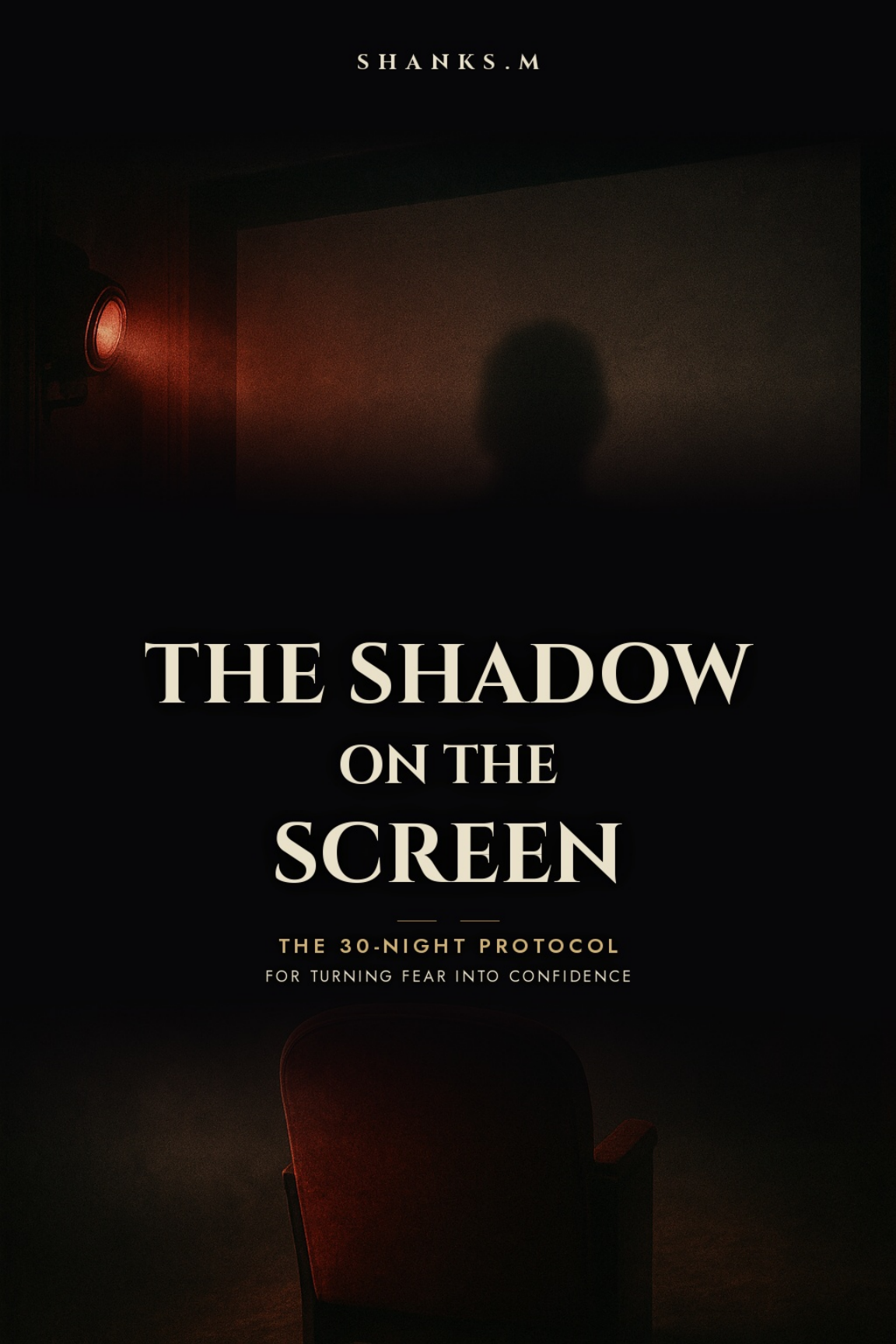


S H A N K S . M

A dark, atmospheric scene featuring a large, dark screen or wall. To the left, a spotlight is mounted on the wall, casting a warm, orange glow. A faint, dark shadow of a person is visible on the screen. In the foreground, the back of a red upholstered chair is visible, facing the screen.

THE SHADOW ON THE SCREEN

THE 30-NIGHT PROTOCOL
FOR TURNING FEAR INTO CONFIDENCE

S H A N K S . M

THE SHADOW ON THE SCREEN

*The thirty-night protocol
for turning fear into confidence.*

T H E E . C . R . A . N . M E T H O D

THE SHADOW ON THE SCREEN

The thirty-night protocol for turning fear into confidence.

Revised edition · The E.C.R.A.N. Method

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property of their respective owners.*

Set in EB Garamond, Cinzel and Jost.

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BEFORE YOU OPEN

THE CONTRACT

WARNING

This book is not therapy, not treatment, and not a substitute for professional support. Its author is not a psychologist, a psychiatrist or a therapist.

It proposes a personal, voluntary use of principles drawn from psychological research, applied to a viewer's practice. It is written for someone who is broadly okay and would like to be better.

Chapter 16 lists the situations in which you should not begin this protocol, and the six signals that mean stopping it. Read it before the first night, not after the twentieth.

If you are going through a dark stretch, look up your national crisis line — Samaritans on 116 123 in the UK, 988 in the US and Canada, 3114 in France. Your doctor is always a good first port of call.

THE PACT

No protocol works without a written commitment. This one takes thirty seconds. Don't skip this page: readers who skip it drop out at twice the rate of everyone else.

- ☐ I commit to thirty nights. Not thirty perfect days — thirty nights, with gaps, which I will resume without punishing myself.
- ☐ I write every evening, by hand, including the nights I felt nothing. Especially those.
- ☐ I choose my load in advance and respect it, including when I feel like going higher.
- ☐ I execute my rule within forty-eight hours, or I honestly record that I did not.
- ☐ I stop if my sleep deteriorates, and I tell someone.
- ☐ I don't judge what I write. I record it, that's all.

SIGNATURE

DATE OF NIGHT 1

And record your starting Shadow Index here, once chapter 1 is done: ____ / 100.

FOREWORD

THE FOUR LIES

Foreword. Read this standing up.

You've been lied to about fear. Not maliciously. Lazily.

For twenty years, every article, every post, every video about your taste for the dark has repeated the same four sentences. They sound good. They're wrong. And as long as you believe them, you'll keep consuming shadow without ever getting anything out of it.

Lie no. 1: "You watch it for the adrenaline."

Wrong. If you wanted adrenaline, you'd go skydiving. What you're after isn't the spike — it's the climb down. That moment, over the closing credits, when your body confirms you're still here. It isn't fear you love. It's having survived fear. The distinction is everything, and this entire book lives inside it.

Lie no. 2: "Horror is cathartic. It gets it out of your system."

The most widespread lie, and the most damaging. You've been sold the pressure-cooker image: pressure builds, you open the valve, you feel better. Except research on emotional venting has said the exact opposite for fifty years. Discharging an emotion without processing it doesn't empty it — it feeds it. Chapter 3 takes that apart in detail, and it will probably annoy you.

Translation: if you've seen two hundred horror films and you're still the same polite coward in meetings, it isn't because the mechanism doesn't work. It's because you never did the second half of the movement.

Lie no. 3: "It's just entertainment. Stop reading things into it."

Said by people who have never had to leave the room during a specific scene. You know the one. There is a scene, in some film, you have never watched all the way through — and it wasn't the bloodiest, or the loudest. It was the closest. This book exists for that scene.

Lie no. 4: "Watching horror makes you tough."

No. It makes you exposed. That's a starting position, not a diploma. A man who goes to the gym and sits on the bench for two hours doesn't have arms. You've been going to the gym for years. You sit down. You watch other people lift. And you go home believing you trained.



What you're holding

This isn't an essay about horror cinema. Very good ones exist, written by people more scholarly than me, and you'll find them listed at the back.

This is a protocol. Thirty nights. A method in five movements. A measurement system that will hand you, on the thirtieth evening, a number to compare against today's. Not an impression. A number.

The promise is narrow and I'll keep it: you're not going to become someone else. You're going to become someone who knows he can stay. Stay inside a scene. Stay inside a conversation going sideways. Stay inside an awkward silence. Stay facing someone who's testing you. Stay when your body is screaming to leave.

Confidence isn't a feeling. It's a track record.

Nobody becomes self-assured by repeating that they're self-assured. You become it by stacking evidence. Verifiable, dated evidence that you stayed when it was uncomfortable. Dark cinema is the only place on earth where you can manufacture that evidence on demand, at home, risking nothing real.

It's a simulator. The only free, unlimited emotional simulator humanity has ever built. And the overwhelming majority of people use it like a candy dispenser.

Not you. Not after tonight.

How to read this book

Three ways, in ascending order of results.

