Selected Horror Films from the 1890s to 2000s and Recommended Readings

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While this list of films is significantly expanded from the *H is for Horror* slideshow (on view on the fourth floor of Clemons Library through June 13, 2026), it remains less than exhaustive. There is always more—more international films, more subgenres and films that defy genre classification, and simply more perspectives than we were perhaps best equipped to represent even with a limitless format. We encourage enthusiasts to further seek these out, and that is why I have included at the end of this document a list of books that helped inform my commentary for the slideshow and the following summaries, as well as others that better round out the history of horror movies and facilitate deeper dives into subjects we only glossed over (where we included them at all).

The Films

NOTE: While summaries do attempt to provide some implications of extreme content, we recommend caution and a modicum of personal research before viewing any titles you are not familiar with. As these are horror films, some do contain various acts of graphic violence, explicit gore, or other disturbing content that may be offensive, triggering, or otherwise unduly upsetting. (Yes, even some of the early films!)

1890s

The Execution of Mary Stewart (1895)

Dir. Alfred Clark

United States

In the only surviving picture from a series of what were likely the first historical reenactment films, Clark likely took inspiration from the Chamber of Horrors in the Eden Musee Wax Museum. This short film consists almost exclusively of Mary Stewart's beheading, notably one of the first applications of a special effect. Others from the lost macabre series include Joan of Arc's burning, a scalping, and a lynching.

Available in the collection *Edison: The Invention of the Movies*

The Vanishing Lady (1896)

Dir. Georges Méliès

France

A simple disappearing act where a lady is at one point turned into a skeleton, adding a spooky element to the magic trick.

Available in Georges Méliès: First Wizard of Cinema (1896-1913)

The Haunted Castle (1896)

Dir. Georges Méliès

France

In the first haunted house film, we see a simple series of magic tricks build upon one another as guests are terrorized by ghosts and devils and bats in a castle evocative of the phantasmagoric antics of early gothic literature, like Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

Available in Georges Méliès: First Wizard of Cinema (1896-1913)

A Nightmare (1896)

Dir. Georges Méliès

France

A man trying to sleep is visited by several startling characters before the moon itself comes down to attack him. More comical than horrific, although the presence of a minstrel character will be disturbing for many.

Available in Georges Méliès: First Wizard of Cinema (1896-1913)

1900s

Blue Beard (1901)

Dir. Georges Méliès

France

If Méliès's early works could be dismissed as ghoulish comedies, this faithful adaptation of the Blue Beard fairytale provides much more overt horror through the still shocking reveal of its bloody chamber filled with Blue Beard's past wives.

Available in Georges Méliès: First Wizard of Cinema (1896-1913)

The Infernal Cauldron (1903)

Dir. Georges Méliès

France

A goblin throws three people in a fiery cauldron, and their ghosts dance about the room before enacting revenge. A possible inspiration for Dawley's *Frankenstein* a few years after (see below).

Available in Georges Méliès: First Wizard of Cinema (1896-1913)

The Haunted Hotel (1907)

Dir. James Stuart Blackton

United States

Drawing on similar thematic elements from *The Haunted Castle* and *A Nightmare*, Blackton's haunted house short mixes animation effects and a frightful giant to create a film that feels as much like a predecessor to Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead* series as it does to gothic fairytales.

Public Domain, available on Youtube.com

The Sealed Room (1909)

Dir. D.W. Griffith

United States

When a king discovers his concubine with another in his private chamber, he has them walled in to slowly die by immurement. Evocative of Poe, the film is an early example of the more torturous elements of the gothic genre—and the functions and dynamics of spaces within it.

Available in D.W. Griffith's Biograph Shorts (Special ed.)

The Lonely Villa (1909)

Dir. D.W. Griffith

This is considered the first home invasion film. While not at all gruesome, it is thrilling! It is also notable for being an adaptation of an Andrè de Lorde play, At the Telephone (1901). De Lorde's importance to the horror genre lies additionally in being one of the primary playwrights for the Grand Guignol in Paris, a theatre infamous for its psychologically grounded plays filled with graphic special effects and frequent themes of torture.

