Horror and Humor

During the last decade or so, the subgenre of the horror-comedy has gained increasing prominence. Movies such as Beetlejuice, a triumph of this tendency, are predicated upon either getting us to laugh where we might ordinarily scream, or to scream where we might 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. Gremlins (both versions), Ghostbusters (both versions), Arachnophobia, The Addams Family (both versions), possibly Death Becomes Her, and certainly Mars Attacks and Men in Black are highly visible, “blockbuster” examples of what I have in mind, but the fusion of horror and comedy also flourishes in the domain of low-budget production, in films like Dead/Alive as well as in the outré work of Frank Henenlotter, Stuart Gordon, and Sam Rami.

Nor is the taste for blending horror and humor restricted to film. The recently discontinued daily comic strip by Gary Larson, The Far Side, consistently recycled horror for laughs, as do the television programs Tales from the Crypt and Buffy the Vampire Slayer. And even the usually dour, intentionally deadpan television series The X-Files makes room for comedy in episodes like “Humbug.”

Likewise, Tom Disch’s recent novel The Businessman generates humor by sardonically inverting one of the fundamental conventions of the horror genre—representing a ghost who is stricken with disgust by the human she is supposed to haunt, rather than the other way around. And Dean Koontz’s new, best-selling novel—TickTock—moves easily between horror and screwball comedy, while James Hynes’s Publish and Perish: Three Tales of Tenure and Terror restages classic horror motifs and stories for the purpose of academic satire.

Of course, not every recent attempt to fuse horror and humor is effective. Lavish film productions like The Golden Child and Scrooged earned far less than anticipated. But what is more perplexing from a theoretical point of view is not that some fusions of horror and humor fail, but that any at all succeed. For, at least at first glance, horror and humor seem like opposite mental states. Being horrified seems as though it should preclude amusement. And what causes us to laugh does not appear as though it should also be capable of making us scream. The psychological feelings typically associated with humor include a sense of release and sensations of lightness and expansion;¹ those associated with horror, on the other hand, are feelings of pressure, heaviness, and claustrophobia. Thus, it may appear initially implausible that such broadly opposite affects can attach to the same stimulus.

And yet, the evidence from contemporary films, television shows, comic strips, and novels indicates that they can. Moreover, though my examples so far are all of recent vintage, the phenomenon is long-standing. From earlier movie cycles, one recalls Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein, and before that there was the naughty humor of James Whale’s Bride of Frankenstein and The Invisible Man, and, even more hilariously, his Old Dark House.

Furthermore, in literature, there has been a strong correlation between horror and comedy since the emergence of the horror genre. Perhaps Walpole’s Castle of Otranto is already a horror-comedy.² But, in any case, soon after the publication of Mary Shelley’s classic, stage parodies

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 57:2 Spring 1999
with titles such as *Frank-in-Steam* and *Franken-stitch, the Needle Prometheus*—in which the mad scientist, appropriately enough, is a tailor—appeared. Throughout the nineteenth century, stories by Sheridan LeFanu, M. R. James, and others were laced with mordant humor, while Saki’s “The Open Window” and Oscar Wilde’s “The Canterbury Ghost” are side-splitting masterpieces of the collision of laughter and horror.

Given the striking coincidence of horror and humor, it is not surprising that the correlation has been remarked upon. For example, Stuart Gordon, the director of *Re-Animator* and *From the Beyond*, states:

> When Hitchcock referred to *Psycho*, he always referred to it as a comedy. It took seeing it three or four times before I started picking up on it as a comedy. He said that there was a very fine line between getting someone to laugh and getting someone to scream. One thing I’ve learned is that laughter is the antidote. When you don’t think you have to laugh, then you are basically blowing away the intensity. You have to be careful when you do that, you don’t want to be laughing at the expense of the fright. It’s best if you can alternate between the two, build up the tension and then release it with a laugh. It is a double degree of challenge. You’re walking a tightrope, and if something becomes inadvertently funny, the whole thing is over.

