Understanding the Popular Appeal of Horror Cinema: An Integrated-Interactive Model

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Abstract

After defining horror as a fictional product designed to evoke terror through the implied presence of supernatural or grossly abnormal forces and furnishing a brief description of eight major psychological theories of horror—psychodynamic, catharsis, excitation transfer, curiosity/fascination, sensation seeking, dispositional alignment, gender role socialization, and societal concern—three descriptive features of horror film appeal are identified: tension, relevance, and unrealism. Whereas traditional psychological theories have contributed to our understanding of people's interest in and response to horror films, none provides a full accounting of the popular appeal of the horror genre. Accordingly, an integrated-interactive theory is advanced in an effort to explain the allure of horror movies, with control-related fears at the core and belief systems that derive from a person's efforts to cope with the arousing and terrifying stimuli found in horror films at the periphery.

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An Integrated-Interactive Model

From *Nosferatu* (1922) to *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), from Edison's *Frankenstein* (1910) to Lovecraft's *Re-animator* (1984), and from the *Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) to the *Island of Dr. Moreau* (1994) we have spent a significant amount of time, energy, and money creating and enjoying fictionalized horror. In fact, 12 of the 100 top grossing movies of all time fall into the horror genre (IMDb, 2003). Given that the production costs of horror films are often much lower than the cost of producing movies in many other genres, it is no mystery why horror pictures continue to be made. What is less clear is why we continue watching them: what is so entertaining about being scared? Teenagers may flock to horror films in disproportionate numbers, but there is no lack of adult interest in cinematic horror. Therefore, while adolescence may be a period in which horror films seem particularly relevant, these films maintain their relevance well beyond the teenage years. The purpose of this paper is to explain the allure of cinematic horror by defining the genre, reviewing major models of horror film appeal, and offering an integrated-interactive theory of horror movie popularity.

Defining Horror

Horror has been defined in various and sundry ways. Psychological definitions of horror customarily highlight the "fear of some uncertain threat to existential nature and . . . disgust over its potential aftermath" and commonly assert that "the source of threat is [often] supernatural in its composition" (Tamborini & Weaver, 1996, p. 2). Horror writers themselves have sought to

define the genre, and what these definitions lack in operationality they more than made up for in colorful imagery. One of the forerunners of modern horror fiction, H. P. Lovecraft (1923/1973), wrote that horror stories project an "atmosphere of breathlessness and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces . . . of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the demons of unplumbed space" (p. 15). The modern master of horror, Stephen King (1981), conceives of "terror as the finest emotion, and so I will try to terrorize the reader" (p. 37).

The definition of horror utilized in this paper consists of three parts. First, horror films are fictional rather than non-fictional, even though they may be inspired by actual events. Edward Gein—a Wisconsin farmer notorious for murder, grave robbery, and necrophilia in the 1950s—served as the model for portions of three classic horror movies: *Psycho* (1960), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). Yet each movie was clearly fictional in nature. The second component of the present definition of horror recognizes the wisdom of Stephen King's statement that eliciting terror in the viewer is the ultimate goal of the horror writer and film-maker. Finally, as Lovecraft observed, horror tales challenge or suspend the natural laws by which we live. If not supernatural, the forces set loose in horror films imply gross abnormality, thus keeping movies like *Psycho* (1960) and *Jaws* (1975) within the horror genre. Hence, the definition of cinematic horror employed in this paper asserts that horror is a fictionalized account designed to evoke terror through the implied presence of supernatural or grossly abnormal forces.

Explaining Horror

A number of psychosocial models, most with roots in the psychological subfields of personality and social psychology, have been tendered in an effort to explain the enigmatic hold horror pictures seem to have on an audience. Eight of these theories are briefly described in this section.

Psychoanalysis

Both Freud and Jung offered explanations for the popularity of horror fiction. To Freud (1919/1955) horror was a manifestation of the "uncanny," reoccurring thoughts and feelings that have been repressed by the ego but which seem vaguely familiar to the individual. Jung (1934/1968), on the other hand, argued that horror gained its popularity from the fact that it touched on important archetypes or primordial images that he said resided in the collective unconscious. Jungians contend that Analytic concepts like the shadow, mother, and anima/animus archetypes can be found in many works of horror fiction (Iaccino, 1994). The problem with psychoanalytic explanations of horror film appeal is the problem with psychoanalytic explanations of most behavior; a serious lack of precision that makes these theories difficult, if not impossible, to test empirically.

Catharsis

The Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that dramatic portrayals gave the audience an opportunity to purge itself of certain negative emotions, a process he called, *catharsis*. Feshbach (1976), in extending this approach to media presentations of violence and graphic horror, argued that dramatic or violent cinematic exhibitions encouraged the purgation of pent-up emotion and

aggression and in so doing reduced the probability that a person would act on these emotions. Contrary to the catharsis hypothesis, research has shown that exposure to violent media increases rather than decreases subsequent acts of aggression (Bushman & Geen, 1990) and that anger can be reduced by experiences incompatible with anger, like those triggered by exposure to humor or erotica (Ramirez, Bryant, & Zillmann, 1982). Be this as it may, an inverse or negative relationship appears to exist between fear and interest in horror movies (Mundorf, Weaver, & Zillmann, 1989), although there is no way to tell from a correlation whether watching horror films reduces fear, lower levels of fear increase interest in horror movies, or some third variable explains the inverse relationship between these two variables.

