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## **Horror – Why so Popular?: An evaluation of the horror genre as a strong trend in popular culture, with a few popular horror movies as examples**

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**M. Kiranmayi**

PhD Scholar

School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

REVA University, Bengaluru, India

**Dr. Abhisarika Prajapati**

School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

REVA University, Bengaluru, India

### **Abstract**

Thanks to the complex intertwining of the dark side of human psychology, social prejudices and relevant trends, the horror genre is inseparable from popular culture. The paradoxical ability of horror movies to give the audience an adrenaline from within the safety of their seats is what makes them retain a special place amongst the entertainment industry, albeit their characters being caricatural and plotlines be punctured with loopholes. Watching Evil being subdued by the Good is a psychological flex, which is another reason behind the inexplicable popularity of the horror genre. Horror stories are also extremely flexible as they can manage to fit in a number of topics – like religion, history, feminism, etc. – into their narrative. They are also trend setters as they bring obscure taboo subjects to the forefront – be it occult, exorcism, etc. Three such movies – one each from international, national, and regional film industries – are discussed here as they serve as excellent examples of the above stated points.

**Keywords:** horror movies, popular culture, psychoanalysis, Conjuring, Manichitrathazhu

### **Introduction**

Popular culture includes anything that manages to dominate and sway the mind of the general public and the entertainment industry falls in the forefront here as it caters perfectly to all the emotionally entertaining needs of the masses. Horror movies are an inseparable part of popular

culture due to their ability to provide the ultimate rollercoaster ride of emotions that masses crave for, so its little surprise that they their popularity remains unchallenged. Horror movies are a niche in themselves. Although they have great mass appeal like other movies, they are not usually clubbed together. Horror movies, as a genre, stand on their own. Horror genre is a standalone phenomenon, which attracts praise and criticism on its own, with due consideration of the genre, instead of the whole entertainment industry. The popularity of the horror genre can be ascribed to its psychological effects on the masses. Psychoanalysis of horror movies unravel the secret behind the mind-boggling abilities of horror movies. Horror as a genre is based on fear, which is one of the most primal instincts. Horror movies, therefore manage to touch a raw nerve and remain etched in the mass mind. The ability of the horror genre to remain trendy is due to its ability to touch upon and open up exotic taboo subjects to the society – such as witchcraft, exorcism, occult, etc. Also, the horror genre can easily blend itself with any ‘current hot topic’ of the society – be it history, psychology or even feminism. These two points lend to the amazing popularity of horror movies. All of the above-mentioned issues are discussed and illustrated with pointers from three of the most popular horror movies of all times – Manichitrathazhu (Malayalam, 1995) from regional Indian movies, Stree (Hindi, 2018) from the national Indian film industry and Conjuring – 1(English, 2001) from foreign movie industry.

### **What constitutes Popular Culture?**

Popular culture is the culture of the masses, as opposed to the elite classes. Popular culture is the sum total of the tastes of the ordinary people i.e., that which connects the masses of diverse backgrounds and has considerable influence on their lives. It is basically anything – be it books, music, movies, shows, food, fashion, etc. – which attracts the ordinary people. As such, popular culture is generally thought of anything that is not too refined or sophisticated. This doesn’t mean that all of pop-culture is vulgar, but that whatever constitutes popular culture is not too intellectual and complex to understand. Simplistic taste is a characteristic feature of popular culture. Too much of polish and refinement are not as acceptable as authentic uprightness, straightforwardness and open unfiltered-ness in popular culture. Basically, popular culture is anything that gives an adrenaline rush and dopamine burst, without too much of intellectization. Popular culture provides an escape from routine lives, helps purge heavy emotions, is cathartic and makes people more empathetic and open to new perspectives.

### **Horror Genre as a Niche**

While all forms of mass media come under popular culture, movies hold a special place of their own. Much of pop-culture is influenced by the movies of its movies. Movies set the trend and decide what is good/bad, interesting/boring, up-to-date/outdated for all of society. Even within movies, horror movies are a niche in themselves. They stand on their own, apart from all the genres. A horror movie – with a romantic track or family melodrama or heroic action – is still only a horror movie. The thrills and scares that a horror movie is filled with provide more stimulates for dopamine release more than any other genre of movie. It’s little wonder that they have managed to retain their popularity throughout the ages and continue to remain as a special dominant niche by themselves.

## **The Backstories – Life inspires Art**

The three chosen movies all movies claim to be inspired from real-life stories, which is interesting as it goes on just prove that art is, after all, an imitation of real-life.

