

The Unseen Threat

An Exploration of the Fear Through the Lens of Horror Cinema

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I. ABSTRACT

My thesis centers around horror productions and the concept of fear, highlighting the role it plays in the relationship between filmmakers and their audience. Through my research, I hope to explore the ways that horror productions strategically restrict an audience's sense of sight and sound to control the perception of a story, and invoke a physical sensation of fear within the viewer. Throughout this film and essay, I will explore why fear is an effective sensation to exploit for engaging an audience, and how to successfully achieve this exploitation.

The film will be a fictional horror short that will utilize the production techniques and horror tropes discussed in the essay. Additionally, elements of the narrative will be used to emphasize and reflect on themes of fear. The goal of the film will be to recreate and demonstrate the production techniques found in the research, while telling a story that explores fear from a contemporary philosophical standpoint.

The film's narrative will center around a young woman with a secret, but severe phobia, who is forced to come face to face with the very thing that haunts her, in order to escape her own delusions. The woman's environment will invoke a similar sense of fear in her, that the film should invoke in the audience, by having the protagonist's own perception of sight and sound become more distorted and disorienting as the film progresses. The protagonist's relationship to the production is similar to that of the audience, where perception and emotions are at the mercy of the filmmaker in both cases. Because of this, certain elements of the protagonist's experience in the film will be a reflection of the people's experience in the audience themselves. This will provide a chance to draw strong connections between the audience and the protagonist, while utilizing the production techniques found in my research.

II. INTRODUCTION

Oxford Languages defines fear as “an unpleasant emotion caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat.” For emotion that is defined as literally “unpleasant,” it seems counterintuitive that an entire genre of literature and film, which is typically intended for entertainment, would be based around trying to inflict this emotion in a spectator—but that’s exactly what the horror genre does. Oxford Languages defines horror as “an intense feeling of fear, shock, or disgust,” meaning that horror, by definition, is rooted in fear. So, in horror cinema, the goal is to lead the viewer through a calculated story, comprised of moments that frequently leave them with that “intense feeling of fear, shock, or disgust,” or in other words, leaves them in “horror.”

While this concept of exploiting fear for entertainment is a counterintuitive notion, the continual existence of horror cinema comes as no surprise to anyone because it has proven to be successful throughout history and continues to be successful today. It seems odd that a genre rooted in a feeling that is so-called “unpleasant” would attract so many viewers time and time again, but this is not because the films themselves are “unpleasant.” This attraction stems from the fact that horror films evoke unpleasant feelings in a strategic way that ends up leaving some viewers entertained, rather than horrified. This is because horror films are still intended to be enjoyable; the goal is not to scare the audience so much that the experience becomes something to dread. The audience does not gain enjoyment from “fear itself,” but rather from “thrills,” which according to Seeker (a branch of Discovery) is born out of “the physical and emotional release that follows scary situations,” (Concordia St. Paul). Not everyone will experience pleasure from this emotional release, which is why many people do have an adverse reaction to horror content. However, for those who do draw enjoyment from this type of cinema, their

“desire to feel fear is a manifestation of an adrenaline-seeking personality,” (Concordia St. Paul). Glenn Sparks, a communications professor at Purdue University “who studies the media’s effects on people” stated that “fear is a negative emotion that comes about when people are under siege or threat,” (DNews). So, for a horror film to successfully scare an audience in a way that is pleasurable, it must emulate on-screen that feeling of being “under siege or threat” without actually putting the viewer in harm's way.

Psychologist Glenn D. Walters has explored this phenomenon and has identified “three primary factors that feed the attraction to horror entertainment.” He has labeled these factors as “Tension,” “Relevance,” and “Unrealism” (Concordia St. Paul). Tension is used to make the story compelling to the viewer. Without tension, the viewer will become bored, which is why filmmakers use an array of strategies to create “mystery, suspense, gore, terror, and shock” as a way to build tension in their stories (Concordia St.Paul). Relevance has to do with “establishing elements that viewers will identify with,” which can be broken down into two categories, universal relevance and cultural relevance (Concordia St. Paul). According to Walters, universal relevance relates to “the psychology of fear of death and the unknown,” while personal relevance can be a viewer identifying with a protagonist or condemning an antagonist (Concordia St. Paul). Lastly, unrealism refers to the awareness within an audience that their viewing experience is manufactured, and that there are cinematic techniques used by filmmakers to remind the audience that “what they are watching is intended to entertain,” (Concordia St. Paul). This combination of tension, relevance, and unrealism all work together in horror cinema to captivate the viewer, get them to identify with a story, and thrill them in a way that is controlled, reminding them that the purpose of their viewing experience is to be entertained.

