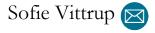# Why Do We Enjoy Scary Movies?

Sofie Vittrup ✉

Introduction

Reading a book, scrolling through social media, and watching Netflix – as humans in the modern world, we spend a lot of time on entertainment and frivolous activities simply for the purpose of enjoyment. In fact, it is a widely accepted assumption in psychology that pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain is an integral part of human nature, meaning that we have an innate desire to feel good and constantly strive to improve our affective state (Andrade and Cohen 2007, 284). It might be surprising, then, to learn that the horror genre in mainstream media has seen a surge in popularity throughout the last few years, considering that the main purpose of horror is to induce fear and disgust in its audience (Clasen 2019, 244). According to book and movie ticket sales, the horror genre has entered something of a golden age with 2017 being the most successful year for horror cinema ever (Owen 2018). When we watch horror movies, we often experience sweaty palms, chills, rapid heartbeats, and even nausea – physiological signs of fear, a negative emotion that we are designed to avoid (Fritscher 2020). So why would we purposely seek out entertainment that induces these thoroughly unpleasant feelings in us? This question is referred to as the paradox of horror.

In order to make sense of this conundrum, the first step is to figure out who actually watches horror. As mentioned, the genre has gained major mainstream popularity, and it is therefore improbable that the consumers of horror are 'abnormal or perverse in any way' (Carroll, 1990). In fact, studies show that 47% of Danish respondents like horror regardless of the type of media and 32% like horror in some but not all contexts (Clasen 2017, 2). Similarly, 54% of North American respondents in another survey also claimed to enjoy horror media (Clasen et al. 2020, 11). In terms of gender, it is evident that horror is appealing to both, with men being only slightly more likely than women to enjoy horror media (Clasen et al. 2020, 19-20). Horror, then, is well-liked by most people – and if we are not simply dealing with a group of emotionally disturbed people who take pleasure in disgusting, frightening media, but rather a very wide audience, it might then be the case that the paradox of horror is not that paradoxical after all. Instead, I argue that horror media serves an adaptive function which can be explained through the evolutionary social sciences. Human

beings are evolutionarily predisposed to find pleasure in simulations that can help prepare them for the real world, and horror movies allow people to experience strong negative emotions within a safe context. In turn, these simulations can help predict and prepare for threats in real life. This thesis will be explored through an analysis of *The Conjuring* (Wan 2013).

Firstly, I will present the theoretical framework that underlies this paper. Through an introduction of the fear system and biological survival strategies, I will explain the functions of horror from an evolutionary perspective. Moreover, I will touch upon the relationship between personality and horror, introducing the two consumer stances 'adrenaline junkies' and 'white knucklers' in order to explain the different reasons people have for watching horror movies. In continuation of this, I will examine the different fear-management strategies utilized by the two personality types. In the next section, I will apply the presented theoretical framework to and provide a media analysis of *The Conjuring* (Wan 2013) in order to explain how an evolutionary perspective on horror movies can help us understand the appeal and popularity of the genre. Finally, I will provide a discussion of my theoretical framework and any alternatives I could have used.

Theory

Human beings are emotional creatures. We are driven by our emotions, which act as powerful motivators, shaping our thoughts and behaviours (Trettenero 2017). From an evolutionary perspective, emotions have evolved to serve adaptive functions in certain contexts, with each emotion being connected to specific physiological, cognitive, and motivational mechanisms that enable people to respond accurately and effectively to a particular situation (Keltner et al. 2006, 117). Emotions are important adaptations that have ensured the survival and reproduction of the human race from the dawn of time, as they provide an innate motivation for avoiding threats, maintaining relationships, protecting family, and other beneficial behaviours (Keltner et al. 2006, 117). In the modern world, our environment has been adapted to accommodate us – streetlights have been put up to combat the fear of the unknown, we are living in large, industrialized cities with few to no wild predacious animals, and healthy food is available to us in grocery stores. However, although survival may not be the primary focus of our daily lives, emotions still serve functions that are socially and culturally valuable. For example, embarrassment motivates conformity to social norms and gratitude motivates reciprocation of favours (Keltner et al. 2006, 123). Similarly, the emotion of fear has evolved to serve an important function. Fear acts as both an emotion as well as a survival mechanism, which has evolved to keep us from potentially dangerous situations; to avoid predators and poisonous animals and, in the modern world, to steer

clear of a dark alley or to be wary of strangers (Clasen 2017, 23-24). Fear is a primitive emotion characterized by sweaty palms, chills, and an increase in heart rate and adrenaline level. The physiological reactions of fear are part of our 'fight or flight' response, which allows a person to be alert in a fearful situation where it is necessary to either run away or fight a predator (Fritscher 2020). Fear is considered a negative emotion – we are both mentally and physiologically uncomfortable when we experience fear, but if it was not for this primitive emotion, human beings would not be here today, as it is one of the most important adaptive functions for our survival (Clasen 2017, 25).

