TELL, DON'T SHOW: FORM, FUNCTION AND AFFECT OF VERBAL ACCOUNT SCENES IN ANGLOPHONE HORROR FILMS AND THRILLERS

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Abstract

"Show, don't tell" is one of the most established axioms in film. In recent years, however, a number of authors have shed light on film dialogue, verbalization and a narrative strategy termed *verbal account*. While found in works of many genres, the verbal account's appearance in horror films is particularly interesting considering the genre's usual reliance on striking, affective visuals. In this article, I present the theoretical framework that has shaped the studies of verbalization in film, particularly Julian Hanich's conceptualization of the verbal account and its subcategories, and draw parallels between this strategy, horror literature and oral tradition. Employing textual analysis of scene examples, I attempt to ascertain the narrative function of such scenes and add a dimension to the existing categorization. Finally, I propose a practical experiment to assess the emotional affect of verbal accounts.

Keywords: verbal account, messenger's report, teichoscopy, acousmatic, affect, horror, thriller.

Introduction

A man sits at a diner and retells his eerie dream to a friend; a dream about the very place they sit in. He recounts the atmosphere, an unsettling dread, and the strange entity which seems to cause it: "There's a man, in back of this place. He's the one who's doing it. I can see him through the wall. I can see his face. I hope that I never see that face, ever, outside of a dream." (Lynch, 2001, 0:12:53) The diner scene in David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001) is a noteworthy example of a narrative strategy observed by Julian Hanich (2010) in *Cinematic emotion in horror films and thrillers: the aesthetic paradox of pleasurable fear*. Hanich (2010) introduces the term *verbal account* to classify scenes where characters retell past events or describe concealed images, inviting the audience to imagine the descriptions in their minds' eyes. Inspiring the title of the present article, David Bordwell (2010) flips the famous "show, don't tell" dictum when discussing similar scenes in one of his *Observations on Film Art* analyses. While Bordwell examines examples from a range of styles and genres, from *Persona* (1966) to *Psycho* (1960), Hanich's 2010 work concentrates on the horror and thriller genres to examine particular verbal account examples and theorize the broad concept of *suggested horror*[1]. Borrowing from drama theory, Hanich (2010) further divides verbal accounts into *teichoscopy* and *messenger's report*. While teichoscopy refers to a description of visuals which a character sees but the audience does not, the messenger's report constitutes a retelling of past events, which may have been witnessed by the characters themselves or relayed by others. Despite this subdivision, the verbal account stands as a narrative unity which, beyond simply delivering information, aims to evoke the imagination of the viewer through its verbalization. Yet,

Hanich's subcategories demonstrate that verbal accounts are diverse in form, raising questions about a unifying definition and characterization.

Drawing from Hanich's (2010, 2022) considerations as well as further observations made on the scenes surveyed for the present work, I propose five constitutive features to delineate *verbal accounts*, setting them apart from other sound or dialogue oriented scenes, and particularly framing the present study focus of verbal accounts in the horror genre: (1) A verbal account is delivered by a diegetic character. Therefore, I exclude from this category non-diegetic narrators, be it a verbal narration or inter-title narrations in silent films. (2) It either recounts past events or describes present visuals that are hidden from the film audience (to reiterate Hanich's subdivision). (3) In case of a messenger's report, the past event may have been witnessed by the speaker themselves or may be a relay of information they came in contact with (for example, local folktales or stories heard from third parties). This rule does not apply to teichoscopy as, by definition, it requires the speaker to see the image described at the time of speaking. (4) The narration must evoke images and stimulate the audience's imagination (Hanich, 2022). This is perhaps the most crucial, defining characteristic of the verbal account: while many character monologues may at first seem like verbal accounts, the distinction between any long speech in film and the verbal account specifically is that the latter aims to recreate verbally a mental image that, otherwise, might have been delivered visually, while the former may have a number of narrative functions without ever eliciting the imagination in the same manner. Verbal accounts usually stand as alternatives for what could have been a flashback or an insert shot[2]. At this

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1   It is important to distinguish the broader idea of suggested horror from the particular strategy of the verbal account. Hanich proposes five types of filmic fear: *shock, dread, terror, direct horror* and *suggested horror*. While *direct horror* presents "confrontation with vivid sound-supported moving-images of threatening acts of violence or a dangerous monster" (2010, p. 82), it stands in opposition to suggested horror, which evokes imagined visualizations, sound effects and concealed visuals. Instances of suggested horror may include, for example, whispers and ghostly voices.

2   Consider, for instance, Rosemary's exclamatory inquiry about her baby's eyes, which are never shown in *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski, 1968).

point, it is crucial to reiterate that the present work focuses on verbal accounts in horror films and thrillers, therefore requiring an additional constitutive feature for the works analyzed in this article: (5) The verbal account must allude to horrific imagery or evoke feelings of fear, dread, discomfort or other emotions relating to horror and horror-thrillers[3].

