

**Radical Diversion: Attractions Politics  
in the Horror Pseudo-documentary  
*The Hellstrom Chronicle***

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Horror cinema, like Gothic literature before it, has always had a fascination with the document: secret(ed), fragmented, damaged, incomplete—but, when confronted, always shockingly revelatory. In the horror text, a sense of imminent discovery offers mingled pleasure and dread, as scholars like Noël Carroll (1990) and Cynthia Freeland (2000, 2004) have discussed. An interest in investigation, witnessing and revelation highlights the key epistemological paradigms and aesthetic questions that horror cinema shares with documentary cinema. These shared concerns revolve around the ways subjects come into knowledge and understanding of their world not just through rational means, but also through feeling and sensation; they also revolve around the degree to which poetic expressiveness and appeals to spectatorial desire should figure in generating these effects and outcomes. Even Carroll and Freeland, primarily concerned as they are with the carefully-courted cognitive processes that draw us to horror narratives, still emphasize the possibility of pleasure in shock and the sublime. Michael Renov (1993), John Corner (2006), and Elizabeth Cowie (2011) have highlighted such concerns in their work on what Renov terms documentary’s “modalities of desire” (1993: 21), and what Cowie terms “the pleasure of the specular as access to knowledge” (Cowie, 2011: 4). For Corner, questions around documentary desire come as well through a need to represent the historical world cinematically in ways that highlight subjectivity, interpretation, and the limitations of the medium—that is the notion of documentary “images as ones to be looked *at* as well as *through*” (Corner, 2006: 293).<sup>1</sup> In the Gothic tradition, the “darkly illuminating labyrinth of language” (Botting, 1996: 14) becomes a similar *dirty window*, creating and obscuring meaning and highlighting Gothic-

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horror narratives as sustained acts of interpretation. Here, getting “lost” in the attempt at telling the story is part of a drama of dread and desire for knowledge. The difficulty of describing and recounting experience—of chronicling—itself becomes a baroque spectacle in such moments. Formal play becomes substantive *attraction*, making the process of telling visible and sensational. Tom Gunning suggests that an “aesthetics of attraction” (1986) inherent to early cinema survives in avant-garde work, but he also argues that documentary shares a similar desire for shocking revelation or uncanny ‘detection’ (1999) via upfront, performative spectacle. An attractions-based aesthetic emphasizes the “direct stimulation” of the spectator’s “visual curiosity” (Gunning, 1986: 384). In the horror genre, a cinema of attractions survives in what Adam Lowenstein terms “spectacle horror,” or “the staging of spectacularly explicit horror for purposes of audience admiration, provocation, and sensory adventure as much as shock or terror, but without necessarily breaking ties with narrative development or historical allegory” (2011: 42). Attractions-based cinema performs visually, aurally—sensorially—with the aim of making the world newly visible to spectators through affective as well as aesthetic appreciation. A cinema of attractions recognizes that there is critical and political power in spectacle.

Horror and documentary cinema have collided in often meaningful ways since the beginning of cinema, when the distinction between the filmic image as *either* fantastic illusion (à la Méliès), *or* imprint of reality (à les Lumières) had not become so razor-sharp as it is now in the popular imaginary. The Lumière Brothers, for example, so tied now to their realist actualities, were just as interested in the spectacular nature of their imagery, as Jerome Kuehl notes of their film of a demolished wall falling, which they screened forwards and then backwards to highlight the nature of the “decepti[ve]” nature of the medium (2012: xxiii). Even watching the Thomas A. Edison-produced “actuality” film “Electrocuting an Elephant” (Edwin S. Porter, James Blair Smith, 1903) now produces shock and disbelief at a piece of footage that was created not as the *record* of the 5 January, 1903 death of Topsy, a circus-performing elephant who killed a trainer after years of abuse, but as a publicity stunt for Coney Island’s Luna Park. A slice of carnivalesque attractions itself, “Electrocuting an Elephant” is an artifact of early documentary-horror attractions, as well as evidence of one of the earliest deaths (Topsy’s final “performance”) to be recorded on film (See Figure 1). The question is not whether the film is a piece of exploitation *or* documentation because it is certainly *both*—encouraging a complex combination of sensorial engagement, cognitive curiosity, and critical distance.

More recently, the question of whether or not the viewership of such actuality-spectacle *either* bears a mark of spectatorial depravity, *or* constitutes a genuine exercise in empathy, occurred in an NBC News story on the “first-person” video coverage of the 14 February, 2018 school shootings in Parkland, Florida (See Figure 2). The footage of “gunshots and screams” recorded by the terrified students who were victims of the massacre, was widely accessible as those recordings became available on social media platforms such as Snapchat’s “Snap Maps,” in addition to becoming quotable fodder for the usual news reports (Clark and Abbruzzese, 2018: n.p.).

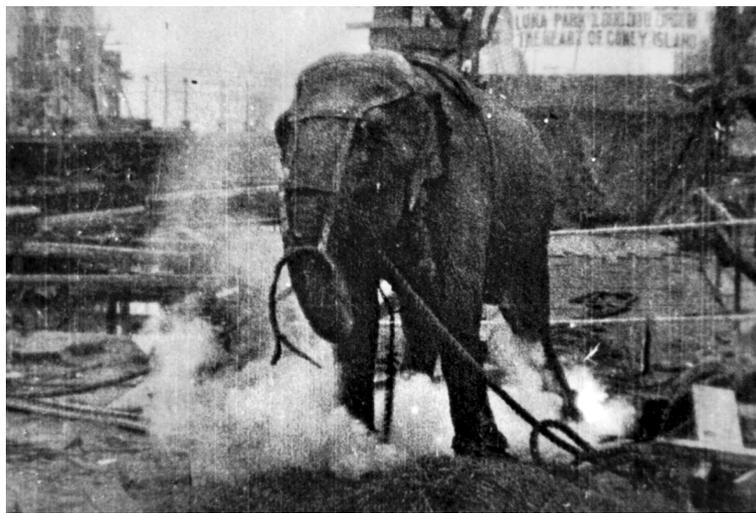


Figure 1: “Electrocuting an Elephant” (Edison Manufacturing Company, 1903)



Figure 2: Taken from footage broadcast on YouTube by *The Washington Post*, 15 February, 2018, accompanied by the caption: “Videos recorded by students give a graphic account of what unfolded inside a Florida high school Feb. 14.” (Ryan Deitsch, *The Washington Post*, MSN.com)

