Conclusion

127 Hours, The Wall, Panic Room, and Cyberspace

127 Hours is like an exercise in conquering the unfilmable.
—Roger Ebert

In an interview, filmmaker Danny Boyle discusses the process of adapting Aron Ralston’s (played by James Franco) real-life survival story for the screen. In 2003, Ralston went hiking by himself in Blue John Canyon in Colorado. While Ralston was exploring a slit in the canyon, a boulder came loose, causing him to fall. The boulder pinned Ralston’s right forearm to the side of the canyon. He was trapped for five days with no food, very little water, and no cellular phone. The only way Ralston could escape was to amputate his arm. In re-creating the slit of the canyon where Ralston was trapped, Boyle designed the set to limit movement for the production crew. According to Boyle, “There were only two ways in [into the slit of the canyon]—either through the top, or walking all the way around the back and then in—and it wasn’t at all convenient for the equipment necessary for filming a movie, like cameras and lights. ‘I told everyone to embrace it.’”1 Boyle’s choice to construct limits within the set of 127 Hours returns us to a question posed at the start of this project: how do films that take place predominantly within one setting, such as Rope, Room, and Locke, make for an exciting film over a long period of time? As argued, the films explored throughout this project embrace cinematic excess by exposing the gaze as a knowable or unknowable force within the confined setting. The “unfilmable,” as Ebert points out in his review of 127 Hours,2 is not only a challenge that filmmakers encounter when working within a limited setting, but also speaks directly to the logic of desire. Desire functions on absence (what we cannot see or know). Yet to be involved in a film’s story world not only manifests our desire to see, but also lays a trap for our potential encounter with the gaze. The gaze manifests how our desire distorts the field of vision. To encounter the
gaze not only realizes our involvement in the film’s narrative, but also reveals the film’s excess. The films explored throughout this study visualize the excess of the gaze as a spectatorship of shock and attraction within a confined setting. Moreover, these films demonstrate the narrative, aesthetic, ethical, social, and political possibilities of cinematic excess. Here, I would like to use *127 Hours*, *The Wall*, and *Panic Room* to bring together a number of points discussed throughout this study.

**Limitations within the Vastness**

Danny Boyle is known for his excessive and energetic style of filmmaking, as evident in films such as *Shallow Grave* (1994), *Trainspotting* (1996), *28 Days Later* (2002), and *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). Boyle brings a similarly energetic quality to *127 Hours* (2010), even describing the film as an action film with a guy who cannot move. This is apparent in his use of fast edits, shifting multiple camera angles, and handheld camerawork. Perhaps most notable is Boyle’s employment of the split-screen format captured during the credit sequence. The screen is divided into three panes that shift upwards and downwards, while depicting crowds of people cheering and clapping at sporting events. We see images of people running a city marathon, swimmers racing, and the running of the bulls in Spain. These shifting images are juxtaposed against people praying, going to work, and vacationing on a beach. Aron Ralston subtly emerges by himself in the middle pane as he prepares for his trip to Blue John Canyon. Certainly, the split-screen format is characteristic of *Phone Booth* in the depiction of information as a database aesthetic. Here, *127 Hours* exposes the excess of the gaze as a knowable force in order for us to directly see life in motion as contingent and adrenalinized. Whereas *Phone Booth* reveals an obscene and dark underside to telecommunication, screen culture, and news media sensationalism, *127 Hours* uses the split-screen format to depict crowds of people as a positive force. Yet Aron stands alone as he is sandwiched between the multi-screen panes of people. He appears spontaneously as an island unto himself. As such, Boyle shows Aron’s independence from others by giving him his own pane within the multi-screen imagery that starts the film. Here, the split-screen format and hyper-kinetic imagery are reminiscent of Godfrey Reggio’s experimental film *Koyaanisqatsi* (1982), which translates as “life out of balance.” This is certainly the case for Aron. When departing for the canyon, he does not leave a message for his friends or family. While preparing for his trip, his phone rings. But he does not answer it. The call is from his sister. On the voice message, we learn that Aron has not called
or talked to his mother in a while and that she is worried about him. Aron is a thrill-seeking loner who does not rely on or need others. This is tested early on in his hike, when he meets Kristi (Kate Mara) and Megan (Amber Tamblyn), who are looking for an underground pool of water in the canyon. Aron takes them to the pool’s location and they swim together. Afterward Kristi and Megan invite him to a party. Aron thanks them for the offer and abruptly takes off. As they watch Aron leave, Kristi says to Megan that he probably won’t show up, suggesting his need to flee when it comes to emotionally connecting with others. When Aron becomes entombed in the canyon, we are forced to stay exclusively with him as we experience his transformation from loner to someone who is dependent on others. From this perspective, Aron is not that far from Michelle in 10 Cloverfield Lane or Andreas in The Passion of Anna. All embody the lonely figure in relation to their physical and/or psychological entrapment.

