

"Why do we pay to get scared?"
The paradoxical lure of horror films

Luciano Mariani info@cinemafocus.eu

[Go to online version \(Italian and English\)](#)



1. Introduction

Horror has always been one of the most popular and enjoyed film genres, and not just by teenagers. The popularity of this genre spans the whole cinema history, from the classical silent movies The cabinet of Dr. Caligari (by Robert Wiene, Germany 1920) and Nosferatu (by F.W. Murnau, Germany 1922) to the several "monster movies" of the 1930s (Frankenstein by James Whale, USA 1931 and Dracula by Tod Browning, USA 1931), from the noir and "gothic" movies of the '40s (Cat people by Jacques Tourneur, USA 1943) to the "splatter" movies of the '70s (The Texas chainsaw massacre by Tob Hooper, USA 1974), reaching out into the new millennium with series like Saw (USA 2004-2010) and the never-ending TV series - not to mention the blending of horror with other genres, science fiction in the first place (for instance, in the Alien series, which started in 1979 and is still under production ...).

The constant, if not growing, popularity of horror makes the question in the title of this Dossier even more intriguing: why do people buy a product for which, out of the context of the movie, they feel different negative and increasingly stronger emotions, from fear to terror, from shock to disgust? What are the psychological mechanisms which allow viewers, not only to bear with intrinsically unpleasant if not repulsive images and sounds, but also to feel pleasure in this experience? In other words, how is it possible to be shocked or disgusted and, at the same time, lured and charmed by what we see and hear?

2. The intrinsic features of horror

Before considering viewers' psychological reactions and the several different explanations which were given for them in the course of time, we need to briefly summarize the specific features of this

film genre, which cause its constant attraction. Walters (2004) states that all horror movies a) cause a degree of tension; b) are relevant for the viewers, i.e. generate interest; and c) display a sense of unrealism.

Tension is a feature of (nearly) all film genres, embodying interest stimulation and motivation to start and continue watching them. By and large, we all go to the movies so that we can watch a problem and its resolution: how will certain characters, living in a particular context, be able to reach (or fail to reach) certain goals, while, in most cases, coping with obstacles or facing challenges? However, the tension which is inherent to horror movies goes well beyond the sense of mystery, suspense or surprise which are the staple diet of many, if not all, movies, from thrillers to adventure films, from fantasy to war movies. There is something more in horror: if fear is the most generic term to define its key emotion, fear itself can have many faces: dread (with corresponding feelings of unrest and anxiety), fright and shock (often associated with surprise), alarm for an impending danger, dismay and consternation before puzzling perspectives, panic and anguish (with their implications of lack of control and helplessness), terror ... This escalation of fears is associated with different, but equally negative, emotions, which enrich fear with new, disturbing feelings: violence in all its forms and its effects, especially on the human body, particularly bleeding or spilling somebody's blood (which are typical of the so-called gore or splatter movies), the sadistic brutality, up to disgust or repulsion when watching elements, whether human or otherwise, which can lead to feelings of sickness or loathing. More recently, the term torture porn has been coined to refer to movies where extreme violence is seen as pornography, since in both cases we are dealing with images which most people would judge as offensive or disturbing.

The second feature of horror is its relevance for the viewers, i.e. the creation of interest through the introduction of a context within which fear can display all its effects. From this standpoint, however, not all viewers can be excited by the same fears to the same degree.

There are fears which we might call universal, since they are part and parcel of "human nature" and of its evolutionary development: particularly the fear of the dark, of danger (especially if associated with the unknown) and of death.

There are also fears which could be defined as culturally or historically conditioned: these are often linked with typical obsessions of a certain period, which are reflected by movies through symbolic elements, only indirectly linked to the original causes.

One obvious example is [Godzilla](#) (by Inoshiro Honda, Japan 1954), the prehistorical monster brought to life by the explosion of an H-bomb, in a period (the 1950s) suffused with the psychosis of nuclear war.

Other examples are the "zombie" movies through which George A. Romero in his [Night of the living dead](#) (USA 1968) showed the end of the American myth and the horror of all the casualties of the Vietnam war, thus hinting at the fact that we are the real monsters, and not the country we are fighting against. We shall come back to this aspect of horror as a mirror of collective fears linked to particular historical-cultural situations, since it constitutes one of the several key explanations of the lure of horror.

