

# **Societal Shifts and the Horror Genre**

Alex Alford

Faculty Mentor

Sue Scheibler, Ph. D. Critical Studies (Film and Television)

Loyola Marymount University

**Abstract:** Horror movies offer a cost-effective way for many filmmakers to get their name out into the world. However, the fluctuating popularity of different subgenres of horror films can make it difficult for the filmmaker to decide what kind of movie they want to make. I intend to research how cultural shifts impact the popularity of different genres of horror movies. Through my research, I will create a visual timeline of the prominent horror films and how they coincide with world events, survey moviegoers, and make my own horror movie to screen to a modern audience. At the end of the project, my deliverable will be an article about my findings and experience that will hopefully be published online in an effort to help fellow filmmakers find success within the horror genre.

**Introduction:**

The horror genre has long been heralded as the indie filmmaker's dream: scary movies see some of the largest returns on investment in Hollywood. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), shot for just \$60,000, has grossed over \$248,000,000 to date (IMDb). However, this movie, which is classified specifically as a "found footage" horror movie, probably wouldn't perform as good today as it did in 1999. Found footage movies have been on the decline - only five studio horror movies released in 2017 were classified as found footage and none of those found commercial success (IMDb). Looking at box office data, one can clearly see that different subgenres of horror movies (such as slasher, monster, or possession), have performed better at different times during history. Many independent filmmakers have turned to the horror genre as a place to start because of how cheaply the movies can be made. Compared to large studios, however, independent filmmakers have a lot more at stake even when the investments being made are relatively small. Through my research, I hope to create a model to help the independent horror film industry better predict what horror genres audiences wish to see and enhance the creator-viewer relationship and experience.

**Background:**

In his book, *The Horror Genre: from Beelzebub to Blair Witch*, author Paul Wells states that the history of the horror film is basically "a history of anxiety in the 20th century" (3). Fear speaks to each person differently. Therefore, the challenge for the horror filmmaker is to create a film that effectively communicates itself to a wide audience on many different levels. People watch horror movies because they are often drawn in by a morbid curiosity of the striking parallels between the cinematic world and their own while everything on the screen goes to hell.

It is easy for one to see these parallels when looking back on the horror genre within a historical context.

The sexual revolution of the 1960s was a transformative time for society - attitudes towards sex become more positive, younger folks began having more premarital sex, and birth control pills became commonplace. However, this also led to increased societal anxieties on the nature of communal and familial structures. Filmmakers at this time were particularly concerned with the 'dead adolescence' that resulted from premarital sex, the fear of parenthood, and the "resentment of children coupled with the desire to remain a child oneself" (Skal). In Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979), we see an alien that bursts out of people's chests after it infects them, representing the fetus as a sort of monster or boogeyman. This was in response to increased societal anxieties over sex and reproduction.

Many people believe that filmmakers have an obligation to use their platform to address prevalent issues through their work. In his article, *Horror movies reflect cultural fears. In 2016, Americans feared invasion*, author Aja Romano makes the bold assertion that every home invasion-based horror film made in 2016 was done so in an attempt to highlight our country's fear of foreign immigration. However, some filmmakers have a different idea about the purpose of horror movies. Horror expert Adam Rockoff once said that none of "the famous slasher film directors have ever said their purpose was anything other than to make an entertaining and, more importantly, profitable movie." Some famous horror movies, such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, carry very prominent themes of familial guilt, subconscious danger, and sexual deviancy. Films such as these "practically beg for a psychoanalytic reading" (Rockoff). However, most audiences enjoy these films without even thinking about the subtext - and that was the director's purpose or intention all along: not to make a sociopolitical statement, but to keep people entertained. With

this in mind, I plan to answer this question: do cultural shifts impact the types of horror movies we like to watch, or are these changes in genre preference merely a matter of changing tastes between the audiences and the filmmakers themselves?

### **Research and Methods:**

In the preliminary stages of my research, I plan on viewing the most successful and prolific horror films of each year from 1960 to the present day. After taking note on the genre, time, and content of each film, I will construct a visual model that functions as a cultural and cinematic timeline for these films. One side of the timeline will contain the prolific horror films of that decade, their genres, and release dates, while the other side of the timeline will contain major social, cultural, political, and economic events and trends from those respective time periods and when they occurred. Hopefully, by constructing this visual timeline, it will bring to light correlations between certain horror movies and what events could have influenced them - that is, if there is any correlation between them.

This timeline construction process will take at least two to three weeks (June), due to the sheer amount of films that will need to be watched and data that must be analyzed. While it will be helpful to glean information pertaining to the history of horror films and why they were made, much more pertinent to today's filmmakers is information relating to present-day horror movies and what factors impact their production and content. Therefore, I will also conduct a survey of moviegoers in order to gain a more relevant and primary source outlook on the current state of the horror genre and how it is perceived. In order to keep this survey well informed but unbiased, I will survey a mixture of film students, film professionals, and regular moviegoers from all over the country. In this survey, I will ask the following questions:

- What are your five favorite horror movies you've seen within the past five years?

