

ANALYSIS OF ANALOG HORROR and its Relationship to Horror of the Past

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Analog Horror: an internet subgenre that is a unique take on found footage horror. As the name implies, media of this genre consists of footage compiled together and edited to look like analog media such as VHS and FM Radio. But why would people want it to look like this? There's a lot behind it, from nostalgia to social commentary, among other things. This essay will encompass the history of, the power of nostalgia within, and the editing techniques and tropes used to make this fascinating new horror genre.

For a niche web subgenre, analog horror has quite an expansive history, going as far back as 1938 with the radio broadcast of *The War of the Worlds* starring Orson Welles, a program referred to as "The Broadcast that Panicked the Nations."¹ The story by H.G. Wells was adapted to be a radio broadcast, creating a very immersive way of experiencing the story done live. Because of the nature and medium of the story, many listeners of the broadcast believed they were listening to actual news. This program started off like a standard broadcast but was interrupted at random intervals with segments of a news broadcast describing an alien invasion. The story became more detailed and intense as the show continued, the pattern proceeding until the news bulletin permanently interrupted the original broadcast to document the alien takeover. This immersive and interactive style of storytelling

1 Hera, Alex, director. *The History of Analog Horror*. 2022. YouTube.

is a big inspiration for modern analog horror.

In the year 1980, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*, a film adaptation of Stephen King's novel by the same name, was released. The movie utilizes the surrealist horror genre, reminiscent of many horror films done in the 70s with the same aesthetic. The use of liminal space (a once-populous space forgotten by time), old and distorted music, and surrealist horror elements in *The Shining* are all elements analog horror uses. Another example from the 80s is *Videodrome* (1983) by David Cronenberg. In short, it follows a television executive who gets wrapped up in a mysterious TV. program called Videodrome, which contains snuff film-esque content, such as people getting tortured and softcore pornography. In the story, the program creates brain tumors in the viewer as they watch in order to ultimately control them. In the end, the effects of the program overtake the main character, who ends his life. Many of the themes seen today in analog horror seem to be inspired by this film, with one main aspect being the harmful effects of media consumption, including access to content and visuals you shouldn't have seen.

The idea that mental corruption could occur from analog media and harm you physically is a pervasive notion for the genre. Subsequent incidents like Max Headroom in 1987 created great inspiration for the genre as it is seen currently. The incident was an under two-minute interruption of a broadcast that showcased a man in a room with a strange mask, kaleidoscopic visuals in the background, and various odd comments being said before disappearing off the air. This was a real interruption of a news broadcast and not much is known about it. Interrupting news or safety/workplace training videos with something perceived as typically unsettling or uncanny is a frequently used trope for analog horror.

Equally important is found footage media. This aspect of the horror genre provides immersive storytelling through discovered

media with little to no scripting, a defining trait of analog horror. The most famous example is *The Blair Witch Project*, a horror-found-footage film from 1999. This film was the inspiration for many tropes in today's modern horror genre. It was an immersive found-footage horror film, with off-the-cuff scripting and few details about production adding to the illusion of the story being a non-fabricated depiction of real-life events. There was also an interactive online element that allowed viewers to read the journal entries of some of the characters while the events of the film progressed. This marketing campaign was one of the first alternate reality games (ARG), defined by Collins Dictionary as "a type of multimedia game for multiple players," often taking place across media and the real world, featuring interactive elements that help the story evolve "according to decisions taken by the players rather than the programmer."²

Despite using most or all of the elements present in analog horror, none of these media are considered part of the analog horror genre. Part of what makes analog horror distinct is the fact that it doesn't use any analog technology but instead re-creates it using modern editing. Overall, it's an homage to these times of the past—you can't emulate and pay homage to a time you're already living in, as part of the goal of analog horror is to create nostalgia for a bygone era.

Analog horror officially first appeared on the internet with a CreepyPasta from 2006, known as *The Wyoming Incident*. CreepyPasta is a "genre of user-generated paranormal and scary stories that were distributed largely via internet forums."³ *The Wyoming Incident* was a lot of people's first exposure to many facets of horror, including the creation and collaboration process of the genre. This video has long since disappeared from the internet,

² "Alternate reality game definition and meaning | Collins English Dictionary." *Collins Dictionary*, HarperCollins Publishers.

