

4 Horror Classics From Cinema's Early Days

Great filmography to consider for a spooky night.

[James Gordon](#)

You have **2** free member-only stories left this month.



Credit: Carl Theodor Dreyer-Filmproduktion

Movies were different then. Three of the following are silent films. Although much shorter on average than today's productions, they are paced differently. They require a different kind of attention to follow. The film language changed since then, so appreciating them is a little like learning another dialect.

Through exposure, modern audiences will understand that

the early films demonstrated another kind of artistic effect altogether. The techniques used were remarkable, that you will rarely if ever see in today's movies. At the same time, they showcase core elements that were influential on modern filmmaking.

There is great news about all four of the following films. If confronted with a limited schedule, the shorter run-time standard in the early days, makes these a great lineup for a creepy viewing program. Fans of contemporary horror could easily catch up on these classics, to get a sense for some of the genre's origins.

The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (1920)

Run time: 71 min.



Image credit: Decla-Bioscop

This German, silent, expressionist masterpiece by Robert

Wiener is one of the earliest horror films. The sets, costume design, and directing are prototypical for how thriller and horror genres would push the boundaries of creativity and convention.

One fascinating quality about this film was how the set changed to reflect the emotional state of the narrator. The bold artifice of the sets was intentional, as they became expressive landscapes for the psychological reality of the film.

The contrast in the movie, between lights and darks was a masterful innovation, using technology at the time to great effect, achieving with black and white what couldn't have been possible with color.

It's such a unique film, that you can take basically any freeze-frame, and easily pick out all of the qualities that make it distinctly *Caligari*.

Nosferatu (1922)

Run time: 94 min.



Image credit: Prana Film

With his seminal vampire classic *Nosferatu*, Murnau built on his early experiments with horror from the haunted house film ***The Haunted Castle***. Responsible for copyright controversies due to its similarity with *Dracula*, *Nosferatu* is an all but direct adaptation of Bram Stoker's novel.

Max Schreck was a talented actor who played the part of Dracula to perfection. All the moody lighting and shadow-play throughout the film are unmistakable. Remade to great effect in 1972 by Werner Herzog, horror fans will be missing out on history if they overlook this chilly landmark.

A Page Of Madness (1926)

Run time: 60 min.



Image credit: Kinugasa Productions

This Japanese classic demonstrates incredible camera technique and creative vision by director Teinosuke Kinugasa. Similar to *Caligari*, ***A Page of Madness*** seeks to capture the experience of insanity in cinematic form.

The film was lost for 45 years after its release, only to be rediscovered in an archive in 1971. For this reason it received a special kind of hype and appreciation in the silent and art cinema world.

Dream, nightmare, and hallucination — all blend together in a torrent of dizzying cinematography and art direction. It's a mind-bending and disturbing visual journey into the heart of mental illness.

Vampyr (1932)

Run time: 71 min.



Image credit: Carl Theodor Dreyer-Filmproduktion

Carl Theodore Dreyer is an outstanding director. In particular, his films *The Passion of Joan of Arc* and *Ordet* warrant a ranking among the greatest of all time. His early horror film *Vampyr* is also of a remarkable quality.

Similar to Murnau's *Nosferatu*, *Vampyr* offers vampiric thrills and gothic chills. However, it differs from Murnau's expressionistic style, in that it feels strikingly intimate and realistic (which became a signature appeal of Dreyer's movies).

It features a female vampire villain, to contrast with the masculinity or even androgyny of Max Schreck's *Nosferatu*. Dreyer's work deserves to be studied and enjoyed closely.

Film lovers will savor his best films, as they were able to channel the essence of the medium so early in cinema's

history. To my eyes, they always seem ahead of their time, with more detail and subtlety even than pieces from decades later.

Old horror movies can be scary and enthralling — but they require patience and a different mindset to enjoy, when compared to more modern releases. The above are a great place to start, if wanting to crack the pages of film's thrilling history.