

Children and orality – self reported body and emotional experiences with horror stories

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This presentation try to find some answers to why young Greenlanders between are fascinated by the horror genre and alternative forces in movies, in literature and in social encounters on the basis of a pilot project among 52 pupils in a small town in Mid-West Greenland. The project is based on questions of how the 11 and 14-year-old pupils experience horror, how they react to horror and of which strategies they use to overcome the horror experience and why they continuously enjoy being confronted with the scary.

My hypothesizes are that adolescents' fascination of horror and supernatural phenomena derives from their own physical, psychological or intellectual transformations, whether they are in a transition from child to adolescent or in a transition from one life position to another, where unmanageable problems can be managed through the possibilities, which horror narratives can provide as to acting out emotions and traumatic experiences – in a secure forum. They can touch upon tabooed subjects in disguise of a harmless scary story. Secondly, at a relational level the interest for the genre provides the adolescents with knowledge, which give them a certain position in the peer group. Thirdly, this interest can provide a sense of social 'glue' – or aesthetic cohesion, in other words it can provide a sense of socio cultural identity. As a fourth assumption, I suggest that there is a change from believing in traditional cosmology towards a modern mode of incorporating supernatural trends from the outer world, which may be mixed up with former beliefs and with Christian beliefs in 'good' and 'bad' – and not least, mixed with elements from the international movie world. As a fifth assumption, I believe that the horror genre can fulfill the need of mystery. Finally, my assumption is that the horror genre reinstalls the sense of the body.

The pilot project from Maniitsoq

As an external examiner at the teachers training college last year, I was so lucky that one of the candidates, Raket Petrussen, handed over her untreated, but completed questionnaire on children's experiences with the sense of horror. It was conducted among Petrussen's own 52 pupils in 6th and 9th grade during Autumn 2005 at her school in Maniitsoq. She allowed me to use it freely for educational or research purposes.

I had a class in the subject 'the horror genre in Greenlandic Literature' during Spring 2006 and had my – then – 7 students fill in a questionnaire with exactly the same questions right in the very beginning of the class, before they were influenced by theories, or by the scheduled literature or class discussions on the subject. The purpose was to make them do comparisons between their own adult experiences and the experiences of the 11 and 14-year-olds later in the course.

In this context I intend to present some of the results from this pilot project and try to offer some explanations of the outcome.

Do they like scary narratives at all?

Not surprisingly almost all the respondents answered confirmatory to the question whether they like watching or reading scary stories. It is among the 13-14-year-olds that scepticism is most evident – most of the youngest and the oldest respondents report that they do believe in scary stories and strange experiences.

Some of the reasons why they do – are as follows:

- "because they give a sense of thrill, they are scary and give a sense of shock and sometimes because they are funny"(no.38, 11 yrs).
- "I like them because I sometimes have a need for being scared, then my friends and I tell each other the stories, (discussing) whether they are scary or terrifying or frightening" (no 16, 14 yrs.).

One of my students expressed in the questionnaire:

- "I like them because you can transmit them as narratives and experiences, but also as topics to discuss and to find solutions to. You just don't forget strange experiences" (no. 4, student).

Besides from reporting that the reason, why they believe in them – is because they have experienced strange things themselves. A 14-year-old gives this reason:

- “Because some people say that if we don’t believe in them, a ghost or something like that will expose it to you. Like the Exorcist, The Entity and other movies based on true stories” (no 16, 14 yrs.).

True stories ... One of the characteristics of oral story telling in Greenland is, that the story transmitted is as close to the truth as possible – and the value of a horror story is generally measured by its degree of authenticity (cf. PEDERSEN 2002), which is also confirmed by one of the students, who reports:

- “Because people who has experienced stuff like that just don’t talk about it for fun” (no. 7, student).

On the question of how they *feel* when they get scared, most of the respondents tend to focus on the physical reaction such as expressed, by an 11-year-old:

- “When I get scared I get really scared. It is just as if somebody will grab you or as if you are right about to see something very frightening. When I am scared I shiver and my body gets tense. Then I get very attentive to sounds” (no. 18, 11 yrs).

Sensitive experiences as expressed here are shared with the 14-year-olds and the students.

The respondents’ answers to how they overcome the sense of fear were of different kind – a recurrent answer from the 11-year-olds, who generally are very precise in their descriptions, reported that:

- “I start crying, try to count, try to fall asleep, we move our big toes” (no 43, 11 yrs.).

Moving your big toe as a strategy to overcome extreme fear may seem odd, but that is a common saying and part of the tacit knowledge among Greenlanders – and somehow logical. When you are paralyzed with fear and are unable to move – it actually helps to canalize all your emotional fear to focusing on the physical activity to moving your toes – eventually to recapture your body control, which is also known from general relaxation exercises.

