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Enjoyment and Social Functions of Horror

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When I was a graduate student at Indiana University, I went home over break to visit my family. My nephew Brian, who was 10 years old at the time, begged his mom to let me take him to a scary movie. My sister was hesitant, warning of nightmares that often accompanied these movies. Still, Brian persisted and confidently declared that he was no longer a little boy, that these things didn't scare him anymore, and that his mom was being ridiculous. Knowing that I studied this type of thing, my sister felt secure enough to let me take Brian to see *Alien*. Brian was thrilled not only to be going, but also to be going with his big uncle. With popcorn, M&Ms, and soda in hand we sat near the back of the large theater in anticipation of the thrills to come.

When the theater went dark, Brian sat erect with eyes wide open and an ear-to-ear grin to match. But as the film progressed, I noticed him starting to slouch into the seat and draw closer to my side. On screen, the astronauts started closely inspecting some kind of spider like organisms contained in specimen jars. The embalmed alien embryos were floating eerily in the large glass containers when—Bang! With one shocking thrust toward the viewer, the disgusting embryo exploded out of the jar and onto the startled face of the defenseless astronaut. At the same instant, as if matching the embryo's thrust off the screen, my nephew's arms jerked forward, sending popcorn and M&Ms sailing high into the air, showering everyone around us. As Brian dove for cover under my arms I listened to scores of M&Ms bouncing loudly down the concrete floors and smiled sheepishly at those around. For the rest of the movie, Brian's face was buried against my arm as he alternately watched and hid his eyes from the terrors on screen. At its

end, he gleefully proclaimed that this was the best film he had ever seen and asked if we could do it again.

At home that night, I couldn't help but think of how many factors played a part in governing our very different experiences: developmental stage, social setting, relational ties, frightening themes, special effects, M&Ms, and popcorn—all playing their part leading to our enjoyment. I was excited by these thoughts, and when I returned from break, I shared the event with my advisor. I told him in some detail my views on how all these things influence our experiences. He paused briefly and said "Hmmm, well, yes, of course, all this may be plausible, but to be sure we need to first put it to the test." I guess the only sure thing to come from this at that time was my sister's understanding of how foolish it was to trust me with her children. Since then, however, I have tried to look more closely at issues related to the enjoyment and social functions of horror. Why do we watch? How do we experience it? What is the aftermath of our emotions? Surprisingly few scientific studies have asked these questions and "put it to the test." Yet the enormous popularity and consumption of the genre make it important for us to do this.

WHY DO WE WATCH?

Think of those times when you put yourself in a situation knowing that it will be upsetting: a film, the news, a personal or public event. On a Memorial Day visit to Washington DC, I accompanied a friend to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Unlike many other monuments, the Vietnam Memorial is a simple, austere, almost hauntingly beautiful place that evokes powerful emotions. While walking away my companion turned and asked, "Why do I do this to myself?" The question didn't surprise me, but it was still difficult to answer.

Explaining selective exposure to some distressing events is a challenge for media entertainment research. The appeal of barbarous slaughter seems counterintuitive at first. Although research in this area helps us explain some of the forces at work, much remains to be learned. Exposure to tragic and horrifying events seems the most difficult to grasp. When choosing horror we intentionally place ourselves in peril of great emotional anguish. Excluding those motivated by sadistic or masochistic needs, why do millions seek this? Some scholars suggest that horrific violence has limited appeal and its apparent popularity is overestimated due to the high profile

of media violence (American Psychological Association, 1993; Centers for Disease Control, 1991; "The killing screens," 1994; National Academy of Science, 1993). Even if this is true, horror's appeal to millions of hard-core fans remains to be explained. Extreme violence in many forms sells (Carey, 1994; Gerbner, 1988; Medved, 1992; Weinraub, 1993). Explanations for this behavior tend to fall into one of three categories: for pleasure derived from horrific content, for protective surveillance, or for concomitants of exposure to horror.

Pleasure From Horrific Content

Some scholars claim that people often enjoy being disgusted and frightened by the types of images we find in horror (Brosnan, 1976). For example, Sparks and Sparks (2000) suggested that horror frequently contains properties associated with sensory delight, novelty, or dispositional alignment that are inherently attractive and enjoyable. However, close inspection of these properties suggests that their appeal is best understood based on rewards from other things confounded with exposure. A better example of this is the position of McCauley (1998), who began with the position that emotional reactions to fiction are distinct from those we experience in response to real events. He claimed that horror's appeal comes directly from watching it, not from some other associated benefit. Zillmann (1998) dismissed these claims as "simply untenable," a position that he defended based on empirical evidence.

