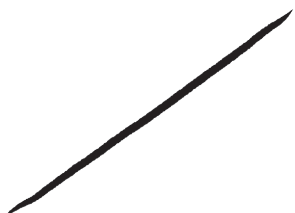


# HOW THE DIGITAL MEDIUM CHANGES THE PERCEPTION OF FILMMAKING.

NEW SUBCONSCIOUS  
"READINGS" OF A MOVING  
IMAGE

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**Abstract:** This article focuses on the way the spectator's perception and analysis of moving images has changed in the past two decades, following the growing technological advancements in the digital field. Both small digital cameras, meant for home use, and the digitalization of everyday life through different online platforms have had a significant impact on the way our brains subconsciously understand visual stimuli. What changes is not only the spectator's viewing experience but also his interpretation of the semiotics of the image. In the first part of the article, I will use as example two of the works of the great Iranian *auteur* Jafar Panahi, whose ban to never make movies again has forced him to find alternate ways of expression. In the second part of the article, I will focus on a lesser-known horror film, crafted in the form of a *Zoom* meeting, which I believe to be a revolutionary milestone in the breaking of the barriers of visual perception: *Hout* (2020), directed by Rob Savage. In understanding these recent changes in our cognitive behavior, the next step would be updating the pedagogical approach to this unavoidable digital medium, in order to prepare the next generation of filmmakers for the medium in which they will be working.

**Keywords:** digitalization, perception of film reality, naturalistic aesthetic, reinterpretation of norms, limits of perception, performative inclusion of the spectator, digital texture of the home movie, polysemy of meanings.

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## ***Introduction***

Digital as a medium has become a key factor in all our lives, especially during and after the Covid pandemic. Artists had to adapt in order to overcome the lack of direct physical contact that was inherent at that time – I myself, working as a film director, had multiple projects in the editing phase in the first year of the pandemic, projects that I continued to edit via *Zoom* with my editor. Even when we were both sick and in quarantine, we would work together via *TeamViewer* or *Zoom* (whichever would work best at that moment) so that we could finish our work on time. There was also a therapeutic side to it, as our "safe space" was in that moment of creation. We had something to do, something to keep us busy from thinking too hard about the negative aspects surrounding us. Even nowadays, on minor projects, we continue to work like that, through digital platforms, as it can be much more time-efficient, with the results being ultimately the same as in the case of a physical meeting in the editing cabin (as long as one has a good internet connection).

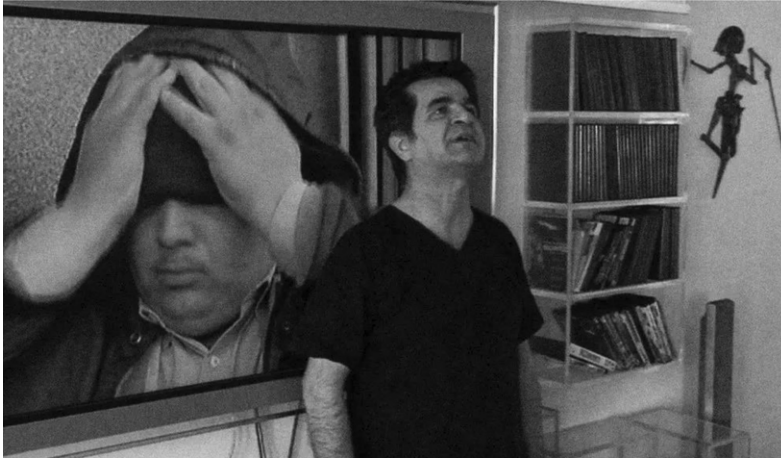
For us, being able to keep working like that under imposed circumstances was fulfilling and therapeutic. It is fascinating how, under great duress, the best

