

History and Approaches: A Literature Review of Horror Movies in America

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Abstract. This essay analyzes the history of American horror movies, pointing out the features of different periods and classic works of American horror movies. Using a certain cultural perspective to see how these films reflect the society. Horror film characters are not born out of thin air, they have certain thoughts, wishes, and reflections even reflecting the general atmosphere of the entire society. Ranging from the Gothic of the silent era, to the rise of the classic monster, to the transformation of the Cold War into science fiction thrillers, to psychological horror, to the rise of social horror in the New Hollywood era, to self-reference in the age of postmodernism, and finally to the rich and diverse "art film horror" of today, it is a long and arduous journey. The form and evolution of horror films are not accidental, they are closely related to social reality, which reflects the changes in the deepest fear of people and the appearance of people's desire. With it we could understand collective imagination and the very deep worries about "the other" during the age in question, and also how the public constantly questions and ponders on the moral boundary, power game and society order amidst social structure transformation.

Keywords: Horror movies, Movie history, American movie

1. Introduction

Watching horror movies is a thrilling experience, but an analysis of their history reveals a long process of development and evolution, often linked to the times and society at large. They reflect the concrete desires, fears, anxieties, and social pressures of people over time. Based on this, this essay will analyze the history of American horror films, highlighting their characteristics at different stages and classic, representative works. It will then incorporate specific cultural approaches to examine how these films reflect society. The characters and figures in horror films don't exist gratuitously; they embody specific thoughts, desires, and reflections, and even reflect the state of society at large. Through this prism, we can discern the collective imagination and deep anxiety about "others" in a specific era, as well as the public's ongoing questioning and reflection on moral boundaries, power relations, and social order in the process of social structural change.

2. A brief history of American horror film

2.1. Early roots and silent era (1900s–1920s)

The roots of American horror films are deeply rooted in the silent film era of the early 20th century. These works were clearly imbued with the dark influences of European Gothic literature and the aesthetic genes of German Expressionism. For example, the 1922 German film "Nosferatu" profoundly reshaped the horror aesthetic of North American audiences, despite not being a Hollywood production [1]. These films excelled in utilizing highly stylized shadow contrasts and distorted scene compositions to create eerie worlds imbued with a supernatural aura. This visual rhetoric not only laid the sensory foundation for genre films but also quietly gave rise to the embryonic form of American horror aesthetics.

At the same time, Hollywood studios also began actively absorbing the dark genes of Gothic culture. Take, for example, Universal Pictures' series of monster-themed shorts and experimental films released in the 1920s. By incorporating the visual grammar of European Expressionism, these works gradually established the original framework for the influential "Monster Cinematic Universe [2]." It is particularly noteworthy that Expressionism's narrative strategy of transforming psychological trauma and subconscious anxiety into distorted space and strange light and shadow, after crossing the Atlantic and taking root in the soil of American film, not only expanded the expressive dimension of the horror genre, but also laid a solid foundation for its aesthetic evolution in the following decades.

2.2. The classic universal monsters (1930s–1940s)

In the late thirties of the 1930 America's horror film reached its peak time of creativity. During this period, Universal Pictures produced some classic films in the horror genre, such as Dracula (1931), Frankenstein (1931), and The Mummy (1932) These films not only established the narrative conventions and visual codes of the horror genre systematically, but also created a series of iconic monster totems that transcend eras, leaving imprints on popular culture [3,4].

During the dark times of the Great Depression, the creatures who sprang from the screen, spoke to the public's fears. Dracula is an outsider of society who had a secret identity and exposed the society's deep-seated fear of the unknown and of being culturally disconnected. Frankenstein's monster linked to the concerns of the lack of control over technology and the creation of inhuman experiments during that era, and the great conflict between the advancements made by humans and the morals of humans. And also the resurrected Mummy brought up the complex intrigue of the ancient past and its mysterious power and influence, which hid deep down in the minds of colonized people. These monster stories provided a safe valve for the prevailing sense of powerlessness and uncertainty, and offered listeners an indirect means to cope safely with the uncontrollable peril of disorder in real life, by way of the metaphoric visual ceremonies.

