descriptive statements in this essay as guidelines and drawing upon several of his Web-based reviews as illustrations and examples, write your own review of a recent movie you viewed, or of a DVD you've always wanted to check out. In the process of developing your own review, you might focus on the same considerations that Schickel discusses here. The concerns and predilections of your imagined readership (you might pretend you're writing for a certain magazine or blog site), and your own moral/intellectual stance vis-à-vis the cinematic "text" to which you are responding.

STEPHEN KING

Why We Crave Horror Movies

In this section of the chapter devoted to popular film, we move from a general discussion of the current state of filmmaking and film reviewing/criticism, to an in-depth examination of certain types of movies, specifically two subgenres: the horror film and the romantic comedy. In the first of the two articles devoted to horror film, Stephen King—perhaps the best-known and most prolific practitioner of the form—provides a thoughtful and provocative backdrop for a discussion of the topic. Consider some of the images that have sprung fully formed from the brain of King: a hotel with blood pouring down its elevator shafts and long-dead people as its guests; a skinny, oppressed teen with superpowers that bring death and devastation to her high school prom; a gigantic and malicious mongrel slobbering hell's own drool; an intelligent and venomous vintage Plymouth Fury automobile; a small town in Maine in which a nameless, shapeless mist blankets the environs and its inhabitants while concealing ferocious, unearthly beasts. All of these—and many more—are products of the fertile (and some would say twisted) imagination of this article's author. The horror-themed books of Stephen King are so widely read—and the movies made from them (including such classics as Carrie, The Shining, Cujo, Christine, Children of the Corn, Firestarter, Pet Sematary, and The Mist) so popularly viewed—that his creations may well have become part of the U.S. collective consciousness. Along with the above-mentioned creep-show fare, King has also created a large body of novels and novel-based films with serious and sensitive themes, such as The Shawshank Redemption, which deals with friendship and honor, and Stand By Me, a touching coming-of-age adventure/drama. Nevertheless, King is perhaps best known for his horror books and films, and in the following article he takes a break from storytelling to reflect on the genre that has brought him worldwide recognition. King begins by stating a bold and not entirely tongue-in-cheek premise: "I think that we are all mentally ill." Underneath a frequently thin veneer of civilization, he suggests, we all have "fears, homicidal rages, and sexual desires"—basers urges which he calls "anticivilization emotions"—and the function of horror movies is to appeal to those dark elements within ourselves and therefore reduce their psychic energy. Thus purged of our negative impulses, we can go on to engage in positive feelings of love, friendship, loyalty, and kindness. According to King, then, horror movies serve an important regulating function, defusing people's destructive urges and helping to maintain a society's psychic equilibrium.

I think that we're all mentally ill; those of us outside the asylums only hide it a little better—and maybe not all that much better, after all. We've all known people who talk to themselves, people who sometimes squinch their faces into horrible grimaces when they believe no one is watching, people who have some hysterical fear—of snakes, the dark, the tight place, the long drop... and, of course, those final worms and grubs that are waiting so patiently underground.

When we pay our four or five bucks and seat ourselves at tenth-row center in a theater showing a horror movie, we are daring the nightmare.

Why? Some of the reasons are simple and obvious. To show that we can, that we are not afraid, that we can ride this roller coaster. Which is not to say that a really good horror movie may not surprise a scream out of us at some point, the way we may scream when the roller coaster twists through a complete 360 or plows through a lake at the bottom of the drop. And horror movies, like roller coasters, have always been the special province of the young; by the time one turns 40 or 50, one's appetite for double twists or 360-degree loops may be considerably depleted.

We also go to re-establish our feelings of essential normality; the horror movie is innately conservative, even reactionary. Freda Jackson as the horrible melting woman in Die, Monster, Die! confirms for us that no matter how far we may be removed from the beauty of a Robert Redford or a Diana Ross, we are still light-years from true ugliness.

And we go to have fun.

Ah, but this is where the ground starts to slope away, isn't it? Because this is a very peculiar sort of fun indeed. The fun comes from seeing others menaced—sometimes killed. One critic has suggested
that if pro football has become the voyeur’s version of combat, then the horror film has become the modern version of the public lynching.

