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Horror: Where are we? Where do we go?

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HORROR: WHERE ARE WE? WHERE DO WE GO?

by

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Abstract

Title of Thesis: Horror: Where are we? Where do we go?

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This project will investigate the current production standards, inspiration and evolution of the genre of horror in media. The final deliverable is a 30 minute documentary covering the genre as a whole across different forms of media. The documentary also includes interviews of respected figures within the genre from different aspects of media such as film, video games, viral social media posts and online databases.

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Introduction/ Background Information

  In the past, patterns of popular movies have been apparent such as monster, slasher, torture-porn, and many other subgenres. Within this documentary project, I dive into the current understanding of horror to gather an idea of what exactly has been done and done well alongside productions that did not resonate with audience as much. I also give a bit of focus to the "faces" of horror from the classic slasher style films like Halloween, Texas Chainsaw Massacre, A Nightmare on Elm Street, and many others. The documentary gives attention to the availability and exposure horror has had as of lately and the audience who enjoys it.

  Focus on different forms of horror was a major factor in this project as the genre takes many forms now with the increase of media consumers enjoy every day. Short form apps like TikTok and YouTube give audiences a new form of media that horror can explore. YouTube is home to many amazing short films from independent film makers like Matt Sears and Dillon Vibbart while TikTok gives an avenue for creators to express their ideas in and out of the horror genre from accounts like @lights.are.off. This platform helps creators that are more interested in making short 10-20 second clips that encapsulates their idea and focus into a piece of art. Aside from short form apps, the gaming industry has been leaning into horror with the popular AAA horror games like the Resident Evil series and other developments while thousands of indie developed horror games have surfaced gaining a lot of attention from both causual gamers and streamers. The horror genre of gaming has even made its way into the multiplayer gaming space with games like Dead by Daylight, DEVOUR, and Friday The 13th: The Game. A significant increase of IPs (Intellectual Properties) have made their way into the gaming industry as well with games licensing characters from popular horror productions or gaining rights to IPs to

create a whole new game around. There has been talk about using these IPs as a "crutch" to help a game do better than it originally would while others say it is a great marketing tactic to ensure a developer's return on investment. Many popular games are gaining inspiration from community creations such as Siren Head, created by Trevor Henderson. Also, a section of the indie developed horror games has put focus on creating horror out of subjects that are not normally scary such as kids shows, kids toys and making the antagonist of a game well known characters like Shrek. Other games are creating a world of horror around kids' toys like Poppy Playtime and popular game series Five Nights at Freddy's. Concluding the documentary, I share ideas of possible leads the genre of horror may lean toward in future creations.

Literature Review

In recent years, the genre of horror has been increasing in interests. Horror seems to go through cycles of styles that have peak points of interest, such as zombies, paranormal, slasher, etc. Peter Gutierrez stated.

> Horror represents the shadow of culture, of media and of Media Studies: the unintegrated part of the whole that draws power from our very reluctance to confront it and acknowledge it as, in fact, integral to the human psyche. How can people be so evil? What happens after death? How are we to cope with the inevitably of illness and mortality as well as other existential fears such as loneliness, abandonment or not being in control of oneself? These are the sorts of questions that horror, with greater or lesser degrees of artfulness, seeks to answer. (Gutierrez 48)

Consumers seem to enjoy horror, as it is a way to cope with their own everyday lives. Whether it is in books, films, or video games, areas of science fiction, fantasy, and horror have become of valued interest for a specific community (Lancaster). Within recent years, movie

lovers have seen a resurgence of the classic slasher horror genre, such as *Friday the 13th*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Christensen 272). Popular movie series like *Halloween* and *Scream* are also being remade or added on to as the genre is beginning to cycle through the styles of horror. Elizabeth Flux analyzes the newest adaptation of *The Invisible Man* and stated that "a successful adaptation should not simply repeat the existing narrative for the sake of it; it should revitalize the conversation, offering something new while staying true to the ideals of the original" (Flux 35). American films also tend to find a lot of inspiration from other country's creations. David Martin-Jones and Maria Montañez talk about this method of remaking ideas for different audiences when they stated, "Hollywood remaking successful films from other film industries is an established practice, with Asia providing several high-profile examples since the Japanese horror film Ringu/Ring" (Martin-Jones & Montanez 26).

