Emotional Realism and Actuality:
The Function of Prosumer Aesthetics in Film

Celia Lam

Abstract

Current trends in film and television production styles have favoured the use of aesthetics associated with prosumer and social media products. These aesthetics, including handheld shaky-cam, variable audio and open acknowledgement of the camera, have been utilised for their ability to imitate reality, to take away a little of the polish of professional film and television production and to inject the raw, ad hoc immediacy of actuality. Yet an emotional connection between a film and its spectator cannot be disregarded, and represents another form of reality in film: that of emotional realism. Indeed conventional cinema relies on aural and visual techniques to generate emotional authenticity for its characters and to align them with spectators as a means to encourage investment in a believable fictional world.

The application of techniques associated with real-world aesthetics in narrative contexts seems instinctively to be at odds with the aims of fictional cinema. Through a close analysis of *Chronicle*, this paper explores the function of prosumer aesthetics in a fictional context and examines how tropes of "reality" can inform emotional realism.

Key words: Prosumer aesthetics, production techniques, fiction film, realism, reality.

In recent years a series of films have been produced using the 21st century aesthetic of prosumer technologies that challenges the convention of classical fictional techniques and blurs the boundary between spectator, character and camera. In particular the aesthetic confronts the construction of emotional realism in narrative film. Within the parameters of a fictional world emotional realism manifests as emotional authenticity, generated through the application of specific cinematic techniques that align spectator and character. Experiences and reactions within the fictional world become imbued with veracity through emotional authenticity and form a foundation of believability on which (albeit diegetic) reality is based. The aesthetics of the prosumer seemingly abandon conventions that support alignment and emotional realism in favour of "real-world" mimicry. Yet these aesthetics have been used with increasing frequency in narrative films. This paper explores the function of prosumer aesthetics in a fictional context and examines how the tropes of reality can inform emotional realism.

Prosumer aesthetics are a blend of the raw, gritty and occasionally grainy imagery associated with consumer grade handheld video cameras, described by Lev Manovich as "DV realism," and the visual outcome of a recording lens infused with the movement and positioning of its human operator Mark Hansen terms the "haptic aesthetic" (11). As a set of technical and stylistic choices, the aesthetic mimics the everyday user's appropriation of a multi-lens environment in which the self-referential need to record and publish our lives in social media is enabled via lightweight and easily operated digital cameras and smart phones.

In particular the camera lens (and slaved audio – another feature of the prosumer aesthetic in which audio and vision is simultaneously edited to mimic the effect of on-camera microphones) is positioned, not in relation to the viewer (Metz in Rosen), or to itself as an external object viewing a profilmic event (Mulvey), but primarily in relation to the diegetic character as an acknowledged object of gaze. It also becomes an object of operation within the diegesis as the visceral, mobile and amateur stylistic tropes of prosumer-composed images are adopted to suggest a non-professional presence behind the lens. By extension, an authenticity associated with the amateur and the unmediated (perhaps incidental) capturing of reality as it happens is suggested. In application the techniques become "indexical, providing some truth-value of their referent…" (Landesman 34).

Indeed the challenge of the capturing and projecting lens lies in its function between the experiential "real world" of actuality and the perceptual "screening" of mediated reality. Through the camera's lens reality begins to lose its claim to actuality as it becomes possible to mould, shape, edit and re-contextualize the images of reality into *some other* meaning, thereby fictionalizing even documentary footage which purports to present unmediated fact. Indeed the documentary film's claim to actuality and an objective reality has been widely discounted by many scholars, who argue the genre's stylistic conventions are but techniques to support a highly subjective view of the

filmmaker's *version* of reality.[1] As Michael Renov states, "every documentary representation depends upon its own detour from the real, through the defiles of the audiovisual signifier" (7).

The earliest manifestation of such technologically mediated ambivalence is seen in photography, which presented problems by claiming to represent actuality. Yet, as Metz argues, a photograph of a real object is still only a reflection of reality. The "perceived is not really the object, it is its shade, its phantom, its double, its *replica* in a new kind of mirror" (Metz cited in Rosen 250). Thus the medium – in this case the camera lens and apparatus of projection – inhibits claims to reality. The image that is experienced via manufactured processes is, by default, reality rendered as illusion, a symbolic rather than iconic signifier of reality. It is for this reason that Andre Bazin eschews the convention of coverage – in which a scene is visually fragmented into separate shots and reconstituted in the edit – in favour of minimal camera movement, long takes and wide angles. The presence of the camera and the subjective signifiers of variable shot sizes interrupt the presentation of a reality that, while scripted and fictional can reflect a social realism that "tends to make more reality appear on the screen" (MacCabe 181).