Available in D.W. Griffith's Biograph Shorts (Special ed.)

1910s

Frankenstein (1910)

Dir. J. Searle Dawley

This early adaptation of Frankenstein creates its monster more through magic than science, evoking Welsh folklore with the monster's emergence from a fiery cauldron. The monster also disappears in a mirror, linking it more to psychological monsters of the period.

United States

Available in the collection Edison: The Invention of the Movies

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1912)

Dir. Lucius J. Henderson

United States

A simple telling of the classic tale of a scientist dividing the good and evil parts of his being into two separate entities and the consequences that ensue. The story would go on to be adapted multiple times within the decade and following decades.

Public Domain, available on Wikipedia and YouTube

The Student of Prague (1913)

Dir. Stellan Rye

Germany

A poor student trades his reflection for success, underestimating the true nature of the deal and its consequences. One of the first German horror films. Adapted from Poe's short story *William Wilson* (1839) by Hanns Heinz Ewers (author of the 1911 horror classic *Alraune*), the story combines elements of the Faustian bargain with a doppelgänger narrative reminiscent of Jekyll and Hyde.

1920s

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

Dir. Robert Wiene

Germany

Often cited as the quintessential work of German Expressionism, the film follows a young man trying to stop a sleepwalking serial killer and the wicked doctor controlling him. One of the earliest fully realized examples of a film deploying an unreliable narrator. The events could be entirely contrived as the delusions of a madman...but are they?

Nosferatu (1922)

Dir. F. W. Murnau

Germany

The oldest surviving Dracula film, this unauthorized adaptation changes several elements and names, adding a greater emphasis on the vampire as plague bearer and positioning the Mina character in a more heroically sacrificial role.

Phantom of the Opera (1925)

Dir. Rupert Julian

United States

Perhaps the most famous role of actor and makeup artist Lon "The Man of a Thousand Faces" Chaney's career, this adaption helped set up the theme of the sympathetic monster that the next two decades would further explore.

Un Chien Andalou (1929)

Dir. Luis Buñuel

France

Surrealism's violent cinematic arrival. Before David Lynch's *Eraserhead* (1977), there was this little terror. Featuring imagery still upsetting to this day, Luis Buñuel, with the help of Salvador Dali, created a film of pure dream logic, with a heavy emphasis on post-war nightmares.

1930s

Dracula (1931)

Dir. Tod Browning

United States

Bela Lugosi brought American horror into the talkies with this adaptation that draws heavily from the stage play he had previously starred in. Exotic seeming at the time, *Dracula* helped develop the sexual allure of the vampire.

Frankenstein (1931)

Dir. James Whale

United States

Drastically different from the novel, where the monster was able to speak eloquently, Karloff managed to win the hearts of fans through his physical performance and limited vocalizations.

Freaks (1932)

Dir. Tod Browning

United States

With a cast composed of actual carnival performers, *Freaks* required no major special effects. Taking the idea of compassion for the monster to a sometimes problematic but nonetheless bold extreme, the film would almost end Tod

Browning's career, despite its message that beauty and ugliness should be valued as behavioral traits and not just appearances.

<u>Vampyr</u> (1932)

Dir. Carl Theodor Dryer

Germany and France

A holdout of the silent era, this classic draws more from the surreal than expressionist, paving the way for many subversive vampire films that followed.

The Black Cat (1934)

Dir. Edgar G. Ulmer

United States

Karloff and Lugosi go toe-to-toe in this very expressionistically gothic and nearly in-name-only Poe adaptation. Notable for one of the earliest overt scenes of what we would now call torture horror.

1940s

King of the Zombies (1941)

Dir. Jean Yarbrough

United States

Horror comedies arguably predate straight horror films, but *King of the Zombies* is a notable example of the change in tone studios were taking at the time with more overtly supernatural narratives. The film is also notable for comedic actor Mantan Moreland, who helps build the groundwork for future artists of African American horror and steals the show. Unlike the leads, Moreland is one of the few cast members to return for the sequel.