1. As a reader. You read the five parts, close the book, and never run the protocol. You'll still understand why you keep coming back. That's honest, and it's already better than ninety percent of what gets written on the subject.
2. As a practitioner. You take the entry test now. You read Parts I and II. You start the thirty nights this weekend. You keep the log. This is where the book becomes a machine.
3. As a circle. Three to five of you. You run the thirty nights together, each at home, and you send each other three numbers every morning. The kit is at the back. This is the version that produces the most violent transformations, and I mean that word.

One last thing before we go down.

You've probably spent part of your life apologising for this taste. Saying "I like weird stuff" in a self-deprecating tone, to defuse it. Feeling people pull back slightly when you name your favourite film.

Stop. What you took for a deviance is an untrained appetite. You've been holding a precision instrument and using it as a hammer for fifteen years.

Let's calibrate it.

THE DIAGNOSTIC

Your Shadow Index. Twenty questions. Be brutal.

First, a measurement. Without measurement, no evidence. Without evidence, you'll be taking my word for it — and a book you take on faith changes nothing.

This test is not a validated clinical instrument and I'll never pretend otherwise. It's a personal calibration tool. Its only job is to produce a starting point, so the finishing point means something. It borrows its structure from the scales used in the psychology of recreational fear — notably Coltan Scrivner's work on morbid curiosity — but it measures something different: not what draws you in, but what you can do with it.

HOW TO TAKE IT

- Answer fast. Never spend more than five seconds on a question.
- Score each item from 0 to 5. 0 = never, not at all, no. 5 = always, completely, yes.
- If you're torn between two scores, take the lower one. Always.
- Add up each axis. Each axis gives a score out of 20.
- Write down the date. You will retake this exact test on night 30.

AXIS A — The Pull (what draws you in)

1. When a disturbing trailer comes up, I watch it to the end instead of scrolling past.
2. I deliberately seek out works with a reputation for being hard to sit through, knowing I'll have a bad time.
3. True accounts of disappearances, trials and disasters grab me instantly.
4. During a very hard scene, part of me wants to see what happens, even while the rest wants out.

AXIS B — The Hold (what you can take)

1. I finish films, even when they leave me feeling bad.
2. I don't pick up my phone during tense moments to bleed off the pressure.
3. I don't hit pause "just for a minute" to catch my breath.
4. I don't look up the ending mid-viewing to defuse the suspense.

AXIS C — The Sensor (what you feel)

1. During a tense scene, I know exactly *where* in my body it lands.
2. I notice the precise moment my breathing changes.
3. After a film, I can say whether I'm shaken, irritated, sad or wired — not just "weird".
4. I can tell when a scene hits me for a personal reason, rather than because it's well made.

AXIS D — The Name (what you can articulate)

1. I can name the exact emotion a scene set off, with a precise word, not a catch-all.
2. I can connect a scene that marked me to a concrete memory from my life.
3. I have, somewhere, written words down about what a film did to me.
4. When something stirs me, I hunt for the right word instead of moving on.

AXIS E — The Transfer (what you do with it)

1. I have changed a concrete behaviour after watching something.
2. Within 48 hours of a film that shook me, I've done something I'd been putting off.
3. I use what I learn in fiction to hold uncomfortable real situations.
4. Someone close to me could name a visible change in me connected to this practice.

The maths

Add up each axis (0 to 20). Then total them (0 to 100). That's your Shadow Index.

0 – 30

THE SLEEPER

You watch. Nothing happens. You are at the very beginning, which is the best place to improve fast.

31 – 55

THE CONSUMER

The profile of 70% of readers. Heavy exposure, zero exploitation. Everything is to be gained on D and E.

56 – 75

THE PRACTITIONER

You already do part of the movement without knowing it. The protocol will structure what you improvise.

76 – 100

THE OPERATOR

Rare. Check your E axis honestly: most high scores collapse once you ask for dated acts.

Now, the bad news

I'm going to tell you what you scored without having seen your sheet.

Your A and B axes are high. Probably 14 or more. You're drawn in, you can take it, you go the distance. Congratulations — that's the entry-level requirement for anyone who likes this stuff.

Your C axis is middling. You feel things. You're not sure where.

And your D and E axes are on the floor. Six, eight, maybe four. You've never put a precise word on what a film did to you, and you've never changed anything in your life because of one. Not once, not consciously, not with a date attached.

If I've just described you, you're not an unusual case. You're the absolute norm. That's the profile of the overwhelming majority of people who love this.

You don't work your shadow. You consume it.

And that's excellent news. Because A and B — the pull and the hold — are the two slowest axes to move. They depend on your temperament, your history, your physiology. You will not raise them twenty points in a month.

D and E are the two fastest. They're pure skills. Naming is a skill. Transferring is a skill. Skills train, and they train quickly.

You've already done the hardest ten years. You've accumulated massive exposure. You simply skipped the last two steps of the movement, and nobody ever told you they existed.

Thirty nights. That's what it takes to install D and E.

PART I

THE DIAGNOSTIC — WHY YOU KEEP COMING BACK

THE ARMCHAIR PARADOX

What your body is actually doing while you watch.

Let's start from the mechanics. Not the poetry: the mechanics.

You're sitting down. At the most primitive level of processing, your nervous system cannot tell a filmed threat from a real one. Heart rate up, pupils dilated, adrenaline, cortisol. Your body is getting ready to run.

But you don't run. You stay in a chair, under a blanket, with crisps.

That's the paradox: the entire threat response, none of the consequences. A load with no invoice. And your brain, having just been handed a complete fright followed by guaranteed survival, records the single most useful piece of information available: *I was afraid, and I'm still here.*

Repeat that a thousand times and you get a nervous system that has learned fear is not a reliable predictor of catastrophe. That is precisely — very precisely — the principle behind exposure therapy.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

In 2021, four researchers — Coltan Scrivner, John Johnson, Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Mathias Clasen — published a study of 310 participants conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic in *Personality and Individual Differences*. The finding: horror fans reported significantly less psychological distress than everyone else. Less depression, less anxiety, less irritability, fewer sleep problems. Fans of collapse narratives — apocalypse, zombies, invasion — additionally reported feeling better practically prepared for the crisis.

Be careful what that does not say. It's a correlation on self-report, not proof that horror makes you resilient. The authors are explicit about this. Their cautious hypothesis: horror fans may simply have more practice at emotional regulation, because they voluntarily and repeatedly expose themselves to strong emotion in a safe environment.

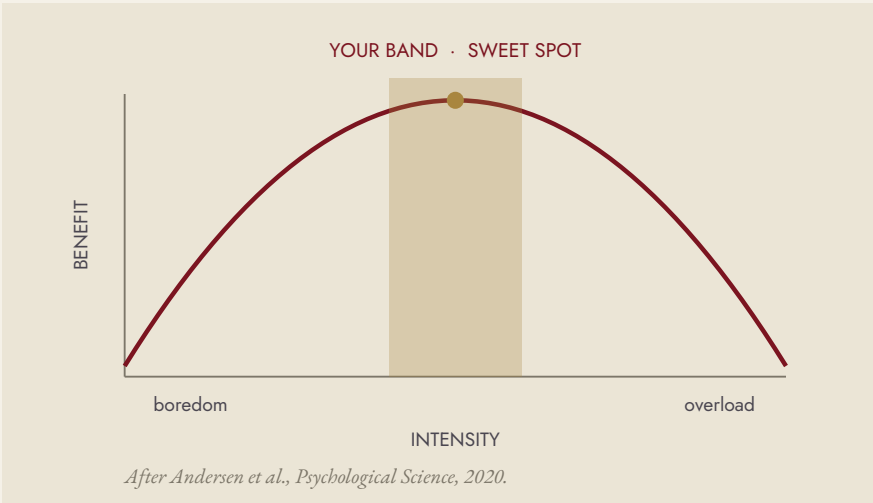
Practice. Hold on to that word. The whole book is inside it.

The most important point in this chapter

There's an optimal dose, and it isn't "as much as possible".

In 2020, a team at Aarhus University led by Marc Malmndorf Andersen did something nobody had done: measured fear and enjoyment in the field, inside a real haunted attraction, on participants wearing heart monitors. Published in *Psychological Science*.

The result is a bell curve. An inverted U.



Too little fear: boredom. Too much fear: distress — you check out, you shut down. And between them, a narrow band where enjoyment peaks, which the authors nicknamed the *sweet spot*. The heart-rate signatures show the same shape: enjoyment matches "just right" departures from normal physiological state.

That band isn't the same for you and for me. It's your band. It's personal, and it shifts with your fatigue, your week, your sleep.

The film that changes you isn't the hardest one. It's the one that puts you exactly on the edge.

Which is why the guy who forces himself through the twenty most unbearable films ever made learns nothing. He's permanently overloaded. He isn't training; he's numbing himself or damaging himself. Like a beginner loading 140 kilos on the bench — he isn't building muscle, he's building an injury.