Notions of truth, authenticity and reality in cinema take many forms. Thus while Bazin advocated for the presentation of a form of social realism in fictional film, cultural theorist Ien Ang supports the notion of a different inherent "truth" in narrative fiction. Writing about viewer reaction to the 1980s soap *Dallas*, Ang argues for an emotional realism that connotes rather than denotes, one in which the experiences and emotional responses of characters are judged based on their resonance with spectators' own lived experiences; the "'true to life' elements" (47) of the series. This emotional reality is achieved in part through the functions of plotting and characterization but also through the use of conventional filmmaking techniques, the "last shot of an episode is then nearly always a close-up of the face of the character concerned, which emphasizes the psychological conflict she or he is in" (53). The close up highlights the emotional nuances of the actor while at the same time signifying to the audience the relevance of the moment of emotion, and with the aid of music and performance, the emotional resonance the moment has for the narrative of the film.

These techniques create a certain emotional authenticity for the diegesis such that, even if the events of the plot are far removed from everyday reality, the emotional resonance they have for the characters in the plot constructs points of identification and empathy for a viewing audience. By becoming invested in the moments of

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[1] The terms "actuality" and "reality" are often used with some degree of fluidity and are defined in reference both to each other and to the factual; that is devoid of the imaginary. The origins of the words provide some distinction in which "actual" (late Latin, *actualis* = pertaining to acts, practical) and "real" (late Latin *realis/res* = relating to things/thing) are constituted as practical states of being (in actuality), and objects (the "real" thing). The associative notion of reality as a factual conceptualization of the world "as it is" is a result of the implications that actuality brings to the term (Erikson 453). The notions have been explored with some flexibility in the field of psychoanalysis where the relative interiority and exteriority of the terms are used interchangeably. Freud claims the "state-ness" of actuality when differentiating between the internal "thought-reality" and "external actuality" of patients who display a "disregard of the reality-test," while Erikson distinguishes between an external "phenomenal reality" (462) which analysts aim to free from "certain distortions" (462) and the internal activity of actuality as a "world of participation, shared with a minimum of defensive maneuvers and a maximum of mutual activation" (463). Yet a common conjecture is the relative malleability of "reality," which Erikson suggests, can be subject to "distortions" (462) and the inherent nature of actuality found in its "external" (Freud) manifestation. Thus there is an implicit suggestion that while actuality is in some way "fixed," reality can be reflected, represented, or altered.

emotion, the spectator can ease into a suspension of disbelief and connect with the narrative on an illusionary level. Spectators are invited to invest in the reality of the fiction not as a mirror of actuality but as a constructed "other world," in which the plausibility of the plotted events is closely linked to the emotional truth of the character's responses to the world, the events within the plot, and to other characters within the fiction. In order to do so the spectator is required to suspend disbelief and, in the words of Richard Allen, to "experience projective illusion" (139). Conventional filmmaking techniques encourage this projective illusion through the use of the aforementioned close up, while Mary Ann Doane's notion of the three spaces of cinema – the diegetic, screen and theatre – suggests the power of sound design to physically align spectator and character (cited in Rosen). Similarly emotional alignment and identification is assisted by the selection of musical score to cue an emotional response. As Neil McDonald states, "music can embody aspects of a character or a prevailing mood of pain and obsession" (73).

In the process of achieving projective illusion, audiences demonstrate a learned ability to read the cues of conventional filmmaking – continuity and montage editing, sound design and music – as signifiers of a fictional reality. Audiences inherently understand that to engage with the narrative they first need to read the images, not as a reflection of actuality but as a fictional reality, one in which the emotional reality of the construct is paramount to disengaging with their lived reality in order to enter the constructed world.

