Nosferatu (1922)

Thomas Hutter is the protagonist of this 1922 horror classic. The driving conflict of the story is Hutter’s survival and defeat of Nosferatu. Like most German Expressionist films, Nosferatu carries an eerily stark mystique to each scene, and it is one of the first major production of the horror production. It bears themes such as lust and primal fear. Gustav von Wangenheim gives an over-the-top and flamboyant performance right on par for the era of acting from which it came. Unfortunately, any relatability in Wangenheim’s acting is lost on his poorly written character. Thomas Hutter is nothing worth rooting for as he isn’t given any real story. He is a poor protagonist as he does not drive the plot of the film, Nosferatu/Count Orlok does. Most of his action involves cowering and fainting, which makes for a fairly uninteresting protagonist. The biggest things for me to take from this classic would be the patience it puts into the cinematography. A lingering shot or a slow, haunting walk by Max Schreck can really bring out a sense of terror in this film.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night (2014)

A man named Arash serves as the protagonist in this Iranian vampire/western film directed by Ana Lily Amirpour. He is the sole provider for his heroin addicted father and the cat that he recently stole. The conflict arises when his father becomes indebted to a vicious drug dealer named Saeed. Meanwhile, a strange girl (whose name we never learn) comes to town and stalks individuals at random, sometimes toying with them, sometimes killing them and feeding on their blood. She eventually crosses paths with this drug dealer and kills him. Soon after this, Arash visits Saeed to try and talk him into giving his father some more time. He walks in to find Saeed dead on the floor of his narcotic filled apartment. In this, Arash sees an opportunity. He steals the drugs and turns to a life of crime to help him and his father escape a life of poverty, not knowing that the entire time, *The Girl* is watching him.

*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* takes a few notes from classic vampire flicks such as Nosferatu and Dracula while bringing an abstract multi-narrative format reminiscent of Tarantino’s earlier work. The lighting and cinematography in this film is phenomenal, using deep shadows and sharp whites to create a darkly kinetic atmosphere that keeps the audience on their toes yet still engrossed in wonder. The scenes are shot in sub real-time. Characters pause and wait a little longer than what is humanly considered normal, but this works with the genre and feels like a solid throwback to its roots. Motion is present in most shots, yet the camera is stable throughout the film, which makes the subjects on screen feel emphasized without the camerawork becoming too choppy or shaky.

The tone carries a paced, quiet terror throughout the film but still manages to bring out a flurry of emotions from laughter to love as the story crosses into many different territories. The love between Arash and The Girl is developed over a quite brief period of time but still feels real, innocent, and convincing. This innocence of the romance that the two leads captured is quite remarkable since the movie is, after all, about a serial killer.

Shaun of the Dead (2004)

Shaun, the title character, is the main protagonist of the movie. Following a breakup, Shaun awakens with a hangover to realize that the undead have overrun the streets of London. He and his best friend then set out to save their friends, Shaun’s parents, and his ex-girlfriend. Like every other zombie movie, the conflict is simply survival. Unlike most zombie films, however, the tone is one of slacker comedy and everyday, relatable banter. Despite having some good laughs, the film manages to still frighten the average movie goer with some creepy, crawly zombies.

The characters are very believable as average individuals as none of them possess any real powers or prowess that would conventionally protect them from a zombie apocalypse. Because of this, it is very easy for the audience to place themselves in the characters’ shoes. The entire cast puts on a very believable and emotional performance, and Simon Pegg’s ability to bring comedy and emotion to character development, most notably between Shaun and his step-father, is truly astounding. A nice little addition to this is the fore mentioned breakup at the beginning of the film. All moviegoers have gone through such an experience and therefore instantly relate to Shaun as the lovable underdog. The breakup is mostly his fault, however, placing a sense of flawed humanity on his character; another nice little trick in the storytelling.

The muted hues that are very commonly found in British cinematography add to the atmosphere of death surrounding the characters. The macabre humor truly shines and is complemented by quick cutaways and wipe transitions. The gruesomeness and gore is not held back at all, which when paired with the hilarious comedy, creates a sort of chaotic numbness that can really give chills at times.

