



**“Media Monsters: An Exploration of Fear and Enjoyment in
Film”**

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Abstract

For a genre full of gore, violence, and terror, Horror is puzzlingly popular in the entertainment industry. Even films with meager budgets and campy effects hold a special place in the public consciousness, with classic movie monsters taking their place in music, cereal boxes, and theme parks as some of the most famous characters in cinema. Their popularity, despite their gruesome subject matter, begs the question of what makes horror so enjoyable. Perspectives drawing on psychology, biology, and film theory conclude that the thrill comes from experiencing fear in a safe space. To this end, horror films seek to straddle the line between more and more convincing scares and an ever-present acknowledgment that everything is fake. This paper attempts to identify this duality in horror film between realism and predictability and discovers that many of the features that set horror apart as a “low brow” or “predictable” genre are major pros in favor of it. Repetition of the same typical monsters and tropes allows the genre to address some of the most deep-seated human fears from multiple fresh perspectives. At the same time, the repetition of similar plotlines and symbols is crucial to maintaining their fiction. Ultimately, the best-remembered horror films are those that speak to many deep human fears at once, in new and creative ways.

Introduction

From the 18th-19th century wave of Gothic literature to the popular “slasher” films of the 80s, horror has been a lucrative niche in the entertainment industry. Even low-budget horror films with small sets and cheap effects still reap enormous returns in the box office, some making hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue (Bui). Why is it so easy for horror films to succeed with audiences? What makes an abandoned house or a shot of the moon so enthralling? Furthermore, the horror genre seems to depend consistently on the same tropes: ghosts, creepy little girls, haunted houses, and serial killers. Even after countless iterations, something about these “classic” horror tropes continues to provoke screams. While the enjoyment of horror films varies significantly between individuals, the industry does well for a subject matter that is so unappetizing and repetitive. This paper aims to explore audience' relationship with fear in the entertainment industry. It will draw on biological frameworks, psychology, and film analysis to explain what makes the most famous horror films terrifying and entertaining.

Fear vs. Enjoyment

The first puzzle when discussing horror stories is to consider how fear—a biological aversion to harmful stimuli—turns into something people seek on their nights off. Stephen King, one of the most prolific horror writers today, suggests that people watch horror “to show that we can, that we are not afraid...” (“Why We Crave Horror Movies”). This statement may be true, but it does not tell the whole story. Anyone who has gone to the theater and seen people jump with delight knows that the fear makes the experience thrilling. Perhaps audiences enjoy such films as a way “to reestablish...feelings of essential normality...” (“Why We Crave Horror Movies”). After all, seeing the nightmare-puzzles inflicted on characters by Jigsaw in *Saw* (2004) can make everyday problems seem inconsequential. However, if the goal is to escape

from mundanity, why watch films that evoke fear instead of joy? Ultimately, King decides that audiences seek horror “to have fun” (“Why We Crave Horror Movies”). Teens swarmed theaters for *Scream* (1996) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) simply because they are fun to watch, even if the characters on-screen are living their worst nightmares. Why is this fun? King credits the preoccupation with horror to the need to “keep the gators fed” (“Why We Crave Horror Movies”). In other words, our fascination with the macabre is a way to safely exercise our curiosity about that which is too unappetizing to talk about in the course of normal life.

To understand this penchant for carnage, it helps to look at the extremes of horror. The *Saw* franchise serves as an excellent example of stories so brutally violent that it becomes difficult to understand the appeal. This subgenre, dubbed “torture-horror,” is almost needlessly gruesome. Other than an innate fascination with gore, it is difficult to think of any reason why one would enjoy it. In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Jeremy Morris calls torture-horror “a manifestation of a recurring form of recreation whose milestones include gladiator battles, inquisitions, and public executions...” (43). According to Morris, the violence and gore in these films appeal to animalistic impulses that have made a home in entertainment for centuries. Some films like *Saw* appeal to a perverted sense of justice, one where people receive over-the-top retribution for their faults. Other movies like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003) lack even that. Morris suggests “one answer is that enjoyment, even that which is sadistic, is infectious” (50). This statement is controversial because it implies that even the horrible deeds of Jigsaw and Leatherface are somehow enjoyable. Furthermore, he argues that the “genius” of torture-horror is that “it transforms the source of fear from a distant other to something familiar within ourselves...the delight of the torturer...is being consciously shared by the audience” (Morris 51). This interpretation is popular: that people who watch horror movies or play horror games are

