

## Coming Soon to Theaters: The Evolution of Horror Movie Posters

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In this article, Karishma Verma uses the techniques of genre analysis to explore the evolution of horror movie posters. By looking into the history and examples of horror movie posters across time, she suggests that this seemingly simple genre actually involves more complexity than we think. From her findings, Verma reflects on how the choices that go into creating a horror movie poster can impact a viewer's perception of the movie.

You have probably seen them hung up outside of movie theaters letting everyone know about the upcoming attractions. When you walk inside to buy an overpriced ticket or popcorn, they are also lined up across the walls, strikingly darker than the other ones. Perhaps you aren't usually drawn to scary movies, but you cannot help but look at them due to the contrast against the others. If you haven't guessed by now, I am talking about horror movie posters.

Last year, I saw a post on Tumblr showing how all of the latest horror movie posters look the same—dark background, a creepy figure or person lurking in the foreground, and words such as “terrifying” bolded in a contrasting font. As someone who typically does not enjoy modern horror movies (they tend to make me laugh rather than cause me to have nightmares), I found this Tumblr post to be evidence as to why all current horror movies are the same. Fast-forward to two months ago, I saw the same post again online. Upon seeing it a second time, I thought about how this compared to classic horror movies. You see, I am a fan of classic horror and suspenseful movies.



Figure 1: Movie posters for *The Birds* and *The Witch*. Retrieved from *IMDB.com*.

In other words, if I see that Netflix has added an Alfred Hitchcock film to their instant streaming catalog, you can bet that I'm adding it to my queue! For this article, I decided to examine a question that sparked an interest in me ever since I saw the social media post—how have horror movie posters evolved across time?

Specifically, I decided to look at visual aspects (i.e., taglines, pictures, font size, background color) of horror movie posters and how these features have changed. To remind myself of what current horror movie posters look like, I decided to go to a couple of movie theaters in the Bloomington-Normal, IL area to check out the upcoming attractions that were displayed outside of the theater.

### Coming to a Theater Near You



Figure 2: Poster for *Blair Witch*. Retrieved from *IMDB.com*.

I started my journey at AMC Starplex Cinemas in Normal on a September afternoon. It's important to note that since it was September, there was the annual surge of horror movies and re-makes being featured just in time for Halloween in the upcoming month. The first horror movie poster that was featured outside of the theater was *Blair Witch* (Figure 2), which is the sequel to the 1999 film *The Blair Witch Project*. The first visual aspect that I noticed was the sharp contrast between the bright red background of the poster and the black tree branches extending into the sky. The font color

for the text on the poster matched the tree branches, and the title of the movie was in all caps. Just by looking at the poster and not having any prior knowledge about *The Blair Witch Project* franchise, I figured that the setting for this movie was probably going to be in a forest or in the woods. Looking under the movie title, I discovered that I was right! The tagline, or the movie's slogan, said in all caps, "THERE IS SOMETHING EVIL HIDING IN THE WOODS." I also noted that unlike the movie posters that were featured outside of the theater for other movie genres, such as romances or comedies, the *Blair Witch* poster did not feature any of the actors' names.

The second horror movie poster that was displayed outside the theater was for *Don't Breathe* (Figure 3). This poster also had a bit of contrast in terms

of the colors. Similar to what I saw in that Tumblr post, the background color for *Don't Breathe's* poster is black. Both the image in the foreground and the text are a little bit brighter with hues of red and yellow, but the poster still seems to be screaming, "Hey, this is a horror movie!" The image on the poster is a woman with her mouth covered by someone else's hands, which goes along with the title of the movie. The text on this poster was also in all caps but was different than *Blair Witch* in that this poster had a tagline that read, "FROM THE CREATORS OF *EVIL DEAD*," followed by reviews for the movie. I noticed that the reviews on the poster put certain words in a larger font, such as "RELENTLESS HORROR MOVIES" and "VIOLENCE THAT'LL HAVE YOU SQUIRMING."



