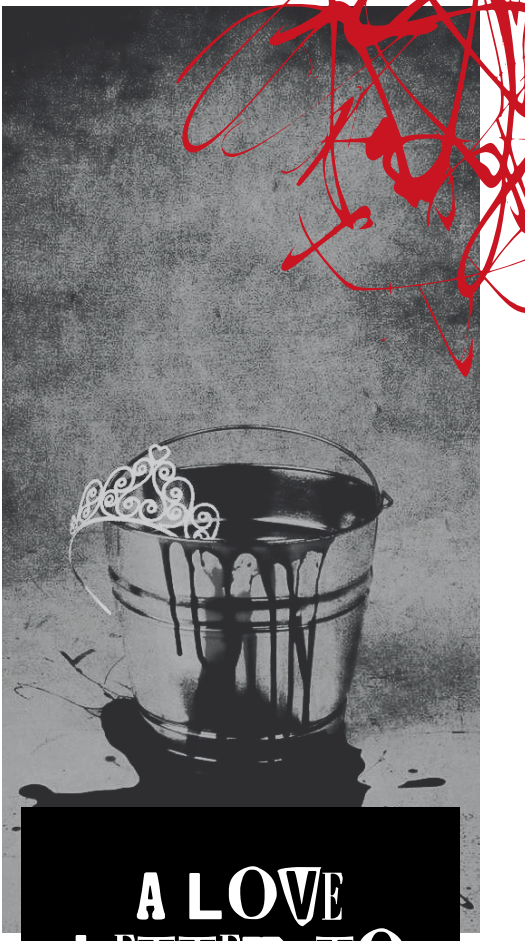
FOR THE LOVE OF HORROR

When I think back to where my love of horror came from, two memories stand out the most. One was sneaking downstairs while my parents were watching a movie and catching a peek at the opening scene of *Hollow Man,* where an invisible gorilla picks up a rat and squishes it rather gruesomely. (It took me until now to figure out which movie this scene was from.) That solves one childhood mystery!) The second was a couple of years later, when I watched *The Ring* at a sleepover. Afterwards, my mom was so mad that she made me watch *Identity*, in which a killer murders people while stranded in a motel. (And for the record, one of those is rated PG-13 and the other is R...) I'm not exactly sure what point she was trying to make, but I guess she thought if I could handle a girl with long hair coming out of a well, I could handle a severed head in a dryer.

I don't think I ever really recovered from either of those scenes, and to be honest, I'm not sure I ever wanted to...



A LOVE LETTER TO HORROR MOVIES

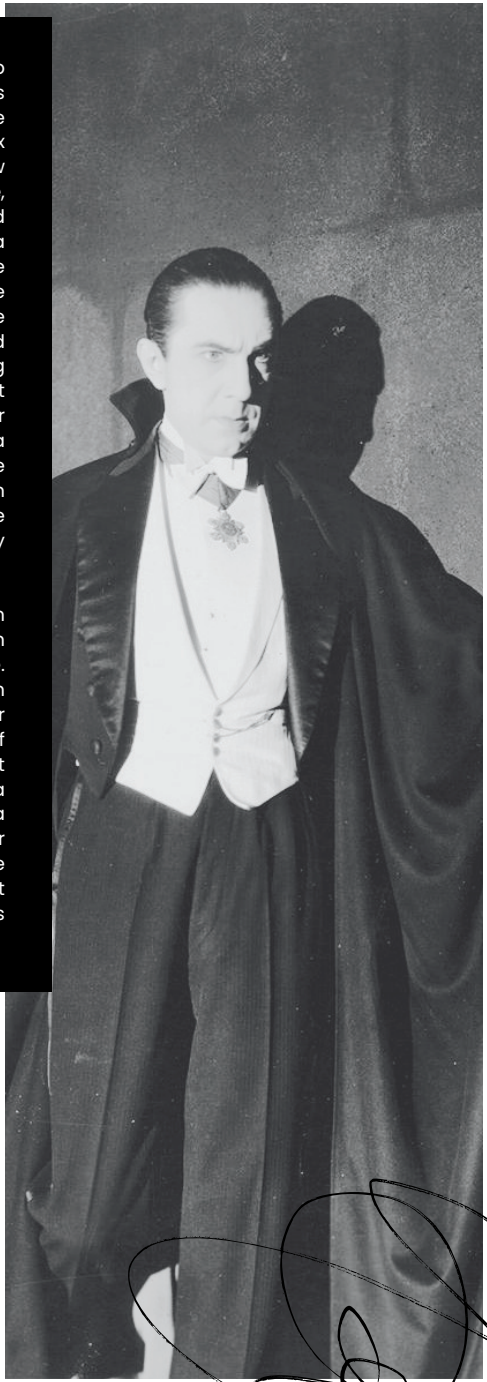
In an attempt to trace the history of horror as a genre, I quickly realized that I would essentially be tracing the history of human storytelling. As it turns out, every culture, going back as far as we have records, has its own collection of myths and folklore that were created to instill fear. A monster lurking in the woods, a witch brewing a potion, a cautionary tale warning children not to wander too far.

Some of the first evidence we have of ancient storytelling includes fearsome demons and monsters. For example, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, found engraved on a 4,000-year-old Babylonian tablet, is a poem that follows a king on a quest to find the secret of immortality. Along the way, he battles Humbaba, a demon-giant who guards a sacred forest — proof that we've been dreaming up monsters to throw our heroes against since literally the first written words!

Despite logic dictating that we should keep away from things that cause us fear, humans have been actively seeking out ways to scare ourselves for centuries. It is, literally, a paradox as old as time. Even Aristotle spoke about how weird it is that we're set up to avoid horrible, dangerous things, and yet we feel magnetised to them anyway. Thousands of years before a bloody chainsaw ever graced our screens, he observed that humans take pleasure in the representation of things that would otherwise disgust or distress us in real life. He concluded that this enjoyment comes from discovering what these horrible things are like, not necessarily the horrible thing itself. For example, we may be naturally curious what a corpse looks like, but if we were to come across a real one, it would repel us. It is much easier to see a fake one on TV than to come face to face with one. Basically, we can enjoy fear only when we know we're safe from it.

Aristotle also described it as a catharsis; an idea that art can stir up fear and then discharge it, leaving us lighter than before. There's a reason people who struggle with anxiety are often the most devoted horror fans. Some even consider it a source of comfort! It may seem counterintuitive, but it makes sense when you consider that in a movie the threat is obvious — it's a monster, a ghost, a masked killer — but in real life, fear isn't always so black and white. When the horrors are on screen, it helps give that unnamed anxiety a place to land, even if it's only for a couple of hours.

While scary stories are basically as old as storytelling itself, the genre didn't really get its name until 1764 when Horace Walpole published *The Castle of Otranto*, a gothic tale that more or less invented the whole haunted-castle, cursed-bloodline thing. What followed was some of the classic stories we all know and love — Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Stoker's *Dracula*, to name a few. The fact that these monsters remain at the forefront of the horror genre is indicative of how impactful they were. It's centuries later, and in the last two years alone we've gotten a new *Nosferatu*, a *Frankenstein*, and an upcoming *Werwulf*.



DRACULA (1931)

Even before movies as we know them, traveling showmen were staging phantasmagoria, a horror stage show that used smoke and lanterns to project ghosts and demons onto walls to scare audiences. Once film arrived, the ghouls quickly followed: German Expressionism gave us the genre-defining *Nosferatu* in 1922, and by the 1930s Hollywood was already mining those previously mentioned gothic classics for everything they were worth. Universal Studios was an early producer of horror as it made its way to the silver screen with films like *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), *Frankenstein* (1931), *Dracula* (1931), *The Mummy* (1932), *Murderers of Rue Morgue* (1932), *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935), and *The Invisible Man* (1933).

In other words, horror has been mainstream from the moment it existed. But that's not to say it was necessarily respected… What followed those canon monster flicks was a run of diminishing-return sequels like *The Invisible Man Returns* (1940), *Son of Dracula* (1943), and *The Mummy's Ghost* (1944). The titles alone give the impression that studios already saw these movies as products, not art. Critics treated horror as a guilty pleasure at best and moral panic at worst. Every generation had its stretch of hand-wringing about whether all this on-screen carnage was rotting the youth. But horror was Hollywood's cash cow: too profitable to kill, too lowbrow to be taken seriously. This pretty much shaped horror's reputation for the next half-century, filling seats but never award ballots…

Cut to today and it appears we are on a generational run of horror films that are not only genuinely unsettling (complimentary) but also brilliantly made. Many are even calling it a *horror renaissance.*



FRANKENSTEIN (1931)

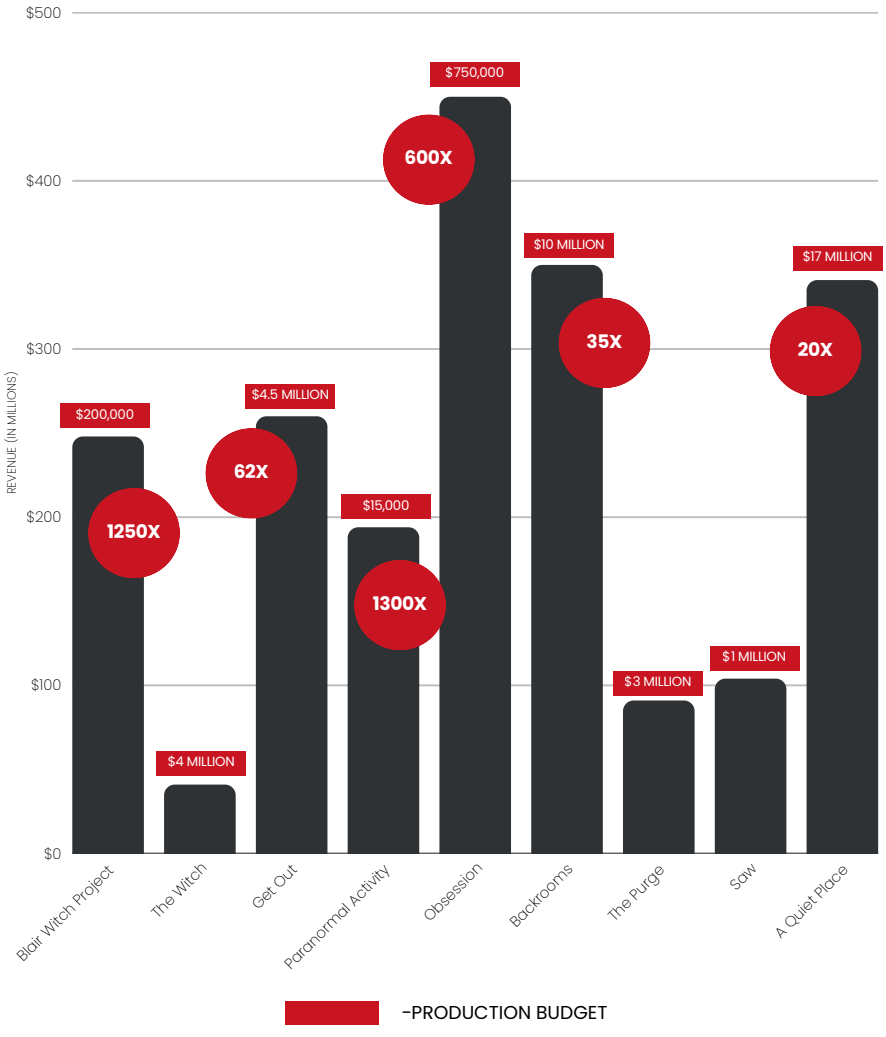
It's hard to claim a renaissance as you're living it, but horror has indeed been dominating the conversations online, selling out theatres, and creating cultural buzz that most franchises would kill for. If the successes of recent mid- to low-budget releases like *Obsession* and *Backrooms* are anything to go by, audiences have a growing appetite for horror right now. While blockbuster filmmaking has become increasingly sanitized with remakes and other existing IP, horror still feels new and exciting. And this latest boom proves that audiences are down to support these strange, weird little films. The people yearn for originality and practical effects, folks!

