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Restoring Relics – (Re)-releasing *Antrum* (2018) and film as folk horror

Lauren Stephenson

‘Since the dawn of cinema we’ve been making movies about Hell and the devil, and they’ve been ‘just films’, so they’ve been safe. *Antrum* is not safe.’

- *Antrum* (2018)

In late 2019, a newly released found footage film caused quite a stir on the festival circuit. The film was supposedly screened to only a handful of viewers, and claimed to contain the remaining footage from a long-lost horror film, *Antrum*. This footage, however, was not your average recovered reel. *Antrum* is cursed, or so the mythology goes; according to its publicity, the film is supposedly implicated in the untimely and violent deaths of many who have dared watch it. Whilst the notion of the ‘haunted film’ is nothing new to the horror genre (see *Ringu* (Nakata, 1998), *V/H/S* (Bettinelli-Olpin et. al., 2012) or the *Video Palace* podcast (Braccia and Monello, 2018-present)) *Antrum* is distinct in its self-reflexive manipulation of the discourse surrounding the horror genre at large. Taking the myth-making practices that so often occur between horror and its audiences, and echoing the ‘curses’ of *Poltergeist* (Hooper, 1982) or *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), the film creates a folk horror relic of film itself. *Antrum* demonstrates how, in the digital age, folk horror finds its relics in the analogue realm; the ancient bones and leatherbound tomes replaced by film stock and VHS tapes. This chapter intends to explore the space that *Antrum* occupies at the intersection between folk horror and found footage, authenticity and myth¹.

Purportedly filmed in the late 1970s, on grainy 35mm film stock, *Antrum* tells the story of a teenage girl, Oralea, and her younger brother, Nathan, who go in search of the gateway to Hell. Their pet dog, Maxine, has been euthanised in the opening scene, having bitten Nathan in an

¹ As *Antrum* is set up as a film within a film, I’ll hereby refer to the narrative film (the recovered footage) as *Antrum*, and the wider framing of this footage (including interviews and excerpts) as *Antrum 18* to allay confusion.

unprovoked attack. Nathan is haunted by the idea that the circumstances surrounding her death have prevented his beloved dog from entering Heaven. In a bid to pacify and reassure her brother, Oralee constructs an elaborate mythology, pieced together from various religious beliefs and superstitions. She sets Nathan a quest – to go into the woods, unearth Hell’s gateway and release Maxine’s soul from torment.

The act of unearthing, so central to the folk horror at large, is put to considerable use here. The film itself includes multiple acts of digging and discovery, which are enhanced by repeated slow pan of the camera from below the earth to above. From the film’s opening to its close, therefore, *Antrum* emphasises its own ‘ambivalent vertiginousness’, described by Chambers as ‘[the] dizzying sense of the history “beneath” one’s feet and the presence of the past within the present’, and a central tenet of the folk horror text (2022, 18). This sense of history is not only evident in the multiple acts of *literal* unearthing that occur during *Antrum*’s original, fictional, narrative and footage, but also within the repeated emphasis on *Antrum*’s own unearthing as lost film, recounted throughout *Antrum 18* and its publicity. 25 years after it was allegedly lost, the film stock itself is ‘unearthed’, and *Antrum 18*’s filmmakers, Laicini and Amito, set about curating and restoring the film to circulate to audiences once more. *Antrum*’s unearthed footage is prefaced by documentary-style interviews, which are themselves an exercise in excavation. These segments further investigate and illuminate the troubled history and fearsome reputation of this cursed text, and contribute to the authenticity of *Antrum* as (re)found footage.