³ "creepypasta Meaning | Pop Culture by Dictionary.com." *Dictionary.com*, 1 March 2018

but it certainly made an impact. To summarize, this CreepyPasta was about a broadcast intrusion that had Videodrome-esque frequencies that harmed viewers with several side effects like headaches, vomiting, and hallucinations. Of course, it wasn't real, but people still speculated, and, like most CreepyPasta, it became an internet urban legend. The video was reminiscent of the Max Headroom incident, but with the horror elements dialed up a few notches. It used VHS video effects with clips of disturbing faces that trigger the uncanny valley⁴ look. Despite the obvious analog horror-style nature of *The Wyoming Incident*, the genre wouldn't receive an official label for at least a decade.

Many of the tropes present in analog horror are born from the fact that the setting and time period are essential for making this genre what it is, but there's much more to the genre than just setting something in the past. Common decades used in analog horror are the 70s through the early 2000s. The 70s and 2000s are used most often as settings, but aesthetics from the 80s and 90s are also used frequently. Each decade has specific elements that create symbolism and underlying horror just by being utilized. To understand further, we have to look at the historical events of the period and how events contributed to the main horror genre, as well as the unique nostalgia each period possesses.

Rarely is it heard that someone who lived in the 70s is nostalgic for the 70s; it's Gen Z that has painted those dark times into a "vibey," carefree, and simpler era. Something about the warm fall-tone color palettes, bell-bottom jeans, tie dye, and hippie culture draws people in. This brings me to something called false nostalgia, which seems to play a big role in the horror factor of this genre. False nostalgia is a recent term that made itself more known on the internet around the time when quarantine first started during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Similarly, this is when analog horror

⁴ For an in-depth definition look at Kendall, Emily, and Hans Peter Moravec. "Uncanny valley | Definition, Origin, & Facts." *Britannica*, 27 April 2023

started to gain more traction. So what is false nostalgia? It's "the longing for or reminiscence of an era which you did not actually grow up in, having only experienced the era through its movies, TV. shows, music, etc; not based on actual life experience."⁵ For example, in a Reddit thread from 2018, a user left a post describing how their father showed them the band The Cure, and ever since, they've experienced these strong feelings of sad longing nostalgia for a time long gone that they weren't even alive during.⁶ How do these feelings occur, and why? From personal experience and from knowing others who have experienced false nostalgia, I theorize this longing is a form of escapism. We want to escape from our current reality and long for a "simpler time" which is what regular nostalgia stems from, typically from childhood. But that still begs the question: why do we sometimes feel that way about a time we weren't a part of? In his article from the Guardian about this topic, James Greig describes his experiences in lockdown during the pandemic, namely about how he passed the time by consuming films from the 70s. Eventually, he formed a relationship with them that resembled nostalgic feelings, and ultimately he began to romanticize the decade as a form of escapism. Overall, he states that "what we see in the past, real or imagined, is often revealing about what we're missing in the present."⁷

By setting analog horror pieces in periods that people romanticize and making it feel so real with the editing and interactive elements, this genre preys on those falsely nostalgic feelings. In their book of poetry *False Nostalgia*, Aden Rolfe describes their works as exploring the "interaction of memory, identity, and narrative" in relationship to "what we remember and

5 "False nostalgia." *Urban Dictionary* (Due to the nature of the subject being very internet centered, it was hard to find a solid definition elsewhere.)

6 u/IdleKing. "Is there a term for 'fake' nostalgia? : r/Music." *Reddit*, 5 December 2018.

7 Greig, James. "I was born in the 90s. So why am I suddenly nostalgic for the 70s? | James Greig." *The Guardian*, 12 February 2021.

