

Keeping a Distance: The Joy of Haunted Attractions

Madelon Hoedt

“It’s hard to tell the difference, sometimes, between fear and excitement.”

Richard Laymon, *After Midnight*

Frayed white letters appear against a blood-soaked background, accompanied by images of shambling figures and the sound of a chainsaw, a slow pulse and maniacal laughter: “This fall, you will be tested, mentally, physically, until your blood is shed. Are you ready?” The trailer of the Terror Test venue in Mississippi gives visitors a clear idea of what they are in for.(1) Similarly, in 2008, the New York City-based Nightmare Haunted House made the following promise to its visitors: “With more special effects, more elaborate sets, and more evil baddies waiting to get you then [sic] ever before, NIGHTMARE: BAD DREAMS COME TRUE will bring your worst night terrors to screaming life.”(2) If we look at the facts listed on the website of the Haunted House Association, we can see that there are over 3,000 haunted attractions in the United States, which together generate revenue of around 300 million dollars in ticket sales each year.(3) Haunted attractions are big business, it seems, drawing in millions of visitors each Halloween who willingly pay to be scared out of their wits. Yet what is the attraction of these venues? Why would anyone respond to these grisly invitations?

The question of the attraction of horror has been addressed by scholars in the past. Most of these theories, however, are linked to the more obvious forms of horror culture, most often extending no further than novels and movies. Yet it seems safe to assume that there is a huge difference between the relative safety of a horror book or film and the in-your-face frights of a scare attraction, where visitors are transformed into the protagonists of their own horror narrative. Andrew Tudor has noted these differences between horror forms in his article ‘Why horror? The peculiar pleasures of a popular genre’: “They [the scholars] ask, in effect, what is it that people-in-general like about horror-in-general” (4), further stating that “...the question should not be ‘why horror?’ at all. It should be, rather, why do *these* people like this horror in *this* place at *this* particular time?” (5) I agree with Tudor: ‘horror’, especially in its more extreme forms, cannot be seen as one big entity, but instead should be divided into its different manifestations. In this article, then, I will focus on haunted attractions and the issues that play a part in the explanation for their enjoyment.

Scholarly scares: concepts and theory

What exactly is a haunted attraction (or scare attraction)? The definition used in this article is as follows: a haunted attraction is a venue, designed to frighten its audience. The term does not apply to sites that claim to be haunted by actual ghosts. Instead, the venues have a basis in fiction or ‘horrible history’. Haunted attractions are site-specific (though the contents are not always directly related to the actual location of the venue) and contain a number of performance elements. Effects used can include live actors, animatronics, theatrical sets and sound- and light effects. The themes of haunted attractions are intended to be frightening in nature, revolving around serial killers, mysterious murders, mad scientists and their creations. Most haunted attractions are staged during or around the month of October and

operate in correlation with the Halloween holiday season. Some venues, such as the Dungeons franchise and the London Bridge Experience, are open all year.(6)

The following discussion will only concern itself with haunted attractions and not with fairground ghost rides. The problem with this form is the complex nature of the form: actors can be used, or rides can merely contain animatronics. In addition, there is an issue as to whether visitors placed in carts or able to move around on their own (differences which each present specific challenges). For this reason, it would appear that a separate exploration of ghost rides has more merit. Hell Houses, venues run church communities will not be discussed here, either. Although the means for scaring the audience are similar, a Hell House focuses on showing its audience the horrors of sin and the aim of these venues is fundamentally different to that of a haunted attraction: a haunted attraction is meant for fun, firstly, with education being a possible second focus.(7) In contrast, Hell House concentrates on instilling actual fear in its visitors, warning them about the fate that might be awaiting them in the afterlife. The absence of the “entertainment for fun” element places the concept of hell houses outside the scope of this research. However, further exploration of this phenomenon is not without interest for any future work. (8)

In many ways, a haunted attraction is similar to other forms of horror. The goal to entertain through fear is present in any. So, what makes haunted attractions exceptional and merits a separate theory for their enjoyment?

Two concepts are of interest here, control and distance, which have been put forward by John Morreall in his article ‘Enjoying negative emotions in fictions’. Control is understood as the power an audience can exert over the material; the means by which they can directly influence or manipulate the material presented. Often you hear people telling of how they closed their eyes during a particularly gory part of a movie, or how they had to stop reading a book because it was simply “too scary”. This is what is meant by control here: the option to manipulate the material in such a way that the horrific experience ceases immediately. Such an ‘emergency exit’ is an option in the case of both novels and films: by closing the book, or closing one’s eyes, the horror is immediately shut out. To use Morreall’s own words: “When we have this ability to start, stop, and direct the experience, we can enjoy a wide range of experiences, even “unpleasant” ones.” (9) His argument is based on this notion that, as long as we are in control, negative, and (for the sake of this argument) scary emotions can be enjoyed. As stated by Morreall: “Intense fear – terror – is not enjoyable because in such a state we lose control over our attention, our bodies, and our total situation.” (10) A similar idea can be found in the text by Daniel Shaw: “If one were really in danger, one would not feel the terror as pleasurable.”(11)