The presence of a documentary-style introduction evokes *Antrum 18*’s found footage predecessors (yet another instance of unearthing, perhaps): texts such as *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980), *Ghostwatch* (Manning, 1992), *The Poughkeepsie Tapes* (Dowdle, 2008), *Hell House LLC* (Cognetti, 2015) all make use of ‘mockumentary’-style framing. In asserting *Antrum 18*’s existence as a media artefact through this introduction, the film as a whole also functions as an effective example of Bolter and Grusin’s ‘hypermediacy’ (2000), whilst the diegetic narrative of the

Antrum in isolation readily satisfies the generic expectations and conventions of a folk horror text. Quite deliberately, this reminds the audience of their status and situation as a viewer, rather than participant, of folk horror; indeed, *Antrum 18*'s revelatory horrors rely heavily upon the erosion of the audience's conception of themselves as distinct from the action on-screen. The film challenges the separation of audience and screen by directly threatening the audience with the film's alleged curse, undermining the expected invulnerability of horror's audience to the events on-screen and directly implicating them in the (perhaps inadvisable) archaeological work which the film as a whole claims to undertake. The medium of film hereby becomes a threshold, not only between worlds but between past and present, between fact and fiction.

It is in the liminal space between states that *Antrum 18* finds itself mining the found footage mode not merely in a practical sense (ie. *Antrum* is footage which is found) but also through its ideology and intention. 'Found footage horror seeks (not always successfully) to create a space where spectators can enjoy having their boundaries pushed, where our confidence that we know where the lines between fact and fiction lie are directly challenged.' (Heller-Nicholas 2014, 4). *Antrum 18*'s opening interview segment consults a range of 'experts': academics, film festival programmers and fans. Some of these interviewees play themselves, and do indeed occupy the roles attributed to them. Others are fictional, brought to the screen by actors, placing the viewer in further doubt as to the 'separateness' between film and reality, and further challenging the supposed and expected invulnerability of the fiction film spectator. Cultivating uncertainty regarding the truth and authenticity of the film as a whole also lends legitimacy to the 'curse' attached to the text. As Sayad (2016, 45) suggests: '[the] combination of the work's uncertain fictional status and low production values playfully collapses the boundaries separating the depicted universe from reality, and by extension challenges the ontological status of the fiction film as self-contained object. The horror movie is thus presented not as mere artifact but as a fragment of the real world, and the implication is that its material might well spill over into it.' And spill over it does.

Throughout the documentary segment, *Antrum's* title card is repeatedly shown, both in colour and in black and white, and often at moments that seem incongruous to the documentary's structure (as though suggesting that the image was not deliberately edited in by the creators). With its repeated appearance the film text itself seems to move closer and closer to the present moment and the present viewer; and with the mounting insinuation that the filmmakers no longer have complete control over the film they're making (or indeed, restoring). These early signs of filmic corruption take the place and fulfil the function of the intra-diegetic camera so well-used in found footage; a convention that paradoxically mimics 'the aesthetics and modes of representation proper of documentary filmmaking, while at the same time signposting their fantastic ontological status through the presence of fictionality clues' (Formenti 2020, 10). *Antrum* does not make use of such a camera, despite its mockumentary interlude. Therefore, the reassurance the camera often provides in found footage is also absent; the intervention of the unearthed film into the talking heads segment does not similarly serve to remind the viewer that 'we are 'witnessing' these horrific events from a secure location' or that we are 'viewing them in an artistic context' (Formenti 2020, 16). Rather, the *Antrum's* trespass into the opening interviews seeks to further verify and legitimise the supernatural power of the film stock and the images it holds, whilst also serving to situate the film within the developing narrative of 'cursed' cinema (the random and repeated appearance of the title card unavoidably recalls the notorious subliminal shots of *The Exorcist*).

Through its recovery, then, the lost film stock has itself become the locus of horror. Where found footage, as Dudenhoffer notes, employs the 'demon-as-camera' (2014, 154) *Antrum 18* employs demon-as-film. *Antrum's* 35mm form supplants found footage's video-camera as the 'centripetal catalyser' of the film's action and narrative (Surace 2019, 27), and in so doing, as Wallace suggests, 'the medium itself... rather than the apparatus in its totality... becomes monstrous' (2021 530). The transformation of the film form *into* film content, enabled and enhanced through the fear and fascination with which *Antrum* is treated in the mockumentary segment, not only complicates found footage's 'observational mode' (Heller-Nicholas, 2014) through disempowering both the

camera and the filmmaker. It also corroborates one of Scovell's formal ideas of folk horror; in recalling 35mm film as a cursed analogue form within the digital age, *Antrum 18* stands as a 'work which creates its own folklore through various forms of popular conscious memory, even when it is young in comparison to more typical folkloric and antiquarian artefacts of the same character' (Scovell 2017, 7).