There are actually biological reasons why this controlled fear is so effective at scaring an audience while simultaneously leaving them entertained. It partially has to do with what was mentioned earlier, the fact that viewers of horror films are aware that what they are watching is meant for entertainment and that “they are in a safe environment.” Horror cinema has a way of frequently triggering the “fight-or-flight” response in its viewers which releases a boost of “adrenaline, endorphins, and dopamine.” Once the brain is able to “process surroundings,” it can then “conclude that the experience is not a genuine threat,” which ends up leaving the viewer with feelings that are pleasurable (Concordia St. Paul).

Sociologist Margee Kerr, attributes this type of viewing experience to the phenomenon of “excitation transfer,” which happens “after an accelerated heart rate, heavy breathing, and other physical reactions to fear wear off” and a viewer begins to “experience intense relief,” (Concordia St. Paul). This is the root of why many people enjoy horror films. It’s because “people who experience an emotional response to horror also experience more enjoyment when threats are resolved,” (Concordia St. Paul).

Excitation transfer provides a good explanation for how horror films get perceived as entertaining, but this phenomenon can only occur once the viewer has experienced fear first. If human biology can help create an understanding of how pleasure is derived from horror cinema, it can also help explain what makes horror cinema so scary in the first place, to trigger this excitation transfer. “Stressful stimuli” can trigger a fight-or-flight response automatically, it is “autonomic,” meaning that “people do not consciously know it is happening,” (Concordia St. Paul). This is what horror filmmakers rely on to scare their audience. They know that certain production techniques can help automatically trigger feelings of distress and discomfort within a viewer, and they use different combinations of these techniques to subconsciously invoke fear

within their audience. Different parts of the brain “work together to identify fear and respond to it.” So when a filmmaker is using certain scare tactics within their film, they are actually manipulating on-screen information in a way that activates the brain’s thalamus, sensory cortex, hippocampus, amygdala, and hypothalamus. These regions of the brain process this manipulated information as threatening or unnerving, leaving the viewer experiencing a sensation of fear (Concordia St. Paul). The biology and psychology of experiencing horror cinema are both deeply intertwined with each other, and are very complex. However, with a basic understanding of these sciences in their relation to horror cinema, filmmakers are left with more than enough production tools under their belt to truly horrify their audience in a way that is palatable and pleasurable.

III. STRUCTURE

Before a filmmaker can even begin considering the technical strategies used during production to evoke a sense of fear in the viewer, they must first understand how to effectively structure their horror story. This idea of structure is important to consider during all stages of the filmmaking process, but especially when it comes to the initial writing of a story. The film’s narrative must be scary enough on its own before a filmmaker can actually bring the story to life on-screen. This does come with balance, however. A horror story should be scary, of course, but it’s important that the story has other tones as well to break up the horror; an audience shouldn’t be scared the entire way through a film otherwise they become “desensitized” (Light). This is where the concept of “hills and valleys” comes into the conversation, also known as “scene and sequel,” (Light). These terms refer to the idea that for each moment of tension, excitement, or horror (the hills), there should be moments of stillness, calmness, and reflection (the valleys) to balance out the emotional reactions the audience will experience. What this means for story

structure is that a character needs to experience an event and then be given “time to reflect on that event” before experiencing another event (Light). This type of structure is really effective in horror films, which is why they so frequently tend to follow it in the presentation of their story. This technique has become easily identifiable throughout horror cinema, and can be used as a formulaic way of guaranteeing an emotional response out of an audience.

A video essay by In Depth Cine titled, “How Camera Movement Makes Horror Terrifying,” has broken down these hills and valleys into the “Three Stages of Horror,” which they identify as “Downtime,” “Build Up,” and “The Scare.” Downtime is when the film lets the audience breathe, it allows them to take a moment to think about what is going on, and it allows time in the story for the characters to develop (Light). The build up is “where the true terror lies” because “you know something is coming, but you don't know what it is, or when it will appear,” (Light). This is the time to tease the audience through story beats and production techniques that make suggestions about character vulnerability and potential threats in the world of the film. The most climactic stage, the scare, is when the filmmaker takes the audience “by surprise,” (Light). The goal of this stage is to bring the build up to a close and catch the viewer off guard, to startle them or present them with something frighteningly unexpected.

