

## **Authenticity in Harsh Spaces: The Storytelling of Documentary Versus Horror Film**

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In an interview with Martin Scorsese, a major American filmmaker in the New Hollywood era, the American Film Institute and Discovery Channel asked about the difference between documentary and dramatic-style film. His answer was eloquent, balanced also with a hint of political phrasing so as not to take sides: “The impulse is the same all the time...to tell the story or to share with an audience his story” ([American Film Institute](#)). By this, he means the act of storytelling is ubiquitous and has the same psychological effect on the audience regardless of the format it is delivered cinematographically, with the line being blurred between the two styles. The need to tell a story is always accompanied by either a need to “record” or “interpret,” the former being documentary and the latter being dramatic fiction ([American Film Institute](#)). I think this distinction holds the answer to the question of differentiating between documentary/nonfiction film and dramatic/fiction film, especially while trying to understand a film’s ability to depict raw reality or intense societal issues. On a genre level, looking at specifically journalistic documentary and horror film, arguably two presumably antithetical or oppugnant categories, seems to be an intriguing yet seldomly compared duo. In this paper, I will attempt to answer the following question: how authentically do documentary films versus horror films depict harsh realities — specifically regarding the global refugee crisis? By comparing the two — specifically by using “Exodus” (documentary) and “His House” (horror) — one may better understand the significance of each genre on the individual and societal level as it relates to global issues such as these.

Firstly, separately analyzing documentary-style films under this guise, one finds a less clearly categorical or clearly defined genre. Jill Godmilow, a documentary filmmaker who detests that as her title, explains her work is not the stereotypical journalistic content but is wrapped into similar categories such as ‘documentary’ and ‘nonfiction’ giving it an impression of being entirely factual, void of creative or biased moves — which is another misinterpretation of even pure journalistic video production ([University of Notre Dame](#)). She is a prime example of the blurred definitions between types of films and documentaries, with intentions and expectations differing from product to product. This makes confining a nonfiction documentary film to a certain set of criteria (for the sake of comparison, especially) difficult. The closest to a broad definition was well put by Medium blogger Dainéal MacLean, who said that documentaries innately have some form of “manipulation;” they “are about real life, but are not actually real life” ([MacLean](#)). He states also, however, that the modern understanding of documentary, with the widespread awareness of its bias (need for a story arc, heroes and villains, etc.), actually provides this genre with more credibility. Audiences can take this perspective, based still in factual and/or realistic events and get a better understanding/fact-check this perspective on their own such as by consuming more content from news media outlets ([MacLean](#)). The documentary “Exodus” provides a humanistic account of five groups of people across 26 countries fleeing conflict-torn countries in search of refuge ([Breslow](#)). Credibility of this film depicting real-world issues (the refugee crisis/mass migration) is built into the procedural makeup of the documentary, with firsthand footage even from the families themselves, and introducing a meditation on the broader sociopolitical context ([Peabody](#)). Also built into the documentary, however, is an intention from the director and filmmakers involved, including their own camera work, carefully selected music, etc. that build a narrative that

dramatizes the reality. This leaves the question of authenticity in documentary filmmaking still murky, but with realistic intentions and practices still set.

Horror film seems to have a more clearly defined place in the cinema world, with an obvious intention to enthrall an audience by invoking fear. Horror films have historically been and continue to be used to dramatize commonplace societal fears of the time (or recent past) as well as to process these situations by presenting them on a comforting-enough, fictional backdrop ([Um](#)). Often, these films, especially gothic horror films (such as “His House,”) are meant to elicit philosophical, heavily existential ponderings on personal and grand issues, even on a transnational or international scale ([Um](#)). As Shaila Dewan from *The New York Times* writes, horror is also used to “caricature” anxieties ([NYT](#)). Such as with the concept of grief, horror films are suited to take a common phenomenon and make it fantastical in some way ([Lee and Millar](#)), which goes against this idea of authentically showcasing reality/societal issues. However, though it is not necessarily ‘real,’ this genre has also been theorized to be a preferable and effective space to allow audiences to connect with the excruciating feelings of grief ([Lee and Millar](#)). Though it lacks authenticity in realistic viewings of harsh realities, horror may be a more approachable space to interact with these ideas. “His House” includes elements of grief but is more clearly/broadly commenting on the plight of refugees globally, especially from conflict-torn countries to Europe. Though the intention is surely to comment on this increasingly relevant issue and bring awareness to it, the essence of this genre bind it to a creative retelling and interpretation that lacks veracity. Gothic tones such as with images and talk of an apeth in addition to frames that defy logical or realistic means already take “His House” away from an audience who can understand truthfully or factually what being inside the head of a refugee (figuratively) is like — and it makes sense that this is not the intention.

Documentary-style and horror films differ in their abilities to authentically represent global and societal issues. Documentaries can come in a wide array of formats with different practices and motives in place; though there is a drive to present situations in arguably the most authentic way in the cinematic world, there will always be a sense of bias that disallows from a truly authentic account of these situations. Horror films have more clearly defined terms and motives that make connecting with these issues easier but in a less authentic way. Both genres play an integral role in shaping personal and mass opinions and emotions that, when put into a global context, will arguably shape decision-making. The lines between what is fiction and nonfiction film is up to a shocking amount of interpretation, and showing reality in its purest form, authentically, seems to be an extremely difficult task once behind the camera, regardless of the format in which it comes.

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