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“Horror-Comedy: The Chaotic Spectrum and Cinematic Synthesis”

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“I pledge that I have acted honorably.”

On the surface, the genres of horror and comedy do not have much in common in terms of causes, reactions, or themes. The divide between the two seems fairly straightforward: simply put, what is funny is funny, and what is scary is scary. But truthfully, their separation is hazy and ill-defined, appearing as more of a stream than a break between categories. Characters commonly associated with horror, such as the zombie, have become the stars of comedies, and comedic characters, such as the clown, are beginning to claw their way into horror movies. Many (if not all) horror movies have scenes in which a viewer might laugh, and numerous comedies can cause both laughter and screaming amongst their audiences, sometimes from various audience members as a result of the same scene. Thus, it seems that the two genres are in fact somehow connected, but the extent to which they are connected, and the qualities that they have in common, are not commonly studied. Fortunately, cinema offers a lens through which the two can be explored and differentiated; coupled with philosophical research and literary analyses, it becomes apparent that four elements are fundamental to the connection of these genres. The extent to which each factor appears in a film determines whether that film may be generally deemed horrifying, humorous, or both. These four factors are:

1. The established threat or likelihood of harm.
2. The realism, and unknowable or inconceivable occurrences/characters.
3. The sympathy or empathy one feels towards the characters.
4. The chaotic setting and occurrences, or Chaotic Spectrum. The three former factors influence this spectrum, and the spectrum helps determine the reaction of both the individual to a horror-comedy and the general reaction of an audience.

1. Comedy, Horror, and Horror-Comedy:¹

a. *A Note on Subjectivity*

While it can be argued that what is “funny” and what is “scary” remains subjective, what makes something funny or scary to a person has a certain framework, i.e. The Chaotic Spectrum. In other words, while the movies researched for this thesis may not be deemed funny or scary to a specific person, I examine them in order to explore the reasons why a person might (and generally does) consider them funny, scary, or both. Thus, this work examines genre as a social construct in order to determine a general means of distinguishing horror from comedy, but possible individual reactions to movies (that are commonly deemed horrifying or humorous) reveal that no definition can fully account for every response; the Chaotic Spectrum intends to determine individualized responses in order to come to a general consensus, and thus, to define genre. Furthermore, specific scenes and characters (such as the clown and the zombie) highlight the categorically transcendent (or rather, merging) nature of humor and horror.

b. *Why Cinema?*

Cinema appears essential in relaying the connection between the categories of horror and comedy,² as it allows several viewers to watch and react to the same scenes, and can incorporate images and music in order to influence a specific reaction from a viewer. As Dennis L. White

¹ Here, horror-comedy and comedy-horror will be used interchangeably, being that one of this thesis’ intended goals is to show the difficulty in defining a movie as “mostly humorous” or “mostly horrifying.” The movies being studied herein are meant to encompass various sections of the Chaotic Spectrum, but all are intended to fall somewhere between “Pure Comedy” and “Pure Horror,” and to not be either extreme. Arguably, at least when accounting for every conceivable individual, neither extreme is an actual category.

² “Comedy,” when used, refers to the genre. “Humor” is used to explain the (intended) reactions of comedy.

says, “a film succeeds if it can provoke emotion; the more meaningful the emotion the better the film” (White 2). Likewise focusing on the non-rational, horror writer Stephen King adds that “the most important thing that film and fiction share is an interest in the image--the bright picture that glows in the physical eye or in the mind's eye ... [T]o those who make films...it is often more important to see than to think” (King 1). Of significance to King’s remark is just *why* these visuals are so compelling; it is the feelings of commiseration, despair, and/or amusement that the images arouse that makes cinema a compelling medium through which to compare humor and horror. In order to further enhance these feelings, music, for example, can be utilized. This idea is explored in *Diary of the Dead*, in which the narrator, Debra, says that she will be using music to make her documentary more terrifying. The addition of music is not something that can be examined in any other horror-humor medium, only in cinema and theatre.³

Thus, cinema is fundamental to humor-horror research because comedy and horror are genres that are largely defined by the reactions they elicit. Furthermore, cinema allows a viewer to experience consistent visuals that he or she would not be able to find in multiple performances of a play or readings of a book. This consistency in viewing experience does not merely pertain to the individual viewer, but applies to multiple viewers, because the visuals created from reading a book may vary from person to person, but what they see on a screen will be fundamentally the same.

c. Comedy, Horror, and Horror-Comedy: An Initial Definition

Before I examine the relationship between comedy and horror any further, these two terms must be defined. However, as this study intends to prove, many definitions for comedy can

³ Theatre is not considered in depth here, except when it comes to tracing the origins of the clown, because of possible performance errors that are unique to a play, as well as the different actors and scenery used from play to play that may cause one version to significantly differ from another.

likewise be applicable to horror, and vice-versa. Robert Bloch, the author of the novel “Psycho,” supports this idea by saying that “comedy and horror are opposite sides of the same coin.” He adds that “both deal in the grotesque and the unexpected, but in such a fashion as to provoke two entirely different physical reactions”⁴ (“Horror and Humor” 146). Here I disagree with Bloch, because the physical reactions to comedies and horror movies are not always different, and definitions for horror that rely on a character or audience member’s reaction can, in certain situations, be applied to comedies. Similarly, definitions for comedies can be associated with those of horror, notably in the sense of a viewer having a humorous reaction to something that a character finds scary. Thus, if the two genres are defined in terms of intended reactions, said reactions may not only fail to be achieved, but they may not be a result of the intended cause; screaming, for example, can be a result of something comedic or of something horrifying, and while it may be the intent of a scene to be frightening, laughter might stem from the viewer finding said scene amusing instead.⁵ Thus, it does not make sense to define comedy and horror without supposing that a definition for the first genre could easily be used to define the second, and the second to define the first.

For this reason, it is not enough to say that there is one type or ideal of horror or comedy, but there are instead very specific types that relate to this study. Significantly, in accord with the findings of Noël Carroll’s work concerning horror, the horror mentioned herein must involve some sort of “monster(s)” established as being outside or against the norm, one(s) that “the human (characters) regard as disturbances of the natural order” (“The Nature of Horror” 52).

⁴ Laughter, for example, can be indicative of either horror or humor. Certainly, though, it is telling that the author of a “horror masterpiece” recognizes that there is a link between comedy and horror.

⁵ This is often the case with jump scares, which may legitimately frighten a person, but may also amuse the viewer as a result of the build-up or in instances where the viewer “knew it was coming.” Similarly, tickling may result in something between a scream and a laugh, while something “fun” or “amusing,” such as an amusement park ride, may result in a scream, a smile, etc.

Furthermore, “the character’s affective reaction to the monstrous in horror stories is not merely a matter of fear, i.e., of being frightened by something that threatens danger. Rather, threat is compounded by revulsion, nausea, and disgust” (“The Nature of Horror” 53). This essential criterion means that a horror movie must not only frighten the audience members, but also disgust them, for horror includes an aversion to what is impure or unclean, and thus leads to revulsion. Similarly, something humorous might be disgusting, such as comedy surrounding flatulence or the tradition of “pieing” a clown. This action is a source of amusement to some, but a disgusting, unsettling act for a person who does not appreciate dirtiness; the latter experiences the aforementioned revulsion typical of horror, not the mirth of humor that is expected. Yet, this very disgust may be what someone else finds funny, as the grotesque, if considered innocuous, can be amusing.

In addition, horror movies typically cause the audience to mirror the characters’ reactions and fears. In other words, the characters’ fear becomes the audience’s. However, when the opposite is true and an audience member finds himself laughing at a situation that a character finds terrifying, the scene takes on a humorous tone. For this reason, as previously stated, it can become difficult to define specific scenes as being horrifying or humorous within these movies. In *Diary of the Dead*, for example, there is something humorous about the character Tracy tripping in the woods and being attacked by a zombie; she had previously condemned and even mocked this trope of falling in horror movies as being unrealistic, only to then undergo it herself. In this situation, the audience’s reactions may be similar to those reactions commonly associated with humor, including laughter,⁶ relief, and joy. These responses, of course, greatly contradict with Tracy’s own reaction at this moment. However, should an audience member experience

⁶ However, as previously stated, humor does not always necessitate laughter, nor does laughter always equate to humor. Thus, these common associations are not always accurate.

Tracy's situation firsthand, his or her reaction will become akin to her own. Living the experience is far different from watching it unfold, and while the movie screen may draw a viewer into its story, it is always there to shield the viewer from any actual harm.

This relationship between the audience and the character negates what appears to be a point of contention in my claim (this claim being that horror and humor have overlapping, often indistinguishable or merging qualities). The possible argument lies in the assessment of comedy as being "'positive' and not 'negative' - that is, that the liberation which comedy affords is not one that must be associated with license and lassitude" (Knox 547). This positive quality of humor appears opposite horror's association with negativity, but in reality, the two are not so black and white. In the above example, for instance, an audience member may recognize both the humor and the horror of Tracy's situation, causing an audience member to laugh in a somewhat ashamed manner. While the viewer may find himself amused by the dark humor of this scene, he can still recognize that the character has only an ironic sense of the humor surrounding her. For the character, humor serves to make the scene even more terrifying, as it adds to the unreality of her situation.⁷ Yet for the audience member, the humor creates distance from the situation's horror, causing him to laugh until the character screams, thus bringing him back into her world.

