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Monstrous Appetites and Positive Emotions in *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *The Walking Dead*

Rikke Schubart

**Abstract:** Looking at television series *True Blood* (2008–), *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–), and *The Walking Dead* (2010–), this article analyzes positive emotions in horror: the sexual emotions, trust, and hope. The article starts by substituting the positive-negative dichotomy of emotions with seeing emotions as coming in a “package” (Solomon) and having a “story” (Frijda), thus working together and not in opposition. It goes on to discuss the interaction of predation and sex in *True Blood*, torture and trust in *The Vampire Diaries*, and disgust, despair, and hope in *The Walking Dead*. The article then considers horror emotions, positive and negative, from a functional and evolutionary perspective. Comparing horror to play fighting and fiction to the pretend of play, the article suggests four reasons why horror is attractive: we learn to feel emotions (sensation), to react to emotions (evaluation), control our emotions (action tendency in the here-and-now), and to experiment (action tendency and planning for what comes next).

**Keywords:** emotions, hope, horror, sexual emotions, trust, vampire, werewolf, zombie

Negative emotions such as fear, disgust, and horror are commonly believed to characterize the horror genre. Here, however, I consider the role of the positive emotions in horror and ask if they, too, are central to the genre.

“I can’t tell if my skin is burning up or if it’s freezing, but it feels *so fucking good,*” says a werewolf as he drinks blood from a male vampire in the vampire series *True Blood* (HBO, 2008–). When another werewolf suggests he spit some of that blood into the mouth of a third werewolf, he protests, “That’s *gay!*” Much of the appeal of *True Blood* lies in a tongue-in-cheek portrayal of sexual emotions. Another vampire series, *The Vampire Diaries* (CW, 2009–), is concerned with trust and control rather than with pleasure. In season three, a
father submits his vampire daughter to torture in an attempt to suppress her blood appetite. When he is interrupted, he assures the pain is for her best: “She’ll trust me to do the right thing.” Here, monstrous appetites bring with them the need to control oneself and the question of whom you can trust with your intimate secrets. Finally, AMC’s zombie series *The Walking Dead* (2010–) blends monstrous appetites with several positive emotions, among them love and hope. “I love you,” says Andrea tenderly as she kisses her zombie sister and puts a bullet in her head. In *The Walking Dead*, hope for a future in a world taken over by hungry zombies is a key emotion.¹

Looking at *True Blood*, *The Vampire Diaries*, and *The Walking Dead* I examine how positive emotions appear together with monstrous appetites. I show that negative and positive emotions interact in horror and that if we include positive emotions, this gives us a more accurate picture of the genre. In conclusion, I consider the emotional appeal of horror.

**About Negative and Positive Emotions**

A lot of attention has been given to the negative emotions in horror. The very name of the genre, *horror*, is defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “painful and intense fear, dread, or dismay” and “intense aversion or repugnance.” Fear, dread, and repugnance are also the emotions cognitive film scholars have examined. Thus, “little argument seems required to establish that horror films are designed to provoke fear,” says philosopher Noël Carroll, adding that monsters are “disgusting,” “repulsive and abhorrent” and “depictions and descriptions in horror films are criterially prefocused in terms of foregrounding the harmfulness and the impurity of the monsters” (1999: 38, 40). Carroll describes horror as what is abnormal and causes fear and disgust in characters and in the audience: “In works of horror, the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order . . . our responses are meant, ideally, to parallel those of characters . . . The monster in horror fiction, that is, is not only lethal but—and this is of utmost significance—also disgusting” (1990: 16, 18, 22). Philosopher Cynthia Freeland also focuses on negative emotions: “horror films are designed to prompt emotions of fear, sympathy, revulsion, dread, anxiety, or disgust” (2000: 3).² And cognitive film theorist Torben Grodal (2009) discusses predator scenarios and the handling of contagious corpses as central to the genre, helping us practice hunting and survival skills. Finally, film scholar Julian Hanich’s 2010 phenomenological study is dedicated to fear, which Hanich divides into direct and suggested horror, shock, dread, and terror. To sum up: little has been said about the positive emotions of horror unless we shift from cognitive and phenomenological theories to psychoanalytic approaches to horror.³
Speaking of positive and negative emotions is, from an evolutionary and functional perspective, a contradiction in terms. In an evolutionary perspective, emotions are neither positive nor negative; they are useful and have evolved for a reason. Yet the terms positive and negative are common in psychology, sociology, and philosophy, where they indicate that emotions are felt as pleasant or unpleasant (another set of terms is approach/avoid with the idea being that we want to approach positive emotions and avoid negative ones). An example of this is when psychologist Frijda divides emotions into positive and negative, the latter including anger, anxiety, despair, disgust, and fear (1986: 218–219).

