

The Supernatural and the Movies

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Abstract

The opinion is often heard that supernatural content in movies and television is on the rise. This view shouldn't be blindly accepted without an attempt to quantify it. This paper presents some investigative methods, as well as a scoring system that minimizes the subjective aspect of this process. A history of horror in literature, and its migration to the film medium is presented. The paper concludes with a proposed explanation for the effects observed.

Scope

This paper presents an analysis of the development of supernatural content in movies, from the time of inception of the medium to present. The decline in rational-based television shows is frequently discussed, but represents a much larger, more challenging project. The scope here was intentionally limited to theatrical films in order to create a more manageable set of content to examine.

The 'horror' genre consists of both supernatural and non-supernatural stories, and was selected as a way to further narrow down the field of discussion while still being representative of the medium of movies in general. Science fiction and fantasy stories also often include fantastic elements, such as aliens and monsters from outer space ("Godzilla"); time travel, witchcraft ("Harry Potter") and so forth. However in the sci-fi genre the line between supernatural and mere "futurism" is often blurred, requiring more subjective interpretations in order to evaluate. As part of the decision to limit this examination, one can ask whether it's likely that mainstream movies like "Superman" or "Spiderman" help foster public belief in the reality of these characters. I assumed they don't, and that movies like this probably don't warrant serious discussion as an influence on society beliefs.

Also excluded from evaluation and discussion here are movies that are obvious parodies of other films and other comedies, such as the "Scary Movie" series.

Spoiler Warning: this paper includes details of plots and reveals endings of classic and recent movies, the reader should proceed at their own risk!

Introduction

The frequent reaction among skeptics seems to be to lament the fact that movies have become more supernaturally-oriented. The first task to be undertaken is to verify the accuracy of the perception – is this correct? This impression could be explained by selective memory, or a classic example of confirmation bias. After all, the

perception depends on a subjective interpretation. Only after we verify if this impression is true can we explore possible explanations for the phenomenon.

The author has long held Hollywood in disdain for the content they foist on the public. The "last straw" event that inspired this paper was the author seeing a 1999 remake of a classic 1959 horror film, "House on Haunted Hill". In the 1959 original, all events occurring throughout the film that seemed supernatural were explained at the end as all having rational explanations (the plot boiled down to a conflict between a married couple, with each one attempting to eliminate the other). However in the 1999 version, not only did most events remain with a supernatural explanation at the conclusion, it turned out the house *itself* was "evil", and was acting with intelligence and deliberate malevolence. I therefore set a goal for myself to attempt to quantify this shift in rationality. There are a few challenges in researching films for content, which will be discussed later.

History of Horror

Before proceeding, it may be useful to chronicle the development of the horror story, prior to its migration from print to celluloid. Of course ghost stories aren't new, Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is a ghost story. Several of Shakespeare's other stories included tales of the fantastic or macabre: Macbeth is another example. In 1764, Horace Walpole originated the "gothic novel." Gothic novels were dark tales, as the name suggests, however they lacked any supernatural basis. Don't misunderstand, these books had hauntings, ghosts, as well as disappearing corpses and the like. However it would always turn out in the light of day that the "corpses" were really wax dummies, and the "ghosts" were actually criminals wearing costumes and makeup¹. Popular authors of the genre during this period were Ann Radcliffe and Clara Reeve. These types of books were called "penny dreadfuls" in the United Kingdom, a term still encountered.

In 1792 or 1793, Christian Heinrich Spiess (1755-1799) began publishing similar stories in Germany, however in addition to the rational elements, they also incorporated 'real' supernatural elements. This type of story became popular enough to create a name for the genre, "Schauerromane" (loosely translates to "shudder stories"). Spiess was considered very nearly insane at the time of his death due to his weird fancies. In 1796 Mathew Gregory Lewis brought these 'realistic horrors' to English-speaking people with his novel [The Monk](#).

