

Frisson

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Summary

This paper is about frisson, the sensation of having a physical reaction in response to aesthetic stimuli. This reaction is not common and occurs from the result of activation to the amygdala and hypothalamus or activation to the sympathetic nervous system.

However, it is also possible to experience frisson from stimuli perceived as negative. In this case, adrenaline is pumped through the body triggering the fight or flight response.

This paper looks at a few examples of activation from stimulus that causes physical reactions in our body.

Beauty is all around us.....so is fear. Our brains respond to both of these in different ways and can cause a physical response to different stimuli known as frisson. Frisson (the French word for 'shiver') is a sudden, strong feeling of excitement or fear triggered from any aesthetic experience. Though scientists are in conflict as to how many people experience these sensations, what is agreed upon is that it is not very common. People who experience frisson are better able to experience extreme emotions. These people also tend to be more open to new experiences.

Frisson presents itself in many different ways. The most common ways frisson is identified is through the sensation of getting the chills, getting goosebumps, the feeling of a lump in the throat, or dilated pupils. These physical reactions are caused by different parts of our brain being activated from specific stimuli. While it is common to associate the feeling of getting shivers from hearing something enjoyable, like music, we can also get these sensations from visual experiences as well.

When we see something visually stimulating like a picture, painting, or something in nature, for example, our sympathetic nervous system is activated, triggering our reward system. During this activation, people feel a sensation of being in awe which can translate physically in the body. Auditory stimulation can come from music, speeches, or poems, for example and occurs from a high volume of fibers connecting the auditory cortex to the parts of our brain that process emotions. The auditory cortex is integral to how we perceive sound from the pitch of the sound, the source of the sound, and the tone of the sound. The amygdala and hypothalamus are the parts of the brain responsible for processing emotions. The amygdala processes emotions specifically linked to the fight or flight response and is the part of the brain responsible for fear

conditioning, while the hypothalamus processes more emotions brought on by hormones from anything not perceived as a fear response. The large number of fibers connecting the auditory cortex to the amygdala and hypothalamus allows them to better communicate allowing the person to experience strong emotions more easily. Philosopher of music Leonard Meyer wrote in his book that music's ability to evoke emotion in the listener stems from its ability to meet and break expectations.

There are important aspects to note about frisson that contribute to the experience of the sensation. The first being related to auditory stimulus. When we are aurally stimulated, text is not always a factor so much as delivery is. For example, if we get frisson from music, it may not be lyrics of a song that trigger the response. In the same way, if we get frisson from a poem or speech, it is more likely the delivery of speech that creates the sensation of frisson. Another important factor of the experience of frisson from either visual or aural stimulation is that the environment and social context have a large impact on our perception of specific things. Whether or not we can identify with any part of our stimulus or how well that stimulus 'fits the mold' will have an impact on our perception and affect our body's response.

While it is rare for people to experience frisson, it is likely that trauma has an impact on people being able to experience these physical sensations. Experiences of trauma create heightened activity in the amygdala, the part of the brain that registers fight or flight response. Because of this heightened activity, people with trauma are probably more likely to experience frisson because their brain would register this stimulus as a perceived threat even if it is not.

The physical response of frisson that some people are able to experience from being stimulated in different ways is a unique experience demonstrating someone's ability to experience strong emotions. While everyone feels sensations of fear, satisfaction, or any other emotion, only a small percentage of people experience these with physical reactions.

This is a link to the song *O Magnum Mysterium* arranged by Kevin Memley. This is my favorite song and the song that gives me the strongest frisson. My whole body has a very extreme response to this song, so I wanted to share it with everyone!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9It0XnBMan8>