Excitation Transfer

Excitation Transfer is a variation on the catharsis view. Zillmann (1978) has argued that frightening movie stimuli physiologically arouse the viewer who then experiences an intensification of positive affect in response to plot resolution, whether or not this entails a happy ending. Sparks (1991), in line with this model, discerned that distress and delight in response to a horror film correlated in three different samples, the effect being particularly pronounced in males. However, in many horror films the plot is never resolved and the monster or killer survives to participate in the sequel, and there is no evidence that serial films like *Friday the 13th* (1980, 1981, 1982, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1988, 1989, 1993) or *Halloween* (1978, 1981, 1988, 1989, 1995, 1998) are any less popular than horror movies in which the monster or killer is vanquished (Wells, 2000). McCauley (1998), in conducting two small studies, also uncovered data inconsistent with the excitation transfer hypothesis to the extent that enjoyment of cinematic horror was higher during the movie than at the end of the picture.

Curiosity/Fascination

Carroll (1990) maintains that instead of eliminating or reducing negative affect, horror films stimulate and excite positive emotions like curiosity and fascination. The violation of societal norms, a common theme in many horror pictures, may attract the attention of some viewers because it is outside the viewer's normal everyday experience. In support of a curiosity/fascination explanation of horror film popularity, Tamborini, Stiff, and Zillmann (1987) observed a correlation of .39 between the deceit subscale of the Machiavellianism scale, a measure of the acceptance of norm violating behavior, and interest in horror cinema. Alternatively, research connotes that not all viewers identify with norm violating and, in fact,

respond favorably when norm violators, like teenagers who engage in drug use, premarital sex, or petty crime, are punished over the course of a movie (Weaver, 1991).

Sensation Seeking

Zuckerman (1979) has proposed a sensation seeking theory of horror film appeal in which high sensation seeking people are said to be attracted to horror pictures because of the increased levels of sensation these movies provide. Edwards (1984), Sparks (1986) and Johnston (1995) have all recorded robust positive correlations between scores on Zuckerman's Sensation Seeking Scale (SSS) and self-reported enjoyment of frightening entertainment and horror movies, although the relationship between SSS scores and interest in horror is not always significant (Tamborini, Stiff, & Zillmann, 1987). Zuckerman (1996) himself cautions us against "interpreting a preference in terms of a single trait or any disposition at all" because "there are many social facilitating factors that bring young people into these films" (p. 158).

Dispositional Alignment

People seem to enjoy the violence in horror movies when it is directed against those they believe are deserving of such treatment (Zillmann & Paulus, 1993). This observation has given rise to dispositional alignment theory in which it is hypothesized that a person's emotional reactions to events portrayed in a horror film can be traced back to the dispositional feelings they have for the person involved. In other words, if it is someone who is seen as deserving of punishment, like a teenage girl currently engaged in sexual activity (Weaver, 1991), then the viewer is likely to adopt a positive view of the violence. Violence directed against someone not considered deserving of punishment, like an innocent child, is more likely to be interpreted in a

negative light. While the dispositional alignment theory informs us of which episodes of violence in a horror picture will be acceptable to a viewer, it does not fully explain why horror, graphic or otherwise, is so popular with viewers.

Gender Role Socialization

In a classic study on gender differences in the social context of horror movie watching, Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, and Aust (1986) determined that teenage boys enjoyed a horror film significantly more when the female companion they were sitting next to expressed fright, whereas teenage girls enjoyed the film more when the male companion with whom they were paired showed a sense of mastery and control. These observations have given rise to the gender role socialization or *snuggle theory* in which horror films are viewed as a vehicle by which adolescents demonstrate gender role congruent behavior: mastery and fearlessness in boys and dependency and fearfulness in girls (Zillmann & Gibson, 1996). This theory fails to explain, however, why some people prefer to watch horror movies alone (McCauley, 1998).

Societal Concerns

Stephen King (1981) states that horror films often serve as a "barometer of those things which trouble the night thoughts of a whole society" (p. 131). Following up on this observation, Skal (1993) contends that horror films reflect current societal issues and concerns by denoting how the fear of totalitarianism in the 1930s gave birth to movies like *Frankenstein* (1931), the fear of radiation gave flight to the creature features of the 1950s, the war in Vietnam gave rise to a new breed of zombie movie as represented by 1968's *Night of the Living Dead*, Watergate inspired mistrust for authority figures and films like *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and serial

killers encouraged an interest in movies like *Silence of the Lambs* (1991). As important as societal concerns are in understanding the popularity of horror movies, it should be kept in mind that many of these movies operate on universal or cross-cultural fears.

