

Roger Hauser

50 HORROR FILMS

The must-sees, those that changed the genre
and those that made history




COOLTURA

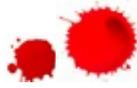
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Introduction

Since its early inception, horror has been one of the most underestimated genres in the history of cinema. Although B movies are plentiful, horror cinema has produced extraordinary masterpieces throughout history; sometimes in its pure form, others hidden within other genres.

Horror has always been subject to pressures from followers or detractors, facing either fascinating appeal or all out disdain.

Detractors will consider horror cinema as senseless psychological torture, a series of gory misadventures or as plainly silly. For horror fans, the success of any movie will depend on being scared stiff every two minutes!

The growing passion for cinema beyond genres has historically provided a more reasonable comparison. Horror is just a genre, and as such, there are good and bad horror movies. Obviously, the quality of a product cannot be determined only by its genre; things are more complex. Perhaps it is true that horror films hide behind either disturbing or boring fatalities, but that can also be said of other genres. However, in the case of horror films the line between what is and what is not credible is not well defined, so films can easily lose credibility.

This is because in cinema the conception of something “credible” is not even remotely close to reality. Horror movies, as well as westerns, epic or science fiction movies, reject the notion of reality; but building something credible beyond reality requires talent and a good budget. This has not always been accessible, which has resulted in too many low-budget films with difficult-to-believe plots being produced throughout the history of cinema.

There are, however, exceptional films which have become classics despite a lack of funding. Nonetheless, some of them were considered to be “bizarre movies” or they fell under the mantle of “cult films”.

This fine distinction of credibility within horror films usually combines with an excess of paranormal ingredients; the result being that, on many occasions, the watcher encounters zombies, mummies, ghosts, vampires and aliens. They can

be overbearing yet suffering beings, whose phantasmagorical behaviour appears to come from a foreseeable afterlife.

In other cases, even more humane characters perpetuate a brutal tyranny. This may be the result of some past misfortune, from resolute influences of evil spells, undisclosed atrocities or irresponsible experiments.

Horror cinema is full of monstrous characters, abnormality, and mysterious battles between double personality beings and madness. In such a context, the accessibility of the script is obscured by this madness and facing the unknown becomes a dark romantic response which may lead to death or oblivion.

Attempting to define a genre, however, is the beginning of its destruction. Genres, as cinema itself, are permanently changing. They cut across culture. The stronger the attempt to pinpoint its style, the more contradictions will emerge.





The Founding Creatures

German expressionism can be considered an early example of the horror category. Films such as *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, *The Hands of Orlac* and *The Student of Prague* have set the tone, taken up by Universal Pictures' early examples in North American cinema. Three decades later, the English producer Hammer continued in the same vein.

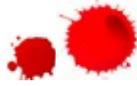
Despite the fact that Edgar Allan Poe's work can be considered an early source of inspiration for horror films, Universal Studios went down another road and selected two scarcely known writers, Bram Stoker and Mary Shelley, authors of the novels *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, respectively. Nobody could have imagined at the time of shooting, the importance these films would have.

Both the characters of these novels are dead and yet still alive. The former feeds on human beings; and blood is his life force but also symbolizes his tragedy. The later was brought back from death without the essential attributes necessary to thrive in society. He has too much love and too much hatred to offer, thus, if his romantic desires are not fulfilled his frustration will result in carnage.

Their lives are miserable, but they are portrayed as terrifying to our eyes. The common human being fails to perceive the secret suffering buried in their sinister bodies.

These two stories were central to the development of horror movies, and were probably the root of many of the sub-genres of the 1960's.





Origins and Evolution of Horror in Cinema

Lon Chaney was a prominent pioneer of horror in silent films such as *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and, especially, *The Phantom of the Opera*. His ability to change his facial expression using his own makeup techniques earned him the nickname “the man of a thousand faces”.

Since the German F.W. Murnau tried unsuccessfully to obtain the rights to adapt *Dracula* in 1922, he decided to rename his vampire “Nosferatu” instead. The poetic delicacy of this praiseworthy film constituted the foundation of the various American blockbusters released the following decade.

In 1931, with the release of both *Frankenstein*, directed by James Whale and *Dracula*, directed by Tod Browning, Universal reached an unparalleled production of horror language. By the same token, both actors Boris Karloff and Bela Lugosi were launched to fame, and they remained type-cast thereafter. The aesthetic quality of both these films became once more a model for horror artists for almost three decades.