127 Hours is not like confinement films such as Misery, Room, or 10 Cloverfield Lane, where we wonder how the characters will overcome their captors. Rather, 127 Hours assumes that we already know the true story of Aron Ralston. For example, when Aron is initially pinned to the boulder, he grabs his pocketknife and we believe that he is going to amputate his arm. Instead, Aron begins to chip away at the boulder, hoping it will come loose and free him. Here, Boyle shows us a number of Aron’s memories triggered by objects that set off very strong recollections of his past. For example, when the sunlight moves through the slit of the canyon, Aron extends his leg into a patch of light for warmth. The image cuts to Aron as a young boy, camping with his dad as they build a campfire. Throughout the film, Aron’s memory triggers begin to form a pattern of his life and what led him to become a loner.

Indeed, as much as 127 Hours is a survival narrative, it is also very much about Aron’s letting go of his fantasy of not depending on the love of or need for others. Aron uses his video recorder as a confessional tool, to not only document his entrapment in case he should die, but to also express his remorsefulness to his family—to communicate his love to them. At one point, he apologizes for his selfishness, such as missing his sister’s wedding. Not unlike Phone Booth and Locke, the slit of the canyon is a confessional space. Moreover, the boulder that entraps Aron has existential resonance. This is expressed when Aron emotionally says to the video camera, before amputating his arm, “I chose all of this. . . . This rock has been waiting for me my entire life. . . . Ever since it was a bit of meteorite. A million years ago. . . . There in space. It’s been waiting to come here. Right, right here. I’ve been moving towards it my whole life.” His video camera battery then dies. At this point, Aron amputates his arm. He escapes the canyon and is rescued by a family hiking. Not unlike Andreas in The Passion of Anna or Michelle in 10 Cloverfield Lane, Aron is
a lonely figure who is haunted by certain events of his past. Perhaps the most painful memory triggered during his entrapment is his breakup with his girlfriend. In an interview with the real-life Aron Ralston, he stated that he was “crushed to the core” after the breakup with his girlfriend in 2006. But whereas Andreas clings to his fantasy of solitude until the very end of the film in *The Passion of Anna*, Aron is transformed by his entrapment. Aron achieves freedom not only by physically cutting off his arm, but also by confronting his traumatic past.

As argued, *127 Hours* suggests that audiences will have prior knowledge of Ralston’s amputating his arm in order to escape the canyon. Having this “surplus-knowledge” of Ralston’s entrapment, in certain ways, follows Hitchcock’s bomb theory by rendering everyday action with uncanniness. Aron’s arrival at the canyon is suspenseful because we know that he will eventually become trapped, turning the film into a survival narrative. This makes the amputation scene all the more disturbing. If we know the true story of Ralston, then we know that we will have to confront the decision to amputate his arm. Yet we are invested in Aron’s survival and are therefore complicit in his decision. The scene is horrific and repulsive, which makes it very traumatic to watch. There are even reports of people fainting in movie theaters during this scene. Still, Aron’s amputation of his arm is beautiful, not only because he survived this ordeal, but also because he has been transformed by the event itself. Indeed, *127 Hours* is a cinema of excess in Boyle’s fast-paced editing, split-screen format, and handheld cinematography. It is a film that renders the gaze knowable within the confined space of the slit of the canyon, not only to depict Aron’s entrapment, but also to show his transformation by the event itself. At the end of the film, Aron swims with his amputated arm, a scene that connects back to the beginning of the film when he swam with Kristi and Megan. Boyle stated that he wanted to start the film with water imagery. Certainly water is key to Aron’s survival. But it also suggests fluidity as well as his rebirth. At the end of the film, when Aron emerges out of the swimming pool, he sees his family smiling at him. Through the limitations imposed upon him, Aron transforms into a subject who sees himself as a part of the world and dependent on the love of others.

