

Films About Ghosts: A Brief Look at Turn-of-the-Century Haunted House Films

Posted November 1, 2025

The Square PHX History Blog

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“A house as old as this one becomes, in time, a living thing. It starts holding onto things...keeping them alive when they shouldn't be. Some of them are good; some of them bad...Some should never be spoken about again.”

– Thomas Sharpe, Crimson Peak film trailer

Did you know...

Is Phoenix haunted?

Phoenix may not be a place that one considers to be a hotspot for the supernatural but there are several places that are considered to be haunted, at least according to sites like AZCentral and Visit Phoenix. One of these places, though there is little consensus, is Rosson House in downtown Phoenix. Several of the current and former staff have

said that they've never experienced any supernatural phenomena themselves, but that doesn't mean it isn't fun to think about, and also to watch films that lean into that turn-of-the-century haunted house genre!

What was the first horror movie?

The first time a horror film graced the screen was in 1896 with Georges Méliès' *Le Manoir du Diable*, also known as *The Haunted Castle* or *The House of the Devil*.

According to the New York Film Academy, "The three-minute film is complete with cauldrons, animated skeletons, ghosts, transforming bats, and, ultimately, an incarnation of the Devil. While not intended to be scary—more wondrous, as was Méliès' MO—it was the first example of a film (only just rediscovered in 1977) to include the supernatural."



Screenshot from *Dante's Inferno*, 1911,
by Padovan-Bertolini.

There is a bit of disagreement when it comes to the first feature-length horror film. Some say it's Francesco Bertolini, Giuseppe de Liguoro, and Adolfo Padovan's [*Dante's Inferno*](#)

(1911) and others claim it's Robert Wiene's [*The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*](#) (1920). It depends on if you consider *Dante's Inferno* (1911) horror or not (it is Italy's first-feature length film of any genre). For some, its violence and graphic nature (especially for the time) make it fall under the horror umbrella.

Why these films?

Before I get started on my list, here are a few reasons these specific films were selected:

1. Time Period: The films are all set at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. Given Rosson House is a fully restored 1895 Queen Anne style house, this time period and subject seemed especially apt. The choice was also made to use "turn-of-the-century" phrasing versus "Victorian era" so as to include films that take place outside of England

(though admittedly, most do take place there). It was also during this time period that saw a rise in spiritualism and seances.

2. Haunted Houses: Haunted houses have been around since antiquity. The first recorded instance was recorded by the Roman writer Pliny the Younger (61-112 CE) in a letter to his patron Lucias Sura describing a haunted house in Athens. (Meehan, 2020, p. 5) This means that not only are they entertaining, but they've been part of the cultural zeitgeist for quite some time. Houses can feature as abandoned ruins full of unresolved trauma, or perfectly blend modern spaces nevertheless stuffed with awful secrets or hidden annexes, basements, or attics. (Luckhurst, 2021, p. 57)
3. Variety: The selection below is a range of scariness. From not at all scary to jump scare heavy, there is an offering for any level of fan. Additionally, the films come from different time periods which gives viewers insight into how haunted houses were and are depicted by Hollywood.

The Films

- [The Bewitched House \(1907\)](#): In *The Bewitched House*, a trio of travelers go into a seemingly empty house to escape a storm. It turns out that the house is haunted and it's unclear whether they are better off inside or out in the storm. This French silent film is one of the earliest haunted house films and fortunately one that can still be seen.

It feels very advanced for the time in its utilization of stop motion. There is a scene in which sausage and bread seem to be cut by an apparition which I'd argue still looks great by modern standards. This is definitely worth watching because it's a great example of early horror short films with techniques that show up in future horror films.