Then there are fears which are specific to a particular social group, teenagers in particular (one of the key target audiences of this genre), who, while searching for independence and identity, can

find a mirror of their worries in horror. It is not by chance that many horror movies are set in schools, a context which is potentially dangerous for the social and academic comparison which constantly faces teenagers with success or failure with respect to their schoolmates ([Carrie](#) by Brian De Palma, USA 1976). The fear of one's neighbourhood, no longer seen as a safe context for growing up but rather as a mixture of hypocrisy, hatred and repression is also reflected in movies like [A nightmare on Elm Street](#) (by Wes Craven, USA 1984), where teenagers are, once again, the target of the hideous murderer.

Finally, there are fears more linked to a personal level, thus belonging to a single individual, and here individual differences are of the utmost importance. For example, people who are afraid to lose control or people who need to experience strong emotions are probably more attracted by horror than others. Again, we shall come back to this issue since it is at the basis of another key interpretation of the lure of horror.

The third distinguishing feature of horror movies is the unrealism or hyperrealism of its contexts: its fictional nature is displayed, for instance, in supernatural elements or in gross abnormalities, which tend to increase the sense of psychological distance between viewers, living in a "normal" world, and what they see on the screen. The reality shown on the screen is often clearly fictional and artificial, as is the "cartoon-like" violence or the over-the-top explosion of cruelty, which is easily recognizable as false. The same role is played by the "sense of humour" or "black comedy" which is typical of many horror movies, and which helps to somehow soften the impact of the viewers' "proximity". Other elements of mise-en-scene, like the use of light and music, which often underscores the potential of tension and fear, can also, and almost paradoxically, strengthen the unrealism of vision (our real daily experiences are not accompanied by a "musical score" which heightens their emotional impact). All these elements have a sort of "protective function", since they help viewers to put up with scenes which look unreal thanks to the psychological distance from the screen.

The features we have just listed describe the elements which both attract and disgust viewers of a horror movie, but they do not provide us with an explanation of why so many people are fascinated by horror. To this end, we need to examine a series of hypotheses which, by analysing the deeper dimensions of this phenomenon, have tried to explain the paradoxical attraction of horror. We shall follow a widely accepted typology of explanations (Walters 2004; see also Hess 2017 and Bagnasco 2017).

3. The "deep-end" psychologies

Looking for objective reasons for such a paradoxical phenomenon, it comes as no surprise to learn that "deep-end psychologies", particularly the psychoanalytic ones, have been used right from the start.

Freud dealt with this issue in a very straightforward way in his work "The Uncanny" (1919), where he described as "uncanny" "that sort of dreadful feeling which goes back to what has been familiar to us for a long time". Thoughts and feelings belonging to the first stages of our development, and focused on the fascination with the inexplicable and the mysterious, precede the advent of rationality and the subsequent repression. Horror would allow access - or return - to these vaguely familiar and pleasant thoughts, under socially acceptable circumstances and thus less subject to social repression. "When we are scared by a story or an image, we are actually really obsessed by

infant beliefs or superstitions which we have inherited from our "primitive forefathers" (Freud 1919).

Jung, too, makes reference to the first stages in life, but links horror images (following the just mentioned Freud's words) to archetypes well established since our primeval development and persisting, although in a hidden form, during all the stages of our development as a human race. Thoughts and feelings like the fear of the dark and the potentially dangerous unknown can temporarily be brought back to consciousness, together with rational thought - which reminds us of the fact that consciousness itself has helped us to overcome or put up with these primeval fears.

Horror cinema has long featured as protagonists a male "monster" and a sexually attractive female "victim" ("beauty and the beast", we might say), implying a sadistic relationship between the sexes, closely linked with the male's dominant power and his voyeuristic pleasure. More recently, however, this image has come into question owing to the increasingly powerful female component of horror: the female figure is no longer (or not just) the victim - she can also be the monster, or the bearer of monsters: just think of [Alien 3](#) (by David Fincher, Usa 1992), where the protagonist discovers to her horror that she is carrying the embryo of the monster.

In sum, although we are talking about hypotheses and theories which are not directly testable, horror cinema would allow us to watch what taboos and social restrictions would normally prevent us from watching. Besides, horror can allow us to live sadomasochist drives over again, as well as the worst fantasies of violence, punishment and vengeance, in a context, like the cinematic one, which we know is fictional and therefore does not imply any sort of direct responsibility on our part.

