fear and evil are conceptualized, as well as the characteristics of screens when they act as the locus of the uncanny. When studying the different forms of screen representation in sci-fi horror, the key aspect to pay attention to is how the feared is embodied in the media technology. In the first case above, it does so through reflection and imitation and, in the second, the screen allows evil to access individuals' private lives, meaning that they lose control over their own selves and see their safe spaces invaded.

2. A Typology of Screen Presence in Sci-Fi Horror

Having established the connection between sci-fi horror narratives and media research, this study introduces five distinct forms of screen presence in audiovisual horror narratives, namely: reference; *mise en abyme*; narrative element/character; erasure of the frame within the frame; and aesthetics/narrative technique across mediums. In developing the classification, the different forms that horror has traditionally taken in relation to screens is considered, alongside the overarching framework of the previously referenced media research and its central concerns. This categorization serves firstly to determine whether and how these different forms of screen presence condition the narrative and, secondly, to show which of the specific issues that the analyzed texts reflect upon are also explored within the field of media studies. The following summary of the different forms of screen representation provides examples to better clarify their specific characteristics and purposes. It is worth noting though that while one movie/ television series episode is used to elucidate each category, there may be more than one category present in a narrative. Besides the *Twilight Zone* episode already discussed

above, this section includes illustrative fragments from *Poltergeist* (Hopper 1982), *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1983), *The Circle* (Ponsaldt 2017) and *Unfriended* (Gabriadze 2014) as illustrative examples.

(a) *Reference* is possibly the most self-explanatory category. It applies to those occasions when the screen is used to include a metanarrative or when an existing media element is maintained within the base reality of the audiovisual text. These references are often included as a form of connecting the fictional narrative with the audience's reality and their inclusion is motivated by a desire to emphasize the perpetual presence of televisual narratives. They can be found in the movie *Poltergeist* (1982) on various occasions. For instance, Mister Rogers, the television personality, appears on screen interrupting a football game as a result of the neighbor unwillingly changing the channel with his remote control. The same thing occurs when *A Guy Named Joy* (Fleming 1943) is playing on television, a film which, interestingly and maybe adding more layers to the metanarrative, Steven Spielberg (*Poltergeist*'s writer) would direct a remake of in 1989 entitled *Always*.

These cross-references between content do not point to any specific horror mode characteristic of reflective surfaces but are more generally used to provide thematic clues in this genre, as well as others. Through the lens of media studies, this connection can be linked to concerns about how much influence and control mass media has over culture and society. It is also reminiscent of the transmedia experience, including as it does elements that are disseminated across different mediums (see Jenkins 2011). While *Poltergeist* does not constitute a transmedia narrative in a broader sense— consider, in contrast, Jenkins' example of *The Matrix*, where the plot of the games and comics provide complementary information to the main story in the canonic trilogy— it complements the audience's televisual/cinematic culture, heightening the thematic interest in the medium. Ultimately, it is a way of playing with the audience's desire for identification (UGT). By virtue of recognizing the programs and movies that the characters are watching, audiences can see themselves as in-group members.

(b) *Mise en abyme* is a technique of placing a copy of an image within itself, often in a way that suggests an infinitely recurring sequence. In this context, this category refers to those examples where media screens appear in a given scene, doubling the screen where the audiovisual content itself is being played. This occurs in the already discussed episode from *The Twilight Zone* "What's in the box?" when the television addict protagonist is watching his future on television. In these scenes, the audience can see not only the television set in Joe's living room but also the physical frame of the television in the reverse shots of the protagonist as he is watching his television.

This presentation of the screen serves to showcase a fictional audience—Joe, in this particular case—and their relationship with both the medium and the media content they are consuming. By presenting screens in the form of *mise en abyme*, rather than paying attention to the television set in itself, the narrative focuses on the character's identity as an audience member and calls into question their behavior as such. This

form of screen presence in fiction becomes part of the characterization process. It is often employed, as can be seen in the example analyzed above, to highlight the passivity of audiences when they are consuming mass media. As regards audiovisual horror narratives, *mise en abyme* acts like a screen *doppelgänger* inside of the actual audience's own screens. In the example, it confronts Joe with a form of doubling that has the potential to turn the familiar into the unfamiliar through the conceptualization of his television set as the source of an unavoidable evil force that affects his behavior. The familiar television set in audiences' homes is hence associated with the unfamiliar evil seen on screen.

