Captive, Captor, and Aliens: 10 Cloverfield Lane

In *Phone Booth*, the Caller threatens to kill Kelly if Stu does not publicly admit his lies. Stu must adhere to the Caller’s demands and face the consequences of his infidelity. In certain ways, the Caller’s actions have a close correlation to the torture narrative. Terrorizing Stu and Kelly is key to procuring the truth. By holding Stu hostage and threatening to murder Kelly, the Caller forces Stu to confess his lies. Indeed, the phone booth acts as a space of confession—a terrain of torture. Here, it is worth adding that the Caller, played by Kiefer Sutherland, happens to play Jack Bauer of *24*, who is known for tracking down terrorists and using torture to extract information.

Spy thrillers often resort to the biopolitics of torture as a reliable method to extract the truth. Biopolitics suggests that truth can be rendered by inflicting pain on the subject’s body. Although *Phone Booth* is not a spy or mission narrative, it shares motifs in that both envision accessing truth through the body. Hilary Neroni explains: “In the contemporary torture fantasy, truth lies in the tortured body and the torturer must use violence to rip away the fictions that hide it.” For Neroni, the production of fiction in television shows such as *24* is not the path toward the truth; rather, torture enacted on the vulnerable body is the only means to discover truth. Similarly, in *Phone Booth*, the Caller threatens Stu to get him to confess his sins, to speak the veracity of his affair to Kelly. The only means of uncovering the truth is through Stu’s vulnerable body, which is sadistically confined in the phone booth.

But there is an alternative to ascertaining information that does not resort to the ideology of torture. In comparing the television series *Alias* (2001–2006) to *24*, Neroni explains that the shows differ in their methods of acquiring information. For Neroni, torture is less effective in *Alias* as a means of manifesting information. The character Sydney Bristow (Jennifer Garner) relies on performing fictional scenarios “as the most successful way of completing the tasks necessary for the preservation of national security.” Neroni explains that Sydney “recognizes herself as a desiring subject, and, at the same time, she sees others as desiring subjects as well.” Sydney completes her missions by making herself desirable...
and staging fictions rather than employing torture. This is certainly the case in the 1980s Cold War thriller television series *The Americans* (2013–2018). Elizabeth (Keri Russell) and Philip Jennings (Matthew Rhys) are KGB officers posing as an American couple living in the United States. A major part of their job is to procure information by dressing up as different characters. Like Sydney in *Alias*, Elizabeth and Philip rely primarily on fictional scenarios in order to fulfill their missions, which involve reading the victim’s desire. Perhaps the biggest fiction they perform is when Philip marries Martha Hanson (Alison Wright), a lonely woman who works as a secretary for the FBI’s counterintelligence agency. Philip must play the character of Clark Westerfield in order to gain access to the FBI. Philip understands that for the mission to succeed, truth will be gained through the lens of desire rather than the terrain of torture. As such, Philip plays on Martha’s desire in order to lure her into his trap.

The science fiction fantasy thriller *10 Cloverfield Lane* is far from the mission or espionage narratives of *Alias* and *The Americans*. Yet playing on the subject’s desire is key to the film’s narrative tension within its confined setting. *10 Cloverfield Lane* is a follow-up to Matt Reeves’s alien invasion film *Cloverfield* (2008). It tells the story of a young woman named Michelle (Mary Elizabeth Winstead) who is held captive in a fallout bunker by Howard (John Goodman), a man who murdered a young girl named Brittany two years earlier. After surviving a car crash, Michelle awakens from a coma in Howard’s bunker, which is located on a farm forty miles outside of Lake Charles, Louisiana. Michelle discovers that Howard rescued her from the accident and has since cared for her. Also living in the bunker is Emmett (John Gallagher Jr.), who talked Howard into letting him into the bunker after seeing a red flash outside. While Michelle was unconscious, Earth had been invaded by aliens. According to Howard, the planet may no longer be habitable, and the only way to survive is to remain in the bunker.

My claim is that Howard keeps Michelle alive in order to resurrect the fantasy of his daughter, Megan. Michelle learns that Megan was, in fact, Brittany, who was kidnapped and murdered two years ago. In order for Michelle to plan her escape, she must play the role of Megan. Similar to Brandon and Phillip hiding a corpse in the trunk in the penthouse living room in *Rope*, Michelle’s lie has a close correlation to a functioning reality within Howard’s bunker. By adopting the figure of Megan, Michelle normalizes the bunker’s confined space, thus keeping Howard’s obscene underside at bay. By not performing Howard’s fantasy, Michelle resurrects a nightmarish (excessive) side of him that could threaten her life. In order to trick Howard and escape the bunker, Michelle must resort to logic and reasoning. Similar to *Alias* and *The Americans*, Michelle’s
plan involves attracting Howard’s desire through a fantasy scenario, luring him into a trap in preparation for her and Emmett’s escape. Most importantly, Michelle and Emmett’s secret corresponds to their surplus-knowledge (excess), which they must keep contained in order to sustain the fantasy. The combination of Howard’s unreliability and Michelle and Emmett’s lie drive the suspense and narrative tension within the bunker’s confined setting.