Philosophers Robert C. Solomon and Lori D. Stone problematize the positive-negative dichotomy as a “lazy thinking” which makes an “easy organizational principle” out of “oppositional thinking” (2002: 432). Instead, they say, most emotions are multidimensional and cannot be paired with an opposite emotion: “If an emotion is multidimensional then it immediately follows that the notion of ‘opposites’ is confused. Opposites depend on polarity, and polarity is just what is not available in even the simplest emotions. (What is the opposite of fear? Is it courage? Is it recklessness? Is it indifference? Is it panic? Or rage?)” (432–433). Also, the normative aspect of negative-positive comes from ethics, not science: “The positive-negative polarity as well as the conception of emotional opposites have their origins in ethics . . . [it] comes out of the medieval church which in turn traces its psychology back to Aristotle” (418). A positive-negative polarity, argue Solomon and Stone, holds three meanings, namely the physical sensation (something is pleasant or unpleasant), moral behavior (something is valued as good or bad), and ethics (something feels right or wrong and relates to virtue and vice). Conflating the three obscures our view of emotions. It obscures our experience of an emotion with our cognitive evaluation of it and our reaction to the emotion. From a functional perspective, emotions cannot be negative just as they cannot be bad; only their causes and consequences can be bad.

Using a different set of terms—say, approach/avoid—does not solve the problem since the problem is with dichotomy. Emotions are not paired into opposites, say Solomon and Stone. Elsewhere, writing in the context of justice, Solomon says emotions come in a “package,” meaning that they interact with and presuppose other emotions. Talking of justice, Solomon says “compassion and revenge are but two sides of the same coin, and . . . I would call that coinage ‘justice’” (1994: 294). There is no vengeance without a sense of justice and vengeance starts with “caring and concern and consequently indignation and revenge” (Solomon 1995: 43). Similarly, talking about hope, psychologist Richard S. Lazarus links hope to despair: “It is all but impossible to speak of hope without considering its main negative counterparts, despair, helplessness,
hopelessness, and depression” (1999: 653). Lazarus adds that social emotions work with other emotions, not alone.

*These emotions—sympathetic and antipathetic—go hand in hand; one cannot have one without the other. One cannot have attachments without the possibility of loss, and one cannot suffer a loss without first having enjoyed (however briefly or even vicariously) attachments… One cannot have pride without the possibility of shame, and one cannot be shamed if one has no pride. The positive and the negative passions travel together (Solomon 1995: 245)*

Thus, instead of seeing positive and negative emotions as opposites, we can see them as interacting and codependent. Frijda uses the metaphor “story” when he says some emotions have a “dual principle of categorization,” which involves “action readiness change”—that is, they make us change our attitude from one to another—and are “elicited by a specific constellation of events, a specific ‘story’ . . . That story defines the emotion” (1986: 73). His example is jealousy, embedded in a story of love. Jealousy, like trust and hope, has no universal facial expression as basic emotions like fear, anger, and disgust do. Neuroethics is currently exploring the innate nature of moral emotions, however, even if innate, we still need to learn them by example. We must see them in others to be able to feel them ourselves. Returning to the question of positive and negative emotions, I suggest emotions function in networks, not opposites. Also, many emotions are more complex than “positive” or “negative” and come in Solomon’s “package” of multiple emotions. Thus, you can have disgust without love or hope, but despair comes with loss of hope and grief with bereavement.

**Monstrous Appetites**

I have chosen appetites rather than monsters themselves, since everyone can agree that to be hungry and feed is not evil but the natural drive of any creature. In Carroll’s definition a monster is unnatural and disrupts the natural order of things. In my definition a monster may be natural or unnatural as long as it disrupts the natural order of things. By appetite I think primarily of hunger but with it come also desire and the drives and willpower to satisfy both.

**True Blood**

The HBO vampire television series *True Blood* started in 2008 and is currently in its fifth season. It is set in the Deep South in the small town Beau Temps in a near-future America where vampires and humans coexist and vampires drink a blood substitute called True Blood. Season one and two deal with a co-
existence troubled by racism, exploitation, religious extremism, and terrorism, and has supernatural creatures such as vampires, shape shifters, and a mae-nad. Primary is the love story between Sookie and the vampire Bill around which stories of family, friends, and foes evolve. In the first episode of third season, “Bad Blood,” Bill (Stephen Moyer) is kidnapped. “Who are you?” he asks the men in the car who has chained him with silver. At this point we do not yet know that they are werewolves. “You can call us the Fuck You Crew,” says the leader Cooter (Grant Bowler).

Bill is in the back with a man on each side and two more men are in the front seat. Cooter bites Bill’s arm and drinks his blood, laughing and hooting loudly in excitement. Upbeat rock music is playing on the car radio. They have stripped Bill of his shirt and the guy in the back seat, half-naked, pulls at his own nipples and says:

BACK SEAT WEREWOLF: I can’t tell whether or not my skin is burning up or if it’s freezing but it feels so fucking good!
FRONT SEAT WEREWOLF: Pull over, Jimmie, I gotta get me a drag off of this fuck.
LEADER: No, we ain’t stopping.
FRONT SEAT WEREWOLF: I’m dying over here.
LEADER: Spit some in his mouth
FRONT SEAT WEREWOLF: What?
BACK SEAT WEREWOLF: That’s gay!
LEADER: And playing with your own titties in a car full of dudes ain’t?

