

THE SEARCH FOR LOST FEAR: THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE HORROR FAN IN TERMS OF SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural studies has contributed to a move to wider cultural investigation in sociology-orientated media research and increasingly in sociology itself. This, however, must not be seen as an absolutely new beginning. Much more, it represents a renewal of socio-cultural approaches which have played an important role in sociology since it began. Nevertheless, for a long time these approaches have been forced into the background by mainstream sociological theory which essentially reduced society to its basic structures (see Crane 1994). Georg Simmel and Max Weber have already made it clear that society should be understood in its cultural dimension and that it must be examined in respect to its cultural make-up.

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Therefore, Weber, giving the example of the modern press, called for an examination of the effects of "objective" social forms on modern lifestyle and on the subjective individual. This was in 1910, at the very first German Sociology Conference. Weber understood the press as a topic for significant cultural research and he felt that its impact on the individual had to be investigated. On creating the idea that sociology was a cultural science, Weber stressed forcefully that media research ought to be pursued as cultural analysis. In the last few years, due to cultural studies alone, this insight has once again become the basis of research.

At the same time, studies of media audiences carried out in this field go back to semiotic analysis and, above all, to ethnographic methods. Those were developed along the lines of the Chicago School. In his book, *Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies* (1992), Norman Denzin showed how closely these two research traditions are linked. In our team's research, "Media Culture and Ways of Life",¹ we took up the "cultural studies audience experiment" (Nightingale 1996) together with the concept of the social world as developed by Anselm Strauss and Howard Becker following the traditions of symbolic interactionism (Strauss 1978; Becker 1982). In accordance with Shibutani, Strauss (1978, p. 119) suggests these basic characteristics of a social world: "Each social world is a 'universe of regularised mutual response.'" "Each is an arena in which there is a kind of organisation." Also each is a "cultural area," its boundaries being "set neither by territory nor formal membership but by the limits of effective communication." This perspective made it possible to examine the life-styles, the social activities along with the relationships of the media audience within their own circles. A media culture is formed by this audience's use and appropriation of the media or of a specific genre within it. This method fills a gap that exists in many studies in this field. The problem arises when researchers begin with a particular text and, therefore, concentrate principally on the text-audience-interaction specific to the text or genre in question. This interaction must be understood as a primary activity, in accordance with Strauss.

In the following report, I will discuss essential aspects of the social world of the horror fan and a few of the processes which Becker (1986) calls "Doing Things Together." I will do this in order to illustrate the role which symbolic interactionism can play in cultural studies because of its ethnographical traditions and its experience in qualitative research. In particular, I will look at the different types of fans, who, by means of their practices, are crucially involved in the social world's existence and its continuing survival. To begin with, it should be emphasized that those questions which dominate public discourse on horror fans have not determined our research, since we formed this beyond media effects research. Our research is neither shaped by the question of whether people become deviant or violent because of horror videos nor by the problem of why people are, in general, fascinated by the depiction of violence and action. As is well known, there is a vast amount of literature in this area. This has existed since antiquity but only a few certain conclusions have been reached.² The effects of horror and violent films are,

however, classified as particularly dangerous since the following have been suspected on numerous occasions, though to date, they have (still) not been proven: "loss of creativity, loss of one's own initiative, social and ethical disorientation, loss of imagination, isolation, social disintegration, construction of a consumer orientation, increasing fear, heightened aggression and a negative image of women, etc." (Kunczik 1987, p. 129).

We are not concerned with questions of influence but, in the tradition of symbolic Interactionism (Becker 1963; Blumer 1969), (1) with the ethnographical research of processes in acquiring horror films as well as further activities in the social world of fans; (2) with the way in which fans produce their situated versions of these processes and of the social world as a whole; (3) above all, therefore, with the question as to the meaning the viewers themselves ascribe to their customs when dealing with horror films. Therefore, we reject the monocausal essays about influence in media research. These start from individual factors such as catharsis, habitualization or stimulation and reduce the viewer to a passive one. Instead, we consider the basic insight of symbolic interactionism as helpful: "They believe that the human being is active from the moment of birth to death. The important question becomes one of understanding how humans develop their own accounts and motives for explaining their actions to one another" (Denzin 1992, p. 24). The media texts do not appear at the center of the research, as is the case in much cultural studies work, but rather the "lived experiences" of fans, their subjective perspective, in the sense of Becker, and their respective situation in the social world.

During an ethnographic field study that lasted several years, we have tried to reach a "thick description" (Geertz 1973) of the fan culture and to write narratives of how the fans do things together (Becker 1986; Richardson 1990). The aim is to acquaint the reader who does not know the culture of horror fans from their own view with their world and to show the processes, the framework of experience in which practices are produced, understood and interpreted. As opposed to much cultural studies research, therefore, a wide empirical basis is necessary. In order to create this, we have combined various methods: participant observation, narrative as well as biographical interviews, group discussions, analysis of films and newspapers and the use of field notes as well as field diaries. In terms of methodology, this research strategy was essentially a form of triangulation (cf. Denzin 1970) which in our view is the most suitable way for an ethnography. The data, collected in different ways, was brought together at the time of organizing our study. The formation of types with regard to how fans participated in their social world resulted from the precedent of using comparison groups for validation as Glaser and Strauss (1967) had done. This method of using data was aimed at the development of a grounded theory of fan culture.