Desire and the Missing Piece

The halfway mark of *10 Cloverfield Lane* involves a comical moment with Emmett working on a picture puzzle of a cat scuba-diving in a fishbowl. He connects the last piece only to discover that there are missing pieces. Working on the puzzle certainly underscores the different ways in which Michelle and Emmett try to pass the time in the bunker. Of course, the cat in the fishbowl speaks directly to Michelle and Emmett’s entrapment. The cat’s scuba-diving gear also alludes to Michelle’s makeshift hazmat suit, which saves her when battling the aliens at the climax of the film. Perhaps more importantly, the puzzle’s missing pieces are proxies for the uncertainty and unreliability of Howard. Indeed, Howard’s motivations are not made clear to Michelle, Emmett, or the viewer. Michelle and Emmett are constantly shifting their allegiance to him. The missing pieces of the puzzle not only suggest the passing of time within the bunker’s confined setting, but also represent Howard’s untrustworthiness.

Perhaps more importantly, the missing pieces of the puzzle address the allure of what Lacan terms *objet petit a* (the object cause of desire). For Lacan, subjectivity is constitutive of lack. The subject’s entry into the symbolic order comes with the prohibition of enjoyment. The symbolic order is grounded on regulating enjoyment. In *Talk Radio*, Barry’s ethical action to speak on controversial topics not only breaks with broadcast radio’s standards and practices, but also defies the prohibition of enjoyment that regulates the symbolic order. To enjoy obscenely, as Barry does, draws attention to one’s excess. Barry sticks out because he enjoys too much in his talk on controversial topics. In the same way, Brandon cannot contain his satisfaction during the dinner party, knowing that David’s dead body is hidden in the trunk in the living room in *Rope*. Yet it is Brandon drawing attention to his enjoyment that piques Rupert’s desire to investigate the penthouse and find what is in the room more than the room. It is Brandon’s obscene enjoyment that ultimately leads to his and Phillip’s demise. The subject sacrifices enjoyment for entry into the symbolic order.
Yet the subject always carries a remainder of enjoyment—a kernel that becomes the subject’s object cause of desire. As Slavoj Žižek explains, “the point of Lacan’s concept of surplus-enjoyment: the very renunciation to jouissance brings about a remainder/surplus of jouissance.” The subject relinquishes jouissance for access to the symbolic. But the subject is tainted by the loss of jouissance—a piece of excess (surplus-enjoyment) that one can never get rid of.

Becoming a part of the symbolic constitutes the subject of desire. Sustaining one’s desire is the fact that desire can never be satisfied due to the unattainability of the object cause of the desire. Objet petit a (the lost object) holds the answer for desire. But the paradox is that objet petit a never existed from the start, which is why desire has no escape from its excess. For Lacan, when the subject enters the symbolic order, desire is directed to the big Other: “desire is the desire of the Other.” But the big Other does not have access to objet petit a. The symbolic functions on this shared absence of the object cause of desire. Indeed, the object cause of desire is the missing piece of the puzzle. The object cause of desire specifies an absence that elicits the subject’s desire. That is, the logic of desire operates by the subject not obtaining the lost object. Yet the subject’s inability to locate the lost object is paradoxically the source of his or her enjoyment.

The opening sequence of 10 Cloverfield Lane depicts the logic of desire by emphasizing incomplete information to the viewer. The first image is a long shot of the river as the camera dollies backwards, moving through the window and ending inside Michelle’s apartment. We see a number of objects in her apartment to paint a picture of her character, particularly her interest in clothing design. The absence of narrative sound and a fragmented editing style pose questions rather than supply answers. At one point, Michelle speaks on the phone with hesitation. Her lips and body language suggest that Michelle is leaving her boyfriend. As she exits the apartment, the image zooms in on a set of keys and a ring. Certainly, Michelle’s packing her belongings puts us in Hitchcock terrain, as we are prompted to remember Marion Crane’s (Janet Leigh’s) escape from Phoenix after stealing her boss’s client’s money in Psycho. To be sure, like Marion, Michelle is a woman on the run who meets with a violent, halting force. A wide shot shows Michelle driving through a rural area, offering a sense of vastness compared to the city. She pulls up to the gas station as a truck suspiciously pulls up close behind her car. Similar to Steven Spielberg’s road thriller, Duel (1971), a clear view of the driver is never given. The bodiless driver correlates to the gaze as an unknowable force that renders the space with uncertainty. Not unlike the suspicious driver in the parking lot of WGAB that opens Talk Radio, the unseen
driver of the truck in the gas station reveals something that protrudes or sticks out. This surplus-knowledge, like the bucket that will not stand upright in the opening scene of The Passion of Anna, or the haunting and forbidding opening of The Shining, transforms objects and everyday actions into an uncanny state. These obstructions not only realize our desire of looking, but also lay a trap for our encounter with the gaze. As Michelle drives away, she receives a call from her boyfriend Ben (voiced by Bradley Cooper), who is upset that she left him. After the call, a vehicle crashes into Michelle as her car spins out of control. The film abruptly cuts to its credits and back to the accident as Michelle’s car lands in a field. After the credit/car crash sequences, Michelle awakens in Howard’s bunker with a broken leg.

The film’s opening generates a number of questions, particularly the identity of the person who crashed into Michelle, and how she arrived at Howard’s bunker. The movement from Michelle’s apartment to the bunker is a truncated trajectory of events that follow the logic of desire in posing a number of questions without answers. The accident not only incites our desire to know more, but also creates a mystery about why Howard rescued Michelle. How did she get to the bunker? Is Howard the person who hit her? Is Howard trustworthy?

What Do You Want?

