

Different Directions: Types of Horror Films and How They Affect Us

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For more than a century of filmmaking, the horror genre (and its countless subgenres) has nearly always been relevant. From *Nosferatu* to *The Witch*, tricks of the trade have made their way into a worldwide culture with directors of the genre affecting their viewers' psyche by using a variety of cinematic techniques and themes that stimulate their natural fears.

Horror movies have been inarguably popular since their inception, but the reason an individual may have for going to see such a film varies greatly depending on the person's personality, gender, etc. For example, The Q Methodology article referenced for this paper demonstrates three primary motivations for visits to the movies: "adrenaline junkies," "white knucklers," and "detectives" (Callahan, Evans, & Robinson, 2014).

The adrenaline junkies are often seen as the typical thrill-seekers who get a rush from being scared (they often prefer movies like *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* or *Halloween*), the white knucklers are those who are genuinely horrified by the material and are often affected by nightmares but can't help but watch, and the detectives are those who like to analyze a film as they watch it in an attempt to work out the plot, preferring films like *The Shining* and *The Exorcist* (Callahan et al., 2014). A study was produced by the researchers that took popular, common responses of horror movie watchers explaining why they watch those films, and had random individuals vote on which statement they related to the most.

"Adrenaline Junkies" associated most with statements such as "Being scared makes me feel alive" and "I enjoy the new ways directors can come up with to scare me" (Callahan et al., 2014, p. 48), "White Knucklers" picked statements like "I like horror movies about things that could really happen" and "I like suspenseful horror movies" (Callahan et al., 2014, p. 49), and finally, "Detectives" chose along the lines of "I enjoy realistic effects in horror films" and "A good story is just as important as scares" (Callahan, et. Al, 2014, p. 50). There are several

explanations to the cognitive aspects of horror films, and why they affect us in different psychological and physical ways.

A big part of what causes the viewer to be frightened while watching horror films – such as *The Exorcist* – can be tied to the concept known as cinematic neurosis (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007). Cinematic neurosis can be defined as a “development of anxiety somatic responses, dissociation, and even psychotic symptoms after watching a film.” (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007, p. 211). In 1978, a young woman was reported with a case of cinematic neurosis after watching *The Exorcist* (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007). Prior to watching the film the young woman exhibited normal behavior, but after viewing the film, she began to experience symptoms that included fear and anxiety, as well as being afraid to be left alone during the night (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007). One could argue that a traumatic experience after watching a horror film is very similar to a child being scared by a fairytale (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007).

It is because horror films work for adults the same way fairytales work for children that films like *The Exorcist* or *The Shining* are able to evoke such stressful experiences for the viewers (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007). The process of listening to a fairytale before bedtime alone in the dark causes a mixture of anxious feelings for a child, but as the story goes on the fairytale often provides a cathartic mechanism that will relieve the child of their stress, avoiding cinematic neurosis (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007). While demonic themes also create the same magical and mysterious feelings as fairytales, the key difference between the two are the graphic images that are actually seen (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007). A child listening to a fairytale can sufficiently overcome the anxiety and stress induced without visual images, but in horror films the disturbingly dark and explicit images seen specifically in demonic based horror films can “overwhelm ego boundaries.” (Ballon & Leszcz, p. 215). Films such as these are not the only

ones that may cause cinematic neurosis or illicit a response from an individual; directors have begun to experiment with the genre, offering new and fresh takes of old ideas.

There are various methods that filmmakers use in order to create a work that viewers may see as a haunting or disturbing; one method is the so-called “found-footage” film. This is a relatively new phenomenon that has brought in millions of dollars from films such as the *Paranormal Activity* franchise.

Many believe the first use of this was in the movie *Cannibal Holocaust* in 1980 (Sayad, 2016). A few films then followed this technique without much success, until the 1999 hit *The Blair Witch Project* (Sayad, 2016). The key ingredient to these movies is the suggestion or implication that the recordings are in fact real events (Sayad, 2016). These films usually open up with descriptions along the lines of “the following is footage of the deaths or disappearances of...” or “these are real events that occurred...” (Sayad, 2016). Although most of the audience can understand that the film they are seeing is not in fact real, this style can cause all sorts of emotional reaction or interest, possibly including cinematic neurosis (Ballon & Leszcz, 2007).

To compliment the found footage theme, the directors of these movies use low budget equipment and special effects (Sayad, 2016). For example, in Oren Peli’s *Paranormal Activity* franchise, the movies are presented as if the protagonists have placed camcorders and webcams in each room of the house (Sayad, 2016). Additionally, the lack of recognizable actors adds to the realistic feeling of the film. Once the setting is presented as real, these movies then bring in different sequences in attempt to scare the audience, such as a panning camera that causes the viewer to scan the entire shot in search for something horrific (Sayad, 2016). With “found footage,” the goal of the director is believed to be stretching the subject’s thoughts of what is a movie and what is reality. Other subgenres offer similar experiences, but play with the psyche of

the viewer rather than giving them cues on when to be scared, like the “jump-scares” movies like *Paranormal Activity* offer.

A notable contribution to the psychological aspect of horror films is *The Thing*, directed by John Carpenter. It is a “body horror” film that is considered to be a cult classic by many horror film enthusiasts. Set in an American research station in the Antarctic, a group of scientists face off with a parasitic organism that has the ability to consume and imitate any living organism it comes in contact with. The extraterrestrial’s ability to take on the appearance of the scientists leads to paranoia and an eventual conflict among the scientists. Carpenter’s film is well regarded for its visual effects, directorial methods, and cinematic themes. Addison (2013) examines the reasoning for *The Thing*’s cult status, despite its initial criticisms and poor box office performance at the time of its release.

*The Thing*’s status as a cult horror film among fans is attributed to the film’s cinematic techniques and themes. In Addison’s report (2013), she writes that the “deconstruction of the ways in which humans reassure themselves of their existence is the *raison-d’être* for its designation as one of the ‘scariest’ films ever produced” (p. 157). With the assistance of practical effects, Carpenter provides the viewers with a gory spectacle of ordinary human beings suddenly contorting and tearing apart into a goopy, gory, and unidentifiable organism. The gruesome and quick nature of these transformations emphasizes the fragile nature of the human body and attacks the moviegoer’s natural fear of human mortality. Addison (2013) points out a question raised by the characters in the film: Do they know if they are being taken over by the organism? She writes that the film’s ultimate horror is “not knowing if one is still *human*, or even what it truly means to *be human*” (Addison, 2013, p.159). Even at the film’s end, Carpenter stresses the fear of the unknown by making it uncertain if the surviving scientists are human or not.

As a horror film, *The Thing* effectively attacks the human psyche by exposing the viewer to the fragility of the human body and social bonds, forcing him or her to confront “the deepest fears about human frailty” (Addison, 2013, p. 159).

Regardless of which sub-genre of horror is being seen, whether it be sacrilegious, paranormal, or body horror, the unique and different approaches taken by the film creators are what make the movies scary to watch. Each horror film offers its own spin on both thematic and cinematic techniques that frighten the viewer due to the film’s ability to successfully tap into the audience’s psyche and create a feeling of true fear.

## References

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