

Seah Shi-ren writes on fear.

- 1 Shades of scarlet have always been linked with danger and dominance, and interestingly, animal colouration research confirms this: even in contests for food, many animals meekly give way to any competitor coloured red. This instinctive response to colour suggests that fear is an innate response to potential perils. For humans, our in-built fears can be traced back to our ancestors, who faced extreme weather conditions and a relentless pressure to outwit wild predators. Fear sensitised them to the presence of these threats and allowed them to anticipate what lay ahead and respond accordingly, improving their chances of survival. Even today, these primal instincts persist. People experience an atavistic fear when they view menacing-looking wildlife in highly secure enclosures, despite being perfectly safe, and never having met or been harmed by such animals before. Evidently, our innate fears are instrumental in shaping our behaviour. 5
- 2 However, most fears were learnt and amplified by the societies we lived in. As sociologist David Altheide rightly argued, 'fear does not just happen; it is socially constructed and then manipulated by those who seek to benefit'. Down the ages, people in power have done just that, since fearful people are easily led – and misled. Fear was nurtured by village leaders to instil proper values within us, by which moral standards were most effectively enforced through our fears of social isolation or condemnation in our smaller communities of old if we fell short of these standards. Religious leaders also took advantage of our fear of eternal damnation to control our behaviour, and make arbitrary, self-serving social hierarchies appear immutable and incontestable. Illiteracy and superstition further intensified these adherents' fears – and filled the spiritual leaders' coffers too, with them 'needing' to donate minimum sums of money in order to accrue merit. Indubitably, simpler times meant simpler arguments: not listening to gods' representatives on earth meant that we were heading straight to the fiery pits of hell. 10
- 3 Today, there is an overarching narrative of fear. Fear used to be only tied to specific threats – death, punishment, illness, hunger – but in recent times, even the nebulous feeling of fear itself is a legitimate cause for concern, especially when medical science has tied anxiety to heart disease and cancer. From being previously seen as trivial and weak, low-grade fears are now important enough to warrant an expensive session with a therapist. (Thankfully though, this has led to a rise in the number of men opening up about their emotions and anxieties, and having a safe space to be vulnerable.) Additionally, collective, commonly felt fears are no longer the norm, where contemporary trends of customisation have spawned highly individualised fears about our lives. After all, with 'Dr. Google', we can now perform online searches for all possible diagnoses for the slightest bodily health concerns. 15
- 4 Interestingly, when there is fear, we give our governments the legal right to control every single aspect of our lives and behaviour. We allow ourselves to be watched anonymously by closed circuit television systems and permit our Internet activities to be filtered and screened, all in the name of security. Nobody questions the government's monopoly over surveillance, data collection or even the use of force. By empowering governments with the greatest abilities, people fear less since fanatical terrorists, deadly diseases and all manner of fearful events are expected to miraculously disappear. 20
- 5 And troubling as it may be, fear sells. The fear market thrives in a society that has internalised the belief that we are powerless to cope with the risks we face and are continually confronted with the problem of survival. Capitalising on this, business-minded opportunists transform and package our elusive general anxieties about life into tangible fears, and in doing so, exultantly line their pockets by selling a growing range of products and services, as people pay more to fear less. Shrewd entrepreneurs are also extremely talented at harnessing our proclivity for anxiety in situations where our fears bear little relationship to actual experience, to promote 'innovative' products that tackle our 'problems in life'. Ironically, the market for personal security gizmos is booming, even though crime rates have been kept low: high-tech Halloween costumes, equipped with sophisticated devices that allow parents to keep track of their little trick-or-treaters, have been flying off the shelves at exorbitant prices, although the incidence of 25

child abductions has drastically dropped in the last decade. Worryingly, this burgeoning fear economy has turned us into passive subjects who can only respond by mindlessly and obsessively consuming products to ease our deep insecurities.

- 6 Fear is also so deeply embedded into our cultural lexicon that we are reminded of it even in lighter moments: the game show *Fear Factor* ran on the premise that contestants confront terrifying, stomach-churning situations for the enjoyment of repulsed yet transfixed viewers. This captivation with experiencing fear sustains one of the most profitable industries – horror entertainment. But for fear to be bankable, one condition must be fulfilled: for people to truly enjoy a scary situation, and experience a flood of adrenaline, endorphins, and dopamine, it must happen in a completely protected space. Haunted houses scare us by shocking our senses and triggering a fear response. However, our brains can process the fact that these are not ‘real’ threats, so we scream and jump – but then almost immediately laugh and smile. 55
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- 7 Predictably, the digital age has magnified the pervasiveness of fear. We live in an era obsessed with limitless access to information, showcasing all kinds of dangers that *might* afflict us. Threats far removed from our urban lives are internalised on a daily basis: viral footage of a python heavily swollen after consuming a man in a small village in Sulawesi lingers in our minds as we trudge home through our concrete jungles. To top it off, once-specialised technical knowledge is now widely available to the public, giving rise to lowered barriers to entry in technology development. Lone wolf terrorists can download a gun blueprint anywhere in the world and easily construct it on a 3D printer. The awareness of such covert dangers has created the terrifying notion that no one is safe, and, more perversely, that anyone can cause harm – your classmate in school or even your neighbour next door. 65
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- 8 As we become more cognisant of our capabilities, we also have a stronger perception of our vulnerabilities. Increased knowledge, historically the antidote of fear, now also serves to poison our sense of rationality and to heighten an irrational sense of panic. Quiet fears of everyday life now manifest in seemingly insignificant details: nervousness sending our children up the school bus, discomfort sitting next to a foreigner on the train, a creeping unease when a loved one remains uncontactable for a few hours. The only way to cope with the multiplying uncertainties and perceived dangers of the world, it would seem, is to stay even more wired – and so the cycle of anxiety continues. When American President Theodore Roosevelt proclaimed in 1933 that there was nothing to fear but fear itself, he sadly could not have anticipated that people would today be ruled more by fear than ever before. 75
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- 9 To effectively counter fear, we must challenge the narrative that we are powerless, because our human imagination possesses a formidable capacity to learn from the risks it faces. Throughout history, humanity has learnt from its setbacks, and developed ways of systematically identifying, evaluating, selecting and implementing options for reducing fear-inducing threats. There is always an alternative. Whether or not we are aware of the choices confronting us depends upon whether we define ourselves by our vulnerability or by our capacity to be resilient. 85
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