

What makes horror films scary

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The horror film is a very strange genre. Audiences actually watch them to be scared witless, and what more is that its for entertainment. It seems then that being frightened can translate into pleasure for people, and so it follow that scarier, more frightening a film is, the greater the impact on the audience. This begs a question though, what is it about horror films which makes them scary? The early horror films such as 'The Bride of Frankenstein (1935)', used the idea of the monster to create horror. The monster represented a formidable, unstoppable, dangerous force, whose goal was simply to inflict acts of violence on the victims.

The idea of the monster seems to stems from the universal fear of people with more physical strength then our own; they are the subject of 'bogie man' stories told to children to keep them in check. More then this though, the fear of the monster portrayed the real fears of society when these early movies where made. Clearly filmmakers have always looked at the current fears in society when devising their next monster or villain. For example a fear frequently capitalised on was the fear of Eastern Europe, a place unfamiliar to the west and therefore dangerous.

Early films such as Nosferatu 1922, and subsequent vampire films illustrate the fear well By the mid 20th century, fear in post war western society shifted its focus away from the now conquered Europe, to its own doorsteps. Unimaginable ideas of serial killers and psychotics living next door filled the hearts of the public. At this point then the stage was set for a change in the horror genre. Films such as the classic Psycho (1960) and Peeping Tom (1960) shockingly realised the possibility that a seemingly 'normal' person could in fact commit the most horrific acts.

The concept of Psycho in particular invoked a type of primal fear in society, people began questioning their own safety, as if any second a stranger who looked normal a moment ago could do the unthinkable. There is an interesting feature to note in Psycho. Even though Hitchcock made an effort to make Norman seem like a perfectly normal man, the audience frequently observes small oddities in his behaviour suggesting perhaps that he is slightly abnormal, but nevertheless, we do not question his sanity. Also, when Norman is actually committing a horrific act, he is in disguise, dressed as his mother.

What this amounts to is a killer who, while the audience can relate him, are distanced from him, bringing back that uncertain horror of the unknown seen in earlier films. The conventions set by Psycho in the 60s have not greatly changed till present. This is because fears in society have remained similar, the west is in an all time powerful position, so if a treat is come, most likely it will come from within. And so we seen many subsequent films still using the type of horror found in Psycho to create fear (and therefore pleasure) in audiences.

A good example of this is Halloween (1978), here fear is created by the horrific killings by disturbed Mike Myers. Myers' history is known in the film, and therefore the audience has some relation to him, similar to Psycho's Norman. However, Myers covers his face with a hockey mask, again distancing himself from the audience. As stated above subsequent horror movies such as A Nightmare On Elm Street, (1984), and Scream (1996) have used the effective codes and conventions set by films such as Psycho.

However in more recent years, there again has been a change in the genre, albeit a subtle one.

Society is now at a stage where it has much control, control of distance, criminals and the human body. Still though there is one thing that still out of our control, and that is the unknown paranormal. A film which used the fear of the paranormal to great effect was the 'The Blair Witch Project' (1999), in which the 'killer' is never seen only inferred by the horrid events unfolding before the audience. The screams and movements of the victims in the film were enough to make people physically sick, it was truly a frightening film.

Another effective example of a horror film using the fear of the unknown is Final Destination (2000), which portrayed a group of students trying to escape not from a monster, vampire or psychotic killer, but from death itself. However, their efforts are in vain as it becomes horrifically clear that no matter where they go, death would eventually reach them. An interesting common denominator from both these films is that modern technology seems to be shown in a negative light, in Final Destination death comes through an aeroplane and a computer, and in The Blair Witch Project it is then the camcorder itself which seems to play an evil role.

So here another fear from society is evident, fear of the rapid and uncontrollable increase in technology. Another example of a film of this type is Ringu (2000), in which the paranormal killer commits her atrocities by using televisions and videotapes. To summarise, filmmakers have been able to create terrifying films by using the surrounding context of society. The fears

of everyday people are observed and then are mass produced and delivered back to very people who were the original inspirations for them.