Let the Right One In (2008)

Oskar and Eli are the main characters of this Swedish romantic horror movie directed by Tomas Alfredson. Oskar is being bullied relentlessly by a group of kids who go to school with him. Eli sees him fantasizing revenge one night and encourages him to fight back. The two of them become friends and eventually begin a romantic relationship as he struggles with the realization that she is something not quite human. The film features a rare version of the vampire that is violent, monstrous, and yet regretful of their addiction to blood. We get a sense that she is a victim of circumstance even though she is largely an antagonist from certain points of view in the story. The tone of the film is dark to an extreme, exploring the darker aspects and emotions of adolescence such as bullying, angst, and vengeance when adults don’t step in.

The film possesses a haunting, steady pace to it that can bring rise to feelings of anxiety or shock. Cinematographer Hoyt van Hoytema is fond of slow, corner reveals that coincide well with quiet moments of realization from the characters. There are a few moments when the excessive use of voyeur shots can annoy the senses but perhaps that is what Alfredson was going for. Another thing I noticed was how this film championed the use of sound effects to build suspense. The deep growling of Eli’s stomach or a quiet, yet focused dripping sound both draws in the audience’s attention and heightens their awareness to detail, allowing for the suspense to seep in.

The Lost Boys (1987)

The main characters of *The Lost Boys* are Michael and Sam Emerson. After their recently divorced mother takes them to all live with their grandfather, the boys soon realize that Santa Carla is a haven for vampires. Michael is unknowingly introduced to a group of them and after a ritualistic blood drinking, becomes one of them. His brother then takes on the task of finding the head vampire and killing him to restore Michael back to normal.

Like most 1980s films (and all films by Joel Schumacher) The Lost Boys doesn’t throw too many surprises at you. It keeps the adrenaline pumping throughout by using quick, flashy cuts and an oversaturation of music and sounds. Cinematographer Michael Chapman is fond of using huge, sweeping flybys and psychedelic montages to simulate flying, hallucinations, or other sensations associated with vampirism. The problem is the film relies on these tricks a little too much and becomes distracting around the one hour mark. The tone of the movie feels like it’s trying to scare you but can’t really manage to get past its own campiness. The rare moments when you are immersed in the tale are usually brought about by the raw performance of Keifer Sutherland, who steals the show as the vicious vampire, David who inducts Michael into their society. The film relies on his visceral acting to keep the subject of vampires from becoming a gimmick. The set design is also worthy of praise for creating a busy, yet immersive lair for the vampires to hang out. This terrific set along with the first major dialogue we see from David, establishes the motives and practices of the group but unfortunately is the highlight of the film so far as scares go.

As a prospective filmmaker, I personally look at the Schumacher era of cinema as more of a lesson as to what not to do than what to do. While his over-the-top efforts can get some decent enjoyment for camp, it can’t get past its own predictability and tactlessness.

Thirst (2009)

This Korean vampire thriller directed by Park Chan-wook stars Song Kang-ho (Oldboy; The Good, The Bad, The Weird) as Sang-hyun, a priest who has volunteered for a dangerous biological experiment in hopes to find a cure to a virus. He is the sole survivor of this experiment which transforms him into a bloodthirsty vampire. Kim Ok-bin costars as a neglected housewife who begins an affair with Sang-hyun, eventually joining him in vampirism. This serves as the film’s point of no return in this masterfully structured three act sequence which successfully utilizes a sense of character progression. The cinematography in this film is simplistic, yet always significant. Cinematographer Chung-hoon Chung uses dark hues with low saturation to bring a moody feel to the picture, and uses shots to divulge the focus, thoughts, or motivations of a particular character. The highest praise in this production, however, must go to the cast. Save for a few minor characters, the leads as well as the supporting actors put on a chilling, convincing performance grounded in genuine, relatable emotions. Imperfect human nature (as opposed to black and white characterization) paints the vampires as addicts just as much as it does as murderers. The more relatable a character feels, the more engrossed the audience will be when they kill, are killed, or do something that challenges the typical audience’s morality.

