Cinema of Confinement

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Introduction

Excess, the Gaze, and Cinema of Confinement

After *Fight Club* (which had nearly four hundred scenes and almost two hundred locations), the idea of doing an entire story [*Panic Room*] inside one house appealed to me. . . . The whole place, a three-story apartment, is all built on stage and we have cameras that can go literally anywhere. They can move and follow the actors from the third floor to the first. All over the place.

—David Fincher, director of *Panic Room*

Since the birth of cinema, filmmakers have explored different ways of telling stories across multiple settings within the length of one film. From the early editing experiments of Edwin S. Porter and D. W. Griffith, to the current globe-trotting of James Bond and Marvel movies, shifts in location continue to fascinate filmmakers and audiences alike. Aesthetically, many of these movies articulate cinematic space as fluid and continuous, since the image is subordinated to the narrative even when the story changes locations. As such, the mode of production for the classic style of narration is to naturalize and integrate space by not drawing significant attention to the mechanisms that create the illusion of cinematic reality. This process is often referred to as the invisible style of narration, which involves composing and editing space that directs the viewer’s spectatorship towards the narrative and the actions of the characters. These films offer the spectator a cinema that displays the unlimited power of the camera, showing all perspectives of the events throughout a variety of settings.

But how do films that take place in one location make for an engaging and suspenseful spectatorship? How do filmmakers make a confined setting such as a living room, a car, a phone booth, or a fallout bunker
attractive to audiences over a long stretch of time? Excess is the key concept to answering these questions.

Films such as David Fincher’s home invasion thriller *Panic Room* (2002) are what I refer to as the “cinema of confinement” because the narrative tension focuses predominantly within one location. The quotation above addresses one of the ways in which excess is depicted in the film. As Fincher explains, he makes up for the film’s confined setting by constructing the home within a controlled environment so that the camera can potentially be “all over the place.”¹ But how do we account for confinement films that do not employ an excessively visual style and are just as narratively suspenseful as *Panic Room*, such as Lenny Abrahamson’s *Room* (2015), Dan Trachtenberg’s *10 Cloverfield Lane* (2016), and Doug Liman’s *The Wall* (2017)? This raises a number of questions in understanding the theoretical aspects of excess. How does excess function in cinema in relation to spectatorship? What are its effects in relation to characters and their environment? How does excess serve the cinema of confinement in the articulation of space? What ideological, political, and social insights does excess offer?

Excess is not only about hyper-stylized cinema. Excess also involves what is in the film space more than the film space itself. It is something that at once eludes our looking and elicits our desire to look into the film’s narrative or plot. That is to say, excess entails a psychical force in our viewership. Consider Alfred Hitchcock’s bomb theory. Rather than having a bomb randomly explode, such as the café explosion scene that opens Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men* (2006), the logic of Hitchcock’s suspense involves showing viewers a ticking bomb placed on a train.² By sharing this secret information with viewers, a common conversation or everyday chitchat on the train becomes freighted with dread and tension. Slavoj Žižek describes Hitchcockian suspense in relation to the phallic stage as something that stands out within the ordinary. For Žižek, the phallic stage “is precisely the detail that ‘does not fit,’ that ‘sticks out’ from the idyllic surface scene and denatures it, renders it uncanny.”³ This unordinary detail is surplus-knowledge—it is the excess that unhangs the signified (meaning or mental image) from the signifier (the object or referent to which the meaning or mental image refers), such as the ticking bomb stuffed in the trunk of a car that opens Orson Welles’s *Touch of Evil* (1958). Long takes are often associated with slowness, pensiveness, and duration. One would think that employing long takes would frustrate viewers by emphasizing the passing of time. After all, Hollywood films do not want to draw significant attention to a film’s system of mediation. The long take in *Touch of Evil* is anything but slow as the vehicle makes its way through the border city in Texas. The suspense of the car bomb sequence
is attributed to Welles letting us in on the secret (surplus-knowledge). Allowing excess to “stick out” not only builds incredible suspense—as demonstrated in Hitchcock’s bomb theory—but also can transform cinematic space with unsettling effects, as in the long take in Touch of Evil.4 Even when the long take moves away from the vehicle, introducing us to newlyweds Mike Vargas (Charlton Heston) and Susan Vargas (Janet Leigh) walking along the street, the scene continues to have an unsettling effect upon our spectatorship—because desire functions on what we do not know. The logic of desire operates on lack and absence, not on mastery and plenitude. For example, when Mike and Susan first appear within the moving long take, they are obstructions. The camera tracks Mike and Susan as they walk along the city while the couple in the vehicle with the ticking bomb drives off-screen. The introduction of Mike and Susan both intensifies our spectatorship and demonstrates how our desire distorts the visual field of perception within the scene. As such, the bomb as surplus-knowledge radicalizes our perception of the city, as objects, conversations, and events become charged with uncertainty. Our knowledge of a ticking bomb, combined with the real-time movement of the camera, elicits our desire to look as we anticipate the explosion.