Next to the sense of control, Morreall adds a second concept, distance, stating that: “Control is usually easiest to maintain when we are merely attending to something which has no practical consequences for us, as when we watch from a distance some event unrelated to us.” (12) Distance implies the position of the audience in respect to the material. For instance, in the case of a film, the viewer takes a third person view and is watching the actions of others without actively taking part. Although identification of the audience with the characters is possible and even necessary to fully enjoy the material, it can still be noted that there is a difference between the audience and the actual story. They can identify, but are not actively involved: the protagonists are chased by a maniacal killer, and not the cinema-goer. Yet this is exactly what happens when visiting a haunted attraction. To use the example of the London Tombs, visitors can expect to be chased by the creatures living inside the crypts. Similarly, there is no way in which one is able to simply ‘switch off’ the action in a haunted venue, as is possible when watching a movie. These

issues clearly pinpoint the differences between haunted venues to other forms of horror, most notably novels and movies. It can be said that the enjoyment of a horror book or film is an experience that is relatively safe, where the worst that can happen is sustaining a paper cut or a sleepless night. A haunted attraction, however, uses the idea of 'fear for fun' for a terrifying, in-your-face experience.

However, similarities do exist between scare attractions and other forms of horror, in particular with theatre and videogames. Despite the fact that the element of control is present in the case of horror videogames (play can be ended by the click of a mouse), the distance between the player and the material is much smaller than in the case of a movie or novel. When playing, the player's 'avatar' acts as the protagonist and the player is thus much more involved in the action. Any scares in the game are aimed directly at the player, similar to the way in which the scares in a haunted attraction are aimed directly at its visitors. The correlation between the two is voiced in a paper by Bernard Perron: "...horror videogames are nothing else than Haunted Houses, playgrounds where we come to play at frightening ourselves." (13) Although the player is able to control both the game (by ending a playing session) and his actions (by controlling the avatar), there is still an element of the action being outside of the player's hands, adding to the experience. This aspect has been described by Tanya Krzywinska, who has discussed the difference in responses to movies and videogames:

The element of pre-determination, which lies outside the player's sphere of agency, is therefore linked to the metaphysical dimension in which manicheism operates. The concept of the moral occult plays a central role in my argument that horror-based videogames are strongly dependent on their capacity to allow players to experience a dynamic between states of being *in control* and *out of control*. (14)

According to Krzywinska, the presence of a force that lies outside of the player's control adds to the horror experienced by the player. This idea coincides with the control theory of Morreall: the parts of the game experience which cannot be controlled by the player, which put the player in a situation where he is *out of control*, are perceived as frightening. This distinction in experience and control between a movie and a videogame, which I described earlier, is expressed by Krzywinska, as well: "...films are less able than games to build into their deep structure a concrete experience of being in control and out of control of on-screen events." (15)

However, the element of distance is still present: players are physically removed from the virtual horrors on the screen and therefore unable to fully participate in the way in which the audience of a haunted attraction is exposed to the scares. Secondly, although there is the tension between being in and out of control, essentially, the player remains in control of the game (literally holding the controller) and is thus able to direct the action, something which is impossible in the case of a haunted attraction. Although books and movies can ultimately be described as 'safe', allowing a reader or cinema-goer to manipulate the material, this process is lessened in the case of videogames, yet these still retain elements of control and distance, more so than scare attractions do. Seemingly unparalleled, a haunted attraction merges the idea of 'fear for fun' into one terrifying, in-your-face experience.

Seeing that most existing horror theory has been written with novels and movies in mind, it would appear that haunted attractions require a slightly different approach. In the next few paragraphs three of the main theories on the enjoyment of horror and their position in relation to scare attractions will be discussed.

The first theories that will be addressed are the cognitive theory, with Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* as its main work, and 'fantastic' theory of Tzvetan Todorov. (16) A decision has been made to discuss these two theories together, as they pose similar problems for the current argument. Firstly, both theories contain the idea of fascination and curiosity, where it is assumed that the monstrous beings of horror, human or inhuman, fascinate us. This feeling can be seen as a sense of morbid curiosity, where something is so ugly, so revolting, that one cannot look away. Although this is true for both movies and novels, which usually contain a moment where the monster is revealed to the audience in all its revolting glory, this idea is more problematic in the case of haunted attractions: the lack of light and other obstructions make a similar observation and subsequent appreciation of the creatures in the venue nearly impossible.