From then on, many films in line with the collective conception of horror were produced, such as *Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Rouben Mamoulian in 1931, *The Mommy* by Karl Freund in 1932 and *Freaks* by Tod Browning in 1932, an undeniably rare mix of horror, comedy and documentary.

Universal was faced with a competitor: RKO. This company came forward and released the extraordinary *King Kong* by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack in 1933. This was the first time the animation technique known as stop-motion or stop frame was used in combination with actors and it left the viewers breathless.

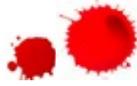
By 1941, Universal released the dangerous *Wolf Man*, starring Lon Chaney Jr, the son of the makeup genius, plus several *Frankenstein* sequels. On the other hand, RKO started exploring a brand new dimension with *Cat People*, by Jacques Tourneur in 1942. Whilst not yet fully formed, the seeds of fantasy films had been planted, which then led to the start of psychological horror.

In the late 1950s, the legendary English producer Hammer joined in and produced films for the following three decades. Their hallmark was gothic horror with a simple structure, vivid colours and overdone acting. Hammer did not leave out the genre's original creations: their first release was *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (1956), followed by *Drakula* (1958) and *The Mummy* (1959). Hammer's star director was London's Terence Fisher and the most sordid main characters were played by Christopher Lee and Peter Cushing.

Hammer's film settings denote a nostalgic return to late romanticism, with its sombre countryside, gloomy forests, medieval ruins and, above all, huge castles with basements, crypts and passages inhabited by ghostly beings, strange whispers and creatures of the night. Such a captivating atmosphere used to contain unusual dangers whose supernatural origins were rarely shown explicitly, but vaguely suggested.

With a morbid sense of humor and undeniable disregard of budgets, American Roger Corman started the so-called B movies. A fan of amusing excess, he emphasized Edgar Allan Poe's literary genius, producing, in only four years, *House of Usher*, *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Premature Burial*, *Tales of Terror*, *The Raven*, *The Masque of the Red Death* and *The Tomb of Ligeia*, usually starring the amazingly talented actor, Vincent Price.





Sub-genres

As from the 1960s, the tendency towards low-budget movies opened the way to “gore” cinema, a somewhat superficial and crude variant that emphasized visceral mutilation and visual violence. Using special effects and an excess of fake blood, these films focused on the vulnerability of the human body and its mutilation. The long list of films in this category was widely analyzed by the Spanish authors Manuel Valencia and Eduardo Guillot in their 1996 volume of *Blood, Sweat and Viscera (Sangre, sudor y vísceras)*.

An exceptional sub-genre emerged in the 1970s under the disturbing name of “disaster films”. Huge fires, earthquakes, ship-wrecks or the hypothetical collision of an asteroid onto the Earth used to caused an ongoing apocalypse from which characters tried to escape. Lots of blood and screaming were necessary to accomplish a peaceful ending. In these super productions, always destined to become blockbusters, first-rate actors were always employed, which generated several storylines detrimental to the main issue. Of course, a couple of main characters, plus some secondary ones and many extras had to die before the story ended.

Some of the first films of this genre are *San Francisco* (1936), on the legendary 1906 earthquake, *When Worlds Collide* (1951), about a giant star traveling towards the Earth, and *Marabunta* (1954), on a plantation threatened by a fierce army of killer ants.

This genre really blossomed in 1970, with the release of *Airport*, followed by *The Poseidon Adventure* in 1972. Two remarkable movies in this style produced in 1974 were *Earthquake* and *The Towering Inferno*. These films clearly defined the main features disaster movies should have: several famous actors playing small roles, rhapsodic plots and surrounding sound effects, such as ‘sensurround’ that make the seats vibrate.

Interest in disaster films slowly decreased, until it briefly returned in 1997 with *Titanic*, by James Cameron, becoming the second box-office success in history.

Later, the “slasher” films emerged (psychopaths in search of teenagers), constituting a moralistic branch of the genre. With a prudish perspective,

teenagers are killed for taking drugs or having sex. Some examples: *Halloween* in 1978 and *Friday the 13th* in 1980.





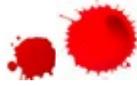
The Fascination Experienced by Masters

Once the horror genre was established, great cinema masters were tempted to participate directly or indirectly.