Another recurrent answer from this age group is:

- “I say my prayers, sing hymns, try to fall asleep as quickly as possible or turn to something else” (no. 49, 11 yrs.).

The 14-year-olds are a bit more embarrassed to admit, that they say their prayers to overcome the sense of fear as this one expresses with a touch of self reflection:

- “I try to remember my favourite cheerful pieces of music. I try to remember happy/cheerful memories. I lit the lights, the TV and the Radio in the sitting room and read comic papers. Okay ... sometimes I say my prayers” (no. 16, 14 yrs.).

The students’ answers to the strategy of overcoming fear are generally correspondent to this one.

What do they watch and read?

Interestingly, the most popular horror movies across the age groups are the Asian horror movies:

Takashi Shimizu’s *Ju-on* from 2000 and his American version *The Grudge* from 2004. *Ju-on/The Grudge* is about an evil curse – and vengeful spirits seem to linger upon a house where the horrific murder of a woman and child took place – and anyone who sets foot inside the house is marked for a terrifying haunting. One by one, those who have been tainted by the house begin to die, and nowhere is safe.

Another popular movie is Hideo Nakata’s *Ringu* from 1998 and Gore Verbinski’s American version *The Ring* from 2003. The Japanese psychological thriller, *The Ring* is based on a novel by Suzuki Koji with the original title *Ringu*, (1989) as part of a trilogy, which scored a great hit all over in Asia. The plot is about a videotape that kills everyone who sees it – exactly one week after viewing. And they do – children and adults. The movie is *mise en scene* in a realistic, modern environment – making use of an understated atmosphere, which emphasizes the sense of threat any moment.

Finally, the brothers Oxide Pang Chun & Danny Pang’s *The Eye 2* from 2004 is mentioned among the most popular Asian movies. In this movie, the protagonist Joey Cheng (played by Oi Shu) has been rejected from her love of her life and exposes herself to several suicidal attempts. In her delusional and emotionally unstable condition, she is frequently threatened by the sudden presence of strangers from the hereafter. The style used in the movie is similar to that of *the Ring* – the thrill is depicted more as a mental

state than fear of evil people. The thrill gradually creeps into your body in an understated manner.

Fascination of J-horror

Watching Japanese horror movies, the so called *J-horror* (MUNKHOLM 2005:23), like for instance *Ring/Ringu* (NAKATA & TAKIGAWA 1998); *Ring 2* (NAKATA 2005); *Dark Water* (NAKATA 2002); the different versions of *Ju-on/The Grudge* (SHIMIZU 2000, 2003, 2004) – movies, which are all the most popular among the respondents – there is a striking likeness to the horror elements, which are characteristic for the Greenlandic horror narratives: female ghost crawling towards her victim – in Greenlandic called an *ikusimioq* (one who crawls on her elboes) – long, black hair covering most of the face; child's ghost materializing in front of you etc. Furthermore, a condensed and uncanny atmosphere of horror is created in the Japanese movies, which stimulates the senses at a slow pace. The Japanese movies do not make use of the shock effects, we know from the American horror movies like Wes Cravens teenage thriller *Scream* (1996), but rather they make use of hinting at something gloomy coming up. It is a game between a supernatural agency at work and something naturally comprehensible. The lurking horror is created by quiet cuts – you follow the protagonists' direction of the gaze, out of the frame, and thereby you are stimulated to expect something ghastly to happen analogously with the protagonists. The mise en scène of the frame is close to the minimalistic style – long and empty hallways, sparsely furnished rooms, deserted spaces, close-ups on faces, which obviously express the sense of horror; rough lighting and a sound design, which all together recreate the space into monstrous scenery, where the evil might break out any moment.

The movies make use of the characteristic range of suspense, which is generally used in a horror narratives – the game between moving from familiar to unfamiliar environments; the game of feeling secure one moment being replaced by feeling in an exposed position the next moment; the game between playing on enlightened scepticism and credulity and the game of changing from present time to past, where the animistic is enacted, in movies as well as in literature (cf. BRIGGS 1977:18f).

The Japanese movies are about vengeful ghost, the so called *onryou*, which, according to Munkholm (2005) are:

(...) typically (...) driven by a simple motive for revenge, and often it is about ghosts of women who have been so unfairly treated when living, that they return from the dead to take revenge (MUNKHOLM 2005:23, my translation).

A Greenlandic parallel to the Japanese *onryou* can for instance be found in Johan Egede's for Greenlanders well known, allegedly self experienced narrative from 1971, "Misigisaq qiaamminartoq" (= a horror experience. EGEDE 1990), which is about a spirit that materialized as an old woman, who haunted the narrator across time and space, at home as well as in the wilderness – who, as we see in J-horror, too – is crawling towards her victim dragging her long hair along the floor:

(...) then I saw an old woman crawling towards my daughter with her disgusting hair down, trailing it along the floor. When her eyes turned against the moon light, I saw them give out light. I was paralyzed (...). When she was rising, I shouted with all my strength "Get thee hence, Satan!" (EGEDE 1990:15, my translation).