THE SOCIAL WORLD OF THE HORROR FAN

Communication and Activities

In order to define the position of an individual fan within their social world, it was necessary to examine how he or she participates within that world. Among other things, fans are distinguished by a specialized interest, by a particular way of ordering reality and by certain routines. The analysis of these forms will reveal crucial aspects of the social world of the horror fan which at first remains invisible to the outsider. If he (she) has not already done so, the ethnographer will become aware of the existence of the social world whenever he (she) holds his (her) first fanzine³ or is given the chance to visit a "convention." It is precisely in this way that we see, as a rule, fans are not isolated individuals with an obscure hobby. Rather, in various ways, they are integrated into a social world that is both local and international. This world is distinguished by specific activities. Two of these, the viewing and the acquiring of horror films, are presented here in some more detail.

Firstly, it can be seen in activities associated with a viewing by a fan that horror films are usually seen on video since they do not often appear in cinemas or on television or, if they do, it is in a censored format. On viewing, many fans close windows, shut blinds—even on summer days—and switch off the lights. A few even turn away from any conversation during this time. By copying the conditions of a cinema, they create a framework in the sense of Goffman (1974) and this gives the film a more intensive effect and heightens the enjoyment. Parents, to achieve these effects, must watch the films when their children are in bed. This means these "little escapes" become all the more intensive because they simultaneously provide a release from family life.

Besides the solitary viewing, horror films are often seen in groups. It is precisely this shared experience of fear and horror which creates pleasure and effective alliances. Therefore, we could show that, for young fans, video consumption is a group event, shaped by social intercourse and liveliness. As it is with young fans, so older fans also develop solidarity in the face of the threat of the monster(s). In a framework which is beyond the everyday, horror, fear and salvation can be experienced together. Now and then, fear also changes into identification with the attacker. Particularly impressive in this respect was the visit to an annual fantasy film festival in Paris, which has been taking place since 1972:

The aggressive and emphatic rhythmical music, which we have heard since entering the "Palais de la Mutualité," has become even louder. The auditorium, which we can see from the press-box is filling up gradually and changes into a type of arena. Many of those fans who are present, making up the largest part of the audience, "play" with one another: A few of them are dressed up. Once, twice, a costumed actor from a film even emerged to be greeted with a loud howling. The audience hunt and scrap with each other, they roar at each other and laugh. In addition, they pelt each other with bags of flour, use water pistols and now and again set off

fire-crackers. I'm glad that, because of my companion's press-card, I did not have to join that carnivalesque hustle and bustle against my will. In the press-box, the audience behaves just as one normally behaves in this time-honoured Paris theatre. Then, when two men, one around 60 with white hair and the other about 20 years younger, sit in front of us, the auditorium is filled with great excitement. A roar begins, hats fly through the air and parts of the audience make threatening gestures. Tony Curtis, whose daughter appeared in the cult film "Halloween" and who for a short time has himself been producing horror films, and Dario Argento, star director and winner of the festival, do not allow themselves to be affected, however. They greet the audience only briefly. Soon, the film "Opera" begins. This is a modified version by Argento of *Phantom of the Opera*. The roars from the audience have become so loud we can only understand fragments of the soundtrack. When the Phantom appears for the first time, loud calls of "Tuez, tuez" ring out. The depiction of the murder, backed by the music of Verdi, convinces me that the film has not been cut. My companion, who is watching a new style horror film for the first time, has long since closed her eyes. When we leave the theatre, she confesses, exhausted after several "Tuez"/Verdi interludes, that she will never forget these few hours (Excerpt from field notes).

The unusual scene which played out in the auditorium is a very strong reminder of Bakhtin's description of the carnival (1968) as a form of popular entertainment. This is characterised by laughter and physical sensations, nonsense and parody, by eccentricity and exaggeration. In this respect, it presents a form of "resistance" against sense, subjectivity and responsibility. Therefore, in the case of the fans who were departing from viewing the video, the meaning transmitted by speech was less important than the threat created by the spectacle of pictures on screen. No one in the auditorium could escape the carnival bustle. Those taking part in the festival, who were exposed to the noise and pictures and were, as a rule, covered by flour and, to some degree, soaked, can be seen laughing, applauding, booing and repeating individual lines of dialogue together. This is used creatively by the audience while they watch the film. As at the Happening, the distance between the viewer and the performance is reduced.

The various examples make it clear that a horror film is treated differently, even on viewing. Horror fans are by no means a passive consumer, but rather they adopt films actively, by participating. This is also shown by the fact that all films, particularly those considered important and valuable to the fan communities, are those which are viewed several times. Many fans believe a good film is one you want to see again.

