

# Dealing with the Monster.

## Strategies in the reception of occult content in films

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Abstract – The purpose of this study was the investigation of individual strategies in the reception of non-rational content in films (extraordinary events and experiences which cannot be explained by scientifically known natural laws) by young people, and of differences between horror fans and other young people. A part of a horror film was shown to 50 adolescent subjects in single sessions. The film was stopped at several points, and the subjects were asked questions about what they had just seen. More data was collected by the subjects filling out a questionnaire. Contrary to our expectations, horror fans do not have a specifically strong orientation to non-rational content in films. In addition, no significant correlation with the development of occult belief systems was found. Other elements such as aggressiveness and sexuality are more important. Furthermore, there seemed to be a relationship to the development of ego identity in the case of those liking the horror genre. These people had dealt thoroughly with their political beliefs and sexuality. However it was found that an orientation to non-rational content in films correlates with emotionality, a pessimistic attitude, and also with the development of occult belief systems, but has no relation to the development of ego identity.

Keywords: horror films, film reception, identity status, non-rational film contents, signalled stopping technique

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Media-psychological research on horror films which has been conducted in Europe and North America has largely and for a long time focussed on the effects of exposure to media violence and the effect this has on the behaviour of recipients. The main concern of this kind of media effects research is to get clear answers and evidence in order to make simple and generalising statements about the value, effects, and risks of the consumption of media violence. Although there is evidence that such effects exist (e.g. Wittmann et al., 2008, with regard to aggression, and Robertson et al., 2013, with regard to antisocial behaviour), the issue remains controversial (e.g. Gunter, 2008). However, during the 1980s and 1990s, the focus of media-psychological research increasingly turned towards the *processes of reception* of media content. The awareness grew that viewers of films and television programmes do not have to be seen as largely passive beings helplessly exposed to a torrent of images, but as agents. Individual reception strategies<sup>2</sup> include processes of *selection*, of *perception*, and of *intellectual processing* (Suckfüll, 2013; Neumann-Braun, 2005; Charlton, 1997; Charlton & Borcsa, 1997; Pette & Charlton, 1997): before watching a film one has to select it from an array of TV programs and films; while watching a film there exist different modes and forms of perception (e.g. emotionally involved or distant, focussing on particular details and overlooking others etc.); during and after watching a film an intellectual processing of the perceived film contents takes place (e.g. reflecting on possible endings, on motifs and objectives of protagonists, on similarities to one's own life situation etc.). I will come to this in more detail later on.

With regard to their *psychological function* for processes of film reception these elements can be seen as culturally independent. However, on the content level this is obviously not the case. The ways in which

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on the results of a study conducted between 1996 and 1999 and published as a thesis in 2000 (Mayer, 2000). In the meantime, a lot of research in media reception has been done, and some of the theoretical concepts developed for the study should be brought up to date in the light of subsequent research literature. However, two points justify the publication of this 'previous material' in an English version: on the content level there is the issue of the reception of 'occult' or 'non-rational' (see the second chapter for a definition) content, and on the methodological level there is the use of the 'signalled stopping technique' which is – although it has proved itself to be very effective – practically non-existent in media research.

<sup>2</sup> As Suckfüll & Scharnow (2009: 368) rightly remark, the word 'strategy' "suggests a rational, goal-driven behaviour that is hardly compatible with the more automated cognitive and emotional processes that take place during the casual reception of media content". Thus, the phrase "individual reception strategy" takes this broader definition into account.

films are interpreted as well as the effects of them upon the behavior of recipients are absolutely dependent culturally. This dependency has to be taken into consideration with regard to the study presented here.

The reception of horror movies in secularized western societies is a phenomenon which typically concerns young people i.e. such films are produced for juveniles, and are predominantly viewed by them. Modern horror films can be characterized by the fact that the 'non-rational' bursts into the everyday world.<sup>3</sup> The scenarios have a closer relationship to everyday conditions than films of the related fantasy and science fiction genres. In general, our known (and scientifically established) laws of nature also apply in the world of horror movies.

Several product analyses (Cherry, 2009; Reiß, 1990, 1987; Baumann, 1989; Winter, 2010) discovered plausible reasons for the particular affinity of many juveniles to the 'horror' genre. For example, such films reflect factors important in adolescent development. This manifests itself, among other things, in characteristic elements, including sexuality, death, and violence, which are often found in the films. Particular attention should be given to the figure of the half or double creature (ghosts, zombies, werewolves, etc.) symbolising a state of 'not yet' and 'not any more'. The life span of adolescence can be understood as characterised by such an ambiguous state of being. Further characteristics of horror movies are: a pessimistic view of society (institutions, family situations), lack of understanding for the needs of juveniles, and conflicts between generations. In addition to such *manifest* content, *latent* messages can also be found in horror films. According to Reiß (1990) they concern (1) the divisiveness of human existence which disrupts the drive for clarity, unity, and integrity, (2) the principle of development, a "dying and rebirth" dominating the metamorphosis from child to adult, and (3) the return of the repressed: lightly

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<sup>3</sup> There is no generally accepted definition of the film genre horror. According to Cherry who adopts a broader perspective, "the genre should [...] be more accurately thought of as an overlapping and evolving set of 'conceptual categories' that are in a constant state of flux" (2009, p. 3). With regard to the purpose of my study, I followed the definition of Baumann (1989) and excluded sub-genres like psychological horror, as well as exploitation films (cf. Cherry 2009, pp. 5-6 for a presentation of different sub-categories or sub-genres of horror films). Baumann defines horror as "a sub-category of speculative fiction where the impossible becomes possible and real in a world much the same as ours, and where people like you and I react to such signs of fragility of their world with horror" (1989, p. 109 – translation by the author).

scratching under the apparently civilised surface reveals the untamed compulsive and animalistic aspects of human existence.

