

# Evolution of a Genre

**By Olivia Miller, MiraCosta College  
Mentor: Billy Gunn**

Truth really is stranger than fiction. The horror industry has been prevalent in pop culture for over a century. From the first horror film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) to contemporary pieces such as *Get Out* (2017), this genre has consistently showcased advanced cinematographic techniques. These techniques have been up to date for their specific time period, exciting the viewers about the enhancements. This keeps the viewers hooked, as human nature is prone to take an interest in these topics. It is scientifically proven that humans are psychologically inclined to find horror appealing. The dark, disturbing, and terrifying content elicits a shocked response from the audience. By having this grasp on the viewer's attention, the filmmakers can convey outlooks on social issues based on observations and experiences. Therefore, the horror film genre has proven to be successful over the past century due to large-scale technological cinematographic advancements and human psychological tendencies that fuel interest in horror. This gives horror films the ability to explore social issues, making the film seem realistic enough to apply to life.

Beginning with technological cinematographic horror advancements, leading technology in film is used to attract viewers. In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, many advanced cinematographic techniques were showcased. By dyeing the film, scenes appeared in different colors. For example, nighttime scenes are blue, conveying mysteriousness and uncertainty. During the daytime, the film is dyed yellow/orange. This provides contrast, conveying peace. In Jane's house, the film is pink. This conveys feelings of love, reminding the audience of the protagonist's feelings toward her (Valdez & Mehrabian 396-401). Another technique called vignettes zoomed in on a character or object. This highlights a reaction, expressing importance to the viewers. When transitioning between scenes, quadrants of the screen were utilized. This advanced technique reminds the audience that two separate events involving characters are occurring simultaneously. In the 1920s, these breakthrough methods not only told the story, but excited the audience over the artistic improvements in the cinematographic realm. Cinematographic advancements foreshadow impending danger, building suspense. This suspense is what the audience craves, grasping their attention and intriguing their senses.

Leading technology in the domain of horror is displayed differently in contemporary films. In *Get Out*, prosthetics are utilized, such as in the scene where Dean conducts surgery. This scene features a head being cut open and a brain showing. The gory brain strikes a chord among the audience as it scares them, creating curiosity. Furthermore, the point-of-view shots enable the audience to see what Chris, the victim of the terrifying crimes, is living through. An example transpires when Chris is in "the sunken place." Computer-generated imagery makes Chris appear as if he is slowly sinking into a blank space. A small image of what is happening outside of Chris is shown, allowing the audience to visualize from Chris's point of view. These advanced uses of cinematography engage the audience by awakening multiple emotions: they feel disturbed, interested, and impatient to see what happens next (Wilson 1027). The many creative ways to conduct cinematography reflect the director's artistic talents, thereby drawing audiences to the films.

Although *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Get Out* are ninety-seven years apart, these two horror films share characteristics in terms of using technology to attract their spectators. In both movies, the directors use the most up-to-date cinematic techniques, equipment, and production methods considering their eras. By doing so, the viewers feel more moved by the film than before. These powerful effects of cinema ripple throughout all facets of the graphical representation of the story and are being continuously updated as time progresses. Being a visual medium, film has a powerful psychological effect on its viewers.

The visual medium of film shows rather than tells to an audience of voyeurs, or “someone who is engrossed in prying on the personal affairs and lifestyles of other individuals” (“Voyeurism”). Voyeurism escalates the horror genre, as the viewers directly feel the effects on a hormonal level. The feel-good chemical called endorphins is released by the brain (McArdle et. al). Furthermore, adrenaline is secreted by the fight-or-flight response being activated. The audience isn’t in any actual danger, yet feels pleasurable effects (Scrivner et. al 2-7). Voyeurism and these effects are demonstrated in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* when Cesare foreshadows that Alan will die before dawn. This plants a seed that is played off in the petrifying scene of his death. This also occurs in the suspenseful scene when Cesare attempts to murder Jane. The build-up in these examples constructs tension, which is broken, thereby causing the audience to experience a release of endorphins. The audience is not the target of Cesare’s killing, yet feel the intensity as if they were. By individuals watching and enjoying horror, they are chasing endorphins and adrenaline, growing the popularity of the genre. The same phenomenon is demonstrated in *Get Out* (Scrivner et. al 3-6).