And why the person who only watches comfort learns nothing either. Zero load, zero adaptation.

The whole of Part II is about finding your band, staying in it, and moving it up one notch at a time.

The armchair is a gym

I'll use this analogy throughout, so let's install it properly.

GYM	ARMCHAIR
The load on the bar	The intensity of the film (scale of 1 to 5)
Form and technique	The session protocol (chapter 7)
Muscle feedback	Body localisation (chapter 8)
The training log	The night sheet
Progressive overload	Moving up one notch at a time
Recovery	Dry nights, no screen
The actual point	What you do with the body you built

Nobody goes to the gym to lift iron. They go so they can carry shopping, survive a house move, grow old on their feet. The iron is a means.

Nobody should watch a dark film in order to watch a dark film. The film is a means. The point is elsewhere, and it's very concrete: the conversation you've postponed for four months, the no you can't say, the room you walk into looking at your shoes.

We'll get there. But first I have to destroy something.

CATHARSIS IS A LIE

And it's the best news in this book.

You know the story. Aristotle, tragedy, the purging of the passions. You watch misfortune on stage, you weep, you leave washed clean. Two thousand years later, everyone repeats the same thing: horror gets it out of your system.

It's false. Not "false with nuance": false in the sense that fifty years of experimental research point the other way.

THE DEMOLITION

1973: Albert Bandura calls for a moratorium on catharsis theory in therapy. The data don't support it.

2002: Brad Bushman publishes what became a classic experiment in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Participants who have just been angered hit a punching bag while thinking about the person who angered them. Under catharsis theory, they should feel better. Result: they feel angrier and behave more aggressively afterwards. A control group that does nothing at all fares better than the group that "vents".

2024: a meta-analysis run at Ohio State aggregates 154 studies and more than 10,000 participants. Conclusion: venting anger doesn't reduce it. What reduces it is lowering physiological arousal — not raising it. Bushman, co-author: in his view there is no scientific evidence whatsoever supporting catharsis theory.

Take a second with that. It should bother you, because it contradicts the entirety of the standard discourse on this subject — including, in all honesty, the first draft of this book.

Why this is good news

Because if catharsis worked, you'd have nothing to do. Watching would suffice. Open the valve, feel better, repeat.

Which is exactly what you've been doing for fifteen years. With what measurable result?

If discharge isn't enough, then there is a movement left to make. One you've never made, that nobody taught you, and that explains why two hundred films changed nothing while the mechanism itself is entirely real.

The film isn't what does the work. What you do in the two hours afterwards is.

So what actually works?

Three documented mechanisms. None of them is catharsis. All three require something from you.

1. Graded exposure

Deliberately approaching what you avoid, at a tolerable dose, repeatedly, until the alarm recalibrates. This is the core of exposure therapy, the best-supported protocol in all of psychotherapy for fear. A dark film is graded exposure that is

free, dosable and interruptible. Provided you dose it instead of enduring it. That's movement E.

2. Affect labelling

Putting a precise word on an emotion while it's happening. In 2007, Matthew Lieberman's team at UCLA published a landmark imaging study in *Psychological Science*. When a participant names the emotion they perceive, activity in the amygdala — the threat detector — decreases, while the right ventrolateral prefrontal cortex activates. Naming an emotion doesn't merely describe it. It alters it.

Naming it "anxiety" isn't enough. You need the right word: is it abandonment, shame, powerlessness, rage, disgust, vertigo? Precision is the active ingredient. That's movement A.

3. Implementation intentions

Turning an understanding into a programmed action: "if this situation, then I do this." In 2006, Peter Gollwitzer and Paschal Sheeran published a meta-analysis of 94 independent tests: these if-then plans produce a medium-to-large effect on goal attainment — a Cohen's *d* of 0.65. A vague intention almost never becomes an act. An intention wired to a specific cue does, and massively so.

That's movement N, and it's the one that 99% of shadow enthusiasts have never performed in their lives.

The new model

Forget the pressure cooker. Here's the correct model:

| *The film isn't a valve. It's a test bench.*

It empties nothing. It reveals a reaction, under controlled conditions where you can observe it without paying the price. What you do with the information is on you.

A pilot in a simulator doesn't purge his fear of stalling. He triggers a stall in safety, watches exactly what he does, names his error, and corrects it. Twenty times. Then he gets into a real aircraft, and the day the alarm sounds for real, his hands know what to do.

You have a simulator. You've never used it as one.

THE MONSTER IS AN INDEX

What makes you flinch isn't random.

Carl Gustav Jung called the "Shadow" everything a person refuses to recognise as their own: the impulses, desires, cowardices and rages that can't be fitted into their self-image. What we refuse to see in ourselves, we project — onto other people, onto groups, onto stories.

I won't sell you Jung as hard science — analytical psychology is an interpretive framework, not an experimentally validated model, and anyone telling you otherwise is selling you something else. But as a reading grid it is formidably effective. And it pairs cleanly with a solid fact: whatever triggers a disproportionate reaction in you is a signal.

The question isn't "is this film scary?" The question is "why this one, on me, right now?"

Two people watch the same film. One finds the family dinner scene slack. The other's throat closes and she doesn't know why. The film is identical. The difference is entirely in the viewer.

Your flinch is therefore a measuring instrument aimed at you. An index. It tells you nothing about the film. It tells you everything about what you haven't processed.

The seven figures and what they index

Monsters have repeated for three thousand years. Not from lack of imagination: because there are only so many ways to be afraid of being human. Here are the seven families, and what your pull towards — or recoil from — each one marks out.

THE FIGURE	WHAT IT INDEXES IN YOU
The masked killer — no face, no motive, no words	The aggression you won't allow yourself. The anger you were never permitted to express, returning as an external threat.
The ghost — returns, demands, won't leave	Unfinished grief. What was never said to someone. The conversation that will never happen.
The possessed — the body acting against itself	Fear of losing control. The part of you that you judge unacceptable and have kept leashed since childhood.
The house — the space that traps, digests, lies	Family and identity. The structure meant to protect you, which you suspect is damaging you.
The double — the twin, the reflection, the other you	The life you didn't live. The choice you didn't make. The ambition you shelved.
The cult — the smiling group that welcomes you a bit too well	Your need to belong, and the price you'll pay not to be alone.
The thing — the unnameable, the formless, what has no name	Objectless dread. Death. The void. What has no solution and must simply be carried.

EXERCISE · THREE MINUTES, RIGHT NOW

Take the seven rows above. Score each from 0 to 10: how badly does this figure get to you?

Look at your highest score. Then read the right-hand column beside it.

This isn't a magazine quiz. Your highest score names the territory you'll be working in week 3 of the protocol. Write it down somewhere. You'll need it in chapter 11.

The interpretation trap

I have to warn you about something, because this is where 100% of clever people come off the rails.

You're going to be tempted to turn this into a game. To decode every film, produce elegant grids, be brilliant. Decoding is delicious. It is also the very best way to change nothing.

Understanding your shadow is an excellent way of never getting near it.

Intelligence is the finest defence mechanism ever invented. As long as you're analysing, you're up high, at a distance, safe. You're talking *about* the thing instead of feeling it.

So, an absolute rule for the rest of this book: no interpretation counts unless it is followed by an observable action within 48 hours. An insight with no act is entertainment. Often excellent entertainment, frequently better than the film. But entertainment.

We'll come back to this. At length. It's movement N, and it's the only one that truly matters.

THE FOUR PROFILES

Which one are you, and what it changes for you.

Take your five axis scores. Find your profile.

THE SCANNER

HIGH D · LOW C OR E

WHAT YOU DO — You understand everything and nothing gets through. Your intelligence puts three seconds of distance between you and the hit: by the time a scene touches you, you're already analysing it. You're brilliant on what the film is saying and mute on what it did to you.

YOUR FAILURE POINT — Interpretation in place of experience. You think the thing so you don't have to feel it — and it's so rewarding that you never notice.

YOUR CORRECTION — Absolute ban on writing a single line of analysis for the first ten nights. Physical sensations and one word from the lexicon, nothing else. And your chapter 10 rule must always involve another person — never a solo project.

THE MUZZLED

HIGH B · LOW C

WHAT YOU DO — You take everything. The hardest films slide off. People find you solid; you find yourself slightly dead. You've sat through things that made other people vomit and felt nothing, during or after.

YOUR FAILURE POINT — Anaesthesia. You mistake solidity for absence of signal. Your sensations were turned down long ago, probably for excellent reasons.

YOUR CORRECTION — Deaf-body protocol (chapter 8) for ten nights, no exceptions. Low load: never above 3 before night 15 — the Muzzled's mistake is raising the load in order to finally feel something. Your C axis before anything else.

THE RAW

HIGH C · LOW B

WHAT YOU DO — You feel everything, hard and fast. A scene floors you and you cut it off. You have a list of films you've never managed to finish, and a reputation for being too sensitive that you've carried since childhood.