For Protective Surveillance

Another possibility is that the attraction to horrific media has evolutionary origins associated with protective vigilance and curiosity. According to this belief, we do not enjoy these experiences. In fact, quite the opposite is true. Witnessing these events is distressing. Nevertheless, innate cognitive processes focus our attention on images that contain cues of danger, cues often associated with horrific violence. This position is based on the notion that structures in the brain's limbic system that control emotion have remained essentially unchanged over thousands of years. Zillmann (1998) posited that continuous monitoring of the environment for danger was adaptive in early humans, and much of this endures today. Even though this behavior has lost most of its utility (Zillmann, 1979), our impulse to watch violent events remains.

Of course, in acknowledging that phylogenic assertions of this nature are by and large impossible to test, we are eventually left looking for other explanations. Perhaps most widespread among other accounts are those attributing attention to a learned association between exposure to horror and gratifications confounded with the experience. Several explanations fall into this category and can be understood best by considering how people experience exposure.

HOW DO WE EXPERIENCE EXPOSURE?

Accounts of viewing experience can be distinguished along several lines. At the most rudimentary level, accounts vary in terms of those positing the positive versus negative experiences of witnessing extreme violence. Some scholars claim that people enjoy horrifying images (Brosnan, 1976; McCauley, 1998), whereas others maintain that we do not (Denny, 1991; Gray, 1971; Rachman, 1990; Tamborini, 1991, 1996; Zillmann, 1998). The simple difference between assertions of delight or distress is less illuminating, however, than the logic associated with various claims and the factors said to determine the nature of experience.

Aesthetic Emotions

McCauley (1998) claimed that emotional reactions to fiction can be qualitatively different from their everyday emotional counterparts. In fact, he suggested that we blunder when we use the same names to represent dramatic emotions, as they are a parallel but different reality. Counter to everyday emotions, dramatic emotions are always positively valenced. This perspective helps explain the perplexing difference in audience reactions to fictional versus real-life events. In contrast to those asserting that feelings elicited by fictional media are irrational (Rorty, 1978), incoherent (Radford, 1975), or not real emotions (Binkley, 1977; Gombrich, 1962), this position simply states that aesthetic emotions are distinct from emotional reactions to real events (Bell, 1914; Danto, 1964, 1981; Fry, 1920).

Frijda (1989) explained that the distinct character of aesthetic emotions comes from audience perceptions of witnessed events as actual occurrences in an imaginary world. When watching a film, viewers do not suspend disbelief, but observe "real" events occurring in a fantasy world. Belief is the observant baseline, and it is maintained unless film cues force the viewer to

think about its fictional nature. According to Frijda, fiction simply allows viewers to inhibit certain emotions because they know some parts are unreal. This realization gives aesthetic emotions their distinct character. Our awareness that witnessed fictional events are irrelevant to our welfare and that actions cannot intervene leads to "complementing emotions." Although we identify with characters and sense their imminent fates, we are free of any consequences. Yet we can still experience a deep "responding emotion" to films that make us aware of a meaningful real-world experience or the possibility of its tangible consequences for us.

McCauley's (1998) position on "dramatic" emotions is similar to the notions of Frijda. **In his claim that dramatic emotions are always appealing in spite of their content, McCauley asserted that the pleasure experienced from viewing horrifying images comes only when the violence is framed as fiction.** As such, the initial experience of a horror film is not determined by the horror's negative tone but is determined instead by **its ability to mark and qualify the viewer's humanity, a quality that is always experienced positively.** This requires that the film allow the person to achieve dramatic distance by presenting certain cues that signal its fictional nature. These cues provide a "protective frame" that allows the viewer to experience a dramatic emotion rather than the "everyday" emotion expected from violent stimuli. The pleasure in the human "transcendence" produced by this experience is likened to that experienced with tragedy. Fictional tragedy is said to induce grief that goes beyond the viewer's individual problems, making those problems seem less significant. In a similar vein, the experience of horror in reaction to a film can be enjoyed because it is "purified" of personal consequence and makes us appreciate our humanity.

Although seemingly untestable, the proposition that dramatic distance qualitatively changes our initial experience of horrifying images is at least internally consistent with the contention that reactions to fictional horror are positive from the onset. However, when further noting that the pleasure in dramatic emotions is akin to that of catharsis, the logic seems to be called into question. If catharsis is the basis for the experience of pleasure, perhaps we should look there for our understanding of factors that determine the hedonic nature of the experience that McCauley tried to distinguish.

Catharsis

One of the most widely debated schemes for explaining our experience of horror and other violent media is the catharsis doctrine. Broadly interpreted,

this principle suggests that violent media have therapeutic properties. It holds that exposure to certain content can purge us of various fears, phobias, negative emotions, and antisocial behavioral impulses (Alloway; 1972; Evans, 1984; Harrington, 1972; Thomas, 1972). Initial research suggested the possibility that angered individuals were cleansed of their hostilities (Feshbach, 1955, 1976; Feshbach & Singer, 1971). It was held, presumably, that watching others performing violent behaviors allowed viewers to fantasize about acting out their violent impulses. This vicarious experience substituted for the need to actually perform the aggressive behavior, thus the impulse to aggress was reduced. Subsequent investigations, however, not only demonstrated the dubious nature of data originally thought supportive of catharsis (Chaffee & McLeod, 1971; Liebert, Sobol, & Davidson, 1972), but offered substantial evidence refuting the notion that exposure rids us of hostile or harmful negative emotions (Baron & Richardson, 1994; Geen & Quanty, 1977; Zillmann, 1979). In light of this, a prudent treatment of the issue might simply state that media-induced catharsis is unsupported by evidence. Nevertheless, the continued attention it receives suggests that there are questions remaining to be answered.