**Know Your Enemy**

Whereas *127 Hours* exposes the excess of the gaze as an overwhelming presence, Doug Liman’s confinement thriller, *The Wall*, creates narrative suspense by rendering the encounter with the gaze as an unknowable
force. It is a film where we encounter the gaze with traumatic results. Like *127 Hours*, *The Wall* takes place in an open and vast landscape. It is a sparse and minimalist narrative involving two American soldiers, Sergeant Shane Matthews (John Cena) and Sergeant Allen “Ize” Isaac (Aaron Taylor-Johnson), in the desert of Iraq. Matthews and Isaac are sent to investigate a pipeline construction site where eight contract employees have been shot and killed by an Iraqi sniper referred to as “Juba” (Laith Nakli). Surveilling the pipeline from a great distance, they conclude that it is safe to enter the site. While investigating the site, Matthews is suddenly shot by Juba. When Isaac goes to rescue Matthews, he is shot in the knee. Isaac painfully makes his way to a crumbling stone wall for protection. From this point on, the film takes place entirely behind the stone wall as Isaac tries to locate Juba’s position while Matthews lays injured and unconscious out in the open. When Isaac calls headquarters for help, he learns that Juba has hijacked his radio signal. Isaac uses his other radio and discovers that Juba shot the antennae. Juba tunes his radio to Isaac’s frequency, demanding that he talk to him. He wants to learn who Isaac is and why he came back to Iraq when the war is over. Not unlike the Caller in *Phone Booth*, if Isaac does not follow Juba’s demands, Juba will kill Matthews, whom he has framed in his rifle’s crosshairs.

Unlike *127 Hours* and *Phone Booth*, *The Wall* relies primarily on minimalist stylization. Like the first half of *Room*, the film employs low-key shifts to articulate cinematic space, such as the use of long takes and slow dolly shots. Yet it is Juba’s disembodied voice (as Michel Chion’s notion of the *acousmêtre*) that helps to create a spectatorship of uncertainty which entices our desire. Like the Caller in *Phone Booth*, Juba’s presence is revealed through the crosshairs of his rifle. Juba is not only absent within Isaac’s field of vision, but he is also an unreliable and unpredictable enemy. As Isaac figures out, Juba is “the ghost,” the “Angel of Death,” who is responsible for other killings in the desert. Both Isaac’s and our inability to see Juba demonstrates the power of the *acousmêtre*. As explored in *Talk Radio*, *Phone Booth*, and *Locke*, the disconnect between voice and body is the excessive element that “sticks out” in the film, infusing the space with antagonism. As such, rather than employing hyper-stylized camerawork, Liman primarily relies on the separation of voice and body to unsettle our viewership.

Similar to the captive films explored throughout this study, Isaac must figure out a way to outwit Juba. Like Aron in *127 Hours*, Isaac must survive in the desert with no food or water. By mapping the trajectory of the bullet that hit his leg and by counting the number of times Juba fired his rifle at Isaac and Matthews, Isaac begins to narrow down Juba’s location. At one point during his radio conversation with Juba, Isaac hears
metal crashing in the background. Listening closely, Isaac identifies the banging of the metal on top of a large trash pile in the far distance. He believes it is Juba’s location. Meanwhile, Matthews, assumed to be unconscious, interrupts Isaac’s radio transmission with static to signal that he is alive. Isaac tells Matthews where Juba is positioned. Matthews subtly and slowly retrieves his rifle, trying not to draw Juba’s attention and alert him that he is conscious. Using the passing of a sandstorm as a shield, Matthews loads his rifle and fires at the trash pile. Matthews drags himself across the desert floor as we believe that he has killed Juba. But as Matthews drags himself to the stone wall, Juba shoots and kills him. Here, at Isaac’s lowest point, Juba demands to know the real reason why he came back to Iraq. We learn that Isaac harbors deep guilt for the death of his friend and fellow American soldier, Dean. He confides in Juba that Dean became trapped by an enemy sniper. Isaac tried to shoot the sniper but accidentally shot and killed Dean. Isaac emotionally breaks down and says that he lied about Dean’s death to everyone. Not unlike Stu in Phone Booth, Ivan in Locke, Barry in Talk Radio, and Aron in 127 Hours, the confined space of the stone wall becomes a space of confession for Isaac. Yet by confessing his guilt to Juba, Isaac overcomes this tragic event.

At the end of the second act of the film, Isaac is able to contact headquarters. But Juba intercepts the message and poses as Isaac. He tells headquarters that he and Matthews found nothing in their investigation. Juba requests that they pick them up because they are baking in the sun like potatoes. Listening in, Isaac knows that Juba is luring them into a trap. Shortly after, Ivan hears the helicopter approaching in the distance. In a last stand against Juba, Isaac breaks down the stone wall and fires at the trash pile. His act is both real and symbolic. No shots are fired back, and Isaac believes Juba is dead. The helicopter arrives and rescues Isaac. But as they are flying over the trash pile, Juba fires at the helicopter and shoots one of the soldiers and the pilot. Isaac yells to the other soldier that the sniper is in the trash pile. But it is too late as the helicopter crashes, ending the film with uncertainty. Here, The Wall shares a trope with the horror genre by employing the trick ending in the form of the gaze. Not unlike the alien that sneaks aboard the escape shuttle in Alien, or Carrie’s hand jutting out the gravestone’s pile of dirt at the end of Carrie, Juba’s shooting down of the helicopter manifests a blind spot in our desire to see. The brief reprieve that the film offers after Isaac is rescued not only demonstrates how our desire distorts the visual field of perception, but also lays a trap for our encounter with the gaze. As such, to encounter the gaze demonstrates that our looking resides within the film, not as a transcendent spectator.