Cat People (1942)

Jacques Tourneur

United States

A woman believes that she is cursed to turn into a huge cat and tear her lover apart if she ever gets aroused. It almost sounds comical but is handled with terribly effective care, resisting a definitive answer to if she is delusional or not. Credited for creating the jump scare, *Cat People* is the ultimate testament to "less is more," leaving its monster to the imagination. Few films have made walking home alone at night so unnerving.

I Walked with a Zombie (1943)

Dir. Jacques Tourneur

United States

This Jane Eyre adaptation is set on a Caribbean island, and, for the time it was made, it features a largely nuanced and respectable (again, for the time!) depiction of Vodou practices, as the locals anticipate a plantation family's downfall from within. Like *Freaks* before it, the film plays off prejudiced expectations for who the real monsters are while telling a tale that is surprisingly haunted by the evils of colonialism and slavery.

The Seventh Victim (1943)

Dir. Mark Robson

United States

A woman in search of her missing sister uncovers many secrets, including her ties to a satanic cult. An early example of the occult thriller, *The Seventh Victim* draws heavily from film noir, opting for existential dread over more conventional horrors.

1950s

Gojira (1954)

Dir. Ishirō Honda

Japan

The first entry in the long-running Godzilla franchise is often overshadowed by its more playful, children-oriented sequels. But make no mistake, the original classic was a serious film about the horrors of the atomic bomb and the future of modern weaponry. Gojira, a seemingly unstoppable force of mankind's hubris, leaves cities leveled and survivors with radiation burns in its wake. With the military proven impotent against the monster, there is no clear solution but to risk unleashing further, perhaps even greater, evils of modernity.

Them! (1954)

Dir. Gordon Douglas

United States

Giant atomic ants wreak havoc in the desert in this eerie predecessor to *Aliens* (1986). More than just award-winning special effects, and a chillingly atmospheric setup, *Them!* offers a great example of the 50s sci-fi monster as a metaphor for the Cold War Red Scare.

Creature From the Black Lagoon (1954)

Dir. Jack Arnold

United States

This classic adventure horror sends a crew of explorers up the Amazon River to discover the original fishman, who in turn takes great interest in a female member of their crew. One of the greatest make-up and costume designs of all time, *Creature* helped establish many of the tropes for animal monster films, like *Jaws* (see below), to come.

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956)

Dir. Don Siegel

United States

An even more overt Red Scare horror, these alien invaders replicate and replace us, leaving the last survivors in a small town up against a fearsome mob that seeks to assimilate them. At the same time, the metaphor is malleable enough to also represent the opposite, with countercultural outsiders trying to evade the conformity of McCarthyism.

The Fly (1958)

Dir. Kurt Neumann

United States

Though arguably eclipsed by David Cronenberg's (1986) remake which is more focused on the body horror of the transformation, the '58 original's take on a scientist trying to build a teleporter who is then accidentally merged with a fly evokes more of the horror of actual scientific accidents of the time, like *the* 1945 "demon core incident." In an era of atomic giants, *The Fly* is one of the few horror films to touch on the actual horrific consequences that laboratories risk unleashing when working with radioactive and similarly hazardous materials and equipment: disfigurement and painful death.

Horror of Dracula (1958)

Dir. Terence Fisher

United Kingdom

Another compressed adaptation with characters and names changed from the novel, the Hammer studio would go on to make a franchise with several Dracula and other vampire-focused spin-offs, usually starring Christopher Lee as a more bestial Count, with snake-like fangs and overtly satanic iconography, and Peter Cushing as Doctor Van Helsing, often willing to combat his nemesis more physically than prior incarnations of the character. The Hammer films were notable for their blend of gothic aesthetics with those of the emerging folk horror genre. *Horror of Dracula* marked an increase in lurid content with its proclivity for bloody neck bites and heaving bosoms.

Peeping Tom (1960)

Dir. Michael Powell

United Kingdom

Released the same year as Hitchcock's *Psycho*, audiences were not prepared for the acclaimed director of films like *Black Narcissus* (1947) and *The Red Shoes* (1948) to take his explorations of obsession in such a perverse and grisly direction. The film follows the killer, a cinematographer with a traumatized past, torn between guilt and obsession as he tries to capture the moment of absolute terror before each of his victims die. This proto-slasher not only helped establish the point-of-view perspective as integral for future films of the genre but explored its function thoughtfully through its killer's motives.

