

The Art of Paying to Get Scared

Cesar Caballero

Southern Utah University

INDS 6000

Dr. Cynthia Kimball Davis

October 18, 2020

Abstract

This paper discusses the possible reasons as to why people love horror experiences including movies and haunted attractions. The paper explains people tend to love horror because of their most primal emotions (fear and adrenaline) and based on gender and loneliness. Furthermore, it is stated that horror has evolved concurrently with modern times, thus connecting with the current audience. It is concluded that people could love horror because while they love to get scared and feel that adrenaline rush, they connect with the realistic portrayal of horror (and its social commentary) yet feel safe since they know it is not really happening to them.

The Art of Paying to Get Scared

“Do you want to feel my feet?” I look at my nephew in disbelief and laugh out loud. We are sitting at a lavish movie theatre attending a sold-out midnight double feature showing of *The Conjuring Part 1 & 2*. He looks anxious and the dim light of the screen reflected on his somewhat wet face, tells me he is sweating. I think for a moment and soon his question makes sense: he must be sweating on his feet as much as he is on his face. He laughs back and nervously says: “This is too scary... why are we paying to get scared?” I think to myself: I did not force him to come with me. In fact, he was the one with the idea; my sons were smarter and decided to sit this one out. But my nephew and I knew deep inside that this was a one-of-a-kind experience for us horror lovers. So, why are we watching these two scary movies back to back in the dark at such late hours? In fact, why do we crave to be scared? Why do we love horror? Jonathan Norman (2018) in “*Personality Types and The Enjoyment of Horror Movies*” states, “Ever since its introduction, popularity of horror fiction has puzzled the minds of people across a variety of cultures and backgrounds” (p. 56). Many people (I included) from so many different cultures seem to be enthralled by horror in general. So, what is the reason behind this?

Love to be Afraid

There must be some rational explanation behind the love for horror. After all, it seems to only be growing in popularity. As a matter of fact -being more specific to only movies, the horror genre has been revitalized and in recent years has produced hit movies that have grossed north of \$300 million dollars in a single year (Goodwin, 2018, p.1). What makes these movies so enticing for those of us who love them? Some experts argue that humans love to be afraid because it is one of their most primal emotions while others argue that loneliness and gender are predictors to the type of people who enjoy these movies (Norman, 2018). In the eyes of these

experts, lonely men are the ones who tend to want to experience their most primal emotions (fear). If that were a checklist, I would be able to check off “gender” and “primal emotions” (as a matter of fact, I love to be scared), but I am not lonely. In fact, when I conversed with my nephew (my movie buddy of choice for horror movies) about what the experts said, he referred to me as a ‘social butterfly’. Ah, the plot thickens: is there more to loving horror than gender and loneliness?

Digging Deeper into Horror Territory

If horror is what someone is looking for, they are bound to find plenty of it at the multiplexes or on demand platforms these days. Is there something wrong with these people who enjoy them? Are my nephew and I in the wrong for loving such a genre? Not necessarily.

Luciano Mariani states:

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 (2018, p. 4).

Apparently, watching something that stresses us or makes us anxious can help us feel better in a way. On that thought, the fact of seeing what happens to the villains in these movies also shows that if we were ever to act those negative thoughts, we would probably end up caught like most of them do and paying a dear price. Furthermore, seeing the villains be punished at the end is always comforting and rewarding! Are then, horror movies stress relievers in a way? Is that all there is to why people like me or my nephew love them even though they still terrify us? Mariani

further states “ 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” (2018, p.5). It seems as if these movies in fact serve a function as stress relievers and reminders of what could happen if we acted like the characters in the movies. Could that be it? Could that be why we love them? Maybe they serve the purpose of being cautionary tales, in a way. Is there more to this equation? All I know is that whenever I do something horror related such as watching movies, going to Halloween festivals or haunted houses (more on that in a minute), I do get more anxious and stressed than I normally am, yet I am enjoying it. I enjoy horror so much that I love paying to experience it!

Haunted Housing: Yes, it is a verb!