YOUR FAILURE POINT — Overload. You mistake intensity for progress. You're permanently past your sweet spot, so you learn nothing — you endure.

YOUR CORRECTION — Maximum load 3 until night 20. Four-six breathing from the first rise, systematically. Short nights rather than full ones. Two dry nights a week instead of one. Your progress will come from dosing, not from courage.

THE WATCHER

VERY HIGH A · LOW E

WHAT YOU DO — You consume enormously. You're looking for something without knowing what, you don't find it, and you immediately queue up the next one. Your watchlist is infinite and your life hasn't moved a millimetre in

three years.

YOUR FAILURE POINT — The loop. The next film always contains the answer. It's the mechanism of a gentle, socially accepted, entirely sterile addiction.

YOUR CORRECTION — Strict quota: you watch nothing until yesterday's rule is executed. No exceptions, no arrangements. Your E axis is your only building site — the other four will follow on their own.

WHAT IF EVERY AXIS IS LOW?

Under 10 across the board, you are probably not a shadow enthusiast — you are curious. The protocol still works, staying on loads 1 and 2 with short nights. You will progress more slowly on B and far faster on D and E, because you have no bad habits to undo.

One note before we continue

These profiles are not identities. They are not "personality types" and it would be dishonest of me to sell them as such. They are operating habits — observable, modifiable, and frequently mixed.

Their single use is this: each one has a different failure point. The Scanner fails in the same place every time. So does the Muzzled, but elsewhere. If you run the protocol without knowing where you'll come undone, you'll come undone there.

So keep your correction line. It's worth more than the name of the profile.

PART II

THE E.C.R.A.N. METHOD

E	EXPOSURE CH. 6 Choose your load before pressing play. Dosing is half the result.
C	CONTACT CH. 7 Watch with an observer left switched on. Seven room rules, one breath pattern.
R	REACTION CH. 8 Locate it in the body. Where, what texture, what intensity.
A	ANCHOR CH. 9 Name it with the exact word and tie it to a real scene from your life.
N	NEW RULE CH. 10 A filmable act, under two minutes, executed within 48 hours.

Five movements. Always in this order. Skipping the fifth is what you have done your entire life.

E — EXPOSURE

Choosing your load. Nobody starts at 140 kilos.

First movement. The most underrated, because it happens before you press play. You don't choose a film. You choose a load. Small change in vocabulary, revolution in practice.

When you open a platform and scroll until something catches your eye, you're letting the algorithm and your mood design your training session. No serious athlete works that way. You arrive knowing what you're lifting.

The load scale

THE LEVEL		WHEN TO USE IT
1	ATMOSPHERE Unease, strangeness, melancholy. No shocks. You could eat dinner through it.	Calibration, recovery nights, hard weeks.
2	TENSION The suspense holds you. You jump once or twice. Gone within an hour.	First working level. Week 1.

	THE LEVEL	WHEN TO USE IT
3	IMPACT One or two scenes stay with you. You think about it the next day. Your body spoke.	The core of the protocol. Where 80% of the work happens.
4	SHOCK You're shaken. The film follows you for two or three days. You hesitate to recommend it.	Weeks 2 and 3. Never two nights running.
5	OPERATION The film alters you. There's a before and an after. You may never rewatch it.	Once in the protocol. Once only. With the load 5 protocol.

The four dosing rules

They follow directly from the inverted U in chapter 2. Don't negotiate with them.

1. Aim for the edge, not the bottom. The right load leaves you tense but present. If you check out, dissociate, or reach for your phone to survive, you're overloaded. That doesn't train you; it teaches you to flee more elegantly.
2. One notch at a time. You move up a level after two clean sessions at the level below — meaning two sessions where you completed all five movements. Not two sessions where you merely watched.
3. Tonight's load depends on your week. Bad sleep, conflict at work, recent bereavement, exam season: you drop a notch. Automatically. That isn't cowardice, it's programming. Nobody sets a personal record on four hours' sleep.
4. Load 5 has to be earned. Three clean sessions at load 4, minimum. And never two load 5s in the same week. Never.

The session contract

Before you press play, you write four lines. Thirty seconds. Non-negotiable.

THE FOUR LINES

- Title and target load. "Tonight: load 3."*
- My starting state. A 0-10 score for your current tension. You can't measure an effect without measuring the baseline.
- My exit clause. Write down in advance what you'll do if you have to stop: "I cut it, I write three lines, I go get a glass of water." An exit clause written cold is what stops you fleeing badly when hot.
- My finish time. Decided beforehand. Your sleep is not an adjustable variable, and we're about to take that seriously.

On sleep, and I'm not joking

You're probably telling yourself you'll watch this at half past midnight as usual. No.

The physiological arousal produced by a load 3 or above takes between forty-five and ninety minutes to come down. If you go straight to bed, you're not sleeping: you're passing out in a state of alert, your deep sleep takes the hit, and tomorrow you're more fragile — therefore more vulnerable to the next load. You're building the exact opposite of what you want.

Protocol rule: finish at least one hour before bed. The half hour of writing that follows counts inside that hour. If you can't, move the session. If you can never manage it, run the protocol at weekends across fifteen nights and eight weeks. That works too. What doesn't work is doing it at the cost of your sleep.

The special case: load 5

A load 5 isn't a film you watch. It's an operation you schedule.

LOAD 5 PROTOCOL

- Never on a weeknight.
- Never alone if you're going through a hard stretch.
- Clear two hours afterwards, with no obligations.
- Tell someone. A message before, a message after. "I'm watching X tonight, I'll text you at 11." It sounds excessive. It isn't.
- The following night is a dry night. Mandatory.

C — CONTACT

How to watch. Yes, there's a right way.

You know how to watch a film. You don't know how to watch in contact.

The difference is the one between someone running and someone running with a heart-rate monitor and an intention. Same motion. Incomparable results.

In contact, you do two things at once: you live the film and you keep an observer switched on in the background, taking notes. It takes three or four sessions to learn. At first it's clumsy and slightly breaks immersion. Then it becomes automatic, and you discover it increases immersion rather than reducing it.

The seven rules of the room

SESSION PROTOCOL

- Phone out of arm's reach. Not face down: out of reach. The phone is the most-used exit in the world, and every time you take it during a rise in tension, you teach your nervous system that tension is intolerable. You're training flight.
- Low light, not darkness. Total dark tips some people into overload. One weak, warm source behind you.

- Big screen, loud sound. On a phone there's no load, so there's no training. Headphones or speakers. Sound does 60% of the work and everyone underestimates it.
- Sitting, not lying down. Lying down puts the body in passive mode and you lose half your signals. Sitting, back straight, feet on the floor.
- No comfort pauses. You may stop — you may not pause to bleed off pressure and then resume. Either you stay, or you use your exit clause. The lukewarm middle is what trains avoidance.
- Nobody to talk to during. The joke that defuses tension is a perfectly respectable and perfectly useless defence here. Watching with others: total silence, discussion afterwards.
- One question in mind. Not "what's going to happen". But: "where is this landing in me?"

Breathing, and why this isn't wellness

One technique in this entire book, because it's mechanically sound: exhale longer than you inhale.

In through the nose for four counts. Out through the mouth for six, slowly. The extended exhale recruits vagal activity and brings heart rate down. It isn't mystical or decorative: it's the most direct lever you have on your own arousal.

Remember the 2024 meta-analysis: what lowers anger is lowering arousal. Not discharging it. Here is your manual control.

*When it rises: four, six. You're not escaping the scene.
You're turning down your own volume.*

This is exactly the transferable skill. The day someone comes at you in a meeting, you won't be able to leave the room. But you can run four-six under the table while they talk, and arrive at your turn with a voice that doesn't shake.

This technique is the number one reason people write to me saying something changed. Not the decoding. The breathing.

The rule of the gaze

One prohibition during a session: you do not look away.

If you can't hold the scene, you use your exit clause and stop cleanly. But you don't do the thing everyone does — glance sideways for three seconds, then sneak back.

Why this matters: that micro-gesture, repeated, is avoidance training. Your body learns that a discreet escape hatch exists, always available, at no social cost. And it will look for that hatch everywhere else. In difficult conversations. In front of a number that worries you. Facing someone telling you a truth.

Looking away from fiction has no consequence. Turning it into a nervous habit does.

EXERCISE · THE TWENTY-SECOND TEST

Next time a scene makes you feel bad: count twenty seconds while watching, running four-six.

Twenty seconds. That's all. Almost no scene has a true peak longer than that.

At the end of the twenty seconds, note what happened in your body. Most people discover the same thing with astonishment: it comes down on its own. The sensation peaks somewhere around eight to twelve seconds, then declines, without them doing anything.

This is the most useful information of your life. Emotions don't rise indefinitely. They crest and fall. You've spent years fleeing at second four, believing it would keep climbing forever.