The Haunting (1963)

Dir. Robert Wise

United States and United Kingdom

Where madness ends and the true paranormal begins is never too easy to discern. One of the greatest haunted house films ever made, this adaptation of Shirley Jackson's classic novel *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959) remains a high point of the gothic genre, frequently imitated but rarely surpassed.

The Last Man on Earth (1964)

Dir. Sidney Salkow

United States and Italy

The first film adaptation of Richard Matheson's apocalyptic vampire novel *I Am Legend* (1954). Both novel and film have gone on to be recognized as larger contributions to the modern ghoul-oriented zombie subgenre (as developed by George A. Romero with his *Night of the Living Dead* and subsequent sequels) than vampires. Nonetheless, it remains an essential work of both subgenres and post-apocalyptic horror in general.

Blood and Black Lace (1964)

Dir. Mario Baya

Italy

A seminal example of the classic Italian giallo subgenre that Bava helped bring to film, here Bava's use of rich colors and confident camera work predicts the mid-career work of Dario Argento who would push the genre further into the surreal and supernatural, far away from its lurid pulp crime roots.

Night of the Living Dead (1968)

Dir. George A. Romero

United States

One of the most significant horror films to rise out of the American independent filmmaking scene. Romero shifts the concept of a zombie, from its roots in Vodou practices, to a hoard of undead cannibalistic ghouls. Casting black actor Duane Jones in the lead added an extra dimension to many of the scenes, notably his power conflicts with other white characters, and the film's ending, which came to powerfully evoke the civil rights tensions of the times.

1970s

Ganja & Hess (1973)

Dir. Bill Gunn

United States

This highly erotic vampire film starring Duane Jones and Marlene Clark flew in the face of many trends at the time. Boldly experimental, and feverishly independent, this was an intellectual work of black cinema in an age of Blaxploitation.

Black Christmas (1974)

Dir. Bob Clark

Canada

Before John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978) this holiday classic laid out most of the remaining essential groundwork to ignite the slasher subgenre from its prototypical predecessors. Following a group of sorority girls being stalked by a mysterious killer hiding in their attic, the film deploys the voyeuristic camera and final girl tropes while capturing an atmosphere arguable more unnerving than All Hallows' Eve.

Jaws (1975)

Dir. Stephen Spielberg

United States

A seemingly unnatural great white shark terrorizes a small, tourist-dependent island town in New England. People forget, but this action-adventure thriller, the original blockbuster, is also absolutely a horror film! Borrowing stylistic elements from *Cat People, Creature of the Black Lagoon*, and even the emerging slasher genre, at the end of the day, it's the film that made a generation afraid to get back in the water. What more needs to be said?

Dawn of the Dead (1978)

Dir. George A. Romero

United States

In the second of the *Living Dead* films, Romero returns for more deliberate social commentary and an uncompromising amount of gore that is filmed almost pornographically. The outbreak continues, and a band of survivors hole up in a shopping mall where they find a strange commercial escapism from the outside world, until that world inevitably comes barging in.

Alien (1979)

Dir. Ridley Scott

United States and United Kingdom

A parasitic alien picks off the members of a spaceship's blue-collar crew when they answer a distress beacon from an unexplored planet. A perfect marriage of sci-fi and horror tropes from the prior twenty-plus years and some of the best artists of their generation, this haunted house in space masterpiece combines body horror and biomechanical creature designs from the psycho-sexual surrealist mind of H. R. Giger with human spacecrafts and equipment by futurist Jean Giraud. The tagline says it all: "In space, no one can hear you scream."

1980s

The Thing (1982)

Dir. John Carpenter

United States

Remakes seldom are as good as the original, let alone better, but this grisly body horror classic about a shape-shifting alien hiding amongst members of a research team in the frozen Antarctic combines elements of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* with *Alien* to exceptionally bleak effect.