The concern that undergirds the article is around whether these actuality-spectacles “provided an important vantage point that isn’t otherwise available” (Hermida, quoted in Clark and Abbruzzese, 2018: n.p.)<sup>2</sup> or whether their proliferation, potentially stripped of context, rendered the footage anything more than “public entertainment”<sup>3</sup> (North, quoted in Clark and Abbruzzese, 2018: n.p.). In the first instance, the spectator is an empathetic citizen seeking to share in the “visceral and emotional” pain and terror of a national narrative of failure to regulate gun ownership—a kind of “step[ping] into the shoes of others” that allows for empathy and solidarity in crisis.<sup>4</sup> In the second, the fear is that the footage—when de-localized and de-historicized—might appeal merely to the spectator’s spirit of ‘perversity’—the need to approximate a sense of shock, panic, or tragedy for the sensation alone. Again, the fact that the spectator can *negotiate* multiple positions of reception—even and including perverse ones—is rarely the focus in such reportage (though, to its credit, this news report at least presents a debate). The visual document of a traumatic event bears multiple meanings, encourages multiple spectatorial positions and sensorial responses—including those where being “shocked into meaning” means that the usual cognitive processes are suddenly short-circuited. This fully embodied form of knowledge is at least one form of spectatorial desire shared by horror and documentary.

I open with two examples spanning more than a century not to note a significant gap in horror-documentary or pseudo-documentary production, but to highlight that the regular intersection of horror and documentary has persisted in the ensuing decades since the inception of cinema. In some cases, the intersection happened accidentally, as in the infamous 23 November, 1963 footage shot by Abraham Zapruder, which accidentally captured the shocking death of President John F. Kennedy (see Figure 3), or in the very early “Monkeyshines, no. 1 and no. 2” (W.K.L. Dickinson and William Heis), made in 1889 or 1890 by the Edison Manufacturing Company to test the cylinder for the Kinetoscope, designed for the viewing of films through a peephole by individual spectators. The flickering, fading wraithlike image of a blurred and faceless man in white against a dark background here turns Edison’s test footage into an uncanny experimental film (see Figure 4), but it also highlights the reason why cinema, even in its most practical applications as here, is always-already primed for revealing the “other” reality sought by pseudo-documentaries. Benjamin Christensen’s more intentional *Haxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* (1922), for example, “took the threads of phantasm and wove them into a film thesis that would not talk about witches, but would give the witch life” (Baxstrom and Meyers, 2016: 1). Christensen’s film, full of

spectacularly expressionistic imagery and provocative reenactments (see Figure 5), is in the words of Richard Baxstrom and Todd Meyers “an artistic work filled with irrationalities that not only made the witch plausible, but real” (2016: 1). *Haxan* courts spectatorial desire in the form of audaciously upfront horror imagery; it is pseudo-documentary spectacle horror.



Figure 3, left, is taken from footage shot by Abraham Zapruder on 23 November, 1963; Figure 4, right, shows a flickering uncanny figure in the Edison-produced “Monkeyshines” (1899-90).



Figure 5: Expressionistic reenactment in *Häxan: Witchcraft through the Ages* (Benjamin Christensen, 1922)

This essay concerns itself with such spectatorial desire in the 1971 Oscar-winning pseudo-documentary horror film, *The Hellstrom Chronicle*. I argue that Walon Green's stunningly shot and edited insect-documentary-cum-apocalyptic-monster-movie operates on four levels: 1) as straightforward entomological scientific inquiry, 2) as a satire and "subversion" of "factual discourse" (Roscoe and Hight, 2001: 4, 8) through de-contextualized exploitation of its insect footage, 3) as a radical critique of U.S. war-mongering and exploitation of the environment, and 4) as a metaphysical, cosmic-dread film. As an apocalyptic anti-war, pro-environment monster movie, *The Hellstrom Chronicle* is not unique in its moment. *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1971) and *The Last House on the Left* (1972), for example, feature similarly bleak looks at the American family, as well as offering an anti-anthropocentric framing of the human-animal-as-meat that *Hellstrom* evokes in its suggestions of bodily decay and cosmic insignificance in the course of deep time. With a script by David Seltzer, writer of *The Omen* (novel and film, 1976), *The Hellstrom Chronicle* presents its unprecedented macro-footage of the insect world as both a mirror of the programmatic violence of humans, and evidence that human existence on Earth is not only acutely destructive, but ephemeral.

The anti-anthropocentric thrust of *The Hellstrom Chronicle* is characteristic of the pseudo-documentary, particularly as it manifests across the 1970s, culminating in *The Killing of America* (Sheldon Renan, Leonard Schrader, 1982), possibly the most scathing indictment of the sham that is the American Dream ever put to film (and a film that deserves a wider audience). Perhaps closer in aesthetic to the hoax film than to the documentary, the pseudo-documentary uses the rhetoric of factual discourse and the aesthetics of conventional expository documentary to render the strange more real, or to render the real seemingly strange. More of a rhetorical orientation towards its subject matter than a sub-genre per se, the pseudo-documentary combines a fictional and factual discourse; a typically dynamic, persuasive voice-over narration; and often playful reflexive commentary on its subject matter and constructed-ness. *The Hellstrom Chronicle* in particular aesthetically echoes the Italian Mondo film, *Mondo Cane* (Gualtiero Jacopetti, Paolo Cavara, Franco Prosperi, 1962), a film that is as much an anti-colonial critique as it is a Western-centric exploitation of "exotic" places and practices. *Hellstrom* largely eschews the pseudo-documentary's (and the Mondo film's) occasional racist underpinnings—nowhere more present than in its Oscar-nominated precursor, *Chariots of the Gods* (Harald Reinl, 1970)—even as it borrows the Mondo film's dominant, essayistic voice-over and over-determined

associational editing to force telling connections and distinctions between insect and human animal.

