

ABSTRACT

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“Do You Trust Me?” Horror, Homology, and Genre Emergence in a Time of Dislocation
(Under the direction of Professor Victoria J. Gallagher)

The purpose of this study is to examine the social rhetorical effects of increasingly decentralized media and social environments, on the nature and character of media artifacts and their social function. Particularly, this research focuses on genre emergence and innovation alongside the proliferation of digital streaming services. More specifically, this essay examines three popular horror films as representative artifacts illustrating the genre emergence and innovation enabled by new media formations. This essay analyzes not only innovation in the horror genre and its rhetorical effects, but also the implication of those shifts for the broader social and media environment as material changes in media distribution, production, and consumption accelerate.

This essay draws on a broad range of approaches including rhetorics of popular culture, horror film theory, rhetorical genre theory, and theories of circulation to create its primary framing of the stakes and significance of its analysis. The central approach of this essay is the rhetorical criticism of three horror films both separately and as a cluster of related artifacts. The primary tool of analysis in this essay is Barry Brummett’s theory of homology, the rhetorical action produced by structural resemblances in fictional narratives to real-life dilemmas, extended through theories of genre and circulation.

The primary observation produced by this approach is an emergent shift in the narrative structure and social function of popular horror from emphasizing the punishment of social transgressions and enforcing of social norms to one emphasizing the cultivation of interpersonal relationships. This analysis demonstrates the suitability of homology as informed by genre and circulation to the analysis of contemporary media artifacts particularly film and television. Finally, this analysis presents an answer to anxieties of media determinism and the proliferation of simulation and simulacra by identifying a productive symbolic answer to increasing material and social dislocation.