

The History of Horror Films

The History of Horror from 1895-Present day

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Abstract

This page will present the history of horror films since the beginning of film history in 1895 to present day 2018. This page will go through decade by decade the horror films that were significant during that era and list the popular themes throughout each decade.

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1 1895–1899

The first film that can be considered a horror film is George Melies' *Le Manoir du Diable* (The Manor of the Devil 1896).¹ The film focuses on a demon and the banishment of said demon. George Melies was the most prominent horror filmmaker in the 1890s as he made more short horror films such as *L'auberge ensorcelée* (Bewitched Inn 1897) which is about a man in a hotel who gets a joke played on him by a paranormal being. This era was the earliest era of motion pictures thus not many horror films were made. It is not known how the films were received at the time but viewing it through a modern lens with the technology we have now these films would not be frightening to anybody.

2 1900–1909

Much like the previous decade film was still in its infant years and short films were the only form of film during that time as well. Some horror films of this era include Alice Guy's *Esmeralda* (1905) which is a short based off of the Hunchback of Notre Dame. Spanish filmmaker Segundo de Chomón contributed a great deal to early horror films with some of his works *La Maison Ensorcelée* (The Haunted House 1908) and *Satan S'amuse* (Satan at Play 1907).² Both films used costume design to create some unsettling looking characters and *The Haunted House* makes excellent use of special effects to simulate a ghost moving objects around.

3 1910–1919

During this era films such as *Frankenstein* (1910), *The Golem* (1915), *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919), and *The Vampires* (1915) made an impact on the horror genre.³ During this time there was also a shift from short films to fea-

¹M. Babbis, 'The True Origin of the Horror Film,' May 1990, accessed December 3, 2018, http://pages.emerson.edu/organizations/fas/latent_image/issues/1990-05/horror.htm.

²K. Robinson, 'The Short, Spooky Films of Segundo de Chomón, "The Spanish Méliès",' October 12, 2015, accessed December 3, 2018, <http://filmdirtblog.blogspot.com/2015/10/the-short-spooky-films-of-segundo-de.html>.

³K. Wilson, 'Horror Film History — Introduction,' accessed November 1, 2018, <http://www.horrorfilmhistory.com/index.php?pageID=home>.



Figure 1: Nosferatu was the first depiction of Dracula even though they could not mention Dracula by name.

Marmolejo1489, *English: "Nosferatu: Phantom Der Nacht" Movie Horizontal Logo (White Letters)*, April 3, 2018, accessed December 6, 2018,
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nosferatu_Phantom_der_Nacht_movie_horizontal_white_logo.png

ture length films so now the stories started to focus on narrative instead of the spectacle of cinema. During this time films about monsters such as Frankenstein and Vampires began to come about, and those monsters are still used in horror today. The Golem is a particularly interesting film because it was a German film produced during the first world war when Germany had banned Hollywood movies. The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari was a notable horror film because it was shot in a studio which was not always normal back then, but it made use of created sets tailored directly to the movie.

4 1920–1929

The 1920s was more or less the same as the other decades as filmmakers were still trying to figure out film in general never mind the genre of horror. During this period some of the notable films were Nosferatu (1922, See Figure 1), Häxan (1922), The Hunchback of Notre Dame (1923), and The Phantom of the Opera

(1925).⁴ Nosferatu was a depiction of Dracula based off of Bram Stokers novel however due to copyright issues some details had to be changed and the film is controversial for taking all of its ideas from Dracula. Häxan is notable because it blends genres together when horror was not a defined genre. The film blends together fiction and non-fiction as well as adding elements of a documentary in there as well. The Hunchback of Notre Dame and The Phantom of the Opera were notable because they are surviving films with actor Leonidas Cheney who was known as the man of 1000 faces for his use of makeup and facial expressions.

5 1930–1939

During the 1930s Horror film saw a resurgence due to the implementation of sound in movies. The ability to add sound effects to a horror film changed the atmosphere of horror by helping to create tense moments. The 1930s also was the first time that the genre of horror was mentioned by name. Many consider this period to be the golden age of horror films as many influential films came out during this time such as Dracula (1931), Frankenstein (1931), The Mummy (1932), Freaks (1932), King Kong (1933), and Bride of Frankenstein (1935).⁵ The same theme of monsters can be seen here just as in the 1910s only this time all films were feature length and had sound. especially Dracula which was the first horror film to have sound in it. Most of the horror films released at this time have been redone throughout the decades such as Dracula, Frankenstein, King Kong, and The Mummy. This proves that the concepts for the films were a good baseline that transcends time to still make the films relevant today.