- Do you like the horror movies currently being produced by the film industry?
- What genre of horror movie is your favorite?
- What scares you?
- Do you draw any parallels between horror movies you watch and the real world?

These preliminary questions will act as a good jumping off point for drawing comparisons between the research I've conducted and how horror movies are actually perceived in the real world.

Once I have conducted all the primary and secondary research I can, I plan to use what I have learned thus far to create my own horror movie based on what I think will be best received by the audience. I will produce the film in my hometown of Dallas, TX to cut down on many of the costs - filming in Dallas is a great alternative to Los Angeles because it not only has a huge wealth of actors willing to act in student work but also doesn't require many of the permitting costs and location fees that LA does. Instead of asking for money for time compensation, I will be asking for money to help with the production costs of this film. The abbreviated budget is as follows, and all dollar values represent the cost of renting each respective piece of gear for one week from my preferred equipment rental service, LensProToGo:

- Camera: \$1,500
  - Canon C100 Mk II (\$400)
  - Canon CINE Prime Lens Set (\$700)
  - DJi Ronin Gimbal (\$400)
  - Tripod, Jib (In-Kind)
- Sound: \$500
  - Zoom 8 Multitrack Recorder (\$200)

- Rode NTG 4+ Microphone (\$100)
- Boom Pole (\$100)
- Cables, Misc. (\$100)
- Lighting: In-Kind
- Food: \$500
- Total Cost: \$2,500

All services, talent, and crew will be rendered in-kind for the purposes of this film. I know many people who owe me favors.

After the film is completed, I will screen it for the folks previously surveyed and include a new survey that asks them the following questions:

- Did this movie scare you?
  - If so, what moments in the film were most frightening?
- What do you think the film was *really* about?
- Can you draw any parallels to the film and your life?

The entire process should take two months - one month to write the film, and one month to produce and edit it (July-August). The final screenings and surveys will take place at the end of August, and then I will compile my findings into an article which I hope will have prospects for publication in popular online horror sites/publications such as *Bloody Disgusting* and *Fangoria* and even more mainstream movie journalism sites like *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter*.

This article will be a final culmination of my research and will include my visual horror movie timeline, the results to both of my surveys, and a copy of my film.

**Expectations and Conclusion:**

Through conducting this research, I hope to shed light on how filmmakers can better create movies that will resonate with their audience. However, the results of this research might not be what one would expect. I expect to see socio-economic shifts having a greater impact on the horror film industry before the turn of the century. This is because before the year 2000, mass technology such as personal computers and cell phones weren't very prevalent. This gave filmmakers a much more sterile environment in which they could create their films with very little opinion from the outside world and thus provide an unaltered interpretation of the world around them. However, with the rampantness of social media, personal review outlets, and advancing communication present in the modern day, it's impossible for the filmmaker not to be thoroughly impacted by the wishes and desires of their prospective audiences. I believe that, in regards to horror movies today, my research will uncover a feedback loop wherein the cinematic wishes and desires of audiences and society are in charge of what we see up on the screen and not the other way around.

## Works Cited

- Aster, Ari and Gabriel Byrne. *Hereditary*. A24, 2018.
- Calia, Michael. "Hollywood Moves Back to Demonic Possession Stories." *The Wall Street Journal*, Dow Jones & Company, 28 Oct. 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/hollywood-moves-back-to-demonic-possession-stories-1446048013>.
- Craven, Wes, and Robert Shaye. *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. New Line Cinema, 1984.
- Donahue, Anne T. "Why Horror Is the Most Comforting Genre of 2018." *Marie Claire*, Marie Claire, 19 Nov. 2018, <https://www.marieclaire.com/culture/a25058660/horror-movies-2018-trump/>.
- Eggertsen, Chris. "100 Years of Horror: Culture Shock: The Influence of History on Horror." *Bloody Disgusting!*, 9 July 2010, <https://bloody-disgusting.com/editorials/20853/100-years-of-horror-culture-shock-the-influence-of-history-on-horror/>.
- Kendrick, James. "Razors in the Dreamscape: Revisiting 'A Nightmare on Elm Street' and the Slasher Film." *Film Criticism*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2009, pp. 17–33.
- Pesce, Nicole Lyn. "Horror Movies Are Making a Killing at the Box Office. Here's the Scary Reason Why." *MarketWatch*, MarketWatch, 25 Oct. 2018, <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/horror-movies-are-making-a-killing-at-the-box-office-heres-the-scary-reason-why-2018-10-25>.
- Rockoff, Adam. *Horror of It All: One Moviegoers Love Affair with Masked Maniacs, Frightened Virgins, and the ...Living Dead*. Scribner, 2016.
- Romano, Aja. "Horror movies reflect cultural fears. In 2016, Americans feared invasion." *Vox*, Vox, 21 Dec. 2016, <https://www.vox.com/culture/2016/12/21/13737476/horror-movies-2016-invasion>.



Skal, David J. *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror*. Faber and Faber, 2010.

Wells, Paul. *The Horror Genre: from Beelzebub to Blair Witch*. Wallflower Press, 2007.