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**Book Section:**

Madill, A. (2024) Bela Lugosi's Haunted Mirror: Spontaneous Deployment of Lacanian Concepts in Rending Paranormal Experiences. In: French Psychoanalysis Revisited. *Annals of Theoretical Psychology*, 20. Springer, Cham, Switzerland, pp. 33-52. ISBN: 978-3-031-68533-0. ISSN: 0747-5241. EISSN: 2512-2207.

[https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-68534-7\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-68534-7_3)

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**Bela Lugosi's Haunted Mirror:  
Spontaneous sense-making around the *objet a***

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*Annals of Theoretical Psychology*, Vol.20. Springer.

**Acknowledgements**

This analysis benefitted enormously from insights provided by the Lacan Reading Group of the University of Leeds UK, in particular Dr Brendon Nicholls and Dr Nicolas Ray. I am also grateful to Professor Hoare Klempe for organizing and securing funding for the workshop on *New Perspectives on French Psychoanalysis* at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in December 2022 and for the feedback I received. This article formed the basis of an online presentation for *Lacan in Scotland* organized by Dr Calum Neill which can be viewed at <http://tinyurl.com/2j93bzhp> The transcript on which this analysis is based is available on request from the author at [a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:a.l.madill@leeds.ac.uk). For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

## **Bela Lugosi's Haunted Mirror:**

### **Spontaneous sense-making around the *objet a***

#### **Abstract**

The first aim of this article is to provide an example of the spontaneous deployment of Lacanian concepts in the rendition of disturbing experiences by narrators naïve to psychoanalytic theory. The second aim is to explore the applicability of Lacanian theory for understanding experiences of the paranormal. The text analysed is a 27 minute sequence from the television mini-series *Deadly Possessions*. In it, Cindy Lee and her daughter Irene relate a story about the murder of Cindy's Uncle Bob, Frank Saletri, who lived in Bela Lugosi's old house. They are experiencing traumatic disturbances around the mirror that, we are told, was in the bedroom during the murder and want to donate it to the host's Haunted Museum. A Lacanian reading of the text is provided which draws on the following concepts: mirror stage, primal scene, the uncanny, *objet a*, and the *fundamental fantasy*. A reflection is then offered with regard to the aims of the analysis.

#### **Introduction**

Lacanian theory can be opaque and difficult to understand. Moreover, while its concepts were developed in the context of therapeutic practice, it can be hard to see how Lacanian theory illuminates the experiences of everyday life. Hence, the first aim of this article is to provide an example of the spontaneous deployment of Lacanian concepts in the rendition of disturbing experiences by narrators naïve to psychoanalytic theory. In so doing, I seek to demonstrate how at least some of Lacan's key concepts can resonate strongly with mundane accounting practices expressing and explaining the 'felt sense' or 'lived reality' of trauma.

The second aim is to explore the applicability of Lacanian theory for understanding experiences of the paranormal. Stories help us communicate our experiences to others and, in turn, to make sense of the world through shared narrative conventions (Bakhtin, 1981). Stories of the paranormal have a stockpile of genres from which draw, such as gothic, horror, and true crime, alongside the usual devices of conversational interaction when spooky experiences are discussed with others (Wooffitt, 1992). Many paranormal tales are presented,

and received, as fictional entertainment. Others, however, espouse to be true, although this, itself, is a not uncommon strategy to enhance the impact of creative works.

The text on which this analysis is based is a piece of television entertainment which tells a tale of the paranormal around an artefact with contested provenance (e.g., Biddle, 2021). As such, it sits in the liminal space between truth and fiction as, arguably, do the formations of the unconscious. Hence, in undertaking my analysis, I will take my cue from Bond (2013) who describes his use of Lacanian theory with regard to crime scene photographs as “above all, not a search for some (lost) object – or some neatly asserted outcome – but an exercise in thinking psychoanalytically” (p.174).

### **Material**

The material is taken from a six-episode television mini-series called *Deadly Possessions* first aired on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2016 on the *Travel Channel*. This is an off-shoot of the popular networked series *Ghost Adventures*. In *Deadly Possessions* the host and producer – Zak Bagans – interviews members of the public who are offering him ‘haunted’ or ‘cursed’ artefacts for his museum – *The Haunted Museum* – in Las Vegas. Hence, the mini-series functions both as entertainment and as an advert for the museum.

The material is a 27 minute clip representing the first half of episode 4. It was selected because the content appears to invoke strongly the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the concept often considered Lacan’s most significant contribution to psychoanalysis (Kirshner, 2005). As a piece of programming, the material as aired is edited and is artificial to the extent that the guests are tasked with presenting an interesting story about their artefact and the host with creating engaging content in-line with the conceit of the series. Moreover, the show creates tension through the setting of the museum, muted lighting, eerie soundscape, inserting old photographs and film clips, where relevant, and using short video recreations dramatizing

aspects of the narrated story. Where necessary for the analysis, stills from the sequence are included within the conditions of Fair Use.

## **Synopsis**

In the selected material, Cindy Lee relates a story about the murder of her Uncle Bob, Frank Roberts Saletri. She tells us that her uncle worked with the actor Bela Lugosi and lived in his old house. In 1982 her uncle was murdered in the bedroom of this house: tortured with a screwdriver and then shot in the head. The murder has never been solved. Cindy also tells us that the mirror from this bedroom now belongs to her family. Although not entirely clear, the mirror seems to have been taken by Cindy's older daughter when she left home, but then returned to Cindy's house and placed in her spare bedroom. Cindy and her younger daughter, Irene, recount aspects of the older daughter's experience with the mirror while she was living alone. This involved seeing a 'dark entity' in the mirror, hands reaching out of the mirror, and teeth biting her neck while she curled her hair in front of it. Traumatized, she returned to her mother's house. Irene also tells us about a bad dream she had while sleeping in the spare room not realizing the mirror was in the corner. She dreamed of being attacked and awoke with scratches on her body. Cindy wants to leave the mirror behind and Zak agrees to give it a 'good home' in his Haunted Museum.

Throughout, Zak provides relevant paranormal lore and posits paranormal explanations for the disturbing experiences surrounding the mirror. Zak then recruits three of his colleagues in a scrying experiment to stare into the mirror in the isolation room of the museum. They have various strange experiences including seeing a mysterious light in the mirror. In the final sequence, Zak documents a flood in the museum basement the morning after the scrying experiment and connects this mishap to his new ownership of the mirror.

