Horror Films are unsettling films designed to frighten and panic, cause dread and alarm, and to invoke our hidden worst fears, often in a terrifying, shocking finale, while captivating and entertaining us at the same time in a cathartic experience. **Thriller and Suspense Films:** These are types of films known to promote intense excitement, suspense, a high level of anticipation, ultra-heightened expectation, uncertainty, anxiety, and nerve-wracking tension. Thriller and suspense films are virtually synonymous and interchangeable categorizations, with similar characteristics and features.

If the genre is to be defined strictly, a genuine thriller is a film that relentlessly pursues a single-minded goal - to provide thrills and keep the audience cliff-hanging at the 'edge of their seats' as the plot builds towards a climax. The tension usually arises when the main character(s) is placed in a menacing situation or mystery, or an escape or dangerous mission from which escape seems impossible. Life itself is threatened, usually because the principal character is unsuspecting or unknowingly involved in a dangerous or potentially deadly situation. Plots of thrillers involve characters which come into conflict with each other or with outside forces - the menace is sometimes abstract or shadowy.

Horror films effectively center on the dark side of life, the forbidden, and strange and alarming events. They deal with our most primal nature and its fears: our nightmares, our vulnerability, our alienation, our revulsions, our terror of the unknown, our fear of death and dismemberment, loss of identity, or fear of sexuality.

Whatever dark, primitive, and revolting traits that simultaneously attract and repel us are featured in the horror genre. Horror films are often combined with *science fiction* when the menace or monster is related to a corruption of technology, or when Earth is threatened by aliens. The *fantasy* and *supernatural* film genres are not synonymous with the horror genre, although *thriller films* may have some relation when they focus on the revolting and horrible acts of the killer/madman. Horror films are also known as chillers, scary movies, spookfests, and the macabre.

**Introduction to Horror Films Genre:**

Horror films go back as far as the onset of films themselves, over a 100 years ago. From our earliest days, we use our vivid imaginations to see ghosts in shadowy shapes, to be emotionally connected to the unknown and to fear things that are improbable. Watching a horror film gives an opening into that scary world, into an outlet for the essence of fear itself, without actually being in danger. Weird as it sounds, there's a very real thrill and fun factor in being scared or watching disturbing, horrific images.

Horror films, when done well and with less reliance on horrifying special effects, can be extremely potent film forms, tapping into our dream states and the horror of the irrational and unknown, and the horror within man himself. (The best horror films only imply or suggest the horror in subtle ways, rather than blatantly displaying
it, i.e., Val Lewton's horror films.) In horror films, the irrational forces of chaos or horror invariably need to be defeated, and often these films end with a return to normalcy and victory over the monstrous.

Of necessity, the earliest horror films were Gothic in style - meaning that they were usually set in spooky old mansions, castles, or fog-shrouded, dark and shadowy locales. Their main characters have included "unknown," human, supernatural or grotesque creatures, ranging from vampires, demented madmen, devils, unfriendly ghosts, monsters, mad scientists, "Frankensteins," "Jekyll/Hyde" dualities (good against evil), demons, zombies, evil spirits, arch fiends, Satanic villains, the "possessed," werewolves and freaks to even the unseen, diabolical presence of evil.

Horror films developed out of a number of sources: folktales with devil characters, witchcraft, fables, myths, ghost stories, Grand Guignol melodramas, and Gothic or Victorian novels from Europe by way of Mary Shelley, Victor Hugo or Irish writer Bram Stoker, and American writers Robert Louis Stevenson and Edgar Allan Poe. Oscar Wilde's 1890 Faustian tale The Picture of Dorian Gray and H.G. Wells' 1896 story of The Island of Dr. Moreau were adapted into early film versions. In many ways, the expressionistic German silent cinema led the world in films of horror and the supernatural, and established its cinematic vocabulary and style. Many of the early silent classics would be remade during the talkies era.

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Many of the films in the horror genre from the mid-1930s to the late 1950s were B-grade movies, inferior sequels, or atrocious low-budget gimmick films. In the atomic age of the 1950s, much was made of the modern effects of radioactivity exposure, toxic chemical spills, or other scientific accidents - such as the development of giant mutant monsters or carnivorous insects, including Gojira (1954, Japan, aka Godzilla). During that time, most of the monster horror films were cheaply made, drive-in, teenage-oriented, grade-Z films, such as I Was a Teenage Werewolf (1957).