In a 2013 co-authored article conceptualizing the Gothic mode in documentaries such as *Capturing the Friedmans* (Andrew Jarecki, 2003) and *Cropsey* (Joshua Zeman and Barbara Brancaccio, 2010), I argued that the horror (or “fantastical”) pseudo-documentary (in opposition to these films) is largely ludic and uncritical in its goals.<sup>5</sup> This may well be the case in uncanny pseudo-documentaries like the aforementioned *Chariots of the Gods* and its follow-up film, *In Search of Ancient Astronauts* (1975, Harald Reinl); in visceral horror documentaries like *H.H. Holmes: America’s First Serial Killer* (2004, John Borowski); and in reality television series like *A Haunting* (The Discovery Channel, 2005-2007; Destination America, 2012-present) and Syfy’s *Ghost Hunters* (2004-present). But here I want to revise and complicate that earlier conclusion to suggest that the suspicion of positivism and rationality that one finds in Gothic-horror’s reflexive play and stylistic excess, can be found to a significant degree in the horror pseudo-documentary form. Why this is important has to do with Gothic-horror’s function as an alternative discourse of realism that has been critically productive in both horror and documentary. We need not always look to the avant-garde to find subversive potential, but instead may look to how popular forms render subversion deceptively through convention. It is in the context of a critical-versus-ludic engagement with Gothic-horror convention in the horror pseudo-documentary form, that I want to re-evaluate *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, a film that enacts critique through straightforward horror pseudo-documentary tropes: particularly in its geopolitical and cultural crisis-mongering, and in its playful deployment of monster-movie conventions. What makes *The Hellstrom Chronicle* a uniquely radical example of the horror pseudo-documentary lies in the ways that it plays with the familiar.

Horror pseudo-documentaries traditionally combine horror and documentary themes, tropes, and rhetorical strategies in ways that rely heavily on the spectators’ savvy awareness of documentary, reality television, mystery and horror conventions. While the traditional horror pseudo-documentary renders the historical world strange, it does so through juxtaposing conjecture and speculation with strings of unanswered questions and readings of evidence that are often *extracted* from historical, archaeological, anthropological or cultural contexts. Pseudo-documentaries can and often do work to subvert their own claims to transparency by highlighting the rhetorical power of documentary aesthetics and factual discourse, but they typically do little else with the fevered sense of allusive textual and generic play they conjure up.

Gary D. Rhodes argues that in pseudo-documentaries such as the television series *In Search of ...* (1976-82; 2002), and *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987-2010), “the question becomes the answer” (2005: 157). That is, the potentially critically productive ambiguity inherent to an open “What if?” ending instead becomes in pseudo-documentary a *fulfillment* of narrative conventions. Open endings in the horror pseudo-documentary in particular serve a teleological drive to take events that are explicable within the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology or geography, and tilt them rhetorically towards the supernatural or paranormal. A single, cryptic phone-in to a late-night radio show by an unidentified caller in southern Florida, for example, is enough to suggest a supernatural cause to the strange phenomena covered in *In Search of ...*’s episode on the Bermuda Triangle (01.04; airdate, 27 April, 1977). Another episode of that series devoted to the “Magic of Stonehenge” (01.24; airdate, 10 September, 1977) begins with a string of reasons why the massive stones would be next to impossible to get to the site, let alone into position, and proceeds to compile numerous esoteric uses for the site, including its use as a sort of ancient communications network, or as a generator of a massive magnetic field. “The question which still eludes us,” intones host Leonard Nimoy in the episode’s coda, “is who erected these working monuments? Clearly they were the work of people more advanced than we had thought possible for that time. We can speculate that our ancestors were possessed of knowledge that was somehow lost to succeeding generations. Or, perhaps they had help?” Though the word “alien” is never mentioned in the episode’s expository script, its final question to the viewer implies the wildly popular hypothesis put forward in the 1970s by Erich von Däniken’s book *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968) and its film version that a visit by extraterrestrials provided primitive humanity with the tools and knowledge to erect the giant stones.<sup>6</sup> Such mysteries in the pseudo-documentary need not involve spaces as vast and cryptic as the Bermuda Triangle or Stonehenge to have an impact. And they need not be limited to the 1970s. In an episode of Discovery Channel’s *A Haunting* (“Demon Child,” 02.01; airdate, 10 August, 2006), a family’s belief that their child’s strange behavior (including peeing in his closet) is a form of demonic possession by a demon called “Man” outstrips any other possibility (that the child is simply an imaginative brat, for example), only because the episode takes pains to offer numerous other “strange” events to make the claim seem more plausible through repetition.

In the pseudo-documentary, the rhetorical slant is key. We *expect* the pseudo-documentary to turn away from rational explanations of its visual record to the fantasy of a possible world where skeptics are fools and believers

in the preternatural and supernatural see their unconventional conclusions supported—if not by evidence, then by a final interrogatory appeal to the viewer’s sense of mystery. In doing so, the pseudo-documentary feeds into the traditional connotation of Gothic as an anti-realist discourse of excess and transgression. Conversely, I argue elsewhere (2016) for the Gothic as a critical-realist mode, suspicious of a reality it sees as uncanny and troubling, even threatening in its resistance to any means of capture or decipherment.<sup>7</sup> Pseudo-documentaries do, indeed, flirt with questioning the positivistic conclusions of rational (scientific) discourse, as Rhodes suggests, but rarely do they highlight themselves as acts of documentary-style interpretation that open up critical pathways into the historical world and the spectator’s tenuous relationship to it. When, for example, the television series, *In Search of ...*, claims at the beginning of every episode that its treatment of everything from hauntings to spontaneous combustion is “based in part on theory and conjecture” and meant to “suggest some possible explanation, but not necessarily the only ones to the mysteries [they] will examine,” the spectator is less *suspicious* of what will follow than *primed* for it. The ambiguities and final *frissons* evoked by pseudo-documentaries can thus be read generically (and ironically) as rhetorical closure to the narrative, where, as Rhodes argues above, a final question (“Or is it ... ?”) becomes the answer. The pseudo-documentary tends in this way to be conceptually retrograde in its appropriation of traditional documentary aesthetics, at least if we consider its straightforward use of an expository formula in which “[i]magery and utterance combine to lead the audience to a monolithic conclusion to their esoteric questions: the exalted truth, rendered impersonally and without apparent bias” (Rhodes, 2005: 159). The horror pseudo-documentary can serve as a form of meta-documentary and meta-horror in the sense that formal and generic play are often front-and-center in its aesthetics. However, a film like *The Hellstrom Chronicle* differs from the horror pseudo-documentary significantly in that it *re-enacts* Gothic-horror convention not as a canny wink to the spectator, but with the purpose of revealing monstrous ruptures in the tools (factual, fictional) we use to understand the historical world. Framing the world as though teetering on the brink of the inscrutable and the irrational, *The Hellstrom Chronicle* points to and disrupts our vague or illusory sense of the real by rendering it through the conventions of the darkly fantastic, while still maintaining a link to the historical world, so crucial within the documentary tradition.

