**Senior Project Proposal**

**Catherine F.**

**12/16/24**

1. Title of Project:

*What’s Your Favorite Scary Movie? A Look Into Horror and Its Importance Within American Culture*

1. Contact Information:

* BASIS Advisor’s Name: Tyler K.
* Off-Site Advisor’s Name:
  + - His/Her Title: Ember C.

1. Statement of Purpose:

I’m hoping to show people who often dismiss or don’t understand horror the genre’s importance within American culture. Defining the horror genre isn’t easy due to how broad it is and many researches have conflicting definitions. However, the vagueness of the genre is what makes it so compelling and more accessible than a lot of people might initially think. I will do this by researching multiple important aspects of the genre and then creating a documentary to present that information to an audience. Horror is a great genre to understand the human experience as well as a time capsule in history and it is important for people to truly understand it’s importance within society. There is more to the genre than mindless gore and it is often perceived as a lesser genre. It has importance both within the film industry itself and with our current society and culture.

1. Background:

I love horror and have always had a fascination with monsters and the genre as a whole. I love watching horror as it is a creative way of showing the human experience and every movie within the genre has its place, The good movies and the bad movies. I have done a lot of research on multiple facets of horror in the past ranging from scientific sources to documentaries and podcasts. I have explored the historical significance, the psychology behind watching horror, why people enjoy it, and the history of queerness portrayed in the genre. I have completed at least one research paper regarding a new aspect of horror every year of highschool and my love for the genre has only grown.

1. Prior Research:

Horror is an extremely vast genre that can range greatly in both monsters and themes. The horror monster often correlates with whatever the people of that time period deem outside of societal norms. The monster itself also often has conflicting impulses and feelings that lead the viewer to feel conflicted as well. Horror highlights what our culture sees as outside of the societal “norm” and uses various monsters to also comment on both the “norm” and current problems within our society. For example, zombies are often used to represent the decay of society and make comments on racism and consumerism within our society. Vampires often represent the patriarchy as well as capitalism as they literally destroy women to maintain youth and are often aristocrats who feed on people below them in order to sustain and reinvent themselves. The horror genre itself has long been used to comment on current society with its themes and monsters.

The final girl in its early portrayals was still intended to please a specifically male audience. However, movies such as *Alien* began to change this archetype as it portrayed a final girl not made for male consumption. In the film *Candyman*, it makes the point of creating a sympathetic monster who’s whole creation was due to an extremely racist and violent mob, showing that the real monster was the mob's misplaced and cruel fear towards people they considered “other.” Monsters also often explore parts of society that may at the time be considered taboo. For instance, vampire films such as *Nosferatu* started implementing queerness within their stories. The way queerness was first represented in horror was often very negative. However, overtime horror has become an often very inclusive genre where good representation is shown in both heroes and villains such as in the popular franchise *Chucky.* The way that horror often portrays fear and characters of all types overcoming that fear provides people with validation. People also often watch horror because it represents their fears in such an extreme way that it is often cathartic. People love horror because it represents fear in a safe environment as well as a thrilling experience for people who have more sensation seeking tendencies.

1. Significance:

Many people are quick to judge and dismiss the horror genre without taking any time to try and understand the importance behind it and the reasons that people consume it. I hope to use this project to convey the purpose of this genre and build understanding by learning more about the historical, social and psychological aspects of this genre within our society. Horror as a genre does not have a clear definition and people often argue about what movies could be classified as horror and what could not. This vague definition is part of what makes horror so important as there is so much variation within the genre. I hope to bring a new perspective looking specifically at the cultural importance of horror and how all of the different lenses and aspects of horror connect to create a genre built on society's fears and assumed expectations which causes people to face personal fears and biases while watching. Horror is an important genre that can be used to analyze the human experience and fears at different points in time. It is also important in regards to special effects and pushing the boundaries of film making and audiences.

1. Description:

My final product will be a documentary style video and presentation that displays and goes through all of the different ways that horror is important in American culture. I will go into detail revolving on specific lenses such as history, psychology, representation, and politics. I will showcase interviews of people with different perspectives on reasons that they do or do not consume horror and their experiences or opinions that pertain to each lens. I will also showcase a number of clips as examples throughout the documentary and create commentary based on the sources that I have researched exploring different lenses of the genre with interview examples shown in between.

