



Killer animals in films: reality vs fiction

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Among horror, drama, action, and sci-fi films, the subgenre of killer animals has been exploited since the very beginnings of cinema (e.g., *The Sea Beast* from 1926, and *King Kong* from 1933; Fig. 1).

In the 1950's, a peak in movies about killer animals was spearheaded by *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953) and *Gojira* (1954).

Most of the films during this decade were about giant animals (Sánchez, 2007; De Fez, 2007).

Later, in the 1970's, the number of killer animal films grew incredibly after the successful *Jaws* (1975) was released, only this time the animals were not monstrous or abnormally big. Instead, they were "normal"

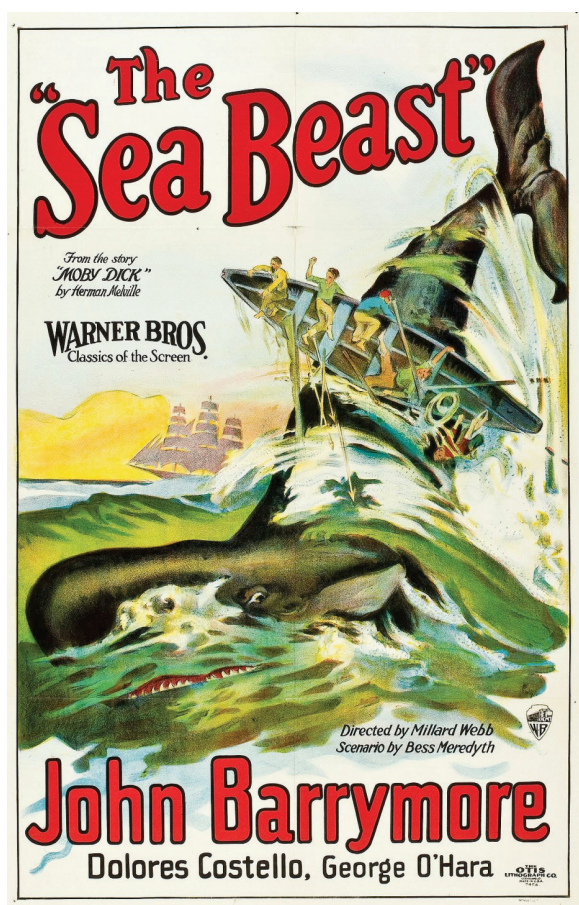


Figure 1. Movie posters of *The Sea Beast* (1926), an adaptation of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, and *King Kong* (1933). Sources: Wikipedia and Filmaffinity.com, respectively.