However, by no means do all adolescent people have a preference for this film genre. It depends on the *thematic bias* (“thematische Voreingenommenheit” – Charlton & Neumann-Braun, 1992) of an individual as to which kind of films are preferred, and how they are received. The thematic bias results from current issues and developmental life-themes, as well as from medium-term or long-lasting “core themes” (Noam, 1988) and/or identity themes (Holland, 1975). It leads to an expectation-driven selection of films as well as to an individual strategy of reception (Suckfüll, 2013). In addition to developmental characteristics, individual motivational structures form an important element in the emergence of genre preferences.

Film genres themselves tie into historical developments, and this also applies to horror (Baumann, 1989; Cherry, 2009; Marriott & Newman, 2006; Vossen, 2004; Wells, 2000). Such films reflect social and cultural developments as well as thematic trends and fashions. What provoked an intense emotion of horror yesterday might bring only a weary smile today, and may even seem ridiculous. The unchangeable characteristic of horror films, however, is the provocation of intense emotions of fear and shock in the audience. This eponymous characteristic is significant: the existence of fictional horror (films, literature) in all cultures demonstrates the deep-rooted human need to experience such intense emotions in a safe environment. In the German language the term *Angstlust* [lust for fear] characterises the quasi-paradoxical combination of the positive emotions of enjoyment and excitement, and the negative emotion of fear.

A further anthropological constant is the desire for ghost stories or, more generally, for stories dealing with the ‘otherworld’. The uncanny and supernatural are features able to provoke negative emotions like scare, panic, or unease, i.e. to create feelings of *Angstlust*, a key objective of horror films. Horror films, which include such ‘non-rational’ elements (according to the specific definition given by Baumann – see footnote 3), are promising with regard to the investigation of individual reception strategies of horror films because they combine this particular way of inducing *Angstlust* with several others, more earth-bound, possibilities.

## 2. The purpose of the study

The purpose of this explorative study was to see whether individual strategies of dealing with ‘occult’ film content were detectable and, additionally, to gain insight into the motivational structure of those juveniles who indicate the film genre ‘horror’ as their preference. The extent of the orientation towards ‘non-rational’ and/or occult aspects of a film, i.e. towards narrative structures depicting fractures in everyday reality, forms an important element. In this context, fractures in everyday reality do not concern critical life events or peak experiences but extraordinary events and experiences which cannot be explained by scientifically known (and accepted) natural laws. Therefore I call them *non-rational* – as a neutral and broadly defined term (e.g. dream content can be precognitive) – or *occult* – as a more specific term which brings historico-cultural meanings (e.g. the returning of the dead, powerful magic rituals etc.) to light.

The general assumption that differences exist in the reception processes of occult film content gave rise to the search for developmental, personality-related, and situational factors. A further assumption was that among horror fans there are many juveniles who are particularly subjected to psychodynamic processes of change, and whose self-identity is fragile. Such an identity state is reflected in horror films in the characteristic dissolution of borders by means of supernatural/non-rational/occult film content. Closely related to this was the assumption that horror fans orient themselves towards non-rational film content to an exceptional degree, that is, they are particularly interested in those structures of the plot which are based on non-rational elements. Figure 1 shows a schematic representation of the study’s issues.

