

Blog

The Popularity of Supernatural vs. Psychological Horror Films from 1970-2021

Norman Bates vs. Freddy Krueger. Patrick Bateman vs. Pazuzu. Which kind of horror movie has been more popular over the past 50 years - psychological or supernatural? Lab intern Christoffer Nordved Madsen dives into the data.

Christoffer Nordved Madsen • 13 December 2022

There are many ways in which to divide the horror genre into subgenres, but at the highest level, one can distinguish between supernatural and psychological horror. Whereas supernatural horror movies involve unnatural forces and creatures, psychological horror involves humans with monstrous tendencies. I collected data from Imdb.com to investigate how popular each subgenre has been over time (1970-2021), and the results are in the graph below. I searched by the criteria of most popular horror movie for each year, and wrote the ten highest ranked films into a spreadsheet.

The seventies had many supernatural horror films with vampires and demons. Notably, *Dracula A.D.* (1972) and *The Exorcist* (1973) played a major role in the horror scene of the seventies. The late seventies and eighties were marked by pseudo-supernatural serial killers such as Michael Myers from the *Halloween*-series (1978-2022), but also zombie films and sci-fi genre-hybrids such as *Day of the Dead* (1985) and *Alien* (1979) or *The Thing* (1982) which were, at least in part, fueled by Cold War paranoia and the fear of something other and evil.

The popularity of the slasher and sci-fi genres amongst horror fans declined in the nineties, but this decade also marked the revival of vampire themed horror films such as *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) and *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996).

Psychological horror films were relatively unpopular in the nineties, but gained popularity in the 2000s in part due to *American Psycho* (2000) and *Saw* (2004), which feature serial killers who are portrayed not as evil per se, but as highly disturbed and troubled individuals. Meanwhile, the supernatural horror films were mostly action-horror films such as the *Blade* series (1998-2004) and the *Underworld* series (2003-2016). During the same decade, *Let the Right One In* (2008) gained popularity with its depiction of a vampire girl living in a dark and troubled Sweden.

From 2010 to 2020, the most popular supernatural horror films were *The Conjuring* part one (2013) and two (2016) as well as *It* part one (2017) and two (2019). Although these films were full of supernatural elements, the characters had psychological issues which the antagonists used against them. In other words, the movies combined supernatural and psychological elements. And in *It* part one and two, the protagonists had to conquer these psychological issues to defeat Pennywise, also known as “It.”

The popularity of supernatural vs. psychological horror films is mostly driven by socio-cultural factors. *The Exorcist* (1973) and *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968) resonated with concerns about a generation of children who rebelled against past generations by drinking, doing drugs, and going against traditional American values such as religion (the counter-culture). Likewise, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) included a disturbing scene in which a zombified girl killed and ate her parents – a potent depiction of a rebellious new generation. Psychological horrorfilms during this time were likewise fueled by a fear for how the counter culture affected society. For instance, Michael Myers’s iconic murdering of delinquent and sexually active teenagers seemed to carry a conservative message about the dangers of hedonistic self-indulgence. The explosive popularity of horror – both psychological and supernatural – during the 70’s is thus connected to the rise of the counter culture.

During the 80’s, supernatural horror-films were mostly sci-fi genre hybrids that tapped into Cold War fears of invasion from alien forces of evil and unchecked scientific progress. The 90’s, however, brought back the popularity of vampire films, a symptom of the decade’s postmodern blurring of moral categories. For instance, *Interview with the Vampire* (1994) takes the perspective of the monster, and so the audience empathizes with a supernatural being that traditionally has been regarded as inherently evil. Instead, the audience sees how flawed and miserable vampires are, and this suggests that “evil” individuals can be similarly troubled individuals with exculpatory reasons for their immoral behavior.

The line between good and evil continued to be blurred throughout the 2000’s with psychological horror films such as *American Psycho* (2000), which portrayed the psychopathic Jason Bateman as an insane, unstable individual (but at least partly a product of a diseased society), or *Saw* (1994), which also featured an antagonist with whom it is difficult to to empathize because of his illness.