Secondly, there is the notion of a progressive narrative and disclosure plots. This view relates to the idea that, in order to witness the ending of a story, one is inclined to ignore the scary or gory aspects of the narrative or at least tolerate them for the sake of the plot. It should be noted that such a narrative is almost completely absent from scare attractions. The Dungeons franchise uses displays based on legends and history, such as Sweeney Todd and Jack the Ripper. Nightmare Haunted House has used nightmares, paranormal experiences and the most common phobias for the various instalments of this attraction. For 2009, Terror Test will use the theme of infection, creating a background story of a deadly virus being released into the general public. In all of these, the themes function merely as a backdrop for the sets and scares. When walking through a haunted attraction, we are treated to scenes, not a full narrative with beginning, middle, end and plot. Therefore, the theory that the horror is ignored in order to find out what happened cannot be applied to these venues.

The last problem with the cognitive and 'fantastic' theory is the reliance on aesthetic distance and a rational approach. Both views assume that an audience will take a step back in order to appreciate the narrative, the monster and its power, in short, to appreciate the aesthetics of horror. However, when inside a scare attractions and being chased by the creatures inside, it is simply impossible to sit back and take a good, long look. Often, groups of visitors are literally chased through the venue with performers urging them to run from room to room and are thus kept from expressing any form of appreciation. A second possibility is the simple fact that a visitor might not want to stay and examine the displays, as they are frightened and want to 'get out'. To quote Carroll: "One supposes that fascination would be too great a luxury to endure, if one, against all odds, were to encounter a horrific monster in "real life"." (17) Although haunted attractions are a game of make-believe, the monsters you encounter inside are as close to real life as it gets. Both the cognitive and fantastic theory requires a specific, rational mindset from the audience, which is hardly feasible in a discussion of scare attractions.

What remains is to look at psychoanalysis, at Freud and his ideas of the uncanny; the alien and the familiar becoming alien, both of them frightening. When these fears are repressed, according to Freud, they lead to a contamination of the unconscious. By allowing a 'return of the repressed', a controlled experience of the repressed emotions (and possible unconscious, unwanted desires), a feeling of catharsis can occur. Thus cleansed from any unnatural emotions or urges, a person can once again return to the existing order. (18) Objections have been raised as to whether this theory is valid when discussing books and movies. As stated by Berys Gaut: "...These films not infrequently leave (and are designed to leave) a lingering sense of fearfulness in their audience [...] This is precisely the opposite effect one would expect if one's fear had been lightened." (19) Yet this idea of catharsis seems very plausible in a discussion of

haunted attractions. A visitor enters the venue, is scared out of their wits, and then emerges back into the sunlight and the real world: order is once again established.

Enter at your own risk: case studies

Returning to London Bridge Underground Station after a visit to the London Dungeons and the London Tombs; eyes stinging and throat parched from the darkness inside, the strobe-lights and the artificial fog; tired, the beginnings of a headache poking at the back of the eyes. All this and more: a strange combination of discomforts with a strong sense of elation and sheer pleasure, the sense of a day well-spent. This section contains a number of case studies, which will be linked to the concepts of control and distance, outlined above, as well as additional observations. Where possible, the information was gathered first-hand by visiting the attractions and contacting the staff of the venues to obtain additional insights.⁽²⁰⁾ In the case of the two venues discussed that are located in the United States, the author was forced to rely solely on the correspondence with the owners. Inevitably, my personal experiences will at times resound in the following discussion. These occurrences will be marked as such and should not be considered as conclusive evidence. As mentioned above, a number of venues were studied for the case studies presented here. This selection was based on location (whether or not it would be feasible to visit them) and on the nature of the venue. Here, each of them will be briefly introduced.

- Dungeons franchise:

Currently, there are five Dungeons in five European cities (three in the United Kingdom, one in Germany and one in the Netherlands). The Dungeons focus on ‘horrible history’ and each instalment features displays which are typical for that city (using Jack the Ripper in London, for instance, and Rembrandt in Amsterdam), yet the effects and scenes used are largely similar. This case study will deal with the London, Amsterdam and Edinburgh Dungeons, specifically, as these have been visited by the author.

- London Bridge Experience/London Tombs:

Open since 2008, the London Bridge Experience is located directly underneath the actual London Bridge. The venue contains two segments: the first, the London Bridge Experience, is an actor-driven attraction which relates the history of London Bridge from Roman times up to the present day. The second part is a visit to the London Tombs, where the frights begin: dressed in hardhats and high-visibility vests, groups are led into the crypts of London Bridge and confronted by the various creatures that inhabit them. Since its opening in 2008, the London Tombs have already been awarded the title “UK’s best scare attraction” in the same year.