Perhaps the biggest mystery at the start of 10 Cloverfield Lane is whether the planet has, in fact, been invaded by aliens. Certainly, one’s knowledge of the invasion in Cloverfield offers insight into this question. As such, desire operates by prompting a number of questions without answers. The “missing scenes” that open 10 Cloverfield Lane speak to the film’s ambiguity, which stimulates our desire for the answer. Just as Cloverfield never supplies the viewer with a clear answer as to who the aliens are and why they have invaded the planet, 10 Cloverfield Lane generates its mystery and suspense by both confining the viewer to Michelle’s point of view and not showing the invasion itself. Of course, this is not new territory in the sci-fi/fantasy genre. A number of recent television series—particularly zombie and vampire narratives—often begin with a missing scene that would explain the reasons for the invasion, such as Rick Grimes (Andrew Lincoln) of The Walking Dead (2010–present), who awakens from a coma in a hospital and discovers that he is now living in a zombie apocalypse. In Van Helsing (2016–present), Vanessa Van Helsing (Kelly Overton) comes out of a coma to discover that she is living in a vampire plague and has the
ability to bite vampires and turn them back to human form. In both cases, we are not privy to the origin of the apocalypse or plague. The missing scene in both shows’ dystopian universes is objet petit a, not only because it is the mystery that generates our desire to know more, but also because its absence paradoxically stages various obstacles that these characters must battle for survival. In the same way, we are in the dark about Howard and the aliens as much as Michelle is. Like the conditions of Grimes and Van Helsing, Michelle’s blackout denies us access to the missing scene.

When Michelle awakens from the car accident and discovers that she is held captive in a room, her instincts kick in as she plans to attack Howard. Noises are heard off-screen as Howard enters the room. Like Annie in Misery and Old Nick in Room, Howard is revealed in fragmentation. This partial view speaks not only to Howard’s power, but also to the viewer’s inability to fully render the room’s setting. Michelle asks what he wants. When Howard’s face is finally revealed, he responds to Michelle’s question: “I’m going to keep you alive.” Indeed, Howard’s response speaks directly to the relationship between fantasy and desire. Fantasy establishes the coordinates of desire. Through the work of fantasy, one can have an imaginary relationship with one’s object cause of desire. Howard is keeping Michelle alive in order to sustain his fantasy of Megan. Michelle will become the object that stands in for Howard’s object cause of desire.

After Howard leaves, Michelle uses her crutch as a weapon by sharpening its end. She sets a fire in the air vent and positions herself in attack mode. Howard returns to the room and Michelle attacks him, which fails to physically harm him. He drugs Michelle and chains her to the wall. Later, he returns with food and explains that he saved her. He tells Michelle that she is safe in the fallout bunker because there was an attack—“possibly nuclear assault.” He connects the alien invasion to the Russians as the possible culprit, calling them the “Russkies,” slang used during the Cold War. Howard explains to Michelle that he built the bunker under his farmhouse: “I’ve prepared for this,” he says, smiling with delight. Indeed, Howard’s smile speaks to his obscene enjoyment, confirming that his conspiracy theories have been proven right. Here, Howard has a close connection to Forester in Falling Down and the Caller in Phone Booth—all three characters are depicted as nightmarish men who resist social progress and lament the past. Not unlike Forester’s license plate that reads: “d-fense,” Howard explains that you always have to be prepared for the worst. Like Forester, Howard was involved with military defense, working with chemicals to launch satellites into orbit. Certainly, the bunker reminds one of the concerns of global nuclear war and radiation fallout during the Cold War era. Although Michelle’s reaction sug-
gests her skepticism about Howard’s conspiracy theories, they are proven correct at the end of the film.

A loud crash is heard off-screen as we are introduced to Emmett, a man of the same age as Michelle. From the start, Emmett is revealed to be clumsy—a trait that will come back to haunt him when planning their escape. Howard rescued Emmett, allowing him to escape into the fallout bunker during the alien invasion. Emmett has known Howard for a long time. He even helped Howard build the fallout bunker. Emmett tells Michelle that Howard is correct—she is safe in the bunker—although she is not entirely convinced. But for viewers of *Cloverfield*, Emmett is certainly right about the invasion. Michelle asks: “How do we get out of here?” As Emmett is about to tell her about the attack, Howard unexpectedly appears. Indeed, Howard is always watching and listening—which will prove fatal for Emmett later in the film.

Howard shows Michelle to the living quarter of the bunker while a jukebox plays 1950s music. The camera moves through the common area to reveal that Howard has created a living space akin to 1950s décor. Here, the style of the fallout bunker closely corresponds to Howard’s stasis in time and his resistance to change—particularly in his view of women as homemakers. Perhaps more importantly, the bunker’s 1950s décor harkens back to an innocent time—motifs that conservatives jumped on in the 1980s and 1990s in bolstering television shows such as *The Donna Reed Show* and *Leave It to Beaver* (1957–1963) for their positive and didactic portrayal of family values. For Howard, the bunker serves as a peaceful scenario—a fantasy without its obscene underside, where men are in charge and women are in a subservient position. Howard reinforces this hierarchy when he tells Michelle that she will learn how to cook. Not unlike Annie in *Misery*, there is a dark and frightening side to Howard. Like Annie, who presents herself as a puritan to Paul (even as she unpredictably lashes out with verbal assaults), keeping Howard’s obscene underside submerged involves sustaining his fantasy of the supposed innocence of the 1950s and the traditional roles assigned to men and women as depicted in prime-time television series. To be sure, when Michelle almost slips, Emmett tries to help. Howard yells at Emmett: “Keep your hands to yourself. No touching!” Emmett backs off. Howard has strict rules in the bunker. Preventing any form of intimacy between Michelle and Emmett not only alludes to his conservative values, but also sustains and protects his fantasy of Michelle as Megan.

