

Ha! / Aaah!
The Painful Relationship Between Humor and Horror

by David Misch

Aaah!!! This is terrifying!!! Everywhere I turn, it's ... it's ... ACADEMIA!!!

Seriously! Look at the last essay – footnotes! The next essay – polysyllabic terminology! I, a former funny folksinger/stand-up comic/screenwriter/author (but not *academic* author) have somehow become trapped inside an academic book. How did this happen?! I mean, other than someone asking me, my agreeing, and then spending weeks writing it.

I guess it's because I know something about comedy. Actually, if you believe my first book's title (and you should because all book titles are true, although to be honest I've only found 38 shades of Grey), I know *everything* about comedy. And comedy, it is posited, goes hand-in-claw with horror. Can this be so?

A great man once said "There is no principle of comedy which doesn't also apply to drama." And I agree with me. All artistic expression is rooted in four principles: pattern recognition, misdirection, tension and resolution, and surprise. If that's true (and it must be, because it's in the book *Horrific Humor and the Moment of Droll Grimness in Cinema: Sidesplitting sLaughter*; John A. Dowell, Johnson Cheu, eds.), then horror should have those same elements.

Pirate ship. Lookout yells from the crow's nest: "One enemy ship!" Captain says to the First Mate: "Bring me my red shirt. For if there is a battle and I am struck, the crew must not see my wounds and become afrighted." Lookout calls from the crow's nest: "Ten enemy ships!" Captain says, "And bring me my brown pants."

Pattern recognition, right? Red shirt/blood; brown pants/other body fluid.

In every horror movie ever made, an attractive, scantily-clad young woman walks down a dark hallway; looks left – pattern introduced; looks right – pattern established; insane clown with knife leaps from behind – pattern disrupted, along with jugular vein.

All comedy and all horror establish patterns which introduce tension, then break those patterns in a surprising way, often using misdirection.

So comedy and horror work the same – thank you and good night. Where's my check?

What? Five *thousand* words? I thought you said five *hundred*. Wow, this changes everything. Okay, um....

Proving that comedy and horror employ the same principles is an extraordinarily complex task, one that requires a series of reasoned arguments and perceptively chosen examples from disparate disciplines, coming together in a cogent argument which will persuade skeptical readers of this unlikely proposition, not to mention adding up to

five thousand words and a giant windfall for my bank account, if you define “giant windfall” as a night out at Applebee’s.

So here goes.... (Girds loins.) (Ooo, that feels kinda good, gimme a sec....)
(Okay.)

Comedy vs. Drama

Now that I think about it (and I never thought about it until this moment wink wink), humor and horror seem pretty different; one’s a pie in the face, the other’s an axe in the skull. Still, my sense is that comedy and horror are not mortal enemies.

It’s been said by no less an authority than me that everyone’s first comedy routine is peekaboo, which is half-funny (peeka) and half-scary (Boo!). The film genre of horror-comedy, from Haunted Spooks in 1920 to 2009’s Zombieland, has never really, you should excuse the expression, died.

Graphic designer Milton Glaser says “Everything is defined by its opposite”. But if the principles of humor work for horror too, maybe the two forms are less opposite than complementary.

Look at the philosophical explanations of comedy. Immanuel “Carrot Top” Kant’s Incongruity Theory says it’s funny when two things that don’t go together go together, which I condense to five pretentious words: Rapid juxtaposition of dissonant concepts. When a guy walks down the street then slips on a banana peel, that’s rapid juxtaposition. But so is taking a relaxing shower then getting stabbed by a psycho killer. (I’m looking at you, Janet Leigh.)

Another humor theory comes from Sigmund “Shecky” Freud, who took time off from masturbating to invent Relief Theory, which says comedy represents a rapid expulsion of tension. (I wonder where he got that idea.) But Relief Theory doesn’t seem to work for horror; we’re relaxed when we laugh but not when we scream. Which makes sense because those reactions are caused by antithetical things – what could be more different than murder and slapstick?

Except.... Most people would say horror movies also provide a release – seeing something terrible that we know isn’t real allows us to “be in” a horrible situation and come through it safely, even if the characters don’t. Horror audiences exorcise their psychological demons by watching the exercise of actual demons.

So to prove the similarities of these two seemingly distinctive forms, we need to prove that the basic mechanics of one apply to the other...