Although ancestral dangers and threats have been minimised and modern society is a much safer place for humans to reside in, fear is still a fundamental human emotion. As Clasen argues, 'humans are fearful creatures' (2017, 23). Not only do we fear being assaulted or killed, a loved one dying, natural disasters, or suffering from illness – we also fear things that are imaginary and most likely will never happen to us, like monsters hiding under the bed or being attacked by evil spirits and other supernatural beings. These fears, plausible or not, are a product of our history as human beings. Our ancestors lived dangerous lives threatened by predators, treacherous landscapes, untreatable diseases, and violent cultures, which has led to us being on a constant lookout for danger (Clasen 2017, 23-25). Thus, as a product of evolution, humans have become 'hypersensitive to cues of danger', which means that we are evolutionarily predisposed to pay attention to threats in the environment (Clasen 2017, 26). This sensitivity to danger has resulted in an evolutionarily evolved 'fear module', which is a defence system that is automatically and unconsciously activated by stimuli that indicate danger, for example darkness, wide open spaces, or heights. After detecting danger, the fear module then activates the relevant survival strategy (Öhman and Mineka 2001, 484-485).

Humans are biologically wired with survival strategies that allow us to respond efficiently to both non-threatening and life endangering circumstances (Mobbs et. al. 2015, 2). As proposed by Mobbs et al. (2015, 6), five strategies have been developed in order to secure survival and respond to real or potential threats: 'prediction, prevention, threat orienting, threat assessment, and rapid reaction to imminent danger at varying defensive distances'. These strategies constitute what Mobbs et al. (2015, 2) have defined as the Survival Optimization System (SOS), which accounts for the ways in which 'humans predict, respond to, control and learn about danger'. Each survival strategy is activated at specific stages of the Threat Imminence Continuum. The Threat Imminence Continuum is a model which defines and explains threat-stages and how they change depending on whether a threat is absent, detected, or attacking. The model consists of the following stages: safety, pre-encounter threat, post-encounter threat, circa-strike attack, escape/die (Mobbs et al.

2015, 7). In order to explain the functions of horror, I will focus on the threat prediction strategy which takes place at the safety and pre-encounter threat stages. Threat prediction involves the ways in which an organism consciously predicts and simulates a potential threat. The ability to anticipate threats while still being in a safe context allows one to prepare for potentially dangerous situations (Mobbs et al. 2015, 7). Threat prediction is most sophisticated and complex in humans, as we have a 'highly developed ability to envisage, simulate and predict future scenarios [which] allows us to modify our current behavior to prepare, escape, or even avoid possible future dangers' (Mobbs et al. 2015, 7). This ability is developed through imagination and memories. By reflecting on past events, humans are able to imagine what may happen in the future, allowing them to prepare for or completely avoid dangerous situations. In practice, prediction strategies activate precautionary behaviours such as 'increasing alertness, environmental surveillance and … pre-encounter avoidance' (Mobbs et al. 2015, 7). Mobbs et al. (2015, 8) suggest two different prediction strategies: the simulation and imagination strategy and predictive coding. The simulation and imagination strategy is concerned with the ability to simulate the future and anticipate threats while in a safe context, as described. Predictive coding involves the way in which the brain interprets the sensory input in a given situation. By matching previous information and experiences with what is observed, we are able to make quick and accurate decisions about and responses to threat scenarios. These two strategies allow humans to minimize the risk of finding themselves in dangerous situations and increase the chance of survival in a threat scenario (Mobbs et al. 2015, 8).

Being able to imagine scenarios, predict threats, and plan one's actions accordingly is an ability that is critical to our survival. The effectiveness and development of the survival strategies are influenced by two different learning systems. Classic Pavlovian conditioning, referred to by Mobbs et al. (2015, 14) as encounter learning, is highly effective and adaptive, as experiences from previous encounters can prepare you for future situations. This type of learning is also referred to as associative learning because it teaches an animal to 'associate a particular context, event or particular actions with threat', allowing for more precise and effective responses to similar events in the future (Mobbs et al. 2015, 14). However, seeking out experiences that can teach us about threats and how to react to them can be dangerous. Instead, vicarious learning can be a more optimal learning method. Vicarious learning involves learning about threats through the witnessing of other people's experiences (Mobbs et al. 2015, 16). As stated by Mobbs et. al., 'we combine the information learned through the observation of others with the existing knowledge and data obtained through our own personal experiences' which improves our prediction strategy skills and ultimately allows us to more accurately simulate and predict future scenarios (2015, 16). As with threat prediction, vicarious learning is more sophisticated in humans than in animals, as we are able

