

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

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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

Since the beginnings of Cinema, horror has stood the test of time as one of the most beloved and consumed genres. The origins of film as we know it today can be traced all the way back to the mid 1800s, with series photographs. This is the process of taking a series of photographs as an object moves; in this case birds flying; which are then imprinted on a rolling glass plate and projected to give the illusion of movement (Sklar, 2021). Arguably, the first motion picture projector was invented in 1895 by the Lumiere brothers, who coined it the "cinematographe". This invention was used by secretary-turned-filmmaker Alice Guy-Blanché in 1896 to produce what is considered by some to be the first completely functional film, *The Cabbage Fairy* (Sharman). In the early 1900s, cinema began to take off as a form of entertainment for all to enjoy. As the years increased, so did the popularity. The 1920s opened a want for horror cinema, and it was delivered. Many consider this decade and the one that followed to be the golden age of horror, with many films that people considered today classics being produced. Films such as *Nosferatu* (1922), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920), and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) are

still considered to be some of the greatest films of all time. But without modern elements of horror today, such as sound, color, sophisticated special effects, how have these films managed to produce the same types of reactions?

In the absence of modern horror elements, horror cinema of the past century still was able to spook viewers. One of the most powerful tools in filmmaking is lighting. Being able to manipulate lighting can create a vast number of effects that directors use in order to convey feeling and emotion and even invoke responses in viewers. Three-point lighting is the most common form of lighting. It involves three different lights being pointed at a single object in order to highlight and give importance (Ramaeker, 2014). It is still used to today but was the most important way of lighting prior to colored films. High-key and low-key lighting were two other important filming techniques. The first reduces lighting ratio in a scene, which in turn creates a more even display of dark and bright. The second creates more of a contrast and was much more popular in the creation of horror films. The large contrasts were used to create suspense in their dramatics.

In 1932, one of the most influential horror films of the century was released. *Freaks*, directed by Tod Browning follows a group of performers in a “freakshow” and their reaction to a trapeze artist joining the group, when it is revealed to them that she plans to murder one of the “freaks”; a dwarf with a large inheritance. *Freaks* gained notoriety, and controversy as it contains actors with real-life deformities, in an effort by the director to normalize disabled people. This was unfortunately not very well-received, and the film was banned in several countries, along with the runtime being cut dramatically. *Freaks* has gained status as a cult classic and has been referenced in different forms of media. Its scenes are still considered to be some of the most terrifying in horror cinema history, and its contents are still analyzed today.

With the success of the Horror films of the 1920s in full view, studios began to take notice, even as money became a concerningly scarce entity. Universal Pictures produced just shy of 15 horror films in the 1930s. These films, beginning with *Dracula* (directed by Tod Browning of *Freaks* fame) and *Frankenstein* (directed by James Whale) in 1931, brought giant financial success to the company, even as the Great Depression began to ravage the United States. Other films such as *The Invisible Man*, *Werewolf of London*, *The Bride of Frankenstein*, *The Mummy*, among others proved to have lasting impacts in modern culture and set the stage for what was possible in terms of Horror success. These films are considered classics not only because of their fear-inducement, but for their production, acting, and quality. It is because of this that the Universal Monsters franchise has stood the test of time and continue to influence horror culture today.

One of the biggest advancements of film came in the 1930s, when the integration of sound started becoming popular in the film world. With films like *The Jazz Singer* (1927) becoming a global phenomenon based on its integration (albeit very small) of sound, “talkies” became all the rage. Stereo-sound was developed afterwards, in 1935 to great success as well. It encapsulated viewers with big soundtrack noise they had never heard before (Dakic, 1955) . But one of the biggest pioneers of sound in film was not horror oriented. In 1940, the Walt Disney Company released *Fantasia*, which is still one of the most beloved films in Disney History. What made *Fantasia* so monumental was the development of Fantasound, a stereo-sound reproduction system, which differed from other system in that it gave the illusion of movement of sound across speakers with the pan-pot (Griffin, 2015). Integration of sound also meant integration of music, sound effects, all of which continue to be used in the creation of fear in film.