- Austrian Fritz Lang devoted one of his masterpieces to the genre: *M, the Düsseldorf Vampire*, which was dramatically mixed with noir crime, where a child murderer devastates the Düsseldorf community. It was Lang's second-to-last film before his exile in Germany, and one of the first films to use the concept of *leitmotiv*.
- British Alfred Hitchcock unleashed suspense and shocked cinema lovers when a spurt of blood dissolved into the bathtub water in *Psycho* (1960) or when a flock of birds suddenly attacked a blonde in *The Birds* (1963).
- At the same time, Roman Polanski directed three disturbing films: *Repulsion*, *Rosemary's Baby*, and the magical *The Tenant*, in which he also played the leading role. Additionally, he exquisitely mocked the genre in his comedy *Dance of the Vampires*.
- Stanley Kubrick yielded to Stephen King's charming precise horror and directed, with equal exactitude, *The Shinning*, which continues to thrill audiences today.
- Steven Spielberg produced an upheaval in the industry when, in 1975, in his film *Jaws* swimmers were attacked at Amity Island beaches. It has earned him a fortune!
- Three of the four *Alien* installments involved three important producers of American cinema: Ridley Scott, James Cameron and David Fincher. The saga is composed of four installments, each one being surprisingly attractive and different, due to the fact that they combine horror with different genres.
- In the 1990s, Francis Ford Coppola and Kenneth Brannagh revisited the original creations, Frankenstein and Dracula. Their versions presented an attractive narrative development and were intended to pay tribute to the original novels. However, many consider that Bran Stoker's *Dracula*

and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* lack both the dark magic they had in the 1930s and the gothic appeal they had in the 1950s.





Out of Program

Horror can spread across every aspect of human behavior and cinema is not excluded. It is not surprising that distinctive features of horror are concealed in films belonging to other genres.

In the 'rarities' listed below we can see certain features of horror films not apparent in the past, disguised in other styles or even unexpectedly presenting the opposite face to that expected.

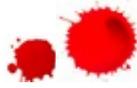
- *The Shadow of the Vampire*, a little jewel, is a fiction on the actual shooting of the film *Nosferatu*, by Murnau, and presents Max Schreck, the leading actor as indeed a vampire.
- Noir crimes generally include a scene with hallucinations and nightmares, often following a beating or torture, or caused by some drug intake. These scenes inevitably refer to horror films, especially to German expressionism, as can be seen in Edward Dmytryk's 1944 film *Murder, My Sweet*, in the scene after the beating.
- *Imsomnie* (1963) was one of the first short films by Pierre Etaix, where he mocks horror tales and films and skillfully plays with horror language. The result was as surprising as it was unknown.
- Ed Wood was a New York film director equally devoted to horror and science fiction. Based on such appallingly malevolent films like *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, he was considered the worst director ever. With time, however, a cult developed around him, perhaps because, as Luis Borges puts it, "if a mistake is so stunning, the only possible path to take is to encourage it". His work definitely falls into the horror category, although it is not clear whether this relates to the genre itself or to other considerations.
- In 1994, Tim Burton produced a film on Ed Wood, starring Johnny Depp, and some years earlier had produced a friendly and melancholic version of classic horror monsters in *Edward Scissorhands* and in his short film Vincent. In the latter film he pays tribute to the master of horror Vincent Price.

- Although several adaptations were made of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, none were felt to have done justice to the original novel. The 1931 version mentioned before, directed by Rouben Mamoulian, is the classic version. Actor Fredric March won an Academy Award for his performance in this film and the technical secrets behind the transformation scenes were revealed long after the director had passed away. An imitation of this film, albeit without makeup, was released in 1941, directed by Victor Fleming and starring Spencer Tracy. Some other variations of the plot produced better results, such as *The Nutty Professor* (1963), in which Jerry Lewis turns the character around, with the monster becoming a misogynist and handsome seducer. In yet another version, *Mary Reilly* (1996), directed by Stephen Frears, the story is told through the eyes of a housemaid.
- *Monster, Inc.* is a great Pixar/Disney animated film partially approaching the slasher format. Monsters working at a company invade children's nightmares to scare to obtain electric power from their screaming. In this film horror evolves into brilliant comedy.
- An aftereffect of the TV series *The Walking Dead* was the return in the new millennium of old zombies, confined for years to B movies. The comedies *Warm Bodies* and *Zombieland* combine a defined sense of horror with the originality of love and action.

Throughout the development of the horror genre, films have been produced in a hurry, with low budgets, sloppy or rough scripts, poor special effects and rustic visuals. Many observers say that the best movies have been, in fact, produced under such circumstances.