In contrast to fans of television series (Jenkins 1992), horror fans have problems as the films they love are, as a rule, censored or banned in most countries. Therefore, it is a very important question to ask how they are able to acquire the desired film as intact as possible. Firstly, there are the neighboring countries. If the films are not available there, German fans, for example, obtain them from mail order firms in Malaysia, Hong Kong, or the United States. This makes it a very expensive hobby. Therefore, fans are presented with opportunities to buy films together. There is a great solidarity among fans since they happily make their video collection, which is often costly, available to other fans, though not to outsiders of whom they are naturally suspicious. Long term contacts and even friendships arise

because of activities such as exchanging or loaning videos. Films are leant and swapped at club conventions. In order to be kept informed about interesting films, many fans have subscribed to the writings of the Federal Board of Censors which list those texts liable to corrupt young people and which regularly include information on banned films.

A large part of activities and contacts which are upheld by young and old fans involve, therefore, acquiring "censored films." The Federal Board of Censors acts as a censor in the sense of Foucault. In connection with the works of Michel Foucault, we can describe the board of censors as an "ordering": "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourse, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory divisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions" (Foucault 1980, p. 194). Censorship is a "playing with power," it is not possessed but practised. In a network of relations which is permanently changing, "points of resistance" also always belong to that power. Therefore, practices of fans are carried out in resistance to those of the board of censors, which are formed on aesthetic and moral grounds. For this reason, fans already find the practices attractive. The social world of fans is, in certain ways, a "counter-public sphere." This would probably look quite different without the power of the censors, if it could exist at all. Besides this, there are further important activities which fans integrate into their specialized world, such as acquisition and demonstration of knowledge, production and collection of fanzines, collection of films and other objects or conversations and gossip.

Above all else, communication by media dominates the formation and maintenance of contacts, leads to the removal of restrictions on the social world and increases the possibility for effective communication (Shibutani 1955). Fanzines, discussions on the Internet (cf. Wetzstein et al. 1995), cinema and video magazines, program guides—basically all secondary and tertiary texts as defined by Fiske (1987, pp. 84-85)—spread information about films, about activities dealing with films and events within that social world (e.g., festivals and conventions). This communications network plays a decisive role in the development of a common perspective. Groups who are bound by this communication network, differ due to varying forms of participation and, along with this, they differ in the level of integration in the social world (cf. Unruh 1983). The horror social world is a relatively open "cultural area" in the sense of Shibutani and Strauss. Limits are not specified by territorial border lines, formal affiliation or bureaucratic roles, but only by the decision to accept the social world and cognitively identify with it and its "limits of effective communication."

The social interrelationships of fans are, therefore, not an artificial creation steered by the culture industry. Rather, they are active constructs which, nevertheless, are based on the handicaps of that industry. Howard Becker (1976, p. 703) defined a social world "as consisting of all those people and organisations whose activity is necessary to produce the kind of events and objects which that world characteristically produces." This definition emphasizes the fact that social worlds

are based on the co-ordinating practices of their members which produce the world, as well as the meaning of social objects and events in that world.

A particular interest in horror films leads, therefore, to the constitution of a community that isolates itself from other groups, particularly groups of "non-fans," and from the rest of its environment. This is done by means of the cultural texts, practices and experiences which members in that society share. From the analysis of our data, it was clear that we could divide the world of horror fans into four different social types.⁴ These were the novice, the tourist, the buff and the freak.⁵ This implies that in the context of fan culture, there exist a number of heterogeneous practices of reception and appropriation that lead to common yet also to differing experiences, forms of knowledge and relationships. In the following, we will look, above all, at the dimension of emotional experience.

The Novice

Among the viewers we examined, the novices were those who, as a rule, first had negative experiences of horror films, mostly of splatter movies. Today we take it for granted that everyone is familiar with the horror genre because, for almost 25 years, its icons and themes have been forcing their way into popular commercial culture. In reality, however, the first "interaction" with new horror films is often an unpleasant experience for many viewers because of extremely realistic scenes of violence. This is connected to visual shocks, disgust and feelings of fear. Often, novices would not watch these films all the way to the end. They are not interested in or are not prepared for the "involvement"⁶ required at each viewing. This can be linked to their biography or their cultural history⁷ or even to the fact that they must first acquaint themselves with the conventions and rules of the genre.

This is the case even for audiences with a greater experience of films, for example, the cineastes. They have unavoidable negative experiences because they are not used to the detailed and explicit depiction of violence or because they reject this on aesthetic or moral grounds due to their cultural background. They are (at first) overwhelmed by the figural production (cf. Lash 1988). This is shaped by spectacles and they cannot distance themselves from it by perceiving and enjoying them for their technical production as special effects. As Goffman said, they cannot (at first) cope with the layering of reality that exists in these films. Within this structure, violence, horror and disgust are only the necessary accompaniment to the experience of the more unusually aesthetic and psychological layers. For the novices, who perceive films in the context of this framework, horror films primarily cause negative emotions. Only with difficulty can they free themselves from this perception. He (she) sees splatter movies primarily as an orgy of blood and violence and this is because he (she) has been influenced by the taboo breaking, excessive scenes.

Roy, 21: I think, horror films have no meaning at all, they're only entertainment. I mean, what are you supposed to take as a meaning? If someone gets their head chopped off with a circular saw, what significance does it have? Maybe, it's saying if you work with a saw, keep it far enough away from your head?