The 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project* used these genre-bound audience expectations to great effect when, in an effort to convince of the reality of their film's premise, directors Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick, appropriated the aesthetic of DV realism.[2] In essence the film is a mockumentary, albeit one that is deliberately styled as an observational documentary. Yet its approach to storytelling not only challenged the genre's claims to unmediated reality, but also efficiently blurred fact and fiction to expose audiences' conditioned reading of the techniques as signifiers for the real. In place of the carefully considered shots, editing, sound design and music normally associated with fictional storytelling, the film was presented as found footage and adopted a mobile, occasionally shaky and unfocused lens, replete with slaved audio and a narrative framework that accounted for the presence of a camera, which invited direct reference from its three main characters. Indeed it was the visceral "reality" of the technique that accounts for the believability of the film's premise and led audiences to read the film, not as stylized fiction but as truth: as a documented account of events leading up to the disappearance of the movie's three purportedly real film students while making a documentary on the mythical Blair Witch.

The Blair Witch Project was not the first film to adopt the found footage conceit (Peter Watkins' 1965 *The War Game* is an early example). However the plausibility of the 1999 outing is firmly rooted in the wider techno-cultural milieu of the time. The late 1990s saw a burgeoning Do-It-Yourself amateur media culture aided by the digitization of media and nascent sub-cultural potential of the Internet. In particular the proliferation of cheap digital cameras and affordable editing software encouraged

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[2] The expectation that the cues of conventional filmmaking techniques, such as continuity and montage editing, sound design and music, relate specifically to the construction of *fictional* diegetic worlds. Conversely, non-conventional filmmaking techniques, such as excessive Handycam, are the tools of documentary filmmakers who construct narratives based on *fact.*

non-professionals, ranging from enthusiasts to aspiring film students, to mimic the professional productions they witnessed in mainstream media. The fact that *The Blair Witch Project*'s three characters were film students meant their access to the "official" 16 mm film camera used was conceivable while the general availability of prosumer equipment lent their use of the secondary Handycam believability. Additionally the viral website created in the lead up to the release of the film fit, hand-in-glove, with the notion of the Internet as a repository for non-mainstream culture that was starting to gain currency at the time. A large number of audience "discovered" the mystery of the Blair Witch through a dedicated website that listed missing person reports for the three main characters, leading many audience members to believe in the authenticity of the "found footage" tag of the film (as was the intent of the filmmakers).

While the promotion for the film was swathed in an ambivalence that presented fact as fiction, it was the accurate appropriation of a non-professional production aesthetic that consolidated its claim to actuality. It both borrowed from and reflected a set of behaviours manifesting in contemporary youth culture, specifically the increased use of affordable production and editing equipment by a DVD generation who made shorts in their spare time. In echoing this real world behaviour, the film tapped into a set of preconceived significations of authenticity that intrinsically linked the aesthetics with an amateur producer attempting to adopt a professional stylization. Thus the inclusion of interviews, cutaways and establishing shots was believable within a narrative framework purporting to follow the filmmaking experiences of its protagonists. At the same time the juxtaposition of the (attempted) professional techniques to the decidedly amateur Handycam footage served to reinforce the authenticity of its claim as a record of unmediated reality.

For *The Blair Witch Project* to successfully present fiction as fact, the film needed to distract the audience from its inherently constructed nature. To achieve that, conventional cinematic techniques and the signification of the fictional they came to represent were necessarily discarded. The aesthetic of the prosumer was adopted in its stead precisely for its ability to signify 'truth' and to convince the audience to invest in the actuality of the narrative.

It is an aesthetic that served the fact/fiction narrative of *The Blair Witch Project* well. Yet more recent films have reflected a trend towards adopting prosumer techniques to serve highly fictionalized narratives in the science fiction (*Cloverfield,* 2008) and horror (*Paranormal Activity,* 2007) genres. As established, the fictionalized construct of narrative films clearly relies upon techniques that delineate reality from imagination and generate emotional authenticity. Prosumer aesthetics are built on indexical signifiers that suggest an actuality far removed from the constructed world of the diegesis, and constantly remind an audience of the reality of their everyday experience. The application of such techniques to the construction of a fictional narrative seems experimental at best, clichéd and gimmicky at worst. At the very least techniques indicative of reality would appear best suited to momentary self-referential gestures towards contemporary technological use rather than as legitimate cinematic tools.

Josh Trank's 2012 film *Chronicle* offers a means to examine the dramatic potential of a technique that lies between the seemingly incongruous "real world" styling of prosumer technology and the fictional construct of narrative. The film adopts the

aesthetic conventions of DV realism that characterizes other "found footage" films in the genre. However unlike *The Blair Witch Project* it was not filmed on a DV camera but shot on 35 mm film. The final vision was treated to give it a DV "feel." The decision to shoot on film was perhaps motivated by the wish for more latitude in deciding the final look of the film in post-production, or to ensure more technically accurate images as it was filmed by camera operators rather than the actors of the piece (Holben). Regardless of practical considerations, mimicking rather than capturing the prosumer aesthetic in-camera is indicative of a creative process that aspires to an outcome more complex than *The Blair Witch Project*'s claim to authenticity.

