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## **Semiotic Analysis of Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror Movies and An Evaluation of Horror Genre in Turkish Cinema**

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## **Abstract**

Cosmic Horror, developed by H. P. Lovecraft, is a subgenre of science fiction, fantasy and horror. Cosmic horror is about the fear of the unknowable. It is usually about threatening beings from outer space or ancient malevolent mysteries. It has also played a key role in the development of horror cinema. Unlike stereotypical horror themes, deep stories about the pains of human existence are included in the cosmic horror subgenre. This thesis presents a research on feature films that are directly or indirectly related to the cosmic horror genre. With this aim, some sample films were selected and some sequences of these films were analyzed using the semiotic method. Moreover, in order to make an evaluation on horror films in Turkish cinema, participants who have produced works in the horror genre were interviewed. They were asked to answer specific questions. A conclusion was finally reached based on the collected findings.

## **Keywords**

Cinema; cosmic horror; H. P. Lovecraft; horror; science fiction; semiotic; Turkish horror cinema

## INTRODUCTION

Humans have succeeded in becoming human by telling stories. This thesis aims to explain how old and deep-rooted the narrative tradition is. If there is one characteristic that distinguishes humanity from other animals, it is the ability to tell stories. Homo Sapiens means "wise man" in Latin. But humans not only know, they also narrate. They create stories to carry knowledge from generation to generation, from region to region. The term "Homo Narrans", which is very appropriate for this concept, means "storyteller" in Latin. This term was first coined by Walter R. Fisher in his 1984 article "Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument" (Fisher, 1984).

Humanity tells stories about what it has known and imagined since the day it came into existence, making it permanent. Stories not only make knowledge permanent, but also open the horizons of pioneering people and guide them. The Apollo 11 mission may have been inspired by literature or cinema, such as the story of a prince flying to the moon (The Little Prince) or Jules Verne's novel From the Earth to the Moon and its movie adaptation. It is natural that most people who watched these movies or read these books at the time dreamed of living on the moon and exploring other planets. The fact that this was achieved so quickly has a lot to do with dreams and hopes. Human beings have always been curious about things beyond what their eyes see and their skin feels. Since the earliest stories and legends that written and oral tradition has been able to transmit to humanity, these fictions, which are a reflection of imagination, have been encountered. Today, these traditional themes of "speculative fiction" continue to live on, modernized and adapted to the times.

The term "speculative fiction" was first coined by Robert A. Heinlein to name a subgenre of science fiction. However, currently it is more commonly used as an umbrella term for genres such as fantasy, science fiction and horror, as well as hybrid forms of these genres. Since the term does not yet have a clear definition, it can be used by different people to mean different things. A modern definition of speculative fiction is any text that departs from a "real" or "natural" explanation for events and characters, which means that it is supposed to be more imaginative than real. Literary genres in this

direction emerged as a reaction to the idea that art, which developed after the Enlightenment, should be mimetic, that is, it should imitate life. This form of understanding sought to replace the supposed irrationality of medieval myths with rationality and scientific knowledge. It therefore excluded "fantasy" as a pejorative term from literature. Fantasy was seen as undesirable because it was illogical, unconvincing, naive and childish. For these reasons, speculative fiction is a generic nomenclature for a variety of genres that are in opposition to traditionalized Western culture, which has an unshakable prejudice that literature is an imitation of real life. The attempts to challenge this mimetic conception of literature began with Gothic literature and have continued up to the present day (Oziewicz, 2017).

Meanwhile, genres such as fantasy, science fiction and horror have become more popular today because of their appeal. These genres, which are covered by "speculative fiction", are attractive because they integrate fantastic elements that occur in realistic settings with high moral values. People still love stories about extraordinary people and animals, despite the modern science and technology developing around them. Because these stories remind them that there are other worlds beyond what the eyes can see. It is through stories like these that people can make seminal connections between the past, present and future. Speculative fiction can help people understand themselves better by showing them how deeply rooted their sense of wonder is. It can also give them the hope to make a difference when they see that people who are different from them are driven by the same motivations and emotions.