This article presents the framework for an investigation of the verbal account, triangulating its forms, functions and affect. The first section presents the theoretical framework that has shaped the studies of verbalization in film in the past years, articulating the many concepts and terms related to film speech and sound. In the subsequent section, I draw parallels between the control of information in the verbal account strategy, first-person horror literature and oral storytelling, proposing similarities between the act of watching a messenger's report scene, and reading or listening to a scary story, and arguing for ambiguity as the commonality that makes these storytelling modes effective. Then, through textual analysis of verbal account examples in horror audiovisual works, I expand on Hanich's categorization by taking into consideration the overlooked presence or absence of the speaker on screen in horror verbal accounts, and glance over possible narrative functions of such scenes. The scope of the analysis is limited to narrative fiction[4] films and series which are originally anglophone, due to the importance of vocabulary in the delivery of verbal accounts. In the final section, I propose further steps in the form of a practical experiment aimed at assessing affect of verbal account scenes, allowing for an in-depth inquiry of form, function and affect of verbal accounts in horror across the research.

Verbalization, noniconogenic narration and verbal accounts

The focus of film studies literature on the image and relative neglect of sound, particularly dialogue, has been argued by many in efforts to re-frame the importance of film sound (Altman, 1980; Hanich, 2022; Kozloff, 2000). Rick Altman (1980) claims that "From the early days of sound, theoreticians have warned against the mixing of the cinema's pure image orientation with the degraded language and practices of the theater" (p. 70). Indeed, a relative disdain for dialogue finds its way among renowned filmmakers to this day. Despite Michel Chion's comprehensive body of work on sound (encompassing music, effect and dialogue), spoken word remains a secondary affair and "language skepticism" remains alive in film studies (Hanich, 2022, p. 146). Works which focus on dialogue or speech, such as Sarah Kozloff's *Overhearing Film Dialogue,* are few and far between. Kozloff (2000) observes that orientations to minimize dialogue are not exclusive to film; they have been present in both theater and literature for some time, a claim corroborated by Bordwell (2010). According to Kozloff (2000), "'Showing,' that is, presenting actions without any narrative commentary, is supposed to be more subtle, and to call for more participation by the reader than allowing a narrator to evaluate or summarize" (p. 11). Even screenwriting manuals adhere to such rules and presuppositions based on the "show, don't tell" adage. However, actions do not always equate to subtlety, and dialogue subtext is proof that speech can have hidden layers and invite participation. While the reasons for such rejection of speech may be manifold, Kozloff (2000) argues its roots lie in its association with femininity: historically, while highly regarded speech has been characterized as masculine,

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3   While there is much scholarly debate on the definition of genre, for the purpose of this paper I turn to Grodal's (2017) embodied approach, basing the selection of audiovisual works on their overall intended emotional affect. The examples analyzed in this article may be categorized as horror, thrillers, psychological thrillers (hybrid horror-thrillers) or challenge genre classification altogether. My interest and selection criteria focused on the common affective goal of generating fear, dread, chills and similar psychological and bodily responses. I exclude works that may contain occasional suspenseful or horrific scenes, but largely fit into other genres.

4   This includes mockumentaries, found footage films, or similar categorizations which Peter Turner (2019) terms "diegetic camera films".

everyday talk and gossip is perceived as belonging to the realm of women. This is confirmed by popular proverbs and the "prescriptive rules" dialogue in film has been subjected to (pp. 11-28). Arguing for a complex relationship between the two, Kozloff (2000) rejects the idea that sound merely adds to the image. In a similar vein, Chion (1994/2019) champions not only sound but voice in film through his conceptualization of the a*cousmêtre* (a disembodied voice). Chion confers the acousmêtre a certain power: "ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence" (Chion, 1999, pp. 23-24).[5]

In *Insidious* (Wan, 2010), Lorraine, played by Barbara Hershey, tells her son and daughter-in-law of a dream she had the night before. After two short introductory sentences, the frame dissolves from a medium shot of Lorraine to a handheld shot into a dark corridor. As her narration continues in voice over, the images are depicted as she describes: seeing her grandson in bed in his room and the dark figure that stands in the corner (Wan, 2010, 0:44:21). The verbalization that brings forth images, such as this *Insidious* example, are characterized by Chion as *iconogenic*. (1994/2019); this is a mode of speech that acts "upon the images" (p. 150). In contrast, is the mode characterized as *noniconogenic* narration: "It's the situation in which a character tells a story at length, which she says was told to her or which happened to her, and in which all we see in the image is the person speaking" (p. 156). This description shows great similarity to Hanich's conceptualization of verbal accounts.

Responding to Chion's terminology, Hanich (2022) argues that the term noniconogenic still places the image as the standard, and offers *suggestive verbalizations* as an alternative.