The trend continued in 1812 with the first publication of Kinder- und Hausmärchen (“Children’s and Household Tales”), by Jakob Ludwig Karl Grimm and Wilhelm Karl Grimm. A second volume was published in 1814. This collection has been reprinted many times since, and has become known as “Grimm’s Fairy Tales”. These tales are based on German, and to some extent, French folklore. Witches, goblins, and trolls are all present. The following is only a small sample of the stories which owe their ancestry to the Grimms, at least as the individuals responsible for recording them for posterity:

- Cinderella
- The Elves and the Shoemaker
- The Fisherman and his Wife
- The Frog Prince
- The Golden Goose
- Hansel and Gretel
- Little Red Riding Hood
- The Pied Piper of Hamelin
- Rapunzel
- Rumpelstiltskin
- Sleeping Beauty
- Snow White
- Tom Thumb

Although we are all familiar with these stories, we may not remember their origin with the Grimms. Contemplate for a moment the extent that these stories and themes have been incorporated into our society and culture, inspiring other books and short stories, and of course, movies – even spawning terms in daily use in our language. Note: a movie was made about the Grimms in 1962 called “The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm”. It’s somewhat grim in tone itself, and probably not historically accurate, but is interesting nevertheless.

The next important author in the horror genre was probably J. Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873). Le Fanu wrote several stories with supernatural elements, without resorting to mundane explanations at the conclusion as others had. In 1872 Le Fanu introduced a female vampire character named Carmilla. That story introduced several elements into the vampire lore that are now standard. Le Fanu almost certainly influenced Bram Stoker’s novel Dracula. It should also be noted that in the early 1900s, the term “vampire” was routinely used in reference to predatory females, possibly as a result of the Carmilla story.² It wasn’t until the popularization of Stoker’s Dracula that the term took on its current interpretation.

Another contributor to the development of horror culture was the Grand Guignol puppet theatre. This was a small theatre in Paris that flourished in the late 19th and early 20th century. It featured puppet shows that routinely involved beheadings, the gouging out of eyes, and other forms of mayhem, all with plenty of realistic-appearing blood. The theatre was very successful, and resulted in a second site in London. Although violent, these

presentations don’t seem to have relied on supernatural elements to any great degree. The Grand Guignol theatre shows up briefly in the 1994 film of Ann Rice’s Interview with a Vampire. The term “Grand Guignol” is still used in the horror genre to describe particularly gory tales.

Thus the horror literature was almost completely developed by the end of the 19th century, needing only a few more contributions in order to fully mature, from writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Jules Verne, and H.P. Lovecraft (among others). In the 20th century the more fantastic aspect of the genre probably owes a large debt to “Astounding Science Fiction” and other material published by John Campbell, Jr.

Development of Movies and the Cinema

Let’s shift gears a little bit and examine how movies came about. It’s common knowledge that Thomas Edison invented movies in the mid 1890s, with his “Kinetograph” movie camera and “Kinetoscope” viewing device. There were earlier devices that could show a series of still pictures in rapid succession. Besides Edison’s Kinetoscope, the next closest contending technology for movies was probably the “Mutoscope”, which used a series of photographs printed on cards mounted radially to a central core (like a large Rolodex). The viewer looked into a small window and turned a crank to see a moving picture sequence of about a minute or less. These devices can sometimes still be found in penny arcades.

By the time of Edison’s invention, he had already become very successful as a result of his previous inventions. He had a large factory and hundreds of employees. It was actually an engineer working for Edison, William K. L. Dickson, who developed the important aspects of the 35mm motion picture film system, as well as Edison’s Kinetoscope viewer device. It’s important to realize that although the Edison/Dickson Kinetoscope used 35mm motion picture film, it was still somewhat of a novelty device. The film image was viewed by only one person at a time, looking at the picture through a magnifying lens, just as with the Mutoscope. The film was formed into a continuous loop of about 20 feet in length which offered a continuously-repeating scene of only a few seconds duration. Typical subjects were someone sneezing, a couple dancing, a comic doing a pratfall, and so on (all without sound of course). The technology at this stage was essentially at the level of someone viewing 35mm slides by holding them up to the light. This isn’t what we think of as “the movies” today. In short, Edison made advances in the motion camera and certain aspects of motion photography, but his method of display wasn’t mature.