Many films popular in America have had some resource or reference to a film or short that was created outside of the United States. Consumers even see horror type subjects being implemented in content for a wide age-range in a variety of ways based on intended audiences. "Terrifying stories intended for the youngest audiences, especially audio-visual stories, are often ghostly rather than horrific and they tend to sugar-coat certain situations or treat some of their more intense moments comedically" (Perez-Guerrero & Forero-Serna 15). Some cartoons may show scenes where a character's head or arm pops off, but without all the blood, guts, and death, leading to the character just popping their dismembered body part right back on like it never happened.

Intended audience is a very important subject when it comes to both marketing a film and avoiding negativity once the film releases. Some films get put in a certain rating system and end

up being controversial to parents whose children view the film. Filipa Antunes speaks on this issue, specifically talking about the movie *Gremlins.* "…the movie itself turns nasty, especially in the scene involving a monster that gets slammed in a microwave oven…I had a queasy feeling that before long we'd be reading newspaper stories about kids who went home and tried the same thing with the family cat" (Antunes 34). Some films, specifically PG-13 and up, can have terrifyingly unsettling scenes that if viewed at a young age, may be very negative on a child's upbringing. Some films such as *The Omen* even showcase a child as being the villain. In these films, facial expressions are reversed according to Amanda Greer. She states that "the child is usually the object of a subjective adult gaze. The child embodies "to-be-looked-at-ness."" The child villain, however, inverts this gaze to become the subject, the gazer, or "a figure who not only rejects the 'childish' (passive) position prescribed for it but also powerfully refutes the entire adult-child hierarchy" (Greer 90). This is a shift in power being expressed on the faces of the characters. The child is making it known to the other characters and the audience that they are the most powerful entity on screen. Erika Moreno touches on this expressing that "there is an attempt to dismantle the conception of the child as a defenseless creature that is bound to adults" (Moreno 214). Christensen and Hester build on this and states that "While children in horror have often been represented as monstrous creatures, the genre simply subverts the standard cultural constructions of the child that see them as pure and, indeed, unequivocally innocent" (Christensen & Hester 498). This concept gives the audience an idea to think about, which is, what if my child is not or was not as innocent as I thought?

Branching off the effects a film can have on children under the age requirements, the concept of "based on a true story" grabs the audience's attention and can help some films that

would otherwise fall victim to becoming just another horror film. In August of 2018, Elizabeth Flux wrote an article focusing on the horror film *Winchester.*

> In terms of its adherence to the horror genre, Winchester is a classic ghost story that is, at times, a little heavy on the tropes: there are jump scares, possessed children and flickering lights aplenty. The plot is also by the numbers and ultimately predictable. But, beyond its beautiful sets and attention to detail, the film's real saving grace is the way in which it navigates truth and fiction, lacing history around the supernatural. The question 'How much of this is real?' is enough to elevate an otherwise potentially forgettable movie. (Flux 26)

The film uses a story that was true and then intertwined a paranormal story with it to create a horror screen adventure for consumers.

Within different styles of horror, atmosphere and suspense are big factors in making the piece immersive for the consumers. Lin et al. speaks about mediated fright, which is used to build suspense, scare the audience, and create negative emotions while giving a satisfying ending to transfer the negative emotions to feelings of enjoyment and fulfillment (Lin et al. 3224). When the climax of a movie comes, it builds emotions in a negative way, such as the main character being attacked and is later transferred to enjoyment, such as the character avoiding or catching the attacker. In an article from Piatti-Farnell, they cover the film *Dead Snow* and their focal point being the vast snowy landscape. Piatti-Farnell stated "Even though the fights with the zombies are obviously at the center of much of the plot, *Dead Snow* also dedicates a lot of attention to capturing long, lingering shots of the snowy landscape. The latter is almost invariably presented as eerily calm, its vastness providing an overbearing sense of stillness and desolation" (Piatti-

Farnell, 78). Many films and video games have the idea that for something to be scary, it has to be dark. *Dead Snow* was a great example of thinking outside of that box and creating different aspects of what makes a landscape scary or unsettling.

