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Discovering the Extraordinary in the Ordinary

In space, no one can hear you scream. That is the tagline of Ridley Scott's 1979 horror classic, *Alien*. While it might be true that no one can hear you scream in *space*, I'm fairly certain the entire neighborhood heard me scream the first time I watched *Alien*.

I have never enjoyed horror movies. My heart races uncomfortably when the eerie music score begins to play, I cover my eyes in anticipation of jump scares and, by the end, I'm usually hiding under a blanket. I never understood how some people seemed to derive pleasure from the experience of pure terror. And while I know that many movies have cultural significance, horror films have always appeared to me to be little more than cheap thrills designed to entice bored teenagers, not an art form deserving recognition and discussion.

Or so I thought, until I took Cinema Studies 2264 – Film Genres in American Cinema.

Although I'm majoring in Economics, I thought it would be interesting to learn about a subject that's outside of my core curriculum. I signed up for the class expecting to study iconic films like *Citizen Kane* and *Sunset Boulevard*. When I discovered that the syllabus also included movies like *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *The Blair Witch Project*, I asked myself "Really? Is this some sort of mistake?"

Despite my fear of watching these movies and my skepticism about the value of actually *studying* them, I gave the professor the benefit of the doubt and decided to give the horror genre a chance. And I am so glad that I did. The films that I assumed were nothing more than shallow teenager flicks are actually fascinating pieces of cinema that have thematic depth and incorporate elements of psychology and sociology in unexpected ways.

Some of our classroom discussion focused on the purpose of vampires, mummies and other monsters in certain sub-genres of horror films. Among other things, I learned that monsters elicit revulsion and terror because they unnaturally transgress boundaries that society keeps separate. Zombies, for example, scare us not because they are *dangerous*, but because they cross the line between life and death, two categories that are critically separate in our structured worldview. Similarly, werewolves violate the boundary between human and animal, terrifying viewers by disrupting one of our most basic understandings of the world around us.

We also learned that audiences derive gratification from monster movies not because they like to be frightened, but because the inevitable defeat of the monster comforts our subconscious minds by assuring us that these societal boundaries cannot be breached. So, for example, when the extraterrestrial shapeshifter is killed at the end of *The Thing*, the film reaffirms society's categories of real and unreal by destroying the creature that represents both.

What I loved most about the class is that it revealed an intricate, deeper level of meaning to a type of motion picture that I wrongly thought was unworthy of study. With the few horror films I had watched previously, it did not occur to me that they might have artistic merit, and I certainly never considered the possibility that they offered a glimpse into the workings of the

inner mind. My Cinema Studies course taught me to evaluate and analyze something as commonplace as horror movies and discover layers of meaning and themes that have changed my perspective on the film genre.

The same phenomenon has occurred with many of my other courses. Following my first few Economics classes, I could no longer walk into a store without reflecting on the market forces of supply and demand at work around me. I would glance at a sweatshirt and find myself considering its price in terms of marginal utility and profit maximization.

Similarly, after a Social Psychology class, I began to notice interpersonal dynamics among my friends that were previously imperceptible to me.

Surprisingly, I've found that many of the most intellectually eye-opening moments during my time at Bowdoin have involved the transformation of my perspective on the commonplace. Whether it's watching a horror movie, shopping for clothes or just hanging out with friends, I've learned to apply my liberal arts studies to everyday life. My experiences at Bowdoin have allowed me to constantly discover unexpected connections and surprising importance in my daily interactions with familiar ideas. The fascination in finding meaning and depth in the seemingly simple has caused me to more closely investigate the world around me and appreciate the significance of things and experiences that were previously unremarkable.

I like to think of it as discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary. Whether it's studying multivariate calculus, Russian literature, the ecology of marine organisms or the horror film genre, a liberal arts education gives us the tools to reexamine everyday experiences and uncover complexity that is hiding in plain sight.

So take a Biology class and learn how trillions of individual cells make up your body.

Take a Music class and learn to hear the harmonic intervals in everyday songs.

Take a Computer Science class and learn how algorithms power some of your favorite apps.

And, if you're not too frightened, you can even take a Cinema Studies class and learn how subliminal images are used to scare you in *The Shining*.

Whatever classes you take, learn to discover the extraordinary in the ordinary. Because, just like the shapeshifter in *The Thing*, not everything is as simple as it appears.