- Fright Club:

Located on the South Bank in London, Fright Club is a lesser known attraction. It is a relatively short, but quite intense, venue, its theme rooted in the well-known ‘mad scientist’ stories. The venue is designed by the same production team that was responsible for the London Bridge Experience and London Tombs and several similarities can be detected.

- Nightmare Haunted House:

Nightmare Haunted House, based in New York City, has been around since 2003. Approaching a haunted attraction as a theatrical event, its aim to frighten its audience, Nightmare employs a form of hyperrealism and provides an experience that is mainly actor-driven. In the words of director Timothy Haskell: “Real things are more scary than the fantastical.”⁽²¹⁾ The theme of the venue changes yearly and has included Nightmare: Face Your Fear (staging the thirteen most common phobias), Nightmare: Ghost Stories (portraying people’s personal experiences with the paranormal) and Nightmare: Bad Dreams Come True (displaying twenty different recurring nightmares). All information for these instalments was gathered by

asking the audience of Nightmare about their own experiences, thus making for a very personal event for its audiences.

- Terror Test:

Wanting to bring the technology of a professional haunted house to a state which (at that point) had none, the Terror Test venue was opened in Mississippi. Through use of movie-quality scenes and ultra-realism, a professional cast and scripted scenes, Terror Test tries not only to shock, but to tap into the more primal fears. Like Nightmare (and most other US-based scare attractions), the theme of Terror Test is changed yearly. Last year, the venue consisted of three separate attractions: Legion, Switchblade Circus and the aptly named Slaughterhouse. The theme for the 2009 instalment is 'Infection', where a research lab accidentally releases a virus into the general public.

Although all venues also have older or younger visitors, the age groups that make up the typical audience for these attractions are teenagers and people in their twenties. Secondly, when staff of the different venues is asked about the reasons for audiences to visit their attractions, the main incentive is said to be: the adrenaline rush. Other motivations listed were: visiting a scare attraction is the best way to fully enjoy Halloween season (in the case of the US attractions, which operate during the end of October); enjoyment of the high detail of sets and theme; unusual date; and (interesting for our current discussion) 'paths through a good scream'.(22) However, the main incentive listed here points directly at Aristotle's ideas on catharsis. The relation of scare attractions to the horror genre in general is an ambivalent one. When discussing the 'edutainment' scares of the Dungeons and the London Tombs, it can be said that the themes addressed inside the venues position them outside of the genre as a whole: although the horror element is key, it is unlikely that the contents of any of the locations respond to larger trends within the horror genre. Other venues, such as Terror Test, state that they mix 'current trends' with their own unique style, (23) whereas Timothy Haskell of Nightmare has said that he follows his own views and does not 'comport to the trends of the horror genre.'(24)

So far, the concepts of control and distance are assumed to play a huge part in whether or not something will induce fear. To once again quote Morreall: "Control is usually easiest to maintain when we are merely attending to something which has no practical consequences for us, as when we watch from a distance some event unrelated to us." (25) Yet, what features are presented in the venues that influence control and distance and how are these experienced by the audience?

Obviously, visitors are unable to physically influence the action once they enter the attraction and to start and stop the experience at will. However, most venues have some kind of 'emergency exit' available, where some displays can be skipped (as is true in the Dungeons in the case of the rides and sections that use strobe lighting) or where the scares can be avoided altogether (one can go and enjoy the London Bridge Experience without having to venture into the Tombs). In the case of Nightmare, the actors are trained to spot the difference between "let me out, seriously I want to get out" and "let me out, this is so much fun". Where needed, visitors can be escorted out of the venue.(26) It should, however, be noted that these exits are not easily visible, as this would break the illusion when inside the venue (and damage the feeling of not being in control).

Another way to break the feeling of control is to use elements of the unexpected. We cannot control what we do not know will happen. The most basic examples of this are simple shock effects, with actors or animatronics suddenly jumping out at you. A more intricate way to deal with this is presented in the case of the London Tombs and Fright Club. The actors in these venues are very active and the props and sets

are designed in a way that makes it possible for the actors to really ‘work the crowd’. By ducking through trapdoors or moving through the scene, the performers can deliver fright after fright, something which causes visitors to feel a heightened sense of fear, as they never know where the next scare might be coming from. These ‘surprises’ can take two forms: during my visit to the London Tombs I witnessed one of the actors running around and climbing onto parts of the set, clawing at the tour group through a fence in an attempt to ‘get us’. In other cases, actors simply followed the group, keeping level with us without actually doing anything. This created a strong sense of unfulfilled anticipation. A similar effect was reached when encountering an actor who was lying on the floor and slowly crawling forward, seemingly without noticing the group (yet, as a visitor and being aware of the kind of venue we were in, a number of people in our group were waiting for them to lash out and grab us any moment).