When it comes to monsters in horror films, there tends to be a pattern of making the villain or monster look gross and demented. Some films such as ghost story films make the villain either look physically unpleasant and scary. If ghosts were in fact real, their track record shows that they do not have a physical form. "The monster from nature is a tangible, visible being, sometime seen as a wonder or a portent. Spirit and flesh merge in the modern monster, who has physical presence as well as the invisible power of inducing terror" says Carrie Rickey (Rickey 113). The industry uses the idea of ghosts having a physical form as a way to give the film more structure for the viewers and keep their attention, as well as help them understand the plot. The more that creators focus on patterns, specifically what patterns work and what patterns have been overworked, the more variety will be created in the genre of horror, leading to less dark and gloomy settings, more interesting creatures, and stories that surprise the consumers more. One example of surprising the consumers is the intro for the film *It Follows*. Casey Ryan Kelly explains the beginning of the film as:

> It Follows (2014) opens on a quiet dusk in a pristine upper-middle-class Detroit suburb. A woman in high heels flees her home in a panic to a score of intense percussion. A stationary 360-degree shot captures the woman traversing the street and circling back to her house. Visibly terrorized, she continually glances back as if to observe something in pursuit but only visible to her. She reemerges from the house and absconds in her parents' car, destination indeterminate. The next morning her bludgeoned, disarticulated body appears on a remote beach with no clue as to her killer's identity. (Kelly 234)

This film immediately starts with terror and gives a short form of what could happen to the soon to be announced main character if they do not find a way to understand what this creature is and does.

Another aspect in horror is the focus on what Kyle Christensen calls "the monstrous man-boy." This monstrous man-boy, as Christensen explains is "…a villainous and almost always white male character who, despite being of adult age, lives in a perpetual childhood state, engaging in petulant and immature behaviors that often have violent consequences (Christensen 88). An example Christensen gives is the character Brahms from the film *The Boy*. Brahms is "a homicidal man who lives his life masquerading as a doll in the *The Boy*. Many other films have examples of this, but Brahms tends to act as a child, wanting the main character to "play" with him and take care of him as if he was a little boy again.

Interest in horror has a way of following what is going on in a specific culture. Benson Allot expressed that horror finds itself inspired by general cultural context, "As the horror renaissance reveals, the United States has been a frightening place to live for quite some time" (Benson-Allot 71). Kendall R. Phillips of The University of Texas Press wrote an article in 2018 where they allege that classic films like *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* are still so well-known because of cultural context. They say, "mystery thrillers may have resonated with audiences as they endured the country's first Red Scare, bolstered by public discourse after World War I that encouraged citizens to maintain a skeptical eye over even the most mundane contexts" (Ramsey 341). In recent years, horror films have started tackling the battle of racism in media. It is said that Jordan Peele's movie *Get Out* "…explores racism through an interracial couple and the girlfriend's Stepford Wives-esque family, has been lauded by critics and audiences alike" (Wilz 225). The film currently holds a 99% rating on Rotten Tomatoes and has

passed $150 million at the domestic box office as of March of 2017 (Wilz 225). Many classic films have either had a fully Caucasian cast or has had very few characters of other ethnicities. In response to learning that it was to be categorized as a comedy or musical for the Golden Globe awards, Peele tweeted back provocatively, 'It's a documentary' (Morris 2017). Later he explained, 'The reason for the visceral response to this movie being called a comedy is that we are still living in a time in which African American cries for justice aren't being taken seriously. It is important to acknowledge that though there are funny moments, the systemic racism that the movie is about is very real" (Landsberg, 629).

