The Art of Horror

A brief examination at how the horror genre has expanded in media & purpose.

By Piper Greisl

There is no singular pinpoint to the start of horror. While some may point to the Gothic literature of the 19th century or the German expressionist films of the early 20th century, both of which remain pillars of the genre, one cannot point to the first horror story in the same way that one cannot point to the first love story. Horror has existed for as long as fear has, and fear has existed for as long as there have been things to fear. These have existed forever.

And yet, horror has carved itself out as a standout genre, with it taking multiple forms and subgenres, and many saying that the wider genre reflects something deeper.

The Castle of Otranto, a 1794 novel by Horace Walpole, is credited as the starting point for Gothic literature. The novel's atmosphere, which combines a medieval setting with mysterious supernatural events, has come to be synonymous with the Gothic genre. Authors like Clara Reeve and Ann Radcliffe further popularized and expanded the genre, with each writing books like *The Old English Baron* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho*. Their works lead to the introduction of tropes that continue to this day, for example, the "explained supernatural" narrative, in which events that at first glance appeared paranormal but are later revealed to be explained through the ordinary.

However, this isn't to say it was uncommon for supernatural elements to come into play. Matthew Gregory Lewis, for example, didn't hesitate to include hauntingly memorable ghosts like the Bleeding Nun in his 1796 novel, *The Monk*. Specters and undead ghouls were popular additions to the gothic genre, paving the way for what would become some of the most memorable elements of the wider horror genre. William Beckford's 1786 novel, *Vathek*, which featured sorcery, devils, and spirits from Arabian mythology, became a source of inspiration for a wide range of writers, from Lord Byron to H.P. Lovecraft.

Precursors to the genre, however, are often referenced as inspiring some of these authors. William Shakespeare's tragedies, for example, frequently feature ghostly apparitions, prophecies, mysterious omens, and murderous revenge plots. Take, for example, the timeless image of *Hamlet* soliloquizing to the skull of Yorick, or Lady Macbeth's futile obsession with cleaning the metaphorical blood off her hands. Other poets, like John Milton and Alexander Pope, stood out for their tragically beautiful verse. Milton's *Paradise Lost* even served as inspiration for Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, both exploring the notions of creation and de-creation. Most of the early Gothic explored the theme of decay, whether it be of the mind, the soul, or the body.

By the late 1800s, these aesthetics and themes were being ushered into the age of silent film. 1896 saw the release of the French silent film, *Le Manoir du Diable*, or *The House of the Devil*, by Georges Méliès. Despite relying more on feelings of wonder, rather than fear, this film is widely considered to be one of, if not the, first horror film due to its themes and stylization. The three-minute-long film features ghosts, supernatural or magical transformations, skeletons, and, of course, a depiction of the Devil — all things you'd be likely to find in a scary movie today.

Méliès' catalogue of work consists of similar films, all falling under the genre of trick films. These films utilized innovative film techniques to create the otherwise unachievable. The special effects formed here helped filmmakers open up possibilities for visual storytelling, especially in the horror genre.

With the emergence of German Expressionism, many filmmakers began to explore hyper-expressive storytelling, oftentimes through distorted realities. The Weimar Republic's political climate induced many artists to reject realism and embrace raw emotion, including those of dissociation, depersonalization, instability, and madness.

It wouldn't be the last time that cultural anxieties and the effects of war impacted horror films. By the 1950s, the horror genre was deeply rooted in the fear of the unknown, deception, and the threat of losing one's humanity. Driven by the anxieties of the Cold War, sci-fi horror thrived in the American cinemas. The technological advancements of the time were overshadowed by the threat of nuclear weapons, and many films played off the paranoia of possible invasions.

The 1956 film, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, is widely cited as one such example. Marked by a period of McCarthyism, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* tapped into the post-war fears of internal subversion and attacks on the so-called American way of life. Many read the film's extraterrestrial antagonists as an allegory for communism, analyzing the film as a product of the Red Scare.

As the genre continued to expand, so too did the techniques used by filmmakers and marketing teams. 3D horror films grew in popularity, and directors often implemented gimmicks for their theatrical releases, namely William Castle. In his 1961 film, *Mr. Sardonicus*, cinema audiences were introduced to the "Punishment Poll," where they had the option to vote for the titular character to be punished or shown mercy. In Castle's 1959

film, *The Tingler*, vibrating motors were installed into select theatre chairs and would then activate during the final scene, in which one of the titular creatures is said to escape into the theatre. Vincent Price, the star of the film, would then warn the audiences that the only way to survive was to "scream — scream for your lives."

Through their continued experimentation, the onscreen effects in horror films also expanded. The use of practical effects became a staple of the increasingly popular gore-based horror movies. In George A. Romero's 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombies' rotting flesh was created using mortician's wax, with additional makeup darkening the shadows of their faces to create a sunken, decayed look.

Most of the blood, meanwhile, was Bosco Chocolate Syrup, and the human flesh that the zombies feast on was made up of meat and offal.