1. Methodology:

Research different sources and lenses

Create a script and visual guide for the documentary

Record voice over to guide the documentary

Film interviews

Compile clips and b roll

Edit and piece together footage

*Explain, step by step, how you will complete this project. (As long as necessary in order to fully detail your planned methodology)*

1. Problems:

I am worried about the amount of time that this project requires. I am also concerned that combined with this time crunch it may be difficult to fit interviews into both my schedule as well as other people’s. I also foresee budget and possibly equipment issues. I will need to find a suitable and stable environment to interview. I will also have to gather equipment such as mics in order to truly conduct the interviews. Lastly I will need an IRB as well as a Media Release form in order to create the documentary and conduct interviews.

1. Budget:

Rough estimate currently: $90

I need to purchase two mics for interviews and may need some extra cords.

I will pay for all of these.

1. Annotated Bibliography:

*Make a list of texts you plan to consult or have already consulted (minimum of 10 sources). Many sources initially seem relevant but turn out not to be, so it is always better to list all sources that might be of interest. Add new sources as you come across them.*

*This will enable you to make a Works Cited list at the end of your presentation.* ***You should begin annotating your bibliography now, with at least five annotations submitted with this proposal. The remainder of your 8-10 sources must be completed and a revised Proposal submitted before Winter Break (by Dec. 20)****.* ***Your proposal will be published on your blog.***

*Be sure to use the appropriate citation method based upon the topic of your research:*

Works Cited Styles:

∙*Chicago: History, Economics (*[*http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/)*](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/))

∙*APA: Social Sciences, Physical Sciences (*[*http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/*](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/) *section/2/)*

∙*MLA: Arts, English, other Humanities (*[*http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/)*](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/2/))

∙*ACS: Chemistry and Engineering (*[*http://library.williams.edu/citing/styles/*](http://library.williams.edu/citing/styles/)*acs.php)*

**IRB Approval (Only for students who are working with human subjects)**

Students who wish to work with human subjects for their research must be approved by an Institutional Review Board IRB) at the school or if the school does not have an IRB the student must seek approval through the BASIS ED IRB panel. For students working with a professor at a university, they should be added to that professor’s IRB approval through the university. Please see separate instruction documents related to the IRB process.

**Student projects must not involve collecting sensitive data from minors. Sensitive data includes information about mental or physical health, illegal behavior, drug or alcohol use, or sexual behavior.**

**Annotated Bibliography**

During the height of the AIDS movement as the death toll continued to increase, queer representation very quickly turned into bashing and villainizing about up until the late 80s and early 90s where more protests began to take place as people started calling this out and film makers either tried to write queer characters or attempt to adopt a slightly more positive representation of a gay character. However, with a still severe lack of change in how these characters were represented people began making their own production companies and movies in order to create their own representation. This early movement often surrounding downtown cinemas and film festivals was called the New Queer Cinema.

These movies provided a look into queer culture and interesting systems of oppression through various characters in their films portrayed through a queer lens. They talked about issues within the queer community as well as casual discussions around identity. This trend continued for a while as many new filmmakers began to present their own movies and experiences in regards to queer cinema. The movies then began to branch out to different genres as queer characters were introduced changing the typical stereotypes involved in the genders. One such genre was horror.

Movies such as *Hellbent* started a new trend which aimed to create queer horror without the harmful stereotypes. The popular franchise, *Chucky,* is one of the first horror film franchises where a queer filmmaker inserted explicitly queer characters into a major horror franchise. *Chucky* featured queer characters all throughout the franchise, both as heroes and as villains. This franchise was able to pave the way for more queer narratives within the slasher genre leading to recent movies like the *Fear Street* trilogy.

Queerness has come a long way in movies and especially the horror genre. However, there are still issues regarding poor representation and queer filmmakers still getting less distribution than queer movies made by people who aren’t queer themselves.

