

Happily Horrified

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“You may enter.” The knobbly, cracked hand of the hooded speaker sweeps slowly across his body and comes to rest upon the arched doors. For a moment, all are silent; his eyes laugh menacingly at ours. Then, he pushes, and the solid oak doors creak open. I suck in my breath; I can hear my blood pulsating in my ears. The hand pulling mine gently leads me into the black uncertainty. As my eyes gradually adjust, I see that I am following my friends’ figures down a long corridor, our shadows drifting silently along the peeling walls. My eyes fall upon the silhouette of a young girl floating in a pool of light at the end of the hallway. We creep forward; one foot, then the next. Suddenly, the pool of light is enveloped by blackness. We stop: a noise behind us. I spin around. The girl is now standing where we had just been a half minute before. Her long, black hair clings to her cheeks as she lifts her head. I start pushing. “Run! Just go!” I sprint down the hall, through a bathroom smeared with blood. I shove my way through frigid, hanging corpses, past cackling clowns with knives held high in their clenched fists. Finally, an empty room; I slow. My heavy breath hangs in the air, and a bead of cold sweat trickles down through my hair.

Now where? The lights are dimming, the walls seeming to cave in. Then, the roar of a starting chain saw. Again my legs, though I can’t feel them, are carrying me faster and faster. The roar overpowers my eardrums, then grows softer, more distant. Finally, I’m back in the cold night air. My hands hit my knees, my chest heaves. My best

friend Kati is beside me now. The rest of our group appears, laughing hysterically.

“I didn’t know you guys could run so fast,” Chris manages between bouts of laughter.

“That was awesome!” I say, and Kati agrees.

We pile into Chris’s ‘93 Pathfinder. As we drive back to Kati’s house, the others laugh and compare favorite rooms and characters of the haunted house we just left, but I’m lost in my thoughts. Why is that considered entertainment? What makes people want to put themselves in situations like that? I was so scared in there, but I loved it!

It seems so paradoxical. One of the most fundamental assumptions of natural human behavior is that we avoid the repulsive and seek the pleasurable. As Noel Carroll, professor and author of fifteen books and hundreds of articles on philosophical subjects, so eloquently points out, “We do not, for example, attempt to add some pleasure to a boring afternoon by opening the lid of a steamy trash can in order to savor its unwholesome stew of broken bits of meat, moldering fruits and vegetables, and noxious, unrecognizable clumps” (275). So how can it be that, in the case of horror films and haunted houses, not only do we seek the revolting, but we find pleasure in it?

The human species has historically always acknowledged that the world is full of “dark” and “evil” aspects (“Horror Story” 245). Beyond this simple acknowledgement, however, humans have always maintained a fascination for the “otherworldly.” The ancient Egyptians are remembered today for their preoccupation with the realm of the spirits, and their diligent earthly work that would prepare them for what they believed would follow death; ancestor worship began with the Zhou Dynasty in China in 1500 B.C.; classical mythology depicts characters such as Medusa (who turned onlookers to stone and brandished a scalp of snakes), the Hydra (a many-headed water beast who

acted as guardian of the Underworld), and Cyclopes (one-eyed giants). Many of these tales involved a hero (for example, Orpheus or Heracles), who was driven to journey through the land of the dead in order to accomplish his mission or reach his destination (Wilson).

The modern horror genre, however, began its development in the late eighteenth century. As the Enlightenment movement continued to find scientific explanations for seemingly every aspect of life, many fought against the rational, ordered world with tales of terror, now known as Gothic literature. These stories related heinous evils and were often framed against an ominous medieval backdrop. This history may offer insight into another reason the horror genre remains popular today. Science and technology continue to define and shape our world in an increasingly ordered and deliberate fashion. It is possible that many find the impossibilities of the horror genre an outlet for rebellion against today's scientific, classified, formulized universe. To be sure, however, the legacy of Gothic literature continues to awe and entice hordes of indulgers to the present day, and will inevitably continue to do so, as the human fascination with and curiosity towards evil has not waned ("Horror Story" 245).

