Horror & Society

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Movies are the mirrors of the Mirror Stage, a psychoanalytic theory created by Jacques Lacan. He asserts that infants can recognize themselves in a mirror or other symbolic contraptions. They can understand that they are separate from other beings and objects; this understanding of "other" creates a desire for what is separate from the viewer (Todd, 2004, p. 20). Modern society is ruled by capitalism; money becomes more important than one's self-interest. Greed rules everything; "what can you do for me?" Society ultimately demands sacrifice from the individual; sacrifice enjoyment for the greater good, and do what is "right." Society demands enjoyment even as it must adhere to the prohibition, the social laws, and barriers against specific actions and behaviors. These constraints on society put the sacrifices into perspective, creating a desire for what they cannot have in real life (Todd, 2004, p. 30-31). Fantasy, a contrived scenario, teaches humans to desire the impossible. Fantasy brings the desire to reality, but it does not fulfill desire; it merely identifies what should be desired (Slavoj, 1991, p. 6). Movies temporarily alleviate the sense of loss that the sacrifice of enjoyment causes without endangering society. They allow the individual to visualize the missing enjoyment without destroying the structure of capitalism. However, they do not fulfill the ultimate desire for very long. So if movies are a reflection of society and its desires, then what does a horror movie reflect? Furthermore, what does society get out of the consumption of horror movies?

Horror movies lure the audience with fantasy while reflecting society's fears and concerns (by extension, the audience's concerns). The trappings of fantasy make these uncomfortable and challenging topics palatable and command enjoyment from the audience through the fear and anxiety-inducing media. According to the notorious Stephen King, people like horror films because they "intend to take away the shades of gray…. It urges us to put away our more civilized and adult penchant for analysis and to become children again, seeing things in pure blacks and whites. It may be that horror movies provide psychic relief on this level because this invitation to lapse into simplicity, irrationality, and even outright madness is extended so rarely. We are told we may allow our emotions a free rein . . . or no rein at all" (King, p. 2, 1981). Horror movies inherently reestablish and reassure the community of its normality. Stephen King

makes the argument that everyone is insane. However, the degree to which everyone is insane differs; an ax murderer will get locked away while a person who speaks to himself in a moment of stress is left alone. Negative, anti-civilized emotions (i.e., violent anger) simmer below the surface and must be exercised in some fashion. The horror movie, which appeals to society in the worst ways possible, provides those hidden emotions an outlet (King, 1981). When that movie is done, the viewer can go back to their everyday, civilized existence and feel better about themselves.

Stephen King's assertion that there is a well of untapped uncivilized emotions within each person fits Sigmund Freud's theory of the Id, the Ego, and the Superego. Freud's theory purposes that a person's psyche is composed of three parts. The Id is unconscious, impulsive, primitive, and instinctual. The Id is the conscious part where sexual and aggressive drives and hidden memories (including subconscious fears) reside. It responds to one's basic urges, needs, and desires. The Ego is the part of the conscience that is responsible for reason and self-control. The Ego is ruled by reality and societal laws in the ultimate pursuit of enjoyment (i.e., one must go to work to get paid) and then enjoy their day off by not doing anything). The Superego comprises two pieces, the conscience (which supplies guilt and anxiety or pride) and the Ideal self (whom you were supposed to be if life was perfect). The Superego incorporates society and family values that were installed during childhood (McLeod, 2019). Horror movies target the hidden, primal urges of the Id in society's collective conscious.

That is not to say that everyone wants to become an ax murderer deep down in their childish subconscious. However, it should be noted that without the prohibition, the social laws and barriers that dictate what is and is not acceptable, society would most likely be a lot less civil. Humans are fascinated by what scares them or what society defines as forbidden. Consider the great perils of society, the real crimes and unknowns that horrify and fascinate; murder, suicide, violence, the great unknown after death, one's sins (lust, greed, wraith, Etc.), the corruption of society/government, and the yawning, empty feeling of hopelessness. The greatest fears that translate onto the silver screen are real-life horrors. According to the film and horror genre expert Andrew Scahill, Ph.D., assistant professor of English, horror movies allow the viewer to vacillate between sadism and masochism (Ward, 2019). They provide an escape from the monotony of

life, drawing the viewer into the story by making the camera's lens (the movie's perspective) the audience's temporary eyes.