the stories we tell ourselves.”⁸ So the narrative of several analog horrors is reminiscent of or references actual events from history, like things that happened in the 70s. With the 70s being inherently violent and these analog horror plots being violent, a subconscious connection is already created. But it’s presented in an innocent and nostalgic way, which pulls the viewer in and lulls them into a false sense of security that slowly gets distorted. That mental safe haven of escapism is being destroyed as the story progresses: things get darker and more disturbing, unsettling the viewer and making the horror feel much more real. Nostalgia, including false nostalgia, is described as an important state of mind by psychologists. In a podcast done by Kaitlin Luna for the American Psychological Association, she interviews expert Krystine Batcho about nostalgia and how important it is for the human psyche. Batcho stated that nostalgia is a very “emotional experience that unifies.” It helps to “unite our sense of who we are, our self, our identity over time.” She also stated that nostalgia is an “essential psychological function” because it is a “highly social emotion.”⁹ Nostalgia anchors our identity and helps people process hard times when their current reality isn’t stable and is at risk of change. In this way, analog horror utilizes that fear of corrupted innocence and security, manipulating your nostalgia and using it against you. With this concept understood, let’s look at the time periods themselves, starting with the 70s.

Aesthetically and topically, the 1970s represents a staple in the horror, thriller, and social commentary genres in general, with iconic titles like *Carrie* (1976), *Eraserhead* (1977), *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), and *Suspiria* (1977). Ironically enough, for a time that evokes a usually positive emotion in people, it was a tragic time of trauma and political/social crisis. Thus, born from

8 Rolfe, Aden. “False Nostalgia.” *Giramondo Publishing*.

9 Batcho, Krystine, and Kaitlin Luna. “Speaking of Psychology: Does nostalgia have a psychological purpose? With Krystine Batcho, PhD.” *American Psychological Association*.

that anguish, was some of the most visceral commentary and psychologically twisted horror films ever made. From the rise in serial killings and abductions to political scandals like Watergate, crime was reaching a peak while trust in the government was trending in the opposite direction. Horror from that time wasn't just meant to be scary; each piece of media had a message and was a political/social commentary on the true horror of mankind. Lack of faith and corruption of youth was commonly symbolized in these films, especially in the notorious slasher genre with films like *Halloween* (1978). The common thread features youth engaging in "corrupt" behavior, and then being punished for it. But some slashers took a more political approach, like *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974), which established the more gritty, raw, violent horror that's based more in reality, in this case, a commentary on the Vietnam War and the economic distress of the 70s. Analog horror is inspired by many of the ideas brought up in 70s horror, like the corruption of innocence and having something appear safe that's supposed to provide comfort but instead was corrupted the whole time. Analog horror likes to use things reminiscent of childhood, then crush your perception of it to one of fear and disdain. A common plot thread in analog horror is using exciting new-age technology from past decades and advertising it as a great thing for society, and then showing that it is actually the thing corrupting that society.¹⁰

The 80s are a source of nostalgia, but this time it's more genuine, for a great amount of it comes from people who lived during the period. This decade is also commonly used for nostalgia bait-type media, but just because there are fewer manufactured nostalgic feelings towards the 80s, that doesn't exclude it from being a scary time to live.

Horror in the 80s was still big with commentary on social

10 For information see Krancer, Brooke. "Horror Cinema, Trauma, and the US in Crisis in the 1970s." *ArcGIS StoryMaps*, 9 July 2022.

and political issues but discussed it with more fantastical and supernatural things like man-eating sharks, aliens, ghosts, and unexplainable creatures. Famous examples are *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), *Beetlejuice* (1988), *Poltergeist* (1982), and *Friday the 13th* (1980). This is exactly what analog horror does today, taking the gritty horrific narratives and adding a fantastical element of aliens, the supernatural, or some Lovecraftian force.¹¹

80s horror seems to have more of an allure and is emulated more in analog horror even if the setting isn't the 80s. The horror of this time had a lot of the iconic synthesizer music that set the tone just right, and more prosthetics for special effects were being used, making the visual quality better. Examples include movies like *The Thing* (1982) and *The Fly* (1986), movies that wouldn't have been possible decades before.