Descriptive Features of Horror Film Appeal

Johnston (1995) administered a series of personality tests to a group of 220 high school students and determined that their motives for watching *slasher films* fell into four general categories referred to as gore watching, thrill watching, independent watching, and problem watching. Gore watching is characterized by low empathy, high sensation seeking, low fearfulness, and in males, a strong identification with the killer. Whereas gore watching is driven by an interest in violence, thrill watching is motivated by suspense and is associated with high levels of empathy and sensation seeking. Independent watching, a third pattern identified by Johnston, evolves from a spirit of mastery and is characterized by strong identification with the victim and high levels of positive affect. The fourth pattern, problem watching, also entails identification with the victim, but unlike independent watching, the affect is negative and the mood helpless. As the Johnston study suggests, there is no one reason why people watch horror movies. Instead, there are several different patterns of motivation and not one of the eight traditional theoretical models of horror film appeal reviewed in this paper seems capable of accounting for all of the patterns. From the definition of horror adopted in this paper, the eight traditional models of horror film appeal, and the complex process by which people interpret and relate to works of fiction, it is proposed that the allure of horror cinema is a function of three primary factors: tension, relevance, and unrealism.

Tension

Horror films create tension through mystery (*Rosemary's Baby,* 1968), suspense (*The Haunting*, 1963), gore (*The Evil Dead*, 1982), terror (*The Shining*, 1980), and shock (*Suspira*, 1977):

> I recognize terror as the finest emotion, and so I will try to terrorize the reader. But if I find I cannot terrify him/her, I will try to horrify; and if I find I cannot horrify, I'll go for the gross-out. I'm not proud. (Stephen King, 1981, p. 37).

The arousal that horror pictures incite is well documented (Tannenbaum, 1980; Zillmann, 1984) and is generally thought to be a function of the atmosphere of suspense, visual stimulation, and, for males, an opportunity for mastery that movies in the horror genre provide viewers (Brosius & Schmitt, 1990). The musical score and sound track add to the tension by building suspense and supplying information about a character's current emotional state (Cohen, 1990). Horror cinema's ability to induce (curiosity/fascination) and relieve (catharsis) tension, and raise tension in anticipation of successful plot resolution (excitation transfer) is central to its appeal. Moreover, certain individuals are especially sensitive to the tension augmenting properties of horror films (sensation seeking).

The tension engendered by horror films differs from the tension produced by action-adventure and dramatic films because of the presence of otherworldly forces. Movies like *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Dracula* (1931) reflect a strong sense of the supernatural, yet what about movies with more realistic antagonists like those in *Psycho* (1960) and *Jaws* (1975)? The tension that made *Psycho* (1960) a hit derived from the viewer's belief that something beyond his or her normal experience was going on at the Bates Hotel and that these experiences were

grounded in the supernatural or at least grossly abnormal. In a related vein, *Jaws* (1975) calls upon the supernatural or grossly abnormal by asking us to believe that a shark with a cerebrum the size of a walnut can outwit a Chief of Police, a highly educated marine biologist, and a seasoned shark hunter. Tension based on the distortion of natural forms (Cantor & Oliver, 1996), either as a supernatural force or perception of gross abnormality, is one of three fundamental characteristics of horror cinema that appeals to audiences.

Relevance

For a movie to be watched, it must first generate interest among potential viewers. Interest can be sparked in a variety of different ways but relevance is one of the more common avenues by which interest in a film is established. The relevance of horror movies is oftentimes less obvious than it is for other genres and exists on four different levels: universal, cultural, subgroup, and personal. The universal relevance of a film is the degree to which it touches on the ubiquitous aspects of fear and terror, as they apply to the themes of darkness, danger, and death. Jung's (1934/1968) archetype of darkness is said to embody absolute evil and is well represented in cinematic horror. Danger, as symbolized by the *unknown*, and death are two additional universal fears that work their way into horror pictures. From a purely evolutionary standpoint, avoiding dark places where predatory animals may hide, attempting to understand that which is presently unknown, and finding ways to postpone death have survival value and may have been passed onto future generations through an evolutionary process. According to many psychoanalytic thinkers, universal fears make a horror film more relevant.

Cultural and historical fears may be as paramount to the popularity of horror films as

universal fears. Based on Skal's (1993) societal concern model of horror picture appeal, we can see that horror movies in the United States have reflected a number of cultural changes and historical events. The creature features of the 1950s, *Them!* (1954) and *Godzilla* (1954) being but two examples, reflected world-wide concern over the proliferation of nuclear weapons, while the AIDS epidemic of the late 1980s gave rise to a renewed interest in vampires (e.g., *The Lost Boys*, 1987). George Romero has used horror to poignantly critique American society with the zombies in his 1968 *Night of the Living Dead* representing dead American servicemen in Vietnam and his 1978 *Dawn of the Dead* exploring the folly of American consumerism. The dysfunctional American family became a popular target for horror films of the late 1980s as exemplified by *The Stepfather* series (1987, 1989, 1992). Societal concern theory highlights the role of cultural and historical fears in the development of horror movie scripts (Wells, 2000).