Interview with a Vampire (1994)

Brad Pitt stars as Louis de Pointe du Lac in this adaptation of Anne Rice’s 1976 novel with Neil Jordan as director. The story is told to us from the perspective of an interviewer who has a chance encounter with a vampire. After he loses his wife and daughter, Louis is left with no reason to live but a psychotic vampire named Lestat redeems his life by offering him immortality. He reluctantly agrees but then must struggle with having to kill. His hunger eventually claims a young girl whose mother recently died from the plague. He allows Lestat to turn her into a vampire as well, thus saving her life yet dooming her as well. Louis decides to look after the young girl and help her feed, finally giving into his new nature. But the main conflict continues to be Louis’ struggle with what he has been made.

Without the need for fancy camerawork or editing sequences, *Interview* tells its story beautifully and knows itself for the kind of vampire movie it is. This work isn’t true horror as its more traditional counterparts, but rather a more dramatic kind of story, akin to 1992’s Bram Stoker’s Dracula. The use of super wide shots and sweeps detailing the environment makes for a larger world and really sets itself as a period piece. We get a convincing feel for each era depicted with robust and intricate sets and character designs. Anne Rice’s patience for lore and character development pays off as we are immersed in this saga that actively wants to answer your questions regarding vampires. It doesn’t leave room for the *fear-of-the-unknown* trick that movies like *Let the Right One In* use, but this works well with the sprawling, dramatic direction that this film in particular takes. Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, and Kirsten Dunst give three of the best performances I’ve seen in all of their respective careers as the incredibly diverse main trio of the film. Anne Rice finds a healthy balance between monstrous and overtly romanticized (the *Twilight* route) and breeds a new image of vampires that has had a lasting effect of this subgenre. I would like to bring a touch of this form to my movie but in small doses.

Daybreakers (2009)

This 2009 film is written and directed by the Australian Spierig brothers, Michael and Peter and stars probable real-life vampire and all around badass, Ethan Hawke as Edward Dalton, a senior hematologist in a world overrun by a virus that turned the mass population into vampires. The global supply of human blood is running low, and Dalton predicts that soon the entire blood industry will collapse. As a result, vampires are going into withdrawals from blood and “subsiding” into ghoulish, bat-like creatures. Dalton decides to abandon his search for a replacement to blood and begins his mission to cure the world of vampirism.

The Sperig brother sow together an intricate post-apocalyptic dystopia, using varying high and low color saturations within the same frames and a subtle glimmer after-effect to mold a comic book inspired theme. The atmosphere of the film borrows from *Resident Evil* as well as *Gattaca*, both lush and surgically evil. The pacing of the action is a bit rushed and clunky, and the dialogue can be a little contrived at times, but the originality of the story as well as the sleek way it presents itself will keep you entertained until the end.

Bram Stoker’s Dracula (1992)

James V. Heart’s adaptation of “Dracula” directed and produced by Francis Ford Coppola set the tone for vampire movies in the 90s. Coppola draws gothic influences from the early vampire classics and uses it as a frame for his usual, visually mesmerizing and operatic style. Veteran cinematographer of *Goodfellas* and *The Last Temptation of Christ* Michael Ballhaus shines in his only collaboration with Coppola. He creates a very dark setting amidst a rustic and eerily unstable world with low exposures and little ambient light.

The dramatically turbulent and disturbed score composed by Wojciech Kilar takes the energy to new levels and molds the film firmly into its status as a fantasy movie. That being said, it can come off as a little silly when set to some of film’s overacted moments. And it wasn’t just from Keanu Reeves; many of the lines fall flat and can lean more toward shouting than acting at times. It could be an overcompensation to try and meet the dramatic tenacity set up by the director and script, or simply a lack of connection from the actors with the vision of the project but the campiness of the acting does not detract from the brilliantly presented story.