The 1980s was also a time of political paranoia that was still lingering from the 70s. The rise of the AIDS crisis and the re-escalation of the Cold War was making the public tense. Because of this, horror was used as an exploration of the unspoken terror through more fantastical surreal narratives, and the time was offering an ideal background of repression and subjugation. Many believe that the more reactionary a decade's politics, the better horror is for that time. For example, LGBTQ+ themes in films of this time were extremely reactionary to sexual and cultural politics of the period, as evidenced by the transphobic conclusion of *Sleepaway Camp* (1983) and the homophobic content in *Nightmare on Elm Street 2* (1985). To sum up 80s horror, an article from *The Film Magazine* describes it perfectly. "80s horror is good because the 1980s were horrible."¹²

But if the 80s were such a horrible time, how is it so nostalgic? This nostalgic wave for the 80s is coming from a lot of people who

11 For more information see 1980s: Fashion, Movies & Politics - HISTORY.[®] *History Channel*.

12 Harris, James. "Why the 1980s Is the Best Decade for Horror." *The Film Magazine*, 9 September 2020.

lived in it. In terms of art culture, disco and “big hair” bands made a huge impact. Reaganomics worked for middle and upper-class families, making it seem like a time of prosperity (for some), and of course, there were feelings of optimism for the future with new technology. Naturally, these are the highlights one would want to reflect on. But from what I find, the nostalgia for this era also comes from the youth of today, partly thanks to the 2016 Netflix show *Stranger Things*. It’s a compelling blend of modernity and retro, feeling familiar to viewers. But it is also a foreign enough time that no longer exists to us. Using the image of a close group of friends riding around a small town on their bikes without the burdens of technology or social media—all the while being blissfully unaware of the politics in their world—the show appeals to a simpler, romanticized time of uncorrupted youth.¹³ That appeal is used in analog horror, and like most things in the genre, is destroyed, which can devastate the viewer. Although we see the 80s as a lively time with lots of color and excitement, analog horror is the opposite. It’s desaturated, empty, void of feeling—a place designed for uncomfortable uncanniness and not a warm and fuzzy place that makes you think of your childhood.

The 90s is a decade that was considered a time of relative peace and prosperity. It’s a nostalgic time just for that reason, a truly uneventful decade that updated everything people loved from the 80s without ghosts of the past. But even though it was a time of peace, it was also a revolutionary time for horror. The 90s was more of a time of meta-commentary in its films with a certain level of self-awareness. The best example of this is the *Scream* franchise, starting in 1996. It paid homage to horror in the past while acknowledging all its tropes and flaws in a suspenseful and comedic way. The suspense was more important in the film than the violence, much like in the original *Halloween* film. It was also

13 For more information see “Why is 80’s nostalgia so prevalent at the moment?” *Quora* and “What is it about the 80s that makes us so nostalgic? : r/StrangerThings.” *Reddit*, 27 July 2018.

a time when the horror and thriller genres were getting combined in films like *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). A lot of other popular movies to come out of the 90s were titles like *Misery* (1990), *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *IT* (1990), and *The Sixth Sense* (1999). The horror genre kept the fantastical elements of 80s horror but brought the horror back to being about human relationships, so the plots feel more character-centric. The 90s weren't afraid to play with the genre, and that aspect of 90s horror is part of why we have analog horror today. Also, setting an analog horror narrative in the 90s makes it more disturbing because it was a time of such peace. To have something that horrific happen in a time of general prosperity is unsettling.¹⁴

The techniques and approaches from the 1990s continued to apply to the settings, events, and aesthetics of the 2000s. Beyond addressing major events like Y2K and 9/11, not much from the 2000s has influenced analog horror as of yet besides being a period setting. I speculate that with the current rise in nostalgia bait content using the early 2000s, we might see more of an increase in the use of aesthetics and referencing of events from that time. Analog horror appears to be a very popular genre amongst younger Millennials and older Gen Z. I've noticed the trend in romanticizing early 2000s aesthetics, especially regarding old toys and cartoons from childhood. I hypothesize that we might see a trend in analog horror regarding old toys from the period like Furbies, dolls, or even some playground equipment and certain cartoons.

Now, how does one create an analog horror series? Editors use a varying amount of different programs, like Audacity, Blender, SonyVegas, Adobe Photoshop, Final Cut Pro, and more. The genre simply can't be done without editing because it is supposed to feel like a hollow, uncanny copy of something we know and are

14 For more information see Gislason, Lor, et al. "Horror In The '90s: A Decade Of Reflection & Change." *Horror Obsessive*, 12 June 2020.

familiar with. As stated before, what makes a series analog horror is the fact that it's not analog—it's a digital recreation. Because every component of the videos is edited, it makes it hard to create a list of exactly everything that goes into the editing process, but it can be narrowed down to a few main elements: uncanny distorted imagery, choppy out-of-order editing, distorted sound design, and video/image filters.