of results can be achieved with the simplest of means. In the case of filmmakers, the constant need to adapt their craft to the *Zeitgeist* works as a distraction from the adversities they cannot control. My example is just one of the multitude of cases of workers in the field of cinema who were compelled, due to *force majeure*, to adapt in order to survive. And for this article, it represents a starting point for an empirical type of research. Covid, even though it remains a despicable memory to these tumultuous, warmongering present times, represents but a forced transition in the case of the digitalization of our visual perception. In the last two decades, digital cameras have slowly and steadily replaced the traditional method of shooting on film while simultaneously changing the visual perception of the spectator. And due to the limitless connectivity and access that every citizen of a free country has to the digital medium, this perception changed once more. In the following article, I will try to bring to light how the digital medium, both represented by the accessibility of digital cameras and the digital connectivity of the Internet, has achieved this sudden change, and as a result, how film scholars should reconsider their pedagogical approach when shaping the next generations of filmmakers.

### ***Making (not) films with the digital technique***

It is obvious that the texture of the digital image, which is inherent in the pixels of an amateur camera, has a completely different impact on our brains from that of classical film, which we nowadays immediately catalog as being a fictional story. "Amateur" digital feels closer, more intimate, as if we are watching a home movie. In this sense, it has successfully replaced the old Super 8 mm film stock. The sensation of manipulation from on part of the director is minimal, as we believe that the camera just recorded the events unfolding in a particular space and time. We don't immediately think that what we are witnessing is a contoured reality, but rather a viewable document of a past (or maybe even present) age. This is a difference that is not sufficiently explained to film students; a young filmmaker, after three or five years of study, is used to analyzing moving pictures "indiscriminately" without being conscious of the medium that is constantly changing around him. If the times and tendencies change, so should the pedagogy and the implications for the students. Everyone has access to a camera now. There are billions of videos being filmed by mobile phones in the whole world, millions of minutes of content being uploaded online for everyone to see. What makes filmmakers so special anymore? And how can one turn mere clips shot on a personal phone into a film? What is the difference between a "meme" that makes us laugh and a short comedy film shot

on an amateur support? What is the difference between an everyday *vlog of an influencer* and a *documentary that follows the everyday routine of its director*?<sup>9</sup> These are questions that should be studied by each of us working in the film industry, and even though we might not find an absolute answer, we should at least find comfort in the fact that there are some who have managed to successfully cross the line.



Still from *This is Not a Film* (2011), directed by Jafar Panahi and Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, where the director had just presented a scene from one of his earlier movies to prove how the talent of a non-professional actor had elevated the script he (Panahi) had written.

Photo source: <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/29/movies/hes-jafar-panahi-but-this-is-not-a-film.html>

There are film *auteurs* who have been struggling to find means to regain their personal and artistic freedom for decades – and no example is more fitting than that of the renowned Iranian director Jafar Panahi. In the past decade, he has transposed his life as a dissident of the totalitarian regime into his films, blurring the lines between fact and fiction after having been banned for 20 years from making films in Iran. With no financial or logistic means to make traditional movies and being placed under house arrest, he managed, with the help of fellow filmmaker Mojtaba Mirtahmasb and his digital camera, to shoot the award-winning masterpiece *This is Not a Film* (2011), – a film which he managed to smuggle out of the country on a USB drive hidden inside a cake. Four years later, in 2015, Panahi posed as a taxi driver with a handycam in *Taxi Tehran*, filming a hybrid between documentary and fiction – thus revolutionizing the use of

minimal means to create a powerful, innovative, and artistic piece of cinema with such simplicity and genuineness. He has managed time and again to bypass the system holding him captive, with lifetime bans on leaving Iran not preventing him from finding ingenious solutions to making his films. The reason? His own words are the most eloquent response:

I am a filmmaker and ultimately, I just want to make films. I will always find a way to make them. I only understand film and cinema; there are no other influences. I only look for different ways to make my films. I don't know if you would call that "defiance" or something else. It is called "filmmaking". Filmmakers make films; they cannot do anything other than that. As a filmmaker I am simply exploring every possible avenue to assist in the filmmaking process. (Todd, 2019)

