

# Unmasking Terror: Horror Performance, Gender, and The Self

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## INTRODUCTION AND GUIDING QUESTIONS

Focusing on how body modification finds its way into the performance of horror as a pop culture genre, my research attempts to examine issues of gender roles and self-making. The following guiding questions can serve to understand the overarching themes pertaining to this study:

- What does it mean for something to be scary?
- How is self-enhancement exercised through horror performance?
- Does horror performance challenge established sex and gender preconceptions?

## METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

### Participant Observation

3 fieldsites; 2 months.

*Frightmare in the Falls Horror Con*, Niagara, ON;  
*Legends of Horror at Casa Loma*, Toronto, ON;  
*The Amityville Horror (1979) Screening: Paradise Theatre*, Toronto, ON.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

Carried out through the span of six months, both virtually and in-person with a diverse variety of sample subjects. Approved by the University of Toronto Ethics Review Board. n = 15

### Analysis of Overarching Themes

Thoroughly conducted after close reading of field notes, interview transcription, and careful examination of the academic conversation proposed by the relevant literature.

## KEY CONCEPTS

### **Performance/Performativity in Horror:**

Does the modification of bodies through horror performance strengthen a relationship between performing horror and becoming horror? Is there a need to become the subject of horror instead of the object of horror?

### **Synthetic Horror vs. Actual Horror:**

Fear, as a primordial human response, operates in specific ways for specific purposes. However, physiological responses triggered by horror consumption have proven to be vastly different. This synthetic response to horror can be understood as a result of the inherent idea of safety tied to the consumption of horror as a pop culture genre.

### **Cultural Determinism:**

Championed by post-Boasian anthropologists like Margaret Mead and Ruth Benedict, this theory suggests that selves (personalities) are culturally determined. In terms of this study, cultural determinism can clarify how Western-generated frames of knowledge have informed what it means to be “scary” in North America.

## RESULTS

Among research subjects, horror consumption is tied to feelings of excitement and joy. Thus, a dichotomy is visible between *synthetic horror* and *actual horror*.

Through the performance of horror, self-making is explored by challenging the established societal roles. Achieving to embody different iterations of a body can be understood as a way of creating, regaining, or exercising different types of control over traditional narratives.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest gratitude is extended to **Dr. Katie Kilroy-Marac** for her unyielding support throughout this project, at all points properly and lovingly guiding the investigation in the right direction.

Furthermore, I would like to acknowledge my colleague, **Farzana Jahan**, for having accompanied me through this year-long process while also completing her own research. At points, our own feedback was all we had to go on.



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