

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL HORROR & PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Abstract

The horror genre is widely appreciated for its ability to challenge audiences through fear, offering suspense and excitement. Among its subgenres, psychological horror stands out for its unique focus on the mind, emotions, and internal struggles, rather than relying on direct confrontations with physical monsters or external threats. This subgenre delves into the complexities of the human psyche, often depicting mental illness and psychological tension to evoke fear. Unlike traditional horror, psychological horror builds suspense through atmosphere, character development, and the gradual unraveling of the protagonist's mental state, making it a subtler yet more unsettling form of horror. A literature review highlights how psychological horror has significantly shaped the portrayal of mental illness, offering deeper, more introspective representations of psychological disorders. The findings indicate that this subgenre's strength lies in its ability to present fear from a different perspective, often leaving much to the imagination of the audience, which intensifies the sense of dread. By focusing on internal fears and psychological conflicts, psychological horror provides a distinctive narrative experience, setting it apart from other horror subgenres that rely on physical confrontations. This makes it a compelling form of storytelling that resonates deeply with audiences, tapping into their subconscious fears and emotions.

Keywords:

Psychological Horror, Horror genre, Psychoanalysis

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INTRODUCTION

The horror genre set in the 1950s often reflects the dominant social and political concerns of the time, including xenophobia, anti-communism, and anxieties about technology and a society governed by scientists. This genre is frequently understood as a reflection of specific American fears, such as alien invasions and ideological battles (Biskind, 1983; Jancovich, 1992, in Tudor, 2002). According to Tudor (2002), audiences are drawn to the horror genre because it expresses these concerns in an accessible and entertaining way. Thus, horror serves as a means of expressing social tensions and concerns, both on an individual level and within society at large, particularly in the context of social, political, and technological change.

Horror was considered a minor genre in the 1920s with the support of the German film movement. However, during the mid-century boom, the genre became saturated and divided into several subgenres (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019; Hutching, 2004 in Santos, 2022). Church, (2021) emphasizes that horror is now one of the most divisive popular genres: it garners great devotion from fans who consider it their favorite type of film, while others avoid it altogether if possible. Generally, horror follows a formula of visual elements and tropes, including intentionally confusing or invasive cinematography, strange visual displays punctuated by suspenseful music, silence interrupted by loud noises, and unnatural lighting (such as very cold or dark tones) (Bordwell & Thompson, 2019; Brown, 2016, in Santos, 2022).

Lynch & Martins (2015), in Vorobeva (2024), described fear induced by video games, finding that more than half of the participants reported a sense of excitement and joy, followed by fear. Fear, a basic human emotion, involves universal biochemical responses and individual emotional reactions that vary from person to person. It is an evolutionary mechanism designed to help humans survive by triggering the "fight or flight" response, which prepares the body to face a threat (Cherry, 2022; Fritscher, 2023, in Vorobeva, 2024). The Silent Hill series (1999–2012) introduced psychological elements into the survival horror genre early on, and since then, psychological horror has developed as a subgenre that emphasizes inner struggles to induce anxiety (Vorobeva, 2024). Nickel, in **Horror and the Idea of Everyday Life** (2010), explains that although horror uses everyday anxieties for its effectiveness, the relationship is

not always direct. It is not necessarily true that horror must symbolically or directly resemble real-life threats to evoke a strong emotional response. Horror can present its threats in a realistic and frightening way, even when the audience does not believe these threats are real after leaving the theater.

Psychological horror is a subgenre of horror that centers on the main protagonist's fears, feelings of guilt, beliefs, and emotionally unstable state (Prohászková, 2012). It is defined as horror rooted in a character's emotions and beliefs, particularly fear (Wendykowska, 2012). By exploring mental, emotional, and psychological states, this subgenre aims to frighten and unsettle the audience (Judytl, 2022; Vorobeva, 2024). Characters are often depicted as mentally unstable, unreliable, or disturbed (Jancovich, 2015; Kracauer, 2019; Marak, 2014).

In psychological horror, there is no direct encounter with the source of fear—monsters are rarely seen, and there is little to no direct combat— focusing instead on creating a tense and unsettling atmosphere (De, 2021; Fuchs, 2019; Hightower, 2024; Kalinowski, 2019; Boaca, 2024 in Vorobeva, 2024). The eerie atmosphere is also enhanced by the concept of "the uncanny," introduced in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis and further developed by Mori as the "uncanny valley" (Freud, 1976; Mori et al., 2012).

METHODS

This research utilizes desk research, a method that involves researching, retrieving data, evaluating articles and data, and reprocessing information collected from official sources. The primary purpose of desk research is to identify and summarize previous studies, reports, and documents to develop a new theory (Specht, 2019; Maciejewska et al., 2022).