## Schematic Representation of the Study's Issues

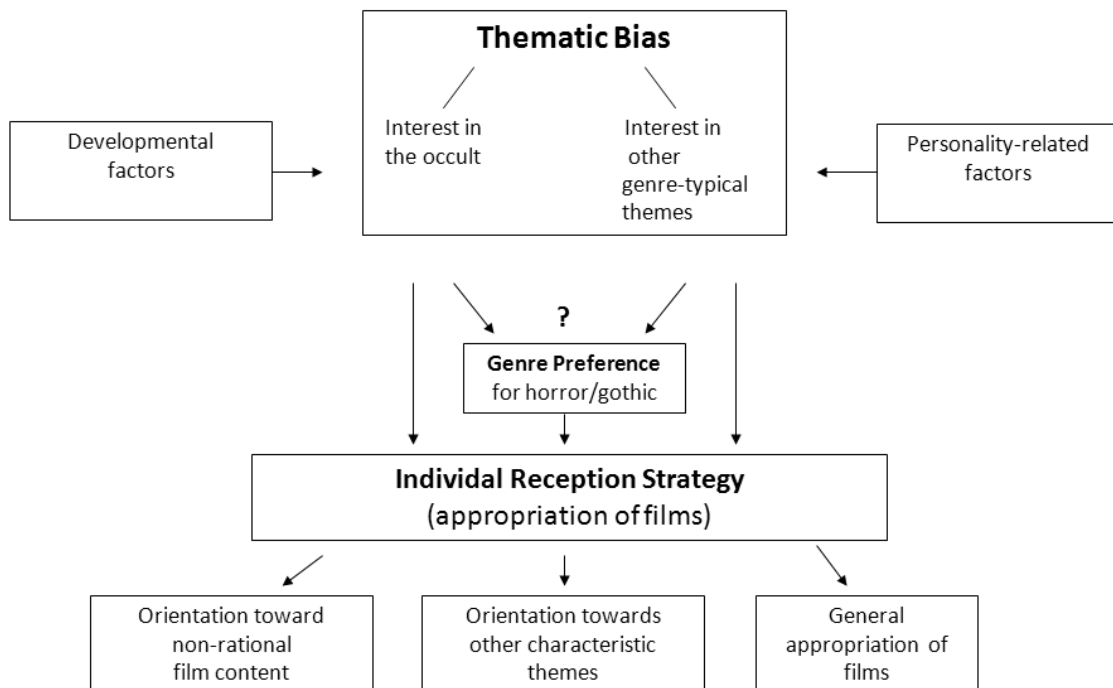


Figure 1: Schematic Representation of the Study's Issues

The thematic bias results from developmental and personality-related factors. Elements which are particularly interesting with regard to this study are: interest in occult and non-rational film content, on the one hand, and interest in other themes which are characteristic for the horror film genre such as aggression/violence, and sexuality, on the other. The thematic bias does not result in a preference for this film genre in all cases: not every juvenile who has a developmental-related resonance for genre-typical themes (such as an interest in the occult, for example) becomes a horror fan. Regardless of the individual preference for film genres, one can assume a special relationship between adolescents and the non-

rational, as studies on occultism amongst young people demonstrate (Halperin, 1992; Hyzin & Lawson, 1992; Mayer, 2000, pp. 31-34; Streib, 1996).<sup>4</sup>

I developed an extensive study design to investigate these issues, and chose a two-fold strategy in order to evaluate the data in a quantitative and qualitative way. The first allows a group comparison between horror fans and other young media users, and uses only isolated elements of individual strategies of film reception; the second one focuses on individual-motivational structures, and on individual perspectives of the film resulting from this.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sample and film material

The sample consisted of 50 juveniles and young adults (mean age: 17.2 yrs.; range: 15-22 yrs.; 31 males, 19 females). They knew in advance that the film to be shown included occult content. It was a non-selected population; some participants self-identified as horror fans.

The stimulus material was a segment of the cinema film *Nightmare on Elm Street* (Wes Craven, USA 1984). The plot of this film mixes the sphere of everyday life with the non-rational sphere of dreams and nightmares, which become true. The ‘monster’, the key character of the otherworld, is Fred Krueger, a serial killer who was burned alive by angry parents in an act of vigilantism, and who returns as an undead acting out his obsession and claiming the lives of his killers’ children as revenge.

#### 3.2. Procedure

Questionnaires were sent in advance to the participants by mail; they had to complete these and bring them to the experimental session. The single sessions consisted of three parts: firstly, four cards of a projective psychological test were presented to the participant (Thematic Apperception Text – TAT,

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<sup>4</sup> There is not much literature on occultism and adolescents from an academically objective perspective. Many papers which take account of these things mention occultism in the same breath as Satanism and substance abuse, i.e. with an absolutely negative connotation. This kind of literature provides little insight in relation to my study and is therefore only of marginal interest.

Murray, 1943). This was followed by the presentation of a part of *Nightmare on Elm Street*, combined with questions about the film. The session was completed with the Identity Status Interview (Marcia *et al.*, 1993).

