Why do so many of us enjoy being told scary, frightening stories? What are some of the consequences of such exposure? In light of the continued popularity and profitability of horror films over the past four decades, these questions have become the focus of growing public debate and scholarly attention. Research in the past two decades has examined the role of gender on the viewing experiences of young men and women; more recently, children’s fear reactions to horror films have been analyzed.

Horror films first appeared during the silent film era. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919) is generally recognized as the first production of this genre. The period from 1920 through 1960 was dominated by gothic horror films, in which a sense of eeriness was created with tilted cameras, strange buildings, and shadowy, often exotic characters. Films of this period were often highly derivative and usually avoided depictions of dismemberment and blood because of strictly enforced film production codes. Horror films that exploited the inventive use of special effects to portray grisly slaughter first appeared in the 1960s. These gory productions typically pushed the limits of realistically gruesome imagery.

Horror movies that frequently juxtaposed erotic and violent imagery, commonly referred to as slasher films, dominated theaters beginning in the 1980s. The combination of violence and attractive girls was popular at the box office, and three of the most successful horror movie franchises (*Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*) emerged during this period. However, apparently in response to critical concerns about potential consequences of mixing erotic and violent images, a clear shift in content is evident in contemporary horror films. For example, Barry Sapolsky, Fred Molitor, and Sarah Luque report that, compared with those of the previous decade, horror films during the 1990s escalated the projection of graphic violence while essentially eliminating erotic imagery.

The horror film, which was long the purview of independent producers, has become a priority for major film studios. The ultimate goal of a major studio is the discovery and development of a long-term horror film franchise—such as *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*, or *Scream*—that will generate large profits from both story concept serialization and the sale of residual products (e.g., books, costumes, games). However, as T. L. Stanley makes clear, tremendous profits are typically enjoyed by almost all contemporary horror films. Isolating four recent films (*The Blair Witch Project*, *The Grudge*, *The Ring*, and *Saw*), Stanley outlines the huge discrepancy between the average production cost of $14.8 million and the more than $188.2 million in combined worldwide gross income.

Horror films are especially appealing to avid moviegoers—individuals who see at least 12 films per year and account for 77% of all theatre admissions, and who typically are single, well-educated, 16-to-20-year-olds from middle-class, urban families—and this emerges as a key reason for the continued success of such films. Equally important, however, is the fact that horror audiences typically are split almost evenly between male and female viewers, with many reporting a strong interest in the communal experience of being scared with their friends. In other words, horror films are, for many viewers, great “date movies.”
This phenomenon was first observed and researched by Dolf Zillmann and his colleagues, who demonstrated in an experiment that an opposite-gender companion's affective reactions to horror strongly impacted a co-viewer's experience of distress, delight, and attraction. Specifically, young men and women were exposed to a horror film in the presence of a same-age, opposite-gender companion who expressed mastery, affective indifference, or distress. It was found that men enjoyed the movie most in the company of a distressed woman and least in the company of a mastering woman. Women, in contrast, enjoyed the horror film most in the company of a mastering man and least in the company of a distressed man. Further, men who displayed mastery and women who displayed distress enjoyed an enhancement of their physical appeal. Building from these findings, Zillmann and James Weaver advanced the gender-socialization theory of reactions to horror, also referred to as the snuggle theory of horror, explicating some of the social motives for and social consequences of the consumption of cinematic horror. Richard Harris and his colleagues have reported fascinating evidence supporting this theory.

Obviously, not all consequences of horror film viewing are positive, especially when children watch such materials at a developmentally premature stage. Joanne Cantor illustrates many of these concerns summarizing her program of research on fear reactions.

See also

Adult Mediation Strategies, Adult Mediation of Violence Effects, Aggression, Movies and, Desensitization Effects, Fear Reactions, Movies, Sexuality in, Movies, Violence in, Promotional Tie-Ins

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