> The thing I have found is that you’ll never find an audience that wants to laugh more than a horror audience.6

If Gordon’s revealing comments about the nexus of horror and humor are somewhat meandering, Robert Bloch, the dean of American horror writers and the author of the novel *Psycho*, is more precise. He writes:

> Comedy and horror are opposite sides of the same coin. ... Both deal in the grotesque and the unexpected, but in such a fashion as to provoke two entirely different physical reactions. Physical comedy is usually fantasy; it’s exaggeration, as when W. C. Fields comes out of a small town pet shop with a live ostrich. There’s a willing suspension of disbelief but we don’t generally regard it as fantasy because it’s designed to promote laughter rather than tension or fear.5

> Indeed, even Edgar Allan Poe may have had an intimation of a deep connection between horror and humor, for in his discussion of fantasy—a category that would appear to subsume what we call horror—he notes that it is on a continuum with humor. In his *Broadway Journal* of January 18, 1845, Poe observes:

> Fancy is at length found impinging upon the province of Fantasy. The votaries of this latter delight not only in novelty and unexpectedness of combination, but in the avoidance of proportions. The result is therefore abnormal and to a healthy mind affords less of pleasure through its novelty, than pain through incoherence. When, proceeding a step farther, however, Fantasy seeks not merely disproportionate but incongruous or antagonistical elements, the effect is rendered more pleasureable from its greater positiveness—there is an effort of Truth to shake from her that which is no property of hers—and we laugh.6

Indeed, there is also a perhaps perverse way in which our theoretical heritage belies the confluence of horror and humor. Namely, we find that sometimes putative theories of comedy look as though they are equally serviceable as theories of horror. Freud, for example, identifies the object of wit with what can be called the jokework, which manifests repressed modes of unconscious thinking. But, at the same time, in his celebrated essay “The ‘Uncanny’”—which is as close as Freud comes to a theory of horror—the object of uncanny feelings is also the manifestation of repressed, unconscious modes of thinking, such as the omnipotence of thought.7 Thus, in Freud’s theory, the road to comic laughter and the road to feelings of uncanniness are unaccountably the same.

Likewise, in Jentsch’s study of the uncanny, which Freud cites, the ideal object for eliciting feelings of uncanniness is the automaton that closely approximates animate or human life.8 But, as students of comic theory will immediately recognize, this observation converges on Henri Bergson’s candidate for the object of laughter, viz., humanity encrusted in the mechanical.9

> The kind of evidence that I have already marshaled in favor of some connection between horror and humor can be amplified in many different ways. But the conclusion is unavoidable. There is some intimate relation of affinity between horror and humor. I have spent a great deal of time motivating this conclusion, how-

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ever, because, though it appears unavoidable, it nevertheless is paradoxical or at least mysterious.

For, as noted previously, it appears that these two mental states—being horrified and being comically amused—could not be more different. Horror, in some sense, oppresses; comedy liberates. Horror turns the screw; comedy releases it. Comedy elates; horror stimulates depression, paranoia, and dread.

Though these feelings, insofar as they are not propositions, are not contradictory in the logician’s sense, they are at least so emotionally conflictive that we would not predict that they could be provoked by what to all intents and purposes appear to be the same stimuli. Yet that counterintuitive finding is where the data point us.

Perhaps what is so troubling about the data is that they reveal that what appears to be exactly the same figure—say the monster in *House of Frankenstein* and the monster in *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein*—can look and act in exactly the same way; they can be perceptually indiscernible.10 Yet, one provokes horror and the other provokes humor. How can the self-same stimulus give rise to such generically different emotional responses? How can the figure in one film be an appropriate object of horror and in another film be an appropriate object of comic amusement? In order to answer these questions, we will have to develop a theory that explains both how horror and humor are alike and how they are different.

Basically, then, we have two questions before us. The first concerns the apparently facile transition, as in *Beetlejuice*, from horror to humor and vice versa. To explain this, we need to show how horror and humor are alike. Indeed, they are so alike that indiscernibly portrayed monsters can give rise to either horror or humor.11

But this phenomenon itself raises another question. For though the self-same monster type that we find in *House of Frankenstein* can give rise to laughter—as the case of *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* shows—typically, with respect to *House of Frankenstein*, he does not. Standardly we do not laugh at our horrific monsters. So there is some differentia between horror and humor—a differentia whose explanation is made philosophically urgent insofar as it appears that horrific figures and humorous ones can, in principle, be perceptually indiscernible.

In order to answer these questions, I will want to say something about the nature of horror and something about the nature of humor. Thus, in what follows, I will proceed in two stages: stage one will sketch a theory of horror; and then stage two will introduce a theoretical discussion of humor for the purpose of isolating its pertinent similarities to and differences from horror.