Consider classic slasher movies. According to Carol Clover in her book *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*, the movie's beginning usually depicts the killer's point of view. The audience is transported into the metaphorical mind of the killer as he or she stalks and murders prey, thus forcing them to adopt a sympathetic understanding. During the beginning scene, the audience takes on a new identity, far removed from the socially acceptable, law-abiding citizen. After the beginning scene, that perspective is often switched to the perspective of the main protagonist[s] or "final girl" (a horror movie trope where only one girl survives the immeasurable odds). The audience is left to follow [and support] the main girl's fight for survival (Clover, 2015). The camera's vision forces the audience to take on an individual perspective, and by doing so, the audience temporarily becomes the killer, the victim, or the "final girl." The horror genre allows society to work out the differences between "Us" and "Them." We define ourselves, our identities, by defining the "Other," what we are "not." In the case of horror movies, the monster in the story is the "Other." "I know who I am because I am not that monster" (Hall, 1996, p. 6).

The brain reacts to a horror movie by increasing its visual and auditory perception to perceive cues of threats in the environment. After a sudden shock, like a jump scare, brain activity is more evident in regions involved in emotion processing, direct evaluation, and decision-making. On a neurological level is there is an increased level of activity in the amygdala, which is a part of the brain that deals with emotions, in this case, fear. Under extreme circumstances, horror movies can cause PTSD and make the viewer desensitized to traumatic events. So why do people continually go back to these movies? According to the Excitation Transfer Process and the Gender Socialization theory, it depends on how it makes us feel, both emotionally and physically. Horror movies expertly exploit viewers growing anxiety to enhance their excitement and adrenaline (an addictive feeling). (Harward, 2014).

Horror movies are a commentary on social issues and concerns. Albeit, these issues are exaggerated and twisted into a feature film for the audience's enjoyment. Fear is subjective, and the unique thing about the horror movie genre is that most films can create a sense of fear that is

recognized as universal and right, even across cultures and time. According to Kendall Phillips in his book *Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture,* classic horror movies like *Dracula* and *Psycho* did not cause American culture to go into one particular direction or another. On the contrary, these films were connected to American culture and were depicted to be recognized as accurate (Phillips, 2005, p.5). That is not to say that the audience would start believing in the walking dead and ghosts, but they would understand, subconsciously, that what was depicted was accurate to their cultural fears and concerns.

The book goes on to explain how horror films utilize the recognizable and the shocking. Horror is based on recognizing the unfamiliar in something familiar or, in other words, the "resonate violation" (Phillips, 2005, p. 7-8). The concept connects uniquely with Freud's theory of "The Uncanny" (the psychological experience that something is disturbingly familiar in a mysterious way) (Malewitz, 2021). The uncanny creates "intellectual uncertainty" by reinforcing and confirming hidden (primal) fears (Maddrey, 2010, p. 7). Consciously, viewers are aware that the movie is fiction (or fictionalized). However, there is an uncanniness, a dash of realism to the movie that comforts (lulls into complacency), then disrupts when the realism is distorted. Phillips states that the depiction of collective cultural anxieties, even done indirectly, up on the screen, is a vital piece to the day's politics. They are forcing the audience to confront these anxieties and think differently about them. They help us cope with the issues of today. When society's culture is disturbed, and anxiety is high, horror movies see a surge in viewing. Phillips further hypothesizes that horror movies shock the population out of their anxiety, motivating society to work towards change (Phillips, 2005, p. 9). Horror movies also introduce and reinforce abstract fears. When these fears present themselves in reality, society recognizes and is aware of the potential danger (Dushi, 2021).

