HORROR TRIGGER

Have you ever thought about what causes that chilly feeling down your spine, your heart to race, and that odd sensation as if your insides are squeezing tight or disappearing?

Why do certain things make us feel sick? Why do they upset our stomachs, make our mouths dry, and turn our heads dizzy?

Fear and disgust are recognised as two of the six human basic emotion: anger, fear, sadness, enjoyment, disgust and surprise (Ekman, 1992).

They are considered basic due to their deep connection with our primal survival needs. They direct us towards important and beneficial goals and away from unpleasant and dangerous threats. This is also the reason why they are so powerful in controlling our thoughts, and interfering in our decisions, and behaviours.

Both fear and disgust are considered basic negative emotion, mainly because they cause physical and psychological discomfort (Russell, et al., 1999). They have evolved as automatic mechanisms to protect us from anything that could put our lives in serious danger.

Disgust generally alerts us to dangers like diseases, parasites or unhygienic and unhealthy conditions (Curtis, 2013); while fear is attached to a much more immediate violent presence. They both overlap in their intention to warn us and activate our bodies to guide them into the safest action: to avoid or confront (Woody & Teachman, 2000).
In addition to the psychological aspect, emotion play an important part in creating and maintaining moral values and social order, and shaping our relationships with others and the world.

As Sara Ahmed points out in her exploration of the political aspect of emotion, fear is not just based on a physical and psychical feeling or reaction. It also needs something to fear, a scary or threatening object. We are not just afraid; we are afraid of something or someone (Ahmed, 2004). Moreover, what is considered 'fearful' often varies and is morally defined by each society's cultural boundaries and values.

Similarly, disgust is deeply bound to what each culture delimits as hygienic or healthy, based on the evolutionary prevention of contracting infections or diseases. However, it's important to consider the fine line between an objective threat and a subjective moral judgment associated with disgust (Curtis, 2013), as well as its links to aesthetics and beauty standards.

WHAT IS OTHERNESS?

When we consider the external triggers and representations of these emotion, it becomes clear that one of the largest monopolies of fearful, disgusting, and disturbing imagery in the Western world is possessed by [horror culture and dark aesthetics,] especially by horror cinema. Moreover, these terrifying fictional representations has a strong bond with what Stuart Hall describes as 'the spectacle of "the other"' (Hall, 1997). The construction and capitalisation of "the otherness" - understood as the abject, something that causes insecurity regarding its ambiguous threatening difference from "the normal" (Kristeva, 1980).

As humans, our peculiar way of understanding the world is strongly tied to language, which is a complex system that structures meaning through categorisation. Every piece of meaningful information and stimulus that our brains process is labelled and categorised by what Richard Dyer terms types. This process shapes how we interpret and interact with the world around us (Hall, 1997).

In contrast, the concept of "otherness" is mainly constructed through the idea of stereotype, serving as a reductionist and essentialist form of type (Hall, 1997). The otherness is a vast and diverse category of subjectivities and elements, yet is often perceived as an ambiguous and abject opposition to what is considered "normal". Within the space of socially and culturally accepted norms and boundaries, anything falling outside these limits tends to be excluded and rejected; subjected to fear and revulsion. It is understood as the Other (Butler, 1993).

This binary opposition, in consequence, is far from neutral; it is rooted in a hierarchical structure where the Other is always subordinated. This entails that all identities and experiences inside it are, by definition, non-privileged in those aspects that make them members of the abject. To represent them like this is to wield symbolic power (Hall, 1997). To situate their destiny on the margins.

- **Horror CONNECTION THE OTHER**
  Horror has exercised and exercises symbolic power.
  Its Western narratives, particularly in the representation of 'the other,' serve as a discourse that teaches us what we should find scary or repulsive. By crafting an imaginary of monstrosities and abject characteristics, it effectively constructs and manipulates the concept of "the otherness". It is a way of producing meaning (Hall, 1997).

The problem arises when we understand that, as Mikhail Bakhtin states in his linguistic theories, meaning is dialogic. It is not only defined by the intentions of its producer but also shaped by the interpretations and adaptations of those who receive it (Hall, 1997).

This communicative relationship also works with stereotyped representations, where the intention and the interpretation can oscillate between the reductionist and judgmental "description" and the exaggerated and parodic response to it (Butler, 1990).

So, can we consider horror culture a subversive practice or a space for representation?
Or is it always destined to reinforce 'the Other's' narrative, utilizing stereotypes to evoke fear and disgust?
Is it reinforcement when individuals from marginalized identities identify with horror elements?
Or does the intention behind a horror representation determine whether it is subversive or not?

Horror APPROPRIATION

It is not difficult to interpret some intention in Western horror representations to capitalise on the narrative of the otherness by using elements of marginalised and oppressed communities as a disturbance booster or as a perverse illustration (Wood and Lippe, 1979).
Villains and monsters are often created through the use of stereotyped attributes from ethnic, tribal, and spiritual symbols, disabilities, diseases, and mental health conditions, and frequently, they are queer-coded.
Horror cinema has even designed its own set of stereotypes, often being quite repetitive in some curious narratives. For example, there's the 'hot blond girlfriend' and the 'racialized (probably Black) character' who typically dies first. Or, in contrast, "if you are gay, you will probably survive" (Vallese, Logan et al., 2022).