1. STAGE ONE: HORROR

Our concern with the relation of horror to humor is motivated by an aesthetic problem—the issue of how within popular genres it is possible to move from horror to comedy with such apparent though counterintuitive ease. Here it is important to note that we are concerned with horror and comedy as they manifest themselves in certain well-known genres. We are not concerned with what might be called “real-life” horror—the horror, say, that overcomes us when we read about urban violence. “Horror,” for our purposes, pertains to the sort of emotion that attends reading what are commonly called “horror novels” and the like, and viewing horror movies. To be more accurate, we should speak of “art-horror” here—i.e., the sort of horror associated with one particular genre of mass art. But for convenience, I will simply refer to the phenomenon as horror (with the unstated proviso that the relevant sense of horror under discussion is art-horror).

But what is the horror genre? What distinguishes the horror genre from other popular genres like the Western or the detective thriller? Perhaps one useful way to begin to answer this question is to take note of the fact that often genres are identified, among other ways, in terms of the characters who inhabit them. Westerns at the very least are fictions that have cowboys in them, while detection thrillers must contain detectives—either professionals (cops or private eyes) or ordinary folk forced into that role (like the character Thornhill, played by Cary Grant, in *North by Northwest*).

So, are there any characters who typically inhabit horror fictions—characters who may serve to mark off horror fictions in the way that cowboys, in part, mark off Westerns? Here it seems that there is an obvious candidate—viz., the monster. Horror fictions have heroes and heroines just like other types of fiction, but they also seem to contain a special character of their own,
the monster: Dracula, the werewolf (of London or Paris), the Creature from the Black Lagoon, Freddie Kruger, King Kong, Godzilla, and the Living Dead. Moreover, as these examples indicate, frequently horror fictions take their titles from the monster that haunts them.

However, if this putative insight is to be of any use, something needs to be said about how we are to understand the notion of a monster. For my purposes, the most effective way of characterizing such monsters is to say that they are beings whose existence science denies. Worms as long as freight trains, vampires, ghosts and other revenants, bug-eyed creatures from other galaxies, haunted houses, and wolfmen are all monsters on this construal. Similarly, though science acknowledges that dinosaurs once existed, the dinosaurs in Michael Crichton’s *Jurassic Park* are monsters in my sense, since the idea that such dinosaurs exist today—or that such creatures could be concocted in the way the novel suggests—offends science. Similarly, the squid in Peter Benchley’s *The Beast*, his most recent rewriting of *Jaws*, is a monster because it appears to possess self-consciousness.

Monsters, then, are creatures—fictionally confected out of either supernatural lore or science fiction fancy—whose existence contemporary science challenges. And a horror fiction is in part standardly marked by its possession of one such monster at minimum.

One objection to this initial approximation of the way to begin to demarcate the horror genre is that it seems liable to one family of obvious counterexamples—the psycho-killer or slasher, of whom Norman Bates is perhaps the most illustrious example. The problem is this: many people, including the owners of video stores and the compilers of television listings, are inclined to count *Psycho* as horror, but on the view just propounded, it is not, because Norman Bates and his progeny are psychotic—a category which science countenances—and, therefore, he is not a monster. Consequently, *Psycho* and the like are not horror fictions. However, since the subgenre of the psycho-slasher strikes many as one of the most active arenas of horror in the late 1970s and 1980s, such a conclusion appears unpalatable.

Now, in point of fact, the correlation of horror fictions with monsters does not exclude as many psycho-slashers as one might anticipate. For, very frequently, the psycho-slashers and other assorted berserkers of the recent horror cycle are literally monsters according to the previous stipulation. Certainly, the most famous slashers of the last decade or so are of supernatural provenance: Michael Meyers of the *Halloween* cycle, Jason of the *Friday the 13th* cycle, Freddie from *Nightmare on Elm Street*, and Chucky from *Child’s Play*.

On the other hand, Hannibal Lector is arguably only a psychotic—albeit one unprecedented in the annals of psychiatry—rather than a monster. So, if you are disposed to classify *The Silence of the Lambs* as a horror fiction, you may balk at the correlation between horror and monsters. However, there is an easy way in which to adjust the correlation so that it accommodates Hannibal Lector and his peers. It merely requires the recognition that the psycho-killers one encounters in the relevant popular fictions are not really of the sort countenanced by contemporary psychology, but are actually creatures of science fiction, though in these cases we are dealing with science fictions of the mind, not the body.