Fred, 42 (video librarian): There's a certain group of customers who only want to watch horror films. That means—and I want to state this quite bluntly—there are video freaks, the rejects of humanity, who watch these films. These who bring money to the shop are usually unemployed and the rejects of humanity. Yeah, if you live off these people, you've got to stock these films.

As a rule, this causes the novice to turn away quickly from the films again and also to avoid any closer relationships with fans, that is presuming he or she has actually met any. He (she) also cannot make the necessary references to deal with many of the activities and events within the social world. For example, what happens at a horror meeting at a half-ruined castle? How and why do you become a leader in a fanclub? He (she) resembles the stranger, as described by Schütz (1944/1972). In order to find his or her way in a world which is new to him or her, he (she) needs explicit knowledge not only of "what" but also of "why." The knowledge of the novice is also only marginal and unsystematic. He or she knows none of the recent directors and also knows nothing about the background to the splatter genre. He or she brands these films as blood and butchery films which always show the same things: scenes of murder, cruelty, dismembered corpses, and so on. Among novices, feelings of aversion and disgust dominate. They are unable to take enjoyment in the film and even if they watch it to the end they do not manage to accept or enjoy the art horror.

Likewise, the novice cannot perceive the depiction of violent scenes in the context of the horror genre. Therefore, he or she cannot differentiate between purely exploitative films and films which are more culturally complex, such as *Evil Dead* in which the depiction of violence is treated from a distance with reflection and irony.

Frank, 19: "Evil Dead" ought to be a cult film. Personally, I think "Evil Dead" has very little plot. It's just butchery.

Many novices do not manage to grasp adequately the significance of the plot and of the effects of splatter movies, never mind the significance of references to the film itself or to others in the genre. At the same time, he cannot grasp the criticism of society and of civilization by many independent producers. However, it is precisely the genre's habit of referring to itself which is one of the essential aspects on which horror films are founded. They take it for granted that the audience has had previous experience and therefore is acquainted to some degree with the development of plots and with the effects which should be expected. They also presume that the audience know with what they have become involved. Only if a

viewer meets all these pre-conditions will he or she be able to properly enjoy the film. In this context, the generation specific style of reception can be identified (cf. Willis et al. 1990; Vogelgesang 1991). Adults find it more difficult to become involved in the films because generally their dealings with audio-visual realities are not so intimate as those of young people, among whom horror films are very popular. It is almost possible to speak of a perception gap, because young people enjoy the symbolic interaction with horror films and can create their own elementary aesthetic of terror (Willis et al. 1990).

Ronald, 19: In the group once, we saw a horror film, don't know what it was called. Anyway, I sat there on the armchair at home, everything was dark and my cigarette ash fell because I was so on edge ... Or, I was frightened half to death, like someone behind me grabbed my shoulder. There I was, right in the film. I've never experienced anything so great in any other type of film.

The desire to experience intense fear and excitement is the precondition for the "involvement" needed to move from being a novice to being a tourist and, therefore, to penetrate farther into the social world.

The Tourist

Normally, we understand a tourist to be a person who undertakes a journey in order to experience pleasure and diversion as he or she discovers foreign lands and cultures. In general, they are seen searching for cultural experiences which characteristically are out of the ordinary.

In the same way, horror tourists are fascinated, for example, by the special effects in splatter movies. By this, we do not only mean the extremely realistic depiction of violence but also, as is often forgotten, the monster. A very popular film among fans was *The Fly* by David Cronenberg. The physical transformations that appear in the film are, on one hand, horrifying and on the other, fascinating because they show an unusual creature that exceeds our imagination. Special effects guarantee the authenticity needed for the depiction to have an impact. It is, however, always important for fans to know that the depicted scenes have been artificially produced.

Interestingly, all fans object to the film *Faces of Death*, which was advertised as containing only scenes of real killings. This objection is based on the following correlation. In order to enjoy watching a horror film, it is important to see it in its frame correctly. According to Goffman (1974), this frame which fans apply when watching a film, is a "fiction frame." Within the film, special effects produce a "key." There is an impression of authenticity as "apparent" reality is created out of fiction and meaning is transformed through an "act as if" process. If it becomes too much for the fan, he or she is able to distance himself from events again by using the frame of "film fiction." The novice can only do this with difficulty or dislike,

assuming he or she can do it at all. A film like *Faces of Death* prevents this from its outset because it has a different frame. The ability to handle the frame of horror films (with pleasure) makes the difference between the horror-tourist and the horror-novice who is not yet able to manipulate the rules separating fiction and reality or is not interested in doing this. Because the horror-tourist is already acquainted with fictional violence, blood and horror, he or she is in the position to develop a more effective frame for interpretation than that of the novice. He or she sees through the film's keying of reality.

Nevertheless, his or her knowledge of films cannot be described as a deeper specialization, as it is in the case of the buff or the freak. The tourist knows only as much as is needed to enjoy the films with relish. In horror films, the horror-tourist looks for intense experiences that are strongest if he or she views them instinctively. He or she aims to use it as a form of freedom, allowing himself a short-lived attempt at escape from the day-to-day obligations and routines (Cohen and Taylor 1976). For this, the tourist can use exciting action, gore feasts but also the fantastical worlds in horror films. The last of these is attractive precisely because things happen there which lie beyond the frame of our cultural imagination. The cognitive interest of fans is directed with particular delight at the impossible and the unknown.

