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The Evolution of Villains and the Reflection of Fear in Society

When attempting to understand the culture of a society during a specific time period, observing the time's art, literature, and other forms of media is critical in order to truly gain insight. This is because the works produced often relate to current events, reflecting ideals and time-specific concepts in their plots or images. The fears of a society are no exception to this concept. "Through artwork, such as Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Hitchcock's *Psycho*, King's and Kubrick's *The Shining*, artists convey moral visions and audiences can reflect on them, reject or embrace them, take inspiration from them, and otherwise be enriched beyond entertainment and catharsis" (Asma). Just as questions regarding morality have been presented to the general public through various forms of media throughout history, the collective fears of a film's audience are exploited every time a horror movie begins - our history is reflected through film, and public concern is most often represented by the villain.

Being just a part in the seemingly endless spectrum of human emotion, fear is arguably one of the most powerful feelings. With an ability to greatly affect our physiology, it is often exploited for fun. The horror genre - whether applied to books, film, video games, or spoken word - is one of the most longstanding and profitable of all time. So why is it that we as individuals often seek out things that scare us? How do these experiences affect us? Fear stimulates the sympathetic nervous system, which prepares the body for fight or flight. "Neurologist Melvin Könner explains that the nerve net, balanced by the braking power of the

parasympathetic system, spurs the increase of heart rate, rise in blood pressure, increased flow of blood to the muscles, and decreased circulation to the viscera that accompany fear and flight in many animals" (qtd. in Asma). This experience is considered a rush to some, as the increased amount of adrenaline parallels that thrill an individual may feel when skydiving or riding on a roller coaster - the presence of danger in an environment that promises no real harm allows individuals to experience fear without any real threat to their being.

It is this reality that provides a reason for why so many people watch and enjoy horror films - it is a thrilling way to feel fear while maintaining one's safety. The ability of a filmmaker and screenwriter to instill fear in an audience that expects to simply return to their normal lives after watching a film is crucial, which could be why the creators shape their antagonists from the fears held by the society. Perhaps that is why the film considered to be the first horror movie was received with fear rather than wonder, as the creator had originally intended. "[George] Mellies created what is widely believed to be the first ever 'horror' movie in 1898, complete with cauldrons, animated skeletons, ghosts, transforming bats and, ultimately, an incarnation of the Devil" (Zurko). Though Mellies had not necessarily intended to create a movie to scare his audience, the imagery within the film may have fed off of the fear many people have regarding the supernatural - manifestations of death, which may be considered the ultimate fear of the unknown.

From then on, the horror genre evolved to include many different eras and types of antagonists. From horror's "Golden Age" of the 1920's and 1930's to the present, audiences have seen films either adapted from literature, centered on disaster, shown in theaters with buzzing seats and other gimmicks, focusing on the occult, or just generally full of violence and gore. As seen in Nick Zurko's timeline of the genre, the most noticeable changes can be

observed in the villains of each era of horror: monster movies in the 1920's and 1930's, supernatural horror films in the 1970's, the famous slasher flicks of the 1980's, and many others. These changes could be said to have occurred due to the changing cultural phenomena and fears related to the history of the time.

One of the most easily noticeable reflections of an era on its horror films was during the 1940's and 1950's, during what are considered "The Atomic Years" of the horror genre. During the period of World War II (1939-1945) and the following decade, many horror films withdrew their plotlines from the previously popular notions of the supernatural to the relevant effects of radioactive mutation. Seen in both *Godzilla* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, society's fear of the new nuclear bomb's effects were rampant. As the Cold War began afterward and political tensions were very high, movies like *The War of the Worlds* and *When Worlds Collide* were released (Zurko). Fears of impending destruction and doom at the hands of a powerful force were exploited within these movies, as a nuclear world war was a menacing possibility.

Nearly thirty years later, it is no surprise that the late 1970's and 1980's were the years of gory slasher films when one considers the numerous serial killers terrorizing the country in just the two decades prior. The 60's, 70's, and early 80's were plagued by violence at the hands of famous murderers including the Zodiac Killer, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Richard Ramirez, Jeffrey Dahmer, members of the Manson family, and others. With all of these well-known killers being apprehended and facing trials highly covered by the media, it was very plausible for people to be afraid of dying at the hands of a murderer. While individuals were making sure they kept their doors locked at night, horror movie writers and directors were able to use this collective public fear and paranoia to create some of the most iconic film villains of all time (Day). *Halloween*'s Michael Myers, *Friday the 13th*'s Jason Voorhees, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*'s

Freddy Krueger, and the first film iteration of Hannibal Lecter in *Manhunter* are just some of the antagonists of the late twentieth century that clearly reflect the public concern of the time – ruthless serial killers.