Horror fictions may contain lizards larger than small towns, and, though science countenances the existence of lizards, lizards larger than, say, Northfield, Minnesota, are not creatures of science but of science fiction. Likewise, the relevant psycho-slashers are not the kind of psychotics one finds catalogued in the third, revised edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. They are either fanciful, fictional extrapolations thereof, or drawn from wholly mythological material. Hannibal Lector, for example, is merely our most recent version of Mephistopheles—erudite, omniscient, satanic—out to seduce Starling’s soul with the promise of knowledge. Thus, horrific psycho-slashers are science fictions of the psyche, veritable monsters from the viewpoint of science proper, which serve, in part, to mark off the fictions in which they thrive as horror fictions.

Nevertheless, even if the correlation between horror and the presence of a monster can be defended as a necessary condition for horror fiction, more must be said. For there are many fictions that contain monsters which we do not classify as horror fictions. For example, the space odyssey *Star Wars* contains the creature Chewbacca, who, for all intents and purposes, is
a monster, a monster who looks exactly like the
sort of thing we would expect to find in a were-
wolf movie. In fact, there is a 1940s movie
called The Return of the Vampire where, to my
mind, the vampire’s assistant is virtually a dead-
ringer for Chewbacca. And yet we do not call
Star Wars a horror film, even though we might
call a werewolf film with a creature made-up ex-
actly like Chewbacca a horror film. So, the ques-
tion is: what is the difference between a horror
fiction proper and a nonhorror fiction like Star
Wars that has a monster in it?

One obvious difference between a horror fic-
tion and a mere monster fiction—i.e., a fiction
with a monster in it—revolves around our emo-
tional response to the monster in the horror fic-
tion. We are horrified by the monsters in horror
fictions, whereas creatures like Chewbacca in
Star Wars are not horrifying. We regard Chew-
bacca emotionally as we do any of the other pro-
tagonists in the film. So the solution to the prob-
lem of distinguishing horror fictions from mere
monster fictions depends upon saying exactly
what comprises our emotional reactions to horri-
fying monsters.

At first, this may appear to be an impossible
task. Is not everyone’s emotional reaction to hor-
ror unique, and, in any case, insofar as it is sub-
jective, how could we ever hope to get at it in a
way that could yield precise generalizations?
However, the problem is not so daunting once
one realizes that horror fictions are generally de-
signed to guide audience response. Specifically,
such fictions are generally designed to control
and guide our emotional responses in such a way
that, ideally, horror audiences are supposed to
react emotionally to the monsters featured in
horror fictions in the same manner that the char-
acters in horror fictions react emotionally to the
monsters they meet there.

That is, with horror fictions, ideally, the emo-
tional responses of the audience to the monster
are meant to mimic the emotional responses of
the human characters in the fiction to the mon-
sters therein. The makers of horror fictions, in
the standard case, want the audience to shudder
at the prospect of encountering the monster
when the characters in the plot so shudder. In-
deed, most frequently, the emotional responses
of the fictional protagonists even prime or cue
the emotional response of the audience to the relevant monster in such a way that the audi-
ence’s responses recapitulate the characters’ re-
response. Thus, if we can say something by way of
general summary about the standard or generic
types of emotional responses that fictional char-
acters evince toward monsters, we will be able to
hypothesize something about the way in which,
normatively speaking, audiences are supposed
to respond emotionally to the monsters in horror
fictions.

But how do fictional characters respond emo-
tionally to the monsters they encounter in horror
stories? Let this paradigmatic example from
Stephen King’s novel Needful Things serve as a
basis for discussion.

The character Polly has been set upon by a
spider of supernatural origin. It is growing larger
by the moment. It is already larger than a cat.
King writes:

She drew in breath to scream and then its front legs
dropped onto her shoulders like the arms of some
scabrous dime-a-dance Lothario. Its listless ruby eyes
stared into her own. Its fanged mouth dropped open
and she could smell its breath—a stink of bitter spices
and rotting meat.

She opened her mouth to scream. One of its legs
pawed into her mouth. Rough, gruesome bristles ca-
ressed her teeth and tongue. The spider meowed ea-
gerly.

Polly resisted her first instinct to spit the horrid,
pulsing thing out. She released the plunger and
grabbed the spider’s leg. At the same time she bit
down, using all her strength in her jaws. Something
chunched like a mouthful of Life Savers, and a cold
bitter taste like ancient tea filled her mouth. The spi-
der uttered a cry of pain and tried to draw back. ...

