

# Horror movies reflect cultural fears. In 2016, Americans feared invasion.

Movies like *Don't Breathe* and *Hush* had a direct connection to US politics.

By Aja Romano | @ajaromano | Dec 21, 2016, 11:20am EST

Stephen Lang stars as the Blind Man in *Don't Breathe* | Sony Pictures

Horror movies show us what we fear. That's why the best horror movies are almost always pulling double duty, serving up scares that also illuminate the anxieties that lie below the surface of our collective cultural norms.

In 2016, however, many of those below-the-surface fears exploded into the cultural forefront. No longer repressed were white Americans' fears of faceless people of color, or the insidious invading corruption of foreign influences. These anxieties, fueled by **fake news, misinformation**, and **a web of vast and nefarious conspiracy theories**, shaped the current political climate **to a degree** few had imagined possible.

Most 2016 horror films were in production before this year began, yet they're a telling glimpse into a long-brewing pot of cultural anxieties that seemed to boil over in 2016. And among the most successful horror films of the year, one took the standard tropes of its genre and upended them in order to get at some unexpected and timely truths about American society.

## **This year's horror films were blunt and straightforward**

This cultural shift toward an overt courting of extremist right-wing ideologies was immediately evident in the crop of horror and suspense films released in 2016, from ***Green Room***, which pitted a young rock band against a neo-Nazi stronghold in the rural Pacific Northwest, to ***The Wailing***, which **dealt explicitly with xenophobia** and the fears born out of an inability to communicate across cultural and linguistic divides. Everywhere you looked in horror this year, the cultural anxieties that shaped the **global rise of nationalist politics** were rampant, whether it was **paranoia bred out of**

**religious frenzy** (*The Witch*), rich white men **seizing power through authoritarianism** and class-based violence (*The Purge: Election Year*), or **apocalyptic fear** (*10 Cloverfield Lane*).

Again and again in 2016, horror films chose to forgo allegory and metaphor in favor of the direct route: pointing out that racist extremism, power-mad gun rights advocacy, religious zealotry, conspiracy-driven survivalism, and xenophobic nationalism are all scary as hell.

Perhaps that's why the other most common horror trend of the year is also one of the genre's most straightforward metaphors: the home invasion. 2016 saw a number of successful examples of this trope, as well as a couple of interesting subversions and a few more lackluster entries. But the trend is clear, and it has interesting things to say about our often conflicting cultural attitudes on whether we should fear what's outside the home — or what's inside it.

### **2016 gave us a tidy crop of home invasion films**

Two home invasion films were among 2016's small crop of popular, critically well-received horror: the Netflix film *Hush* and the summer box office topper *Don't Breathe*. Interestingly, both films borrowed a home invasion trope made famous by 1967's *Wait Until Dark*: The victim (or ostensible victim — more on that in a bit) of the invasion is disabled.

Another well-received entry in the genre, *Green Room* **flirted with** the idea that the intruders into the protected fortress, in this case a nightclub, might be **a necessary bit of upheaval** for the people inside it, but also that the invaders have no idea what they're getting into. (*Don't Breathe* went on to turn this theme into **a fittingly breathtaking upheaval of the whole genre**.)

Other films like *Mercy* and *Intruder* gave us mediocre variants on the popular “faceless home invaders” trope (with a shoutout to 2015's far more interesting trick-or-treat home invasion film *Hellions*). Finally, *The Purge: Election Year* greatly expanded a franchise that began as a relatively straightforward, self-contained home invasion story. The 2016 installment **fully explored** the dystopia mainly just hinted at by the previous two films, turning the original metaphor of the home invasion into the larger idea that

the only way to truly be safe from attack is to go on the offensive and rebel against the larger societal forces that originally drove you into the home to begin with.

The obvious question here is: Why were there so many home invasion films this year? The answer, perhaps equally obvious, is that horror reflects our social unease — “our” usually being the genre’s typically white storytellers, filmmakers, and actors. (A **2016 research report** found that 97 percent of Hollywood film directors are male and 87 percent are white; the report also found that 90 percent of writers are male, while another study found that **66 percent of writers are white.**)

And what white Americans feared this year — as reflected at the box office and at the polling booth — was invasion by foreign influences.