Horror films branched out in all different directions in the 1960s and after, especially as the Production Code disappeared and film censorship was on the decline. Directors began to frankly portray horror in ordinary circumstances and seemingly-innocent settings.

Another suspense/thriller director Alfred Hitchcock, whose early silent film The Lodger (1926) explored horror's themes, brought out his most horrific film over 30 years later at the start of the decade. His film changed the face of all horror films ever since. Pure archetypal horror was now to be found in the dark shadows of the human soul itself - in a psychopathic, cross-dressing Bates Motel operator and taxidermist (Anthony Perkins). The low-budget, television-influenced, B & W Psycho (1960) could be considered the 'Citizen Kane' of horror films, with its complex Oedipal themes and schizophrenia. Its most famous scene was the classic shower murder in which the heroine (Janet Leigh) was savagely stabbed, with Bernard Herrmann's violin-tinged memorable score. The scene still invokes sheer terror, and the film itself would come to influence all subsequent Hollywood horror films - especially the 'slasher' horror film subgenre.

Hitchcock's next horror masterpiece was Universal Studios' apocalyptic The Birds (1963) about the invasion of coastal town Bodega Bay by avian flocks. A spoiled heiress (Tippi Hedren), her potential boyfriend (Rod
Taylor), his mother (Jessica Tandy), and a schoolteacher (Suzanne Pleshette) all suffered from the many bird attacks. The theme of Man vs. Nature running amok remained unresolved by the film's end.

In 1968, the MPAA created a new rating system with G, M, R, and X ratings, in part as a response to the subversive, violent themes of horror films. In the 1970s, nightmarish horror and terror lurked everywhere. One of the top box-office hits in the early 70s was Willard (1971) about a wimpish 27 year old loner (and Mama's boy) who trained his bloodthirsty pet rodent friends to vengefully attack his co-worker enemies - it launched an equally awful sequel Ben (1972) (with an Oscar nomination for Best Song for its title song - performed by Michael Jackson. Master filmmaker Stanley Kubrick's controversial A Clockwork Orange (1971) was a brilliant adaptation of Anthony Burgess' novel about rape, murder, and behaviorist experiments to eradicate aberrant sex and violence. And in the kitschy The Abominable Dr. Phibes (1971), madman Dr. Anton Phibes (Vincent Price) let loose Biblical plagues against his victims - physicians who failed to save the life of his wife (Caroline Munro).

Future director Steven Spielberg's first notable film (originally made-for-TV) was the paranoic Duel (1972) about a monstrous and malevolent gas-tank truck without a driver. Director Nicolas Roeg's psychological thriller Don't Look Now (1973) duplicated Hitchcockian terror in a tale of disaster in Venice for Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland. Although it was a musical/comedy, the cult-campish Frankenstein classic The Rocky Horror Picture Show (1975) was set in a haunted castle with a group of transsexual aliens, and starred a young Susan Sarandon, Barry Bostwick, and Tim Curry. The weird and bawdy film soon became a cultural institution and phenomenon as it played for many years in packed midnight showings, with costumed audience members participating in the screenings. Jack Starrett's fast-paced horror chase film, Race With the Devil (1975) starred Peter Fonda and Warren Oates as innocent vacationers - with their wives (Loretta Swit and Lara Parker) - who are pursued by Satanists after inadvertently watching them perform a human sacrifice.

As the decade of the seventies progressed, the horror genre was subjected to violence, sadism, brutality, slasher films, victims of possession, and graphic blood-and-gore tales. Two of the most effective, box-office successes of the 70s included the camp classic It's Alive! (1974) about a murderous baby, and Tobe Hooper's exploitative, low-budget, hand-made cult film - The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974). The notorious first film about a terrorized group of teenagers was loosely based on the true crimes of grisly, notorious Wisconsin serial killer Ed Gein, as was Hitchcock's Psycho (1960), Three on a Meathook (1972), Deranged (1974), and Jonathan Demme's The Silence of the Lambs (1991). The lead horror character Leatherface (Gunnar Hansen) was both repulsive and muscular, in his Grand Guignol pursuit of victims to butcher. [There were four sequels to the TCM film: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 2 (1986) also directed by Hooper, Leatherface: The Texas Chainsaw Massacre 3 (1990) directed by Jeff Burr, Texas Chainsaw Massacre: The Next Generation (1995) directed by Kim Henkel and featuring future stars Matthew McConaughey and Renee Zellweger, and producer Michael Bay's The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (2003) with Jessica Biel as one of the terrorized teenagers.]