This expected grabbing of ankles brings us to the next issue: that of touching. Although many venues have clear rules on this issue, stating that visitors are not allowed to touch the actors, and vice versa, I found that I felt somewhat unsure about this once inside, as in the example of the crawling performer (which is, of course, the desired effect). In the podcast “How the hell you scare people?”, featuring Timothy Haskell and Richard Jordan, the issue of touching is briefly discussed.⁽²⁷⁾ One of the main types of fear, described by Haskell, is to make the audience feel as though they are actually in danger. Richard Jordan relates how this feeling can be achieved: “Whatever you can do to invade their personal space without actually touching them.”⁽²⁸⁾ Exploring these boundaries of distance obviously makes for a more intense experience. However, this rule is not used everywhere. For some time, Fright Club employed a tactic where visitors would be made aware of the possibility of being touched, but once inside this did not happen (again, unfulfilled anticipation), or the touch would be very light, a mere brush with props such as feather dusters. This decision was made to bring an extra dimension to the otherwise somewhat limited attraction (the space is quite small, compared to some of the other venues).⁽²⁹⁾ However, when the ownership of Fright Club changed hands, changes were made. These days, the venue employs a more active touching policy. There are several accounts from visits to Fright Club where the visitors were subjected to intentional, intense contact: a visitor related an experience where one of the actors approached them, put their hands on their head and ruffled their hair.⁽³⁰⁾ Another story even mentions a visitor getting head-butted.⁽³¹⁾ Obviously, this account is an example of taking a lack of distance to the extreme and is not always appreciated by the visitors.⁽³²⁾ However, it can be noted that stories like these (whether or not they are true) give a venue a certain notoriety and could add to the feelings of anticipation and fear for future visitors that are familiar with these comments.

Yet apart from these ‘physical’ examples, it seems that there exists a second form of control and distance. The previous discussion defines control and distance primarily as physical properties. However, when looking into the practice of haunted attractions, it is also possible to identify a form of mental control and distance, rooted in the idea of anticipation of fear. As Morreall points out, it is easiest to maintain control when there is a distance between an audience member and the event or performer. Although the physical events in a scare attraction do have direct consequences for the audience (actors jumping out at you, etc.), it is still a game of make-believe. If, somehow, a visitor can convince themselves that the events portrayed are unrelated to them, they might be frightened, but this fear can be expected to be less intense than in the case of someone who does not distance themselves. Returning to the Haunternet podcast, anticipation of fear is another type of fright that is defined by Haskell. In relation to this, Richard Jordan states that “you want to get them [the audience] scared before they even get inside.” However, it is possible for people to resist this anticipation of fear (“They’ll be shutting themselves off.”), which makes it all the more difficult to get under someone’s skin and truly frighten them.⁽³³⁾ By taking the show ‘outside’ and adding scary

elements before visitors enter the attraction itself, their sense of control and distance are already diminished.

At this point, it is interesting to turn to the ideas of Richard Schechner. In his book *Performance Theory*, he describes the idea of a ‘pre-show’: “Too little study has been made of how people – both spectators and performers – approach and leave performances. How do specific audiences get to, and into, the performance space; how do they go from that space?”(34) As can be understood from the words of Timothy Haskell and Richard Jordan, this process is very important when visiting a scare attraction. The experience does not begin when entering the venue; it starts long before. It can be argued that the location of the venue itself plays a part in this. The London Tombs are situated in the spaces below London Bridge and requires the visitors to don a hardhat and a high-visibility vest. Although these are not necessary safety precautions, this process has been installed to involve the audience and add to the anticipation of the actual visit.(35) In other cases, information of the venue location is not used. The Amsterdam Dungeons are located in a deconsecrated church, where the relic of the Miracle of Amsterdam was held.(36) Features of this church are still visible in the venue itself, such as the vaulted ceilings and the organ. However, visitors are not made aware of this in any way (yet one might wonder what the response would be if they were informed).