violent individuals acting on impulse. There are, however, several problems with this sentiment. In his book *Monsters and Mad Scientists: A Cultural History of the Horror Movie*, Andrew Tudor mocks this view, recounting the awkwardness that often comes with telling people he studies horror movies. “Doesn’t it desensitize you?” one genteel lady asked, as if viewing horror movies functioned as a kind of condom of the conscience” (7). By “condom of the conscience,” Tudor means the general assumption that horror is a way to practice deviant behavior safely. On the contrary, he notes that despite people’s concerns, he is mentally sound “with no desire to kick kittens, drink blood, or disembowel members of the moral majority” (Tudor 7). He has loved horror movies since his teens, and his enjoyment is entirely unrelated to any attraction to the macabre. Likewise, many audiences do not experience this supposed enjoyment from violence, only revulsion. A 2007 study by Hourani and King found that:

...the more havoc the evil/antagonist wreaks, the more aroused and negatively disposed toward the antagonist the audience becomes. In films with traditional endings, theory suggests that audience feelings and arousal are then transferred, intensifying audience enjoyment when the evil/antagonist is conquered. (476)

Contrary to the common perception of horror lovers, people do not identify with the killer but actively celebrate their destruction. This reaction is evident in audience responses, such as “He got what he deserved, I really liked that,” and, “Finally a film where the guy actually dies and gets what he deserved” (Hourani and King 488). For the most part, even audiences that enjoy gore do not readily identify with the villain. Indeed, there must be some other process underlying this morbid curiosity.

Perhaps a better explanation for the popularity of horror movies is the biological point of view, which is that the very act of feeling scared is exciting. Physiologically, fear is not very different from excitement. In a dangerous situation, the body switches to “fight or flight” response, headed by the autonomic nervous system (Stemmler 64-65). Fear then manifests in

physiological changes in the form of increased heart rate, breathing, sweat, and goosebumps (Stemmler 6). A similar response arises in situations of excitement, such as rollercoaster rides or jump-scares. These shared physiological responses are implicated in the twin reactions of fright and excitement when watching horror films (Javanbakht and Saab, *Smithsonian.com*). Excitation Transfer Theory, proposed by Dolf Zillman, thus suggests that the physiological arousal from watching a horror film remains intact and that it can be redirected to positive feelings when the movie ends and audiences realize they are safe (Cummins). However, this does not take into account the yelps of delight *during* the movie. Instead, it is more appropriate to say that the enjoyment comes from the autonomic nervous system response minus the real danger. Alfred Hitchcock, another horror celebrity, corroborates this in his essay “The Enjoyment of Fear”:

...millions seek [fear] vicariously, in the theater and in the cinema. In darkened auditoriums they identify themselves with fictitious characters who are experiencing fear, and experience, themselves, the same fear sensations (the quickened pulse, the alternately dry and damp palm, etc.), but without paying the price. (117)

The raised heart rate and breathing with the knowledge that no real threat exists, leaves the audience thrilled and on-edge in a controlled atmosphere. Almost all horror movies are specifically designed to achieve this physical response, to “stimulate intense emotional responses in spite of an awareness of fictionality” (Baird 13). The music, sounds, and staging of each frame are meant to increase the suspense and ultimate startle payoff. For example, scenes meant to build tension are often shot in long takes, punctuated by quick cuts to startle viewers (Hayward and VanDerWerff).