Perhaps much of our fascination is a result of the religious framework that seems to inevitably encompass the horror genre. In almost every religion there is an ongoing battle between the epitome of good and the ultimate evil. I believe we are intrigued by these ultimate forms of evil, the work of Satan and demons, unknown magical forces. These films and simulations represent, for most people, their greatest fears. Viewers and participants are often required to confront death (and perhaps even what may follow death), as well as the greatest forces of evil imaginable to the human mind. Through the

atrocities that horror films and even haunted houses offer to us, we must necessarily explore religious themes, and essentially our personal beliefs and views on the struggle of good versus evil. And because these situations are only simulations, we are able to leave the situation with the sense that we triumphed over that evil.

Our fascination may also result from the impossibility of what we are offered through horrifying simulations. Senior lecturer in Moral Philosophy at the Scottish University of St. Andrews Berys Gaut claims in his “The Paradox of Horror” that because monsters are “physically impossible according to our conceptual scheme, we are...curious about them, and find them fascinating” (296). Noel Carroll agrees, expressing his belief that because monsters are so unusual to us and to our cultural understanding, we have a natural desire to learn about them (281). Take, for example, the monster in Lovecraft’s “The Dunwich Horror”:

“Bigger’n a barn...all made o’ squirmin ropes...hull thing sort o’ shaped like a hen’s egg bigger’n anything, with dozen o’ legs like hogsheads that haff shut up when they step...nothin’ solid abaout it—all like jelly...great bulgin’ eyes all over it...ten or twenty maouths or trunks astickn’ aout all along the sides....”

(Carroll 281)

However, Gaut also points out that “not all horror fictions involve monsters,” that an extremely prominent and popular subcategory of horror is the depiction of the serial killer (296). In the 2007 thriller *Disturbia*, actor Shia LaBeouf, through his teenage character Kale Brecht, demonstrates the natural human inquisitiveness inspired not by a “monster,” but by a “slasher.”

Under house arrest for “popping” his Spanish teacher, and lacking TV, internet, and gaming services (which his mother had promptly aborted following his incarceration), Kale is left with nothing better to occupy his time than building Twinkie towers and spying on the unsuspecting residents of his wealthy, suburban neighborhood. Kale learns that the suspect in an abducted woman’s investigation (a case similar to several homicides in a nearby town) is thought to have been driving a blue 1967 Ford Mustang with a dented front left fender. Kale later observes his neighbor, Robert Turner, pushing just such a car, dented front left fender and all, into Turner’s garage. Kale informs his friends, Ronnie and Ashley, of what he had discovered, and they all decide to “stake out,” keeping both binoculars and a video recorder trained on Turner’s house. Later that night, the trio spots a frantic woman racing hysterically through Turner’s hallways and rooms, while through the curtains, they see Turner’s silhouette brandishing a glaring, silver knife. The three lunge forward, leaning as close as possible to the glass of Kale’s bedroom window, straining to see what will happen. Their rapid, heavy breathing fogs the window; their large, frightened eyes dart from woman to Turner (Disturbia). Their fascination with the scene has glued them to the sight of it, despite their fear. As Carroll suggests, “One wants to gaze upon the unusual even when it is simultaneously repelling” (286).

So we see that, through the fascination, we can still feel fear. But through the fear, can we also feel pleasure? Some researchers believe no. These proponents of the “aftermath model” assert that the observer does not, in fact, enjoy the fearful experience (the haunted house or horror film) itself, but rather the relief at the resolution of the experience, when the brain finally relaxes after its tensed, stressful state. As the

University of California at Los Angeles assistant research psychologist Raphael Rose states, “There is a profound sense of relief when the terror ends” (Pressley), and it is for this immense release that so many endure the fear and displeasure of, say, a horror film or haunted house.