Why does support for the catharsis position continue in spite of evidence to the contrary found in the study of media violence? McCauley (1998) reasoned that failure to find support for catharsis results from flaws in research. He noted, for example, that media research tended to show short excerpts of violence that omit the plot and character development necessary to instigate the types of emotions required for catharsis to occur. He faulted research for using measures that fail to differentiate aggressive behavior motivated by impulse versus instrumentality and submitted that perhaps fictional violence rids us only of impulsive aggression. He concluded that work in this area does not provide a good test of catharsis, and that the concept deserves more attention.

Certainly, many film scholars treat symbolic catharsis as a credible principle. Some see it as a form of human transcendence that can result from our watching man's brutality to man and the terror it begets (Moeran, 1986; Rockett, 1988). Most talk simply of purging (Carroll, 1990; Denne, 1972; King, 1981). In fact, it seems that many observers accept as a given the notion that film violence can and does cleanse viewers of all types of unpleasant emotions. Although little detail is given to explicate the underlying mechanisms at work, fictional scholars often talk of identification, vicarious experience, and other similarly vague processes.

Zillmann (1998) took issue with such conjecture by questioning how this "miraculous cleansing" of our emotions could occur, and he expressed

surprise over psychologists' neglect in the construction of theories that explain phenomena associated with violent media exposure. Although little theoretical development directly addresses this issue, perhaps some insight can be gained from work in emotion theory. Lazarus provided one approach that might prove useful in this regard.

Lazarus (1991) claimed that aesthetic emotions in response to films are governed by the same mechanisms that control the generation of all emotions. His cognitive-motivational-relational theory contends that environmental and personality factors influence event appraisal. Appraisal governs all that follows, including coping strategies and the specific emotional state. The same process occurs with emotional response to film. The exposure experience is determined by relevant personality traits and situational cues both internal and external to the film. The traits and cues impact appraisal of the film experience in terms of its relevance for the individual's well being. Resulting coping processes regulate both the type and the strength of the emotion experienced. Central to this theory is knowledge of the emotions under consideration. Understanding the core relational themes (the essence, or defining features of an emotion) and coping tendencies associated with the emotion can inform us of the manner in which exposure should be related to the unfolding of emotional experience, whether that be one of relief (e.g., catharsis) or intensification.

From this perspective, we might propose that a catharsis should occur in response to film exposure only under circumstances in which appraisal and coping processes function in a manner allowing essential relief. If so, the central issue becomes identifying the circumstances where film cues are appraised in a manner generating relief from the experience of negative emotions. At first, this might seem no more demonstrable than speculations about inaccessible emotional processes offered by many critical film scholars. However, Lazarus's detailed explication of emotions along with their associated action and coping strategies offer the promise of testable hypotheses specifying when relief from negative affect should occur.

Central to predictions of experiential relief is the distinction between cognitive and action coping strategies designed to deal with specific threats. People attempt to manage environmental demands (the person-environment relationship) through coping responses designed to maximize their welfare. In efforts to deal with threats and dangers, people can either attempt to change the environment through actions (e.g., attack, flight, or other modifying behaviors) or cognitive adaptation (e.g., avoidance, denial, ridicule, or other forms of reappraisal). For example, anger occurs when appraisal reveals a

demeaning offense or threat to one's ego. If appraisal indicates that the offense can be rectified by attack, the coping action will occur. However, if the likely outcome of physical action is appraised as dysfunctional, cognitive coping ensues. Cognitive coping strategies that change the appraised meaning of the offense or stop its deliberation can benefit well-being by inhibiting the experience of anger completely or by preventing its escalation to dangerous levels.

From a functional perspective, catharsis should occur only in conditions where dysfunctional emotions exist and a means for diminishing the emotion can be found. With regard to media, we might expect that the type of passive activity associated with viewing is suitable only for advancing behavior associated with cognitive coping mechanisms. In this regard, it reasons that cathartic reactions through media can occur only for emotional states requiring cognitive coping, and only in circumstances where the media content and exposure setting provide the coping benefits required by the specific emotion in question. To the extent that the experience of, and reaction to, these content and exposure conditions is universal, we should expect anybody experiencing the relevant emotional state to experience the cathartic effect. However, if individual differences moderate the experience of the content and setting, we should expect related differences in resultant relief.

