

How
is the
emotion of
fear
evoked in
horror
film stills?

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Introduction

As an aspiring filmmaker, I have always found learning about storytelling techniques and devices used in movies fascinating. Apart from telling stories, films are able to evoke emotions through the visual medium, dialogue, music, sound and movement. Even elements of filmmaking such as pace, length and rhythm of shots can be meaningful in evoking emotions that further the story. This combination of verbal and nonverbal storytelling techniques makes films a 'total work' of art, similar to Richard Wangner's concept of Gesamtkunstwerk, a synthesis of the arts in music-drama. As a fan of horror films, I have often wondered what causes a person to feel scared, and which elements contribute most to evoking anxiety and fear in the viewers. In this investigation, I am examining film stills and considering how various directorial choices contribute to the audience's feeling of fear.

I chose to analyse stills instead of scenes due to the fact that I wanted to focus on how visual features evoke the feeling of fear, which further portrays the strength of visual stimuli. The research question I will answer is: How can the emotion of fear be communicated at the level of an individual still? To answer this, I will be analyzing both the subject matter with its associations and signifiers as well as the director's formal superstructure, which can construct feelings as a result of particular design arrangements. In order to fully understand the mechanisms that motivate feelings of fear in audience members, I will examine these stills both from a filmmaker's perspective and a psychological angle. By examining specific stills from three horror movies chronologically: Psycho, 1960, by Alfred Hitchcock; The Shining (1980) by Stanley Kubrick; and Edward Scissorhands (1990) by Tim Burton, this essay will also explore the evolution of horror film tropes and historic events that inform what audiences experiences as scary.

— Directors evoking fear

In order to understand a filmmaker's decision to include specific elements in a horror film, one must first grasp the psychological underpinnings of fear. The main goal of horror films is to create an overpowering experience. Movies as a form of art have the power to evoke emotions in viewers. Through the use of visual techniques film stills can evoke emotional sensations which create feelings such as: tension, fear or excitement. A very simple example is how directors use sound to evoke tension in their films. Through the use of particular wavelengths, the waves impact the heartbeat of a viewer and make it beat faster which results in them releasing dopamine. Furthermore a visual effect which evokes fear can be done through characterisation. Directors stylise the characters through makeup or dark clothing in order for them to be seen as scary. Other ways to accomplish the sense of an overpowering experience is by evoking unconscious fears, urges, and desires that are hidden within the subconscious. As the genre emerged, it became clear that horror films work by triggering deep emotions within the audience, connected to memory, feeling or experience. For example, the use of a dark colour palette, a common aesthetic theme in horror films, creates associations between the dark imagery with the fears in our own lives, where we have previously been in similar scenarios. Sigmund Freud developed a theory of fear. Freud's theory of fear is based on Ernst Jentsch the 'uncanny', which describes the primitive images and thoughts in the unconscious, can help explain the mechanisms of fear and the way that film is able to capture a visual still shot of something that is experienced as scary, impacting the senses. Freud believed that the root of fear is in the uncanny: when the unconscious images we hold are altered in some way to make them unfamiliar.

Freud lists a few ways that this uncanny feeling is created, for example through doubling and mirroring, or *déjà vu*. Doubling can be presented through a doll, which mimics a human but has inhuman features, creating an eerie contrast between the familiar and the unfamiliar. *Déjà vu*, when a situation we might have experienced before is repeated, causes this uncanny feeling as well.

As observed by Mary Beth Oliver and Meghan Sanders: "One social approach to the enjoyment of horror films suggests that this type of entertainment represents a rite of passage from the "innocent" world of childhood to the "dangerous" world of adulthood". The viewers who watch horror films, enjoy the films because, via the experience of terror, they release anxiety buried in their unconscious. These devices of both literature and film have been used historically to signify to the audience genre, building suspense and creating fear. Fear in cinema is pleasurable since it is unreal and designed to entertain. Horror films are designed to culminate in catharsis. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, catharsis is "the process of releasing, and thereby providing relief from, strong or repressed emotions," which helps the viewer cleanse the mind of negative emotions. This is why horror films have evolved according to the zeitgeist of the time they are made, for example the fear of the unknown transformed into the fear of technology during the early 20th century. More specifically, Gothic horror often included female virginal characters, representing a widespread cultural fear of women being corrupted or polluted." Dika argued that the rise in the popularity of the slasher film can be partially explained by a societal shift toward more conservative social, sexual, and political values, culminating in the election of Ronald Reagan to the presidency." More recently, during the Cold War, horror films depicted deformed creatures, created by radiation, motivated by the audience's fear of nuclear conflict.