It is true that the mythic, “fairytale” horror film intends to take away the shades of gray. It urges us to put away our more civilized and adult penchant for analysis and to become children again, seeing things in pure blacks and whites. It may be that horror movies provide psychic relief on this level because this invitation to lapse into simplicity, irrationality and even outright madness is extended so rarely. We are told we may allow our emotions a free rein or no rein at all.

If we are all insane, then sanity becomes a matter of degree. If your insanity leads you to carve up women like Jack the Ripper or the Cleveland Torso Murderer, we clap you away in the funny farm (but neither of those two amateur-night surgeons was ever caught, heh-heh-heh); if, on the other hand your insanity leads you only to talk to yourself when you're under stress or to pick your nose on the morning bus, then you are left alone to go about your business . . . though it is doubtful that you will ever be invited to the best parties.

The potential lynchers are almost all of us (excluding saints, past and present; but then, most saints have been crazy in their own ways), and every and now and then, he has to let loose to scream and roll around in the grass. Our emotions and our fears form their own body, and we recognize that it demands its own exercise to maintain proper muscle tone. Certain of these emotional muscles are accepted—even exalted—in civilized society; they are, of course, the emotions that tend to maintain the status quo of civilization itself. Love, friendship, loyalty, kindness—these are all the emotions that we applaud, emotions that are immortalized in the couplets of Hallmark cards and in the verses (I don’t dare call it poetry) of [Star Trek actor] Leonard Nimoy.

When we exhibit these emotions, society showers us with positive reinforcement; we learn this even before we get out of diapers. When, as children, we hug our rotten little puke of a sister and give her a kiss, all the aunts and uncles smile and twit and cry, “Isn’t he the sweetest little thing?” Such coveted treats as chocolate-covered graham crackers often follow. But if we deliberately slam the rotten little puke of a sister’s fingers in the door, sanctions follow—angry remonstrance from parents, aunts and uncles; instead of a chocolate-covered graham cracker, a spanking.

But anticultivision emotions don’t go away, and they demand periodic exercise. We have such “sick” jokes as, “What's the difference between a truckload of bowling balls and a truckload of dead babies?

(You can’t unload a truckload of bowling balls with a pitchfork . . . a joke, by the way, that I heard originally from a ten-year-old.) Such a joke may surprise a laugh or a grin out of us even as we recoil, a possibility that confirms the thesis: If we share a brotherhood of man, then we also share an insanity of man. None of which is intended as a defense of either the sick joke or insanity but merely as an explanation of why the best horror films, like the best fairy tales, manage to be reactionary, anarchistic, and revolutionary all at the same time.

The mythic horror movie, like the sick joke, has a dirty job to do. It deliberately appeals to all that is worst in us. It is morbidity unchained, our most base instincts let free, our nastiest fantasies realized—and it all happens, fittingly enough, in the dark. For those reasons, good liberals often shy away from horror films. For myself, I like to see the most aggressive of them—Dawn of the Dead, for instance—as lifting a trap door in the civilized forebrain and throwing a basket of raw meat to the hungry alligators swimming around in that subterranean river beneath.

Why bother? Because it keeps them from getting out, man. It keeps them down there and me up here. It was Lennon and McCartney who said that all you need is love, and I would agree with that.

As long as you keep the gators fed.

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING

1. In a persuasive essay, consider King’s premise that we all have “anticulturization emotions.” Begin prewriting by listing some activities other than horror movies and “sick” jokes that Americans might use to purge these emotions and “keep the gators fed.” Then, as you develop the argumentative body of your essay, consider the extent to which your listed examples might reflect certain unhealthy aspects of contemporary society. Drawing upon those arguments, develop a conclusion and/or thematic premise that explains how our modern psychology might differ from that of people who lived a century or more ago, and why.

2. If you are a fan of horror movies, make a list of several of your favorites. In an analytical essay, examine some movies from your list in light of King’s theories about the horror genre’s appeal. Do your examples support or disprove King’s point about the daredevil, normative, and psychological function of horror movies? If you enjoy horror movies, are you drawn to them for the reasons Stephen King suggests—that is, do you have deep-seated fears, angry urges, or inappropriate sexual drives that need defusing—or are there other factors involved that King has