In the 1960s, there was a significant cultural change where people lost their faith in authority. Horror movies reflected this change by making "the monster" a conspiracy (i.e., *The Stepford Wives*) or the patriarchy. *The Shinning* shows Jack's transition from a man who hates his everyday life, a life filled with work and subpar-ness, to a patriarchal monster filled with rage. The hotel pushes him to his limits and strips him of the socially acceptable suburban persona to the buried uncivilized emotions underneath. The exact quote, "All work and no play makes Jack

a dull boy," can be understood through Scahill's analysis. "Play" refers to the ability to do anything one wants without restrictive laws and rules. "Work" refers to the repressive, empathetic obligations that society imposes. The traditional "patriarchy" did not have to oblige to these obligations (Ward, 2019).

The theories found in *End of Dissatisfaction* and *Looking Awry* uniquely conceptualize the enjoyment of horror movies. It is interesting to note that despite our society's domination by capitalism and the constant desire for enjoyment, many horror movies capitalize on being a critique of capitalism. Consider the movie *Dawn of the Dead*; it is not just a movie about zombies and the glorification of bloodshed and cannibalism. It is a critique of consumerism and capitalism and the power they have over society to make people into mindless, complacent zombies determined to buy the newest unnecessary gadgets and products. There is little doubt on the movie's underlining message given that the survivors hole up inside a shopping mall, the epicenter of consumerism in the 80s and early 90s. The survivors, having exterminated the zombies, exalt in their take-over of the mall by… shopping in "a carnivalesque parody of rampant consumerism" (Harper, 2002). The scene appears to be fun, a brief reprieve and escape from the zombie apocalypse outside. Nonetheless, it depicts the empty instant gratification of consumerism (Harper, 2002).

Another example of a horror movie as a critique of capitalism and the social elite is the 1988 movie *They Live*. It is about a wanderer who finds a pair of sunglasses capable of showing the world the way it truly is. He notices that the media and the government are comprised of subliminal messages. The messages are meant to keep the population subdued and under control while the social elite, skull-faced aliens, aim for world domination. In short, it is the media, Hollywood, making fun of itself (Carpenter, 1988). Slavoj Žižek created an analysis video of the movie, connecting its message to the concept of ideology. Individuals are interpolated into the fabric of society by being "subjects of pleasures." Subconsciously people are aware that society is filled with an ideology that blurs reality. There is a pervasive ideology that dictates what is socially acceptable (i.e., getting married, obeying authority, being employed, Etc.) and demands that the subjects enjoy the control. *They Live* features a fight scene between the main protagonist and his best friend; the friend fights viciously against being forced to wear the glasses. This se-

quence is a metaphor for how difficult, frightening, and painful it is to detach oneself from the prevailing ideology (G, 2014).

Looking Awry provides an analysis of zombie movies, specifically *The Night of the Living Dead.* Zombies are pursuers of a demand that transcends death, a demand to be buried properly. Death is a universal fear, as is the fear of being forgotten after death. Zombies come back because the tradition of memorializing them went wrong; thus, their memory will die. The Holocaust and Gulag victims are modern examples of the "living dead," phantoms that will haunt society "until we give them a decent burial until we integrate the trauma of their death into our historical memory" (Slavoj, 1991, p. 23). It can be argued that the horrors of history fascinate and plague modern society because of guilt; many died and were unable to receive proper resting places and respect. Alternatively, perhaps the stories need to be internalized into society to make sure history does not repeat itself. Whichever case it may be, real crimes committed by fellow humans taps into a unique fear that fiction cannot. Depictions of real tragedies remind humanity that it is not a monster that they fear, but themselves.