The first step to liberation is to think outside the box. When people break free from their current conditioning, it will be much easier for them to choose the path of liberation. In this way, a higher level of life can be achieved by breaking away from the destructive conditioning of mainstream society. They can then create things that have never been created before. Fantasy movies (science fiction, horror, etc.) are perfect tools for this.

In this thesis, examples of Cosmic Horror movies, which are at the intersection of horror and science fiction genres, are presented. The scientific approach of semiotics is used to make sense of these films. Semiotics suggests that every visual or auditory structure can be interpreted according to its elements (sign, signified and signifier). This

approach helps to understand the content of a subject by identifying what is being conveyed. Therefore, this research examines how Cosmic Horror films represent modern scientific technologies, especially on a cosmic scale, to convey messages about humanity, science or the environment.

Cosmic Horror refers to the sense of futility that humanity feels when it realizes the vastness of the universe and its own insignificance in this cosmic order. Lovecraft's stories are a satire on the sense of self-worth that humans have in the cosmic order. According to Lovecraft, humans are happy because they have an enormous lack of knowledge. Otherwise, they lose their minds and life becomes unlivable for them. Nature is unpredictable and uncontrollable. H. P. Lovecraft's stories always have a pessimistic ending (Koçsoy, 2017, pp. 202-203).

For example, in "Alien" (1979), the crew of a spaceship has to fight a creature they discover on an alien planet. In "In the Mouth of Madness" (1994), an epidemic of madness spreading from the books of a mad author begins to affect all of humanity. In "The Call of Cthulhu" (2005), the crew of an ocean-going ship discovers that an unnamed island is home to an ancient alien. In "The Mist" (2007), a group of civilians trapped in a supermarket battle alien creatures in the mist that has descended over the town. In "Arrival" (2016), experts investigate alien ships that appear in 12 different locations around the world. These horror films want to show how ideas about nature and society can be dramatically changed by an unexpected catastrophe.

The thesis consists of four parts. Part I is the introduction to this thesis and contains the problem and purpose of this thesis. In addition, the main focus of this thesis is stated. Part II contains a literature review that examines the origins of horror films. Starting from the invention of cinema, the development of horror cinema as a genre has been discussed. Afterwards, the origins of these films in literature are investigated and Cosmic Horror is analyzed as a subgenre. Furthermore, detailed information about H. P. Lovecraft, who is considered to be the founder of this genre, is given.

Part III provides a semiotic analysis of the selected films. The specific scenes in the films were identified and visually described. In the context of Cosmic Horror, the meaning it denotes is articulated. The messages conveyed by the film frames in their denotative and connotative meanings are revealed. Furthermore, in this part, an online

interview was conducted with the artists who produced works in horror cinema and literature. The status of the horror genre in Turkish cinema was discussed with them. In the last part, a conclusion is reached by using all the findings collected. It is mentioned whether the thesis has reached the conclusion it wanted to reach and suggestions are presented for similar studies to be conducted in the future.

## RESULTS

The main purpose of this thesis is to obtain information about the subgenre of cosmic horror, which is thought to be missing in the Turkish academic literature. Cosmic horror is thought to have a profound impact on Horror cinema. Developed by American writer H. P. Lovecraft in the early 20th century, this subgenre has inspired many horror and thriller films. In the Research part of the thesis, selected horror films from different decades were analyzed from the perspective of cosmic horror in terms of their visuals and the symbolism they contain. Therefore, a gap in the Turkish academic literature on the semiotic analysis of horror films has been filled. The American films selected for analysis are **Alien** (Ridley Scott, 1979), **In the Mouth of Madness** (John Carpenter, 1994), **The Call of Cthulhu** (Andrew Leman, 2005), **The Mist** (Frank Darabont, 2007) and **Arrival** (Denis Villeneuve, 2016). The selected Turkish films are **Karanlık Sular - The Serpent's Tale** (Kutluğ Ataman, 1993), **Sır Dosyası – The Secret File** (The Taylan Brothers, 1998) (TV Series), **D@bbe** (Hasan Karacadag, 2006), **Karadedeler Olayı - The Karadedeler Incident** (Bağbakan Brothers, 2011) and **Baskın: Karabasan** (Can Evrenol, 2015). It was observed that these films visually repeated certain themes.