The ambivalent ending of The Wall not only denies us narrative
closure, but also exposes the antagonism that classical narrative film structure often alleviates. As explored throughout this study, the excess of the gaze offers political and social insights, as in the case of Green Room, Phone Booth, and Talk Radio. Although The Wall establishes clear boundaries between Isaac and Juba, the fact that the enemy is not killed evokes the uncertainty of the Iraq War and the U.S. initiative to help rebuild Iraq’s economy. Liman underscores this commentary by confronting the viewer with antagonism instead of narrative closure. Moreover, the film calls into question our understanding of (and empathy for) the enemy. Juba tells Isaac that he was a teacher in Baghdad. His school was destroyed by the U.S. military. Some of his students died, and he still feels pain from the shrapnel in his elbow. Juba tells Isaac that the stone wall that protects him once belonged to a school. Juba then became a sharpshooter trained by the United States. Juba not only speaks English, but also studied English literature—as we (and Isaac) learn by his references to Shakespeare and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” and “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Certainly, Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” speaks to Isaac’s harboring of his guilt for mistakenly killing Dean. Not unlike Phillip in Rope, who becomes psychologically unraveled because he cannot contain his secret of murdering David, Isaac is haunted by the truth about Dean’s death. As we learn, he carries Dean’s broken scope with him. Here, the broken scope shows us two sides of the real as described by Žižek: the real is what resists symbolization and is the screen upon which to project our fantasies. On the one hand, the broken scope stands for trauma, horror, and guilt for mistakenly killing Dean. On the other hand, the broken scope as the screen of the real helps Isaac make sense of his guilt and shame over Dean’s death.

Perhaps more importantly, Juba’s reference to Poe is reminiscent of Poe’s story “The Cask of Amontillado,” where the character Fortunato is entombed alive behind a wall. Ironically, it is not so much that Isaac is trapped behind the wall that speaks to Poe’s revenge narrative. Rather, it is Juba who is entombed—not only by the scars caused by the U.S. military in bombing his school, but also by virtue of his physical entombment in the trash heap. Still, our identification is aligned with Isaac, who is also wrestling with the scars of war, as he attempts to locate and kill Juba. In both cases, The Wall muddies our sympathy for the suffering both characters have endured from the war. As such, The Wall’s uncertain ending as the embodiment of the gaze forces us to focus on the trauma and instability of the war in Iraq, as well as our understanding of the enemy.
Showing Too Much Space

Paradoxically, the confined spaces of *127 Hours* and *The Wall* are themselves situated in the open and vast spaces of the canyon and desert, respectively. By contrast, David Fincher’s home invasion film, *Panic Room*, takes place almost entirely in a four-story brownstone/townhome (or “townstone,” as it is called in the film) in New York’s upper West Side. The film relies on the exposure of the gaze as a knowable presence by showing the viewer too much space within the confined setting. The depiction of this excess of space not only reflects the vastness of the home, but also exploits the tensions of wealth, property, and class. The film begins with Meg Altman (Jodi Foster), recently divorced from her husband who is a pharmaceutical mogul, and her young daughter, Sarah (Kristen Stewart), viewing the “townstone” with two realtors, Lydia (Ann Magnuson) and Evan (Ian Buchanan). Like Ullman and Watson showing Wendy and Jack the Overlook Hotel at the start of *The Shining*, the showing of the property in *Panic Room* is also a tour for the viewer. Learning these spaces, such as the elevator and the vertiginous levels of staircases, plays an important role when the intruders break into the home. For example, the elevator, an excessive amenity for their home, saves Meg and Sarah from being captured by the intruders when they initially break into their home. When Lydia and Evan show Meg the master bedroom suite, she realizes that the room is smaller than the other bedrooms. Evan tells her that she is the first client to notice this, demonstrating Meg’s awareness of space. As we learn, Meg is claustrophobic. Evan reveals that the master suite is built with a panic room, a safe space in case of an emergency. Evan explains that once the door to the panic room closes, no one can enter it from the outside. The panic room is encased in cement and thick steel. Here, Meg asks Evan if he ever read Edgar Allan Poe. Like Juba’s citations, Meg’s reference to Poe alludes to the “buried alive” narrative of “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Premature Burial.” And, similar to the amenities in Howard’s bunker in *10 Cloverfield Lane*, the panic room is equipped with emergency kits, a public announcement system, a phone line, and a number of video surveillance monitors of various rooms within the home. Certainly, the surveillance monitors speak to the database culture and split-screen format as explored in *Phone Booth*. But surveillance monitors also reflect the manner in which the architecture of space is articulated in the film and its correlation to the illusion of the mastery of seeing. This is most notable in Fincher’s elaborate use of the “all-seeing” moving long take.