The flaw here is the aftermath model’s underlying assumption that positive emotions can occur only after the fearful stimulus has gone; that the human species can experience only one emotion at a time.

I know differently. As the dramatic music resonates in my ears, my anticipation heightens. I’m certain something big is about to happen. Actress Julia Stiles, as mother Katherine Thorn in the 2006 film *The Omen*, is staring questioningly at her reflection in the mirror. Then, there it is! The haunting reflection of a red-eyed demon breathing down her neck! I jump about a foot in the air. I pull my eyes away to turn and look at Colleen, sitting next to me on the couch. My jaw hangs agape in shock and fright, yet my lips are turned up at the corners in an excited smile; I’m terrified, and I’m having a great time!

This cannot be, according to the aftermath model, but is in direct concordance with the theory of “co-activation.” Andrade and Cohen believe that individuals are in fact capable of experiencing positive feelings in addition to fear, and all at the same time. These researchers analyzed the responses of seventy-five students from the University of California at Berkeley to a frightening stimulus. Each student first observed two minutes of a documentary (to standardize emotional levels), followed by four and a half minutes of a horror movie. The participants were asked to report their levels of happy and fearful emotions, and if and when they experienced these emotions simultaneously, at intervals throughout the film. From the study, Andrade and Cohen concluded that not only did

participants feel both fear and pleasure at the same time, but the more fear they felt, the more pleasure they experienced as well (291).

As I agree with Andrade and Cohen's theory, because I know that I do in fact enjoy the scary movie or haunted house as I experience it, I grew curious as to what my fellow University of Colorado at Boulder students would have to say on the subject. And so I decided to conduct a study of my own. I polled twenty CU-Boulder students who claimed to enjoy horror films and/or haunted houses. Each student was asked when he or she found the experience most pleasurable: during the experience or after the stimulus had gone. Nine of the ten males questioned responded that they enjoyed the experience most while it was occurring, and nine of ten females responded in the same way. Thus, it seems possible that the aftermath model is inaccurate, and that co-activation offers the better explanation.

But it seems to me that "co-activation" of emotions is not so well-defined as one might think. As Berys Gaut suggests, "There is no pattern of physiological changes or set of sensations peculiar to each emotion, and an emotion may be associated with different sensations..." (302). For example, the physiological manifestations of our responses to fear are extremely similar to those of love at first sight: sweating, muscle tension, rapid, pounding heartbeat, difficulty breathing. Stanley Schachter, author of "The Interaction of Cognitive and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State," proposes that excitation is not specific to pleasurable or displeasurable emotions, and that the excitation from either of these causes is the same. Therefore, when they are experienced in sequence, they add to each other. For example, if one experiences excitation from a pleasurable experience, say a funny line or scene in a horror film, the following murder attempt on

the hero's life will serve to intensify the emotion the viewer had experienced in the scene before.

Can this suggestion, termed the "excitation transfer theory" by Dolf Zillman, be explained scientifically? In fact it can, by the brain's dispersion of catecholamines. These neurotransmitters are released to signal your body to respond to a stimulus, whether fearful or pleasurable. The effects of these catecholamines, however, diminish relatively slowly, and so excitation by a previous stimulus or emotion is intensified by subsequent or simultaneously occurring emotions (Zillman). This makes it possible to "find both negative emotional responses and their objects pleasant," due to their intensification of pleasurable stimuli (Gaut 302).

I know this to be true. I always find a horror film that contains at least some comic relief to be more enjoyable. The tension is briefly broken, and I am excited by a positive emotion. When the next scene cuts to a portrayal of the murderer, I am already enjoying the movie, excited and intrigued, with attention fully focused. This next scene, therefore, seems even more enjoyable than it would have been had the previous scene been excluded.

Gaut takes the excitation transfer theory one step further: he proposes that negative emotions may not be experienced at all; that while the objects (or experiences) that cause the emotions may be negative, the emotions themselves are not necessarily so. The simple fact that what we are witnessing may be unpleasant does not require that what we are feeling is also unpleasant (300).