Martin, 29: What is really fascinating in horror films is that you can never say for sure the story is beyond the confines of reality and yet, you can also never say for sure these events could never happen. The attraction is to play with fantasy. Your imagination can go a little further than the murder happening round the corner.

The desire to satisfy a curiosity for fantasy and to become a "local" motivates the tourist to stay longer in the horror social world. The extremely realistic scenes of violence and the experiences that are linked to them become tiresome after a while.

Fred, 27: The excitement and the feeling of turmoil aren't there any more. You get colder somehow, more hardened and then, you find a lot of it is just boring because you've already seen it or else you know the trick behind it.

Because of this monotony and the trivialization of the attraction of shock and the aesthetics of terror on the whole, many tourists find nothing else new or exciting; they cannot secure another out of the ordinary experience. Therefore, many of them turn away from the horror social world either temporarily or else permanently. Others will continuously try to use the film as a means to escape their everyday world. To do this, they utilize, above all, fantasy aspects of the genre, of which the monsters and their victims, as well as their production, are just one element, although an important one. For these fans, the mere search for experiences

is no longer enough; they want to know about the films and the genre. Their curiosity drives them on; they now meet with other fans and so become horror-buffs.

The Buff

In contrast to the horror-novice and the tourist, the buff is situated at the heart of the fans' social world and is one of its essential representatives. He or she has developed a lasting interest in horror films and has participated in the social world for several years or even decades. The tourist, on the other hand, can be defined by a rather short-term involvement. The great experience of the buffs is revealed most clearly when they process horror films with reference to their experience.

Kurt, 27: Over the years, I've formed a sort of anti-lock system. In all films of the genre, therefore, you can recognise by music or camera direction that something is going to happen and, as a rule, the majority of the audience falls for it....Then, I don't watch the screen, but look round the cinema and laugh my head off when the people there are startled.

In this statement, the "real fans'" need for distinction is also evident. They want to be separated from those who are "not real fans." Unlike novices and tourists, Kurt is no longer so easily frightened because of his greater awareness. This is the case for almost all buffs. Many were able to tell us the last film that had unnerved them and how good that film had therefore seemed. It is very difficult for the "real fan" to experience fear and disgust.

Splatter movies, in which plot backs down in favor of the spectacular, eventually lose their spectacular character. The buffs can be identified, therefore, by their ability to distinguish films more subtly.

Kurt, 27: So, I don't particularly like to look at the contents but more often at how it is made, because you've already seen hundreds or even thousands of films. I pay much more attention to the standard of acting, to how well the make-up is done, to the lighting, or to where the mistakes are...where something has been forgotten during editing.

Kurt values the film in a similar way to a film critic. On one hand, every detail of the film becomes important and potentially an "experience" for him. On the other, he enjoys experiencing emotions on watching a film, even if it is only to a limited degree. He likes the fact that, unlike many viewers, he has learned to keep his emotions under control. He has managed to turn fear into pleasure because while he is watching, he is able again and again to identify clearly that he is enjoying fiction. He swings between distance and fascinated participation. This ability distinguishes him clearly from the tourist and the novice.

Peter, 29: If I've this tingle then the film was good. Then, it has got through to me....that's why you remember good films.

Horst, 31: The purely splatter movie is quickly forgotten. There's nothing exciting in them. You don't get that certain tingle from them.

Both Peter and Horst show, therefore, a more cultivated taste. They don't say they are looking for scenes of blood or horror, but rather they prefer those horror videos that give them a pleasant thrill. At best, they like to feel some sort of "tingle." The negative emotions, which novices and tourists associate with horror films and which, in a way, are the ticket needed to enter the fantasy world, are reduced to a minimum among buffs. Therefore, they can concentrate on the "pleasant" aspects of the genre and of horror. They no longer delight in the revelation of the monster in the course of the story. The monster, therefore, arouses their curiosity and their interest because it lies beyond what can be imagined in an everyday situation but can be taken for granted within the genre frame of horror films.

In addition, deciphering "tricks" and effects become a special delight for fans. The fascination lies in the fact that the pictures seem like reality without actually being real. Part of the buff's media competence is his/her ability to simultaneously sort the pictures and to enjoy them. Monsters and also blood orgies and butchery are not perceived as a depiction of reality but rather as spectacles produced by effects. In this context, the commercial fan magazine, *Fangoria*, plays an important role. It reports in detail about monsters and their production process. In this way, awareness is increased and there is preparation for meeting the monsters and their victims. In addition, pictures about new monsters arouse interest for films and for the stories in which the monsters play a role. How has this monster developed? What explanation does the story offer for it? Can it be defeated? Here too, the motive of curiosity clearly comes to fruition. This curiosity is directed on the bizarre, the puzzling and the unknown. Buffs have also learned that they can only satisfy their curiosity if they are ready to bear disgust, fear and horror. It is, therefore, essential that depicted events are fictional and horror scenarios are embedded in the context of the plot.

Heinz, 35: That stuff in horror films is all exaggeration, fantasy.... Like, if it was a traffic accident and someone there was seriously injured, that's much more shocking.