None of this is to say that there weren't incredible horror films before now. I would argue that we have been slowly ramping up to this for decades. But what was once either a mega-millions blockbuster or low-budget corn syrup-and-red-dye slop has since become something different. And for that, we can all bow our heads and thank Mr. Jason Blum for entering the picture.

We really can't talk about modern horror without talking about Jason Blum and Blumhouse Productions, where he spent most of the 2000s producing indie films nobody watched – that is, until he struck gold with P*aranormal Activity* in 2009. Shot on a famously tiny budget (we're talking an original budget of $15,000!), it ended up grossing nearly $200 million and becoming one of the biggest returns on investment in film history. But what could have been a fluke, Blum turned into a long-standing formula: keep budgets low and creative control high. His whole model ran on these mid- to low-budget movies, allowing for less investment from the studios and curtailing their instincts to sand down any "experimental" ideas. The success of Blumhouse films like *Paranormal Activity, Insidious, and The Purge* allowed the production company to grow, while also paving the way for others to enter the horror space with more confidence. Blum himself has described this current momentum as reminiscent of the 1970s. A new generation of young people making original, edgy movies that are really connecting with audiences.

BOX OFFICE KILLINGS

While the rest of the industry sinks nine figures into franchises and prays, horror quietly runs the craziest profit margins in the business. Tiny budgets, *monster* returns. It's not that horror makes the most money; it's that it makes the most out of the least.





AMERICAN PSYCHO (2000)

Rather than claim that the films coming out today are better than those of previous generations, it's probably more appropriate to say that it is the growing appreciation for the genre that has helped raise its legitimacy in the culture. Horror films are no longer automatically disreputable thanks to a recent crop of filmmakers who have a true respect for the genre and a unique point of view — Jordan Peele, Robert Eggers, Ari Aster, Zach Cregger, Ryan Coogler, to name a few. It seems as though horror is finally starting to get its flowers.

These directors, along with boutique studios like A24 and Neon, are currently being hailed as the forefront of what is being called "elevated horror." Of course, the label is a bit of a backhanded compliment to the genre as it implies everything that came before it was mere schlock. The idea that horror needed elevating in the first place conveniently forgets that the genre has been doing the same thing for as long as it has existed. Let's not forget that the 60s and 70s gave us *Rosemary's Baby, The Exorcist, Texas Chainsaw* and *Halloween*. Or that the 90s gave us *Silence of the Lambs, Scream* and *Se7en.* One could argue that these decades also have legitimate claims to being horror golden ages.

What looks like only monsters and jump scares from the outside has always been something a lot sneakier: an outlet for the taboos and terrors no one wants to say out loud. Our real-life fears are often too big, too shapeless to look at directly, so we do what everyone does when they're afraid of the dark – conjure up a monster and point to that instead. Horror is always a product of its time, and the most impactful films not only entertain but also illustrate the moral panic that comes with whatever shifts are happening in the culture.

I've read a few claims that those who aren't as empathetic enjoy horror more, which I find to be very surface-level and, quite frankly, incorrect. In fact, I would argue the opposite is true. Aside from some of the kindest people I know being horror fans, empathy is our capacity to feel with someone, not by how little we can bear to look at something disturbing. The irony is that it's actually that same empathy that allows horror to work in the first place. These movies hinge on audiences caring about the characters. If the audience doesn't care what happens to the protagonists, the entire thing falls flat. After all, why would we care if this made-up person has been chopped up into a million pieces? It's not real! Without empathy, all a film has is "wouldn't it be crazy if this happened?" — and that question can lead to some interesting set-ups, but it can't carry a two-hour movie.

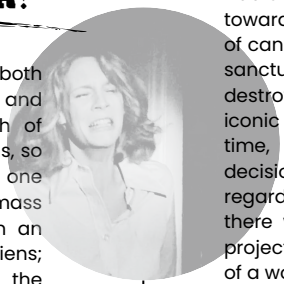
This sort of first-thought conclusion assumes that the only empathetic response to disturbing material is to refuse to look at it. Horror runs on the complete opposite sentiment, as it is one of the only genres that asks you to sit with that discomfort and really explore it. The idea that someone who loves blood and guts must have evil in their soul is the common mistake that proximity to darkness is the same as darkness itself. I could honestly write an entire essay on this statement alone, but I'll keep it simple here: ***engaging with something is not the same as advocating for it.*** If it were, every crime novelist would be a criminal and every movie about a serial killer would be a brochure for murder.



THE 1950S: ATTACK OF THE KILLER WHATEVER!

During this time, Americans both feared communist infiltration and were haunted by the aftermath of World War II and nuclear weapons, so the decade's fears were twofold: one surrounding radiation and mass annihilation which manifested in an uptick in giant monsters and aliens; and another that claimed the monster (communists) could be right outside your door, looking just like you or me...

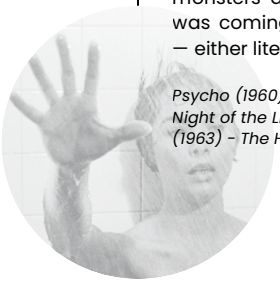
Godzilla (1954) - Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) - Creature from the Black Lagoon (1954) - The Thing from Another World (1951)



THE 1960S: GOING, GOING, GONE (MAD)

With the rise of the Civil Rights Movement and sexual revolutions, there were a lot of anxieties regarding social upheaval due to these new concepts of identity and autonomy. All of this radical change was clashing with the traditional norms of the time and folks were getting scared. This led to a more realistic horror; no more giant monsters and aliens. Now, the call was coming from inside the house — either literally, or figuratively.

Psycho (1960) - Rosemary's Baby (1968) - Night of the Living Dead (1968) - The Birds (1963) - The Haunting (1963)



THE 1970S: WELCOME... TO HELL!

There was a strong uptick in serial killers, and with that, the illusion of an idyllic America was forever fractured. The fear began to turn toward the nuclear home — a family of cannibals, a violation of domestic sanctuary, a neighborhood destroyed, making way for the iconic slasher film. At the same time, the recent Roe v Wade decision brought about new fears regarding female autonomy, and there were a few horror films that projected the monstrous potential of a woman's power. *(Slay mama!)*

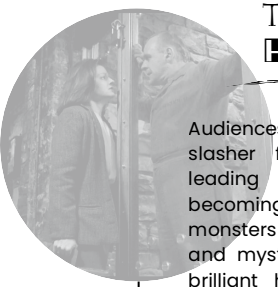
Texas Chainsaw Massacre (1974) - Halloween (1978) - Carrie (1976) - The Exorcist (1973) - The Omen (1976) - Black Christmas (1974)

THE 1980S: THE FINAL GIRL WILL SEE YOU NOW



Slasher films continued to dominate and were further solidified during this time, complete with a now-infamous rulebook: the minority dies first, the promiscuous teens get punished, and the virgin always survives. This subgenre further drilled the idea that premarital sex gets you killed, and this conservative rationale helped further the horrible logic that "sex kills" once the AIDS crisis hit the public consciousness.

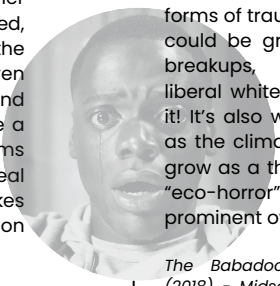
Friday the 13th (1980) - A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984) - The Shining (1980) - The Thing (1982) - Poltergeist (1982)



THE 1990S: HE'LL HAVE THE CHAOTI!

Audiences eventually picked up on the slasher formula and grew bored, leading the genre to pivot to becoming more cerebral. Now these monsters are no longer unknowable and mystic. Instead, they are rather brilliant human beings — cultured, witty and smarter than everyone in the room. In some cases, the villain even wins in the end! With capitalism and race conversations becoming more a part of the social consciousness, films began to gesture at who the real monsters are. The decade also takes the opportunity to turn the camera on itself with irony and self-awareness.

Silence of the Lambs (1991) - Se7en (1995) - Scream (1996) - Misery (1990) - The Sixth Sense (1999) - Candyman (1992) - American Psycho (2000)

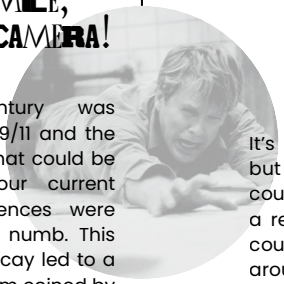


THE 2010S: A24 PRESENTS: TRAUMA!

We began to see more emphasis on metaphorical and abstract concepts, as horror became a more obvious allegory for various forms of trauma. Now the monster could be grief, inherited trauma, breakups, domestic violence, liberal white racism — you name it! It's also worth mentioning that as the climate crisis continues to grow as a threat, the subgenre of "eco-horror" becomes more prominent over the years.

The Babadook (2014) - Hereditary (2018) - Midsommar (2019) - Get Out (2017) - It Follows (2014) - A Quiet Place (2018) - The Invisible Man (2020)

THE 2000S: SMILE, YOU'RE *DEAD* ON CAMERA!



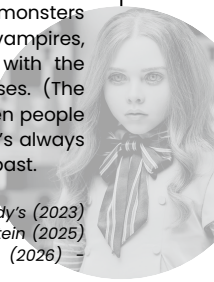
The early 21st century was undoubtedly shaped by 9/11 and the war on terror. After all, what could be more terrifying than our current reality? American audiences were pessimistic, anxious and numb. This attitude toward moral decay led to a rise of "torture porn," a term coined by film critic David Edelstein in 2006. These movies are characterized by gratuitous portrayals of graphic violence. In addition, the steady rise in technology and the surveillance state led to a found-footage boom.

Blair Witch Project (1999) - Saw (2004) - Hostel (2005) - Final Destination (2001) - 28 Days Later (2001) - The Strangers (2008) - Paranormal Activity (2007)

THE 2020S: RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINES?

It's difficult to define the present day, but there are a few connections that could be made. In a post-COVID world, a return of body horror and contagion could be in the works, while anxieties around AI will likely lead us to more robot takeovers. It seems we are also already in the middle of a "comfort horror" wave; a return to the monsters most familiar to us, like vampires, monsters, werewolves, along with the return of early 2000s franchises. (The devil you know, amiright?) When people are anxious about the future, it's always comforting to romanticize the past.

M3GAN (2022) - Five Nights at Freddy's (2023) - The Substance (2024) - Frankenstein (2025) - Nosferatu (2024) - Scream 7 (2026) - Werwulf (2026)



THE VILLAINOUS QUEER

But sometimes the creature on screen isn't only a stand-in for an unmistakable threat like a bomb, or a plague, or a man with a human face as a mask. While horror can externalize our fears, there is also a pattern of who they use to build those fears off of. In various genres, villains and monsters are often used as surrogates for society's "deviants" — the thing that doesn't belong, the outsider that threatens safety, the person that has made all the wrong choices. There are three groups in particular that the genre has a history of casting as the thing to be feared, punished, or even just pushed aside: the queer, the unruly woman, and the racial "other." Just as horror can reflect what society fears, it can also reflect *whom* it fears…

Established in 1930, the Hays Code was a set of guidelines created to govern content in American films and block things like interracial couples, disrespect toward police or priests, or any kind of "sexual perversions." (Dude, just say gay.) Under the code, these characters were allowed to be depicted doing sinful things but only if they were punished for them by the end. So while gay people were technically allowed to be alluded to on screen, they could only ever be depicted as evil. Enter, **The Villainous Queers!** This code was in effect until 1968 and obviously had a significant impact on the way queer character traits were portrayed. For decades, it was the only role gay actors could play in mainstream media, and due to the negative attitudes toward homosexuality at the time, many audiences just accepted that being gay was enough to pin someone as the bad guy.



FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE (1963)

Given the social stigma around male femininity, you can find plenty of examples of villains with effeminate traits — extravagant looks, sassy attitudes, effeminate mannerisms and that classic evil giggle. Not to mention having a particular fondness for fluffy white Persian cats… This is called the "Sissy Villain" trope. In these scenarios, the Hero is often a big strong manly man, further emphasizing the villain's unmasculinity by comparison. (Because there is nothing more manly than beating up a sissy, right?) It doesn't matter that the limp-wristed villain is smarter, richer and more powerful. He looks gay and weak, so there's no way he can win.

(All of that being said, it turns out gay guys *can* be evil in real life too!)



SAM ALTMAN AND PETER THIEL

It has been speculated on many occasions that filmmakers and authors often used their monsters as metaphors for their own… *perversions*. And of all the classic monsters, Count Dracula has gotta be the gayest. He lives in a grandiose castle, wears a fabulous cape, is surrounded by three hags, and is obsessed with sucking on Johnathan Harker's neck. Despite having three brides and a hunger for Lucy and Mina (diva worship!), there is still that one scene where Dracula snaps at one of his brides for circling Harker, saying *"This man belongs to me!"* Not to mention the scene where Lucy's three male suitors are swapping blood and just bro-ing out. Make of that what you will, but there has been a lot of speculation that Bram Stoker may have been a little, you know… *limp wrist.*

COMING OUT OF THE COFFIN



INTERVIEW WITH A VAMPIRE (1991)

Stoker's wife, Florence Balcombe, was allegedly courted by the famously gay Oscar Wilde before she ultimately married Stoker. (She has a type, folks!) Despite this, Wilde and Stoker were good friends for over twenty years, and when Oscar was tried and imprisoned for "gross indecency" in 1895, some scholars claim that this led Stoker to publish Dracula, which came out two years later. Of course, no one can really know for sure, but watching a man you love get punished for what he desires, then writing a monster whose desires are feared… It's pretty poetic!

For some historical context, the word "homosexuality" didn't even exist until 1870. Before that, same-sex desire was treated as something anyone could simply *slip* into. It was still a sin, no doubt, but it wasn't considered to be a *type* of person until it became labeled as a "diagnosis," a condition that one could catch or potentially cure. Even twenty-five years before Count Dracula, we had Sheridan Le Fanu's 1872 gothic tale, *Carmilla*, where a female vampire preys obsessively on other women and gets punished more savagely than any male vampire in the entire canon. She was staked, beheaded, burned, and scattered. (A woman refusing a man, even if it's to kill him? Unforgivable!)

The vampire was patient zero of this fictional contagion; a monster whose bite literally converts you was the perfect symbol for all of this gay panic. One must squash it before it turns you too…

LITTLE FUN FACT: F.W. Murnau, who was openly gay, filmed an unauthorized adaptation of Stoker's Dracula in 1922 titled *Nosferatu*. (Did he feel akin to the Count's "curse"?) While Stoker had since passed, his wife, Florence, sued for copyright infringement and won, leading to a court order to destroy all the prints of the film. Fortunately, several copies survived and began to resurface internationally. While the queer undertones in *Dracula* are purely speculative, there is something quietly poignant about the widow of an allegedly repressed author trying to destroy a gay filmmaker's version of her husband's monster… Just sayin!

This same logic would resurface with a vengeance during the AIDS crisis. A blood-based "curse" that is passed through intimate contact soon started to become less and less of a metaphor…

But while the Hays Code and the monster-label embodied their repression, leave it to the LGBTQ+ community to turn it into something fun! Traits that are widely recognized as queer-coded — effeminate mannerisms, theatrical flamboyance, and the kind of sassiness that deliberately brushes up against a straight-laced lead — were originally deployed to signal deviance. Queer audiences decided to reclaim it anyway.

To many, these depictions validate their feelings of "other-ness," offering a unique lens for marginalized people to see themselves. While the flamboyance was meant to mark these characters as abnormal, to a queer kid it was likely their first flicker of recognition on screen. The genre basically handed them a monster and said "this is you." They saw something that was fabulous, powerful, and had all the best lines. Who wants to be the unfunny, straight hero anyway?

From sexy vampires to Dr. Frank-N-Furter to celebrated queer icon Mr. Babadook, it all builds horror up to be the gayest genre in the game. Horror understands what it means to be hunted, misunderstood, closeted, fetishized, and feared. It makes sense that marginalized people would ultimately see themselves in it. Perhaps it even gives them space for their own rage and revenge.



RAISED BY VILLAINS

As a kid, my favorite Disney characters were always the bad guys. Hades was the funniest. Jafar had a wicked winged eyeliner. And even at six years old, I knew Scar was hot. (This explains a lot…) While I don't identify as queer myself, I am choosing to interpret all of this as foreshadowing to me pretty much exclusively hanging out with gay guys for the rest of my life.

I saw *The Lion King* in theatres in 1994, and while I don't exactly remember it (I was three), I do remember having a strong fascination with Scar for years. While everyone else was pining after teenage Simba, I was like waaait… but what about his uncle tho? He was dark, brooding and had a sexy little scar. Plus, English accent! It's only now that I can look back and spot how overtly queer Scar was. Even just physically, Mufasa was designed to be more king-like and "manly" with a broad nose and thick flowing mane. Meanwhile, Scar has a leaner build, but exaggerated facial features that give the illusion that he is more dramatic. Of course, then there's his cunty little attitude and his lazy, slinky posture. Scar's biting sarcasm and sassiness give him the same personality as any bitchy old queen.

But my all-time favorite Disney character was always Hades. Like every kid at some point in their life, I was obsessed with Greek mythology, so Disney's *Hercules* had a big impact on me in general. While Hades is less overtly queer than Scar, he has the same sarcastic personality and more feminine mannerisms when contrasted with the macho-masculine characters like Zeus and Hercules.

There are many more subtle examples of Disney's queer-coded villains, but unlike the others that were built with a vague pastiche of gayness, I'd be remiss to not mention *The Little Mermaid*'s Ursula.



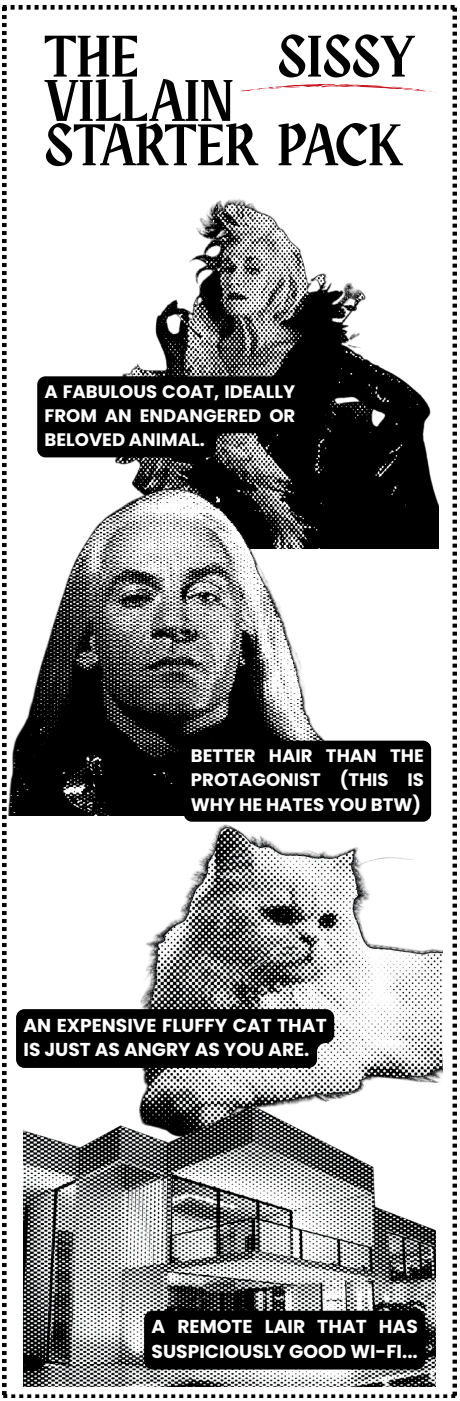
HERCULES (1997)

The Little Mermaid's Ursula was directly ripped from the legendary drag queen and John Waters muse, Divine. Howard Ashman, the lyricist and producer who wrote Part of Your World, came up in the same Baltimore gay scene as Divine, and the reference is uncanny — the wide frame, the flame hair, the undeniable drag makeup. Animators even used real drag performances as live-action references for Ursula's iconic Poor Unfortunate Souls. Unfortunately, Divine died in 1988, just months before *The Little Mermaid*'s 1989 release.

But I don't want to give Disney too much credit, as they were ultimately having their cake and eating it too. They were both using queerness as a shorthand for corruption, while also relying on queer artists to make them the most fabulous and beloved characters of all time. Even thirty years later, Disney still struggles with wanting the cultural credit for having their "first" "gay" "character" without ruffling feathers in any direction. (Show two boys kissing, you cowards!)

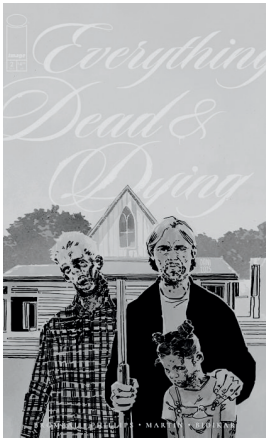


NOT DISNEY, BUT NO ONE WAS DOING IT LIKE THIS DIVA!! *POWERPUFF GIRLS*



THOUGHTS I HAD WHILE READING:

EVERYTHING DEAD AND DYING BY TATE BROMBAL



I don't know much about comics. What I do know a lot about, however, is zombies. I can't get enough of the stuff! Seriously, I'm one of the few elite soldiers who finished the entire Walking Dead series despite every brain cell telling me it's time to let go. I've pretty much seen every iteration of a dystopian zombie apocalypse you can think of, and I can confidently report that the genre has pretty much been picked clean to the bone. Will that ever stop me? Nope! So when I saw this beautiful cover of a guy milking a zombie cow, it certainly piqued my interest. After just one issue, this story had me by the ankles. I was already rooting hard for this queer little family. (Two dads *and* they're undead? A family can look like anything!)

Jack Chandler lives quietly on a farm with his zombie husband and adopted daughter (also zombie). He spends his days tending to his crops and maintaining the routine of not just his family, but the entire zombie neighborhood, for over a decade. What immediately sets this dystopian story apart is that the apocalypse has already happened, and at this point, the zombies really aren't that much of a threat. There doesn't seem to be a lot of violence in Jack's day-to-day… That is, until the outsiders arrive and all hell breaks loose.