In more recent years, film has come to reflect Western society's increasing concern regarding health. The emergence of new diseases has always been a topic of discussion, though the many medical scares in the past few decades have created increased dialogue concerning public health (Nasiruddin, Halabi, Dao, Chen, and Brown). Body horror, or the visual depiction of what is often the mutilation or other violations of the human body, has become increasingly popular and graphic in recent horror movies - most likely as a response to the rising number of infectious diseases being found (Cruz). The more recent discoveries of illnesses with the ability to resist antibiotics has created a sense of dread among both scientific and public communities, as these may point to the possibilities of drug-resistant and incurable diseases in the future.

While the fear of illness is nothing new, modern cinema has recently capitalized on the burgeoning recent fears. "The zombie emerges as an ideal replacement for the plague: the infectious spread of this fictional and personified virus becomes as metaphorically vital, fungible, and multivalent as the bubonic plague itself once was. Infection by zombie is just as arbitrary, inescapable, and devastating as infection by plague" (Boluk and Lenz). Though the bubonic plague no longer appears to be a huge concern, the reborn zombie character still successfully embodies these anxieties mentioned above. The inescapability of infection perfectly mirrors this, and these fears regarding infection and illness have been frequently represented through the popular zombie antagonist in modern horror cinema.

Though the zombie has been featured in film since the 1930's, it was George A Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* that revolutionized its presentation on the big screen. "Before that,

zombies were sorcerers' slaves in Haitian Vodou folklore, but Romero imported them to contemporary America. He also codified a new set of undead rules. His zombies had an insatiable hunger for human flesh. They hunted in packs − and were unstoppable unless they were decapitated. They could turn their victims into fellow zombies with one bite" (Barber). Romero's new "rules" made zombies a disease to the living, turning them into their biggest fears - a creature with no bodily autonomy changed by something that society cannot seem to understand.

The lack of bodily autonomy relates back to the popular subgenre of body horror, in which graphic violations of the human body are depicted through mutation or metamorphosis. Being known and often criticized for its abundant gore, "there are few cinematic examples of the human body wasting away and being utterly torn apart that are as blatant as in zombie films" (Cruz). Because the films imprint graphically violent images into the minds of viewers, it is no surprise that people associate ultraviolence with the zombie character. This violence can also be tied in with another common fear among the modern world – terrorism and other general violence. Recent events occurring all over the world have spurred this hysteria on to an almost uncontrollable level, with the media constantly covering instances of terrorism and reporting on concerns regarding the next possible attacks (Birch-Bayley).

Considered by many as one of the most devastating events in United States history, the tragedy of September 11th, 2001 is considered one of the main catalysts that offset the incredible fear of terrorism by unseen groups. After the events of 9/11, many began to fear the inescapable reality of death – natural or unnatural. The xenophobia that developed in response to this occurrence is reflected in modern horror by the timeless idea of 'us vs. them' – now as humankind versus zombies. The effects of this prompted an explosive reemergence of popularity

for zombies, which had just been recently revived in film a few decades prior.

The impact of 9/11 on the so-called "zombie renaissance" is clear when watching the genre's films – a common setting includes the decimated streets of a once metropolitan area, now littered with corpses and the laden with the feeling of hopeless abandonment (Bishop). Because these screened environments so closely resemble war-torn and terrorized places mirroring those of our current world, the horror genre effectively frightens its audience – one that has been desensitized to and no longer fears villains of the past as intensely as others have. Current media coverage is accused of exploiting collective fears, with its omnipresence constantly exposing viewers to the horrors of the world (Botting). The effective shock factor associated with modern horror film lies mainly in the visual aspect, which is created to be parallel to the images often shown in the media – prompting the audience to project real fears onto the story being shown.

The horror genre is known for its ability to receive intense reactions from its audience, since fear is most certainly one of the most potent and sensitive emotions. Drawing upon the sensitivities of the crowd is crucial for developing an effective plot, as the reactions of the audience are what determines a film's success. When studying the history of the genre, it is apparent that certain categories and types of antagonists emerge when one also observes the history of the time in which the films were shown. The combined histories of both genre and era demonstrate the impact of the people on the films of their generation. Just as times are changing, horror films are always evolving to match the fears of its general audience. With this in mind, it is certain that the movies of the near future will be just as reflective of the times as films of the past have proven to be. Only time will tell exactly what the newer generations will come to fear.

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