The new frontiers of audiovisual technology enabled digital effects to create an alarming sense of reality, unknown before, but this has not necessarily resulted in an evolution of the genre. Many horror films today focus on grandiose displays of terrifying images rather than on the characters' inner world. This, sooner or later, leads to bypassing one of the masters' essential lessons: any genre can survive if the story being told is good enough.





50 Must-watch Horror Films

Horror often shows up unexpectedly. That is why the task of choosing 50 films has resulted in an eclectic list with proposed sub-genres and a sympathetic grasp of overall quality. We include here B movies, emblematic titles, cult films and certain masterpieces surpassing all genres.

In the search for those golden pieces buried in the stack of lost treasures, we have eliminated some debatable titles in favor of others of higher quality. At any rate, the movies mentioned are worth watching, whether for the footprint they left on film culture or for their irresistible nostalgic appeal.



- 1 -

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari

(Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari, Germany, 1920).
Robert Wiene

Francis reports that when he and Alan visited Dr Caligari, his somnambulist assistant announced that Alan would only live until dawn. But none of this would actually happen. A carefully built scam misleads the viewer into a perfect illusion, and the absence of dialogue, pertinent to silent films, is skillfully used by the director. The story flows well thanks to both its visual content and its obscure nature. The use of extensive flashbacks effectively leads the viewer into confusion. Despite Griffith still seeking his own sphere of expression, in North America, *Caligari* became, along with Chaplin's films, one of the main cinema myths.



- 2 -

The Phantom of the Opera

(USA, 1925)
Rupert Julian

The old, disfigured and mad violinist haunting the Paris Opera House basements begins his journey into the history of cinema with this film. This particular version may not be the best, as it is quite old and the direction somewhat clumsy, but, surprisingly, all of Leroux's novel adaptations to cinema have been memorable. Here, the stars go to Lon Chaney's work, the great creator of a series of monsters present during most of the silent films era.



- 3 -
M

(Germany, 1931)
Fritz Lang

We move from expressionism to impressionism. With this film, based on a real story, Fritz Lang introduced psychopathic killers into cinema. Aided by Peter Lorre's unique facial features he created a tormented predator who kidnaps and murders children. Ironically, both the police and the underworld end up joining forces to destroy him. The obscure atmosphere of the setting is an innovative combination of the already classic expressionism with the new German realism in drama, although it has also been associated with the prevailing pessimism following Germany's defeat in the Great War. Edvard Grieg's intense musical score completes the disturbing feeling.



- 4 -
Freaks

(USA, 1932)
Tod Browning

Bizarre and extremely distressing, this shocking classic can be understood as the most vehement statement in favor of diversity in the history of cinema. A group of crippled and deformed circus dwarfs plot a scheme to earn some money. The cruel tale slides into horror. What is curious about this film is that it subverts classical horror to provide an approach of staggering modernity. If horror comes from the weird, the exception to normality, Browning changes the process until his freaks end up being normal, and normal beings become monstrous. This rare film is a must-see.



- 5 -
The Bride of Frankenstein

(USA, 1935)
James Whale

A sequel to the founding *Doctor Frankenstein*, also by James Whale, this version surpasses the first in terms of art direction, character composition and suggestive power. Since the second is a continuation, it is a good idea to watch them together. The film deals with the ancestral fight against death and the consequences of intolerance, discrimination, loneliness and exclusion. Under the umbrella of horror, it contains references to homosexuality and necrophilia not detected by censorship. In a shot taken from a low level, the figure of the monster resembles that of a crucified person. James Whale combines horror with humor in an atmosphere of masterfully managed suspense. John J. Mescall's photography offers unusual camera angles, shots with dark overtones and sites with extraordinary architecture.



- 6 -
Cat People

(USA, 1942)
Jacques Tourneur

A woman fears she will be transformed into a panther if she is kissed. This terrifying suspicion is supported only by insinuation, not by an explicit image. The viewer imagines horrifying situations without actually having watched them. Tourneur creates an intentionally ambiguous film presenting incomplete information. It is unknown whether the fears the main character shows are a consequence of sexual repression, or if she was a victim of an ancestral curse. This uncertainty supports the plot with unbearable tension. Although the acting is still a bit stiff, as it used to be in the 1940s, the use of the human voice is remarkable. Distinct diction and whispered dialogue seem to nourish the feeling of vulnerability driving the intrigue.