The text further discusses the concept of the "return of the living dead" to Stephen King's *Pet Sematary.* The story is about the Creed family, who move to a small town in Maine. Their home is right next to a highway where massive trucks pass by all the time. One of these trucks hits the family cat, Church, and then the two-year-old son, Gage. Luckily or unluckily (as the case ends up turning out to be) for the family, a pet cemetery in the town was initially built on Native American land and had the power to return the dead. The land represents the "between two deaths" and is plagued by the Wendigo (an evil spirit). In his desperate desire to hold onto his family, the father, Louis, buries Church and his son despite warnings against it (a dead student comes back to deliver the warning). Both returns altered, possessed by evil, malevolent spirits. Gage ultimately kills his mother and is killed by his father. Louis, still filled with the desperate desire to hold onto his family, buries his wife and waits for her return. His desire is so strong that he steadfastly believes that "this time around will be different" (Slavoj, 1991, p. 25). Pet Sematary embodies the fear of losing loved ones and the overwhelming desire to hold onto them despite any obstacle, including death.

End of Satisfaction discusses the power of names and symbolism; they hold great power in society. Names establish recognition and status within the societal structure. It is better to have a broken body and a "good name" than have a perfectly healthy, intact body with a slandered name (McGowan, 2004). Names have an interesting correlation to horror movies; they have so much power in a society that there are films hinged on the concept of a demon or monster being thwarted by its name's power. Consider *The Conjuring*, the main protagonist Lorraine Warren gains power over the terrorizing demon and ultimately destroys it when she learns his name, Valek.

Consider the other social issues that plague society, many of which are not new but as old as time; racism, sexism, government corruption, religion, classism, poverty, immigration, contagion, Etc. According to Siegfried Kracauer, popular films reflect the desires and anxieties of a time and place. Thus, it stands to reason that the films that stand the test of time tap into humanity's most basic primal fears, namely death. *Dracula* was a response to WWI and the Depression. *Carrie* rebalanced the feminist status-quo (and it should be argued that it criticized religious zeal due to the mother's obsession with religion, causing Carrie's harsh upbringing) (Maddrey, 2010, p. 1). *Homunculus* (1916) depicts a Frankenstein-like story of a shunned inhuman monster. He exacts retribution against his creator and humanity for their cruel rejection of him. His retribution ultimately leads to a world war. This movie can be paralleled to post-war Germany. In America, the Great Depression may be responsible for that timeframe's horror movies (Maddrey, 2010, p. 8-9). In the case of *Dracula*, the vampire is a tragic victim victimizer who contemplates death (he becomes a symbol of necessary change). It can be theorized that the movie is a metaphor for the "mysterious draining forces they [society] could not control" (Maddrey, 2010, p. 12). In other words, the movie reflects society's hopelessness and the desire for change during the Great Depression; the people were "sucked dry" of their hope and economic well-being.

Adam Lowenstein, a film and media studies professor at the University of Pittsburgh, states that horror movies are uniquely suited to "engage traumatic history and to confront viewers with it" (Dewan, 2000). The fantasy allows history to become relative, distant even. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Halloween* (1978) was created

with the horrors of Vietnam and the civil rights movement in mind. They feature human-on-human carnage, a stark comparison to the violent images of that day. Although initially not intended to be a social commentary of civil rights and racism, *Night of the Living Dead* featured a black protagonist (a controversial choice at the time). The movie mirrors real-life events:

Real-life- Southern sheriffs and their dogs search for civil rights activists.

Movie- Police and their dogs search the countryside.

Real-life- Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated by being shot in the head.

Movie- The main protagonist, a black man, is shot in the head after being mistaken for a zombie (Dewan, 2000).

The movie *The Purge* criticizes classism within the United States and the massive divide between the low/middle classes and the one-percenters. One particularly striking analysis of the movie utilizes the Marxism theory. This socioeconomic analysis uses a materialist interpretation of historical development to understand class relations and social conflict, which was utilized as a reference point to analyze the classism within *The Purge*. The researcher found that there are two forms of oppression within the movie. The first is an ideological Marxist which consists of racism, materialism, and radicalism. The second form of oppression is an economic Marxist (Bahiyyah, 2017).