The man in the back seat drinks from Bill and spits the blood into the mouth of the guy in the front seat. In True Blood, vampire blood has the same effect as Ecstasy and goes by the name V. V is what you buy if you want to get

Figure 1. “That’s gay!”
Two werewolves sharing vampire blood in True Blood
high and if you drink it when you have sex, it explodes your senses. Later in “Bad Blood” the kidnappers get reckless from intoxication and Bill escapes.

The sexual nature is explicitly stated in this scene: playing with “titties,” things being “gay,” and “it feels so fucking good.” There is no mistake about the sexual emotions expressed by the men. But what kind of emotion is sex? In psychology, sex was long seen as an internal stimulus like hunger, a motivational drive that makes sex an innate instinct. Sex is not among Robert Plutchik’s basic emotions nor is it on Frijda’s list of emotions. However, psychologist Walter Everaerd suggests that we see sex in an emotional perspective where emotions have “three components: (1) neurophysiological-biochemical, (2) behavioral expressive, and (3) feeling-experiential” (1989: 6).

In Everaerd’s version, sex is registered in our brain, it is expressed and seen on our body as actions, and we feel it as physical sensations. This tripartite structure of emotions involves cognition (thoughts), sensations (affect), and actions (behavior). In this version sex is a social emotion to be shared with others and evoked by thoughts, actions, or stimulants like Ecstasy. “The sexual emotion is blended with all kinds of other emotions. What is reported about the sexual experience depends on which emotion is processed and dominates in subjective report” (Everaerd 1989: 13). One person’s experience of great sex can be another person’s rape. In The Emotions (1986), Frijda did not consider sex as an emotion; however, in The Laws of Emotions (2007) he dedicates a chapter to the subject. Frijda links sex to drives, the sexual motivational system, and the desire system and divides sex into several emotions: “being attracted; being charmed; being in love; sexual excitement; sexual desire; lust; sexual enjoyment” (2007: 228). These emotions “might be considered different stages or appearances of one sex emotion” (228).

So, sex is a drive and an instinct as well as sexual emotions. Striking about the car scene is the physical excitement of touching nipples, laughing, sweating, trembling, panting, and the impatience for more. This is what Frijda calls sexual excitement, sexual desire, lust, and sexual enjoyment. While lust is physical and automatic and located in the body, desire is both physical and mental, it is the burning wish for sex, whereas lust, says Frijda, is animal-like. “In lust, the body comes into awareness as a body-to-be-touched, an instrument of penetration or of receiving penetration. It hums of it and aches for it. The sexualized body also is felt as the instrument for one’s sexual actions. One’s skin clamors for being stroked, one’s hands clamor for stroking” (2007: 244).

V rhymes with E, slang for Ecstasy which the writers of the series are alluding to. Ecstasy is called a love-drug because it enhances sensations, reduces prohibitions, stimulates connectivity with others, and produces intense, euphoric feelings of being high. “Enhanced sensory perceptions are paramount to the Ecstasy experience; users report an increased perception of color,
sound, smell, and touch” (Kennedy et al. 2010: 156). In the past two decades, the use of Ecstasy has become widespread. It heightens sensuality and “evokes great psychomotor excitation, a rise in self-esteem, and enhanced alertness, and promotes greater receptivity in sensual aspects but often without the desire to engage in sexual activity” (Ibid.: 157). Young women report that “sex on E is like—I would recommend it because you’ll never want to have it any other way. No, I mean, it’s good” (Ibid.: 163).

The werewolves’ pleasures, however, come from intimate violation—that is, rape—of Bill’s body, which they penetrate. Film scholar Margrethe Bruun Vaage argues that rape is used to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Thus, recent television series have sympathetic characters that are murderers (The Wire) and serial killers (Dexter), however, they do not rape because unlike murder, a rape cannot be forgiven. It has a “polarizing function” and “is used narratively to ensure strong desires for revenge in the spectator” (Vaage 2012: 6, 9). A fictional character can have fuzzy moral behavior, but there are lines not to be crossed. Rape is one. Vaage says rape evokes the negative and basic emotions of contempt, anger, and disgust (CAD). “Feelings of contempt point to virtues such as respect, duty and hierarchy being violated in an ethics of community; feelings of anger arises when individual rights and autonomy is violated according to an ethics of autonomy; and finally, feelings of disgust are prompted when the perceived natural order is violated” (2012: 14).

Going back to the car scene, we find anger in Bill’s later comment that he will surely die if they continue draining him and disgust in the question of spitting. But even though negative emotions of anger and disgust are here, lust and excitement clearly dominate, both from the four men’s perspective and from a viewer’s perspective. Even if we understand Bill’s anger, we are primarily invited to, if not necessarily consent to, then certainly recognize and feel the men’s predatory joy. And clearly, predatory behavior and positive emotions are not opposites since the men take pleasure in their actions. Psychologist Victor Nell argues that blood lust, positive emotions, and predator aggression join hands in a pain-blood-death complex. This is when the sight of a prey’s blood and death struggle causes positive affects and excitement in the predator: “predation is dopaminergic, affectively positive, and distinct from rage . . . the hunt and kill are positive emotional experiences for the predator” (2006: 212, 214). Blood shedding creates erotic excitement: “arousal during hunts is very high, with pant-hooting, screaming, whistling, piloerection to exaggerate body size, charge displays” (Ibid.: 214). To delight in a prey’s pain and agony, to eat the prey alive, and to share its blood is natural from a predator’s perspective. And . . . also from a human predator’s perspective.
In *True Blood* sexual emotions interlock with pain and pleasure and with aggression in animal and human ways. The show self-consciously plays with expectations about the transgressive behavior of supernatural predators who feel hunger and have sexual appetites. This mixture is foregrounded and thematized. Although viewers do not yet know the men are werewolves, we suspect they are supernatural. And if kidnapping and rape is wrong from a moral perspective, it is pure pleasure from a predator perspective.