4. Horror as catharsis

Aristotle argues that watching dramatic scenes implying violence, together with the corresponding fear and anguish, has the almost "therapeutic" function of purifying our spirit from negative thoughts and emotions, or, in other words, to give vent to our aggressiveness (thus following psychoanalytic theories), preventing us from experiencing it in reality, and even punishing us if we should imagine to act out that violence in our real daily life. Although this is a fascinating hypothesis, it is not confirmed by scientific research, which, on the contrary, argues that watching horror movies can increase aggressiveness, and that getting used to watching and putting up with violent scenes can make these actions more "acceptable" and almost desirable: in other words, the more we can bear certain situations, the more willing we are to experience them again (in opposition to humorous and erotic scenes, which are supposed to reduce angry and aggressive feelings). Besides, science has proved an inverse correlation between the subjective degree of fear and the tendency to watch horror movies (Mundorf, Weaver and Zillman 1989), as well as a positive correlation between the acceptance of behaviours violating social norms and the interest to watch horror movies (Tamborini, Stiff and Zillmann 1987).

A horror film specialist like John Carpenter once said that "everybody is entitled to one good scare", and this can also relate to the fact that some people can use the horror fiction to compensate for the horror of their own daily life. As a matter of fact, several troubles of our own daily life, like anxiety, anguish, confusion, and so on, are well represented in horror films, so that one can watch them to face one's own personal troubles. Thanks to the fact that horror movies often show extreme situations, i.e. the worst that can happen to somebody, we can, on the one hand, make a mental image of what we should not do to remain within a "safety zone", and on the other hand, we can experience terror and disgust but, both while and after watching the film, we

can think back to what we have seen and relate it in a rational way to our daily experience.

Besides, as soon as we realize that we are in an unreal (or hyperreal) space, which is monitored and thus safe, we can tolerate feelings of fear, which imply pleasure, since they are very different from real dangerous situations. "Within a world of complete chaos, with the population rise, greenhouse effect, toxic waste, acid rain, cancer, deforestation, famine, natural disasters and extinction of plant and animal life, grisly visions of death are thrown at us from all directions, we are scared to breathe the air or turn on our microwave - we are scared to be alive. This tends to desensitize us when it comes to the media, it often allows for entertainment in whatever form to become a cathartic and visceral experience" (Cineniche blog).

5. Excitation transfer

Zillmann (1978) argued that negative emotions stimulated while watching a movie sharpen the positive emotions at the end of the movie, when the plot comes to an end - and this is also true when the positive character does not have the better of her/his antagonist. In practice, some groups of viewers enjoy the film more not at the plot's end, but during the apparently most terrifying sequences (we should also note that the film's ending, especially if positive, is almost always delayed in order to create more suspense, and thus violent scenes make up for most of the viewing time).

Relevance for the viewers is the key factor here, as we have already mentioned. The task of the movie is to manipulate its viewers so that in most cases they can identify with the victims of the situation. It is certainly not difficult to show contexts which viewers can recognize as potentially belonging to their personal sphere, but it is even more productive to show situations superficially different, but based on subconscious or unconscious emotions, which the movie invites us to take as a mirror of our own situation.

However, relevance can also be established by stimulating viewers' identification with the aggressor. "As potential victims, we fear serial killers, and yet we try to identify with their power" (Edelstein 2006): we should remember that in a (real) world where the single individual is often the victim, rather than the creator or controller, of the circumstances, we can find it pleasurable to identify with a character who has complete power over others - a character who often seems motivated by punishing people for their real or imaginary faults. In other words, we can almost feel comprehension or even sympathy for the aggressor, although we recognize the cruelty of his/her actions. Besides, the human mind has a tendency to attribute its own failure to external causes, i.e. to factors which have interfered with one's own decisions and plans. The aggressor in horror movies is often an extremely intelligent being, although he/she is prone to some sort of intrinsic weakness, which will in the end destroy him/her: in this sense, the viewers' identification can be made easier.

Even if the violence in horror movies is mostly of a "graphic" sort (almost as if it belonged to a cartoon), it can be extremely exciting, especially for some kinds of viewers. "Whether one identifies with the victim or with the aggressor, the benefits of catharsis or expiation resulting from this kind of movies can ultimately be perceived as a pleasant experience" (Goldstein 1998).

6. Curiosity, fascination and the search for emotions

Carroll (1990) has argued a very concrete and pragmatic point: curiosity is what drives us to see how people like us would react if faced with "abnormal", or clearly dangerous, situations. In other words, getting out of "normal" contexts allows us to take pleasure in "dreaming about" what might happen once common social norms are violently violated. This equals to a sort of "exploration" both of our fears and of our beliefs and attitudes towards the world - an exploration which is carried out, as we said, in all the safety conditions of a movie theatre.