Therefore, to further clarify, a film exemplifies the qualities of both comedy and horror by drawing the audience into its story and by causing the audience to react (usually with laughter and/or screaming), by making the fears and joys of the characters featured become those of the audience, or by making the audience respond in a considerably different way to what they see on screen. Perhaps Carroll puts it best when he says that comedy-horror films "are predicated upon either getting us to laugh where we might ordinarily scream, or to scream where we might

⁷ Humor here is not "positive" or "liberating" for the character, though it might be for the audience member. This is an example of "dark humor," or humor that incorporates some of the reactions caused by horror (for the character) and others that are fundamentally expected of humor (for the audience, however briefly).

typically laugh, or to alternate between laughing and screaming throughout the duration of the film. One aim of this genre, it would appear, is to shift moods rapidly - to turn from horror to humor, or vice-versa, on a dime" ("Horror and Humor" 145). Thus, at the heart of what I consider as "humor-horror films," there must be some strong reaction to what is on screen, though the reaction can be anything from laughter, to screaming, or even silence. Additionally, there must be a monster, and there must be a sense of chaos, an essential element which will be further explored in Section 2 of this thesis.

Yet, it could be argued that I have simply defined a horror movie that features or includes humor; what separates that movie from comedy-horror as a genre? Here is my point: in defining horror and humor, I am showing that the divide is not clear cut, nor as wide as is commonly assumed. However, comedy-horror can be said to differ from comedy with horror or horror with humor in that it twists a common assumption about a character or storyline in order to cause a reaction opposite of what is expected. By this, I do not mean that such a movie must have several jokes or ironic situations, but rather, it must have moments of relief that are commonly associated with humor along with moments of tension that are commonly associated with horror, and it must (intend to) cause a viewer to be caught between the two reactions, or to have a reaction that significantly differs from that of the character on-screen.

d. Movie Choices, and a Look into the Psychopath

Before we may proceed further, the rationale behind the movies included and excluded in this study must be explained. Although there are certainly horror movies that provoke laughter because they are simply poorly done or rely on satire, such movies are not relevant to this thesis. Poorly-done horror movies, while funny, are so for a purely unintentional reason. By contrast,

the type of humor discussed herein is not only intentional,⁸ but also purposeful. One of the key research questions this study undertakes, then, is whether there is a single, perpetuating purpose found across the majority of movies we may call “Comedy-Horror.” Whereas the point of this examination is to identify distinguishing, unique features of comedy-horror, laughing at something that is just poorly done is not at all unique to cinema; a poorly-done play can be just as funny, as with one in which the actors forget their lines or have trouble delivering them. Thus, there is little reason to think that poor production value is related to the humor experienced in the sorts of movies mentioned henceforth, some of which were high-budget films. For similar reasons, pure satire will not be considered because it serves to ridicule or dismiss certain aspects of the horror-humor genre. However, certain “loving” forms of parody and movies that include satire, such as *Scary Movie*⁹ and *Shaun of the Dead*, have been considered. After all, these instead pay homage to the types of movies they are parodying, which means that the distinguishing elements of these movies remain so that they may still be explored.

Additionally, there is no consideration of movies featuring seemingly-fantastical but unquestioned characters, such as fairy tales or fantasy films, in which the monster figure is treated as a normal or expected part of society or of nature. In other words, there must be an element of chaos, of “the unnatural,” behind a movie in order for it to be considered horrifying. Therefore, films such as *How To Train Your Dragon* and *Star Wars* do not match the criteria for inclusion in this research, for the monsters do not appear as incongruously unnatural figures in

⁸ While an audience member may have an unexpected reaction to a scene, such as finding a scary scene funny, it is a reaction that can be explained in terms that do not blame the production value. The reasons why a specific scene, character, etc. may affect an individual in such an unexpected way, which will be explored in greater depth, are dependent upon the individual’s experiences, not on faults concerning the quality of the movie. Thus, it is intended that the audience react in some strong way to these scenes/movies, with either humor or horror, or with a mix of both, hence the “ashamed laugh” mentioned earlier.

⁹ The first installments of *Scary Movie* are not necessarily loving, but they certainly offer something for both lovers of horror and lovers of comedy. Additionally, they serve to highlight possible moments of humor within several horror movies, as well as exaggerate horrifying scenes to make them humorous, and therefore, to show a possible journey from horror to humor.

the worlds in which they emerge; they may scare certain characters, but are by no means frightening due to the incredulousness of their existence, but rather, their actions. The dragons are an expected part of life in *How to Train Your Dragon*, while Chewbacca's presence is neither menacing nor questioned in *Star Wars*. Rather, the dragons are scary because of their ability to destroy, while the frightening characters in *Star Wars* are for the most part all too human.¹⁰

By contrast, scientifically credible “monsters,” such as those found in psychological thrillers (e.g., *The Silence of the Lambs*), will be considered germane to this study. Elsewhere, however, their classification as a part of the “horror genre” is contested by several of the experts cited in this study, including Carroll, who, as stated previously, reasons that part of what makes a horror movie particularly horrifying is that the monster is, decidedly, unexplainable, unable to be understood, and in a sense unreal as a result (“The Nature of Horror” 52). Consequently, while the horror monster may exist in the movie, it is difficult to reason its presence in our own world. Carroll thus claims that this discredits the assertion that the psychopaths in *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Psycho* are in fact “monsters,” but I assert that these psychopaths serve as a link between reality and improbability, the link that causes the impossibly fantastical monsters to seem possible. The deeds of the psychopath are so unimaginable, so frightening, as to appear unreal, and the realization that such terror does indeed live in our world leads to the question of how far this reality extends. As White says, while *Psycho* de-emphasizes many of the common elements found within horror movies, it still causes the viewer to feel fear (White 3-4). Furthermore, I would add, *Psycho*, like the later *The Silence of the Lambs*, both depend on the essential and necessary horror criterion of a “threat ... compounded by revulsion, nausea, and

¹⁰ The non-human characters that can be considered frightening, such as Jabba the Hut, are secondary or tertiary. Furthermore, while their special characteristics may cause some of the fear (such as Jabba the Hut's appearance being grotesque, and thus frightening), it is their “evil deeds” which, for the most part, make them menacing. Their existence is neither questioned nor (for the most part) frightening in its own right.

disgust” discussed at the outset of this study (“The Nature of Horror” 53). In fact, both films focus on the visceral effects of blood, corpses, preservation of bodies, gory violence, dismemberment, and the like. And, though Carroll rejects the idea of Norman Bates being horror-worthy due to the character’s “humanity,” and the reality of someone like him being alive, the rarity of such a person’s existence and the desire for him or someone like him not to be real causes Norman Bates to become a monster in his own right, one that is even more terrifying because of his similarities to real-life serial killers.

Does this mean that all villains can elicit, as Carroll calls it, the reaction of art-horror?¹¹ No, it does not. For example, as previously stated, *Star Wars* is not considered a horror film, even though Anakin Skywalker, as Darth Vader, exhibits certain monstrous characteristics. His turn to evil, while foreseeable, was also carefully constructed; he did not decide overnight to be “evil,” nor was he born evil. His reactions were a result of tragedy, not some unexplainable phenomena such as that found in *American Psycho*.¹²

Still, this certainly leaves room for some questionable categorization, as it could include movies such as *The Dark Knight*, and still poses a problem in categorizing *Psycho*. While *The Dark Knight* is not currently labeled a horror or humor movie, the idea of the Joker being a monster seems feasible, due to his mask, his cruelty, and his love of chaos. Yet here, the movie’s origin in comics works against it being labeled a horror movie, for superhero movies tend to

¹¹ Art-horror refers to “an occurrent emotional state [that may include] muscular contractions, tension, cringing, shuddering, recoiling, tingling frozenness, momentary arrests, paralysis, trembling, perhaps involuntary screaming, and so on... [which is] caused by [a] cognitive state” (“The Nature of Horror” 54). In other words, these physical reactions may differ from person to person, but the emotional state is caused by a cognitive realization of danger, impurity, etc., coupled with some abnormal physical reaction.

¹² While Yoda asserted that Anakin would become evil, there were few indications beyond this assertion of any villainous nature, up until his familial tragedy. For an event to have a horrific outcome is something we can understand, but for it to rise out of nowhere does not make sense. Why Anakin “turned to the dark side” can be understood, but in the case of horror, the presence of this “darkness” is something that we do not expect, or that does not make sense. Still, of all the characters in *Star Wars*, Anakin is certainly the closest to being a monster, especially if he is seen as a sort of pseudo-psychopath; as a science-fiction film, which is sometimes conflated with or subsumed under the horror movie category, this less clear distinction seems reasonable.

focus more on crime and action when labeling genres; a future study could possibly delineate the reasons. Likewise concerning the killer in *Psycho*, Norman Bates did have an (arguably) understandable reason for his behavior, as it stemmed from his mother's abuse. However, when a character's reaction is not a matter of justice or of "getting even," but one of chaotic destruction, he becomes monstrous. Furthermore, in such instances, the character often fails or does not wish to redeem himself, and may display a degree of cruelty that is "supernatural" in its intensity.

e. The Significance of Laughter

Laughter has various causes, some of which can be tied to humor and others to horror. One proposed reason for laughter is to relieve a body when emotions become overwhelming (almost as a form of protecting itself). In other words, the laughter occurs to calm a person down. This is known as the Relief Theory, which says that "laughter is not the beginning of fighting, fleeing, or any other action. Rather, laughter functions only as a release of excess nervous energy" (Morreall 567-568). While there are arguments against this idea's significance in finding something funny, scientific research has revealed that laughter can have a cathartic effect, and that "there is a connection between at least some laughter and the expenditure of energy" (Morreall 627-629). However, John Morreall, who explores this theory along with several others in "Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor," ultimately refutes it, deeming the Relief Theory "an outdated hydraulic theory of the mind" (Morreall 708-709). For our purposes, however, the idea of cathartic effect (which he does not refute) remains relevant.