By the 1970s, horror films began to embrace the grittiness that came with the genre. Films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *The Hills Have Eyes* (1977), and *Halloween* (1978) leaned into personal, more realized horrors — the killer next door, the dangerous hitchhiker, the everyday gone wrong. Supernatural horror

Filmmakers like Friedrich Christian Anton Lang, also known as Fritz Lang, leaned into the avant-garde of the expressionist movement, producing works like the 1927 science-fiction film *Metropolis*. The horror genre, specifically, thrived in the artistic environment of the time.

Films like Robert Wiene's *The Hands of Orlac* and Paul Leni's *The Man Who Laughs* invoked morbid explorations of identity. Both films starred actor Conrad Veidt, who would become easily recognizable for his haunting stare, with his performance in *The Man Who Laughs* serving as the visual inspiration for Detective Comics' villain, the Joker.

Nosferatu, the renowned 1922 silent film directed by F. W. Murnau, made a stunning use of light and shadow to bring to (undead) life the character of Count Orlok, played by Max Schreck. The beauty of the film was only

expanded by Hans Erdmann's orchestral score.

Notably, however, the film was an unauthorized adaptation of Bram Stoker's 1897 novel, *Dracula*. Under critical analysis, both *Nosferatu* and *Dracula* present a fear of "the other," reflecting the wider cultural attitudes and anxieties of both times, whether or not the theme was intentional. This evaluative lens, however, introduces the importance of the context in which horror art is created.

The German Expressionist movement, as a whole, was heavily impacted by World War I, with many artists from the time being moved by the cruelties of war displayed on the international front. Weimar Era Germany was marked by its political instability and economic strife, which was then reflected by the despair portrayed in the avant-garde art movements.

movies continued to persist, with films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973). The common thread between each of these, however, was unfettered realism and intimacy with movie audiences, making even paranormal threats feel grounded and unrestrained.

This era of horror movies exposed audiences to uncensored gore and violence, something that would continue as the genre grew. Some suggest that this was a result of increased accessibility to news coverage of international events, especially the Vietnam War. As the American people were exposed to footage of war-torn battlefields, filmmakers responded in part to the societal unease and disillusionment.
Tom Savini, a director and prosthetic makeup artist for several horror movies, served as a

combat photographer during the Vietnam War. In a 2002 interview, he told the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, "Through my lens, I saw some hideous [stuff]. To cope with it, I guess I tried to think of it as special effects. Now, as an artist, I just think of creating the effect within the limitations we have to deal with."

Horror became a genre that recognized the horrors of reality by mirroring it through fiction. It's no surprise, then, that counterculture movements like the goth and punk subcultures gravitated towards it. The aesthetics of bands like Bauhaus, Sisters of Mercy, Rosetta Stone, and Xmal Deutschland became reminiscent of the eerie, gothic horrors that brought to light ghouls and vampires. Meanwhile, bands like Iron Maiden, Slayer, Anthrax, and The Misfits reflected the same grotesque imagery from gritty slashers and sinister demons.

Fashion, too, has grown from the genre, with the gothic subculture embracing the silhouettes of shadows and specters, and the horror punk subculture (and its variants) embracing distressed fabrics, patterns, and DIY movements. A sort of horror couture has even been explored, with designers like Robert Wun seizing the beauty behind the darkness.

With the rich history that the genre holds, it's no surprise that horror has evolved so much over time. Especially, given the idea that as our cultures and societies grow and change over time, so too does the horror genre. It reflects not only on the fears and anxieties of the times, but also the deeper, more innate questions of the human experience. What makes something right and something else wrong? Where do we draw our lines? What does it mean to be human? What makes someone a monster? And as we continue to create art in the horror genre, a larger question emerges — what answers does the art we create reflect back to us?

Pip's Picks

Books...

Looking for an unsettling short story or novella? "The Veldt" by Ray Bradbury offers a quick exploration of the horrific implications of future technology. Likewise, "I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream" by Harlan Ellison is both a science fiction staple and a harrowing tale. Interested in a more classically Gothic read? Check out H.G. Wells' "The Red Room," Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw," Edgar Allen Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," and William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily."

More inclined towards the classics? Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* and John William Polidori's "The Vampyre" are staples for vampire fans. *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley and *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson are, of course, must-reads. For something a little more obscure, check out Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland*, or *The Transformation*.

Movies...

Need some good horror flicks for your next movie night? *Black Christmas* (1974) offers a suspense-filled experience that will have you double-checking you've locked your doors. Looking for a solid zombie movie? Try *28 Days Later* (2002), *Train to Busan* (2016), or the original *Night of the Living Dead* trilogy.

Looking for some stunning visuals to go alongside the terror? Try *Suspiria* (1977) for some dreamlike horror or *Nosferatu* (2024) for an eerie, gothic tale. *Perfect Blue* (1997) offers stunning animation. When in doubt, Rod Serling's anthology series, *Twilight Zone*, is always a safe go-to for anyone who loves the weird and unusual.