*The Hellstrom Chronicle* combines the pseudo-documentary’s reflexive playfulness with a critique of both the terrible political realities of its cultural

moment, and the representational forms used to present those realities. Produced by David Wolper in the same year as another Wolper production, *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (Mel Stuart), and released in some venues as a double-bill alongside that film, *The Hellstrom Chronicle* was marketed as an apocalyptic horror-science-fiction film. Posters featured the image of a butterfly with two eye-like circles on its wings, accompanied by the claim, “Shocking. Beautiful. Brilliant. Sensual. Deadly ... and in the end, only *they* will survive.” (See Figure 6.) Another poster declared: “Science-Fiction? No! Science-Fact!” In the film, “they” are of course insects, the planet’s longest-existing creatures, long predating humans and—as the film makes abundantly clear—destined to outlive them.



Figure 6: One-sheet for *The Hellstrom Chronicle*

*The Hellstrom Chronicle* is an oddball documentary-horror hybrid. As I mentioned above, its script is by David Seltzer, who would later go on to pen the screenplay for the perennially popular, *The Omen* (Richard Donner) and its tie-in novelization. Director Green, who had worked with Wolper on documentary shoots for National Geographic, also served as one of the film’s three principal cinematographers as well as a co-producer. The film is deftly

edited (by Jon Soh) and features intricate, impressionistic sound design (by Charles L. Campbell, David Ronne and composer Lalo Schiffrin, who scored George Lucas's *THX-1138* in the same year, and would later be nominated for an Oscar for his score for *The Amityville Horror* [Stuart Rosenberg, 1979]). Some of the sound effects are derived from recordings of the natural world, significantly enhanced. We hear the sound of worms munching on plant leaves in full stereo, for example, with echoing reverb to accentuate the grotesque, up-close images. Arguably, the film won its Oscar largely for its never-before-seen macro-lens footage of the insect world, which included glimpses inside a termite tower and a bee hive; extreme-close-up, slow-motion footage of the flapping of a bee's wings; the view from inside a carnivorous plant; monstrous insect faces and bulbous mirror-eyes that fill the screen; and a full-scale record of a battle between two ant colonies—including the decapitations and dismemberments expected of a proper war. According to the end credits, all of the film's "statements about the insect world are factual and [were] reviewed by Roy Snelling and Charles Hogue, PhD, of the Entomology Department, Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History." The hard science behind the film's claims stops there, however.

In the film's end credits, we learn that its fear-mongering eponymous entomologist "Nils Hellstrom"—who serves the film as part expert 'chronicler', part leering horror-host—is a *fictional* character, played by actor Lawrence Pressman (in a perpetually smirking and glowering performance). Purportedly, there was an actual entomologist assigned to the role, but when he died unexpectedly, Pressman was brought on to embody the "expert" (Tomkins, 2012, n.p.). Pressman savors the role of the film's authority figure as though he's got a universal truth tucked in the pocket of his blazer, alternately glowering and sneering at the spectator and delivering his lines like he's rolling a delicious chocolate around in his mouth. His excessively creepy, arrogant demeanor is meant to telegraph continuously that his presence in the film is a parodic take on the expert-witness character in so many horror films whose dire pronouncements go unheeded by his fellow humans (See Figure 7). Hellstrom's role as one of horror cinema's archetypal unsung savants is suggested immediately in his initial claims that his unorthodox beliefs have "cost [him] two fellowships, one assistant professorship and," after a dramatic pause, followed by a sly grin, "even a few friendships." In short, Hellstrom's claims are unpopular because, presumably, they are unpleasant, audacious, and even potentially shocking, to contemplate.



Figure 7: Actor Lawrence Pressman as entomological “expert”-*cum*-apocalyptic harbinger, carnival “barker,” and horror host, Dr. Nils Hellstrom

Here, the film aligns Hellstrom squarely with the carnival “barker” whose job it is to generate interest in the carnival’s otherwise distracted general public of the horror attractions that await them—inside the tent, or behind the curtain of his stage. Robert Bogdan notes that the responsibility of the carnival barker (more properly known as a ‘talker’, ‘lecturer’, or ‘blower’ [Bradna and Hartzell, cited in Bogdan, 1988: 86]) was “to attract the crowd, to grab attention with their modulating voices and slick talk. Using exaggeration and misrepresentation, they told passersby of the wonders that awaited them for the price of one thin dime” (1988: 86). Early horror cinema occasionally adopted this persuasive strategy: James Whale’s *Frankenstein* confronts its audience with a prefatory lecturer directly addressing the audience from a stage, ending his speech with a tantalizing, “You’ve been warned!” The film’s follow-up, *Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935), features a prologue in which the Shelleys and Lord Byron (“England’s greatest sinner!”) have a conversation meant to stoke interest in the lurid nature of the story to come (“Open up your pits of hell!” urges Byron to Mary Shelley as she begins her continuation of the story), while Shelley’s comments in the opening proclaim her purpose

to have been a “moral” one. And some prints of Tod Browning’s *Freaks* (1932) featured a didactic scroll offering the audience context and moral instruction on empathetic reception of the film’s “amazing” subject matter, while using further enticing and provocative framing of the film as a “highly unusual attraction,” and a “startling horror story of the abnormal and unwanted.” Like the prologue in *Bride*, the opening scroll of *Freaks* acted as a simultaneous enticer and disclaimer, potentially warding off any charges of indecency. In their role as spectacle-horror showmen, the carnival barkers, despite their ‘misrepresentations’ of the subjects on display—which often included creating wholly fictional histories for them to “aggrandize” their deformities (Bogdan, 1988: 86, 98)—were likely to be associated themselves with freakishness and oddities. The barkers were—like horror’s witnesses who return to tell the story, marked by the darker realities of their world—arguably freaks themselves, purveyors of forbidden knowledge.

*The Hellstrom Chronicle*’s oblique presentation of the Hellstrom character as a performer enticing a potential audience to consume his exploitative spectacle, is a decidedly twisted spin on the dry, stolid National Geographic type—a dispassionate talking head with a straightforward presentation of clinical subject matter. Hellstrom is a “cinema showman” (Gunning, 1986: 384)—a purveyor of spectacle who addresses the spectator directly—and, as such, becomes a stand-in for the filmmakers behind *The Hellstrom Chronicle*. Pressman frequently enters the frame in profile, giving him the opportunity to turn to the camera to acknowledge the film’s spectators as though he’s just noticed them out there watching. With a half-smile on his face and a never-ending string of sidelong, knowing glances at the camera, Pressman-as-Hellstrom delivers portentous pronouncements that insects will outlast humanity through their sheer adaptability. We learn in the end credits that Hellstrom’s “statements relating to the impermanence of the human species have been synthesized from contemporary opinions.” This proviso must be read against the kind of “theory and conjecture” disclaimer that frames a pseudo-documentary series like *In Search of . . .* In light of the proliferation of warnings and directives by Hellstrom that have preceded this disclaimer in the film, the sheer evasiveness of the disclaimer requires that it be read as sarcastic commentary on the film’s didactic, paranoid fear-mongering. And yet, despite the fun the film has in undermining Hellstrom in the end, his pronouncements carry a dire political message that, for all its ‘aggrandized’ (Bogdan, 1988) delivery, seems downright logical and justly terrifying.