Additionally, laughter relates to the "Superiority Theory," variations of which can be attributed to Thomas Hobbes (who referred to it as the Sudden Glory Theory), Plato, and Roger Scruton. A commonality between the ideas of these three philosophers is that "laughter feels

good... but the pleasure is mixed with malice towards those being laughed at” (Morreall 271-272). For instance, in Norse mythology, the trickster character of Loki can be considered humorous, but it is hard to consider his actions as such if we were the ones receiving them. Loki may derive pleasure from the chaos he inflicts, but those upon whom he acts do not receive the same pleasure, only misery. Thus, a playfully chaotic outcome that leads to humor is only possible by way of identification with the person who is not directly influenced by the chaos, thereby seeming to require fear or shame on the part of one person to lead to amusement on the part of another. Once again, Morreall acknowledges problems with this theory, such as superiority over a person not necessarily leading to humor; for the purposes of humor-horror studies, though, this theory is certainly relevant, because superiority over a person can lead to feelings of humor on the part of the subject and feelings of horror on the part of his object, meaning the one upon which the humor is enacted.

Somewhat conversely, laughter often acknowledges kinship between two or more people, often by ostracizing a third. Henri Bergson’s Dehumanization Theory is crucial here, as Bergson claims that humor serves to “dehumanize” a person by making him an object of ridicule, and that “the comic will come into being, it appears, whenever a group of men concentrate their attention on one of their number, imposing silence on their emotions and calling into play nothing but their intelligence” (Bergson 1). He goes on to state that “the attitudes, gestures and movements of the human body are laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine” (Bergson 2), arguing further that “we laugh every time a person gives us the impression of being a thing” (Bergson 3). Thus, the focus of this humor is bonding between two or more people through the rejection of another person. Such humor does not allow for moral judgment, meaning that what is funny may not always be ethical, nor does ethics play into whether something is

considered funny. Humor here is understood to be caused purely by an involuntary occurrence in response to the person being dehumanized, which leads to that person being stripped of his humanity and turned into a source of humor for those around him.

Yet, problematically, Bergson's Dehumanization Theory, like the Superiority Theory, does not explain why a person may laugh at himself, nor exactly why the objectification of this man, an action which is fairly sinister, is funny. Morreall addresses this challenge by saying that "the biggest joke I shall ever experience is me. And once I am liberated from attachment to my ego and can see myself with humor, the humor in all experience comes easily" (Morreall 3183). What makes something humorous, then, is not something that the viewer can control; if anything, it is a detachment from the self that allows amusement towards the self. Thus, laughter can be a very social activity, but the presence of others is neither necessary for laughter nor necessitates it happening, because laughter can also be used to draw attention to our own shortcomings or lack of understanding. By this, I do not mean that a joke cannot make sense to us, but that in laughing at it, we are recognizing that the elements of the joke themselves are worthy of questioning, or at least lack overt or clear congruency.

Relatedly, when we laugh at something horrifying, it is meant to relieve the emotional buildup of horror and lead towards acceptance of what we do not and cannot understand. As Morreall says, "Physicians and nurses themselves have long had their own kind of humor, usually too "dark" for public consumption, that allows them to keep their cool instead of succumbing to disgust, fear, anger, and sadness" (Morreall 2004-2005). The joke, then, is in our inability to comprehend or stop the horrors that surround us, and that inability is the part that we can recognize and take comfort in, for it is a type of gallows humor.

Here, horror and humor begin to intertwine in the sense that either can cause laughter. In both cases, laughter serves as a confirmation of something being “out of place,” though in the case of horror, it can also be a warning. Conversely, humorous laughter can serve as a signal that a danger has passed, or that the danger is still present, but cannot be managed, and thus must be accepted. In this acceptance, however, there is rebellion: letting horror consume and overwhelm us is far different from accepting that horror’s reality, and laughing in its face.

Lastly, the Incongruity Theory, which is the current reigning theory amongst philosophers and psychologists, argues that laughter results from things that “do not go together, match, or fit in some way... [they] violate our normal mental patterns and normal expectations” (Morreall 472). However, significantly, much the same idea of incongruity has been attributed to horror studies, the belief being that the incongruous in such situations is what causes fear. When it is revealed that these incongruous objects are nonthreatening, or only threatening to someone to whom we are not attached, the idea of the Chaotic Spectrum forms.

2. Comedy-Horror on the Chaotic Spectrum

a. *What is the Chaotic Spectrum?*

Chaos is, for the intents of this thesis, an instance in which something is recognized as being sinister, in some manner, but not necessarily harmful. It is also incongruous, difficult or impossible to understand, stemming out of seemingly nothing and from nowhere. Its purpose is to bring about destruction, confusion, and/or personal amusement. Likewise, something deemed chaotic is an object or creature that goes against what is expected, committing acts that can be neither predicted nor understood motivationally.

Humor and horror can both be considered reactions to the chaotic, because the former is a positive response which serves to fight or deny the chaos, whereas horror involves giving into or becoming the chaos. Of course, there are reactions that lie somewhere between the two, since chaos can range from something playful to something deadly. Likewise, there are movies that range between horror and comedy, with horror-comedy being in the middle, and the movies to either side of it some version of “horror with comedy” or “comedy with horror,” with Pure Horror and Pure Comedy at either end.¹³

While this may sound similar to the Incongruity Theory, which I credit as being largely influential, it ultimately differs in that incongruity does not always cause humor or horror, and that the incongruity experienced in humor and horror can range in terms of how threatening, relatable, and realistic it is, hence the Chaotic Spectrum. For example, if a person sees someone in a place that he does not connect that person with, such as someone’s doctor outside of his office, perhaps at a restaurant, the setting can be deemed incongruous. Seeing the doctor there goes against the man or woman’s expectations, as the doctor is associated with his job, for it is the manner in which he is known to his patient. To see him outside of his office is to see him outside of his perceived identity, his normal context or “element.” But the incongruity here is not alarming, just unexpected. Once the setting becomes chaotic, this changes, and the reaction is either one of fear or amusement.

To further clarify, students may find it peculiar to see their teachers outside of school. But seeing a teacher at a grocery store does not create laughter. Such an interaction may result in jokes later on, or a moment of confusion upon meeting, but not actual laughter. The situation is deemed odd, not horrifying or humorous. Seeing this teacher at a wild party, however, might

¹³ As mentioned previously, the categories of “Pure Comedy” and “Pure Horror” seem unlikely, but they are included for the sake of extreme cases that may warrant the distinction.

render the student incredulous, scared if the teacher is dancing inappropriately with students and amused if he or she is intoxicated and speaking nonsensically. Thus, it is not mere incongruity which leads to the horror or humor, but the recognition of a chaotic factor, not merely a surprise factor, which renders it funny or terrifying. This key distinction between the merely incongruous and the chaotic leads to my proposal that horror and humor lie across a scale of reactions related to chaos: the “Chaotic Spectrum.”

It is important to keep in mind that, here, genre is being studied as a social construct. Thus, in spite of individualized reactions having the potential to differ, The Chaotic Spectrum serves to suggest ways in which a movie genre may be defined, based on expected general responses; it also reveals how an individual will likely react to several scenes and characters of a movie, and examines why it will effect him or her that specific way. Thus, the Spectrum includes everything from horror-comedies to comedies with horror and horror movies with humor, but makes no attempt to judge at what interval one becomes which genre. Instead, it highlights moments of chaos while presenting possible reactions to those moments and reasons for those reactions.

b. Sympathetic Suffering and Emotional Distance

As previously stated, comedy-horror films are known for having moments in which an audience member mimics a character’s reactions or empathizes with them, as well as moments in which the audience member’s reactions are opposite those of the character. When the setting of a movie is something that the viewer has previously experienced in real life, it makes the story more relatable, and emotions experienced as a result of that prior event will resurface. Thus, it seems possible to judge an audience member’s reaction partially by reflecting on what major

wars, tragedies, etc. are occurring at the time. The question of “too soon?” is often posed when a referential joke appears shortly after a tragedy, and here, that “too soon” is something that a director ought to question. Once again, individual tragedies cannot be accounted for, and as such, do not factor into the labeling of these genres. For example, a director has no way of knowing if a viewer recently survived an assault, and may, for that reason, be sensitive to witnessing such an assault, even as a form of, for instance, slapstick on-screen. Other times, a situation may cause a viewer to remember an “in-joke” that he has with a friend, which could cause him to be amused by something outside of the movie, the movie scene having simply served as a reminder of that joke, and not been amusing in its own right.