Fincher employs the long take not only to guide us through the spaces of the home, but also to afford the viewer otherwise impossible
perspectives for human eyes. Here, we are reminded of Fincher expressing why filming an entire story inside one house appealed to him: to construct a multilevel apartment where the camera “can go literally anywhere.” This is most notable in the long take of the intruders breaking into the house. The image begins with Sarah sleeping in her bed, then it glides out of her bedroom, and fluently descends the multiple levels of the stairs. The long take then moves through the first level of the home, stopping at three windows facing the street as a group of men arrive. Like _Misery, Room, _and _10 Cloverfield Lane_, the invaders/captors are mysterious, since we are unable to detect who they are and what they look like. The long take pans to the left and slithers inside the keyhole of the front door as one of the intruders, Burnham (Forest Whitaker), an employee of the home’s security company, tries (unsuccessfully) to open the door with his keys. The camera moves out of the keyhole as the intruders go to the back door. The camera glides across the kitchen, moving across counters and past appliances. The long take reaches the back door, where the intruders find themselves (again) unable to gain access. The camera then moves upward through all of the floors of the home, stopping at a sky window, where we see the invaders track stealthily across the roof. The shot finishes in a closet with the intruders about to enter through a roof access panel. Similar to the cinematography in _The Shining_, the long take during the home invasion sequence embodies Joan Copjec’s notion of the unattributable shot—a shot that cannot be connected to an observer but assures “that some others exist.” Similar to _The Shining_, the moving long take has a ghostly or spectral dimension in its ability to move through vents, walls, floors, and doors. Whereas the long tracking shots in _The Shining_ suggest the lurking of a spectral figure, the intruder-like “all-seeing” long take in _Panic Room_ is more characteristic of Tom Gunning’s notion of the “cinema of attraction.” That is, the long take compels us to look on with captivation and awe, as we watch the mechanism and special effects of the shot defy the laws of empirical reality as it moves through impossible spaces for human eyes. As explained in the introduction, the elaborate long take in _Touch of Evil_ entices our desire to see, by not only showing us the planting of the bomb in the trunk of the car, but also by obstructing our seeing as the car drives through the city. But, in the case of the intruder sequence in _Panic Room_, the long take defies impediments by having the camera—via special effects—transcend impossible access and usher us to places that otherwise would be potential barriers to our looking. The only obstruction during the sequence is our inability to clearly identify the intruders outside the home.

When Meg and Sarah discover that their home has been invaded, they frantically retreat to the panic room. They learn that the intruders
are there to steal a large sum of money that the previous owner hid inside a safe in the floor of the panic room. Not unlike the confinement thrillers *10 Cloverfield Lane, Room*, and *Green Room*, the allure of *Panic Room* comes from not only wondering how Meg and Sarah can possibly survive when there is no escape route, but also how the intruders will force mother and daughter out of the panic room. Making matters worse, Sarah has diabetes and needs her glucagon syringe, which is in her bedroom. If she does not have her injection, she will die.

Indeed, *Panic Room* is a film that produces the gaze as a knowable force through its spectacular and expressive cinematography. This certainly does not evacuate the film’s suspense. But the expressive camera and dark atmosphere draw considerable attention to the film’s excessive presence. At the same time, the film’s exposure of excess has a social dimension in terms of wealth, class, and property. As we learn during the tour of the home, the previous owner used the top floor for live-in help. Lydia tells Meg that the previous owner, who recently died, was a recluse, rich and paranoid. The home is obviously too big for Meg and Sarah. Even Meg has reservations about this. But as Lydia humorously says to her: “You will have another family. You could even have two families.” After Sarah and Meg move into the house, there are spaces that are clearly not being used. This disjunction between lived space and empty and unused spaces helps to create uncertainty within the confined setting. As such, there is a ridiculously large surplus of space in the home for two people to inhabit.