Panahi is the first film *auteur*, since the long-abandoned experimentations of the *Dogme '95* movement, to make his films on a digital support regarded as being for home-use only. While Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg were the first to embrace digital cameras and a naturalistic aesthetic in their films (*The Idiots* and *The Celebration*, both from 1998, being the core examples), they gradually abandoned the movement they had founded and pursued different stylistic pathways, in a more organized fashion and with bigger budgets. Panahi, who initially worked as an assistant director on Abbas Kiarostami's features, started to make his own films in a classical manner, and only later did he embrace what one could define as ***the ultimate guerrilla style of filmmaking***. Panahi, due to his condition as an oppressed artist, single-handedly revolutionized the use of digital cameras meant for personal use in order to break the barriers between reality and fiction. Why is that, and how did he manage to accomplish such a feat? Let us take *Taxi Tehran* as an example, bearing in mind the fact that the texture of the image from a digital camera maintains, in our subconscious understanding of moving pictures, an identity of reality, of something filmed by a regular person who happened to *record* that specific moment in time *without interfering*.



The last shot from *Taxi Tehran* (2015), directed by Jafar Panahi, where the director returns to the car for his niece. Right after this still, the car is ransacked by thieves. Photo source: Screenshot taken from *Taxi Tehran*, 2015, directed by Jafar Panahi.

*Taxi Tehran* happens almost entirely in the titular taxi, driven by Panahi himself. He records, with a camera placed on the dashboard of the car, the interactions with his clients. If one watches the film without knowing anything about its director, the belief is that *Taxi Tehran* represents a truthful documentation of a taxi driver's routes through the city. And for the first half hour, it definitely feels like a documentary, as most of the people who are driven by Panahi through the streets of Tehran are unprofessional actors. Some recognize him, others don't, and their discussions vary from politics to everyday life. However, as the film advances, it starts to be shaped in a derivation of the three-act structure, as Panahi picks up his niece from the school, and their goal is to meet up with a famous human rights activist, Nasrin Sotoudeh. The spectator slowly begins to realize that **this is actually a film**, crafted with such finesse and mastery that it blends the documentary approach into predetermined fiction. *Taxi Tehran* shifts from being just an observation of the people inhabiting the capital of Iran to being a *personal commentary*, fully assumed by the creator, who is also the guide and main character of his film. The spectator may feel tricked by this hybridization of the genres, as he was not witnessing events playing out, but rather events being made to play out. Yet this emotional involvement of the spectator is *as real as it gets*, reminding in a way of that well-known anecdote surrounding the first public projection of the Lumière brothers' *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat* (1896), in which

the spectators standing in the first rows of the cinema allegedly started running away as the train was approaching on the screen, fearing that they would be run down by the locomotive. In essence, the feeling of realism is the same, and through these methods of subjugating reality, directing it and turning it into ***another kind of reality***, Panahi remains one of the most ingenious and transgressive directors of modern times/ of the modern period. His perfect example of an artist who manages to make cinema with almost no means at his disposal is of outstanding relevance for the ongoing struggle of every contemporary filmmaker – maintaining relevance in a fast-paced, constantly changing world.

### ***How digital and digitalization redefine the semiotics of the moving image***

Aside from Jafar Panahi, another branch of cinema has used the digital, meant for home-use cameras, in order to create a new sensation of immersion for the viewer. The beginnings of the online medium in the late 1990s favored the appearance of found footage horror films, with *The Blair Witch Project* from 1999 (directed by Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick) being the first to revolutionize the genre. With a small budget of around 60.000 dollars (most of which went into distribution), *The Blair Witch Project* managed to gross over 260 million dollars at the box office, making it one of the most successful movies ever. Aside from the visceral nature of the footage, which seemed real because it had been filmed by the actors themselves, the creators had even made an online site that enforced the idea that the people appearing in the movie had really disappeared and that the footage was indeed real.