To this end, it is interesting to remark how the role played by the spectator in many horror movies (as in other film genres) can be described as an "omniscient but not omnipotent" person: in other words, we can be in a position to know more than what the film characters know (as Hitchcock often does - playing with suspense by making us aware of the dangers that the characters are running), but at the same time we can do nothing to change the situations. Thus we are conscious viewers and also, since we are aware of what is happening or is about to happen, we are in a way responsible for the events. We are in a position to simulate an experience ("pretending" that situations are real, "as if" we really took part in them), which allows us to feel a kind of fear which is functional to the film's narrative but is not simulated: we are not actors, who are really pretending to be afraid of something - we do experience fear up to its extremes. "The fact that we are fictionally threatened by a danger (which we are not) causes a reaction which is indistinguishable from a real feeling of fear for an external observer, but which actually differs for us, who are feeling that emotion. It is a sort of "near-fear", a fear we are well aware of through our introspection, the fear for something "which is not really frightening"" (Cantone 2017). A movie like [Funny games](#) (by Michael Haneke, Austria 1997, re-shot by the director with the same title for the American market in 2007), which plays with a very strong "sadistic suspense", makes us active participants of the situation, together with the victims, thus raising the intriguing question of point of view: aren't we, as active spectators who share the experience shown on the screen, jointly responsible for the violence? There is no catharsis in this movie, nor are there escape routes which somehow justify the fact that we go on watching despite what we see.

7. Individual differences

However, it is not altogether easy to provide coherent explanations of viewers' reactions. For example, we have already pointed out that people who accept behaviours violating social norms seem to be more interested in horror movies - but at the same time many viewers also seem to approve of the punishment that the "monster" inflicts on a whole lot of characters who have in turn violated social norms (all sorts of crimes, promiscuous sexual behaviours, etc.), or who have simply been so "stupid" as to put themselves in dangerous situations (like entering a condemned house, going into a wood by night, follow the traces of paranormal events, and so on). It is as if, through the punishments inflicted on the screen, spectators express their feelings of "retributive justice", thus considering as positive acts of violence if somehow justified (Weaver 1991). For instance, in [Saw](#) (by James Wan, USA 2004, and in its several sequels) the victims are in no way innocent people and therefore (almost) nobody escapes death.

Individual differences, in any case, are an important factor in explaining people's disposition to watch horror movies. For example, people who are fascinated by "high risk" behaviours (like extreme sports, or even some professionals like war correspondents) would seem to have a higher tendency to be lured by horror movies, even in comparison with other film genres which, although filled with elements of novelty and surprise, do not provide that special "thrill" and do not get the adrenalin going - which horror movies usually do; and this, despite the fact that, quite contrary to other genres, horror movies do not always come to "happy endings". In these cases, people would

seem to look for and face extremely risky situations in order to test their own limits, i.e. to see how far they can go, to accept extreme challenges.

However, there are limits, too, in our ability to bear with and find pleasure in watching the "unwatchable": if the images on the screen go well beyond our expectations for terror, even high levels of tolerance cannot be exceeded. Just remember some viewers' reactions while watching [The Blair Witch Project](#) (by Daniel, Myryck, Eduardo Sanchez, USA 1999).

Still in the realm of individual differences, we have already mentioned teenagers' fascination with horror, compared to, e.g. elderly people who, being aware of their own weaknesses, do not fancy (or no longer fancy) movies which ask them to face challenges no longer coherent with their age. At the other end of the spectrum, we know that very little children have problems in telling fact from fiction, and this can explain why they are easily frightened. This is consistent with the fact that as adults we can enjoy certain movies which, when seen as little children, had filled our minds with negative emotions.

All in all, different people show different motivations in enjoying horror movies, and these motivations are not fixed, but are subject to changes in time and with regard to particular movies.

8. The role played by gender

It has been observed that, in a teenage couple, the boy seems to enjoy a horror movie much more if the girl sitting next to him seems terrified, and, conversely, the girl seems to be more involved in the movie if she perceives to be sitting next to a boy who shows complete self-control (Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf and Aust 1986). In other words, the boy can show his courage and the girl her need for protection (Zillmann e Gibson 1986), thus confirming social roles and identities which are often attributed (even in stereotyped ways) to males and females. This hypothesis should obviously be accepted with extreme care, since it does not explain, for example, why some people prefer to watch a horror movie alone, or why in many cases girls (rather than boys) seem to prefer and choose this kind of movie - or what happens when adolescence comes to an end.