I have not commented on homosexuality, which is a central theme in third season. *True Blood* openly plays with transgressive and alternative sexualities such as BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Dominance and Submission, Sadism and Masochism) and homosexuality. Third season has a homosexual vampire King with a lover, there is a lesbian Queen, the vampire Eric poses as gay, and the shape shifter Sam has erotic dreams about Bill. In short, sexual emotions are at the heart of plots and in the appeal to audiences. The show's sexual morale is that all sexual practices are acceptable as long as they are consensual. If not, violations are punishable by death.

*True Blood* fuses monstrous appetites with sexual emotions. Viewed in an emotions perspective, we get only half the story if we focus on only negative emotions or positive emotions. Just like predation creates positive affects in a predator, the predation in the car scene creates positive emotions for characters, with which spectators are invited to engage. How, precisely, viewers engage in the rape scene is a question I shall not pursue.

**The Vampire Diaries**

Like *True Blood*, CW's vampire series *The Vampire Diaries* (2009–) is set in the Deep South, in the town Mystic Falls, Virginia. The main story is a love triangle between Elena and the vampire brothers Stefan (her boyfriend) and Damon. The series also has witches and werewolves. Unlike *True Blood*, the supernatural creatures live in secrecy. Vampires walk in the daytime with the help of magical rings and only a small group of vampire hunters know about their existence. Where *True Blood* explores the sexual element of monstrous appetites, *The Vampire Diaries* thematizes how to keep those appetites and your “second” nature a secret, how to adapt in a hostile world, and, ultimately, how to learn whom to trust. Can you trust family, friends, or your boyfriend or girlfriend? Where protagonists in *True Blood* are in their twenties or early thirties, the central characters in *The Vampire Diaries* are in their late teens.

A recurring side character is Caroline (Candice Accola), the town’s vain and narcissistic cheerleader. When she becomes a vampire in season three, her human and vampire friends help her learn to control her appetite. With a magical ring she continues life as a human until her boyfriend’s mother, Carol, discovers her secret. Carol calls the vampire hunter Bill (Jack Coleman): “I've
gotten myself into a bit of a vampire situation.” In episode three “The End of the Affair” Caroline wakes up in a dungeon, strapped to a chair.

This is the iconic bad place where torture will happen. Since dramatic music and a lighting with hard shadows prepare us to see Bill in the role of “sadistic torturer” we are quite surprised when Caroline says: “Dad?” Bill loves his daughter, but as a vampire hunter he cannot let her out in society. To test if she can control her appetite, he holds a bag with human blood to her nose, which brings out her vamp face with pulsating veins and fangs. “Blood controls you, sweetheart. This is how I’m gonna fix you,” he says and let sunlight burn Caroline’s skin. Season three introduces what I call educational torture, which is torture done by a relative or friend.

CAROLINE: Please stop, please stop, please. I won’t hurt anyone, I swear. I can handle the urge, I can.
DAD: If you could handle the urge, this wouldn’t happen [he again holds up a bag with blood which brings out her vamp face].
CAROLINE: I am sorry. I am sorry.
DAD: I am conditioning you to associate vampirism with pain. In time the thought of human blood will make you repress your vampire instincts completely.
CAROLINE: That’s impossible. Daddy. You can’t change who I am.
DAD: Yes I can.
CAROLINE: No.
DAD: You remember this? [he lets in the sunlight]

Season three of The Vampire Diaries introduces what I call educational torture, which is torture done by a relative or friend. This torture is used to teach a vampire to control her appetite.

Figure 2. “I want you to try your best.” Vampire hunter Bill teaches his vampire daughter not to drink human blood in The Vampire Diaries
This scene shows various emotions felt by characters. First, the torture causes pain and without her ring Caroline bleeds and suffers. She is a vampire but she is also a victim (intertextually the scene pays homage to blonde victim Whitney in a similar torture chair in the notorious Hostel: Part II). This pain is straightforwardly represented and, I think, affectively shared by audiences. However, the scene also involves the trust of a father and daughter relationship, which sets it apart from torture with a sexual predator. Bill may have good intentions, yet we disapprove of his actions since we know Caroline can, as she says, control her urge.

