

Deaths Perception: Why do people like horror movies?

Written by Terry Smith

(Note: Many of the notices on the Audition and Showtime calendars are reposted from the [Neohiopal](http://lists.neohiopal.org/listinfo.cgi/neohiopal-neohiopal.org) newsletter.)

Before getting into the Notes section, see the link to the Vimeo film below, done by [go to Virginia Marti site](http://www.vmcad.edu/) Virginia Marti College of Design (Lakewood, OH) students where I play Dr. Taylor. This project was our team's entry in this year's Cleveland's [48 Hour Film Project](http://www.48hourfilm.com/cleveland/) competition (July, 2011). Each team is given a genre and a few other requirements and given 48 hours to make a complete movie. We didn't really want 'Horror', but we ran with it and made it more of a dark comedy.

<http://vimeo.com/27319684>

After seeing the film, here are some comments from my tennis buddies. The names have been changed to protect the living:

You are scaring me. I must say you are either a good actor or one sick dude. No bad line calls when we play....Jerry

Now I know where you got that wrist snap forehand from....Lars - from a hopefully safe distance in Sweden

Terry, you found your niche. I hope they don't type-cast you. I know you have sooooo much more in you. Good job. WTF here I thought you were normal....Frank

Terry♦.I think your tennis game just got a whole lot better♦By the way, I will be out of town for the next 200 years♦Hope we can get together and play some tennis when I get back♦Are you in for PSYCHO parts 4,5,6 and 7?Ron

Great movie. Freddy Krueger might learn a few tricks from you.Dave

I need your autographJohn

You are awesome, Terry!

Outstanding!! I think you're ready for my next movie.Dickie

Notes on Horror:

- What's the difference between deaths in a horror film and deaths in Shakespeare? Those in Shakespeare, at least those of the heroes, are deaths of persons of high estate - kings, emperors, etc., showing that even the highest achieving individuals are powerless and that Fate is omnipotent. But at least with these heroes and heroines, the reader sees that, although this hero dies under various circumstances, there is the possibility of achievement and glory if some things were changed slightly. Victims in horror films just portray powerlessness. So Shakespeare can be inspiring, seeing possibilities, while horror just breeds fear.

- Can horror be funny if you add absurdity, campiness? That's what we're hoping for with regard to 'Student Body Count'. I thought some scenes might be too much, but when you quickly add something funny, it reduces the creepiness. We all certainly had a lot of laughs during production, which I can't totally explain.

- The antics of Cleveland Friday night TV host Ghouardi (Ernie Anderson) were funny in themselves but might have made us laugh more because of the context. As a pre-teen watching those scary movies with brothers and friends his shenanigans were comic relief in relation to the movies; knowing that he would have some wisecrack during the next commercial break would help us get over our fright.

- On the other hand, is laughing at death worse. "It's always something cruel that laughter

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drowns," (Roy Orbison). If we treat death as a joke, are we more inclined to think that "life is but a joke"? (Bob Dylan, All Along the Watchtower, speaking of other people)

Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus is the most gory of his plays. Some think he didn't write it, but agree that he at least approved of it being performed. Was it simply because horror has always been a money-maker and his theater profited from it?

Do people like horror because it make them feel that, although their life may be bad, at least it's not as bad as that victim's. Gives them a little more sense of power, that they have more control over their lives than the victims in movies. Again, not an inspiring message, but may explain the draw of horror shows.

Do the perpetrators seem powerful to us? We envy their confidence in being so bold and exerting their will to the extreme? Unless they're insane, the criminal really is so afraid of using his mind, so afraid it won't work well, that he uses physical courage and the rush that physical risk provides to compensate. The inventor is not afraid to use his mind, he gives to the world; the criminal acts with an internal locus of control similar to the inventor, doing what he wants, not what everyone else is doing, not what others tell him to do, the difference being that the criminal takes by force, and gives nothing positive to the world.

There may be degrees of horror and levels of value attributed. If Hitchcock was considered to be better than recent slasher films, it was due to his psychological element. Humans like to learn and if young, intelligent, or successful, people do bad things, we want to know more about them. When more pathetic people commit crime, we don't have as much interest, we don't think we can learn from their actions. We're not like them so we can't see ourselves committing such crimes, but when we see someone closer to our kind, we wonder if we could do what they did, we wonder if someone we know could do such things, and how can we stop it from happening.

Film can be fun in that editing provides a means by which the filmmaker can be a magician. He can edit the film such that we only see part of the action and our imagination sees the rest. Is this why filmmakers like horror? They enjoy the cleverness it takes to cut a shot so you don't see everything (as you would, say, if it were on stage) which allows the imagination to kick in. For example, with film you can show a hand coming down with a knife, but not the actual stabbing, then show the bloody result, and your mind fills in the blanks.

Regardless of their negative long-term effects on some viewers, perhaps people like horror shows because they long to feel something, anything, to watch a film that's not boring. The viewer knows he's safe in his comfortable chair, the movie will come to an end, and he will get up and walk out of the theater. But he can be fairly confident that he will be taken in, into an altered state of consciousness if the horror movie delivers on its promise to frighten. By experiencing the emotion due to fear, the viewer feels something, so he feels more alive. After the movie, this viewer feels more satisfied with his life as it is because it's better than life depicted in the movie.

Conversely, the same viewer may dislike movies that depict positive heroic figures because the lives of people in these movies seem better than his own. This lazy viewer now feels inferior when leaving the theater. A more courageous viewer will see an inspirational movie and want to move into action in a similar way, he will want to do something difficult, something morally right, something productive or creative.