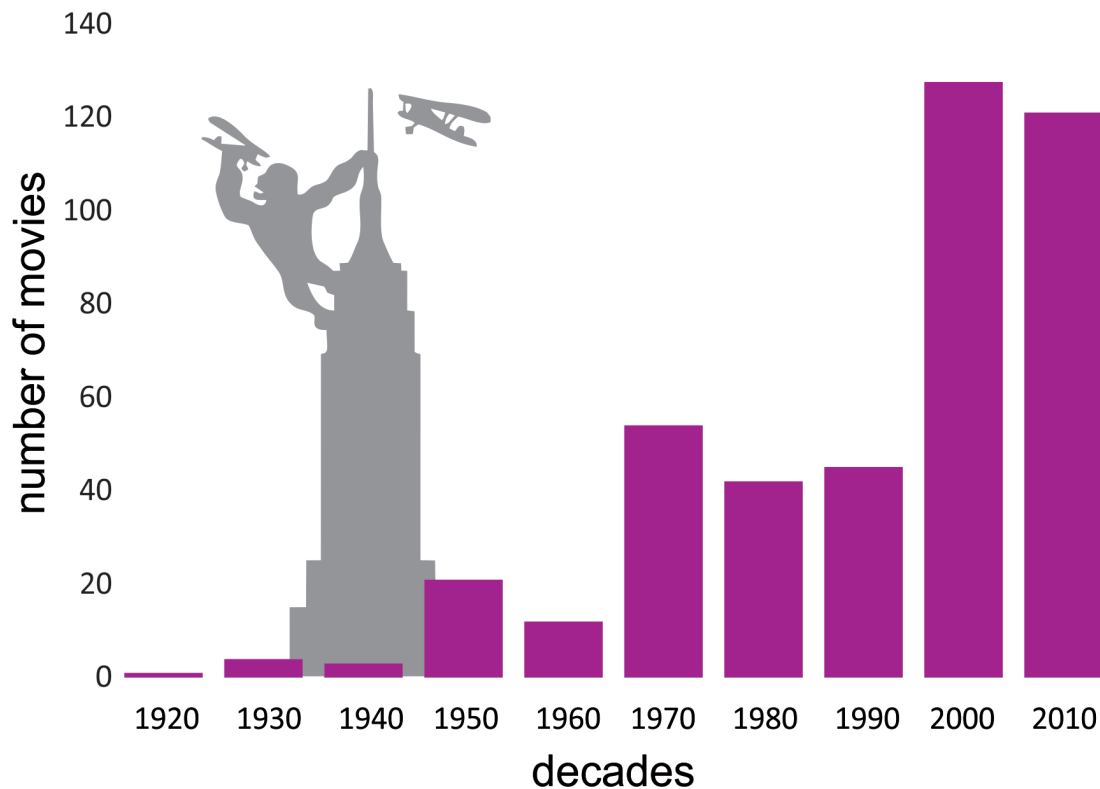


Figure 2. Graph showing the number of killer animal films per decade.

animals, representing a more real threat (De Fez, 2007), a trend that was already popular in the 1960's with films like Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963).

With the use of CGI (Computer Generated Images) in more recent times, this sub-genre increased exponentially. There were 190 killer animal movies released before the year 2000 (in nearly 100 years of cinema history) and more than 250 movies since (Fig. 2). This dramatic increase of killer animal films started with the influential *Jurassic Park* (1993).

Non-human animals constitute the cause of death of millions of people each year, by transmission of deadly diseases, venomous bites or violent attacks. However, are the animals as dangerous as depicted in films? Which are the animals that causes more human deaths each year, apart from humans ourselves? Are the deadliest animals the focus of horror films?

MATERIAL AND METHODS

A thorough search of horror/drama/action/sci-fi films with killer animals as the main antagonists was performed using the public online databases IMDb (<https://www.imdb.com/>) and Letterboxd (<https://letterboxd.com/>). The complete list of compiled films can be accessed at <https://letterboxd.com/ghelhal/list/animal-attack/>. Original movie titles are used herein, romanized when necessary (e.g., the Japanese movie *Gojira* was released internationally as *Godzilla*).

The data was confronted with the number of human deaths per year caused by animals (Wikipedia, 2020). Many animals starring in horror movies do not represent real threats to humans and therefore, there are no available data regarding the number of human deaths per year to be included in the analysis.

RESULTS

Some animals have captivated the febrile minds of filmmakers in spite of the fact that they do not kill a large number of humans each year, as shown in Figure 3. That is the case for sharks (80 movies and 10 deaths per year), crocodiles (37 movies and 1,000 deaths per year), and spiders (18 movies and very few deaths each year, given that antivenoms are readily available; Diaz, 2004).

Other animals have been featured in several horror movies (Fig. 4), even though they do not represent a threat to humans (although some of them can kill people). They are: non-human primates (16 movies), dinosaurs (excluding birds; more than 15 movies and no confirmed human casualties due to lack of coexistence), cephalopods (over 10 movies), birds (11 movies), bees (12 movies), ants (9 movies), piranhas (8 mov-

ies), bears (8 movies and around 3 deaths each year), domestic cats (7 movies), pigs (6 movies), bats (6 movies), and wasps (5 movies).

On the other hand, some of the deadliest animals have been featured in very few movies or in no movies at all (Fig. 3). In this group we can mention mosquitoes (2 movies and 1 million deaths per year due to several diseases including malaria, yellow fever, and dengue), tsetse flies (2 movies about flies in general and 10,000 deaths per year due to tsetse disease), assassin bugs (no movies and 10,000 deaths due to Chagas disease), and freshwater snails (no movies and 10,000 deaths due to schistosomiasis).