Some form of ‘preshow’, as described by Haskell and Jordan, is a more obvious example of the process of preparation. Upon arriving to the venue, visitors are treated to suggestive music, dimmed lights and a designed environment, causing them to brace themselves for the scares that are yet to come. More importantly, the ‘pre-show’ can be used for a blurring between the imagined horrors and the real world, almost forcing the audience to believe that what they will be subjected to is ‘the real thing’. Carroll describes the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ that is necessary to be affected by horror novels or movies. In order to be frightened, one has to believe that the events and monsters depicted in writing or on screen are (at least for a short period of time) real. Essentially this is only a game of make-believe: “... if one really believed that the theater were beset by lethal shape changers, demons, intergalactic cannibals, or toxic zombies, one would hardly sit by for long. One would probably attempt to flee, to hide, to protect oneself, or to contact the proper authorities [...]” (37) For this discussion, the use of the term ‘willing’ is particularly interesting. When travelling to a haunted attraction, a visitor could mentally prepare themselves for the experience to come, where, for the duration of the tour, they will believe that zombies exist. However, once inside, it is difficult to hold on to that idea. None of the visitors will call the police after visiting the London Tombs, nor make an attempt to alert any other authorities. Yet, whilst inside the venue, an attempt (or at the very least, an urge) to flee cannot be denied. Despite of the fact that every visitor knows that zombies do not exist, very few will stand around to put this knowledge to the test when a number of creatures are shambling in their direction. This response corresponds with another observation of Freud: “Nowadays we no longer believe in them [“secret injurious powers and the return of the dead”], we have *surmounted* these modes of thought; but we do not feel quite sure of our new beliefs, and the old ones still exist within us ready to seize upon any confirmation.” (38) Although modern society no longer believes in evil spirits or monsters, we are not yet fully convinced of these beliefs. The emotional response visitors have to the ‘creatures’ they encounter inside scare attractions seems to support this notion of a clash between what we know to be real and what might exist, thus making the experience all the more frightening.

It appears that this form of ‘blurring’ between actual and imagined horrors is readily exploited by the venues on a number of levels. One of the most notable attempts of connecting reality with fiction in this

way is the article that was published in various newspapers in November 2007, when the first tickets for the London Bridge Experience and the London Tombs went on sale. According to the coverage, a large number of skeletons were found in a sealed vault by the contractors working on the construction of the venue, which resulted in a series of spooky events (missing tools, defective light bulbs and even disappearances), resulting in the crew becoming too scared to keep working at the site. Although this was proven to be nothing more than a publicity stunt, connected to Halloween and ticket sales, the article was readily copied by a large number of media, including the BBC.(39) Another example is Nightmare Haunted House, where ‘linescarers’ are employed to prepare its audience. However, to quote Timothy Haskell: “We stage happenings where a weirdo is bothering patrons and making them feel uncomfortable and then we have a security guard throw them out like they actually weren’t part of the event.”(40) Again, the illusion of scares is made very real. It can even be argued that the actors standing outside London Bridge Underground station with flyers to lure visitors to the nearby London Dungeons and Tombs are another exponent of this. Instead of encountering these ‘ghouls’ within the defined space of a scare attraction, one finds them in the middle of a busy London street, another case of ‘creature meets reality’ and of the remaining ‘doubts’, as described by Freud.

In addition to the issues with control and distance, there was another point of interest that came to light during the case studies: the workings within the tour groups. When being guided through a venue in a small group (usually ten to twelve people), it is not uncommon that some form of ‘community spirit’ emerges. Connections between visitors are made on a number of levels, most notably that of mutual enjoyment. During my visit to the Edinburgh Dungeons, when the group consisted largely of visiting families, I even found myself looking out for the children in the group and trying to reassure them where needed. The selection of a leader in the London Bridge Experience is another example: during my visit, the young man who was selected as group leader at the beginning of the tour remained the leader throughout and was eventually teased by the group into entering the Tombs first. In the words of Tash Banks, this selection of a leader “gives visitors a false sense of security and identifies them as a group”. This idea of “you’re a group travelling through time together, and this is your leader X” makes it easier to draw the audience into the story.(41)

Opposed to this, a feature which is employed in both the London and Amsterdam Dungeons is to (briefly) separate members of the audience from the tour group. When considered in correlation with the bonding described above and the idea of ‘safety in numbers’, it is easy to see how this separation would cause a very immediate sense of nervousness. Although one is aware that the venue is supposed to be ‘safe’, it is difficult to firmly retain this idea when one person from your group, who could easily be one of the friends you are visiting with, is selected to be tortured or die a gruesome death. Some examples: in the new Surgery segment in the London Dungeons (installed in 2009), a member of the group is selected to enter the surgical theatre before the others. When the group is allowed to enter, they find the person strapped to a chair. An audio segment follows, explaining about medieval methods of anatomy and operations, which ends with an account of beheading. At this point, all the lights go out. A scream is heard and the audience is covered with a light spray of water. When the lights are once again switched on, the curtains around the ‘volunteer’ are closed and the group is ushered out, forced to leave them behind. The concept of separation is explored even further in the Amsterdam Dungeons: at several points in the show, visitors are singled out and asked to enter a room before the rest of the group. In addition, visitors are separated as soon as they enter the Amsterdam Dungeons. A large part of the venue is situated underground and the groups are transported there using two elevators. Upon entering the venue, visitors are asked to divide themselves between these, into a male and a female group, leaving them feeling

unsure as to whether they will be reunited when reaching their destinations. When taking into account that a lot of couples visit the Dungeons, the sense of dread is even more immediate.