Furthermore, if the character is the one undergoing the threat, the viewer will not necessarily be frightened. But in instances where the threat is towards the viewer as well, such as in *The Ring*, the humor of the situation evaporates, leaving room for horror instead. Since the threat is directed towards both the viewer and the character, the viewer is able to commiserate with the character on-screen, as the viewer’s suspended disbelief allows him or her to become immersed in the “what-ifs” of horror. Similarly, the likability of a character, as well as how relatable and realistic he/she is, helps determine whether or not a person will respond with horror or humor to that character’s plight; traits of that character that are reminiscent of someone the audience member knows are also pertinent, due to the “reality factor” that has already been discussed, i.e. that the more realistic a scene is, the more horrifying it becomes, and the less likely we are to enjoy someone else undergoing it. Thus, the more relatable the character, the more “real” the movie.

Of course, there are characters that lack that realism, ones which we expect to undergo something horrific, such as the “dumb” or “slutty” blonde. Because we expect it, and are taught

to think that this character “had it coming” these moments are often more humorous than horrifying. A possible exception is found in *Scream*, in which the famous Drew Barrymore is killed early into the movie. It is not common for particularly famous actresses to be killed in a movie, at least not so early on, since they are the “star power” behind it. However, this is likely because *Scream* tried to play with what was commonly expected of horror movies, which in turn made the movie more horrifying since it did not have a set formula, and anything could happen. What would happen was unknown, which made it all the more horrifying, but because the movie was playing with common horror tropes, it was not beyond comprehension, and still had various moments that could be considered humorous.

c. The Unknown, or the Divide Between Reality and Possibility

Real life is often more frightening than something an audience assumes to be impossible. Numerous studies have shown that young adults “are more likely to be frightened by realistic fiction and reality programs, because both of these categories depict events that they know can actually happen” (Cantor and Nathanson 1996; Cantor and Sparks 1984). Yet, it appears that “the difference between fiction and fantasy (what is possible vs. what is not possible) is not always clear-cut” (Cantor 1). This very blurring shows that the temporary possibility, however remote, of these other terrors indeed being a reality increases that horror. Even if fantastical monsters typically exist solely in a fictional reality, the reality of the psychopath, for example, suggests that there is a possibility behind such monsters invading our own world.

Due to this possibility,¹⁴ several other characters commonly found in these horror-humor movies translate to the real world in a similar manner to the psychopath. These characters are based on the traditions and legends of several cultures, and, significantly, they are embraced in those cultures as being real. Specifics of their appearance or purpose may change over time, but their roots in myth, which is already somewhere between fact and fiction, lends to the credibility of them being “possibly real.” That possibility increases the “fright factor” of seeing them in movies, much as with film psychopaths (thus offering a further challenge to Carroll’s view that psychopaths should be excluded from horror because they could be real). Oftentimes, the characters are symbolic of some current issue, rendering the line between “real” and “not real” even harder to place. More literally, Joanne Cantor points out “that a threatening visual image may be totally realistic and depict an actual danger existing today” (Cantor 2), one which, as previously stated, can influence our reaction to a scene.

One such issue or “danger” is death, which is something we cannot fully understand; as such, it is something that often causes fear, which humor tries to ease. As Bruce G. Hallenbeck says, “We only have one weapon with which to fight off the inevitability of death: humor. It works in the trenches, it works for prisoners of war, it works for doctors who hold people's lives in their hands every day... No matter how bad times may get, we'll always have comedy-horror films to comfort us with the knowledge that they could be worse” (Hallenbeck 3627-3631). Joseph Campbell adds that the monsters in these movies “represent powers too vast for the normal forms of life to contain them” (*The Power of Myth: Masks of Eternity*). An example is Vishnu, who takes on the role of the destroyer. This deity goes beyond moral judgment, instead

¹⁴ While we know that psychopaths are real, “evil” clowns and zombies are less credible. However, there are instances of killer clowns such as John Wayne Gacy, and recent instances of men devouring one another due to bath salts. This makes it seem as if all the latter two are, at least in some small sense, present within reality.

“explod(ing) all standards for harmony, order, and ethical conduct.” Campbell refers to these powers, and those of other monsters, as being “sublime.”

Immanuel Kant’s notion of the sublime, then, is relevant to comedy-horror studies in that it shows why something frightening might contain or turn into humor. Essentially, fear offers the sublime experience of awe when something is so monstrous that it is beyond our ability to make sense of or understand. Humor, then, attempts to understand this phenomenon, and it succeeds in an unexpected manner: conclusively, humor recognizes the viewer’s inability to fully comprehend the monster. In other words, the monster may still be incomprehensible, but this inability to understand its existence becomes an accepted fact, and in acknowledging our ignorance, we gain understanding of our situation; this allows us to embrace the absurdity of the monster as something unavoidable, which squelches hope that it can be stopped or that it will suddenly make sense, and leads to acceptance. In the case of gallows humor, it is this very eradication of hope that makes the terror more benign, because the protagonist “knows it’s coming” and knows what to expect, even in the broadest terms of “this is ridiculous, but this is happening.”

Thus, comedy-horror films protect audiences from the issues they are analyzing by envisioning “worst case scenarios” that are personified by monsters, and showing ways that such scenarios can destroy certain characters, while also showing ways in which certain characters may survive them. Some of these characters escape the monsters physically, while others escape the monsters emotionally by accepting the monster’s existence and its ability to cause harm. Thus, for the character, the threat of harm is present within the monster, but the monster is not always able to harm that character in the way that the character (and perhaps audience) may fear.

d. *Danger, Perceived and Explicit*

The realism of an event is not horrifying if the event itself is not frightening, and what makes the event frightening is in part determined by how likely it is to cause someone harm. While gallows humor is an acceptance of this harm, horror is found within that humor, perhaps best showing how intimately connected the two are. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that a reaction is one of humor when the one thing we believe about “the unknown” is that it cannot harm us, but when we believe that it can harm us, we feel terrified. However, when something is truly unknowable but can harm us, and we cannot escape it, we sometimes use humor to try to calm ourselves down, as if to try to escape our feelings of fear, if not those of pain. This is another example of gallows humor, which, like dark humor, further reveals how difficult it is to establish the cause of laughter, and whether something is humorous or horrifying.

Certain events and images are almost universally affective in relaying to a viewer that there is a threatening situation or character. When a monster clearly states his intentions, for example, the threat is perhaps most apparent. Relying on facial expressions of the monster to establish this threat may ignore the reactions of several populations of the public, such as the autistic, who may not be able to recognize that the “evil smile” is not simply a smile. It also does not account for monsters that wear masks.¹⁵ Thus, perhaps the easiest ways to relay a threat is through cryptic messages, direct dialogue, or the use of weapons; additionally, previous attacks establish the possibility of future attacks, which are further enhanced in frightfulness when a viewer does not know when the attack will happen.

Here, the director cannot account for what an individual viewer may consider threatening, as there are phobias related to fire, drowning, or various factors. But something these phobias

¹⁵ Masks are relevant to the aforementioned “unknown” factor, being that they can be used to hide the identity of the monster, as is the case of *Scream*. Thus, the three factors of the unknown, realism, and threat are all related, and in understanding their relation, the reaction they cause can be better understood.

share in common is that they are based around fear, often for inexplicable reasons, but with the consensus being that something might cause harm, even if the chances are slim. This harm can range from discomfort to pain to death, and said threat seems more probable in the phobic's eyes. An example here deals with the coulrophobic, who are going to react intensely to the appearance of a clown on-screen regardless of his actions. For movies like *It*, the viewer's fear is compounded by that clown's appearance, by things it "might do," even if it has not expressed a desire or ability to do those things. Because *It* has done all of those things, the threat of more violence is especially likely, and thus, the fear brought about by this threat is experienced by a more general, non-coulrophobic audience, with those who relate to and like the characters experiencing a more intense version of the fear

3. The Zombie and the Clown

Over the last few decades, the undead character of the zombie has gained life, a zest and spirit through comedy, whereas the clown, that familiar, lovable symbol of childhood, has grown monstrous, grotesque, and foul. Thus, the ability to shift from humor to horror, horror to humor, is encapsulated by these two characters - to think that a lovable symbol of childhood could evolve into a legitimate phobia, and that a centuries-old monster could become a source of ridicule makes the idea of a Chaotic Spectrum all the more believable.