Predictability Relieves Realism

Many horror films seek to create more and more realistic scares by setting the story in believable circumstances. Found footage films presented as amateur documentaries use shaky

camera work and basic-looking editing to convince the viewer they were filmed during real events. The epitome of these is *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), which features a group of film students--Mike, Josh, and Heather--in the woods with a video camera, hoping to investigate the local legend of the Blair Witch. What sets this film apart is the advent of a never-before-seen advertising campaign that aspired to bring the horror to life. First, the trailer identifies this as actual footage found a year after the students disappeared, including news broadcasts, interviews with parents, and police analyses of crime scene evidence. The editor layered this footage over the footage of Heather apologizing for getting her friends involved in the Blair Witch Project. The trailer ends with a black screen and a link to the website. In this way, the filmmakers also utilized the growing internet to spread the word. This strategy proved particularly effective at a time when it was unclear whether the amateur site was a corporate hoax or the work of actual college students. The site features character bios of all the “filmmakers,” as well as interviews and research conducted by the characters about mysterious local disappearances. The actors were specifically selected for their improvisation abilities to further the illusion. They used their real names and their IMDB pages listed them as “missing, presumed dead” (Hawkes, *Telegraph.co.uk*). After the movie’s release, they were instructed to lay low to convince audiences that perhaps they were, in fact, dead. According to an article on the subject, “the hoax went so viral, Donahue's mother received condolence cards” from concerned viewers (Marthe, *Broadly*). A study analyzing internet news group discussions after the release explains:

The film plays upon the expectations of the recipients, tempting some into wondering for a brief moment "What if it were true?" and potentially confusing others into taking the fiction to be fact and acting upon this mistaken conviction. (Schreier)

Altogether, this mockumentary-style creates an uncomfortable viewing experience, giving audiences the sensation that they are watching real events unfold.

Though effectively done in *The Blair Witch Project*, some degree of realism is necessary for *any* horror film. After all, “movies must have enough of a ring of truth about them to be frightening in the first place if they are to be entertaining” (Hoekstra et al. 135). However, it must always be clear that the story is fictional, or the fear becomes too realistic. This distinction between “art-horror” and “natural horror (the terrible things that happen in the everyday world)” (Fahy 3) is at the root of horror movie enjoyment. Ax murderers and rampaging monsters are only fun with the promise that the credits will eventually roll. A study on the horror-movie response by Hoekstra et al supports this. In this study, participants were asked to recall a movie they saw as a child and rate their fear. They note that “the more realistic the movie was perceived as being, the more fright was expressed,” which could be desirable or not, depending on the viewer (Hoekstra et al. 130). Naturally, the more realistic the threat appeared, the more fear the participants reported. Furthermore, they found that “viewers reported more sleep problems when these movies were perceived as being more realistic, a perception far more likely to occur at younger ages when the fantasy-reality distinction is blurred” (Hoekstra et al 133). Perhaps this is the reason why children react with genuine fear rather than excitement, continuing to fear monsters hidden under their beds even after the movie has ended. Conversely, the same study reported that children who grew up with horror films reported enjoying them more, perhaps because they were accustomed to the format. In order to enjoy horror, it seems these films must fit into a predictable medium, a form that audiences saw before. *The Philosophy of Horror* explains:

Just as audiences crave the fear it elicits, they also take pleasure in its predictability. It is this safety net of predictability- of closing a book, of leaving the theater when the lights go back on, or of knowing that a professional skydiver will pull the cord on your parachute- that enables us to enjoy the thrilling, horrifying journey. It is this safety net that makes horror so much fun. (Fahy12)

According to this view, predictability is crucial. Only in knowing that the experience is harmless can one enjoy the adrenaline rush. In a way, predictability exactly counteracts the realism of a story: while one makes it scarier, the other makes it more bearable. What emerges from this assertion is that horror stories must maintain a level of implausibility in order to preserve enjoyment.