## **Method**

The material was transcribed verbatim with descriptions added where necessary to understand the text, such as where or at whom Zak is looking, and indication of visuals, particularly vis-a-vis the mirror. A diagram was also created of the personages mentioned, relationships between them, relationship to the mirror, and the location in which the mirror is relevant to them. The diagram helped to identify associations between elements of the story and the filmed sequence but also people made pertinent by their absence. The transcript was then read and re-read carefully while making notes on resonances with key concepts in Lacanian theory.

As in psychoanalytic practice, the narrative was approached from the position of ‘listening’ for the way in which unconscious desire organizes speech despite, even *in spite*, of the conscious intension of the speaker. This meant following associations made in the narrative, identifying assumptions that must be made for the narrative to work, and ‘hearing’ where ‘it’ speaks the truth of desire through reading for literal meaning which goes against the grain of probable intent. In this way an interpretation is offered of the points of contact between the story told and Lacanian theory. These are argued to mark the phenomena of trauma which are, by definition, almost impossible to articulate and so find expression in layered and oblique registers or repertoires of meaning. My approach accepts the necessity of narrating experiences of the paranormal via genre conventions, exploiting even to a high degree of theatricality the visual medium of popular television programming. With regard to the latter, some analysis is undertaken with regard to impacts of the camera work. However, issues of truth and fiction are conceptualized analytically as the single side of a Mobius strip as seen from different perspectives, or at two different points in time, in which *accounting* for and *creating* reality are inextricably linked.

## **Analysis**

The analysis draws predominantly on central concepts of Lacanian theory. The mirror stage and the *objet a* are related in that the *objet petit a* was expounded through Lacan's exploration of the implications of the mirror stage (Proto, 2013). The analysis also draws on Freud's (1918) notion of the primal scene as developed by Lacan (1953 [1979]) and Freud's (1919) exploration of the uncanny which has theoretical coincidences with Lacan's mirror stage, particularly with regard to the specular or doubled other, the fragmented body, and the alter ego (Twohig, 2003). Reference is made throughout to the three orders posited by Lacan in which phenomena are registered. Simply put: the Imaginary is the realm of images, particularly important being the image of the body; the Symbolic is the realm of the signifier and of meaning; and the Real is what cannot be incorporated into the Imaginary or Symbolic however, rather than preceding these two orders, is constituted alongside them and marks their edge. Finally, the analysis is considered in relation to the *fundamental fantasy* as structured differentially according to psychological structure vis-à-vis the *objet a* and the *Other*.

### ***The mirror stage***

The central artefact of the text under scrutiny is a mirror inherited through a family line and relevant in the story to three of its generations: from uncle, to niece, to the niece's daughters. The mirror is important in Lacanian theory both as a physical surface and as a metaphor of the way in which human subjectivity develops in a process of being reflected back by others. Specifically, the mirror stage is a posited juncture during which the child between the ages of 6 and 18 months develops a sense of having an integrated body and, eventually, an ego (Lacan, 2006 [1949]). However, this 'little other', or '*petit autre*,' in the mirror is external and whole while the child experiences him- or herself as a disparate cacophony of feelings, sensations, and uncoordinated body parts. In most the propitious scenario, the first *Other*, usually the mother, joins the child in jubilation over recognition of

its image, confirms it to be the child's own, and the child's independent existence and positive value is confirmed consistently in the reactions of significant others. In this way, if fortunate, the child establishes a strong sense of psychological and physical integrity and worthiness of love. However, this sense of integrity constituting the ego is installed from the outside and may remain fragile. In the text under consideration, we see this sense of integration come under pressure.

Cindy tells us about the traumatic origin of the Bela Lugosi mirror in the family story within the context of the torture and murder of her Uncle Bob: "somebody took a screwdriver to his knees and elbows. And they shot him and then they tried to dig out the bullet with a screwdriver" (lines 45-47). The mirror, which we are told was in the room at the time, is therefore associated with a reflection of bodily rupture and death. In fact, for both Cindy's daughters, the mirror catalyses experiences of a compromised body: of being bitten (line 119) and of being scratched (line 236), but also of fragmented body parts including hands (line 156) and a face (line 239).

Uncle Bob's death is also traumatic in being sexualized. The screwdriver and bullet are penetrating phallic objects, he was killed in his bedroom, and the murderer indulged himself there sadistically. Importantly, Cindy adds that it "wasn't a forced entry" (line 58), with the, most likely unintentional, connotation that the meeting had been anticipated by her uncle as a consensual sexual liaison. Moreover, she states, with hearable sexual innuendo, "I think it was a close friend and whatever else went on- who knows" (lines 58-59). The sexual aspects of the mirror's traumatic history are played out also in the disturbing experiences of Cindy's daughters. They too are attacked sadistically in its presence, phantasmagorically while Cindy's older daughter attends her feminine toilette (lines 113-114) and in a dream while Irene sleeps in her bed (line 235-237).

These disturbing experiences do not occur with any mirror. They occur with a mirror associated strongly with a traumatic event in the family history: what might be conceptualized psychoanalytically as a family myth constituted around a primal scene.

### *The primal scene*

Freud (1918) first conceptualized the primal scene as a repressed early memory, fantasy, or reconstruction of having witnessed parental coitus misunderstood as an act of violence. Later, Freud (1937) reformulated his understanding of the primal scene as a traumatic, usually sexually arousing event, in the life history of the individual or, importantly here, of their forebears. Essentially, the primal scene provides the unconscious co-ordinates for our constitution as sexed beings around the primacy of the father's relationship with the mother. The primal scene can be interpolated into a family myth which is played out fatalistically in a cycle of repetition compulsion. Lacan (1953 [1979]) identified this as the 'neurotic's individual myth,' exploring its features through re-examining Freud's case of the Rat Man. In this, Lacan argued that family stories about his father's shameful gambling debt and marriage for money replayed in the Rat Man's immobilization constellated by a situation in which a repayment scenario occurred alongside the presence in his life of a rich woman-poor woman binary (Hewitson, 2013).