The plot of the film is in essence a study of psychological decline. Following the discovery of a mysterious alien rock three teenage boys: introverted Andrew, blasé Matt, and popular Steve – develop superhuman abilities that enable them to control objects by telekinesis and to manipulate electricity, giving them super strength and the power of flight. At first the boys use their powers for fun, but as their powers grow, they are soon confronted by the dangers of their abilities and their own dark natures. Ordinarily this type of plot is served by conventional cinematic techniques that enhance emotional beats within the unfolding narrative. As such the application of realistic prosumer tropes seems initially out of place. However *Chronicle* differs from other films in the DV realism genre by abandoning claims to being found. It does not establish a dramatic conceit in which the film itself is the unmediated account of a (past) cataclysmic event recorded by a witness. Instead the film contravenes the aesthetic as a stylistic choice not for its indexical signification of actuality, but for its potential as a point of identification and observation which serves to (re)enforce the emotional reality of the diegesis.

Chronicle: Emotional Reality through a Camera's Lens

A complex series of relationships are established between the capturing (and for the audience, viewing) lens and the film's main characters in which physical alignment extends to emotional allegiance and ultimately the construction of the camera as a character in its own right. In the process a camera-based emotional realism is achieved and enforced.

Alignment with Camera: Point of View (POV)

From the outset the camera is physically aligned with Andrew, showing the audience what Andrew wishes to represent of his own experience. The opening shot establishes Andrew and the main dramatic conceit of the film. Half hidden behind the eyepiece of his Canon XL1 MiniDV camera, Andrew announces that he will film all events to follow, presumably motivated as much by his fascination with cameras and filmmaking as with the wish to gather evidence of his father's violent and abusive behaviour. Matt and Steve, introduced through Andrew's lens, openly reference the camera thereby legitimizing its position within the diegesis.

Figure 1. Andrew in opening shot of *Chronicle* (2012)

Figure 2. Steve acknowledges the camera (*Chronicle*)

The viewing lens – that through which the audience sees the film – is associated with Andrew, operated, it is imagined, by the unseen character whose presence is only "felt" behind the lens. However this association is not exclusive. At a party attended by the majority of the school's student body Andrew is seen in frame, throwing into question the origin of the lens. The mystery is resolved when Andrew addresses Matt behind the lens, freeing the camera from its submission to Andrew and introducing the possibility of an associative mobility for the lens within the diegetic space.

As subsequent characters pick up and operate the camera, the lens becomes briefly associated with their viewing perspective, sharing the same physical space and experiential position as the character who carries and operates it, constituting what Jenna Ng calls the "first person lens based POV." It is not through a character's subjective POV that the lens sees but through a subjectively laden objectivity. While the camera records it offers a seemingly objective view of the fictional world, yet when Andrew's camera is passed to his friends they cease to be objects of the camera's gaze. When in physical possession of the camera, they draw the lens into their subjectivity and impose their perspective over the camera's look.

Figure 3. Drawn into Steve's subjectivity when he controls the camera (*Chronicle*)

At the same time, the shared possessive subjectivity of Andrew's camera is not the only view offered in the diegesis. The party scene also introduces Casey, seen first through the first person lens based POV of the camera-as-controlled-by-Matt. She also operates a camera – recording for her blog – and a quick cut to her lens establishes the film's second conceit; any lens is accessible. Inter-cutting between the two lenses offers a direct way of accessing the spatial perspective of the characters, and interjects a conventional shot-reverse-shot editing structure.

Figure 4. Casey's camera (*Chronicle*)

Figure 5. Matt seen through Casey's camera (*Chronicle*)

Through the first person lens based POV, the camera becomes momentarily associated with whoever controls it, aligned briefly with the viewing position of the character whose perspective it shares. However between characters is the potential threat of a disassociation from alignment, and thus a void in perspective with which to attribute the camera. Ng accounts for this by suggesting the anthropomorphized POV of the camera as viewing object. In films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield*, when a character looses control of the camera, as when Hud is attacked and killed by an alien in *Cloverfield*, its continued recording reinforces its independence as a viewing object outside of a character's control and constructs it as a character in its own right.