These visual themes include: Alien life form, fog, madness, scientific approach, ancient knowledge, sticky liquid(s), dark atmosphere, passage and space. These themes are used consistently in the analyzed films. Foggy and dark atmospheres increase the dose of the unknown and reveal the feeling of fear. For this reason, it is seen that either all or certain parts of the films take place in such an atmosphere.

Cosmic horror often deals with the fear of an extraterrestrial alien life form. For this reason, some films choose outer space as their setting. The alien life form encountered in a spaceship or on another planet gives the movie characters a hard time. On the other hand, the number of cosmic horror movies set on Earth is also quite high. In

these movies, aliens come and land on earth. On their way to Earth, they use either a spaceship or a passage that enables interdimensional travel. Sometimes the existence of these alien creatures is confirmed by ancient records. They have even influenced human development to the extent that people have come to see them as gods.

The description of the appearance of the aliens varies from movie to movie. In most of them, Lovecraft-influenced depictions of aliens inspired by sea creatures are preferred. Oceans and sea beds are less explored regions than the earth. Even today, they remain a great mystery for humanity. For this reason, they have always harbored amazing life forms for humans. This preference for alien depictions in cosmic horror stories and later in movies stems from the fact that sea creatures seem almost extraterrestrial. They are evolutionarily different from land creatures, or at least they appear to be. In addition to these, there are also alien characters created based on sexual themes (as in *Alien*).

In cosmic horror films, the anthropomorphization of aliens is avoided. The reason for this is that in these films aliens are treated as the other and human characters are not asked to empathize with them in any way. The fear and disgust of alien life forms is merely a reflection of real world prejudices, ethnic discrimination, xenophobia, racism, etc. The feeling of otherness against the different is present in all human beings. Horror movies also feed on this. Lovecraft himself is known to have had racist and xenophobic thoughts during his lifetime. Taking these feelings with him, he reflected the hostility to the other that already existed in humans in his cosmic stories. These aliens do not look like human beings, it is very difficult or even impossible to communicate with them. The tentacle is the most used element in the depiction of these creatures. The aliens secrete strange-looking sticky fluids from their bodies.

Although there are characters in cosmic horror films who take refuge in religious teachings in the face of supernatural events, the protagonist is always someone who adopts common sense and a scientific approach. They try to shed light on extraterrestrial beings or incomprehensible events with the scientific data that humanity has reached. But success is often impossible. Because what is encountered is a superhuman phenomenon far beyond human's limited perception. Cosmic horror stories are based on, in Lovecraft's words, "a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature" (Lovecraft, 2013).

This inconceivable incompatibility of the laws of nature drives human characters first to madness and then to death. Madness occupies a very important position in Lovecraft's fiction. The background of this can be traced back to Lovecraft's own life story. Lovecraft's father was institutionalized when he was very young and remained there until his death. His mother suffered a similar fate. There were many moments in Lovecraft's life when he had difficulty maintaining his sanity. He was easily influenced by events and overreacted. All these fragments of reality were powerful sources of inspiration for Lovecraft. Of course, this is not the only influence. The works of the writers he looked up to from an early age also gave him this vision.

Cosmic indifference is the backbone of Lovecraftian stories. The fact that they live in the vast universe without any influence on it is a painful knowledge for most readers/viewers. The values that human beings place on themselves are ludicrous. The universe shows a cosmic indifference towards them. Humanity's encounter with the being(s) superior to it will drive it out of its sanity.

A table analyzing semiotically the common visual themes used in the films is appended below. This table shows what these themes express at the level of denotation and connotation.