Michelle is not convinced that Howard is reliable. Not unlike Rupert, who probes Brandon and Phillip in *Rope*, she recognizes something in him more than him—that he is concealing information. During dinner, she sees keys attached to Howard’s jeans. To get access to the keys,
she creates a fake conversation with Emmett. Howard becomes frustrated because he is not included in the conversation. Howard slams his fists on the table and shouts: “I know what a traitor looks like,” suggesting that he can read Michelle’s desire. That is, Howard recognizes the excess of her fake conversation with Emmett. Again, this will prove fatal for Emmett, who is unable to contain his excess and prevent Howard’s obscene underside from manifesting later in the film. Howard forces Michelle to apologize, asserting that he is a disciplinary force as both a rule follower and the “man of the house.” Michelle apologizes while clandestinely stealing his keys. As they continue to eat, Michelle grabs a bottle, smashes Howard in the head, and flees toward the stairs. But like her first attack on Howard, Michelle’s escape comes to a halt. Howard is correct—there is something polluting the air. When Michelle is about to leave the bunker, Howard’s neighbor Leslie (Suzanne Cryer) appears outside the door window. Leslie’s face is contaminated as she begs Michelle to let her in to the bunker. Howard yells not to let Leslie in because she will contaminate the bunker. Michelle surrenders and returns the keys to Howard. When Michelle returns to her room, she has a conversation with Howard and learns that he had crashed into her because he was panicking about the invasion. He apologizes to Michelle. Later, Michelle stitches Howard’s head wound. She knows that she has a potential weapon in the stitching needle, yet she does not attack him again. As such, restoring order to the bunker’s confined setting is evident in how objects switch from tools to weapons and vice versa. When Michelle resists the temptation to use the needle as a weapon, she surrenders her desire to escape the bunker, accepting the truth of her situation. Howard requests that Michelle take Megan’s clothes. Once again, we are in Hitchcock territory as one is reminded of Scottie reconstructing his fantasy of Madeleine (Kim Novak) in Vertigo. Howard explains to Michelle that Megan’s mother turned against him and moved to Chicago. Here, Michelle literally sutures her relationship with Howard by stitching his wound. At the same time, Michelle restores Howard’s fantasy, unbeknownst to her as a stand-in for Megan/Brittany. Michelle, so to speak, closes up Howard’s excess. She both normalizes Howard and restores his bunker into an idyllic setting associated with 1950s nostalgia.

Fiction within Fiction

Upon Michelle’s learning that Megan was Howard’s daughter and her realization that it is not safe to leave the bunker, Howard suddenly ap-
pears to be trustworthy to her and Emmett. When the bunker’s ventilation system breaks down, Michelle’s loyalty towards Howards changes. Michelle is the only one who can fit through the air duct to reset the system. Snaking her way through the duct, she reaches the space where the ventilation is housed. After resetting the machine, Michelle notices a ladder that leads to an area with a skylight. Michelle climbs the ladder and reaches the window, which is partially shaded by a covering. Looking closely at the window, she notices human-made scratches at the edge of the covering. She slides the shades and discovers that someone has scratched “help” in blood. Michelle’s look of horror is analogous to Lacan’s reading of Holbein’s *The Ambassadors*. Like the stain at the bottom of *The Ambassadors*, the small scratches on the side of the window arrest Michelle’s looking with anxiety. Moving her head slightly (looking awry), Michelle encounters the gaze as the stain is revealed to be the word “help.” Not unlike Brandon and Phillip’s penthouse window in *Rope* that offers us an “Apollonian” view of the cityscape, the bunker’s skylight generates a peaceful and comforting perspective for Michelle. When Michelle reads the message, however, the window loses its transparent effect, creating a “Dionysian” effect as the object looks back at her. Indeed, the message captures Michelle’s and the viewer’s desire as well as the chain of meanings that she pieces together in solving the mystery of Howard.8

As Michelle climbs down the ladder, she steps on an object, which is revealed to be an earring with traces of blood. Her expression turns to horror as she realizes that the earring belonged to Megan, the girl in the picture that Howard had shown her. She concludes that the owner of the message written in blood was Megan. Speaking to Emmett about the earring and the message, Michelle learns that the girl in the picture was not Howard’s daughter, but Brittany, who had gone missing two years ago.

Michelle realizes that she has become, in the way Slavoj Žižek describes Judy in *Vertigo*, a “copy of copy.”9 This is what Scottie horrifically discovers at the end of *Vertigo*. Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore) hired Scottie to follow and investigate his wife Madeleine. He tells Scottie that she has been haunted by her long-dead relative Carlotta Valdes and believes that she may be thinking of committing suicide. Unbeknownst to Scottie, he is investigating a “copy” of Madeleine (played by Gavin’s mistress Judy). Near the halfway point in the film, Scottie and Judy (performing as Madeleine) unexpectedly become attracted to each other. Sticking to the plan, Judy (performing as Madeleine) pretends to commit suicide to cover up the murder of Elster’s wife. In the second half of the film Scottie unexpectedly meets Judy, who looks strikingly like Madeleine. He dresses Judy to look exactly like Madeleine. Scottie does not know that he is, in fact, creating a copy of a copy of Madeleine. For Žižek, the “imitation of
"imitation" is where "symbolic truth emerges." This is the horror that Scottie discovers at the end of the film: namely, he was set up by Elster. Scottie was nothing but a pawn in Elster’s murderous plot. Similarly, Michelle is unknowingly imitating the role of Brittany who went missing, or was believed to be kidnapped, two years ago. Michelle and Emmett Horrifically discover that Brittany is a substitute for Megan in the photo. As such, the truth emerges when they encounter the “copy of the copy.” This is made evident when Michelle shockingly learns that she is wearing the same “Paris Je T’Aime” (Paris I Love You) shirt as Brittany/Megan in the photo (see figure 7.1). Howard now dresses up Michelle as Brittany/Megan. This new information requires that Michelle and Emmett come up with a plan of escape immediately. Not unlike Misery and Room, Michelle and Emmett’s plan must not involve physically fighting Howard, but playing on his desire. As such, they cannot awaken his excessive and obscene side as a child abductor and murderer.