The “cinema experience” was created by Frenchmen Auguste and Louis Lumière in 1896. They were the first to project motion picture images onto a screen so that multiple spectators could view them simultaneously. At

the World's Fair of 1900 they projected their images on a screen 25 by 15 meters, or about 80 x 50 feet³. This is larger than standard cinema screens today, almost the same size as some IMAX[®] screens. The Lumières were also responsible for the term "cinema" used to refer to this shared experience we all appreciate. It is this cinema experience, in a darkened room, shared with people all around you, that makes it the truly immersive experience that it is. When the viewer is surrounded by dozens, or even hundreds of fellow human beings, all laughing together or crying together, or gasping in unison at something startling, that is what makes the medium so conducive to many stories, including horror.

Many people probably don't appreciate the difference between "a movie" which is a product, a thing on film; and "the cinema", which is an experience in a theatre. Edison never did quite realize the importance of this, trusting in the success of his Kinetoscope "peepshow" viewing device. With the success of the Lumières, and the obvious preference of patrons for the group experience, Edison quickly had his engineers develop his own projector. But Edison never regained the market leader position. In 1917 Edison finally gave up on the movie business, closing his studio and liquidating his film production assets. However the legacy he left to the world of movies was Dickson's 35mm film format that has endured from 1895 to the present, more than 110 years, still used in every theatre around the world.

Convergence: Horror comes to the Movies

Georges Méliès was an early influential filmmaker, described as the first true movie "director", and the creator of the first movie studio. He is perhaps best known for his short film of 1902, "Le Voyage dans la Lune" (A Trip to the Moon). This film has been called "a mixture of surrealism, pantomime, and humor," the story a combination of Jules Verne and H.G. Wells. It features one of the most memorable shots in early motion pictures, when the space capsule hits the man in the moon in the eye. However other than this slight deviation from reality, this work doesn't have much interest to us in the study of supernatural movies.

On the other hand, Méliès' later "La Conquête du pôle" (Conquest of the Pole) in 1912 gave us what is perhaps the first truly supernatural moment in a motion picture: an "abominable snow creature" attacks and eats members of a polar expedition. Thus the supernatural horror movie was born (even so, Méliès went broke in 1913).

A milestone occurred in 1913 with the German film "The Student of Prague." This film introduced events with a Satanic cause. "Der Golem" in 1915 involved a stone statue come-to-life to enact vengeance. This film, along with "Homunculus" of 1916, was loosely based on the Greek legend of Prometheus, who stole heavenly fire from the gods to infuse life into his creation.

The 1920s saw the emergence of some key, though perhaps not particularly well-known, titles. D.W. Griffith's "One Exciting Night" of 1922, released by United Artists, is probably the prototype of the "haunted house weekend" type of film. It included two murders, missing treasure, secret passages with sliding panels, and a hooded figure stalking the heroine, all set against the backdrop of a raging storm. Universal's "The Cat and the Canary" in 1927 incorporated the elements of the reading of a will at midnight, more sliding doors, and someone attempting to convince someone else they're crazy. This vehicle was remade several times, including a Bob Hope comedy in 1939. Both of these titles turned out in the end to have no supernatural antagonist, but only human perpetrators. In this respect they were the exact translation to film of the gothic novel of the previous century. Being silent films they were also probably not particularly effective, lacking the benefit of the sounds of moaning wind, creaking doors and such. The first sound version of this type of story was "The Terror" released by Warners in 1928.

D. W. Griffith's "The Sorrows of Satan" in 1925 introduced the idea of a contemporary Satan, appearing in human form. Up until this time Satan had invariably been portrayed as having horns, with hooves for feet, or even the entire lower body of a goat (a *lâ Pan* or *Satyr*). In cartoons and drawings Satan would usually have bright red skin (although of course color movies didn't come until much later). In this film Satan only appeared in his "true" satanic form in silhouette.

Although the definitive "Dracula" movie was released in 1931, that wasn't the first time the story had been filmed. The story was made as a silent film, "Nosferatu: Eine Symphonie Des Grauens" in Germany in 1922, directed by F. W. Murnau. Although clearly based on the Dracula story, apparently at that time filmmakers didn't worry too much about obtaining the rights to stories, and rather than negotiate with Bram Stoker's widow, they simply changed the names of all the characters. Count Dracula became Count Orlock.