Some of the taxa fairly represented in films (Fig. 3) are snakes (23 movies and 50,000 deaths per year), dogs (14 movies and 25,000 deaths per year due to rabies plus 15 from violent attacks), and scorpions

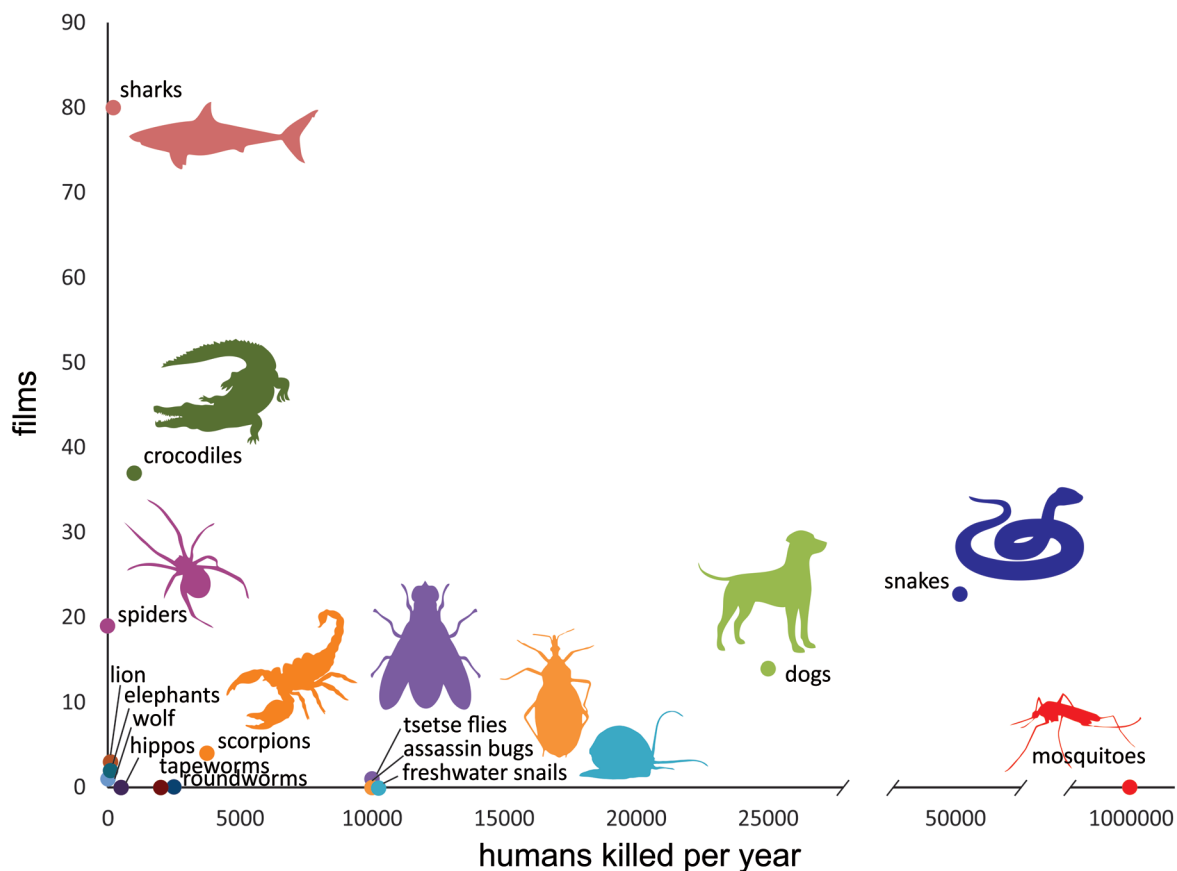


Figure 3. Graph showing the number of human deaths per year versus the number of films of selected animal group, of a total of 442 films. Note that the x axis is not to scale.

(5 movies and 3,250 deaths per year).

There are a few animals with bad reputations and considered natural pests, like cockroaches (4 movies) and locusts (3 movies). While no one has died due to a locust attack, it is a divine punishment in Biblical myths. Also, given that rats transmit several diseases (e.g., hantavirus, leptospirosis), the fear they inspire has resulted in at least 16 movies (Fig. 4).

Among the most bizarre animal choices for a horror movie are *The Tinger* (1959), about a velvet worm-like parasitic creature (Fig. 5), *Night of the Lepus* (1972), about mutated giant rabbits, and *Psycho Pike* (1992), about a large aggressive pike.

A special mention to the cross-subgenre of killer zombie animals, where we can find *Black Sheep* (2006), *Poultrygeist* (2006), *Zombeavers* (2014), *Zombie Shark* (2015),

Zoombies (2016) and *Zoombies 2* (2019), among others.

CONCLUSION

A review of movies involving killer animals shows that the animals that causes thousands of human deaths each year do not inspire fear or concern in movies and hence, in the public. This may be in part reverted by educating about diseases transmitted by these animals and the real danger that some animals represent.