to obtain information through a variety of channels. Not only do we observe the behaviour and experiences of other people in real life, but we are also able to learn through various types of media, including literature, television, gameplay, and the internet (Mobbs et al. 2015, 16). According to research conducted by Reeves and Nass (2002), our interactions with these types of media are identical to our social interactions in real life, meaning that 'people respond to computers and other forms of media in the same ways that they respond to real people' (Chiasson and Gutwin 2005, 829). In their experiments with human-media interactions, they found that computers to a large degree 'were social actors that people reacted to with the same polite treatment that they would give to another human' (Reeves and Nass 2002, 26). The way that we socially and physiologically react the same to media as we do to real experiences has been referred to as The Media Equation. This hypothesis is backed up by Grodal (2009, 101-102), who argues that the lower levels of our brains do not distinguish between what is real and what is not. Instead, 'the default mode of processing information is to believe it as soon as one has comprehended it', and the recognition that something is not real takes more mental work and happens at higher levels of the brain (Grodal 2009, 101). Therefore, when we engage with fiction – even though we are consciously aware that it is fiction – our bodies react automatically, engaging physiological and cognitive processes that are outside of our cognitive control and thereby producing genuine emotions (Clasen 2017, 27).

In the realm of horror, this automatic processing of input means that when we watch horror movies, our bodies react with the same physiological signs of fear that they would in a dangerous situation in real life. By showing images of aversive, frightening stimuli, horror movies target and engage the fear system and activates evolved defence mechanisms (Clasen 2017, 29). In doing so, horror movies allow us to experience strong negative emotions and physiological arousal within a safe context. This exposure can help us develop coping skills 'both by giving us personal experience with negative emotion, and with our reactions to negative emotions, as well as by letting us witness the coping behavior of fictional characters' (Clasen 2017, 59). Moreover, watching horror movies can help improve our threat prediction skills. It has been established that it is beneficial for humans to be able to predict future scenarios, and horror media is an effective way to simulate dangerous situations and prepare us for threats in the real world without the risk of real-life consequences. Horror movies are appealing to us because we are evolutionarily predisposed to find pleasure in simulations that can help prepare us for the real world – we 'are "'designed" (by natural selection) to find simulation pleasurable because it is biologically adaptive' (Clasen 2021, 16). Horror provides us with vicarious learning experiences that help shape and improve our behaviour in threat situations. Through horror movies, we are able to live vicariously through characters that experience worst-case scenarios in a variety of dangerous worlds and we learn what to do and not

to do through the decisions of these characters. A good horror movie will absorb the viewer completely in the story, allowing one to identify with and learn through the characters' responses to different types of threats and situations. Horror movies often contain supernatural threats but psychological realism, which allows viewers to generalize threats and situations to real life. Although characters or threats may be fictional, the lessons learned through their actions can be valuable. We will probably never have to fight a zombie or a demon in real life, but these act as dramatic versions of real-world threats. By watching horror movies, we are 'imaginatively formulating responses' to dangerous situations, and these rehearsals 'guide our own agency in chaotic and uncontrollable situations' that we may encounter in our lives (Asma 2014, 954). Thus, one of the primary functions of horror is the ability to explore an array of dangerous situations and strong, negative emotions without risk, which in turn can prepare us for and help us deal with strong emotions and threats in the real world.

In addition to this, horror movie consumption can function as a tool to improve an individual's fear-management strategies. Research shows that different people are attracted to horror for different reasons, suggesting that there may be a correlation between the appeals of horror and personality. In the study 'Why Do We Keep Going Back? A Q Method Analysis of our Attraction to Horror Movies', three types of people have been identified: adrenaline junkies, white knucklers, and detectives (Robinson et al. 2014, 41). In this paper, my focus will be on the first two types. The white knucklers and the adrenaline junkies differ in the way in which they approach horror movies; the former are more scared and wish to minimize emotional arousal while watching, while the latter are sensation-seeking and wish to maximize emotional arousal (Robinson et al. 2014, 41; Clasen et al. 2019, 62). The adrenaline junkies represent the stereotypical horror movie consumers and include people who score high on the sensation-seeking trait. They view horror movies because they find it exciting and enjoy the physiological arousal that comes with it. This type of person is likely to have a high optimal stimulation level, which means that they enjoy uncertainty, new unfamiliar situations, and suspense, both in real life and in horror movies (Høgh-Olesen and Dalsgaard 2014, 168; Robinson et al. 2014, 46). For people with a high optimal stimulation level, activities that are mentally and physiologically stimulating and arousing function as a reward in and of themselves (Høgh-Olesen and Dalsgaard 2014, 169). Adrenaline junkies will therefore often actively seek out exposure to scary stimuli and engage fear-management strategies to up-regulate and maximize their fear experience (Clasen et al. 2019, 62). One such strategy is immersion, which involves actively attempting to become absorbed within a fear experience, for example by turning out the lights and investing oneself in the story and characters while watching a horror movie. The effect of using this strategy while experiencing the strong negative emotions

and physiological stimulation related to horror movies is a feeling of being in control. As Clasen et al. (2019, 70) found in their study of fear regulation strategies in haunted houses, actively maximizing one's fear arousal 'makes the fear experience predictable' and can therefore '[turn] otherwise frightening scenarios into enjoyable thrills'.