The foreign movie (Conjuring -1) is said to be based on the experiences of a professional paranormal investigatory couple, while the two Indian movies (Stree and Manichitrathazhu) make use of local legends from South India as the base material for their story. While the makers of all the three movies did mold the story as per their own will, the true stories on which the movies claim to be based on are quite interesting.

The Conjuring -1 is the first in the Conjuring Universe. The movie is centered on the real-life experiences of the Perron Family in 1971, who are said to have supported the making of the movie. As the movie also chronicles the real-life exploits of Ed and Warren Lorraine, a couple who investigate paranormal events; it is reported that Lorraine warren was consulted, and her advice was sought by the directors of the movie. In fact, the movie was initially titled as 'Warren Files', as it was inspired by the case files of the Warren couple. Despite cinematic liberties, the people who had experienced the events in their life – be it members of the Perron Family or the investigatory Warren Couple - claim that the movie stays true to their experiences.

Stree introduces itself as being based on a ridiculously true phenomenon. The phenomenon referred to here is the legend of 'Nale Ba' from Karnataka. Here, it was rumored that a witch would knock at random doors at night and would call out to the people in the voice of their relatives or friends. People who opened their doors, believing it to their loved ones, lost their lives brutally at the hands of the witch. To keep the witch away, people took to writing 'Nale Ba', which translates to 'Come Tomorrow' in Kannada, on the walls of their homes, as it was said that the witch would read and obediently follow whatever was written.

The national-award winning, evergreen classic Malayalam movie Manichitrataharzu's flashback story i.e., the 'Lord and Dancer' part, is said to have been picked up from a tragic tale of "Alummoottil Tharvadu" (an ancestral mansion) from Travancore, Kerala, which occurred in the 19th century. The old master of the mansion and a servant girl are said to have been murdered by the younger members of the family, following which, the mansion lost all its glory and now stands desolated. The old mansion turned into a muse for the writers and the dual murders sparked off their imagination, who spun a long tale of horror and revenge involving an old King and a servant (dancing) girl.

That all the movies claim to be inspired from real-life stories just goes on to prove that art is indeed inspired by real-life and therefore, art has an intrinsic interrelated connection with the real society around. Art, as it is often said, is only a mirror of the society around it. This holds true for movies in particular, and for horror movies too in extension. The converse holds true too, as art has immense influence over the society and is capable of bring about trends and changing the tastes of people over time. Art and Life are mirrors of each other, so both can inspire change in the other. The immense popularity and almost cult-like status achieved by the two movies in their respective languages attests to this attitude of society.

## Behind the Screen - Psychoanalysis

So, what actually makes horror genre so popular? Horror is popular because it **works on fear**. Fear is a very primal instinct of living beings. Horror movies hit home more than other movies due to their close link to psychological weak points of human beings. This is why they impact more and linger for long in the psyche of the society. Horror movies are capable of producing that primal fear in humans without actually putting them in harm's way.

That explains the success of the three chosen movies.

The Conjuring -1 exploded into the Conjuring Universe, with a multitude of movies which are all equally popular. That popularity of (almost) all the movies of the Conjuring Universe proves that a repeated story is no hindrance on the way to popularity for horror movies, as long as the necessary fear impulse is ignited. Conjuring-1 especially makes on go cold with its presentation of the hauntings, possession and exorcism. Stree also was a roaring success and even went on to have a sequel. While comedy was definitely an attraction for the movie, the horror part of the movie is what leaves a permanent mark. The dressing and soft voice of the mysterious shadowy ghost were enough to send shivers down the spine of the audience. Manichithrathazhu has won national awards and has been remade in multiple Indian languages. This movie manages to maintain the mystery behind the haunting and untowed incidents, provides an interesting backstory to the ghost and gives an interesting twist in the climax.

One common thread that runs through the narrative of all these movies is religion. Religion, be it any one of the many, plays a major role in horror narrative. Watching Evil being subdued and finally concerned by the Good is a psychological flex, it gives a sense of accomplishment, confidence and security. The common base of all religions is the assurance of **protection from Evil**, and all the three movies are seen using the same trope. The instinct of a Savior coming to save the day and eliminating the Evil is deep embedded in the ethos of the simple crowds. Although even heroic movies work on the same story, horror movies get an edge as the Evil that they deal with is otherworldly and monstrous. So, seeing human characters being aided by the Supreme Good to defeat Evil gives the masses a good psychological cushion.