Figure 3: Poster for *Don't Breathe*. Retrieved from *IMDB.com*.

It seemed that the creators of these horror movie posters took into account the reception of the posters. Under the model of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) in Joyce Walker's article "Just CHATting," **reception** deals with how the audience perceives the text and how it can influence them (75). These posters are typically displayed both inside and outside of a movie theater amongst other posters. In order to stand out from the other posters so that people who are coming and going from the theater take a second to look at it, it seems that the dark backgrounds and scary/creepy images work to pop out from the romance or action movie posters. In my case, I was able to tell that these were horror movies just by glancing at them. Even the text displayed on the posters can give even the casual observer knowledge of what to expect from the movie. These particular posters displayed words such as, "evil," "relentless," "violence," and "squirming." I noticed that they seem to promise moviegoers the fact that they will be frightened.

Once I got a sense of the horror movies featured at AMC Starplex in Normal, I decided to venture to Wehrenberg Theaters in Bloomington. This theater also had similar movie posters as Starplex's, including *Blair Witch* and *Don't Breathe*. Since I couldn't find any other horror movie posters prominently displayed at Wehrenberg (or at the Normal Theater where I went shortly afterwards), I thought that I could do some online research and also explore some posters from older horror films.

## You Can't Beat the Classics

The website that I took a look at was Rotten Tomatoes, which is known for film reviews and its "Tomatometer" that measures the quality of movies and TV shows based on both critic and audience ratings. I felt a bit overwhelmed



Figure 4: Poster for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. Retrieved from *IMDB.com*.

looking at all of the horror movies featured on the website, so I decided to search for the top-rated horror movies in order to narrow down my search. The top-rated horror movie on Rotten Tomatoes is the 1920 silent film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, with a Tomatometer rating of 100%. After looking at current horror movie posters, I could immediately see some noticeable similarities and differences. The poster for *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Figure 4) also has a dark background (surprise, surprise!), with a contrasting foreground image and font. One difference that I first noticed was the fact that this poster featured a creepy-looking man carrying a woman in the dark. Unlike *Blair Witch* and *Don't Breathe*, the “villain” character of the movie is displayed right on the movie poster. The typography of the title only has certain words in all caps to grab our attention instead of all words, yet it is still in a creepy font. For this particular poster, there was no tagline.



Figure 5: Poster for *Psycho*. Retrieved from *IMDB.com*.

The next poster that I looked at was rated #5 on the Rotten Tomatoes list of top-rated horror movies, which was the 1960 film *Psycho* (Figure 5) that was released exactly 40 years after *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*. *Psycho* is not only one of my favorite Alfred Hitchcock films, but it is also one of my favorite horror films in general. This movie poster struck me as particularly interesting because it uses colors outside of the blacks, grays, and reds that I was seeing from the previous posters. Since this article will be printed in black-and-white, let me describe the colors to you. While there is

a black background, the side of the poster with the names of the actors, director, and studio has a bright blue background. The title of the movie is in a bright yellow font, and the actors featured on the poster have color filters over their pictures. I thought that it was fascinating to see how the “victim” of the movie had a bright yellow filter over her picture while the “villain” of the movie had a brown filter over his picture. Even if you have never seen this film before, you can visually see who is the victim and who is the villain with just glancing at the poster—a similar tactic used in the modern posters I examined but in a different way.

The title of the movie, *Psycho*, is seen as having been ripped like a piece of paper, which is distinct from the other posters that do not alter the typography too much. The other noticeable difference in this poster compared to the others I analyzed was that *Psycho*'s poster displays names in a way that sticks out. This particular poster features names of the actors in the film, the director, as well as the studio. In addition to this, the last names of these people are in a slightly bigger font than their first names. This is a

film directed by Alfred Hitchcock, whose name has been popularized by his previously successful films. Due to this, the representation is aimed toward moviegoers who are a fan of Hitchcock's previous work. **Representation** deals with the ways people who produce a text think about it as well as all of the activities that help make the creation of the text successful (Walker 75). It seems that *Psycho*'s movie poster has the goal of generating excitement among audiences. This is also prevalent in the tagline for the movie, "A new—and altogether different—screen excitement!!!" With the word "excitement" and the multiple exclamation marks, this movie poster wants to create buzz for Hitchcock's new film, to say the least. The goal of exciting moviegoers also contrasts with the modern movie posters in that they are not outwardly trying to scare or creep out audiences with the poster since putting certain names on the poster, such as Hitchcock's, already promises that the film will be frightening.