The earring not only uncovers Howard’s lie, but also reveals that Brittany is the real of Howard’s desire. What Michelle discovers is the missing piece of Howard’s traumatic kernel—his obscene enjoyment as a kidnapper and murderer. Michelle’s new knowledge of Howard recalls a scene in Misery when Paul finds newspaper clippings of Annie’s murder trial. Paul shockingly learns that Annie was accused of murdering babies when she was a hospital nurse. Yet Paul must continue to perform Annie’s fantasy as her favorite writer while preparing his escape. Likewise, Michelle must perform Howard’s fantasy in order to keep his obscene underside at bay. Not unlike Room, in which Joy has Jack play dead as a way to trick Old Nick, or Paul in Misery, who must write a new novel that resurrects the character of “Misery,” Michelle must enact Howard’s fantasy of Megan in order to sustain normalcy within the bunker. Her escape plan involves her seamstress skills, which help her create a hazmat suit out of a shower curtain. Once the suit is ready, she and Emmett will take the gun from Howard, tie him up, and one of them will escape and call for help. To do so, they must read Howard’s desire by staging a fiction within a fiction. But they must not draw attention to the excess of their lie. That is, Michelle and Emmett must not display any signs that they are harboring a secret. They must contain their surplus-knowledge and maintain the status quo within the bunker. Similar to the ideas of the Kammerspielefilme in Rope, the confinement of space puts under a microscope not only objects within the room, but also the characters’ gestures and body language. If Michelle or Emmett reveal something that sticks out, they will awaken a dark and nightmarish side of Howard, which is exactly what happens when Emmett is caught in a mousetrap during a game of charades.
In writing about Alfred Hitchcock’s *Murder!* (1930), Alenka Zupančič links the play-within-a-play narration device to the logic of desire in the whodunit narrative—what she describes as the “play-scene-genre.” In a traditional sense of the detective or whodunit genre, the crime is excluded from the narrative. The detective’s job is to gather facts, clues, and data, and deduce what has happened. In solving the case, the detective moves from non-knowledge to knowledge. The detective is our surrogate in the quest for knowledge. Zupančič points out that Hitchcock did not care for the whodunit genre. By creating a play within a play, Hitchcock was able to stage something different from the traditional whodunit scene. Instead of revealing the murderer’s identity in *Murder!* Hitchcock creates a scene in which the murderer Fane (Esme Percy) auditions for Sir John’s (Herbert Marshall) play, which happens to be on the subject of murder. Fane realizes during the audition that Sir John has lured him into a trap. Knowing that he has betrayed his guilt for murdering the young actress Edna Druce, Fane kills himself during his trapeze act at the climax of the film. Fane never verbally admits to Sir John that he is the murderer. Instead, he leaves Sir John a letter, demonstrating that the play scene produced an indication of his guilt. Sir John’s mousetrap underscores Hitchcock’s bomb theory by allowing viewers to take part in his plan. As Zupančič explains, “The mousetrap captures not only the murderer’s guilt, but also our desire—and this is what makes it so fascinating.” Drawing on Lacan’s notion that every truth has the structure of fiction, Hilary Neroni explains, “The implicit claim of *Alias* is not that truth itself has a fictional status, that it is simply a construction, but one must use fictional constructions to find it.” Just as Sir John creates a fantasy to capture Fane’s guilt in *Murder!* Neroni explains that Sydney in *Alias* creates a scenario that speaks to the victim’s desire in ac-
cessing the truth. Not unlike the climax of *Rope*—when Rupert exposes Brandon and Phillip’s lie, which collapses the peaceful setting of the penthouse space—once Fane realizes he has been set up, his mannerisms become creaturely and distorted to depict his excess as an indication of his guilt. As such, Fane’s protracted movements demonstrate the post-effects of the gaze.

In the same manner as in *Murder!* a play-scene captures Emmett’s desire (as well as ours) during the game of charades. The phrase Emmett has is “little women.” He offers Howard a number of clues to say the word “women,” but Howard can only say “girl” and “little princess.” This moment clearly speaks to Howard’s fantasy of women as subservient to men. Not unlike Fane’s bizarre mannerism when he is caught in Sir John’s mousetrap, the word “women” causes Howard to become strangely uncomfortable. Enunciating “women” is traumatic for Howard because it forces him to face the real of his desire. During Howard’s turn, he reads the card and offers the following verbal clues to Emmett: “I know what you’re doing. I see what you’re doing. I know what you’re up to.” Like Fane, Emmett becomes flustered, telling Howard he does not know what he is getting at. Howard continues by stating: “I see you when you’re sleeping. I know what you’re doing.” Emmett begins to crumble, thinking that Howard is not playing the game but literally telling him that he knows about their escape plan. Michelle realizes the clue and proclaims: “Santa Claus!” Indeed, Emmett’s indication of guilt has been recognized by Howard. Whereas Michelle is able to contain her surplus-knowledge by thinking rationally, Emmett cannot maintain the lie. Not unlike Phillip in *Rope*, who begins to show signs of guilt during the party for murdering David, Emmett draws attention to his excess by his inability to perform the lie in planning the escape from the bunker. Also, not unlike Sir John trapping Fane’s guilt during the audition, the game of charades turns an ordinary and everyday activity into something terrifying.