Subgroup fears, particularly those involving developmental trends, are a third way the relevance of horror movies can be enhanced. Many horror films exploit juvenile fears since teenagers are presumed to be one of the larger, if not the largest, groups of horror fiction enthusiasts in America. Adolescent-relevant issues of independence and identity figure prominently in horror pictures, making them particularly attractive to teenagers. Gender role identity theory, it would seem, has a great deal to say about the relevance of the horror genre to adolescent consumers. It is no coincidence that school serves as an important setting for many pictures in the *slasher* subgenre, movies which are made with teenage audiences in mind. School plays a significant role in the everyday lives of teenagers in that it establishes a context within which students can compare themselves to their peers on criteria of success and failure

both socially and academically -- issues that are at the heart of many juvenile fears (Jarvis, 2001). The neighborhood setting, as epitomized by *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), also facilitates the subgroup and personal relevance of horror fiction.

Relevance can also exist on a personal level. Individuals concerned with losing control (Cavallaro, 2002) or who possess strong sensation seeking tendencies (Tamborini & Stiff, 1987) may find horror movies more relevant than those who are unconcerned about issues of control or who possess weak sensation seeking tendencies. Wells (2000) writes that the fear experienced by a viewer in response to watching a horror film is directly proportional to the viewer's level of sympathy for and identification with the protagonist. Dispositional alignment theory holds that viewing pleasure is enhanced when the movie portrays people receiving punishment the viewer believes deserve punishment (Zillmann & Paulus, 1993). Hence, if a character enters an obviously haunted house, the punishment he or she receives as a consequence of this action is seen as warranted and adds to overall viewer satisfaction. Movies in the horror genre that produce tension and incorporate universal, cultural, subgroup, and personal fear themes hold greater psychological appeal than horror films possessing low levels of tension and relevance.

Unrealism

Haidt, McCauley, and Rozin (1994), in conducting research on disgust, exposed college students to three documentary videos depicting real-life horrors. One clip showed cows being stunned, killed, and butchered in a slaughterhouse; a second clip pictured a live monkey being struck in the head with a hammer, having its skull cracked opened, and its brain served as dessert; a third clip depicted a child's facial skin being turned inside out in preparation for

surgery. Ninety percent of the students turned the video off before it reached the end. Even the majority of individuals who watched the tape in its entirety found the images disturbing. Yet many of these same individuals would think nothing of paying money to attend the premier of a new horror film with much more blood and gore than was present in the documentaries that most of them found repugnant. McCauley (1998) posed the logical question of why these students found the documentary film so unpleasant when most had sat through horror pictures that were appreciably more violent and bloody. The answer that McCauley came up with was that the fictional nature of horror films affords viewers a sense of control by placing psychological distance between them and the violent acts they have witnessed.

Most people who view horror movies understand that the filmed events are unreal, which furnishes them with psychological distance from the horror portrayed in the film. In fact, there is evidence that young viewers who perceive greater realism in horror films are more negatively affected by their exposure to horror films than viewers who perceive the film as unreal (Hoekstra, Harris, & Helmick, 1999). Several factors reinforce the fictional nature of cinematic depictions of horror: First, the supernatural content and gross abnormality that characterize the horror genre facilitate psychological distance. Likewise, the black humor that is part and parcel of many horror movies lends psychological distance to vivid portrayals of horror (McCauley, 1998). Finally, the music track for many horror pictures serves a distancing function in the sense that while music can induce tension by supplying additional information and creating suspense, it also injects an air of unreality into a picture because our everyday actions are not normally accompanied by music (Cohen, 1990). Apter (1992) remarks that cues for unreality serve a

protective function to the extent that unreality helps people cope with the horrors they observe on screen. This unreality is viewed to be a consequence of the psychological distance which fiction provides and through which the appeal of horror cinema is realized.

When presenting a new psychological theory, it is important to keep description and explanation separate. Theories that fail to make this distinction leave themselves vulnerable to accusations of tautology and circular reasoning. The disease model of addiction, for instance, has been severely criticized for mixing description and explanation in its accrual of theoretical constructs to account for substance abuse etiology. Arguing that problem drinking is the consequence of a disease process and maintaining that the evidence for this disease process can be found in a person's propensity to drink alcohol is both tautological and unhelpful (Heather & Robertson, 1985). Tension, relevance, and unrealism describe horror film appeal but do not explain why people find these features appealing or how these features contribute to the popularity of horror fiction. Explaining horror film appeal requires a deeper analysis of human psychology than is possible using the tension, relevance, and unrealism descriptors. Variables considered useful in explaining horror film popularity will be classified as core and peripheral elements of an integrated-interactive model of horror film appeal. It should be noted that while the descriptive features and explanatory elements of horror film allure are closely related, they are not interchangeable.

An Integrated-Interactive Model of Horror Movie Appeal

The integrated-interactive approach views horror films as a stimulus with which a person interacts and eventually copes. Horror movies initially attract our attention by building tension,

showing relevance, and creating safety through unrealism. However, it is the position of this paper that it is a person's manner of coping with horror stimuli that is responsible for the lasting appeal of horror fiction. Before addressing the nature of this appeal, the lifestyle theory upon which the integrated-interactive model is based will be briefly discussed.