Thus, supernatural and psychological horror films in the 90’s and early 2000’s were popular because good and evil were regarded as interconnected. No longer were people good or evil, but nuanced and full of unique traits and motivations whether they were pro-social or anti-social. The horror genre thus demonstrated its ability to engage with serious moral issues in a manner that resonated with audiences.

The 2000’s were also marked by action-horror films, but these were not as obviously symptomatic of socio-cultural factors as the previously mentioned horror films. Still, *Let the Right One In* (2008) went against this wave of action-

horror films with a protagonist who falls in love with a morally ambiguous vampire girl. Like Jason Bateman, Jigsaw, or Louis from *Interview with the Vampire* (1994), this vampire girl, Eli, is quite nuanced. Although Eli kills several people to feed her hunger, she also helps the protagonist against bullies.

From 2010 to 2020, these anti-heroes and action-horror monsters were replaced by evil entities or individuals with sinister intentions and no exculpatory motives. The *It* and *The Conjuring* films brought back scary and inherently evil beings. The psychological horror films during this time, that is, *Get Out* (2017), *Bone Tomahawk* (2015) and *Midsommar* (2019) also featured evil antagonists with no exculpatory motives. Those antagonists had an anti-American agenda, which may reflect how America was losing cultural and political influence and power during this period.

This change marked a gradual turning away from the former, morally nuanced perspective on “evil” individuals, which paved the way for horror movies featuring purely evil antagonists in the period 2010-2020 (i.e., *It*, *The Conjuring*, *Get Out*, *Bone Tomahawk*, and *Midsommar*).

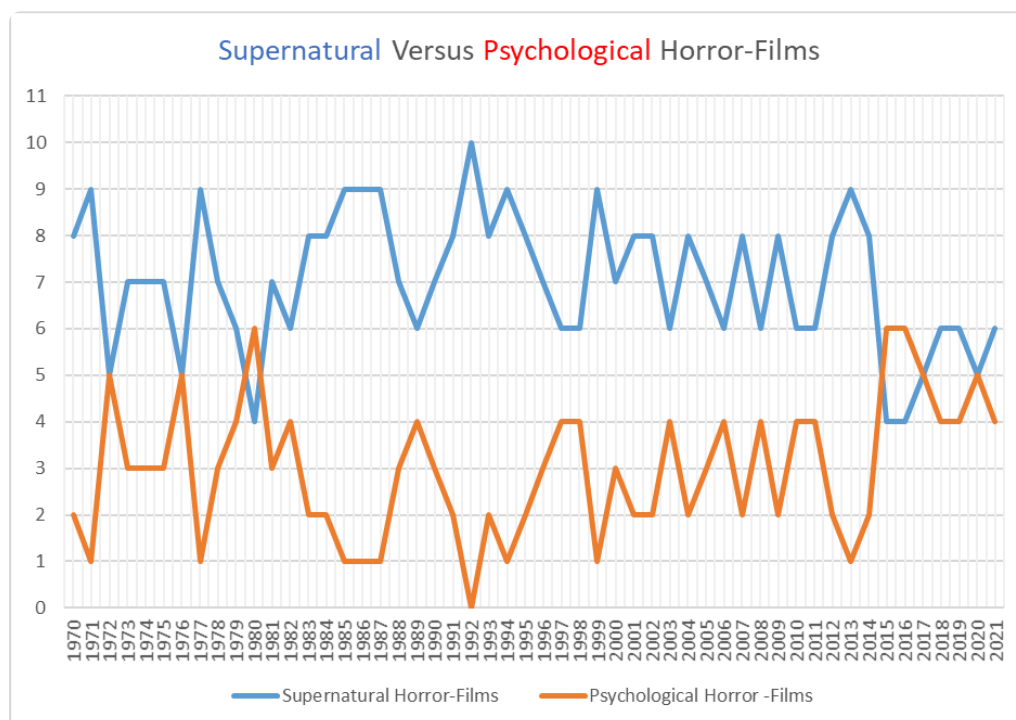


Figure 1