6 1940–1949

The 1940s saw a notable decline in horror films as well as originality of horror films except for one film which was The Wolf Man (1941, See Figure 2). The Wolf Man was a werewolf movie and although it was not the first werewolf movie it was still very successful due to the concepts of werewolf's in films not being fully explored yet. The Hollywood studio system allowed filmmakers to quickly make a sequel to The Wolf Man which also included a crossover to Franken-

⁴Wilson, 'Horror Film History — Introduction.'

⁵Ibid.



Figure 2: The Wolf Man was a notable werewolf film that created many sequels and crossovers.

(U. Pictures, *English: Official Logo of the Movie The Wolf Man*, 1941, accessed December 6, 2018, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Der_Wolfmensch_logo.png)

stein with Frankenstein meets the Wolfman (1943). Other movies to come out during this era were similar to the movies of the previous decade including The Mummy's Tomb (1942), The Mummy's Ghost (1944), The Mummy's Curse (1944), The Ghost of Frankenstein (1942), House of Frankenstein (1944), House of Dracula (1945), Son of Dracula (1943), and another adaptation of Frankenstein (1948).⁶ Most films during this era were either based on Dracula, Frankenstein, the mummy, or a werewolf but it is to be expected that some films were not as great during this period as world war II was taking place.

7 1950–1959

During the 1950s with the aftermath of the second world war the horror developed another trope of radioactive fear. Either it a town or city affected by radiation or creatures affected by radiation, the horror genre moved away from the classic horror monsters for a while. some films to come out in this time period are War of the Worlds (1953), When Worlds Collide (1953), and Godz-

⁶T. Dirks, 'Horror Films,' accessed December 3, 2018, <https://www.filmsite.org/horrorfilms.html>.



Figure 3: A depiction of the famous shower scene in Psycho.

(‘Free Image on Pixabay - Psycho, Shower, Scene, Movie,’ accessed December 6, 2018, <https://pixabay.com/en/psycho-shower-scene-movie-murder-29041/>)

illa (1954).⁷ Fear was not of the supernatural, but the fear was very real with countries at war and a nuclear fallout. These movies served as political pieces as well as forms of entertainment.

8 1960–1969

During the 1960s horror introduced a new kind of monster to the fray and that was the human being as a monster. The horror felt more real than ever during this era as the monster was not some creature that did not exist but could be anybody around you. notable movies to portray humans as the monster include Psycho (1960, See Figure 3), The Birds (1963), and Carnival of Souls (1962).⁸ Psycho was especially notable as some say it was one of the greatest films ever

⁷N. Y. F. Academy, ‘How Horror Movies Have Changed Since Their Beginning,’ October 21, 2015, accessed November 1, 2018, <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/how-horror-movies-have-changed-since-their-beginning/>.

⁸Wilson, ‘Horror Film History — Introduction.’

created. *Psycho* was based on real-life events of a man named Ed Gein and the film centers around Norman Bates who is presented as ‘normal’ throughout the film and only in the last portion of the film does it reveal the kind of person that he really is. *Psycho* was so popular that it managed to get a spin-off TV show called *Bates Motel* which takes place before the events of the film happen. Not all films were focused on the human monster in this era as George A. Romero’s famous film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was focused around zombies and was also a commentary on society at the time.

9 1970–1979

During this era horror had shifted from portraying human evils to psychological fears whether it range from psychotic murderers to a fear of sharks. Some of the notable films to come out in the 1970s are *The Exorcist* (1973, See Figure 4), *Carrie* (1976), *The Omen* (1976), and *Jaws* (1975).⁹ *The Exorcist* is one particular horror film that did well and is often referenced as the scariest movie of all time. The use of effects and make-up are often described ahead of its time. It was also a horror movie that took its subject very seriously with no comedy bits in it. The film was widely successful winning two Oscars and was the first horror film to be nominated for best picture. *The Exorcist* drove the horror genre further proving that horror can be serious and not just a cheap scare. Another widely influential film of the genre was *Jaws*. *Jaws* played off of people’s fear of water and sharks even though the shark was not natural shark people still think what if something like that is out there. *Jaws* also did an excellent job with suspense never revealing the shark completely accompanied by the famous music as the shark got closer to his victim. Although psychological horror was very prominent in this time period there were still other horror films most notably *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and *Halloween* (1978) which kick-started the slasher genre. The slasher genre would become more popular in the 80s, but *Halloween* started it all creating tropes such as the masked killer attacking teenagers which would eventually become clichés due to overuse in many films.