Cinematic excess is intimately connected to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the “gaze”: a limit of looking within the visual field of perception. The gaze is a point of failure within the film’s visual plane, which causes our looking to falter. At the same time, the encounter with the gaze reveals the film’s hidden excess; this is not to suggest that excess defies interpretation. Todd McGowan importantly explains that early film theorists such as Roland Barthes, Kristin Thompson, and Stephen Heath understood excess as a limitation of a film’s narrative. Excess, in this regard, exceeds the narrative and eludes narrative analysis. If we can recognize cinematic excess, then we can explain its potential meanings. As McGowan observes, “Even as the excess resists signification, it does so within a world of signification—or else we would not even be able to register it,”5 because excess is not external to the narrative, but rather “internal” to a film’s narrative structure.

My claim is that excess energizes space within the cinema of confinement as well as builds narrative tension. The gaze is a visual manifestation of excess that underscores our looking within the picture, not outside it as a transcendent viewer.6 Depending on how filmmakers deploy the gaze, it can have varying effects upon our spectatorship. To encounter the gaze in confinement cinema is to experience its excessive dimension as both shock and attraction. In the first case of excess, the gaze manifests as an unknowable force that disturbs our sense of looking. Here, the encounter with the gaze arises with shocking or traumatic effects upon our
spectatorship. The force of the gaze is unknowable because we do not fully realize how our desire to see initially distorts the field of perception until we encounter the gaze’s excessive presence. In other words, the encounter with the gaze as an unknowable force apprises us that we cannot see everything. Moreover, the excess revealed by the gaze underscores that cinematic space is not inherently neutral but is constructed by the filmmaker. The gaze realizes something that does not fit within the order of our looking. At the same time, the impact of the gaze reveals how our desire distorts the visual plane. As such, our encounter with the gaze manifests a blind spot in our desire to see. In the second case of excess, the gaze is primarily enunciated within the visual field by the filmmaker showing us too much information as a distorting presence, such as David Fincher’s approach to shooting *Panic Room*. As I will explain in further detail in chapter 1, the filmmaker’s rendering excess visible diminishes the traumatic impact of the knowability of the gaze. This is not to suggest that films which exploit excess are not exciting to watch or lack desire. All narrative films, to some degree or another, incorporate the logic of desire. Thus, the goal of this project is to map these two dimensions of the gaze in films that primarily take place in one setting.