Indeed, such an analysis is far more complex than pointing out Norman Bates's suspicious feminine mannerisms or recognising the use of the Magical Negro trope in The Shining.
All these components are used in diverse ways, with more or less consciousness, and it is also important to pay attention to how they interact with each other within different contexts and stories (Hutchings, 2004).

However, to better comprehend how these representative mechanisms function, two specific elements that have been recurrently used in horror can be particularly illustrative: disabilities and madness.

They are mainly employed to create more shock value or to enhance the disturbing and scary effect of villains or monstrous characters.
The disabled community has been particularly exploited and appropriated by horror, with a notable emphasis on the portrayal of disabled bodies (Cheyne, 2019). However, looking at the idea of madness and mental disorders could be more illuminative on how stereotypes associated with fear and rejection have been created and installed in our collective minds through a very specific imaginary.

To understand how the idea of the Other has been constructed around the identity of marginalised and oppressed communities, it is necessary to look back in time and realise how myths around certain identities have been created.
Just as the Witch hunts served to uphold Christian doctrine and control women (Federici, 2004), asylums were similarly built to segregate what Foucault calls the degenerate of the abnormal:

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[quote]   The racism that psychiatry gave birth to in this period is racism against the abnormal, against individuals
who, as carriers of a condition, a stigmata, or any defect whatsoever, may more or less randomly transmit to their
heirs the unpredictable consequences of the evil, or rather of the non normal, that they carry within them.
...
The degenerate is someone who cannot be reached by any kind of penalty. The degenerate is someone who, at all events,
cannot be cured. (Foucault, 1975, pp. 316-318)
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Even if the general idea of the psychiatric hospital was to keep patients in a common safe space for treatment, it ended up being a control device to enclose and take away the autonomy of all those identities that somehow disturbed the normal order in ways that were not considered crimes or weren't able to be prosecuted by the law, such as the breaking of the monogamous, misogynistic and heterosexual family structure of that time (Foucault, 1975).

The imaginary of madness and asylum patients was shaped by commonly stereotyped moral, psychological, and physical characteristics of this abnormal otherness. So it is not difficult to guess why so many horror and dark-thriller movies use this idea of the insane and the asylums to illustrate the Other as a threat or as the villains. It is not a way of depicting the reality of these people but representing the myth that our society, within the norm, has created around it (In Praise of Shadows, 2022). Consequently, these representations apply symbolic power as they reinforce the stereotyped idea of "the dangerous psychopath or schizophrenic", contributing to the mental health stigma and the marginalisation of people outside the neurotypical-sane norm (Hall, 1997).

- ## Horror CONFORT AND IDENTIFICATION

  In large part, horror and dark artistic creations are constructed by many different stereotypes about the marginalised otherness, each resonating differently with diverse audiences. For instance, in the portrayal of disabilities and madness, mainstream Western media often opts for those kinds of offensive shocking depictions.

In contrast, the non-privilege groups that see themselves depicted in these ways – as the *disabled* or the *mad* communities – are constantly experiencing these dark portrayals as a new control device that keeps them apart from the *normal*. These representations subtly mirror the role of asylums: marginalising the Other.

However, as we saw, representation is dialogic.
The meaning behind these representations is not fixed; it is fluid and changes with interactions among the different subjectivities from creators, those represented, and audiences (Hall, 1997). This makes stereotypes, not only a reductive way of illustrating the otherness as the abject threat of the norm, but also the only mainstream representation of these freak and weird identities.

This idea connects with an important question here:
Why do many people from marginalized communities find comfort in horror and darkness?
What makes horror a space of identification?

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[quote]   I think horror makes an audience uncomfortable, and queerness makes society uncomfortable. (veon, 2023)
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Belonging to a marginal identity community generally implies that your experiences will always have a certain touch of terror. Whether it's the fear of being discovered, the potential consequences of others' perceptions, not being accepted by your loved ones, or facing various forms of violence, having an identity outside the norm means placing oneself in "the weird."

The weird is not universal but is always subject to the cultural norm of each society. This implies that the general and everyday representation of Western society in mainstream media will be based on identities and experiences defined as normal in this culture. Consequently, "the Other" will not be represented in a complex or central way but always in an ambiguous opposition to the normal subject (Butler, 1993). The Other will always be portrayed as something the normal subject must reject, ignore, escape, fear, or disdain. Therefore, the representation of marginal identities, those who live their lives feeling that they don't fit in or are strange, will always be somehow associated with the dark, the eerie, and horror.

Living a human experience where every representation excludes your identity and your particular experiences leads to feeling, in some way, defective. That's why many people who have grown up feeling strange compared to the norm find a space of identification and some relief in these types of stereotyped and dark representations of their identities (Vallese, Logan et al., 2022). Instead of finding them offensive or reductionist (which they also do), their terrifying characteristics are processed as a reflection of the fears, anxieties, and violence they face for being the odd ones, the weird... the monsters.