Repetition: A Double-Edged Sword

The horror genre often relies on predictable mechanics and tropes to maintain the understanding that this is fiction. By repeating typical plotlines and reviving old monsters, the genre creates a common vocabulary to talk about fear. Indeed, for a genre that relies so heavily on suspense, it is outlandishly predictable. Time and again, production companies consistently return to vampires, werewolves, haunted houses, ghosts, possessed dolls, or the latest zombie apocalypse. In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Fahy notes the repetition of "recurring structures, narratives, images, and figures." He writes:

Horror audiences...tend to 'desire that the same stories be told again and again,' but they also find pleasure in the subtle variations of the expected formula. This kind of repetition, both in varying the conventions of the genre and in the form of sequels, disrupts a fixed interpretation of the text. (2)

Horror films repeatedly feature teens camping, engaging in sexual activity, and then they are swiftly killed off one by one. It has reached a point in which the mere image of an upside-down cross, a coffin, or a full moon immediately indicates the presence of demons, vampires, or werewolves. Nevertheless, audiences continue to enjoy the same stories. Fahy argues that this is not a failure of the genre or a lack of creativity, but rather a medium through which to cover new and exciting approaches to horror. A representative example of this is the zombie story, which includes widely different approaches to the same premise. By re-addressing zombies in different ways, the genre broadens the conversation on their symbolic meaning. For example, zombies

symbolize death; they return from the grave to steal what makes one conscious and individual (the “brains”). However, they can be fast or slow, much like the approach of death. In *World War Z* (2013), for example, the zombie hoard is overwhelming in speed and number. They are unrelenting, evading helicopter fire and leaping over walls to slam into their prey. The overall impression is of a sudden, violent, and gory death. Conversely, zombies of *The Walking Dead* (2010) appear tame by comparison. Protagonists need only wait for them to stumble over before moving them out of the way (“Them” 12:00-12:30). Hence, the threat is not so much the attack, but rather the slow, inevitable death that characters must experience. On the other end of the spectrum, zombie stories can be comedic, like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004). In this interpretation, Shaun’s blasé attitude toward the apocalypse takes an amusing tone. The audience’s surprise when Shaun does not react as expected creates humor. The humorous angle then provides an entirely new way to approach the fear of death: this fear is rational and a nonchalant attitude towards the apocalypse is ridiculous. Thus, the symbol of the zombie allows one to approach the fear of death from multiple angles. In this way, the reliable format of scary stories ensures that deep-seated fears are approached in new and gruesome ways without becoming too realistically disturbing. However, it is essential to acknowledge that repetition is a double-edged sword: if too much is recycled, the films become tired and dull, ruining the enjoyment altogether.

The repetition in the horror genre occurs not just in individual monsters but in its overall themes. *Monsters and Mad Scientists* by Andrew Tudor delineates three distinct narrative categories, namely the knowledge narrative, invasion narrative, and metamorphosis narrative. The “knowledge” narrative is characterized by a discovery that unleashes a threat to the world. In *Frankenstein*’s case, this was due to “‘meddling’ in things that one should not,” but the discovery could also be accidental (Tudor 84). This classic tale about how much humanity can

know vs. how much should humanity know is present in many of the most famous horror stories. In some, like *Frankenstein*, or Hawthorne's *The Birthmark*, the story serves as a cautionary tale against pursuing the unknown. In Lovecraft's *The Call of Cthulhu*, the characters' rational world slowly unravels as they attempt to research the supernatural. All of these stories suggest that there are some things one is simply not meant to understand. Though it has become less common in recent decades, the fame of these knowledge narratives still speaks to the common fear of the unknown.

The "invasion" narrative, which Tudor considers the "simplest of horror-movie forms" refers to any story in which a monster simply arrives and wreaks havoc (Tudor 90). It can be a monster of any form, though unlike the knowledge narrative in which characters actively pursue the unknown, here it arrives uninvited. *Dracula* is a good example of the invasion narrative: The book emphasizes that Dracula is a foreigner, and his power stems directly from the soil of his foreign land. Tudor also points out the "sexual overtones of vampirism," the "sustained animal references," and "the life/death opposition" common in specifically vampire stories (92). Once again, the archetype of "the invader" or "the monster movie" provides a basis to discuss more specific threats and fears. Within that discussion, individual monsters, such as "the vampire," allow for further specificity:

Many vampire movies, for example- including Universal's first *Dracula* in 1931- have recourse to the image of long fingers emerging from the vampire's coffin, its lid slowly rising- the creature symbolically and actually penetrating the secular world. Later, such images became more aggressive, with whole corpses thrusting their way out of their graves; but even as early as the 1946 *Return of the Vampire* there is a quite startling shot of a vampire's hand erupting from behind the soil. (Tudor 92)

The monster--symbolic of death--can either arrive slowly or bursting out of a grave, offering either an aggressive or insidious form of invasion. The specific choice of monster, such as vampire (death or censured sexual desire) or werewolf (animal instinct), in addition to the chosen

method of invasion (aggressive vs. insidious), determines the specific types of fear a work can address.