Plenty of dystopian stories gesture at the idea that *"whoa, actually, humans were the real monsters all along,"* but this series feels more specific than that. It's beyond the usual do-what-it-takes survivalism. Most zombie narratives align us with the scavengers: a ragtag group on the road, just looting abandoned buildings in the name of survival. But here, we see a flipped perspective. It is the outsiders who stumble upon Jack's peaceful town and deem it unnatural. To me, this story touched on the human impulse to eliminate what doesn't fit into our specific worldview. In a matter of hours, they destroy this neighborhood completely, along with the family living at its center. In trying to preserve their own version of humanity, they annihilate someone else's.

This begs the question, who gets to decide what a life worth living looks like? There is an assumption that survival must conform to familiar structures, and there is something quietly radical in how Jack chooses to live among the undead. He allows them to be as they are while still being loved. In a genre that often revolves around restoring order and humanity, this story offers acceptance instead. As a gay man in a rural farming community, Jack already knew what it meant to live differently long before the world ended. He already understood isolation, judgment and the work required to build a family outside of the traditional scope. The apocalypse simply gave him another reason to protect a life the world insisted shouldn't exist.



FEMALE RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINE

Much like the queers, women have also been able to reclaim a lot of their rage through recent horror films like *Midsommar*, *Pearl*, and *Jennifer's Body*. It makes sense that female rage has found its home in the horror genre. After all, anger is one of the few emotions that women are actively trained out of. It could land you getting labeled as "difficult" at best and "crazy" at worst. Horror is one of the few places where it's actually encouraged that the female character grab that axe and start swinging! In these films, rage is taken quite literally – killing, destroying, transforming.



PEARL (2022)

Long before modern feminism, female rage has been depicted in text for centuries. In 431 BCE, Euripides gave us Medea, a woman so betrayed by her unfaithful husband that she murders their own children to make him feel it. Aeschylus gave us Clytemnestra, who waited years for her husband to return from war only to open his throat in the bath for sacrificing their daughter. Shakespeare gave us Lady Macbeth, begging the spirits to "unsex" her so she'd have the stomach to do what the men around her couldn't. Of course, I'm not condoning any of these actions. These women did monstrous things, yes, but they were also grieving, wronged and pushed so far past the edge that part of you is like... I get it, girl. Go on!

For an audience trained to metabolize their anger privately (or not at all), watching these acts play out on screen can be cathartic, just as Aristotle clocked thousands of years ago. He argued that watching fear and fury play out on a stage lets an audience discharge those same feelings in themselves. He probably didn't have a film about a woman becoming impregnated by a car due to a rejection of traditional human relationships in mind, but hey, the mechanics still apply. (Pun intended.)



TITANE (2022)

In her book, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, film theorist Barbara Creed speaks a lot about the "monstrous-feminine", arguing against the framing that women are often posed as the victims in horror films: passive, objectified, and violated. Creed argues that culture has in fact always imagined the feminine as dangerous and catalogues several archetypes — the evil womb, the witch, the possessed teen, the angry mother. The throughline in all of these is that the patriarchal systems recognize how powerful the female body can be, and they are *terrified* of it. She references Freud's theory that the fear of the woman is due to man's castration anxiety — that because a woman appears "castrated," man feels threatened. But a more accurate read might be that it's the *castrating* that men find terrifying; a woman that threatens to *do* the cutting.

Creed talks about "vagina dentata," the myth that a toothed vagina exists and that men should beware where they put their dicks lest they lose them, and how it is a symbol for this kind of male dread. In the 2007 film *Teeth*, a puritanical teenager named Dawn is born with a toothed vagina. Dawn struggles to maintain her purity in a sex-obsessed culture, and the film offers a sharp commentary (again, pun intended) on male entitlement and consent.

Continue on page 15

Men always say that as the defining compliment, don't they? She's a cool girl. Being the Cool Girl means I am a hot, brilliant, funny woman who adores football, poker, dirty jokes, and burping, who plays video games, drinks cheap beer, loves threesomes and anal sex, and jams hot dogs and hamburgers into her mouth like she's hosting the world's biggest culinary gang bang while somehow maintaining a size 2, because Cool Girls are above all hot. Hot and understanding. Cool Girls never get angry; they only smile in a chagrined, loving manner and let their men do whatever they want. Go ahead, shit on me, I don't mind, I'm the Cool Girl.

And the Cool Girls are even more pathetic: They're not even pretending to be the woman they want to be, they're pretending to be the woman a man wants them to be. Oh, and if you're not a Cool Girl, I beg you not to believe that your man doesn't want the Cool Girl. It may be a slightly different version - maybe he's a vegetarian, so Cool Girl loves seitan and is great with dogs; or maybe he's a hipster artist, so Cool Girl is a tattooed, bespectacled nerd who loves comics. There are variations to the window dressing, but believe me, he wants Cool Girl, who is basically the girl who likes every fucking thing he likes and doesn't ever complain. (How do you know you're not Cool Girl? Because he says things like: "I like strong women." If he says that to you, he will at some point fuck someone else. Because "I like strong women" is code for "I hate strong women.")

Men actually think this girl exists. Maybe they're fooled because so many women are willing to pretend to be this girl. For a long time Cool Girl offended me. I used to see men - friends, coworkers, strangers - giddy over these awful pretender women, and I'd want to sit these men down and calmly say: You are not dating a woman, you are dating a woman who has watched too many movies written by socially awkward men who'd like to believe that this kind of woman exists and might kiss them. I'd want to grab the poor guy by his lapels or messenger bag and say: The bitch doesn't really love chili dogs that much - no one loves chili dogs that much!

– Gone Girl, Gillian Flynn



GONE GIRL (2014)



HEREDITARY (2017)

In one of the most iconic scenes in *Hereditary*, tensions are high after Charlie's death and Annie begins lashing out at Peter, accusing him of lacking responsibility and being emotionally distant. She uses this moment to unleash years of repressed resentment. (*"All I do is worry and slave and defend you … and all I get back is that fucking face on your face …"*) This scene highlights the invisible duties of mothers that often go unrecognized; the emotional labor, caretaking, even having to defend her son. This anger is not just against Peter, but rather an entire system that expects her to absorb the pain and maintain peace in her family.

While her anger and sadness are justified, Annie does not come across as "likable" in this scene. The film does not romanticize or simplify her anger; rather, it shows her as messy, monstrous, and morally ambiguous. It shows how loss can break through the composure of a "good" mother. The way her husband and son react in this scene mirrors how society often reacts to a woman's rage: discomfort and dismissal, rather than hearing or change. This monologue is rich with emotion and power. This is a variation of female rage: maternal rage.

DON'T you swear at me, you little shit! Don't you EVER raise your voice at me! I am your mother! You understand? All I do is worry and slave and defend you, and all I get back is that fucking face on your face! So full of disdain and resentment and always so annoyed! Well, now your sister is dead! And I know you miss her and I know it was an accident and I know you're in pain and I wish could take that away for you. I WISH I could shield you from the knowledge that you did what you did, but your sister is dead! She's gone forever! And what a waste... if it could've maybe brought us together, or something, if you could've just said "I'm sorry" or faced up to what happened, maybe then we could do something with this, but you can't take responsibility for anything! So, now I can't accept. And I can't forgive. Because... because NOBODY admits anything they've done!



THE MENU (2022)

In *The Menu*, there is a scene where we discover that Tyler knew what was to happen at this meal (everyone x_x) and hired Margot to go with him as his last-minute date. In the original script, Margot was supposed to react with a single tear, a more "acceptable" display of female emotion. But actress Anya Taylor-Joy insisted that she would not be sad in this situation – she'd be angry. This completely changes the energy of the scene, and actually gives Margot agency and a voice. She refuses to be a victim in silence, and there is a psychological power shift after this moment. Her anger renounces complicity and she demands accountability.

There's been a long tradition in media in which women's emotional responses are filtered through tears, longing, and self-sacrifice. Anger is accepted only when converted into sadness or guilt. Tyler is a complete dickhead who betrayed Margot's trust and was willing to sacrifice both of them to eat this once-in-a-lifetime meal. (Not gonna lie, me af.) Margot is completely justified in her anger. The value of feminine rage in media lies in its honesty. Being angry is a natural reaction for anyone. Female rage in contemporary culture should be less about destruction and more about establishing boundaries, like Margot in this scene. Here, she is using her anger to express "you are wrong and I'm not okay."

While Dawn can (and does) castrate men, the film doesn't necessarily make her out to be a monster. The vagina dentata only snaps when she's being violated and is otherwise capable of consensual, non-castrating sex. It may be a silly way to make the point, but hey, we got there.

But Creed wasn't exactly *celebrating* this monstrous feminine trope. In the case of *Teeth*, it's easy to view it as a reclamation of female autonomy, but we have to ask if this film is really about a woman empowered, or is it just about male fear? You know I hate to do it, but I must point out that a man did ultimately write and direct this.* So, one could argue that this film is simply Freud's male castration anxiety wearing feminist drag. In fact, the film further illustrates Creed's point that the patriarchy often codes the feminine as monstrous by making the vagina something to be feared. Film critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas devoted an entire chapter to *Teeth* in her book *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*, saying that "*Teeth* is a great concept for a film, but the final product feels less concerned about women and their bodies than it does about what women's bodies can do to men."

**Of course, just because a man wrote it doesn't mean it can't be feminist. Plenty of men have engaged with the female experience thoughtfully, just as plenty of women have not...*

The obsession with female purity is deep and cross-cultural, almost always having the same underlying anxiety: paternity certainty. Virginity and fidelity were never really about virtue, but rather about property and inheritance. It's all about making sure a man's wealth passed to his biological children! This, of course, branched out to many of patriarchy's greatest hits: the obsession with virgin brides; the Virgin Mary becoming the golden standard for women everywhere (because apparently the only way to be sexually-adjacent and pure is to conceive without having sex at all, an impossible bar that every woman will fail by definition); the Madonna-Whore complex; the *True Love Waits* movement and abstinence-only education. Like a limited edition Barbie doll, a woman is worth more if her box remains unopened...

While *Teeth* weaponized the whole "good girl" thing, there's another figure who has survived hundreds of slasher films by being just that. You know her, you love her! She's: **THE FINAL GIRL!**

ENTER: THE FINAL GIRL

The Final Girl is, well, the final girl at the end of the movie. She is the survivor, often running away screaming while covered in blood. But it's the reason she survives in the first place that is most interesting. The Final Girl represents a binary of who gets *rewarded* (those who are chaste, smart, and restrained) and who gets *punished* (everyone else who dared to have fun). She is pure, and all of her friends died because they were not.

So, what makes a Final Girl? Well, she has to be a girl. After all, men are the expendable gender when it comes to horror — and before you start proclaiming *Men's Rights!* at me, this is still due to patriarchy. (The call is always coming from inside the house with them, so to speak.) This comes from the double standard that a female character will automatically have the audience's sympathy due to the assumption that she will be more useless and cowardly in high-stress, chainsaw-forward situations. As long as her actions don't get a more likable character killed, the audience will almost always fall in her favor.

However, the female character can lose that sympathy just as quickly as she gained it. If she is at all manipulative, violent, slutty, immoral, ugly, or even just a little bit annoying, audiences won't lose any sleep over her being hacked up with a machete. Alternatively, while the male character has to earn the audience's sympathy upfront, it is rather simple for him to gain it by being entertaining and brave. Even the "lovable coward" gains a few sympathy points for being a little bit funny, although he will always be less respected than the brave ultra-manly Hero.

Benny: But I still want to know what happens!

Buffy: Everyone gets horribly killed except the blonde girl in the nightie who finally kills the monster with a machete but it's not really dead.