⁹Academy, ‘[How Horror Movies Have Changed Since Their Beginning.](#)’



Figure 4: The Exorcist is considered one of the most notable horror films to ever exist and was the first horror film to be nominated for best motion picture.

(W. Bros, *Deutsch: Logo von The Exorcist*, 1973, accessed December 6, 2018, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Exorzistlogo.jpg>)

10 1980–1989

The 1980s was much like the previous decade with some psychological horror films as well as exploring the slasher subgenre further. One new addition to the 1980s was horror films relating to space, aliens, and the unknown. Some notable films of the 80s are *The Shining* (1980), *Friday the 13th* (1980), *The Evil Dead* (1981), *The Thing* (1982), *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Aliens* (1986), and *Child's Play* (1988).¹⁰ *The Shining* is a psychological horror film that plays on madness of being enclosed in a single location for a period of time as well as using supernatural elements to help further the suspense. *Friday the 13th* is a slasher film that is still being remade and re-imagined today. It uses many tropes from *Halloween* and spawned many sequels that came out through the decade spanning 7 films in the 80s alone. Another influential slasher film that still gets remade today is *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The film mixes the tropes of a slasher film with elements of psychological horror as the antagonist of the film attacks teenagers in their dreams. Another big aspect of the 80s was a sort of sci-fi horror with films such as *The Thing* which was about an alien that made an exact replica of whatever it took over. These types of films created

¹⁰Dirks, 'Horror Films.'

suspense in a way that people feared what they did not know.

11 1990–1999

The 90s had a focus towards serial killers and many horror films during the decade came out featuring some sort of serial killer. The use of a serial killer villain worked well with the slasher subgenre so many films to come out in this period were also slashers. This era added nothing really new to the horror genre and recycled content from previous years with sequels or using the slasher formula to quickly produce movies. The notable movies during the 90s were *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *se7en* (1995), *Scream* (1996), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), and *The Sixth Sense* (1999).¹¹ *Scream* is one movie that did particularly well during the 90s spawning sequels. Although it uses the slasher tropes it does it in a way that is self aware of itself. With the idea of a movie being aware of the tropes and using them to their advantage the *Blair Witch Project* was a mockumentary type film that takes inspiration from many horror films that have come before it by not showing the monster and creating suspense.

12 2000–2009

The 2000s marked a time where horror was doing better than ever as costs for movie productions were low and revenue was high. The 2000s were a time when two types of horror movies reigned supreme and those were re-makes of classic horror films and torture horror films. Some of the notable films to come out during this time were *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (2003), *Freddy vs. Jason* (2003), *Exorcist: The Beginning* (2004), *The Amityville Horror* (2005), *The Wicker Man* (2006), *Halloween* (2007), *Friday the 13th* (2009), *Final Destination* (2000), *Donnie Darko* (2001), and *Saw* (2004).¹² The remakes seem to have made a decent amount of money however people often complain about the remakes noting that they were not as good as the originals even calling them uninspired. *Saw* was a notable entry in that it was a very popular horror film that used torture as main method of fear. *Saw* spawned many sequels that came out in the same decade and *Saw* films are still being made today. It is also worth noting

¹¹Wilson, '[Horror Film History – Introduction](#).'

¹²Dirks, '[Horror Films](#).'

that due to the September 11th attacks all types of films including horror films had to question what was now acceptable to be shown in film.

13 2010-Present Day

In the present day of horror films, the genre has taken all the guidelines from previous generations and now horror films of all types are being made. The present-day horror film has Slashers, psychological horror, films depicting human evil, recreations of past successful films, horror films involving the supernatural, and horror films with monsters in them. Although the decade is not over yet some of the notable films so far are IT (2017), Sinister (2012), Black Swan (2010), Insidious (2010), It Follows (2014), Shutter Island (2010), The Conjuring (2013), Hereditary (2018), and The Babadook (2014, See Figure 5).¹³ Special effects and digital editing tools now make films seem more real than ever and in a modern sense horror films have never been scarier. Whether these films stand the test of time or become outdated and deemed unrealistic looking only time will tell.

¹³C. Staff, 'The Best Horror Movies of the Decade So Far, Ranked,' October 26, 2018, accessed December 5, 2018, <http://collider.com/best-horror-movies-2010s/>.



Figure 5: The Babadook is considered one of the greatest modern horror movies.

(B. F. P. L. F. P. LTD, *Español: Logotipo de La Película de Terror Australiana The Babadook (2014), Dirigida Por Jennifer Kent.*, 8 January 2015, 19:45:33, accessed December 6, 2018,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Babadook.jpg)

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