If we compare the different core relational themes and coping tendencies for negative emotions that might require purging (e.g., anger, sorrow), it reasons that, in order for media to relieve the emotion, the exposure experience must embody the action tendency required by the specific emotion considered. For example, if the emotion was sorrow, defined as a somewhat transient feeling of helplessness over an irrevocable loss, Lazarus submitted that the action tendency is withdrawal (inaction), to pull away from others. In this sense, instead of problem-focused coping, sorrow leads to coping that is emotion focused—the type of cognitive response called for when the person believes that nothing they can do will change the problem. One can easily see how viewing a sad film offers opportunity to withdraw and serves the necessary emotion-focused function. As such, the experience of sadness should be relieved by the exposure encounter. Notably, the process leading to relief here might be considered simple intervention by some, and not a purging of the emotion. Then again, the notion of “purging” is itself indistinct, and because the function and outcome here is analogous to catharsis, it might be considered comparable in all practical senses.

If we consider anger, however, it is harder to see how a media experience would advance behavior associated with the action tendency for this

emotion. Anger is experienced when we perceive demeaning offense, a threat of harm to self-esteem. The immediate action tendency is to stop the offense by attacking the person responsible. Of course, the attack will not occur if it seems unlikely to succeed. Concern for reprisal could delay an attack or prevent it altogether. In this case, more deliberate cognitive coping strategies take place to maximize long-term benefits. If cognitive coping can prevent thinking about the offense or change its appraised meaning, it can function to eliminate anger completely or prevent it from reaching hazardous levels. Considered in this regard, film exposure appears dysfunctional in relation to both prevention and reappraisal. Clearly we should not expect violent film to prevent thinking about the offense. In fact, just the opposite should be true. The intervention potential of violent film content on angered individuals should be decidedly low. Instead, its affinity with this emotional state should facilitate rehearsal of hostility and perpetuate anger. Similarly, we should not expect violent film to bring about change in appraised meaning. Instead of reappraisal, the film's hostile images should help preserve appraisal of behavior as demeaning and should discourage the type of “positive thinking” sometimes associated with successful reappraisal (Hart, 1991).

We gain added understanding by considering the experiences of fright and anxiety. Fright is regarded as a reaction to concrete threats of imminent physical harm. We are scared about the immediate prospect of death or injury, a condition that calls for escape. No additional appraisal or coping behaviors are pertinent to its instigation. The most useful response is physical avoidance or escape, which would quickly terminate the fright. Because the action tendency for fright is physical avoidance or escape, it is difficult to see how exposure to horror films would prove advantageous. A similar situation is seen for anxiety: the experience of uncertain existential threats to self or important others that we might think of as a threat to one's ego-identity.

Although anger results from our holding someone responsible for a threat to our self-esteem, anxiety occurs when the threat is to our existential welfare and we have no target for blame. It is the type of dread experienced when we contemplate terrible possibilities that we are incapable of controlling. Because no action can deter the threat, anxiety can only be dealt with through emotion-focused coping. In fact, beyond the type of reappraisal found in cognitive coping, we have few options for managing anxiety other than learning to endure it. Given that watching film promotes imaginative deliberation of fictional and real-life events, exposure to horror seems likely to breed dysfunctional thoughts, generating anxiety instead of

those thoughts that relieve it. Research that shows apprehensive participants avoiding exposure to victimizing violence is consistent with the notion that this content is unlikely to function as a cathartic relief (Wakshlag, Vial, & Tamborini, 1983). At that same time, because the thematic focus of most horror films tends to deal with just the types of existential threats considered to cause anxiety, we might posit that habituation of anxious tendencies could result from repeated exposure to the genre. Of course, this process is clearly distinguishable from anything resembling catharsis. Instead, it touches on learning mastery of fears, which is, in essence, learning to tolerate them.

So what do we conclude from this? Zillmann (1998) has argued convincingly against popular notions of catharsis, certainly more convincingly than those holding to its existence based on any empirical evidence. Even so, theoretical work on emotion offers further insight into these popularly held beliefs. Application of cognitive-motivational-relational theory (Lazarus, 1991) illustrates that catharsis seems obtainable from film exposure given the right antecedent conditions. Then again, the conditions required do not favor catharsis occurring from exposure to violent film. Instead, we suggest that if catharsis occurs, it should take place in viewers watching tragedy. These arguments seem inconsistent with most popular notions of catharsis that suggest that it can occur in angered men watching violent and horrifying images on screen. We hold that these conditions favor further hostility. Similarly with fright, conditions do not warrant the expectation of media induced relief. Perhaps reduced affect can be found over time for those prone to experiencing anxiety; however, it is difficult to interpret this form of relief as an example of catharsis. By contrast, the conditions produced by watching tragedy seem capable of promoting catharsis in those experiencing sorrow and other emotions susceptible to cognitive coping processes.