With the success of these onscreen characters, Universal Pictures gradually built a interconnected "Monster Universe" narrative system. Classic characters such as Dracula, Frankenstein, and The Mummy continued to appear through sequels and crossovers. This strategy not only precisely met audiences' aesthetic expectations of familiar horror icons, but also pioneered the branding of genre films, providing a replicable commercial model for the subsequent industrial development of horror films.

2.3. Postwar & cold war era (1950s–1960s)

After the smoke of World War II cleared, American horror cinema, under the shadow of the Cold War's Iron Curtain, embarked on a new narrative shift. Horror films of the 1950s often deeply integrated with science fiction, vividly reflecting the dual fears of radiation mutation and external invasion in the nuclear age. For example, the giant insects mutated by nuclear testing in "Them!" (1954) directly embodied society's deep anxiety about technological uncontrollability [5]. The alien replicants that quietly replaced human emotions in "Invasion of the Body Snatchers" (1956) accurately captured the collective tremors of ideological assimilation and identity crisis under the influence of McCarthyism [6]. Through metaphorical narratives, these works revealed how Cold War mentality eroded individual autonomy and the foundations of social trust.

In the 1960's, Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) was an important milestone in the development of horror movies. The film entirely gave up on the typical monster type or alien type, delving into the inner hidden illness lurking in the dark corner of an ordinary person's heart. Narrative jumps from outer menaces to one's inner self psychology both pointing towards the spiritual crisis erupt in the American suburb middle class life and also becomes an aesthetic basis for the later psychologically driven horror and thriller variants [7]. During the entire time, horror films not only accurately reflected the collective anxiety and inner contradictions of society during the Cold War era, but also greatly broadened the artistic scope of the horror genre in depicting the essence of humanity by focusing the internal narrative focus.

2.4. The new wave & social horror (1970s–1980s)

The American horror film industry was experiencing a great social change in the period of the 1970s, the term used to describe this moment is "Social Horror Film" era. The film *The Exorcist* created in 1973, the story focuses on religious hysteria, showing how beliefs systems are breaking down and the breakdown of reason in contemporary society [8]. The film is like a prism which reflects the mass anxiety and unease that affected the American mind after the Vietnam war and Watergate Scandals. *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974) and *Halloween* (1978) formed up the foundation for the 'slasher film' genre [9]. These two films brought scenes of violence from exotic spectacles into the domestic sphere and onto suburban streets, which enabled fear to permeate the very fabric of life and made evident the moral crisis and gender repression at the heart of the American experience. *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) by George Romero, when it was released into the late 60s, had a storyline about a black hero and an apocalyptic allegory, making a poignant statement about racial and political tensions at the time, which would set the table for social horror films taking this direction after it [10]. In the eighties, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) took place against a backdrop of Reaganomics and a return to conservative values, turning adolescent dream fears into a resistance symbol for a repressive regime [11] and all of these films were narrated in a kind of way that combined overt gore with a more metaphorical, in order to visualize the cracks under the surface of society and the mind in frightening ways.

2.5. Postmodern & self-reflexive horror (1990s–2000s)

Influenced by postmodern cultural trends, American horror films of the 1990s exhibited distinct self-referential and genre-deconstructing characteristics. *Scream*, released in 1996, broke through the narrative conventions of traditional horror films through its highly conscious metanarrative [12]. The characters' intimate knowledge of the "horror film's survival rules" allowed viewers to establish

a unique aesthetic distance between the horrifying atmosphere and the playful irony. This self-reflexive narrative not only reconstructed the interactive relationship between genre films and viewers but also profoundly revealed how horror elements have been alienated into consumable cultural commodities in an era of media saturation. The subsequent film, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), pioneered a "media-based fear" paradigm that was characteristic of its time through its pseudo-documentary visual experiments [13]. Its narrative strategy, deliberately blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction, pioneered the viral spread of horror elements in the early days of the internet. With the advent of the new millennium, the wave of globalization fostered a profound convergence of cross-cultural horror aesthetics. The classic Japanese film "The Ring" is a globally renowned horror film, with the image of the long-haired Sadako climbing out of a well still fresh in people's minds. While the film has since been remade and adapted in many countries, none have surpassed the original classic. However, this demonstrates the global circulation of classic horror images and their inspiration for other creators [14]. Overall, horror filmmaking during this period transcended simple representations of monsters and violence, delving into the complete cycle of production, circulation, and consumption of horror elements within the contemporary cultural context. Through self-referential narrative strategies, these works continuously interrogate how experiences of fear are systematically constructed, disseminated, and ultimately transformed into consumable cultural commodities within a media society.