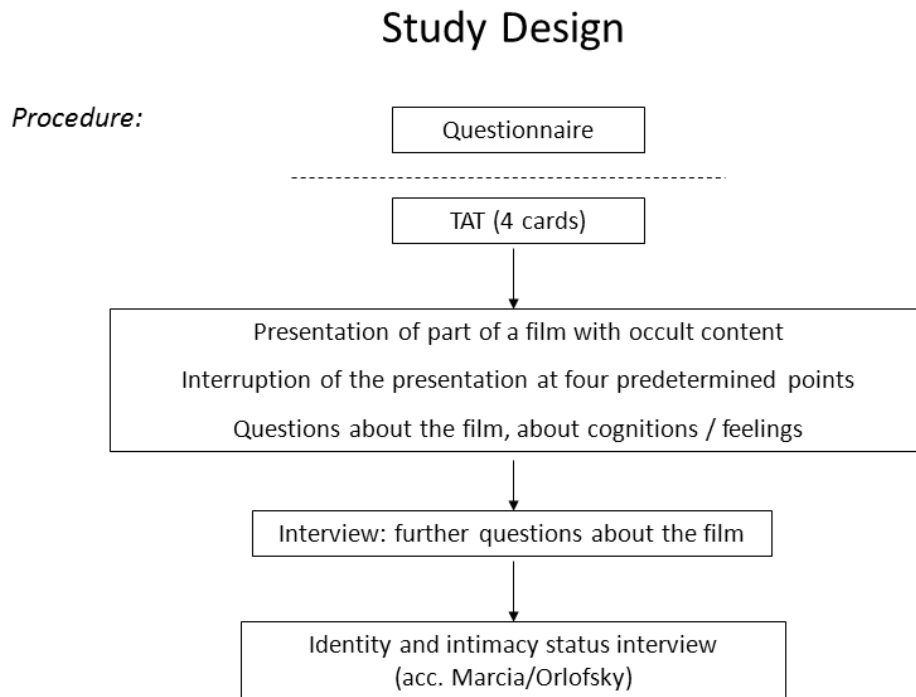


Figure 2 – Study Design

The presentation of the film was interrupted at four predetermined points in order to ask questions directly about the content which had just been viewed. This approach, using the “signalled stopping technique” by Hawkins *et al.* (1991), provided the opportunity to promptly gather impressions and cognitions triggered by the film in close temporal proximity (cf. Charlton *et al.*, 1996; Mayer, 2000). Using this technique, one can avoid the cognitive and emotional distance which normally occurs if the questions are not asked until after the presentation of the whole film. Likewise, the likelihood of the actual processes during reception being overlaid by the rationally deduced opinions that occur with temporal distance from events viewed can be reduced. The first question posed after stopping the film was always open: “what is in your mind at the moment?” Following that, questions were asked about specific aspects of content and



scenes in the preceding part of the film, and about personal reactions to imaginable similar situations in real life.

### 3.3. Operationalization of the individual reception strategy

As shown in figure 1, two concepts had to be operationalized: the individual reception strategy (film appropriation), and the thematic bias.

The *individual reception strategy* had been ascertained by use of the dimensions: (1) ‘orientation towards non-rational film content’; (2) ‘perspectivity’; (3) ‘reflexivity’; (4) ‘involvement’ (see Mayer, 2000, for details). Additionally, questions about specific film content and about film reception in general had been asked. Since only the first dimension is crucial for hypothesis-testing – the other three dimensions are logically derived and only of explorative interest – I will confine discussion to it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In relation to other dimensions of film appropriation: *Perspectivity* identifies the direction of view under which the received content is perceived. Regardless of the degree of cognitive or emotional distance, one’s attention can be focussed on the depicted world of the narrative fiction (‘object-reference’), or on the references to one’s own life and to one’s own experiences and sensitivities (‘self-reference’). The dimension of *reflexivity* describes the degree of cognitive distance from received media content. Even during reception, reflection on narrative content can take place e.g. a consideration of how the plot may progress, or about the sensitivity and/or motives of the protagonists. Such a reflexive attitude towards the presented content can be object-referred as well as self-referred, i.e. it can be confined to ‘reflecting’ the narrative fiction, or alternatively can create references to one’s own living conditions and feelings. *Involvement* represents a measure of psychological distance too, describing the degree of inner participation in the narrated events. If the involvement is high, the recipient feels captured by the story; s/he is affected by the content, and a significant inner resonance becomes apparent. On the other hand, a recipient can be affected only on a superficial level. S/he remains largely detached, and may rate the film as uninteresting. The constructs of *perspectivity*, *reflexivity*, *involvement*, and *orientation towards non-rational film content* are logically derived dimensions which are logically independent. Empirically i.e. concerning the examined sample, they proved to be largely independent too. Therefore it is justified to refer to them as dimensions.

Suckfüll et al. (2009, p. 368), who use the phrase ‘involvement’ in a much more broader sense than I do, refer to some dimensions of film reception processes proposed by other authors which partly overlap with those mentioned above. For example, *perspectivity* coincides partly with *ego-emotional* vs. *socio-emotional* participation, and a *diegetic* mode of reception is included in the dimension *reflexivity* as well as reflection on the *production* circumstances. However, Suckfüll’s own model of modes of reception aims to treat

The extent of the *orientation towards occult or non-rational film content* concerns the question to what extent the attention of the viewer is directed towards those aspects of the narrative fiction which are related to fractures in everyday rationality (in the above mentioned sense). Cracks in everyday life occur, for example, if nightmares suddenly come true and dead people vengefully intervene in everyday life, violating natural laws in doing so, as is the case in the film plot. The stopping points were chosen in such a way that the participants could directly relate to the non-rational film content with their answers if they wanted to do so. Alternatively, their answers might address the everyday dimension of what they had viewed. An example will demonstrate: in a scene from the film, a juvenile named Glen climbs into the window of his girlfriend Nancy's room at night. At the end of the ensuing dialogue, which in part is about experience of dreams coming true, Nancy asks Glen to stay awake at her side, watching, because she wants to look for the 'monster' Freddie Krueger during a kind of lucid dream (that is, a dream in which one is aware that one is dreaming); Glen should wake her if she becomes endangered. However, she does not fully reveal her plan to him, but only urgently appeals: "But don't fall asleep!" Glen then attempts to pretend he misinterprets her request: "What then do you think of me?!" Nancy's reply is then: "You are wrong, it won't happen now, what you're thinking about!"<sup>6</sup> At that point the film was stopped. After a first open question ("What is in your mind at the moment?"), the following questions were asked: "Why did Glen visit Nancy? What does he want from her?" The thematic valence of the film scene contains a direct relation to sexuality (climbing through the sweetheart's window). If the participant's answer was, for example, "He wants to make love with her", this was classified as demonstrating an everyday-rational

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them as a *trait*, i.e. as a habitual pattern of behavior, thought, and emotion. This is beyond the scope of the dimensions of film appropriation constructed by myself and applied to the collected data.