An Overview of Lifestyle Theory

The integrated-interactive model of horror film appeal that derives from lifestyle theory holds that people engage in various patterns of behavior or lifestyles as a means of coping with the problems of everyday living. According to the founding tenets of lifestyle theory, the human being, like all living organisms, has the capacity to perceive, process, and manage threats to its existence. Whether a threat is prepotent (stimulates a survival response in the absence of prior learning) or conditioned (learned through association with an unlearned fear stimulus or response), it must be perceived before it can be processed and acted upon. A perceived threat is processed as existential fear by humans who have a sense of self, independent of the surrounding environment, a cognitive task that is initially accomplished in human children between the ages of 18 and 24 months (Lewis & Brooks, 1978). Three early life tasks assist people in managing existential fear and the threat it implies: (1) achieving affiliation with others, (2) gaining a sense of environmental predictability and control, and (3) earning status and identity. These early life tasks not only help people deal with existential fear, they also play a major role in shaping the fear which can best be described as an encapsulated expression of a person's current existential condition (Walters, 2000a).

The ability to cognitively represent external events foreshadows the human capacity for

symbolic thought. Taking its lead from the developmental work of Jean Piaget (1963), the lifestyle model asserts that people construct schemes to make sense of the world and to cope with natural feelings of existential fear. A scheme is like a node in a neural network that contains cognitive, affective, sensory, behavioral, and motivational elements. For our purposes, a scheme will be defined as the smallest or most basic unit of meaning. Schemes interact with one another to form schematic subnetworks, six of which are emphasized in the integrated-interactive model proposed in this article. Attributions are schematic subnetworks that code for the presumed causes of one's own and other people's behavior. Outcome expectancies are the anticipated consequences of a particular action and efficacy expectancies are a personal estimate of one's chances of securing a specific outcome. Goals, a fourth schematic subnetwork, are the objectives people pursue; and values are the priorities that delimit and clarify an individual's life. A final schematic subnetwork, thinking styles, personifies the cognitive distortions that keep people locked in a pattern long after it has stopped being productive (Walters, 2000b).

Schematic networks and subnetworks exist on several different planes, from the one's that are nearly as circumscribed, simple, and selective as basic schemes, to those that are expansive, complex, and diversified. In its most general form, the schematic network takes on the attributes of a belief system, two of which derive from an artificial breakdown of the space (self, world) and three of which originate from the time (past, present, future) dimensions of the time-space continuum. According to lifestyle theory, the self-view is composed of reflected appraisals (how we believe others perceive us), social comparisons (how we stack up against others), self-representations (features of the environment with which we identify), role identity

(our roles in life that we use to define ourselves), and possible selves (desired and feared future identities). The world-view, by contrast, is comprised of four dimensions: organismic-mechanistic, fatalism-agenticism, fairness-inequity, and malevolence-benevolence. A person's time-related belief systems, the present-, past-, and future-views, demonstrate how a person perceives and acts on information, recollects the past, and anticipates the future, respectively (Walters, 2000b).

Core Element: Fear

Because horror movies feed on fear, the concept of existential fear would seem an appropriate place to start in erecting an integrated-interactive theory of horror film appeal. The fear-producing nature of darkness, danger, and death is well documented in the annals of human history and is liberally represented in horror movies. From an evolutionary standpoint, fear of death and the fear of the unknown have survival value (Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & Solomon, 1998), an observation that has not been lost on the directors of horror films. The monstrous antagonist in *Phantom of the Opera* (1925) was specifically made up to look like the face of death (Schneider, 1993) and people's fear of death and desire to overcome nonexistence are played out in films as diverse as *Dracula* (1931), *Re-animator* (1985), and *Phantasm* (1979). The theme of *Phantasm* is a young boy's struggle with loss, brought on by the deaths of his parents and older brother. Death plays a key role in many horror films and is a guiding theme for the overall genre. It is rare, in fact, to find a horror movie in which someone has not just died, been killed, or is currently being threatened with imminent nonexistence by an evil force or presence. Research indicates that disgust in response to real-life horrors correlates significantly

with fear of death (Haidt et al., 1994). One possibility, then, is that horror films help people cope with their fear of nonexistence, although this probably depends on the film components with which the viewer identifies. Johnston (1995) found that viewers who identified with examples of fear mastery in a horror picture (independent watching) were more apt to use the picture to overcome their own fear than viewers who identified with a helpless victim (problem watching).