Table 1: Chaotic Spectrum

	Pure Comedy	Comedy With Horror	Horror-Comedy	Horror With Humor	Pure Horror
M O N S T E R	a. There is no monster b. The monster is impossible c. The monster is real but nonthreatening	a. Monster is unlikely and not overly monstrous - might try to be but fails	a. Monster can be possible or impossible, but either way, its threat is manageable -still causes havoc	a. Monster is very realistic, feasible backstory b. Monster is unlikely but possible, and threatening	a. Monster is unstoppable and inescapable b. Monster should not exist, but somehow does c. Based on real monster
C H A R A C T E R	a. Unrealistic or realistic but likable characters b. Unharmed characters	a. Minor injuries to likable characters, or over-the-top death scenes b. Injury or death to less likable characters	a. Injury or death to more likable characters b. Characters become more relatable	a. Likable, relatable characters are subjected to realistic pain – may be tortured or killed	a. Character(s) symbolic of “everyman” b. One or more characters relate to or are based on real people c. The viewer immersed movie – “becomes” a character
R E A L I S M	a. Knowledge that plot can happen or will happen with “positive” outcome b. Plot offers escapism from reality	a. Knowledge that plot is not going to happen if it would have “negative” outcome b. Knowledge that plot might happen with a mixed or “ok” outcome	a. Knowledge that plot is unlikely to happen but will have a “negative” outcome if it does	a. Knowledge that plot is likely to happen and will have “negative” outcome if it does a. Plot has happened in real life, and was threatening but manageable	a. Plot has already happened in real life and had “negative” outcome b. Completely unrealistic but happened anyway c. Cannot be stopped
T H R E A T	a. None to character b. None to viewer	a. Minor for characters, greater for less likable characters b. No threat or “fake” threat towards viewer	a. Threat grows - characters’ fears impact viewer b. Jokes used to lessen tension	a. Viewer has received similar threat or can easily picture it happening b. Jokes relieve threat at times and enhance threat at other times	a. Directed towards viewer b. Relates to or based on real-world occurrence(s) c. Unavoidable by character(s)
U N K N O W N	a. Everything is understood b. There is no unknown c. Unknown is accepted as being incomprehensible	a. Confusion is noticeable but not concerning - ignorance is bliss	a. Confusion leads to worry, but worry does not consume - distractions are used to detract from the worry	a. Figuring out the unknown becomes central to characters’ well-being b. Tries to figure out unknown but gives up	a. No idea what is going on or what to do b. Unable to be understood, but understanding is crucial to survival c. Try to understand - cannot

Summary of Chaotic Spectrum

Movies become progressively more horrifying as the monster becomes less stoppable and the characters become more relatable. The existence of the monster in Pure Horror is either fully reasonable or fully illogical, as the former suggests his ability to reside within and disrupt reality and the latter makes him appear more powerful, for his sheer existence denies all reason, and thus our ability to understand and react to his presence. Likewise, a movie is more often humorous if it has unrealistic characters, or if ignorance on the part of the viewer (in relation to the plot or characters' backstories) is not penalized. In other words, in Pure Humor, the unknown factors are not going to cause the viewer/characters harm. Additionally, when the threat is more personal and realistic, it is more horrifying, and when the unknown is accepted, it is more humorous, but when an attempt to understand the unknown is made, it is often horrifying.

How to Use:

Once again, no movie is going to fully fit into any one of these categories, at least not when every individual reaction is taken into account. However, to find a suitable category for a film, the "average" of these reactions must be taken. For example, in *Zombieland*, the monsters can be viewed in several ways: while the majority of people might consider zombies impossible (thus rendering the monster part of "Pure Comedy"), there are many people who will still find the monster frightening because of the possibility of its existence (as suggested by the movie), and the corresponding threat of such an existence. In other words, the zombie slowly begins to fit under the Horror With Humor Category for certain audience members; additionally, the prevalence of gore factors into the threat factor, and the more threatening a monster, the scarier it is, even if it is unlikely (or impossible) to exist. Thus, the grotesque scenes in which the zombies feast will also be of significance to a viewer, and even if they put the zombie under the Pure Comedy category because of its inability to exist, they might recognize the zombie as being powerful and unstoppable, thus putting him in the Pure Horror category as well. In this case, the monster would not be at either end of the Spectrum but somewhere in between, and this is without factoring in the various other categories. Another category, the characters, can be recognized as representing the "everyman," because their names are locations, not actual names, which would put them under the Pure Horror category. However, the characters only receive minor injuries, and are ultimately able to triumph over their foe, which falls under the category of Comedy with Horror. Ultimately, this impacts the realism, which becomes fairly centered in the Horror-Comedy range. Thus, these factors must be averaged in order to define a movie, and from individual to individual, results will significantly vary. However, if all of those individual responses are taken into account, a general consensus can be reached and this movie can be placed in a genre.

Visual of Personal chart

Pure Comedy	Comedy With Horror	Horror-Comedy	Horror With Humor	Horror
Monsters	Characters	Realism	Unknown	Monsters
Threat	Threat	Threat		Characters
	Unknown	Unknown		

a. *The Evolution of the Clown*

The clown clearly represents the dynamic between horror and humor, as its history is full of instances of both. The clown, which later became a primary character of the Renaissance, derives from mythical and archetypal tricksters. Wolfgang M. Zucker points out that there is no one type of clown, but that certain creatures which may appear to be clowns are in fact not, such as “the person who is funny against his will and... the witty wisecracker” (Zucker 310). Furthermore, there are some commonalities amongst all clowns, even though the original trickster character was by no means a modern clown, nor was he a clown of ancient Greece. For instance, the clown “evokes laughter and gives some strange psychological satisfaction by an appearance and behavior that elsewhere in society are repudiated, abhorred, and despised. He is not only allowed but even expected to act and to speak in a way which his audience, while being amused, considers entirely improper, inadequate, and out of order” (Zucker 310). In this sense, it can be argued that chaos is fundamental to a clown’s nature.

Additionally, as Lucille Hoerr Charles points out, certain clowns embody the gore and general disgust associated with horror. The Zuni clown society of the Pueblo Indians, for example, challenge each other in dismembering dogs and eating live mice, and a common part of their rituals involves being doused in urine, which they then consume alongside excrement (Charles 30). Additionally, Campbell says that clown figures in religion are often grotesque, meant to represent that they are “not the ultimate image of G-d” but a part of it.

Relatedly, one unexpected attribute shared by many clowns involves their relation to religion and the devil, which may account for some of the horrific reactions a clown can cause. Zucker adds that “man feels painfully his separation from the unattainable heights of those above him, but his pain is alleviated by the discovery that there still exists somebody as far removed

from man as man is from G-d. The merry laughter about the clown is not different from the laughter of the children in front of a monkey cage” (Zucker 314). In other words, through the clown’s debasement, a person can find amusement; as suggested by the Superiority Theory, the clown’s inferiority to man, in relation to the man’s own inferiority to G-d, can be one thing that renders the clown a humorous character.

However, in comparison to man, the clown can be considered “supernatural.” In the clown, “what is visible is something so inhuman that it lacks even the ability to be ashamed of its failures... What clowns offer, minimally, is relief from the comforts of shame. Comedy substitutes for shame a kind of astonishment at the hilarious ways we insist on existence, or existence insists upon us” (Delpech-Ramey 134 and 139). In relation to the aforementioned “sublime” quality of both comedy and horror, “the clown does everything exaggeratedly, both in order to symbolize the exaggerated size and quality characteristic of an element which is causing unconscious conflict; and also the better to emphasize and to hold up for clear understanding” (Charles 34). In other words, his actions reveal our inner lack of understanding or our turmoil within reality, which is then brought to the forefront of our minds to be analyzed.

Thus, we are given a creature who is caught between life and death, and who defies our societal expectations. While his red nose and big boots may cause amusement for some, their symbolic nature and incongruity with what we expect prove to be chaotic and capable of arousing fear.

b. *The Evolution of the Zombie*

The zombie’s relation to myth is likewise crucial in the examination of humor and horror, being that this mythical origin represents a plausible part of our own natures. The zombi’s origin

is hard to place, though it is often attributed to Haitian myths. The zombi of Haitian myths was enslaved by a voodoo priest, caught between death and life; this creature is still believed to be real in Haitian culture, and examples of its presence can be found in books such as *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. Additionally, the zombies in George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, while never called "zombies," are referenced in terms of Haitian myths about the dead walking the Earth when Hell overflows. This is perhaps the earliest instance of Haitian zombis shifting to modern version of zombies, which started off slow, and herdlike. In *Dawn of the Dead*, the undead congregate in a shopping mall with the character Peter remarking that they are "after the place. They don't know why; they just remember. Remember that they want to be in here."

Thus, the realism of these characters is not merely speculative: entire cultures believe in the prevalence of similar creatures, such as the Ro-lang of Tibetan myths. Additionally, Hans-W. Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier point out that the word "zombi" has various plausible origins, including France and Africa (Ackermann 467). Certain aspects of the Haitian zombi likely came from different cultures, such as the zombi's nasal voice, which is a belief of the Ga people of Ghana, and the zombi's salt-free diet, which can be traced back to a Dahomean belief (Ackermann 479).

Figuratively, zombies may also represent aspects of our own lives, what we fear, and what we hope to overcome. In an interview focused on mythology, Campbell says that "the images of myth are reflections of the spiritual potentialities of every one of us. Through contemplating these we evoke their powers in our own lives" (*The Power of Myth: Masks of Eternity*). While Campbell was not specifically referring to zombies, this statement nonetheless applies to them in that they embody certain tropes found throughout religious texts. Rebirth, for example, is seen in the reanimation of a zombie, which is by no means the image one would

associate with a reborn Jesus. Thus, the zombie's previously mentioned immortality is distorted into something vile and repulsive, not desirable. Similarly, Delpech-Ramey goes so far as to claim that "mythology is symbolic... and can be recognized as simultaneously humorous and sublime. These mythological characters begin to represent our own shortcomings alongside our potentials. The clown, for instance, represents an inhuman part of our natures, one which we shape through exterior sources. Some clowns, such as Charlie Chaplin, can even be perceived as wanting nothing more than to die, but being incapable of death" (Delpech-Ramey 133, 137-139).