<sup>6</sup> The meaning of the English script differs slightly from the German translation (which is translated back into English above because these differences must be taken into account with regard to possibilities and probabilities of the participants' answers):

Nancy: "and you can't mess up. A lot might depend on this."

Glen: "I won't screw up".

Nancy: "Hey, turn off the light [...] ok, here's what we're gonna do."

Glen: "Stalkin' here."

Nancy: "And it's not what you're thinkin'".

orientation. However, if the answer was, “He doesn’t want to fall asleep, and he wants to watch her”, it was classified as orientated towards the non-rational elements of the plot.

Further indications of the individual reception strategy were gathered from questions about specific film content (religious themes, sexuality, vigilante justice, the attitude toward authority figures) and general questions about film reception. These questions were asked directly after the presentation of the film had finished. Furthermore, conclusions about the individual’s image of society as well as their attitude toward occult themes could be drawn from the answers. General questions concerned knowledge about and evaluation of what was viewed e.g. if the film appealed to the participants, which scenes impressed them the most, and which role in the film the participants would have preferred if they had been actors.

### 3.4. Operationalization of the thematic bias

The thematic bias depends on six constitutive factors, as shown in the following figure:

## Thematic Bias

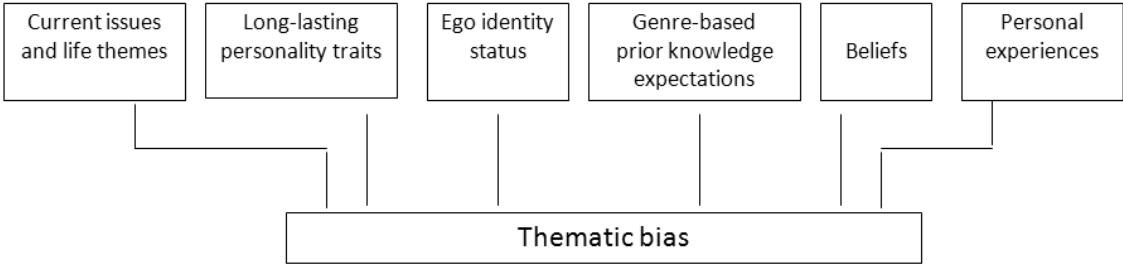


Figure 3 – Constitutive Factors of Thematic Bias

- (1) *Current issues and life themes.* Currently relevant life themes influence the appropriation of film content. A person who has just fallen in love will, for example, experience the content of a romantic love movie in a different way to a person who just acrimoniously split up with his or her partner. Data on currently relevant life themes had been gathered by a list of 20 themes (e.g. “love”, “future”, “dying/death”, “hobbies”) provided with a four-point scale given as part of a questionnaire. Using the scale, the participant rated how strongly he is currently occupied with the stated theme or issue. A further part of the questionnaire dealt with critical life events. A list of 12 critical life events (e.g. “severe illness”, “parents’ divorce”, “disappointed love”), based on the studies of Hurme (1981) and Filipp (1995), was also given. This list should only serve as a guide. The individually experienced critical life events were to be written on six empty lines according to their perceived severity.
- (2) *Long-lasting personality traits.* A further component of the questionnaire contained four scales from the revised version of the *Freiburger Persönlichkeitsinventar* FPI-R [Freiburg Personality Inventory] (Fahrenberg, Hampel, & Selg, 1984). ‘Aggression’, ‘Social Orientation’, ‘Extraversion’, and ‘Emotionality’ are constructs of particular interest for the study. On the one hand, they touch upon important elements relating to adolescence as a transition period, but are also characteristic features of horror movies (violence, aggression, powerful emotions, and the reception of horror movies as a social action). On the other hand, the scale ‘emotionality’ proved to be an important predictor of mental risks faced by young people from occult practises (Mischo, 1991).  
A further characteristic feature of horror films is a pessimistic view of society. To determine the degree of personal and social optimism, the corresponding scales of the German *Fragebogen zu personalem und sozialem Optimismus* POSO [Questionnaire of Personal and Social Optimism] (Schweizer et al., 2001; Schweizer & Schneider, 1997) were used.
- (3) *Developmental status of identity.* In order to obtain information on the current developmental status of the juveniles, the concept of ego identity status by Marcia et al. (1993) was drawn upon. Marcia differentiated *the identity vs. role-diffusion stage* from Erikson’s model of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1950), making distinct four different elements of identity status: the status of ‘identity

diffusion', 'foreclosure', 'moratorium', and 'identity achievement' (Marcia, 1993, pp. 10-11). The four identity status elements can refer to various domains of life. They are characterized by a different degree of examination with regard to one's own position, and the extent to which clarity and stability are achieved in this respect. The identity status for the domains was ascertained with a translated version of the *Identity Status Interview* ISI (Marcia & Archer, 1993) for the domains 'Political Beliefs', 'Religious Beliefs', and 'Sex-Role Attitudes'. In addition, the *Intimacy Status Interview* (Orlofsky, 1993 a, b) was conducted which gives information about the quality of friendships and loving relationships, and the capacity to enter into such relationships.