- Buffy the Vampire Slayer



READY OR NOT (2019)

The Final Girl is also almost always a virgin, or at least somewhat virginal. She often remains fully clothed throughout the film and most likely won't be partaking in any of the rambunctious activities all of her friends are doing — sex, drugs, alcohol, etc. In these films, the killer often functions as the enforcer of this 1950s-style morality. "*Uh oh, the young couple is having sex in the woods, and you know what that means... They're DEAD!*" Those who engage in nonmarital sex might as well put a giant target on their back and carry a sign that says Please Slice Me Open.

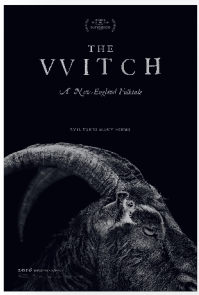
I'm a bit torn, because on one hand, the Final Girl characterization is clearly a virgin-purity fantasy influenced by conservative attitudes on how women should behave — but on the other hand, this device ultimately forces male audiences to identify with a female lead for once. She's the one character the audience is rooting for and we're desperate to see her make it out alive. The trope was built to punish those who stepped out of line, but ended up being a blueprint for women fighting back. It's kind of a beautiful contradiction.

THE FINAL GIRLS CLUB

Entry is simple: survive the movie. Whether you're a lifelong gorehound or someone who watches through their fingers, if you made it to the end, you're one of us! Welcome to the club.













The term itself comes from film scholar Carol Clover, who first coined "Final Girl" in a 1987 essay called "Her Body, Himself." She later folded it into her book, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Clover argued that male audiences don't identify with the killer but rather with the survivor, and that The Final Girl is deliberately built semi-androgynous — boyish, resourceful, sexually reluctant — specifically so male viewers can still relate. The trope existed well before the name, of course. *Halloween*'s Laurie Strode and Sally Hardesty of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* are hailed as the trope's golden girls.

Clover frames the Final Girl's survival as a "privilege" she is granted due to her moral superiority, a favor to what men found appealing in female characters. She is on record saying that she doesn't think the Final Girl is a feminist figure at all, calling those who think so are displaying a "grotesque" form of wishful thinking. (Ouch...) I don't necessarily disagree as the trope ultimately stems from the idea that a woman's suffering is only unjust if she did everything right leading up to it. But I do feel the annoying need to slightly push back on Clover's take. While the origin is certainly not feminist, that doesn't necessarily have to define the Final Girl forever. The same trope built to enforce a rule can still be picked up decades later and used to break it. For example, in *Ready or Not*, Grace doesn't survive by proving she's pure. She survives by telling her husband's entire family and their value system to go to hell. Pretty rad!

Ti West also subverts the Final Girl's origins in his 2022 film *X*, where not only is Maxine not a virgin, she's a sex worker. (gasp!) While they shoot a porno in the farmhouse, an elderly Pearl watches on furiously – but not because she thinks what Maxine is doing is sinful. She is furious with *envy*. Pearl's murderous rage doesn't stem from her morality, but rather that Maxine still has the thing she coveted decades ago: desirability. Maxine is the exact opposite of what a Final Girl was originally required to be. She was highly sexual, selfishly ambitious, and as we see in the later film *Maxxxine*, just as psycho as Pearl was. And yet, Ti West allows her to survive. The original Final Girl pays for survival with her purity, while for Maxine, it cost her her sanity.

THE FINAL GIRLS CLUB PRESENTS:

THE WITCH

When I first watched The Witch ten years ago, I wasn't much of a horror movie fan. I wasn't necessarily against them, and I would definitely watch them with others, but I hadn't quite developed an appreciation for the genre. On first watch, I imagine I was too busy trying to figure out what the hell was going on to really pick up on all of the film's intricate themes. All I remember was that once Black Phillip started talking in a sexy, deep voice and Thomasin ran into the woods naked to live her witchy fantasy, I was sold. Since then, I've watched the film probably five or six times (at least twice in the last six months), and it still holds up as one of my favorites.

At the time of release, A24 supposedly had a tough time marketing the film ahead of opening night. To be fair, "satanic feminist art film" isn't exactly a four-quadrant crowd-pleaser… I'm not sure if Eggers intended to make such a feminist work, but hey, when you tell a story about Puritan patriarchy and a young woman caught in the thick of it, you're automatically entering the territory. I don't make the rules! I suspect most audiences went in expecting a conventional spooky ride in the woods (I Went To The Movies and All I Got Was A Theological Slow-Burn Folk Nightmare), but *The Witch* actually offers something much more bleak and devastating.

The film begins with English settler William being exiled from a 1630s Puritan settlement over his "prideful deceit." There were essentially two types of Puritans at the time — those who wanted to purify the Church of England, and separatists who wanted to separate from the church completely. We can assume that William is the latter and happened to be living amongst the former, hence the disagreement leading to his voluntary banishment. Along with his pregnant wife, Katherine, teenage daughter, Thomasin, preteen son, Caleb, and young twins, Mercy and Jonas, they pack up and leave the colony.

Right off the bat, the film makes it clear that Thomasin is no ordinary Puritan girl, passive and obedient. When the courts banish her father, the rest of the family follows while she hesitates. As the family rides off to the unknown, Thomasin continues to stare back at what she is leaving behind while the rest of her family looks forward, stressing that they will fall in line with the patriarch. The gates of the village swing shut as their wagon rides off, indicating that this avenue has now been closed to her forever. She is, essentially, alone.



William's extreme version of Christianity is built on the notion that suffering is evidence that your faith is working. And well, if that's the case… I guess it's working out pretty well for them. Deprivation, hunger, isolation, hard labor — these are all supposedly tests of their faithfulness to God. Essentially, this patriarch would rather choose starvation for his entire family than compromise on his convictions. (At what point is sticking to your guns no longer admirable? I think when you lead your family to their horrific deaths, but… that's just me.) When the only thing that matters is devotion, that leaves little room for happiness and pleasure. The entire family is put to work to build their new homestead.

There is a great scene of Thomasin praying, where we catch a glimpse of her growing resistance. Thomasin wishes she could be better, more devout, but she is suppressing what she really desires. We already see her yearning for an escape, even if she isn't fully aware of it herself.

> "I here confess I've lived in sin. And broken every one of thy commandments in thought. Followed the desires of mine own will and not the Holy Spirit. I know I deserve more shame and misery in this life and everlasting hellfire."

Some have read this as the moment the Devil marks Thomasin as a target. I suppose if you view this film as the contrast of "good" and "evil," that might make sense. But to me, this is simply a moment where a young woman is struggling between wanting something else for her life and doing what is expected of her. A lot of women can relate, even today. It is worth pointing out that at this point, she hasn't actually *done* anything wrong — in fact, she actually never does anything wrong. (Until she… with the billhook… we'll get to it.) At this point, all of Thomasin's sins are only "in thought." However, during this time, even wanting something else for your life was enough to condemn you.



Katherine shortly bears their fifth child, Samuel, and while under Thomasin's care, the baby abruptly disappears during a riveting game of peek-a-boo. Thomasin desperately looks to the surrounding forest, but sees nothing. The film doesn't leave us guessing where the baby went for very long, though. We immediately cut to poor Samuel with an old witch, where it is revealed in a rather gruesome way that she is using the unbaptized baby to make a… well, there's no other way to say it. She is making a human baby paste for her flying ointment. (This is all within the first ten minutes, by the way. Starting strong with a baby-killing!)

Believing that it could have been a wolf that snatched Samuel, William takes Caleb into the woods to catch it. William admits to having sold Katherine's silver cup to buy the hunting supplies, further indicating that things aren't really looking too good for them. While on this hunt, Caleb clearly has a lot of anxiety about the concept of original sin. The Puritans believed strongly in predestination, and since Samuel had not yet been baptized, unfortunately, he has gone to hell. Bummer :/ This scene with Caleb and his father really touches on how traumatic these ideas can be for children. Even as young as Caleb is, he can see the contradiction and unfairness in an innocent baby going to hell. His father offers little reassurance.

> **Caleb:** Was Samuel born a sinner? How might then…
>
> **William:** We pray he hath entered God's Kingdom.
>
> **Caleb:** What wickedness hath he done?
>
> **William:** Place faith in God, Caleb. We'll speak no more on thy brother.
>
> **Caleb:** Is he in hell?
>
> **William:** Caleb!
>
> **Caleb:** Mother will not stop her prayer…And if he died? If I died this day?
>
> **William:** What is this?
>
> **Caleb:** I hold evil in my heart. My sins are not pardoned.

At the same time, Caleb is struggling to suppress his own natural desires and worries that he may be going to hell as well. Another unfortunate symptom of the family's isolation is that Caleb's maturing sexual desire has no place to land other than his older sister. Big yikes… This is causing him great stress. I mean, imagine being a teenager and genuinely scared that you will spend eternity in a burning hell because your normal development is considered evil. (Tfw your hormones accidentally summon the devil.)



Still convinced that it was a wolf that took Samuel, Thomasin and Caleb later sneak into the forest to check the trap. Caleb is separated from his sister and stumbles into the clutches of the witch, who is now disguised as a seductive young woman. She tempts Caleb with her alluring sexuality, and he walks toward her — both with fear and temptation. The Victoria's Secret model-looking witch kisses him and an elderly arm reaches up and grabs him by the head before cutting to the next scene.

Next, in one of the most disturbing and pivotal scenes of the film, Caleb returns to the farm a few days later, naked and delirious. Katherine suspects witchcraft and begins to pray over him. The twins (who are incredibly annoying) accuse Thomasin, which she passionately denies. William starts to grill his teenage daughter, but while praying over Caleb, the twins allegedly forget the prayer and blame Thomasin once again, sending the family into full-blown hysterics. Caleb begins violently convulsing with his mouth clenched shut and his throat bobbing. William manages to pry his mouth open and dislodge an entire apple from his throat. It is rotten with a single bite taken out of it, an obvious symbol for original sin.

Caleb stops convulsing, and with arms outstretched, he slowly sits up and proclaims his devotion to Christ before dying peacefully. It's difficult to say whether Caleb is truly saved or not, as his joyous prayer could be read either as salvation or as the witch's mockery.

> "Wholly thine I am, my sweet Lord Jesus. My Lord, my love, kiss me with the kisses of thy mouth! How lovely art thou! Thy embrace! My Lord! My Lord! My love! My sole salvation! Take me to thy lap!"

While losing baby Samuel had been chalked up to a wolf or some other animal, Caleb's death signals a huge shift in the film. This was undeniably witchcraft, and by facing it head-on, the final act of the film is officially set in motion.

The family's world is crumbling, and their anxieties need to land somewhere. Luckily for them, they have a teenage daughter! Thomasin suffers from the dreaded "having boobs" syndrome, so naturally, she becomes the family's punching bag for their father's pig-headed choices. (If men are such natural-born leaders, why are they so bad at it?) After Caleb's death, the family is all too ready to accept Thomasin as the problem.

Out of frustration, William locks Thomasin and the twins in the goat house as a punishment for arguing. Thomasin wakes in the middle of the night to find the witch drinking blood from one of the goats' teats, then watches as she seemingly attacks the twins off-screen. At the same time, there is an extremely haunting scene where Katherine is in a dream, and we see Caleb peacefully holding baby Samuel. (You'll also notice that the silver cup that William admitted to selling is also in the background.) She attempts to nurse the baby in her dream-like state, but it is later revealed to be a crow pecking at her bloodied chest.