Lastly, the metamorphosis narrative is more subtle but still quite common. In it, people themselves become the monsters, and the villain becomes their distorted humanity. Famous cases, like *Dr. Jekyll and Mister Hyde* or Two-Face from Batman's *The Dark Knight* (2008), show humanity and the monster side-by-side, inextricably linked. Zombie apocalypse and disaster movies notably use this narrative to compare large-scale threats with simple people becoming corrupt. The second wave of danger often comes from the chaos of broken social order and undoing of law, as in *The Walking Dead* and *Birdbox* (2018). With no civilized structure, these films suggest people reverting to animalistic and monstrous tendencies can be just as terrifying as the end of the world.

Ultimately, the repetition of themes is an asset to the genre because it creates a springboard for new twists and approaches to the same human fears. However, the added flavor is crucial: without fresh elements and sparks of realism, a film loses its impact. This dullness could be why so many sequels of otherwise well-received movies fail to do well. Films such as *Book of Shadows: Blair Witch 2* (2000), the *Saw* franchise, and *Jason Takes Manhattan* (1989) reiterate the same threat, one which is no longer unknown. At this point, predictability completely overwhelms any aspect of realism, and the films become tedious rather than scary.

A “Lowbrow” Artform

In the same way that low budget and repetitive tropes can enhance horror movies, the horror genre seems to excel at turning “bad” writing techniques into strengths. *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors* author Dominic Lennard offers a striking interpretation of the genre:

Horror is an archetypal “lowbrow” form, after all, and thus a particularly interesting subject for the simple reason that common sense tells us it should not be scrutinized. As a genre, horror can use its perceived immunity to serious critique to get away with murder. This is one reason why its representations have been the subject of considerable academic interest. William Paul writes that “the negative definition of the lower works would have it that they are less subtle than higher genres. More positively, it could be said that they are more direct. (5)

Because of its preoccupation with the worst parts of humanity and its appeals to base instincts and worries, horror is considered “lowbrow.” Though a uniquely-adult genre, it is critically seen as juvenile and sometimes considered unworthy of serious academic consideration. Lennard notes that such a base reputation allows the horror genre to accomplish what “higher-brow” genres cannot. It can be direct with its point or meaning showing a dead person to symbolize death or a person transforming to symbolize the worst sides of themselves. Ironically, the appeal of the genre is precisely its ability to address deep-seated fears directly and unabashedly.

Commonly Repeated Archetypes

The tropes most frequently repeated are presumably those that speak to the most common fears, and thus generate the most effective thrill payoff. In many cases, these are obvious: innate, evolutionary fears about bodily harm, predators, or disease. More difficult to explain are supernatural fears, which have no physical basis. Once again, the answer lies in some combination of biological and psychological explanations. According to the evolutionary approach, many human fears merely stem from ancestral survival instincts, like avoiding predators and disease. Even today, encountering a bear in the forest engages our fight-or-flight response. It therefore makes sense that horror movies feature super-predators (*King Kong* (2005), *Godzilla* (1998), *Jaws* (1975)), killers with knives (*Psycho* (1960), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *Scream* (1996)), and devastating disease pandemics (*The Walking Dead*, *World War Z*, *28 Days Later* (2003)). Nevertheless, this neglects the entire swath of supernatural horror, which has no

biological or rational basis. In these cases, it seems that many classic horror monsters act as physical manifestations of deeper fears. While ghosts and zombies do not appear to attack in real life, they do speak to fears of death and disease. Monster attacks, apocalypses, and alien invasions all address large-scale fears of society crumbling. Tales of the dead seeking vengeance, as seen in *The Black Cat* and *The Tell-Tale Heart* (Poe 1843), provoke social fears of confrontation by past mistakes. Masked individuals as in *The Purge* (2013), *Friday the 13th*, and *Halloween* (2018)) may invoke another biological and social fear of strangers. People cannot trust each other because one cannot gauge their intentions from their facial expressions. The “invasion” narrative as a whole also evokes common human fears of loss of control, as something unknown and unwelcome suddenly throws the normal world into chaos.