Through the chosen stills, I will analyse three horror films, examining the filmmaking techniques used and how fear is conveyed. Looking at the psychological foundations of fear, using Jung and Freud, I will explore how directorial choices evoke fear. The director controls all storytelling elements including light, colour palette, atmosphere, and characters. The combined use of these elements, often all at once and instantaneously speaking directly to our senses, is why the power of filmmaking is so salient in this genre.

— History of horror



In his book *Studying Horror Cinema*, Bryan Turnock, provides a historical background of this genre as well as psychological explanation of viewers' fascination with scary films. Turnock follows the progression of this genre from its beginnings to the present day. His detailed monograph serves as a roadmap for scholars as well as film buffs. The origin of the horror genre can be traced to 18th century Britain and the 'Graveyard Poets' like John Keats, Robert Blair, Edward Young, and Thomas Parnell, later transforming into gothic tales, and then psychological stories detailing insanity and madness. The poem *A Night-Piece on Death* (1721) by Thomas Parnell with its expressive description of a dark, gloomy, atmosphere and untended overgrown graveyards, "The grounds, which on the right aspire, In dimness from the view retire: The left presents a place of graves, Whose wall the silent water laves," is considered to be the forerunner of Gothic literature. Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Edgar Allan Poe's *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843) are the prime examples of classic Gothic literature. Perhaps the most notable in the Gothic genre is the emphasis on death and darkness, as well as elements of romance and pleasure found within the horror genre. For example, in Edgar Allan Poe's stories like *The Tell-Tale Heart* (1843), a murder victim's dead heartbeats under the floorboards of his murderer, who is the unnamed narrator of the story leading him to insanity.

Subsequently, horror evolved with the medium of film as cinema adopted the cultural concepts from the popular literature and art of the day. The first horror film was created by the French filmmaker Georges Méliès in 1896. A short 3-minute silent film *The Haunted Castle* told a story of a devil appearing in the titular medieval castle. In his second film, *The Cave of the Demons* (1898) Méliès depicts a lonely woman walking into a cave full of skeletons and haunted by spirits. The beginning of the 20th century, marked by rapid development of the new medium, saw an interest in film adaptations of classic Gothic stories: *The Damnation of Faust* (1903) by Georges Méliès, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1908) by Otis Turner, *Frankenstein* (1910) by J. Searle Dawley. It is important to note that the Gothic stories have been used as an inspiration repeatedly, resulting in numerous adaptations. In the example of *Frankenstein*, there have been over a hundred adaptations, which makes it possible to trace the development of horror through the ways in which the character is depicted. Early film, limited by its technology, was silent and static, evoking fear through the nature of the image. For instance, presenting the unnatural and using meter, music and lighting to transform the mise en scene into a language of fear. For instance in the 1910 version of *Frankenstein*, by J. Searle Dawley, uses theatricality of movement to signal emotion to the viewers (familiar with theatre). The emergence of new technologies and political ideologies transformed into angst over the future of humanity. Films like *Metropolis* (1927) by Fritz Lang, capture the essence of the emerging horror film in dystopian settings. German Expressionism, which influenced the production of *Metropolis*, *Psycho* and *The Shining* is connected with other artistic movements like Bauhaus, in art and design, modernism in literature, as well as powerful new political ideologies, communism and fascism. Notably this represents an evolution from early horror, related to Gothic themes, with its lens on the unknown and ephemeral world of spirits and nature, to the scientific, mechanical and inhuman. In this respect, the historical change in the film *Frankenstein* is a good representation of this transformation.

Shelley's novella is a meditation on the character of life but in the 1910 film *Dawley* focuses on recognizing Good and Evil. The prime drivers of the development of the genre likewise shifted from the producers of Gothic literature to the emerging filmmaker, for instance, Fritz Lang, who produced *Metropolis*, was an Expressionist.