These emotions can be interpreted as enjoyable, because the individual understands that what he or she is experiencing is merely a simulation. "Because we

know that the monsters are only fictional, the fear and disgust they arouse in us are muted in comparison with what they would be if we were to meet such monsters in real life, which allows the pleasures of curiosity more easily to outweigh the displeasures of fear and disgust” (Gaut 296). This is commonly referred to as the “control thesis”: when the individual feels in control of his situation, in the case of horror films and haunted houses, he realizes that nothing will really happen to him.

Researchers Andrade and Cohen refer to this psychological security, and its resulting detachment from depicted events, as the “protective frame.” In order to analyze the degree to which enjoyment was affected by the protective frame, Andrade and Cohen recruited eighty-three University of California at Berkeley students, and again asked them to watch four and a half minutes of a horror film, while reporting their levels of enjoyment at intervals throughout the clip. The procedure was then repeated with the same students, but this second time, the researchers installed within their subjects a stronger protective frame: during the horror clip, Andrade and Cohen placed pictures of the actors in their every-day clothes next to the screen, reminding the viewers that the characters were fictional (293). The results showed that enjoyment levels increased from the standardization experiment, in which no pictures of the actors were placed next to the screen. From this, we see that when people feel sufficiently disengaged and detached from the events, they can feel pleasure along with their fear (294).

It seems to me, however, that this psychological security has individually defined boundaries. I have often heard fellow horror film patrons complain that they did not enjoy a particular movie because they did not experience sufficient fear. For these individuals, the stimulus they experienced was unable to adequately overcome the erected

barrier of their protective frame, and they were therefore prevented from enjoying the arousal that is triggered in response to fear. Yet the situation also loses its pleasure if a simulation becomes too real, and evokes too much fear.

“No way, guys! No way! I can’t go in there!” Our line was at a standstill. The high black walls of the haunted house had been shrinking over the past several feet, and we now found ourselves staring down the only exit: one tiny door, about three feet high. Kati was on the floor, almost in tears; she would not, could not, convince herself that if she tried to crawl through that door, she would come out all right on the other side. For Kati, what she was being asked to do was just too frightening, too real. The experience had more than surpassed her psychological barrier, and the pleasures of curiosity or fascination, or any pleasure for that matter, were not enough to allow her to enjoy the fictional experience.

When, however, an experience strikes the perfect balance (is fearful enough to trigger emotional responses, yet remains just unrealistic enough that psychological security is maintained), an individual can enjoy not only the curiosity and fascination, along with the emotional responses that are triggered by such an experience, but also a sort of mental stimulation.

The screen comes into focus. Two men lie, beaten and bruised, in an abandoned, rusted bathroom. One is chained to a pipe, while the other is similarly bound to a bathtub. Clues have been left for the men that lead them to a saw. Once the tool is discovered, however, the two quickly learn that the blade is too dull to sever the wrought iron. It soon becomes apparent to the audience that the capturer has intentionally left the fate of each man in his own hands: will he choose to amputate his own foot above the chain that binds

him, and escape; or will he keep his appendage, but die, chained in the cement room (*Saw*)?

“Oh my gosh!” I turn to Emily. “I don’t know if I could do it! What would you do?” She thinks for a while. “I’d do it,” she finally replies.