The Unknown

Additionally, many classic tropes are manifestations of the collective human fear of the unknown, which are evolutionarily explained as an innately human fear of the dark. Arguably the most obvious is again the fear of death, inevitable yet unpredictable. Other forms of the unknown, however, are deemed frightening because they are unfamiliar. Lovecraft, the author of terrifying works like the aforementioned *Call of Cthulhu*, is famous for this type of “cosmic horror”; the dread that arrives when something triggers “instinctual awareness...of the paltry state of human understanding” (Asma 154-155).

At the most basic level, almost all horror movies capitalize on the human fear of the unknown. Everything from a powerful unknown entity to a dark speaks to the distrust of what humans cannot see or touch. This distrust is one reason that horror lends itself so well to the cinema because it thrives on *not* showing just as much as it shows. Not only are poor lighting, mediocre camera work, and limited sets all still usable for horror films, they can improve the

overall impression of terror by leaving everything else up to the viewer's imagination. Susan Bier's *Birdbox* (2018) shows the epitome of this concept, centering on the apocalyptic effects of a monster that drives people to insanity by taking the form of their deepest fears. The film never once shows the monster, choosing instead to blindfold both the characters and the camera itself. The monster is "an entity that takes on a form of your worst fears, or your deepest sadness, or your greatest loss" (*Birdbox*, Bier). For this reason, the film never had to come up with a monster. By placing the viewer in the same position as the protagonist—blind—the monster becomes as terrible as any person can imagine. This effect is far scarier than any model a set designer could create. *Birdbox* Director Susanne Bier explains in an interview with *Bloody Disgusting*: "Whatever those beings are, they tap into your deepest fear. Everybody's deepest fear is going to be different from the other person. I think to suddenly take upon a concrete shape in order to illustrate that becomes weak" (Topel, *Bloody-Disgusting.com*). In this way, *not* showing the monster is a more effective way to tap into viewers' fear of the unknown.

A similar phenomenon appears in the ending of *The Blair Witch Project*. The movie ends with Josh separating from the group in an abandoned house, his screams audible from off screen. In a frantic wild-goose chase, Mike and Heather scour the rickety shack for their friend. In the final scene, Heather spots Mike standing in the corner partially off screen. Suddenly, she screams and drops the camera. The movie cuts to black with no explanation of what she saw, nor what happened after. In their interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, the creators admit:

We didn't have any money, so we couldn't do any special effects so we had to figure out how to end it without ruining the rest of the film. We came up with the idea three days before we shot it. We thought it was great — kind of unexplained, but it gave you the idea that something supernatural was happening. (Kinane, *EW.com*)

By leaving the ending open to interpretation and not just showing "a person in a bad witch costume," the directors achieved an ending that was both cheap and eerily effective (Kinane,

EW.com). The directors recall, “When we screened it, people were overwhelmingly confused...However, when asked if they were scared, 19 out of 20 hands went up” (Kinane, *EW.com*). Though the audience does not *see* anything, the simple image of Michael standing in the corner makes one’s hair stand on end. The directors admit that the producers originally wanted something more concrete (Kinane, *EW.com*). They shot several possible endings, but the focus group reaction singled out this scene as the scariest. Ironically, the “easiest” ending to shoot—the one that explained the least—was the most effective at unsettling audiences because it drew on the collective fear of the unknown.