Horror literature and film employed conventions to influence the senses and create a psychological condition of terror in their audiences. This builds on the Enlightenment development of classical concepts of terror as the basis for the sublime, which refers to the aesthetic of pleasure derived from "spectacles of overwhelming power" (Cohen, 106) and outside of human control, formulated in classical Greece by Longinus. Fear has different sources in cinema, each experienced by one of the two out of five senses, whether, sound or vision. The features, tropes, elements, devices such as mythical creatures, abandoned houses, thunderstorms and the expressive use of darkness and light are designed to connect the senses with feelings. For instance, film directors such as James Whale often use shadows to create an eerie uncertainty about the setting, while signaling tension and creating expectation. Similarly, uplighting techniques, most famously used by Whale in his 1931 cinematic adaptation of *Frankenstein*, present the characters with distorted faces, in order to provoke fear through an unnatural appearance of facial features. An example is the use of montage, a standard cinematic technique, pioneered by Lev Kuleshov and implemented by Sergei Eisenstein in *The Battleship Potemkin* (1926). That technique creates an emotional link by juxtaposing unrelated images. With the advent of cinema, a variety of new techniques were available to producers of "horror" developing on the unique experience of cinema that is not available in literature.

Psycho

ALFRED HITCHCOCK



Psycho, directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1960, completely transformed the horror film genre, as Hitchcock did not rely on traditional horror film themes. Set in an everyday setting, the film tells the story of Marion Crane, a young woman on the run, who stops at a roadside motel owned by Norman Bates and his mother. Unlike his predecessors, Hitchcock does not resort to mysterious, supernatural beings or monsters. Instead, the monster takes the shape of an overly shy man with an Oedipus complex. He is the dark shape on the left in the still, hiding behind a translucent shower curtain.

Psycho incorporates traditional visual techniques often used in horror films such as the use of shadows, tense music, facial expressions, and screams. The still above depicts the exact moment before Norman, though the audience doesn't know it's him yet, attacks his victim. The woman is showering, standing on the right side of the frame and the viewer is able to see the water splashing onto her face. She appears to be enjoying her time in the shower, a look of distracted bliss on her face. She believes that she is the only person in the room. Nevertheless, at the left side of the composition the viewer is able to see a shadowy silhouette, standing behind the curtain. The figure is featureless, which creates even more tension due the unrecognisable figure hiding behind the curtain. These visual techniques evoke anticipation in the viewers. Additionally, the camera is positioned at the eye level of the predator, which places Marion below, enhancing her vulnerability.

It furthermore puts the viewer at eye level with the anonymous attacker, which increases the audience's fear by facing it with the predator. The audience is able to detect the figure by the contrast of black and white in the still. Hitchcock was limited to the use of black and white film, which is why he experiments with light in order to create tension. The shadows are marked on Marion's head which suggests that it might be an area which the villain aims to hit her in. This is also highlighted through the hair poking outwards, in the direction of the silhouette. Additionally, considering the cultural context of the 1960s, perhaps the still also provides commentary on the changing times, for example the women's rights movement which was active during this film. Hitchcock intentionally chose to set the scene in the shower, an intimate setting, and the shadowy figure later is revealed to be Norman Bates. These choices may be attributed to representing fears of the changing times and the shifting role of women in society, as Marion, is also introduced early in the film as a woman who does not conform to feminine expectations.

Moreover, Hitchcock, by choosing a familiar situation where the individual is at their most vulnerable, is harkening back to a primitive fear that many people have of ambush. By putting the woman in danger while showering, he is creating tension and fear of being caught unexpectedly without any signs of danger. Hitchcock also chooses the setting to be familiar, something that his viewers can relate to. Freud's ideas of the uncanny makes the viewer understand why Hitchcock is combining the familiar action of showering with the terrifying possibility of someone watching and possibly attacking. The viewer, as witness to this scene, is unable to do anything but watch, and feel a sense of dread of the inevitable. The choice of making the villain a human being, specifically a man, and the victim a woman, provides interesting context and commentary on the fears that people held at the time and extends the genre from the fear of the unknown to the fear of the stranger.

The Shining

STANLEY KUBRICK



Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* is an adaptation of Steven King's best selling novel, known for its unique aesthetic, mystifying storytelling structure, as well as an eerie sense of claustrophobia that permeates the film. The plot follows Jack Torrance, played superbly by Jack Nicholson, and his family, as they discover the disturbing mysteries of the Overlook Hotel in Colorado during a harsh winter. The film provokes numerous questions, and one may begin to wonder whether the events are fantastical mysteries or images in Danny's or Jack's mind.

