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HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE SEEN BY A MACHINE Lively devices in digital horror

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The technology we surround ourselves with is becoming more and more autonomous. Our devices know us, or try to know us, they gather data about us constantly. They use that data to draw conclusions about us, to profile us, to recognise our patterns and predict our movements and desires. So what does it feel like to be watched by a machine? How do we make sense of our present state of concurrent awareness of and obliviousness of living our everyday lives under ubiquitous surveillance? Surveillance and machine vision technologies are often talked about with a certain level of unease, discomfort, or anxiety - but what are the meanings and narratives through which these devices are imagined to be scary? This paper will explore these questions by analysing a selection of creepypasta stories that draw their horror from the experience of being watched by - or through - a machine.

Creepypasta is a term used to describe short internet-based horror stories often shared anonymously and copied and pasted from forum to forum. Written from and for online communities out of the shared affective desire to scare and be scared, the stories have been conceptualized as digital urban legends (Henriksen 2018), contemporary folklore (Tolbert 2015), as an example “the digital gothic” (Balanzategui 2019), or as a fourth generation of digital fiction (Ondrak 2018). Several articles have addressed the connections between creepypasta and technology. Both Henriksen (2014) and Ondrak (2018) draw lines from contemporary creepypasta to the optical illusions produced by eighteenth-century phantasmagoria. Furthermore, Henriksen (2013) argues that the history of monsters is intimately intertwined with that of technology, and that the camera, the supposedly objective and scientific instrument, plays a crucial role in the production of the monsters that inhabit creepypasta stories. Cooley and Milligan (2018) show how many creepypastas explore the “nightmares of technological nostalgia” (p.197), reanimating technologies of the past and imbuing them with unsettling agency.

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This paper builds on this work by analysing a corpus of stories from the NoSleep forum that explicitly centers the fearful possibilities brought about by the machine vision devices that permeate our everyday lives. Instead of drawing on the nostalgic hauntings

of obsolete technologies, these stories are populated by technologies of the present and future, such as web cameras, facial recognition apps, home security systems, AI assistants, and baby monitors. In these stories, the topic of surveillance and the experience of being watched is a pervasive theme, and quotidian devices take on a threatening presence. Sometimes the threat is connected to the idea of surveillance by nefarious corporations or hostile individuals, while in other stories the horror emerges from the realization that the watcher may not be human at all. The devices' unpredictable liveliness is emphasized, either by enabling other people or entities to extend their control over our lives, or by the devices themselves taking on a threatening agency, performing often perplexingly hostile acts.

In my analysis two main themes have emerged from the technological horror of these stories, the first of which is the role of technology in mediating our access to reality and sense of truth. Hayles (2018) has argued that technologies' are taking on an increasingly active role as an interpreter and creators of meaning, and are capable of what she terms as non-conscious cognition. For example, in the story "Has anyone else used expression captioneer?" (jia 2016), the narrator shares his experience with what he thinks is a funny interactive meme site that uses emotion recognition to creatively add captions to selfies uploaded by its users. But then the captions become increasingly distressing and ultimately threatening, indicating that something awful will happen to the narrator in the near future. Here, and in other stories like it, technical devices serve as the site of contact between human and non-human meaningmaking, as a site of co-cognition between us and technical agencies. What these stories make explicit is that this co-cognition does not always go smoothly - it can be antagonistic, uncomfortable, or even scary, and the resulting meanings are no longer our own.

The second theme is the redistribution of agency between humans and technical agents. This is the case in the story "You'll never even know" (M59Gar 2017), the narrator discovers that all the "overlapping connected layers of observation" produced by the devices we surround ourselves with, such as phones, smart TVs, gaming consoles, kitchen devices, home security systems, link together to become something more, a nebulous entity that uses its pervasive presence to subtly sabotage people's lives. Here, to borrow terminology from Jane Bennett (2010), the monster manifests as the result of the agency distributed through an assemblage of technical devices - and the threat is derived from the agency arising from the depth and extent of machine vision technologies' involvement in our lives.

Finally, I argue that these stories function as affective articulations that reveal the anxieties that haunt our relationship with the devices with which we surround ourselves. The ways in which machine vision devices are haunted, infected or possessed, and haunt, infect or possess the lives of the narrators, bring out a cluster of fears that all revolve around how machine vision technologies mediate our relationship with reality and redistribute agency within human/machine assemblages.

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