Browning, Eric, “A Spectrum of Horror: Queer Images in the Contemporary Horror Genre,” *Collage of Bowling Green State University,* August 2022, <https://etd.ohiolink.edu/acprod/odb_etd/ws/send_file/send?accession=bgsu1652640170878528&disposition=inline#page19>

The author uses this article to examine the symbolism of certain horror monsters and the characteristics that make a monster. He suggests that there is a correlation between the monsters of horror and nightmares. Horror itself is not a nightmare as many people seek it out for enjoyment but a lot of the thematic elements themselves have correlation with what humans at the time fear and deem immoral. Horror monsters have conflicting impulses and feelings as well as often being both repulsive and attractive. When it comes to a lot of classic monsters, the viewer is also conflicted and in most cases more conflicted than any of the monsters. The monsters we see are often rooted in what society deems moral or normal and anything outside of that may be rendered as disgusting or dangerous.

Carroll, Noel. “Nightmare and the Horror Film: The Symbolic Biology of Fantastic Beings,” *University of California Press,* 1981, Vol. 34, No.3, pp. 16-25, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1212034>

American zombies can only be understood in full when compared to the Haitian zonbi. The term zonbi has appeared as far back as colonial Saint-Domingue. Zombies themselves represent life and death boundaries as well oppression and the boundary between oppression and freedom. They also represent the racialized consumption of humans. Zombies often are used to represent consumerism and the decay of the American nuclear family and society. This leads into the overlap between capitalism and cannibalism.

McAlister, Elizabeth. “Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies,”*The George Washington University Institute for Ethnographic Research,* 2012, Vol. 85, No. 2, pp. 457-486, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41857250>

This source aims to figure out why humans like horror by researching and analyzing different responses to horror and different mental health and psychological reasons. The source first describes the way that sound is used in horror to elicit a response. The most commonly found sounds in horror are bangs, creaks and similar loud or eerie reactions which often lead into some sort of jump scare, adding to the atmosphere of the movie. The second most common sounds would be the music and soundtrack of a movie. Horror tends to use music specifically designed to be unpleasant or stressful to listen to in order to truly make a movie scary, mixing visual and auditory methods.

The research found that in terms of sensation seeking, men tended to enjoy sensations seeking more than women which had a correlation to greater enjoyment of violence in media. However, this did not necessarily correlate to who showed up to horror movies as both men and women showed up to the film but for different reasons. Men seemed more prone to sensation seeking whereas women wanted some sort of sense of justice. Men reported enjoying horror more often than women due to differences in empathy, sensitivities, and lower proneness to anxiety than women.

The study also over all found that empathy is one of the biggest indicators of horror enjoyment as well as sensation seeking. They also found that older children tended to be specifically afraid of concrete stimuli and that younger children were more afraid of su,boric stimuli. People were also found to enjoy horror less as they age. However the article did say that all of this was based on limited research and that more should be found to reach more concrete conclusions.

Niel, G. Martin. “(Why) Do You Like Scary Movies? A Review of the Empirical Research on Psychological Responses to Horror Films,” *Frontiers in Psychology,* October 18, 2019, <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychology/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02298/pdf>

This author discusses how horror shows and highlights elements that are not currently part of the “normal” reality in our culture. What humans often end up considering “evil” in our society are very simply what we see as different or outside of the parameters of what is expected. Horror shows people’s fears which are often what people deem as the “other.” The author wants to use this essay to pose a question regarding whether or not horror can be used to take a more kind and ethical approach to understanding and showing the monstrous “other” of our culture.

Santilli, Paul. “Culture, Evil, and Horror,” *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology,* January, 2007, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27739626>

This author uses this paper to explore the religious questions and themes that show up throughout the genre of horror. Religion is still incredibly common on screen in horror movies, often appearing mostly on themes and iconography. However, the way that religion is used has changed and is less powerful or helpful, often becoming more of a hindrance and representing more of a lack of confidence in religious institutions and systems. The ways in which religion is now portrayed in horror may even represent a decline of the religious in our culture as its symbols and presence is often used as a primary tool to scare us. Religion within horror has vastly changed and it is hard to tell if that is because our society’s views on religion have changed or if this on screen change is more due to the ways religion has become more of a private affair and people have become more disconnected from the symbols of faith.