(c) A third form of screen inclusion occurs when the television or the key media object in the narrative *functions as a character.* An interesting example of this is the 1983 movie *Videodrome* (Cronenberg). This movie, with clear elements of science fiction despite its central interest in body horror, is another enlightening example of cultural and social concerns about audiences' dependency on media consumption. In it, a mysterious man who appears to be some sort of media guru and a "McLuhanesque deluded scientist" (Brottman 2005, 112) explains that: "[M]assive doses of Videodrome signal will ultimately create a new outgrowth of the human brain which will produce and control hallucination to the point that it will change human reality" (Cronenberg 1983, 00:40:25-00:40:45). Through these bizarre hallucinations, the protagonist, Max, experiences the hallucinatory world created by Videodrome but also realizes that Videodrome, as an entity, wants something, as it is continuously referred to by characters in the know as having a will of its own. As it turns out, the Videodrome VHS movies, that in the beginning appear to simply be a foreign snuff production, broadcast a signal that affects the brain and causes hallucinations, and which the producers want to use to kill anyone who is deemed to be obssessed with violence and sex. In an indeed McLuhanesque fashion, this form of screen inclusion highlights the role of the medium (see McLuhan [1964] 1994), video in this case, and focalizes its critique on the medium itself.

A simulacrum is at the core of this text, as the media-induced hallucinations become reality and Professor Brian O'Blivion, a media theorist inspired precisely on Marshall McLuhan, argues that "television is reality, and reality is less than television" (Cronenberg 1983, 00:33:05-00:33:15). Moreover, a very literal representation of how in the film media consumption (specifically the consumption of violent sexual content) causes a tumor in the viewer's brain allows for a personification of the evil forces of media in the Videodrome VHS movies. *Videodrome* confronts audiences with a fragmentary reality that results not only in a crack in space and time, but also in a profound loss of subjectivity as the media object—VHS/television—takes over an alienated Max. Once again, the horror narrative employs screen presence to legitimize the argument that media effects are a direct and damaging influence on their uncritical mass audience. In this particular case, television and screens as characters also help elucidate the specific role that media are playing in the lives of their audiences within the fictional text. In terms of the UGT, the screen/television/VHS most notably represent the need for

escapism, something Max, as a media executive, immediately recognizes as having potential for profit (Cronenberg 1983, 00:08:50-00:09:10).

(d) The *erasure of the frame within the frame* refers to those cases in which the frame of the fictional screen coincides with the frame of the actual screen where the movie/television show is being watched. In contrast to the aforementioned *mise en abyme*, in this case the frame changes, putting the emphasis on the television image coming toward the real-world audience, and becoming the whole image that is seen on their own screens, substituting the frame of the original television set. This screen presence transverses many genres and has been commonly used to insert surveillance footage in movies. It tends to be visually coded with a change of either image quality or the aspect ratio. This can be appreciated in the techno-thriller *The Circle* (Ponsaldt 2017). The movie is in an aspect ratio of 2.35:1 except for those fragments seen through the protagonist's camera recordings, in the style of live recordings from popular social media apps, that change to a 5:3 ratio.

The erasure of the frame within the frame, especially when it is not indicated by any visible change, obscures the boundary between inside and outside. Just as with the previous category of screen presence, it highlights the intermingling of reality and fiction. This one, however, has a clearer connection to the liminal quality of screens in horror narratives. The blurring of the screen frame takes both the *mise en abyme* and the *screens as characters* categories one step further. Instead of stressing the role of audiences, this type of screen presence focuses on creating direct involvement and an awareness of the watcher's condition as a passive uncritical audience. The erasure of the safe distance provided by being able to see the whole screen and apparatus is lost and the *doppelgänger* of the screen completely takes over, priming a fearful response to surveillance footage.

(e) Finally, *screens as aesthetics and narrative technique* refers to screens that appear associated with visual elements that are characteristic of digital media technologies. For instance, the inclusion of glitching effects is very common in the found footage and desktop horror genres,[1] with notable examples such as *Unfriended* (Gabriadze 2014). This particular type of screen integration in the narrative also relates to audience practices in that the experience of watching a movie or a television series that relies on the aesthetics of some other medium, often digital, presupposes that the audience is familiar with it. Even from the perspective of low media literacy, these elements can be recognized as characteristic of computer technology and immediately associated with a cinematic framing of digital aesthetics.

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[1]   Found footage is an audiovisual genre that entails the inclusion of recordings that, due to their quality, are understood to be original footage as it is presented to the real-world audience. The metafilmic elements of the genre operate as a "framing or narrative technique" (Aldana Reyes 2015, 124) and its realism "hinges explicitly upon exposing itself as a media artifact" (Heller-Nicholas 2014, 7). It is presented "as a fragment of the real world, and the implication is that its material might well spill over into it" (Sayad 2016, 45). Desktop horror is a subgenre in which "cameras available to us on a daily basis, including our computers and phones, provide familiar frames of attention" (Larsen 2019) that are shown in the film as part (or the center of) the narrative.