Horror REAPROPRIATION

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[quote]   This is all to say: I eventually came to understand that, while I was busy fretting over whether being gay
would displace me from connecting with the films I loved most, queer affection for horror was actively being claimed,
recontextualized and integrated into the culture and community - and, like most things touched by queerness, horror
becomes more textured, more nuanced, and far more exciting when viewed through a queer lens. (Vallese, Logan et al.,
2022)
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This common identification with the weird, the dark, and the freakish has been a shared inspiration in certain Western collectives and subcultures when expressing their identity through various creative movements. Punk reclaims the ugly and repulsive to confront the norm; certain subgenres of metal, goth, and industrial music use dark and terrifying elements to advocate for political, identity, and philosophical themes; disturbing and trash cinema, or certain horror comedies mock and invert the tropes, stereotypes, and clichés of horror narratives.
These, and many more, artistic movements and creations are significant examples where horror and darkness come in as a subversive strategy in favour of the marginal: in reappropriating and accepting the unusual.

- ### WHY QUEER?
  Be "the weird one," "the other," "the strange one," "the different one," "the freak," "the Maverick." Anyone who has lived, in one way or another, with the weight of these labels has questioned how they truly define or shape their identity. They have suffered the weight and power of binaries; they have been on the weak, opposite, subordinate, incorrect side (Derrida, 1982).

  [quote] "Queer Theory" conveys a double emphasis - on the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production, and on the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences. (de Lauretis, 1991, pp. iv)

Queer theory opposes these binaries and rigid labels (Butler, 1993). Being queer doesn't just imply belonging to this abject space but also subverting it, making it one's own. It is questioning our identities and how they have been constructed and represented, blowing them up, and then rebuilding them. It is taking all the debris of what once was the reason for our exclusion and suffering and reinventing it in our favour, to rediscover ourselves and be free to express who we truly are. It is betting on the real complexity of the human being.

Something similar is done by horror, the dark, and raw and disturbing representations. It plays with our fears and weaknesses and questions the strict moral norms of our society. It takes our existential doubts to the absurd and destroys our defence systems to let us reflect and create from our absolute vulnerability.

For all this, without trying to define or enclose any of them into rigid labels or definitions, we can at least say that queerness is quite terrifying, while horror is terribly queer.

WEIRD IRONY AND PARODIC SUBVERSION

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[quote]   The norm has become invisible; and its hate discourses and stereotyped representation less theatrical and
more "natural" (Keetley, 2020, pp. 7)
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Queer is a subversive term. Just like the word "Nigga" or "Negro" was created as an insult used by people situated within the norm to point out certain identities, in this case, from the Black community, within otherness. "Queer" was another way of naming what was considered strange and incorrect in terms of sexuality and/or gender. But these offensive terms have been ironically reappropriated by their respective identity groups, so they now serve as subversive labels that name the identity complexity they represent. They are parodic, fluid, vindictive, and political terms. They've reversed the discourse (Foucault, 1978).

In this sense, Queerness goes a step further to break down any normative barriers and proposes a space of constant personal questioning and collective resignification (Halperin, 1995). It uses the parodic performance of stereotypes and represents them even more exaggeratedly and simplistically to confront them and strip them of the identity value they intend to exert (Butler, 1990).

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[quote]   Norms are invisible, becoming present only when they rub up against difference. (Lupton and Xia, 2021
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It is in these types of representations where the dark and the queer find the possibility to interlock, subvert, and detach from the power exercised by the norm. It is a queer horror that has the potential to use everything that was created with the intention of marginalizing, excluding, and despising certain identities to now reclaim their differences and peculiarities. To create safe spaces of acceptance in human contradiction and complexity, freedom in responsibility, and visceral honesty in being oneself.

Queer horror is not here to go unnoticed. It's not here to normalize and neutralize difference or to meet diversity quotas.

Queer horror is here to make noise, to be grotesque, raw, and uncomfortable. To be a monstrous otherness that disrupts the norm and explores that dark and creative side that makes us so human.

- **HORROR MAKES ME FEEL SAFE**
  Both horror and queerness awaken our morbid curiosity. They exist as paradoxical spaces where, despite our internal repressive mechanisms and norm-provoking rejection and remorse, fascination remains irresistible. They simultaneously scare and captivate us, drawing upon their links to the unknown and the forbidden – aspects that touch deeply the innate human curiosity. Moreover, their main potential lies in their incredible and grotesque ability to reflect and question the most human nooks of our existence (Stevens, 2014).
  Queer horror is radically honest, visceral, and raw in embodying the human experience.

Darkness has an incredible potential to create safe spaces because it confronts us with the macabre and reconciles us with the discomfort of our existence. It lays out all the suffering and ugliness of being human; it makes us aware of our vulnerable finiteness.
With that, it forces us to accept our deepest fears and use the fascinating creative power of darkness to better understand our passage through the world and to live a fuller and more honest experience.

Horror and darkness join queerness in an attempt to create safe spaces where one can be oneself in the rawest and most honest way possible, and to embrace our weirdness and differences collectively, tenderly, and artistically.

Queer horror is cathartic, liberating, and vulnerably subversive.