Books and scientific articles related to the horror genre were gathered, followed by those focusing on the psychological horror subgenre and psychoanalysis from various journals, which were then organized into a systematic flow. After highlighting key theories, the journals were reviewed to generate a theorem by summarizing, sorting, and processing the information from each article. Articles outlining the role of psychological horror in inducing mental anxiety were further developed by incorporating additional related studies.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Introduction to Psychological Horror. Psychological horror is a subgenre of horror that focuses on themes that contrast with reality. Unlike traditional horror, psychological horror delves into the character's beliefs, fears, and emotional, psychiatric, or mental state. This subgenre rarely presents the source of fear directly. Instead, there is seldom a physical confrontation, with the mental instability of the antagonist becoming the "monster" (Baako, 2023; Fuchs, 2019; Hightower, 2024; Jancovich, 2015; Judytl, 2022; Kalinowski, 2019; Prohászková, 2012; Santos, 2022; Tomé et al., 2024; Vorobeva, 2024; Wendykowska, 2012; Younis & Fedtke, 2024).

Mental Distraction on Psychological Horror. The psychological horror subgenre was designed to scare and unsettle audiences by exploring mental, emotional, and psychological states (Judytl, 2022 in Vorobeva, 2024). This subgenre often features elements of mystery, with characters portrayed as mentally unstable, unreliable, or disturbed (Jancovich, 2015; Kracauer, 1946 in Marak, 2021). Baako (2023) explains that psychological horror exploits the complexities of the human mind to evoke fear, discomfort, and tension, redefining horror by shifting the focus from external threats to internal demons.

Psychological horror works by manipulating the audience's perceptions, emotions, and fears through psychological, emotional, and mental torment. The subgenre often relies on subtlety, ambiguity, and suggestion to create a lingering sense of dread that remains long after the film ends. It typically expresses psychological anxieties such as madness, fear, guilt, and paranoia, and it also addresses themes like memory, suicide, sadness, and depression, as illustrated in *Omori's* game (Fukunaga, 2021 in Younis & Fedtke, 2024). Additionally, a hallmark of psychological horror is its depiction of the

"monster" or villain in the form of the character's mental instability or disguised reality (Chibnal & Petley, 2002 in Santos, 2022).

The Monster of Psychological Horror. The psychological horror subgenre typically avoids direct encounters with the source of fear. Monsters are rarely seen, and there are seldom direct battles with unwanted creatures, making the game's emphasis more on creating a challenging atmosphere (De, 2021; Boaca, 2024 in Vorobeva, 2024). As previously explained, psychological horror works by disrupting our perception of familiar reality, fostering uncertainty and fear. In this genre, the main threat (or "monster") is the familiar world, which changes subtly in ways that trigger confusion and insecurity. This often leads characters to feel as though they are losing their grip on reality or their sanity, causing deep anxiety (Fuchs, 2019; Kalinowski, 2019).

This concept relates to Freud's theory of "the uncanny" (German: *das Unheimliche*), later expanded by Lacan. "The uncanny" refers to the discomfort or strangeness that arises when we encounter something familiar, but with subtle differences that make it unsettling (Freud, 1976; Jentsch, 1997; Windsor, 2019). The concept is further developed through the "uncanny valley" theory, where human-like figures—such as mannequins, robots, or dolls—become disturbing when they almost, but not quite, resemble real humans. The more human-like these figures appear, the more unsettling they become as they fall into this "valley" and appear monstrous. To avoid this, designs must not be too inhuman or too human-like. The resemblance doesn't need to be physical; it can also stem from subtle psychological factors such as personality, disturbing behaviors, or unusual interests (Mori et al., 2012; Nummenmaa, 2021; Spampinato, 2016).

Psychological Horror and Psychoanalysis. The psychological horror subgenre typically avoids direct encounters with the source of fear, meaning monsters are rarely seen, and direct battles with unwanted creatures are uncommon. Instead, this subgenre focuses more on creating a tense, atmospheric experience (De, 2021; Boaca, 2024 in Vorobeva, 2024). As previously defined, psychological horror disrupts our perception of familiar reality, generating uncertainty and fear. In this genre, the main threat (or "monster") is often the familiar world, subtly altered to provoke confusion and insecurity. This can cause characters to feel as if they are losing their grip on reality or sanity, leading to deep anxiety (Fuchs, 2019; Kalinowski, 2019).

This concept connects to Freud's theory of "the uncanny" (German: **das Unheimliche**), further elaborated by Lacan. "The uncanny" refers to the discomfort or unease we feel when something familiar becomes strange or incongruous in subtle ways (Freud, 1976; Jentsch, 1997; Windsor, 2019). This idea is complemented by the "uncanny valley" theory, which suggests that human-like figures—such as mannequins, robots, or dolls—become disturbing when they closely resemble humans but are not quite identical. As these figures approach human likeness, they fall into the "uncanny valley," becoming monstrous or unsettling. To avoid this horror, designs must strike a balance, neither too inhuman nor too human-like. This resemblance need not be purely physical; it can also involve subtle psychological factors, such as personality traits, disturbing behaviors, or unusual interests (Mori et al., 2012; Nummenmaa, 2021; Spampinato, 2016).