William wakes the next morning and we catch a glimpse of Katherine with blood on her tunic, indicating that the crow was not part of the dream. Yeesh… He steps outside to find the goats slaughtered, the twins missing, and an unconscious Thomasin with blood on her hands. (She is not beating the witch allegations, I fear…)



Before Thomasin can even get up, Black Phillip gores William and kills him, leading an unhinged Katherine to lash out at Thomasin. She attempts to strangle Thomasin, suggesting that she is a "proud slut," tempting both her brother and her father with her maturing womanhood. Under this particular brand of patriarchy, women are seen as a symbol of "sin" and temptation. They are the ones to blame, not the men experiencing these temptations themselves. In an act of self-defense, Thomasin tearfully kills her mother with a billhook. It is a very emotionally tense scene as we watch Thomasin embrace her mother's bloody body.

Thomasin stands and stares out toward Caleb's grave, and it hits her that she is now completely alone. She slowly removes her bodice, as if she is finally stripping herself of her Puritan past. There is nothing left for her here. Later, Black Phillip leads her into the goat stable, where she begs the goat to speak — and in the most eerily smooth and spooky voice, he does. Black Phillip (who is Satan, in case you didn't catch that) offers Thomasin the life she desires, a life the world has refused her. A life of warmth, comfort, and autonomy.

> "Wouldst thou like the taste of butter? A pretty dress? Wouldst thou like to live deliciously?"

Given all that she's been through, can you blame the girl for taking the goat up on his offer?? A shadowy figure emerges behind her, and she is guided to sign her name in a book. Black Phillip then accompanies her to the forest, where she finds a coven of naked witches holding a Witches' Sabbath around a bonfire. The witches begin to levitate and Thomasin joins them, laughing hysterically as she ascends above the trees.

I appreciate the film's ambiguous ending, as it trusts the audience to determine whether this is a happy ending for Thomasin or not. On one hand, she gets the freedom she desired. She is now allowed to express herself with fewer limitations. But at what cost? She did have to sign her soul to the Devil and become a witch who preys on innocent babies…

LITTLE FUN FACT: Modern Satanism is actually quite an interesting rabbit hole for anyone interested. Some may be surprised to learn that the Satanist community does not actually endorse evil or promote child sacrifices. Satan is used more as a symbol of rebellion, self-determination, and refusing religious ideology. If you think about it, anyone who sees God as responsible for everything good and Satan as responsible for everything bad is operating off a version of Christianity that is completely detached from its historical origins. In fact, the Bible states quite explicitly that God is responsible for both good and evil. Satanists are just pointing out the contradictions. (Look, you're not going to find me at the Church of Satan on Sundays any time soon, but you gotta admit, they've got a point…)

At the end of the day, Thomasin was offered a choice - the first choice she had likely ever been offered - and she took her chances. To me, the ending felt like a sweet release, and the final shot of Thomasin laughing pretty much says it all. In my opinion, the coven represents female solidarity outside the patriarchal structures in which she had been confined.

There is, of course, an argument to be made that the Devil is simply another patriarchal figure, and that Thomasin just ends up trading one master for another. This is an interesting interpretation, but ultimately, she is left with no place to go and is essentially caught between two evils: signing her soul away to the Devil or continuing to face a life of hard work and oppression in Puritan life. At least one of those doesn't require washing your father's goat-shit-stained tunics.

This is a film that definitely benefits from a second viewing (or a third, or fourth…) in order to really grasp the film's more radical messages. One of the biggest takeaways was that, in its extreme form, Christianity can be the real evil, as it robs people (especially women) of a natural, healthy way of being. The events of this film may be an extreme example of it, but the toxic ideology comes through loud and clear.

LITTLE FUN FACT: *Malleus Maleficarum*, (basically the 15th-century Witch Hunt for Dummies) helped formalize the cultural habit of blaming women for everything. It suggested that women were more susceptible to evil than men, and therefore, should always be suspect number one in any unsavory event. The Catholic Church actually disavowed the text in 1490, just three years after it was published, but the damage had already been done. The fear of the female witch had embedded itself into the social consciousness anyway.

Not to shock you, but misogyny is pretty much built into the infrastructure of all these witch myths since humans could speak. Historically, the witch figure has represented women who have refused the social order, both in terms of patriarchal ownership and actualizing their sexual desires. Once you start researching witchcraft throughout the ages, you'll find a lot about how "Satanism" has traditionally been connected to female sexuality. Hm…

From Circe and Medea to midwives burned at the stake, the witch has always been a convenient archetype for male anxieties about female autonomy. When women step outside the roles assigned to them, mythology has a long tradition of turning them into monsters. In fact, scholars often connect witch imagery, or the "monstrous feminine," with being a crucial patriarchal construct. Basically meaning that women become monsters because patriarchy needs them to be. (Men? Being accountable for their own thoughts and actions? Don't be ridiculous! Women are *right* there.)

The dramatic irony threaded throughout the entire film is that we know Thomasin is not to blame for the family's misfortunes. The horror comes from the anxiety of watching her get blamed for it anyway. Suspicion slowly turns into vengeful wrath as the family begins to break.



Much like Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, mass hysteria effectively turns innocents against each other, distracting them from the greater threats. (This double feature would go crazy, by the way!)

One criticism of the film is that by making the Devil and witchcraft true, the film is suggesting that perhaps some women condemned in the Salem Witch Trials were actually witches. Personally, I don't think this makes much of an impact. Thomasin is condemned whether she was a "real" witch or not. If things had gone a different way, perhaps she would have been tortured and killed just like the other women who were unfairly accused. While the film seemingly condemns this kind of Puritan thinking, it also hints that it can actually drive people to the dark side. If you paint someone out to be the villain, sometimes it's easier for them to just become one…

Among the barren New England landscapes with withering trees and wooden shacks, Robert Eggers, along with cinematographer Jarin Blaschke, paints a very bleak picture of a family's downfall through folk mythology. (Lowkey, this movie did to New England forests what Jaws did for the ocean.) It draws you slowly into its world, building dread so methodically that by the time Thomasin signs her name in the Devil's book, you feel almost relieved. At least this nightmare is over!

It's impossible not to notice Eggers' dedication to historical authenticity. Allegedly, there were no electric or artificial light sources on set. Only the sun, moon, and period-accurate candlelight.

The flat, grey darkness of the film makes every scene feel dim and claustrophobic. Eggers also claims that much of the script was directly picked up from written accounts of witchcraft from the period, including journals and court records. When asked if he will continue to make films in this genre, he said: "The past is the genre I am most enamored with… if that's a genre."

Then there is Mark Korven's score, which hits all the right notes (pun intended). The brief he was given from Eggers was supposedly this: no drums, no woodwinds, no brass, and "maximum dissonance at all times."

The backbone of the score is a unique instrument called a nyckelharpa, a medieval Swedish keyed violin, but the most notable element is the choir. The vocals were performed by The Element Choir in Toronto, who supposedly specialize in vocal improvisation. Allegedly, Korven gave them absolutely no notes to work from, only loose verbal directions like, "sing one note for ten seconds" or "everyone start whooping." The chaotic crescendos and high-pitched harmonies add to the spookiness and give us the sense that the monsters in this movie are ethereal.

There are some incredible performances carried throughout the entire film — Ralph Ineson and his perfectly gravel-y voice, and Kate Dickie, who brings such an emotional performance to her character's unraveling – but Anya Taylor-Joy is the real standout. In her first on-screen performance, she was able to straddle sin and virtue with incredible subtlety. There is one scene in particular that stands out when she begins speaking to Black Phillip. Taylor-Joy uses the most subtle facial movements to convey the contradictory emotions of grief and excitement at the opportunity to "live deliciously."

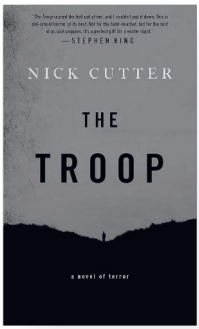
I'd be remiss to not mention Harvey's performance during Caleb's death scene as well. It is an important moment, as the entire last act essentially hinges on it, and with the convulsions, ecstatic prayer, and the ambiguous final moment of peace, he did a pretty incredible job for a young kid!

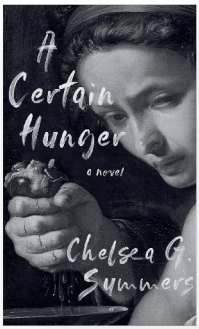
There have been countless depictions of 17th-century Colonial America, and the era's religious superstitions naturally make it a great backdrop for horror films, but *The Witch* offers a fresh spin on the witch subgenre. It exposes how, when pushed far enough, one can become the very thing they fear. Or how treating suffering as a virtue and autonomy as a sin is not, in fact, the way to go. (Shocker!) It may not have the gore and jump scares one may come to expect from horror movies, but it does hit on something truly terrifying: the psychological stress of a world where every natural desire can become evidence against you, even amongst your own family.

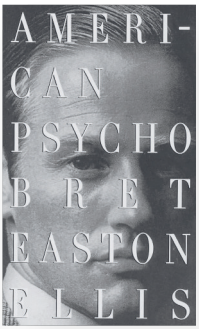
Despite Eggers' self-criticisms — the firewood looking too uniform, the goats being the wrong breed, the candles being all wrong, Anya's earring holes not being CGI'd out — none of it registers as a viewer. He clearly holds himself to a standard that most of us would consider unreachable because personally, I find this movie to be damn-near perfect. After this, Eggers went on to prove himself as a master of dark and disturbing vibes — *The Lighthouse*, *The Northman*, *Nosferatu*, and the upcoming *Werwulf*. But knowing that *The Witch* was his starting point, and watching it again with that context, it is pretty crazy. Some people really are just born with it.

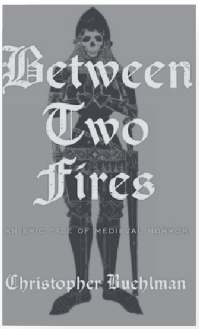


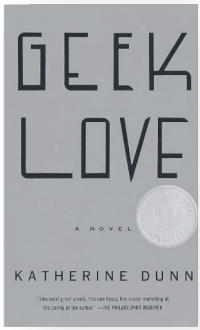
MY HORROR BOOK RECS

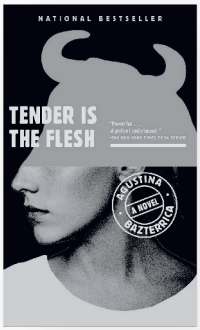


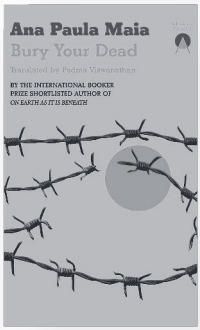


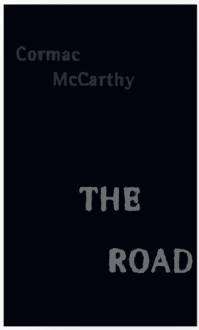




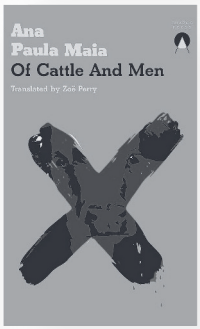


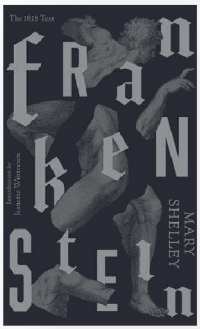


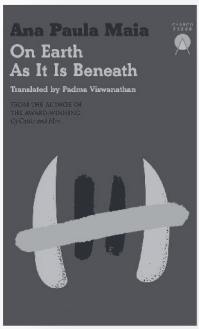




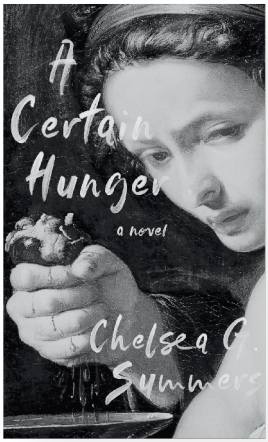








THOUGHTS I HAD WHILE READING: A CERTAIN HUNGER BY CHELSEA G SUMMERS



Ah, the feminine urge to murder your former lovers and eat their organs. Imagine a successful female food critic (rad), who has a lot of sex (very rad), and occasionally murders and eats men (admit it, rad). Chelsea G. Summers' *A Certain Hunger* had me hooked from the start, and there were many moments when I couldn't put it down. I fear this is a book I must make my entire personality. I support women's rights and their wrongs! <3

At first, it's easy to dismiss Dorothy's dining preferences as purely metaphorical; a pointed commentary on gender, power, and consumption. But about halfway through, I began to wonder what exactly the "moral ambiguity" was in this story. Obviously, there's nothing morally ambiguous about murdering and eating your exes. (I do not endorse this behavior, no matter how rad it is.) But once we meet her longtime lover in his butchery, it all clicked for me. We, as readers, were meant to grapple with our own choices. (Ugh, I hate when I have to do that!) Dorothy may be a ruthless killer, but aren't we all complicit in some form of immorality simply by being meat-eaters? We toss nicely packaged, sanitized hunks of meat in our grocery carts, without thinking once about the bloody horrors that had to happen for it to get there. Dorothy's actions are extreme, sure, but at the end of the day, we're all just eating flesh. This book doesn't appear to preach about this, as the author is not a vegetarian herself, but rather provides us with some food for thought. The author challenges us to think about what we are willing to stomach to get what we really want.