The Gaze

To explain how these two dimensions of the gaze work in confinement cinema requires a brief sketching of Lacan’s triad and interrelation of the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. The imaginary is the register of images and appearances. The imaginary involves not only how one sees and perceives objects within the world, but also the subordination of processes or structures that constitute what Lacan calls the symbolic order. The symbolic structures our experiences of everyday life. It is where laws, languages, and systems of communication take place. The symbolic is where we can try on different identities that are already there for us. For Lacan, the subject’s entry into the symbolic order requires the sacrifice of enjoyment, or what he refers to as *jouissance*. Here, it is important to stress that enjoyment (*jouissance*) is not the same as pleasure. Enjoyment is what is beyond the pleasure principle and is prohibited by the symbolic order. As such, the grounding of the symbolic order for Lacan is loss. Without the symbolic’s prohibition, society would cease to function. The imaginary level, however, entails the illusion of wholeness as a respite from the prohibition of enjoyment that the symbolic order imposes on the subject. Although the imaginary provides the illusion of a functioning
symbolic system, it is not a complete and totalizing order. For example, I can imagine what it is like to be a Hollywood movie director, bringing my life story to the big screen. Yet, what I do not recognize is the stress, anxiety, and economic challenges that directors encounter in creating a feature film. Here, the deficiency of the symbolic is the third register: the real. The real is non-symbolic; it is non-sense or non-meaning that breaks down the symbolic. The encounter with the real, as Lacan states, “eludes us.” If the symbolic provides the basis for expressing and structuring ourselves and the world around us, the real is a point where those systems collapse. Yet the paradox of the real is that the very limitation it imposes also offers us a challenge, for example, to create works of art or develop new technologies. As such, the real reveals cracks in the social order and, at the same time, is the stage for the possibility of the new.

The gaze is a visual manifestation of the real. It is a point of non-sense within the visual plane. Yet our experience of the gaze can only be detected through our investment of looking. Lacan’s premise of the gaze demonstrates the split subject (between conscious and the unconscious) within the field of visual perception. The gaze as a stain or distortion marks a point of failure in the visual field. It is a point where the subject’s looking reaches the limits of the visible, where the space between object and subject collapses. Here we must stress that Lacan is not using the term “gaze” in the traditional sense. The gaze, however, is not from the subject, but of the object, as illustrated in Lacan’s example of Hans Holbein’s painting *The Ambassadors*. The painting consists of two ambassadors, symmetrically framed and surrounded by their riches as they look directly at the observer. But, toward the bottom of the painting there appears a strange smear interfering with the painting’s sumptuous presentation. Looking at the painting awry reveals the warped image as a human skull staring directly back at the observer. Lacan states: “we are literally called into the picture, and represented here as caught. . . . [For] the secret of this picture is given at the moment when, moving slightly away, little by little, to the left, then turning around, we see what the magical floating object signifies. It reflects our own nothingness in the figure of death’s head . . . to capture the subject, an obvious relation with desire which, nevertheless, remains enigmatic.” Lacan’s description of *The Ambassadors* raises two points of discussion in relation to the gaze and the subject of desire. First, the painting enacts two types of looking. Holbein’s painting invites the observer to explore all of the different objects that surround the ambassadors, and to interpret their symbolic meaning. Lacan describes this type of looking as being a “pacifying, Apollonian effect of painting.” The smear, however, arrests the observer’s attention, interfering with the painting’s world of images, and revealing an
excessive element that cannot be incorporated into one’s looking. This type of seeing is associated with a disruption, or what Henry Krips describes as having “Dionysian effects.” When revealing itself as a human skull, the anomaly produces a failure in the visual space where one has to readjust one’s looking. The skull is not the gaze itself, but rather a lacuna or distortion in the painting, an excessive element that cannot be incorporated into the picture. This anomaly is the real—the nontextual thing that disturbs the order of reality. The gaze emerges as an effect of the real within the visual plane.

Secondly, the importance of The Ambassadors is that it visually displays desire. According to Lacan, desire is generated by the absence of the object cause of desire, or what he terms objet petit a or objet a. Paradoxically, it is the very “loss” of the object that sustains desire’s energy. For Lacan, once a part of the symbolic order, the subject’s desire situates itself with the desire of the Other, as he states: “desire is the desire of the Other.” But one’s desire can never match or live up to what the Other wants. Therefore, the subject’s desire is never satisfied. This is how the symbolic order binds us together: namely, our shared sacrifice of enjoyment. As such, there is no escape route for one’s desire. The engine of desire is fueled by not obtaining “the lost object” (objet a). When the subject tries to capture objet a, it will always miss it and proclaim “that’s not it.” Žižek offers an example of the soft drink Coke as objet a (surplus-enjoyment). Coke’s once famous slogan was “Coke is it.” By why do we keep drinking Coke? Because Coke is not it. There is a failure in the taste of Coke that keeps one coming back for more. The failure of desire is due to its own impossibility. Lacan notes, “Desire, more than any other point in the range of human possibility, meets its limit somewhere.” As long as objet a remains absent, desire continues to desire.

