



Illustration by Alexandra Taylor

Jubilation in the Jump Scare

An examination of why we love horror and why it feels so good to be so scared.

Written by Emily Bishop

She glances at the clock, noticing for the first time just how late it has gotten. She stands and straightens out the pillows on the couch, putting the house in order before retiring for the night. Walking down the foreboding hallway, she starts to feel uneasy, as if she is not alone. She knows it's ridiculous, no one else is home; it's just her nerves getting the better of her. But then the unmistakable sound of heavy breathing is heard just behind her. She turns, slowly, the anticipation building. At the end of the dark hallway is a sinister and nightmarish creature.

You jump at the reveal, some of the popcorn in your bucket spilling onto the floor. Your heart rate is now elevated from the frightening scene you just watched play out on the silver screen. The movie continues, with more moments of shock and awe sprinkled throughout. When you leave the theatre, you can't help but have a goofy grin plastered across your face. For how terrifying the movie was, you had fun watching it.

"I think it's a lot of stuff we can all relate to," freelance video editor and director Simon Pearce said. "We've all seen something at the end of our bed at night and you think 'Oh, is someone stood there? Oh, no, it's just a coat on a door.' We've all gotten ourselves a bit freaked out."

Simon Pearce has directed multiple horror films, both short and feature-length. Pearce's feature "[Judas Ghost](#)," released in 2015, follows a secret organization dispatched to investigate a sinister and haunted building. His short film "[I Am the Doorway](#)," was adapted from the Stephen King short story of the same name released in 2018. Both the story and film follow a man who believes he has become the doorway to an alien invasion with gruesome consequences.

"Anything that kind of gets a rise or reaction from an audience, I think horror is definitely one of the more visceral genres in terms of doing that," Pearce said. "To be sat at a festival and hear an audience around you react to something or tense up is so satisfying — to know, 'Oh, I did that,'" Pearce said. "So, if you can make people scared or make people jump, that's really cool."

Pearce has been interested in film and television since he was a kid. He used to make films with his friends all in one take on the family video camera, making up stories on the spot. There was something about the process that clicked for him. By the time he was 15, he knew that directing was what he wanted to do.

"It became a regular thing that I would do with my friends. And then eventually, I think my mom had a laptop that happened to come with a free copy of iMovie. So, then I was able to edit stuff," Pearce said.

While Pearce's love of film has been long-lived, he admits that scary movies aren't something he was a massive fan of growing up.

"I was a bit of a scaredy cat, in my teens, so I wouldn't really watch them," Pearce said.

It wasn't until he was attached to direct "[Judas Ghost](#)" that he started to watch horror movies and did a deep dive into the genre.

"I totally understood why people liked them and the adrenaline rush you get from it. It became so much more appealing, and now I watch them quite a lot," Pearce said.

Abigail Marsh, a psychology and neuroscience professor at Georgetown University, explains in [Bytesize Science's "The Chemistry of Fear"](#) that fear comes from the anticipation or expectation of harm. This expectation of harm triggers reactions in your brain that cause a physical response. When experiencing fear, our bodies shift into survival mode, and we react by freezing, fleeing or fighting.

Marsh said when this happens, the sympathetic nervous system — the part of your body that controls essential living functions like breathing, heart rate and sexual arousal — releases a flood of chemicals.

Adrenaline gets you physically ready to respond to a threat. It increases the blood flow to your muscles, increases your heart rate and dilates your pupils. Norepinephrine increases arousal and alertness. It makes you pay more attention to your surroundings, taking in any potential attack so you can react and escape harm. And dopamine, well, dopamine makes you feel good; it signals your brain's reward system, which influences us to do things that feel good.

From a physiological perspective, fear is something we are hardwired to enjoy. That is the jubilation in the jump scare — a short-lasting hit of all the chemicals that make us feel good. In theory, the jump scare should be the epitome of horror. But from a psychological perspective, it is less than effective and rarely leaves a long-lasting impact on the viewer.

"There's a lot of reliance in horror today on jump scares, and that kind of stuff will just shock," Pearce said. "But a lot of the scale of really good horror is just keeping you on the edge of your seat. It's having these long, sustained periods of tension, and then you have the jump, and the reason you jump so much is because you've been on edge for like 10 minutes."

And here begins the minutiae of the horror film versus the thriller.

"The horror film or slasher movie clearly falls into the category of violence or gore, while many psychological thrillers only suggest violence or show it to a minimal degree," write professors of media studies Mary Beth Oliver and Meghan Sanders in their essay "[The Appeal of Horror and Suspense](#)."

