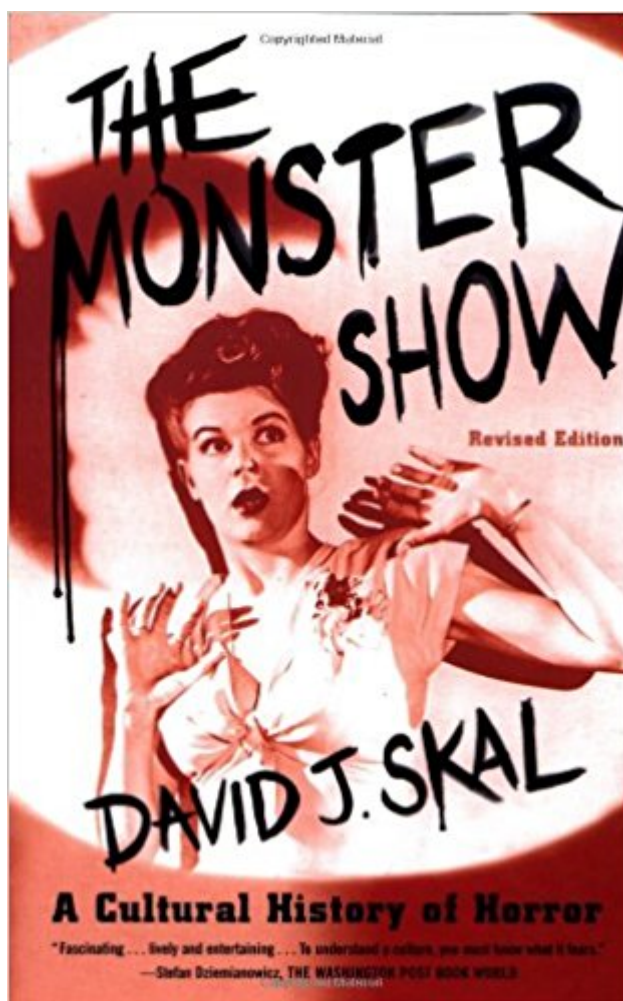


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# The Monster Show: A Cultural History Of Horror; Revised Edition With A New Afterword



## Synopsis

Illuminating the dark side of the American century, *The Monster Show* uncovers the surprising links between horror entertainment and the great social crises of our time, as well as horror's function as a pop analogue to surrealism and other artistic movements. With penetrating analyses and revealing anecdotes, David J. Skal chronicles one of our most popular and pervasive modes of cultural expression. He explores the disguised form in which Hollywood's classic horror movies played out the traumas of two world wars and the Depression; the nightmare visions of invasion and mind control catalyzed by the Cold War; the preoccupation with demon children that took hold as thalidomide, birth control, and abortion changed the reproductive landscape; the vogue in visceral, transformative special effects that paralleled the development of the plastic surgery industry; the link between the AIDS epidemic and the current fascination with vampires; and much more. Now with a new Afterword by the author that looks at horror's popular renaissance in the last decade, *The Monster Show* is a compulsively readable, thought-provoking inquiry into America's obsession with the macabre.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This study of the visual horror genre from *Dr. Caligari* to *Dr. Hannibal Lecter* starts with a discussion of Diane Arbus's photographs of freaks. David Skal then suggests that he will seek to "explain why the images resonated in the culture ... [and] why so much of our imaginative life in the 20th century has been devoted to peeling back the masks and scabs of civilization, to finding, cultivating, and projecting nightmare images of the secret self." Whether or not you agree with his thesis that horror

is a symptom of society's ills (war, disease, poverty), you will find much of value in this thorough, highly readable history--especially the detailed accounts of the work of filmmaker Tod Browning, and of how Frankenstein and Dracula made their way from books to plays to films. The book is handsomely designed (hardcover has dust jacket by Edward Gorey), with illustrations, footnotes, and index. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This entertaining survey mixes behind-the-scenes Hollywood anecdotes with intriguing social analysis. Skal ( *Hollywood Gothic* ) considers the archetypes depicted in *Dracula* , *Frankenstein* , *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* and *Tod Browning's Freaks* as responses to the Great Depression that contained metaphors of class warfare. Scientific sadism in films of the 1940s drew on partial knowledge of the Third Reich, he argues, while movie monsters of the '50s personified Bomb-bred mutants or Cold War brainwashers. Skal links 1960s films' anxiety about sex and reproduction to the introduction of the Pill and Thalidomide, and suggests that horror flicks of the '70s and '80s show signs of the post-traumatic stress syndrome suffered by many Vietnam veterans. Though he analyzes Stephen King's novels, Michael Jackson's "Thriller" video and *Famous Monsters* magazine, his book might have been richer had he delved into more non-Hollywood aspects of pop culture, such as heavy metal music. Illustrations not seen by PW. Copyright 1993 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A very good introduction to Horror films and their evolution in American Cinema with a special nod to German Expressionism. He does a good job of registering Tod Browning's importance as Horror auteur. He explains quite well, within the context of Depression Era America, the attraction to the Horror Film and Bela Lugosi's success (I hadn't realized that *Dracula*, the novel, was one of the most read paperbacks among GIs during WWII, and that Bela Lugosi was an immediate success on the War Bond circuit during the War). I wish he would have gone into more detail about the *Wolf-Man* series, but the background history or myth about Wolves was fascinating. For those interested in Camp, he has a wonderful section on Vampira and her relationship with James Dean(catch the photo of Dean in his *Frankenstein* makeup). His writing is witty, smart, entertaining, and non-academic (no conflating or foregrounding in his prose). This is a welcome addition to anyone's cinematic history collection. Stephen Schicker

