The New Science of Recreational Fear

BY MATHIAS CLASEN

Mathias Clasen, PhD, is associate professor of literature and media in the English Department at Aarhus University and director of the Recreational Fear Lab (www.fear.au.dk). He is the author of many articles and books, including *Why Horror Seduces* (Oxford University Press, 2017) and *A Very Nervous Person's Guide to Horror Movies* (Oxford University Press, 2021). He believes Stephen King is the greatest author in the English language and is willing to defend that belief to the death.

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If you look up "fear" in a psychology textbook, you will see it defined as a so-called negative emotion—an unpleasant emotion that evolved to protect us from danger. One famous psychologist even described fear as the most "toxic" of emotions. Indeed, most people try to organize their lives so that they minimize negative emotions, from fear and anxiety to terror and disgust.

However, and this is a big however, people obviously also seek out negative emotions. They do so when they buy tickets to a horror movie, include an excursion to some creepy location on their vacation, get in line for a wild rollercoaster in a theme park, pick out a thrilling true crime documentary for late-night entertainment, or take up an extreme sport. Such activities fall under the umbrella of a curious phenomenon known as "recreational fear." While the phenomenon is ancient, the science of recreational fear is only now taking off, and it is revealing some very interesting things about human psychology and the importance of playing with fear.

Recreational fear can be defined as behaviors where people voluntarily seek out activities that elicit negative emotions and expect to derive pleasure from such emotions. In order to understand the phenomenon, my colleagues and I established the Recreational Fear Lab—a research center—at Aarhus University in 2020, building on studies we have been conducting since 2016. We do field studies as well as laboratory studies, for instance measuring the relationship between fear and pleasure in guests at a commercial haunted attraction or collecting physiological data from participants exposed to frightening clips or video games in the lab. The science of recreational fear is deeply interdisciplinary. For instance, in investigating the physiologi-

Image from a recent field study at Dystopia Haunted House in Vejle. Photograph: Mathias Clasen.

cal underpinnings of horror entertainment, we combine domain expertise from the humanities with methods from the social sciences.

Our initial interest was in horror entertainment. We were puzzled by the so-called paradox of horror, that is, the peculiar circumstance that many people are attracted to entertainment that is designed to evoke negative emotions. (We found in a survey study that as many as 55% of people say that they enjoy frightening entertainment, and that 80% of all respondents have watched at least one horror movie in the past year.)[1] However, we soon realized that engagement with horror entertainment—books, movies, games, and so on—is just one way in which people voluntarily seek out fear. Indeed, recreational fear saturates human lives. The phenomenon is ubiquitous, and yet we know very little about it.

Some of the earliest playful activities to which we expose infants involve an element of fear. That goes for the baby jump scare, peek-a-boo, as well as for playfully throwing the baby into the air and catching it again. As the child gets older, parents will tend to reach deeper into the toolbox of recreational fear, for instance playfully chasing the child while pretending to be a monster or reading aloud from mildly scary stories, such as the Norwegian fairy tale "The Three Billy Goats Gruff" or the grisly stories collected by the Brothers Grimm. In a pilot study of recreational fear in Danish daycare institutions, we found that teachers in nurseries and kindergartens are surprisingly proficient in dishing out delightful scares to their charges.[2] As kids get older, their appetite for recreational fear only seems to increase. Most teenagers are notoriously attracted to frightening media, such as viral TikToks with scary content or full-blown horror movies. Even old folks may seek to have their recreational fear itch

A participant in a VR horror study in the Recreational Fear Lab.

Image: Torsten Frøstrup. Used with permission.

scratched, for instance by crime shows such as *Midsomer Murders*, where the mangled corpses are about as plentiful as the hydrangeas.

So what gives? Why are humans so dedicated to seeking out fear, at least in a playful context? We think the "playful" is crucial here. Recreational fear is literally about playing with fear, for instance by imaginatively immersing oneself in a threat scenario. We watch horror movies and are, through the magic tools of cinema, imaginatively transported into a universe that brims with danger. We buy into the premise that the parent chasing us is indeed a frightening monster that wants to tear off our limbs and gorge itself on our warm blood as it pulses from severed veins. Psychological distance is key. As long as we know that there is no real danger—that the monster is only pretend, or that the rollercoaster lives up to rigid safety standards—we can enjoy the emotional and physiological stimulation. We can even learn from the experience. It cannot be too frightening, though, nor can it be too tame; it has to hit our "sweet spot of fear." There has to be just the right amount of fear (which is why none of the kindergarten teachers in our survey reported screenings of *The Exorcist*, and why teenagers don't get together for a fright-night of chase play and nursery rhyme recitation).