Of the three early life tasks that help shape existential fear, control/predictability appears to be the task that relates best to people's fear of darkness, danger, and death. Control lost under the cover of darkness is rediscovered in the light of day; danger posed by things unknown is reduced by increased knowledge and predictability; and death is conquered by the promise of symbolic immortality. Along these same lines, Urbano (1998) notes that "the shower murder in *Psycho* and the alien birth from John Hurt's stomach in *Alien* shocked two different generations with similar images of utter powerlessness" (p. 896-897). Fear of loss of control exists at all levels of relevance—personal, subgroup, cultural, and universal—to where we might predict that: (1) individuals who score high on measures of control-related existential fear will be more attracted to horror films than individuals who score low on measures of control-related existential fear; (2) subgroups, like adolescents, who struggle with issues of mastery and autonomy, will find the allure of horror films stronger than subgroups for whom mastery and autonomy are less an issue; (3) cultures that are preoccupied with control, such as are found in industrialized Western nations, should show greater interest in horror films than less control-preoccupied cultures; (4) universal themes surrounding the fear of losing control should be prominent in the horror literature of widely diverse cultures. Hence, control-related existential

fear is considered the core element of horror film appeal.

Peripheral Elements: Belief Systems

Moving from the core element of horror film appeal to the peripheral elements entails a shift in focus from fear to belief systems. The principal means by which people manage existential fear is through their belief systems, so we will explore the manner in which horror films help shape a person's developing self-view, world-view, present-view, past-view, and future-view.

Self-View

In a classic study on the social psychology of horror films, Zillmann et al. (1986) presented college students with a clip from the movie *Friday the 13th: Part III* while in the company of an opposite-gender confederate who was instructed to feign distress, mastery, or indifference. Male undergraduates enjoyed the film significantly more in the presence of a distressed female confederate and found the distressed confederate more attractive than the mastery or indifferent confederates, whereas female undergraduates enjoyed the film clip significantly more when accompanied by a male confederate who displayed mastery. The authors concluded that the results of their study supported the gender-role or *snuggle theory* of horror film appeal. In early hunting and gathering societies, the adult male was the hunter and the female remained behind to care for the home and children. Hunters who survived encounters with wild animals told stories of their adventures designed to frighten those who remained behind. Such stories, along with tests of physical strength and bravery, were instrumental in socializing young males. Overt fear reactions were reinforced in women and adolescent girls.

Adolescent boys, on the other hand, were instructed to remain strong in the face of fear, just like their fathers and the other men of the village. In modern times, these traditional rites of passage have been replaced by symbolic acts like watching scary movies (Zillmann & Gibson, 1996).

The results of the Zillmann et al. (1986) study are broadly consistent with the gender-role theory of horror film appeal but these results may relate to a great deal more than just gender role socialization. Three components of the self-view seem to be particularly relevant to the results of this study: reflected appraisals, social comparisons, and role identity. Reflected appraisals or how people perceive themselves as coming across to others, a process which Cooley (1902/1964) called the *looking-glass self*, may have played a significant role in the Zillmann et al. study by way of peer influence. Adolescents possess a strong imaginary audience and believe that other people are as preoccupied with them as they are with themselves (Bee & Boyd, 2002). Hence, many juveniles are tremendously concerned about how they come across to others, even as they watch a horror film. Likewise, they are on the lookout for social comparisons, making upward comparisons with same-sex peers who display gender congruent reactions (males = mastery, females = fright) and downward comparisons with same-sex peers who exhibit gender incongruent reactions. Role identity is a third component of the self-view. It rises to prominence when watching a horror film with someone of the opposite-sex. In this context, self-attributions of role identity are made on the basis of one's reactions to the film.

Not all viewers of horror identify with the same characters. Results from the Johnston (1995) study showed that gore watching was marked by identification with the killer in a slasher film. Students who adopted independent watching or problem watching styles identified with the

victim; independent watching and problem watching students differed in that independent watchers identified with exhibitions of mastery on the part of a victim or potential victim, problem watchers identified with the sense of helplessness commonly expressed by some of these same victims. As such, gore watchers reported the lowest level of fear, problem watchers the highest level of fear, and independence watchers an intermediate level of fear. Self-representation, it would seem, has a monumental effect on people's interest in and attitudes toward horror pictures. Possible selves also appear to play a role in people's attitudes toward fictionalized accounts of horror. The famous anthropologist, Joseph Campbell (1988) once remarked that the monster concept in fiction can be traced to a "feared adventure of the discovery of the self" (p. 8). Such a journey holds the potential for confrontation with feared selves but may also permit exploration of desired selves given the fact that horror movies are rich in social commentary.

World-View

Horror pictures promote a particular type of world-view, one that leans toward the mechanistic side of the organismic-mechanistic dimension, the fatalism end of the agenticism-fatalism dimension, the fairness pole of the fairness-inequity dimension, and the malevolent fringe of the malevolent-benevolent dimension. Like Frankenstein's monster, horror pictures are diverse bits of legend, myth, and superstition sewn together to form a whole that is the sum of its individual parts. John Carpenter, director of *Halloween* (1978), took a mechanistic approach to the principal subject of his story, Michael Myers, who becomes nothing short of a killing machine. Horror movies from *Dracula* (1931) to *Final Destination* (2000) often emit a strong

sense of fate or destiny. Likewise, despite the senseless violence, there is an odd sense of fair play in many horror films, such as the well-recognized fact that promiscuous girls are significantly more likely to be killed in slasher films than chaste girls (Weaver, 1991). In following up on some of Weaver's findings, Oliver (1993) discovered that traditional attitudes toward female sexuality (i.e., women should remain virgins until marriage) were associated with greater liking for graphic horror films in which sexually promiscuous women were victimized. Finally, horror pictures tend to promote a malevolent world-view as evidenced by Forgas' (1991) observation that positive moods foster a belief that the environment is safe whereas the negative emotions aroused by horror films often give the impression that the environment is unsafe. It is hypothesized, therefore, that more regular viewers of horror films should possess more mechanistic, fatalistic, fairness-leaning, and malevolent world-views than less regular viewers of horror films.