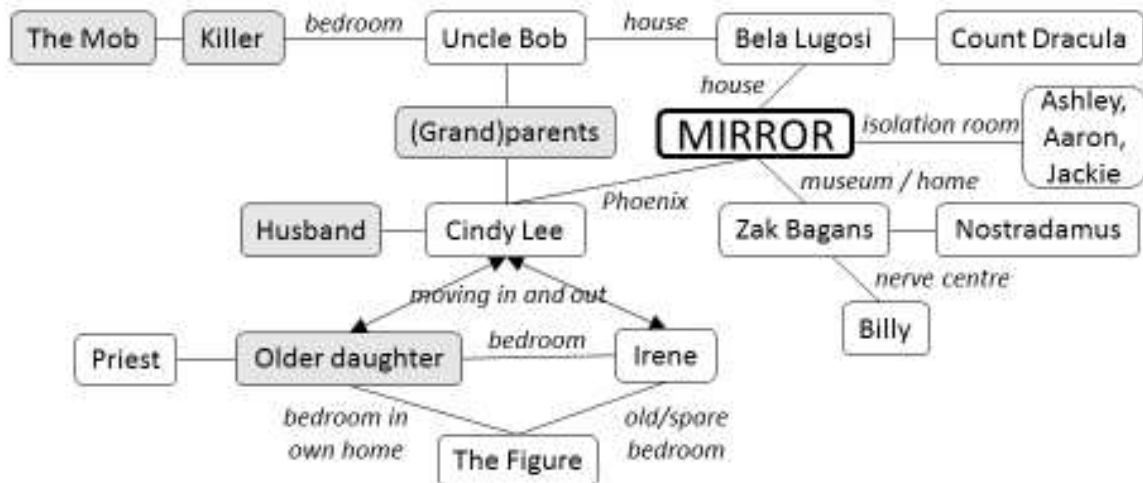
Lacan makes an important distinction between the Imaginary father, the Symbolic father, and the father-in-the-Real. The Imaginary father is the offspring's image of the actual man imbued with fantasies about his qualities. The Symbolic, or Oedipal, father is the function he plays situating his children in the social order as sexed beings separate from their mother. The role of Symbolic father need not be conducted by the biological progenitor, or indeed by a man, and can be fulfilled for example by an organization such as a school. Where the castrating symbolic capacity of the father is weak or absent, the child is particularly vulnerable to experiencing in some form the obscene primal father-in-the-Real (Lacan, 2003

[1938]). This is the father who features in the origin myth of culture posited by Freud (2013): the father of the primal horde not subject to The Law but who assumes sole sexual access to all the women and, as a result, is murdered and eaten by the excluded ‘band of brothers.’ In this, Freud provides an explanation in the form of a myth for socialization which places a limit on *jouissance* and associated incest taboo.

The story of the murder of Cindy’s uncle may function as a family myth involving a particularly archaic primal scene through echoing in striking ways the myth of the primal horde. First, Cindy says “It’s speculated like a mob hit” (line 35) with the implication of being a ritualized and fatal punishment on one man by a group of men. Second, cannibalistic resonances appear via association with the figure of the vampire – one of Lugosi’s famed roles - in that “Cindy Lee’s uncle was killed inside Bela Lugosi’s old house” (line 50-51). Third, sexual elements are involved, as discussed above, and, again, via the association with the vampire which Swales and Owens (2020) argue portrays repressed sexual *jouissance*. Hence, the story of the murder of Cindy’s uncle can be understood as a particularly horrific and archaic family primal scene involving the murder of the obscene father-in-the-Real.

At this point it is useful to consider a diagram of the personages mentioned in the narrative to help identify important relationships and absences (Diagram 1).

***Diagram 1: Personages, the relationships between them, their relationship to the mirror, and the location in which the mirror is relevant to them (shaded indicates pertinent absence)***

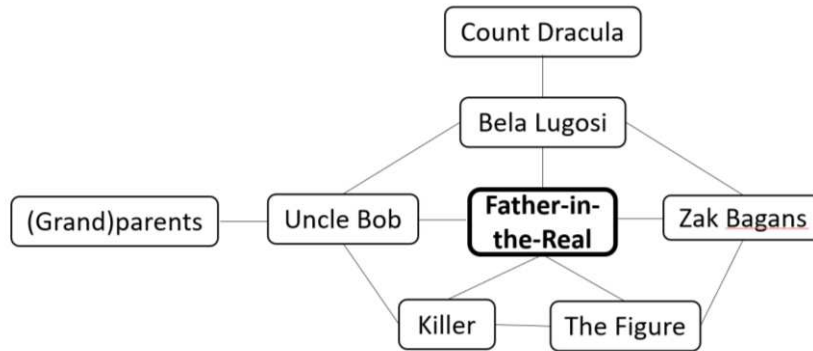


The text under consideration is not only a narrative of the paranormal, it draws also on the genre of true crime given that Saletri's murder is documented in numerous places (e.g., McMillan, 1986). In this respect, it is interesting that the story itself, like many 'true crimes,' is constructed around two key absences or holes: (i) the victim, i.e., Uncle Bob, in that he has been murdered or 'taken out;' and (ii) the killer, in that he has never been identified or, hence, named.

There are additional absences of psychoanalytic import. Logically, the father(s) of Cindy's daughters is missing from the narrative, as are Cindy's own parents who are her genealogical connection to Uncle Bob. Moreover, Cindy's older daughter is missing because, we are told, she is too traumatized to be part of the show and she is never named. The latter is significant in Lacanian terms because the *name-of-the-father*, or *paternal metaphor / function* is a mode through which the Symbolic cuts the dyadic relationship between mother and child. This occurs by making both beholden to a third term or '(sur)name' representing socially inscribed obligations and position. This points to a fragility in the family Symbolic through absences along the paternal line and, hence, in the paternal function. As explained above, this can create a vulnerability to experiencing the obscene father-in-the-Real, here conflated with a number of constellated associations (as outlined later), including Uncle Bob's murderer

who, in an overdetermined manner, is unassimilable to the Symbolic through also remaining unnamed (Diagram 2).

**Diagram 2: Constellated associations around the father-in-the-Real centred on the mirror**



As an artifact connected directly to Uncle Bob’s murder, the mirror appears to condense for the family a sadistic, sexually charged, primal scene around a vicious and unassimilable Uncle/killer constellation, extending metonymically to other elements. This resonance of death is magnified also in the physicality of the mirror in that it is the shape and size of an archetypal tombstone. And the mirror is brought to Zak because it is having a disturbing effect, which includes the frightening image it sometimes reflects. For example, we are told that Cindy’s older daughter “could see like a dark entity” (lines 115-116) or alien figure in the mirror which causes her anguish. In fact, a central theme organizing the text is the potential of the mirror to manifest what is dreadful and should not be there and Lacan’s concept of the *objet a* provides a way of understanding what might be in play.