When developing a horror story, it is important to understand the concept of the “unseen threat,” which is crucial to the build up stage mentioned above, and an idea that applies to pretty much every other aspect of a horror production. In terms of story development, this means to refrain from revealing the antagonizing threat too early, if at all, in the story. This is important for a couple reasons. For starters, by waiting to reveal a threat for as long as possible, the tension slowly builds up with little release, making the reveal that much more satisfying when it comes (In Depth Cine). The other reason though, relates back to human psychology. By leaving a threat

in “obscurity,” whether through visuals or the story structure itself, the audience will “project” their own imagination onto the threat “with whatever terrifies them the most,” which is typically more frightening than the actual threat itself (Film Riot). This is why the unseen threat is not only important when considering story structure, but also when considering other aspects of the production, such as cinematography and sound design, because this idea of leaving a threat unknown and in obscurity can be applied to both fields of the production.

IV. SIGHT

Since film is a visual medium, it should go without saying that sight plays a crucial role in the development of a production. This is especially true of horror cinema because the imagery on-screen can make or break the sensation of fear within an audience. The environment portrayed on-screen works hand in hand with techniques used behind the camera to create a scary, visual atmosphere and subconsciously invoke fear in the viewer. Even the slightest variations in lighting, set design, camera lenses, camera movement or framing can make the difference between a horror movie that is truly terrifying, and one that will make an audience bored, or even laugh. In order to successfully sell a film’s imagery as horror, and invoke fear in an audience through the visuals alone, a film must utilize two specific cinematic elements that use the viewer's own perception of sight against them. The first element has to do with the world that is actually seen on-screen, and the second has to do with technique and how this world is captured within the limits of a camera’s point of view. These two elements are known in cinema as *mise-en-scène* and cinematography.

Oxford Languages defines *mise-en-scène* as “the arrangement of scenery and stage properties in a play,” which of course in the context of cinema refers to the “scenery and stage

properties” of a film. In other words, the *mise-en-scène* refers to the physical world that the audience sees on-screen. Lighting, set design, location, props, costumes, and staging are all elements of *mise-en-scène* that communicate visually to the audience information about the film’s world and about the characters in that world. This is why *mise-en-scène* is so important when creating a horror film, because the visuals in a horror cinema need to inform the audience that the world they are viewing is one to be feared. The story alone in a film could be terrifying, but if the visuals don’t reflect that tone, or the subjectivity of the characters, the audience will feel disconnected from the story on-screen. As a result, they will have a harder time resonating with the film’s characters and their goals, and most of all, they won’t be scared.

When trying to create a scary, or eerie environment on-screen, filmmakers have a series of techniques they can use in the *mise-en-scène* to help push the unsettling atmosphere. The biggest element of *mise-en-scène* that helps sell the on-screen world to the audience as reality, is the setting and set design. The filming location, and any modifications made to it, are vital in communicating to the audience the setting of the scene and the overall story; as viewers, the audience must know to a certain extent where the story or the scene is taking place, and during what time period (historical, contemporary, future, other). These setting decisions can seem obvious, but they carry with them important, more subtle details that contribute to subconsciously invoking fear within a viewer.

For example, take the film *Jaws* (1975), directed by Steven Spielberg, which follows the story of a killer great white shark that goes on a murdering spree at the beaches of the fictional Amity Island. In this film, many of the scenes are shot near the beach, on the beach, or physically in the water. This location seems like the obvious choice for a horror film about a killer shark—because it is—but theoretically, the whole film could have taken place indoors or on

land. The narrative could have followed the people in the story, never showing the shark or the attacks themselves, which would play out more like a drama film than a thriller. By putting emphasis on the beach locations, the ocean, and the shark attacks themselves, Spielberg takes a setting (the beach) that is commonly associated with positive feelings, and mixes it with horror and tragedy (the shark attacks) to create a sense of fear in the location alone. He takes a place where people are vulnerable and typically feel safe, and transforms it into a location that has become unsafe and constantly threatened by potential danger. Everytime a scene takes place on the beach in the film, the viewer is instantly on edge because they know that danger lurks in the waters of this on-screen world, and that the shark could strike at any moment—but they don't know when. Now this may seem like an obvious point to make, that a shark movie would take place at the beach or on the water, but it's important because these filmmaking choices carry subtler implications within the story that emphasize this idea of setting having an impact on the level of fear the viewer will experience.