The white knucklers also enjoy being scared by horror movies but they experience stronger negative psychological effects in the aftermath, including 'nightmares, physical stress, lingering fear, and increased heart rate, and heightened phobias' (Robinson et al. 2014, 48). Paradoxically, they report enjoying the suspense and rush of adrenaline while watching horror even though they feel physically and psychologically afraid at the same time (Robinson et al. 2014, 48). This has been explained as a coactivation of positive and negative emotions. The coactivation of oppositely valenced emotions have been used to explain when and how the consumption of aversive stimuli can be pleasurable (Andrade and Cohen 2007, 283). As shown in a study by Andrade and Cohen (2007, 284), the fact that positive and negative emotions occur at the same time while watching a horror movie disproves the earlier assumption 'that people can only experience positive affect in response to feelings of relief after the aversive stimulus has been removed'. This means that horror movies do not merely activate a feeling of catharsis when the movie is over; rather, the act of watching it in and of itself is rewarding as well. Thus, the consumption of negative emotions can be pleasurable. In order to manage their fear, white knucklers engage a variety of cognitive and behavioural coping strategies. Cognitive strategies include 'self-directed mental regulation, such as distracting oneself from the fear-inducing media or reminding oneself about the fictional nature of the presentation' and behavioural strategies include 'removing oneself physically from the frightening stimulus or covering one's eyes' (Clasen et al. 2019, 63). In doing so, white knucklers manage to suppress and minimize their fear levels, which can lead to a pleasant feeling of overcoming a challenge (Clasen et al. 2019, 70). The combination of consuming negative emotions while applying fear-management strategies allows white knucklers to experience and learn to handle fear while in a safe context.

Thus, while white knucklers and adrenaline junkies are attracted to horror movies for different reasons and employ different fear-management strategies, the overall outcome is the same, namely the feeling of mastery and being in control. According to Clasen et al. (2020, 27), '[there] is adaptive value in exposing oneself to negative stimuli in order to identify and push one's limits and achieve a sense of mastery'. Therefore, another function of horror movies is the development of different fear-management strategies which allows us to learn how to handle and deal with our own fear as well as achieving a sense of mastery.

Analysis of *The Conjuring*

Australian director, producer, and screenwriter James Wan has since the early 2000's made a name for himself within horror cinema (IMDb, n.d.). Starting out as a member of the 'Splat Pack' making violent, brutal horror films, Wan's career has since ascended as he became co-creator of the widely popular *Saw* series. From then on, Wan has gone on to produce and direct several cult horror films in which his focus has been on creating suspense, dread, and jump-scares in worlds filled to the brim with demonic possessions and haunted houses (Mee 2021, 2). The reception and commercial success of these films have led to the description of Wan as 'a blockbuster horror auteur' with several people claiming that he has '[redefined] the horror genre' (Mee 2021, 2; Variety). Particularly *Saw* (Wan 2004), *Insidious* (Wan 2010), and *The Conjuring* (Wan 2013) have cemented Wan's name within horror cinema, with each of these being the beginning of three separate pop culture defining franchises (Crow et al. 2021). *The Conjuring* saw the beginning of an immense franchise which today consists of seven interconnected movies, including sequels, prequels, and spin-offs that have amassed more than $2 billion at the box office in total (Landwehr 2021). The first *Conjuring* movie alone earned $320,2 million worldwide and firmly cemented itself as 'one of the most widely-praised supernatural horror flicks in recent history' (Landwehr 2021).

The Conjuring opens with a pre-credit scene in which the viewer is introduced to Ed and Lorraine Warren, two real-life paranormal investigators currently on call for a case where three roommates have been terrorised by a possessed doll, Annabelle. Fast-forward three years, the Warrens are contacted by the Perron family who have recently moved into an old house on Rhode Island. From the get-go, the family experiences strange activities in the house; one daughter, Christine, feels something pull at her feet at night, doors open and close by themselves, and their dog mysteriously dies in the middle of the night. As the haunting escalates, mother Carolyn is possessed by an evil spirit, Bathsheba, whose purpose is to possess mothers and make them kill their children. As the Warrens examine the house and attempt to help the Perrons, Lorraine discovers that Carolyn is not the first person to be possessed by Bathsheba, as she sees the spirits of her other victims. These spirits are the ones that have been making strange things happen in the house throughout the movie. At the climax, the Warrens perform an exorcism on Carolyn, ultimately banishing the evil supernatural forces from the premise and saving the Perron family (Wan 2013).