2.6. Contemporary horror & "prestige horror" (2010s–now)

Entering the 2010s, a batch of American horror works that can also be called "arthouse horror" were produced. Jordan Peele's *Get Out* (2017) cleverly utilized the disguise of the thriller genre to deeply probe into the racial difficulty and identity crisis of modern society [15]. The movie made use of proper metaphorical methods, bringing up the cultural appropriation and discrimination in structural terms of white liberalism, making it transform the horror genre into means for sharp criticism. A24 Films' *Hereditary* (2018) and *Midsommar* (2019) deepened the artistic transformation of horror cinema. Both films transcended the traditional formula of scaring, instead symbolizing psychological trauma, family disintegration, ritual worship, and thus building a kind of unique "emotional horror" aesthetic system [16]. As well at this time, with the streaming series like Netflix *The Haunting of Hill House*, digital media is also affecting story logic of horror in that scattered and more interactive narrative structure is becoming more and more common and social media is now the echo chamber for people's fear experience [17]. The short is that, contemporary horror films has been far away from the normal area of entertainment as a medium for reflecting the current situation of actual politics and social structure conflict, and collective trauma. By typifying this narrative trick and continuously improving the representation of the horror aesthetics in the public arena, and showcasing its continued vital energy and intellectual prowess as a frontline of social criticism.

3. Cultural approaches to horror film

3.1. Psychoanalytic approaches

From a psychoanalytic perspective, horror films are not only a medium for producing sensory stimulation but also a concrete expression of human subconscious desires. Freud's "Uncanny" theory reveals that the experience of horror stems from the sudden alienation of familiar objects in everyday life—the resurfacing of long-repressed desires, traumas, and fears [18]. The various "monsters" in horror films are symbolic projections of this subconscious: they reflect both the

instinctual impulses and moral guilt that society and the individual mind attempt to deny, while also revealing deep-seated anxieties about the death instinct, sexual impulses, and ethical transgressions. For example, Norman Bates's split personality in *Psycho* (1960) reveals the intense conflict between forbidden desires and matriarchal repression [19]. The narrative setting of a young girl being possessed by a demon in *The Exorcist* (1973) metaphorically represents society's collective anxiety regarding the physical changes and awakening of gender consciousness in adolescent women. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the core charm of horror films lies in the use of the symbolic technique of "alienation", which allows viewers to face the return of repressed content in the subconscious within a safe aesthetic distance, and ultimately achieve ritual purification of emotions and a dynamic balance of psychological structure.

3.2. Feminist film theory

Feminist theory reveals the complex interweaving of gender politics, bodily discipline, and power structures in horror films. Carol J. Clover's "Final Girl" theory suggests that the female character who survives classic slasher films is often portrayed as possessing pure character, high self-discipline, and rationality. By personally enduring violence and effectively fighting back, she transforms from a passive victim to an active agent. This classic role model reflects patriarchal moral expectations and disciplines of the "ideal woman" while also challenging and subverting the traditional male gaze and gender power order through narratives of armed female resistance. Feminist theory further suggests that the recurring scenes of female suffering in horror films—including being chased, imprisoned, or dismembered—often reflect a deep patriarchal anxiety regarding female subjectivity and sexual autonomy [20]. The recurring archetypes of the witch, the controlling mother, and the femme fatale are, at their core, cultural representations of society's fear of female power and desire. Just as the film *Carrie* (1976) horrifies the bodily transformations of adolescence, revealing the complex connections between religious repression and gender-based fear [21], feminist research has viewed horror films as a crucial cultural venue for the interpretation of gender politics, continually deconstructing the power dynamics and bodily discipline underlying narratives of fear.

