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Social Lessons from Our Favorite Horror Movies

I'm a fan of scary stories. With a few hours to spare, I'll gladly spend them with Richard Matheson or Shirley Jackson. If I don't have a few hours to spare, I'll pass the time with whatever horror movie I can find playing in the background while I work.

By Krystal D'Costa on October 31, 2013



Photo by Paree, CC.

I'm a fan of scary stories. With a few hours to spare, I'll gladly spend them with Richard Matheson or Shirley Jackson. If I don't have a few hours to spare, I'll pass the time with whatever horror movie I can find playing in the background while I work. Yes, they can be campy. Yes, they can be formulaic. But they're also highly illustrative of the ways we react to deviations from the norm. Some of these are no-brainers when you think about them, but within the context of horror are interesting to look at.

(Note: These are all rather old movies, but I do include some plot information, so proceed with caution. If you're concerned about spoilers, you may just want to read the bold text. Also given the huge number of remakes, its likely that you've seen a preview for an upcoming release based on a few of these, or you've seen them recently as a re-release.)

1. Bullying has repercussions for just the bullied.

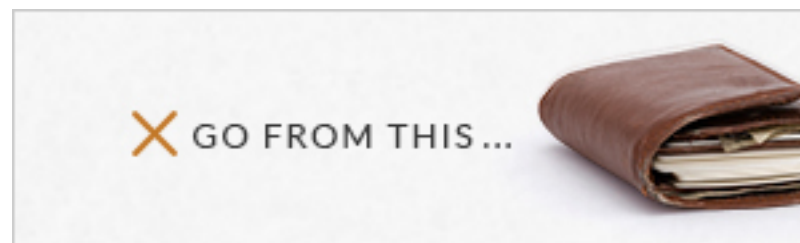
In *Carrie*, the socially underdeveloped girl for whom the movie is named has a run-in with the resident school clique. The resulting anxiety causes Carrie's telekinetic abilities to expand. The clique plotted to get her to prom, and set her up with the clique leader's boyfriend. At prom, members of the clique manage to get Carrie elected prom queen. During her moment on stage, hardly daring to believe that she's been accepted by her classmates, the clique dumps a bucket of blood on her, and the crowd laughs. Big mistake. Carrie uses her telekinetic powers to punish the crowd in various ways. She finally seals the gym as an electrical fire breaks out, and returns home for a confrontation with her mother.

Carrie reminds us that high school can be a lonely time. It also marks the last stage of the "playground" where we learn socialization skills. No one wants to be excluded. No one wants to be the joke. We tend to single out people who are most different, sometimes for

good reasons, many times for not-so-good reasons. This hurts the person being bullied, but bullies can also be ostracized, changing how people interact with them as well.

The closing sequence of the film also demonstrates the lingering effects of bullying, as one of the former tormentors is plagued by horrific dreams of Carrie returning from beyond the grave.

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2. The concept of home is important to the concepts of self we create.

All six-year-old Michael Myers wanted was to go trick-or-treating. He got dressed in his clown costume and waited for his older sister. But she had other plans. Charged with

watching Michael while her parents went to a Halloween party, she instead invited her boyfriend over to relieve the frustrations inherent to raging teen hormones.

If Michael had gotten to go trick or treating would that have prevented him from becoming a ruthless killer? Probably not—let's face it, this child clearly needed help—but his story highlights the importance of being able to interact with others and feel as though you are a member of the community. These early social rites are important to the foundation of self we develop.

Interestingly, in the Rob Zombie remake of this *Halloween*, Michael's home life is actually fractured: his father is dead, his mom works as a stripper, and her boyfriend makes lewd comments to Michael's older sister. The explicit broken home metaphor sends the same message as the subtler messages in the original: home is important to shaping the individual, and if the home does not function as it should, the individual will never be cemented with society.