- (4) *Genre-based prior knowledge/expectations*. Information on expectations and prior knowledge was collected with the questionnaire and by specific questions posed during the interview after the presentation of the film. With this, I could differentiate between the group of horror fans and other media users who had no particular preference for this genre.
- (5) *Beliefs*. In addition, personal beliefs form a constitutive element of thematic bias. This especially concerns films with non-rational content. If a viewer, for example, believes in the existence of ghosts, this may affect the manner in which a film with corresponding content is received and assessed. Data on occult beliefs was collected using a German questionnaire on occultism (Mischo, 1991).
- (6) *Personal experience and knowledge*. The same applies here as to beliefs concerning the effect on thematic bias. Data on these issues was also collected using the questionnaire on occultism (Mischo, 1991).

Prior to the presentation of the film, four cards from the *Thematic Apperception Test* TAT (Murray, 1943) were presented to the participant. The cards were selected with regard to their thematic valence (3 BM: 'depressive affective states', 8 BM: 'aggression', 11 BM: 'confrontation with threatening dangers', 13 MF: 'relationship, sexuality'). The stories elicited are intended to provide additional information on the individual disposition of subject. As with film reception, the main channel of perception with the TAT is visual. With this, individual moods can be recognised which might be filtered out by providing verbal stimuli (e.g. short stories, description of situations) similar ambiguous situations.

### 3.5. Interpretation and analysis of data<sup>7</sup>

The questionnaire data was analysed using conventional methods. For the quantitative analysis the recorded interview data was put into writing in an abridged form. The answers to the questions about the film reception were rated with regard to the four dimensions of film appropriation and to thematic priorities (e.g. sexuality, religiosity, and attitude towards occultism). The stories elicited by the TAT cards assessed whether the thematic valence is taken up, how the stories end, and if they are formed with an optimistic or pessimistic view. The data from the Identity Status Interviews, as well as the Intimacy Status Interviews, were rated independently by two assessors according to the above-mentioned criteria.

## 4. Results

In the following, only the most important findings of the extensive quantitative analysis can be provided.

### 4.1. Orientation towards non-rational film content

The results indicate that the dimension ‘orientation towards non-rational film content’ characterises a trait, that is, it is *not* dependent on age and identity status. One might call it a specific processing style or – according to Suckfüll (2004) – a mode of reception which is related to personality traits such as emotionality as well as a pessimistic attitude towards personal development. Further positive correlations were found with manifestations of occult beliefs as well as frequency of occult practices. Young people whose answers were strongly oriented towards non-rational aspects of the film mentioned the topic “dying/death” as a currently important life theme more than the average participant did. All in all, one could identify a kind of fascination with the borderlands between life and the ‘darker sides’ of existence.

### 4.2. Fans of the horror film genre

A remarkable result is that *no* significant correlation either between a high degree of ‘orientation towards non-rational film content’ and preference of the horror film genre could be found, or between horror fans and an affinity for the ‘darker sides of existence’. With regard to occult film content, horror fans represent

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<sup>7</sup> Described in detail in Mayer (2000).

a heterogeneous group. However, they are characterised by a higher developmental status in the domains of political beliefs and sex-role attitudes. Engagement with these areas of life was further advanced and more often led to an 'achieved identity status'. Horror fans were not identified by a particular affinity to occult beliefs, but by a higher degree of aggression and – more weakly – resonance with the issue of 'sexuality'. Some results indicate that explicit 'horror specialists' possibly make a more rigorous separation between narrative fiction and everyday life. Hence, they can enjoy playfully dealing with fears and horror more easily.

In order to summarise the most important results of the quantitative analysis, one may note the following features:

Juveniles who:

- believe more in paranormal/occult powers and practices (extrasensory perception, magical power, astrology etc.)
- perform occult practices relatively frequently
- are relatively or considerably engaged with the topic of dying/death
- are emotionally unstable
- are relatively pessimistic concerning their personal future

orient themselves strongly to non-rational film content.

Fans of the horror film genre tend to have the following characteristics:

- a higher degree of aggression
- a higher resonance with the issue of 'sexuality'
- a higher developmental identity status in the domains of 'political beliefs' and 'sex-role attitudes'
- *no* explicit affinity to occult beliefs or practices.

The hypothesis that a preference for the 'horror' film genre correlates with a strong orientation towards non-rational film content could not be confirmed. The intrusion of the 'non-rational' into everyday reality as a constitutive element of this film genre did *not* seem to be a consistent motive for the frequent consumption of such films. Furthermore, the hypothesis that horror films are particularly attractive to young people who are in a transitional phase of life or in a period of re-orientation with regard to their identity status (moratorium) could also not be confirmed.

## 5. Single Case Studies

The outline concerning individual reception strategies given by results of quantitative analysis has been differentiated by means of an extensive qualitative analysis of seven individual cases. Each of these young people had a specific approach to the film which corresponded with their individual life themes at the time of viewing. Some aspects of two of these cases shall be comparatively presented as an example. I will call the young people "Jens" and "Marlis".

