

Spooked During a Scary Movie: How Fear and Meta-Emotion Play a Role in Physiological and Emotional Reactions to Viewing Horror Films

Abstract

Horror fiction can be defined as any form of media that is intended to shock, scare, or simply give its viewers a feeling of fear. One of the most consumed mediums of horror fiction are horror films. Horror films are a multi-million-dollar industry, with millions of dedicated fans worldwide, and box-office after box-office success. Franchises like *The Conjuring*, *It*, *Saw*, and *Halloween* all aim to spook their viewers. These films get their praise, and viewership off of giving those who view them a negative experience in terms of emotion and reaction. But how, and more importantly, what reactions are produced as a result of viewing horror films? Looking at the role of fear and how it manifests itself once the title card is shown may just give us an answer.

Introduction

Horror has been ingrained into our society for a vast amount of time, as a cultural phenomenon. Horror, in a sense is its own community with things like conventions that overtake large arenas, fan groups with members from across the world, elaborate cosplay, etc. With such a large following, it is only fair that horror is one of the most vast and consumed film genres of the century. Each year, hundreds

of thousands of people in the US line up to see the latest slasher, home invasion, or paranormal flick. Dedicated horror fans cite the feelings that they acquire while watching whether at home, or in the theater as a driving motivation that keeps them coming back to the genre. One of the most encompassing if not the most encompassing reaction to viewing a horror film is fear.

Fear can be defined as "An unpleasant feeling triggered by the perception of danger, either real or implied" (Mayo Clinic). Because the idea and feeling of fear are so distressing, one would think that would make the general population steer clear of Horror cinema. But that is simply not the case. Horror films continue to be a driving force in Hollywood and for those patrons who dare to be scared. The big question is why is it that people keep purchasing tickets to the newest Horror flicks, knowing the reactions that it might give them?

The History of Horror in Film

Give a brief history on horror in cinema, starting from the 1920s to today's films.

- Discuss the beginnings of horror in cinema in the 1920s (Nosferatu, the Phantom of the Opera, etc).
- *Discuss how in the absence of sound and color in these movies, what methods, like prosthetics/ makeup, lighting, etc., were used in order to give a scary affect to their audiences.*

- Talk about Freaks, one of the most influential, controversial, and praised horror films of the 20th century.
- Discuss Universal's monsters franchise of the 1930s.
- *Discuss the popularity of the integration of sound in the 1930s and how that changed the game for audiences.*
- Discuss the relationship between sci-fi and horror, specifically in the 40s-80s.
- Discuss the slasher films of the 90s like scream, Halloween, etc.
- Talk about the remakes of the early 00s to now's horror films and influential directors of today like Jordan Peele, M. Night Shyamalan, etc.

(Why) Do You Like Scary Movies? A Review of the Empirical Research on Psychological Responses to Horror Films.)

The Making of Horror Films

Discuss how things like lighting, music, set design, editing, suspense, etc. are utilized during horror film production in order to bring out feelings of fear in viewing these films.

- *Discuss how in the absence of sound and color in these movies, what methods, like prosthetics/ makeup, lighting, etc., were used in order to give a scary affect to their audiences.*
- *Discuss the popularity of the integration of sound in the 1930s and how that changed the game for audiences.*
- Give a definition for semiotics and how symbols can play a role in defining horror for a person, or at the very least a feeling of fear.

- Talk about lighting, how important it was before sound was used in film, and how it continues to be a driving force in film-making techniques to combine with other effects, in order to make the audience scared.
- Discuss sound technique in film, foley artistry, soundtracks and orchestration, and how low-wave frequency are being used to create fear.
- Discuss the advancement in prosthetics, CGI and green screen technology, specifically how they have been utilized in horror movies over the last 40 years.

Emotion and Metaemotions

Discuss the concept of metaemotions and emotions.