Wonderful book, well and lovingly written by David J Skal, although I could have done without the California/feminist/Freudian critiques that take up far too much of the last quarter of the book. The

photographs are many and great. An excellent book all the way around. If you have a "Monster movie" fan on your Christmas list this would be a perfect gift.

It sometimes seems that the history of horror films began with Universal's *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*, with an occasional nod to some silent film. It doesn't take much research to find out that there is much more to this history, as David Skal illustrates in *The Monster Show*. In fact, it is till almost the one-third point in the book that these landmark films are really discussed. What happened earlier were such crucial films as *Nosferatu*, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and *The Phantom of the Opera*. Skal also relates stories of early figures, including Lon Chaney and Tod Browning and some of the literary and dramatic predecessors to the horror film. Only after laying this foundation does Skal really get into the iconic movies of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. There were other horror landmark films in this era, including *The Mummy*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and *Island of Lost Souls*, and between the early 1930s and 1940s, others would appear as well, most prominently *the Wolf Man*. These films are quite tame by today's standards, but to many overly sensitive and self-righteous souls of the era, these movies practically heralded the end of civilization, leading to de facto censorship. The genie, however, was out of the bottle, and like any good movie monster, it could never be truly killed. Skal zips from this era to the age of early television, when a new audience got to see these movies (often introduced by figures like *Vampira*) and the fan base expanded to a new, ardent generation. Then it's on to the era of more modern horror, ushered in by *Psycho*: not only is horror more gruesome (the result of better special effects and more relaxed ratings standards). As earlier films could be allegories for war or the Depression, newer films could provide symbols for AIDS and birth control. And new or old, sex and religion were always entangled in the themes. This book is subtitled *A Cultural History of Horror*, but as fascinating as it often is, perhaps it should be a *Cultural History of American Horror* made by Major Studios. There is a lot that is omitted here that should be found in any reasonable history of cinematic horror. Val Lewton, the influential horror producer of the 1940s, has only one of his movies really described (*Cat People*) and only gets a couple pages of text. Roger Corman and his Poe movies are hardly mentioned at all. Most glaringly, Hammer Films, which reinvented horror in the 1950s (when American horror was at its nadir), is discussed in little more than a couple of scattered sentences (let alone any non-English films after the initial German movies). Despite these omissions, this is still a pretty decent book, but the flaws keep it from earning more than four stars. If you're a horror movie fan, this is worth reading. Skal is pretty knowledgeable on the subject and can add an extra level of appreciation for this film genre.

"The Monster Show" is a well-researched and very readable history of horror in (mostly American) mass media. The first part of the book, a detailed look at Dracula and the Frankenstein monster, is to me more compelling and relevant than the semi-psychological analysis of later 20th century horror. But the printing! (That's why I gave the book only 3 stars.) The paperback copy I received had extremely poor printing; the photographs are muddy in the extreme, and some of the type blurry -- it looks like a cheapo job done on the quick. I don't know whether a hardcover copy of the book would look better; I hope so.

I ordered Skal's THE MONSTER SHOW as a required text for a University course, and I have to say, it's one of the few required books I genuinely enjoyed reading and sometimes even looked forward to. David Skal does an excellent job of explaining the history of horror in comparison to the current events occurring at the time of his respective subjects. The prose is informative but hardly dense, and Skal offers his own interesting insight in accompaniment to the facts. A truly great read for horror fans, film buffs, and historians alike.

This is the best book on the subject of horror movies that I have ever read. The author explains in detail the events of an era, the political environment and the mood of the public are related to horror movies of each period. I've read it several times and will probably read it many more times in the future.

This book starts out great! It was so interesting to read about the old fashioned horror films and the people who created them. The author made it so easy to read, and I was flying through it all! I could tell that the book was very well researched, and it was nice to see how the author made connections and observations of his own. It is a very good beginner book for anyone interested in historical horror cinema. The second part of the book is ridiculous. It goes on about silly people who think they are vampires, dumb connections that the author just threw in, and the writing starts to get really silly. It is almost as if the author was told to make the book longer, and he stretched it as far as it could possibly go. It wasn't exactly boring, but unresearched and juvenile. I would recommend this book for people who are just starting to read about the history of the horror movie. It was really easy to read, and the first half was great! Although the second half let me down, I still think this book is worth the read. (Maybe from the library, though!)

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