3. Sleep is important.



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The benefits of sleep have long been recognized by scientists: Sleep allows your body to recharge. Without sufficient sleep, memory, mood, and judgment suffers—we may even be more susceptible to illnesses. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street* a group of teenagers are terrorized by a the ghost of a child serial killer named Freddie Krueger. The first hint that Krueger means business occurs when Tina Gray dreams she is being stalked by a figure with razors on its fingers. She wakes just as the figure catches her, finding that she has cuts where the figure grabbed her in her dream. She learns that her friends all had similar dreams. It is ultimately revealed that Krueger was prematurely released from prison due to an administrative error, and an irate public murdered him. He is now stalking the children of the people who killed him.

The teenagers cannot go to sleep because it is in our dreams that Krueger is the most powerful, and yet without sleep, the characters appear to become increasingly hysterical. Krueger plays upon our need for sleep. We *have* to enter this vulnerable state. Nancy Thompson, the only remaining teen to escape Krueger's murderous onslaught, must reclaim the ability to sleep—and dream.

The *Elm Street* series blurs the line between the imaginary and reality. It reminds us that we need a balance of both to function as human beings.

4. Erratic behavior signifies that something is *very* wrong.

It's great to be passionate about something, but there is a fine line between passion and obsession. If a good friend or loved one begins to act obsessive or possessive about a particular object, as Dennis did in *Christine*, get help for the person immediately.

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Dennis is a fairly plain, but nice, teenager. He decides to use his money—against his parents wishes—to buy a clunker. He lovingly restores the car, becoming increasingly jealous of anyone who expresses an interest in it. He loses all interest in anything but the car. He alienates his best friend and girlfriend, believing that they too want to take his beloved car away. This type of behavior signifies a break with society. Dennis needed help—though perhaps you also loved your first car and can sympathize.

But the response of Dennis' friends is also fairly typical: they try to help and resist being pushed away. They highlight the ways in which our network can be crucial when we start to lose ourselves.

5. Costumes let us hide things.

Why do we wear masks? To pretend to be someone else. Masks allow us to suspend responsibilities and bypass appropriate behaviors because when we are masked, we aren't ourselves. Almost all of Hollywood's most fearsome Halloween monsters have worn costumes of sort sort, and the costumes themselves have taken on qualities of their own. But clown makeup takes this further: because clown makeup is applied directly to the face, it transforms the individual instead of temporarily suspending the individual's own beliefs. With clown makeup, the individual becomes another entity entirely, not just an individual pretending to be something or someone else.

Clowns were historically comical fellows. They likely evolved from court jesters. As a class, they elicit laughter and even encourage it. But can any group accept being the basis of the joke all the time? Perhaps if the humor were innocent, but there are mean-spirited people who enjoy derogatory humor. This presents the opportunity for jokers to turn the tables. Pennywise the Clown from *It* pretty much sums up the fear quotient of clowns, showing us that when you break with social expectations, it can really rattle people. We want to trust what we see, and that can be an easily exploitable vulnerability.



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6. We need variation.

Jack Torrence, a writer, takes a job as a caretaker for The Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*. He believes the off-season, when the hotel is closed and snowed in, will be the prime opportunity to work on his book. The snow settles and Jack has a bout of writer's block, begins to drink, and starts to see things. The hotel's past begins to manifest. He fights with his wife, and is encouraged by the ghost of a former caretaker to "correct" his family. He sets out to murder them.

While Jack had a good idea, and sometimes getting away can help a writer, we need the spontaneity that accompanies human contact. The same routine day-in and day-out dulls the senses.

These are the tip of the iceberg. Have a scary movie lesson to share? Let us know below. In the mean time, I heard a noise I should probably check out.

This post is loosely based on an Anthropology in Practice original, Don't Go In There! Ten Lessons from Our Favorite Horror Movies.

The views expressed are those of the author(s) and are not necessarily those of Scientific American.

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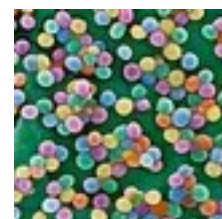
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