- Give the textbook definition of meta-emotion.
- Go more in-depth on research into meta-emotion and its linkage to cognitive science.
- Discuss how meta-emotions are thought to maintain the current emotion a person is feeling, in this case fear, and creates a want to experiences affects brought on by the fear, all in turn caused by viewing the horror film.
- Tie emotions and meta-emotions to each other, and how self-awareness proves to be a driving force in continuing to watch horror films.

(Predicting Emotions and Meta-Emotions at the Movies: The Role of the Need for Affect in Audiences' Experience of Horror and Drama.)

Effects of Horror in Childhood

Some of the responses to watching horror films in childhood, their lasting impact, and a brief discussion on the MPAA rating change.

- Discuss how movie ratings were only G, PG, and R for the majority of the 20th century.
- Talk about the horror movie controversies of the 1980s and the subsequent introduction to the PG-13 rating following the controversy.
- Discuss the Poltergeist and The Gremlins, two “family-oriented horror films”, the latter helping to create the PG-13 rating.
- Talk about exposure to horror in childhood, specifically in the Sultana meta-analysis of effects and growing up and adult anxiety.
- Reference Media Report to Women’s study on phobias developed by watching films in childhood, such as extreme paranoia surrounding death and fear of the dark.
- Discuss how fear and violence shown in horror movies can trickle into adolescence.

(Horror movies, TV shows can have long-lasting effects.)

(Rethinking PG-13: Ratings and the Boundaries of Childhood and Horror)

Appeal of Horror in Adolescence

Discuss why adolescents are the biggest demographic in enjoying horror films, and what that means for their development into adulthood.

- Elaborate on adolescent brains, how the transitional period between childhood and adulthood is the most important for development.
- Discuss how the adolescent age group are the largest consumers of horror media.
- Discuss how gender roles influence viewing of horror films, and the vastly different underlying reasons that teen boys and girls are willing to view a horror film.
- Talk about some of the effects that horror movies can have on adolescents, such as nightmares, increased anxiety of death, fear of the dark, increased unwanted thoughts, as outlined in the Sultana study.
- Discuss conditioning as a result of watching horror films in adolescence.

(Effects of Horror Movies on Psychological Health of Youth)

Physiological Responses to Horror

Discuss culmination of research on the physical responses to viewing horror films.

- Outline the most common physical reactions to fear stimuli in horror films, such as increased heart rate, rapid eye movements, jumping, screaming, flinching, etc.
- Discuss the sympathetic nervous system, how it produces fight or flight reactions, and how those reactions are most commonly triggered while watching horror films.
- Talk about how physiological responses can be accompanied by emotional responses in the context of horror films.

(Psychology and neurobiology of horror movies)

(The viewing of a “Bloodcurdling” horror movie increases platelet reactivity: A randomized cross-over study in healthy volunteers.)

(Relationship of Terror Feelings and Physiological Response During Watching Horror Movie.)

Emotional Responses to Horror

Discuss culmination of research on the emotional responses to viewing horror films.

- Reiterate the definition of meta-emotion and how it relates to emotions in general.
- Outline the most common emotional responses to watching horror films, like increased paranoia, anxiety and nervousness, “butterflies”.
- Discuss how repeated exposure to horror films can lead to increases these emotions, and their severity as time progresses.
- Discuss how Harrison research explains that intense negative emotional reactions are more common in those who are forced to view horror films whether by friends or family, rather than by their own volition.
- Emotion is fuel. Discuss how for horror lovers, these repeated instances of high emotion are a drive for the continued enjoyment of horror films, and an adrenaline junkie to cliff diving.

(Predicting Emotions and Meta-Emotions at the Movies: The Role of the Need for Affect in Audiences' Experience of Horror and Drama.)

(Horror, Personality, and Threat Simulation: A Survey on the Psychology of Scary Media)

(Enjoyment of Mediated Fright and Violence: A Meta-Analysis)

Conclusion

Review what was discussed in the majority of the paper

References

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