Dispositional Determinants

Certainly events in the film are central in shaping the experience of horror. Zillmann (1998) described viewers as mere witnesses whose emotional reactions are determined by events they observe on screen in much the same way that witnessed events shape emotions in real life. Yet, reactions commonly experienced while viewing horror seem most uncommon in everyday life. In contrast to what might be expected, horror film fans seem to take great pleasure from scenes of agonizing suffering and death. Though rare

in real life, we expect this type of devastating violence to repulse and dismay an observer. What then explains these joyous reactions to the infliction of pain in horror? Understanding the witness perspective in terms of the dispositional alignments viewers bring to watching horror offers insight.

Disposition theory (Zillmann, 1980) holds that our likes and dislikes for characters play a critical role in determining reactions to events witnessed in all parts of life. Simply put, we take great pleasure in witnessing good things happen to liked others and bad things to those we dislike. Similarly, we loath witnessing bad things happen to liked others or good things to those we dislike. This widely applied and methodically tested theory explains emotional reactions to sports, humor, suspense and other genres (Zillmann, 1980, 1983, 1991b; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976; Zillmann & Paulus, 1993). Applied to horror, it helps explain the surprisingly festive reactions found in viewers who watch scenes of pain and suffering by considering the development of character dispositions.

Zillmann (1998) submitted that character development plays a pivotal role in the creation of dispositions and their subsequent impact on reactions to film events. We are constantly monitoring the behavior of characters to judge their actions as right or wrong against our own moral standards. The outcome of this scrutiny cultivates character-related dispositions that promote morality-based viewer expectations. These expectations govern our experience of and reactions to anticipated and witnessed events. The confirmation of expectations generates great pleasure, whereas their disconfirmation causes anguish. Even the mere expectation of these outcomes promotes affect. We expect the evil villain to be punished severely and await it with joyous anticipation. We celebrate when it happens, and disparage its failure to occur. A crucial element controlling enjoyment of violence is perceived justification for its performance. We are more than happy to see increasingly brutal treatment of villains, but only if they first commit acts vile enough to warrant severe retribution. Vicious acts against rogues perceived as unjustified lead to viewer displeasure. Applied to horror this supports the need for atrocities in plot development to justify enjoyment of horrific violence taken in revenge. This storyline has been a successful formula for horror film since the early 1930s (Sontag, 1966), and for horror in other media forms since late 18th century (Hallie, 1969).

The extent of violence in horror is great (Sapolsky & Molitor, 1996), with villains and heroes alike who slaughter to achieve their noble or ignoble goals (Hoberman, 1998). Ferocious injury is inflicted on victims throughout the story's development, and in the end the debt must be paid. The graphic

annihilation of the villain serves to restore justice and create euphoria in the viewer, the payback often more violent than the original offense. Negative dispositions override norms dictating that we take no pleasure in witnessing others' pain and misfortune. When the villain represents evil incarnate, the social bounds to expressing hate and enjoying retaliatory violence wane. Zillmann (1998) argued that although a villain might profit temporarily for dramatic purposes, the plot resolution in drama very rarely shows benefaction for evil characters. Notably, however, this discussion focused on dramatic violence. It remains less clear that the same processes govern similar reactions to horror. Some critics question disposition logic as an explanation for horror's appeal, arguing that many recent films end in the triumph of evil (Rickey, 1982; Rosenbaum, 1979). Box office hits like *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and lists of others end with the menace vanished but not vanquished, while the hero is left weak and frightened instead of triumphant. The enormous popularity of these movies suggests that horror film devotees are attending for other reasons.

Some explanations combine features of film content and viewer attributes. For example, Zuckerman (1996) argued that biologically determined trait differences nurture the desire for fright and shock. Other scholars consider individual differences important determinants of how we experience horror itself. Research shows psychoticism a strong predictor of preference for film horror and graphic violence (Aluja-Fabregat, 2000; Weaver, 1991). Similar work shows dimensions of Machiavellian personality a predictor of exposure and appeal (Tamborini, Stiff, & Zillmann, 1987). As such, we might expect that experiences with horror vary as a function of personality. Tamborini (1996) proposed that trait empathy can alter viewer experiences with horror. Differences in empathy associated with well-learned cognitive coping mechanisms are said to short-circuit negative affect and shape emotional experience. Though some work has been done in this area, considerable effort is needed before personality's enjoyment-modifying effect is understood.

Social Determinants

Several scholars attempted to explain horror's appeal using evolutionary conceptions. Sparks and Sparks (2000) argued that violent stimuli in horror films have acquired an inherent attraction. They based their claim on evidence that over millennia a gender-biased interest in violence evolved as an adaptive response to basic human needs (Buss & Shackelford, 1997) and

pointed to repeat findings that gender predicts horror film's appeal as congruent with this logic (Cantor, 1998; Fenigstein, 1979; Sparks, 1991; Tamborini & Stiff, 1987). In a related manner, Zillmann and Gibson (1996) traced the evolution of horror's appeal to gender-socialization practice. They explained the functions of today's horror film as a forum for adolescent rites of passage that date back to preliterate societies.

