

THEME 02

Horror in times of uncertainty

POP-CULTURE

HORROR

SOCIO-CULTURAL

When we experience rapid change, instability and uncertainty, society is often in need of direction. However, instead of navigating our future on hopes and utopias alone, confronting ourselves with our deepest fears can be valuable too. Beyond its bloody surface, the horror genre seems to provide us with the extreme scenarios that allow us to 'safely' explore some of our dark horizons. What does today's horror tell us about our current fears?

Our observations

- Even though horror movies are only the seventh highest grossing genre, it is nevertheless the [most profitable](#) genre. With 2007 movie Paranormal Activity as the pinnacle with a box office revenue of \$193.4m against a \$15k budget. Furthermore, over the last 5 years the horror genre has seen its market share [rise](#).
- Some believe that we currently find ourselves in a new [golden age of horror](#), as more high-quality horror is being produced while also receiving more critical acclaim. For instance, the horror movie *Get Out* received an Oscar for best screenplay last year.
- [Hammer Films](#), originally known for its popular creature horror in 1950s and 1970s and one of the oldest movie production companies, has been revived and is planning to make a come-back to the horror genre.



Connecting the dots

Horror is often associated with cheap thrills, jump scares, the depiction of graphic violence, monsters and the supernatural to evoke fear in their audience. However, in optimal form, the horror genre investigates the dark side of things, where other genres do not dare to tread. At its core, it tries to explore the darker end of our emotional spectrum such as rage, selfishness, lack of compassion and cruelty. It explores what lies beyond the darker limits of civil behavior. As such it evokes uneasiness, disgust or outright terror. As movies are generally thought to reflect the zeitgeist, horror movies can be seen as an indicator of what literally keeps society up at night. The Japanese post-WW2 creature-horror movies that involved gigantic creatures (e.g. *Godzilla*), that were somehow affected by radio-activity, are generally understood as Japanese society dealing with its collective trauma surrounding Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The alien-horror movie *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* is associated with the paranoia that accompanied the era of McCarthyism. During the 1970s and 1980s, generally perceived as the golden age of horror, we see the emergence of a whole range of subgenres, each meditating on a different aspect of the social upheaval taking place at that time. The zombie genre (e.g. *Night of the Living Dead*) questioned growing consumerism, the involvement in the Vietnam war and societal racial tensions; the exorcism genre (e.g. *The Exorcist*) is generally associated with the questioning of faith and the sexual revolution among teenagers; slasher movies reacted to the public fear of serial killers; and 1980s body horror (e.g. *The Fly*) feeds off of the public fear of the AIDS virus. In contrast, the American economic boom of the 1990s is generally seen as the least interesting decade for horror and was accompanied by a post-modern interpretation of the genre through self-awareness and pastiche (e.g. *Scream*, *Scary Movie*).

However, we have seen a clear reinvigoration of the genre in the last two decades. Similar to the golden age of horror during the 1970s, the current renaissance can in part be traced back to current prevalent societal traumas and tensions. The most obvious source being 9/11. Firstly, the events are believed to have resuscitated the zombie genre

(e.g. *28 Days Later*, *Dawn of the Dead*), dealing with the social horror of societal collapse, the spread of viruses, whether it be biological or cultural, and the threat of an enemy from within. Furthermore, in his book *Torture Porn in the Wake of 9/11*, professor of cinema Aaron Michael Kerner shows the relation between body horror movies like *The Saw* franchise and the abuse taking place at the Iraq prison Abu Ghraib. Lastly, similar to the post-war Japanese creature horror movies, and clearly inspired by horror author Lovecraft's cosmic horror genre, the movie *Cloverfield* uses the monstrous and the interdimensional to regurgitate the large-scale violence of 9/11. Even the Marvel Cinematic Universe, targeting mass audiences, rehashed 9/11 as an alien attack on NYC of cosmic proportions.

Further reinforcing the popularity of the genre over the last decade is the emergence of 'post-horror', in which the frame of body, social and cosmic horror has received a more intimate, contemplative and slow-burn treatment. Take for instance, the blurring of boundaries between our bodies, nature and technology in *Ex Machina* and *Annihilation*, the blurring of boundaries between us and them in *Get Out* or *Us* and the interstitial nature of human existence in *Annihilation*, *Blade Runner 2049* and *A Ghost Story*. This thematic trend is also aptly represented by the growing resurgence of pagan folk horror (e.g. *Midsommar*, *Hereditary*, *The Apostle*, *The Witch*, *True Detective*, *The Fountain*), where the animistic context allows for the transitory nature of human existence and the surrender to a larger whole to be celebrated, albeit ambiguously. Interestingly, according to Mary Douglas, in her work *Purity and Danger*, horror has always tried to manifest the interstitial. Whether it be the living dead, the artificially human, human-animal hybrids or the complete shapeless (e.g. *The Blob*, *the Thing*), horror has tried to defy our cultural categorization with the purpose of creating an unknown fearful external threat. However, now with this new wave of post-horror it seems that the breakdown of cultural categorization is applied to disassemble ourselves from within, in an attempt to collapse the wall between us and what we fear, turning our greatest horror potentially into a moment of awe.

Implications

- The horror genre will further grow in popularity as society experiences growing uncertainty and instability. However, there might be different ways in which entertainment companies can capitalize on this zeitgeist. Take for instance Marvel, which approaches our existential angst of alien cosmologies with heroic reassurance. In contrast, we see that A24, an independent studio, lets us linger in fear and uncertainty.
- The post-horror genre will make the horror genre more accessible to a wider audience. Furthermore, by getting rid of old horror tropes, the genre could become more prone to critical acclaim, as demonstrated by movies like *Sixth Sense* and *Get Out*.
- As the post-horror genre breaks down barriers around the conventional horror genre, we might see horror elements seep into other genres (e.g. *Bone Tomahawk* as a cross-over between Western and horror).