Just like horror movies, haunted house attractions are lucrative and yes, a favorite of mine. Every year, I make it a personal point to travel through the state visiting as many haunted attractions as possible with my two sons and nephew in tow. We call it ‘Haunted Housing!’ and we love it as much as we love horror movies. This experience gives us thrills and provides us with memories that will last a lifetime; just like horror movies do. In “*Keeping a Distance: The Joy of Haunted Attractions*,” Madelon Hoedt mentions that the United States counts with over 3,000 haunted attractions, which generate revenue of around \$300 million dollars a year (2009). If that amount sounds familiar, it is because it is so close to what horror movies have generated recently. This only provides further proof of the popularity of horror as a genre that spans movies and activities such as haunted houses. There is definitely a large audience out there and I doubt it is just lonely men who use these experiences as stress relievers. Hoedt explains that haunted houses and horror movies have the remarkably similar objective of scaring people safely with enough distance and control (2009). Everything seems clearer now. Loving movies and activities

that stress people out are fun to watch because the audience feels safe enough knowing there is distance in between and that they are in control since it is not real. I know this much: I love that rushing feeling at the pit of my stomach whenever I am scared by someone at a haunted attraction, or whenever I see someone in a movie scared by something or someone in a dark isolated setting. I love that adrenaline feeling as long as it is from a distance and as long as I feel I am somewhat safe.

Adrenaline & Modern Times

Watching a young cheerleader running through the woods, scared and in a frenzy or a demon wreaking havoc in a fractured family should technically not be enjoyable, except that for people who love horror it is. The audience enjoys the adrenaline beyond words but there is still more to this than just feeling safe while watching it. In recent years horror has changed and experts agree that it has changed with the current times (Godwin, 2018). So, has horror changed and if so, is that part of the equation to understand why we love horror in general? Research shows that whereas people in the 80's were mostly afraid of killers haunting young adults or demons bringing families together as a test of their faith – in real life stories no less- ; nowadays we seem more inclined towards horror movies dealing with the 'metoo' movement, social commentary or social media gone wrong (Goodwin, 2018). What is the point of acknowledging this? Well, horror expresses our collective past, present and future fears giving us an adrenaline rush and while the audience may be scared to see it unfold, they enjoy it because they are fully aware that the experience (while feeling realistic enough) is not as real as what could be happening in the real world. Additionally, the fact that these movies present social commentary and a message trying to say something seems to just make them scarier! In fact, "The adrenaline rush has been listed as the main reason for people to visit haunted attractions and it can be

established that this, then, is also the main reason for their enjoyment of these venues” (Hoedt, 2009, p.43). Adrenaline while experiencing realistic horror is the perfect definition of what the audience feels and wants; it is all great, as long as it is from a safe distance as to not become the victim ourselves. Furthermore, the fact the audience connects with the fictional horror seems to make a difference as well. Karin Goodwin says in the article “*What Our Love of Horror Movies Says About the Terror of Modern Times,*” that whether you love or hate these experiences, they make up the ultimate rollercoaster that we enjoy experiencing since they give us adrenaline or are fixated with our most primal emotions, yet they feel safe because we know they are not truly happening to us and we still control the outcome (2018). It seems like we have finally found our answer.

Conclusion

Thinking of the way I started wondering about why we love horror, I cannot help to see that in fact when watching these movies, a lot of what the experts say holds true to my own personal case. I am a male and I do love feeling that adrenaline rushing through my body (primal emotion), but I do feel safer and in control because I know it is not real. I am sure if it were directly happening to me, I would be screaming and running in no time! Although it feels realistic and I could see it happening in real life (thus connecting with me on a deeper level), it has a distinct feeling. At the end of the day, the love for watching horror movies, experiencing anything horror, or paying to get scared will be defined by how safe you feel while watching and how close to reality that horror is portrayed. Besides, is not real life nowadays scarier than most of these horror fictional experiences? I think so- I would still choose watching any midnight horror movie showing with my nephew or sons over real life in a heartbeat for sure.

References

- Goodwin, K. (2018, January 14). What our love of horror movies says about the terror of modern times. *Herald* [Glasgow, Scotland].
<https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A522832239/GIC?u=sutahu&sid=GIC&xid=842d8bd5>
- Hoedt, M. (2009). Keeping a Distance: The joy of haunted attractions. *The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies*.
<https://media.proquest.com/media/pq/classic/doc/4233675751/fmt/pi/rep/NONE?s=RdqKT3w5oDP9PflmJXo04Wp2O9w%3D>
- Mariani, L. (2018). Why do we pay to get scared? The paradoxical lure of horror films. *Cinemafocus.eu*
<http://www.cinemafocus.eu/Studi%20sul%20cinema/Horror%20-%20English.pdf>
- Norman, J. (2018). Personality Types and the Enjoyment of Horror Movies. *Journal of Social and Psychological Sciences*, 11 (1), page 56-84.