Aside from the whole eating people thing, this book also asks: why don't we acknowledge women's homicidal rage? You don't often hear about female psycho- or sociopaths — well, I suppose you do, only they aren't labeled as such. As with all things patriarchal, this blind spot of not recognizing that women, in fact, do have the capacity to experience rage and anger benefits no one. For example, we can't assume that a woman will immediately be overwhelmed with love and that her instinct to nurture will suddenly kick in simply because she gave birth to a child. Millions of mothers have put their children through unspeakable horrors, and every time we are shocked as if it were the first time anyone has ever heard of such a thing.

But violence is not something we associate with femininity. We like to believe that women are natural caregivers and we are reluctant to acknowledge that there are female humans capable of severe evil… Delphine LaLaurie, a New Orleans socialite who tortured and murdered enslaved people in her home. Diane Downs, who shot three of her children so she could have her affair unencumbered. Darya Saltykova, a Russian noblewoman who tortured and murdered her servants, specifically young women, and allegedly bathed in their blood…

I hope this doesn't come across as me stating that violence is liberating when a woman does it. (I promise I'm not!) But there is something a little patronizing about only allowing women to be victims or saints. By denying women the full spectrum of human capacity — including cruelty, rage, and destruction — we infantilize them. This book sits with the uncomfortable truth that if we're standing on the fact that women and men are equal, that includes the fact that women can be evil too.

BLACK GUY DIES FIRST

So, the villain becomes an icon. The victim becomes the survivor. But what happens when there is no reclamation to be had? That's when we get a trope that is so well-worn that it's become a punchline — it's the **Black Guy Dies First.**

While some could say that this trope has been parodied more than it has actually been used in earnest, authors Dr. Robin R. Means Coleman and Mark H. Harris state in their book T*he Black Guy Dies First* that the actual rate of the Black guy dying first is about 45%. Okay, so it's not *literally* first every time, but when there is so little representation, these patterns can seemingly be more prominent than they actually are. And you have to admit, there aren't many old horror films where the minority character makes it out alive.

Coleman and Harris cite *Spider Baby* as one of the first films to introduce this trope in 1968. The character is an unnamed messenger played by prolific comedic actor Mantan Moreland, who is slashed to death in the first five minutes. Coleman and Harris scrutinize how this trope reduces Black livelihoods to entertainment fodder. For decades, Moreland played characters who acted more like cartoon characters, so while he was a beloved actor, his character's early death did not have as much of an impact on white audiences who viewed him more as a joke rather than a real human. Even in films like *Night of the Living Dead,* our Black protagonist, Ben, fights off hordes of zombies as the last character standing, only to be confused for a zombie in the end and shot by white "rescuers." While Ben wasn't the first to die, this signaled to Black audiences that the characters who look like them will *always* die in the end.

To the absolute shock of no one, this all has deep roots in racism. *(I bring a sort of "everything is rooted in sexism and racism" vibe to the function.)* In the early days of cinema, black character roles weren't exactly abundant, and the ones that did exist were mostly given to those who wore blackface and were willing to play stereotypical caricatures. These minstrel shows had a habit of portraying Black characters as dumb and lazy, leading to a lot of the negative stereotypes that the community still faces today.

This carried on over the years as Black leads were kept away from big-budget films that did not focus on race, believing that white audiences would rather see white actors get more screen time. It goes without saying that this being played out to the masses on giant screens perpetuated the prejudices both on- and off-screen. Over time, social pushback created slightly better roles for Black actors, and studios seemed to finally be coming around to the notion that white audiences are generally not as overtly racist as they had assumed.

By the 70s, Hollywood entered a Blaxploitation phase, featuring hundreds of films with Black actors in an effort to appeal to urban audiences. (tfw capitalism outranks your racism.) While these films presented strong, confident Black characters, they also brought about *new* stereotypes like drug dealing, violence, and hypersexuality, all while omitting any trace of actual Black culture. However, this trend did make Black actors in films less "taboo" just in time for the slasher genre to really take shape. In an attempt to appear more diverse, one token Black character was almost always among the friend group, and again, while they may not have always died first, they would never make it to the end.



NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD (1968)

To be clear, in this trope the character does not necessarily have to be male, or human, or even Black for that matter. If a character is a minority amongst the group, their chances of seeing the end of the movie are pretty slim. In the 1931 version of *Frankenstein*, the monster's first victim is Fritz, the hunchbacked assistant to Dr. Frankenstein. While not Black, the character was not "relatable" to most audiences at the time, especially when compared to the ~ handsome ~ doctor. The death of a character like Fritz provides audiences with an early example of the monster's power while still allowing the tension to build up the danger to the more a character the audience actually cares about. We can see how the Black Guy Dies First logic extends to other marginalized groups, marking them as being equally as expendable.

There are a few offshoots to the Black Guy Dies First trope, like the "Sacrificial" or "Magical Negro," who also rarely make it to the film's end. One's sole purpose is to benefit and protect the white protagonist, while the other usually possesses some mysticism that, again, has the sole purpose of helping the white protagonist. A popular example of this trope is from *The Shining*, where Dick Halloran dies trying to protect a white mother and child. It is one of the only deaths in the film, and doesn't occur in Stephen King's original book. To many, this is more proof that Black characters exist only to be killed off, even when the source material doesn't call for it.

Unlike the Villainous Queer or the Final Girl, the Black Guy Dies First hasn't exactly been embraced, nor has it been retooled to be empowering. At least the queer villain gets to be fabulous, and the Final Girl gets to be a badass! The Black Guy Dies First trope cannot be reclaimed because what can you do with a character that exists only to be killed off? Instead of reclaiming what they were given, Black filmmakers have had to seize authorship instead, writing new roles and directing their own films in order to build something new.



THE BLACKENING (2022)


SINNERS (2025)

The recent award-winning successes of Black horror films have paved the way for a promising future for the genre, one where they can actually survive. Jordan Peele is credited with really kicking the door in with his groundbreaking debut, *Get Out,* in 2017. The film is already considered one of the greatest screenplays of the 21st century and is the second highest-grossing R-rated horror film in history, right behind *The Exorcist*. It was nominated for four Academy Awards and won Best Original Screenplay, making Peele the first Black person to win that category. Cut to last year, and Ryan Coogler's *Sinners* also smashed the box office, grossing nearly $370 million worldwide. The film set more records with a whopping 16 Academy Award nominations and four wins, including Best Actor and Best Original Screenplay.

> "There will never be another Get Out. That was the cultural shift. The moment that racism became the fear factor, and when the Black audience was let in on the joke. Get Out gave us permission to be a part of the show and really see ourselves represented in the screams and scares."
>
> – Lauren La Melle, ScaryCrit: A Black Horror Podcast

In *Get Out*, Chris meets his white girlfriend's family for the first time during a weekend trip. Rose's parents are liberal and try to make Chris feel comfortable by famously saying that they "would have voted for Obama for a third term if [they] could." The film eventually takes a dark turn when we realize that all of the family's elderly guests that weekend are actually bidding on whose brain gets to go into Chris' body. Rose's mother hypnotizes their victims into a deep sleep, known as "the sunken place." This is one of the film's most powerful symbols, as it illustrates the character falling into a black hole, making them feel small and unheard. Much like marginalized people in America, it is reminiscent of that helpless feeling that you cannot save yourself. In an interview, Peele describes the sunken place as "this state of marginalization that I've never really quite had a word for." He continues, "The sunken place is the prison-industrial complex; it's the dark hole we throw black people in."

The reality is, modern racism is not shown through chains or white hoods. It's through the small microaggressions that happen day to day. *Get Out* laid it all out, from getting pulled over by a cop to a literal auction, making it impossible to miss the message. Of course, we all knew about racism before seeing *Get Out*, but the film brought on a discussion of a fear that hadn't been explored on the big screen — a fear of white people.

> "Some people dislike when horror movies are 'woke', which I think is ridiculous because the genre is political."
>
> – @briheartshorror, TikTok



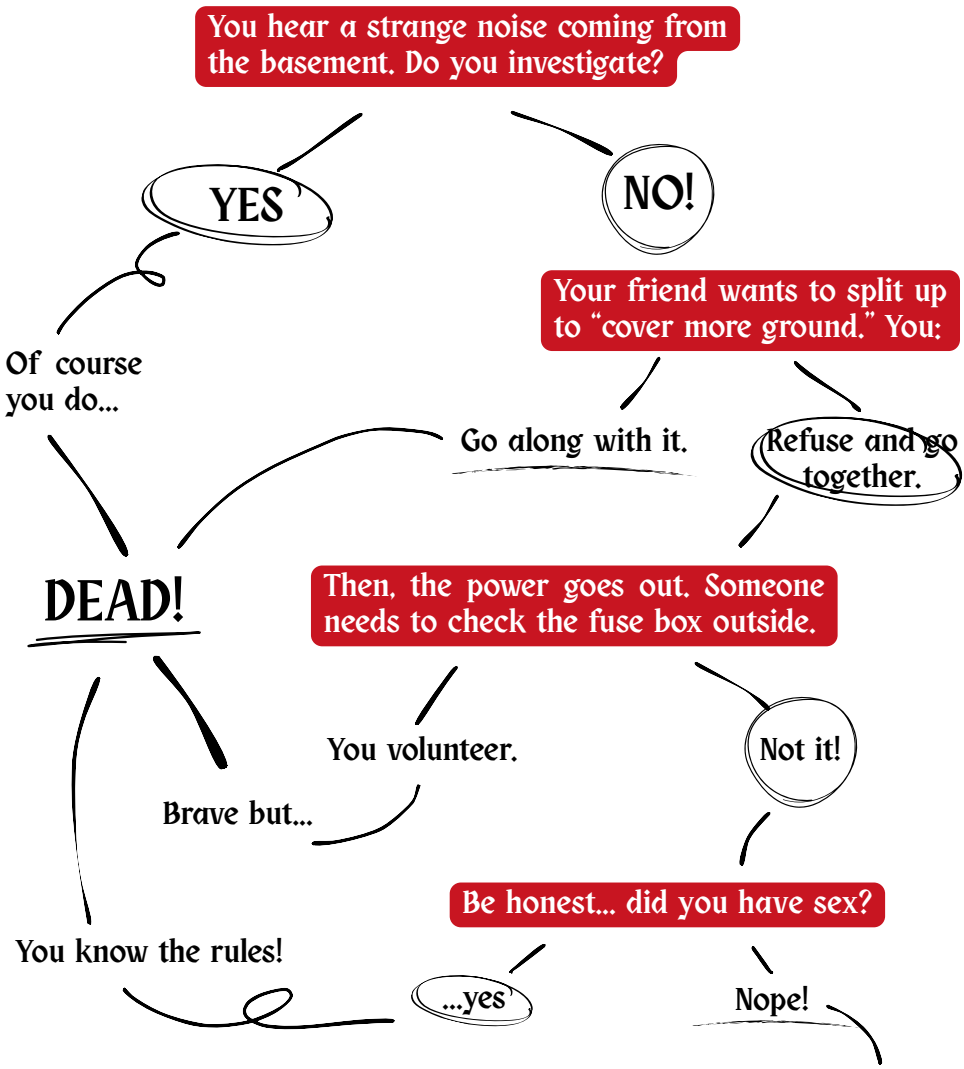
GET OUT (2017)