Universal's "Dracula" directed by Tod Browning in 1931 was a milestone in a few ways. It was particularly offensive to the skeptical view, in that at one point the Van Helsing character faces the camera and declares to the audience that vampires are very real. The film was so influential in establishing the genre, it's often referred to as "the first horror film". Incidentally, this film also introduced the gimmick of having a nurse in attendance at theatres to care for those who might become faint or ill. We'll come back to Dracula shortly.

Even after supernatural elements had been introduced in films, there were several filmmakers that didn't resort to supernatural antagonists or non-rational explanations in their plots. William Castle directed and produced several films, among them two films released in 1959, "House on

Haunted Hill” mentioned earlier, and “The Tinger”. Apparently Castle felt the movie audience wasn’t yet ready to swallow nonsense, and he included scientific (or at least scientific-*sounding*) explanations for all apparent supernatural effects depicted in his films. William Castle was also the originator of many in-theatre gimmicks. For “House” Castle created an effect called “Emergo”. This effect consisted simply of flying a luminous skeleton out over the audience, suspended by wires, at the climax of the movie. For “Tinger” Castle developed another novelty which he called “Percepto”. This was a little more devious, consisting of vibrating buzzers mounted underneath a few seats in the theatre. The idea was to try to simulate the feeling of an electric shock. In a filmed introduction at the start of the film, Castle himself warns the audience that certain sensitive members of the audience will feel “sensations” during the movie, and urges them to scream in order to release tension and save their sanity. The film “Matinee” of 1993 was director Joe Dante’s homage to William Castle and this type of theatre gimmickry. John Goodman plays the Castle character (with a dash of Orson Welles thrown in). If nothing else, this film is worth watching just for the few scenes of “Mant!”, a movie-within-a-movie of the giant-insect-horror variety. It contains every cliché in the book, with wonderful cheesy effects, theremin music, and great overacting by William Schallert, Cathy Moriarty, Kevin McCarthy and others. We only get glimpses of this gem on the theatre screen in the background, however some of the video releases include all of the scenes of it as a “featurette” (it was included on the laser disc release, but strangely not on the DVD I’m told).

More recent examples of frightening but non-supernatural films are “April Fool’s Day” of 1986, and “Silence of the Lambs” of 1991, just to name two. These films are very satisfying horror fare for skeptics.

Research Challenges

The first difficulty in this undertaking to research horror films was that I had to create a system for scoring the supernatural content of movies. There’s no “industry standard” established system for rating the supernatural content in a work of fiction. Before we can give movies a score representing their “supernatural quotient”, we must select a scoring method. Rating systems would seem to rely largely on the subjective impression of the person making the evaluation. A method that attempts to be less subjective was sought for this paper.

I had initially planned to use a rating system forcing a binary choice, i.e., “supernatural” or “non-supernatural”, which would seem to require the minimum subjectivity in making the assessment. However there are so many films in the gray area between these extremes, it made it very difficult to rate many of them. A three-level scoring system was selected as a compromise, with ratings from 0 to 2:

- 0: no supernatural causes, all rational explanations
- 1: minor supernatural content, not affecting the basic story
- 2: significant supernatural content, would ruin the plot if removed.

If dealing with a *group* of movies, this method allows the researcher to simply sum the ratings, or to easily calculate an average between 0 and 2 for the group.

The second challenge to this work was that although there are many published and online reference works available for films, almost none of them reveal movie endings. This requires a researcher to actually watch an entire movie in order to determine whether a rational explanation is provided for events that may initially appear supernatural. This necessarily limited the scope of this examination to a few dozen representative movies that could be reviewed in the time available. However another sampling method also suggested itself, involving modern remakes.

