

Blog

The Popularity of Supernatural vs. Psychological Horror Films, 1920-1969

In this follow-up to an earlier post, lab intern Christoffer Nordved Madsen dives into the popularity of supernatural vs. psychological horror films in the period 1920-1969.

Lab intern Christoffer Nordved Madsen • 17 January 2023

In this blog post, I will describe the development of supernatural vs. psychological horror films from 1920 to 1969. By searching with the criteria “most popular” on IMDB.com, I have listed the 10 most popular horror films for each year, and made a graph that shows the development of each subgenre. This post is a follow-up to [my previous post on supernatural vs. psychological horror films 1970-2021](#).

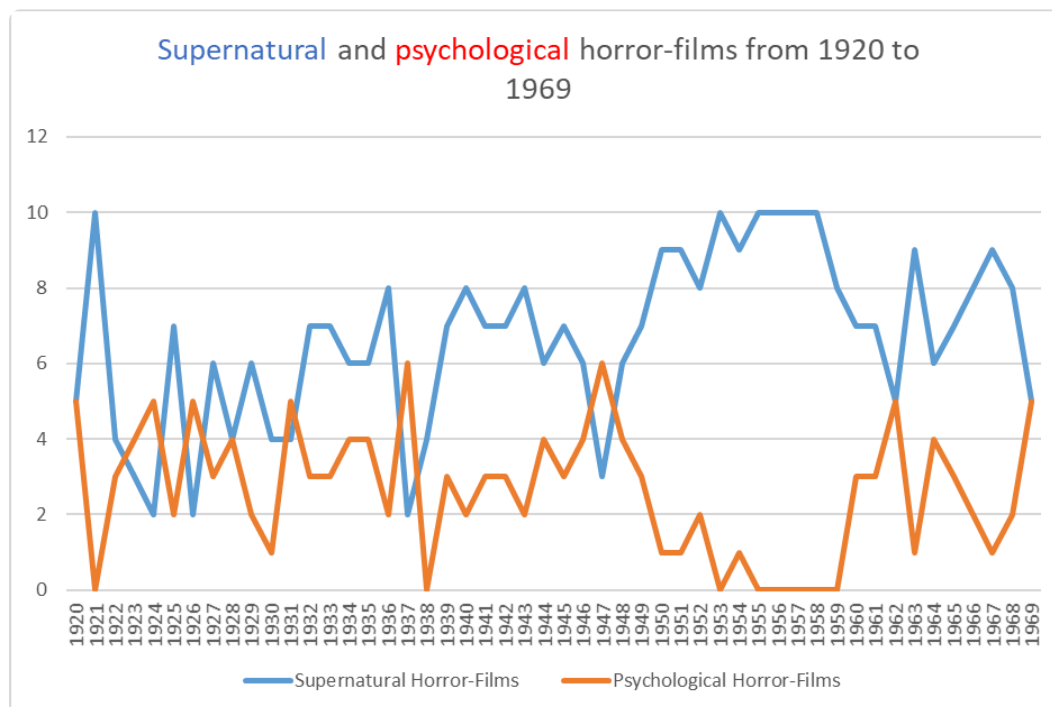


Figure 1

From 1920 to 1930, the most popular supernatural horror-films were the classic vampire-themed films, *Nosferatu* (1922) and *Dracula's Death* (1922) as well as horror films with Freudian implications such as *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1920) or *Wolfblood*

(1925), both of which featured characters with a monstrous, repressed version of themselves. A similar theme is found in the influential psychological horror film, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920).

In the beginning of the 1930's, the production of supernatural horror films drew heavily from classic horror monsters such as Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, the mummy, zombies, and werewolves. Such films include *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), *White Zombie* (1932), and *Werewolf of London* (1935). Such horror-films evidently resonated with cultural anxieties, including concerns over poverty and financial problems, but such fictional monsters also embody fears of other cultures, scientific advancement, death, disease, and, most of all, the monstrous and evil parts of human nature. The later 1930's began to see the popularity of horror-films with large monsters such as King Kong. For example, *The King Kong That Appeared in Edo* (1938) is part of this trend, and I believe such films were popular because people wanted to see spectacular beings brought to life on the silver screen.

The 1940's were full of classic monster movies similar to the ones that were popular in the 1930's. These films include *House of Frankenstein* (1944), *House of Dracula* (1945) and *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943). The popularity of *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (1945), *The Monkey's Paw* (1948), *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1950) and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1950) also implies that Gothic stories still drew crowds, and, in general, provided the inspiration for many supernatural horror films in the period 1920-1969.

Although Dracula, Frankenstein's monster, and zombies still were popular in the 1950's, a tendency to make sci-fi horror films imbued with Cold War fears became the focus of horror cinema. For example, *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1956) embodies the fear of invasion from an alien entity, or, in other words, an entity that would destroy everything the Western-democratic nations stood for. During the 1950's, a series of Godzilla films also embodied the fear of how nuclear bombs or nuclear power would cause nature to take revenge – in the shape of a giant lizard.

In 1960 Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* became the most popular horror film. Norman Bates became an iconic horror villain that embodied a growing fear of psychopaths and serial killers in society. By then, the cultural belief was that psychopaths and serial killers were shaped by societal neglect and trauma. This societal neglect came from how America prioritized war and industry over the mental health and financial stability of its poorer citizens.