Lisa, 29: Horror films and reality are two different things.... Certainly, there are also completely brutal events in everyday life, like when someone is killed or an attack takes place. But what's that to do with horror scenes in films? Even if someone is dissected there, according to all the rules of that art, it's still only tricks, well-made special effects.... It is how those effects are produced that is really interesting.

Even this excerpt from an interview with Lisa emphasizes that understanding special effects gives enjoyment. These are, on the one hand, tricks, and, on the

other, they produce fear and threatening feelings. Lisa, therefore, separates reality and fiction clearly. This ability to differentiate between film experiences and those of everyday life is already pronounced among young buffs.

Moreover, it should be said that buffs perform many of their hobbies in the social world and, therefore, they are integrated into this world. They know its individual elements—films, festivals, conventions, fanzines, and so forth—and they perceive them as interdependent. Their relationship stands out on the background of their identification with the social world because of their high degree of intimacy.

The Freak

The last step in the media career of the horror fan is that of the freak. Freaks share many characteristics with buffs yet differ from these in so far as the freak's productivity is as important for him as watching films. Therefore, the freaks write their own film criticisms, horror stories and publish fanzines. Moreover, they organize film festivals and conventions. Freaks are therefore the real creators of the scene; they care for its survival and its operations. In addition, they are passionate collectors, who create for themselves their own meaningful world which they can enjoy with relish.

With regard to their experiences, the buff and the freak are, at first sight, very similar. Due to their great "horror literacy," both are rarely frightened and scarcely feel any fear or disgust. For example, concerning a good horror film and his last experience of shock, Toni, 33, says:

In a good horror film, there just must be the thrill in it, a good plot.... Funnily, the last time I was frightened wasn't at a film but by an American TV-production which appeared on video under the title "Annihilator." There's a scene in it, which I've since seen twice. I was frightened each time I saw it and found that good in some way. Since then, this video has remained in my archives at home because I still find this film good somehow.

Here, Toni demonstrates his knowledge as a freak and therefore the difference between himself and other fans. He has been frightened by a film, which is generally little known but which he knows very well. What fascinated him so much about this scene?

Toni, 33: Someone turns round and suddenly has practically a robot's face and this is also half burnt off and a minute before it had been a woman. It's done so abruptly and you have no idea what is coming. My God, when I saw that. The whole time, the tension was growing and then that.

It is the revelation of a monster that was wrongly thought to be a human being which Toni felt was the high point of the film. Even here, it becomes clear that the fascination with objects of art horror can be put down to the fact that they harm the

natural frames within which we logically perceive and order the world. Films arouse the "cognitive appetite" (Hobbes) of fans and satisfy it with surprising performances by impossible creatures which we cannot categorize. Despite the momentary shock, Toni remembers this experience as very pleasant and enjoyable.

Elsewhere, Toni describes horror videos as a psychological test. Here is another clear difference from the buff. Freaks use videos specifically to develop self-awareness. They value dealings with intensive feelings and films can make this possible by presenting something beyond reason, in this case in the form of monsters.

Toni, 33: This scene when this half-mutilated person again begins to fight. In principle, that's nothing but the depiction of absolute madness.

Rudi also confirms this desire for self-awareness in the symbolic interaction with horror films.

Rudi, 30: Because I like to analyze myself, that is, how I react to various films, I find my reaction, especially at extreme splatter movies, much more interesting than the film itself. Therefore, I don't reject many films because the plot was perhaps poor. Rather I enjoy a film if it manages to free one of my emotions.

Horror films, in particular controversial or banned splatter movies, create the opportunity for Rudi to observe himself and, in a certain way, also to define himself. At the focal point stand dealings with emotions that are aroused by films and which are the reward for the imaginary exploration of the impossible.

Rudi: Take, for example, *Street Trash*, which I personally believe contains the roughest script I've ever known. The film is simply dreadful from beginning to end. But it does arouse an emotion in the audience. A boring or a bad film wouldn't be able to do that normally. Having said that, I don't think that those films which arouse emotions should be approved unreservedly. If a "Rambo" film affects a viewer in such a way he wants to copy it, that's of course wrong. But the scientific side of it, of myself and how I react to the film, interests me. The most extreme emotion I've ever felt was utter disgust.

It becomes clear in conversations with Rudi and with many other fans that their enjoyment is made even more intense by precisely that cultural idea which claims that controversial or banned films with an excessive depiction of violence could prompt imitation. This is particularly so if the films are set in modern everyday life, like *Street Trash* or use themes like mass murder or rape, which do happen almost as they are portrayed or which are easy to imagine, such as in *Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on Your Grave*. In Rudi's case in particular, it is interesting that he tries to analyze scientifically the films and his responses to them. As Carroll

(1990) showed, many plots of horror films follow the principles of a positivistic development of knowledge. There are several hypotheses for an unexplained event. These are disproved or verified by the revelation of the monster. Rudi analyzes feelings which accompany this response, just like a scientist. In this situation he considers himself an object which can be analyzed and so moves at a distance from his feelings. This practice is probably also an attempt to maintain control over his feelings. Freaks deal with horror videos in a very reflexive way. It is almost possible to speak of self-practice, in the sense of Foucault (1985).