Indeed, in the present article I adopt the term verbal account rather than noniconogenic narration (or suggestive verbalization, for that matter) due to its clarity, specificity and precision to characterize the scenes I intended to analyze. While I make the choice of using "verbal account" in the present research, it is worth noting Hanich's further work surrounding the topic of suggestive verbalization. He has rephrased the idea of the messenger's report into *verbalization-of-the-past* and teichoscopy into *verbalization-of-the-present,* and further expanded the concept to admit two additional categories: *verbalization-of-the-future*, which includes plans, prophecies and threats; and verbalization-of-generalities, speech that evokes commonplace images, advocating for the power of *sensory imagination*, as key to advancing the idea of film beyond just a "medium to be perceived" (Hanich, 2022, pp. 155 – 159)[6].

The terms verbal account, verbalization and, to some extent, noniconogenic narration denote an oral speech reliant delivery. That has been the case with the examples surveyed for this research as well as the ones in the cited works. However this begs the question: Is the verbal account exclusive to sound cinema? Are there instances of verbal accounts or equivalent strategies in the silent era of film? To answer these questions, I propose a contender, Carl Theodore Dryer's *Vampyr* (1932), and revisit the main features that characterize the verbal account listed in the previous section, determining their compatibility. As previously stated, the first requirement of verbal accounts (delivery of the account by a diegetic character) excludes the usual inter-title text, which stands in for the role of a non-diegetic narrator. Therefore, the opening inter-title which introduces the story of Allan Grey, the main character in *Vampyr*, cannot be considered. However, later

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5   While the omniscience of the acousmatic voice is not always absolute, in the case of certain verbal account scenes an acousmêtre may deliver critical information to explain the mystery in a horror film – a point I return to in the section "Form and function of verbal accounts" when discussing an example from *Ghostwatch* (1992).

6   In a similar vein, Bordwell (2010) draws observations regarding the advantages of telling over showing: the possibility of watching a character's reaction and affective aftermath of the story, the emotional development of the one who tells the tale, and the ambiguity caused by the lack of visual flashback, generally perceived as factual. These aspects are further exemplified in the upcoming section "Form and function of verbal accounts".

in the film, when Allan comes upon a book detailing vampire lore, the pages of the book itself are presented fully on screen, allowing the audience to read its text. One section reads:

> In the village of Kisilova, which was stricken one generation ago by a vampire in the form of an old woman, what occurred is as follows: At daybreak, the grave was opened, and the old woman was found lying therein, as though she were asleep. A few men drove an iron stake through her heart and nailed the woman's abominable soul firmly into the earth. She now dies a true death, and the curse that lay over her and her victims had been broken. (Dreyer, 1932, 0:48:10)

While the book in itself is not a character, it is a diegetic feature that stands in for a speaker and fits the other criteria: it delivers an account of a past event, relaying information that may or may not have been witnessed first hand, and stimulates imagination via description of horror-inducing imagery. However, these book inserts are not the same as inter-titles: rather than representing some form of proto verbal account, they constitute an in-between category, where the text is not representative of a character but is diegetic nonetheless. While the example from *Vampyr* is noteworthy and proves that verbal account classifications are not rigid, it must be clarified that the text-on screen is not the focus of the present research. While many contemporary films use on-screen text such as messages, emails, newspaper articles, among others, these are usually exposition tools relegated to conveying narrative information and — to the best of my knowledge and preliminary inquiry — rarely evoke imagination through their descriptions. Even in the case of an adaptation of an epistolary novel, such as *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Coppola, 1992), the letters presented in voice-over reading convey expository information and are often placed alongside the imagery they describe, not fulfilling condition number four proposed previously. Yet, the mention of letters and presence of text on screen brings me to a crucial argument in this research: how the verbal account in film relates to epistolary novels and oral tradition in storytelling, points explored in the subsequent section.

From oral to literary to verbalized on screen

Perhaps due to the criticism verbalization receives as a strategy "borrowed" from other mediums, associations with literature are scarcely encouraged. Hanich (2010) disengages the messenger's report strategy in film from literary comparison by stressing the role of the actor:

> First, the character's voice and his intonation add important cues to our imagination (which distinguishes the account from a literary text). Second, the facial expressions of the characters reporting as well as listening give the scene a dimension beyond the literary. (Hanich, 2010, p. 117)

While the interpretative elements brought forth by an actor may not be inherently present in literary text, written stories have long been read out loud in small social gatherings, where the role of the reader/narrator is comparable to that of the on-screen performer. Tim Prasil (2018) dates the custom of orally sharing ghost stories around the hearth back to the English Renaissance. In the edited collection *Echoing Ghost Stories: Literary Reflections of Oral Tradition,* he describes the selections of tales as "works that present to the reader's eye an attempt to evoke a story intended for the ear" (Prasil, 2018, intro vii). These stories usually employ a framing device: a scenario where characters engage in conversation and one or more character(s) become narrators of a tale within the tale. The practice was customary enough in literature to grant Prasil (2018) the observance of three subgenres: *framed monolog*, f*ramed dialog,* and *portmanteau*. While the framed monolog introduces a single narrator who tells the story and briefly returns to the framed

situation at the end, the framed dialog features back and forth interaction between two or more characters in between bits of the story, and the portmanteau admits several stories told each after the other, similar to horror film anthologies such as *Dead of Night* (1945). In all subgenres, the framing devices are "designed to echo oral tradition" (Prasil, 2018, intro viii); they incorporate the performance of an oral storyteller into the text, positioning the reader as another diegetic character and nearly equating reading to listening. The works Prasil refers to differ in their choice of personal pronoun: some begin with third-person framing and transition into first-person narration as characters tell their tales; others maintain a first-person perspective from the start, even if the storyteller is not the narrator. Determining how the verbal account relates to literature depends on an exploration of narration modes and the reader's perception of them.