Screenshot from The Bewitched House, also known as La Maison Ensorcelée, 1907,

- [*The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* \(1947\)](#): When a newly widowed woman rents a seaside cottage to escape her in-laws, she realizes that her new home is haunted by the ghost of its former owner, a sea captain named Captain Gregg. Not only does *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* have the distinction of being on the edge of the time period we're covering, but it's also probably the least horror-centric of the group (have tissues ready). The film is more of a dramatic romance that happens to have a ghost in it. You may recognize Rex Harrison from his later roles in *My Fair Lady* and *Cleopatra*, but this wasn't the first time he was in a horror adjacent film featuring ghosts, he was also in a film called *Blithe Spirit*, though he was not a ghost in that film. I have a special place in my heart for this movie because my mom and I used to watch it as a double feature with Hitchcock's [*Rebecca*](#).
- [*The Innocents* \(1961\)](#): *The Innocents* is based on Henry James' book *The Turn of the Screw* where a new governess becomes convinced that the house she is staying in is haunted and the children are also being possessed by the ghost haunting the grounds. The film is undeniably a quintessential haunted house movie. It's atmospheric and unsettling. Also, creepy kids in horror are always scary. If you're not familiar with 1960s horror, this is a great place to start.
- [*The Woman in Black* \(2012\)](#): *The Woman in Black* is based off of a 1983 novel written by Susan Hill. In it, a widowed solicitor travels to Eel Marsh House to collect documents left behind by the recently deceased owner. Once there, he realizes that the grounds are haunted by a woman seeking revenge by taking the lives of children in the village. The 2012 version is actually the second time the story has been adapted for film, [the first being in 1989 by the BBC](#). The



The Innocents movie ad from the Arizona Republic newspaper, p. 53, February 4, 1962.

earlier version takes place a bit after the time period discussed her but fortunately the 2012 adaptation was set a bit earlier. *The Woman in Black* is not for the faint of heart, so if jump scares aren't your speed, I suggest avoiding this one.

- [**Crimson Peak \(2015\)**](#): In *Crimson Peak*, Edith Cushing is swept off her feet by the mysterious Sir Thomas Sharpe. She quickly marries him and joins him and his sister at their home Allerdale Hall. All is not as it seems, and Edith soon learns the history behind the dilapidated yet imposing mansion. Guillermo del Toro is a master when it comes to horror. Part of what makes his work so great is his ability to intermingle different genres. Not only is *Crimson Peak* an incredible example of gothic horror, but it's a bit of a mystery as well. I guarantee that if nothing else, you won't be able to take our eyes off of the beautiful set pieces of this film.

- [**Winchester \(2018\)**](#): Set in San Jose, California in 1906, *Winchester* follows Sarah Winchester, the heiress of the firearms manufacturer who is now lives isolated in her labyrinthine mansion.

She believes that her home is haunted by the souls of those killed by the guns manufactured by her company. *Winchester* isn't a classic or even all that popular. However, I think it's fairly underrated. Helen Mirren gives a great performance, the scares are solid, and it's based around a real location ([The Winchester Mystery House](#)) that is supposedly haunted. *Rose Red* and *The Diary of Ellen Rimbauer* are also very loosely inspired by The Winchester Mystery House. The latter almost made this list but didn't quite cut it.



Winchester House, photographed by Jane Lidz for the Historic American Buildings Survey, circa 1933. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Hopefully this will give you some new movies to seek out and a new way to engage with turn-of-the-century history. Happy Halloween!

For More Information:

- My YouTube list of [Haunted House Films That Take Place at the Turn of the Century Short Films and Trailers](#)
- My related Letterboxd list: [Haunted House Films That Take Place at the Turn of the Century, a list of films by Sarah Stubbs • Letterboxd](#)

Related History from The Square:

- [Haunted Houses: How Victorians became the Default Home for Ghosts & Ghouls](#)
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About the Author:

Sarah Stubbs is a local online content creator with BA in History from ASU, a passion for all things pop culture, especially food and horror. The latter were both early passions of Sarah's. Her mother taught her how to cook at a young age, fostering that passion. Additionally, her mother was instrumental in her love of horror movies, showing her movies like *House on Haunted Hill* and the Universal Monster movies before the age of 10. All of these passions played into her creating [Sarah Stubbs Says](#), as well as her other projects like the 100 Horror Movies in 92 Days Challenge.

Sarah also co-founded the site [Geeks Who Eat](#) with her husband Matthew in 2015 and is the co-host of [Final Girls Feast](#). She also does [freelance writing for other outlets](#). Sarah has also been a member of The Square's Block 14 Book Club for over a year.

Thank you for reading our history blog!

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