The selected still depicts five-years-old Danny, the son of Jack, riding his bicycle through the hallway. He is placed at the centre of the frame, facing away from the viewer. The audience is unable to see his facial expressions as his face is concealed, and it observes from the character's perspective. The audience watches the scene from a perspective of someone who walks behind Danny, further creating a sense as if someone was following him. This creates tension as the audience perceives the two girls standing at the end of the hallway at the same time that Danny does. Kubrick, through framing, also places the audience in Danny's mind, as it witnesses these fantastical creatures and events together with him.

The symmetric composition with Danny in the middle, as well as the hallway, creates concentric lines meeting at the vanishing point, guiding the viewer's eye towards the two girls. The shot is created through a wide lens, which allows the audience to not only see the two girls and Danny, but also see the ceiling and the doors on both sides. The use of the wide lens results in the visual illusion of objects in the background seeming to be smaller and the corridor looking longer. The visible doors create an effect as if someone could go out of them and also visual rhythm. The setting of the still is an off-limits part of the hotel, where the employees live. This makes the situation even more unusual, as the girls are unexpectedly found in this setting. The twins themselves adhere to Freud's idea of the uncanny, presenting a doubled version of a single person. By presenting the twins as completely identical, Kubrick makes the familiar feel unfamiliar and disturbing.

Moreover, their location and clothing is an unexpected and uncommon sight in a hotel hallway, which confuses and creates an eerie feeling of suspense in the viewer. Furthermore the uncanny and theatrical clothing of the girls makes them appear doll-like. Their identical clothing and hairstyles, paired with them standing in the same position, is odd. It is uncommon to wear the type of outfits they are wearing for this time period and it reminds of clothing that usually porcelain dolls would wear. Additionally, the wallpaper highlights the doll atmosphere through the pattern and composition, with the girls standing stiffly, creating the illusion of a dollhouse.

Choosing to use the number two while making the girls look identical makes the viewer further question whether what they're seeing is real. This comes from the idea of seeing double, derived from when a human is intoxicated or under a lot of stress. It refers to how a person sees things in twos due to their vision being blurred. The similarity of the two girls and how identical they are to one another, emphasises the uncanny and implies the questioning of vision in the character of Danny, as well as the audience. This technique of mirroring has been used in the novel by Lewis Carroll Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. In the book Alice enters Wonderland through going through the mirror, the concept of mirrors is often associated with things coming to life. In *The Shining* the mirroring of the two characters creates the effect of uncertainty and questioning whether the identical girls are reflections or two separate personas.

The still is a particular example of Kubrick's aim at portraying a sensation. He uses a variety of techniques in order to implement the 'uncanny' and to create a psychological alteration of reality. The psychological distress which *The Shining* evokes, creates a sense of uncertainty and dissociation from reality. The world that Kubrick creates is made through the portrayed: psychotic episodes, fantastical creatures and pathological family relations, questioning what is real or not.



Edward Scissorhands

TIM BURTON



Edward Scissorhands by Tim Burton, released in December of 1990 as a Christmas film, follows the creation and life of Edward, played by Johnny Depp. Superficially Edward represents a quintessential Gothic character, with many parallels to Frankenstein. Edward was created by an inventor living in a castle, isolated from society. The Inventor dies and is unable to complete his creation of Edward, which is why he has scissors instead of hands. The hands were the most complicated part of the body to build, which is why the scientist used scissors as a temporary solution. The protagonist is found by a woman who is living in the city and she brings him back to her house, introducing him to the neighborhood and its way of life. His very different characteristics: uncultured, even whimsical behavior as well as the unexpected arrival, is reminiscent of the surrealistic story about an unexpected visitor, *The Doubtful Guest*, written and illustrated by Edward Gorey (Gorey 5). Burton lists Gorey to be one of his influences. When Gorey describes the appearance of the unexpected guest, he writes: "Then they saw something standing on top of an urn. Whose peculiar appearance gave them a turn." Similarly, in this story, a strange creature with bizarre behavior comes to stay with a respectable Victorian family who lead an orderly life. The film includes classical horror features such as a dark castle, a mad scientist, who is in the background as the creator of Edward, and an unusual creature. However, as the audience begins to learn about Edward, they soon realize that he is in fact a romantic character. This harkens back to Gothic novels, where a character is portrayed as both the lonely hero and the monster. The prototype of Edward is the monster from Frankenstein. Shelley's novel depicts a creature overpowered by isolation, however, in reality he craves love and companionship, which causes him to resort to destructive behaviour to achieve his goal. Therefore, though Edward Scissorhands uses horror film aesthetics to create a tense atmosphere, the film actually inverts the genre's conventions by characterizing Edward as likeable and sympathetic.