A good horror movie creates suspense and builds up the fear level throughout the movie, and it does so by attempting to 'sensitize the audience to danger early on' (Clasen 2017, 33). By introducing a vaguely defined threat from the get-go, the viewer is instantly on edge and searching for signs of danger. In *The Conjuring*, the pre-credit scene introduces the viewer to a world in which

evil supernatural forces are considered a real and dangerous threat. The possessed and malicious-looking doll, Annabelle, is shown moving around a flat by itself while leaving threatening messages to the residents who are becoming increasingly terrified. The Warrens are later seen hosting a seminar titled 'Seekers of the Supernatural' in which they are talking about the case and attempting to enlighten other people about paranormal activity. Because humans are evolutionarily sensitive to cues of danger, horror and fear-inducing stimuli grab and hold our attention (Clasen 2017, 31). By introducing Annabelle and the work of the Warrens as supernatural investigators, the pre-credit scene acts as a hook that captures the audience and warns them that something horrible is going to happen. This is reinforced as the screen blacks out and yellow text appears, claiming that the case we are about to witness is 'so malevolent, [the Warrens] kept it locked away until now' (Wan 2013). The on-screen text is followed by the title while foreboding music swells, creating a feeling of dread and anticipation. With this, the tone and theme of the movie have been set and the most important characters of the franchise, the Warrens, have been introduced.

Throughout the rest of the film, James Wan 'throws every supernatural trope at the screen to see what sticks', beginning with the very first shot from within the house (Glasby 2020, 27). As the Perrons arrive at their new house on Rhode Island, a tracking shot zooms in on the family from inside the house through the window, giving the impression that something is watching them. A few moments later, the family dog refuses to enter the house as it whines on the porch. Seeing as some who believe in the supernatural also believe that animals are able to sense spirits and ghosts, the dog's behaviour is suspicious and functions as an early sign of danger (Aggeler 2020). The first line spoken in the movie comes from the father, Roger, who makes a comment about the silence surrounding the house, which accentuates the isolation of the setting. Isolated settings are common in the horror genre, as they enhance the atmosphere of dread (Spadoni 2014, 157). These elements combined contribute to a feeling of unease. Within the first minute following the pre-credit scene, even before the viewer is invited inside the house or any strange activities have been observed, there are signs that something is not quite right. Atmosphere is a key factor in horror media, as it builds up tension and anticipation. As Spratford (2012, 27) argues, '[we] need to feel the approaching danger in the background details as well as in the actual attacks'. Without the build-up of suspense, the attacks and scares would not be nearly as effective. Therefore, Wan does well in creating an unsettling atmosphere from the very beginning. In addition to this, old abandoned haunted houses are a horror movie staple (Carroll 1990, 98). As with the Perron house, they are often 'gloomy, older houses with especially creepy attics, basements or outbuildings' (Mee 2021, 11). The viewer is likely familiar with this trope and the house itself will therefore work as a foreboding motif. More generally, the setting of *The Conjuring* is naturalistic, which works as an

anchor to reality. By creating 'a recognizable fictional universe' with supernatural elements, the viewer is able to immerse themselves fully in the movie (Clasen 2017, 30). Even though certain elements in the movie are fictitious, such as evil spirits or possessed dolls, realistic characters and settings ground the story in a way that allows viewers to identify and empathize with the story.

The initial feelings of gloom and unease are temporarily dispersed as 80's music plays while the family happily moves their stuff into their new home. A long, continuous tracking shot is utilized in order to present the full layout of the house. As the main plot, namely the haunting of the Perron family, takes place almost exclusively at their home, this setting is focused on in detail 'in order to enhance the tone and mood of the story' (Spratford 2012, 28). As the camera moves through the house, we see big empty rooms with a few antique-looking furniture pieces. Most rooms have only a few windows and dim lighting, as well as walls with cracks and worn tapestry. Overall, although the tone of the scene is light-hearted, the house seems unwelcoming and cold. During the scene, the audience is introduced to the members of the Perron family, Carolyn and Roger Perron and their five daughters ranging from 6 to 13 in age. The introduction of sympathetic characters is essential to horror fiction. In order for us to care about the story and the tragedies that befall the characters, we need likeable protagonists to empathize with and relate to. As Clasen (2017, 34) argues, 'lack of empathy means lack of emotional investment', and this emotional investment is crucial – the stronger our connections to the characters are, the stronger our emotional response to frightening stimuli will be. Introducing a family with young kids is particularly effective in evoking empathy, as humans have a natural urge to protect innocent beings, such as children, from harm (Public Library of Science 2008). Throughout the movie, we experience frightening scenarios and high levels of fear along with the characters and we are introduced to more and more of their backstory, ambitions, and passions. As we get to know the family more intimately, we begin to root for them and the outcome of the movie becomes important to us. As mentioned earlier, referred to as The Media Equation, our brains process fiction as if it were real. This means that we, even though we know that they are fictional, perceive the Perrons and the Warrens as if they were real people and we develop real, genuine feelings for them. We become emotionally attached to them and want to see them succeed. By introducing likeable characters early on in the movie and developing them throughout, *The Conjuring* does a great job at evoking empathy and emotional investment in the viewer, which ultimately makes the movie more frightening. As described, people apply different fear-regulation strategies when watching horror movies and one such strategy is immersion, which is used to maximize fear levels. Relatable and realistic characters make it easier for the viewer to immerse themselves in the movie

to the degree where one may feel like they are part of it, which allows for a more frightening experience.