When they interact with other fans, freaks strive desperately to appear distinctive. They like to show their phenomenal knowledge of horror films and of their social world. They report the important social activities and refer to their exclusive and extensive collection of films, books, posters, and so forth. While, for example, Jenkins (1992), in the case of television series, has emphasized the democratic and anti-hierarchical aspect of their respective fan cultures, horror fans demonstrate that within their own world, there *are* hierarchies. Freaks who know more than others and who therefore can more easily rework horror films for their own aims (e.g., for critiques or to write their own stories) are the main critics or leaders of opinions in this scene. They often try to push through their interpretations of films. These, however, are not simply accepted by the other fans. These fans value the knowledge and competence of the freaks. They accept the hierarchy in relation to factual knowledge of films but otherwise place more value on their own interpretations.

From the Novice to the Freak: The Search for Lost Fear and the Development of Productivity

As we have seen, in order to rise in the horror fans' social world, the viewer must first be able to turn negative feelings, which are linked to watching a film, into enjoyment and pleasure. If horror is a pleasant experience, the first step has been taken. We were not occupied with the fulfilment of needs, but with a form of imaginative hedonism.

Negative emotions, such as fear, horror and disgust, which arise in the symbolic interaction with horror films, are used by fans as a source of pleasure. Here, it is necessary for a viewer to regulate and control his/her own emotions to a large degree.

Novices abandon films if they see themselves as victims of external stimuli or, because of their cultural background, they have no aesthetic interest in the film. Tourists already have some experiences of transforming films into a source of enjoyment while they are watching them because they have learned to see their fictional frame. Films, however, become tiresome if they repeat scenarios and the tourists cannot gain a new perspective on them by means of their imagination.

In contrast, buffs and freaks can sustain their curiosity. Their greater horror literacy helps them, on one hand, to regulate their feelings so that they are not over-

whelmed by them, as can happen in the case of novices and sometimes of tourists. On the other hand, there are negative consequences since often these types have great difficulty feeling anything at all. In a certain way, therefore, they are searching for that lost fear. Buffs and freaks, however, have developed a secondary system of pleasures, whose focus is not violent scenes as is often supposed. Instead, they discover new dimensions which they can enjoy in the films and which are based on their imagination and on their extensive knowledge. For example, they consider these films in the genre's frame or they concentrate on their technical and artistic production. Every aspect of films can be made relevant for the fans and can achieve a purpose in the fans' daily routine. Here also, productivity and creativity of buffs and fans begin. Through these, the enjoyment in working with a horror text can be increased. They express this in the production of fanzines, the composition of their own stories, the sketching of horror comics and the production of their own films (cf. Winter 1995, pp. 195-213).

The different forms of productivity which we discovered during our study demonstrate that a long time spent watching horror films is not an expression of passivity, but rather a necessary condition for the development of creativity. On the whole, differences in productivity between fans only appear gradually. They spread meaning within the cultural economy of the horror social world through their signifying practices (cf. Fiske 1992). This economy can stand in the way of those intended by the culture industry. Therefore, it is possible to ascertain an intense accumulation of horror film facts by buffs and freaks. For some, this is connected to the narrative structures of horror films. In particular, the newer horror films are textually more open than classic feature films (cf. Tudor 1989) and moreover, they are shaped by references to themselves and to other films. For others, however, the attempt by fans to recycle the symbolic building blocks of the film shows that the fan's interest is a cognitive one. By re-interpreting horror films as an object of knowledge, they produce from them a meaning that does not correspond to that preferred by the structure of the media text. Therefore, we must revise the commonly held view of the horror fan. This view exists in the discourse of legitimate culture (social science, film criticisms in the feature pages, magazines, educationalists, and so on) and claims that the fan is primarily interested in violence, sadism or masochism, and occasionally that the fan is intellectually underdeveloped. It is precisely by opposing this opinion that fans find their social identity as a community of the aesthetically like-minded. Their acquisition of films shows a stylistic common ground and together, they share a "popular knowledge" of horror films as well as common purpose and activities.

Horror fans gather information about a field which, since the nineteenth century, has been considered "abnormal" in western society. They do this by means of intensive dealings with monsters, occult powers, mad men and serial killers. Michel Foucault (1977) has shown in his works how the differentiation between "normal" and "abnormal" stands at the center of a "normality apparatus (disposition)." This is interested in controlling, homogenizing and standardizing modern

society. Horror fans concentrate their interests, therefore, on phenomena which power separates from the "normal." In exploring the border between normal and abnormal, the fans question how self-evident this border is. At the same time, they provide the unrepresentable (cf. Denzin 1991, p. 75) a firm place in the social world by means of their various activities. While the post-modern everyday life is stamped by the category of "normality," which is a value that binds and dominates western society, it is also a starting point for imaginary discoveries of the deviating, the different, the heterogeneous. This occurs in the counterculture of horror fans, whose history begins with a love of gothic novel. The controlled, socially organized dealings of horror fans with the abnormal shows that this rejection of normality remains limited to the field of the imagination.