In the selected film still Edward seems at first a frightening figure, particular aspects of the scene provide the viewer with contradictory information about his character. He has all of the traditional features of a monster; he wears black, leather clothing, his hair is dark and spiky, and his pale face is covered in scars from his scissorhands.

Moreover, his hands themselves are threatening weapons, the fact that they can hurt proven by his scarring. Such a character should be feared. However, the director has placed him alongside a dog, which removes the sense of danger. Edward's scary appearance of an antihero contrasts with his self-image, where he is depicted as gentle and kind. This is represented by both his contrast and similarity with the dog. The two figures give a humorous tone to the scene. The fluffiness of the dog's white fur contrasts Edward's spiky, black hair and the sharpness of his scissors. He sits restless, with his eyes gazing into the distance. His facial expression suggests that he is sad or melancholy. But while the fluffy dog and Edward are used as contradictions of each other, the fact that they are calmly sat within the same frame demonstrates that Edward is not the monster that he perhaps physically appears to be.

Contrary to the first impression, the dog's haircut makes the two resemble one another. This visual humour builds further empathy for Edward and is consistent with the other visual cues the director leaves, which create an atmosphere of comfort and safety in the still. If Edward had been placed on the driveway alone, his isolation would instead create tension, perhaps leading the audience to believe he was planning something evil, perhaps revenge. Instead, we see a wide-shot of a typical American suburb, with colorful houses and Christmas lights, suggesting the pleasures of predictable middle-class life, but also revealing the sameness, notice the identically painted garages, that is stifling Edward.

Edward sits dejected, causing him to seem perhaps harmless, and is oblivious to the emerging shadows behind him. Edward's dilemma and melancholy are represented in the shadows that emerge from behind the white house, starting to cover its front. These shadows are inconsistent with the lighting from the top right, that are strong enough so that they should illuminate the foreground in front of the house on the right. Edward, himself also seems to be drawn back into these shadows, suggesting they are about to engulf him.

Ironically, the neighbors' fear of Edward is the origin of the horror in the film. The contrast of comfortable middle-class setting with the shadows that create an ominous presence, unsettles the viewer. The horror of this scene is the realization that Edward's uniqueness, represented by his frightening appearance, overshadows his sympathetic humanity, and he will be swallowed up by the lack of acceptance of otherness in American society.



— Conclusion

By combining the history of horror movies, filmmaking techniques, and psychological theories such as Freud's idea of the uncanny, I aimed to demonstrate in three stills from significant horror films the way that directors use symbols, images and lighting, to create fear. Psycho, The Shining, and Edward Scissorhands each used traditional elements of a horror film. Notably, Edward Scissorhands differs from the other two films, in using aesthetics of fear to subvert audience expectations. The directors made aesthetic choices, they used darkness and shadows, played with remote and abandoned locations, placing the audience in unfamiliar and eerie environments and used the devices of doubling and the uncanny to subvert dominant societal norms. Most importantly, the directors take advantage of the anxiety the audience brings to the cinema, due to historical events or cultural norms, employing characters that reflect those concerns, or setting the films in locations that allude to real life events. The evolution of cinematic techniques demonstrates changes in society that have taken place since the beginning of the film era.

Concepts like the sublime, which date to the classical tragedy, have been integrated into the visual language of horror cinema so much that being frightened requires more and more effort by the filmmaker, who needs to construct ever more elaborate visual tropes, to evoke the surprise required for inducing fear. The foundational psychological theories I've discussed demonstrate methods and reasons that the horror film works, however, they do not entirely explain the popularity of the horror film genre. Perhaps a reason for their popularity is the experience of catharsis that the horror film evokes through the unreal enactment of onscreen fear. As a result, horror, like cinema itself, has created a society that does not look away and looks for novelty and surprise. Ultimately, the logic behind the horror genre can be seen as connected to the enduring attractiveness of cinema.

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