First, let's talk about the uncanny distorted imagery and video/image filters. Everything in an analog horror video is a distorted copy of something that already exists. It's supposed to feel like a corrupted distorted memory or almost like a dream. Backgrounds are usually simplified: often something we recognize, but with less detail. Faces look real, but something is just slightly off until ultimately the face contorts into a horrific image. We recognize the voices as voices, but something about it doesn't sound human.¹⁵ Using this imagery and editing it well is a careful and complex skill. It's easy to make this sort of thing cheesy and not scary. It takes a special subtlety, hiding the strange within the image and making it hard to spot at first. Usually, to create these images, people edit other photos into the frame, or 3-D render their own and edit them to make them look flat. Video/image filters can help to hide some of these subtle details, and filters can make or break your immersion despite being such a small part of the process. These filters are usually VHS tape or TV static filters that are made slightly transparent. Some creators also achieve older-looking footage by yellowing the image and doing some color correcting.

Another key component is choppy editing. A lot of skills for good analog horror go into making it look bad. Having a low sound and image quality makes it look and sound like a cheap old copy. You can easily get away with just slapping a VHS filter over a black screen. But it takes a lot of skill to make bad editing look and

¹⁵ For a more concrete example of this kind of distortion see Kister, Alex. "The Mandela Catalogue Vol. 1." *YouTube*, 9 August 2021, <https://youtu.be/C8d12w6pMos>.

sound good. Again, subtlety is key. Slight glitches in audio and the video feed without being super in your face can make or break that horror experience. Another facet of this part of the editing process is making it look like the decade you're trying to emulate. Many shows will use old news, educational VHS tape, and PSA graphics to achieve this.¹⁶

Next is music and sound design, this is a huge part of analog horror but it also has to be done just right. There is a fine line between creepy and cheesy. Music of several different genres is used to emulate that familiar yet unsettling feeling. It can range from classical to big band music from the 20s - 50s and nostalgic training tape/mall music from the 80s and 90s. But it wouldn't be analog horror without a twist- the music usually has an added effect, such as echo, audio disruption (like a tape getting stuck in the machine), shifts in speed, or modulations in pitch or sound. Another kind of music used is dissonant surreal music with no real melody or rhythm. It's more like noise that creates a hollow, reflective feeling in the listener and sounds like a distant memory you can't quite remember.¹⁷ The same edits made for music are also used for voice-over segments of a series, such as changes in pitch, an echo, or stopping and starting. There is also significant use of different sound effects, like a tape going into a machine and static. But sometimes there will be sound effects for the actions of the characters like running through the woods or fidgeting with a camera.

The setting is an interesting thing here. Most of the time

16 For examples of this kind of editing see Straub, Kris. "L O C A L 5 8 T V - Weather Service." *YouTube*, uploaded by LOCAL58TV, 1 November 2017, <https://youtu.be/M75VLQuFPrY>. and Abode, Remy. "WORLD'S WEIRDEST ANIMALS - GEMINI HOME ENTERTAINMENT." *YouTube*, uploaded by GEMINI HOME ENTERTAINMENT, 17 November 2019, <https://youtu.be/vyDvppwRPM4>.

17 An example of effective use and editing of music is Walls, Martin. "The Walten Files 1 - Company Introductory Tape." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Walten Files, 19 February 2023, <https://youtu.be/uShQXE1Dla8>.

a setting doesn't exist, being whatever training tape, news, or emergency alert system (EAS) broadcast is being used for the narrative. But when it is used, the setting is almost always something called a liminal space. This is perfect for this genre because a liminal space is conceptualized as "a place of transition" between a past and a future. These spaces are often "devoid of humans and, in some cases, distinctly surreal."¹⁸ These spaces are supposed to be empty uncanny versions of beloved places in our childhood, but instead of that positive association, it leaves you feeling vulnerable and exposed. Time doesn't exist in these places, so a future is never in sight.¹⁹

Lastly, here are some common tropes and cliches found in this genre. Usually, there are little to no characters involved. Found tape footage is common, but majority of the time, the footage is made to resemble some regular television programming, often ending with the tape slowly glitching or becoming hijacked (A lot of times by an EAS). In the broadcast, you have something that seems plausible with something else that is entirely impossible and surreal thrown in there, and most of the time no one will react accordingly. For example, something horrific may happen and instead of a proper horrified reaction, a character may act neutral. Sometimes the character won't even react at all.