Vampyr (1932)

This German-French pseudo-silent film by Carl Theodor Dreyer follows Allan Gray, a curious occultist who has traveled to a small French village named Courtempierre, in which the paranormal can be found at every turn. The story unfolds as Allan is entrusted by a dying man to take care of his daughters who are being haunted by the same curse that has taken his life. The story is loosely taken from Sheridan Le Fanu’s short stories in “In a Glass Darkly,” a heavy influence to Bram Stoker. However, this movie stays away from the stalking, murderous vampires that are synonymous with the genre and creates a more manipulative, ghostly version. A usual trope, the main character is given a book that details vampiric nature and how one becomes a vampire, but this story chooses a more outdated and folkloric set of rules which dictate a person can become a vampire simply by not living a godly life or by not being allowed to pass into the next world. This folkloric mysticism is complemented by the simplistic plot and dreamlike camera sequences that were nothing short of revolutionary for the time. Editing and effects are truly groundbreaking, allowing for more motion and perspective than just about any film prior.

While the Americans were still using a vaudevillian, flamboyant style of acting, Europe was experiencing an expressionist movement that slowly leaned toward more realistic acting that is definitely present in this picture. Also, the lack of formal training of the mostly amateur cast could also explain this quieter, more subtle style that prefers to let the camera, lighting, and score create the horror itself. More than anything, this film represents a major shift in the filmmaking industry. Dreyer manages to make the extremely difficult transition from silence to talkies seem effortless with stoic, limited dialogue while still utilizing the title cards of the silent era.

From Dusk Till Dawn (1996)

Quentin Tarantino’s screenplay from a story conceived by Robert Kurtzman was directed by Robert Rodriguez. It stars George Clooney and Quentin Tarantino as Seth and Ritchie Gecko, two bank robbing brothers on the run who hold a family hostage on a crime spree. While stopping at a highway strip club the brothers provoke a gang of vampires disguised as humans. The first time I watched this movie, I had no idea that vampires would be involved at any point, and during the first 45 minutes, it appears that way. Then, without any warning they become a major focus of the plot and the main antagonists, turning the two villainous brothers into anti-heroes. This shattered Hollywood’s template for typical storytelling and caused many other filmmakers to follow suit. The colorization is somewhat bland, even by pre-HD standards. This, along with the over-the-top violence and deadpan script give the overall project a dingy feeling to it. But it seems to know exactly what it wants to be. Characters manage to lure you in with cheesy one-liners or goofy props, including a crotch-gun and a guitar made entirely out of a mutilated corpse. The acting manages to tug at a few real emotions despite being intended as corny, but I don’t think the audience is supposed to think too hard about that. Nevertheless, it deserves mention that Quentin Tarantino gives an intense and believable performance as the more psychotic brother, Ritchie, showing a level of commitment that says he believes in the script.

Martin (1976)

This movie was written and directed by legendary horror icon, George A. Romero and focuses on a disturbed young man from whom the film gets its name. We are introduced to Martin (John Amplas) as he drugs, rapes and then murders a female stranger on a train, feeding on her blood afterwords. We then learn that Martin is on his way to Pittsburgh to move in with his distant Lithuanian relative, Cuda. Cuda is an elderly, superstitious man who believes with certainty that Martin is *nosferatu*. Cuda’s granddaughter, Christina has grown up hearing these stories about her family and thinks her cousin is harmless. She tries to reach out to Martin, realizing he is not mentally stable, and blames this partially on her family’s superstitions. The audience, however, gets to see Martin as the insane mix of Dracula and Norman Bates as he truly is.

Romero’s sleeper hit starts out slowly as it uses some exceptionally edited flashback sequences to reveal its backstory little by little. The story is well layered but sadly doesn’t possess any interesting characters other than Martin himself, and a long list of amateur actors giving amateur performances only accentuates that fact. The dialogue feels unrealistic and expositional at times; people talk way too much to Martin for a man who hardly talks at all. There are many interesting themes that are expressed, such as struggling to cope with one’s identity, one’s identity being defined by their family or past, and the ability to change. A superbly versatile performance by John Amplas captures a horrifically intriguing sense of character about Martin, but as the movie carries on and the scenes get realer and creepier, the line between *vampire movie* and *serial killer movie* get blurred. Romero gets big points in the creep factor for his unique character and visceral editing/camera styles but overall relies on too little to keep it interesting.