### **The home invasion movie is a metaphor for fear of foreigners**

The home invasion trope has been a part of cinema since cinema has existed. An early forerunner of the trope was the **1913 short “Silence,”** directed by famed silent film director Lois Weber. The trope would later feature in movies like Hitchcock’s *Dial M For Murder* before 1967’s *Wait Until Dark* built its entire narrative around the cat-and-mouse game between a blind Audrey Hepburn and her invaders.

But in the genre’s modern incarnation, the rules of home invasion horror were pretty much codified by Michael Haneke’s anarchistic, amoral ***Funny Games*** in 1997. In that film, a pair of lawless psychopaths brutally invade a home in the middle of an idyllic, upper-middle-class neighborhood. Viewers, along with the terrorized family, are subjected to escalating feelings of powerlessness throughout the film, while Haneke uses disconnected violence and deliberate cinematic manipulation to connect his story to **modern societal decay.**

There’s a lot going on in *Funny Games*: class and generational conflicts, audiences’ desensitization to violent media, societal upheaval, you name it. But while Haneke **meant his take** on the trope in *Funny Games* to be a condemnation of the desensitized violence of American cinema, his film largely gave rise to knockoffs that perpetuate exactly that. Watered-down *Funny Games* echoes have since reverberated through the horror genre, translating to a litany of films in which the following basic plot plays out over and over: Happy, secure, upper-middle-class white people are invaded by

anarchistic, violent criminals, usually without any apparent motive other than sadism.

Metaphorically, the allegory of the modern home invasion film is all about the sanctity and deceptive sovereignty of America as a nation state, powerful and impenetrable. The fears of an audience witnessing a home invasion reflects the fears of Americans who feel that “their” country has been or will be invaded by everyone from militant radical Islamists to refugees to job-stealing immigrants.

Since the popular home invasion films ***Them*** (2006) and ***The Strangers*** (2008), horror film’s home invaders have usually donned creepy hoods or masks to carry out their terrorizing acts (as if having your home invaded wasn’t scary enough already). This extra fear factor seals the trope as basically a giant metaphor for xenophobia: fear of a faceless Other, a literal foreign element entering your self-contained domain.

### **The trope is typically aimed at white Americans**

The home invasion trope works by turning the house itself into a metaphor for strength and security; houses in home invasion films are usually either impressive fortresses for rich people, cozy middle-class bungalows hidden away in the woods, or some combination of the two. This idea of the home as a hideaway for white people is crucial to the home invasion trope, which turns on the idea that that secure fortress of solitude is neither secure nor solitary. The more self-contained and sturdy the houses are, the scarier it is to watch them be systematically invaded, despite all their protective elements.

The home invaders in these films, meanwhile, are typically motivated by violence for the sake of violence; *The Strangers* famously has a villain state, “Because you were home,” as the reasoning for why they chose that particular family to victimize. This suggestion of depersonalized takeover reflects the **rise in fears of globalization** and **a loss of “American” culture**. The home invasion narrative often thwarts all efforts at communication between the invader and the invaded, or else puts the means of communication solely in the invader’s control — further heightening feelings of impotence and victimization on the part of the invaded.

Most home invasion films subtly portray the white American victims as coddled into a deceptively placid existence by the trappings of modern capitalism — one that leaves

them hopelessly unequipped to deal with the intruders. (Adam Wingard’s brilliant ***You’re Next*** subverts this idea by making its heroine a commune-raised survivalist.) Rugged American individualism is usually the solution: If the homeowner is to survive, she usually has to drum up her courage and go on the offensive, which usually involves embracing the violence the invaders brought into the house.

Yet the home invasion film isn’t just about giving catharsis to white America’s fear of the other. In an information age where anonymity, and occasionally the use of **actual masks**, is used to launch faceless attacks across the internet, the horror genre’s recent development of the faceless intruder speaks to a different, larger cultural anxiety, particularly the heightened risk of meeting strangers who could invade your real-life spaces. In a society that’s increasingly anxious about internet privacy, and about the way internet security breaches could bleed over into a loss of real-life privacy, the home invasion film is uniquely able to depict an allegorical version of what that security collapse might look like.

