

Why We Crave Horror Movies

Stephen King

Stephen King is one of the most popular and prolific horror writers of our time. His works include *Carrie* (1974), *The Shining* (1977), *The Dead Zone* (1979), and *Misery* (1987), all of which

have been made into popular movies. A native of Maine, King began writing for his college newspaper at the University of Maine. Later, he wrote short stories for men's magazines and received his first big break when he published *Carrie* in 1974. The following essay, which initially appeared in *Playboy* magazine in January 1981, is an excerpt from King's book *Danse Macabre* (1981). King argues that the horror movie performs a helpful task, taking on feelings, urges, and impulses that don't fit neatly into the rational, reasonable, and sane parts of our lives. Indeed, King proposes that the horror movie gives "psychic relief" because in most parts of our lives, "simplicity, irrationality and even outright madness" are so rarely allowed. As such, the horror film functions like a pressure-release valve for the inner monster we must typically repress.

I think that we're all mentally ill; those of us outside the asylums only hide it a little better—and maybe not all that much better, after all. We've all known people who talk to themselves, people who sometimes squinch their faces into horrible grimaces when they believe no one is watching, people who have some hysterical fear—of snakes, the dark, the tight place, the long drop . . . and, of course, those final worms and grubs that are waiting so patiently underground.

When we pay our four or five bucks and seat ourselves at tenth-row center in a theater showing a horror movie, we are daring the nightmare.

Why? Some of the reasons are simple and obvious. To show that we can, that we are not afraid, that we can ride this roller coaster. Which is not to say that a really good horror movie may not surprise a scream out of us at some point, the way we may scream when the roller coaster twists through a complete 360 or plows through a lake at the bottom of the drop. And horror movies, like roller coasters, have always been the special province of the young; by the time one turns 40 or 50, one's appetite for double twists or 360-degree loops may be considerably depleted.

We also go to re-establish our feelings of essential normality; the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary. Freda Jackson as the horrible melting woman in *Die, Monster, Die!* confirms for us that no matter how far we may be removed from the beauty of a Robert Redford or a Diana Ross, we are still light-years from true ugliness.

And we go to have fun.

Ah, but this is where the ground starts to slope away, isn't it? Because this is a very peculiar sort of fun, indeed. The fun comes from seeing others menaced—sometimes killed. One critic has suggested that if pro football has become the voyeur's version of combat, then the horror film has become the modern version of the public lynching.

It is true that the mythic "fairy-tale" horror film intends 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.

If we are all insane, then sanity becomes a matter of degree. If your insanity leads you to carve up women like Jack the Ripper or the Cleveland Torso Murderer, we clap you away in the funny farm (but neither of those two amateur-night surgeons was ever caught, heh-heh-heh); if, on the other hand, your insanity leads you only to talk to yourself when you're under stress or to pick your nose on your morning bus, then you are left alone to go about your business . . . though it is doubtful that you will ever be invited to the best parties.

The potential lyncher is in almost all of us (excluding saints, past and present; but then, most saints have been crazy in their own ways), and every now and then, he has to be let loose to scream and roll around in the grass. Our emotions and our fears form their own body, and we recognize that it demands its own exercise to maintain proper muscle tone. Certain of these emotional muscles are accepted—even exalted—in civilized society; they are, of course, the emotions that tend to maintain the status quo of civilization itself. Love, friendship, loyalty, kindness—these are all the emotions that we applaud, emotions that have been immortalized in the couplets of Hallmark cards and in the verses (I don't dare call it poetry) of Leonard Nimoy.⁹

When we exhibit these emotions, society showers us with positive reinforcement; we learn this even before we get out of diapers. When, as children, we hug our rotten little puke of a sister and give her a kiss, all the aunts and uncles smile and twit and cry, "Isn't he the sweetest little thing?" Such coveted treats as chocolate-covered graham crackers often follow. But if we deliberately slam the rotten little puke of a sister's fingers in the door,

Leonard Nimoy (1931–2015): American actor best known for playing Spock in the original *Star Trek* television series. He later turned to poetry, music, and other artistic pursuits.

sanctions follow—angry remonstrance from parents, aunts and uncles; instead of a chocolate-covered graham cracker, a spanking.

But anticivilization emotions don't go away, and they demand periodic exercise. We have such "sick" jokes as, "What's the difference between a truckload of bowling balls and a truckload of dead babies?" (You can't unload a truckload of bowling balls with a pitchfork . . . a joke, by the way, that I heard originally from a ten-year-old.) Such a joke may surprise a laugh or a grin out of us even as we recoil, a possibility that confirms the thesis: If we share a brotherhood of man, then we also share an insanity of man. None of which is intended as a defense of either the sick joke or insanity but merely as an explanation of why the best horror films, like the best fairy tales, manage to be reactionary, anarchistic, and revolutionary all at the same time.

The mythic horror movie, like the sick joke, has a dirty job to do. It deliberately appeals to all that is worst in us. It is morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free, our nastiest fantasies realized . . . and it all happens, fittingly enough, in the dark. For those reasons, good liberals often shy away from horror films. For myself, I like to see the most aggressive of them—*Dawn of the Dead*, for instance—as lifting a trap door in the civilized forebrain and throwing a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath.

Why bother? Because it keeps them from getting out, man. It keeps them down there and me up here. It was Lennon and McCartney who said that all you need is love, and I would agree with that.

As long as you keep the gators fed.

Understanding the Text

1. King states that when we see a horror film, we are "daring the nightmare" (par. 2). What does he mean by that?
2. King uses the metaphor of "emotional muscles" that need exercise (par. 9). Some of these emotions are seen as positive in that they maintain civilization. What are some of the emotions that don't maintain the social status quo, and why do they still need to be exercised?
3. King relies heavily on metaphors and allusions to create a humorous tone while making his argument. What is the advantage of approaching the topic of horror in this way?

Reflection and Response

4. Consider your own experience with horror films. Are you a fan of horror or not? If so, what about horror attracts you, and if not, what repels you? Now consider your response in light of King's statement "We also go [to horror films] to re-establish our feelings of essential normality" (par. 4). Does your response to horror connect to your feelings of normality? If so, how?
5. King argues that we have some emotions that are affirming of civilization and its norms and others that are not — or, "anticivilization emotions," as he terms them (par. 11). Identify and analyze how these negative emotions are "exercised" (to use King's metaphor) in your own life experiences beyond watching horror films.

Making Connections

6. Compare King's essay with Chuck Klosterman's "My Zombie, Myself: Why Modern Life Feels Rather Undead" (p. 40). How does Klosterman differ from King in his analysis of the need for horror in people's lives? In what ways are the two in agreement? Explain your responses using specific textual support from both essays.
7. King reports that one critic said, "The horror film has become the modern version of the public lynching" (par. 6). King continues the metaphor when he claims, "The potential lyncher is in almost all of us" (par. 9). Do some research on the history of lynching in the United States. After your research, argue whether the comparison between public lynching and horror films is either fair and accurate or overdone and exaggerated. Defend your response.