Here after she disappeared with a rattle! Similar characters appear in the above mentioned movies.

Besides the Japanese movies, about half of the fourteen-year-olds mentioned having seen William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* from 1973 – which is based on a true story as one of the 14-year-olds movie experts expressed!

The Danish film researcher, Rikke Schubart (1993) points out, that *The Exorcist* is a classic teenage-rebellion-splatter movie, depicting the monstrous transformation of a neglected 12-13 year-old girl, Reagan (played by Linda Blair), in the vulnerable state of becoming a teenager. The demonic possession, which Reagan is undergoing, can be interpreted as a raging rebellion against the adult world – in the transformation process from child to adult. Reagan spits on all authorities – the mother, the priest, the doctors – she hits them, she vomits over them – and kills three men – and the most shocking scene is probably the one, where she masturbates with a crucifix and forces her mothers head to her bleeding abdomen. The ultimate revenge on the authorities is complete (SCHUBART 1993:235). The movie, Schubart points out, can also be taken into account for the discovery of "the teenagers bloody sexuality":

The growing sexuality, the body in change and the threatening loss of virginity are all changes that are unfamiliar and scary for the teenager, who is busy rebelling against the family and the social norms of the parents (*ibid.*, my translation).

Referring to James Twitchell¹, Schubart (1993) points out that de classic horror myths such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (orig. 1818), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (orig. 1886) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (orig.1897)², all are

¹ American horror researcher, who among others has written *Dreadful Pleasures. An Anatomy of Modern Horror*. Oxford University Press, 1985.

² See Stephen King: *Frankenstein, Dracula, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1978)

about rebellion, sexuality and about the scary changes of the body. Under the surface they are representing sexual adventures, which communicate to the young, what is tolerated, and what is not (SCHUBART 1993:235). The horror myths are still popular, Schubart points out, but they seem a bit antiquated according to the taste of the young people of present time. That is why new myths have arisen – myths that focus in more detail on the monstrous and on the body symbolism (*ibid.*). *The Exorcist* (FRIEDKIN 1973), which abundantly makes use of splatter effects such as vomit and blood, can also be interpreted as “a kind of a modern over determined puberty ritual, of which the physical and bloody aspects suddenly changes in form; the voice changes; the young bleeds and the [body] hair grows” (SCHUBART 1993:236, my translation). Schubart’s explanation to why the young seek out the splatter genre is that their “expectations and worst forebodings are met with, and they are looking forward to experiencing the sense of anxiety and chock” (SCHUBART 1993:235, my translation) – which is also a possible explanation to the before mentioned respondents craving for and need for consuming horror movies: “I like them because I sometimes have a need for being scared (...)” (no. 16, 14 yrs.)

Preferences among horror literature

As to preferences in horror literature – the answers are very sparse – the respondents clearly have a better memory concerning English titles of international horror movies, that is over 20 different movie titles compared to only 3 titles of named Greenlandic horror books, *Eeeq!* (LYNGE 1990) – an anthology of scary stories – along with *Tupermi Misigisapiluk* (OLSEN 1998), which contains short stories generally about *qivittut*³ – both of which have been the most popular the last decade and both allegedly based on true experiences. Finally, *Aliortukkat – meeqqat allataat* (NUNATTA ATUAGAATEQARFIA 2003) is mentioned among the most popular books. It is a Greenlandic/Danish anthology containing children’s own horror narratives, published by The National Library. Interestingly, *Aliortukkat – meeqqat allataat* seems to be slightly influenced by elements from the new media contrary to the *Eeeq!* (LYNGE 1990) and *Tupermi Misigisapiluk* (OLSEN 1998).

The horror narratives – make rich use of the features known from the Greenlandic oral story telling tradition – combined with distinctive use of sensory images, such as sounds and whistling from heap of stones, from unusual places, baby cries and unspecified smells from nowhere. The images make you hear the sounds, smell the odors, taste the food – and react accordingly to the different types of pathos appeal used in the narratives

³ *qivittoq* is a person who has left people and who will never return again and hereafter becomes a half physical and half spiritual creature, who for instance is able to catch reindeer without use of weapon and who is able to wander across hills and fjords – and is immortal (KLEINSCHMIDT 1871: 152).

– from empathy to disgust.

At the psychological level, the horror fiction circles around themes as struggle between good and bad deriving mainly from Christian concepts of guilt, shame and taboos, which especially Olsen's *Tupermi Misigisapiluk* (1998) is focusing on. Other themes, which are touched upon, are among others, the (demonic) wilderness, and the inland and unfamiliar places, where expectations of unknown forces are enacted. The demonic happens in the solitude, where all physical and psychological senses are sharpened, and it is in the solitude the individual is subject to unknown forces (cf. BRIGGS 1977).