We trust Caroline but not Bill, who left his family when Caroline was a child so she was raised by her mother Liz. Also, we know from the first seasons that Bill left his family for a man, which questions his qualities, since only characters with fuzzy morals are homosexual in this series. Bill’s sexual orientation aside, no parent in The Vampire Diaries can be trusted. Liz tried to kill Caroline when she discovered she was a vampire; Tyler’s mother captured Caroline; Caroline’s boyfriend Tyler had a violent, alcoholic, and narcissistic father; Elena’s mother left her family to indulge in an erotic life as a vampire; and Bonnie’s mother abandoned her. Regardless if parents have good or bad intentions, they put their children at risk. The teenagers must establish their own ethics as they grow up, both as humans (coping with alcoholic, abusive, and narcissistic parents) and as supernatural beings (learning whom to kill, whom to trust, and how to survive).

Educational torture unites love and pain with trust. When Liz arrives to rescue Caroline, she says, “That’s our daughter in there, she looks up to you. She loves you.” “Then she’ll trust me to do the right thing. Let me do this, Liz. Not because she’s a monster. But because we love her.” If Bill did not love his daughter he would simply kill her, and he believes pain is part of the education. But what does he mean when he says “trust me”? Is trust a belief in a person’s judgment to do the right thing? Or is trust an innate emotion?

Annette Baier says moral philosophers see trust as an agreement between equals: “Modern moral philosophy has concentrated on the morality of fairly cool relationships between those who are deemed to be roughly equal in power to determine the rules and to instigate sanctions against rule breakers” (1986: 249). Most trust, however, is not handled in contracts but is felt in “unequal, nonvoluntary, and non-contract-based relationships” such as to “animals, the ill, the dying, children while still young” (ibid.: 49). In these cases, trust is not voluntary, it is there, either innate or forced.

Family is one such unequal trust relationship where growing up alters the power balance between children and parents. Trust is given without being consciously formulated and it is constantly altered and negotiated. “Most of us notice a given form of trust most easily after its sudden demise or severe injury. We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice
it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted” (Baier 1986: 234).

Faced with a vampire daughter, Bill does what he trusts is right. “My dad hates me,” Caroline cries after she is rescued. No, Bill loves her, Liz assures her daughter. What was negotiated in the dungeon was not love, but trust. Baier speaks of “a climate” and “an atmosphere” of trust. Intimate relations—or networks of relations—has to be cultivated in climates of trust, be they with family members, friends, or lovers.

Continuing Baier’s discussion of trust, Karen Jones argues trust is an affective attitude rather than a cognitive belief. “The attitude of optimism is to be cashed out not primarily in terms of beliefs about the other’s trustworthiness, but rather—in accordance with certain contemporary accounts of the emotions—in terms of a distinctive, and affectively loaded, way of seeing the one trusted” (Jones 1996: 4). We trust before we distrust. What needs explaining is not trust but its absence. Philosopher Lawrence C. Becker calls intimate trust basic trust drawing on developmental psychologist Erik Erikson: “Basic trust (and distrust) is something we develop in a crude form in infancy and continue to refine through our lives” (Becker 1996: 46). Trust, adds philosopher Lars Hertzberg (1988), might not even be acquired in childhood but be innate. We are born trusting and later expand basic trust to other situations, learning in the socializing process what and whom to trust—and not to trust.

The Vampire Diaries frames monstrous appetites in the trust of intimate relationships. Moving from the small circle of family to the expanding circles of friends, social groups, and society, trust has to be negotiated. Characters must negotiate trust when they become vampires and werewolves and witches. Who can and cannot be trusted must be experienced and as a rule no one can be trusted until else has been proven.

Trust is negotiated between truster and trusted. Usually, parents teach children about trust. In Vampire Diaries it is the other way round, children teach parents. “Honey, your dad, all in our family. He has beliefs that have been passed down in generations. He was taught never to stray from them,” says Liz. “You did,” says Caroline to Liz (who is a secret vampire hunter like Bill). “You taught me to look at things in a different way,” replies Liz (when she discovered her daughter was a vampire, Liz tried to kill Caroline).

My second observation is that negotiation takes place in Baier’s climate of trust. This climate is outer and inner, both a social exchange and an inner emotion. The emotion of trust develops from basic trust. Becker writes that “to say that we trust others in a noncognitive way is to say that we are disposed to be trustful of them... trust of this sort is not only a way of handling uncertainty; it is also a way of being, a way of going, in uncertain or certain terrain. It is one of many possible general structures of concrete motivation,
attitude, affect, and emotion” (1996: 50). To conserve the ability to have intimate trust requires that we can restore basic trust when it is broken. The *Vampire Diaries* recurrently uses educational torture: Stefanlocks up his brother Damon to control his appetite, Bill tortures Caroline to control her appetite, and Stefan’s friend Alexis and his girlfriend Elena will later in season three torture Stefan to teach him to control his appetite. How can we trust when torture is involved? “Even when these conditions fail, when a person is subjected to more than she can take, the broken habits may be restorable,” says Baier (2004: 177). Trust is restorable if we are convinced of the other’s goodwill. Thus, Bill may be misguided in his means and have lost trust in his daughter’s ability to “control her urges,” but Caroline and Liz prove him wrong. Loss of trust is overcome through love and responding trust. Eventually Bill comes to trust Caroline (and later in season three she asks for his help to torture her boyfriend Tyler for his own good).