Even while promoting mechanistic, fatalistic, fairness-leaning, and malevolent world-views, horror films are not exclusive to these poles and often touch on organismic, agentic, inequity, and benevolent themes as well. Watching a horror picture is a little like taking the Rorschach inkblot test, in the sense that our perception determines what we see. In this way, horror films both create and reinforce particular world-views. *Halloween* (1978) may offer a mechanical killer, but there are several more multi-dimensional characters, particularly Laurie Strode (played by Jamie Lee Curtis) and Dr. Loomis (played by Donald Pleasance), which give a more holistic and balanced feel to the picture. Despite fatalism being the principal theme of *Final Destination* (2000), by the end of the picture the two main characters, Alex (played by

Devon Sawa) and Clear (played by Ali Larter), have defied fate. The five teenage victims in the *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) unwisely pick up an obviously deranged hitchhiker and then enter a house they have no business entering. The deaths of these "Darwin Award" hopefuls are not only inevitable, they seem almost justified. Inequity may nevertheless enter the picture in that these teenagers are as much victims of their own stupidity as they are of Leatherface, yet how they die (hung on a meat hook, bludgeoned to death with a sledgehammer) seems grossly disproportional to the severity of their offenses, a conclusion with which director Tobe Hooper may or may not agree. Even though Hitchcock's *The Birds* is clearly pessimistic in outlook, the movie offers the audience several rays of hope scattered throughout the picture. Noteworthy examples are: At the beginning, Mitch buys two innocent lovebirds. And the ending is open , making way and leaving room for optimism.

Present-View

The perceptual function of the present-view makes its appearance in early childhood and experiences a powerful boost in adolescence. Horror movies aid teenagers in differentiating between fact and fiction and in so doing help shape the perceptual function of a teenager's self-view. The executive function is no less affected by exposure to the horror genre. Watching a horror film presents adolescents and young adults with frightening stimuli to which they can either succumb, or learn to manage. Basic decision-making and coping skills derive from a person's interactions with the environment; one small yet vital aspect of this environment is exposure to horror films. By learning to suppress feelings and display mastery or cling to others in a dependent ploy for protection, a person learns to cope with another aspect of his or her

environment, a skill that may be useful in dealing with more than just horror pictures. Therefore, before writing horror films off as mindless entertainment or dangerous escapism, we would do well to consider the possibility that they assist in the development and elaboration of a person's present-view.

Mundorf et al. (1989) note that individuals with lower levels of self-reported fear acknowledge greater attraction to and enjoyment of horror films. This finding can be interpreted in one of several ways: first, people with initially low levels of fear may, for either dispositional or early environmental reasons, be differentially attracted to horror films, perhaps because watching this type of picture elevates their arousal to a more optimal level. A second possibility is that the individual has learned to effectively manage his or her fear through exposure to horror cinema. This second interpretation is more congruent with the integrated-interactive model advanced in this paper. Nonetheless, a longitudinal study in which a panel of viewers is followed over time is required to determine which interpretation is correct. It may very well turn out that both interpretations are correct under various circumstances or that the two effects interact. Horror fiction, according to the perspective outlined in this paper, has supported human survival since primordial times by virtue of its ability to furnish a stimulus that assists with the evolution and reinforcement of the perceptual and executive functions of a person's present-view.

Past-View

The horror genre shares with comedy, a movement toward the past and a preoccupation with the innocence of childhood (Wells, 2000). However, whereas comedies often focus on

amusing anecdotes, horror films dwell on the more frightening aspects of one's past. Of course, horror films make liberal use of black comedy, disclosing the bond between the two genres. When Ash, played by Bruce Campbell, tries to reassure his friend Scott in the film *The Evil Dead* (1982) that everything is going to work out by asserting, "We're all going to make it out of here. You, me, Shelley . . . well, not Shelley," we both laugh and cringe because we know that Shelley has been hacked to pieces in an earlier scene. There is also dark humor in the scene from *The Stepford Wives* (1975) where Joanne, played by Katherine Ross, meets her robotic double and notices that the robot looks exactly like her except for breasts that have been noticeably enlarged. Playfulness is an appealing aspect of horror films. A mixture of fear and frolic touches on a person's past-view and makes horror movies a genre that can be enjoyed by adults as well as older children and adolescents.

Future-View

Horror and science fiction both address control-related fears, but horror is past-oriented and science fiction looks to the future. There is, nevertheless, a role for horror in the development of a person's future-view. Popular horror films create expectancies and it is expectancies of being frightened or entertained that bring people into movies theaters and video rental shops. The expectancies and anticipations that lead people to view horror films are that they will be scared, shocked, or grossed out; what they often do not understand is their reason for wanting to be scared, shocked, or grossed out. According to the integrated-interactive model people want to be scared, shocked, and grossed out because these responses assist in the development and reinforcement of their basic beliefs about life.