***The objet a***

The *objet a* is Lacan’s development of Freud’s and Klein’s concept of the ‘lost object.’ In Lacanian theory, in order for the child to be situated securely in the Symbolic they must be subjected to ‘castration’ and cut away from symbiosis with the mother. Castration is experienced unconsciously as losing parts of one’s own body, for example, the mother’s breast theorized to be experienced by the infant as completing their mouth. In Seminar X on ‘Anxiety,’ Lacan (2014 [1962-1963]) builds on Freud’s classical notion of the oral, anal and

phallic objects / stages by adding two more, i.e., the *gaze* and the *voice*, the latter associated with the super-ego. Designating voice the “deepest phase” (*ibid.*, p. 295), Lacan places the sequence in an arc representing the idea of ‘repetition with a difference’ pivoting at the phallic object, in which the *gaze* contains always a regressive movement to the anal object and the *voice* to the oral object. For example, Harari (2001) provides a relevant illustration for the oral-voice / super-ego axis reminding us that “(t)he super-ego detected by Melanie Klein [...] is ruled by the devouring tension marked, for example, by the vampirism of the Desire of the Mother” (p. 196).

Although the phallus is retained as a special form of the *objet a*, in his subsequent seminar Lacan (1978 [1964]) considers only four main modes of loss. Each is highly libidinalised and associated with a drive, an erogenous zone, a tangible *part object*, and an intangible *objet a* (Vanheule, 2014): (i) oral drive, mouth, breast, ‘taking in nothing’ / *The Nothing*; (ii) anal drive, anus, faeces, *The Gift*; (iii) scopic drive, eye, image, *The Gaze*; and (iv) invocatory drive, ear, sound, *The Voice*. Hence, the *objet a* is an absence within an unconscious constellation of *part objects* of the body experienced as detachable and associated with its rims, i.e., with entry and exit points where the body is permeable and eroticised. In this regard, it is not insignificant that, in his exposition of the mirror’s paranormal power, Zak refers to it as a rim between two spaces, i.e., as a “portal” (lines 97, 291, 320, & 361) and as a “doorway” (line 345). The unconscious experience of loss creates desire for the return of the *objet a* and, all going well, the young person enters the Symbolic motivated to re-find them in socially acceptable ways. However, a central feature of the *objet a* which makes it extremely paradoxical is that, while exerting a profound effect through causing desire, it never existed and never will exist in tangible form.

The *objet a* can be experienced in each of the three orders and, because it is properly a lost object, its appearance is signaled by anxiety. In the Imaginary, the *objet a* is the *petit*

*autre* in the form of the uncastrated double, the rival who is feared to be the actual object of the desire of the mother. Indeed, in the Imaginary, the *objet a* is ambiguously close and when it appears to manifest is experienced as persecutory. In the Symbolic, the *objet a* is “theagalama, the precious, ‘hidden’, ‘object’ that the *Other* possesses and that the subject seesjouis for pleasure and plentitude” (Proto, 2013, p.4). In the Symbolic, the *objet a* is always too far away and out of reach. In the Real, the *objet a* is unassimilable and is experienced as *surplus jouissance*: enjoyment to the point of suffering. Paradoxically, this is because the Real *objet a* is always too close and cannot be ‘shaken off’.

A fracture line in the Symbolic will be magnified in the Imaginary because, by definition, “the dyadic relationship between subject and mirror excludes the paternal metaphor” (Proto, 2013, p. 9). And, as we have seen, Cindy’s daughters are subjected to terrifying images manifested in association with the Bela Lugosi mirror. It is interesting to consider how, in contrast, Zak, who has no personal history with the mirror, actively pursues manifestations in it with curiosity. Moreover, in its various manifestations as *objet a*, Bela Lugosi’s mirror is construed as a desiring object: as a thing that wants to consume (line 99) and is angry (line 23 & 314). In this way, the mirror provokes fear in the Lacanian terms of encapsulating the ‘desire of the (m)*Other*’ which is always impenetrable and potentially deadly. Experienced as having its own volition, the mirror also evokes aspect of the uncanny identified by Freud in terms of whether a seemingly ordinary object may not indeed be animate.

In his study of the uncanny, Freud (1919) examines the complex range of meanings of the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. The most relevant to the current analysis are that the former can mean belonging to the house, domestic, and familiar, and the latter deceitful, malicious, and the revealing what is concealed, even to oneself. Freud demonstrates that these apparent antonyms have overlapping meaning around the idea of the *estranged familiar*. This

ambiguity is at play in the text and, in important respects, involves the mirror as an inherited object in circulation through Cindy Lee’s family. In literal terms, the mirror is *heimlich*: it is of the *house*. As Cindy tells us: “The mirror used to be in Bela Lugosi’s *house* [...] My uncle lived in there” (lines 26-28). As an inherited artefact, it is also possible to describe the mirror as belonging to the *house* of Lee. This clearly evokes the idea of the mirror being, not only *familiar*, but *familial*. The relationship between ego and counter-part in the mirror is a narcissistic one which is, here, inflected by a family myth involving a particularly horrific primal scene. We therefore arrive at the idea of the mirror as *unheimlich*, the estranged familiar. Again, it is useful to contrast this with Zak’s attempted *familiarity* with the mirror promising to “give it a good home” (lines 283-284), his use of the word ‘home’ implying domestication. We now explore the uncanny Bela Lugosi mirror in relation to the different modes of *objet a* from key points-of-view in the text (Table 1).