Through simulations such as haunted houses and horror films, we are given the opportunity to place ourselves in a particular situation that, if real, would test every ounce of our strength, both mental and physical. But because the situation is only a representation of the actual event, we are able to question, debate, and discover how we ourselves would react. “We can have the experience without dealing with the repercussions,” said a friend of mine, Tim McNerney, when discussing possible explanations for people’s enjoyment of horror films. Graham Masterton, author of more than sixty horror and thriller novels, wrote that people enjoy horror because the genre “depicts ordinary people dealing with extraordinary threats. They like to imagine, “What would I do if a dark shadow with glowing red eyes appeared in my bedroom at night? What would I do if I heard a sinister scratching inside the walls of my house? What would I do if my husband’s head turned around 360 degrees?” (Hoffner and Cantor 43). They have the opportunity to imagine how they themselves would react, how their decisions would differ from the characters’, and how the outcome might therefore change. Perhaps, this allows an individual to somehow feel superior to the characters by believing that his “better” decision would have allowed the monster to be defeated, the victim to be rescued, or the story to have an all-around more satisfactory conclusion. I have discovered, however, that while all of these theories and studies accurately describe why many people put themselves in haunting or horrifying situations, there is

one particular explanation that remains the most common and most universal. I asked twenty University of Colorado at Boulder students whether they enjoyed the adrenaline rush they experienced when watching a horror film or visiting a haunted house. All twenty students (ten male and ten female) responded that yes, they did enjoy this rush, and that this was the number one reason why they chose to engage in such frightening experiences.

So obviously, most people have heard of, and probably experienced, an adrenaline rush. But what exactly occurs in such a response? And what makes it enjoyable?

The answers lie in our bodies' natural "fight-or-flight" response, of which epinephrine, commonly known as adrenaline, is the main ingredient. This hormone is released from the adrenal medulla, located just above our kidneys, and enters into our blood stream. Epinephrine causes our heart rates to increase, along with our respiratory rates; our arterioles (which carry and direct blood-flow) to dilate; our muscles to tense; and "our attention to focus for quick and effective responses to threats" (Choi). The sudden increase in epinephrine levels also signals the brain to produce endorphins. These hormones, released from the pituitary gland into the blood stream, and from the hypothalamus into the spinal cord and brain, are the body's natural pain killers. Binding to opiate receptors in the brain, they contribute to an individual's sense of well-being and happiness, and elicit feelings of euphoria. In a sense, endorphins are the body's natural drug, and are responsible for a natural "high," contributing significantly to the enjoyment of the rush.

Sylvia Kriebig and a team of researchers conducted a study to determine the effects of adrenaline on emotions caused by fear. Kriebig and her team used electrodes to

measure the respiratory and heart rates and the electrodermal reactions of their subjects in response to a “fear-inducing film.” The team also videotaped the facial expressions of the subjects as the film was watched, and recorded their verbal responses following the film. The subjects reported their levels of emotional intensity using a ten-point scale. This was the standardization trial. For a second viewing of the film, each subject received a supplementary injection of epinephrine. Based on all collected data, both the physiological and verbal responses, the team determined that the increased levels of epinephrine led the subjects to experience “higher intensity of emotions,” both fearful and pleasurable (801). Higher intensity of both fear and pleasure means higher levels of endorphins, and so greater enjoyment.

When the danger, or simulation of it, subsides, however, no adrenaline (or epinephrine), is released, and the body returns to homeostasis (its normal functioning state). Though no research has been conducted on this point, it seems to me that, from a developmental standpoint, when this occurs, the restoration must mean that the individual has “won” his battle, overcome the obstacle, defeated the danger, which in itself is accompanied by an overwhelming sense of excitement, triumph, and pleasure.

In reality, no one theory can account for the human enjoyment of horror. In fact, our pleasure is derived from aspects of all the theories and models explored above. Each individual’s enjoyment may depend on a unique combination of these explanations, and in varying proportions. Throughout this investigation process, I have come to see each of these aspects of enjoyment in my personal pursuance of horrifying experiences. I believe the most heavily weighted are the fascination and curiosity, which, due to my

psychological security, I am able to solicit and relish, without fear of consequence. Yet, for others, it's all about the adrenaline; still others, the triumph.

Well, I'd better go. We're back at Kati's house, and the others have just started the movie. I'd hate to miss the beginning of *Silence of the Lambs*!

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