Wan skilfully builds suspense throughout the movie using a variety of different scare tactics. Most hauntings and paranormal attacks take place during the evenings, which taps into the universal human fear of the unknown. Humans do not see well in darkness, which makes us vulnerable to potential threats that may hide in the shadows. Therefore, humans have evolved to have an adaptive response to settings with low visibility in which our alertness and anxiety increases, readying us for a fight-or-flight response (Clasen 2017, 32). *The Conjuring* takes advantage of this biological fear by having the evil spirits strike in the darkest hour when the viewer is already on edge and scanning the frame for potential dangers. In one particular scene, Wan exploits one of the most common childhood fears – the fear that something is hiding under the bed. Two of the daughters, Christine and Nancy, are shown lying in their beds fast asleep, as something suddenly pulls forcefully at Christine's legs. Terrified, she scans the darkness of the bedroom, unable to find the source. As she bends down to look for 'the monster under the bed', a point of view shot follows her eyesight from the left to the right. The view is restricted to the small sliver of light under the bed and the frame is dominated by dark corners. The viewer's vision is restricted to what Christine is seeing, which keeps them engaged and alert. Oftentimes in horror movies, the viewer is alerted of a danger before the characters are, for example by auditory or visual cues, but what makes *The Conjuring* so frightening is the restricted narration (Clasen 2017, 107-108). Our knowledge is restricted to that of the characters, and though there is a build-up of dread and a sense of foreboding, we do not know what is going to attack, nor where or when. While Christine searches for the source of the pulling in the dark room, the viewer only hears the diegetic sound of her whimpering and shaky breaths. After a long build-up of tension, the door to the bedroom slams shut, breaking the eerie silence and replacing it with panicked screams and non-diegetic, distorted music. The scene makes use of the elements 'dread' and 'the unexpected', two of the scare tactics proposed by Matt Glasby (2020, 10). Dread is 'the horror film's major currency' and refers to the build-up of tension and feeling of foreboding, while the unexpected refers to jump-scares (Glasby 2020, 10). The jump-scare in this scene is particularly effective precisely because of the careful build-up. The viewer knows that something is about to happen, but there are no cues as to where or when it will happen – all there is left to do is to wait anxiously for the revelation along with the characters. This combination of dread and the unexpected engages the audience cognitively and emotionally, and takes advantage of the primal, defensive reaction of the startle reflex (Clasen 2017, 32).

The true power of *The Conjuring* does indeed lie in the carefully drawn-out feeling of dread. As argued by Spratford (2012, 27), '[often] the most terrifying moments are achieved through subtle suggestion rather than through a series of shocking scenes and brutality'. While a good jump-scare or a particularly violent scene may certainly be able to cause a physiological reaction, what is really going to terrify and keep an audience on the edge of their seat is the anticipation and uncertainty of what is coming next. Glasby (2020, 27) describes the most horrifying scenes of *The Conjuring* as 'sadistically drawn out build-ups that shock with a sudden reveal'. One such scene depicts Carolyn playing a game of hide-and-clap with who she thinks is her daughter. After checking the girls' bedrooms, however, Carolyn discovers that they are all in bed and something else is making the noise. In a sequence of hand-held shots, the camera switches between functioning as Carolyn's point of view searching the house for the noise and as its own agent following closely behind her. The diegetic sounds of creaking floorboards and clocks ticking accentuate the silence, until the viewer is startled by the crash of framed photographs as they unexpectedly fall to the floor. Non-diegetic sounds of ominous, distorted music take over for a short moment before the house falls silent again, with the only sound being the clapping of an unknown agent. As Carolyn realises where the sounds are coming from, Wan makes use of a Dutch angle from within the basement, looking up at her. The very low angle makes Carolyn seem small in comparison to her surroundings and gives the impression that something is looking menacingly up at her. The use of the scare tactic 'dead space', in this case negative space, makes it seem as if 'there is too much room around the subject' which 'makes us feel unsettled, like something might jump out at any moment' (Glasby 2020, 9). This is accentuated by the darkness of the frame, which suggests that anything could be lurking in the shadows. Once again, the narration is restricted and we, like Carolyn, do not know what is hiding in the basement or when it is going to strike. The scene climaxes as Carolyn is locked in the basement with the lights gone out, and the only source of light is from a match she is holding up. Suspense is built further as the match goes out and she frantically lights another and released with a jump-scare as the hands of an unknown character claps behind her.