The gaze is objet a in the visual field. The gaze is what lures us into the picture—it entices our desire to look within the frame. Desire operates on absence and lack. It operates by what we cannot see. When we encounter the gaze, we are encountering how our desire distorts the visual field. Films that elicit our desire to look lay a trap for the gaze. But we must first become involved in the film in order to experience the shock of the gaze as an unknowable force. Our desire must be called upon, as Lacan states, “by pouring ourselves, as it were, along the veins through which the domain of vision has been integrated into the field of desire.”

The attraction of cinema is that it allows us to see how our desire distorts the visual field. Cinema can show how an encounter with the gaze not only unsettles our spectatorship, but also unravels the unity of narrative space. Consider the final sequence in Ridley Scott’s confinement space horror thriller, Alien (1979), when Ripley (Sigourney Weaver)
frighteningly encounters the creature in her escape shuttle. After she blows up the mother ship, *Nostromo*, we believe that Ripley, as the last survivor, has safely escaped the alien’s terrifying wrath. But when she discovers that the alien has snuck onto the escape shuttle, it is not only traumatic for Ripley, but for us as well. This moment of shock can only emerge because we have invested our desire to look into the film. Indeed, the alien emerges as a blind spot in our looking, with terrifying and “Dionysian” results. Moreover, the alien, as an embodiment of the gaze, unsettles the escape shuttle’s fabric of reality. The emergence of the alien forces us to reevaluate our looking. At the same time, Ripley’s encounter with the alien illustrates why cinema is such an appealing art form—namely, the shock and attraction of the gaze. The gaze not only realizes one’s investment in the film, but permits the spectator to enjoy. Fantasy is key to understanding our enjoyment of cinema and to how we experience the excess of the gaze.

**Fantasy and the Gaze: *Alien* and *Carrie***

To understand the gaze as a moment of rupture requires that we consider Ridley Scott’s depiction of the scene before Ripley encounters the creature in the escape shuttle. We need to understand how fantasy scenarios are constructed in order to explain the traumatic impact of the gaze as a visual manifestation of desire. The gaze emerges as a blind spot within the visual field of representation, causing viewers to lose control of their looking. Part of understanding the impact of the gaze is desire’s relationship to fantasy. Like the concept of the gaze, Lacan does not use the term “fantasy” in the traditional sense, such as the imagined worlds of *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*; nor is it an illusion of reality such as “life is just a dream.” Fantasy sets up the coordinates of desire. It is a framework that permits the subject to make meaning within the world. As Lacan states, “The phantasy is the support of desire; it is not the object that is the support of desire.” Through fantasy, the subject learns how to direct his or her desire. As such, fantasy allows the subject to relate to his or her impossible “lost object” without repercussions. Cinema is powerful in this regard because it can supply a scenario that one may not experience in the everyday world. We can experience characters that can defy the laws of gravity, as in the Marvel movies such as *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) and *Doctor Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016). At the same time, many Hollywood films forgo the disturbing impact of the gaze. These films create fantasy scenarios that function much like ideology, by neutralizing
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cinema’s excess, a method Todd McGowan terms the “cinema of integration,” where desire and fantasy work together, subordinating the traumatic effects of the gaze. As McGowan explains, the gaze in the cinema of integration is not depicted as an impossibility or a disturbing intruder into the film’s narrative or plot. According to McGowan, these films satisfy our desire through fantasy scenarios of satisfaction, while reducing the gaze’s disturbing effect and thus transforming it into an ordinary object. Indeed, the cinema of integration permits us to experience the object cause of desire in ways that we cannot relate to it in everyday life. This is most notable during spectacular endings in films, such as the slow-motion death of Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) in John McTiernan’s Die Hard (1988) as he falls from the Nakatomi building, or the destruction of the death star in George Lucas’s Star Wars: A New Hope (1977). In both examples, viewers achieve satisfaction in the hero overcoming the narrative’s main obstacle. Moreover, directors John McTiernan’s and George Lucas’s imagining of these endings are visually and audibly fulfilling. They offer an experience that we might not find in everyday life. At the same time, they are pleasurable scenarios because they limit the gaze’s disrupting presence. The appeal of these movies and many other Hollywood films lies in the notion that they incorporate the gaze without its intruding impact.