Howard, however, gives no indication that he has trapped Emmett’s desire. And so for Michelle, Emmett, and the viewer, the plan has not been compromised. But this is not the case. After the game, Howard asks Emmett and Michelle to help him move a barrel into the bathroom. Similar to Annie in *Misery* explaining the ankle-smashing practice of “hobbling” once used in African diamond mines for those who stole the goods, Howard says that the barrel is full of perchloric acid, which helps shoot naval satellites into orbit. The chemical instantly dissolves biological elements, including humans. Emmett asks nervously why Howard is showing them the barrel. Howard responds by saying they have to get rid of the waste in the bunker, again trapping Emmett’s desire. They move the barrel into the bathroom. Indeed, the waste that Howard is re-
moving is Emmett—the thing that is getting in the way of his fantasy of Michelle as Megan. Howard then reveals the scissors that Emmett stole. He tells them that he knows what they are up to, proving that Howard is always watching. Emmett apologizes to Howard, saying that he was planning to steal his gun. Emmett explains that he wanted to show Michelle that he is a real man. Although Emmett has not demonstrated his skills to outwit Howard, his explanation speaks to Howard’s fantasy of a strong and rugged male. Yet we are unsure whether Emmett is telling the truth about his feelings for Michelle. Nevertheless, Howard accepts his apology as Michelle and Emmett sigh with relief. Howard then retrieves his gun and shoots Emmett point-blank in the head.

Both Howard’s revealing the scissors and Emmett’s death operate as a traumatic encounter with the gaze. Howard’s discovery of the scissors realizes our investment in the narrative that captures Michelle’s, Emmett’s, and our desire. Similar to Jeff caught spying on Thorwald in Rear Window, the reveal of the scissors realizes a blind spot in our looking. This moment demonstrates not only how our desire is caught within the frame of perception, but also the importance of the film’s construction of a fantasy space of respite before the shocking reveal of the scissors. After the game of charades, we believe that Howard has not figured out that Michelle and Emmett are planning an escape. Once Howard calls them to the living room to move the barrel, fantasy and desire intersect, producing shocking results. Because Howard knows that Michelle and Emmett were trying to deceive him, a nightmarish side of him emerges, resulting in Emmett’s death. Just before Howard shoots Emmett, the image cuts to a shot of Michelle as she sees the gun come into frame. We do not directly see Emmett’s death, only Michelle’s horrified reaction. This blind spot in our looking realizes our desire of looking, laying a trap for our encounter with the gaze. Just as Fane expresses creaturely and distorted movement after being caught in Sir John’s mousetrap in Murder! the post-effect of the gaze for Michelle is captured in the ringing sound after the blast of the gun. The post-effect of the gaze depicts the collapsing of the fantasy’s screen to filter the real. The effect of the real is captured in the drop in audio, which interiorizes Michelle’s point of view, as reality becomes distorted and unhinged. Faint sounds of Howard’s dialogue can be heard as he attempts to comfort her. The drop in audio connects to the film’s first scene in Michelle’s apartment, which relies on body language and gestures as forms of communication. Not unlike the crippling effect of cinematic space in the final tracking shot of Rope, the zoom that engulfs Andreas at the end of The Passion of Anna, or Stu drugged in the ambulance at the end of Phone Booth, the post-effect of the gaze and deformation of space after Emmett’s death are enhanced by the audio register.
For Howard, however, Emmett’s death allows him to continue to enjoy Michelle as his fantasy object. For Michelle, she must put her plan into action and escape the bunker alone.

Desire and Fantasy, Vertical and Horizontal Movement, VFX

After Emmett’s death, a number of images are shown of the bunker: the stairway leading to the exit, the living room, Michelle’s room, and the storage area where Emmett slept. These images are moments of lull for us not only to reflect on the death of Emmett, but also to bridge us into the film’s final act. Moreover, these images operate as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle—the puzzle of Howard that has now been solved as we see Michelle upset, sitting in Emmett’s sleeping space. Howard is heard off-screen approaching. He holds an ice-cream cone and a bowl of ice cream. He is not shown in a full shot—reminding us of his unpredictability. He attempts to comfort Michelle as he tells her that “we can do whatever we want.” The rules that he so strongly enacted have now disappeared. As Howard heads to the kitchen to cook dinner, Michelle returns to her room and prepares her hazmat suit by sealing it with duct tape. But before she can escape, Howard returns and tells her supper is ready. He senses something is wrong with Michelle, which leads him to find the hazmat suit under her bed. Michelle runs to the door and locks Howard in her room. Michelle quickly makes her way to the living room. She enters the bathroom and shockingly sees the perchloric acid dissolving Emmett’s body. As she grabs the freeze spray from the drawer, Howard reappears. He is upset that Michelle has not shown him respect for saving her, as he says: “This is how you repay me?” Michelle knocks over the barrel as Howard falls into the perchloric acid. As Michelle escapes, the chemicals dissolve a lamp chord, setting a fire in the bunker. Michelle packs her hazmat suit and heads for the exit, but is stopped by Howard, whose face is deformed from the chemicals. Indeed, Howard’s metamorphosis into a monster coincides with the destruction of the bunker. Michelle knocks over a shelf of food, knocking out Howard. She escapes through the filtration ducts as flames begin to engulf the bunker, killing Howard.