It tried to lunge away. Spitting out the bitter dark
fluid which had filled her mouth, [and] knowing it
would be a long, long time before she was entirely rid
of that taste, Polly yanked it back again. Some distant
part of her was astounded at this exhibition of strength,
but there was another part of her which understood it
perfectly. She was afraid, she was revolted ...

In this passage, whose essential features one
finds repeated endlessly in horror fictions, King
informs us quite explicitly about the nature of
Polly’s emotional response to the spider, which,
all things being equal, should be our response as
well. What is quite clear is that her response—
and, by extension, our response—is not simply a
matter of fear, though surely both we and Polly

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regard this unnatural creature as immensely fearsome. But also—and this is key—we, along with Polly, are disgusted by the monster. We find it loathsome and impure. Polly must force herself by an act of will to touch it; we would certainly cringe if something like that spider were to brush against us.

Confronted by such a creature, our response would be to recoil, not only because of our fear that it might harm us, but also because it is an abominable, repugnant, impure thing—a dirty, filthy thing. So, on the basis of this example, which I claim is paradigmatic, let us hypothesize that horror fictions are distinguished not simply in virtue of their possession of monsters, but also in virtue of their possession of a certain type, viz., monsters that are not only beings whose existence is not countenanced by science, but also beings designed or predicated upon raising emotional responses of fear and disgust in both fictional characters and corresponding audiences.

Crucial to distinguishing horror fictions from mere fictions with monsters in them is the peculiar emotional state that the monsters in horror fictions are designed to elicit. Thus, in order to be more precise about that emotional state, it would be useful for me to be explicit about the view of the emotions to which I subscribe.

Emotions involve feelings. These feelings are comprised of a mix of experiences—some of which, like changes in heart rate, are physiological in nature, and others, like an expansive sensation, are more of the order of psychological changes. Broadly speaking, we can call these feeling states agitations or modifications. Any emotional state involves some accompanying feeling states of these sorts. Being horrified, for example, often involves shivering, gagging, paralysis, trembling, tension, an impression of one’s “skin crawling,” a quickened pulse, or a sense of heightened alertness, as if danger were near to hand. However, no emotion is reducible to such feelings alone. Why not? Because feeling states such as physiological agitations or psychological modifications can be induced by drugs where there is no question of the subject being in an emotional state.

For example, suppose I could be injected with a drug that replicates all the internal sensations that I underwent the last time I was angry. In such a situation, we would, I suggest, neverthe-

less refrain from saying that I am angry. Why? Because in the present case, there is no one with whom I am angry. I may feel weird; I may feel internal turbulence. But I am not angry, because in order to be in the emotional state of anger, there must be someone or something with whom or with which I am angry; i.e., I must believe that there is someone or something that has wronged me or mine—someone who serves as the focus of my mental state.

Emotions are mental states; they are directed. They are intentional states. They must be directed at objects, real or imagined. In order to be in love, I must be in love with someone. In order to be afraid, I must be afraid of something. An emotion is a mental state that takes or is directed at some object. An emotional state is not merely a feeling state, though it involves feeling. An emotional state involves a feeling that is related to some object.

But how does a feeling get related to an object—an object like my own true love? Clearly, thought must be involved; cognition must be involved. Cognition directs our attention to the objects that give rise to our emotional responses. Thus, emotions are not simply a matter of having certain feelings; emotions also essentially involve having certain thoughts. Emotion is not the opposite of cognition; rather, emotions require cognition as an essential constituent. Indeed, the way in which we identify or individuate emotional states is by reference to the cognitive constituents of an emotion.

The feelings of patriotism and love may be exactly alike in terms of their feeling-tones. In order to distinguish these two emotions, we need to look at the objects to which these mental states are directed. Where the object is one’s country, the emotion is apt to be patriotism; where the object is one’s spouse, the emotion, one hopes, is likely to be love.

Moreover, as this example suggests, what a given emotion takes as its object is not arbitrary: it is governed by formal criteria. Romantic love, for example, must be directed at a person, or what one believes to be a person. Fear must be directed at something that is perceived to be or believed to be harmful. Standardly, one cannot be afraid of something that one does not believe is harmful. I cannot be afraid of a kidney bean, or, if I am afraid of a kidney bean, then that must be due to the fact that I have some rather strange
beliefs about kidney beans, e.g., that they are mind parasites from an alternative universe. One who claimed to be in a state of fear with respect to x, but who genuinely denied that she thought that there was anything harmful about x, would be suspected of contradicting herself.