> "Black horror has the potential to expand more than it ever has. The Blackening is a great example, but we haven't gotten something like that since. We're getting more horror centered around Black women without the sexual and angry tropes of the past. But queer Black narratives are still being excluded."
>
> – Avery Coffey, film reviewer and commentator

But even if they can't all survive, Black filmmakers have at least turned the trope on its head. It's hard not to talk about *Scary Movie* when discussing Black folks in horror, considering it is pretty much the standard for horror comedy, specifically poking fun at the roles Black characters have traditionally played in the genre. In a more modern horror comedy, *The Blackening* (2022), an all-Black friend group celebrates Juneteenth with a weekend away at a cabin. They discover a game called The Blackening that features a figure reminiscent of *Little Black Sambo*. Through the game's rules, the group must sacrifice one of their own based on who is deemed "the Blackest," because hey, they can't all die first! In this satire, their individual Blackness is no longer a liability — it's literally how they will survive. So while queer people reclaimed the villains and women reclaimed the Final Girl, the Black community has seized the entire genre instead. Geez, just think of all of the work it took to accomplish something as simple as not dying first...

Today, the genre of Black horror is becoming much more versatile, showcasing that not every Black narrative is the same. Modern classics like *Get Out* (2017), *Candyman* (2021), or *Antebellum* (2020) may center around Black issues; others like *MA* (2019), *Nope* (2022), or *Blink Twice* (2024) are stories that just so happen to have Black protagonists. Giving black directors, black actors, and black producers the chance to tell new stories offers even more meaningful narratives for audiences to resonate with.

WOULD YOU SURVIVE A HORROR MOVIE?



CONGRATULATIONS! You survived, which means you were cautious, a buzzkill and likely still a virgin. The genre respects you, but not sure you'll get an invite to the next party. Welcome to the Final Girls Club!

A CHARACTER'S LIKE-

So, who dies? Kill the wrong person, or kill them too early, and you risk angering the audience! Executives and writers have concluded that killing off "unpopular" minorities is a safer bet than killing the majority. This has led to a noticeable pattern, something you may call an "algorithm of morality." How is your favorite character looking?

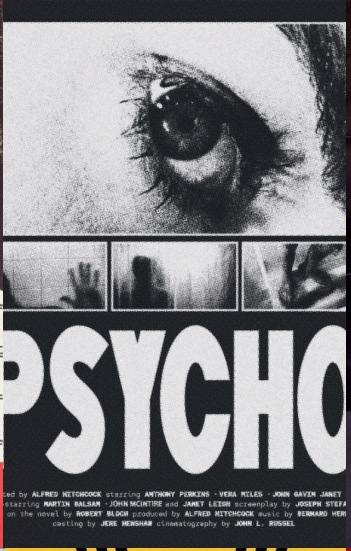
	YOU'RE SO DEAD	MIGHT GET LUCKY
AGE	ELDERLY	PARENT OR MEAN TEEN
SEXUAL ORIENTATION	BISEXUAL, "SLUTTY"	GAY
AESTHETICS	THE RICH BITCH, "UGLY", A COMPLETE MONSTER	HOOKER WITH A HEART OF GOLD, ASSHOLE JOCK, DITZY, THE EFFEMINATE MALE
GENRE ROLE	FACELESS GOONS, THE POWERHOUSE FIGHTER, TOKEN MINORITY	THE LONER, COMIC RELIEF, THE SMART GUY, MR. EXPOSITION, VILLAIN'S RIGHT-HAND MAN, THE INSUFFERABLE GENIUS
FLAWS	TOO DUMB, GREEDY, COWARDLY, NIHILISTIC	STONER, SMARTASS, THE BUTT OF EVERY JOKE, OVERWEIGHT
"VIRTUES"	HOLIER THAN THOU, AMBITIOUS, OVERLY CURIOUS	THE QUIET ONE
SPECIES	UNDEAD, REPTILES, ROBOTS	CATS, EVIL CLONES
OCCUPATION	RETIRED OFFICER, SECOND FEMALE LEAD	VEHICLE DRIVERS, HERO'S BEST FRIEND, THE MENTOR
HEALTH	INCURABLE COUGH, TAKEN ON MORE DAMAGE THAN NECESSARY TO KILL THEM	SOME VAGUE DISEASE, OR IN A COMA

LIKELIHOOD OF DEATH

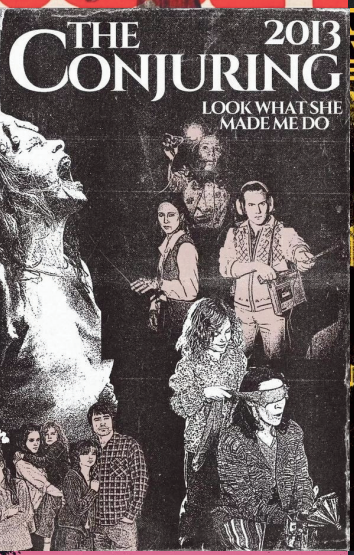
Note: While most of the time you can figure out which characters will survive through the end, some writers want to impress their audience with their ruthlessness. This is called the Anyone Can Die trope and well, it could be anyone!

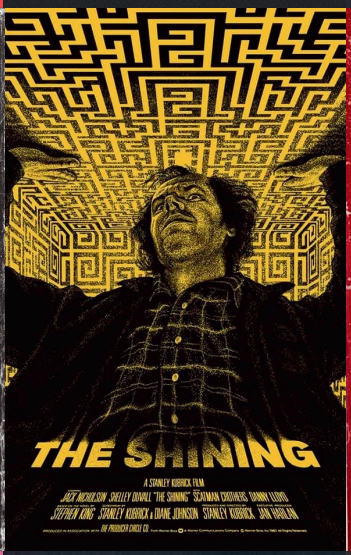
AVERAGE EXPECTANCY	HAS SOME PLOT ARMOR	YOU WILL NEVER DIE!
SINGLE ADULT	PROTAGONIST TEENS	CHILD
STRAIGHT, AVERAGE	RELUCTANT OR ASEXUAL	CELIBATE, VIRGIN
JERK WITH A HEART OF GOLD, THE HERO'S ANALYTICAL FOIL	THE SHRINKING VIOLET, THE TOKEN GIRL IN THE GROUP, HAS A COOL SCAR	CUTIE PIE
THE SIDEKICK, MAIN CHARACTER'S LOVE INTEREST	THE IGNORED EXPERT, MORALLY-GREY VILLAIN, SUPPORTING PROTAGONIST, FRIENDLY ENEMY	THE HERO, DAMSEL IN DISTRESS, FINAL GIRL
NERD WITH GLASSES, UNINTENTIONALLY HATED BY THE AUDIENCE	HAS A CRIPPLING PHOBIA	POLLYANNA, NAIVE
SMART, GENRE SAVVY	NEVER GIVES UP	FRIEND-TO-ALL
HUMANS, HUMAN-LIKE ALIENS	SEXY FEMALE ALIENS	DOGS
SCIENTIST WITH QUESTIONABLE ETHICS, INNOCENT BYSTANDERS	THE CAPTAIN, TEACHER, ARCHAEOLOGIST	SUPERHERO, NUN
"I CAN STILL FIGHT!"	ONLY FLESH WOUNDS, MADE OF IRON, SYMPATHETICALLY SICKLY	BASICALLY INVULNERABLE

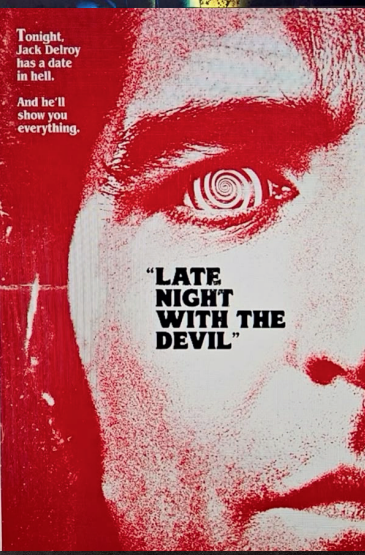


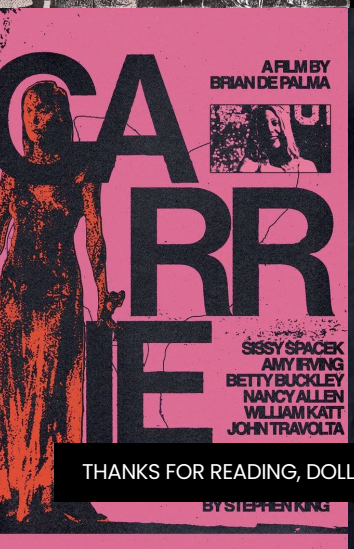


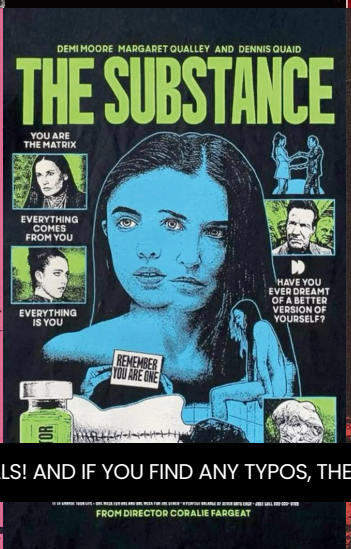


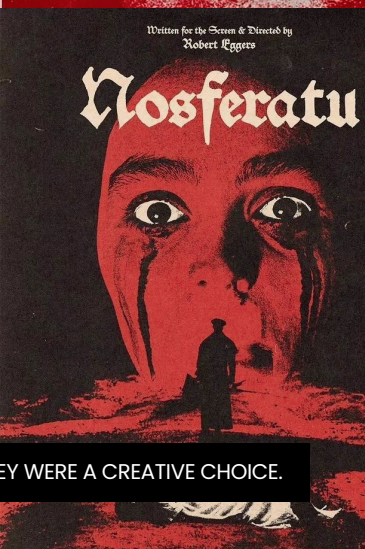












THANKS FOR READING, DOLLS! AND IF YOU FIND ANY TYPOS, THEY WERE A CREATIVE CHOICE.