The Conjuring keeps audiences engaged by breaking the formula of what is expected. Through the first half of the movie, it has been established that the spirits come alive to terrorize the Perrons at night. Aside from Carolyn finding mysterious bruises in the mornings, daytime has been safe. Not only do the characters feel this, but the audience has come to rely on it as well. The feeling of safety is emphasized by the presence of the Warrens, who have been established as professionals within the realm of the paranormal and who are therefore regarded as a type of protectors. Following a hauntingly dark scene wherein Lorraine discovers the history of Bathsheba, however, *The Conjuring* throws the viewer a curveball. As Lorraine emerges from the basement, terrorised but

ultimately unharmed, the feeling of relief does not last long; instead, the hauntings now continue in the high-key lighting of the living-room. In what had previously been considered a safe space, all hell breaks loose as Nancy is pulled around the room by her hair while chaotic music is blasting. The rules that had been established throughout the movie have been broken and there are no more dark corners to hide in. When the narrative spirals out of control in this way, the viewer gets 'the sense that the traumas we are experiencing will never end', which is a scare tactic referred to as 'the unstoppable' (Glasby 2020, 11). From this scene and onward, the audience never feels safe and the pace of the movie has picked up considerably.

Another way in which *The Conjuring* attempts to disturb viewers is by use of supernatural forces and evil spirits which are classic horror movie threats. These threats 'need not be biologically plausible to command attention and evoke a strong emotional response in audiences' (Clasen 2017, 45). Instead, these supernatural evils work in capturing and engaging the audience by use of repulsive, nasty details in their appearance. Referred to as 'the grotesque' scare tactic by Glasby (2020, 10), disgusting corporeal horrors are effective in inspiring fear and revulsion in the audience. The supernatural agents of *The Conjuring* are characterized by milky eyes, oozing sores, matted hair, and veiny, grey skin. They make us want to look away but compel us to keep staring at the same time. As argued by Carroll (1990, 188), these creatures '[capture] our attention immediately' and 'hold us spellbound' because of the way in which they violate our way of categorising things – they are in between normal categories of being, blurring the lines between human and not human. This phenomenon is referred to as 'category jamming' and is a possible explanation for why 'we are both repelled and drawn to horror films and novels' (Asma 2014, 949). Repulsive threats in horror movies target evolved defence mechanisms. As explained, humans are evolutionarily sensitive to cues of danger and this includes stimuli that are disgusting. The emotion of disgust has developed to keep humans away from things that could harm them, such as diseases or pathogens, and it has been found that people across different cultures are disgusted by the same objects and situations; so-called universal disgust triggers (Clasen 2017, 48). Besides pathogen disgust, it is common for the horror genre to utilize moral disgust, which elicits visceral condemnation as a response to violations of moral norms and antisocial behaviour (Clasen 2017, 49). When horror movies elicit moral and pathogen disgust in the audience, it is both repulsive and fascinating at the same time. One explanation for this paradox lies in the trait morbid curiosity. Morbid curiosity is defined by Scrivner (2021, 4) as 'an interest in or curiosity about unpleasant things' and it is suggested that individuals can differ in how morbidly curious they are. Although morbid curiosity may seem paradoxical, it serves an adaptive function as it 'drives individuals to learn about aspects of life that are perceived to be dangerous', including fictitious 'dangers' of supernatural phenomena (Scrivner

2021, 8). Thus, morbid curiosity inspires vicarious learning, including an attraction to horror movies that explore all kinds of dangerous and aversive situations and creatures.

Throughout the movie, *The Conjuring* elicits both pathogen and moral disgust in the viewer. The perhaps most notable example of this is in the very climax of the movie during the exorcism of Carolyn. As Carolyn has taken April and Christine back to the house, she is seen holding her daughter in a tight grip while attempting to murder her with a pair of scissors. This is a severe norm violation which triggers the viewer's condemnation of Carolyn. Seeing a mother almost killing her own child evokes a strong emotional response, and although we know that she is possessed we cannot help but to feel morally disgusted by her. When the exorcism begins, the pathogen disgust peaks in what can be described as 'an assault of the senses' (Glasby 2020, 35). The scene is filled with repulsive details: Carolyn, now almost unrecognizable, is covered in sores and bruises, her eyes turned yellow, and her skin a cold grey. Her voice has changed into a deep growl and her inhuman screams are only temporarily interrupted as she spews out bloody vomit. In this scene, multiple universal disgust triggers have been utilized which engages and holds the attention of the audience. Different viewers may have different reactions to such scenes, depending on how high they score on the morbid curiosity trait; some may have an urge to cover their eyes while others are captivated and unable to look away despite the high level of pathogen disgust.

In sum, director James Wan utilizes an array of scare tactics in order to activate our fear system and elicit strong, negative emotions in the audience. Long, drawn-out build-ups generate high fear levels and cause strong physiological arousal, which can be stimulating especially for people like the adrenaline junkies. Besides, the viewer may benefit from the exposure of negative emotions as it can help improve fear regulation strategies for both adrenaline junkies and white knucklers. This exposure teaches viewers how to deal with their own fear, as it functions as '[a tool] with which to handle negative emotions and threat situations' (Clasen 2017, 62). By learning vicariously through the movie, *The Conjuring* may also contribute to the improvement of threat prediction strategies. While the threats in the movie do not exist in real life, they can prepare us for real life threat scenarios. The exposure to evil spirits and dangerous situations as well as the characters' reactions to these encourages us to imagine how we would respond to similar situations in the real world. As Asma (2014, 954) argues, '[we] use the imagination in order to establish and guide our own *agency* in chaotic and uncontrollable situations'. Although we may never encounter supernatural evils or monsters, we are sure to come across obstacles and uncomfortable situations in our lives and horror movies provide accessible and efficient practice for such situations.