Hellstrom’s “chronicle” offers a dreadful speculation on the true inheritors of an earth eventually depleted by humanity (among the film’s

targets are “hydrogen bombs and pollution”) and as such may seem like not much more than an environmental horror film script rammed up against some stunning insect photography. Yet *The Hellstrom Chronicle* continually strips away the expository power of Hellstrom’s claims by overplaying the character’s confidence to an absurd degree. If the political message remains, it is because the film’s excesses in this vein approach satire. Hellstrom forces interpretations onto the evidentiary (and sometimes stock) footage he presents. In his first statement, heard in voice-over against the film’s opening images of violent volcanic eruptions, Hellstrom tells us that “The earth was created not with the gentle caress of love but with the brutal violence of rape.” The film’s striking imagery of often frenzied, vicious insect survival will seem to bear out such an audacious pronouncement, if largely because everything in the film—including, implicitly, the motives of Hellstrom himself—is meant to be framed by monstrous violence and seductive, manipulative sexuality. Hellstrom’s statements throughout the film allow spectators little room to interpret the film’s imagery for themselves. According to his voice-over, the bulbous black widow spider that we see in close-up on a web bouncing under her weight, is “trembling with obese sexuality” as she awaits her mate, who will eventually ‘unite’ with her “in mindless ecstasy” before she sucks him dry. And the insect in general is claimed to be nature’s most “grotesque variation,” “a foetus with the capability to dominate all,” whose adaptability over 300 million years has transformed it into “specters as limitless as the imagination of the insane.” In such statements, *The Hellstrom Chronicle* inverts the strategy of the self-consciously unsure or questing authorial perspective used in Gothic documentaries like the aforementioned *Capturing the Friedmans* and *Cropsey*, both of which equivocate on the power of their knowledge-pursuing filmmaker-subjects to reach any solid conclusion; instead, its commanding voice-over offers a supremely confident, totalizing interpretation of its evidentiary footage that is often extremely difficult to accept, even as polemic or opinion.<sup>8</sup> The “text”—the insects themselves—can be read; but the film’s highly colorful and themed reading of their actions takes on a critical potential that holds audiences somewhere between gleaning documentary information, analyzing their historical moment, rewarding their horror genre savvy, and contemplating the ironic overconfidence of the authority narrating the film.

Nils Hellstrom’s excessively over-determined, fear-mongering apocalyptic reading of the film’s evidentiary footage enacts a grotesque celebration and parody of the role of the authority in both documentary and horror cinema. The film encourages a spectatorial position that combines sublimity regarding its evidentiary imagery and audacious pronouncements, and a kind of bemused

(not to mention *amused*) skepticism that it is a documentary at all. Seltzer's unrestrained voice-over script frames the film as Hellstrom's impassioned exploration of his obsession with the subject matter, peppering the monologue with some of the juiciest overwriting to grace the screen. With the overconfidence of one of Edgar Poe's imprudent narrators, Hellstrom cautions the spectator: "And if you, at this moment, dare to think this is lunacy, I invite you to remain in your seat, draw your own conclusion and learn the inevitable destiny of ignorance." Compare this comment to the narrator of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," who implores his reader to note the 'acuteness' of his powers of observation, asking "How, then, am I mad? Hearken! and observe how healthily—how calmly I can tell you the whole story" ([1843]1984: 555). Like that tale's narrator, Hellstrom expresses what is essentially a highly subjective, impassioned interpretation of his surroundings with a supremely (over)confident certainty.

As a *chronicle*, then, the film is not meant to be Nils Hellstrom's autobiography, but instead his expressive account of the events, filtered through a persuasive rhetorical strategy that suggests *The Hellstrom Chronicle* to be additionally a parody of the essay film. For, like that form, it is "metadiscursive" (Papazian and Eades, 2016: 4), creating a limiting impressionism around the absurdly confident expository information offered by Hellstrom's voice-over. Hellstrom's status as a fictional construct—an artificial embodiment of "synthesized [...] contemporary opinions"—makes the film's playful indictment of the power of rhetorical form all the more visible. Even though Hellstrom's implicit political messages come across as sensible (if dreadful), in forcing an interpretation onto evidentiary images that can barely sustain the reading they're being given, the film demands that Hellstrom's voice-over be read *as itself* a colourful *reading*—through a horror lens darkly. The images of insect battles and attacks are, indeed, violent in the film—as are images of a grasshopper digested to desiccation by a cobra plant, or an iguana squinting in pain as it is devoured by thousands of driver ants—but the assured voice-over's self-conscious monster-movie rhetoric ramps up the terror to push it to formulaic excess. The Hellstrom voice-over pulls the spectator back from the evidentiary potency of the otherwise convincingly horrific images, encouraging a sense of hilarity that often attends horror's extreme spectacles—but here the hilarity is critical. The film *stamps* horror genre convention onto its documentary footage like a dominating revisionary commentary on what the spectator sees—a textual re-enactment that pushes reality a little too far into the realm of paranoia, even as it appeals to a collective fear that humans (and Americans in particular) are overtaxing the

planet. “It is the need for individual luxury,” urges Hellstrom, “that creates the technology that destroys the planet, making it uninhabitable for all but one—the insect.” The voice-over message can be heard alongside the images, *supplementing* them with an imposed cautionary reading, rather than conventionally “complement[ing]” (Kozloff, 1988: 104) them with information that offers a unified reading (i.e., a reading focused exclusively on the behaviours of insects).

Sarah Kozloff notes that voice-over in cinema is always-already going to be read as “asynchronous” (1988: 103) because it throws into relief the dialogue between the visual and its narrative presentation. Kozloff sees potential in the highlighting of this interplay in what she terms “ironic” and “unreliable” voice-over. In Kozloff’s terms, Nils Hellstrom is an “ironic narrator” (1988: 111). His forced commentary on the imagery isn’t necessarily “undermined” by the film’s insect footage; it is an “overinflation” (Kozloff, 1988: 112) of that footage, throwing both voice-over text and evidentiary imagery into tension with each other. Hellstrom’s audience hears the film’s *other* message, one that arrives in the voice-over as a thematic directive to regard the position of the human animal in nature as one of degraded privilege: “It is we who are the dwarfs, he who is the giant.” Humans, it suggests, can “radically change the earth,” but they do not have the power to adapt to those changes. Insects, however, do—and will.