Corrupting the Familiar

While fear of the unknown can explain the vast majority of horror movie components, it does not explain everything. For example, another common device is the perversion of innocence – i.e., when a monster or malignant force invades what is considered pure. Paranormal films commonly rely on the trope of an upside-down cross, signifying the twisting or inversion of religion. *The Exorcist* (1973) attacks innocence in multiple ways. The demonically possessed 12-year old girl Regan makes vulgar and sexualized comments to the priest attending to her. She prods at his moral failures, such as his absence during his mother’s lonely death. Perversion of the innocence of children and religion culminates in the scene where the demon masturbates with a cross. Even though most scenes are not as explicit, perverted innocence frequently appears in horror movies in the form of innocent or otherwise ordinary things behaving unnaturally. Haunted houses are a classic example of this, but other innocent objects are recruited to create a sense of unease. In *Poltergeist* (1982), the sight of kitchen chairs arranged atop the table in an impossible configuration creates an unsettling effect. Children’s dolls in *Annabelle* (2014), *The Boy* (2016), *Child’s Play* (1988), and *Dolly Dearest* (1991) evoke dread when they speak or

move outside of human control. The genre uses children as an ancillary device to provoke unease. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), for instance, uses sounds of children's laughter in the middle of the forest to terrify investigators. *The Babadook* (2014), for example, made the villain a children's book. In *The Exorcist* (1973), the demon creeps into Regan disguised as her imaginary friend. The simple image of a young girl in a nightgown has been used in countless horror films, either innocent, but grossly out of place (*The Shining* (1980), *The Ring* (2002)), or corrupted herself. For example, the first episode of *The Walking Dead* (2010) famously shows a zombie-fied little girl in a nightgown to communicate the sheer scale the disease has reached:

...the set of bunny slippers we see shuffling along the pavement is inhabited not, as one might expect, by an abandoned darling in need of rescue by the sheriff's deputy protagonist, but by its monstrous inverse: a groaning, blood-besmeared and smashed-faced atrocity requiring the swiftest euthanasia law enforcement's six-shooters can deliver. (Lennard 6)

In all of these films, innocence— specifically perverted innocence— signals to viewers that the foe is too ubiquitous to beat; even the most innocent are corrupted. It can touch even things thought to be safe (like one's home, religion, kitchen chairs, children, or toys). Suddenly, the film suggests, one's safe zones can no longer be trusted.

Horror movies deliver some of the biggest blows by violating the boundary between safe and dangerous, known and unknown. Many movies center on the fact that the evil is contained just as a tarantula might seem tame behind glass. This illusion snaps in movies like *The Ring*, where Samara begins to climb out of the TV and into the protagonist's room. Until this point, the rules of Samara's videotape had been contained: her *image* made viewers die of fright. The shock when she steps out of the screen in physical form is, therefore, terrifying. Likewise, the famous "spider-walk scene" from *The Exorcist*, deleted from the original 1973 version (but added back in 2000), is the only instance where Regan leaves the room. A review of the film by

Film Comment Magazine describes it as “even more unsettling than its reputation indicates” (Jones).

What is Scariest?

Almost all horror movies touch on at least one archetypal threat. It seems, however, that the most memorable films juggle a number of them at once while offering a new interpretation of the same tropes. First, many archetypes are built to address multiple fear dimensions. For example, general categories like ghosts and zombies address different sides of the same coin. Though both discuss death, ghosts address the personal, emotional components: loss of loved ones, regrets, guilt, vendettas/vengeance, and passing of the spirit. Zombies, in contrast, revolve around the death of the flesh, as well as humanity’s relationship with the inevitability and harsh anonymity of death. Furthermore, zombie stories combine physical and psychological horror, making them the perfect storm of many fears at once. The apocalypse provides the perfect opportunity to explore how people operate at their worst. In this way, zombie stories explore metamorphosis in more ways than one, such as the psychological changes brought on by desperation that prove just as dangerous as the physical change when becoming undead. Rival bands or deranged maniacs often present just as real a threat as the zombies themselves. Altogether, zombie stories are at once invasion narratives and metamorphosis narratives, complimenting anxieties about death with the fear of living people. Thus, fear of death becomes both physical gore and its form of cosmic horror: an inevitable force that is uncontrollable.