Another element of *mise-en-scène* that contributes to invoking a sense of fear through visuals is lighting. Lighting can be used in all sorts of ways to add tension to a scene or reflect a character's subjectivity. With horror films in particular, there are a handful of lighting techniques that can be used to exploit a viewer's biological and psychological responses to light, which contribute to creating an eerie aesthetic on-screen. One of the biggest uses of lighting in horror cinema is the strategic placement of shadows. This can be as simple as leaving a corner of a room unlit to suggest something is waiting in the shadows. It can also be used to silhouette an element on-screen, such as a person or a prop. The idea behind the use of shadows is to suggest a threat without directly showing what the threat is, allowing the viewer to project their own imagination onto the image, which tends to be far scarier than the actual threat itself (Film Riot).

In this sense, shadows are used both as an expansive and reductive tool. Visually, shadows are reductive, they reduce the information an audience can access by concealing details and leaving vague visual elements to unpack. Conceptually however, shadows are expansive to a film, they expand the story through ambiguity, pushing the visual tension and allowing room for suggesting new ideas or threats indirectly.

A good example of this can be found in the shower scene of Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1969), where the protagonist, Marion Crane (Janet Leigh), is stabbed to death by a shadowy figure while showering at a motel. In this scene, Marion is bathing in front of a translucent shower curtain, which is just clear enough to see light moving behind it, but not clear enough to see details. The first moment where the viewer is presented with vague, shadowy danger is when the bathroom door opens behind the curtain; while there is no detail in this movement of light, it is still clear to the viewer that a door has been opened and Marion is no longer alone. As the shadow creeps closer, the viewer can now clearly identify the general shape of a human, but again, the detail of this imagery does not expand past the outline of the silhouette. Even when the curtain is pulled open by this shadow in the following moments, the viewer is still left with an incomplete portrait of who this threat is, because the person's face is left unlit, leaving only the outline of shadows to decipher what is going on. For anyone who has seen the film, this technique is obviously used for the additional purpose of concealing the identity of the killer, for the sake of the plot, but that's besides the point. The purpose of this example is not to illustrate how Hitchcock preserved a plot twist within the film through the use of shadows, rather it is to illustrate how the ambiguity and vagueness of shadows can be used to trigger and exploit a viewer's imagination, for the purpose of evoking a stronger, fear based reaction out of them.

While shadows are a critical component of lighting that is utilized by horror filmmakers to subconsciously invoke fear within an audience, lighting is not limited to shadows. Another creative usage of light that unsettles viewers is to project the light source from uncommon and unflattering angles. People are used to viewing other people, or things, in specific types of lighting, usually overhead from the sun or indoor lights. In horror however, this type of lighting is often challenged through the use of uncommon and unflattering lighting angles, because it subverts the standard lighting we are accustomed and desensitized to. When these angles are used, it often evokes a sense of unease within a viewer, because it depicts light in a way that isn't produced naturally in the real world, which is unfamiliar to the viewer's eyes and triggers a subconscious sense of discomfort (Film Riot). Similarly, when lighting flickers on-screen, viewers experience a sense of angst, and this is for a couple of reasons. One, because flickers are reminiscent of lightning storms or "dark and stormy nights," which is typically associated with horror itself, and arguably relates to a primal fear of storms; a fear that's embedded in human evolution. Another reason flickers are effective is because it adds to the visual chaos on-screen, which can be used to overwhelm the viewer in moments of tension and heighten the sensation of fear (Film Riot).

All of this work done to develop the *mise-en-scène* of a horror film would mean nothing however without the camera. Cinematography takes the aesthetics of the *mise-en-scène* and turns it into a visual experience for the viewer, through the use of various camera techniques. Just like with the *mise-en-scène*, the cinematography of a horror film works subliminally to invoke fear in a viewer and push the visual tension of a story. Through a combination of creative camera angles, movement, and framing, the cinematography of a film is able to convey complex ideas that heighten visual tension and capture character subjectivity.