Considering McLuhan's postulations, the assumed strengths and weaknesses of a medium can be affected/influenced by its representation in fictional texts made for a different medium. This becomes particularly important when thinking about the connection between television and Internet-driven screens—computers and mobile devices. This form of screen presence highlights both the medium and the audience. Interestingly, this type of cross-medium aesthetics might suggest the acknowledgement of a more critical and engaged audience. Beyond the sci-fi elements of technological and media advances, from the perspective of horror narratives, the intrusion of other medium aesthetics might reflect the crossing of the screen portal. As distinct characteristics intermingle and take over, the above-mentioned presence of the *doppelgänger* screen which equates with the audience's screen is further accentuated.

3. Phone and Computer Screens: the Media Effects Debate over Social Media

The last two types of screen presence—with *The Circle* and *Unfriended* as illustrative examples—emphasize the dangers of social media and the Internet. The most evident difference between these and the other three types is that the screens are implicitly rather than explicitly shown. That is, in most cases for the *erasure of the frame* category and always for the *screens as aesthetics* one, there is no screen or television set that is included in the audiovisual narrative that real-world audiences are watching but, rather, the presence of screens is introduced through certain aesthetics and characteristics—such as glitching or the inclusion of pop-ups—that we associate with specific mediums—notably computers and smartphones. *The Social Dilemma* can be looked at as a docudrama with sci-fi and horror elements that explores the lack of control people have over the technology they use and the ubiquitous presence of screens. It includes fictionalized sections with a set of fictional characters, mixed with interviews and footage of real-life trials and keynote speeches. Here, the typology is put into practice to further the understanding of this docudrama and see whether narratives that deal with new media technologies are prone to the last two types of screen presence. Looking at screens as an element that adds to the layered meaning of the narrative helps to elucidate whether preoccupations about media effects are expressed similarly when dealing with digital technologies as when dealing with television, or if, to the contrary, they have changed to adapt to the particularities of the new Internet screens. It also contributes to showing how science fiction and horror elements often permeate other cinematic genres.

The Social Dilemma explores the darker side of social media and serves as an example of how horror and screens materialize in contemporary narratives that represent how much impact smartphones, the Internet and social media have on people's lives. Despite being a docudrama, the film has easily identifiable science fiction elements, in the scenes representing embodiments of the algorithm, and of horror in the overall fear-inducing tone of the documentary. The fictional sections operate primarily as a horror narrative that retells the nefarious effects that the use of social media and addiction to

phones can have on people, particularly teenagers. In the fictional story, the parents of three teenage children struggle to limit their offspring's Internet consumption and dependency on their phones. While the oldest sister realizes the dangers that social media represent for her and her siblings' sociability and mental health, the other two show signs of addiction that clearly affect their well-being. Ben, the middle child, is challenged by his sister to not use his phone for a week. During this period of non-use, three embodiments of the AI within the phone, portrayed by an actor in different iterations of the algorithm's needs—revenue, engagement and growth—, discuss the possible ways in which they can lure Ben back to social media and the Internet, such as pushing conspiracy theory videos and social media notifications from the girl he has a crush on. The horror in the narrative is built around considering media effects as direct and powerful. Focusing on the different forms of screen presence as defined above sheds light on the narrative construction of the film and its underlying mass media-related concerns.

(i) *Reference.* This docudrama shows screens with similar interfaces to those of familiar social networks. From the perspective of the representation of the screen, the audience is expected to have specific familiarity with the aesthetics presented in the narrative. This familiarity results in "active engagement of the participant beyond the simple interaction with a story or character level," which is key in contemporary media and especially in horror (Ndalianis 2012, 10). The appearance of social networks and video sites seen on the protagonists' phone screens highlights the overarching power of the companies it reminds audiences of, such as Facebook and Twitter—explicitly mentioned during the interview sections—resulting in a tacit agreement with the overall argument of the narrative about the nefarious nature of social media use, presented through Ben's shortcomings. Hence, appealing to a form of in-group knowledge through the fear of ending up in the same grim position as the protagonist results in identification (UGT). In effect, *The Social Dilemma* shows how algorithms exploit this desire for identification.

(ii) *Mise en abyme.* Due to the ekphrastic nature of the Internet and computers as they are depicted here, *The Social Dilemma* often resorts to this form of screen presence. The docudrama is almost permanently focused on phone and computer screens. Not only the protagonists but also the anthropomorphized algorithms are always looking at them. As previously mentioned, this type of screen inclusion calls attention to the role of the characters as audience. Screens are so ubiquitous that, in this case, identifying as an audience member is presented as unavoidable. This results in a game of mirrors: first, there is the screen of the phone that Ben uses; second, within the fictional representation of the world inside his social media account, numerous screens surround his avatar, giving it a screen-like glow; and finally, the anthropomorphized algorithms are also interacting with computer screens through which they can control the *doppelgänger* they have created. Via the mirror-like qualities of all the screens reflecting screens, the narrative points toward concerns about fragmentation of subjectivity and alienation.

