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# Fear Transcoding: A Comparative Study of True Crime Narratives and Fictional Horror Films

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**Abstract:** In the risk society and digital media, fear has become a flourishing cultural consumption. Comparing true crime narratives with horror films, this study integrates narratology, cultural studies, and terror management theory across five dimensions: fear sources, narrative logic, construction of security, audience contracts, and media-sensory experience. Horror translates premodern and posthuman anxieties into supernatural others by symbolic encoding, achieving ritualized purification; true crime confronts modernity's systemic crises by documentary encoding, eliciting risk alertness through open endings. The two are complementary, transcoding fear from "supernatural mystery" to "social pathology."

**Keywords:** True crime narrative; Fictional horror film; Fear transcoding; Risk society; Collective anxiety

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## 1. Problem and theoretical horizon

### 1.1. The paradox of fear consumption

Fear consumption is exploding—Serial passed one hundred million downloads, horror films earn huge returns on modest budgets, and games and jubensha extend the boundary. As public safety improves, the appetite for fear consumption grows: horror works have gradually shifted toward psychological and social horror, while true crime narratives have entered mainstream culture.

### 1.2. Fear transcoding

Scholarship treats them separately. This study asks how the two encode collective anxiety through differing fear mechanisms [1]. "Fear transcoding" renders it consumable: horror projects it onto supernatural others symbolically, true crime anchors it in real events documentarily.

### 1.3. Research gap

Horror studies have a mature Western lineage—Carroll's "art-horror" [2], Creed's "monstrous-feminine" [3]; Chinese research stays with cinema. Beyond the genre, posthuman readings of media culture have opened a related conceptual horizon [4]. True crime research has attended to the cultural function of such narratives [5], yet these narratives are rarely read as fear narratives, still less are they systematically compared with horror fiction.

### 1.4. Method

Narratology supplies Genette's focalization and Propp's morphology; Dai's film-critical method offers operational support [6]; cultural studies, Western Marxist critique [7], Williams's "structure of feeling" [8], Hall [1]; psychology, terror management theory [9]; sociology, Beck [10], Bauman [11]. Two core cases per category secure comparability; encoding follows focalization (**Table 1**), character function (**Table 2**), and structure—closed arc versus open ending.

**Table 1.** Focalization types

| Type | Criterion | Examples |
|---|---|---|
| Zero | Omniscient narrator. | Cutscenes in Silent Hill |
| Internal | A character's perception. | Ju-On; Nida Podcast host |
| External | External behavior only. | Observational camera in documentaries |

**Table 2.** Character functions

| Function | Criterion | Horror films | True crime |
|---|---|---|---|
| Hero / Subject | Confronts fear. | Exorcists, survivors | Journalists, families |
| Villain / Object | Generates fear. | Ghosts, monsters | Perpetrators, systems |
| Helper | Assists. | Psychics, companions | Witnesses, lawyers |
| Dispatcher | Triggers action. | Breaking a taboo | A case found |

## 2. Mechanisms of fear generation

Comparison proceeds across five dimensions; the dichotomy is an ideal type, since many works occupy border zones.

### 2.1. Fear sources

Horror locates fear in supernatural others—ghosts, curses, demons—that transcend legal order, projecting anxiety onto the other that is to be fought or fled from. True crime points inward: perpetrators are ordinary people, shattering the illusion that "evil lies outside" and exposing judicial flaws.

### 2.2. Narrative logic

Horror follows mythic closure—"taboo–retribution–redemption"—with clear causality; Ju-On instead shows fatalistic recurrence that dissolves moral boundaries. True crime follows a logic of chaos: a case is woven from contingencies with no single culprit, and fragmented narration never reconstructs the truth.

### 2.3. Construction of security

Horror restores order symbolically: evil is overcome or the protagonist escapes, and taboo narratives imply that rules keep you safe; indiscriminate curses dissolve security. True crime offers only illusory control: learning triggers yields the sense of being "prepared"—fragile, since overconsumption deepens pessimism.

### 2.4. Audience contracts

Horror audiences seek "safely experiencing danger"—stimulation and release. True crime audiences lean toward cognitive need and survival rehearsal.

### 2.5. Media-sensory experience

Horror works through audiovisual impact—jump scares, body horror, sound—and games deepen immersion. True crime relies on auditory immersion: podcasts build intimacy through voice and testimony; documentaries display authentic archives.

## 3. Encoding and transcoding

This section contrasts symbolic encoding in horror with documentary encoding in true crime, then considers their convergence.