In other words, the representation has changed. While early horror movie posters implemented the technique of drawing audiences in by emphasizing a director's name or using particular buzzwords, modern horror movie posters rely more on including explicitly "creepy" images to represent their films. This may also play a role in the reception of these movie posters as well. It seems that as time goes on, moviegoers are more acquainted with the horror movie genre than they may have been at the beginning of the 20th century. Due to this, the producers of the movie posters want to utilize other ways of grabbing attention through creating more frightening, straightforward imagery. For instance, instead of listing the names of A-list actors, a modern horror movie poster might include an image of an eerie forest.

After examining *Psycho*'s movie poster, I began to wonder whether or not emphasizing the names of the actors, director, or studio was the norm back in the 1960s. I decided to take a look at the #7 top-rated horror movie on the Rotten Tomatoes list. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) is another one of my favorite classic horror movies, so I was curious to see how the layout of this poster compared to *Psycho*'s poster since these movies were released eight years apart. Unlike *Psycho*'s movie poster, *Rosemary's Baby* (Figure 6) sticks to eerily dark colors. The majority of the background of the poster is green and has the lead actress featured prominently. Under this is a black background with a silhouette of a baby carriage and the tagline for the movie, "Pray for Rosemary's Baby," in white font. While this portion of the movie poster is visually dark, the bottom of the poster is white and has black text that states the name of the lead actress, the production company, and the Paramount logo.



Figure 6: Poster for *Rosemary's Baby*. Retrieved from [IMDB.com](https://www.imdb.com).

Although it may not be as outwardly obvious as *Psycho*'s poster, it seems that this movie poster also wants to let certain names speak for themselves. It seems that the two names the people who created the movie poster for *Rosemary's Baby* wanted moviegoers to know about were Mia Farrow, a popular actress in the 1960s, and Paramount Pictures, which is the studio that produced the movie. I could not help but be curious as to why names aren't an integral part of horror movie posters as much as they used to be during the '60s. Surely, there are still big names associated with current horror movies. So why aren't they such a focal point for movie posters anymore? I turned to scholars to answer this question.

### Studio's Choice

I went to Illinois State University's Milner Library online article search to find articles that could help me answer my question. After a while of not generating any results from searching terms such as "movie poster promotion," "movie poster production," and "1960s movie posters," I thought that maybe I was being too specific with my search. As a last-ditch effort to finding some results, I searched the term "movie poster tagline." This is where I found the article, "Three Words to Tell a Story: The Movie Poster Tagline" by Johannes Mahlkecht. I found that this article was a particularly excellent resource to look into not only the history and rhetoric of the movie tagline, but also to explore the information major studios wanted to provide for moviegoers. Success!

According to Mahlkecht, the main reason why taglines promoted both studios and the actors more "aggressively" in the past was due to the rise and fall of the major studio system. The major companies that ruled Hollywood during this time, such as Fox, MGM, Paramount, etc., had control over the actors, directors, distributors, and movie theaters. "Each studio had its own image to defend and to advertise. And since actors were contractually bound to a particular studio, selling their names and trying to increase their popularity was, for studios as well as actors, an investment that ideally paid off in later productions" (Mahlkecht 417). This explained why the movie posters for *Psycho* and *Rosemary's Baby* seemed to draw my attention to the names featured on the poster. During this time period when studios had control over the people involved in making and distributing movies, the movie posters were impacted by **ecology**, which involves the biological and environmental forces that exist and impact many factors of the text (Walker 76). Not only are the movie posters trying to sell the moviegoers the movie itself, but they are also trying to sell the names of the actors in the film (Mia Farrow, for example) as well as the names of the directors (Alfred Hitchcock) due to their contractual obligations.