Aside from interest based on cultural effects, movies and video games have come a long way when it comes to tips and tricks to sway the consumer's emotions one way over another. In earlier times of production, horror had not been established yet. Chris Grosvenor expressed that "prior to 1931, at least when seen through a discursive frame, there were no horror films – the language of horror had not yet solidified into a definable genre" (Grosvenor 409). When horror was emerging, certain aspects had to be different in horror compared to other genres because of the kind of emotions it attempts to induce within the consumers. When it comes to horror movies, "…the genre of monster horror actually utilized what was avoided in other films: off-screen sound without prior visual establishment of the sound source" (Nelson 16). Where many times during a film, suspense would build leading to a certain event that would draw emotion from the consumer. The use of off-screen sound in this fashion gives the consumer no time to emotionally prepare themselves, making it more impactful. Though this method has evolved, it is limited. Seung Min Hong stated that "there are only so many opportunities to depict the disembodied presence of the unidentified by using the sound-without-image approach, since it is no longer usable once the sound source is identified on the screen" (Min Hong 217).

Piggybacking on this idea, a study was done in 2019 by Christoph Klimmt et al. regarding music

soundtracks having an effect on the player. They stated that "If music is switched off and thus

unavailable, as a source of enjoyment, players may thus respond strategically by harvesting the

beautiful 3D graphics or the great sound effects to maximize their sense of special presence and

identification (Klimmt et al. 706). Within the horror genre, this can be used as an atmospheric

trick to make the player feel unease rather than comfort. The player may either feel that the

current moment is a low point where nothing scary or eventful will happen or quite the opposite

where the thought of "it's too quiet" comes into play as they prepare for the inevitable. The art of

storytelling within video games compared to film rely on the player. In a film, characters may

find objects to display that will give the viewers direction when attempting to put together the

plot. When it comes to video games, players are given items that can give direction as well, but

the player may not always come across these items, so pieces of the story may get left out. Ewan

Kirkland covers this story telling strategy in their analysis of the Silent Hill game series.

> Pictures and photographs, fragments of newspapers, inscriptions on monuments, diary
>
> entries, graffiti, writing on collectable objects, radio transmissions, audio tape recordings,
>
> background conversations, all contribute to this second-level storytelling process.
>
> (Kirkland 169)

These pieces of information scattered in different ways may not always include pertinent

information in order to understand what is happening in the game, but can give more backstory

of why certain things are happening or lore about the world the game takes place in.

A lot of research has been done around horror. Whether it is what style is most popular,

what goes into building the correct atmosphere, what is the best fit for intended audiences or

generally what makes a good horror movie, show or video game, there are plenty of things to understand and build on. This genre is evolving, as well as the different consumable pieces it is intertwined in. As society continues to advance more and more with technology, the realism of horror can continue to grow. Whereas for the longest time people have played video games on a console or with keyboard and mouse on a PC, they now move into the world of Virtual Reality where games become more immersive than ever. Stuart Bender wrote an article analyzing emotional responses while playing VR games and found that especially in VR video games, the "immersive gameplay modes" resulted in higher fear and arousal when compared to the less immersive modes (Bender 944). In this project, I plan to dissect popular recent pieces of horror and get a general understanding of what works, why and when.

Research Methodology

This project is a video documentary focusing on the current production standards and trends of the horror genre and how it is evolving. Many changes and adaptations have been made within the genre and understanding the current standing as well as potential pathways for the future will help creators tailor their creation and market it in a certain fashion that is coherent to the interest of the community. Within diving into all these subjects, I have gathered information in interviews with short film makers, video game developers, short form content creators and horror database hosts who all have a significant knowledge of the genre. These interviews have given me significant insight into their respective fields within horror preparing me with enough material and understanding for this documentary project.

Conclusions

This documentary was an analysis of horror covering different forms of media. The intent was to make this documentary both an entertaining and informational piece of media, as well as a future research tool. If I was to do this project over again, I would implement more of the pop-culture focus of horror as well as other community creations that have inspired many creators within the genre to build on. Many creations that are both high end and independently focused have a significant amount of inspiration from consumers and small indie creators.

Though I think the project is a valuable piece of information, I wish I could have had more interviews with respected figures as support, but many creators were unable to answer the interview questions. Throughout the project, I have also had issues with editing and the voice over. I am proficient enough to construct a project such as this one with a bit of extra time, but in the end, I was the voice of the project due to time and money constraints.

Overall, the project gives an overview of the current standards and popular trends within horror and gives ideas and suggestions of possible steps creators could take moving forward to do well in the genre.

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