Intimate trust is nourished and negotiated with the help of others. Philosopher Amy Mullin says trust is both innate and shaped by social norms: “The role played by social norms in shaping the content of trust also makes sense of the fact that other people, besides the truster and the one trusted, may be invoked to help settle questions about whether or not trust has been betrayed” (2005: 325). *The Vampire Diaries* explores both inner trust and the social climate of trust, plots are about characters adapting to a social world, their abilities to control their selves and their nature, as well as their monstrous appetites. In a postmodern world, parents are no wiser than children and trust is cultivated in social networks. This does not mean the family is not loving, but that basic trust needs to be cultivated in a flexible network which combines friends, family, and lovers.

The trust in *The Vampire Diaries* is different from the trust discussed by cognitive film theorists. My distinction is between intimate trust and “cool” trust, as Baier calls contractual trust. Intimate trust is inner and interpersonal. It comes unquestioned and it cannot be willed or reasoned with. It is felt and when shattered it is restored through love and affection, not pain or reasoning. It is the kind of trust we need to face the world: trust as inner (faith in ourselves) and interpersonal (faith in the goodwill of others). Can I trust my dad to love me? The answer is yes, he loves you. But don’t trust that he—or anyone else for that matter—won’t try to kill you.

**The Walking Dead**

My last example of monstrous appetites is AMC’s *The Walking Dead* (2010–) about a group of survivors in a postapocalyptic America taken over by zombies. Where *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries* have beautiful, well-dressed, powerful, and intelligent monsters, *The Walking Dead* has rotting corpses hungry for human flesh. The subgenre is survival horror, a term from com-
puter games where a player’s avatar is vulnerable and underequipped in a world where victory is impossible and the goal is to evade rather than eliminate the enemy. To play survival horror a player must ration resources and develop quick reflexes to be good at fighting. Survival horror games have a bleak atmosphere of death, decay, danger, and decomposition, and if played with a controller, this device moves to mimic struggles and heighten our sense of engagement.

At a first glance *The Walking Dead* looks like the kind of horror Carroll describes: “The monster in horror fiction, that is, is not only lethal but—and this is of utmost significance—also disgusting,” says Carroll. “Both fear and disgust are etched on the characters’ features. Within the context of the horror narrative, the monsters are identified as impure and unclean” (1990: 22, 23). Grodal points to “disgust and revulsion” as typical and says the undead indicate “tacit folk knowledge of infection, backed up by autonomic reactions of disgust, vomiting, and so on which ensure that we minimize contact with possible sources of infection” (2009: 115). In the fourth episode in season one (which has only six episodes), “walkers,” as zombies are called, attacked the camp when part of the group was in the city to get guns. On their return, several in the group have been killed or infected by zombies.

We will look at three scenes in episode five, “Wildfire,” where the living dispose of the infected by smashing their brains and burning the bodies. They turn their heads, grimace, and hold things to their mouths and noses to block the stench of rotting flesh. In the first scene there is discussion about how to dispose of those bodies. “Hey, hey, hey, what are you guys doing?” says Glenn (Steven Yeun), “our people go over there. Our people go in that row over there. We don’t burn them! We bury them. Understand! People go in that row over there.” They are all upset about the deaths and show this differently; some cry, some are angry, some grieving, and Shane (Jon Bernthal) blames the leader Rick (Andrew Lincoln) for leaving them vulnerable to the attack.

In the second scene Amy wakes up as a zombie in Andrea’s arms. Andrea’s little sister Amy was among the victims, and Andrea (Laurie Holden) has been sitting by her body all day, waiting for this moment. Andrea kisses Amy tenderly and shoots her in the head after saying goodbye: “I am sorry for not ever being there. I always thought there would be more time. I am here now, Amy. I am here. I love you [gunshot].” This is an intimate scene with melancholic music and reaction shots of other survivors who look concerned when Amy awakens and turn their faces away in sympathy after the shot. Andrea shows no sign of disgust, Amy’s second death is followed by the normal emotions to losing a relative: sorrow and sadness.

![Figure 3: Love and loss. Amy kisses her zombie sister and shoots her in the head in The Walking Dead](image)
The third scene is at the end of the episode. Rick’s decision to get guns was debated and his next decision, to go to the military Center for Disease Control (CDC) to see if they have a cure, is also unpopular. One family leaves the group, but Rick’s wife Lori (Sarah Wayne Callies) supports his decision although we know she disagrees. When Rick and Lori discuss, Loris says, “Tell me something with certainty.” “I love you,” Rick replies, “That’s all I got.” Shane, too, disagrees, but at the group meeting he says, “I’ve known this man [Rick] a long time and I trust his instincts. I say the most important thing here is we need to stay together.” With Rick, Lori, and Shane in agreement, the group accepts the decision although it is risky. How do they know there are survivors in the city where the CDC is located? Cities attract great numbers of walkers. When they arrive at CDC there is no sign of life and as walkers close in on them, Rick yells to the security camera above the gate: “I know you are in there. I know you can hear me. We’re desperate. Please help us. We have women, children, no food, hardly any gas left, nowhere else to go. You’re killing us!” The group tells Rick this was “a wrong call” and that they must run for their lives. Rick refuses. And then the gate miraculously opens.