R — REACTION

The body map. Where it lands tells you what it touched.

Closing credits. Don't move. Don't speak. Don't reach for your phone.

Thirty seconds, eyes closed. One question: where?

Not "what did I feel". Where. In which part of my body did it land, and where is it sitting now?

This step looks trivial. It's the most discriminating in the protocol. The ability to perceive your own internal signals — clinicians call it interoception — is what separates people who know what they feel from people who discover their anger six hours late, slamming a car door.

The body knows before you do. It always has. You've simply never asked it.

The map

ZONE	WHAT IT USUALLY MARKS OUT
THE THROAT <i>tightening, a lump, voice cut off</i>	What you didn't say. The swallowed sentence, the refusal that never came out, the truth kept back for everyone else's peace.
THE CHEST <i>weight, crushing, beat</i>	Attachment. Abandonment, grief, fear of losing someone. The most frequent zone in people who lost someone early.
THE SOLAR PLEXUS <i>hollowness, a knot, the stomach dropping</i>	Control and safety. Territory, money, standing, the fear that the floor will give way.
THE NECK AND SHOULDERS <i>rising, stiffness, vigilance</i>	Social threat. Judgement, humiliation, being looked at. The dominant zone for perfectionists.
THE JAW AND FISTS <i>clenching, tension, beat</i>	Blocked anger. What wants out and what you learned very early never to let out.
THE LEGS AND PELVIS <i>tingling, restlessness, the urge to leave</i>	Prevented flight. The body wants to leave the room and won't allow itself to. Usually tied to a live real-world situation.

How to use it

You're not looking for the correct answer. You're looking for your answer — the one that recurs.

Across thirty nights, a pattern will emerge. Maybe the throat, fourteen times out of thirty. Maybe the solar plexus. That regularity is the most personal and most usable information this book will make you produce — and no online test, no quiz, no horoscope could have handed it to you, because it comes from your own data, collected over a month.

That's what makes it credible to you. You didn't believe an author. You observed a pattern in yourself.

EXERCISE · THE THREE SCAN QUESTIONS

After the credits, eyes closed, in order:

1. Where? One zone. Just one — the strongest.
2. What texture? Tight, hot, hollow, heavy, electric, dense, bristling. The vocabulary of texture is richer than the vocabulary of emotion, and it lies far less.
3. What intensity? 0 to 10. Write it down. Then write it again ten minutes later.

Those two numbers, ten minutes apart, are your recovery curve. Over thirty nights it will shorten. You'll see it in black and white.

For people who feel nothing

If you ran the scan and found: nothing. Blank. No zone at all.

Two possibilities.

First: the load was too low. Nothing to feel, nothing to find. Move up a notch.

Second, and more common than people think: you have weak access to your internal signals. There is nothing abnormal about that and it doesn't make you a machine. It's extremely common in highly cerebral, high-performing people who are used to functioning despite their state rather than with it. That's the Muzzled profile, chapter 5.

In that case, don't start with emotions. Start with the crudest, most undeniable things:

DEAF-BODY PROTOCOL

- Is your jaw clenched? Check physically, with your hand.
- Are your shoulders up? Compare with where they were two hours ago.

- Are your hands closed? Look at them.
- Is your breathing high in the chest, or low in the belly? Put one hand on each.
- Are you warmer or colder than before?

Those are five mechanical facts, not feelings. Anyone can answer them. Start there for ten nights, and the finer sensations will surface on their own. They were always there. The volume was just turned off.

A — ANCHOR

The scalpel sentence. The right word beats a thousand strong ones.

Here is the movement nobody performs. The one that explains why you've watched two hundred films and taken nothing from them.

You've felt it (R). Now you're going to name it.

Reminder from chapter 3: naming an emotion reduces amygdala response and recruits the prefrontal cortex. This isn't decorative introspection, it's a documented neurological lever. But it has a condition almost everyone misses.

Precision is the active ingredient. "It messed me up" heals nothing. "I felt ashamed" operates.

The poor-vocabulary problem

Most adults run their inner life on five words: good, bad, weird, stressed, tired. Five. For the entirety of human experience.

With five words you can't catch anything. It's like sorting grains of rice wearing oven gloves. The act of naming becomes inoperative — not because the mechanism is wrong, but because your tool is too coarse.

So here's the tool. Forty words. Tear this page out, put it in your notebook, use it every night until you no longer need it.

FEAR	LOSS	ANGER	SHAME	DRIVE
apprehension	sorrow	annoyance	awkwardness	relief
alarm	nostalgia	irritation	embarrassmen	tenderness
dread	longing	indignation	t	fascination
terror	abandonment	rage	humiliation	desire
panic	desolation	resentment	guilt	excitement
wariness	regret	bitterness	unworthiness	admiration
insecurity	resignation	contempt	exposure	envy
vertigo	emptiness	disgust	remorse	gratitude
			smallness	

Golden rule: if the word you chose produces no physical reaction as you write it, it is not the right one. Go back to the column.

The scalpel sentence

One sentence, four slots. You write it by hand, every night. Not in a phone note: by hand. Handwriting is slower, and the slowness is the point.

1	THE PRECISE SCENE <i>"When the mother turns at the table and says nothing..."</i>
2	THE SENSATION AND ITS PLACE <i>"... I felt my throat close, a warm tightening..."</i>
3	THE REAL LINK <i>"... and it touched Sundays at my parents' house, I was eleven..."</i>

4

THE EXACT WORD

“... the word is resignation.”

The three errors that void the movement

1. Staying on the film. “That scene was really chilling.” That’s film criticism. You’re off topic. Slot 3 — the link to your life — is not optional: it’s where the work happens. Without it, you’re writing a review.
2. The catch-all word. “It made me feel weird.” Weird isn’t an emotion, it’s an admission that you didn’t look. Go back to the list. Find the exact word. If it takes two minutes, take two minutes. The exact word often produces a small physical reaction when you find it — warmth, a release, sometimes stinging eyes. That’s the sign.
3. The vague link. “It reminded me of my childhood.” Too broad to be usable. You need a scene: a place, a person, a moment. “My parents’ kitchen, a Sunday, I was eleven, my father wasn’t speaking.” Now we can work.

What will happen around night 9

I’m telling you now so it doesn’t blindsides you.

Around the ninth or tenth night, most people go through the same event: they write a scalpel sentence and realise, rereading it, that it has nothing to do with the film. That the film was a pretext. That what they’ve just written, they have never formulated in their life — not to a friend, not to a therapist, not to themselves.

It’s a strange feeling. A sort of quiet vertigo.

It isn’t a miracle. It’s the mechanical result of nine repetitions of a movement you’d never made. Nine times putting a precise word on a precise state and tying it to a precise memory. That’s the data talking, not magic.

When it happens, do nothing special. Don't get carried away, don't call anyone at midnight. Write the date in the margin, circle the sentence, and move to the next movement.

Because an insight you don't convert into an act is, three weeks from now, an anecdote.

N — NEW RULE

The 48 hours. The only chapter that produces results.

Here we are. Everything else was getting you to this page.

If you only read seven pages of this book, make it these. The four preceding movements produce understanding. Understanding changes nothing about a life. Nothing at all. People die with an exceptional understanding of themselves and an existence they never dared touch.

An insight without an act is a luxury form of entertainment.

The principle

Remember Gollwitzer and Sheeran: 94 tests, medium-to-large effect, $d = 0.65$. What turns an intention into a behaviour is not motivation, not willpower, not clarity of purpose. It's an if-then plan, written in advance, with a specific cue.

So every night, after your scalpel sentence, you write a second sentence. One.

THE FORMULA

"If [precise external cue], then I [observable action under two minutes]."

One rule per night. Written. Executed within 48 hours. Ticked on the sheet.

The four criteria for a valid rule

1. Filmable. A camera must be able to record the action. "Be more confident" isn't filmable. "Speak first on item 3 of the meeting" is. If it isn't filmable, it isn't a rule, it's a wish.
2. Under two minutes. The action itself must fit in under two minutes. Not "have the big conversation with my father" — but "message my father to suggest a call on Sunday". You don't build an action habit out of expensive actions. You build it out of tiny, non-negotiable ones.
3. External cue. The "if" must be an event in the world, not an internal state. "If I feel ready" will never arrive. "If Marc talks over me", "if my alarm goes off tomorrow", "if I walk past his office door": those happen.
4. Within 48 hours. Past two days, execution rate collapses. The emotional charge that made the action obvious has dissipated, and your brain has already rebuilt every reason it wasn't that important.

Real examples

Complete chains. Notice how small the final rule is. That's deliberate. It's what makes it executable.

R · REACTION Her throat tightened during a family dinner scene where nobody says anything.

A · ANCHOR The word: *resignation*. The link: Sunday meals at her parents' house.

N · NEW RULE If my brother calls this week, then I tell him Sundays weigh on me — one sentence, not a debate.