Likewise, specific movies can rise above their genre by elevating their tropes to a new discussion altogether. For example, slasher films by nature address fears of death, disfigurement, and gore. However, *The Shining* adds a new dimension of fear by including not only a psychotic madman and copious amounts of blood (biological fear) but also insanity and unexplainable

psychic forces (fear of unknown). Similarly, *The Blair Witch Project* stood out from most cabin-in-the-woods films by grappling with more than just fear of the dark, the unknown, and “cosmic horror.” It includes perverted innocence in misplaced child laughter, as well as the guilt that Heather and her friends feel for becoming involved in matters beyond their control. Lastly, the film’s real effect comes from addressing the audience’s role as viewers. The realistic edge forces audiences to consider: ‘Is this real? Is this not actually fun?’ *The Exorcist*, too, addresses the unnaturalness and perversion of the innocence of a little girl’s imaginary friend, changing her speech and behavior to be too vulgar for some adults. The looming threat of an entity we cannot understand or control, threatening our very humanity, also relates to the “cosmic horror” described by Lovecraft. Hoekstra et al.’s study corroborates that multiple fear types at once tend to elicit the most robust fear response:

The list of movies generated by participants as being particularly scary are primarily R-rated films involving substantial amounts of gore and violence, often with a supernatural element. Interestingly, although such movies are not generally considered to be very realistic, viewers reported more sleep problems when these movies were perceived as being more realistic. (Cantor 1994 qtd. in Hoekstra et al. 133)

This quote suggests that a mixture of violence and the supernatural is a frightening combination. When these unbelievable situations unfold in realistic settings, the audience’s level of fear increases.

The Exorcist addresses almost every single category of fear mentioned thus far.

Evolutionary fears of death, disfigurement, and disease interplay in Reagan’s lacerations, vomit, head-spinning, and backwards crawling. The aforementioned perverted innocence plays a major role when a small girl begins to speak and act in ways antithetical to both childhood and religion. The same entity preys on social fears by addressing Father Karras in his mother’s voice and taking advantage of the guilt he feels for letting her die alone in a nursing home. In this way, the

demon addresses the audience's fears of their faults brought to light. Furthermore, the film embodies all three of Tudor's narrative categories simultaneously. Indeed, *The Exorcist* is an invasion narrative because the demon violates spiritual/physical boundaries to invade Regan's very person. It violates personal boundaries by knowing things about Father Karras that it should not, and it crosses physical boundaries by leaving Regan's room in an inhuman way. The film also functions as a knowledge narrative, in which medicine and science attempt to understand Regan's condition. Both priests ultimately meet their end by trying to understand and control the demon within her. Regan's story is also a metamorphosis narrative. In it she becomes something altogether inhuman. In this way, the single demon featured in *The Exorcist* speaks to a great number of human fears at once and is seared into audiences' imagination as one of the most famous horror films ever made.

Creative Interplay/Juxtaposition

Perhaps the best-remembered horror films are those that incorporate a great number of archetypal fear narratives, interweave these fears most effectively, or both. All good films seem to have both of these characteristics. First, they address a wide variety of *types* of fears, not just death/disease/disfigurement, but also guilt and insecurity, societal and social fears (estrangement, mass hysteria), and loss of control. Second, they combine them into a single, malignant force in new and creative ways. As described in *Bad Seeds and Holy Terrors*, "monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening" (Lennard 12). The "horrific cognitive dissonance" that Lennard describes is what remains in the audience's mind long after seeing the movie, and it sets apart the effective horror movies from cheap jump scares (12). The way that fears are integrated into a story, the form they take, and their pairing/juxtaposition with each other is what gives each horror film its own unique take on what terrifies audiences most.

Ultimately, a lasting horror film is one that forces audiences to consider the reality of their deepest fears by giving a face to otherwise formless anxieties. This face can be markedly direct— a decomposed body to represent death or a wolf-man to represent animalistic human tendencies. As a “lowbrow” form of art, horror embraces amateur storytelling techniques to speak openly about what other genres will not show outright. It fills seats by giving people the chance to meet their fears in person in a thrillingly cathartic but controlled way. It is the films that can most accurately name and grapple with the deepest human fears that remain in the audience’s collective consciousness. Horror interweaves many fears at once in a fresh and unseen way, creating a film that will continue to unsettle audiences long after its release.

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