According to Głowiński and Stone (1977), "third-person narration progresses within the boundaries of what can be defined as the quasi-objective language of the novel" (p. 103), meaning the information presented is taken as objective and unquestionable, while in contrast, the reader of a first-person story experiences doubt:

> He is doomed to a peculiar uncertainty as to the informational content of the sentence. He cannot refer to an authoritative narrator, for when a story is told in the first person, the narrator is equal to any other character belonging to the realm of ordinary mortals and, therefore, fallible. (Głowiński & Stone, 1977, p. 104)

If the first-person mode engenders uncertainty while third-person narration presents objectivity, an evident analogy forms through Bordwell's (2010) contrast of the flashback as truth and the personal testimony as a questionable account. However, distrust of the narrative is not the main point I put forth by this comparison. Instead, I point out that the

first-person narration in literature and the verbal account are similar in how they control/present information to the reader/viewer-listener and elicit mental images. Take the following excerpt from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*:

> As I said this I suddenly beheld the figure of a man, at some distance, advancing towards me with superhuman speed. He bounded over the crevices in the ice, among which I had walked with caution; his stature, also, as he approached, seemed to exceed that of man. I was troubled; a mist came over my eyes, and I felt a faintness seize me, but I was quickly restored by the cold gale of the mountains. I perceived, as the shape came nearer (sight tremendous and abhorred!) that it was the wretch whom I had created. (Shelley, 1818/2022, p. 97)

The indication of Victor Frankenstein's perspective in the use of pronouns (I, my) does not cause the reader to question the validity of his tale, but serves to present visual elements that form a mental image of the action described as he had experienced it: an initial ambiguity of who the figure might be, his size and physical movement that distinguish him from any regular man, and the final moment of confirmation. Susan Stewart (1982) claims that in the horror story, more than any other genre, audience time and story time are synchronous, following the unfolding of narrative presented by the storyteller:

> In the horror story the expectations and tensions of receiving information sequentially are heightened and exaggerated in such a way that each addition of narrative information will not only affect the status of information given previously, it will affect the status of the listener himself. (p. 33)

The audience is positioned as the victim, as she exemplifies with the literary device of the epistolary (of which *Frankenstein*

is a notable example), arguing that the letter technique is more effective in literature than in horror films, due to the reader being positioned as readers themselves rather than observers of another reader on screen (Stewart, 1982). In response to this claim, I argue the verbal account generates the same effect as epistolary literature: in both the use of letters and the verbal account technique, it is the discovery of details that maintains suspense in the slow revelation of each word, whether written or verbalized. Compare the Frankenstein excerpt to the following messenger's report from the first episode of the series *The Haunting of Hill House*, where a grieving widow describes her husband's apparition after a fatal car accident:

> This was the night after the burial, you see. I felt the water on my cheeks and I heard the car horn, and then I looked up at the ceiling… and there he was. Hanging there, upside down. I could… I could see the water, dripping off of his hair, and his face was a… a deep purple, like the blood had all just pooled into his cheeks. It's funny, you'd think you'd scream after seeing something like that, but you don't. You just stare. (Flanagan, 2018, 0:09:35)

Similarly to the literary excerpt, the widow's sensory descriptions allow the audience to imagine a picture in their minds as the words are uttered. As argued by Hanich (2010), it must be acknowledged that the actor's delivery of the lines through intonation, pauses and facial expression influence the affect of the scene. In this example, the widow's eyes and finger point up and her face twists into a painful cry before she utters the words "and there he was". The descriptions of the apparition's purple face are further emphasized by the widow's hand gestures, wrapping around her own cheeks. Yet, the dramatized delivery alone does not account for its impact: while supported by on-screen acting, it is the sensory evocation through the verbalized text that instigate the audience's imagination. Both written (literary) and verbalized (audiovisual) examples

share the intent of stimulating imaginations in place of presenting absolute, objective images. Rather than distancing the verbal account from horror literature to suggest its specificity in the medium, understanding the affect of this strategy benefits from the analogies found in written horror.

