CAN AN EVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS DISSOLVE THE PARADOX OF HORROR?

A QUANTITATIVE STUDY OF INDIVIDUAL VARIABLES AND HORROR MEDIA USE
“THE PARADOX OF HORROR”

Formulated by philosopher of art Noël Carroll (1990, p. 158): “There is a theoretical question about horror which, although not unique to horror, nevertheless is not one that readily arises with respect to other popular genres, such as mystery, romance, comedy, the thriller, adventure stories, and the western. The question is: why would anyone be interested in the genre to begin with?”
I tend to enjoy horror media
1072 responses

In the past year, about how often have you used horror media (e.g., horror literature, film, and video games) for entertainment?
1072 responses

I generally prefer horror media that I find
952 responses

In the hours after I have used horror media, I am generally ___ than if I had used another type of medium.
952 responses
CLASSICAL (AND MORE RECENT) ACCOUNTS

Aristotle: Catharsis
Sigmund Freud: Repression (surprise)
Dolf Zillman: Excitation transfer
Noël Carroll: Epistemophilia

...
Can we do better?

Can an evolutionary account dissolve the paradox of horror?

Mathias Clasen (2012, p. 12): “If one meets a hungry predator for the first time, it is desirable to have a store of surrogate experience with predator evasion to draw from, rather than proceed by trial-and-error. Thus, like pretend play, fiction is a kind of mental simulation (Oatley, 1999) that gives us surrogate experience risk-free and at low cost (Carroll, 1999; 2011; Tooby & Cosmides, 2001). Scary stories about dangerous monsters illustrate this principle well... On this view, the modern horror story is a kind of supernatural stimulus, a hypertrophied variation on chase play: it is a technology that enlists all manner of monstrous agents to tap into an adaptive motivational system for learning about danger and to calibrate our responses to danger.”
AN EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE

An explanation based, ultimately, in the syndrome of benign masochism (e.g., Rozin, 1999). Note Pinker’s (2011, p. 611) functional underpinning:

These paradoxical pleasures ... are adult tastes in which a neophyte must overcome a first reaction of pain, disgust, or fear on the way to becoming a connoisseur. And all are acquired by controlling one’s exposure to the stressor in gradually increasing doses. What they have in common is a coupling of high potential gains (nutrition, medicinal benefits, speed, knowledge of new environments) with high potential dangers (poisoning, exposure, accidents). The pleasure in acquiring one of these tastes is the pleasure of pushing the outside of the envelope: of probing, in calibrated steps, how high, hot, strong, fast, or far one can go without bringing on disaster. The ultimate advantage is to open up beneficial regions in the space of local experiences that are closed off by default by innate fears and cautions.”
OUR APPROACH

MTurk survey (N=1072; 1187 before eliminations) of American users and nonusers of horror media.

The survey covered:

- Personal details (e.g., sex, age, number of children, level of education)
- Paranormal Belief Scale (Tobacyk, 2004; revised according to Lindeman and Svedholm, 2012)
- Brief Sensation Seeking Scale (Hoyle et al., 2002)
- Big 5 (50-item IPIP)
- Items on participants’ horror media uses (e.g., “How often do you use horror media?”)
- Items on participants’ horror media preferences (e.g., “Do you prefer natural or supernatural horror?”)
- Items on participants’ horror media experiences (e.g., “Do you prefer horror media that scare you mildly/moderately/highly?”)
RESULTS - AGE

Age and Enjoyment of Horror Media

1. Strongly Disagree
2. Somewhat Disagree
3. Neither Agree nor Disagree
4. Somewhat Agree
5. Strongly Agree

I tend to enjoy horror media

Average Age

31  32  33  34  35  36  37
RESULTS – SEX

Frequency of Horror Use by Males and Females

In the past year, about how often have you used horror media?

Enjoyment of Horror Media by Males and Females

Preference for Horror Media Intensity by Males and Females

I generally prefer horror media that I find

Males
Female
RESULTS - SENSATION SEEKING

Predicting Horror Enjoyment with Sensation Seeking

I tend to enjoy horror media

Predicting Preference for Horror Intensity with Sensation Seeking

I generally prefer horror media that I find

Predicting Frequency of Horror Use with Sensation Seeking

In the past year, about how often have you used horror media?

Mean Total Sensation Seeking

In the past year, about how often have you used horror media?
RESULTS – PERSONALITY

Predicting Horror Enjoyment with Intellect/Imagination

I tend to enjoy horror media

1 Strongly Disagree
2 Somewhat Disagree
3 Neither Agree nor Disagree
4 Somewhat Agree
5 Strongly Agree

Predicting Preference for Horror Intensity with Intellect/Imagination

I generally prefer horror media that I find

1 not at all frightening
2 mildly frightening
3 moderately frightening
4 highly frightening
5 extremely frightening

Predicting Frequency of Horror Use with Intellect/Imagination

In the past year, about how often have you used horror media?

0 Never
1 Once
2 Several Times
3 Once a Month
4 Several Times a Month
5 Once a Week
6 Several Times a Week

Mean Intellect/Imagination
RESULTS – PARANORMAL BELIEFS

Predicting Preference for Supernatural Horror with Paranormal Beliefs

I generally prefer horror media that deal with

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<th>Mean Total Paranormal Beliefs</th>
<th>1 Natural</th>
<th>2 No difference</th>
<th>3 Supernatural</th>
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Predicting Fear of Supernatural Horror with Paranormal Beliefs

I am generally more easily scared by horror media that deal with

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<th>2 The Natural and Supernatural Equally</th>
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Everyone expects a high level of fear from using horror media, but people high on SS and Intellect/Imagination also expect to experience positive emotions, such as joy and anticipation. They want intellectual stimulation.

This explains the 'kickstart problem.'

Everyone hopes to experience a high level of fear from using horror media, but people who consider themselves hardest to scare like horror media most. These people use horror media more often, and they prefer more extreme forms of horror.

This supports the benign masochism account.
IN A NUTSHELL

Horror is initially aversive. People high in Intellect/imagination and SS, however, like intellectual stimulation and challenge, and so they brave the initially aversive response to simulate (relevant) threats (kickstart problem — why people initially choose to simulate horror). In doing this, they enter a positive feedback loop by which they attain adaptive mastery through coping with virtual simulated danger (benign masochism — what people get out of simulating horror).

Clasen and Kjeldgaard-Christiansen (2017): “Horror across media generally facilitates perspective-taking with one or more characters in great peril and allows for mentally simulating dangerous events. The payoff is that we get to experience terrible situations with no real risk. Horror in video gaming, cinema, and literature works because we humans are constructed the way we are—and understanding why we are constructed that way requires an evolutionary perspective. That is why an evolutionary approach is indispensable in accounting for the forms and functions of horror.”
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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For more on the paradox of horror, and on the evolutionary approach to horror generally, look for Mathias’s forthcoming book Why Horror Seduces, published this fall by OUP.