As horror films became more and more popular, the genres in which they were consumed changed within the decades. From the 40s to the 80s, one of the most popular types of horror films were science-fiction films. These films, with advanced and magical creatures, aliens, among other things captivated audiences. In the 90s, horror-comedies were popular as the horror genre began to take itself less seriously. *Scream, Evil Dead, and Final Destination* are great examples of horror with a less serious tone.

The Making of Horror Films

The textbook definition of Semiotics is as follows: “a general philosophical theory of signs and symbols that deals especially with their function in both artificially constructed and natural languages and comprises syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics.” (Merriam-Webster). In similar terms, semiotics is the study of signs and symbols in any form. One of the most popular ways in which we view sign and symbols is in film. To look at films through a semiotic lens, it should first be noted how to classify a sign. A sign has two different parts. The first is a signifier, which is the physical thing we experience. The second is a signified, or the response to the signifier (Zaimar, 2017). This can be translated into every single horror movie that a person watches. There are signifiers, whether it be a jumpscare, a sound, or a terrifying image, that invoke feelings of fear and negative reactions in the films audience, which are signified.

Sounds in film are always put forth with fear of the audience in mind. One of the most common techniques in sound production of film is foley artistry. Foley artists are used during the post-production of film in order to create realistic sound effects for a movie. In horror films these sounds effects tend to be more brutal than other films. Whether it be breaking bones, blood gushing, stabbing or axe wielding sound effects, foley artists use common things as props. Snapping pasta in half for

the sound of breaking bones, using wet sponges to emulate blood or flesh, foley artistry is a useful tool in creating the tools necessary in horror films. Another valuable sound in film is the soundtrack. Themes from movies like Halloween and Nightmare on Elm Street are synonymous with Horror. Orchestration in film can be used in order to create suspense, feelings of fear as they get louder with a climax, or even jump-scares following a bout of quiet. Sound is one of the most important tools in film production.

As technology has advanced throughout the years, its advancements can be seen within the production of film. Some of these advancements include prosthetics, CGI, and green screen technology. Since the popularity of horror films in the 1920s, prosthetics have been a terrifying way of creating fear in horror films. One of the earliest examples is in the film *The Phantom Of The Opera*. Lou Chaney, also known as “the man of a thousand faces” played the Phantom, and did all of his own makeup for the film, along with many other horror films that he starred in. His work with prosthetics, which he often kept secret, is still analyzed today and revered as terrifying, even by today's standards. Prosthetics are used in most horror films today, to create monsters, serial killers, aliens, anything scary that a person can think of. Computer generated effects over the last 20 years have become almost seamless compared to the choppy beginnings of the previous century. In today's world, anything is able to be created in order to give an audience a truly scary experience. Some modern examples include the new Ghostbusters film, and its ghosts, ghouls, and the effects of the proton pack used to suck up the invading monsters. The creation of horror with today's technology is proving to be a limitless experience with the continued advancement of technology.

Emotion and Metaemotions

The concept of Metaemotion is an exciting new discussion within the realm of psychology. Metaemotion is defined as “emotions about emotions” (Gottman, 1996). This simply means that metaemotion refers to emotions that are produced in responses to a person’s evaluations on emotions. An example of metaemotion is when a person experiences feelings of sadness, and then experiences embarrassment as a result of feeling sad. When researchers think about metaemotion, they draw much thought from metacognition. Metacognition refers to the process of understanding one’s own thinking. (Chicks, 2013) Metacognition is known as a deeper level of thinking because you are analyzing how you think, which requires thinking in itself. The same concept applies to meta-emotion. This in turn reflects a concept of self-regulation, the same as metacognition does. Metaemotion is utilized for horror lovers and haters alike while watching horror films. When you are presented with a stimulus that invokes fear, you experience emotional along with physiological reactions. Awareness of these reactions can cause more emotional reactions. For example, realizing you are experiencing rapid heartrate and excessive breathing, or general unease as a result of watching a horror film can cause you to experience increased paranoia.

