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We usually define "fear" as a negative emotion, which is unpleasant. Normally, we desperately want to avoid this emotion because it causes distress and terror. However, the aesthetics and psychology behind horror films explain "fear" can be a pleasurable experience. – Park.M

The human brain is programmed to keep us safe. It sends signals through the intricate systems of our body and trigger appropriate responses to a potential threat to our safety. We experience different levels of fear depending on context and provided with chemical reactions from a gland called the amygdala. We are able to differentiate between a thrill and genuine danger because of the relationship between the "thinking" and "emotional" parts of our brains, which evaluate the content of our surroundings.

In a scenario where the brain detects a legitimate danger like being pursued by a wild animal, the "fight or flight" in which the amygdala grants hormonal releases through our body that enhance our physical capabilities until we are safe ie, surges of adrenaline, dilated pupils, widened bronchi and accelerated heart rate. Fear is something hard wired into humans for our survival as a species, very unlikely to have been a sensation actively sought out by our ancestors for entertainment. But why have we evolved to enjoy the sensation of fear in the present day?

Data collected from a recent survey (2023) shows that 60% out of 89,797 adults identify as fans of the genre, being more popular among the 18-30 age. (O'Neal, 2023).

In this essay I will explore the horror genre in the entertainment industry making links to the psychology of our species and what exactly goes into making something "pleasurably" scary. The reason for this topic exploration is for my third-year practice of using horror illustrations to teach important lessons or bring light to an issue that will provoke a positive change in our world. As of now I plan to create a narrative or series of illustrated short stories in fable-likeness covering issues that I feel are overlooked by society and the mainstream media including silent genocides, mental disorders and the reason for societal problems like high prices and pollution. I aim to incorporate metaphor, personification and similes in my illustrations, as well as thorough research to aid those with learning difficulties or general trouble understanding the complexities of the way things are and what we can all do to make a difference.

Each person has their own unique set of fears that were either naturally part of them, taught to them by somebody or gained through a negative experience or trauma. Typical phobias including spiders and the dark are known as 'rational fears' because they are associated with danger and trigger our natural survival instincts (Communication, 2022). Because of this, most horror media use the dark as a device to establish an unsettling atmosphere. Upon examination, classic horror films follow a similar formula i.e. 'Frankenstein' (1931) and 'Dracula' (1931) centre around unstoppable, almost-human forces equipped with powers that pose a threat to humanity and motives that are sinister. The fear of an omnipotent being with the capacity to cause irreversible damage is another rational fear, one our ancestors needed in order to survive, so the movies are set to target a completely logical stimuli whilst bombarding the brain with complex elements that're both familiar and incomprehensible. The viewer for example could associate the all powerful, human-like threat with an oppressive figure in their lives or from their childhood but with the addition of otherworldly abilities or unexplainable origin. From the 1980s came several examples of cinematic breakthroughs for the horror genre including 'the shining', a film with unique storytelling, cinematography and pacing. The movie provokes a completely new type of fear in the viewer and leaves so much room for interpretation instead of excessive exposition. The movie is set in a well-lit, well-kept hotel and centres around a family of 3. The story is so different to what is expected from a horror film which is why it works so well. It recontextualises all the elements we associate with safety and security and uses it against us in a way that can be described as "uncanny". There are still elements of typical horror films like supernatural entities or illusions and implied "possession" when the father of the family goes insane and chases the mother down with an axe in an drawn out and realistic scene that evokes anxiety, uncomfortability and empathy for the characters. Uncanny horror has become a popular area of exploration because of simply how fascinating it is. Oxford dictionary defines the word "uncanny" as something strange and difficult to explain, however the term is used more commonly to describe something disturbing yet familiar. The reason this sub-genre is so intriguing is because the fear is not linked to our primitive instincts, but rather a result of the world we have designed for ourselves. In 1970, a robotics engineer named Masahiro mori theorised "the uncanny valley effect" which was applied when creating automatons that had human likeness to an unsettling extent. The valley is the exact point where something becomes a perfect blend between overly realistic, yet obviously false (Gillis, 2024). It's the explanation for why so many people regardless of age will find wax sculptures, dolls, clowns and statues unnerving or outright frightening. Currently the world is in disarray over the advancement and integration of Artificial intelligence in our society from taking over jobs to producing art by

stealing from human artists. Since A.I is associated with robots, which is associated with products of the uncanny valley, it is understandable that the current artistic movements would be exploring the theme more.

Recently horror movies are heavy on suggesting or implying messages through the mise-en-scene, with elements like body language, line delivery, cinematography and timing and allowing them to do the storytelling. Sometimes messages are better received when one is able to figure it out for themselves. There are several examples of movies released in the past 10 years including 'Midsommar' that wasn't received too well because of its abstract nature and the confusion it leaves the audience with. A lot of viewers will leave a cinema feeling underwhelmed or frustrated with an open ending or a confusing twist and this is due to the human need to make sense of things, a cognitive function known as Apophenia.