John Carpenter's influential, and acclaimed independent-sleeper horror classic Halloween (1978) with a creepy soundtrack, featured Michael Myers as the deranged, knife-wielding killer of teenage babysitters (notably Jamie Lee Curtis, the daughter of Janet Leigh who had earlier starred as the 'scream queen' in Hitchcock's Psycho) who had returned to his old neighborhood of Haddonfield, Illinois after an escape from a mental institution. His spooky doctor (British horror actor Donald Pleasance) pursued the mad slasher as he wreaked havoc. [This popular slasher, serial killer film inspired numerous, mostly inferior sequels - seven more by the year 2002.] Steven Spielberg's second horror film Jaws (1975) - was a terrific summer blockbuster about a threatening great white shark off an Eastern beach community - Amity Island. Horrible conflicts could occur with supernatural, Jaws-like monsters in space, such as in director Ridley Scott's Alien (1979), with the tagline: "In space, no one
can hear you scream.". An adapted Stephen King tale provided the basis for Stanley Kubrick's masterfully-directed gothic film *The Shining (1980)* about a crazed husband (Jack Nicholson) with personal demons in the Overlook Hotel, closed and snowbound for the winter in Colorado, with his emotionally-abused wife (Shelley Duvall) and psychic young son.

**Roman Polanski's Horror Films in the 60s:** Polish director Roman Polanski's first film in English, the potent and scary British production titled *Repulsion (1965)*, depicted a young, sexually-disturbed beautician's (Catherine Deneuve) unstable descent into hallucinatory madness in a London apartment. After his public acceptance for the film, Polanski directed the offbeat ghoulish comedy *The Fearless Vampire Killers (1966)* starring his wife Sharon Tate (a victim of the gruesome Manson 'family' murders).

Evil spirits possessed the body of a young 12 year-old girl (Linda Blair) in director William Friedkin's manipulative critical and box-office success *The Exorcist (1973)* from William Peter Blatty's best-selling novel, with extravagant, ground-breaking special effects and startling makeup. Its twisting head, pea-soup vomit spewing, crotch-stabbing with a crucifix, and other horrific visuals terrified audiences.

Some of the better devil-possession sequels in the late 70s and early 80s were *The Amityville Horror (1979)* about a devilish haunted house, Tobe Hooper's *Poltergeist (1982)* - a supreme ghost story about menacing spirits that kidnap a young child (in a film produced, co-written and 'co-directed' by Steven Spielberg) by sucking her into a TV set ("They're heeeere!") and taking her into a parallel dimension. *Poltergeist* encouraged two sequels in 1986 and 1988. *The Omen (1976)*, with a memorable score by Jerry Goldsmith, about a young adopted son (of parents Gregory Peck and Lee Remick) named Damien - Satan's son, also inspired two sequels to compose a trilogy: *Damien: Omen II (1978)*, and *The Final Conflict (1981)*). There was also a made-for-cable TV sequel titled *Omen IV: The Awakening* in 1991.

**Friday the 13th (1980),** the first of the horror genre's most recognizable horror series - with an astonishing number of sequels, ripped off more original films of the 70s (such as director Mario Bava's definitive slasher/gore film *A Bay of Blood (1971, It.)* - R-rated) with tales of terrorized teen camp counselors. It also inspired a TV series and several spoofs. Jason Voorhees, like the psychopathic Freddy Krueger after him in the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series, became a landmark name.

One of the trends in the popular genre of horror films was to remake Japanese horror films, culminating in retreads of successful foreign classics. The most effective, intelligent and stylish horror film of the new decade was Gore Verbinski's *The Ring (2002)* - a modern-day, gothic horror classic, a remake of the Japanese horror flick *Ringu (1998)*. Other horror films were retreads of successful foreign classics (i.e., *The Grudge (2004)* (with two sequels in 2006 and 2009) and *Dark Water (2005)*).

M. Night Shyamalan's effective *The Sixth Sense (1999)*, about a young boy (Haley Joel Osment) who sees "dead people" - this was Shyamalan's signature film with clever clues sprinkled throughout the film; also Shyamalan's spooky *Signs (2002)*, about a disillusioned minister (Mel Gibson) who encounters gigantic, eerie crop circles on his farm.

In general, horror films are successful if they create fear in the viewer. Usually, it takes already existing fears and expands on those. Horror films are a mixture of fear, supernatural beings/occurrences, and murders or violence that increases the viewer’s fear.