I also thought it was interesting how Mahlknecht points out how movie taglines tend to utilize one of five appeals—story, genre, stardom, quality, and technical achievements. “Tagline writers choose to focus on the one element of the film they believe has the most potential to draw audiences. And while a tagline may relate to two or even all three of the above appeals simultaneously, one usually dominates. The tagline for a film with an unknown cast, for instance, will seldom refer to the lead actors. Instead, it will address genre or story elements” (Mahlknecht 415). I wanted to see whether or not this idea of using one of five appeals when writing taglines remained consistent over time, so I continued viewing movie posters on Rotten Tomatoes. I looked at the #24 top-rated horror movie, *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) (Figure 7). This 30-year jump from the previous two posters proved to seem more similar to the two current movie posters I saw at Starplex. There are some pops of color on this poster with the eyes of the person featured, the insect on their mouth, and the title for the movie all in an amber color. Unlike the current posters, the names of the lead actors are on this one. I suspect that this is probably because it features a popular actress, Jodie Foster. The tagline on this poster of *The Silence of the Lambs* says, “from the terrifying best seller.” Going off of the appeals used in Mahlknecht’s article, it seems that this poster uses the stardom appeal in order to draw audiences in since it highlights the fact that particular actors are in the movie as well as the fact that this movie is from a “terrifying” best-selling novel.



Figure 7: Poster for *The Silence of the Lambs*. Retrieved from [IMDB.com](https://www.imdb.com).

I also found the 1999 movie *The Blair Witch Project* on the Rotten Tomatoes list at #62. Since I looked at the movie poster for its sequel, *Blair Witch*, I was curious to see if the posters were similar. While the poster for *The Blair Witch Project* (Figure 8) had the continuation of a black background with a couple of images (a forest and half of a person’s face) similar to the previous posters, this one had more text on it in terms of the tagline. This tagline reads, “In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary. . . . A year later their footage was found.”



Figure 8: Poster for *The Blair Witch Project*. Retrieved from [IMDB.com](https://www.imdb.com).

It was interesting to see how the current movie, *Blair Witch*, used a genre appeal tagline where it used certain words to indicate that it was a horror movie. *The Blair Witch Project*, on the other hand, uses a story appeal in order to explain the plot to moviegoers. I figure that this discrepancy is because *Blair Witch* is a sequel of an established movie, so viewers may already know what

to expect. The goal for the sequel would probably be to just communicate to moviegoers that the sequel to this popular horror film is now in theaters. This differs from the goal of *The Blair Witch Project* movie poster, which seems to be to introduce audiences to a creepy story where they have to watch the movie in order to find out what happens.

## Evolution of Fear

This exploration to see how the genre of horror movie posters has evolved across time was fascinating to me since I honestly did not expect there to be so much change. I always thought, “A horror movie is a horror movie, right? The elements must be similar!” It was interesting to see how the concept of fear has changed within horror movie posters in terms of how the movie poster creators used to outwardly display the villain (e.g., monster, the killer, etc.) to today where audiences have become familiar with these tactics and expect more ambiguous, yet creepy images on horror movie posters (e.g., a person with their mouth covered, trees in a dark forest, etc.).

I also did not expect to see much of an evolution in the color and typography used, especially since my **antecedent knowledge**, or prior knowledge, involved viewing a Tumblr post about how most modern horror movie posters look the same. As horror movie poster creators have become more drawn to the idea of whether or not a movie will terrify moviegoers versus selling who is in the movie, the utilization of intimidating fonts and typing words in all caps is now a norm. While I am still not a big fan of modern horror movies, you better believe that I will now have the compulsion to stop and look at horror movie posters whenever I go to the theaters, regardless of whether or not I am there to have a terrifying experience.

## Works Cited

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