Why Do We Watch Horror Movies?

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Abstract

Fear is one of the most fundamental human emotions. Evolution has shaped fear as a survival mechanism that alerts individuals to danger and prepares the body for action. When confronted with a threat, the brain activates the sympathetic nervous system, increasing heart rate, sharpening attention, and releasing stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol. Horror films exploit this ancient biological system. Although viewers intellectually understand that the threat is fictional, the brain often responds as though the danger were real. The result is an intense emotional experience within a controlled and safe environment. This combination of perceived danger and actual safety creates what psychologists call safe fear—an opportunity to experience powerful emotions without facing real-world consequences. One of the central psychological explanations for horror's popularity is the concept of excitation transfer, developed by psychologist Dolf Zillmann. During frightening scenes, physiological arousal steadily increases. When the danger is resolved, this arousal transforms into relief and pleasure, making the positive emotions even more intense. Some researchers suggest that horror functions as a form of psychological rehearsal. Just as children play games that simulate adult situations, adults may use fictional horror to practice emotional responses to threatening circumstances. Watching horror is often a communal activity. Friends attend horror movies together, families tell ghost stories, and audiences collectively react to frightening scenes. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle argued that tragedy allows audiences to experience catharsis—an emotional purification through art. Ultimately, we watch horror movies not because we enjoy suffering, but because they transform fear into understanding, vulnerability into resilience, and darkness into insight. The monsters on screen may be fictional, yet the emotions they evoke are profoundly real, reminding us that confronting our deepest fears can be both intellectually enriching and emotionally rewarding.

Keywords: Psychological horror, Curiosity about the unknown, Psychology of fear, Safe fear, Existential anxiety, Social bonding