Meg’s wealth is set into relief by Burnham’s working-class status. Burnham is a character defined by his tools and his expert knowledge of the mechanics of the house. As we have seen throughout this study, objects within confined settings are more likely to lose their primary purpose or meaning. For Burnham, his tools forgo their connection to his working-class status and become tools of criminality to break into the safe in the panic room. But his motivation to rob the safe does not mean hurting anyone. Here, the issue of class in relation to excess speaks to the logic of desire. As explored in *Misery, Room*, and *10 Cloverfield Lane*, characters must initially rely on logic rather than instinct in order to overcome their captors. In *Panic Room*, Burnham expresses ambivalence when he and his associates discover that Meg and Sarah have moved into the home earlier than expected. Their plan was to rob the panic room when the house was still empty. The other intruders are Junior (Jared Leto), who is related to the previous owner and has learned that the money is hidden in the panic room, and Raoul (Dwight Yoakam), a bus driver from Flatbush, Brooklyn. Junior and Raoul are willing to use violence if necessary. They operate on instinct and irrationality, making poor choices that
ultimately result in deadly consequences. Even Jared Leto’s cartoonish
and excessive acting helps to embody his irrationality. By contrast, Burn-
ham is rational and logical as he tries to figure out ways to get Sarah and
Meg out of the panic room. Here, Burnham’s moral ambiguity plays an
important part in Meg and Sarah’s survival at the end of the film. When
Burnham finally accesses the panic room, he discovers that Sarah has
suffered a seizure because of her diabetes. Meg had managed to throw
the glucagon syringe into the panic room before Raoul locked her out.
Burnham agrees to give Sarah her injection, telling her that he did not
want the plan to go this way. The only reason he decided to rob them
was to give his own child a better life. Instead of reacting negatively or
acting violently toward Burnham, Sarah reads Burnham’s embroidered
name on his shirt and says: “Thank you, Burnham.” As explored in Misery,
Room, and 10 Cloverfield Lane, characters must initially rely on logic rather
than instinct in order to overcome their captors. In Misery, Paul plays on
Annie’s desire by performing the role as her favorite writer, which allows
him to prepare for his escape. In Room, Joy and Jack have to construct a
fictional death in order to trick Old Nick. In 10 Cloverfield Lane, Michelle
plays on Howard’s desire by playing the role of his estranged daughter
while planning her escape from the bunker. At the climax of Panic Room,
when Raoul is about to kill Meg with a sledgehammer, Burnham, who has
the chance to escape with the money, instead returns to the house and
kills Raoul. As such, Sarah’s compassion toward Burnham in the panic
room played on his desire, which informs his decision to return to the
house and save them by shooting Raoul in the head. When Raoul sees
Sarah looking at him in the panic room, this is why he says: “Don’t you
look at me.” Raoul knows that making eye contact with Sarah can po-
tentially implicate his desire. By avoiding eye contact, Raoul sustains his
commitment to the plan, even if it must involve violence.

Most of Panic Room takes place in the home and employs low-key
lighting. By contrast, the final shot of Meg and Sarah sitting on a bench
near the park is bright and colorful. But unlike the trick ending of The
Wall, or the antagonism of the type provoked by the photograph of Jack
from 1921 in The Shining, Panic Room does not leave us with ambiguity.
This is most notable in the scene’s long take dolly forward and zooming
back shot that ends the film. The dolly forward and zoom back technique
decompresses and widens the background while maintaining the size of
the foreground. This technique speaks directly to Meg’s transformation
at the end of the film. The scene begins with Sarah reading a property list-
ing, since they are now looking for another place to live. Meg responds:
“Do we need all that space?” This suggests that the large space of the
“townstone” has affected Meg. Her battle with the intruders indicates that
she has overcome claustrophobia. In the final shot, the background of the park subtly expands the space behind Meg and Sarah. Here Fincher employs the dolly forward and zoom back shot not to create a vertigo effect, which is often used to express a character’s heightened interior state, but rather to suggest Meg conquering her claustrophobia. Whereas the fantasy frame collapses at the end of *The Passion of Anna* as space caves in on Andreas, we have the opposite effect in the final shot of *Panic Room*. Meg’s fantasy frame is assured by the dolly forward and zoom back shot to indicate that she has overcome her fear of entombed spaces. Indeed, *Panic Room* is a film that reveals the gaze as a knowable presence. Fincher correlates the excess of the gaze with an expressive cinematography. Its excessive treatment of the architecture of space not only reflects Meg’s claustrophobia, but also speaks to the excesses and inequality of wealth. Yet the allure of the “townstone” is its location within the crowded space of New York City. As Lydia says to Meg early in the film: “I don’t have to tell you this amount of living space is uncommon in Manhattan.”