Moreover, their strength lies in one similarity: the uncertainty and ambiguity generated by a subjective report rather than an objective depiction. While the emotions associated with art-horror are plural, a particular concept often associated with the genre is key to determining what makes the verbal account effective: creepiness. According to McAndrew and Koehnke (2016) the feeling of being "creeped out" relies on the impossibility to precise the nature of the threat or whether something constitutes a threat or not, placing ambiguity and uncertainty at the core of creepiness. The qualification "creepy" is contrasted with other related adjectives such as "terrifying" or "disgusting", as these denote a clearer interpretation of the nature of the threat (McAndrew & Koehnke, 2016). While some verbal accounts, especially teichoscopy examples, may describe graphic imagery that alludes to such adjectives as "disgusting", the absence of the image itself is enough to conjure ambiguity as each viewer imagines the description in their own way. Take, for instance, one of the verbal accounts in *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick, & Sanchéz, 1999) where an interviewee recounts a description of the titular witch as someone "whose feet never touched the ground" (0:12:13). The ambiguity embedded in the choice of vocabulary elicits creepiness.

The parallels drawn with literature and oral storytelling do not take away from the uniqueness of verbal accounts in the film medium. While I have argued that interpretive elements (acting a part) is not unique to film, having been present in oral retellings and readings, film does present a unique set of visual and auditory elements that support verbalization. From the creation of an atmosphere through lighting, cinematography and set design, to the addition of sound design through

effects, music or both, the verbal account scene in audiovisual, while mainly text-oriented, is rendered effective through a combination of all elements presented to its audience.

Form and function of verbal accounts

In initial conceptualizations of the verbal account and its classification, the temporal aspect is evident: messenger's report is an account of the past while teichoscopy is a description of the present (Hanich, 2010). In a subsequent development of the concepts, Hanich adds the possibility of verbalizations of the future and generalities (Hanich, 2022). Despite mentioning different degrees of explicitness, temporality remains the defining dimension distinguishing verbal accounts. In his 2020 article *Mise en Esprit,* Hanich tackles the spatial aspect when discussing a recent wave of one-character films where the character is confined to one space and interacts with others via telecommunication devices, meaning "these offscreen characters appear only as acousmatic voices" (Hanich, 2020, p. 251). His exploration of characters' onscreen presence or absence also draws on Chion's terminology, highlighting the visualized and acousmatic listening modes. Yet, the one-character films analyzed by Hanich are mostly categorized as dramas or thrillers and, despite including some disturbing verbalizations (of blood, for instance), do not serve the specific purpose of examining the workings of suggestive verbalization in horror proposed in the present work. Bridging Hanich's 2010 and 2020 works via Chion, I propose that the spatial presence or absence of the verbal account speaker on screen begets a classification expansion.

Chion (1994/2019) proposes the use of *visualized* sound to oppose *acousmatic*. An acousmatic voice (or the disembodied voice Chion terms *acousmêtre*) hides offscreen. Verbal account scenes usually draw on the power of an actor's performance to deliver the tale, as observed previously in *The Haunting of Hill House* scene, therefore most examples of

messenger's report and teichoscopy consist of a visualized character on screen. There are instances, however, of verbal accounts delivered over the phone or radio, where an unseen voice provides the speech and the visualized character is the one who listens: I propose these be called *acousmatic verbal accounts*. In *Pontypool* (McDonald, 2008), a helicopter correspondent in contact with his radio station describes a horrific zombie attack. His disembodied voice is broadcast as the audience observes the reaction of his radio station colleagues. *Ghostwatch* (Manning, 1992), a scripted Halloween special whose use of diegetic cameras and famous British TV presenters conferred enough authenticity to terrify audiences and convince some it was real (Woods, 2017), depicts a number of disembodied voices telling their personal stories as the show host invites viewers to call and share their paranormal experiences. Two examples stand out due to their clear diegetic purpose: at distinct moments of the show, callers inform the host (and audience) of backstory that clarifies the mystery under investigation, that of a mother and two young daughters who are terrorized by paranormal activity in their house. The first caller tells the legend of a woman who was said to drown children and have lived in that family's house, while the second caller reveals crucial information on a former male tenant of the house:

> He developed paranoid fantasies. He used to tell me there was a woman on the inside of his body, taking over his thoughts and actions, making him do things he didn't want to do. He started to wear dresses. The delusions got so bad, there was only one way to escape them. He took his own life. (Manning, 1992, 1:20:57)

The caller goes on to reveal details on the man's suicide that match the descriptions of the haunting experienced by the family in the house, both confirming the veracity of the accounts previously told by the mother and two girls, and offering a final answer to who or what has been haunting them.

Although not as absolute as that of a voice-over narrator, the phone callers' exposition lends itself to omniscience of the acousmêtre proposed by Chion.

The description in *Pontypool* (2008) and story in *Ghostwatch* (1992) are, respectively, examples of *acousmatic teichoscopy* and *acousmatic messenger's report,* as both verbal accounts are delivered by off-screen characters, present only in voice. On the other end, *visualized teichoscopy* is seen in *Rosemary's Baby (*1968)*,* where the title character, played by Mia Farrow, covers her mouth in shock and desperately asks the cultists around her newborn "What have you done to it? What have you done to its eyes?" (Polanski, 1968, 2:10:16). The speech in *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) where Quint, played by Robert Shaw, retells his experience with a school of sharks after his vessel went down during WWII is a notable example of *visualized messenger's report*. This categorization has been summarized in Table 1, a preliminary survey of 14 audiovisual works of horror or horror-thrillers containing verbal accounts.