Hellstrom’s continually confrontational cautionary statements make it easy to look at *The Hellstrom Chronicle* merely as a fear-mongering pseudo-documentary allegory of human excess, or worse, a mere product-of-its-time. In his 1 January, 1971 review, Roger Ebert seriously misses the film’s point, calling the film’s narration “so theatrical and philosophically naive that it’s unworthy of the photography,” and concluding, “Think how bad the insects could feel if they could see a documentary about what humans are up to” (2015: n.p.). Yet this is *exactly* the argument that *The Hellstrom Chronicle* makes in the almost whimsical attitude it takes in anthropomorphizing its insect subjects. Indeed, the film’s main analytical thrust is less entomologic than ethnographic: the insects as presented in the film are anthropomorphized to manifest a mirror image of humanity’s basic desires for sex, violence, and survival. This effect is achieved not just through the voice-over, but, as indicated above, through associative montage and guiding commentary that links *The Hellstrom Chronicle* to the Italian Mondo or “shockumentary” tradition, which makes its cultural arguments almost entirely via repetition and juxtaposition of images and events across cultures. From notorious examples of the form, such as the aforementioned *Mondo Cane*, to self-conscious art-

house entries, such as *Baraka* (1992, Ron Fricke), the Mondo aesthetic makes its sometimes critical, sometimes reductive statements about humanity by collapsing vastly different cultures into shocking comparisons and contrasts that create meaning by generating an embodied response from spectators. The pseudo-documentary operates similarly. As Gary D. Rhodes observes of Harald Reinl's film, *Chariots of the Gods*: "The editing shifts from image to image, which are no longer attributed to their geography or culture, and blurs them into a visual menagerie suited to the film's argument" (2006: 158).<sup>9</sup> The back-and-forth movement from insect footage to Hellstrom's scripted commentary in *The Hellstrom Chronicle* continually gestures to the kind of level playing ground that Ebert suggests in his concluding statement above, as when Hellstrom says that he would like to see the "ironic smile on the creator's face" when he made man and insect equal. This very irony dominates *The Hellstrom Chronicle's* script and presentation. In what almost seems a canny observation of the business-as-usual final "Or is it ...?" question for the pseudo-documentary, Hellstrom asks why any creature struggles to survive against the inevitability of death. He concludes that "The insect has the answer, because he never posed the question." In moments such as this the film holds itself up as a darkly comical mirror on a Cold War culture that fears everything that stands in the way of anthropocentric (and especially American) domination and exceptionalism.

*The Hellstrom Chronicle* actually *is* a well-researched and stunningly shot insect documentary. It is also an anti-speciesist animal rights documentary, an apocalyptic cautionary tale, and as good an entry into the killer-insect horror cinema subgenre as *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1958) (which it visually excerpts) and *Phase IV* (Saul Bass, 1974) (which it arguably inspired). Additionally, it stands as a significant commentary on factual discourse, stranding its spectators squarely between subjective cinematographic representation and a stunningly revealed referent. Yet, it remains unsung by scholars in this regard. In *F is for Phony*, a scholarly collection on documentaries that play with notions of fakery, hoax and deception as part of a critical intervention on documentary historiography, Jesse Lerner excludes *The Hellstrom Chronicle* from what he and co-editor Alexandra Juhasz term "productive fake documentaries" (Juhasz and Lerner, 2006: 5), calling it one of a "host of other sensationalist and tabloid films liberally borrowing documentary devices for the dissemination of untruths" (Juhasz and Lerner, 2006: 21).<sup>10</sup> Lerner makes this call despite his claim that more productive fake documentaries, like Orson Welles's mockumentary *News on the March* sequence in *Citizen Kane*, achieve their critical power through the "known lie that brings what would otherwise be

transparent form into focus” (Juhasz and Lerner, 2006: 5). Juhasz defines productive fake documentaries, as “produc[ing] uncertainty and also knowingness about documentary’s codes, assumptions, and processes” (Juhasz and Lerner, 2006: 7).<sup>11</sup> I would offer that *The Hellstrom Chronicle* is nothing if not a film that documents its own tendency towards fakery, and in doing so it highlights the way that a historical reality and context can be forced onto the referent via appeals to factual discourse—the direct address and voice-over of an expert, for example. It claims in sensationalist, apocalyptic terms that insects are the true inheritors of the earth—the only life form that ultimately will really matter. And yet it fashions itself as a *human* interest story just the same—ironically and satirically stamping human subjectivity onto the more “superior” species it documents for the sole sake of making an argument *about* humanity by comparison and contrast. If the film’s position on humanity’s fleeting existence in the scheme of deep history is true, the only thing in *The Hellstrom Chronicle* that *should* matter is the footage of insects doing what insects do. No reading, or readings, of their behavior—and no amount of comparisons and contrasts to human behavior—would “explain” the insect’s dominance through adaptability. What matters, in fact, is that Hellstrom’s paranoid claims *do* impress upon the spectator a sense of historical processes and an awareness of a specific historical moment. In this way, the film becomes a key example of what Kirsten Moana Thompson calls “apocalyptic dread” (2007), shocking the spectator with an awareness of cosmic insignificance while confronting them with imagery suggesting the more disturbing aspects of their world. Thompson divides her focus on dread into three types: “memorial,” or that dread which is associated with “remembering”; “scopic,” or that dread which is associated with repressed knowledge; and “specular,” or that dread which is “attache[d] to” or projected onto a double (2007: 25). Hellstrom echoes all three, but makes particular use of scopic and specular dread in its allegorical connections between human and insect. The film was released on 28 June, 1971. The Vietnam War would not end officially until 1975. The 4 May, 1970, murders of four students at Kent State University in Ohio, and the massive 21 April, 1971, protest in Washington, DC, precede its release, stoking anti-war sentiment in the minds of Americans. (In a war where Agent Orange and Napalm were deployed by the U.S. military to poison and burn the tropical foliage of Vietnam, American spectators could not have felt anything but uneasy watching Hellstrom present the spraying of billions of locusts in Africa and the American west.) At this point, the 1972 Watergate scandal is yet to come. And the “Keep America Beautiful” campaign will air its first environmental spot on U.S. television on

22 April, 1971, showing Native American character, “Iron Eyes Cody” (played by Italian-American actor Espera Oscar de Corti) weeping over steaming landfills, polluted creeks, and smog-choked highways. The institutions and industries that were deemed infallible in their support of America’s triumphant presence in WWII were now being held under suspicion.