It can be anticipated that there are other processes at play within a group, apart from the ‘bonding’. In the fourth chapter of *The Pleasures of Horror*, Matt Hills notes that the horror fandom is one that consists largely of connoisseurs who take pride in the fact that they are no longer scared by horrific images but are, instead, able to see the genre for its aesthetic merit. Although the aesthetic merit of haunted attractions is marginal, as we have already seen, the notion of ‘not being scared’ might play a big role. The groups in the attractions are assembled randomly, resulting in an arrangement where visitors are taking the tour together with a number of strangers, as well as friends or family. A feeling of peer pressure might become of importance, related directly to Hills’ statements about the connoisseurship of most horror fans, where a visitor might be labelled as ‘weak’ when they display any signs of being frightened. Although no definite assumptions can be made regarding this matter at this point in time, it would appear that further exploration of these ideas is feasible.(42)

Apart from the psychological aspects, neurological research might also provide interesting insights, most notably theories in the area of sensation seeking. The definition coined by Marvin Zuckerman, in his book *Sensation seeking: beyond the optimal level of arousal*, is as follows: “Sensation seeking is a trait defined by the need for varied, novel, and complex sensations and experiences and the willingness to take physical and social risks for the sake of such experience.” (43) These ideas do not seem to hold up in the case of novels and movies: as has been noted by various scholars, horror narratives are quite conservative (at least on the surface) and often explore very similar themes, thus eliminating the “varied and novel sensations” mentioned by Zuckerman. Similarly, the physical risks are virtually absent: as mentioned before, it is difficult to sustain more damage than a paper cut from reading a horror novel. The social risks, understood by Zuckerman in terms of ‘shame and embarrassment’ (44) are still a possibility as the genre is not held in high esteem by many people. All in all, it is very difficult to apply the theory of thrill-seeking to horror novels and movies. This is different in relation to haunted attraction: the audio-visual stimuli provide the aforementioned “varied, novel and complex sensations”, whereas the more immediate danger where there is none (only in extreme cases can a visitor be harmed by either the actors or the installations of the venue) hold up the theory of physical risk. The apparent lack of acceptance of the genre could, once again, account for the social risk involved. Also, we have seen that the main reason people to visit scare attractions would appear to be because of the adrenaline rush it may provide, which appears to point directly to the theory of sensation seeking and the need for thrills, providing us with even more reasons to take a closer look at the ideas put forward by Zuckerman.

Conclusions

On a purely theoretical level, it is easy to acknowledge the lack of narrative, control and distance in scare attractions, which seems to rule out explanations located in the cognitive or fantastic theories of, most notably, Carroll and Todorov. The adrenaline rush has been listed as the main reason for people to visit haunted attractions and it can be established that this, then, is also the main reason for their enjoyment of these venues. This seems to point us to the ideas of catharsis and the return of the repressed, to the theories of Freud and Aristotle. By being able to experience intense emotions in a (relatively) safe environment, one can be scared without any lasting consequences, as opposed to the lingering dread that can be the result of novels and movies (as noted by Gaut).

Scare attractions are a form of release, a way in which to experience scares in a closed environment, more direct, more primal than any horror movie could ever be.

However, when we want to find a more complete explanation for this enjoyment, we need to consider other factors, as well, which have been largely ignored in existing works of horror theory. Both group psychology and sensation seeking are concepts that have not yet been considered. However, as I have shown, these concepts hold an important place in the discussion of the horror-seeking audience of scare attractions. It would therefore be beneficial to explore these processes further.

Finally, I have attempted to show that the treatment of the theory on the enjoyment of haunted attractions is quite different from other theories coined to explain the attraction of horror. Returning to the ideas of Tudor, which I quoted at the beginning of this paper: 'horror' is a sum of its parts and not a one big entity. In order to answer the question 'why horror?', we should not explore the genre as a whole, but its different forms. To use the invitation, extended by Terror Test to its visitors: "Are you ready?"