It is worth noting that some films depict several examples of visualized and acousmatic verbal accounts throughout its run. *Ghostwatch* has a number of visualized messenger's reports in the form of studio recorded interviews with members of the public that intercut the main paranormal investigation (allegedly occurring live); these stories do not feed the main mystery, but add to the atmosphere of the show. In *The Bay* (Levinson, 2012), a mockumentary disclosing the buried truth of a small town where a parasite spread through the water, resulting in the gruesome death of many residents, there are notable examples of both visualized and acousmatic verbal accounts. Early in the film, a man (filmed by the police car camera) describes the body he discovered to a police officer: "Her guts were tore out, and her tongue cut off" (Levinson, 2012, 0:18:55). In a later scene, audio recording devices worn by police officers inform details of an incident following a 911 call. While the police cruiser camera remains on the outside, the audio follows two officers into the house as they encounter a horrific scene, constructed via dialogue between several characters whose identification is unclear:

Table 1 Classification of verbal account scenes in surveyed films or series

Film/Series	Speaker's Depiction	Temporality
The Blair Witch Project (1999)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
Mulholland Drive (2001)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
The Haunting of Hill House (2018)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
The Vast of Night (2019)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
Angel Heart (1987)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
Jaws (1975)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
Doctor Sleep (2019)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
The Fog (1980)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
Candyman (1992)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
Nosferatu (2024)	Visualized	Messenger's Report
Ghostwatch (1992)	Visualized/Acousmatic	Messenger's Report
The Bay (2012)	Visualized/Acousmatic	Messenger's Report/Teichoscopy
Pontypool (2008)	Acousmatic	Teichoscopy
Rosemary's Baby (1968)	Visualized	Teichoscopy

– They are all dying. They are all dying, look at them.

– No way, what have you done, Jim?

– They were begging me.

– What is crawling on those people?

– I don't know.

– What is on those people? It's crawling out of their bodies. They're eating their flesh.

– His tongue is gone, he can't even speak.

– Shoot me, shoot me. (Levinson, 2012, 0:47:50)

Besides the visualized and acousmatic teichoscopy examples described above, *The Bay* includes a number of 911 calls, phone message recordings between characters and video interviews that present partial descriptions of horrific imagery and past events. In found footage films and mockumentaries (*Ghostwatch, The Bay, The Blair Witch Project*), or what Peter Turner (2019) terms *diegetic camera films*, reporting events through interviews is a common narrative strategy, therefore verbal accounts (both acousmatic and visualized) are frequent. However, these classifications are not rigid and small variations occur in the presentation of different scenes belonging to the same category. For instance, while an acousmatic verbal account requires the speaker to be absent for the duration of its delivery, that in turn means that the appearance of the speaker, however brief, is sufficient to categorize it as visualized. For example, the scene in *Candyman* (Rose, 1992) where the legend of the titular character is told cuts back and forth between the speaker and the listener, with more emphasis (in terms of shot duration) given to the listener, played by Virginia Madsen, as she is the protagonist. In Robert Eggers' *Nosferatu* (2024), the speaker and listener share screen space as the character Ellen, played by Lily-Rose Depp, sits in the foreground to the left, recounting a terrifying dream to her husband, played by Nicholas Hoult, who sits farther back, to screen right. It is also worth noting that some verbal accounts are accompanied by sound effects which allude to its descriptions.

These classification terms are not purely a matter of categorization, but a first step toward establishing how different aesthetic presentations of the verbal account can influence affect. Bordwell's (2010) analysis of scenes that prioritize telling over showing highlights the emotional development of the storytelling character as an advantage. Scenes such as the apparition of the widow's husband in *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) or the shark encounter in *Jaws* (1975) keep the camera almost entirely on the speaker's face, allowing the actors to maximize their facial expressions, intonation and other speech patterns, potentializing empathy and identification with that character's emotional state. Speaking of the narrative voice in a story, Stewart (1982) claims it "presents a paradoxical mixture of speech acts, for it is both a report and a warning. As a report it survives the events it describes, and as a warning it precedes a future set of horrible possibilities" (p. 44). In addition to generating character empathy, this cautionary function is also evident in the verbal account in *Jaws (1975),* where a survivor shares the account as a warning of horrors to come. On the other hand, previously cited examples of acousmatic verbal accounts, *Ghostwatch* (1992) and *Pontypool* (2008), limit the acting to the speaker's voice and the reactions of listener-characters on screen. In *Pontypool* (2008), the images that accompany acousmatic teichoscopy are closeups of three characters who work at the radio station: the audience sees their shocked faces as they hear detailed descriptions of zombies dragging people out of a van and biting into their flesh. In *Ghostwatch* (1992), the acousmatic messenger's report starts with medium shots of the show host and his guest, a paranormal investigator, but as the caller reveals the tale there is a cut to a wide shot of the studio, behind the cameras, slowly traveling in until the last revelation (the details that match the family's supernatural experience), when the viewer gets to see the response of the host and guest in medium shots. While the information is provided by the acousmatic voices, the empathy remains with those on screen, who react to it.