Nils Hellstrom’s dire claims for humanity derive directly from this context, and become allegorized in the film’s final scene, an impressively staged demonstration of the driver ant’s pillaging to feed its colony. Here, the film “stages” a full scale attack with streams of soldier ants crossing rivers on bridges made by the bodies of other ants who will sacrifice themselves to the colony’s destructive cause. Again, as in the Mondo film, the scene is shot and edited with colonial superiority to the subjects who move in to exploit their victims, yet tintured with anti-colonial sentiment in the pathos and terror it evokes in its presentation of invasion, consumption, and annihilation. It is also a tour-de-force of body horror, filled with extreme close ups of ant pincers munching on the flesh of their victims, and deftly shot and edited to make this small-scale battlefield seem as immense in scope as the film’s allegorical implications for the scene. Hellstrom’s scripted framing of the scene means to suggest that such insect armies as these will apocalyptically destroy the feeble remains of the human race once it has left itself weakened by war and environmental abuse: “The industrial waste that poisons our air, the DDT that poisons our food source, the radiation that destroys our very flesh, are to the insect nothing more than a gentle perfume,” he warns. “And the toxins that are killing our fellow creatures—the insects live, reproduce, thrive and gain strength by virtue of our growing weakness.” Yet, the scene’s staging, despite such pronouncements of their superiority over humans, also suggests that the insects are simultaneously an ominous *reflection* of humanity—again, Thompson’s dreaded specular double in action. The scene ends with shots of the triumphant soldier ants standing straight up on their hind legs atop stone slabs that appear like monolithic bulwarks, lit by the burnt-orange glow of a fading sun. The film ends similarly, with a giant beetle looming on a burnt horizon (See Figures 8 and 9). Such imagery is characteristic of apocalyptic horror films of the period such as 1974’s *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper) and 1977’s *The Hills Have Eyes* (Wes Craven), which are also critical of U.S. foreign policy and its diminishing returns (especially for the working class), excessive military spending, capitalist outsourcing of local labor, industrial mechanization, and abuse and waste of environmental resources. *The*



Figure 8: Driver ants, triumphant atop their “military” bulwarks.



Figure 9: An apocalyptic closing image.

*Hellstrom Chronicle*'s suspicions of its historical moment and the ways human animals engage with it are *deeply critical*, not delusional. Nils Hellstrom continually undercuts, obfuscates and densely thematizes what the viewer sees. The film comments on the excesses of humanity by *being* excessive—as presentation but also as interpretation. *The Hellstrom Chronicle* targets documentary as a discourse of sobriety prone to abuse by both scientific discourse and hegemonic propaganda. It is a parody of the documentary form as easily coopted, and it tailors this parodic mode towards a satire of its historical moment. As such, if it can be deemed “fake,” it must also be seen as critically “productive” contra the conclusions made by Juhasz and Lerner (2006).

In drawing upon conventions of horror and the Gothic, *The Hellstrom Chronicle* makes an explicit acknowledgment of the critical power of sensation and spectacle. In its parodic, satirical, and allegorical terms, it combines attractions-based “spectacle horror,” pseudo-documentary discourse, and the mockumentary’s characteristic reflexivity to create a viewing experience that combines shock, amusement, and formal and social critique. *The Hellstrom Chronicle*’s appeal to a fully embodied spectator is no mere ludic tactic, or superficial diversion, but a potential tool for exploring the kinds of productive sensorial experience shared by both horror and documentary spectatorships. In “The Spectacle of Actuality,” Elizabeth Cowie asks of documentary, “should we look for knowledge or for pleasure?” (1999: 26), and in later work, identifies “mise-en-scenes of desire and of imagining that enable identification” (2011: 86) in documentary similar to those of fiction. In Cowie’s terms, the documentary gaze carries echoes of the revelatory and the uncanny that parallel the gaze of cinematic horror, for “[i]n curiosity, the desire to see is allied with the desire [to] know through seeing what cannot normally be seen, that is, what is normally veiled or hidden from sight” (2011: 13). In Cowie’s framing, the documentary spectator confronts knowledge through a combination of desire for and dread of revelation. *The Hellstrom Chronicle* strands the spectator in this realm of expectation of spectacular revelation, somewhere between seeing to know and feeling to know. It holds documentary epistemology and horror narratives of curiosity, disclosure and unease in constant balance, and takes this up as a form of aesthetic play through generic convention and stylistic/poetic excess or reflexivity. In doing so, it participates in a politics of attractions, a kind of “radical diversion” that encourages an interplay of affective engagement and critical distance.

In “Documentary in a Post-Documentary Culture? A Note on Forms and their Functions,” John Corner identifies a key, turn-of-the-21<sup>st</sup> century shift in

documentary aesthetics that reveals a “weakening of documentary status” (2001, n.p.). For Corner, a viewership that no longer places any value in the once-dominant expository rhetorical form has instead encouraged a dramatic and “decisive shift towards *diversion*” in documentary, a degree of “representational play and reflexivity” that is more “performative” than critical (2001, n.p., emphasis added). Corner locates this discussion in terms of the influence of reality television on documentary aesthetics and a move away from postmodern questions around representation-as-manipulation towards a “dynamics of diversion and the aesthetics of performance [that] dominate a greatly expanded range of popular images of the real” (2001, n.p.). Corner’s position is a standard scholarly lament on the unrealized critical potential that increased accessibility to recording technologies might have provided—from home movie, to video, to digital technology. While the pseudo-documentary form isn’t quite reality television, it does anticipate that form’s blend of factual discourse, melodramatic flourish, actuality-as-spectacle, and audaciously over-determined narration. Like reality TV, the pseudo-documentary also courts its spectator’s combined curiosity, critical distance, and sense of outrage through formal self-awareness. Nils Hellstrom’s essayistic expository act constructs a subjectivity that is a perpetual play between acts of observation and interpretation, witnessing and chronicling. Even in its overconfidence Hellstrom’s chronicle unsettles the documentary form to suggest the productive and transcendent possibilities of Gothic-horror fragmentariness, inscrutability, equivocation, and narrative “anticlosure” (Heller, 1987: 110), or a reflexive circling back to the text’s initial questions that implicates the reader (or spectator) in the fraught process of exegesis that occurs so often in horror texts. Ultimately, the epistemic links between horror and documentary evident in the horror pseudo-documentary tell us that there is important critical power in encouraging desire—both pleasurable and dreadful—in seeking knowledge.