Jens is a true horror film aficionado and 'expert' who takes the trouble to get uncut original versions of horror movies via special film distributors. He had the highest consumption of horror movies in the whole sample. Marlis does not usually watch horror movies. However, with regard to her film reception she was characterised by a high degree of orientation towards non-rational film content. Jens and Marlis both belong to the oldest participants within the sample. Both featured a high identity status in general, and both of them liked the film.

Jens does not believe in the paranormal or occult and he has never participated in occult practices. He called himself an irreligious person. With regard to film appropriation, he scarcely referred to non-rational film content and such elements did not seem to interest him greatly; depictions of violence as well as the combat situation between two opponents particularly aroused his interest.

In answer to the question concerning which film role he would like to play if he were an actor, he stated that he would prefer the role of Nancy as the young opponent of the monster Freddy Krueger. The decisive point for his choice was the "simple trial of strength, who will be more successful. Not because she survives him, but simply to see who performs better".



Marlis, too, would have preferred the role of Nancy. This was for different reasons, however. She saw in Nancy a kind of fellow sufferer who had to go through a period of despair, grief, fear, and being misunderstood, but who eventually succeeded in dealing with the situation.<sup>8</sup> Marlis herself was in a difficult stage of her life. She was unemployed, still living with her parents and very unhappy with her physical appearance. She was very familiar with esoteric beliefs and had had experience of events she interpreted as being paranormal. She performed occult practices (mantic techniques as well as magic rituals) several times a month.

A comparative view shows the following: For Jens, the horror film aficionado, the interest in non-rational film content plays a minor part despite the fact that the intrusion of the non-rational into everyday reality is distinctive of the horror film genre. For Marlis, however, the degree of orientation towards non-rational film content is – consistently with her belief system – high, and yet she is not a fan of this film genre. One can therefore conclude that neither the explicit horror fan nor the ‘esoteric’ person seeks non-rational content in fictional films. In the first case, the attraction of other elements (depictions of violence, the emotional kick) apparently have priority, whereas for the ‘occult-practicing esoteric’, fictional films do not represent an appropriate medium for the engagement with the non-rational. The film presented was too unrealistic for that. With regard to her own magical practices, reading books, talking with friends, and watching (pseudo-) documentaries on that issue seemed to be of greater interest than narrative fictions. Due to her identification with the character of Nancy, however, she liked the film.

## 6. Basic forms of dealing with occult content in fictional films

The results of this study indicate that the individual strategies of film reception strongly depend on belief systems, and, in general, on the thematic bias. For some recipients, the sensed degree of realism of the fictional story plays an important role for the reception of the film, for others this point may only be of marginal importance. The following four basic forms of dealing with occult content in films are derived

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<sup>8</sup> See Mares & Cantor (1992) for the role of social comparison and empathy in film reception.

from the data of the seven individual cases.<sup>9</sup> Because the data are gathered from a western audience, using an American movie as stimulus material, these forms of reception are limited to the related cultural sphere, at least at first glance. However, they are formulated in an abstract manner without specification of contents. Thus, a cultural transfer and adaption in relation to other stimulus material may be possible.

- a) The cognitive dissonance between the recipient's belief system and the belief system represented by the logic of the film plot is felt to be unpleasant, and the differences as too significant. Transferability to the recipient's own life situation is unattainable. Dissociation as well as a negative assessment is the result. The cognitive dissonance may be considerable but the effect of this is minimal, since other elements are more important. The non-rational aspects of the film are more or less neglected. The source material is 'cut into shape' according to the individual's own needs – the constructive aspect of the film's reception can come to the fore.
- b) The recipient clearly separates the domains of fiction and reality. This simplifies dealing with speculative fiction. Despite contradictions between the film-immanent logic and the recipient's own belief system, an understanding is easily possible. He bears or enjoys the cognitive dissonance and getting involved with the fiction is perceived as exciting and stimulating. One can find two variants: first, engagement with the fantastic has priority, with motives ranging from a need for entertainment, a substitutional trying-out of alternative ways of thinking and experiencing, to escapist tendencies (cf. Vorderer & Knobloch 1996). Second, the content presented is interpreted as allegoric and received with regard to its symbolic meaning and structure. In these two forms the fiction can be used as a projection surface for self-representation and imagination, and acts as the basis for liking the fiction. Whether or not a positive assessment is given depends on further factors.
- c) The recipient's belief system also includes non-rational elements; the differences with the film-immanent logic are negligible. Although there is some cognitive dissonance, it is not significant. However, the range of interactions is considerable. With increasing approximation, the degrees of

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<sup>9</sup> Due to space constraints it is not possible to present all seven cases to demonstrate the true plausibility of the model (cf. Mayer, 2000, pp. 164-238). The model can be brought into line with the modes of reception model by Suckfüll (2004, 2013). It can also be interpreted with reference to the concept of 'perceived reality' (Potter, 1988; see also Rothmund et al., 2001a,b).

freedom for dealing with the 'template' decrease because it becomes more difficult to become involved with the narrative fictional character. Individual film details gain importance almost as pieces of evidence for the belief system. The way in which the protagonists of the film deal with problems which are particularly based on non-rational reasons in this film genre can be exemplarily received; with sufficient agreement it can be assessed positively, whilst in the contrary case it may disturb and irritate, limiting the pleasure of watching the film.