Conclusion

The problem with traditional theories of horror film appeal is not that they are wrong, it is that they are incomplete. Integrating aspects of eight popular theoretical models designed to explain the lure of horror films (psychoanalytic, catharsis, excitation transfer, curiosity/fascination, sensation seeking, dispositional alignment, gender role socialization, societal concern) and defining horror as a fictionalized account designed to evoke terror through the implied presence of supernatural or extremely abnormal forces, the present paper describes horror film appeal as consisting of three principal factors: tension, relevance, and unrealism. For those looking to be frightened, it is a film's ability to induce tension, provide a context (relevance), and supply relief (unrealism) that defines its appeal. We might even predict that viewer enjoyment of horror films is a direct function of these three factors such that films rated high in tension, relevance, and unrealism will be rated as more appealing than films rated low in tension, relevance, and unrealism. Asserting that these three factors account for the popularity of horror films is like arguing that people like candy because it is sweet. We must understand the mechanisms that make tension, relevance, and unrealism appealing just as much as we must understand why many people enjoy sweet-tasting foods.

The integrated-interactive model differs from most traditional theories of horror cinema appeal in drawing a clear distinction between description and explanation. Horror film appeal may be adequately described by tension, relevance, and unrealism. However, these factors do not explain why horror films continue to attract audiences. To answer this question we must call upon an integrated-interactive explanation of horror film appeal in which fear and belief systems

assume center stage

Horror films are popular because they speak to the basic human condition, to existential fear, and to people's attempts to overcome their fear belief systems. For some, horror movies exacerbate existential fear, yet for many others, watching a horror film is a way to put existential fear into its proper perspective. That which frightens us becomes less intimidating once it is understood; the unknown is the basis of many of our deepest fears. Horror pictures afford people the opportunity to articulate, identify, and manage their fears by taking an abstract concept like fear and concretizing it into stimuli that are projected onto a television screen or a movie screen. Belief systems complete the process by furnishing us with a life philosophy (self-view, world-view, past-view, present-view, future-view) that serves a preventive function by exerting a palliative effect on fear.

It has been argued that there is nothing more practical than a good theory. Theories permit the organization of knowledge into manageable units or constructs which, in turn, allow scientists to establish hypotheses and conduct research designed to investigate the empirical validity of these constructs. Although the integrated-interactive model of horror film appeal is far from empirically established, it is capable of producing testable hypotheses. Ten hypotheses bearing on the explanatory branch of the integrated-interactive model are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

Ten Hypotheses Generated by the Integrated-Interactive Model of Horror Film Appeal

Fear

H_1 Those individuals who score high on measures of control-related existential fear will be

significantly more attracted to horror films than those persons who score low on measures of control-related fear.

H_2 Due to their greater concern with the developmental issues of mastery and autonomy adolescents will find the allure of horror films significantly stronger than adults.

H_3 Highly industrialized western cultures because of their preoccupation with control will create a stronger market for horror films than less industrialized eastern cultures.

H_4 Universal themes centering around the fear of losing control should be evident in the horror literature of widely divergent cultures.

Self-View

H_5 Adolescent boys with conventional gender-role identities and imaginary audiences (i.e., boys don't show fear) will display significantly less fear when watching a horror film than adolescent boys possessing unconventional gender-role identities and imaginary audiences.

H_6 Differential identification with the antagonists and protagonists in a horror picture will reflect fundamental differences in self-representation.

World-View

H_7 Those individuals who watch more than 20 horror films a year will have more mechanistic, fatalistic, fairness-leaning, and malevolent world-views than those individuals who watch fewer than 20 horror films a year.

Present-View

H_8 Fear, as measured by both cognitive and physiological measures, will drop in proportion to the formation of coping skills and beyond the level of simple desensitization achieved through repeated exposure to horror film stimuli.

Past-View

H_9 Viewers will find a horror film that contains periodic comic interludes significantly more enjoyable than the same horror film in which the comic interludes have been removed.

Future-View

H_{10} The degree to which people's expectancies concerning a previously unseen horror movie match their subsequent viewing experience will correlate with their rated enjoyment of the film.

Several of these hypotheses have already been tested and found to have merit, particularly H_4 (Campbell, 1988) and H_6 (Johnston, 1995), although most require further study. It is not the purpose of this paper to simply assume that the integrated-interactive explanation for horror film appeal is superior to each of the individual parts from which it has been constructed, but rather to offer it up for empirical scrutiny and investigation in the spirit of determining whether it renders a comprehensive and meaningful account of what draws people to horror films. In the absence of empirical support the integrated-interactive model is just another interesting idea in search of data. With empirical support the integrated-interactive model sheds a discerning light on horror cinema, one that accentuates the horror genre's potential as a metaphor for the human condition and people's attempts to cope with this condition.

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