The examples from Die Hard and Star Wars normalize the excess of the gaze as a cinema of integration. But this is not the case in the final scene in the escape shuttle in Alien. So how does the gaze function in regard to desire and fantasy? The gaze emerges with disturbing effects in what McGowan calls the “cinema of intersection.” Here, desire intrudes into the film’s fantasy space as an unknowable force. When desire and fantasy collide, viewers experience a traumatic encounter with the gaze. That is, viewers see the impossibility of the gaze directly rather than at a distance, as in the cinema of integration, which is why Žižek argues that fantasy is on the side of reality. As he explains, “When the phantasmic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a ‘loss of reality’ and starts to perceive reality as an ‘irreal’ nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation; this nightmarish universe is not ‘pure fantasy,’ but, on the contrary, that which remains of reality after reality is deprived of its support in fantasy.” Without the fantasy screen, we do not see reality as reality truly is, but rather a nightmarish form of reality. Fantasy renders reality in a meaningful way for the subject. In the collision of desire and fantasy, the subject, however, experiences a loss of reality which, paradoxically, provides a pathway to experiencing the impossible object.

Alien’s frightening final sequence in the escape shuttle is not only attributed to the shocking twist that Ripley did not kill the alien aboard
the *Nostromo* by blowing that ship up, but also to how Scott constructs a peaceful fantasy scenario before Ripley realizes that the alien is now aboard the escape shuttle. After the explosion of *Nostromo*, we believe Ripley has defeated the alien. Here, the escape shuttle not only functions as a space of safety, but as a point of relaxation for her and the viewer. While watching the *Nostromo* explode, Ripley softly says: “I got you. You son of a bitch,” reinforcing her safety. Even the way in which the scene is shot and edited, as well as the peaceful score, offer the impression that Ripley has achieved her goal and is safely installed aboard the shuttle. But when the alien emerges from its hiding place in the shuttle, it destroys any sense of respite that the escape shuttle had once provided for Ripley and the viewer. The emergence of the alien deforms and cripples the setting of the shuttle because the fantasy screen has collapsed. Cinematic excess is no longer integrated and normalized within the shuttle’s confined space, but is now problematized by the alien’s presence as an embodiment of the gaze. This is emphasized by Ripley hiding in the locker as she watches the alien through the door’s glass panel. Here, the locker window performs two functions: it physically protects Ripley, and is a protective screen between reality and the eruption of the real as an embodiment of the alien.21 Knowing the alien is aboard the shuttle, both the viewer’s and Ripley’s control of looking falters. The intensity and suspense of the scene allow the viewers to experience the gaze directly. As such, the sudden appearance of the alien in the escape shuttle renders the gaze into the visual field of representation as an unknowable force that must be defeated.