However, unlike with clowns, not everyone believes in zombies. Ackermann says that "the power of zombis seems to be limited. It is said that if someone does not believe in them, they can do no harm" (Ackermann 487). Thus, it is further supported that these impossible creatures appear more threatening to a viewer when they are considered real. Furthermore, this aspect of the Haitian zombi suggests the power of the unknown to hurt us. The zombie's "unknown" nature heightens how horrifying it is perceived to be, and thus, how much power it actually has to harm someone, further showing that threat, incomprehensibility, and realism are all interrelated.

Thus, the zombie, like the clown, has a complex backstory that has turned it into a modern cinematic star in both comedies and horror movies. But how can a movie be funny when its central character is an unliving nightmare? How can a movie be scary when its "monster" is a clown telling jokes?

4. Movie Analyses

Through a closer look at some of these movies, and by comparing what they have in common and how they stand apart from one another, it becomes possible to give them a relative location on The Chaotic Spectrum. While the locations in this thesis will be based on general reactions, the Chaotic Spectrum works at an individual level as well, as the charts in Section 2 reveal. The hope for this Chaotic Spectrum is that it may assist in the future with determining which movies should be labeled as comedies, horror movies, or comedy-horrors. The process of differentiating the three has been shown to be problematic, due to their fluid relationship. Thus, a more realistic goal is to help understand how a movie might affect an individual at a particular point in time.

a. *It*

It, based on the novel by Stephen King, provides a classic example of the “evil clown” character, as well as of the unknown being used to elicit and enhance fears. There are two monsters in this story: Pennywise¹⁶ and Henry Bower. While Pennywise appears as a clown, he also appears as a giant spider and as decomposing bodies, and can use “Dead Lights” to drive a person insane. Yet, Pennywise uses his clown “mask” to assure children of their safety, before taking them away, and devouring them. Henry Bower is not fantastical, but he is certifiably psychotic, and both monsters inflict pain upon the gang of “Losers” that constitute the story’s protagonists.

The story begins with a series of murders that resemble a crime spree from 30 years earlier. Pennywise is responsible for these murders, and the “lucky” group of seven Losers who stopped *It*’s original crime spree must return to their hometown and fight off *It* once more. But

¹⁶ Pennywise is also called *It*. While Pennywise is quite literally an “it,” the pronoun “he” will be used in this thesis for the sake of clarity.

before they all assemble, the most skeptical member of the group, Stanley Uris, kills himself. Evidently, Stan could never come to terms with being unable to understand what It was or why It was attacking; the character who most relied on logic could not deal with the horrors of being unable to understand.

Fictional horror writer Bill Denbrough, the leader of the group of Losers and the brother of one of Pennywise's victims, George Denbrough, initially claims not to fear Pennywise. However, it becomes apparent that he does, for he states that, "for years I've been paid to scare people, but I've been the one who was scared all my life. I don't want to be scared anymore... this time I'm going to kill It." He further explains that, should the Losers fail to kill It, they will continue to be haunted by It until they are driven insane. This insanity is the ultimate form of the unknown's influence (on the horror side of the scale), because thought ceases to make sense, and fear would become the only thing they knew.

Thus, five of the six Losers (Mike Hanlon having been attacked by Henry) enter the sewers and are able to defeat It for two reasons: first of all, they are adults, and adults do not believe in It as easily as children do. This is why Pennywise initially enlists Henry's assistance; It cannot kill the Losers if they do not believe in It, but Henry, being alive and thus "real," can harm the Losers regardless.¹⁷ Additionally, the Losers win because they are stronger than It when they are together. This strength in their friendship and love for one another is seen several times, and it is their unity, coupled with their belief in their ability to defeat Pennywise, that makes them victorious.¹⁸

¹⁷ This further supports the idea of a psychopath being the link that allows for the seemingly impossible to become real.

¹⁸ While the literal destruction of It comes as a result of Bev shooting it with a silver bullet, then tearing it apart along with her friends, these bullets were representative of Mike and Stan, and the tearing apart is something they do as a group.

Pennywise's chaotic plan dominates the movie, as he brings the fears of the (now six) Losers to life. Throughout the movie, Pennywise makes jokes, and while the jokes may be funny, they stop being funny because he is the one making them. Additionally, Pennywise sends the Losers balloons filled with blood and fortune cookies filled with atrocities such as severed eyeballs. It vows to kill them all, and succeeds in killing one of them, Eddie Kaspbrack, who seemed especially susceptible to believing in the horrific.¹⁹ However, the Losers refuse to let It win.

This unexpected monster, the clown, is all the more frightening *because* It is so unexpected. That is why It was originally able to coerce his victims into being killed, and why the adults are less affected by It as they grow older, and the line between reality and fiction becomes clearer. Yet, It is a very real entity in these movies, so the idea of the Losers being able to overcome It because they believe in It less is ironic.

In summary, *It* is essential to this thesis for several reasons. Firstly, *It* centers on a clown, but this clown is not the smiling, kind-hearted creature of our childhoods. Rather, It is a child-killer, as well as a monster, and while he tells jokes and dresses in a traditional clown style, it is difficult to call him "funny" without first acknowledging the various ways in which he is frightening. Still, there are instances in which the characters are seen laughing, and other scenes which a viewer might find humorous, such as the characters' reunion at the Chinese restaurant. Secondly, the gore that is associated with both humor and horror is featured prominently. This includes a scene in which Beverly must (repeatedly) wash blood out of her sink, as well as the previously mentioned restaurant scene. Finally, the psychopath, Henry Bower, is essential to the

¹⁹ His hypochondria was somewhat debilitating, and this fear of becoming sick (and constant assumption that he was, in fact, sick) could have made him more susceptible to believe that something else (an "It") could harm him.

horrific scenes in this movie; he represents another version of a monster, one that, in contrast to Pennywise, is very real.

Of the five movies analyzed, I place this movie closest to the idea of “Pure Horror,” but certainly it is not at that extreme. For one, *It* has an uplifting, optimistic ending: It is (apparently) defeated, and Bill rides off with his wife, Audra, who wakes up from what appeared to be a permanent comatose state.²⁰ Furthermore, there were moments in which the characters experienced relief or told jokes, and likely, these moments of relief similarly impacted the audience. Also of significance is that the monster was shown to be stoppable, and that its threat did not seem to be directed towards the audience; of course, someone with coulrophobia would disagree with me, and for such a person, the movie would be far scarier.

b. *Scream*

While *It* offered an unexpected monster, *Scream* attempts to offer its audience horror that is considered atypical of the genre, meaning that much of its humorous and horrific scenes are results of the characters acknowledging how a horror movie “should go,” thus relying on common tropes and clichés. In this sense, it is both a horror movie and a movie that satirizes horror, and the method of satire is in itself often comical. However, satire is not always comical, and sometimes, what it exposes can actually be quite horrific. Thus, a relationship between humor and horror is already visible based solely on the movie’s structure.

In a twist on one cliché of horror movies, the movie begins with a witty phone call between Casey Becker, a high school student, and the then-unidentified killer, Ghostface. Casey

²⁰ Of course, this is immediately followed by the sound of Pennywise’s laugh, suggesting that all has not really been resolved, and that the monster may come back to haunt the Losers and their town. But Audra’s recovery symbolizes hope for a happy ending, and this hope will either continue on, or be crushed by Pennywise’s return.

mentions that she is about to watch a movie, at which point the killer asks her to tell him her favorite horror movie. As the conversation turns frightening (with Ghostface stating that he is watching Casey), he asks her questions about several horror movies, claiming that he “want(s) to play a game.” While he is enjoying this “game,” Casey is seen crying and screaming; a loss for her is far from fun, since it means her boyfriend’s death and her own.

As Casey tries to run from Ghostface, her movements are sluggish and stalled, as it is the trope of horror movies for a flirtatious, female victim to stumble and hesitate as she is being chased. Upon catching her, Ghostface kills and then guts Casey; earlier, he did the same to her boyfriend, Steve. While it is eventually revealed that the two were killed because of Casey’s past relationship with Stu Macher, it is also suggested that she was killed for questioning, “Who’s there?” when she heard a knock at the door. Ghostface refers to this line as “a death sentence” in horror movies, and since *Scream* is primarily concerned with the characters’ recognition of their ironic status within a horror movie, it makes sense that this trope would apply for Casey as well.

However, not all of the tropes commonly associated with horror movies are present in *Scream*. In fact, Billy Loomis draws attention to Sidney’s lost virginity when explaining why she now “has to die,” but instead of being killed, she lives. Furthermore, Randy Meeks’ Rules for surviving a Horror Movie do not fully encapsulate nor account for the deaths or survivals within *Scream*. The three rules are:

1. You can never have sex
2. You can never drink or do drugs

3. Never, ever, ever, under any circumstances say I'll be right back, because you won't be right back.

However, none of these rules are shown to be fully accurate, being that Sidney and several drunk classmates survive. Additionally, Stu Macher jokingly says, "I'll be right back," and while he does eventually die, he is also shown to be one of the killers, and reappears before being killed.²¹

Also of note, the relationship between psychopaths and monsters is evident here, being that the killers exhibit almost supernatural strength and stealth while wearing the Ghostface mask. They are able to move from one location to the next noiselessly, and often move so quickly that the other characters do not see them switch locations. Interestingly, while Billy's reason for committing murder stems from maternal abandonment (indirectly caused by Billy's father having an affair with Sidney's mother Maureen), Stu gives no reason for his involvement, joking that it was due to "peer pressure." Because he helped kill multiple people, including his girlfriend, Tatum, it is especially frightening that he has no motive. This lack of motive supports the idea of the psychopath existing within the Chaotic Spectrum and the idea of certain psychopaths being beyond our comprehension. That lack of comprehension further serves to make this movie frightening, while the references to it being a horror movie serve as a form of "in-joke" to make moments of the movie humorous. All of these factors seemed to work well together, being that "*Scream* was hugely successful at the box office, ultimately bringing in over \$173 million worldwide" (Hallenbeck, 3310).