On a thread from the r/analoghorror subreddit, users shared tropes they were tired of seeing in the genre some of which being "shadowed face + realistic eyes", text-to-speech voices without a real explanation for why it's there, and lots of shows trying to copy off the success of another and it cheapening the value. Supernatural forces are seemingly the main antagonist, and it seems many commenters would like to see more psychological issues being

18 Pitre, Jake. "The Eerie Comfort of Liminal Spaces." *The Atlantic*, 1 November 2022.

19 For an example of Liminal Spaces being utilized see Parsons, Kane. "The Backrooms (Found Footage)." *YouTube*, uploaded by Kane Pixels, 7 January 2022, <https://youtu.be/H4dGpz6cnHo>.

tackled without this Lovecraftian omnipotent god-like force behind it all. Another main problem in the genre seems to be the overuse of certain effects, like VHS filters and blackout screens, causing them to lose their impact. There is also an overuse of the rare times characters do show up in analog horror, they are usually already deceased or are dealing with severe trauma that they must work through as the narrative goes on. Imagery like gruesome body horror is also one of the main depictions of people.²⁰

These elements make this genre so unique and refreshing to see because nothing quite like it has been seen before. But with other creators wanting to copy the success of popular shows, and with the genre's presence contained primarily to the internet, we run the risk of overusing these elements to the point where eventually, these tropes will become bland and stale, which could endanger analog horror as a genre. Yes, mainstream horror has an abundance of tropes. Because of its big corporate presence, though, it's unlikely that it's going to disappear, which may not be the case for analog horror. Despite this worry, however, there seems to be an auspicious future for this genre.

As can be seen, analog horror doesn't follow a traditional script format because of its inherently visual-based storytelling methods. I believe this genre is very refreshing to see in the horror scene, bringing a very creative way of storytelling to the table. Despite being very popular on the Internet already, it seems analog horror is coming more into the mainstream like with the 2022 film *Skinamarink* directed by Kyle Edward, which utilized a lot of analog horror tropes and liminal spaces. Even more recently, 17-year-old Kane Parsons, also known by his username Kane Pixels, creator of the analog horror series *The Backrooms*, received a movie deal from A24 to direct a feature-length film version of this series.

20 Analog horror tropes: good or bad? : r/analoghorror." *Reddit*, 6 January 2022.

Another place we are seeing abundant use of this genre is the indie horror game scene. An overwhelming amount of games from the past few years have used elements of analog horror, some of the most popular being by indie game developer Puppet Combo. As for more of a mainstream presence, *Five Nights at Freddy's*, a point-and-click survival horror game released in 2014 by game developer Scott Cawthon, is one of the very few analog horror games that has achieved widespread popularity. For instance, *Five Nights at Freddy's* continued to have multiple sequels, a book series, a plethora of merchandise, and even a movie that is scheduled to release on October 27th, 2023. This game was also the inspiration for many analog horror series on YouTube, through the form of employee training tapes and found security footage.

Overall I believe analog horror is becoming more and more of a popular medium for storytelling. Thanks to the developments in horror and technology from the 1970s-2000s we can today enjoy this unique modern spin on the horror genre.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In your opinion, which of the three components discussed in this essay—history, nostalgia, and techniques with editing and writing—makes the analog horror genre most unique and most compelling?
2. The author breaks down the historical contexts for the eras depicted within the genre. What does a knowledge of this history add to their analysis? And what does this knowledge provide to a viewer of analog horror?
3. From the original *War of the Worlds* broadcast to modern content, the ability to convince an audience of a supposed truth is at the root of analog horror. What about these media make them so convincing and compelling?
4. In the discussion on nostalgia, the author mentions the greater recognition of false nostalgia during the first parts of the COVID-19 quarantine in 2020. What about that time period lent itself to more contemplation on nostalgia—false or otherwise?