The shocking twist in the final sequence of *Alien* is a common trait that is often found in horror cinema. Perhaps one of the most infamous endings is the dream sequence in Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976). Carrie (Sissy Spacek) is a teen who has telekinetic powers. After her classmates play a prank on her at the school prom (dumping blood on her after she is crowned queen), she unleashes her power and a massacre ensues in the gymnasium. Returning home from the prom, drenched in pig’s blood, Carrie has a horrific showdown with her mother (Piper Laurie). Carrie kills her mother and uses her powers to cause the house to cave in on her. In the film’s final scene, one of Carrie’s bullies, Sue (Amy Irving), visits Carrie’s grave, feeling ashamed of the way she treated her. De Palma photographs this sequence in luscious slow motion as Sue slowly approaches the gravestone. She is dressed in white with a flowing gown, holding a bouquet of flowers. The music is tender and swelling. As Sue bends down to lay the flowers near the grave, a bloody hand emerges out of the dirt and grabs her. The image immediately cuts to Sue waking up in her bedroom, wailing as she clutches her wrist. The
trick ending is shocking because of the manner in which De Palma lures us into the image as a fantasy scenario. But as Sue reaches the grave site, elements begin to stick out within the serene setting. The grave site is located on a patch of dirt with a makeshift cross that reads: “For Sale” in big red lettering. Over the sign, black lettering reads: “Carrie White burns in hell,” with an arrow pointing to the ground. Like the blot in *The Ambassadors*, these elements perform as stains within the picturesque setting, furthering our investment to look within the scene. As such, the grave site does not fit within the picture that leads to Carrie’s bloody hand shooting out of the ground, destroying the quaint scene that De Palma constructs for us. Thus, the excess of the gaze invades with disturbing results through the intersection of fantasy and desire.

The Post-Effect of the Gaze, Showing Too Much, and Ideology

Encountering the gaze realizes the subject’s desire of looking. But what are the lingering effects post-gaze? How is cinematic space articulated immediately after the encounter with the gaze? At the end of *Carrie*—when Sue awakens in her bedroom—we learn that she was dreaming of Carrie’s hand shooting out of the grave. Here, the lingering effect of the gaze is visually captured in the slow-moving camera that glides away from Sue as her mother tries to calm her. The ethereal movement of the camera articulates the deformation of space as a result of the gaze. The crippling effect of space coincides with Sue’s psychosis. The camera movement is an example of not only how cinema can show us the traumatic effects of the gaze directly, but can also depict its lingering effects after its initial encounter. As I will explain in chapter 2, in Alfred Hitchcock’s one-room thriller *Rope* (1948), fantasy coincides with Brandon (John Dall) and Phillip (Farley Granger) hiding their secret from the dinner party guests. The secret is the dead body in the trunk, upon which Brandon and Phillip serve dinner. Once Brandon and Phillip’s professor and guest, Rupert (James Stewart), discovers the body, desire slowly begins to undo the fantasy space. This is visually displayed in a panoply of lights outside the big window that penetrates and deforms the penthouse setting. Rupert’s exposure of the lie coincides with the logic of desire. Once fantasy and desire intersect, cinematic space in *Rope* is rendered with uncertainty to depict the excess of the gaze.

The aforementioned scenes from *Alien* and *Carrie* exemplify the gaze as an unknowable force. The shock and horror we experience derives from our investment in seeing and looking in both films. At the
same time, we do not fully realize how our desire distorts the visual field until we encounter the force of the gaze, as in the case of Carrie’s hand exploding out of the grave, or discovering that the alien has clandestinely boarded the escape shuttle. But this should not suggest that an excessive style of cinema is not important for the analysis of the cinema of confinement. Excess can be disarming, as when films show viewers too much, or what McGowan terms the “cinema of fantasy.” The cinema of fantasy, according to McGowan, reveals “little concern for producing desire. They focus on disturbing spectators with moments of too much satisfaction rather than reminding spectators of their dissatisfaction.” De Palma’s use of the split-screen format (the division of separate spaces shown simultaneously within one frame) during the prom massacre sequence in Carrie exemplifies the cinema of fantasy. After the pig’s blood splatters all over Carrie in slow motion, we hear her mother’s voice repeatedly say: “They’re all going to laugh at you.” Carrie suddenly unleashes her telekinetic powers and entraps everyone in the gymnasium. Panic ensues as Carrie water cannons the students and faculty with a firehose. One student attempts to take control of the hose, causing the stream of water to gush upwards at the lights and explode, causing an electrical storm. Fire engulfs the students and faculty as Carrie creepily exits the gymnasium. Unlike the grave sequence at the end of the film, the prom massacre scene overwhelms us with too much satisfaction. The inundation of visual information is reflected by De Palma displaying a large portion of the sequence in the split-screen mode, as if to suggest that one frame or image is not enough to show us the hell storm unleashed by Carrie. The prom massacre sequence is an example of what I will refer to as the excess of the gaze made knowable within the field of vision. It is a moment when a film disturbs and shocks us with too much satisfaction.