Similar to lighting, unconventional and unflattering camera angles can be used in horror to create a sense of unease and discomfort in the viewer. The most common perspectives for cinematography in horror films are the canted angle, the aerial view, and the POV (Point of View) shot. This is because each of these perspectives emulates a way of seeing the world that people don't typically experience, which is jarring as a viewer. Each perspective also carries with it subtle details that trigger subconscious responses or expectations within an audience. When an angle is canted, meaning the camera is tilted left or right in a way that makes the image look crooked, this is not only slightly disorienting for the viewer, but it also can suggest that something in the scene or the story is off balance, or that something on-screen holds weight. This is frequently used to highlight moments of tension in horror as it is visually unsettling to the viewer and it forces upon them a perspective that is awkward and straining to process. Aerial shots, where the camera is directly above a scene looking down, suggest vulnerability for a character, because the perspective implies that there is a smallness to the character and a largeness to the world; this camera angle is reminiscent of a bird watching over the ground for its prey, which suggests to an audience that the character on-screen is in a state of vulnerability and susceptible to a potential threat. Lastly, the POV shot, which emulates the perspective of a person in the film's diegesis, typically the protagonist or villain, is used to help an audience resonate with a specific character, by either forcing the viewer into the perspective of that character or into the perspective of one of the characters around them. By using this kind of perspective in moments of tension during a horror film, the audience can experience heightened emotions, fear in particular, because they are forced to identify with a character on-screen via seeing the world through their eyes (Film Riot).

In addition to camera angles, camera movement serves an important role in horror cinema. This is because camera movement can be used to suggest certain ideas to an audience, reflect character subjectivity, and manipulate what parts of the world are shown and when. The latter is incredibly relevant to horror films because movement can be used for tension building sequences and reveals, such as the reveal of a villain after a long pan. One of the most commonly used camera movements in horror films is the slow push-in/pull-out, which is when the camera slowly creeps forward (closing in on something), or backward (drifting away from something). This adds to the visual tension of a scene because the slow movement signals to the audience that something is about to happen in the story, and it can suggest that a character is slowly being approached by some sort of threat or danger—which is especially effective if the character appears unaware of their slowly impending doom (Light). Additionally, with a push-in, the camera creates a sense of claustrophobia as the screen closes in on something within the frame, and conversely the pull-out can create a sense of vulnerability as the screen widens, exposing a subject to more and more open space. Both of these sensations, claustrophobia and vulnerability, can be disconcerting for the viewer to experience which further instills a sense of fear within them.

The camera doesn't have to be in motion however to create visual claustrophobia and vulnerability. Even still shots with specific framing can evoke these feelings, which is why framing is also important to the visual language of horror cinema. As mentioned, tight framing can make the scene feel dense and create a sense of claustrophobia, whereas wide framing evokes a sense of vulnerability in an audience. The reason that wide framing, or framing with lots of open space, creates an uneasy feeling of vulnerability is because it leaves a character exposed to danger with little to nothing to protect themselves with. This can be literal, as in a

character is running from a villain in an open meadow with nowhere to hide, or it can be more metaphorical, where the negative space around a character doesn't actually equate to vulnerability, rather it is representative of an overall vulnerability in the story or at that moment; it can also be reflective of an emotional vulnerability.

In summary, film is a visual medium. To successfully invoke fear within a viewer, a horror film must manipulate a viewer's sense of sight by utilizing a multitude of production techniques that will impact the visual language of a film and build tension on-screen. Filmmakers build visual tension through a combination of creative mise-en-scène development and cinematography. The mise-en-scène portrays the world of the film through setting, staging, and lighting, and communicates to the audience what kind of world the story takes place in. The cinematography captures this mise-en-scène through creative camera perspectives, movements, and framing. All of these elements work together to create visual tension on-screen, and subconsciously heighten the sense of fear within an audience while watching the film.

V. SOUND

Sound is as important as sight when it comes to horror films, if not more so. The sound design of a film has the capacity to take uncomfortable visuals and transform them into a cinematic experience that is truly chilling and terrifying. Through a combination of foley sound effects (or lack thereof) and music, a filmmaker is able to communicate more information to their audience than with visuals alone, allowing them to inform viewers about the on-screen world and potential threats that await our characters inside of it. Just like with cinematography, a film's sound design is able to exploit human biology and psychology to create a heightened sense of fear within a viewer, while also reflecting character subjectivity.