I had somewhat of an epiphany in realizing films could be selected for evaluation which were remade decades after the original versions were released, as with my experience with “House on Haunted Hill.” By simply comparing the supernatural content between the versions, it creates a gauge of how attitudes toward supernatural content may have changed in the interval between them. To continue with this example, there are actually *four* filmed versions of “House on Haunted Hill”: the 1959 original and the 1999 remake mentioned above, and another series called simply “The Haunting”, made originally in 1963, and *also* remade in 1999. “The Haunting” of 1963 contained relatively mild supernatural aspects, the only manifestations consisting of a cold spot in the house, and unexplained noises during the night. All other effects apparently took place only within the minds of the guests. After reviewing all these versions, the “supernatural quotient” scores of these four movies were rated as follows:

Table 1

Movie	Score
“The House on Haunted Hill” (1959)	0
“The Haunting” (1963)	1
“The House on Haunted Hill” (1999)	2
“The Haunting” (1999)	2

So this one story, as represented in these four films, supports the initial hypothesis that supernatural content has risen over time. All four versions of this story are (supposedly) based on the novel The Haunting of Hill House written by Shirley Jackson in 1959. However there are such major differences between the films, I had to obtain a copy of the book in order to determine which one was closest to the novel, and whether the book contained supernatural events. After reading the novel it became

clear that “The Haunting” of 1963 was the most true to the book, in fact surprisingly so for a Hollywood film.

In the novel and the 1963 film (directed by Robert Wise), a psychologist lures two “sensitive” people to an alleged haunted house in his research for a book on such phenomena. The research project is intended to last several weeks, and the guests move into the house for the duration. However in the prior film “House on Haunted Hill” of 1959, only some of the names of the characters have been retained from the novel, along with the caretaker and his wife, a spooky pair. The gimmick of the guests being locked in at night is also retained. However the plot of this movie was based around a party, with a larger group of people invited to spend just one night in the house, for which they will each receive \$10,000. A “party favor” is given to each guest in the form of a loaded gun! The main character, played by Vincent Price, is a doctor (of undisclosed type), but his presence there has nothing to do with his work.

Finally, “The Haunting” remake of 1999 retains the doctor and research aspects, but the whole story now revolves around the house itself, which is so evil, at the conclusion of the film it is literally shaking itself apart, either to get the guests to leave or merely to torment them.

Now that I’ve provided the background and examples of the rating system, it’s time to start rating more movies.

Quantifying the Classics

I’ll first provide a short summary of the “classic” horror movies evaluated, offering my scores for these titles at the end of this section.

“Cabinet of Dr. Caligari”, 1920

This is probably the great granddaddy of horror movies. However the only supernatural aspect of it is the assumption that “somnambulism” is a legitimate medical condition. More specifically, that someone in a sleeplike state could be controlled by another to the extent of committing crimes, such behavior exhibited in the film by the Doctor’s servant. Of course there’s no evidence presented in the story that the somnambulist wasn’t merely acting on his own, while *pretending* to be under the control of the doctor. Interestingly, although the supernatural aspects of this film are tenuous at best, in the American version the whole story is disclaimed at the end as the ravings of a madman anyway. The German version didn’t resort to this disclaimer. Due to the lack of any real supernatural content plus the disclaimer at the end, it doesn’t rate as supernatural.

“Hunchback of Notre Dame”, 1923

There are no supernatural aspects in this film – there’s nothing supernatural about a deformed man who hangs around a bell tower and falls for a pretty girl. Lon Chaney starred in one of his most famous roles.

“Phantom of the Opera”, 1925

From the novel by Leroux, said to be inspired by the novel *Trilby* by Du Maurier. A disfigured man lives in the basement of the opera house and terrorizes people. Lon Chaney in the starring role again. And again, not very supernatural, although not without some suggestive overtones. But the phantom is just a man – an evil, deranged man to be sure, but a human nonetheless. In fact in the 1943 version with Claude Rains, any hint of fantasy has been removed, all events have a reasonable explanation.

“Svengali”, 1931, Warners (also based on *Trilby*).

This story is the first in this list that warrants being rated for mild supernatural content, based on someone committing acts while in a hypnotic state. The fundamental story isn’t too dissimilar from Dr. Caligari, the difference being that in this example the person is clearly committing these acts against their will. Enough is documented about hypnosis to know this isn’t realistic.