Stone, Bryan. “The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films,” *Journal of Religion & Film,* October 1, 2001, Vol. 5, Iss. 1, <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1788&&context=jrf&&sei-redir=1&referer=https%253A%252F%252Fscholar.google.com%252Fscholar%253Fhl%253Den%2526as_sdt%253D0%25252C3%2526q%253Dreligious%252Bhorror%252B%2526btnG%253D#page19>

This source discusses race and gender in horror from the 70s to now. It talks about the ways in which women are often categorized and stereotyped in horror and how tropes like the final girl started to be a defining trait of the genre. It discusses the ways the final girl was made so that men could ultimately still identify with the character and that the character was made for consumption so as to not lose an audience. The movie *Alien* presents women in such a way that they are not looked at for consumption. It also refers to *Candyman* when discussing a movie that creates a character that is both the monster and the victim. The Candyman would not exist and would never have killed anyone if he had not been brutally killed as the result of a racist mob. *The Witch* takes a similar approach as *Candyman* this time examining the effects of the English settlers interacting with Native Americans. These settlers’ immediate response to “other” the Native Americans combined with their puritanical beliefs needed up directly leading to the creation of The Witch.

Velasquez, Ana, “Return of the Oppressed: Race and Gender in American Horror Film,” *State University of New York,* May 2019, <https://soar.suny.edu/bitstream/handle/20.500.12648/14661/3943_ana.velasquez.pdf?sequence=1#page19>

Waldrop discusses the psychological benefits of horror. She goes through the different ways in which horror can help people cope with reality as horror provides a specific lens for the world to be viewed through. She discusses the way that horror can help people cope and prepare for real world disasters as can be seen during the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the pandemic films like *Contagion* gained significantly more popularity despite being released prior to the events of the pandemic. Watching movies where characters have to go through similar dangers of reality in an extreme situation often provides people with a sense of comfort and also provides them with new ideas on how to handle a specific situation based on the character's actions.

According to Waldrop, it can be extremely validating to see your fear reflected in horror as well as provide the viewer with a safe space to put their fear and anxiety. Horror often takes extreme situations in order to show a character’s struggles and ends with a sole survivor either with an ambiguous ending or a hopeful ending, either way showing a character go through so much and manage to claw their way out the other side.

Horror is also an important tool when it comes to political commentary. The final girls for instance has had a controversial history as the trope itself often seems to be more based in misogyny with women having to adhere to specific societal rules in order to properly survive. Though the trope has been used for negative stereotypes it has also provided a lot of movies such as *Scream* to flip the trope on its head and provide more definition and strength to a character than previously allowed. Horror has endless possibilities for creative methods when it comes to making a political statement.

Waldrop, Sarah, “The Enemy is Fear: The Psychological Benefits of the Horror Genre Through Resilience and Coping,” *Texas State University,* May 2022, <https://digital.library.txst.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/7cdfbcb4-f4ca-450f-89fc-52e4c4889215/content#page19>

This author explores the ways in which queerness has been portrayed in German vampire films. She goes in depth on the ways in which *Nosferatu* represents queer desire as well as queer repression, painting queerness as the enemy. She then expands on this when discussing the movies *Vampyros Lesbos* and *Wir sind die Nacht.* In *Vampyros Lesbos* female sexuality seems to be the threat and is also presented in a way that is not a true representation of queer sexuality but as something for the enjoyment of heterosexual men. Lastly, the film *Wir sind die Nacht* shows queer people’s way of life so that they can escape heteronormative society. However, like the other vampire films, it is ultimately negative and destructive. The author comes to the conclusion that although we have slowly gotten better queer representation, vampire films are maybe not the best way to explore queer sexuality due to the inherent predatory need for blood that is associated with vampires.

Zimmer, Caitlyn, “The Portrayal of Queer Subjectivity in German Vampire film,” *University of Colorado Boulder,* January 2024, <https://scholar.colorado.edu/downloads/x633f147d#>

In the early days of gothic literature, vampires most often represented the oppressive patriarchy. Vampires were often very masculine and were seen literally feeding off of women using them as a way to maintain power and youth. Vampires were usually men who needed to destroy women in order to continue to survive. Later they begin to be portrayed as an aristocrat outside of recent capitalist development. The vampire is an aristocrat outside of the newer societies. Vampires start to represent more of a criticism of capitalism as they need to constantly feed on people below them and reinvent themselves in order to sustain themselves.

Zurutuza, Kristian, “The Evolution of the Vampire Figure in English and American Literature as Social and Economic Symbol of Contemporary western Masculine Identity,” *National Distance Education University*, 2015, <https://apidspace.linhd.uned.es/server/api/core/bitstreams/f5b6e289-dfbe-4790-82e6-7ee5cbd54f98/content#page19>