With this typology of forms of reception of non-rational film content nothing has been said about the emergence of genre preferences. Genre preferences result from complex motivational structures. The shaping of an occult belief system represents only one criterion, and does not necessarily have to be dominant.

One further point should be mentioned: the typology only refers to directly expressed and manifested patterns, but unconscious motives as well as latent structures of needs can also play an important role. With such explanatory models, ambivalences and inconsistencies in statements of some participants become more comprehensible. However, such latent motives are beyond the method of investigation used in this study.

## 7. Conclusion

The results of this study indicate the importance of the thematic bias with regard to the reception of media content. Individual needs, prior knowledge, and expectations affect the perception of received content. Everybody watches 'his own movie'. A disposition to occult belief systems and practices may be reflected in a stronger orientation towards non-rational film content, but not necessarily in a preference for horror films. On the contrary, such tendencies, as well as a strong orientation towards non-rational film content, cannot generally be found among self-identifying horror fans.<sup>10</sup> Affinity with aggression and

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<sup>10</sup> Similar results have been reported by Markert & Suckfüll (2001) who investigated different modes of reception with viewers of the TV series *The X-Files* by means of a questionnaire. Although this series does not belong directly to the horror film genre, a huge overlap with regard to non-rational content exists. The inexplicable phenomena and the supernatural, which together build a core element of the series, are not a predominant issue for every fan.

sexuality seems to be a decisive factor which makes horror films a preferred film genre for *some* juveniles. This is in line with the results of a study conducted by Grimm (1997).

The analysis of individual cases provides a multi-faceted picture of ways of dealing with such media content. For some juveniles, horror films provide the possibility of confrontation with one's own fears and strong emotions within a protected context (see also Pette & Charlton, 1997, Weiß et al., 2007, and Suckfüll & Bleuel, 2011). Some of them do not like the film genre because of its disconnection from reality, while others do not because of a lack of speculative fiction, such as that found in science fiction or fantasy films. Playfully dealing with speculative content can arise from escapist motives and therefore can be an expression of refusing to confront impending developmental tasks. However, others interpret such narrative fictions allegorically, making a clear distinction between the domains of reality and fiction. In such cases, playful engagement with such content can be conducive to development. This clearly demonstrates that one has to refrain from a generalising judgment with regard to the benefit or danger of the consumption of horror films for juveniles.

The size of the sample ( $N = 50$ ) was relatively small for a statistical analysis, but justifiable with regard to the mainly explorative character of the study (as well as the time-consuming study design). In this regard, the combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses proved to be productive, as well as the 'signalled stopping technique' of Hawkins *et al.* (1991). The open questions directly asked after interrupting the presentation of the film ("what is in your mind at the moment?") elicited a wide range of different answers which revealed individual differences in the reception process. Appropriate individual cases could be chosen on the basis of the quantitative results for a differentiated qualitative analysis. Because of the complexity of determining factors, such a qualitative analysis seems to be the only one appropriate for the detection of *individual* strategies of reception. One particular issue of the study was the assessment of the orientation towards *non-rational film content*. With regard to this, another benefit of the 'signalled stopping technique' is highlighted: questions about non-rational issues are often difficult subjects in interviews. In general, the participants are cautious about answering questions concerning such issues because they run a

risk of being stigmatized in Western society, a society deeply pre-structured by rationality.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, their answers can be strongly influenced by social desirability. With this technique, as well as the open questions directly after the interruptions during the film presentation, the danger of such biased answers is minimized. This is because the participants are not asked in a distanced and reflective state of mind after the presentation, when such thoughts about the expectations and attitudes of the researcher have had time to arise.

The last arguments point toward the already mentioned limitation of the study: the dependency of individual film reception on the cultural background. The recipient's belief system as well as the belief system represented by the film plot is culturally influenced. Thus, the same film seen through the eyes of people from different cultures yields different results, as Liebes and Katz (1993) demonstrated impressively in their classic study on the reception of the American TV series *Dallas* in non-Western cultures. With regard to non-rational or occult film contents this point plays a particularly important role: the culturally dominant world view of an individual significantly influences the extent to which contents create experiences of cognitive dissonance.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, again, the 'signalled stopping technique' may help to distinguish individual features from culturally influenced characteristics of the reception of fictional films.

Considering the positive experiences with this methodological approach, it also seems to be a useful tool for other research projects on media reception.

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<sup>11</sup> See e.g. Wooffitt (1992), and Schmied-Knittel & Schetsche (2005) with regard to accounts of extraordinary experiences. Thereby, a specific, secure jargon ('shielded communication') is used which is characterized by various strategies such as the repeated assurance that the reporter is neither crazy nor naïve, stressing that one's powers of recollection are excellent etc.

<sup>12</sup> On a further level it should be considered how people in different cultures are used to deal with cognitive dissonances in general. This point, too, underlies cultural influences.

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