“Dracula”, 1931, Universal

This film contains supernatural elements, although mild in scope. Anyone can sleep in a coffin, run around in a cape attacking people, and drink their blood. The extent of the supernatural aspects are the Count’s alleged immortality, and his ability to turn himself into a bat and also a dog. A damning aspect is when the Van Helsing character addresses the camera directly, assuring the audience that “vampires are real.” So there are minor supernatural aspects. Bela Lugosi made this role forever his. Incidentally this film was the biggest moneymaker of 1931.

“Frankenstein”, 1931, Universal

This one is somewhat borderline, however a doctor sewing body parts together doesn’t violate science or any physical laws. This is no more amazing than modern grafting and organ transplants, which are common medical procedures today. That the creature might run amok after being rejected by society is also not so difficult to accept. Probably the strongest scientific complaints one could make about the movie are the length of time the bodies providing the parts had been dead prior to “reactivation”, and also that the issue of immune system response toward the various body parts (“rejection”) isn’t addressed. But this film classifies as science fiction at worst, not supernatural. Note: the studio adopted a fairly brave marketing scheme, in advising the weak-hearted not to watch it, as a “friendly warning.” There were reports of smelling salts having to be administered to some female members of audiences, which may be true or may be more studio hype.

“Dr. Jekyll & Mr. Hyde”, 1932, Paramount
 Again borderline, but what do we really have here? Someone becoming evil under the influence of chemicals. Actually Mr. Hyde’s behavior isn’t much worse than the effect alcohol has on some people. The character effectively becomes bipolar, an illness treated today with chemicals (drugs). So is it really so surprising that chemicals could induce this behavior in an otherwise normal individual? The change in appearance could perhaps be attributed to artistic license. In fact, not all versions of the story utilized heavy makeup – a 1941 version starring Spencer Tracy relied almost exclusively on a simple change in facial expression to indicate the transition to Hyde. As mild as the supernatural aspects of this story are, several versions still concluded by disclaiming the whole thing as a dream. And as with Caligari before it, the German versions again didn’t resort to this watering-down.

“The Mummy”, 1932, Universal
 No doubt here, the plot relies on a mummy magically coming back to life that’s been dead for over a thousand years. There’s no way to explain that other than as a supernatural event.

“The Invisible Man”, 1933, Universal
 Another borderline tale, but more science-fiction/fantasy than supernatural. Who’s to say making someone or something invisible may not be possible one day? Modern “stealth fighter” planes are effectively invisible to radar, which uses electromagnetic radiation just like visible light. There has also been a fair amount of work by military agencies on active “chameleon-like” camouflage technology. So the way has been at least partially paved toward a rational explanation for making an object or even a person not reflect a visible image, or at least, not its *true* image.

“The Wolf Man”, 1941, Universal
 There’s no rationalizing this as a mental or medical condition – the story legitimizes the folklore of werewolves, and therefore falls squarely into the supernatural category.

That concludes my ten “classics.” My ratings are shown in Table 2. Before proceeding, it’s time for a little quiz... of these ten stories evaluated so far, which one would you guess is most prolific? The answer is the Jekyll & Hyde story, filmed more than 30 times in different guises and with different titles, including 8 incarnations before sound was even introduced to movies. The version referred to here is the first version with sound, starring Frederic March. Another new version was released in 2004, and yet another version is currently in production as a TV series in the UK. I’ll observe that the writing of this story by Robert Louis Stevenson was contemporary with the birth of psychoanalysis, and Freud’s id, ego, superego,

and all the rest of it. At its core the story is about man’s basic internal conflict between good and evil. This story has inspired countless similar tales in movies and on television (including at least two episodes of the original “Star Trek” TV series).

Table 2: Classic Summary

Movie	Score
Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, 1920	0
Hunchback of Notre Dame, 1923	0
Phantom of the Opera, 1925	0
Svengali, 1931, Warners	1
Dracula, 1931, Universal	1
Frankenstein, 1931, Universal	0
Jekyll & Hyde, 1932, Paramount	0
The Mummy, 1932, Universal	2
The Invisible Man, 1933, Universal	0
The Wolf Man, 1941, Universal	2
Total	6

I’ve included the studio/distributor for several of these titles, to expose any connection between supernatural content and the source. This reveals a fairly clear domination by Universal of the supernatural horror movies in this list.

