

What/Why Horror?

The longstanding struggle to define ‘horror’ as a genre and the debates that spawn out of this discussion seem to never reach a definitive answer. Through this paper, I contend that horror as a genre is a conduit through which audiences and filmmakers alike achieve a form of catharsis and acceptance of their fears and tensions. It is almost irrelevant as to what the key signifiers of the genre are as long as a film succeeds in this aforementioned way. The expression and reception of disturbing concepts and realities can be both personified and materialized, as horror pulls them out of abstraction and challenges their characterizations as “irrational”. The study of the practices that solidified horror as a legitimate genre allows for a deeper understanding of spectatorship and the sadomasochistic particularities of both filmmakers and filmgoing audiences. The evolution of horror from the Early and Classical eras onwards to the Contemporary era reflects a change in the way spectators perceive and register cinema as a way to either escape from, or engage with, reality in a productive way.

Horror films work towards invoking fear and terror by specifically activating previously conditioned inherent worries in general audiences. An important representation in horror is that of mental anguish and/or discomfort. For example, *Beau is Afraid* (2023) is a potent expression and visual manifestation of anxiety and how someone struggling from deep rooted trauma deals with the anxious behaviors that come along with it. Ari Aster crafts a world wherein all of our protagonist’s fears and inherent worries are materialized in the real world; we as spectators are provided with an immersive, palpable, and almost tactile experience of what Beau’s anxiety feels like to him.

In this way, horror films work as a form of exposure therapy – a catharsis by the mechanism of ‘tension and release’. Spectators are able to reflect on their own experiences and

welcome pain, disgust, fear, discomfort. The very act of perceiving a horror film goes against our human instincts to steer away from physical and psychological distress yet the active spectatorship the medium provides allows for a reflective experience wherein inner tensions can be expressed and quashed when they are either overcome or given in to. The validation provided by a horror film that expresses general distaste or affinity toward a certain moral and existential idea provides a conduit for the spectator to either resolve or further explore them. Fear-inducing ideas manifest in various different ways in film – monsters, ghosts, spirits, extraterrestrial beings – the diverse canvas for expression through this medium promotes creative manifestations that can be impossible to produce in other genres. Additionally, horror films contribute to a fascinating dialogue regarding the ‘unknown’ that has bemused mankind since the days of pre-literary history.

Audience behavior, as it relates to the horror genre, exemplifies a specific tendency in spectatorship – one of sadomasochism and memesis. As Linda Williams asserts in her article “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess”, the “success of these [body] genres is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics the what is seen on the screen...a self-evident matter of measuring bodily response” (Williams 4-5). This supports her larger assertion that genres such as horror (and pornography) allow for a larger discourse of socio-cultural anxieties, and gender and sexuality. Horror as a genre presents itself as a unique method for such exploration as it provides a safe site for spectators to renegotiate their own deep-seated notions of sexuality, gendered power dynamics, socio-cultural hierarchies, and personal consternations.

Works Cited

Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Genre Reader IV*, University of Texas Press, 2012, pp. 159–77, <http://dx.doi.org/10.7560/742055-016>.