

Violence Anaesthesia: exploring the effects of normalisation and desensitisation to media violence and its impact on the horror genre

## Chapter 1- Blood: The New Black

*“Over the years the horror genre has been forced to change and adapt to suit audiences... to continue to entertain and scare viewers”<sup>1</sup>*

The gloomiest periods of society’s history often have a way of spawning some of the most distinct trends in horror. In recent history, humans have collectively experienced extreme financial crises, war, political instability, and acts of intense violence against each other, which have all been displayed daily in the mass media of the macro world. By 2012, society was spending an average of 13.6 hours<sup>2</sup> a day consuming this fiercely violent and fear-provoking media, effectively being conditioned to hold a desensitised reaction to today’s now normalised violence. Horror has retained its influence and societal obsession despite the generations of change it has endured, which inherently stem from the social and cultural environment in which they are produced. The fluctuating levels of media violence in history have formed a nexus to the horror genre, which must be superior in visual content to media violence in order to achieve the desired effect. Thus, this chapter will examine elements of continuity and change of the connection between the prevalence of media violence and the intense obsession with the horror genre over time.

The horror genre’s roots lie in the silent films of the 1900’s where folklore, myths and legends were explored through the traditional thematic indicators of shadows, darkness and ominous storms. The 1920’s saw The Great Depression triggering escapism of reality whereby 65%<sup>3</sup> of the U.S. population attended films each week. In this period by drawing on classical literature of Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker the audience were scared by attaching visuals to the terrifying texts. As explained by Dr Austin in my closed interview “The presentation of horror evolves to adapt to new technology as well as changing cultural concerns: *Dracula* (1931, Browning) and *Frankenstein* (1931, Whale) both used the new technology of sound as a method of instigating fear”.<sup>4</sup> However, as this is an individual’s opinion, this view may not represent the majority of the population. The advent of war in the 1930’s and 40’s intensified the connections with the horror genre whereby they were used further as escapist worlds to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://thehorror2010.blogspot.com.au/2010/01/how-horror-films-have-changed-and.html>  
Accessed 01/02/14

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2013/10/131030111316.htm> Accessed 13/01/14

<sup>3</sup> <http://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/20853/100-years-of-horror-culture-shock-the-influence-of-history-on-horror/> Accessed 15/01/14

<sup>4</sup> Appendix C for Interview

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forget where real monsters existed. This period saw a rise in monsters and aliens, allowing escape into the impossible supernatural.

According to McRee in his article *Why do we like Horror?* horror movies “represent the decay of society and allow people to feel fear within a controlled setting”<sup>5</sup>. This was reflected in my questionnaire, generating 102 responses. In answer to “do you agree that as humans we consume horror movies to test our fears within a controlled environment?” 66% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed. However, as a large gender and locational skew was present, the results of the questionnaire only represent the view of a narrow proportion of society. The experience of these films creates an outlet for individual’s fear without suffering in the real world. Continuing with horror films representing the decay of society, the end of the 1940’s and beginning of the 50’s saw society realize that the real monsters were humans. This decade saw realism introduced to the genre, where films were more relatable to the audience, which were scarier than the virtual. With the technology advancements speeding up rapidly, horror films began to answer everyone’s question “who will take science too far?”

Tied into the films of the 40’s and 50’s, television was firmly cemented in the family unit, making mass media more widely available and visual than before. Further, the Cold War Era beginning in the 40’s and continuing into the 80’s led to the use of the media for propagandist fear creation and, with it being the first televised war there were no guidelines as to what was too gruesome an image to display. These were steps to breaking social mores; audiences became more open to nudity, on screen violence and drug use, creating a craving for more. Through this was borne one of the most classic horror films to ever exist- Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*. In this film the audience were challenged to not look externally for monstrosities but rather within the human psyche where the scariest happenings occurred. As evidenced through my content analysis<sup>6</sup>, levels of violence appear rather low in comparison to today’s standards, with only 25 seconds of low-level violence being shown through the entire 98 minutes of the film. The results, however, are based on personal interpretation of the film, and so may not reflect others interpretations.

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<sup>5</sup> Mcree “Why do we like Horror?” 2013

<http://blogs.uoregon.edu/aad250mcree/2013/05/12/why-do-we-like-horror/> accessed 5/02/14

<sup>6</sup> Appendix A for Content Analysis