

*Introduction: The Horrific Chiller*

We know it when we see it. We recognize the film's imagery, feel the familiar dread of its suspense, and even foresee what we are in for. We know the horrific chiller by the shape of our sensations, yet are surprisingly unable to describe it in any other form. By definition, all of these films evoke powerful emotions unique to the genre, but the shared qualities within the pictures that cause our unshakable reactions are evasive. We might recall alien beings or supernatural forces, but we also remember terribly disturbing chillers that were entirely naturalistic. We might think of primitive violence, but there are some unusually frightening films that are completely lacking any depicted brutality. There is a remarkable range of films evoking such a singular response. What is it that we see when enveloped by deep and dark disturbance?

Wondering what unites these differing stories with shared experience, I could not complete the answer. Certainly all the films center on primitive conflict, and their characters confront extended peril and possible destruction. True and inclusive, but not very useful, the observation equally applies to other melodramas, films that take us to the edge of our seats, but no farther. Action adventure movies, missions of mortal combat, progress from mounting danger to life-threatening assaults, yet spare us the worst disturbance. Suspense lacks the chiller's unsettling sense of unnatural dread, and the climax is free of horror and lasting impact. There is even less distress from disaster pictures. Although they feature destruction taking countless victims, we enjoy the spectacle while avoiding the holocaust. I could not grasp what ingredients were missing from all these nonhorrific melodramas, the elusive elements seen in every memorable chiller, and my look through film books failed to disclose them.

Seeking what should be obvious, undoubtedly a short and simple answer, an afternoon's exercise turned into a lengthy endeavor. The puzzle's hard-to-get solution did turn out to be simple, but its complexities suggested that I had just started. In a sure step-by-step course a journey unfolded, one that took me in unforeseen and previously rejected directions.

Systematic analysis was certain to uncover common ingredients, but the telling nature of what was discovered came as a complete surprise. Shared elements pieced together into a singular picture of startling clarity, simplicity, and completeness, and every element explained itself by being a proven trigger of automatic emotion. The message was revealed and its codes of communication broken.

The surprising scope of a short formula left so little unsaid that I felt it was possible to complete the picture. Moving on to the fabric of frightening scenes, then to whole films, and finally through all the arts and crafts, the search found not only what we always see, but how films are best fashioned to make us feel the way we do.