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Less Gore Is More With Horror Films

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DURHAM, N.H. - With the approach of Halloween, those seeking a scary thrill might want to watch the classic horror movie "Psycho" instead of modern gore-filled slasher movies. When it comes to horror films, less gore is more, according to a cinematic studies expert at the University of New Hampshire.

Delia Konzett, assistant professor of English at UNH, says although horror films are still very popular, many of her students tell her that today's horror films have lost their edge because they show too much gore. Instead, students say they are more frightened when the scariest moments take place partially off-screen, leaving what happens to the viewer's imagination.

"Classic horror/thriller films engage the viewers and their imaginations. Hitchcock was great at this and never underestimated the imagination of the typical moviegoer. His famous "Psycho" shower scene from 1960 did this in a masterly fashion. We never see the knife enter flesh; it's shown from various angles going through stabbing motions filmed in fast-paced and fragmented montage style that are alternated with close-ups of the shower and parts of Marion Crane's body and her face as she's screaming. These images are accompanied by stabbing sounds (knives plunged into juicy casaba melons were used for realistic sound effects) and Bernard Herrmann's unforgettable, expressionistic sound track with screeching staccato sounds mimicking stabbing sounds played by violins and other string instruments," Konzett says.

"Even though we actually see only a small amount of blood (chocolate syrup going down the drain) and very little gore, if any, in this short two-minute scene, it has profoundly scared several generations of people, especially women, with many saying they are afraid to take showers for days. Very few horror scenes have had this kind of impact," she says.

"Psycho" was ranked the No. 1 thriller by the American Film Institute on the 100th anniversary of the thriller in 2001, and the shower scene often is considered the most memorable scene in film history.

According to Konzett, Steven Spielberg's 1975 "Jaws" inspired a similar reaction with people worldwide afraid to enter the water for fear of shark attacks. Spielberg showed very little of the shark, but combined with a memorable soundtrack (by John Williams), the film engaged the viewer's imagination and has now become synonymous with lurking danger.

"Films such as 'Psycho' and 'Jaws' capture the helplessness of people, catching them when they are most vulnerable. This is why many decades later, they are still popular among the

younger generation in spite of contemporary horror films that are more sensational and filled with blood and gore," she says.

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