Leslie Bloome, cofounder of Alchemy Post Sound, an award winning foley stage for high profile films, sheds light on just how impactful foley sounds can be on an audience. “When it comes to horror films, you don’t want to give away the ghost. You don’t want to give away the monster or the moment,” says Bloome (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh). This is the exact idea behind the unseen threat discussed earlier; the same principles apply to sound design. A horror film’s foley is meant to enhance the feelings of fear by focusing on the sounds of “the unseen character,” (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh). By inserting ambiguous sounds into a film, the viewer knows something is happening, but doesn’t know exactly what it is, which can be unsettling to experience. This strategy helps build suspense and “primes the audience for a truly terrifying reveal,” (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh). Horror films usually preserve the ambiguity of their foley sounds by frequently making the source of those sounds unclear. The sounds that the audience hears in horror films should be suggestive but also “disorienting.” The foley shouldn’t always be “coming from something you can point to in the outside world,” (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh).

Bloome breaks down specific types of sounds that he uses to help create auditory tension in a film, while conveying character subjectivity as an additional tool for amplifying the horror in a sequence. One sound that Bloome likes to use “to accentuate tense moments in horror scenes” is the noise of wind chimes. In talking about the creative technique, he said that “even if there aren’t any chimes in the shot” the sound effect “could be that moment that, you know, somebody hears a ringing in their ears,” (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh). In that example, Bloome is showing how nondiegetic sound can reflect a character’s subjectivity while simultaneously highlighting tension in a scene. The idea behind subjective sound is to help “place you inside the protagonist’s head, so you identify with their fear,” which contributes to the viewer's own heightened sense of horror. Bloome also makes use of sounds that are quiet as a way to convey subjectivity and

strengthen tension in a scene. By leaving certain sounds barely audible, “you really have to strain to hear them, just as the protagonist is doing,” (Geaghan-Breiner and Nigh).

Bloome also uses something called “the accent sound,” which is “a sharp, pronounced sound that stands out against the subtler, more ambient ones” in a film, “indicating to the audience that something is off.” This indication implies that a threat could be appearing soon, but the audience doesn’t know what that threat is, or when it will strike—once again, returning to this idea of the unseen threat that is created through behind the scene production techniques. It is important to note that accent sounds are unrealistic and do not often naturally occur in the real world, but this is why it works so well. Sound design in horror is not about realism, but rather about “creating a heightened reality,” which adds to the overall sense of fear within a viewer. This is because when sound design pushes the limits of realism, it creates a “heightened reality where your ears and mind are playing tricks on you,” which is disorienting to a viewer and helps establish fear in an audience.

Sound, however, isn’t always about foley when it comes to film. Music is just as important when creating an effective scary sound design. One element of music that can impact the level of fear a viewer experiences while watching a horror film, is the pitch of the music. Horror film composer and music theory professor at Juilliard, Michelle DiBucci “credits the pitch of the music with having A FRIGHTENING effect” using *Psycho* as an example to illustrate her point. In talking about the film’s score, she says that “it’s the high that scares us – it’s in the stratosphere register of the violins,” (CBS News). DiBucci also mentions that notes that clash, are low, or drone are effective in horror music because they create a sense of suspense. Neuroscientist Anthony Lacagnina, elaborates on why this is the case by saying that “we don’t like when frequencies clash, like a scream” and that when a viewer hears these kinds of sounds,

“the brain is responding to that by activating those brain areas that are going to be involved in protecting you.” He uses our primal instincts to further illustrate this point by saying “We want to attend to things, for example, like a baby crying, a sound rustling behind you, that would be a very important thing to attend to if it was a predator,” (CBS News). Lacagnina also explains how abrupt or “jolting chords” cause emotional responses because they are startling, which can trigger physical reactions in audience members.

DiBucci explains how there are also musical notes that viewers are conditioned to recognize in horror films, which indicates to them that something troubling lies ahead. The particular set of notes she mentions is the collection known as “Dies Irae” which is from “The Mass for the Dead,” also known as “The Funeral Mass.” The term “Dies Irae” translates to “Day of wrath” which is a reference to the biblical “judgment day.” This set of notes already contain eerie undertones in musical terms because “it’s a cascading musical idea; it falls down,” DiBucci says. These notes have a heavy association with death and eventually gained popularity amongst composers to be used outside of the context of mass, appearing in movies such as *The Shining* (1980), *Friday the 13th* (1980), and *Sweeney Todd* (2007). DiBucci elaborates on how this impacts the viewer by saying that “over a lifetime of movie watching, the brain is gonna know when those collections of notes come in, it does not mean something happy is about to happen!” (CBS News).

