

Cutting Monsters: Examining the Contemporary Cinematic Mechanics of Fear

Introduction

Film is a medium that has the potential to affect people in many ways, if only by virtue of being a medium of personal expression. Historically, films have brought attention to, and in some cases have directly resolved, political and social issues through their power to evoke strong, very real emotions in an audience. Most people can recount an experience where a film has made them feel emotions to such an extent that these feelings cling to them long after the film has finished. Many films have also inspired life-changing (or life-affirming) attitudes and behaviours; cautionary tales about the dangers of addiction, the trials and tribulations of love and romance, and the retelling of major historical events lends cinema an intrinsic ability to relate to us in a deeply personal and unapologetically human capacity.

The horror genre is perhaps the most convincing example of cinema's propensity for directly influencing our psychology; where emotional stories and scenes do indeed cause people to sympathise with characters and reflect those emotions back onto the screen, horror appears to have a wholly unique effect on the viewer. Films in this genre are deliberately constructed to inspire fear, anxiety, and disgust, and often take hold of the viewer in an extremely unpleasant way. Interestingly, contrary to the way our brains and bodies typically respond to fear-inducing stimuli in our natural world, the simulated nature of horror films has an enticing effect on many audiences; people seek out these viewing experiences, deliberately inducing in themselves a strong negative emotional state and paradoxically expressing joy and excitement when reflecting upon it afterwards. The biological 'fight or flight' response, a state we often make strong efforts to avoid, is sought out with enthusiasm and anticipation by the horror film fanatic. In this sense, horror represents the antithesis of what our own evolution has accomplished – we'd all likely run away from a hungry tiger, but happily run towards the screening of a horror film, despite both triggering the same emotional and physiological fear response.

The Devil Went Down To NYC

The release of *The Exorcist* (dir. William Friedkin, 1973) in the early 70s kickstarted a wide-reaching mass appeal for horror, with theatres across the US becoming inundated with excited crowds of patrons. In a New York Times article published a month after *The Exorcist* premiered, journalist Judy Klemesrud describes the effect the film's release had on New York City residents:

"...people stood like sheep in the rain, cold, and sleet for up to four hours to see the chilling film about a 12-year-old girl going to the devil. They lighted bonfires at their waiting post on Second Avenue, between 59th and 60th Streets, to keep warm, littered the streets with food wrappings, got into fist fights, and annoyed shop owners and apartment dwellers who didn't like their entry-ways blocked by a great wall of humans." (Klemesrud, 1974)

This wild unprecedented public response to a film premiere reached a watershed in cinema history two years later with the premiere of Steven Spielberg's thriller *Jaws* (1975), creating the phenomenon of the 'blockbuster film.' Although largely attributed to its marketing campaign, the efforts of which shouldn't be understated, there's a strong case to be made for the film's content and subject matter driving audiences to return for repeat viewings. Where people were enthralled in the grotesque horrors of a young girl becoming possessed, physically twisted and mutilated, so too were they enthralled by the vivid realisation of one of humanity's greatest fears: becoming prey to a relentless and vicious predatory animal. Apropos of our intense dislike towards becoming food, we ostensibly enjoy the fear of watching *others* become food instead and are more than happy to pay for the privilege several times over.

Of course, this is not a phenomenon exclusive to the world of cinema. All manner of tightly controlled and entirely safe, but nonetheless thrilling or scary experiences are widely enjoyed as recreational pursuits. As a video editor and filmmaker, my personal interest in horror films specifically is more concerned with *how* these thrilling responses to fear are induced on a technical level. In examining and understanding the influencing conditions of a frightening situation, I hope to be able to replicate these conditions through filmmaking practices in order to create effective horror films. Across the countless films in this genre that have been released to date, what common factors do they share in their scene structures, cuts, and cinematography that have the ability to immerse us into a vivid state of fear?

The Thing: About Fear

It's important to specify that, for the purposes of this essay, I will be referring to 'fear' as a biological phenomenon rather than 'fear' in a broader philosophical sense. In the field of neurobiology, fear is generally recognised as a specific set of physical symptoms experienced by an individual in the presence of a perceived threat. Although an extremely unpleasant disposition, it is unanimously agreed by field experts that the heightened states of alertness, situational awareness, and physical preparedness produced by these symptoms are actively beneficial to our survival. Developed as an evolutionary response to the threats and physical challenges we have had to endure as a species, the symptoms and associated impulses of fear appear to be hardwired into our biology and are universally experienced. To that end, this apparent objectivity of the emotion and its deep-rooted evolutionary origins makes it a powerful and dependable tool for engaging an audience. Director John Carpenter, famed for his influential contributions to horror cinema, echoes this sentiment:

"Horror is a universal language; we're all afraid. We're born afraid, we're all afraid of things: death, disfigurement, loss of a loved one. Everything that I'm afraid of, you're afraid of and vice versa. So everybody feels fear and suspense." (*Interview Magazine*, 2015)

Carpenter established his career as a filmmaker in the mid-70s, comfortably sharing the same cultural space as the aforementioned works of *The Exorcist* and *Jaws*. During this formative period for the conventions and filmic techniques of the contemporary horror film, Carpenter released his seminal works *Halloween* (1978) and *The Thing* (1982), amongst many others notable within the genre. These films added fuel to the rapidly developing collective fascination with our most primal fears of being hunted being projected onto the big screen.