**Table 1: The mirror as *objet a* from key points-of-view**

	Cindy	Irene	Eldest Daughter	Zak	Aaron	Ashley	Audience
<b>Mode</b>							
<b>oral</b>			Real	Imaginary			
<b>anal</b>	Real			Symbolic			
<b>gaze</b>		Imaginary	Imaginary	Imaginary, Real	Imaginary, Real	Imaginary	Real
<b>voice</b>				Imaginary	Imaginary		

**The oral object.** The mirror is an oral object for Cindy’s eldest daughter and, arguably, the *objet a* in its most archaic form. She experiences bites to her neck as she combs her hair in the mirror. Hence, there is a metonymic association from the mirror, to Uncle Bob, to Bela Lugosi, to Count Dracula (Diagram 2). Through their propensity to bite and suck out the life blood, vampires encapsulate the *sadistic* oral object associated with sexuality and death. Moreover, the literary trope that a vampire has no reflection ratifies it as an *objet a* of no concrete substance. However, as argued throughout, the chain of associations extends also

to the father-in-the-Real (Diagram 2). In this regard, it might be suggested that Cindy's eldest daughter experiences the mirror as an oral *objet a* in the Real and, hence, as a certain mode of hallucination:

The subject calls upon the Father to guarantee the law that situates both the subject and his desire in the Other, but encounters only a void. The foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father gives rise to the fantasmatic presence (present in the Real) of a malevolent authority, suspected of having intrusive or criminal intentions, desiring to commit sexual abuse or homicide. Unlike a repressed signifier, a foreclosed signifier is not absorbed into the unconscious and therefore does not reappear in the psyche in the form of a neurotic symptom. It returns, rather, in the real, usually in the form of a hallucination. (No Subject - Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis, paras 7-10)

Zak leverages also the oral potential of the mirror to build his exposition of its paranormal powers. Specifically, he speculates about the ability of the mirror to 'consume' aspects of what is reflected in it: "did that mirror capture that killer's energy- that killer's soul? [flash of a mirror in theatrical re-enactment] Possibly your uncle? (lines 78-80) and he asks of it, "What is inside of you?" (line 355). In this, Zak's orientation towards the mirror suggest that he experiences it as an oral *objet a* in the Imaginary: that is, as encapsulating an image of the rival who is ambiguously close and persecutory.

***The anal object.*** The mirror is an *anal object* for the mother, Cindy. It is an unwanted gift representing in physical form trauma inherited through the paternal line and she states: "This item has caused my family so much anguish that I no longer feel safe with it" (lines 12-13). Metaphorically, the mirror represents Cindy's murdered uncle and, metonymically, his killer, but also Cindy's parents who are absent from her narrative but through whom the mirror must have come into her possession (Diagram 2). Understandably, she wants to be rid of this *anal object* and articulates perfectly the psychological dilemma presented: "I can't sell it. I can't give it. But if it kinda gets left behind" (lines 272-273). Hence, she conveys the felt sense of the mirror as an *anal object* in the Real, stuck to her in way that cannot be passed on to someone else in a deliberate act. While the killer remains unidentified, she can regain a

proper distance from the unassimilable Real of the family trauma only through a re-enactment of Symbolic castration in which the object is ‘lost.’

The intangible *objet a* of the anal drive, is the *gift* and, hence, the mirror is an *anal object* also for Zak in that he is willing to receive it for his museum collection. In fact, he says of the mirror: “this may be my favourite possession to date” (lines 352-353) and “I believe this mirror to be the most dangerous possession that I own” (lines 486-487). So, for Zak, the mirror is an *anal objet a* in the Symbolic: that is, a powerful, alluring, and charismatic item that will belong to him.

It is interesting to consider the double meaning of the word ‘possession.’ Proto (2013) states that “in the *Real* the *objet a* is ‘possessed’ by the subject” (p. 8). This possession, however, is experienced in a traumatic way as one of being unable to shake off a foreign body – the *surplus jouissance* of a piece of shit – and, hence, is also of being *possessed by* this object. This is conveyed by Cindy in her allusion to the mirror as an unwanted gift/inheritance that cannot be given away. Moreover, although Zak refers to the mirror as a ‘favourite’ possession, he also notes it to be ‘the most dangerous,’ and the polluting aspects of this *anal object* manifest in the dirty, possibly electrified, water of the flooded museum basement he attributes to it: “All this water. You don’t want to touch that” (lines 481-482). However, for Zak, this helps convey to the audience the high status of the object now in his haunted museum.

***The object gaze.*** Of all the modes of the *objet a*, the *object gaze* of the scopic drive is the most prominent in the material analysed.

Cindy’s older daughter seems troubled by the *object gaze* in the Imaginary. In the Imaginary, the *objet a* is experienced as the persecutory *petit autre* of the mirror image and we are told Cindy’s older daughter says a “figure would come through the mirror [re-enactment with flash of mirror] [...] and attack her” (lines 120-123). As an *objet a*, this figure

is never fully discernable and manifest predominantly as a *part objects*: “described the hand [...] [re-enactment with flash of mirror] almost there reaching” (lines 155-158). Moreover, Cindy reports how her older daughter continued to be persecuted by the *object gaze* in the Imaginary, catching something out of the corner of the eye, “second-guessing things [re-enactment with flash of mirror] where you think you see things” (lines 197-198). Cindy’s description of her nameless daughter’s experience may provide examples of how, *in extremis*, “the father’s signifier (i.e., the Law, the Oedipus complex, the Symbolic Order etc.) only survives as an *imago* of the father” (Pronto, 2013, p.9) and not a properly installed *name-of-the-father*.

Irene, too, experiences the *objet gaze* in the Imaginary. While sleeping, unbeknownst in a room with the Bela Lugosi mirror, Irene tell us she had an “awful dream of something attacking me- scratching me- holding me down” (lines 236-237). Like her older sister’s experience, Irene’s dream is of aggressive *part objects*: “I just remember this vision of hands. This very dark face” (line 239). The attack manifests also in the Imaginary with Irene’s discovery of scratches on her body: “Even the middle of my back where I was not able to reach” (lines 242-243) and, presumably, cannot directly see. But Irene has been seen by the *objet gaze*. In fact, one might say it has had her ‘in its sights.’ However, despite these disturbing experiences, Irene keeps a foothold in the Symbolic, describing herself as “more scientific” (line 253) and maintains a containing distance from the *objet a* though allowing it to remain a puzzle to rationality: “it just didn’t add up” (line 260). Even so, both Cindy’s daughters appear to be struggling to find a stable and independent space in the Symbolic, moving in and out of their mother’s house, intermittently sharing a bedroom or sleeping in the spare room.

The *object gaze* in the Imaginary register is also utilized during the show with Zak filmed looking into the mirror seeking out an anomalous human figure or *petit autre*: “I just

look in here [cut to Zak on viewer's far left looking into the camera / mirror; Zak is now speaking in the visuals] trying to see if somebody will appear behind me" (lines 332-334). H

Chabot (2019) refers to contemporary burgeoning of paranormal investigation media as an epistophilic drive in the register of seeing, specifically "a desire to visualize the imperceptible" (p.1). In other words, a desire to *know* through the desire to *see*, in a terrain where, typically, it may be difficult to believe one's eyes. As Black (2014) states, it is in such circumstances that "(t)he subject is itself caught up, manipulated and captured, by the field of vision" (p.362-3). Our short extract from *Deadly Possessions* demonstrates the host and his colleagues leveraging the 'epistophilic drive in the register of seeing,' 'capturing' the audience in the 'field of vision' in terms of both *accounting* for and *creating* the reality presented in the show.