Just as the recovery of the skull catalyses the supernatural events of *The Blood on Satan's Claw* (Haggard, 1971), or the unearthing of the whistle precipitates a haunting in *Oh Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad* (James, 1904), the film reel is similarly employed as a returning relic of past cultural practices and as a conduit or enabling medium for the return of an ancient evil. Film itself hereby acquires a monstrous power or presence, whilst the true monster (the orchestrator of filmic corruption or possession) finds concealment and is left to conjecture. Reflecting Carroll's definition of the horror monster as 'interstitial and/or contradictory in terms of being both living and dead' (1990, 32), film stock as a medium demonstrates a 'dead' (outmoded) form, whilst its embodiment as a diegetic relic simultaneously represents a living entity; a tangible body just as susceptible to harm, manipulation and possession as its human counterpart. As Surace notes of conventional found footage, 'the video camera assumes a double role, on the one hand recording the actions of the characters and generating the film and on the other becoming an actor, a body in the film itself.' (Surace 2019, 27). In this case, it is 35mm film that is embodied through its diegesis, however, and its diegetic status is simultaneously complicated through its insistence that the folk horror elements of the narrative are experienced extra-diegetically. As a folk horror relic with its own curse attached, it is the audience who are directly implicated in the 'discovery' of this film stock and its monstrous power. Film's interstitial monstrosity is further compounded by the space it occupies between past and present. *Antrum* leans heavily on the liminality of analogue film – a relic medium, a record of past actions, whose narratives and characters nonetheless exist in a state of 'present-ness' when replayed by the viewer.

This liminal monstrosity is compounded as *Antrum 18's* interview segment comes to a close; we are shown archival footage of a Budapest theatre, entirely ablaze, as our narrator explains the connection between the footage and a rare screening of *Antrum* that took place in the theatre in 1988. We hear that the fire began during said screening, killing all 56 members of the film's audience. We hear from one of the investigators on this case, Konstantin Asztalos, who confirms that evidence points to multiple fires starting simultaneously from within the audience. Asztalos's mention of film stock's flammability serves to remind us of the risk or danger inherent to film's very form (once again recalling Surace's comments regarding the medium as catalyst (2019, 27)), whilst the archival quality of the footage itself demonstrates *Antrum's* simultaneous existence within both an industrial past and the audience's present.

The contents of the rediscovered footage itself are, in many ways, unremarkable and all too familiar, but do a compelling job of recreating the aesthetic and narrative concerns of the 1970s (there are shades of *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (Craven, 1977) and *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973) here, among many other influences). Moreover, they tap into the anxieties around rural space and socioeconomic class that so occupy canonical folk horror narratives. *Antrum* makes liberal use of the North American 'shatter-zone' (Moon and Talley 2010) and the pervasive horror archetype of the monstrous rural poor. The men who attempt to sacrifice Oralee and Nathan by burning them in a metal structure of Baphomet's likeness are "degenerate country folk" (Murphy in Janisse 2021) whose attempts at sacrificial ritual recall the canonical *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973), their efforts all the more monstrous for the fact that their victims/sacrifices are children.

These monstrous 'folk' themselves appear to represent, or indeed exist in, a time apart from their victims; what little we see of them and their way of life recalls a rural past we might recognise, once again, as homage to Hooper's *Texas Chainsaw* – a film which similarly explored the notion of the monster as chronologically 'out-of-step' with their young victims, whose 'present-ness' is

undeniable in the same way as Oralee and Nathan's. More broadly, the appearance of these two male aggressors resonates with common reading that the 'folk' of folk horror are exoticised and othered through the lens of 'culture shock'. Communities assumed to be long-dormant or, indeed, eradicated by imperialist expansion are found to re-emerge once again within folk horror, a subgenre which Chambers recognises as 'an emergent cinematic subgenre premised upon complex fetishizations of historical and cultural Otherness.' (Chambers 2021).