The negative image that other animals have in the eyes of the public can affect their survival as, for example, the killing of bats after the COVID-19 outbreak in early 2020 (Anonymous, 2020). To some degree, horror movies are responsible for the negative image of many animals.

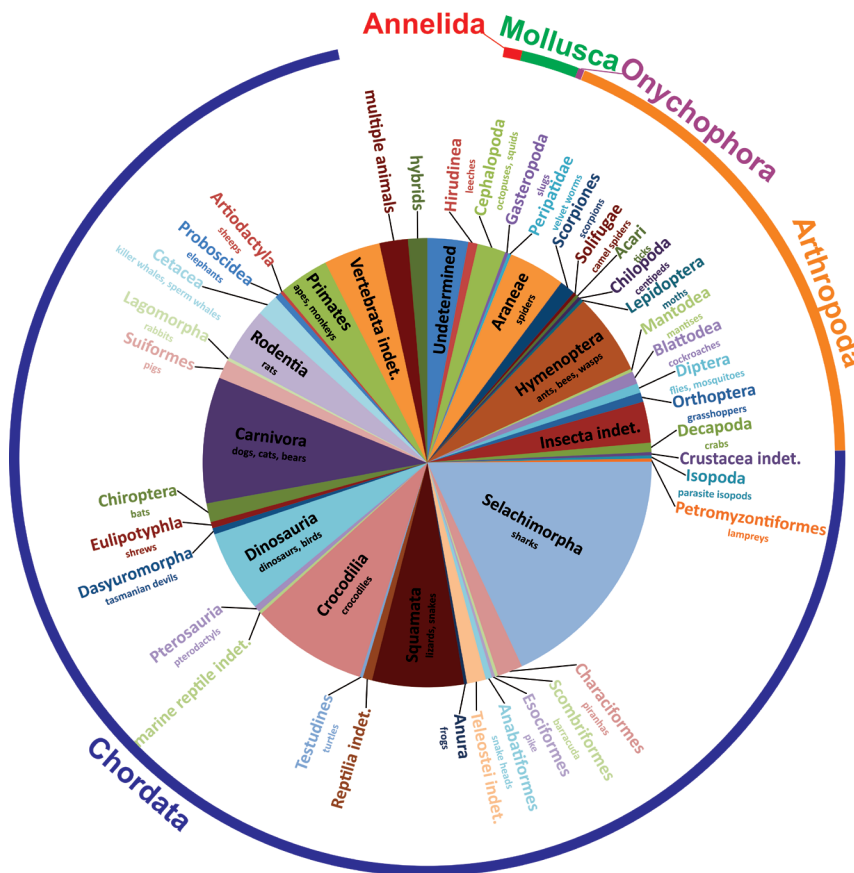


Figure 4. Pie chart showing the proportion of killer animal movies divided by major animal groups. Only the Phyla Annelida, Mollusca, Onychophora, Arthropoda, and Chordata are represented (out of circa 35).



Figure 5. Left: promotional still from the movie *The Tingler* (1959), starring Vincent Price. Right: photo of a velvet worm, *Peripatus* sp. Sources: Columbia Pictures and Wikipedia, respectively.

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- oshiro Honda** (international title: *Godzilla*);
- *The Birds* (1963, USA), directed by Alfred Hitchcock;
 - *Phase IV* (1974, UK/USA), directed by Saul Bass;
 - *Jaws* (1975, USA), directed by Steven Spielberg;
 - *Piranha* (1978, USA), directed by Joe Dante;
 - *Prophecy* (1979, USA), directed by John Frankenheimer;
 - *Cujo* (1983, USA), directed by Lewis Teague;
 - *Razorback* (1984, Australia), directed by Russell Mulcahy;
 - *Jurassic Park* (1993, USA), directed by Steven Spielberg;
 - *Mimic* (1997, USA), directed by Guillermo del Toro;
 - *Open Water* (2003, USA), directed by Chris Kentis;
 - *Gwoemul* (2006, South Korea), directed by Bong Joon-ho (international title: *The Host*);
 - *The Reef* (2010, Australia), directed by Andrew Traucki.

FURTHER WATCHING

Here's a list of 15 classics to get a better understanding of killer animals in films.

- *King Kong* (1933, USA), directed by Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack;
- *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954, USA), directed by Jack Arnold;
- *Gojira* (1954, Japan), directed by In-

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. **Luciano L. Rasia** is a paleontologist working on the evolutionary biology of caviomorph rodents. He is an avid enthusiast of horror and science fiction cinema and literature.