**Table 56**

*Semiotic Analysis of Shared Themes*

| <b>Sign</b>      | <b>Signifier</b>   | <b>Signified</b>  |
|------------------|--------------------|---|
| Alien life form. | A non-human being. | A fearful Other. An unrecognized and incomprehensible life form brings with it fear. It actually touches on human problems such as racism, xenophobia, sexism and class distinctions encountered in daily life. |

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|                      |   |   |
|----------------------|---|---|
| Space.               | A vast, dark void.  | It is so big that it is full of unknowns and this frightens.  |
| Fog.                 | A weather phenomenon that obstructs vision.                 | The fog obscures many things because it reduces visibility. This creates a lack of information, which in turn creates fear. |
| Dark atmosphere.     | A state of lack of light in which vision is restricted.     | Similarly, a dark atmosphere also creates a sense of fear because it reduces knowability.                                   |
| Scientific approach. | The state of looking at things objectively.                 | Questioning, thinking outside the box, atheism, etc.  |
| Ancient knowledge.   | Information from an ancient era.                            | The unknown, the ancient, forgotten knowledge, ephemerality, alien influence.   |
| Madness.             | Being outside of the usual behavioral patterns.             | The limitations of the human mind, incompleteness, inadequacy, the instinct of self-preservation.                           |
| Sticky liquid(s).    | A fluid and smearing liquid.                                | Alienation, pollution, biological matter, sexuality, etc.   |
| Passage.             | A place that provides transition from one place to another. | Change, transformation, invasion, etc.  |

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Cosmic indifference.

A state of insignificance in  
the universe.

Cosmic indifference is a  
satire against the illusion  
that man has a significance  
in the universe in which  
they live. The universe does  
not determine a scenario for  
humans because they have  
no influence on the  
overallity.

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## DISCUSSION

Afterwards, professional artists working in the Horror genre were contacted in order to obtain information about the general situation of Turkish Horror Cinema and the reflections of cosmic horror in the films. It was tried to get information about the pros, cons of Turkish horror cinema and comparisons with other country cinemas. For this purpose, eighteen pre-prepared questions were asked to the artists. The artists were asked to answer these questions in an open-ended way by adding their personal opinions. Due to the pandemic conditions and the workload of the artists, the questions were prepared so that they could be answered at any time instead of face-to-face interviews.

It was aimed to communicate with artists who have created works in the horror genre. Electronic media (e-mail, social media accounts, etc.) were tried for this. However, contact with most of them was not fruitful. Since no response was received, interviews were conducted with much fewer participants. Despite this, it was possible to find out a substantial amount of information about Turkish horror cinema. This information was then combined with the outputs of the Turkish horror films analyzed semiotically.

It has been determined that horror cinema has maintained its importance with small fluctuations for more than a hundred years worldwide. In Turkey, there is along-standing oral and written horror tradition. However, the transfer of this tradition to cinema took place especially after the 2000s. The cosmic horror subgenre, which this thesis focuses on, has greatly influenced Turkish cinema as well as world cinema. This influence is often unconscious.

First, historian and writer Mehmet Berk Yaltrık was contacted. Yaltrık, who conducts academic studies in the field of history, has been publishing his literary works on various online media since 2009. His printed works have appeared in various story collections. In 2017, his first novel "Yedikuleli Mansur" was published. He has confirmed that his real name may appear in the content of this thesis. (Look at "**APPENDIX A**" to see the full text.)

Another artist contacted was journalist and writer Orkun Uçar. In 2004, he and Burak Turna co-wrote the political fiction novel *Metal Fırtına*, which became a bestseller in Turkey. Since 1986, Uçar has been working in the industry as a photo assistant, reporter, assistant director, comic book and script writer. He has given permission for his name to be mentioned in this thesis. (Look at "**APPENDIX B**" to see the full text.)

The participants were first asked what the genre of "horror" means to them. Yaltrık said that horror refers to a supernatural threat that drives characters to survive. He stated that threats coming from a human source would be more appropriate to be evaluated within the thriller genre. Uçar, on the other hand, said that horror influences the audience/reader and enables identification with the characters.