The inherent 'folkness' and otherness of the film's later sequences is further compounded by the invocation of Baphomet, themselves a pagan deity representative of ancient religion and ritual. However, as with many folk horrors, the peripheral presence of these ancient Gods serve as a red herring; Oralee's initially playful mythologies of Hell and evil are made manifest through the arrival of a *human* threat, not a supernatural one. Interwoven into this complex navigation of past, present, good, evil and the notion of sacrifice is the 'body' of the rural landscape itself. The space Oralee has chosen for their exertion is one imbued with death and tragedy, a space which, despite its bucolic beauty, seems to attract death and decay. The forest is a place where people come to end their lives – indeed, Oralee and Nathan come across a lone man who, unbeknownst to them, has visited the forest that day to complete suicide. The man's rage and sadness at being disturbed is not fully contextualised until we realise that he is, in fact, the hanging figure visible in the film's title card (the very same one that interrupted *Antrum 18's* opening mockumentary segment).

In a final nod to the diegetic film's folk horror inspiration, *Antrum* represents a breakdown of contemporary values and social systems as Oralee and Nathan leave the safety of the urban and move closer to the heart of the forest. In particular, the film infers that something is amiss in the family unit – a staple of institutional success and stability in the era of the film's supposed creation (the 1970s). In taking responsibility for Nathan's grieving and recovery after the sudden loss of his dog, Oralee steps into a traditionally parental role and therefore poses questions about the stability and health of the nuclear family unit (and, by extension, the patriarchal institutions of which it is a

part). Through the conspicuous absence of their parents, Oralee and Nathan themselves come to represent the stagnation or failure of the family unit, the corrupting influence of the land on its inhabitants, and the wider corrupting influence of an evil masquerading as diegetic, but actually able to traverse the boundary between film and audience.

Antrum's aesthetic authenticity is central to its operation as a folk horror resurgence text; as Scovell (2017, 167) notes in his comprehensive attempt at a definition of this particularly elusive form, modern folk horror is '[w]ork that reflects nostalgia [through] succumbing to past visions of Folk Horror's primary era'. It is no coincidence, then, that *Antrum's* filmmakers have mined the modern horror canon and 1970s filmmaking practices in particular, evoking with them the spectres of folk and horrors past and present. In the age of digital filmmaking, *Antrum* once again employs 'culture shock' tactics in presenting the audience with a worn, degraded image which is synonymous with cult filmmaking of a much earlier filmmaking era. These familiar yet chronologically distant practices and aesthetics are then corrupted, made strange, by moments of supernatural trespass. The coherence and stable chronology of the narrative film is gradually eroded and confused as the film becomes increasingly punctuated by the momentary appearance of demonic symbols (which appear to have been scratched into the film itself), religious iconography and excerpts of a snuff film (which have been mysteriously edited into the film at random intervals). These interruptions serve to further compromise and corrupt *Antrum's* narrative coherence and consistency, whilst once again designating the film medium as one which is inherently vulnerable to manipulation, and characteristically proximate to the strange, the unknown, and the unsafe.

Antrum's narrative, corrupted and interrupted as it is, therefore becomes secondary to the tangible, textual existence of the film stock itself, 35mm film becomes the horrific vehicle or conduit, enabling the past to return. Where, in other found footage texts, the camera becomes diegetic, here it is the recovered film reels which occupy that central diegetic space. Material concerns quite deliberately supersede narrative ones; the locus of the horror is not what's on screen, but is rather

found within the very fabric of the analogue film technologies that make the screening possible. The well-known vulnerabilities and fallibilities of 35mm film are exploited and expanded to include a vulnerability to possession and supernatural manipulation. What has the analogue enabled, concealed and then released upon its unearthing? This curse or possession of the medium itself, along with its 35mm aesthetic, also allows the film to transcend some of the challenges posed to a folk horror in the digital age, namely the risk that our contemporary society's interactivity threatens to undermine one of the central tenets of folk horror: isolation. Isolation is, arguably, recovered here (in a metaphorical sense, at least) through the alienating experience of the interrupted and corrupted aesthetic of *Antrum*, intended to jar an audience used to the high-definition and smooth lines of digital filmmaking. In manipulating and making horrific the comparative limitations and fallibilities of film stock in the era of digital filmmaking, the recovery and recirculation of *Antrum* evokes a return to (or of) analogue, and its (re)discovery and return codes *Antrum* and the film that holds it as folk relic. With this, the safety and security of the digital world (and the expected distance between film and audience) is undermined and supplanted by horrors which both pre-date and find a home within film itself.