The feeling of strangeness in psychological horror lies in a specific relationship—the fluctuating dynamic between the foreground and background. The threat does not simply appear but is anticipated or inferred through ambiguity, specifically in the ambiguity of the foreground. This phenomenon is often depicted using blurriness, such as twilight, fog, or darkness, where ambiguity thrives. Because things shift between the foreground and background, the "uncanny" meaning remains elusive and cannot be fully concretized. Media that feature psychological horror often adopt a shadowy, unreal character. When this quality pervades the entire environment, it can evoke a general experience of derealization, similar to the delusional moods found in early stages of schizophrenia (Fuchs, 2019).

Burke (1757/1990) and Lyotard (1984) in Connolly (2003) explain that the root of anxiety in psychological horror is terror. Terror itself is "the fear of pain or death" and is related to the strongest human desire: self-preservation. The distinction between pain and terror lies in that "pain acts on the

mind through the body, while terror typically affects the body's organs through the workings of the mind, signaling danger".

Tomé et al., (2024) found that playing psychological horror games can have a cathartic effect, even in a game environment designed to evoke tension and anxiety. This is supported by engaging narratives that foster attachment and empathy, not only for the main character but also for the overall story. A compelling narrative, along with the representation of mental health issues, enhances this effect. Smith (2023) explains that catharsis in the horror genre serves as a "reset," allowing tension to build again. Catharsis can be achieved by defeating a group of enemies, escaping after a chase, or reaching a safe room. The concept of catharsis, developed by Freud and Breuer (Thomas, 2009), refers to the process of emotional release, suggesting that psychological horror video games may serve as a medium for stress relief.

Challenges to Implementation. Psychological horror that depicts mental illness without promoting stigma, and avoids preying on ignorance to create fear, is rare (Dickens, 2017; Hightower, 2024). Wahl (2003) research shows that websites and video games often trivialize or mock mental illness. The media tends to portray individuals with mental illness as either cliched tropes or, worse, as cruel social outcasts with no hope of recovery. Video games, in particular, often neglect to ensure that their depictions of mental illness are accurate and sensitive. Instead, they use mental illness as a plot device without further consideration, resulting in negative and unrealistic portrayals, which has earned the psychological horror genre much criticism (Tomé et al., 2024).

Additionally, there is a lack of recovery depictions for characters with mental illness, often attributing their struggles to supernatural or paranormal causes (Anderson, 2020 in Hightower, 2024). In a study conducted by Ferrari et al., (2019) of 100 video games, 97% of the games portrayed mental illness negatively, associating it with "violence, madness, despair," and similar themes (Ferrari et al., 2019 in Hightower, 2024). This contributes to the harmful stigma around mental illness, particularly the stereotype of the "homicidal maniac" (Shapiro & Rotter, 2016 in Hightower, 2024).

Research by Dickens (2017) highlights how games in the psychological horror genre often perpetuate negative societal stigma, depicting mental illness as a "curse." Such games frequently feature horrifying mental hospitals, fear of people with mental health difficulties, and negative stereotypes, such as portraying those with mental health disorders as drug addicts, or depicting electroconvulsive therapy as punishment. These games often present individuals with mental illness as strange or abnormal members of society. B. Smith (2015) explains that this stigma is largely driven by media representations of people with mental health disorders in a negative light. Therefore, it is a challenge to design psychological horror media without reinforcing negative stigmas about mental illness (Dickens, 2017).

Further research by Buday et al., (2022) shows that many media, particularly video games, depict mental illness symptoms. Among these, 75% portray characters with mental illness negatively. Schizophrenia with paranoid delusions is the most commonly depicted condition. In contrast, only 3% of video game media depict intervention efforts for these symptoms, with many portraying the psychiatric field negatively or ineffectively. While mental health professionals are generally aware of negative representations in the film industry, the field of video games and its impact on public perceptions of mental illness and psychiatry has largely been overlooked.

CONCLUSION

Based on this research, the psychological horror genre explores human fear by disrupting the perception of reality and destabilizing the mental state of its characters. By not explicitly displaying the source of fear, this subgenre utilizes psychological instability and a tense atmosphere as the primary "monster." Elements such as anxiety, paranoia, and insanity are central to the conflict, creating a deeper and more personal horror experience for both the audience and the characters. There is a close connection between psychoanalytic theory, particularly Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny, and psychological horror. Familiar yet subtly distorted elements create a sense of unease

that triggers strong emotional responses in both films and video games. This is further reinforced by the "uncanny valley" theory, where imperfections in representations of people or environments evoke anxiety. Additionally, Kristeva explains that the unease generated by the uncanny is due to the collapse of the distinction between subject and object, creating ambiguity. Jung also conceptualized the uncanny as a shadow imprinted on the subconscious mind.

Overall, psychological horror serves not only as entertainment but also as a medium to express deep fears related to the human mental and emotional state. This study provides new insights into how psychological and psychoanalytic elements contribute to a more intense and evocative horror experience, particularly in modern media such as video games. Despite the criticisms this subgenre faces, it is important to approach the creation of media thoughtfully, especially regarding mental health and social issues. It is a challenge to craft psychological horror without promoting negative stigmas toward people with mental illness or psychiatry.

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