Of the vast scope of themes and subject matter that horror covers, this intense dynamic between predator and prey appears to be a consistently occurring narrative throughline; when stripped of its dialogue, finer details, and nuances, *Halloween* is no more about a serial killer and his victims than *Jaws* is about a killer shark and its apparent hatred of recreational swimmers. Indeed, both of these examples and their contemporaries were following trends and styles of their era, but their rigid focus on monstrous creatures chasing defenseless prey remained a staple quality of the genre.

Monsters, then, in all their forms, are often the central structure of which horror's more abstract themes orbit. What these monsters might represent and what they're capable of varies massively from story to story, but the overarching theme remains: monsters are a natural enemy, and we adversely react to their presence despite the absolute safety provided by the fourth wall.

Oh My, What Great Big Teeth You May or May Not Have

It's no revelation, of course, that we are afraid of monsters. Stories about horrifying creatures and people with sinister goals and motives have been written since the dawn of fiction. The visual nature of cinema affords us the luxury of being able to see these monsters fully realised with special effects, removing a perceptual boundary intrinsic to other mediums. However, the on-screen appearance of a

monster, and by extension its physical form, is only one aspect of a much larger whole; it seems that the 'presence' of a monster (that is, the very fact that it exists and its wider, passive effect on the surrounding environment) is of much more importance to our various systems of assessing threat. Unlike the moment-to-moment sequences where a monster is explicitly shown, its imprint on the physical space and the characters that inhabit it is much more permanent. A shark attack in *Jaws* is brutal and viscerally terrifying, provoking an automatic response in the viewer, but it's the pool of blood left behind that sinks hearts into stomachs.

The Blair Witch Project (dir. Daniel Myrick & Eduardo Sánchez, 1999) hit theatres at the dawn of the millennium, some thirty years after the monster movie renaissance of the 70s. Independently produced and funded, Myrick and Sánchez had extremely limited resources with which to realise their film project: an intensely suspenseful horror-thriller that felt believable, in the vein of the overly earnest tone documentaries on the supernatural often adopt. Widely acclaimed for its extreme anxiety-inducing pacing, it received a viral reception to such an extent that a considerable portion of the general public were utterly convinced that the content of the film was real. Myrick and Sánchez had actors shoot the scenes themselves with handheld cameras, popularising the found-footage subgenre of horror, giving the film an intense nervousness; the comfort and nostalgia of watching a collection of old home videos was distorted into nerve-shattering horror, and audiences were pulled in by the intense verisimilitude granted by the frantic, shaky camera movements. Moreover, perhaps the most impressive feat that *The Blair Witch Project* achieves is that it manages to effectively frighten the viewer despite the fact that the titular Blair Witch is never seen on-screen once.

The film takes place almost entirely in a dense forest following a group of students documenting their search for the Blair Witch, an urban legend that surrounds the abduction and murder of several children some decades prior. As they delve deeper into the forest, things quickly descend into chaos as characters start to go missing, and increasingly morbid and disturbing freak occurrences torment the group. The Blair Witch, whatever it may be, ostensibly operates in much the same way that some predators will 'play' with their prey before killing it. We never see the characters go missing, in the sense that we never watch them get dragged away; they simply go missing overnight, and the remaining few are left to bask in the horror of what *might* have happened. Neither the characters nor the audience aren't afforded so much as a slight glimpse as to what's causing the horror, only what further horrors that horror has wrought.

This technique of withholding crucial visual and narrative information is taken to its logical extreme in the film's climax. After following a trail of clues, the remaining survivors find a decrepit shack deep within the forest. In the basement, riddled with children's handprints and various demonic symbols, we see a previously presumed dead Mike standing upright, seemingly conscious, staring blankly at a wall. The audience is hit with a sudden affirmation that the Blair Witch is in fact real and can extend its influence to the people it hunts. This 'presence' is then made manifest by an unseen force knocking the camera back, before cutting to black.

As viewers, by this point in the film, our brains have been repeatedly teased and starved of information that we, as creatures of survival, subconsciously deem critical. With only the knowledge of what this force is capable of without fundamental pieces of information to guide those assumptions, we can only imagine what, exactly, the Blair Witch is. An individual viewer is then forced to connect the dots everyone else sees with their own subjective threads that are informed by more complex, personal, and deep-rooted fears. Your Blair Witch is infinitely more terrifying to you than my Blair Witch could ever hope to be, because your Blair Witch is everything you have been neurologically trained to fear. A shark leaves a pool of blood and we know to fear sharks. In the absence of sharks, however, a pool of blood is enough to make us construct our own monsters, and they have teeth just big enough, and claws just sharp enough, to be your biggest threat.

So Anyway, I Wrote A Horror Film About Corridors

Halls (2022?) will be a short horror film written by me, a scared person. Diagnosed with a veritable shopping catalogue of anxiety and stress disorders, fear and anxiety are things I deal with and experience to extreme degrees on a daily basis. I have a personal connection to fear; it is an emotion that has defined and controlled formative years of my life and is, frankly, one of the most evil fucking things I have ever had to cope with. In contrast, corridors aren't.

Inspired by the past two years I've spent living in student halls accommodation, *Halls* is a film about two students getting lost in their student halls building, eventually finding themselves on a floor of the building that logically shouldn't exist. Corridors and staircases bend and twist into infinity, and they soon catch the attention of an enigmatic, sinister creature that calls the impossible floor its home. When writing the script, I wanted to make the corridors themselves feel like a threat, and this was achieved by hinting at a creature's presence but never outright exposing *what* that creature is.