Psychoanalysis reveals that horror movies provide a platform for **abjection**. Abjection is a powerful psychological process, wherein, one's own consciousness is disgusted and rejected parts of its own self which it recognizes are socially taboo. Horror movies strike the right cord as they hit at this buried part of human psyche. For example, Conjuring-1 has a story of a mother sacrificing her infant child to Satan. The antidote for this monster is pure love of a mother to her child. Stree has a woman brutally murdered on her wedding night. She stops her rampage when she gets respect from the people of the village. Manichitrathazhu speaks about a dancer killed by a possessive king for loving another man. She stops only when she gets to 'kill' the king with her own hands. The backstories of all the movies make the skin of audience crawl, as those are things which one doesn't want in their society. On the other hand, the reconciliatory stories have powerful human emotions (such as mother's love, sympathy, justice/revenge) are at play.

Horror movies thus taken audience on a ride as they first scare people out of their wits, keep them on their toes with scary haunting scenes, drive up basic human emotions (like love, pity, etc.) in the climax and then provide a huge relief of being saved at the end. It is this

whirlwind of emotions which make horror movies addictive. The catharsis and **euphoric sensation** that horror movies provide is incomparable. It is stimulating, empathy-inducing, develops **resilience** i.e., stress/anxiety-coping ability and provide an overall cathartic experience. It gives the experience of visceral fear and a peek into the dark zones of the mind, all while one is seated safely in their seat. This is what makes horror movies so appealing to the masses.

### **Blending in with the current Hot Topic**

Along with the above-stated feature, another unique feature of horror movies which endears it to the audience is its ability to flawlessly blend into the current favorite hot topic of the society. In spite of their deep and dark stories, horror movies are extremely flexible as they can manage to fit in a number of social topics - like religion, history, feminism, etc. - into their narrative. For example, *Conjuring-1* was included the infamous historical witch-hunts in its backstory. *Stree* had a feminist twist at the end, while *Manichitrathazhu* had a unique climax, wherein science (psychology) and religion were shown as complementary, instead of polar opposites. Thus, horror, besides working on the instinctual emotion of fear; also manage to engage the rational side of the audience as it easily draws in topics which are much-talked about in society. Others movies may do this too, but watching these topics in the backdrop of the heavy emotional mayhem which a horror movie causes has considerably different effect.

### **Trend Setting**

Besides drawing in hot topics from society, horror movies also introduce the masses to topics which are usually taboo or hushed up in society such as religion, folklore, esoteric rituals, black magic, possession, psychology, etc. Seeing such less-spoken about subjects shown on the big screen intellectually excite the audience and adds zest to an already fully engulfing experience of a horror movie. The *Conjuring-1* introduced the concept of supernatural investigation and the use of a combination of intuitive powers, religion, historical knowledge, rational skills and technology in the process of tracing and eliminating the demon. *Stree* started the trend of redefining witch as a fiercely independent woman (which was started in the West) in Indian cinema. *Manichitrathazhu* blended psychology i.e., a scientific view with what was purely a religious/ superstitious arena before (possession). Horror movies are thus, trend setting.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, these selected three movies, which are all immensely popular, serve as excellent examples to drive home the noted points. The three movies come from different industries and belong to different timespans - which prove the analysis to be universal in nature. The psychological whirlwind of emotions which a horror movie puts the audience through makes it enduring and leaves an everlasting impact. Horror movies throw light upon the dark side of humanity and touch upon such desires and expressions which are forbidden in normal society. This temporary snapping of reality, while being securely seated in reality, make horror movie viewing an unforgettable experience. Alongside the psychological upheaval, horror movies also excite the masses by showing shadowy subjects - like occult, esoteric practices, exorcism, etc., on the big screen. Introduction of such subjects, which are largely unspoken in society, add spice to an already overwhelming experience. Addition of relevant hot topics into this completes the picture. All of these elements add up to make the perfect recipe for a complete mass mind-

controlling entertainer. These unique techniques of attracting and attesting the attention of the audience is what makes horror genre a standalone. Although a horror movie may include bits of other genres like romance, drama, violence, etc., it never blends fully into any of the other genres and stand apart from all other genres of cinema. This is because of the innate ability of horror narrative to stimulate the primal impulse of terror and fear, which lays buried deep in the subconsciousness. Popular culture is commonly defined as anything that is just entertaining, as opposed to elite culture that is serious and leads to creation of something. Horror as a genre is destructive instead of constructive, which makes it more mass than anything imaginable. The effect that popular culture and horror movies have on one other can thus never be overestimated.

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