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1. Source: <http://terrortest.com/>. Text is taken from the 2008 trailer, available on the website (July 20th, 2009)
2. Source: <http://hauntedhousenyc.com/newyork/about-2/> (July 20th, 2009)
3. Source: http://www.hauntedhouseassociation.org/haunted_attraction_information.htm (July 15th, 2009)
4. Tudor, Andrew; "Why horror? The peculiar pleasures of a popular genre"; in: *Cultural Studies*, 11(3) 1997; pp. 443-463; citation taken from p. 445
5. Ibid., p. 461
6. For additional information on these venues, see: <http://thedungeons.com> and <http://www.thelondonbridgeexperience.com/> (October 20th, 2009)
7. The Dungeons franchise (<http://thedungeons.com>) focuses on a form of scary edutainment. The venues are situated in various cities and depict the more grisly aspects of the town's history. An example is the use of Jack the Ripper and the Great Fire in the London venue.
8. The documentary *Hell House* (2001) by director George Ratliff depicts the efforts of the members of the Trinity Church community from Cedar Hill, Texas, in setting up their hell house and is a valuable source of information regarding this phenomenon. For more information, see: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0301235/> (November 15th, 2009)
9. Morreall, John; "Enjoying negative emotions in fictions"; in: *Philosophy and literature*, 9:1 (1985: Apr.), pp. 95-103; citation taken from p. 97
10. Ibid., p. 97
11. Shaw, Daniel, "Power, horror and ambivalence"; in: Shaw, Daniel (ed.); *Film and Philosophy: Horror Special Edition*; 2001. <http://www.lhup.edu/dshaw/pohor.html> (July 20th, 2009)
12. Morreall, p. 97.
13. Perron, Bernard; "Coming to play at frightening yourself: Welcome to the world of horror video games"; <http://www.aestheticsofplay.org/papers/perron2.htm> (December 5th, 2009)
14. Krzywinska, Tanya; "Hands-On Horror", in: King, Geoff, Krzywinska, Tanya (ed.); *Screenplay*; London: Wallflower Press, 2002, p. 206-224. Citation taken from p. 208
15. Ibid., p. 216
16. Carroll, Noël; *The Philosophy of Horror; or: Paradox of the Heart*; New York: Routledge, 1990. Todorov, Tzvetan; *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1975
17. Carroll, p. 189.
18. The concept of catharsis finds its origins with Aristotle, who defined catharsis as 'purging of the spirit of morbid and base ideas or emotions by witnessing the playing out of such emotions or ideas on stage' (Powell). Freud's 'cathartic treatment' incorporates some of these ideas: in the case of the return of the repressed, the patient would be forced to relive the repressed fears and experiences. The cathartic experience described here, in relation to scare attractions, is closer to the ideas of Aristotle and focuses on the notion of being scared in a (relatively) safe environment. See also: Powell, Esta; 'Catharsis in Psychology and Beyond: A Historic Overview'; <http://primal-page.com/cathar.htm> (December 11th, 2009)
19. Gaut, Berys; "The paradox of horror"; in: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 33:4 (1993: Oct.); pp. 333-345. Citation taken from p. 336.
20. The following visits were made to: the Amsterdam Dungeons (May 22nd, 2009); the London Dungeons (June 16th, 2009); the London Bridge Experience/London Tombs (June 16th, 2009); Fright Club (June 17th, 2009) and the Edinburgh Dungeons (July 26th, 2009). The discussion is based on the scare attractions as they were at that point in time.
21. Correspondence with Timothy Haskell.

22. Ibid.
23. Correspondence with Rick Carballo.
24. Correspondence with Timothy Haskell.
25. Morreall, p. 97.
26. Correspondence with Timothy Haskell.
27. The “How the hell do you do that?” series were made for the Haunternet site (link) and deals with all the aspects of running a haunted attraction. Episode 9, which is cited here, discusses the ways in which people can be scared (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVUkt_HkDGs; originally posted: April 10, 2009) (December 11th, 2009)
28. Citation taken from podcast.
29. Correspondence with Tash Banks.
30. Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wGct0VwsL8>; second comment by user ‘obelysk08’. (July 5th, 2009)
31. Correspondence with Tash Banks.
32. Source:
http://hauntedattractions.co.uk/index.php?option=com_fireboard&Itemid=147&func=view&catid=5&id=&id=187&catid=5 (July 5th, 2009)
33. Citations taken from podcast.
34. Schechner, Richard; *Performance Studies*; London: Routledge, second ed., 2003. Citation taken from p. 190.
35. Correspondence with Tash Banks.
36. See also: <http://www.therealpresence.org/eucharst/mir/holland.html> (July 10th, 2009)
37. Carroll, p. 63.
38. Freud, Sigmund; “The Uncanny”; 1919. Taken from: <http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/~amtower/uncanny.html> (December 11th, 2009)
39. Coverage by the BBC: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/7072188.stm> and the Daily Mail: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-491080/Builders-spooked-skeleton-discovery-tourist-attractions-sealed-vault.html>. Others had their doubts about the story, as can be seen in this article from the Londonist: http://londonist.com/2007/11/spook_central_b.php (July 5th, 2009)
40. Correspondence with Timothy Haskell.
41. Correspondence with Tash Banks.
42. Hills, Matt; *The Pleasures of Horror*; London: Continuum, 2005. Chapter 4 of the book focuses on the horror fandom.
43. Zuckerman, Marvin; *Sensation seeking: beyond the optimal level of arousal*; Hillsdale: Erlbaum, 1979. Citation taken from p. 10.
44. Ibid., p. 11.