Given all the recent emphasis on masks, it’s especially significant that in 2016, the two most successful home invasion films took time to reveal our intruders’ faces.

### **2016’s best home invasion film is a total subversion of the trope — especially the idea of America as an invaded sanctuary**

A number of 2016’s home invasion films have interrogated this narrative of an innocent victim invaded by faceless nihilists. Several, like *Mercy* and *Don’t Breathe*, challenge both the idea that the invaders are the villains and the assumption that those being invaded are innocent. The popular *Hush* also includes a sequence in which the invader — whose name and motives are never revealed; he’s credited only as “Man” — takes off the face mask to show his victim, a deaf woman named Maddie, that he’s not all that concerned about being anonymous.

*Hush*’s greatest strength is its depiction of Maddie as a helplessly naive character who gains self-reliance over the course of the film; she starts out so trusting that all her doors are unlocked, and at one point she casually leaves her sliding door open, even after she’s gotten a strange vibe from her environment. *Hush*, like *The Purge: Election Year*, paints the invasion as a wake-up call, inevitably reaching the same conclusion about the progress of any assault on local turf: The best way out is to fight back.

But of all the home invasion films this year, the one that pushed back the hardest against the whole trope — while simultaneously being a pristine example of it — was *Don't Breathe*. Set against the backdrop of Detroit, which figures as a kind of ravaged capitalist wasteland, *Don't Breathe* asks us to empathize fully with the invaders by making them the protagonists, while still allowing them to be flawed characters. (Its closest predecessor in this regard might be the brutal, transfixing French film *Martyrs*.) The person being invaded in *Don't Breathe* is a blind man — as with *Hush*, credited only as “the Blind Man” — and like his famous forerunner, Audrey Hepburn’s blind protagonist in *Wait Until Dark*, he turns the tables on his intruders.

But *Don't Breathe*’s famously twisty plot is full of so many table turns that the entire game of kill-or-be-killed that takes place inside the blind man’s house becomes **a much larger social commentary** about the way US capitalism has dehumanized us.

Most home invasion films trend toward incredible amounts of silence as the invaders creep around, while *Don't Breathe* — after an initial period of total silence — becomes noisy in the extreme. Despite their best efforts, the protagonists can’t stay quiet because the blind man’s house is a minefield of clattering junk and decay.

In *Don't Breathe*, the entire idea of the home invasion as a xenophobic allegory is shot to hell, mainly because the horror is already deeply embedded inside the house. If the house in a home invasion story is a metaphor for America, then *Don't Breathe*’s house is a decrepit, ugly shell of material greed — one that seems held together by sheer willpower on the part of the terrifying (but admittedly badass), gun-wielding white veteran at its center.

*Don't Breathe*’s metaphorical America is a capitalist nightmare you would have to be utterly desperate to want to enter — which **exactly describes the refugees** many Americans are concerned with keeping out. In 2016, numerous films (***Hell or High Water, The Other Side***) reflected the political concerns and economic anxiety of down-and-out white America, **a theme** that would play out again in the US presidential election. *Don't Breathe*, meanwhile, took pains to illustrate that the effects of capitalism have turned our metaphorical house into a nihilistic, greed-driven wasteland where hope only barely survives.

Horror movies show us what we fear, and what we fear typically goes hand in hand with what kinds of laws we pass. In 2016, home invasion films like *Hush*, whose villain promises, “I can come in anytime I want, and I can get you anytime I want,” reflected fears that spawned a larger political agenda to build walls, close borders, and deport **a false number of alleged “criminals”** from the US. But other home invasion films in 2016, like *Purge: Election Year* and *Don’t Breathe*, rejected that premise, issuing scathing critiques of the kind of flawed thinking and fearmongering that built such a shaky, insecure house to begin with.

In a year when reality seemed to fracture ideological echo chambers, the fracturing of the hitherto straightforward home invasion narrative reflected the larger cultural divide. Some embraced the trope’s xenophobic tendencies while others rejected them, but percolating beneath it all was a deep-rooted fear about the state of America today.