Most cultures socialize children in a gender-specific fashion (Barry, Bacon, & Child, 1957). Boys are trained to hide their fear, and girls are encouraged to exhibit it (Brody, 1985; Saarni, 1989; Shennum & Bugental, 1982). However, the manner in which these customs are learned has changed considerably over time. Peers now impose norms once conveyed by parents, and the cinema has become the classroom for adolescent education. This should be particularly important for young men wanting to master their fears. Horror films facilitate socialization processes by providing conditions for routine confrontation of fears (Dickstein, 1980). They offer a safe forum for testing one's courage. In fact, frequent exposure to these films should facilitate insensitivity to their graphic violence and render them no longer disturbing. The desire to master these fears is a powerful force governing the appeal of horror.

An important part in the process is the comfort of protectors. It can help explain the initial ability for young boys to confront fears they have not begun to master. For the boy who has not learned to cope with this fear, the images in the film may be so upsetting that initial exposure should be avoided at all costs. Under these conditions an adult companion provides the comfort and feelings of security necessary for exposure to commence. For a young woman, the same comforting can come from the adult or the presence of a desirable companion.

Several scholars consider the social gratifications associated with expressing fear as central to horror films' appeal (Mundorf, Weaver, & Zillmann, 1989; Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986). A functional understanding of these gratifications is offered in the gender-socialization theory of affect (Zillmann & Weaver, 1996). The theory holds that exposure to horror offers an opportunity for young viewers to profit from enacting gender-specific behaviors prohibited in most other settings. In this setting, adolescent males can demonstrate their manhood by acting fearless when confronted by atrocities on screen. In contrast, young women can demonstrate their vulnerability by showing suitably high levels of fear, seeking protection from their young male companions, and admiring them for their bravery (Mundorf et al., 1989). In line with this reasoning, research

shows that young men enjoy watching horror films more when viewing with frightened females. In contrast, young women take more pleasure from the film when they watch with young men displaying mastery. Moreover, performance of gender-appropriate behavior can increase attraction to opposite-gender companions (Zillmann et al., 1986). The theory explains this behavior as resulting from the powerful impact of gender-role norms on the way young viewers perceive and govern their own behaviors as well as the behaviors of others (Bem, 1976, 1985). Reward comes from performing gender-appropriate behaviors, one of these being the expression of affect. The degree to which viewers follow prescribed norms determines the level of enjoyment. However, the source of reward is misattributed to pleasure derived from attributes of film content.

Several factors, then, appear capable of turning the inherently distressing experience of horror into a rewarding viewing encounter. Dispositional alignment within the film content as well as external social determinants can generate pleasure from what would otherwise be a distressing experience. Nevertheless, though these factors can override the natural response to gruesome images in film, horror still plays a critical role in shaping viewer experience.

Intensity of Experience

Media's ability to generate powerful emotional response to entertainment is well documented. Drama, humor, erotica and other media forms can create intense arousal (cf. Zillmann, 1982). Critical here is reasoning that arousal from extreme violence can intensify emotional reactions given direction by other means, and that stimulation expected can be particularly high in empathically distressed individuals (Tamborini, Stiff, & Heidel, 1990). Zillmann (1991a) classified arousal from empathic distress as a response energizer that bolsters affect without giving it emotional direction. Excitation-transfer logic (Zillmann, 1982) suggests that arousal from any prior activity remains after activities end and heightens reactions to subsequent experiences, making them more intense than they would otherwise be. Applied to horror films this reasoning indicates that arousal from distress experienced throughout exposure is capable of heightening reactions to later events. Although these excitatory mechanisms control response strength, other factors dictate its emotional tenor.

If we accept that arousal energizes subsequent behavior, strong reactions are expected from horror. The content and form of today's super-violent

horror have great excitatory capacity. Both the images and the media's ability to present them in startling form are intrinsically arousing. Dark rooms, sharp objects, poison, pits, and killers; most horror films confront viewers with repeated aversive stimuli. When you add shrieking sounds, eerie music, and disquieting visual effects, elevated levels of arousal are inescapable. Consequently, viewers exposed to horror undergo an exhilarating emotional experience. Empirical evidence offers strong support for excitation transfer's impact on exposure to media in general (Cantor, Zillmann, & Bryant, 1975; de Wied, Zillmann, & Ordman, 1994; Zillmann, Hay, & Bryant, 1975; Zillmann, Mody, & Cantor, 1974) and exposure to horror in particular (Sparks, 1991). Though innate reactions to this preposterous violence are great emotional anguish, appraisal processes can modify these initial responses (Tamborini, 1991). The disparity in these two contrasting reactions has led to other accounts of arousal mechanisms' relationship to the appeal of graphic horror.