(iii) *As a character*. *The Social Dilemma* presents a personified representation of what it considers as the three main characteristics/objectives behind the social media algorithm: revenue, engagement and growth. In this way, the algorithm as the central media object becomes a character in the narrative, reminiscent of other fictional AIs that have human appearance. These algorithms create what in the docudrama (Orlowski 2020) is described as a "voodoo-doll-like" avatar of the user based on their behavior online. The "voodoo-doll-like" representation of the protagonist is akin to the uncanny doubled subjectivity in a mirror. Witnessing the embodiments of the algorithm's manipulation of a person's will—clear evidence of alleged direct media effects—turns the familiar into the unfamiliar. It illustrates the social media user's alienation, which represents a clear threat to the integrity of their subjectivity. As the narrative focuses prominently on Shoshana Zuboff's idea of "surveillance capitalism" (2019) and the worry about data collection, there is a return to the great fear of media having direct effects on their audiences, characteristic of early studies of media effects.

(iv) *Erasure of the frame within the frame*. Throughout the film, there is no such erasure when it comes to phone and computer screens. The only times when the image of a screen coincides with the frame of the film's audience occurs when cropped excerpts from television news broadcasts are shown. This is also an example of *reference*, and it works to further emphasize identification with the characters that are watching in the fictional narrative, given that audiences are likely to be familiar with the programs and anchors shown on screen. The important focal point here is that, through the erasure of the television frame, the audience of *The Social Dilemma* is watching the same news broadcast that the characters are watching, without the apparent mediation of the fictional television set as we have seen in "What's in the Box?". It is worth mentioning that the news pieces included in the narrative are reports on the negative impact of social media, contributing to defining the evil that audiences—both fictional and those in the docudrama—are facing. The zooming in and cropping of these broadcast fragments works to establish an overall sense of dread and fear that permeates the plot of the docudrama.

(v) *Screen aesthetics*. The predominant aesthetics are reminiscent of both the digital realm and, more notably, of what cinema often frames as video game design. For instance, the countdown at the bottom of the screen when Ben is away from his phone is an example of such visual choices. This priming—a technique often used in media to link ideas or concepts in order to lead the audience to an intended conclusion—connects social media with video games and, in turn, with the idea of harmful media effects, as numerous studies have paid special attention to exploring whether there is a connection between playing violent video games and subsequent violent behavior in real life. The fear of losing one's own subjectivity and consciousness, as framed in the context of sci-fi horror narratives, becomes a reality in *The Social Dilemma* as the *doppelgänger* replaces the real Ben and the latter enters the world of algorithms. This category is an aspect that the narrative pays special attention to. However, it remains mostly a stylistic enrichment rather than a key thematic focus.

4. CONCLUSION

This study interrogates the position and status of screens as framed throughout television and cinema history. Screens can be considered as elements that have developed their own myths as the contemporary version of reflective surfaces in traditional horror. In the various examples discussed in this article, screens become sources of the uncanny while never losing their evocation of science fiction through the technological and digital elements that they amplify. However, the key question is not why these screens are uncanny but what the audiences' reactions to these different uncanny screens tell us about screens as a symbol. The five different forms of screens that have been identified correlate mass media-related concerns that originate in the field of media studies with the specific forms of horror they allude to. Ultimately, this typology serves to systematize the possible representations of the screen that can be found in television shows and cinema. In this sense, although developed with television screens and the sci-fi horror genre as the primary focus, the categorization serves to look at new iterations of screen presence that explore contemporary preoccupations and anxieties that revolve around computer and phone screens.

The analysis of *The Social Dilemma* shows that representing phone screens does not rely solely on transporting the aesthetic qualities of those new mediums onto the television screen. All the categories of screen presence, as identified in the proposed typology, play a key role in framing the socio-political concerns that horror and science fiction narratives aim to highlight. This analysis is framed within the contemporary social context, where concerns about data mining and AI are on the rise. The appearance of social media and especially of algorithms that measure users' behaviors and interests presents a challenge to the above-mentioned assumption of audiences' freedom to make conscious decisions. Through the typology and its application to new forms of screen presence that focus on Internet-connected screens, it becomes evident how seemingly old concerns about mass media—direct effects, media addiction and surveillance—are rediscovered and adapted to the new context employing quite similar audiovisual resources. Finally, it is worth noting that this study aims to establish that in order to improve overall media literacy, audiences must be aware not only of their position as such but also of the assumptions that popular media make about them and their critical stance.

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Laura Álvarez Trigo is an assistant professor at the Department of English Studies at Universidad de Valladolid. She is interested in how media theory can inform the study of the representation of screens and audiences in popular culture. Her research focuses on Gender and Film Studies, as well as US Contemporary Literature.