Cyberspace and the Allure of Confinement Cinema

*127 Hours* and *The Wall* are examples of two recent films that involve confinement narratives. Films such as *Life of Pi*, *Gravity*, *All Is Lost*, *I Am Legend*, *The Martian* (Ridley Scott, 2015), *Captain Phillips*, *The Impossible* (J. A. Bayona, 2012), *Open Water*, and *Cast Away* (Robert Zemeckis, 2000) are just some of the films that have been released over the past several years and depict entrapment or characters marooned. It is interesting to note that this surge of confinement movies has taken place during the emergence of cyberspace communication. Certainly, the conditions of digitization have transformed our everyday experiences of time and space, whether it is texting, FaceTiming a friend, or ordering a DVD on the web. But the collapsing of time and space has also informed the parceling and ordering of narrative information in cinema. Since the 1990s, a surge in nonlinear narratives in cinema has emerged. Films such as *Groundhog Day* (Harold Ramis, 1993), *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994), *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003), *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* (Michel Gondry, 2004), *The Constant Gardener* (Fernando Meirelles, 2005), and *Inception* (Christopher Nolan, 2010), to name but a few, are movies that forgo chronological storytelling. Scholars have attributed the increase in nonlinear narratives to everyday practices of digital media, such as surfing the internet, interactive video gaming, and time-shifting media.
But what are the spatial implications of these films in relation to
digital media and cyberspace? How has our engagement with virtual
space shaped cinematic space since the emergence of the web? Just as
we have seen a rise in nonlinear narratives, we have witnessed a swell in
confinement cinema. This is not to suggest that nonlinear narratives and
limited-space films are trumping the classical mode of filmmaking. The
classical ordering of narrative time and space across multiple locations is
still predominantly the way most films are presented. Nevertheless, the
increase in confinement cinema offers some insights on digitization and
cyberspace communication in relation to the logic of desire.

Unlike films such as Room, 10 Cloverfield Lane, Panic Room, and The
Wall, 127 Hours does not pose the question of how Aron will escape. The
film suggests that we know that he has to amputate his arm in order to
survive. We quickly learn that because of the mass of the boulder pinning
his arm, Aron only has one way to extricate himself. The enjoyment of
the film lies in watching Aron arrive at this conclusion as he wrestles with
his past. In the case of Misery, Room, Phone Booth, 10 Cloverfield Lane, Panic
Room, and The Wall, our enjoyment comes in speculating how these char-
acters will overcome their captors and escape their dire situations. These
films are not only about survival, they are also puzzle narratives. Indeed,
digital technologies have altered the relationship between the subject
and the object of desire. As argued, desire is elicited by absence and lack.
Movies entice our desire not by mastery, but by what we do not know. As I
explained about 10 Cloverfield Lane, the logic of desire involves searching
for the missing pieces of the puzzle. That is, desire seeks resolutions to
the questions posed by the film’s narrative: Is Howard trustworthy? Have
aliens invaded the Earth? As we saw at the end of The Shining, the photo-
graph of Jack from 1921 leaves us with antagonism rather than closure. At
the same time, the mysterious photograph entices our desire to rewatch
the film, to see if we can find clues that explain the photograph’s mean-
ing. And certainly playback devices and on-demand streaming services
enable us to rewatch The Shining at our leisure—to search and discover
the secrets of the Overlook Hotel. As such, digital time-shifting devices
greatly shrink the wait time in accessing movies and television shows.
Moreover, on-demand services diminish the allure of the object of desire.
As Todd McGowan explains, “on-demand technology has the effect of
deflating the object by rendering it immediately accessible.”15 The speed
with which one can access a movie impacts the logic of desire, because
the gap between the subject and the object is so quickly fulfilled. The in-
stant access afforded by digital technologies has the effect of diminishing
the aura of the object (whether it is looking up the meaning of a word
or streaming a movie on a mobile device). This was certainly the case
with Ivan using his car technology to communicate with his family and employees in *Locke*. For McGowan, “atemporal” cinema (films that break with the linear unfolding of time so that we experience time directly) is a product of digital media and cyberspace. According to McGowan, these films reflect the logic of the drive, which “does not respect the forward movement of time but remains attached to repetition.” Whereas desire follows a linear ordering of events, drive is attributed to films that outright define chronology. These films, for McGowan, allow the subject to invest in the trauma of loss by experiencing time as contingent and antagonistic, not as ordered and linear.