That *Antrum 18* actively seeks to erode or compromise the border between screen and audience evokes early film history and, in particular, early public film screenings, when the moving picture on screen appeared as a kind of sorcery, an experience that simultaneously fascinated and unsettled its audiences. Tales of spectators fleeing from the Lumieres' *Arrival of the Train* (1896), so convinced were they that the train would burst from the screen and into the theatre, have been passed into cinematic lore despite their veracity long being disputed, and appear to demonstrate our inherent scepticism regarding the irreality of the frame. This sublime attraction and experience of cinema itself vacillates between complete trust (suspension of disbelief) and inherent mistrust ('it's only a movie'), and nowhere is this more evident than in the horror film and the longevity of its appeal to audience. As Daniel notes, this attraction-repulsion dynamic 'is not regulated merely by scopophilia and fear, but more fully by the intensification of the lived-body experience of the spectator' (Daniel

2020, 31). This simultaneous bodily investment in, and mistrust of, the film text continues to make itself evident through 'real-world' allegations made against 'cursed' films such as *The Omen* (Donner, 1976) and *The Exorcist* – productions that may have had more than their fair share of misfortune, but which audiences (and marketing departments) begin to imbue with some kind of otherworldly, malevolent power that removes control and autonomy from the creators themselves and affords film itself some form of occult agency.

Along these lines, it is telling that since its general release in 2020, there continues to be a conspicuous dearth of writing on *Antrum*, outside of fan-sites and Reddit threads. Very few major publications have provided reviews, those that have provide typically positive, but consistently vague, accounts of the film and its potential as cursed artefact. This absence of the usual journalistic and critical saturation that anticipates a film's widespread release only serves to further add to the folkloric elements of *Antrum* as a real-world cursed text or relic. (This author is not ashamed to admit that she herself googled 'is *Antrum* cursed?' on multiple occasions before watching the film, and it seems there's a consensus of ambivalence regarding this particular question and its answer). Film, then, has long held the capacity to become a folk horror-esque relic, and this capacity is seemingly realised with the 'rediscovery' of *Antrum*; the unearthing of both the film and its curse call to mind the bones, books and ancient ruins of folk horrors past, whilst the use of documentary-style framing (and a marketing campaign that relied heavily on selling the film as legitimately cursed) situate the film firmly within found footage discourse.

In the way that canonical folk horror (such as Gladwell's *Requiem for a Village* (1976)) utilised the land and its folk horror connotations to mourn the erosion of pre-industrial rural life, *Antrum* serves as a requiem to film. We, as viewer, fulfil the role of discoverer in watching *Antrum* (a role we are often asked to play in found footage) and the film itself represents a past and a technology lost, or forcibly destroyed, by the relentless progression of time and technology. Film in *Antrum 18* becomes a proxy for the land; in its manipulation and moderation it becomes harmful, perhaps even

vengeful, in much the same way we see the land work against the protagonists of M.R. James' short stories or the women of *The Witchfinder General* (Reeves, 1968). Selected histories and traditions become indelibly printed upon the film stock, its return could bring welcome nostalgia, but we risk uncovering something far darker and more dangerous. Furthermore, the erosion and instability of the overtly fictional elements of *Antrum* demonstrate a complex, unreliable and easily corrupted relationship between audience and these said histories and traditions – an apt reflection in the age of misinformation and long overdue reckonings with incomplete and incorrect colonial histories. *Antrum 18* invites the viewer to make a choice; discard superstition and engage, or walk away. Beyond all else, *Antrum* is a compelling and self-reflective commentary on the irresistible draw of the unknown or the unexplained, a tribute to the nature of horror cinema itself. To return to the film's opening statement; *Antrum* is not safe, and that is exactly why we watch it.

