

What makes a good horror movie?

3 July 2015



Like them or hate them horror films are big business and a string of new horror films are hitting the big screen this year. But what creates the intensity of suspense? And was Alfred Hitchcock – the master of suspense - right?

Our sense of horror works by tapping into our primal fears and a PhD student at The University of Nottingham has attempted to analyse the viewer experience and timing structures of suspense by measuring the electrical activity created by our sweat glands. The aim is to define the anatomy of cinematic suspense and offer the media industry an evidence based framework for the construction of suspense for scenes in feature length films and video games as well as the creation of film trailers and experimental digital story experiences.

Keith Bound, from the Department of Culture, Film and Media, recruited a team of volunteers to investigate their physiological and psychological responses to horror films. They were shown 32 short film clips from eight feature length horror films and their experience of suspense was assessed by monitoring electrodermal activity (EDA) – a response created by the release of sweat from the eccrine glands. These glands react when we experience anxiety, fear or stress – the reaction that makes our palms sweat.

Horror for the digital age

Keith Bound is a final year PhD student at The University of Nottingham. His thesis is entitled

Psychophysiological film: Defining the anatomy of cinematic suspense for horror films.

Keith said: "The digital age provides new ways to watch films from cinema, TV, laptop, PC tablet and experience films through complex story structures, where short film clips (micro-narratives) are linked to an interactive story experience with voice, text and image messaging, email and the web.

"With suspense being a core method of viewer engagement and enjoyment it's essential that we understand how we can meet the desired viewing experience through different types of story experiences.

"One way to do this is to measure the time structures of suspense and our reaction to what we see and hear. We were also able to identify viewers' coping strategies such as closing eyes or looking away from the screen."

What is the 'best' kind of horror?

The study showed that distinctive psychophysiological patterns of sudden-fright and anxiety with different levels of intensity are experienced when watching four types of suspense:

- Direct: We see the film in the first person – as if we are the character in the film.
- Shared: When we empathise with fictional character's situation.
- Vicarious: The viewer knows a fictional character's life is threatened but they are not aware of the danger.
- Composite: Direct, shared and vicarious suspense synchronised together.

The participants in this study were more likely to experience an intense form of anxiety and suspense when the [fictional character](#) wasn't aware of what was about to happen. Vicarious suspense also elicited an intense level of anxiety even when participants had seen the film before.

Keith said: "These findings provide evidence to support Alfred Hitchcock's assumption that vicarious suspense is the most consistent method to generate an intense form of anxiety and suspense. But cinematic techniques such as cinematography, editing, sound and set design also play a part in the viewer experience."

Helping to define 'suspense' in film

Dr Liz Evans, Keith's supervisor on the study and an expert in the relationship between technology and the experience of narrative, said: "Keith's research is at the cutting edge of film studies and offers a fascinating insight into how audiences respond to suspenseful narratives. His work not only helps scholars re-think how to define 'suspense' in film, it also provides a framework for filmmakers to help them create even scarier, more suspenseful content."

Keith has presented his research at four international conferences in Europe and USA. In July 2015 he will be launching his psychophysiological film and research consultancy Receptive Cinema which offers film production and video games companies an evidence based model and a novel approach to the construction of suspense for scenes in horror feature length films and video games, film trailers and experimental digital story experiences.

He said: "I have always been interested in monsters and scary stories, taking an interest in dinosaurs, Dr Who and later in horror films. Horror films terrified me in what I would see on screen but I was also fascinated with [horror films](#) and how realistic the creatures would look through special effects. Today I continue my journey by visiting the cinema as soon as the next horror film is released."

Provided by University of Nottingham

APA citation: What makes a good horror movie? (2015, July 3) retrieved 27 February 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-07-good-horror-movie.html>

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