Horror Movies Turn Fantastic

A shot in the arm was given to the supernatural side of the horror film genre in the 1940s, via the “Inner Sanctum” series of films, inspired by the radio show. The series included the following titles:

- Calling Dr. Death, 1943
- Dead Man’s Eyes, 1944
- Weird Woman, 1944
- Frozen Ghost, 1945
- Strange Confession, 1945
- Pillow of Death, 1946

Lon Chaney starred in all the films in the series. These movies were also all released by Universal. I haven’t had the opportunity to view these films in order to rate them here, but supernatural content is prevalent according to other reviews.

Ghost stories

Although I don’t delve here into specific types of supernatural content in movies, ghosts are a common reoccurring theme. There are a few examples of this genre I’d like to briefly mention.

- “The Uninvited”, 1944, Paramount

The film is significant because it introduced the idea of the “evil ghost” terrorizing the inhabitants of a dwelling. Reports are that the studio was somewhat nervous about the antagonist not turning out to be flesh and blood in the end, as usual for such stories. The supernatural aspects of the story were toned way down in the advertising, which billed it as “the story of a love that is out of this world.”

“The Ghost and Mrs. Muir,” 1947

This was an interesting entry in the genre. On its surface the story seems to be about a woman interacting with a real ghost, a manifestation of a former sea captain who still continues to inhabit his home after death. Although the captain, portrayed by Rex Harrison, is a coarse and imposing figure, he’s not particularly frightening. In fact he’s not sufficiently frightening to drive a widow and her young daughter out of the place. But there are a few clues included which suggest the entire captain presence may have been simply a fantasy of the woman, perhaps influenced by being surrounded by his portrait and other personal effects left in the house. So the overall supernatural content is left a little ambiguous, and difficult to judge. Although it was a serious, perhaps even mildly romantic film, the story was turned into a silly situation comedy on television in the 1960s.

The “Topper” series

This series hardly qualifies as ghost stories, being very light-hearted with friendly ghosts that not only don’t do any harm to anyone, but help solve crimes. A modern incarnation would be the Alec Baldwin and Geena Davis ghost characters in “Beetlejuice”.

People have commented to me that I should discuss the movie “Ghost”, of 1990, being a credulous film. This is true, especially with its tagline, “you will believe.” However like most of the other ghost stories mentioned here, it falls outside the horror genre, and therefore outside the primary scope of this paper. So let’s move on.

Hitchcock

I’d like to single out one director of horror films: Alfred Hitchcock is widely acknowledged by many to be the “master of horror.” It may be instructive to count how many of his stories relied on supernatural perpetrators or events. Surprise! There aren’t any. Of the dozens of movies he made throughout his career, not a single one resorted to the supernatural crutch. His stories were simple murder mysteries, spy thrillers and the like. Nothing supernatural. In fact, Hitchcock’s “Family Plot” of 1976 is about a phony psychic/con artist, a bone tossed to the skeptic movement (his last movie).

The only possible exception in the Hitchcock résumé might be “The Birds”, 1963. Another Du Maurier story, the plot involves birds attacking a coastal town without apparent provocation. However no indication is ever present in the movie that a supernatural effect is at work, either. If the movie had been made today, it would probably be explained that the birds were reacting to an

environmental problem: changes in the atmosphere, pollution of the water, or something similar.

Modern Horror Movies

Earlier, ten “classic” horror movies were evaluated for supernatural content. It’s time to do the same for more recent titles. I’ve selected a cross-section of some of the most popular movies from the last 30 years, including a couple of recent entries. I don’t think detailed explanations are necessary, I’ll skip right to the scoring:

Table 3: The Modern Classics

Movie	Score
The Exorcist, 1973	2
The Omen, 1976	2
Halloween, 1978	0
The Amityville Horror, 1979	2
Friday the 13th (Jason), 1980	0
The Shining, 1980	1
Poltergeist, 1982	2
Nightmare on Elm Street (Freddy), 1984	2
The Ring, 2002	2
The Grudge, 2004	2
Total	15

Granted the method of selecting titles employed here was popularity and memorability, not a scientific method. However even allowing for some bias in selection, a substantial increase in supernatural content compared to the classics is fairly evident in the score totals. In fact some people may be surprised at the two zero scores I gave in Table 3, which warrants a comment or two. In the original “Halloween”, a man escapes from a mental institution and goes on a killing spree. The only supernatural aspect in the film is that the man doesn’t seem to die very easily at the end. However there’s no evidence of anything supernatural at work.