It is in this context that *The Hellstrom Chronicle* performs what might be called its “radical diversion” as regards documentary spectatorship. I borrow Corner’s framing (above) of a turn to merely ludic reflexivity in later popular documentary forms not so much to contest it as to suggest that a turn to what he calls “diversion” in documentary aesthetics need not be unproductive. In my terms, a “*radical diversion*” in documentary aesthetics may look something like what a horror pseudo-documentary like *The Hellstrom Chronicle* does in highlighting the materiality of the medium and in encouraging contemplation through sensation. *The Hellstrom Chronicle* adopts the Gothic tradition’s peculiarly revelatory and sensory reality, especially its turn to expressive—even excessive—spectacle, sensation, and sublimity as ways of understanding the

impact of the historical world on the subject. It carries with it the overriding presumption that the historical world is always-already sublime; that is, its immense scope, ephemerality and resistance to “capture” confront the observer with a pleasurable dread that is, in Lyotardian terms, “generative” (quoted in Johnson, 121) in its encouraging spectators to explore the limits and limitations of form.<sup>12</sup> As I have argued in this essay, *The Hellstrom Chronicle* introduces a possibility for popular forms and generic convention to be deployed in a critical, interrogatory form of horror attractions cinema to investigate the historical world and our methods of capturing it.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Corner’s notion here echoes Renov’s earlier point that “As desire is put into play, documentary discourse may realize historical discursivity *through and against* pleasurable surface, may engage in self-reflection *in the service of* moral suasion” (1993: 25).

<sup>2</sup> Clark and Abbruzzese here cite Alfred Hermida, a professor with the University of British Columbia in Vancouver’s school of journalism.

<sup>3</sup> Clark and Abbruzzese here cite Karen North, of the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Journalism in Los Angeles, who also puts forward that such footage, presented within the proper context, can be historically and socially important in terms of sharing the experience of tragic events.

<sup>4</sup> The first comment is Hermida, the second, North. See notes 2 and 3 above.

<sup>5</sup> See Papagena Robbins and Kristopher Woofert, “‘Gothumentary’: The Gothic Unsettling of Documentary’s Rhetoric of Rationality,” in *Textus: English Studies in Italy*. Vol. 12, no. 3 (Fall 2013): 49-62.

<sup>6</sup> Genre literature and cinema are important precedents for the pseudo-documentary. One of the pseudo-documentary’s most popular topics—ancient aliens—has been traced to the fiction of H.P. Lovecraft by Jason Colavito (2005), who surveys various ancient-alien theories and extraterrestrial-based religious cults with the notion that all such belief systems derive from ideas central specifically to the so-called Cthulhu mythos, first appearing in Lovecraft’s “The Call of Cthulhu” (1928). Central to Colavito’s thesis is the notion that scientists, spiritualists and theorists turned to such ideas over the course of a 20<sup>th</sup> Century that became increasingly secular as the result of industrialization, urbanization and scientific discovery. Lovecraft himself argued in his epistolary output that the discoveries of hard science only opened up greater, more profound questions. Gary D. Rhodes locates pseudo-documentary treatments of ancient alien conspiracy theories in a historically specific counter-

culture and New Age tradition that extends from the turn-of-the-19<sup>th</sup>-century Spiritualist movement, and occult and alternative thinkers in the 1920s, 30s and 40s, such as Alice Bailey (2005: 156).<sup>6</sup> As a number of scholars have shown (Sconce, 2000; Kaplan 2003, 2008; Chéroux, et al, 2004; Gunning, 2007), the potentially revelatory “new medium” of photography was a key tool for these alternative movements. Spiritualists especially took a technophilic stance on the photographic medium-as-magical that the pseudo-documentary would adopt unreservedly.

<sup>7</sup> See Kristopher Woofter, “Shoot the Dead: Horror Cinema, Documentary, and Gothic Realism,” PhD diss., Concordia University, 2017, Spectrum (981984). A prior version of the analysis of *The Hellstrom Chronicle* was part of my PhD dissertation.

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of a Gothic narrative in which the narrating voice manifests grossly overconfident interpretations of the proceedings is in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), where family servant, Nelly Dean, offers a comprehensive account of events that it is questionable she could have witnessed so fully.

<sup>9</sup> Mondo films and horror are often linked, explicitly so in such mockumentary horror films as *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980, Ruggero Deodato); its fictional expedition is framed as an exploitative ethnographic project, and it makes satirical parallels between the “savagery” of the Amazon and the urban “jungle” of Wall Street. *The Hellstrom Chronicle*’s take on American exploitation of global and natural resources fits squarely within this kind of critique.

<sup>10</sup> Juhasz and Lerner make no distinction between “fake” documentary and “pseudo-” documentary in their collection’s framing introduction, preferring the former term to the latter “because it registers both the copying [of factual discourse and aesthetics] and its discovery” (Juhasz, 2006: 7). In Juhasz’s identifying in “fake” the notion of a critical practice, I would make a distinction between “fake” and “pseudo-” documentary, which adopts documentary form as a way of speculating about and exploring unknowns with a greater sense of realism than can be offered by fictional narratives covering such topics.

<sup>11</sup> Juhasz and Lerner are responding to pervasive concerns in cinema scholarship with respect to the power of cinematic forms to mediate the *real* right out of history by reshaping memory—to reform it into a palimpsestic layering of erasures, re-visions. Accordingly, Juhasz and Lerner call for a productive fake documentary project in the form of “films that don’t just deconstruct but reconstruct; films that unmake and make reality claims; films that mark that it matters who remembers and in what context,” and films that “unlink and link their text and viewer to knowledge about many documentary truths, and an equally many documentary lies, about identity, history, authenticity, and authority” (2006: 16). They would place *The Hellstrom Chronicle* within the category of “sensationalistic pseudodocumentary tales of the uncanny,” which they say lie “in the murky borderlands of documentary, fiction, and fake” (19). I posit that *The Hellstrom Chronicle* creates a productive space in these “murky borderlands of documentary, fiction, and fake.”

<sup>12</sup> The passage, quoted here by David B. Johnson (2012), is from Lyotard’s 1991 *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, regards the contemplation of the failure of the imagination to rectify the unrepresentable: “Rather than resulting in a kind of stultified impasse,” argues Lyotard, “the irresolvability of this situation itself becomes generative: it produces a negative

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presentation of what exceeds presentation, ‘a sign of the presence of the absolute’” (1991: 152).

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