Beyond generating empathy, these scenes have narrative goals that also differ from one account to another. In *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), the interviews with townsfolk at the beginning of the film are a collection of mostly overheard messenger's reports (not directly witnessed by the speakers) that collectively inform the viewer of the witch's lore (appearance and modus operandi). Moreover, these scenes introduce clues to events that happen to the filmmaker-characters once they get lost in the woods: for example, the reference to children as victims of the witch hints at the sound of children laughing that they hear at night, and the description of how children were forced to face a wall before being killed re-contextualizes the final shot of the film. Turner (2019) speaks of such initial scenes in diegetic camera films as primers to the "reality" or authenticity of it. I add that these verbal accounts also prime the audience narratively: to form mental images of a witch that will never be seen, and associate future visualized events to non-visualized accounts provided at the start of the film. In an opposite movement, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) depicts Satan's eyes during an assault scene which Rosemary believes to be a dream, only to later evoke that image in teichoscopy. Turner (2019) claims that priming must occur toward the beginning, as viewers tend to retain early information more easily, which brings the question of the position of verbal account scenes. Of the examples surveyed for this article (Table 1), some had their verbal account scenes near the beginning of the film or episode (*The Blair Witch Project, Mulholland Drive, The Haunting of Hill House, Nosferatu, The Fog*), others had the accounts toward the end (*Jaws, Rosemary's Baby, The Vast of Night, Angel Heart, Ghostwatch, Doctor Sleep*), and others placed the scenes in the second act or at different moments throughout the film (*Pontypool, The Bay,* also *Ghostwatch*), indicating varied intentions through their placing that may not align with Turner's priming goal. The verbal account may serve to set the atmosphere (*Mulholland Drive*), prime future events (*The Blair Witch Project*), generate empathy towards a character (*Jaws*), inform about the lore (*The Vast of Night*), reveal a mystery (*Angel Heart*), or a combination of these functions.

The point of view of a messenger's report also signals different functions and may influence audience affect. Reports told in the third person (by a speaker who heard the story from someone else), as is the case with most interviews in *The Blair Witch Project*, usually inform the audience of diegetic lore. When the tale is told in first person, by the one who witnessed it, it adds an emotional, empathetic effect to the delivery. In *The Vast of Night* (2019), a woman shares the heartbreaking story of her young son's odd behavior and eventual disappearance, which she attributes to aliens; while the tale serves to inform the main characters of the nature of the mystery they are investigating, it simultaneously forms an emotional connection with the storyteller on screen. The description of footprints on the ground before the alien abduction of the child also primes the audience to interpret a shot at the end of the film, where a similar fate is delivered to the main characters.

While the question of narrative functions of different verbal accounts requires further investigation, the expansion of classification proposed in this article has served the important goal of establishing parameters that will inform future inquiries into ascertaining such functions, particularly those pertaining to the horror genre as the aforementioned roles in creating atmosphere, lore exposition, and revealing a mystery. Moreover, the analysis of form serves to shape the subsequent step in the research: the study of emotional affect through a practical experiment.

A psychophysiological approach to verbal account affect

Diverging from traditional art-horror principles, Xavier Aldana Reyes (2016) advocates for a broader perspective on what constitutes horror and its affect, one that includes "sources of threat that are not direct or even seen" and is generally characterized by "the emotional state of threat, of feeling

either directly attacked by the film (in the startle effect) or by extrapolation via alignment with the body on screen" (Reyes, 2016, p.16). He makes a case for distancing horror films from psychoanalysis (a prominent approach since the 1970s) and proposes an "affective-corporeal" approach, particularly to account for fear and empathy in horror films of extreme violence, such as *Hostel* (2005), considering the body on screen as well as the body of the viewer. He approaches affect as a somatic response, different from the elaborated cognitive process that is emotion (Reyes, 2016). How, then, can affect be measured in the context of both the visceral scenes that Reyes addresses and the suggested horror of verbal accounts?