Yet another theme which is touched upon is the role of community in relation to the above mentioned *qivittut*, circling around the question whether they are demons or real persons, who have been neglected from society in an 'us-versus-the-others-among-ourselves-discourse' – or, in the end, whether they represent our alter ego. Within this theme, normative attitudes towards the sexually different is also to be found (cf. STEENHOLDT 2001) – again, from the perception of 'us' versus 'them' among our selves. Obviously, death is a recurrent theme, as well as moral and ethics in relation to tacit hunting rules; ethics in relation to general (normative) conduct of life; fear and anxiety; repression; loneliness; longing; pain; lies and jealousy – are all themes, which are touched upon under the disguise of horror narratives. Further more, from a psychological perspective, the theme of physical and emotional transformation; initiation voyage into the wilderness; regression; loss of ego and symbolic death as well as rebirth – are all themes deriving from the word of mouth narratives.

Further, the fiction make use of the sense of being watched secretly and the sense of being stalked – as also shown in the popular Japanese horror movies mentioned before. It all gratifies the respondents occasionally "*need for being scared*" as quoted earlier.

Theoretical aspects of body experience and the affect of thrill

A Danish critic Nikolaj M. Lassen suggests (*Weekendavisen* 30.03.2001) that we love to watch horror movies, because the sense of thrill gives us back our body. *Darkness*, he says, is an important element of shockers and in relation to our experience of these. Normally, when we are surrounded by light, we pay more attention to our environment than we do to our selves.

We repress the experience of ourselves as passive, physical objects by dislocating attention externally. 'The others' become bodies and objects that we 'occupy' with projected feelings and drives. (...) But as darker it gets the more difficult it gets –[we] repress the bodily experience externally and 'occupy' the environment with feelings and attention – as we can see nothing to

occupy. That is why we dislocate feelings and attention internally and in a way 'reoccupy' (...) our own body; we feel our own bodily surface and become more attentive to our selves as passive objects. As objects which can be treated by others as object of action and treatment" (LASSEN 2001, my translation).

Subject and object – body and environment – get inverted – in straight line with Jean-Paul Sartre's theory on 'The Glance' (1992 [orig. 1943]).

It is exactly this principle horror movies make use of (LASSEN 2001). Often the horror fiction is narrated in 1st person and makes use of close-ups or 'shallow focus', in opposition to classical film narratives, which make use of deep focus, where objects in the foreground, the middle ground and the background all are in sharp focus. Close-ups function like fear of the dark. In the darkness the senses are inhibited at the distant level and increased at the close level: the close and safe object-universe around us disappears and our excited nerves make us clear that we, as recipients, are potential objects of pain and abuse (*ibid.*). We lose control and get awfully scared, sometimes to the degree of paralysis. This makes the close sensitivity even more alert, as in a paralyzed state we are further more passive and out of control of our environment. Lassen's argument is that the sense of *Self* is sharpened and that is why horror movies and horror literature are exciting and pleasant (*ibid.*)

It is no coincidence that especially adolescents are fascinated by the horror genre thinking of all their pubescent hormones raging in their bodies. According to the former mentioned Schubart (1993), it is a game between the Freudian desire/anxiety versus the passive submission we also know from the so-called survival activities. Behind everything forbidden, every repression of the body there is an equivalent desire. The worse the better, the more a horror fiction scares us the more pleasurable it is to read or to watch.

The point is that young people seek the horror fiction over and over again, not in order to experience nightmare, but to find a way to handle the affect of fear and anxiety, in other words to find a method to control fear within a secure environment – you have to be able to return home 'safely' (NIELSEN 1989). If this awareness is lost, only anxiety will be left. Unwillingly adolescents move towards and into a development of peculiar feelings and instincts, just like the protagonists of the preferred horror movies – fascinated and frightened of the bodily changes, its new possibilities and monstrosity (*ibid.*)

End remarks:

My suggestion – based on the pilot project described above – is that adolescents' fascination of horror and supernatural phenomena derives from their own physical and emotional transformations. Furthermore, their fascination of this genre derives from a

need of getting together around a subject, through which they can act out emotions of fear and anxiety – in a secure forum. At a relational level the interest for the genre provides the adolescents with knowledge, which give them a certain position in the group – as one of the respondents expressed: “I like them because sometimes I have a need for being scared, then my friends and I tell each other stories, discussing whether they are scary or terrifying or frightening”. Finally, I assume that the traditional narratives from the pre-colonial period have been replaced with new narratives, as for instance the horror genre – including traditional elements combined with supernatural trends, Christian beliefs as well as elements from the movie world from the global world.

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