

# “I loved it! It was so creepy but not in a way that made me scared”

## THRILLS IN FRONT OF THE SCREEN

Sabrina Unterstell/Amelie Müller

**631 international students described thrills experienced while watching television in their childhood. The results show what programme design elements help to make excitement a pleasurable experience.**

Frightening TV experiences can have long-lasting effects: they can cause nightmares, or make people change their behaviour for years because of what they have seen (cf. Holler & Müller in this issue). Conversely, however, surviving and overcoming moments of fear can also help a person to grow. Sometimes people even consciously seek to confront their fears, or at least seek moments of tension, and enjoy exploring their own boundaries: thrills come into play here. Many television formats, especially those made for adults, are based on generating excitement, and for children too, excitement is a key motive for the use of entertainment media (Hennighausen & Schwab, 2013). But how can we offer children an exciting TV experience without frightening them?

In order to find out what characterises moments of excitement that are experienced as enjoyable, descriptions of thrills experienced while watching television were examined, and compared with descriptions of experiences of fear. The International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI), in collaboration with partners from 8 countries,<sup>1</sup> has conducted a study on

memories of fears and thrills experienced while watching television.<sup>2</sup> 631 students<sup>3</sup> responded to a questionnaire between April 2013 and January 2014. They drew a picture showing a frightening TV experience in their childhood, explained what exactly had scared them, and described their experience during and after viewing the programme. They were then asked to draw and describe a “thrill” experience, i.e. a TV experience where they perceived fear as a pleasurable emotion. The drawings and statements were evaluated in combination with an analysis of the programmes and film sequences that were mentioned.

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### FEAR AND THRILL

#### What is the difference between fear and thrill?

Fear arises in a situation that is evaluated as dangerous, and is meant to activate physical functions to protect our own boundaries (i.e. ourselves and our own aims and basic needs) (Glaserapp, 2013, p. 134f.; cf. also Glaserapp in this issue). If, however, a situation is judged to be dangerous, but we are nonetheless confident that our boundaries will not be transgressed (Balint, 2013, p. 20), then the result is a thrill, that is, a “form of sensation of fear that does not really affect us, but can be enjoyed in the awareness that the situation will

end positively” (Peterson, 1996, p. 85). Television is therefore an ideal medium for experiencing thrills, since TV content does not constitute any real danger for the viewer. This only applies, however, to physical injuries, since psychological trauma can affect not only the victim of an incident, but also the witnesses (Reddemann & Dehner-Rau, 2006). Which emotions individual viewers feel when watching television depends on how much they can distance themselves from the events on the screen, and this varies considerably from one person to the next.<sup>4</sup>

There are people who are curious about and derive pleasure from seeing gruesome things, and exploring the limits of their own emotions. Such people often have less empathy for the role of the victim, and in some cases even find something fascinating about the power held by the evil characters. They are better able to distance themselves from media events, and to experience thrills in the knowledge that the film content has no impact on reality. Others, on the other hand, have trouble distancing themselves from the events on the screen, and share in the suffering of all the characters in the film to whom bad things happen. Watching such things therefore violates their psychological boundaries, since the fictionality does not help them to distance themselves from the content. Children belong to this second group, as it is harder

gave me a thrill as they were slightly scary but they solved them and this made them less scary” (Emily, 18, New Zealand, watched the series at age 7, cf. Ill. 1). Whether or not children presuppose a positive outcome as something guaranteed by particular

formats, the hope of a happy ending is fuelled by confident heroes and heroines who seem capable of coping with the situation. The same applies, of course, to heroes who have the task of averting a threat from others. The tangible self-confidence of the characters gives rise to moments of pleasure for the viewer: “When the guy from *Taken* [Liam Neeson] gets a call from the kidnappers who have taken his daughter. The situation is thrilling and his response was fantastic,” says John (age 19, New Zealand; saw the film at age 13), remembering a scene in which the coolness of the protagonist impressed him and inspired *Angstlust* (enjoyment and excitement combined with fear).

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#### Depictions that allow distance

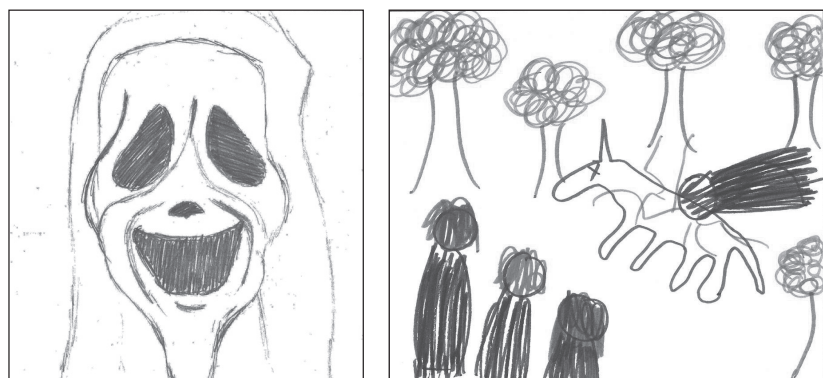
Adding pleasant feelings to moments of fear can also encourage *Angstlust*, since

this allows moments of relaxation to relieve the tension. In the study, thrilling scenes were frequently described as amusing. There were, for example, scenes where villains became ridiculous and thus lost some of their terror. Even existing fears can be minimised by an amusing context: “As a child, I was always afraid of burglars, but in this film [*Home Alone*] I found it funny,” recounts Janine (age 19, Germany, saw the film at age 11). The amusing film portrayal allowed her, for the first time, to experience a positive feeling in connection with this frightening subject. Older children and adolescents can, on this basis, enjoy watching even horror comedies. They recognise the humour in the comic scenes, and can thus distance themselves from the predicament of the victims: “A murderer chases a woman, she flees to a shelf holding a pistol, a knife and a banana. She chooses the banana as a weapon. Of course you’re scared for the woman, but she’s so clichéd that you have to laugh at her misfortune.” This is how Sven (age 23, Germany) describes his thrilling scene from *Scary Movie* (viewed at age 13, cf. also Ill. 3). In such scenes, the tension is relieved by the knowledge not just that they are fictional, but that they are not even meant to be taken seriously on the fictional level. This allows further distance from frightening content and thus encourages a pleasurable viewing experience.