9. Social fears and anxieties

We have already mentioned the fact that many horror movies seem to reflect, as in a mirror, and in a symbolic form, the anxieties, worries and fears that afflict whole generations at particular times in history (Skal 1993). Besides "monsters", like Godzilla, which, being generated by nuclear radiation, embodied the psychotic fear of nuclear destruction in the '50s, recall the fear of totalitarian regimes in the '30s, which paralleled the great success of movies introducing man-generated monsters, like [Frankenstein](#) (by James Whale, USA 1931). Many US movies of the '50s showed threatening but also cunning aliens, who were even able to replace humans - a clear reference to the fear of communism as a force which could subvert not just public order but individual minds as well: just think of movies like [The thing \(From another world\)](#) (by Christian Nyby, USA 1951) and [Invasion of the body snatchers](#) (by Don Siegel, USA 1956). The same can be said about the fear of serial killers in the '90s, as witnessed by [The silence of the lambs](#) (by Jonathan Demme, USA 1991). The revival of "zombie" movies at the start of the new century could refer to the new fears generated by the 9/11 slaughter and by the subsequent wars in the Middle East.

Finally, we need to keep in mind that, even though some kinds of movies can stimulate certain anxieties and fears in particular cultures, these same movies can often stimulate strong emotions

even in different cultures, since they act on fears that, as we have seen, have a universal character, or, at the very least, are cross-cultural in nature.

10. Conclusion

"Horror films are popular because they speak to the basic human condition, to existential fear, and to people's attempts to overcome their fear belief systems. For some, horror movies exacerbate existential fear, yet for many others, watching a horror film is a way to put existential fear into its proper perspective. That which frightens us becomes less intimidating once it is understood; the unknown is the basis of many of our deepest fears. Horror pictures afford people the opportunity to articulate, identify, and manage their fears by taking an abstract concept like fear and concretizing it into stimuli that are projected onto a television screen or a movie screen ... The horror genre's potential [is] a metaphor for the human condition and people's attempts to cope with this condition" (Walters 2004).

References

- Bagnasco A. 2017. *Horror: la psicologia che te li fa amare*, <http://www.comunicativa-mente.it/horror/>
- Cantone D. 2017. "Perché guardiamo gli horror", *Endoxa/Prospettive sul presente*, Anno 4, No. 18, <https://endoxai.net/2017/03/26/perche-guardiamo-gli-horror/>
- Carroll N. 1990. *The philosophy of horror, or Paradoxes of the heart*, Routledge, New York and London, <https://guionterror.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/philosophy-of-horror.pdf>
- Cineniche Blog. *A study on fear and pleasure in the horror film*, <http://cineniche.blogspot.com/p/study-on-fear-and-pleasure-in-horror.html>
- Edelstein D. 2006. "Now playig at your local multiplex. Torture porn", *New York magazine*, <http://nymag.com/movies/features/15622/>
- Goldstein J.H.1998. *Why we watch. The attractions of violent entertainment*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Hess J.P. 2017. The psychology of scary movies, <https://filmmakeriq.com/courses/psychology-scary-movies/>
- Mundorf N., Weaver J., Zillman D. 1989. "Effects of gender roles and self perceptions on affective reactions to horror films", *Sex roles*, Vol. 20, Issue 11-12, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00288078>
- Skal D.J. 1993. *The monster show: A cultural history of horror*, W.W.Norton, New York.
- Tamborini R., Stiff J., Zillmann D. 1987. "Preference for graphic horror featuring male versus female victimization", *Human Communication Research*, 13.
- Walters G.D. 2004. "Understanding the popular appeal of horror cinema: An integrated-interactive model", *Journal of Media Psychology*, Vol. 9, No. 2, <https://www.scribd.com/document/285716133/Understanding-the-Popular-Appeal-of-Horror-Cinema>
- Zillman, D. 1978. "Attributions and misattributions of excitatory reactions", in Harvey, J. H., Ickes, W., Kidd, R. F. (Eds), *New directions in attribution research*, Vol. 2, Erlbaum, Hillsdale, NJ.
- Zillmann D., Gibson R. 1996. "Evolution of the horror genre", in Weaver J, Tamborini R. (Eds.), *Horror films: Current research in audience preferences and reactions*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mahwah, NJ.
- Zillmann D., Weaver J.B., Mundorf N., Aust C.F. 1986. "Effects of an opposite-gender companion's affect to horror on distress, delight, and attraction", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51, 3.



Want to know more?

* From the [Filmmaker IQ](#) website:

[The psychology of scary movies](#), a course by J.P.Hess

* [Psychological appeal driving the popularity of ultra-violent horror films](#), by David Innes

* From the *Science and Religion Today* website:

[Why are some people more attracted to scary movies than others are?](#), by Stuart Fischhoff

cinemafocus.eu