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Northumbria University expert explains the ‘undying’ appeal of horror movies in the run up to Halloween

From flesh-eating zombies to homicidal maniacs wreaking havoc along hotel corridors - it seems we can't get enough of horror movies despite their relentless attempts to terrify us for more than a century.

And with Halloween just around the corner, how is this low-budget film genre able to stand the test of time and even re-invent itself in the face of new technologies and a growing number of big budget blockbusters?

[Dr Johnny Walker](#) - a lecturer in media at Northumbria University – has written a book explaining just this, while providing a thorough explanation of British horror film production throughout the 21st Century.

Some of us may be familiar with the Hammer Horror films which haunted our big screens from the mid-1950s. The late Christopher Lee's electrifying performance as Count Dracula in the film inspired by Bram Stoker's novel, *Dracula*, undoubtedly earned Lee his legacy as the film industry's go-to bad guy.

But by the 1960s, masked actors with bolts through their necks and vampires wearing frilly shirts began to lose their fright appeal, according to Dr Walker, the author of *Contemporary British Horror Cinema: Industry, Genre & Society*.

“People were responding better to horror films that were grounded within reality,” he explains. “There's only so much you can do with scary monsters. Films like *Psycho*, *Night of the Living Dead* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* were all shot in a style that wasn't fantastical. These more true-to-life films became the forerunners of *The Blair Witch Project*, which went on to literalise the horror documentary form.

“Horror films have always been relatively cheap, typically costing well under a million pounds to make. They're often only set in one or two locations, with a small cast of actors. *The Blair Witch Project*, which was released in 1999, cost pennies to make but generated over \$140m at the box office.”

The global success of this American fright flick along with Japan's *The Ring* – released a year earlier in 1998 – revived the production of horror films in Britain as directors began to take note of these cheap-to-make but highly profitable pictures.

“The film *28 Days Later* paved the way for a British horror film revival in 2002,” said Dr Walker. “No one could have anticipated the popularity of that film here and over in America. Its director, Danny Boyle, reignited interest in the zombie film. If it wasn't for that film, we probably wouldn't have seen *Shaun of the Dead*, which was a huge British horror success after that.

“Neil Marshall – who is from Newcastle and a graduate of Northumbria University – directed *Dog Soldiers* in 2002 and then *The Descent* in 2005,

both of which went a long way to re-inventing the genre in the 21st Century.”

In 2008, the film industry took a new politically-inspired turn as it began to tackle the “hoodie horror” subgenre, with the horror Eden Lake as its touchstone. The film tackled Britain’s so-called anxiety surrounding hooded youths when, during a romantic weekend getaway, a young couple confronts a gang, and suffers brutal consequences.

Despite Dr Walker’s assurances that horror films are successful with little-known actors, he accepts that Britain’s all-time highest grossing horror movie The Woman in Black – released in 2012 – profited from casting Daniel Radcliffe in the starring role.

“It’s a ghost story that’s widely appealing,” he said. “It cuts across the age groups and it’s got Harry Potter in it.”

Horror expert Dr Walker gives his top five recommended films to watch this Halloween:

1. Phantasm (1979)

A young boy and his friends face off against a mysterious grave robber known only as the Tall Man, who keeps a mysterious arsenal of terrible weapons with him.

Dr Walker says: “It’s out of step with the other horror films of that period. It’s not a film that typically gets talked about. When people talk about 1970s horror films they talk about The Exorcist but this film is so unusual and so unlike anything else that I can’t help but recommend it.”

2. 28 Days Later (2002)

A group of animal rights activists free a caged chimp infected with the “Rage” virus from a medical research lab. When London bike courier Jim wakes up from a coma a month after, he finds his city all but deserted. On the run from the zombie-like victims of the Rage, Jim stumbles upon a group of survivors and joins them on a perilous journey to what he hopes will be safety.

Dr Walker says: "It's a really effective film in spite of being made with limited resources. It captures the sparseness of urban environments very effectively and introduced the idea of running zombies into the mainstream."

3. Switch Blade Romance (2003)

A beautiful young Frenchwoman, Alex, travels out to the country to visit her family and brings along her friend Marie. Soon after they get settled in the secluded home, Alex's parents are brutally attacked by a psychotic truck driver, who proceeds to stalk the two women as well.

Dr Walker says: "This is a more extreme version of *Scream*! It's a slasher film that's very self-aware. It wears its references on its sleeve and has twist ending so commonplace nowadays but certainly took me by surprise when I first saw it."

4. A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984)

In Wes Craven's classic American slasher film, several Midwestern teenagers fall prey to Freddy Krueger - a disfigured midnight mangler who preys on the teenagers in their dreams - which, in turn, kills them in reality.

Dr Walker says: "This was a film that I was never allowed to watch growing up and then I watched it one day at a friend's house and it changed my life! The idea of being on the run from something when you go to sleep is something that is so terrifying it's probably one of the most original horror films ever made."

5. It (1990)

Seven friends engage in a struggle with the demon they first encountered 30 years earlier in their hometown. The creature has the ability to transform itself into its prey's worst fears, allowing it to exploit the phobias of its victims. It mostly takes the form of a sadistic, wisecracking clown called [Pennywise the Dancing Clown](#).

Dr Walker says: "When I was younger I used to go to the video shop and look

up to the horror shelf and what stood out was Tim Currie's face as Pennywise the clown from It. It's frightening because it's about the monsters that children fear. Children have wild imaginations. What's friendly? A clown. What's terrifying? A clown. It's a really interesting paradox."

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