²¹ The trouble seen with this list of rules further stresses how difficult outlining a horror movie can be, being that the characters, situations, and consequences of each movie may be similar, but are rarely (if ever) the same.

Thus, *Scream* is significant to a horror-humor thesis because it attempts to draw awareness to the setup of a traditional horror movie, and by giving the audience knowledge of the events to transpire, the unknown factor diminishes.²² This mitigation of the unknown leads to potential humor in several scenes, including one in which Tatum pretends to be “the helpless victim” to Ghostface, before realizing that she has, in fact, become his real victim. However, this acknowledgement of horror tropes is so meta as to be disturbing, and as Hallenbeck says, it is “a film that is so aware of itself that it becomes unsettling. It's like watching a movie that stars members of the audience with whom you're watching it” (Hallenbeck 3298). For this reason, it is easy to be both amused and frightened by the events that unfold, and perhaps, to be caught between both emotional states as the movie progresses. On the Chaotic Spectrum, this movie is located somewhere between the Horror with Humor and the Horror-Comedy area, as is also the case with:

c. *Shaun of the Dead*

Similar to the relation of *Scream* to horror slasher films, *Shaun of the Dead* satirizes multiple zombie movies, including George A. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* series and *28 Days Later*. In fact, *Shaun of the Dead* was created in part due to the directors' mutual love of Romero's work (Hallenbeck 3520-3521). Yet, *Shaun of the Dead's* plot stands apart from those earlier zombie movies, mixing horror and humor to the point that it is hard to expect what the next scene will offer. It is considered by many to be “the first rom-zom-com or romantic zombie comedy” (Hallenbeck 3516).

²² As previously mentioned, Drew Barrymore's death was a surprise, being that she was part of the movie's “star power.” However, her character could easily fit the “had-it-coming” role, and for this reason, her death serves to highlight the power of these tropes and to acknowledge their usage within the movie.

The character Shaun is known for not keeping promises, and for having it in himself to do well if given the proper motivation (based on his step-father's opinion). He gains this motivation when the zombie apocalypse occurs, finding himself the leader amongst a group of survivors that consist of his mother, Barbara, his step-father, Philip, his best friend, Ed, his ex-girlfriend, Liz, and her flat mates, David and Di. Throughout the movie, he becomes representative of the "everyman," and it is his job to transform into "the hero."

In *Shaun of the Dead*, the idea of zombies being a possible entity within our own world is prevalent, being that numerous humorous references are made to the "zombielike" nature of people. One of the earliest scenes involves Shaun walking like a stereotypical zombie, followed by one in which he slowly and robotically talks about a t.v. he is trying to sell. Other scenes show several people who are acting like "zombies," including a man pushing a cart and a cashier who both look "dead-eyed." Additionally, when Ed refers to the real zombies as "zombies," Shaun insists that he not call them that, because it is "ridiculous." Perhaps this is a commentary on the absurdity of their existence, which in turn, as previously discussed, serves to make zombies more terrifying, because in spite of this absurdity, they are very real in the movie world. It is also a likely reference to early zombie movies that did not refer to their monsters as zombies, such as *Dawn of the Dead*, which does, however, mention a Haitian saying about the dead walking the Earth.²³

Similarly, in many ways, Ed can metaphorically be considered a zombie. It seems plausible that he is effectively trying to turn Shaun into a zombie by severing his ties to other people with his antics and by consuming his time with video games; more literally, at the end of the movie, he attempts to bite Shaun. Additionally, Ed is a clown, based on his jokes and his "non-human" nature. This is established in a scene that features an argument between Shaun and

²³ Zombis are a part of Haitian culture, and while not outright stated, the reference here is clear.

his flat mate, Pete, which concerns Ed living in their home. This argument leads to Pete saying that, if Ed wants to live like an animal, he should go live in a shed; ironically, at the end of the movie, a zombified version of Ed is seen living in Shaun's shed. Furthermore, as with certain clowns, Ed seems almost immune to death. At the movie's end, he is able to combat his zombified state and retain parts of himself,²⁴ such as his love of video games and his friendship with Shaun.

Another example of what makes the movie comedic is that there are multiple blatant warnings that something is amiss, but Ed and Shaun miss all of them. From news reports on screen to a couple outside the Winchester bar that are "making out" (in reality, the woman was eating the man's neck), the brain-dead Shaun is oblivious to all around him. Also, there are numerous jokes that foreshadow what is happening around the characters, such as Barbara asking what Liz might want to eat, since "these days a lot of people don't eat meat," and Ed saying that, even though Liz dumped Shaun, "it's not the end of the world."

Consistent with horror-comedy, however, in stark contrast to these humorous moments is the scene in which the zombies try to break into the Winchester pub. David is pulled apart (while still alive), and it is revealed that Barbara has been bitten. These scenes are not only frightening, but upsetting for several characters. Significantly, Shaun finds himself having to shoot his mother in the head, and having to decide whether he and Liz should kill themselves. While the latter scene can be considered gallows humor, it is difficult to see the scene in which Barbara is shot as comedic, especially when, at the end of the movie, the audience learns that she might have been somewhat "alive" like Ed.

²⁴ Earlier, this was implied with a zombified Philip, who goes out of his way to turn off loud music that had previously annoyed him.

Thus, even though *Shaun of the Dead* is about zombies, it is also about the people living during the apocalypse, and in many ways, the unreality of their situation takes on a meta form, because the characters find humor in their horror as a way of dealing with the events around them. As Hallenbeck says, “The pop culture jokes fly fast and furiously, touching on everything from Batman to rock music to, of course, Romero zombie films. We realize at one point that the only reason Shaun's mother is named Barbara is so that a character can say to her, “They're coming to get you, Barbara,” a la the original *Night of the Living Dead*” (Hallenbeck 3537-3540). Contrastingly, Hallenbeck points out that “*Shaun of the Dead* actually has some very poignant, even compelling moments, such as when Shaun's friends try to convince him that his mother must be destroyed before she comes back to devour them. It's a frightening idea, straight out of Romero, but it hits home even harder because much-loved family members—a proper English mum and her devoted son—are thrust into this horrific situation” (Hallenbeck 3533-3536).

Thus, *Shaun of the Dead* is scary because of what happens to the characters, and because of the possible humanness of the zombies, but the movie is also humorous for these reasons. The movie can by no means be considered Pure Humor, because likable, relatable characters face horrific fates, but it is not Pure Horror either, because of the multiple in-jokes, irony, and ultimate success of Shaun in escaping the monsters. *Shaun of the Dead* shows that countries outside of the U.S. have introduced zombies to the realm of comedy as well, and that there is not one type of humor that works well with horror, but several. In fact, in many ways, *Shaun of the Dead* is similar to an American zombie movie, namely:

d. *Zombieland*

Zombieland offers prime examples of what constitutes a horror-humor movie while demonstrating why these movies are so successful. Its main character, “Columbus,” starts off the story with a set of rules that a survivor must follow in order to keep surviving.²⁵ These rules are juxtaposed against humorous, simultaneously scary examples of what happens when the rules are not followed. For example, Rule #3 is “Beware of Bathrooms,” which is unfortunate for Columbus, who has irritable bowel syndrome. While the irony here can be considered amusing, it is also frightening, since an example of the rule being broken concerns a man being bloodily devoured.

What is especially interesting about *Zombieland* is that, while marketed primarily as a comedy, it contains some of the scariest²⁶ zombies on film: they can run extremely fast, are strong, and display a level of intelligence beyond the vacant eyes and drooling with which zombies are usually associated. For example, Columbus’ neighbor, 406, becomes zombified after being bitten by a homeless man. Upon transforming, she is able to pounce at him, open doors, and sprint towards him in spite of a broken ankle. While she is by no means capable of solving complex equations, she is certainly a bigger threat than the zombies in, for instance, George A. Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead*, which move slowly and are not hugely menacing unless in a group. Furthermore, these zombies highlight the idea of gore being essential to horror, since the majority of them are soaked in blood and/or at some level of decay. For example, 406’s bone pops out when she tries to attack Columbus, and the woman in the “seat belts” example is surrounded by little girls with bloody mouths and dresses.

²⁵ Like with the previously mentioned rules from *Scream*, this list is problematic, and in the end, Columbus even changes one of his most significant rules, “Don’t be a Hero,” to “Be a Hero.”

²⁶ Scariest here meaning that they are especially dangerous and likely to cause harm, as opposed to the zombies in *Shaun of the Dead*, which were slow and less consumed with finding a meal.