Michael Abels, another horror film composer, who has worked on every project so far by acclaimed horror film director Jordan Peele—*Get Out* (2017), *Us* (2019), and *Nope* (2022)—provides more insight on the power that music can have in scaring an audience. To no surprise, Abels references the concept of the unseen threat in the context of music, by using the example of choral singing in a language that is different from the one being spoken on-screen.

Abels says, “It’s about the unknown. When you can’t understand what [the music is] saying, then that pulls into your own fears of making things even worse than they might really be.” Abels uses this very technique at the beginning of *Get Out* as a way of creating a chilling soundtrack to accompany the opening credits (CBS News).

Abels also discusses something called, “the tritone,” historically known as the “diabolus musica” or the “devil in music,” which is “two notes, six piano keys apart” that clash and create a feeling of discomfort when listened to. This is another tool used by horror film composers to accent moments of tension. Abels uses visual metaphors and abstract imagery to explain why the tritone is effective, saying that “these are all the colors of darkness and fear and anger and terror, and these colors can be mixed with the colors of joy and happiness and contentment and sincerity. And by mixing them, you can create the exact balance of these two things” which Abels claims is not just important for horror, but for any music that is “just a little bit tense” (CBS News).

In summary, sound design is able to take scary imagery in cinema to the next level by activating another sense that can be manipulated in a way to trigger physical effects and evoke feelings of fear in a viewer. Through a combination of strategic foley and creative music scoring, sound design can build auditory tension, which compliments the visual tension on-screen, and creates a heightened sense of reality that adds to the sensation of fear being experienced by the audience.

VI. *PHOBIA* (2023)

My film, *Phobia* (2023), is a live-action horror short that explores the concept of fear both through its content and its production. The film follows the story of a woman named

Amber, who is plagued by a severe phobia that she keeps secret. On her 22nd birthday, she is confronted by a series of delusions related to a traumatic past experience that forces her to come face to face with the thing that haunts her most: fire. Through this narrative, the film is able to explore the nuanced relationship between fear and people, while utilizing the production strategies discussed earlier, as a way to build tension and hopefully scare the viewer.

I wrote this film in the fall of 2022, while I researched horror storytelling. Because I was depicting a protagonist with a phobia of fire, I researched both pyrophobia and pyromania to try to gain a better understanding of how fire disorders physically manifest in people. This was the basis for the two main characters in the film, Amber and Eli. Amber is a literal depiction of pyrophobia because she, as a character, has that condition. Because of this, the film alludes to Amber having severe anxiety, paranoia, OCD, PTSD, and even a little bit of claustrophobia. Eli, on the other hand, became a representation (and a more figurative depiction) of pyromania, in order to contrast Amber's character. His character, and alter ego as the Man in the Mask, is representative of chaos, disorder, and impulsiveness. I was able to use this information to not only develop more dynamic characters, but also to reflect these traits and associations through cinematic metaphor, whether that be in *mise-en-scène*, cinematography, or sound design.

The film was cast by the beginning of 2023, and production began that February. The cast consisted of two leads and two supporting roles. We worked with a small crew over the course of around six days to shoot the entirety of the film, using a variety of locations and times of day. We started with the apartment scenes, which took about three days to shoot, spread out over two weeks. We then spent a day each, working on the office scene, the television host sequences, and the flashback. Most scenes were shot on a Sony FS700, with the exception of the television host sequences, and the flashback sequence, which were all shot on a Canon DSLR camera.

I cut and colored the film in Davinci Resolve, and I used a combination of Resolve and Adobe After Effects for any visual effects that I needed for the film. The sound design and music come from a combination of sounds recorded during production, royalty free sounds, and royalty free music, with the exception of the end credits song, which is copyrighted, but being used in this educational context under “Fair Use.”

Throughout the writing, production, and post-production process, my goal was to use as much of the horror filmmaking strategies from my research as possible, to create a subconscious level of fear within the viewer—and if not fear, then at the very least, discomfort. When structuring the story, I attempted to keep the threat to Amber vague for as long as possible, to build suspense up for a climactic reveal in the finale. This goes back to that idea of the unseen threat, allowing more room for fear and tension building within the film. This idea also translates over to the sight aspect of the film: the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography. For *mise-en-scène*, by having Amber’s delusions constantly change form, the audience is left with an obscure idea of what is actually threatening her. Even when the viewer is given the satisfaction of seeing the threat in the form of a person, the threat is still obscured by a mask and shadows. In terms of cinematography, there were frequent uses of push-ins and pull-outs to suggest that something is near or about to occur, without any information as to what that might be. The camera is also frequently framed tight on Amber, especially in moments of tension, to create this sensation of claustrophobia and discomfort, leaving the viewer with an ambiguous uneasy feeling. Lastly, the sound design reflects this idea of an unknown threat through high tension, distressing noises and music. One example of this is the sound of the smoke alarm, which goes off several times in the film. The sound is grating, loud, and is already associated with a threat to safety, which leaves the viewer feeling vulnerable and exposed to danger when they hear it. With the music, clashing