In terms of *accounting* for the phenomena described by Cindy and Irene, Zak connects the mirror with the *object gaze* in the register of the Real. Early on Zak introduces the idea of the mirror that watches, stating in a voiceover: "Cindy Lee's uncle was killed inside Bela Lugosi's old house [flash of a mirror in theatrical re-enactment] with the mirror watching" (lines 50-52). This evokes Lacan's story of the floating sardine can in which he explicates a moment of realisation with regard to the *object gaze*. While his companion pronounces that 'The can doesn't see you,' Lacan disagrees: "the can was looking at me, all the same. It was looking at me at the level of the point of light, the point at which everything that looks at me is situated" (Lacan in Jay, 1993, p.365). It is this *gaze* that Zak imputes to the watching mirror, specifically the *Real gaze* as the point from which one is seen but from exactly where one can never discern.

On the other hand, that the mirror as a haunted object capable of 'looking back' is *created* during the *content* of the show in a scrying experiment (lines 65, 67, 95 & 413): an occult technique for making the 'un-seeable' visible in a reflective surface. Zak recruits three

colleagues -Aaron, Ashley and Jackie - to sit one-by-one in the isolation room explaining that “I want you to stare into this mirror and I want you to look at yourself in this mirror until I call you up” (lines 391-392). The image in the mirror has a disturbing effect and the *object gaze* manifests in the Imaginary for both Aaron and Ashley. Ashley says, “I almost feel like I’m looking at somebody else” (line 411) and, while Aaron identifies with his image in the mirror, it is of an alter-ego compromised by age: “I just found myself old- really old” (line 426). Moreover, they both glimpse a mysterious light in the mirror for which there is no objective source. At this point, Aaron experiences also a presence: “then all of a sudden I saw this light like someone came in” (line 451) and he demands of it “Come out and show yourself” (line 422). Hence, characteristic of the appearance of the Real *object gaze*, Aaron becomes aware of himself as conspicuously visible by the uncanny *Other* and from a vantage point he cannot perceive: “You saw me. Let me see you” (line 431).

The Bela Lugosi mirror as a haunted object is *created* vis-à-vis the *object gaze*, not only in the *content* of the show but in the production of an uncanny effect via its *form*.

First, the whole sequence is filmed with an oval of light centre screen (Images 1-5). This creates an atmosphere of mystery through obscuring the image but, importantly, produces an effect of the *object gaze* through creating a desire to see the focal point more clearly. Specifically, the oval of light suggests an ever-present eye, and flashing images of eyes and the oval top of the mirror as an eye-like pattern are interspersed throughout the piece. This oval part-image of the mirror is like a cataracted eye with strange alien irises in red vertical stripes (Image 1). And the blind eye of an unfathomable presence is a paradigmatic manifestation of the Real *gaze*. Hence, through this *form* of filming and editing, the viewer, too, is caught in the dangerous ambiance of the mirror.

Second, the sequence presents us throughout with images of doubles echoing the *objet a* in the Imaginary as the *petit autre* in the uncanny form of the uncastrated double. Hence,

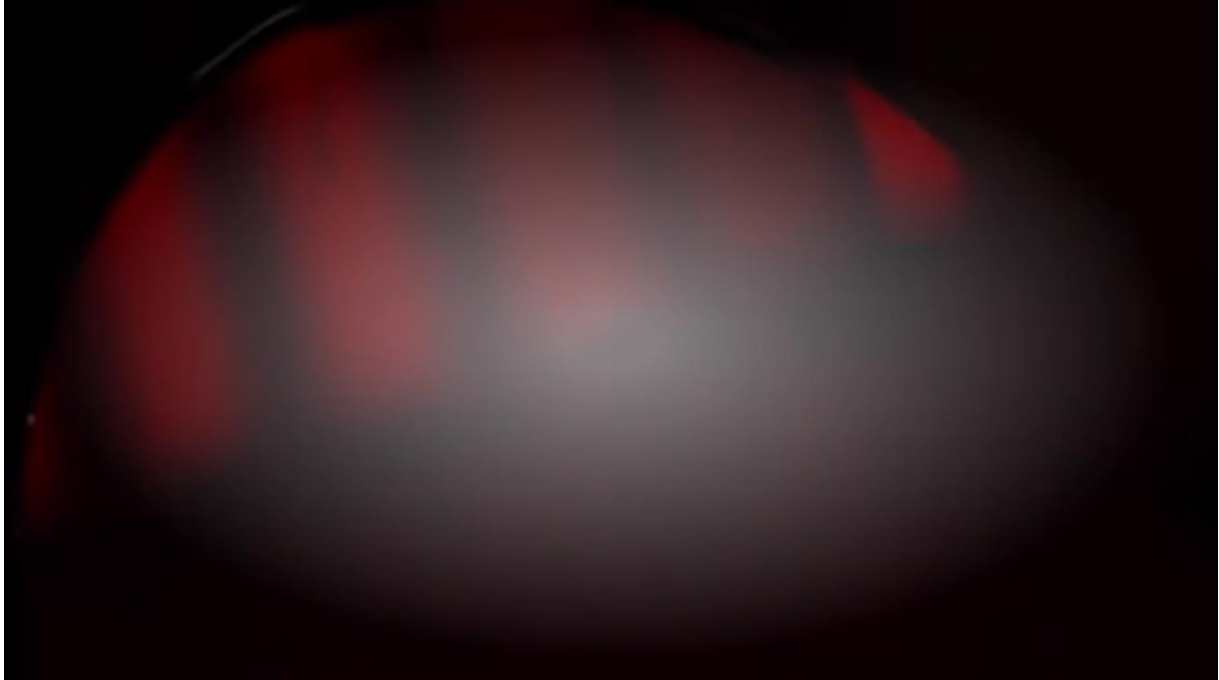
Cindy and Irene are filmed next to the mirror such that their reflection can be seen disconcertingly askew (Image 2). Moreover, in the scrying experiment, Aaron and his reflection are shown in the same shot (Image 3), Aaron and Jackie are edited as if staring into the mirror side-by-side, and multiple images of Aaron appear on monitors.