That is, I cannot be in a state of fear unless I recognize the particular object of my mental state as meeting the formal criterion of harmfulness. Or, another way to put it is to say that I cannot be said to be afraid of something unless I adjudge the object in question to be subsumable under the category of the harmful. In order to fear x, my beliefs, thoughts, judgments, or cognitions with respect to x must accord with certain criteria of appropriateness. It is in this sense that the cognitive constituent of my mental state determines what emotional state I am in; for how I recognize the object of my emotion—what categories I subsume it under—establish what emotional state I am in.

This is not to say that feeling has no role in the emotions. To be in an emotional state one needs to be in some feeling state. However, what emotional state one is in hinges on one’s thoughts about the object toward which the emotion is directed. The relation between the thought constituents and the feeling constituents in an emotional state is one of causation. That is, when I am in an emotional state, that is a matter of my having certain appropriate thoughts about a particular object, which thoughts, in turn, cause certain physical agitations and psychic modifications—i.e., certain feeling states—in me. To be concrete: in order to be afraid I must have certain thoughts—e.g., that the hissing snake before me belongs to the category of harmful things—and such thoughts, in turn, cause certain feeling states in me—e.g., a psychological state sensation describable, for example, as my blood running cold, and perhaps a physiological agitation caused by a surge of adrenalin in my circulatory system.

Emotions, then, involve feelings and cognitions, cognitions about the categories to which the objects of the overall state belong. Applying this model to the characteristic emotional state that monsters in horror fiction provoke, we can say that we are horrified when the monsters who are the particular objects of our emotional state are thought of as harmful or threatening (i.e., they are fearsome) and they are also thought of as impure (i.e., they are revolting or disgusting), where making these categorical assessments causes certain feeling states in us—like shuddering, trembling, chilling (as in “spine-chilling”), a sensation of creepiness, of unease, and so on.

To be horrified, that is, involves our subsumption of the monster in a horror fiction under both the categories of the fearsome and the impure where, in turn, these cognitions cause various psycho-physical agitations, such as that of feeling our flesh “crawl.” The horrific response is a compound, as King frankly states in the passage quoted, of fear and revulsion, where the harmfulness of the monster is the criterial ground for fear and the monster’s impurity is the criterial ground for revulsion.

A horror fiction, then, is a narrative or image in which at least one monster appears, such that the monster in question is designed to elicit an emotional response from us that is a complex compound of fear and disgust in virtue of the potential danger or threat the monster evinces and in virtue of its impurity. Central to the classification of a fiction as art-horror or genre-horror is that it contains a monster designed to arouse the emotions of fear in the audience in virtue of its harmfulness, and that of revulsion in virtue of its impurity.

The insight that horror fictions contain monsters is admittedly pedestrian, and the claim that the relevant monsters are fearsome is perhaps equally obvious, since the monsters in horror fictions customarily occupy themselves with killing and maiming people, as well as eating them and worse. Where my theory may be innovative, however, is in the hypothesis that horror also essentially involves the emotional response of abhorrence, disgust, or revulsion in consequence of the monster’s impurity.

Nevertheless, though this may represent an innovation in the theory of horror, it may be an innovation that some readers feel is more obfuscatory than informative. For central to this theory of horror is the notion of impurity, a notion that many may think is so vague that it is of no theoretical value whatsoever. So in order to allay such misgivings, let me say something about the nature of impurity.

According to a number of anthropologists, including Mary Douglas and Edmund Leach, reactions of impurity correlate regularly with transgressions or violations or jammings of standing
schemes of cultural categorization. In their interpretation of the abominations of Leviticus, for example, they hypothesize that crawling things from the sea, like lobsters, are regarded by Jews as impure because, for the ancient Hebrews, crawling was regarded as a defining characteristic of earthbound creatures, not creatures from the sea. A lobster, in other words, is a kind of category error or categorical contradiction (or traif, in high-powered philosophical jargon).

Similarly, according to Leviticus, all winged insects with four legs are to be abominated because, though having four legs is a feature of land animals, these things fly, i.e., they inhabit the air. Things that are interstitial—that cross the boundaries of the deep categories of a culture’s conceptual scheme—are primary candidates for impurity. Feces, insofar as they figure ambiguously in terms of categorical oppositions such as me/not me, inside/outside, and living/dead, serve as a ready target for abhorrence as impure, as do spittle, blood, tears, sweat, hair clippings, nail clippings, pieces of flesh, and so on.