Additionally, there are motifs throughout *Zombieland* that resonate with real-life, thereby, once again, making the zombies' existence seem plausible, or at least relatable to people who do exist in our world. In a similar way to *Shaun of the Dead*, these zombies are compared to the everyday people who lived before the undead rose. This motif is evident several times, including when Columbus says that he used to treat everyone like zombies, and that "if you don't have people, you might as well be a zombie." Interestingly, Columbus didn't have people in his life before the apocalypse, thus making him, by his own definition, a zombie. Yet the zombie outbreak caused him to add people to his life, and to finally start being "human."

Interestingly, in a movie where zombies are the star monster, the clown plays a crucial role, because Columbus says that his biggest fear is clowns. Towards the end of the movie, he has to fight a zombified clown, causing him to remark: "Of course. It had to be clown. No, it had to be a clown and it had to be Wichita for me to understand that some rules are meant to be broken." The rule he is referring to is number 17: Don't be a Hero. Here, he decides to instead "Be a Hero," and to fight off the clown and save Wichita from a zombie horde that has chosen to attack her and her little sister.

Significantly, the attack takes place at Pacific Playland, which is an amusement park. Such a park is, like the clown, usually associated with innocence and childhood, not with zombies, violence, and terror. There are two exceptions to this, one of course being the tragic results of a ride malfunctioning, or of a visitor disregarding warning signs and injuring himself. The other exception relates to certain amusement park attractions, such as haunted houses, drop tower rides, and roller coasters. These are all meant to scare-amuse the visitor in a similar way to the horror-humor of the movies mentioned within this thesis. Notably, Columbus finds himself being chased by zombies in a haunted house, Tallahassee fights some of the horde while riding a

roller coaster, and Wichita and Little Rock become trapped on a drop tower ride, only to then be surrounded by and saved from the horde.

On the Chaotic Spectrum, *Zombieland* is located somewhere between Comedy with Horror and Horror-Comedy. Because of its gore, violence, everyman characters, and monstrous zombies, it is difficult not to find something about this movie scary. However, the well-timed jokes and likable characters add humor to the movie that, in many cases, overshadows the horror. Additionally, the movie ends on a hopeful note: having survived the Pacific Playland attack means that the characters can survive most anything. While the monsters may be grotesque, their threat is manageable, and they are rendered less frightening. A movie that is in many ways, but very different ways, equally frightening and scary is:

e. *Scary Movie*

Scary Movie parodies several horror movies, including *Scream*, which itself satirizes the common tropes of horror movies. The other movie that *Scary Movie* heavily parodies is *I Know What You Did Last Summer*, as evidenced by the teens hitting and disposing of a body due to reckless driving;²⁷ they vow not to tell anyone about the murder, but a year later, one of their classmates is killed. Cindy, whose name and general characterization are an obvious reference to *Scream*'s Sidney, thinks that the two events are connected. As she tries to figure out who The Killer is, her friends are killed off in over-the-top scenes that, while based off of some of *Scream*'s own scenes, are so zany and unrealistic as to stand apart from them.

Scary Movie has a similar beginning to that of *Scream*, being that a young woman is at home alone, making popcorn, when she receives a phone call. *Scary Movie* quickly turns to

²⁷ In this case, the man is actually fine and tries to walk away, but the teens do not notice. They wind up hitting him over the head (accidentally) with an alcohol bottle, which knocks him out, at which point they dispose of the body.

jokes, with The Killer asking Drew what her favorite horror movie is, to which she answers “Kazaam.” He responds that this is not a horror movie, to which she replies, “Well you haven’t seen Shaq act.”²⁸ Additionally, there is a joke concerning flatulence, a joke concerning breast implants, and a series of jokes concerning the tendency of victims to make terrible choices in horror movies. This series includes Drew having to choose between a sign that says Life and one that says Death, and picking Death, as well as a scene in which she falls into a chalk drawing of a body, and another scene in which she is presented with a series of weapons and chooses to wield a banana. Interestingly, some of the mistakes she makes are the same mistakes that *Scream’s* Casey makes, such as staying in the house while the killer calls her and hesitating as she runs away.²⁹

However, there is not merely humor in these scenes, but horror, at least for Drew; in a similar manner to *Scream*, The Killer requests to know Drew’s name so that he can tell who he is looking at. He threatens to kill her boyfriend (though it is not actually her boyfriend), and later stabs her, all for seemingly no reason. Moments like this are frequent throughout *Scary Movie*, such as the scene in which a crowd of moviegoers stab Brenda to death. While it is humorous for an audience, it is certainly not humorous for Brenda.³⁰

Similarly, there are certain jokes within *Scary Movie* that may not appeal to everyone. For example, there is a joke about Shorty having been close to the first victim, Drew, because he had roofied her; rape jokes in general are a cause of controversy, as seen with the recent Tosh.0 fiasco in which a joke by comedian Daniel Tosh led to an audience member leaving his

²⁸ While this is obviously a joke, it does show how certain people can find something horrifying, even if it is not intended to be horrifying.

²⁹ It also worth noting that, when Drew opens the door to hit The Killer and instead hits a group of Trick’R Treaters, one of them is dressed as a scary clown.

³⁰ This is not to imply that an audience will sympathize with her, especially since it is a group of moviegoers who kill Brenda; however, if a group of moviegoers attacked the viewer, he or she would similarly feel fear.

performance and spiraled into a hate war on many social media sites. Additionally, there is a joke about Shorty and Brenda not knowing their father(s), and in several scenes, the humor is based off of Ray's suppressed homosexuality (such as when he is impaled through the head by a penis, and when he asks Brenda to put on his football uniform). Some of this might be offensive to a viewer from a nontraditional family, or to a homosexual.

In fact, the movie can be fairly offensive to lovers of the horror genre in general. As Hallenbeck says, "although the movie was an immediate hit, it pales in comparison to many of the films it parodies, as well as to genuinely great spoofs such as Mel Brooks' *Young Frankenstein* (1974) and Roman Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* (1967). The reason is painfully obvious when you watch the film. Instead of bringing out the humor in the concept with affection, as Brooks and Polanski do, Wayans merely reveals his contempt for the entire horror genre" (Hallenbeck 3378-3381). In other words, much of the humor is actually a result of pointing out flaws in horror movies, which seems to connect to the Sudden Glory theory of humor.

Even though *Scary Movie* mocked the taste of much of its audience, it "was a huge success, eventually earning nearly \$300 million worldwide" (Hallenbeck 3391). The movie became the first of a franchise, and Hallenbeck considers the series it "a mixed bag... the first two are needlessly raunchy and mean-spirited while the last two are as much fun as those in Zucker's *Naked Gun* series" (Hallenbeck 3428-3429). Thus, the subjectivity of an audience does factor into the reception of a movie, but the root of that subjectivity varies from person to person, and Hallenbeck's dislike of "raunchy, mean-spirited" comedy does not mean that comedy cannot be raunchy and mean-spirited.

While *Scary Movie* is the closest to being Pure Comedy of the five movies I have explored, it still has moments that can be considered frightening, and it contains scenes of murder that are usually associated with horror, as well as numerous moments of gore, and “potty” or sexual humor. Thus, while is it more of a comedy based on horror, it is still relevant to this study, in that it helps show ways in which a more horrific movie (*Scream*) can become humorous. This relationship between the two movies, then, highlights the capability of a movie to cross between horror to humor. This seems to suggest that comedy and horror work best as a team, not in opposition to each other. While a film may be monetarily successful even without such a mix, it is this mix of comedy alleviating yet simultaneously enhancing horror that works “best” for a diverse audience.

5. Conclusion

Horror and comedy are not nearly as different as they first appear; in fact, attempts to distinguish between the two reveal myriad problems in the assignment of movie genres. Whether a genre can ever truly fit or resonate with every audience member is unlikely, due to individualized fears, in-jokes, and current events. However, general ideas of genre can be determined when these individualized and temporal factors are not present, or at least, when they are not highly influential.

It is not enough to define either genre by the reactions they cause, or intend to cause, nor is it enough to define them by the characters they utilize. This is evident in that the clown and the zombie appear in both movie types, causing decidedly different reactions from one to the next. In horror-comedy, the two genres, then, are brought together by the chaotic, and it is by recognizing

the specific ways in which they are chaotic, and how these types of chaos differ from one another, that genres can be differentiated.

Although I have tried to generally rank five movies on my Spectrum, I acknowledge that such an attempt can be met with decidedly different results. Fears and amusements vary from person to person, and while the Spectrum attempts to encompass all of these possible feelings and their connected reactions, there will likely be overlooked outliers, or movies that further complicate the connection between horror and comedy by incorporating still other genres, such as romance. The Spectrum is simply a proposed method for defining genre, and in its attempt to create these categories, the Spectrum highlights just how similar the categories are.

Audience members will continue to scream at comedy, to laugh at horror, and to question why their reactions are so varied. But through The Chaotic Spectrum, we can realize and relieve our more innocuous fears and recognize when we have legitimate cause for fright. In order to understand what makes something humorous and what makes something horrifying, a viewer must question his own experiences and the more general experiences of the world around him. In order to determine a viewer's reaction within the Spectrum, it is not enough to question "what is frightening" or "what is funny," but to examine the overlapping theme of chaos that is found within the genres of horror and comedy, and to question, "what does this connection mean, and how is this connection possible?"

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