We discovered the sweet spot of fear in one of our haunted house studies. In this study, which was conducted in 2017 and led by my brilliant colleague Marc Malmdorf Andersen, we put up surveillance cameras at the most frightening locations in the haunt, equipped participants with heart rate monitors, and collected survey data. One of our goals was to investigate the relationship between fear and enjoyment. Traditionally, people have thought that in the domain of

horror entertainment, the relationship would be linear—the scarier, the better. However, when we looked at the data, that is not what we found. Rather, we found a so-called inverted U-shaped relationship. If a horror experience is not frightening enough, people are bored; if it is too frightening, people become overwhelmed and pleasure plummets.[3] Presumably, the sweet spot varies from person to person, which helps explain why some people stay away from horror movies.[4] That particular form of recreational fear carries an emotional payload that blows them beyond their sweet spot, but they may still enjoy other forms of recreational fear, such as rollercoasters or true crime podcasts, which for them are less intense.

A stylized depiction of the sweet spot of fear.

Image by Pernille Lærke Munk-Hansen, used with permission

Recreational fear is not just about transient emotional and physiological stimulation. Our studies are increasingly suggesting that there may be powerful benefits of such activities. For instance, we conducted another haunted house study—led by another of my brilliant colleagues, the morbid curiosity specialist Coltan Scrivner—to investigate the benefits of playing with fear for different people. We found that there are three types of horror fans, and that they reap different benefits from the experience.[5]

The first type, the adrenaline junkie, loves the thrill and the kick of horror. This type reports a mood boost from horror entertainment. They arrive at the haunt, run through the fifty-odd rooms, emerge sweaty and happy at the exit; they are in an even better mood than when they arrived. For them, the mood boost is crucial.

The second type, the white-knuckler, also loves horror, but for them, it is not so much a question of intense stimulation as it is a challenge in keeping fear at a tolerable level. They employ a range of emotion regulation strategies to manipulate their own fear, as we have shown in another haunt study,[6] and intriguingly, they feel that they learn something important about themselves, and that the experience allows them to develop as a person. They may feel that they learn about their own stress threshold, for instance, or that they get to practice and hone their ability to suppress anxiety.

The third type, the dark coper, is a kind of super-athlete of horror. Dark copers reap *all* the benefits, reporting a mood boost as well as self-insight and personal development. Many dark copers have psychological issues and actively use horror entertainment as a kind of self-medication, for instance to manage anxiety or treat the symptoms of depression.[7] They report using horror to navigate a world that they perceive to be scary.

Horror and other forms of recreational fear is more than mindless entertainment. In-

A guest in Dystopia Haunted House. Image: Mads Andreas Frost/Jyllands-Posten, used with permission.

deed, research coming out of our lab suggests that recreational fear may be a crucial tool for learning about not just the dark sides of existence, but about the darker areas of our own emotional landscape. It may even allow us to improve our ability to cope with stress, anxiety, and fear. We conducted a study during the first COVID lockdown to investigate whether people who had watched many horror movies had improved psychological resilience.[8] We did find such a correlation. Yes, the horror hounds were better equipped to deal with the stress of lockdown. While we cannot prove causation from a survey study like this, we do think that watching horror movies allows people to practice and improve their emotion regulation skills. Such skills are anything but trivial. The ability to regulate one's own emotions and cope with fear, stress, and anxiety is crucial in many domains of life. If one is good at keeping anxiety down, one is likely to perform better at a job interview, say, or during a classroom presentation.

Perhaps it makes sense to see recreational fear as a kind of fear inoculation.[9] It is a way to administer an enjoyable shot of manageable fear, which lets people build resilience and coping skills—and mother nature was wise enough to construct our species in such a way as to make the process enjoyable. Most people—if not everybody—finds pleasure in some form of recreational fear, and as I have argued, recreational fear can be good for us. Even kids may need a good scare from time to

time. Indeed, recent research suggests that we may be doing our children a huge disservice by shielding them from any kind of mental discomfort, including frightening activities. The epidemic of mental health problems among western youth may in part be a result of such overprotective parenting; research by some of our collaborators suggests that risky play – one form of recreational fear – may be an important protective influence against the development of anxiety disorder.[10] In other words, it is probably good for children—and even for us adults—to occasionally seek out recreational fear and challenge our boundaries while gaining self-insight and building resilience in the process. It can also be a hell of a lot of fun. ■

Notes

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