In *Chronicle*, Andrew's camera is afforded greater spatial mobility due to a narrative construct that gives Andrew the ability to levitate it. This allows Andrew to be seen in the camera's frame while still controlling it. Thus the first person lens based POV becomes turned in on itself. The perspective offered is that of Andrew's yet it is not his subjective viewing perspective of the diegesis – rather it is the view of the camera-as-viewing object, anthropomorphic but clearly controlled by Andrew. However unlike the restricted view of the operator offered by the limited framing in *The Blair Witch Project* or *Cloverfield*, the viewer is presented with a sweeping, free-floating lens reminiscent of conventional dolly or crane shots. While functionally under the control of the character, the camera becomes free of it in both perspective and physicality. The way in which the films handle this POV addresses some of the criticisms of the aesthetic which argue that the technique, while offering the semblance of mobility within the diegesis, actually restricts the range of views offered to an audience (Ng). When Andrew floats his camera throughout a scene in which he and Steve have a rooftop conversation, conventional framing techniques are invoked, as the lens adopts the slow, serene, push-in effect of a dolly track.

Figure 6. Andrew controls camera by telekinesis and is seen in frame (*Chronicle*)

Alignment with Camera: From Visual to Experiential

As the narrative progresses the camera's view is visually and then experientially aligned with Andrew's subjective experience of his life. In an introductory scene at school, Andrew is targeted by a group of bullies who attack not only him but also his camera. The attack is seen from the perspective of the camera in Andrew's hand; as Andrew is pushed and shoved so is the lens, pulling the camera into his subjectivity. Eventually it physically echoes Andrew's experience as a bully rips it from his hands and throws it to the ground, extending the alignment from the visual to the experiential as it receives the same treatment as the character it "sees" for.

Figures 7-9. Bullies take Andrew's camera (*Chronicle*)

Instilling Emotional Veracity

Later this experiential alignment extends to the emotional. Prolonged screen time suggests an allegiance between character and lens, which becomes increasingly symbiotic as the film progresses. The camera relies on Andrew to enable it to view, and by viewing to exist within the diegesis, while at the same time Andrew counts on the lens to witness for him the stark reality of his life, and by witnessing to help make sense of his domestic situation and his growing super human powers. As he refines his powers he starts to operate the camera by telekinesis, effectively demonstrating the extent to which the lens had become an extension of his physical being.

Fig. 10. Andrew controls camera by
telekinesis (*Chronicle*)

The way in which he relates to camera operation is also reflective of his emotional state; floating and carefree when Andrew, Matt and Steve experience the joy of flying; slow and pensive when Andrew experiments with levitation after an (off screen) admonishment from his father; and fast, visceral and aggressive when Andrew avenges himself on his school yard bullies. At the same time the camera's presence registers as a type of emotional support when Andrew receives his first on screen

beating from his father. Having set up the camera, half obscured, on his desk Andrew turns to confront the verbal and physical abuse that had only been intimated thus far.

Figures 11-13. Andrew's camera captures a beating and echoes his perspective (*Chronicle*)

The camera is not under his control however Andrew's gaze at the lens both before and after the beating draws the object of his gaze into his subjectivity, affirming his experience at the same time agreeing with his moral perspective. It is as if the camera is connected to Andrew on a cognitive and emotional level, and even though he does not control it, it is very much "on his side": understanding, sympathetic and reflective. It is a part of him. In the final scene of the film, Matt addresses the camera and Andrew simultaneously, reinforcing the man-machine fusion. The audience is invited not to view the camera in alignment with Matt – even though it is he who operates the camera – but to see it as a conduit to Andrew, or his memory at the very least.

Figure 14. Matt addressed Andrew via camera
(*Chronicle*)

Lens as Character

The camera functions first as Andrew's emotional doppelgänger however as the film progresses and Andrew becomes increasingly insular and destructive, it slowly gains autonomy and is constructed as an entity – albeit one representative of Andrew's humanity – in its own right. Unlike the recording eye of Ng's anthropomorphized POV however this camera is imbued with a type of emotional quality of its own. When his mother's medical funds run out, Andrew attacks and robs a group of youths before ransacking and destroying a service station, during which Andrew's camera becomes progressively removed from his subjective position.

