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The Horror Genre

Stephen King once wrote in the text "Why We Crave Horror Movies" that we have to "keep the alligator fed". This means that we have to feed our own desire, the hidden inclinations and the dark sides of our personality.

He also mentions that we watch horror movies to dare our own fear, and we watch it even if we get scared.

The horror-genre evokes psychological, physical as well as emotional reactions among the viewers or readers. That is precisely the reason why the genre is so vigorous and has existed for centuries. It simply appeals to all parts of human nature; "It explores the limits of what people are capable of doing and experiencing" as J.A Cuddon says in his book *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory (1992)*. The horror-genre focuses on everything normal people are afraid of, such as "death, afterlife, punishment, darkness, evil, violence and destruction" (J.A Cuddon, op. cit.)

One typical element which is widely used is the gothic setting. The weather is often used in this respect. When something scary is about to happen, it always gets stormy, rainy or gloomy. This artistic effect is a convention that has been part of the horror-genre ever since it was developed.

Another conventional element is that the story often takes place in the night when it is dark and difficult to see what is going on, or in very remote places in old mysterious mansions or houses as for instance in Bram Stoker's "Dracula" (1897) or Hitchcock's "Psycho" (1960).

An almost inevitable element is the "monster". Originally it was often a physical monster such as a vampire. The vampire figure has survived as a horror element from "Dracula" to one of the most recent horror movies, Catherine Hardwick's "Twilight" based on Stephenie Meyer's books. While in early vampire movies the vampire figure was physically special and unmistakable, the modern vampire is more realistic and appears closer to a normal human being. One could say that

the modern vampire is more of a psychological figure. But this does not make the modern vampire less scary. On the contrary, the fact that the figure is more "normal" and realistic makes it even more scary, because it is something we can relate to more easily.

In a post-modern horror movie such as Lars von Trier's "Antichrist" (2009) the main characters are totally normal people on the surface whose reactions towards each other are horrifying, nevertheless. In addition to the psychological monster figures, von Trier uses very traditional horror elements such as mysterious nature and remote places.

When successful horror stories are able to shock us, it is partly due to the expectations we have when we go to the cinema or open a book.

The expectation in itself creates a tense atmosphere, an alertness and readiness for instant action which makes you vulnerable to sudden horror. A tension is built up, you know something strange and grim is going to happen but you don't know what or when.

The horror-genre will obviously still change and develop, but it will never disappear. We "need" a genre such as that because it speaks to "deeply rooted, primitive and powerful forces, energies and fears" (J.A Cuddon. op.cit). That is the alligator we have to keep fed, as Stephen King puts it. These mainly unconscious fears will hardly disappear, however developed and mature mankind will become.