Videodrome (1983)

Dir. David Cronenberg

Canada

The master of body horror, Cronenberg has seldom taken his fascination with the relationship between information and flesh to such hallucinatory extremes as this meditation on many of the philosophical ideas of Marshall McLuhan. The film follows a television producer, ever hungry for a new experience, who discovers a signal broadcasting 24-hour violent and sexual extremity and then loses his grasp of reality while trying to capitalize on it.

A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

Dir. Wes Craven

United States

The slasher film goes supernatural in this iconic film about the spirit of a child killer who now stalks the youth of his town in their dreams. When you die in his dreams, you die in real life, forcing the teenagers of Elm Street to try and stay awake while their denial-consumed parents obstruct them at every turn.

Mr. Vampire (1985)

Dir. Ricky Lau

Hong Kong

This kung fu comedy horror classic pits Taoist priests up against Chinese hopping corpses (*jiangshi*), in a delightful blend of special effects, laughs, and zany scares.

Day of the Dead (1985)

Dir. George A. Romero

United States

The third and final of the original trilogy of *Living Dead* films. The gore effects here reach new heights amid a slightly more comic-book tone. A group of scientists and soldiers hold out in an old mine turned bunker, trying to find a solution to the hordes of undead that have taken over the world. Tensions rise between conflicting ideologies as the undead are revealed to be not as mindless as had long been thought.

Evil Dead II (1987)

Sam Raimi

United States

Part remake, part sequel, this follow-up to the gruesome indie darling combines more scares with an offbeat brand of slapstick comedy, creating a strange but masterfully shot horror classic that cemented its reluctant hero, Ash Williams (played by indie darling Bruce Campbell), as a pop-culture icon. Few horror movies have so effectively inspired generations of filmmakers to venture into the woods.

1990s

Candyman (1992)

Dir. Bernard Rose

United States

This adaptation of Clive Barker's short story *The Forbidden* relocates the story from the UK to the Cabrini-Green housing development in Chicago, making the titular Candyman the ghost of an African American artist, mutilated and killed by a wealthy white man for loving his daughter. With a hook for a hand, he lives on as story, summoned whenever his name

is spoken before a mirror five times. When a graduate student studying urban legends comes to Cabrini and challenges his existence, he is compelled to shed blood.

Scream (1996)

Dir. Wes Craven

United States

The quintessential post-modern slasher, a group of teens is terrorized in a small town by a killer obsessed with scary movies. To survive, they will have to rely on their knowledge of the tropes of slashers. Still, life isn't a movie, and the killer may have a couple tricks still up their sleeves. Smartly written and tightly directed by Wes Craven at the peak of the late period of his career, the film is a very fun mix of dark humor and nasty kills.

Ringu (1998)

Dir. Hideo Nakata

Japan

A haunted video tape condemns anyone who watches it to a mysterious and horrific death after seven days. One of the major works of J-horror, the film's American remake would spawn a series of American remakes of Japanese and Korean horror films.

The Blair Witch Project (1999)

Dir. Daniel Myrick and Eduardo Sánchez

United States

Though technically not the first found footage film, like *Halloween* it remains the title most credited for creating its subgenre. Three documentarians wander into the woods in search of a local folkloric cryptid. Their bodies are never found. Told in an epistolary style, the movie consists of the footage they shot.

The Sixth Sense (1999)

Dir. M. Night Shyamalan

United States

A psychologist tries to help a young boy who believes he can speak with dead people. Soon, the doctor realizes the boy may not only be right but that things are more than what they seem.

2000s

Pulse (2001)

Dir. Kiyoshi Kurosawa

Japan

Another masterpiece of the J-horror wave, this techno supernatural film explores the notion of the afterlife filling up and spilling out into modern technology, such as computers and the internet. What should be a silly premise in the hands of Kurosawa proves fertile ground for some deeply nightmarish scares, amongst an atmosphere of profound loneliness and dread.

28 Days Later (2002)

Dir. Danny Boyle

United States and United Kingdom

Drawing heavily from the *Living Dead Trilogy*, and earlier science fiction classics like *Day of the Triffids* (1962), Boyle almost singlehandedly reignited the zombie subgenre with this aesthetically lo-fi tale of a coma patient waking up to discover a rage virus has taken over England, turning the population into rabid animals.