Films such as *Panic Room*, *Misery*, *Room*, *Green Room*, *Phone Booth*, *10 Cloverfield Lane*, and *The Wall* elicit our desire because they evoke impossible situations for characters to overcome. The films impose an injunction that nothing is possible by backing their characters into a corner. Yet the impossibilities these characters must face stage the possibilities of their escape and survival. Films such as *Rope*, *Phone Booth*, and *10 Cloverfield Lane* not only creatively deploy excess in order to visually and audibly make for an engaging film within a confined location, they also pose questions that seem to have impossible answers to attract and elicit our desire. How will Phillip and Brandon get away with murder? How will Jack and Joy outwit their captor in *Room*? Certainly, movies that shift from multiple locations impose limitations in order to activate our desire. Otherwise, there would be no reason to watch them. But films with one or a few locations dramatically intensify the limitations imposed on both characters and the viewer. The limitation not only forces the filmmaker to come up with ways to spatially engage us, but also must attract our desire to see how they will sustain our interest in a narrative that works primarily within one location. It is not surprising that films that take place within a limited location—such as *Rope*, *Locke*, *Phone Booth*, *127 Hours*, and *The Wall*—are often referred to as experiments. This characterization attests to the challenges filmmakers face when working in one primary location.

If the recent surge in atemporal cinema is a product of the digital era, then we must appreciate the increase in confinement cinema as part of this development in relation to desire and the subject of loss. The increase in nonlinear narrative in cinema is intimately connected to digital technologies by shrinking the gap between the subject and the object of desire. Slavoj Žižek makes a similar point in his reading of postmodern cinema that “tells it all” in relation to subjectivity and the injunction to enjoy. As he poses the question, “what if, by way of ‘filling in the gaps’ and ‘telling it all,’ what we retreat from is the void as such, which, of course, is ultimately none other than the void of subjectivity (the Lacanian ‘barred subject’)?” For Žižek, “filling in the gaps” and the freedom of a post-
modern society to enjoy are the demise of the big Other, collapsing what he describes as “symbolic efficiency.” Symbolic efficiency derives from the fiction or lie of the big Other. Yet our investment in the fiction of the big Other binds us together within the symbolic universe. This is most notable in how the big Other provides identities that we can take up in everyday life. I cannot say that I am a professor or lawyer without there being a consensus about what constitutes a professor or a lawyer. That is to say, the big Other must also know what a professor and a lawyer are: for example, passing a dissertation defense, or passing the bar exam.

Symbolic efficiency not only involves our collective belief in the big Other, but also the process of disavowal between vision and language. Žižek uses the examples of the mark or mask of a judge’s insignia to explain this notion: “I know very well that things are the way I see them [that this person is a corrupt weakling], but none the less I treat him with respect, since he wears the insignia of a judge, so that when he speaks, it is the Law itself which speaks through him.”¹⁸ For Žižek, it is not just what our eyes see, but also the “words of the institution of the Law” that we believe when we respect the symbolic authority of a judge.¹⁹ Shutting down the gap between the subject and object normalizes and avoids “the void of subjectivity.” For this reason, the decline of symbolic efficiency or “short-circuiting” the gap between the subject and object has a dimension of enjoyment in relation to the logic of desire. The elimination of the gap between the subject and the object does not produce more enjoyment. By contrast, it is the prohibition and limitation in our investment in the big Other that enables us to enjoy.²⁰ The subject of desire requires that the object cause of desire always be missing. Yet it is the barrier to the primordial lost “thing” that paradoxically generates our enjoyment. It is this short-circuiting between subject and object that speaks to the allure of confinement cinema.

Confinement cinema seeks to reinforce the gap, to stress absence and loss by imposing a spatial limit upon both characters and the viewer. If we are losing the gap between the subject and object of desire because of digital technologies, then confinement cinema places emphasis on the gap by putting characters and the viewer into impossible situations narratively and spatially. Just as Joy and Jack are held captive in Room, we are trapped alongside them. This is not to suggest that films that are constantly shifting locations do not elicit our desire to see how the film will solve the problem it poses. Rather, it is the recent surge and allure of confinement cinema that speaks to our current technological moment. Our enjoyment is the spatial limitation, guessing how the characters will escape their situation, especially when they cannot access digital technologies to communicate with others, as in the case of Aron in 127 Hours.
and Isaac in *The Wall*. Delaying the solution to the problems posed by the film enhances our spectatorship. What appears to be unsolvable (characters trapped in a panic room, a fallout bunker, a hotel, a phone booth, the slit in a canyon, or a crumbling stone wall) elicits our desire to see and hear. These films demonstrate that a single-setting narrative can be just as exciting as movies that shift among many locations. I have attributed this effect to Lacan’s theory of the gaze and Michel Chion’s notion of the *acousmêtre*. The gaze realizes our desire to see. Our encounter with the gaze shows how our desire distorts the field of vision. The gaze demonstrates that our desire to look is itself integrated into the film. Chion’s notion of the *acousmêtre* reveals our desire to hear (the invocatory drive) in the separation of voice and body. Both notions involve something excessive that stands out within the order of looking or hearing. As argued throughout this study, the manner in which excess is deployed within the confined location makes for a suspenseful and energizing spectatorship over an extended period of time.