Effects of Horror in Childhood and Adolescence

Up until the 1980s, the Motion Picture Association had rating systems for all ages, and adults, without any middle ground. This grey area for films in between lead to quite a few films being rated for all ages when they contained scary or suggestive content. One of the best examples of this is the 1982 film *Poltergeist*. Originally rated R due to its intense sound, it was appealed and changed to a PG rating, while being marketed as one of the first “family-friendly” horror films (Antunes, 2017). Contrary to popular belief, the film was not extremely criticized for its intense horror and mild rating within the general

public and critics alike upon its release. One film again marketed as “family-friendly” horror which was subjected to extreme scrutiny and controversy however was *Gremlins* (1984). It was heavily regarded as extremely violent, and “seriously mean”. This extreme controversy pushed the MPAA to add an additional rating, PG-13, in the middle of PG and R. This addition has proved to be an important rating that many horror films of today fall into.

Even with the addition of the PG-13 rating, exposure to horror media in childhood is often times than not unpreventable. Whether exposure is through school, friends, or a child’s general curiosity, children often are exposed to horror films at young ages. Children seek out horror films for a variety of reasons, but one of the biggest is societal gender roles. For centuries women have been seen as weak, overtly feminine and reliant of men. Men have been seen as aggressive, macho, strong, and protectors. It has been researched that these themes are present in adolescents while viewing horror films together. Young men view films in order to assert their dominance as men, and to prove that they are not “weak” or scared whilst viewing these films. Young women view these films in order to feel protected by these men (Walters, 2004). No matter the cause, having young children and adolescents view these films can lead to negative reactions. Short-term reactions in children can include anxiety, increased heart rate, feelings of terror, dizziness, and shortness of breath (Sultana, 2021). Long-term effects can also occur, which can, in more cases than not, trickle into adolescence and even adulthood. These include night terrors, panic disorders, anxiety disorders, and in severe cases, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Sultana, 2021).

Physiological Responses to Horror

When a person views a horror film, in response to fear stimuli, they exhibit physiological changes. This is not only due to the film in general, but is

also caused by the sympathetic nervous system, or SNS. This system, a part of the autonomic nervous system, is responsible for “fight-or-flight” reactions (Kox, 2014). These reactions are commonly observed as a result of viewing horror films. Even though you are not in imminent danger when watching a horror film, your body can still treat it as if you are. Once a person exhibits fear stimuli, the body goes into fight-or-flight mode. This can manifest itself in responses such as intense respiration, increased heart rate, rapid eye movement, nausea and physical movements like shaking, and jumping (Nummenmaa, 2021). These responses, coupled with the emotional responses from watching horror films produce intense fear that keeps horror lovers filling up movie theaters.

Emotional Responses to Horror

Like physiological responses to horror movies, emotional responses can invoke lasting reactions on movie-goers. In general, the most common emotional responses to viewing horror films are increased paranoia, anxiety, and nervousness, or the “feeling of butterflies in your stomach”. Any experienced horror fan will tell you that these emotional reactions never truly go away, no matter how many horror films a person views. In fact, emotional responses may actually increase as a result of repeated exposure and knowledge. It has been hypothesized in research that the more a person knows about horror or a horror movie in particular, the more frightening it is to them (Martin, 2019). Metaemotion also plays a role in the emotional reactions that a person experiences. Many horror fans argue that when they are sitting in a movie theater, watching a horror film, they recognize the emotions they feel as a result of fear stimuli. This realization, in turn can lead to happy emotions and adrenaline spikes. These metaemotions cause people to continue to view horror films as it is a pleasurable experience. Emotional responses are also often invoked due to a person’s need for affect, or NFA. People who enjoy horror movies usually have a high NFA, they need to be in situations which will

cause them to invoke emotional responses, much like thrill seekers need to skydive or bungee jump. Emotion is fuel. People put themselves in situation which invoke big reactions because they want to *feel* (Bartsch, 2010).

Conclusion

Horror Movies are one of the most exciting mediums of horror fiction. They allow their viewers to be transported to a world of fear, of the unknown, of creatures unheard of, a place without imminent danger that can bring fear to all. Horror films continue to be on of the biggest genres, one that continues to expand and grow and will only become better with time.

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