Hostel (2005)

Dir. Eli Roth

United States

Along with *Saw* (2004) and its steady flow of sequels, this exceptionally gory and sexually explicit film launched the post-9/11 torture horror films of the 2000s. A womanizing band of college backpackers take a detour on their EuroTrip to a small town where the women are said to be famously easy to sleep with, only to discover it is a trap. Instead, the locals provide facilities for the wealthy and depraved to brutally murder tourists! Inspired by growing fears of online snuff content, the films of Takashi Miike, American Splatterpunk literature, and the New French Extremity film movement, *Hostel* was also released shortly after the CBS publication of the Abu Ghraib torture photos, positioning it in the eye of a storm of extreme violence, simultaneously rooted in the gothic tradition and also immediate to the media landscape of its time.

Pan's Labyrinth (2006)

Dir. Guillermo del Toro

Spain and Mexico

The line between childhood imagination and reality blurs as a young girl makes sense of the extreme violence and cruelty of Francoist Spain through the framework of fairytale quests to help save her dying mother. Beautiful and heartbreaking, terrifying and life-affirming, del Toro's masterpiece cemented his status as one of the great filmmakers of our time while also helping draw international attention to Spanish-speaking horror and fantasy (often one in the same) from across the globe to this day.

The Host (2006)

Dir. Bong Joon Ho

South Korea

This Korean monster movie finds its own voice rooted in the political landscape of its country while holding command over many of the tropes that would allow it to reach a larger international audience. Here, the future director of *Parasite* (2019) moves from scenes that are comical to horrifying and action packed to somberly tragic, giving an experience that never settles into one comfortable mode.

Let the Right One In (2008)

Dir. Thomas Alfredson

Sweden

Adapted by the author of the 2004 novel, this tale of a lonely and bullied boy who forms a deep bond with a strange girl, only to discover that she is a vampire, has become one of the most beloved contemporary additions to the subgenre. A cold, dark film in nearly every sense, at times disturbingly violent, with an ending that can be seen as either twistedly happy or profoundly tragic, remains one of the great examples of horror as something more than morbid fascination or cheap thrills. It is a film about monsters because it's a film about humanity.

Some Further Reading

The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart by Noël Carroll

Before the Nickelodeon: Edwin S. Porter and the Edison Manufacturing Company by Charles Musser

Georges Méliès: The Birth of the Auteur by Elizabeth Ezra

<u>Horror Noire: A History of Black American Horror From the 1890s to Present (Second edition.)</u> by Robin R. Means Coleman

<u>The Haunted Screen: Expressionism in the German Cinema and the Influence of Max Reinhardt</u> by Lotte H. Eisner

Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film by Linda Williams

Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War by Anton Kaes

From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film (Rev. and expanded ed.) by Siegfried Kracauer

<u>Projected Fears: Horror Films and American Culture</u> by Kendall R. Phillips

Giallo!: Genre, Modernity, and Detection in Italian Horror Cinemas by Alexia Kannas

Spanish Horror Film by Antonio Lázaro-Reboll and Antonio Lázaro-Reboll

Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film (First Princeton classics edition.) by Carol J. Clover

An Edgy Realism: Film Theoretical Encounters With Dogma 95, New French Extremity, and the Shaky-Cam Horror Film by P. Jerome Schaefer

The Postmodern Slasher Film by Steve Jones

The Midnight Eye Guide to New Japanese Film by Tom Mes

Japanese Horror Films and Their American Remakes: Translating Fear, Adapting Culture by Valerie Wee

Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film by Xavier Aldana-Reyes

Torture Porn: Popular Horror After Saw by Steve Jones

Queer Screams: A History of LGBTQ+ Survival Through the Lens of American Horror Cinema by Abigail Waldron

<u>The Black Guy Dies First: Black Horror Cinema From Fodder to Oscar (First Saga Press trade paperback edition.)</u> by Robin R. Means Coleman and Mark H. Harris

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