Third, at points, Zak is himself installed as the *object gaze* and a mutually supporting uncanny dialectic is played out between Zak and the mirror. Zak's instantiation as *object gaze* in the Imaginary can be discerned while his colleagues are in the isolation chamber. Zak tells us that he will be "in nerve centre with Billy where I can monitor them closely" (lines 404-405). In this way, Zak is able to see his colleagues on the monitors while being himself, but as another *petit autre*, unavailable to their sight. However, importantly in terms of *form*, Zak speaks directly to camera. Many television programmes involve direct address to the viewer, and this is utilized to some extent in *Deadly Possessions*. However, arguably, this specific instance may create an effect of the *object gaze* in the Real for the audience, i.e., of being seen from an impossible specular place inside the screen. That is, first, Zak is at the same time installed as *object gaze vis-à-vis* his colleagues and, second, it is the only time in the sequence as a whole that he speaks to camera.

This effect is magnified in a short sequence towards the end in which Zak contemplates the mirror on his own (lines 317-363). He is filmed looking searchingly almost directly into the camera, giving the impression of scanning the mirror's reflective surface. However, in the moments Zak looks into the camera, the Real *objet gaze* is installed for the viewer disconcertingly in two seeming opposing places at once. First, Zak is the *gaze* as he stares blindly out at the viewer and seemingly into the mirror (Image 4). That is, he transforms the viewers' safe position as 'watcher' to that in which their own presence is being searched out visually from inside the television. Second, the viewer is also installed as

the Real *gaze* as they watch Zak seeming from the impossible specular place within the mirror that Zak cannot see.

*Image 1: Image of the top curve of the mirror used in clips throughout (11mins 05secs)*



*Image 2: Askew doubling of Irene in the mirror (10mins 00secs)*



*Image 3: Direct doubling of Aaron in the mirror (23mins 33secs)*



*Image 4: Zak looking into the camera lens / mirror (18 mins.07 secs)*



*The object voice.* Interestingly, it is only after Zak has taken possession of the mirror that the *object voice* appears in the narrative. Miller (2007) clarifies that “(t)he voice is everything in the signifier that does not partake in the effect of signification” (p. 141). Hence, the *voice* manifests while Aaron is in the isolation room and Zak finds it hard to understand some of what he says, importantly, about the uncanny mirror: “What did he say?” (line 425). Another feature of the *voice* is that it is assigned to the *Other* and, like all forms of the *objet a*, has a libidinal charge. This occurs for Aaron when he hears noises in the isolation room and takes them as a sign of presence associated with the mirror: “There’s a weird feeling in here guys. I heard something right here just like scuffle” (lines 441-442).

The *voice* also features in Zak’s filming of the basement flood in that he draws attention to noises for which he cannot account and attributes the scenario to the mirror being in his possession: “Oh gosh. *Bleep*. [unexplained noises] Holy *bleep*. Just heard sounds coming from right here. [unexplained noises] Hear that? [unexplained noises] Loud noises coming from in here. [unexplained noises] Just capturing it” (lines 478-481). In both these instances, the *object voice* appears to manifest in the Imaginary. In the first example, this can

be surmised because Zak and Aaron are contemporaries who exhibit, at time, some friendly tension and, in both, objectively audible sounds create a ‘fantastic image’ of the mirror’s persecutory power. Finally, the *voice* can also manifest in situations where vocalization is detached from the body from which it belongs (Zizek, 2012), such as in Zak’s voiceovers, during which he is instantiated into the position of *objet a*.

### ***The fundamental fantasy***

In Lacanian terms the subject and object must be separated, yet remain in relationship, for the individual to sustain the *fundamental fantasy* framing their reality. Hence, when the object appears, this marks a terrifying failure of the *fantasy* (Troubé, 2015). The *fundamental fantasy* is unconscious and underlies the structure of the individual as obsessional neurotic, hysterical neurotic, or perverse. All are variants of the, typically masculine, obsessional neurotic’s *fantasy* captured in the matheme  $\$ \langle \rangle a$ . This can be read as the subject of the unconscious in relationship with the *objet a*, the *fantasy* being to make this impossible relationship direct, complete, and fully satisfying. As the basic *fantasy*,  $\$ \langle \rangle a$  has been a central theme of this analysis. It is, however, the other types of *fundamental fantasy* that are illustrated more specifically in the examined text as differential structural positions taken towards the *objet petit a* and the ‘big’ *Other* representing Symbolic authority. To be clear, the following is not a commentary on the people in the show but is an analysis of the structural position they appear to inhabit within the sequence as aired.

***Hysteric.*** Within the text, Cindy and Irene illustrate the typically feminine hysterical neurotic position. The *fantasy* of the hysteric is represented by the matheme  $a \langle \rangle \bar{A}$  which can be read as the hysteric as object in relationship with the *Other* as barred or structurally incomplete. That is, as Bryant (2013) explains: “the hysteric wants to be the solution to the master’s lack or incompleteness. Therefore [s]he uses [her/]his fantasy as way of maneuvering the Other to reveal a lack of incompleteness in the Other so that [s]he might

