

Roger Hauser

# 50 HORROR FILMS

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



  
COOLTURA



# 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 credulous 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 an 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 Mummy* 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.