Figure 15. Aerial view of robbery (*Chronicle*)

Figure 16. Camera returns to Andrew (*Chronicle*)

Throughout the duration of Andrew's assault on the group, his camera hovers above at a distance, seemingly seeking safety in objectivity. It looks down as if to judge the morality of Andrew's action from afar, only venturing closer when the act is complete and Andrew slumps by the side of the road, dejectedly clutching his spoils. In that instant the camera – or Andrew's remaining moral core which the camera has come to represent – seems to reach out to Andrew, offering comfort but warning against further violence, its abhorrence manifest in the physical distance between its viewing position and its controller in the preceding action. This is reinforced in the following scene in which Andrew's accidental destruction of a service station is shown only through the facility's security camera and not Andrew's own lens. It is as if the camera has abandoned him, signifying a complete disconnection between Andrew's diegetic experience and the camera's viewing position.

After the incident at the service station, Andrew and his camera are hospitalized. Andrew is confronted by his father who informs him of his mother's death, and blames him for her passing. Throughout this interlude the action is covered from two perspectives: a security camera inside the room providing a high angle view of the room and Andrew's camera set up on a tripod at the foot of his bed providing a mid-two shot of Andrew and his father. As his father becomes more irate, Andrew slowly wakes and with that his camera starts a slow push in. At the height of his anger Andrew's father motions to hit him across the head and Andrew reacts by grabbing his arm. At the same time the vision of the scene switches to the security camera and through it audiences witness the destruction of the wall and window in Andrew's room, along with his camera. With that, the last of Andrew's humanity is destroyed as he rises from his bed and proceeds to drop his father from the side of the building.
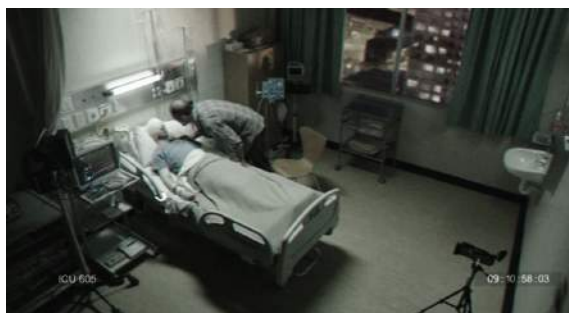
Figure 17. View from security camera (*Chronicle*)

Fig. 18. Mid-shot from Andrew's camera (*Chronicle*)

As if to reinforce the importance of the symbiotic relationship between character and lens, the film now disregards Andrew's subjectivity and offers Casey and Matt as

alternative aligning perspectives with whom to empathize. Some distance away, Matt senses Andrew's distress and travels to the hospital with Casey and her camera – through which the subsequent action is seen. He arrives in time to save Andrew's father, setting up a confrontation with Andrew that quickly deteriorates into an aerial battle. Without the characterization of an anthropomorphized lens, Andrew becomes objectified as a force of pure destruction, an anti-hero whose destruction becomes the task of the new, alternative, hero Matt. For as much as Andrew's control of the camera legitimized its position within the diegesis, the camera's presence also reflected an aspect of Andrew's vulnerability and sympathy as a character.

Lens as Character: Points of Comparison

In a way the characterization of the camera is made possible by the multiplicity of POV offered throughout the film. The destruction of Andrew's camera at the beginning of the third act allows the film to fully exploit the ability to access and see through any camera lens. Casey's camera, helicopter, news and security cameras are utilized in quick succession as the viewer's perspective is flicked from lens to lens in pursuit of Matt and Andrew's aerial confrontation. When they pause at the Chicago Space Needle, an abundance of digital devices are appropriated to give the viewer access to the action. The multitudes of lenses (with the exception of Casey's camera) have no specific character to whom they can align, instead mimicking the voyeuristic gaze of the general audience as, phones and tablets raised, the (diegetically insignificant) bystander in the film witnesses and records the climatic events.

Figure 19. Multiple lenses (*Chronicle*)

While serving the function of showing the viewer the action, the multiple and fleeting lens-based POVs were exploited to delineate the intimate, emotional connection that Andrew, his camera and the audience had established. By presenting the external lenses of the bystanders as cold, emotionless and voyeuristic (interested only in the novelty of the spectacle and less in the human tragedy behind it), Andrew's camera is established as a main character in its own right. In contrast to the measured, serene and at times beautiful images captured by Andrew's camera, these mass POV lenses are fleeting, grainy and harshly pragmatic both in aesthetics and in function: they are dispensed with once serving their purpose of tracking the action. The privileged viewing position of Andrew's camera is thus reinforced as the most legitimate, emotionally truthful camera with which to identify.