The excess of the gaze not only demonstrates the attraction and appeal of confinement cinema, but can provide insights into the mechanisms of power and ideology. As explained previously, the symbolic order provides the systems of language for communication in everyday life. The symbolic is where we construct an experience of reality in shielding us from the disturbance of the real. To encounter the real demonstrates the vulnerability of the symbolic order. As Jennifer Friedlander observes, the purpose of “reality” is “to protect us from the Real, by providing us with a symbolic framework that covers over the Real’s disruptive effects.” The symbolic order functions by masking excess in order to present the illusion of the world as harmonious and whole. From this standpoint, ideology needs fantasy as a supplement in order to exercise its power. This is because fantasy provides the subject with distance from the antagonism that underlies the symbolic order. Here the excess of the
gaze can unmask an obscene underside of fantasy. In Stanley Kubrick’s Vietnam War film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), Pyle (Vincent D’Onofrio) gets too close to his fantasy as the model Marine during the boot camp training segment, which causes him to suffer a mental breakdown. Pyle kills Sgt. Hartman (R. Lee Ermey) with his M14 and then kills himself. Kubrick shows viewers a dark underside of how authority is exercised in war and its damaging effects by having Pyle literally malfunction. As Todd McGowan explains, excess in Kubrick’s films reveals “the hidden enjoyment of symbolic authority itself.” The exposure of excess in Kubrick’s films is not simply an assault on ideology itself. Rather, as McGowan explains, Kubrick’s films undercut “ideology’s fantasmatic underside” by revealing the symbolic authority as excessive. In *Full Metal Jacket*, the excess of the gaze is rendered visible and knowable as a means for viewers to see the mechanics of power and authority and its obscene underside. From this perspective, fantasy can have both peaceful and horrific results. In the case of *Full Metal Jacket*, fantasy shows viewers an obscene underside of how military power is exercised during the Vietnam War. A number of the films under analysis in this project explore the ideological dimension of excess, including post–Cold War anxieties and paranoia in *10 Cloverfield Lane*, neo-Nazism in Oliver Stone’s *Talk Radio* (1988) and Jeremy Saulnier’s *Green Room* (2015), war and trauma in *The Wall*, and screen culture, surveillance, and news media sensationalism in Joel Schumacher’s *Phone Booth* (2002).

Chapter Overview

The goal of this project is to explore how the excess of the gaze is articulated within the confined setting. Although the ordering of the films under analysis (chapter 2 through chapter 7) has a historical trajectory, I have not set out to give a historical analysis of confinement cinema. Confinement films are not exclusive to one genre—they are often found in horror films, thrillers, and dramas. Some confinement scenarios include characters who are trapped or marooned: *Lifeboat* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1944), *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972), *Open Water* (Chris Kentis, 2003), *I Am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007), *127 Hours* (Danny Boyle, 2010), *Gravity* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2013), *Life of Pi* (Ang Lee, 2012), *All Is Lost* (J. C. Chandor, 2013), and *The Tunnel* (Kim Seong-hun, 2016). Other confinement scenarios feature characters who are held captive: *Misery* (Rob Reiner, 1990), *Buried* (Rodrigo Cortés, 2010), *Captain Phillips* (Paul Greengrass, 2013), *Grand Piano* (Eugenio Mira, 2013), *Don’t Breathe*
EXCESS, THE GAZE, AND CINEMA OF CONFINEMENT