Having defeated Howard, Michelle must now battle her next obstacle: the aliens. Michelle escapes to the skylight where Brittany had scratched “help.” She puts on the hazmat suit, breaks the lock using the freeze spray, and escapes from the bunker. She approaches Howard’s truck to retrieve what’s left of her belongings from the car accident. As she opens the door she rips the hazmat suit. Panicking, she sutures the
CAPTIVE, CAPTOR, AND ALIENS

rip with duct tape. She looks up and sees a flock of birds passing overhead. Realizing that the air is safe, she takes off her mask. But something arrests Michelle’s looking. She sees a spaceship on the horizon, patrolling the area. Suddenly, Howard’s bunker explodes, catching the ship’s attention. The ship turns toward the direction of the explosion and deposits creatures onto the ground. Michelle frantically looks for the truck’s keys, which she cannot find. She runs to Leslie’s vehicle parked on the farm. She reaches the car and sets off its alarm, drawing the attention of the aliens. Michelle hides in a nearby shed, where she finds Leslie dead. While the aliens investigate the vehicle, Michelle finds Leslie’s keys and turns off the alarm. The aliens approach the shed. Michelle escapes and runs toward a neighboring house in the distance. She stops as the mother ship hovers above the house. It begins to spray chemicals. Michelle runs back to Howard’s truck and quickly puts on her mask. As she enters the truck, the mother ship sucks Michelle and the vehicle into the air. Michelle finds the bottle of liquor she took with her at the beginning of the film. She creates a Molotov cocktail and throws it into an opening of the ship. The alien ship explodes, dropping the truck to the ground, mirroring Michelle’s car crash at the start of the film as the image cuts to black. Michelle awakens as the alien ship crashes in the distance. She enters Leslie’s vehicle and drives away, crashing through a mailbox with the address of 10 Cloverfield Ln. An overhead shot tracks Michelle as she drives along, mirroring a shot that began her journey at the start of the film. Michelle turns on the radio and learns that the military has taken back the southern seaboard. The broadcast announces a safe zone located in Baton Rouge. But they are looking for those who have battle or medical training to assist people in Houston. Michelle slams on the brakes as she reaches a crossroads. She can either drive to the safe zone or to Houston. Michelle backs up the car and drives in the direction of Houston. A flash of lightning reveals a spaceship hovering in the sky as she drives into the distance, ending the film on an uncertain note.

10 Cloverfield Lane has many similarities to Cloverfield. Although Cloverfield is not confined to one space, as in the case of 10 Cloverfield Lane, it is limited to Hud’s (T. J. Miller) perspective. Viewers experience Cloverfield entirely from the perspective of a personal video camera, operated mainly by Hud. The camera documents the group’s attempt to survive the monster’s fury as they traverse the city in an effort to rescue Rob’s (Michael Stahl-David) ex-girlfriend, Beth (Odette Annable), who is trapped in a collapsed building. Both films take what Dan Trachtenberg and J. J. Abrams describe as a “lo-fi” approach stylistically in order to produce “hi-fi” results.15 (Hi-fi or high-fidelity more accurately reproduces the sound of its source. Lo-fi refers to lesser audio fidelity in recording its
source.) In the case of *Cloverfield*, the amateur and improvisational quality (lo-fi forms) not only captures the group’s frantic situation to produce hi-fi results, but also how personal media can inform the look and design of a film. For example, smartphones, mobile screens, and small digital cameras allow for the instantaneous recording of events, which can be quickly uploaded to the internet and shared with friends and family members through email and social networking sites. *10 Cloverfield Lane* also has a close correlation to lo-fi forms in the intimate spaces and close proximity of characters within the confined setting to produce hi-fi results. Just as we only see events through the camera lens directed by Hud as the vulnerable camera operator in *Cloverfield*, we are confined to Michelle’s perspective in *10 Cloverfield Lane*.

Digital effects certainly help to enhance both films in achieving hi-fi results. This augmentation is particularly noticeable in that both films rely on vertical and horizontal movement as they build narrative conflict in relation to characters overcoming personal obstacles. Kristen Whissel explains that digital effects have multiplied contemporary cinema’s “vertical imagination” in tracing opposing conflicts of extreme highs and lows. Whissel identifies characters defying forces of gravity as a “visualization of power,” in what she terms “spatial dialectics.” Many contemporary blockbuster films, according to Whissel, resist not only the laws of physics, “but also the spaces and times that define a fictional world’s prevailing order.” For Whissel, the spatial dialectics of verticality can traverse historical inertia. Consider the dazzling scene in *Cloverfield* when Rob, Hud, and Lily rescue Beth from her penthouse building. Before the monster’s attack on the city, Rob and Lily had broken up. Rob took a job in Japan, a decision that he wrestles with early in the film. After the attack on the city, Rob and his group of friends decide to find Beth rather than follow the military’s order to leave the city. Here, the group must first horizontally traverse the space of New York City to reach Beth’s penthouse building. Then they must ascend her building, which has collapsed sideways onto an adjacent building. Reaching the top of the building, they must cross the slanted rooftop to access Beth’s penthouse, where they discover her pinned to the floor by a rebar. The group’s horizontal and vertical movements clearly perform “polarized extremes,” enhanced by the film’s digital effects. Indeed, Rob’s vertical movement to save Beth has personal meaning as the couple reunite. The spatial dialectics of the scene rupture and change the course of events for Rob and Beth. Certainly, the melodrama of this scene reminds us of many climatic sequences, such as King Kong’s dramatic fall from the top of the Empire State Building, or Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) falling to his death from the Nakatomi building at the end of *Die Hard*. Recent digital visual effects, however, have contrib-
uted to even greater aesthetic possibilities in characters achieving upward and downward movement, such as the blockbuster Marvel movies *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) and *Dr. Strange* (Scott Derrickson, 2016).

