

Film tastes follow society's cue, says prof



Comedy movies and occult-horror films, such as "Dracula" and "The Amityville Horror," are in vogue today. Film tastes are more than just a passing fancy. They offer a measure of the tenor of the times and provide insight into our nation's collective experiences and fears, says a University of Michigan authority.

"Motion pictures have a way of running in cycles side by side with historical events," said Frank E. Beaver, U-M professor of communication. Today, for example, the popularity of comedy film rivals the period around the 1930s, when the Marx brothers, domestic comedies, satires of manners and self-ridicule began to emerge, he said.

"SOCIAL CRITICS tell us that the comic films of the decade — and other types of escapist entertainment, such as Bushy Berkeley's dance spectacles — saw a nation through a bleak period. It was a time of economic depression and increasing inter national tension, for which movies became an antidote of escape," said Beaver. "One can't help but wonder if the predominance and popularity of screen comedies aren't once again linked to

the uncertainties of our present economic situation and to a general anxiety about the future."

Another historical trend in the film world is the popularity of occult-horror movies most noticeable after major military con flicts, said Beaver, who also serves as film reviewer for U-M radio station WUOM-FM in Ann Arbor.

"The first cycle of these movies showed up in Germany right after World War I. In 1922, F.W. Murnau made the first screen version of 'Dracula' — titled 'Nosferatu' — and shortly thereafter Germany produced a varied collection of monster films. In our own country, monster pictures appeared about the same time with John Barrymore's 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' (1920)."

Now, in the post-Vietnam era, the occult-horror film is back in full force, said Beaver.

"The Exorcist" forcefully reintroduced the genre just as the war was winding down, and since then there have been dozens of similar films about demonic forces at work in the world."

It is arguable, said Beaver, that horror movies, like comedies, provide relief from tensions.

"The channeling off of anxiety by

watching someone else's horror on the screen is often offered as part of the reason for the popularity of the genre. In these movies, good always triumphs over evil — usually through religious intervention — and in this respect horror-occult films also offer hope through forces greater than human kind."

FOLLOWING wartime, there have also been outcroppings of films depicting mental aberrations — such as insanity, nervous disorders, shell shock victims — and ones in which authority figures are brought into question, said Beaver.

"The mental aberration films in the United States in the late 1940s can be viewed as a hangover from the atrocities of the second world war.

"Most recently, 'One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest' has earned the distinction of becoming the most popular serious film since the end of the Vietnam War. This picture was set in a mental institution, and like 'The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari' (made in Germany in 1919) elicited sympathy for the patients while questioning the ways and means of the authorities.

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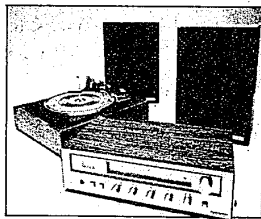
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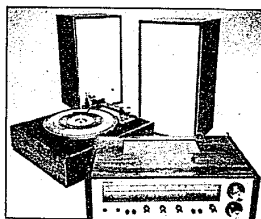
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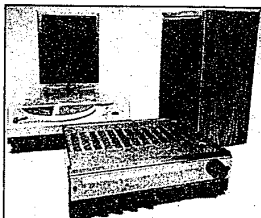
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