R · REACTION His jaw stayed clenched for forty minutes watching a character humiliated in public.

A · ANCHOR The word: *indignation*. The link: Tuesday's meeting, where his work was presented by someone else.

N · NEW RULE If Thomas takes one of my ideas in a meeting, then I say "to add to that — it's the point I sent on Thursday".

R · REACTION She felt nothing the whole film, then cried at the credits without understanding why.

A · ANCHOR The word: *longing*. The link: her grandfather, dead four years ago, whom she has never discussed with anyone.

N · NEW RULE If I pass the postbox tomorrow, then I post a card to my grandmother.

The one metric that predicts everything

Across thirty nights you'll collect several numbers. One predicts your final result, and I can tell you which right now:

Your transfer rate. The percentage of nights on which you actually executed your rule.

Not your average load. Not the number of films. Not the depth of your analysis. Your transfer rate.

Below 40%, you'll have had an interesting reading experience and you'll be exactly the same person on the thirtieth evening. Between 40 and 70%, you'll feel things

shift and the people around you will notice something without knowing what. Above 70%, you'll finish with twenty to twenty-five dated, verifiable acts that the older version of you would not have committed.

Twenty acts. That's what confidence is. Not a belief, not a posture, not an affirmation in the mirror. A case file against your own internal reputation.

The question everyone asks

"What if my rule has nothing to do with the film?"

That's the point. The film is a trigger, not a subject. If you watch a possession film and tomorrow's rule is to call your brother, you've understood the method perfectly. If your rule is to watch another possession film, you've understood perfectly how to change nothing.

The film is the gym. Life is the match. Nobody has ever congratulated you on your bench press.

PART III

THE THIRTY-NIGHT PROTOCOL

THE PROTOCOL

Thirty nights. Four stages. One discipline.

Here's the machine. It's simple, and its simplicity is what makes it survivable.

Thirty nights across four stages. Each night has a target load, a session type and an instruction. Not every night is a film night — deliberately: recovery is part of training, exactly as it is in a gym.

THE THREE KINDS OF NIGHT

- Full night. A whole feature, all five movements. Budget two and a half hours including the log.
- Short night. A ten-to-twenty-minute sequence, chosen in advance, often rewatched. All five movements anyway. Forty minutes total. These nights are underrated: revisiting a known scene often yields more than a first viewing, because suspense is no longer occupying your mind.
- Dry night. No screen at all. Log only, plus executing any outstanding rule. These are consolidation nights and they aren't optional. Skipping them means training seven days a week: you don't progress, you deplete.

How to read the table

Load: the target level from the chapter 6 scale. If your week has been hard, drop a notch, guilt-free.

Territory: the family of figures to favour, per the chapter 4 table. You pick the film; the book picks the terrain.

Focus: the movement you pay special attention to that night. You always do all five. But you sharpen one.

And one instruction above all: don't run ahead. One night per day. If you skip a day, resume at the next number — you don't catch up. This isn't a race, it's a rhythm.

WEEK 1

RECONNAISSANCE

Nights 1 to 7 — Objective: learn to feel and to name. The load is deliberately low.

Most people want to rush this and rob themselves of the foundations. This week builds your C axis.

N°	TYPE	TERRITORY · FOCUS	THE INSTRUCTION
1	Full load 1	Free C	Look for nothing. Just run the thirty-second body scan after the credits. That's all, and it's already a lot.
2	Short load 2	Free C	Revisit a scene you know by heart. Note the three precise moments your breathing changes.
3	Full load 2	The house C + D	First pass through the lexicon. One word, the most precise you can find.
4	Dry load —	— D	No screen. Reread your three sheets. Write the word that recurs, and why you think it recurs.
5	Full load 2	The ghost D	Tonight slot 3 of the scalpel sentence is mandatory: a place, a person, a dated moment.
6	Short load 3	Free C	Twenty-second test on the hardest scene. Four-six. You don't look away.
7	Dry load —	— N	Stage review. Execute any outstanding rule. Calculate your first transfer rate, out of six.

WEEK 2

DESCENT

Nights 8 to 14 — Objective: identify your dominant territory. The load rises. This is the week most people experience their first scalpel sentence that hurts. This week builds your D axis.

N°	TYPE	TERRITORY · FOCUS	THE INSTRUCTION
8	Full load 3	The masked killer R + A	Anger territory. Where exactly does it land? Be uncomfortably precise.
9	Full load 3	The possessed A	The tipping night for many readers. If it comes, write more than planned. Don't stop at the line.
10	Dry load —	— N	Reread the nine sheets. Which territory recurs most? That's your week 3 terrain. Circle it.
11	Short load 3	Your territory A	One sequence only, on your territory, watched twice in a row. The second time changes everything.
12	Full load 3	The cult D + N	Tonight's question: where do I accept too much, so as not to end up alone?
13	Short load 4	Free C	First load 4, in short format. Twenty minutes is plenty. The short format is your shock absorber.
14	Dry load —	— N	Review. Transfer rate out of twelve. Under 40%: drop the load and double your attention on N.

WEEK 3

CONFRONTATION

Nights 15 to 21 — Objective: go at the figure you scored highest in chapter 4. The most demanding week. It's also the only one where the protocol asks you to deliberately go where you don't want to go.

N°	TYPE	TERRITORY · FOCUS	THE INSTRUCTION
15	Full load 4	Your territory ALL FIVE	The film you've been postponing since chapter 4. You know the one. Tonight.
16	Dry load —	— A	No screen. Rewrite yesterday's scalpel sentence three times, hunting a truer word each pass.
17	Full load 3	The double D + N	The life you didn't live. Tonight's rule must attach to a project you shelved.
18	Short load 4	Your territory R	Second pass on the night 15 sequence. Compare the two sheets side by side. The gap is your result.
19	Full load 4	The thing A	Objectless territory. The lexicon will feel poor tonight. Find the word anyway.
20	Dry load —	— N	Consolidation. Execute every outstanding rule. All of them. Today.
21	Full load 5	Free ALL FIVE	Maximum load, once in the entire protocol. Chapter 6 load 5 protocol, no exceptions. In doubt? Stay at 4: that's a programming decision, not a retreat.

WEEK 4

INTEGRATION

Nights 22 to 30 — Objective: transfer, consolidate, measure. The load comes down. The work moves from the armchair into your life. This week builds your E axis, and it decides everything.

N°	TYPE	TERRITORY · FOCUS	THE INSTRUCTION
22	Dry load —	— R	Mandatory after night 21. No screen. Body scan alone, twice during the day.
23	Short load 2	Free N	Deliberately low load. All attention on the rule. The film is only a pretext tonight.
24	Full load 3	Free N	Tonight the rule must involve a real person. Not you alone in your kitchen.
25	Dry load —	— N	Pure execution day. No reading, no new writing. Acts only.
26	Full load 3	Your territory ALL FIVE	Back to your terrain, a month on. Compare with the night 15 sheet.
27	Short load 2	Free D	A pleasure night, with a sheet anyway. Check the method hasn't stolen the pleasure. If it has: chapter 16.
28	Dry load —	— N	Last rule of the protocol. Make it a hard one. You have thirty days of evidence behind you.
29	Dry load —	— ALL FIVE	Plot your thirty points on the load / enjoyment graph. Draw the curve. Find your peak.

N°	TYPE	TERRITORY · FOCUS	THE INSTRUCTION
30	Measure load —	— REVIEW	Retake the chapter 1 test. Compare axis by axis. Tick the nine proofs. Then watch a film and write nothing at all.

THE NIGHT SHEET

The only document you have to produce. Copy it thirty times.

One page per night. By hand. Five minutes.

Don't reinvent it, don't improve it, don't build a tracking spreadsheet with charts — that's the classic Scanner trap, and I've watched people spend three hours on their scoring system and zero minutes on tomorrow's rule.

DATE AND NIGHT NO.	
TITLE AND TARGET LOAD	
STARTING STATE (0-10)	
R · WHERE IT LANDED <i>zone, texture, intensity at 0 min / at 10 min</i>	
A · THE SCALPEL SENTENCE <i>four slots, by hand</i>	
A · THE EXACT WORD <i>and its precision, scored 0 to 3</i>	

N · THE NEW RULE <i>if ... then I ...</i>	
N · EXECUTED? <i>yes / no — tick within 48 hours</i>	
ENJOYMENT OF THE SESSION (0-10)	

Copy this frame into a paper notebook. Not an app. Handwriting is slower, and the slowness is the active ingredient of step A.

The five numbers and what they become

You record five numbers a night. After thirty nights they produce four curves. Those are your results.