"While an epiphany is a sudden realisation of a true connection or meaning, an 'apophany' is the false realisation of one." (Love.S 2023) Apophenia is the term given to the phenomena of linking a random or meaningless occurrence with significant, divine or prophetic significance. Apophenia and pareidolia are one of the same, although pareidolia refers to identifying shapes or figures in nature, like animal shaped clouds or faces in the patterns on leaves or wood. There is nothing inherently bad about this disposition as for many it can be comforting to believe in divine signs or messages from loved ones, when life can seem difficult. Although certain harmful methodologies or beliefs can be reinforced or justified by overanalysing coincidental occurrences that can result in mass hysteria or psychosis. The reason certain filmmakers will intentionally leave plot holes, difficult to decipher metaphors or abstract semiotics is because they know that the less they spoon feed the audience, the more curious the audience will become, generating conversation and debate whether internal to an individual or external to the masses. The message or meaning that is either present or lacking is sometimes left for the viewer to decipher using critical thinking and semiotic analysis which is beneficial for cognitive development.

So what good is all this research in relation to my proposed question? Identifying the trends in horror media throughout the years, from the perspective of the artists and the viewers gives a clearer view of the bigger picture specifically what works when trying to tackle an issue using fear as the driving force, without manipulating a narrative or using people's vulnerabilities against them. Going back to our development as a functioning society and considering all the difficulties that our ancestors went through to establish what we now know to be a "thriving" civilisation, people still

needed guidance, morals to live by and a sense of belonging which aren't always guaranteed for many at birth. Children are dependent on their parents or carers to protect them, support them, guide them and provide them with love and answers to all of the confusing questions that come with being a sentient individual. Children are vulnerable and do not have the understanding or capacity to rationalise or even regulate their own emotions, so typically parents help them navigate in ways that will make sense to them without being entirely true. Certain issues need to be established firmly from the get-go, like looking both ways before crossing or not talking to strangers to ensure their absolute safety, but telling them that babies come from storks and that the tooth fairy, Father Christmas and the Easter bunny are real, feeds their powerful imagination and fills them with hope until they're old enough to understand things better. Our early civilisation could be compared to a child, needing guidance support and nurturing in order to survive, which some would argue is the reason for many religions. Those with authority and responsibility over a nation would have to ensure their people were under a sort of control, not necessarily for a sinister motive but rather to maintain order and stability (Orrante, 2008). Many religions contain a formula, including mindfulness techniques that keep one's mind occupied, a reassurance of one's value and purpose in life and typically positive morals i.e. don't steal or harm others. The not so pleasant parts of many religions are the topics of afterlife and where one's soul will end up after inevitably dying on earth. This very topic is one that we humans will never be able to agree on since nobody has physical proof of what it's like when facing death. Our brains experience fear to literally avoid death, the one thing we can't explain or escape so it could be argued that the promise of eternal paradise is an example of Apophenia and that we have created meaning to comfort us through one of the only issues that can't be fully comprehended. The fear of death and the fear of punishment alongside the promise of paradise are things we tend to avoid thinking about even now to avoid existential dread. "No passion so effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning as fear" (Burke 1757, pt. 2, sect. 2).

Fear has influence and power and has been used to enable our kind to function for a very long time. It is up to debate whether or not using fear is an ethical method, but it's definitely an effective one which leads back to the question, can we use horror to make a difference? Can we teach important lessons and bring light to issues by using the positive fear that we experience from horror media to change the way our world works, bringing down systemic oppression and injustice and teaching people the value of their voice and impact as

individuals. The UK is currently in a cost of living crisis, children are going without meals because their parents are unable to provide for them and the same food that is out of their budgets is being wasted by the tonnes daily. We are planetary issues like coral bleaching (Staff, 2024), species endangerment (Earth.org, 2021) and global warming (NCEI.Monitoring.Info@noaa.gov, 2024) and are told of all the ways we can reduce our carbon footprint whilst genocides, funded by our country are occurring while we go about our lives, struggling to get by in jobs that underpay us. In a report from trtworld.com, it is estimated that the genocide happening in Gaza by Israel has “exceeded the annual emissions of 20 individual countries and territories” over two months. The reality is that we don’t need movies or video games to experience horror, our world is terrifying as it is currently and conforming to lives of not knowing what to do or how to make a stand against the oppressive systems that exist is only going to make the world a worse place for future generations.

The fear we experience when consuming scary media isn’t the same as the fear we feel when in a legitimate dangerous situation. The reason for this is because we are simultaneously able to immerse ourselves in a narrative and acknowledge that we aren’t actually in the scenario being portrayed on our screens. “The “paradox of horror” is that being scared, under the right circumstances, can be fun. And recreational fear, as it is aptly named, could benefit us, too.” (Sima, 2022). In the same article, Sima quotes scholar and author Mathias Clasen who claims that fear is an extremely important tool for learning. It’s possible that a lot can be achieved through the non traumatic horror that we actively seek. Important lessons that engage us and teach us how to make this world a better place and removing the gatekept information that will allow us to make the changes that have been denied us for too long.



Guernica, oil on canvas by Pablo Picasso, 1937; in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid. (Figure 1)

For my third year practise I will be exploring contemporary, classic and historical media, discussing examples of artists who used their medium as a form of protest. I'll make points that are blunt and informative using necessary imagery or symbolism. 'guernica'(fig1) by Pablo Picasso's infamous pice measuring 349,3 x 776,6 cm and causing controversy because of its lack of explanation from Picasso himself, and the intense meaning that it contains. The piece depicts the atrocities carried out by Germany on the Basque town 'guernica' and is rife with raw expression and passion from the artist himself. It's a haunting piece that grew in popularity even after Picasso's death which shows how impactful art can be when used to tell a story or raise awareness (Leal, 2019). I aim to pour my passion and emotion into my work as both an outlet and a form of expression and I hope to connect with whomever should view my work. I will conduct more research into psychology in order to better understand how to effectively execute my practice.

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