In the article, *Horror Movies Reflect Cultural Fears. In 2016, Americans Feared Invasion*; the author asserts that every home invasion horror film was created to highlight the country's fear of foreign immigration. *The Wailing* dealt with xenophobia and the fears of not communicating across cultural and linguistic divides. The movie *The Witch* dealt with religious frenzy and paranoia (Romona, 2016). Before September 9, 2001, most horror movies depicted the main antagonist as part of the natural environment (sharks, inhuman monsters, an unnatural phenomenon). After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, horror movies started to depict other humans (generally characterized as someone who is definitely "other" in looks and behavior) as the main antagonists. *The Hostel* depicts the sadistic leanings of international political relations (Korstanje & Skoll, 2017).

The movie *Get Out* simultaneously engages and subverts the horror film tropes that black lives are disposable in a post-racial America. The sunken place is a metaphor for social death, the

forcible silencing of black voices in society (Lane, 2019). It is depicted as a void where black people are compressed and cut off from society while a white person controls their body and ultimate fate. They are only permitted to see the horrors surrounding them. The movie establishes itself as criticism for racism and the associated stereotypes inherent with the prejudice against black people. All the while simultaneously calling out liberal white Americans who were complacent when they believed that racism had been demolished after Obama became president. It is a unique take on black bodies' objectification, the appropriation of black culture, and the systematic degradation of fellow humans through racism without remorse (Pinedo, 2020).

The concept of infection has been a part of humanity's fiction for years. Mythological creatures like vampires and werewolves were initially attributed to the infection of an individual by a contagion. Consider most (if not all) lore surrounding these creatures; the transformation begins with a bite, a transference of a "curse" or disease. Even the stereotypical traits of being a vampire fit the description of contracting rabies (i.e., light sensitivity, heightened senses, unusual food cravings, Etc). *Dracula* has sexual undertones, and it can be argued that it is a social commentary on the sexual revolution and sexually transmitted disease. In Victorian times, there was a significant fear of contracting an infection or becoming contaminated. In the 20th century, horror movies were predominantly centered on plagues and apocalypses (Sartin 2019).

Due to COVID-19, the 2011 movie *Contagion* has considerable societal significance. The movie is about a contagion that spreads through respiratory droplets and fomites, contaminated inanimate objects. The novel (unknown) virus spreads despite the best efforts of medical researchers and public health officials. The structure of society starts to collapse when quarantines are implemented. Conspiracy theories run rampant, people are panic buying, there are widespread looting and violent cases, and the virus originated from animal viruses in China. *Contagion* is a scarily accurate interpretation of how people react to a novel virus and how easily society can be undermined (Soderbergh, Burns, Shamberg, Sher, Jacobs, Winslet, & Fishburne, America, 2012). Horror movies that focus on illness and contagious diseases are not as "in your face" as movies that feature monsters or psychopathic, murderous humans. The threat in these "contagion" movies sneak up on the victims and gradually grow to such a degree that humans can barely overcome it, which is what makes contagion horror movies, at least in today's day and

age, one of the most frighteningly realistic. The vast majority of humanity has evolved past the fears of "the great unknown monsters" (i.e., the witches, the vampires, and the werewolves). However, despite the significant advancements in science and medicine, humanity barely keeps up with the rapid evolution of viruses and bacteria (Sartin 2019).

So what will the genre reflect of today's fears? Based on the projected movies that are set to be released, the cycle of "tried and true" topics continues to play: Race (in *Judas and the Black Messiah*), illness and family (in *Son*), the fear of mental illness (in *Fear of Rain*), Etc. Society's fears change based on current events and the necessary changes of the day. However, it can be argued that there is a cycle to these fears, a cycle that refuses to be broken because society's very structure (one that allows the societal issues to exist) is broken. Nonetheless, horror movies provide a catharsis for society. The audience can release their negative emotions (the frustrations, fears, and anger) by watching violence and terror on the screen. Horror movies specialize in making the audience enjoy the consumption of the perverted, the hidden fears, and the desires that society forces us to hide. It allows the public to strip away the shiny, civilized, mundane wrappings to enjoy if only for a time, the primitive.

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