Some frightening scenes that precisely exhibit voyeurism occur when the audience watches Chris as he struggles through the obstacles of meeting his girlfriend’s family. Specifically, the scenes where the protagonist is hypnotized, gore is shown, or the nighttime running scene. These all have a satisfying effect on the viewers. What these three scenes have in common is the suspense that is built, followed by the tension being broken in an instant. Once again, the fight-or-flight response is activated without the viewers being in a threatening position. This causes the emission of adrenaline. Furthermore, endorphins are released by the brain into the bloodstream. On a neurological level, these effects result in an overall enjoyable feeling. Viewers of the horror genre seek these feelings. Both *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Get Out*, along with many horror movies contain a reaction to previous stimuli that results in an endorphin and adrenaline rush (Scrivner et. al 8-9). Therefore, the horror film genre has been successful over many years as humans have felt the enjoyable effects by being voyeurs.

Being a voyeur of horror films offers insight into social issues. The horror film genre takes a creative approach to exploring social issues through the lens of fear. Horror films are similar enough to reality, which sends the audience chills by using real issues. However, it is different from reality by extrapolating these issues to fictitious extremes. In *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, the dynamic between Cesare and Dr. Caligari conveys a frightful message. Dr. Caligari is the master of Cesare, who blindly follows his commands. Cesare represents the common person while Dr. Cagliari represents totalitarianism. He preys on the citizens by taking advantage of their gullibility by promising fortune-telling. The citizens, thrilled over the false hope, symbolize turning to a totalitarian government for answers. In the case of the story and reality, this has a negative result of a dismal future. The German Expressionist set of distorted backgrounds, warped settings, and disproportionated objects depicts the deranged state of mind of the regime (Ashmore 416-418). Lastly, the title emphasizes the cabinet, where Cesare sleeps. This cabinet is analogous to life under totalitarianism. The only purpose of living in this society is to submit to nefarious authority. Therefore, life in this society is meaningless, as you’d be better off spending it asleep in a cabinet. The disorder portrayed in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* causes the audience to feel genuine emotions concerning a pretend world. This film sends a shocking message to the audience by creating a separate universe with the same issues. In this separate universe, people are suffering. They cannot live freely to answer the call of their hearts. Rather, their fate, fortune, and what is to come are all determined by the corrupt government. Given that this film was released two years after World War I, it is relevant for Robert Wiene to discuss issues revolving around a corrupt government controlling all facets of life (Greenberg 125-126).

*Get Out* tackles social issues as well; specifically, racism. The director of the film reveals his thoughts on this issue through an unrealistic and realistic presentation of this concept. The unrealistic presentation includes Rose’s malicious family performing a warm facade, which highlights the fears of a black individual courting a white partner. Rose’s family makes Chris a victim of their schemes. By doing so, Peele is addressing how white people spread rumors, have prejudices or biases, and other negative attitudes toward the black

community, especially when possibly joining the family. On a more realistic level, Peele also acknowledges police brutality. This occurs in the scene where the police officer asks for Chris' license even though Chris wasn't driving. This example is more lifelike, connecting the audience to the film. The use of racism, a genuine issue, in this mythical world seizes the audience's attention, stressing how these matters have a pronounced impact on individuals (Pinnix 118). This adds a level of relatability as racism is a hot-button topic within American politics.

Both *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *Get Out* dive into subjects at the forefront of people's minds, considering societal events. These films address social issues by exacerbating them, sparking the audience's curiosity about sociological possibilities. The fear the audience feels results in encouragement to create a better future. Therefore, the mention of social issues in the horror film genre is significant as the viewers experience a connection.

The horror film genre is especially popular because of the exciting technological enhancements and psychological reactions, thereby becoming more effective when discussing social issues. From dyed film and vignettes to point-of-view shots and prosthetics, the audience looks forward to the new cinematographic techniques. This paves the way for the audience members to feel an adrenaline rush and release of endorphins. Therefore, the directors can convey commentary on society effectively, becoming more relatable. Since its beginning, horror films have been appealing to viewers as it reflects their interests.

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