

Hollywood Horror: Promoting The Spirit Of Fear

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The years of 2017 and 2018 heralded many notable, fear-inducing tragedies in the United States, along with political upheaval and deadly natural disasters that negatively impacted virtually all Americans. Traditionally, America turns to Hollywood in search of an uplifting escape from fearful news, and typically, Hollywood delivers.

However, in opposition to common-sense expectations, recent movie-goers, in search of even more fearful experiences, have instead flocked in record numbers to the onscreen terrors depicted in horror movies. Never before have we witnessed so many successful horror films in such a short period. According to Emily Dunn of Screenrant.com, "It feels like we're in the middle of a real horror renaissance at the moment."

In fact, the horror genre topped one billion dollars in revenues for the first time in 2017 and totaled nearly ten percent of all cinematic ticket sales—the highest percentage ever for the frightful category—with the summer blockbuster, *IT*, becoming the highest-grossing horror film in history.

Even more noteworthy, this phenomenon occurred while the rest of the movie industry was experiencing an unprecedented, panic-inducing slump in ticket sales—down 16 percent in 2017—amid widespread criticism for failing to meet the quality standards of the movie-going public.

Historically, most movies of the horror genre fail to attract critical acclaim or attention from the major movie-industry awards committees. However, 2017's *Get Out* received four Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, and it won for Best Original Screenplay. Currently, many industry observers and critics claim that *A Quiet Place*, released in 2018, is also deserving of Oscar consideration.

Along with the increased box office and critical acclaim, the horror genre is now attracting A-list screenwriters, directors, and actors. "Horror is not a niche genre anymore," according to veteran movie producer, Ed Pressman. Scott Roxborough, a writer for *The Hollywood Reporter* adds, "One thing is certain: Horror, for better or worse, has gone mainstream."

Of notable concern, beyond the graphic violence and the glorification of evil, is the newly transgressive nature of the typical horror screenplay. The new screenwriters are weaving transgender and homosexual themes into the disturbing, blood-soaked storylines. There seems to be a strong desire within the genre to push the envelope, to violate all moral boundaries. Director Dee Rees, for example, has just contracted to head up a horror film about black lesbians in rural America. According to acclaimed director, Luca Guadagnino, "The most avant-garde, the most transgressive work in cinema right now is being done in horror."

Even worse is how the genre tends to target young people. For its opening weekend, better than 60 percent of the audience for *Happy Death Day* was under 25, and this trend continues in 2018.

Amid this "horror renaissance," should a Christian be concerned, or do we risk overreacting to yet another distraction—best ignored—coming from Hollywood? After all, much of our television and

movie entertainment these days, even so-called “family-fare,” employs an element of mystery, surprise, and varying levels of violence and fear as plot devices.

However, the horror movie typically deals with greater extremes, while preying upon and exploiting our most basic and instinctive fears, often using the depiction of graphic violence and demonic influence to render us weak, vulnerable, and frightened. It may be “only a movie,” but these are dangerous themes to be flirting with so casually. Moreover, the viewer runs the risk of becoming desensitized to the wicked thoughts and activities that dominate the nefarious plot.

Perhaps we are living through mankind’s most fearful days, when a spirit of fear is dominating even our entertainments. But, in the midst of the bad times, is it wise for us to lower our guard—to subject our minds voluntarily to images that depict uncontrolled demonic activity and the glorification of evil? After all, Psalm 101:3 declares, “I will set nothing wicked before my eyes,” while Ephesians 4:27 warns us to, “give no place to the devil.”

Finally, wisdom from the apostle Paul would dictate the pursuit of activities and diversions, not designed to stoke our fears, leaving us weak, hostile, and insecure, but instead, “to stir up the gift of God which is in you. . . . For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (II Timothy 1:6-7).