

## A TRAGIC PANORAMA

The visual and architectural language of illusionism has been consistently present in human-made immersive environments. Oliver Grau, in his seminal text *Virtual Art, From Immersion to Illusion*, traces the origins of the immersive environment, in part, to the Great Frieze in the Villa dei Misteri at Pompeii (ca. 60 B.C.)—a 360 degree fresco dedicated to Dionysus, and used for rites of initiation and rituals. The fresco depicts life-sized figures preparing for the Bacchic rite, and includes images of Dionysus—as if a visitor is sharing the space with them. The strategy employed by the fresco's designers visually extends the architecture of the space, making use of perspectival tools, and realistic renderings of imaginary architecture. Grau describes the installation, “With the exception of this opening in the wall, which is less than three meters wide, the visitor to the room is surrounded hermetically by a 360 vision with unity of time and place. The overall effect is to break down barriers between the observer and what is happening in the images on the walls.” – “The fresco brings gods and humans together on the same pictorial level.”<sup>1</sup>

Later in his book, Grau writes of the popularity of the panorama *The Battle of Sedan*, finished 1883 by Anton von Werner and his team of 13 additional painters, and especially notes the political nature of the project. *The Battle of Sedan* is considered to be a precursor to cinema due to its appeal amongst all classes of the time. Grau illuminates the nationalist tendencies in the composition of its images—especially its historical revisionism—and points to it as a modern example of the dictation of emotion through hermetic image spaces—a fixture that can easily be seen in contemporary Hollywood films depicting, especially those depicting American wars.

In 1896, as the price of admission into *The Battle of Sedan* was waning, Georges Méliès released his film *Le Manoir Du Diable*—considered to be the first film of the horror genre. In just three minutes in length, it contains a visual index of tropes and images which continue in the genre today—bats, devils, witches, &c.—though no doubt each with their own visual lineage—traceable to the spiritualist movements of the time by way medieval folklore. In his film, each of these characters enters and exits the static view of the camera in seemingly supernaturally manners—what were at the time, advanced editing techniques.<sup>2</sup> The film was not intended to evoke fear, but still—by image alone—began a trend in the production of increasingly distorted and horrific films. Its near immediate influence was felt, taken up by German Expressionist cinema wherein the design of the lighting and film sets were said to have subjectivity projected onto their production materials—*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari* (1920), by Robert Wiene, being a prominent example.<sup>3</sup>

Standing in contrast to expressionist set design's potential to activate a broad range of emotions, the haunted house, as a format, exchanges dynamism for intensity, and opts out of the nationalism of modern panoramas in favor of terror. Chris Heller, in *Smithsonian Magazine*, notes that haunted houses in America emerged in the 1930s, and were organized by the families residing in the buildings.<sup>4</sup> The haunted house, in this sense, is akin to the everyperson's panoramic encounter, in that it provides an immersive environment often cobbled together by amateurs. The hermetic nature of the experience as an image space, is predicated by the architecture of the house. This differs from modern panoramas, like *The Battle of Sedan*, which was housed in a specially constructed rotunda, the exterior of which did

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1 Grau, Oliver. *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.

2 Wilson, Karina. "Silent Horror: The Golem, Cabinet of Dr Caligari, Nosferatu, Häxan." *Horror Film History - Horror Films in the 1920s*. Accessed April 2019.

3 Eisner, Lotte. *The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt*. Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 2009.

4 Heller, Chris. "A Brief History of the Haunted House." *Smithsonian.com*. Accessed April 2019.

not hint at the content within. Haunted houses, on the other hand, make direct use of their architecture and locale. The contents—the domestic siting of terror and the joining of spiritualized images and technological illusions—are wholly integrated with the architecture; the building and its site becoming a part of the image.

Contemporary, roadside haunted houses have not strayed far from their roots as projects of the residents or owners, though they have been highly influenced by the *Haunted Mansion* at Disneyland, which opened in 1969. Not unlike the 19<sup>th</sup> century panorama, in which visitors were invited to sit or stand on a rotating platform to view the images at a mechanical pace, modern examples of haunted houses typically employ a predetermined pathway for visitor flow, in which the patrons experience a series of horrific images and physical starts. The route which each visitor is funneled through has a direct relationship to the novelesque structure of film with its beginning, middle and end, and no actions made by visitors will effect the outcome of the narrative. The trust in their own physical safety that visitors must have mirrors the willful ignorance of the apparatus of cinema which grounds experience of most films. Characters, or images of characters, included in the standard roadside haunted house begin with the cast of *Le Manoir Du Diable*—supernatural entities with sway in the physical world. They are joined by the more grotesque, and more human actors—the serial killers from the nighttime news programs; costumes of real-life sociopaths known for inflicting actual pain on actual people.

This secularization of the haunted house characters echoes some sentiments of *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*—the protagonist of which is a scientist, and perhaps the antithesis to religious or spiritual speculation. Dietrich Scheunemann writes in his formal analysis of Wiene's film that the reemergence of the doppelgänger (a trope that is integral to the film's plot), and its shift to cinema, is a symptom of the exploitation of film's technological possibilities via photographic technique.<sup>5</sup> While the Romantic, literary interest in the doppelgänger hinged on the potentiality of a tangible intervention envisioned by the readers, the emergence of this story in cinema secularizes and supplants the romantic notion with technological advancement. The director's employ of the doppelgänger trope as a way to parse modern technology opens a window into the sentiments of terror at the time—instead of a refocusing, the shift in the camera is more akin to trucking; the horizontal sliding of the camera's body to apprehend a wholly different, yet equally terrifying subject.

It is terror that is the singular emotion on which horrific genres sharpen their blade. It is this terror that is cutting the path through the roadside haunted house—moving the visitor this way and that—or progressing a film from one scene to the next. To remove its whetstone is to allow for the visitor flow to spiral out into a plurality of trajectories. All of the sudden, the costumed actors are on equal footing with the visitors; the cinema lights go on and reveal us all to be apparitions.

“What should I call it? As a philologist and man of words I baptized it, not without some liberty—for who could be sure of the proper name of the Antichrist?—with the name of a Greek god: I called it *Dionysian*”

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

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5 Scheunemann, Dietrich. *Expressionist Film: New Perspectives*. Rochester, N.Y: Camden House, 2011.