The sensation of reality that transpires from *The Blair Witch Project*, aside from the extremely clever PR campaign, is due to the texture of the image (shot on a Hi8 camcorder, a camera recording on VHS tapes, that was still new for that time) and the raw, uneven movements of the camera. The camera basically becomes the very eye of its characters, a subjective witness that apparently *records random actions that seem not to be predetermined by a director*. The footage bears witness to a proclaimed reality – where not much is actually seen, and what happens outside the limits of the frame is more terrifying than what happens within the frame. As such, the spectator is assaulted by the realization that his comfort zone, his “safe space” in front of the screen, isn’t safe anymore. The fact that the footage has been found by a “third party” means that the characters are dead – and the spectator could be next. This terrifying thought fed the unrelenting machinery of the film industry to oversaturate the market with thousands of found footage horror films throughout the 2000s and 2010s.



Above: Still of the famous shot from *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), directed by Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, which also represents the poster for the film. Photo source: <https://player.bfi.org.uk/rentals/film/watch-the-blair-witch-project-1999-online>

Below: Still from *Host* (2020), paying homage to its precursor. Photo source: Screenshot taken from *Host*, 2020, directed by Rob Savage.



In the more recent past, more than two decades after *The Blair Witch Project*, English writer/director Rob Savage took a more daring approach to the now-exhausted genre of found footage horror, adapting it directly to the digital medium. Right after the beginning of the pandemic, when Zoom, TeamViewer, and Google Meets became of paramount importance to everyone continuing to work from home, this small movie, named *Host*, had its premiere. Written, shot, and edited in just three months, it immediately became a sensational piece of cinema that owes its existence entirely to the virtual medium – and to the pandemic. It was filmed remotely, using webcams and low-budget effects, and edited into a film that is as long as the duration of the Zoom call it depicts. Everything happens in real time, through the lenses of the online medium.

The film tells the story of a group of friends that come together one evening in order to attempt a séance (a way to communicate with the spirits of the dead). However, following a prank from one of the friends, the séance actually summons an evil spirit that gradually starts haunting the Zoom call. One by one, the main characters start experiencing strange events in their respective homes, ultimately leading to their brutal and gory deaths. The spectator, basically, is given the role of a direct witness in the haunting and killing of the characters.

*Host* represents the natural evolution of films like *Paranormal Activity* (2007) within the context of the digitalization of everyday life. However, from the point of view of the semiotics of the image, *Host* is much more complex than its precursors. While in the horror found footage genre, there would only be one frame for the spectator to process, in *Host* there are usually six frames at a time and, in certain moments even more (up to nine, matching the total number of characters that enter and exit the Zoom call). As such, the traditional editing technique of the “split screen” becomes an inherent trademark of this *Zoom horror*, as it has been described. Automatically, ***the limits of perception of the human eye are strained to the maximum***, and, paradoxically, the best way to view *Host* is actually on a cinema screen rather than on a computer. That is because the viewer can miss a lot of elements that happen in the characters’ backgrounds – subtle movements, shadowy figures hidden in the dark, things being moved on their own.

The movie also relies on the fact that, in a real Zoom call, our attention always focuses on the main speaker – we never manage to observe everyone at the same time. Precisely because of this instinctual analysis of the moving image, there is a huge amount of information being staged by the director in all the other frames. As such, there is so much more happening in the frames-within-the frame than the usual viewer has been trained to observe. The movie demands, due to its unique language, a certain amount of direct involvement from the spectator, almost drawing him into the universe of the story, which at that point becomes unsettlingly realistic. ***The story performs in real time***, in a real framework, with characters that feel real. And the willing spectator needs to allow himself to be drawn into this piece of performance in order to experience it completely.

Sure, the story *is* just another classic horror story. But it is crafted in such a manner that it utilizes typical tropes and clichés of the genre to also become a satire of itself. It is, in effect, **an innovative and meta film**. And, while managing to be frightening and scary, it also happens to be very funny – after having been put through (literal) hell, the last two surviving main characters meet physically at the end of the film and bump elbows instead of hugging. Even in the most horrifying circumstances, with their lives about to end, they still respect the rules of social distancing.