Looking at the three scenes, we can focus on negative emotions—the disgust and fear facing the contagious, unnatural, and lethal zombies and the sadness when losing loved ones or the despair of being underequipped in a world ruled by zombies—but if we include the positive emotions the picture changes. We find dire circumstances met with Andrea’s realization she loves her little sister, Shane’s decision to trust Rick (Shane is jealous of Rick and in love with Lori and when she thought Rick dead, she had a romantic relationship with Shane), and, centrally in the fifth episode, Rick’s hope that they find other survivors, perhaps even a cure. These emotions—love, trust, and hope—are more than positive; they are extremely positive and as necessary to our well-being as the ability to fight predators. Without hope there is only despair.

Baier sees positive emotions as a way to overcome demoralization: “I suggested that some strengthening ‘girdle’ of social hope, faith, and love might provide the strength not to go to pieces when terrible things happen or the resilience to put ourselves back together, morally speaking, after a temporary collapse” (2004: 185). It is this resilience that some characters in The Walking Dead have. They wear this “girdle” of hope, emotions that are not basic but learned, and they share these feelings with others.

In a social perspective, positive emotions are as vital to survival as negative one. Psychologist Richard S. Lazarus connects hope and despair. Where optimism and desire focus on the present, hope points to the future and is defined by our cognitive belief “that favorable options are still possible” (1999: 675) despite no odds and under extreme circumstances. In optimism we focus on the
possibility of the odds in our favor; in hope there may be no odds in our favor and no possibility, yet we continue hoping. This is the nature of hope: faith against all odds, optimism without any possibility, and love despite the loved one lost. The story of hope is “our current life circumstance is unsatisfactory—that is, it involves deprivation or is damaging or threatening” and the action tendency of hope is “a vital psychological resource in our lives” (Lazarus 1999: 654).

You cannot reason with a zombie, it has no ethics, no social code, and no brain activity but to search for food so it can satisfy its hunger. It is stripped of humanity, rationality, and any feeling but hunger. The lesson of survival horror is how to survive. Survival horror is concerned with disease, extinction, predation, and the ability to fight disfavorable odds. But to overcome hopeless odds we need more than a fight or flee response or the ability to handle corpses. We need love, hope, faith, and trust. Even lost love reminds us of love, and a leader without faith in his “gut instincts” (as Lori calls Rick’s decision) lacks the optimism to act and can give no hope for a future.

**Conclusion: The Function of Positive Emotions in Horror**

It is now time to ask what the function of the positive emotions in horror is. There already exist many explanations of the paradox that continues to puzzle, namely, why do we enjoy fictional horror? Why would anyone want to experience something horrible, even if in fiction? Previous studies suggest we take pleasure in characters’ perverse sexual behavior (Clover 1992; Creed 1993); that we learn sexual rules (Twitchell 1985); that we satisfy our curiosity about the monstrous (Carroll 1990) and the pervers (Smith 1999); that we learn about evil (Freeland) or that when we experience fear we practice survival skills (Grodal 2007); and that we simply enjoy the physical sensations of angst-lust (Hanich 2010).

I suggest there are four reasons we find horror appealing. First, to watch is to learn how to feel. The desire to seek out emotions is innate. Findings in cognitive studies and neuroscience show that right after birth babies seek out people’s faces to read emotions. Curiosity is innate. We feel and learn emotions not only from having them ourselves but also from seeing them in others. We learn social emotions and research in mirror neurons indicate we mimic affects, motor movement, and cognitive elements in emotions. There may even be pleasure in sharing emotions without any functional learning at all, that is for the sheer felt pleasure of sensation. I agree with Carroll that audiences’ emotions ideally are parallel to those of fictional characters. The reaction to excited werewolves is not necessarily to fear them, but sometimes to share their excitement.

**Survival horror is concerned with disease, extinction, predation and the ability to fight disfavorable odds. But to overcome hopeless odds we need more than a fight or flee response or the ability to handle corpses. We need love, hope, faith, and trust.**
Second, when we watch horror we learn how to react to emotions. Where the first reason concerns feeling, this concerns evaluating: how do I react to fear, disgust, pain, to sexual emotions. Here, the fiction frame of horror is crucial. Watching horror can be compared to rough-and-tumble play and play fighting in animals. Research shows we learn motor skills, cognitive skills, and complex social rules from play. When you are in play mode, the rules of reality are suspended yet can be readily called upon if needed. Reality is both there and not there. Play fighting is only fun when it balances possibility with challenge. If too violent, play fighting stops. If too little resistance, it stops too. Fiction, like play, is a social arena where skills are learned and put to the test. When I feel pain, how should I respond? If surrounded by zombies, what should I do? Again, we see fictional characters react and we use their reaction to react ourselves (we can, of course, choose to react differently, however, we often share character’s perspective and when they are afraid and scream so, ideally, do we).