Discussion

In this paper, I have examined the appeal and functions of horror media from an evolutionary perspective. Through this particular theoretical framework, I have attempted to determine which elements from our evolution as human beings can explain our fascination with a phenomenon that is designed to elicit negative emotions and physiological responses in its consumers. At the core of this paper, then, the focal point has been on the benefits and appeal of horror movies for the individual. Still, there are additional aspects of and approaches to horror that could be examined in order to gain an integrative understanding of why humans are attracted to it and why horror as a genre has endured through the years.

Horror as a genre has been prevalent all throughout human history. From prehistoric cave paintings to folk-tales to gothic novels all the way to the horror literature and cinema we know today, horror has always been with us in some shape or form (Owen 2018). As Owen (2018) argues, 'horror is an artistic expression of an ontological truth: we are creatures formed in no small part by the things to which we are averse'. Horror explores these aversive things; it explores biologically universal fears such as predators and pathogens, which has been the focus of this paper. But horror also explores fears that have emerged from the present sociocultural environment. These fears are 'flexible and contextual', meaning that they change over time and are dependent on the cultural and social context in which they emerge (Owen 2018). Horror media can be seen as a mirroring of social and cultural anxieties – in 2021, such anxieties include artificial intelligence, biological experimentation gone wrong, planetary destruction, or as is particularly relevant right now, global pandemics. It is evident, then, that culture plays a huge role in the domain of horror, and a biocultural framework could therefore also provide an interesting perspective on the consumption of horror media. Clasen (2012, 228) argues in favour of a biocultural approach, suggesting that combining historical and cultural circumstances with human evolution and biology 'has the potential of adding analytic richness and boosting explanatory power in the study of horror fiction'. Such an integrative approach is effective in understanding the nature of horror fiction, why it continues to be relevant, and why we continue to find it so appealing.

Furthermore, it would be relevant to examine horror in a social context. As stated, the focus of this paper has been on the benefits and appeals of watching horror movies for the individual. However, many 'horror experiences are social in nature', such as watching a horror movie with friends, playing co-operative horror games, or visiting haunted houses (Clasen et al. 2020, 21). For further research, it would be interesting to explore the effects that such a shared experience can have on a relationship. In the study of fear management in haunted houses by Clasen et al. (2019, 66), one strategy included bodily contact with others, such as holding hands to feel safe. It would

be interesting to explore this further to see whether watching horror movies together could be a bonding experience that strengthens relationships. Additionally, it would be relevant to explore group dynamics in horror experiences. I have applied a media analysis to *The Conjuring* in order to explore the scare tactics used to frighten the audience. In the future, one could focus on the effect of the social construction of fear, such as emotional contagion, the emotional norms applied when watching, or the function of laughter while watching (Renda 2019, 1784-1796).

Conclusion

Within the last few years, horror media has seen a surge in popularity with 2017 being the biggest year in the history of horror cinema. In this paper, I have attempted to examine and clarify why a genre that is designed to elicit negative emotions in its audience remains appealing to so many people. I have found that the consumption of negative emotions can be biologically adaptive. Horror media taps into and engages evolved fear systems which can be both stimulating as well as adaptive in the sense that it enables the development of biological survival strategies. As a result of our history as vulnerable human beings in a dangerous world, we are evolutionarily predisposed to pay attention to threats in the environment and we are wired with survival strategies that allow us to respond efficiently to potentially dangerous situations. These survival strategies include the ways in which humans predict, respond to, control, and learn about danger. In this paper, I have focused on the threat prediction strategy, which involves the ways in which humans predict and simulate potential threats and dangers. Our ability to simulate and envision future scenarios allows us to modify our behaviour to respond accurately to or completely avoid future threats. The prediction strategy is developed in part through vicarious learning, which includes the information we gather through the observation of other people, literature, television, gameplay, and the internet. The horror genre is particularly effective as vicarious learning as we are able to experience strong negative emotions and dangerous situations in a safe context which in turn can prepare us for and teach us how to effectively respond to threatening situations in real life. Not only do we learn vicariously through the actions and reactions of fictional characters, the exposure to negative emotions can also function as tool with which we learn how to deal with our own fear as it helps improve our fear-management strategies. A movie such as *The Conjuring* which is exceptional at building suspense and eliciting strong, negative emotions and physiological arousal in the audience is effective as a source for vicarious learning. Even though the threats in *The Conjuring* are not real, they function as simulation of and practice for obstacles and dangerous situations we may face in the real world. For further research, it would be interesting to examine horror movies from a

biocultural or sociological perspective in order to gain an integrative understanding of the appeal and functions of the horror genre.

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