Still from *Host*. The moment of the séance, where the spectator has seven simultaneous planes to follow.

Photo source: Screenshot taken from *Host*, 2020, directed by Rob Savage.

As I mentioned, the film has a purely performative nature because the viewer is treated as just another witness participating in the Zoom call. It is performative also because of how it challenges the very grammar of understanding moving pictures. Special effects are invisible, the stunts are very well executed, and the camerawork is also extremely realistic (mainly because it is done by the actors with outside guidance from the director of photography). Technically, it is a brilliant achievement, taking into consideration the timespan in which it was made and creating the perfect ground for a “safe” space to be turned upside down. The film has this very intimate feeling to it and manages to turn the very intimacy of the characters into a prison and, eventually, their tomb.

What is innovative about *Host* is that it brings this ***multilayered semiotics of the image*** to the table. The traditional 2D way of watching a movie is challenged, as we are dealing with frames within frames. The film also incorporates elements of frame storytelling because the evil spirit haunts one of the characters at a time while the others bear witness, incapable of doing anything to help each other. Like a monstrous *Decameron*. The spirit haunts them in turns, dealing with each space and character at a time. As a result, this dual complexity can be found within the framework of the film – what is seen and what the seen frame signifies on a higher level of interpretation. We are dealing with ***a polysemy of meanings that innovate the language of cinema.***

It is important to mention that this framework was not invented by filmmakers but rather by tech companies. The programmers of online apps inadvertently discovered the multilayered aspect of multiple moving images; internet apps like Skype and Zoom "force" those using them to develop a kind of subconscious distributive attention when being in meetings with many people. As stated above, this plethora of stimuli challenges deeply how we view a 2D image, training our brains outside of the original convention of analyzing an image from the left to the right (as Rudolf Arnheim postulates in his famous work *Art and Visual Perception*). Instead, in this case, the brain locks itself onto multiple smaller frames – one at a time, in order to gain a bigger picture of all of them together. Rob Savage understood the potential this medium presents and utilized these tools of communication that force the viewers to enhance their distributive attention, with the purpose of telling a simple story in an intricate and unique fashion.

These new forms of filmmaking, influenced by technological advancements, ultimately represent a new way of perceiving moving pictures – we are dealing with an increased rhythm of assimilating new information. However, the question arises whether, in this process, our brain loses its analytical patience and ultimately starts rushing through information to assimilate in quantity and not in quality. It is something that TikTok does to the brain, as well. Only time will tell, as it depends solely on the continuous advancement of digital platforms – and people's benevolence towards embracing these changes.

### **Conclusion**

In contemporary cinema, especially with the accessibility of smartphones, there are so many more examples of how the "amateur" digital texture combines with the classical craft of filmmaking to give birth to hybrid forms of docufiction. But I believe the two examples provided in this article, that of the Iranian *auteur* Jafar Panahi and of the severely underrated *Zoom-horror* film *Host*, are the most eloquent for proving how our perception of a 2D image has changed in the past two decades. I believe it is important for everyone working in the audiovisual field, from practitioners to pedagogues, to become aware of these changes. Practitioners are usually influenced directly by the *Zeitgeist* on a subliminal level, and when they implement these newfound elements, they do it without realizing what they are perpetuating. Their driving force is the **authorial instinct**, which commands their inspiration from an unexplorable area of the subconscious. However, pedagogues, who continuously need to research their field of work, do not have this luxury, as they must be the first to adapt their teaching methods for the sake of their students. Pedagogues need to ask themselves the real questions about the

times they live in in order to prepare future generations for the times they are going to face, not just for the times they never lived. In doing so, researchers and pedagogues can make truly astonishing discoveries that can further influence the continuous development of this wonderful art of filmmaking.

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