Employing functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) and inter-subject correlation (ISC) to assess brain activity of participants watching horror films, Hudson et al. (2020) found distinct neurological patterns in response to acute fear and sustained fear. Acute fear was characterized as "a threat that is proximal in space and time", while sustained fear refers to the anticipation of the threat (Hudson et al., 2020, p.2), concepts comparable to Hanich's classifications of shock or direct horror, and dread, respectively. While Hudson et al. (2020) present insightful distinctions of neurological processing of these different types of fear, the study does not focus on scenes of verbal accounts. I posit that a similar measurement of the psychophysiological response to verbal account scenes as opposed to direct, visualized horror scenes, combined with a self-assessment questionnaire, would bring forth valuable data regarding their affective reception. To address this, I envision two interconnected experiments comprising the collection of psychophysiological data as well as self-assessment upon the viewing of a single story presented in distinct variations, allowing for a comparison of verbal accounts and direct horror scenes, as well as acousmatic and visualized versions. While a thorough investigation

requires that the verbal account is studied in both subcategories identified by Hanich (teichoscopy and messenger's report), the detailing of the experimental design below contemplates a messenger's report example[7]. In both experiments, subjects in separate groups could be exposed to one of three conditions (an audiovisual stimuli of approximately 2 minutes) while psychophysiological data is collected, and then be asked to complete a self-assessment questionnaire after viewing the condition, in order to assess differences in affective response to each condition.

The first experiment could focus on ascertaining affect of a verbal account scene in comparison to a direct horror scene and textual stimuli, allowing for a juxtaposition of audiovisual verbal account and first-person text (akin to literary text) which were correlated previously in this article, as well as triangulation of the three conditions to determine how affective response differs in each condition. The first condition would be a direct horror scene, where the threat is visually depicted. The second is a verbal account version of the same event: here, the scene depicts the character recounting their past experience, matching monologue with the events depicted in the first condition. The third variation would be a written account: a first-person prose text, identical to the text spoken by the actor in the verbal account condition, which would be displayed on screen for participants to read. In order to preserve temporal resolution in data collection and account for different reading speeds, the text would be animated to display sentences or phrases gradually.

The second experiment could tackle the newly proposed variations of verbal account as acousmatic and visualized, with one scene depicting the speaker and another depicting the listener, in addition to an audio-only condition that serves as a control group, allowing for a direct comparison of affective responses in scenes where the character on screen is either

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7   A separate study repeating the same conditions could be conducted for teichoscopy. The design of the study would be identical, also including a visualized and an acousmatic scenes of teichoscopy.

the speaker or the listener. The first condition is identical to one from the previous experiment: a verbal account scene depicting a character recounting a past experience (therefore, a visualized messenger's report). The second condition is a scene where only the listener-character is in frame, listening to the verbal account narration over the phone. The account is heard by this character and the audience but the speaker is never seen, making this the acousmatic verbal account condition. The audio used in this scene will be identical to the one used in the visualized condition. Lastly, the third condition removes the visual stimuli altogether, presenting only the verbal account audio over a black screen.

The development of such study materials requires creative and technical control, from the screenwriting to the post-production phase, as all variations must stem from the same original story and match each other in storytelling beats. As a filmmaker, I propose such study while cognizant of its challenges, particularly in crafting a scene which is effective in both direct visual form and verbal account form. It is, however, reasonable to propose the creation of such materials under a modest budget in a filmmaking-oriented academic setting[8].

Employing psychophysiological data collection during film viewing has largely been used to accurately measure arousal levels (Bente et al., 2022; Chun et al., 2020). To tackle the valence dimension, a self-report in the form of a questionnaire could be administered immediately after viewing/listening, including inquiries about the classification of participants' emotional response, allowing for more complex interpretation of the data. On the one hand, the measurable embodied affect of the horror genre makes it especially suitable for the collection of physiological data that substantiates subjective reports, while on the other, the questionnaire data provides an

emotional map to anchor the physiological measurements. The aim of the experiment envisioned here is to bring new insights into our understanding of how audiences respond to verbal account scenes, including the newly proposed acousmatic and visualized variations, via a multifaceted comparison which could begin as a pilot study yet entertain future expansion and exploration.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to present the theoretical work that has been developed around the verbal account strategy and similar instances of verbalization on screen, finding correspondences across different authors, and synthesizing the framework of a larger research on verbal account form, function, and affect. Establishing similarities between these accounts, first-person literature, and oral storytelling, I proposed that the parallels between these different mediums is not a point to be overlooked on the way to praising verbal account for its specificity, but rather emphasized as further evidence that the audience (viewer, listener or reader) yearns to be told tales they can imagine in their mind's eyes. Through an analysis of verbal account scenes in a select number of anglophone horror/thriller films, I identified a number of functions these scenes might be associated with and proposed further classification of messenger's report and teichoscopy as acousmatic or visualized, as a starting point to establish differing affects or intentions. Acknowledging the complexity of emotional responses, an assessment of verbal account affect was conceptualized in the form of a practical experiment, aspiring to obtain insightful data on the audience's reception of verbalization in horror films and open new avenues for the exploration of verbal accounts in the genre.

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8 Despite its seemingly complex design, of the six conditions described across both experiments, only three require the filming an audiovisual scene (the direct horror scene, the acousmatic verbal account and the visualized verbal account). The other three are created by: sourcing the audio recorded on one of the previous scenes; sourcing the verbal account text and animating it on screen; and repeating the same condition (the visualized verbal account used in experiments one and two are identical).

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