CONCLUSION

This ethnography of the horror fans' social world has made it clear how different and varied the experiences and practices of fans can be. Therefore, they develop in a distinct social world in whose construction they are actively involved, relating techniques of emotion management to the context of the social world. Their experiences, their emotional involvement as well as their operation network (e.g., fan clubs) are clear signs that there exists a "neo-tribe" which is an aesthetic and affective community, as Maffesoli (1995) suggested. This theory suggests that the everyday routine of post-modern life can be distinguished through the expression of a multitude of local rationalism and contrasting values.

While in many cultural studies investigations, various interpretations and appropriations of media texts are examined, the social world perspective of Symbolic Interactionism makes it possible to emphasize how fans create the basis for communities and a common culture which last beyond the viewing of a film, for example. This is done through shared activities, organizations, communication networks and purposes. The social world perspective can thus contribute to future research into questions of how communities of media consumers spread and organize themselves physically over a longer period of time. Through this, a gap in the research of fan culture to date can be closed.

Besides, fan cultures are reflexive communities in the sense of Lash (1994). They are chosen by their own members and their survival depends on those members' productive and creative practices. With this, the problem of their creation and re-invention becomes greater than for a traditional community. Even in the research into these processes, symbolic interactionism can complete the investigations of cultural studies by means of anti-deterministic traditions that stress the creative potential of individuals and groups (Strauss 1978, p. 120).

Over and above that, our study, following the methodology that has been examined here, illustrates that the value of ethnography in media research, as conceived from cultural sociology, lies in the fact that it makes possible thick descriptions

from contextual processes. Also, it contributes, in this way, to our ability to understand the reception and the appropriation of the media as well as the connected practices which are established in the fans' social world. The study is, admittedly, only a first step on the way to an analysis of the full context in which media consumption occurs in a post-modern society.

The "cultural turn," as led by cultural studies (Hall 1997), does not mean that everything becomes culture. Rather, it means that the cultural dimensions of social processes are to be adequately considered. The processes in this case are the perspectives and practices of the fans. Only in this way can the real and complex relationship between culture, social practice and power be demonstrated (cf. Grossberg 1995). Recently, the critique of "cultural populism" (McGuigan 1992) has overlooked all too easily the fact that the perspective of media audiences was ignored as insignificant for too long and that one, but not the only, hope for cultural criticism and social change lies hidden in the productivity and the creativity of the fans. For further research, therefore, it is important to refine and to continue the "cultural studies' audience experiment" with new methods and theories. Moreover, the project of cultural studies seems to be the best frame for research because of its principles of openness, flexibility and radical examination in relation to the context. These overcome the divisions of individual conventions and disciplines and so contribute to a fruitful discussion on the other side of the artificial border.

NOTES

1. Our team was formed in 1986 at the University of Trier. Having completed a socio-cultural analysis of the correlation between media history and the history of cultural differentiation (Winter and Eckert 1990), we carried out studies into the culture of videos (Eckert et al. 1991a) and of computers (Eckert et al. 1991b), into the sadomasochistic subculture (Wetzstein et al. 1993) and also into the culture of computer networks (Wetzstein et al. 1995).

2. These questions become important to us when the horror fans themselves consider them. How do they deal with these problems? How do they begin this "discourse"?

3. A fanzine is a magazine produced by fans themselves and sold at cost price.

4. According to Goffman (1974), the social categories of "novice" and of "tourist" have the value of metaphors which are used to explore the social world and to order the empirical data.

5. For this, we follow closely the conventions of phenomenological sociology and symbolic interactionism. Important works in this context are, for example, Alfred Schütz's essay on "Strangers" (1944/1972), Dean MacCannell's book on the tourists (1976), William F. Whyte's *Street Corner Society* (1943), Herbert Gans *Urban Villagers* (1962) and the attempt to systematize by David Unruh (1983) who, referring to social worlds, was able to show the difference between "stranger, tourist, regular and insider." In the field of film research, Bruce Austin (1981), referring to fans of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, was able to show the difference between "first-timers, veterans and regulars," categories which he linked to how frequently each fan would visit.

6. Goffman (1963, p. 43) defines involvement in the following way: "Involvement refers to the capacity of an individual to give, or withhold from giving, his concerted attention to some activity at hand."

7. Cf. Denzin's (1995, p. 261 ff.) analysis of different interpretations of *Natural Born Killers*, above all, those shaped by respective ethnic contexts.

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EVANGELICAL CHRISTIANS' RESPONSES TO POPULAR CULTURE: TOWARD AN EVALUATIVE SCHEMA

Todd Rendleman

The purpose of this study is to provide insight into the ways that evangelical Christians engage and evaluate popular culture. To this end, I have observed and audiotaped several evangelical Christians' reactions to representations of Christianity in the film *Dead Man Walking*, and I will trace the ontological underpinnings that influence the ways in which they respond to the film. In analyzing their significance-making processes, I propose that many of their reactions to the movie are guided by a theory of evaluation that emphasizes the pedagogical possibilities of artistic expression. Examining the ways in which this group makes judgments and the values that undergird those judgments is important because it can provide more nuanced understandings of evangelical Christian ethos and spectatorship, thus facilitating subcultural understanding both inside and outside of their community.

As a researcher of audience reception, I align myself with the cultural studies turn toward ethnography as "a challenge to the necessary pairing of ideology and