3.3. Race and postcolonial readings

Horror films often depict conflict, with racial tension being a recurring theme in many films. Real-life racial discrimination and exploitation are further magnified in films. For example, real-life exploitation can be exaggerated into more mysterious themes, such as life extension or replacement. For example, the 2017 film *"Get Out"* dramatically depicts the exploitation and abuse of Black people by white people, who treat them merely as vessels for survival, without respect. This film, in fact, criticizes and satirizes the reality of white supremacy and the betrayal of Black people in American society. Robin R. Minns Coleman points out that this film effectively uses Black people as protagonists to address the issue of racial discrimination. While Black people are typically seen as supporting characters in films, used to serve the narrative, this film, with Black people as the deceived protagonists, further illustrates the vulnerable position of Black people, who are isolated, stared at, and deceived [22].

On the other hand, the zombie genre, exemplified by George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and its series, has been viewed since the 1960s as a visual metaphor for colonial and postcolonial discourse. The walking dead, wandering the border between life and death, are both a concrete manifestation of dehumanization and a collective symbol of mass panic, profoundly

reflecting Western civilization's paradoxical fear of alien cultures and its desire to control them under the colonialist lens. Scholar Kyle William Bishop, in his research, reveals that the systematic dehumanization of the zombie image precisely replicates the objectification of colonized indigenous peoples within imperialist discourse [23].

Overall, whether confronting the deep structures of racism or reflecting on the construction logic of the cultural other, horror films have consistently opened up a unique field for cultural critique. These visual narratives, acting as a barometer of social sentiment, continuously reflect the racial tensions and lingering colonial memories lurking within the fabric of modern civilization.

3.4. Marxist & socio-political critiques

From a Marxist perspective, horror films are often interpreted as cultural symbols reflecting the inherent contradictions of capitalist society. George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) is a prime example: the film's absurd scenes of hordes of zombies roaming a shopping mall constitute a sharp allegory of the alienated state of human existence in consumer society. As Jameson has pointed out, mass cultural products often constitute symbolic projections of society's collective unconscious—those aimless, walking corpses are a brilliant metaphor for the loss of subjectivity among contemporary individuals under the erosion of capitalist logic [24]. Horror films often go beyond highlighting the opposition between humans and ghosts or the distinction between good and evil. Rather, they use these stark contrasts to illustrate a unique power structure. These power structures are key to character differentiation and the fundamental reason for amplifying fear. In the classic film *"Us"* (2019), the unequal social power structure persists, and the film uses subtle means to express this. This demonstrates that cinematic creation is not groundless or unfounded, but rather grounded in reality. It even has a profound and intimate connection to reality, serving as a metaphor for, and even a critique of, reality.

3.5. Globalization & transnational horror

Since the beginning of the new century, the creation and dissemination of horror films have increasingly exhibited transnational fluidity. Within this global landscape, American horror films have served as both cultural exporters and recipients of exotic horror aesthetics. For example, the Hollywood remake of the Japanese classic *The Ring* (1998) into *The Ring* (2002) retained the uniquely dark psychological atmosphere and social repression of East Asian horror traditions while creatively incorporating the visual impact and family ethical crises of American cinema [25]. This cultural hybridization vividly demonstrates the extraordinary adaptability and regenerative potential of the horror genre as a vehicle for cross-cultural communication. Within the context of globalized narratives, American horror productions have increasingly focused on images of the cultural other and global crises. Whether it's the global pandemic panic in *World War Z* (2013) or the reverse influence of Asian films like *Train to Busan* (2016) on the American zombie genre, both demonstrate the bidirectional flow of horror aesthetics. Transnational horror narratives have become a mirror reflecting the dialogue between civilizations—within the network of global capital and cultural communication, the manifestations and symbolic meanings of fear are constantly reconstructed. Contemporary American horror has transcended a single model of cultural output and evolved into a system of fear discourse co-constructed with a global audience.

4. Conclusion

The development of American horror cinema spans a century, from the Gothic experiments of the silent era to the rise of the classic monster genre, through the Cold War's transformation into science fiction thrillers and psychological horror, to the emergence of social horror films during the New Hollywood era, and through the self-referential narratives of postmodernism, to the diverse blossoming of "artistic horror" today. The content and changes of horror movies are not random, but are often closely related to social reality, and also show the changes in people's deep inner fears and the appearance of desires. Therefore, through horror movies, we can see an era, as well as people's consciousness and thoughts.

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