Aural Alignment: Heard First

For Doane, the placement of speakers in the cinema theatre, and the subsequent distribution of sound through those speakers creates a "sonorous envelope" (343) that recalls the imprinting of the mother's voice of the infant before birth. In particular, the human voice, endowed with "'presence' guarantees the singularity and stability of a point of audition" (Doane 343). Thus, while Andrew's voice is not representative of the prenatal mother, it is to his voice that the spectator is aligned. The film opens on black and for the first thirty seconds the most immediate and "present," both in proximity and vocal quality, sound is Andrew's voice as he argues with his (aurally distant) father through his bedroom door. From that point forward, Andrew's physical location behind the lens constructs him as the most "present" character as the film extends the conceit of self-shot footage to the audio. As Andrew is the camera operator, his voice is the closest to the imagined on-camera microphone and thus the clearest and richest in timber.

The film does not strictly conform to the prosumer audio conceit however. For the most part, particularly in the first two acts of the film, the audio is slaved to the image and shifts abruptly when the visuals change. There is no musical score and the proximity of characters and events to the camera determines the audio quality and strength. However the film does not shy away from the use of sound effects, introducing whooshes (when flying), thumps (when punches are thrown), and high-pitched digital distortions mixed with a low hum (when the alien rock is discovered). It adopts the convention of adding non-diegetic sounds to reinforce the fictional reality of the diegesis at the same time conforming to audience's generic expectations of how flying, fighting and alien objects *should* sound. In this regard the film builds in a backdoor, enabling the audio some degree of conceptual freedom and bending the prosumer aesthetic so that a more aurally coherent landscape can be created.

A more flexible approach to sound design also enables the use of aural techniques to enhance Andrew's emotional experience, adding a level of alignment with his character. The effect is first used towards the end of the second act when Andrew uses his super strength to retaliate against his father. In the silence after the confrontation Andrew floats his camera towards him and a low protracted whoosh-hum is introduced, reflecting the beginning of his psychological decline. In a later scene after Andrew's hospitalisation, the sound is again used to indicate Andrew's control over the camera and his growing emotional trauma. As Andrew wakes from a state of unconsciousness, the camera slowly tracks forward accompanied by the low whoosh-hum subtly mixed under his father's vocals. Outwardly Andrew shows no signs of change. However the sound effect signals he is awake and as his father's diatribe reaches its peak a sustained high pitched tone is introduced, reflecting a psychological tension that has reached its limit. When the building finally explodes, the visual and aural release of tension acts as a turning point for Andrew's submission to his role as the ultimate predator.

Conclusion

The prosumer aesthetic is an indexical sign of actuality. However, in a fictional context, the presumptive connotations of reality are challenged by the technique's ability to recontextualize the chronicled events. In this instance an unmediated reality

is not denoted. Instead the subjective experience of the fictional character is enriched by the connotative implications of the aesthetic; the events may not be real, but for the character within the dramatic framework, the *experience* of it is and the aesthetics reflect this reality. By restricting the spectator to the same experiential field as the character, the distance between the spectator's objective gaze and the subjective experience of the character is reduced, thus enhancing an emotional alignment and reinforcing the emotional reality of the film. When the camera lens is constructed as a character in its own right it offers a midpoint of alignment in which the emotional resonance of a scene can be connoted through visuals alone. In this way, more so than with conventional techniques, the lens is endowed with emotion independent from music, sound, and the gaze of character or viewer. Constructed as a character, it takes on the "lifelike" (Ang) qualities of an emoting entity within the diegesis.

Chronicle's appropriation of the prosumer aesthetic does not, like *The Blair Witch Project* or some of its contemporaries, seek to convince its audience of the authenticity of its content, nor does it construct a sensation of recorded reality. Rather the application of handheld camera and slaved audio techniques offers a means to bring the audience within close psychological proximity of its characters – observational if not experiential. As such themes of affirmation, self-destruction and redemption find equal expression (literally) through visual manifestation, performance and narrative progression. By abandoning the convention of fictional techniques, *Chronicle* is thus rendered as a more interesting study of psychological decline, and ultimately a more complex film.

There is no doubt that these techniques will continue to be explored and applied in the unconventional telling of conventional narratives that challenge and confront the boundaries between spectral, character and technological gazes, and which aim to blur the line between fictional representation and the indexical symbolism of the apparently real.

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