When asked about the treatment of the horror genre in world cinema, Yaltrık said that there has been a diversity in recent times, especially in the Folk Horror genre. Uçar, on the other hand, stated that the long-standing history of horror cinema continues today without losing its influence.

Both authors said that H. P. Lovecraft was a great source of inspiration in their literary careers. Yaltrık defined "cosmic horror" as existential terror. He stated that it asks philosophical questions about human existence. Uçar said that cosmic horror is related to the fear of aliens, even though it is not a genre he is familiar with.

When asked about Lovecraft's influence on modern horror cinema, Yaltrık said that he inspired many works with the themes he added to the literature and brought the horror of existence to cinema. Uçar also stated that Lovecraft brought horror to the dimension of the universe. About the elements used to create atmosphere in cosmic horror films, Yaltrık said that the main point is the fear of the unknown. It does not necessarily have to be about space, and it deals with the fear of ancient and forgotten

things. In parallel to this, Uçar said that it is about an ancient evil. He emphasized that the point he shed light on is the sense of evil hidden in human beings.

Both Yaltrık and Uçar said that cosmic horror is based on the human fear of the unknown, of what cannot be understood. The fear of the unknown is the earliest fear of human beings. This type of fear targets the human brain and mind before a physical threat. When asked how well cosmic horror is portrayed in cinema, Yaltrık said that there are many examples and that it has even inspired computer games. Uçar also stated that the movie industry has developed technologically most in the horror and science fiction genres.

The participants were asked about the status of Turkish horror cinema compared to world standards. Yaltrık said that Turkish horror cinema cannot break out of certain molds. Stating that the subject of "jinn" haunting is constantly covered, the author stated that if different themes are tried, it will rise to an important position in the world. Uçar, on the other hand, said that Turkey has a very old horror tradition and that horror cinema will gradually develop.

Regarding the Turkish audience's interest in horror movies, Uçar said that the audience shows great interest in "djinn" movies. However, this situation causes the movies to confine themselves to a limited area. Yaltrık also said that interest is gradually being lost due to monotonous, repetitive screenplays. Furthermore, he said that the few quality films in Turkish horror cinema are being lost among the others.

Folk narratives are powerful sources of inspiration for horror films. The participants were asked whether horror films in Turkey also draw from these sources. Yaltrık said that they are not utilized properly and wasted. Uçar, on the other hand, stated that in addition to the now clichéd universal horror elements, Eastern narratives are also effective.

When asked about the films in Turkish horror cinema that fall within the scope of Lovecraftian horror, Uçar cited the Dabbe film series as an example. Yaltrık, on the other hand, mentioned the movie Baskın: Karabasan (2015) directed by Can Evrenol, the 1993 film Karanlık Sular (The Serpent's Tale), a vampire narrative, and the 1998 TV series Sır Dosyası (The Secret File) directed by The Taylan Brothers, an unfinished project.

On the potential viability of space-themed horror films in Turkish cinema, Yaltrık noted that Turkey's ancient culture provides a suitable setting for this genre. Similarly, Uçar said that this genre has remained idle and should be made. The authors stated that horror filmmakers in Turkey do not want to take risks and that science fiction-horror genre works are not produced because they require extra costs and technical equipment.

Finally, the participants stated that although Turkish horror cinema emerged late, it has the potential to become an important genre in the future, but for this to happen, different sub-genres should be tried by going beyond the established lines.

According to the findings, the reflection of the cosmic horror genre in Turkish cinema is seen in themes such as "invasion of non-human beings", "ancient knowledge from the past" and "madness". These themes are often fed by an Islamic background. The invading beings are not aliens, but the jinn mentioned in the Quran. This insistence on adhering to religious motifs in Turkish horror films has created a vicious circle over time. For this reason, the majority of the films produced are like copies of each other.

Horror Cinema, which has a unique place in World Cinema, usually takes its source from literature. Europe, America, the Far East; all these cinemas would not have succeeded without a literary foundation. For this reason, the backwardness of the horror genre in Turkish Literature is parallel to the backwardness of horror stories in literature. Unless today's horror filmmakers turn to literary sources, they will not be able to build a lasting horror film.