Daniel observes of found footage that: 'within these films, an affective surplus is often generated by that which we specifically cannot see: the out-of-frame.' (2020, 54) – *Antrum's* 'out of frame' momentarily invades the frame, in a variety of insidious ways. These momentary infractions not only serve to remind the audience of the forces and horror existing and occurring outside of the narrative film, but also work effectively to undermine a viewer's confidence in what they have, and have not, seen. Through encouraging uncertainty regarding the film's provenance and history, 'the medium itself... rather than the apparatus in its totality... becomes monstrous... the textual bursts become manifestations of the creatures whose presence can be implied – paradoxically – by the overwhelming experience of their absence' (Wallace 2021, 530). The film's ability to utilise fragmented image and audio to increase the affective power of the film situates *Antrum 18* firmly within a broader found footage tradition. Daniel continues; '[f]ound footage horror specifically manipulates the intensity of its sounds and images through the freedom it possesses to exploit the out-of-frame more fully, a freedom granted by its realist form: given that it purports to be a document assembled from previously recorded footage, the repeated failures to 'properly' frame the content being recorded can often be ascribed to the exigencies of the horrific situation.' (54).

Whilst *Antrum's* codification as fiction film is not the text we are most used to seeing recovered in the found footage mode, it nonetheless operates in similar ways and its realism is achieved not through proving the authenticity of the footage itself, but through the convincing portrayal of the film's fabric as a cursed object.

Instead of the degradation, corruption and interruption of the image signalling, as it does in so many found footage films, the impending doom of the characters on-screen, the glitching that takes place in *Antrum*, being as it is extra-diegetic and happening outside of and apart from the narrative film, is a cue to the audience; they are the ones whose precarity is being signalled through the imperfections of the film's images. Surace notes of formal found footage that 'bodies are offered up to the cameras as sacrificial victims, mediated through the screen and the film' (2019, 35). In shifting agency and monstrosity from apparatus to medium, and designating 35mm film as folk horror 'relic', *Antrum 18's* implication is that we, the current spectators, are to become the sacrificial body. If, as Wallace suggests, 'the film strip... becomes emblematic of the 'skin' that... separates the human body from the monstrous' (2021, 530), the corruption of that film strip at the hands of *Antrum's* unspecified 'meta-monster' works to situate the monstrous and the human (spectator's) body in the same space, external to the artistic frame.

In conclusion, *Antrum's* horror derives from its immediate acknowledgement of its existence as a film. In moments, *Antrum's* narrative as fictional, whilst its mockumentary framing simultaneously insists upon the film's extra-diegetic existence and expounds upon and reinforces the film's place in a 'real world' chronology and history. This emphatic insistence upon authenticity through exposure embodies '[t]he paradox – and power – of found footage' which, Heller-Nicholas continues, 'is that its particular type of realism hinges explicitly upon exposing itself as a media artifact' (7). What makes *Antrum 18* distinct within the found footage canon, though, is its active updating of the folk horror 'relic'. Through its narrative and its marketing, *Antrum 18* creates its own mythology to attach to the physical object of film itself – including its own connections to lived history and an

institutional and generic past. It then works hard to establish and legitimise itself as an unearthed artefact, one which holds secrets of people, cultures and practices lost. In doing so, *Antrum* becomes a 'post-screen' folk horror experience (Ng 2021) a film that 'uses folklore... to imbue itself with a sense of the arcane for eerie, uncanny or horrific purposes' (Scovell 2017, 7) to corrupt and effect movement in the boundaries between on-screen action and off-screen affect. The result is a film which moves fluidly between found footage and folk horror, and shakes the resolve of even the most hardened sceptics. *Antrum* is an endurance test, which challenges the viewer to keep watching as the security of narrative and screen unravel and something far more sinister takes root. A film whose history and curse, real or unreal, linger on the viewer's mind long after the credits have rolled.

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