THE NUMBER	WHAT IT BECOMES
Load (1-5) plotted against Enjoyment (0-10)	Your personal curve. Plot your thirty points on a graph. You'll get your own inverted U — Andersen's, drawn with your data. The peak is your sweet spot. That's your optimal training band, in numbers. Nobody could have given it to you.
Intensity at 0 min and at 10 min	Your recovery curve. The gap between the two numbers. It will widen over the nights: you come down faster. It's the most direct physiological evidence that your regulation system is training.
Word precision (0-3)	Your granularity curve. 0 = catch-all word, 3 = exact word with a physical reaction as you write it. That's your D axis in real time.

THE NUMBER	WHAT IT BECOMES
Rule executed (yes/no)	Your transfer rate. The number that decides everything. Calculate it on nights 10, 20 and 30.

Five numbers. Five minutes an evening. Two and a half hours across an entire month.

That's the full price. Anyone telling you a transformation costs less is selling you something.

PART IV

THE ARCHIVE — EIGHTEEN FILMS DECODED

THE DECODER

What each film is actually about. And who it operates on.

Eighteen entries. They aren't here to tell you what to watch — they're here to show you how to read a film before you start it, so you know what load you're taking and what territory you're operating in.

Each entry gives: the load, the real subject beneath the apparent one, the territory in the chapter 4 sense, and the question to ask yourself afterwards. No plot summaries: this isn't a TV guide, and I assume you can find a synopsis.

A usage warning: several of these films deal with grief, family abuse, addiction or mental illness. If one of those subjects is live for you right now, the entry flags it. Going around it isn't weakness: it's dosing, and dosing is half the method.

HEREDITARY 2018

LOAD 5

TERRITORY The house

THE REAL SUBJECT What a family passes down without ever naming it — and the grief you won't allow yourself because the person was difficult. The most precise film ever made about psychic inheritance.

THE QUESTION *What did I inherit that I never chose?*

SENSITIVE grief, suicide, family abuse

THE BABADOOK 2014

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The possessed

THE REAL SUBJECT Maternal ambivalence: loving someone and resenting them for existing. The film doesn't destroy the monster, it learns to feed it in the basement. The most mature thesis in the genre.

THE QUESTION *Which feeling do I judge unacceptable in myself?*

SENSITIVE loss of a partner, parental burnout

GET OUT 2017

LOAD 3

TERRITORY The cult

THE REAL SUBJECT Social gaslighting. Being in a room where everyone is charming, sensing something is wrong, and having to choose between your own perception and everyone else's comfort.

THE QUESTION *Where am I pretending not to see?*

MIDSOMMAR 2019

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The cult

THE REAL SUBJECT Emotional dependence. What we accept in order not to be left, and the terrible relief that arrives when we finally let go. A break-up film disguised as a cult film.

THE QUESTION *In which relationship do I apologise for existing?*

SENSITIVE family bereavement, suicide

BLACK SWAN 2010

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The double

THE REAL SUBJECT Perfectionism as socially rewarded self-harm. Nobody will stop you: they'll applaud all the way down.

THE QUESTION *What am I sacrificing my health to, while calling it high standards?*

SENSITIVE self-harm, eating disorders

SHUTTER ISLAND 2010

LOAD 3

TERRITORY The thing

THE REAL SUBJECT Denial as survival architecture. How a mind will build an entire world rather than admit one fact.

THE QUESTION *What is the thing I know, and arrange not to know?*

THE WITCH 2015

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The house

THE REAL SUBJECT Guilt, dogma and the shame of desire. What happens to someone raised to distrust themselves.

THE QUESTION *Which want do I treat as a fault?*

IT FOLLOWS 2014

LOAD 3

TERRITORY The thing

THE REAL SUBJECT Intimacy, symbolic contamination, and the arrival of mortality that comes with adulthood. The threat never runs. It walks. Like time.

THE QUESTION *What am I walking quickly away from?*

SAINT MAUD 2019

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The possessed

THE REAL SUBJECT Loneliness, and the devouring need to matter to someone. Faith as the last defence against insignificance.

THE QUESTION *Who would I like to matter to, and have never told?*

SENSITIVE self-harm, religious delusion

US 2019

LOAD 3

TERRITORY The double

THE REAL SUBJECT The parallel life. What you'd have become with a different hand, and the quiet guilt of comfort.

THE QUESTION *Which choice did I make without ever deciding it?*

THE OTHERS 2001

LOAD 2

TERRITORY The ghost

THE REAL SUBJECT Grief and the refusal to know. The gentlest on this list, and the best entry point if you're starting.

THE QUESTION *What am I refusing to accept as over?*

THE SHINING 1980

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The house

THE REAL SUBJECT Isolation, paternal failure, and the mechanics of addiction filmed from the inside. The hotel was never the problem.

THE QUESTION *When do I become someone I don't like?*

SENSITIVE domestic violence, alcohol

THE NIGHT HOUSE 2020

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The ghost

THE REAL SUBJECT Discovering you didn't know the person you lived with for ten years. Grief doubled by betrayal, with nobody left to hold accountable.

THE QUESTION *Who have I built a convenient version of?*

SENSITIVE grief, suicide

TAKE SHELTER 2011

LOAD 3

TERRITORY The thing

THE REAL SUBJECT Anticipatory anxiety, and the fear of no longer being able to trust your own judgement. The truest film ever made about being afraid of being afraid.

THE QUESTION *Which catastrophe am I preparing for instead of living?*

SENSITIVE mental health, family history

PERFECT BLUE 1997

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The double

THE REAL SUBJECT Identity fracturing under other people's gaze. Written before social media, and since promoted to documentary.

THE QUESTION *Which version of me am I maintaining for other people?*

SENSITIVE sexual assault, stalking

REQUIEM FOR A DREAM 2000

LOAD 5

TERRITORY The possessed

THE REAL SUBJECT Desire become master. It isn't a film about drugs: it's a film about wanting something so badly it starts driving you.

THE QUESTION *Which desire is driving me, instead of me driving it?*

SENSITIVE addiction, sex work, extremely punishing

A TALE OF TWO SISTERS 2003

LOAD 4

TERRITORY The house

THE REAL SUBJECT Survivor's guilt, and memory rearranging itself to make life bearable.

THE QUESTION *What do I feel responsible for, and have never said out loud?*

SENSITIVE grief, suicide

UNDER THE SKIN 2013

LOAD 3

TERRITORY The thing

THE REAL SUBJECT Learning to be human, observed from outside. Empathy as a late discovery — and what it costs when it arrives.

THE QUESTION *At what point did I stop feeling other people?*

THE RECOVERY ROOM

Five load-1 films. For nights when you've already given.

You don't train a muscle that's still sore. Five works at load 1 to 2: shadow, tension, unease — but no punch to the stomach. They suit short nights, hard weeks, and any stretch where you want to maintain the practice without enduring it.

THE FILM	WHY IT IS HERE
The Sixth Sense 1999	Gentle melancholy. A grief film disguised as a ghost story, and one of the few that consoles.
Arrival 2016	Grief and time, without a single aggressive scene. Ideal after a load 4.
Lake Mungo 2008	Australian mockumentary. Far sadder than frightening. Devastatingly effective on the D axis.
The Innocents 1961	Elegance and total ambiguity, no graphic violence. Perfect for training the gaze.
Picnic at Hanging Rock 1975	Pure unease, no monster, no explanation. An excellent test of your tolerance for the unresolved.

PART V

THE RETURN

THE MEASUREMENT

Night 30. Retake the test. Here's what you'll find.

Go back to chapter 1. Redo the twenty questions, exactly, without rereading your old answers until you've finished.

Then compare, axis by axis.

What I predict

I'm going to tell you what you'll find again, and this time it's a test of the method as much as of you.

AXIS	TYPICAL CHANGE
A — The Pull	Essentially unchanged, sometimes slightly down. Normal: raw attraction isn't trainable and has no reason to move. A small drop usually means compulsive consumption has decreased — you watch less and better.
B — The Hold	+1 to +3 points. Slow by nature. You don't move a mountain of temperament in thirty nights.

AXIS	TYPICAL CHANGE
C — The Sensor	+3 to +6 points. This is where the deaf body wakes up. The jump is sharp for the Muzzled, quieter for the Raw, who started high.
D — The Name	+6 to +12 points. The strongest gain in the protocol, every time. Thirty repetitions of a precise naming movement with a lexicon in front of you. That's pure learning.
E — The Transfer	+5 to +14 points, entirely correlated with your transfer rate. Above 70% executed, you're at the top of that range. Below 40%, almost nothing will have moved — and that isn't a failure of the protocol, it's information about your relationship with execution, which is itself worth the month.

Expected total: between +15 and +30 Shadow Index points.

If you're below +10, don't conclude it didn't work. Look at your transfer rate before any other number. Nine times out of ten it's low, and everything is explained there.

The nine behavioural proofs

Scores are self-reported, therefore arguable. Here's the real list: nine observable markers. Tick the ones that describe you today and didn't describe you a month ago.