Third, to enjoy horror is to learn how to control emotions. Recalling the tripartite structure of emotion—feeling, cognition, and action tendency—this is the difference between feeling and action tendency: To feel pain is one thing, to react to pain is another thing, and the ability to control our action tendency yet a further development of our reaction. To handle real-life situations we learn to control instinctive action tendencies and arm ourselves with several options: so, in response to pain, we can flee or fight or try to talk sense to the perpetrator (as do chained victims Caroline and Bill). Grodal suggests that in horror we learn aggressive coping, to boost our stamina, and the punishment-reward principle (we “endure” horror emotions and are rewarded with pleasures during and after watching). However, to control our emotions (and here I mean audiences’ emotional response to fictional characters’ emotions and situations such as being subject to torture) involves yet more skills, which take us to the last reason.

Fourth, to enjoy horror is to learn to experiment and prepare for the future. During play fighting animals “are learning how to calibrate and match their emotional reactions to an unpredictable world” (Pellis and Pelllis 2009: 162). Play offers new situations in the company of unpredictable others. Playing improves “motor, cognitive, and social skills” (in the here and now) but also “the calibration of one’s emotional response to unexpected events in the world” (ibid.: 162) (in what comes next). Where animals play in the here and now, humans can imagine nonexistent and unnatural situations such as being kidnapped by gay werewolves, tortured by a father, or living in a world taken over by zombies. Playing with horror helps us form scripts or schemata (as sociologists call our memory of social situations) in response to not-yet-met dangers. Together, the reasons suggest we learn sensations, reaction, control, flexibil-
ity, and agency. In other words, horror provides emotional testing, resilience, and calibration to choose a best course of action.

Returning to the positive emotions, what function do they serve, then, in a genre known for fear, disgust, and horror? A full answer is beyond the limited space here, however, from a functional perspective I suggest they serve the same function as negative emotions: they help us survive. Characteristic about horror is that it pushes our engagement to the very limit. If we compare horror to play-fighting, it takes pain to the limit of play, threatening to tip pleasurable pain into too much pain, which becomes real pain or a traumatic experience (thus, people afraid of horror often has the viewing of a specific movie as the point from where they stopped watching horror movies).

If positive emotions are part of the “package” of negative emotions, we can assume at least two functions. First, they are among emotions we need to learn by example. Negative emotions are only negative in a situational context. Merriam-Webster Dictionary thus defines despair as “to lose all hope or confidence,” that is, absence of hope. Likewise, grief is “a deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement,” that is, loss of a loved one. Lazarus points to the variety of emotions: “to make a sharp division between negative and positive is misleading. It lumps all negative emotional experiences together, which overlooks the great differences among the emotional reactions” (1996: 657). Learning about death, pain, torture, grief, and disgust also takes us into the realms of love, trust, and hope.

Second, learning involves not only learning to feel an emotion, but also to react to, handle, control, and use the emotion. Thus, hope and trust are both basic and felt but they can also be used as coping strategies in dangerous situations. If negative emotions are concerned with here and now, positive emotions point to the future: to respond with hope to a zombie plague means to think of what comes next. The answer to complex situations are not always found in aggressive coping or punishment-reward systems, nor in stamina or fight-and-flee instincts. Positive emotions involve complex action tendencies based both on emotions (do I feel hope?) and cognition (if I have hope, what choice do I then make?).

Positive emotions vary in nature and serve different functions: Sexual emotions interact with aggression and need to be “tamed,” that is unleashed in consensual relationships. The emotion of trust needs to evolve from basic to social, to be expanded from family to wider circles of friends and relatives where it can help form new, life-saving, relationships. And hope points us to a future when there are no odds in our favor and, apparently, no future possible.
To explain positive emotions in horror requires more work and also more theoretical approaches may be needed to answer the paradox of horror. For now, however, we can conclude that positive emotions are at the core of horror, that they help us handle monstrous appetites, and that they give us the possibility of other responses to danger than do negative emotions. Positive emotions spring from instincts and drives, from basic feelings and gut instincts, but their development is social and to master them requires a careful combination of our guts, hearts, and minds.

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Notes

1 Thanks to Dirk Eitzen for his insightful suggestion that The Walking Dead involves positive emotions. In the first version of this article presented at the Society for the Cognitive Study of the Moving Image conference in New York, 13–15 June 2012, I used The Walking Dead as an example of horror with only negative emotions.

2 Freeland does not specify who “sympathy” is for, but it appears to be for characters threatened by monsters, not for the monsters.

3 For classical psychoanalytical approaches to horror, see Clover (1992), Creed (1993), and Twitchell (1985).

4 For babies reading faces, see Baron-Cohen (2003: 54–56). For the multiple functions of mirror neurons, see Rizzolatti and Craighero (2005).

5 For play fighting in rats, see Pellis and Pellis (2009). For play fighting in dogs, see Bekoff and Pierce (2009).

References


**Filmography**

*Hostel: Part II* (Eli Roth, 2007)

*True Blood* (HBO, 2008–)

*Vampire Diaries, The* (CW, 2009–)

*Walking Dead, The* (AMC, 2010–)