(Fede Álvarez, 2016), The Beguiled (Sofia Coppola, 2017), Split (M. Night Shyamalan, 2017), and Get Out (Jordan Peele, 2017). Confinement can result from weather or a force of nature: The Shining (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), This Is the End (Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, 2013), and The Hateful Eight (Quentin Tarantino, 2015); or entrapment due to a supernatural force such as monsters, vampires, and/or aliens: Night of the Living Dead (George Romero, 1968), Alien, Quarantine (John Erick Dowdle, 2008), and Train to Busan (Yeon Sang-ho, 2016). Confinement can be due to physical and/or mental disorder, such as in Rear Window (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954), Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? (Robert Aldrich, 1962), Lady in a Cage (Walter Grauman, 1964), Wait Until Dark (Terence Young, 1967), The Passion of Anna (Ingmar Bergman, 1969), and The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1972). In some cases, confinement is a film’s experiment with a real-time depiction of the event, such as in Rope, Russian Ark (Alexander Sokurov, 2002), and Locke (Steven Knight, 2013). Of course, confinement can be imposed by the law and the stripping of one’s personal freedom, as in the prison narrative. Given the vast number of prison movies, which arguably can be considered their own genre, they will not be explored in this study. Rather, I want to provide a survey of films, tracking how each film under investigation engages with excess.

Chapter 1 explores how the knowability and unknowability of the gaze operate in two recent confinement films: Room and Green Room. The remaining chapters will examine how these two dimensions of the gaze perform in each film under analysis. Some of the movies I have chosen to analyze have received little scholarly attention, such as chapter 3’s analysis of Ingmar Bergman’s The Passion of Anna and chapter 5’s investigation of Oliver Stone’s Talk Radio. Although The Passion of Anna is the only non–English language film explored in this study, I believe it is important to consider one of Bergman’s films for this study because the term “chamber play” comes directly from his works, such as his trilogy Through a Glass Darkly (1961), Winter Light (1962), and The Silence (1963), as well as his Faro island films of the 1960s, such as Persona (1966), Shame (1968), and Hour of the Wolf (1968). Chapter 5 analyzes Talk Radio, a film that has been overshadowed by Oliver Stone’s Vietnam War movies in the late 1980s. Here, I explore the connections between excess and ethical action in relation to the disembodied voice, or what Michel Chion terms acousmêtre. A technology that plays a vital role in the cinema of confinement is the phone to communicate with the other outside of the confined space. Chapter 6 takes up the relationship between excess and the disembodied voice and telecommunication in Phone Booth and Locke. It should be no surprise that many films of confinement are characteristic
of the horror/thriller genre. Chapter 2 examines Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* as an early example of how excess operates in confinement cinema as a mode of suspense. Chapter 4 explores the relationship between excess and Stanley Kubrick’s depiction of the supernatural in *The Shining*. Chapter 7 focuses on the logic of desire and symbolic fiction in *10 Cloverfield Lane* as what can be described as a sci-fi containment captive narrative.

Lastly, except for *Rope* and *Locke*, the films under analysis are not purely confined to one room or setting. There is often a lead-in to the chamber space, or where the majority of the film’s action will occur, such as in *The Shining*, *Phone Booth*, *127 Hours*, and *10 Cloverfield Lane*. In some cases, the film will briefly cut to another location and return to the confined setting, as in *The Shining* and *Misery*.

Certainly, there are numerous films one can draw upon in examining narratives that take place in a limited setting. Notably, there has recently been a surge in confinement cinema, particularly the emergence of torture porn films, such as *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and *Hostel* (Eli Roth, 2005). In the conclusion of this study, I address a larger, perhaps speculative question of the recent increase in confinement cinema in relation to digital media and cyberspace. Here, I attempt to connect the recent surge of confinement cinema to the ease of crossing boundaries within virtual reality. The internet has allowed one to traverse the digital ether, whether it is shopping on Amazon, Skyping with a friend, or accessing databases of movies and television titles through services such as Netflix and Hulu. The cinema of confinement appears to have an attraction in connection to digital technology because it imposes a limit or impossibility on the characters’ movement within space. The smartphone enables us to always be in contact with the grid. We have GPS technology to help us if we are lost. It should be no surprise that many of the recent films of confinement—particularly movies involving characters who are trapped or held captive—are about making contact outside of their entrapped spaces. In the concluding thoughts of this project, I consider the attraction and surge of recent confinement cinema, specifically plots that involve the inability to use digital technologies to communicate with others.