Some maintain that the jolt of horror is exhilarating, and this stimulation is enjoyable (Rickey, 1982). Consistent with theories on arousal asserting that "reinforcement, and in particular reward, can result in some circumstances from an increase in arousal" (Berlyne, 1967, p. 30), this logic supports claims that a horror film's ability to evoke increased arousal is a source of pleasure for certain viewers (cf. Tannenbaum, 1980). As such, these viewers should seek out horror for the gratifications expected. Research showing that arousal in high sensation seekers increases dramatically during exposure to horror (Tamborini, Miller, Stiff, & Heidel, 1988) is consistent with the revised arousal-jag explanation of the appeal of thrilling fears (Berlyne, 1967). Though some denounce revised arousal-jag notions as logically inconsistent (Zillmann, 1980), evidence that sensation seeking predicts graphic horror's appeal corresponds with this account (Aluja-Fabregat, 2000; Edwards, 1984; Sparks, 1986; Tamborini & Stiff, 1987; Zuckerman & Litle, 1986).

Debate continues between scholars who contend that pleasure comes from the jolt of horror and those who insist that horrific violence evokes only negative affect. Zillmann (1998) argued that empathic distress from harm to liked protagonists is just a way to strengthen later experienced joy. Eventually, he claimed, these protagonists overcome danger. They destroy the threat, or at least escape its pending doom. Both the protagonist's victory and relief from escape are a source of dispositional pleasure, and an arousal residue from prior distress intensifies viewer enjoyment. As such, gruesome violence is an essential prelude to joy from emotional override. Moreover,

if critics contend that horror films today often fail to provide even minimal forms of dispositional reward, other factors, like social gratification, can be used to explain obtained pleasure.

WHAT IS THE AFTERMATH OF EMOTION?

Although research provides insight on some aspects of horror's emotional aftermath, other areas go largely unexamined. Our previous discussion of viewing experience shows considerable insight concerning the short-term reactions to watching extreme violence. In contrast, we know much less about the lasting effects of exposure.

The Immediate Aftermath of Horror

The most apparent aftermath resulting from exposure to horror is the remnant of the emotion from the extreme-violence experience. Most of our prior discussion addresses this issue directly, yet clearly debate persists over some of these issues confronted. Do we experience pleasure from the aesthetic emotion, a form of cathartic relief, or even gratification of some biologically controlled need for sensation? If not, do we maintain that only negative affect comes from viewing horrific violence, dismiss catharsis as pseudo explanation inconsistent with empirical evidence, and contest speculation that witnessing horror in safety could satisfy sensation needs (Zillmann, 1998)? Some debate on these issues is likely to remain. Still, agreement exists on several immediate outcomes. Support for the fact that distress from graphic violence can amplify the emotional aftermath of exposure is not in doubt. Nor is belief that dispositional alignment with characters can influence joy following exposure. Similar agreement exists for claims that social factors associated with distress mastery and gender norms can turn exposure to intrinsically unpleasant images into a pleasurable experience.

Beyond these immediate experiential effects, horror's short-term influence on social perception and behavior is an issue of some concern. The application of priming principles plays a key role in this discussion. Priming can influence judgments by bringing to mind thoughts of connected events and semantically related matter (Forgas, 1991). When considering horror's focus on negative events, priming logic leads us to expect harsh judgments and behavior following exposure. Though some empirical

evidence directly addresses horror in this regard, work in other areas applies as well. Social judgment research concentrating on person perception, as well as behavioral work focusing on aggression and social support, is relevant to these concerns.

As indicated earlier, evidence shows that the social environment created by film exposure plays a strong role in interpersonal attraction. Viewers perceive opposite-gender companions as more attractive when gender-role norms are displayed during exposure to horror (Zillmann, Weaver, Mundorf, & Aust, 1986). On the other hand, horror's impact isn't always beneficial. Social judgments of victims and punishment for criminals are disturbingly impacted by horror. Though scholars disagree on erotica's role in these judgmental effects, evidence clearly indicates that some forms of horror promote callousness toward females. Exposure facilitates perceptions that violence against women is justifiable (Malamuth & Check, 1981), that rape victims are worthless and their injuries less serious (Donnerstein & Linz, 1984; Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1984), and that lighter sentences are appropriate for convicted rapists (Weaver, 1987).

Beyond social judgment outcomes, research examines horror's impact on specific social behavior. Investigations on aggression and social support show horror's relation to critical processes of attention, learning, and sensitization. Aggression research indicates that exposure to violent images like those in horror produces short-term activation of cognitive structures semantically related to hostile action. Though research here generally focuses on other violent genres, similarities to horrific violence make this work seem directly applicable to horror. Meta-analysis of both field (Wood, Wong, & Chachere, 1991) and laboratory studies (Anderson, 1977) offers compelling evidence that violent media act as powerful aggressive primes. At the same time, similar primes are found in prosocial contexts (cf. Liebert & Sprafkin, 1988). Recent work on social support generally indicates that insensitive portrayals like those in horror reduce comforting behaviors (Borkgrevink & Tamborini, 1994, Tamborini, Bahk, & Salomonson, 1993; Tamborini, Salomonson, & Bahk, 1993a, 1993b).