### 3.1. Symbolic encoding in horror films

#### 3.1.1. Ju-On

Ju-On's premise—a grudge of those dying in hatred, cursing all who touch it—metaphorizes the collapse of family ethics, mapping anxiety over intimate violence. Fragmented narration accumulates fear; the open ending seals an inescapable fate. Kayako is at once villain and victim. Symbolic encoding converts repressed anxiety into a tangible force.

#### 3.1.2. Silent Hill

The fog world symbolizes the repression of reality; the bloody otherworld, trauma and repressed desire. Fear is doubly anchored—monsters on the surface, psychological trauma beneath—and the fog maps anxiety over mental illness. Multiple endings cede player agency; security is built by stripping the illusion of control. Monsters concretize inner darkness: Pyramid Head figures male violence, the Nurses the objectified body.

### 3.2. Documentary encoding in true crime

True crime anchors fear through a "reality effect": its encoding is indexical—every detail points to a real event outside the text.

#### 3.2.1. Nida Podcast

A leading Chinese true crime program covers cases from the Lu Rong Yu murders to the Zhang Zhichao case. Its source of fear is human nature and institutions. A linear thread nested with flashbacks renders authenticity: the crime is told slowly, context condensed, and closing reminders turn fear into "risks close to home." Soundscape is the core device [5].

### 3.2.2. The Keepers

On the murder of Sister Cathy Cesnik, it exposes clerical abuse and institutional cover-up. Its fear source is three-tiered: atrocity, complicity, structural corruption. A reticular investigative mode moves fear from shock to anger at evasion. It escalates from case to social critique: "media narrative–public mobilization–institutional response."

## 3.3. Convergence

The two encodings converge. Horror absorbs true crime, using mockumentary for realism (The Blair Witch Project); true crime borrows dramatization (O.J.: Made in America).

# 4. The mapping field of anxiety

## 4.1. Horror: Premodern and posthuman anxiety

Primal fear persists: monster movies map anxiety over technological control; alien themes voice doubt about cosmic unknowns; ghost stories relate unaddressed guilt. Building on the posthuman perspective developed in media studies [4], we extend it to horror: AI themes in horror explore intelligence surpassing humanity, while body horror attends to biotechnological transformation. Race and gender gain representation—Get Out, Hereditary.

## 4.2. True crime: Anxieties of modernity

True crime presents the anxieties of everyday life. Relational: the most dangerous person is often the closest—a pattern true crime dramatizes relentlessly—while Bauman's account of liquid modernity frames the fragility of once-stable bonds [11]. Institutional: wrongful convictions voice doubt about impartiality, and systemic failure leaves the individual powerless. Survival: crimes born of hardship reveal alienation; fraud and data leakage embody the fragility of privacy. The two map anxiety from the supernatural to the modern—not passive mirrors but agents that channel it.

# 5. Cultural function and ethical risk

Fear narratives work as an emotional safety valve and social symptom, a chain of "emotional catharsis–cognitive warning."

## 5.1. An emotional safety valve

Horror offers catharsis traceable to Aristotle [12]: audiences project negative emotion onto the text and safely confront death. Terror management theory holds that existential anxiety is buffered by cultural worldviews [9]; building on this, horror's reaffirmation of these worldviews offers a further catharsis mechanism. True crime regulates cognitively: unease is concretized into cases.

## 5.2. Texts as social symptoms

Fear narratives give sensitive issues a discursive space. By virtue of being "based on facts," true crime explores domestic violence, gender inequality, and corruption where mainstream media are reticent. They also construct public memory: The Keepers revived public scrutiny of a dormant case, while its circulation

interacts with #MeToo.

### 5.3. Risks and ethics

Overconsumption of horror may desensitize viewers; overconsumption of true crime may deepen pessimism and distrust. True crime faces a dilemma: some creators consume victims' suffering and distort facts, causing secondary harm. Creators must respect victims and balance entertainment with responsibility.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Conclusions

First, the two are complementary: horror addresses premodern and posthuman anxiety through symbolic encoding and purification; true crime confronts modernity's systemic crises through documentary encoding and alertness. Second, fear is being transcoded—its source migrates from supernatural ghosts to intimates and to power within systems. Third, both relieve the individual's pressure in the risk society [10]: horror by catharsis, true crime by critique.

### 6.2. Implications

Production should grasp the laws of transcoding, fuse symbolic and social fear, and avoid manufacturing panic. Audiences should improve literacy and consume moderately. Governance should read the migration of fear culture as a map of social pressure to be answered by institutional reform.

### 6.3. Limitations

Cases concentrate in Europe, America, and East Asia; audience data are lacking; VR and AI content are underexplored. Future work may compare encoding across cultures.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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