They distinguish horror and thriller based primarily on gore. Oliver's research on the topic shows that psychological thrillers are generally rated as being more frightening, disturbing, scary, anxiety provoking, suspenseful and overall, more enjoyable than the traditional slasher film.

Their research found that thrillers were considered more interesting, enjoyable, absorbing and fun, while horror films were rated as predictable, silly and low quality. But those are not necessarily bad characteristics. Comedy and horror have often fused to imitate those very aspects of horror. The "[Scary Movie](#)" and "[Chucky](#)" franchises both parody and poke holes at tropes and expectations of the genre in a way that evokes fear and laughter in equal measure.

Horror and thriller are not mutually exclusive. There is often an overlap between the two. "[Hereditary](#)," "[Psycho](#)" and "[Us](#)" are certainly more psychologically driven than films like "[A Nightmare on Elm Street](#)" and "[Halloween](#)." But all these films have moments of gore and violence as well as character-driven plots. The distinction between the thriller genre and horror is not heavily researched.

The two are similar enough that they are almost indistinguishable. They are like siblings — different, but when you look closer, you notice that they have the same nose, the same jawline, the same laugh. At the end of the day, both genres instill dread and unease into the viewer, and that is what truly matters. There are multiple avenues to achieve striking fear into the heart of an audience.

Pearce said there is a simplicity in horror that makes it effective. To him, one of the best ways to achieve this is by not showing the audience everything, allowing the suspense to be built up in their own imagination.

"When you see the monster in the last third of a movie, it ruins it," Pearce said. "Movies where you don't see a lot or stuff is just hinted at, usually, I think are better."

Horror is most effective when it builds tension and atmosphere. This opinion is shared by Casey Crocker, whose first venture into short filmmaking, "[Meet the Devil](#)," won multiple awards at the 2021 Bleedingham Horror Film Festival. The film follows a young man haunted by a strange occurrence after he flees the scene of a car accident on a haunted highway.

Crocker said the film was envisioned as a Western-style horror. When searching for locations to film, environments that were quiet, dark and invoked dread were ideal. The film ran into some real-life scary moments when filming late at night in the middle of a road.

"It was super dangerous, we probably shouldn't have done that," Crocker said. "It worked out. But some cops came by, and they told us that we had to get the hell out of there."

The initial idea for "[Meet the Devil](#)" was to figure out how to scare people without using jump scares. Crocker wanted to create a film that used other elements to scare people.

"I like movies that scare you in a different way. Like, more of an atmosphere kind of thing where maybe it's not scary when you're watching it. And then after it's over, you're just sitting in the dark after the credits are over and you're like, 'Oh shit,'" Crocker said. "It settles in with your mind after it's over and it kind of freaks you out that way."

But there is a necessary factor when considering the enjoyment of fear: you need to be scared in a safe environment. You would not really want to answer the phone to find out someone is stalking you and threatening to kill you. That would be terrifying, and not in a good way. But when it happens to [Drew Barrymore](#) in "[Scream](#)," it is iconic and thrilling.

Crocker said horror is appealing because it puts the viewer in the present moment. Your mind shuts off and you are just left with your basic senses.

"I think that's what everyone's looking for, and that's what horror movies kind of do," Crocker said.

There is also a relatability in horror that makes it appealing. Pearce said there is almost a cathartic satisfaction to watching horror.

"This is happening to other people, and you get scared, but ultimately you know you're safe," Pearce said.

The tension that comes from fear is only enjoyable because of the release that follows it. You can enjoy watching someone in a movie stare down a long, dark hallway and come face to face with a haunting shadow. You feel your heart race and a chill shoot through your neck, but it's all in good fun because you are watching it happen to someone else. If you were not protected by that fourth wall, things would be different.

Imagine if you were standing at the end of a hallway in your home. Hearing the floorboards creak, the terrifying sound of heavy breathing coming from the dark. You realize that someone — or something — really is at the end of your hallway. A ghoulish figure stares back and you are frozen in place with fear.

Fear can be intoxicating, but only when deep down we know we are not in any real danger. Horror movies let us live vicariously through the situation where something really is watching us from the dark. It lets us live out the "what if" fantasy of being chased by possessed dolls, serial killers or ghosts. We feel exhilaration from the adrenaline rush we get from being scared because we do not need that adrenaline to run away or fight.

Sitting in a red crushed velvet seat, eyes glued to a 30-foot screen, we aren't in any real danger. But that doesn't stop our bodies from reacting like we are. In a darkened room with countless strangers, we sit together on the edge of our seats. We can just enjoy the ecstasy of fear with our popcorn, soda and a scary movie.