Characters’ dramatic ascent and descent not only follow Hollywood’s melodramatic mode, but also intimately connect to the logic of desire and fantasy. Fantasy’s appeal is that it can stage dramatic scenes such as the precipice ending of *Die Hard* or Hitchcock’s Statue of Liberty scene in *Saboteur* (1942). Fantasy permits one to have a relationship with the object cause of desire, which digital effects can further enhance. In *10 Cloverfield Lane*, the relationship between horizontal and vertical movement has a personal trajectory for Michelle and the theme of entrapment. The film begins with a horizontal pullback to reveal Michelle’s apartment as we learn that she is leaving her boyfriend without talking to him face to face. Similar to the vista of Beth’s penthouse in *Cloverfield*, the view from Michelle’s apartment is spectacular. The next scene shows Michelle driving horizontally across the rural spaces until her accident halts her trajectory. While unconscious, Michelle descends into Howard’s bunker—a space of doom, where Howard resurrects his fantasy of her as Megan. Part of Michelle’s escaping the bunker encompasses her backstory involving a father and daughter at a hardware store. In a conversation earlier in the film, Michelle explains to Emmett that the father was in a hurry, yanking his daughter’s arm. Michelle says that she wished she could have done something for the little girl, especially when she witnessed the father slap his daughter after she slipped on the floor. But Michelle did not help the little girl, as she says to Emmett: “And I wanted so badly to do something. To help her. But I do what I always do when things get hard. I just panicked and ran.” Here, we learn that Michelle’s father behaved the same way toward her. Certainly, Michelle leaving her boyfriend has a strong connection to her need to flee and avoid conflict. As such, horizontal movement for Michelle corresponds to a linear trajectory of her past. Similar to Andreas in *The Passion of Anna*, as explored in chapter 3, Michelle must traverse the fantasy in order to overcome and fully identify with her past of “no regrets.” As explained in *The Passion of Anna*, Andreas stuffs away the shameful feelings of his past marriage by self-imprisoning himself on the island. At the end of the film, Andreas cannot identify with his past trauma (his symptom). Andreas has no character transformation as the zoom literally and *horizontally* digests him. Michelle, too, is in a state of confinement both personally (her familial past) and physically (the bunker). From this perspective, her escape from the bunker and battle with the aliens have a strong correlation to her overcoming her past. Facing death, Michelle defeats both Howard and the aliens through an upward trajectory. Yet this experience has trans-
formed her. Whereas Whissel notes that vertical movement demonstrates the overcoming of historical forces, Michelle’s ascent marks her overcoming her trauma by identifying with her symptom. The vertical movement ruptures Michelle’s “historical continuity” as she breaks free from her abusive past.

Vertical movement demonstrates not only Michelle’s transformation, but also how heights become associated with power. The ultimate test for Michelle is her battle with the alien ship. Similar to what occurs in *Cloverfield*, her catharsis is through an upward trajectory. At the end, Michelle chooses not to drive away from danger, but directly toward it. Michelle traverses the fantasy by identifying with her symptom of “no regrets.” This, in turn, sets Michelle free as she turns toward the danger. Yet the film’s ending leaves us wondering if she will take on the role of soldier or nurse in Houston. This conclusion reminds us of Sarah Connor’s (Linda Hamilton) transformation at the start of James Cameron’s *Terminator 2* (1991), as she takes up a masculine persona. Hilary Neroni describes Connor’s transformation as embodying the contemporary violent woman in cinema. Whereas *Cloverfield* supplies viewers with wholesomeness in the romantic unification of Rob and Beth (which is often depicted in Hollywood melodramas), the ending of *10 Cloverfield Lane* leaves us with uncertainty. Neroni explains that “the love relationship makes each feel whole, which is to say, free from alienation and complete.”18 The contemporary violent woman, for Neroni, erupts the “complementarity” of the romantic union, which often allows “us to believe in the possibility of overcoming antagonism.”19 The climax of *10 Cloverfield Lane* supplies us with a resolution in Michelle’s defeat of both Howard and the aliens. At the same time, her decision to drive to Houston—like Sarah Connor driving off into the horizon at the end of James Cameron’s *The Terminator* (1984)—leaves us with unanswered questions and no romantic reunion.20 Michelle’s battle with the aliens certainly recalls the ending of *Alien*, when Ripley kills the alien aboard the escape shuttle. At the same time, the ending of the film denies the viewer closure as Michelle drives to Houston. The film leaves us with uncertainty—another missing piece of the puzzle that corresponds to the logic of desire.