The original “Friday the 13th” is much the same, it consists of a series of killings which are revealed at the end to simply be the work of a homicidal maniac. I can’t resist relating a good trivia question here, that allegedly has won money for people in bets. The question is, how many people did Jason Voorhees kill in the original movie? Of course the answer is zero, in the original film all the killings were done by Mrs. Voorhees. Jason never even made an appearance.

Conclusion: What’s Going on Here?

To recap somewhat, here are the main points I’d like to bring home.

The template for horror movies seems to have been the Gothic Novel. Gothic Novels usually had prosaic

explanations (at least in English-speaking countries). However the gothic novels of Germany, (Schauerromane) included fantastic, supernatural elements: ghosts, vampires, werewolves, etc.

Spieß and the Grimms were *also* from Germany, in fact the Grimms were considered national heroes, their likeness appearing on the 1,000 Deutchmark bill at one time.

Bram Stoker's Dracula was based on his research of German and other European folk tales.

There was a very active film production industry in Germany, dating back to quite early in the 20th century, in which fantastic elements were frequently presented without mundane excuses or disclaimers, unlike the custom in American films.

An inordinate number of the early American supernatural movies were produced and released by Universal Studios – it would even be fair to say that Universal *created* the horror movie genre, and introduced the supernatural trend. Interestingly, the studio was founded by Carl Laemmle, an émigré from Germany to the U.S. in 1844. As the Nazi party rose to power in the 1930s, other filmmakers also began emigrating from Germany to the U.S., including F. W. Murnau, Ernst Lubitsch, Alexander Korda, Michael Curtiz, Fritz Lang, and others. Laemmle personally funded the immigration of several of these German refugees, and gave some of them jobs making movies.

So the incorporation of supernatural elements into the horror culture seems to be partially a German/European import, or at least heavily influenced by that culture (by the way, 'poltergeist' is a German word).

The Good News

This transition toward the supernatural happened in written form much earlier than the movies – it was more than 100 years after literature had taken this route before movies started to reflect the same shift. Maybe a better question to contemplate is why this progression took so long. Were mass movie audiences more skeptical? Is it possible the studios were "holding out", or attempting to keep standards high as part of maintaining some sort of moral high ground? Probably not. A cinematographer friend gave me his perspective on this. He has been an avid movie-goer all his life, and remembers going to the movies in the 1950s, when they almost always had a rational explanation for things that seemed supernatural. He suggests the general public was more skeptical 50 years ago, not having been conditioned for these types of stories yet – he thinks audiences would have laughed out loud if the filmmakers attempted to use a real ghost or spirit as the culprit in their movies then. And of course a horror movie that gets laughs or becomes a target of ridicule is the worst fear of a filmmaker or studio. This probably goes a good way toward accounting for the delay of this transition.

Although many horror films today *do* resort to supernatural and fantasy elements, not all of them do. And horror movies don't even constitute a majority of films released, in fact they're a fairly small minority (although the ones that are released are often fairly big-budget and well-publicized). At the time this paper was prepared, 142 different movie titles were either running or had run within the last few weeks in the greater Los Angeles area (this high number is no doubt due to the large number of art houses, and retrospectives which run in this area). However out of the 142 titles, only 10 were in the category of horror⁴. As a percentage of total films out and able to be seen, this is an extremely small fraction.

Finally, more good news: a majority of Americans still don't take things like vampires, werewolves, witches and goblins seriously (although the same may not be said for ghosts, evil spirits, and psychic phenomena).

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Most of the information in this paper came from a handful of sources. I've not included attributions for many of the facts related herein, as they'd merely be repeated citations to the same sources.

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