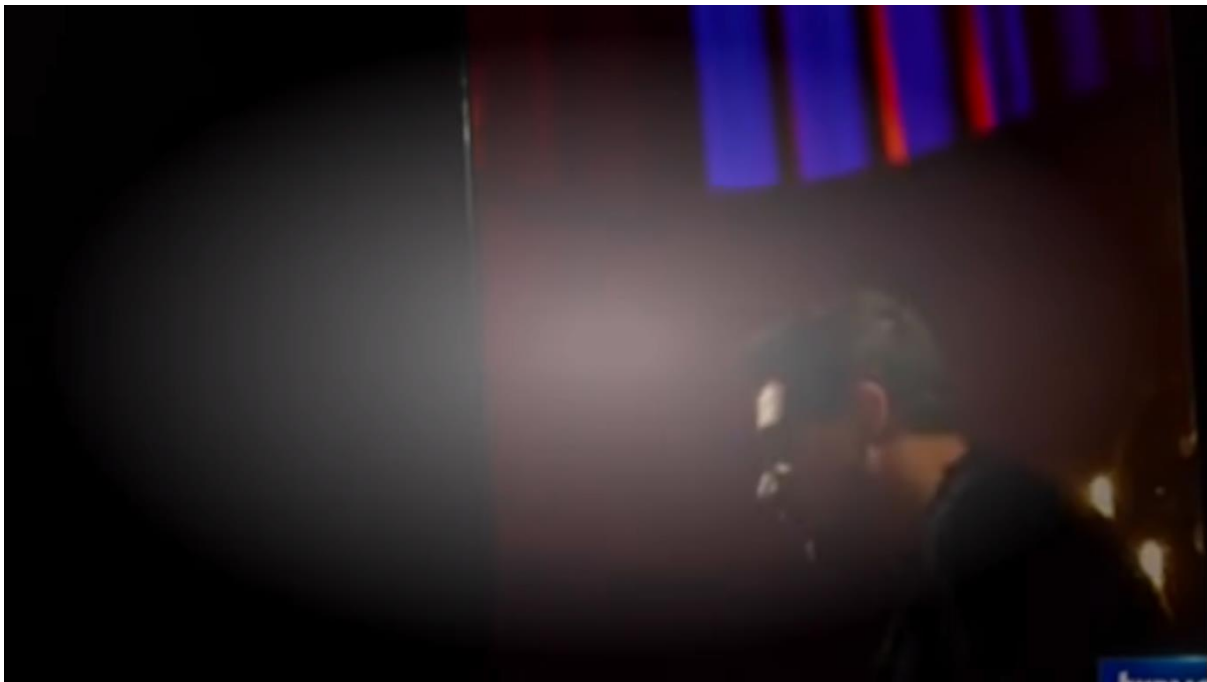
come to fill that lack” (para 13). Accordingly, it is Cindy and Irene who offer up to Zak the *objet a* he is understood to desire and, hence, to lack. Cindy and Irene also demonstrate a relationship with the *Other* as ‘master’ through being able to situate the mirror in the Symbolic and provide it meaning by way of a family myth. Finally, the neurotic mechanism of repression is suggested by Cindy’s inability to do more than allude to the sexual elements of the family myth, while she is able to describe its violence, and in Irene’s typically hysterical conversion symptoms whereby unconscious conflicts are inscribed on the Imaginary of the body.

**Perverse.** The sequence itself includes elements of the typically masculine perverse position. Central to the perverse position is the instantiation of a fetish object which provides *jouissance* but through covering over the structural absence of the *objet a*. Indeed, the series *Deadly Possessions* is focused on such fetish objects and, as is typical of the perverse mode of operation, “creates a scenario in which *all is not as it seems*” (Bond, 2013, p.86). Moreover, the actual sequence under analysis has a perverse structure in which the object is first idealised and subsequently portrayed as polluting.

The perverse *fantasy* is represented by the matheme  $a \ll \$$  which can be read as the perverse person as object in relationship with the subject of the unconscious. Specifically, the perverse person acts as the object instrument of the *Other’s jouissance*, effectively seeking to provide an experience of the *objet a* as ‘too much’. The analysis has indicated ways in which Zak is instantiated in the text at points as *objet a* in the form of the *gaze* and the *voice* and, as host, he does have the role of acting on behalf of the enjoyment of the audience. Moreover, Zak is the only person presented as taking a masterful position vis-à-vis the mirror: he stands to look into it, touches it while looking, and walks away from it (lines 317-363). Importantly, this sequence ambiguates in a highly uncanny way the position from which Zak is being filmed walking away (Image 5). Is Zak being filmed: merely from behind

the mirror?; from within the mirror with the audience instantiated as Real *gaze*?; or from behind in the mirror as mere reflection or as existing ‘in’ the mirror only as the *gaze* of the father-in-the-Real? (Diagram 2).

*Image 5: Zak walks away in / from the mirror (18mins.45secs)*



**Psychotic.** Unlike people of neurotic or perverse structure, those with psychotic structure have no *fundamental fantasy* and are stuck in primary development because “the *Other* doesn't answer, or failed to answer sufficiently” (Verhaeghe, 2004, p. 351). Within the text Cindy's older daughter illustrates the psychotic position, indeed, as mentioned by her mother: “She got where she was second-guessing things [re-enactment with flash of mirror] where you think you see things and are you psychotic or is that real?” (lines 197-199). According to Lacan, people of any structure can experience paranoia and hallucinations. However, “in psychosis elements from the unconscious are not experienced as coming from within – as in neurosis, where symptoms express warded-off truths – but as strange messages that come from without [...] themes of the subject's existence do not enter into the law of the

Symbolic, but emerge in the Real as puzzling and overwhelming problems that seize the subject from the outside” (Vanheule, 2014, p. 71). In this way, unlike Cindy and Irene, Cindy’s older daughter is mute with regard to storytelling about the mirror and we are told that she has experienced the disturbance directly in her waking life unmediated by the buffer of a functioning Symbolic family myth.

## **Reflections**

The first aim of this article was to provide an example of the spontaneous deployment of Lacanian theory by naïve narrators in their rendition of some disturbing experiences. It is argued, and hopefully has been demonstrated, that phenomena related to Lacan’s mirror stage and to his theory of the *objet a*, amongst others, are paralleled in the mundane sense-making practices in the examined text which attempts to express and explain the ‘felt sense’ or ‘lived reality’ of trauma. The mirror as *objet a* must be lost: cut from the Imaginary body of the family. Only then, whilst the killer remains unnamed, can Cindy and her daughters normalise the family Symbolic disrupted by the horrific murder of Uncle Bob constituting the archaic primal scene of the family myth.

The second aim was to explore the applicability of Lacanian theory for understanding experiences of the paranormal. Here it is useful to reflect on Lacan’s (2007 [1959-60]) aphorism ‘every truth has the structure of fiction:’ that reality itself is fantasmatic, its coordinates ordained by the *fundamental fantasy*, or structural lack of a *fundamental fantasy*. Reality, which when put under pressure through trauma, can become distorted by intrusions of the Real. The analysis presented has made intense use of this stance. That is, texts such as *Deadly Possessions* are argued to play hard in the space between truth and fiction, for example, *accounting* for and *creating* a reality of the Bela Lugosi’s mirror as a haunted object: as an *objet a* – essentially a Real *object* with Imaginary and Symbolic iterations. It is useful, however, to consider also Johnston’s (2008) suggested reversal that fiction may have

the structure of a truth: i.e., that the truth of desire is embedded in the stories we tell ourselves and others, whether or not the artifice is deliberate as in edited sequence of television programming. Hence, the value of paranormal reality TV is likely less in how closely they correspond to the facts but what they reveal about the workings of desire.

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