The supernatural horror films in the 1960's were a mix of horror-sci-fi mash-ups such as *Planet of the Vampires* (1965) and *Frankenstein Meets the Space Monsters* (1965) and vampire-themed films such as *Dracula: Prince of Darkness* (1966) and *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967). Thus, vampires continued to be featured on the horror scene, but other classic horror monsters were losing popularity. In 1968, the most popular horror films were the iconic *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *Night of the Living Dead*

(1968). These films embodied a social comment on the counter-culture, as they both featured children with monstrous characteristics. In *Rosemary's Baby* the protagonist becomes impregnated with Satan's child, and in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a zombified daughter kills and eats her parents. Thus, these supernatural horror films offer a monstrous depiction of how younger generations were, by some, perceived to have turned against American society and become violent, addicted to drugs and alcohol, and sexually promiscuous. Satan's spawn and the return of the living dead also mark a form of fictional reckoning that the depravity of human nature had brought upon itself.

Generally, horror films from 1920-1969 were marked by the legacy of monsters from Gothic tales, enlarged animals, and science-fiction based entities with a connection to the Cold War. Not to mention, the latter part of the period saw the beginning of horror films with mentally deranged serial killers, which of course inspired the slasher subgenre.

Thus, the period 1920-1969 shaped the horror scene we have today. We have the horror movies with monsters from old legends such as vampires, werewolves, Frankenstein's monster, and zombies. These monsters trigger primordial fears because they have traits that are reminiscent of dangers from the Pleistocene. We have the enlarged animals such as Godzilla and King Kong. And these films exploit our fear of the unknown lurking within uncharted oceans and jungles. Even though the Cold War has deescalated, we still see aliens and otherworldly beings in horror cinema.

However, there are differences between old and modern horror films. The period from 1920-1969 featured horror films that were inspired by pseudo-scientific theories such as Freud's psychoanalysis as well as anti-communist agendas. For example, *Psycho* (1960) featured the psychotic antagonist, Norman Bates, who dressed as his mother and impersonated her to express his 'Id.' And *The Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1956) utilized the cultural anxiety regarding every American's fear of being invaded by an evil group of alien individuals.

Since 1970, we have seen a change away from these tendencies. The serial killers in horror films from 1970-2021 are often not individuals with repressed sides but either wholly evil individuals or morally complex individuals such as Patrick Bateman and Jigsaw. In addition, the anti-communist implications in horror films are no longer present, and, in fact, we see US-critical films such as *Get Out* (2017), which criticizes the racist part of American society.

The understanding and perception of what is evil, and what it means to be evil, has thus shifted, and the horror genre has shifted with it. Horror monsters and serial killers in horror films no longer embody the "repressed" sides of human nature, generally speaking. Evil now tends to be regarded as a conscious act rather than an act that one cannot control due to repressed desires. Whereas horror films

previously had a tendency to portray America as an almost saintly society overrun by alien or foreign forces of evil, we now see the many nuances that not only America, but every country has.

From my perspective, then, psychological and supernatural horror has changed from being rather simplistic to portraying humanity and evil with a more complex and nuanced perspective. Of course, we do still see wholly evil beings and individuals in horror films, as I discussed [in my previous blog-post](#). But it is interesting how horror movies change in response to large-scale sociocultural changes, and how the distribution of supernatural vs. psychological horror is a symptom of such changes. For the big picture, see the graph below in which I plotted horror movies from across the whole period: 1920-2021.

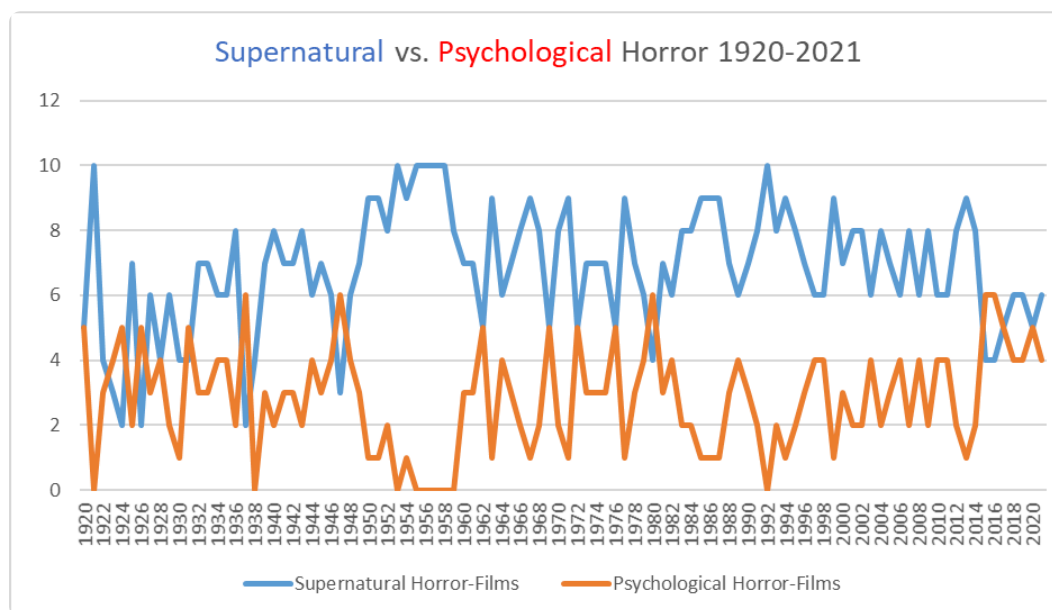


Figure 2