

# HAUNTING OUR OWN HEADS

EM VON DER RUHR

## WHY HORROR?

### And why we can't look away

Slashers, thrillers, and horror films all have at least one thing in common: their ability to manifest physical and emotions responses intensely. The jarring reactions are just what is desired when you head into the theater to see one of these films-but why is this desired? Besides horror being enjoyable for some people, there are plenty of watchers who do not find scaring themselves pleasurable (King). Isabel Christina Pinedo- an assistant professor of media and cultural studies at Hunter College in NY, describes it as "recreational terror" (Keisner). There is a lack of control, the viewer is unable to navigate the simulated experience on the screen from reality, and reason is lost between the translation of the fictional world and reality. To put it simply: we cannot look away. This is also why so many horror films such as "Halloween" "Friday the 13th" and "Saw" use teaser endings that lead to franchises (King). Our level of fear while watching a horror film does not necessarily impact our enjoyment of the film, leading us to seek out the next sequel or return to the genre with another film (Neuendorf). Ultimately, the origin of horror becomes our own minds; our anxieties, our unease with the unknown. And as our technology changes and alters what fears and anxieties we have, the genre shifts to follow. However, there are specific elements of horror that have remained unchanged throughout the genres' history.



## FEAR OF THE DARK?

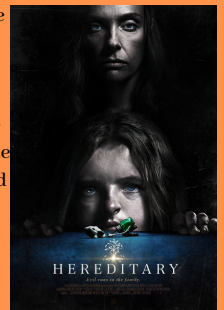
### A History of the Origin of Fear

Why is it that most horror movies contain a dark ambiance, or a setting with obscured light? Sure it's creepy, but why are we so disturbed by this environment? Humanity can trace a lot of significance and association back to caves, they were actually quite important in our survival by providing us shelter. Caves were the subject of metaphors and the unknown for ancient philosophers such as Plato (Allegory of the Cave) and caves are often surroundings in great myths and legends. In the middle ages, caves were believed to be portals to the afterlife or be the dwellings of monsters (Sanna). But what trait is contained in these caves that has held our imaginations captive for centuries, and embedded itself as a primal fear? The fear of the dark; the unknown, and becoming lost. Caves are dimly lit, cavernous with labyrinth like tunnels, tightly enclosed unknown spaces- aka the breeding ground for fear and anxiety, paranoia and hallucinations. The concept of using these cave-like traits such as surrounding darkness, and the uncertainty of what dwells within it, in horror entertainment (or "recreational terror") can be recognized as early as the 1700's and 1800's in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, and Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein*. These films became the basis for horror sensations and created the suspenseful atmosphere we see in almost every horror film today (Sanna). Many blockbuster horror films throughout the 20th century and the early 2000's have taken the subdued and solemn ambiance of the cave to generate a fearful setting, such as "The Nightmare on Elm Street" (1984), "The Descent"(2005), "The Cavern"(2005), and "Silent Hill" (2006). (Sanna).



## CONTEMPORARY HORROR

2018's "Hereditary" (directed by Ari Aster) is a particularly interesting example of contemporary horror that challenges the origin of fear. It certainly adapts the eerie atmosphere into its aesthetic with dark and dusty attics, unknown basements, and obscured corners. But the film also demonstrates a blunt contrast of light and dark as well, elaborating further the concept of caves and where our fears and true terrors stem from: our own emotions, experience, and trauma. Fear, grief, anxiety, and mental illness are the true terrors of this contemporary film. The movie is scary in its ability to challenge the source of our own battles and demons in our minds. The darkness is within not only the characters own heads, but in the viewers as well. Our own experiences take on the roles and plot of the movies, and we as viewers become active participants in the fictional horrors playing out before us (Hanich). The recreational terror built is strong because of the way the events unfold in such a dramatic, yet real, way (Crittenden). It's very difficult for our minds to separate our own feelings and reactions from what we see playing out before us on the screen. This is the case especially when parallels between our real working lives/emotions, and the fantasies of horror that are created: further accentuating the level of depth and ability for films to make metaphorical statements about our own nature (Jancovich). This is precisely the case in "Hereditary". In addition, our own past experiences and associations intensify the elements of fear, making the statement that sometimes our own minds are the scariest things that much more prominent and compelling. In the end, horror movies really are "recreational terror". They are social, people go on first dates to movie theaters to see them, and friends laugh about how frightened they were after (Harris). Most importantly, they are a social experience for what they bring out of us- our very worst nightmares, for us to develop from.



1896- first "horror movie" called The Devil's Castle. It was only 3 minutes long

1910: First version of "Frankenstein"



1978 "Halloween"



1987 "Nightmare on Elm Street"

2018 "Hereditary"

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