- ☐ I said no to something without spending the next five minutes justifying it.
- ☐ I asked a direct question whose answer I was dreading.

- ☐ I let a silence sit without filling it.
- ☐ I held my position after a first objection, instead of folding immediately.
- ☐ I named an emotion out loud, to someone, in real time.
- ☐ I did something within 48 hours that I'd been putting off for over a month.
- ☐ I now notice where things land in my body, without having to think about it.
- ☐ Someone asked if I was all right, in a positive tone, and I didn't know why.
- ☐ I watched something difficult all the way through without touching my phone.

Five boxes out of nine: the protocol worked. Seven or more: you won't go back, and people around you have already noticed.

You didn't gain courage. You gained evidence. Not the same thing, and much better.

Courage doesn't exist as a trait

A last word on confidence, since that's what you came for.

You've been sold the idea that there are confident people and people who aren't. That it's a substance, that you either have it or lack it, and that it must be found somewhere.

That's false, and actively counterproductive. The people you find solid don't feel less fear than you. They simply have, behind them, a stock of occasions when they

acted anyway — and that stock serves as their automatic answer when their brain asks "can I hold this?" They don't consult their feeling. They consult their record.

You've just spent thirty days feeding yours. Twenty actions. Maybe twenty-five.

It isn't much. It's infinitely more than zero, and zero was your starting point a month ago.

WHEN TO STOP

The chapter most self-help books don't write.

This protocol is a tool. Like any tool it has a domain of validity, and using it outside that domain doesn't produce smaller results: it produces damage.

I'd rather lose readers here than harm a single one.

What this book is not

It is not therapy. It is not treatment. I am not a psychologist, a psychiatrist or a therapist, and nothing you've just read replaces professional support.

The mechanisms I describe — graded exposure, affect labelling, implementation intentions — come from psychological research. Their clinical use happens with a professional, inside a frame, with follow-up. What I'm proposing is a recreational, personal use of neighbouring principles, applied to a practice you already had. That's a difference of nature, not of degree.

Don't start this protocol if

- 0 You're living with post-traumatic stress, or you've been through a traumatic
- 1 event whose effects are still live.

0 You're in a depressive episode, or going through a period where you can't
2 see a way out.

0 You're being treated for an anxiety disorder, panic disorder or OCD, and
3 haven't raised this with the person treating you.

0 You have established sleep problems, or recurring nightmares.
4

0 You're under eighteen.
5

0 You're less than three months out from a bereavement, a separation or a job
6 loss.

0 Your relationship with this material is already compulsive: several hours a
7 day, to avoid being alone with yourself.

In these situations, deliberate exposure to intense material can worsen what's already there. The simple rule: this book is for someone who is broadly okay and wants to be better, not for someone who is unwell and looking for a way out.

Stop partway through if

THE SIX STOP SIGNALS

- Your nightmares become regular, or your sleep clearly deteriorates.
- Images return during the day, uninvited and intrusive.
- You feel the need to raise the load in order to feel anything. That's a tolerance pattern, and it's the most important signal on this list.

- You're using the sessions to avoid thinking about something, rather than to think about something.
- Your baseline anxiety rises instead of falling across two consecutive weeks.
- Someone close to you says you seem changed, and not for the better.

In all of those cases: you stop. Not "ease off" — stop, for a week minimum, with no dark screens. And if it persists, speak to a doctor or a psychologist. That isn't a failure of the protocol. It's the protocol working correctly: it gave you information about your state, and the information says stop.

And if it stirs something heavy

Sometimes a scalpel sentence opens a door you didn't know was shut. A memory, a loss, something old.

If that happens to you: it's valuable, and it isn't to be handled alone with a notebook.

Write it down. Then talk to someone — a professional preferably, a reliable friend otherwise. What this protocol can do is make you able to name and to approach. What it cannot do is accompany you through what that opens. That's another job, and it exists.

If you're going through a dark stretch, look up your national crisis line — in the UK, Samaritans on 116 123; in the US and Canada, 988; in France, 3114. All free, all day, every day. This isn't a footnote for legal cover: it's real advice, to a real reader.

THE CIRCLE

How to do this with other people. And why it's three times as effective.

Everything you've just read works alone. It works much better with three.

The reason is unmythical: the transfer rate. Alone, it plateaus around 45%. In a circle, with a daily message of three numbers to people who are expecting them, it regularly clears 75%. And chapter 15 told you that number decides everything.

The rules of the Circle

STARTER KIT

- Three to five people. Fewer and it dies at the first dropout. More and nobody feels responsible.
- Everyone at home. You don't watch together. The session is solitary — that's structural. Sharing happens afterwards.
- One message a day, before noon. Three numbers only: load, tonight's word, rule executed yes/no. Nothing else. No debating the film, no recommendations, no conversation.
- No comment on anyone else's content. You don't judge, interpret or advise. You acknowledge receipt. That's all. The rule is strict and it's what makes

the sharing possible.

- One question permitted, and only if someone misses two days running: "back on it tomorrow?"
- Night 30: you meet. In person. Everyone brings their five curves. Two hours. It's the best evening of the month, by a distance.

The Circle isn't a film club. It's a commitment device. The film is the pretext; the real mechanism is that three people know, every morning, whether you did what you said.

That's as old as the world and it has never stopped working.

THE SHADOW MANIFESTO

- 01 I no longer watch in order to escape.
- 02 I choose my load before I press play.
- 03 I don't look away; if I have to leave, I leave cleanly.
- 04 I know where it lands in my body, and I write it down.
- 05 I hunt the exact word, not the strong one.
- 06 I tie every jolt to a real scene from my life.
- 07 Any understanding not followed by an act is entertainment.
- 08 I act within forty-eight hours, or I have done nothing.
- 09 My load drops when my week is hard. That isn't cowardice, it's programming.
- 10 I stop when my sleep deteriorates, and I tell someone.
- 11 I don't mistake intensity for progress.
- 12 My confidence isn't a feeling: it's a case file, and I keep feeding it.

Copy it out. Sign it. Pin it where you watch.

LAST NIGHT

What's left, now the protocol is over.

Thirty nights. You're done.

Here's what's going to happen over the next few days, and I'd rather warn you.

You'll stop writing. That's normal and even healthy — nobody keeps a notebook forever. But with the notebook you'll gradually stop naming, then stop transferring, and in eight weeks you'll be watching films exactly as before, telling yourself it was a nice experiment.

So here's the maintenance programme. It fits in one line.

One protocolled night a week. All five movements, the sheet, the rule. Just one.

The rest of the time, watch what you want, how you want. No guilt, no grid, no notebook. Raw pleasure is part of the deal and I'd be an idiot to take it from you.

But one night a week, you put the protocol back on. Fifty-two nights a year. Fifty-two rules executed. Fifty-two pieces of evidence added to the file.

Over three years that's a hundred and fifty acts the older version of you would not have committed. At that point it isn't a practice any more. It's a character.

And finally

There's one thing I haven't said, and it matters more than the rest.

You've spent part of your life believing your sensitivity was a manufacturing defect. That people who feel less are better equipped. That it would have been better to be a bit thicker, a bit less crossed by everything.

The opposite is true.

Your sensitivity is a high-resolution sensor. Uncalibrated, it drowns you — too much information, no sorting, and a permanent fatigue other people don't understand. Calibrated, it gives you a considerable head start over people who have never seen anything coming in their lives.

You've just spent thirty days calibrating it.

So tonight, or tomorrow, you'll put a film on. A real one, a hard one, one of the ones that does something to you.

And this time you won't be watching to escape.

You'll be watching the way someone enters a room they hold the key to.

THE SHADOW ISN'T FRIGHTENING.
IT LIGHTS DIFFERENTLY.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

The scientific claims in this book point to the work below. It is all available online: check it. A book you take on faith is worth nothing.

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Jung, C. G. *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self and Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*. For the concept of the Shadow and the mechanics of projection.

One point of honesty: these studies describe populations, not you. A correlation observed across three hundred people does not predict your individual result. That is exactly why this book asks you to produce your own data over thirty nights rather than trusting mine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shanks.M is not a film professor, a therapist or a guru. He is a reader of shadow — someone who spent fifteen years watching what other people avoid, and five more working out why it had changed nothing.

This book came out of an uncomfortable observation: two hundred dark films, an encyclopaedic knowledge of the genre, and precisely zero difficult decisions taken in real life. The gap wasn't in the films. It was in what he did with them.

The E.C.R.A.N. method is the result of that work: five movements, thirty nights, one obsession — turning an emotion felt in an armchair into an act performed on your feet. *Écran*, incidentally, is the French word for screen.

He believes fear is information, that badly calibrated sensitivity is a handicap and well calibrated sensitivity is an advantage, and that a screen is often more honest than the conversation you didn't have.

If this book was useful, there is exactly one thing to do: tonight's rule. And then lend it to someone who watches in the dark without knowing why.

SHANKS.M