## **CONCLUSION**

This thesis analyzed exemplary films with reference to the idea that the subgenre of cosmic horror, brought to perfection by Lovecraft, has had a major influence on cinema. It was thought that the selected films would repeat certain common themes, and the semiotic analysis showed that this idea was correct. Cosmic horror films use elements of classic horror stories and deal with the fear of non-human beings. However, the most important element of fear is always the fear of the "unknown". Similar to other horror films, there is a struggle with the "other". Characters in films such as "Alien" (1979), "In the Mouth of Madness" (1994), "The Call of Cthulhu" (2005), "The Mist" (2007) and "Arrival" (2016) realize that the traditional order is no longer valid and begin to lose their

sanity. While the original stories written by H. P. Lovecraft favored a pessimistic ending, cosmic horror films can have a small victory in line with the classical cinematic conception.

The cosmic horror subgenre is more philosophical than others. In these films, instead of gore themes such as blood, brutality, murder, etc., the sense of meaninglessness experienced by human beings in the process of making sense of their existence predominates. For this reason, they are more likely to go unnoticed by the mainstream audience. They appeal to a small and niche audience. On the other hand, films that incorporate slasher elements, such as *Alien* (1979), can gain a large group of fans.

Since the production cost and potential audience return are uncertain, there are almost no examples of cosmic horror in Turkish horror cinema. Only examples that support cosmic horror in certain aspects such as ancient mysteries and the unknown created by non-humans have emerged. These examples include "The Serpent's Tale" (1993), "The Secret File" (1998) (TV Series), "D@bbe" (2006), "The Karadedeler Incident" (2011) and "Baskin: Karabasan" (2015). The main reason for this is the filmmakers who are afraid of taking risks and want to gain as much as possible from the established cinematic content.

It is clear that the horror film industry in Turkey has been successful in recent years (after the 2000s). However, it is also clear that the scenarios repeat each other. Films are produced mechanically in order to succeed and make profit. There are very few people in Turkish cinema who produce horror films in an original way. Since Turkish horror cinema does not make big budget films, elements such as violence, excessive sound effects and jump scare are often used to keep the audience on the screen. Although these elements keep the audience glued to the screen in the short term, they lose their effect day by day. Therefore, there is a risk that these horror films will be devalued and lose their importance over time. Unless an original cinema is built and developed by different artists, Turkish horror cinema will become a passing trend and disappear.

According to this study, to avoid the current situation, a long-term strategy is needed that takes into account all aspects of the films, including their aesthetics and ethics. It is important to take positive steps towards nurturing and developing the genre in both quality and quantity as part of a holistic strategy to bring a permanent solution

instead of a temporary one. It is hoped that this master's thesis will encourage everyone who wants to make a difference in the horror genre to take action with new thoughts and new strategies.

As with any research, some limitations emerged while writing this thesis. The pandemic period during the research phase prevented face-to-face interviews with the intended participants. Online calls for participation received very few responses. Therefore, only two participants were able to participate in the Q&A, but they still provided valuable feedback on the current state of Turkish horror cinema. The fact that both participants had common thoughts in response to the questions led to the idea that the sample was representative of the general population.

This thesis titled "Semiotic Analysis of Lovecraftian Cosmic Horror Movies and An Evaluation of Horror Genre in Turkish Cinema" can be useful for all researchers who want to work in the horror genre. It would be very valuable for researchers from different fields to analyze the Turkish horror tradition historically and relate it to horror cinema. This is because, although there are horror folk narratives from the past in Turkey, they have not been reflected in the literature at the level they deserve. For this reason, there is a lack of identity in Turkish horror cinema. If future researchers reveal this link between Turkish culture and horror tradition, they will create unique resources for filmmakers.

In conclusion, it should be said that the monotony in Turkish horror cinema should be eliminated. For this, all kinds of scientific studies in this field are important. These studies will also help to understand how to create new original horror films.

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