notes swell, which builds auditory tension, and is released by loud, startling percussive noises. The swelling notes can leave the viewer feeling unsettled because they grow louder and more dissonant which subconsciously signals to the viewer that something is about to happen. The percussive noises are jarring and trigger physical responses that accelerate the heart rate and create a heightened sense of fear.

Overall, I wanted this film to tell a story about fear, and how it can play such a major role in our everyday lives, while also having the film be a literal source of fear for those who experience it. In this sense, it is both a product of fear and an enabler of fear, which I think intertwines in a really interesting and multifaceted way. Amber's journey with her own fears is reflective of the audience's journey with horror cinema. Amber experiences these hills and valleys with her own emotions on-screen as she is confronted by her fear, the same way the audience experiences these hills and valleys when confronted with a scare. Amber lets fear control her world, and the more she gives into it, the smaller that world becomes; her apartment literally begins closing in on her as the story nears the finale. It isn't until she faces her fear that her world expands and her perspective changes, leaving her with an intense sense of relief, similar to the relief the audience experiences in the aftermath of facing a threat on-screen. Amber is never in any physical danger in the story, as we learn by the end, because all the perceived threats were delusions, but she still experiences an intense fear, or horror. This is representative of the viewer, who watches the film from the comfort of being behind a screen, like Amber who watches her threats from behind a glass window. In both cases, neither Amber or the viewer is ever in any actual danger, but they still both experience intense physical reactions, such as fear or horror, from what they are seeing and hearing.

The main thing I want viewers to take away from this is that the more we give into fear, the darker and smaller our world becomes until it is no longer habitable. Once we confront our fears, the world expands and we are able to see it in a new light. I chose horror to convey this message, because it seemed that the best way to make a commentary on fear, with cinema, was to do it through the lens of a genre that centers around the concept of fear itself.

VII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, horror filmmakers exploit the biology and psychology of their viewers through strategic story structure and production techniques, which are used as methods for subconsciously creating a sense of fear within the viewer, with the goal of also leaving them entertained. Horror cinema is a genre of film that seems counterintuitive for effectively entertaining audiences, but its perpetual success has proven that otherwise. This is because people aren't enjoy the feeling of fear itself, but rather they get pleasure from the release of tension when a threat is resolved on-screen. This is why these types of films become watched habitually, because of this phenomenon—excitation transfer. Through the use of story structure formulas and production techniques, filmmakers are able to communicate with the audience in subliminal ways, which heighten the visual and auditory tension in the film, resulting in a greater sense of fear within the viewers.

My short film, *Phobia* (2023), reflects the ways that story structure, cinematography, and sound design can be used to build tension in a horror film, with the goal of subconsciously invoking a sense of fear within the viewers. My film utilized specific camera and sound techniques associated with horror films as a way to strengthen the tension in the story and create a heightened sense of fear within the viewer. *Phobia* is not only an exploration of fear through

the development of its production, but also through the content of its story. The narrative itself is a commentary on the relationship between humans and fear. Additionally, Amber's experience with her own fears is a reflection of the audience's experience with horror cinema.

The production strategies mentioned in this essay are effective in horror cinema for two primary reasons. One reason being that they exploit our own human nature and use it against us. Many of these techniques are successful because they directly impact our biology and psychology in a way that is entirely autonomic; we have no control over their physical effect on us as viewers. The second reason these strategies are effective, is because their initial success has caused them to be reused time and time again throughout horror film history. So as contemporary horror film viewers, with over a century of film history behind us, we have seen these techniques repeatedly, throughout a multitude of different horror films, and it's because of this that we have also been conditioned to expect certain hills and valleys, upon experiencing specific manipulations of sight and sound within a film. The combination of the psychological and biological effects, with conditioned expectations, allows contemporary horror filmmakers to manipulate their audiences' sense of fear more than ever before, by subverting or submitting to these expectations in a way that uses our own nature against us.

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