Horror's Chronic Aftermath

In general, research on short-lived priming effects of horror is limited but supports arguments for its impact. Predictably, its lasting influence is harder to demonstrate. Few seem to question the claims that repeated exposure to horror acts as a socializing agent, assisting young men in mastering

empathic distress (Zillmann & Gibson, 1996), but there is no direct evidence of this effect. When considering evidence of other long-term effects on adolescent development, ethical issues limit the ability to study these questions under controlled conditions. Survey evidence suggests mild fright reactions in adolescents that are short lived (Cantor, 1992). In contrast, evidence from other sources shows stronger and more lasting effects. Anecdotal reports of extreme enduring adolescent fears are reported in psychiatric literature (Buzzuto, 1975; Mathai, 1983). Retrospective reports of adults (Johnson, 1980) and college students (Cantor & Oliver, 1996) also suggest more lasting influence. Although evidence in this area is speculative at best, it provides reason for future concern.

Debate persists concerning other outcomes due to learning, extinction, and desensitization processes, but the considerable research on long-term effects of other violent media forms is informative. According to Geen (1994), evidence clearly supports assertions that observing violence can increase aggressive behavior under certain conditions. Several of the conditions typically found in horror should work toward this lasting impact. For example, because all major characters perform violent acts, horror fosters identification with aggressors and makes identification with suffering victims difficult (Tamborini & Salomonson, 1996). Moreover, the convention in horror to show protagonist violence going unpunished and justifiable is thought to inhibit learning of internal regulators that govern aggressive behavior (Pearl, Bouthilet, Lazar, 1982; Tan, 1981). Likewise, repeated images of horrific violence can lead to desensitization and render viewers indifferent to aggression (Cline, Croft, & Courier, 1973; Linz, Donnerstein, & Adams, 1989; Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1988; Thomas, 1982). Reactions of this type encourage the performance of aggressive behavior (Berkowitz, 1993).

WHAT OF HORROR'S FUTURE?

Although horror has existed in literature for years, most research on modern entertainment horror concentrates on film. No doubt much of this attention is due, once again, to its high media profile. Earlier in this century, scholars looking at media of their time focused on horror in fictional writing (Tamborini, 1991), and it seems logical that scholars in the not too distant future will focus on the next generation of horror technology. Perhaps we have seen the start of horror's future in the video-game genre called *survival horror*. These

games feature a morbid story line, where the player must find clues, solve puzzles, and fight something dark and evil ("The survival horror genre," 1999). Whereas early games like Resident Evil offered third-person perspectives and failed to provide sound or character development on a par with modern horror films, today successful horror-film makers like Clive Barker are producing immersive video games that put players in the first-person perspective as they enter the horrific media environment (Smith, 2001).

A central issue in research on this technology concerns how its active user role and first-person point of view will change the user's experience. If critical processes of empathic distress result from film viewer's being mere witnesses (Zillmann, 1998), these processes will change in the game's interactive environment, and perhaps the expected outcomes will vary in response. Grodal (2000) asserted that video games differ as a result from change in appraised coping. Whereas the appraised coping potential of a film character determines emotional experience for the viewer, appraisal of the player's own coping potentials controls emotional experience in video games, a process closer to real life. In contrast to those who caution of users developing aggressive behavioral scripts, Grodal envisioned video games as tools for emotional control that would function much like other past media. Conceivably the more active and realistic experience of horror in a virtual reality environment could facilitate both cognitive and action coping strategies to eradicate negative emotions by means unavailable through film exposure today. Perhaps interacting with avatars chosen to personify targets of anger will foster reappraisal of behaviors initially taken as a demeaning offense, or physically prevailing over a world of survival horror will offer forms of reassurance needed to rid anxiety. Certainly, at least, one could reason that if film has become the modern day forum for young men to master distress, interactive horror is better suited for practicing these gender-role behaviors.

The active user issue has received great attention from those concerned with information technology, but entertainment scholars have been slow to address its impact on user experience. Vorderer (2000) questioned whether audience members want to labor as much as interactivity demands, and observed that games allow users to alternate between witness and player perspectives. He called for new theory to account for the increasingly complex experience of users who are now ensnared in these dual roles. Understanding this multifaceted experience becomes even more challenging with the complex emotions from horror. The processes leading to emotional override and misattributed joy will be no simpler to understand when experienced in immersive media worlds.

In the end, then, what does all this tell us about the enjoyment and social functions of horror? We can be confident that there are multiple sources of pleasure, some internal to the narrative form and others with social functions at their root. We are learning more about the processes at work, but know quite little about others. And when considering the likely horror in store, we see more complex questions to come. What happens when taking my nephew to see a scary film is replaced by going with him into a world of survival horror? Perhaps it means that I will hold him with one arm and kill the monster with the other as I help him fight his demons more literally than ever before.

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