STATEMENT

Someone was standing at the end of my bed. Watching me sleep. I couldn't see them, but I knew they were there. I could feel it. I kept my eyes shut, praying they would go away. Executive Producer Chris Weitz and I were having dinner and talking about irrational fears. Parasites. Scaffolding. Doctors. Someone watching you sleep.

That last one was mine. It began in childhood, and I was experiencing it more frequently just as I was having my first encounter with internet trolls. Until then I had been largely untouched by the cruelty of public life online.

Through a series of events, I had become a target, singled out for humiliation and ridicule. Fear and dread became part of the sign-in process. Who were these anonymous voices? What were they getting out of this? It seemed like a game to them. Search and destroy. Move on to the next.

CRCL9 grew out of those experiences. Chris and I developed an initial idea, and later Erik Van Wyck joined as a co-writer. Years later, the script feels no less relevant. If anything, the internet's anonymous culture has become more sophisticated and merciless.

don't hate the internet. It's a remarkable, wondrous tool: a place where I learn, create, and connect every day. But I am increasingly preoccupied by its capacity to dehumanize. The way it can turn private vulnerability into public spectacle, and people into content.

I have a daughter. I think about what it means for her to grow up in an environment where faceless attention, even if it's positive, has the potential to destabilize her sense of self.

That's what I wanted to explore with CRCL9. Our hero is drawn into a clandestine online game in which voyeurism is given rules, levels, and likes. Where privacy is converted into content for strangers and cruelty is the point.

The story is fictional, but its inspiration is not. It draws on some real – and still active – games of harassment. Swatting began as a competitive prank for bragging rights. Lolcows are people to be "milked for laughs." Videos of them are posted on forums where they are mocked and doxxed.

The digital world promises connection, yet it can also allow for a much colder, frictionless type of interaction. The one-way kind. A type of voyeurism in which we stalk people on social media, consume and judge their lives, while we pretend we are just “checking in.”

Norwegian actor Thea Sofie Loch Næss plays “Hallie,” our heroine, with extraordinary focus and emotional intelligence. Her challenge was to carry the character across a moral Rubicon while keeping the audience connected to her, and she did so with grace. She’s the anchor of the story.

Cinematically, Evan Maragkoudakis and I chose to align the film with Hallie’s POV. It was important that the film play as both a psychological thriller and a drama about a young woman’s mental decline. The filmmaking choices we made as a team were guided by the desire to get inside Hallie’s head as she struggles against an addictive web of unknown forces. We designed shots to become increasingly off-kilter and, later, encouraged our post-production sound team to lead us deeper into subjective territory.

I still think about those trolls who helped inspire this film. A ghost-like group hidden behind usernames. Our story is full of usernames, including “Thetamine,” “HalHathNo,” “YankeeBlonde,” “MtrcyclMan.”

Mine is “M Axilleas.” It’s a pseudonym, a continuation of the story after the credits end. I don’t expect it to keep me anonymous for long. Someone will probably identify me in a comment beneath a social media post. I wonder what will make that worth doing. Curiosity, perhaps. A tiny dopamine hit. The satisfaction, not of discovering who I am, but of deciding that I don’t get to keep that to myself.

The truth is that none of us know who’s watching us and we are not that hard to find.

That’s the fear. That’s the film.