### What enables children to experience thrills?

#### A reliable framework with confident heroes and heroines

Excitement experienced in a positive way usually arises when we get caught up in the fate of characters in threatening situations. In the case of a series, the hope of a positive outcome is based on the reliability of the format, the certainty that the heroes or heroines (the “good ones”) will always win through in the end: “The mysteries in *Scooby Doo*



Ill. 2 and 3: Students from Hong Kong (left) and New Zealand (right) remember thrilling scenes from *Scary Movie* and *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*

Thrills, furthermore, were mainly experienced while watching animated formats. In this case, the genre creates distance, since a drawn world and drawn characters emphasise the fictional nature of the events more than live-action formats, which suggest a stronger connection to reality.

### Calculable risks

We can detect a general tendency with regard to children's *Angstlust* from the programme formats mentioned: while experiences of fear are more often triggered by adult programmes or horror films, experiences of thrill are mainly provided by children's programmes. In Hong Kong, respondents most often mentioned anime films or series such as *Spirited Away* and *Detective Conan*; in the US, Germany and Turkey it was mainly animated films such as *The Lion King* or science fiction films such as *Jurassic Park*. In New Zealand and Australia, the *Harry Potter* films were mentioned particularly often (cf. Ill. 3), and in Canada it was mainly spooky children's series such as *Freaky Stories*. The students from Israel were most likely to have experienced thrills while watching animated programmes such as *Marco* or Disney films such as *Peter Pan*. This suggests that children are more likely to be able to feel thrills when depictions are milder. The analysis of individual cases shows even more clearly that it is often in harmless situations that children get caught up in a character's fate. This might, for example, be when protagonists are trying to avoid being discovered during pranks or adventures, in situations where the consequence of discovery would not be anything more serious than punishment by adults or the like. So an exciting TV experience for children does not have to involve a matter of life and death. As soon as children can understand what is important for the characters they empathise with, excitement arises from the hope that the character will attain what he or she wants, regardless of what is actually at stake.

## CONCLUSION

The basic finding of the study is that the individual child and his or her age and preferences determine what is felt to be frightening at a specific moment, and what contents inspire a pleasurable thrill. Despite these individual differences, however, some general observations can be made. If, for example, we compare the elements in the films which were described as frightening (cf. Unterstell & Müller in this issue) with the descriptions of the scenes which were felt to be pleasurable, the most striking finding is that thrills are nearly always connected with threatening situations only. When it comes to childhood TV viewing, the pleasurable experience of excitement seldom involves the actual representation of threatening creatures, and the depiction of injuries is never mentioned in connection with moments that are perceived as positive, only in connection with fear. While fear can be generated by a small number of impressions of shocking images (such as the sight of a frightening creature or of physical injuries), *Angstlust* is more likely to occur when children become absorbed in a cleverly structured story, in which they can get caught up in the fate of their heroes and heroines, as they face challenges or dangers. Of course threatening characters are often indispensable as adversaries. However, the story will probably not become better or more exciting if it features characters with a particularly revolting appearance. Here it would be possible to avoid something that frequently frightens children without detracting too much from the quality of an exciting plot. Furthermore, there should be hints throughout the story that encourage the hope of a positive outcome, and moments of excitement should not be endlessly prolonged. Instead they should, if possible, alternate with relaxing emotions (such as humorous scenes), so as to give children an enjoyable thrill without overtaxing them. ■

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The study was conducted by the following collaborators: Dr. Leonie Rutherford, Deakin University, Australia; Prof. Dr. Burkhard Fuhs, University of Erfurt, Germany; Prof. Dr. Werner Haussmann, Friedrich-Alexander-University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany; Prof. Dr. Lothar Mikos, HFF Konrad Wolf, Germany; Prof. Dr. Kara Chan, Baptist University, Hong Kong; Dr. Michal Alon Tirosh, Emek Izrael College, Israel; Prof. Dr. James Nadler, Ryerson University, Canada; Dr. Ruth Zanker, New Zealand Broadcasting School; Prof. Dr. Mine Gencil Bek, Ankara University, Turkey; Prof. Dr. Judy Puritz Cook, Salem State University, USA; Prof. Dr. Rebecca Hains, Salem State University, USA; Prof. Dr. Dafna Lemish, Southern Illinois University, USA
- <sup>2</sup> For the findings on frightening TV experiences cf. article on fear of Unterstell & Müller in this issue.
- <sup>3</sup> 390 women (64.4%) and 217 men (35.7%) aged between 17 and 42 participated in the study. The average age was 22.
- <sup>4</sup> This is shown simply by the fact that nearly all the respondents (98%) describe an experience of fear while watching television as a child, but only 80% mention a thrill. Some note that they are fundamentally unable to experience frightening content as pleasurable.

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