Where objects problematize standing cultural categories, norms, and concepts, they invite reactions of impurity. Objects can also raise categorical misgivings in virtue of being incomplete representations of their class, such as rotted, disintegrating, and broken things, including amputees. And, finally, stuff that is altogether formless, like dirt, sludge, and garbage, provokes categorical anxiety since it seems completely unclassifiable; it is matter out-of-place.

Following Douglas and Leach, then, we can somewhat specify the notion of impurity. Things are adjudged impure when they present problems for standing categories or conceptual schemes, which things may do in virtue of being categorically interstitial, categorically contradictory, incomplete, or formless. Moreover, the relevance of this characterization of impurity for the theory of horror should be immediately apparent, since the monsters in horror fictions could be said virtually to operationalize the sorts of categorical problematizations that anthropologists have itemized.

So many monsters, like werewolves, are categorically interstitial, straddling the categories of wolf and man as a result of being composite creatures. Other monsters, like Dracula and mummies, are categorically contradictory, they are both living and dead at the same time; likewise zombies, a phenomenon captured in the title of films like The Night of the Living Dead and Dead/Alive. And the Frankenstein monster is not only, in some sense, living and dead, it is also newborn at the same time that it is aged. Categorical incompleteness is also a frequent feature of many horrific monsters—headless ghosts and noseless zombies come to mind here. And, finally, formless is just about the only way that one can describe such beings as the Blob.

Not only is the concept of impurity not hopelessly imprecise, it also turns out to be particularly apposite in characterizing the monsters we find in horror fiction. Our emotional response to horror fictions involves not simply fear, but revulsion because such monsters are portrayed as impure—where impurity can be understood in terms of the problematization, violation, transgression, subversion, or simple jamming of our standing cultural categories, norms, and conceptual schemes.

Moreover, the recognition that horror is intimately and essentially bound up with the violation, problematization, and transgression of our categories, norms, and concepts puts us in a particularly strategic position from which to explore the relation of horror to humor, because humor—or at least one very pervasive form of humor—is also necessarily linked to the problematization, violation, and transgression of standing categories, norms, and concepts.

II. STAGE TWO: HUMOR

My aim in this section is twofold. First I want to explain how the movement between the putatively opposite mental states of horror and comic amusement is not only unproblematic, but even somewhat natural. This will involve showing what these two states share in common. On the other hand, horror and humor are not exactly the same. For we do not always laugh at monsters. So, we also want to produce an account of the difference between these mental states. In the previous section, I presented a theoretical account of horror. In this section, I will examine a theory of humor, one that will illuminate its essential similarities and differences with horror.

At present, the leading type of comic theory is what is called the incongruity theory. Historically, it seems that this sort of comic theory took its modern shape in the eighteenth century in re-
action to the kind of superiority theory of humor that is associated with Thomas Hobbes. As is well known, Hobbes’s theory of laughter is nasty, bruitish, and short. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes maintains:

Sudden glory is the passion which makes all those grimaces called laughter; and it is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another by comparison whereof they applaud themselves.17

That is, on Hobbes’s view, the source of comic laughter, indeed of all laughter, isrooted in feelings of superiority.

But this view is clearly inadequate. Often laughter, especially comic laughter, arises when we find ourselves to be the butt of a friendly joke. So, superiority is not a necessary condition for comic amusement. And, of course, neither laughter nor comic amusement need occur in all situations where we find ourselves to be superior. As Francis Hutcheson, reacting to Hobbes, pointed out, we rarely laugh at oysters. So, superiority is not a sufficient condition for comic amusement.

But if superiority is not the wellspring of laughter, what is? Hutcheson suggests that generally the cause of laughter is the bringing together of images which have contrary additional ideas, as well as some resemblance in the principal idea: this contrast between ideas of grandeur, dignity, sanctity, perfection, and ideas of meanness, baseness, profanity, seems to be the very spirit of burlesque; and the greatest part of our raillery and jest is founded upon it.

We also find ourselves moved to laughter by an overstraining of wit, by bringing resemblances from subjects of a quite different kind from the subject to which they are compared.18

That is, for Hutcheson, the basis of comic amusement is incongruity—the bringing together of disparate or contrasting ideas or concepts. Comic teams, for example, are often composed of a tall, thin character and a short, fat one. And European clown performances are frequently comprised of an immaculately clean, sartorially fastidious white clown—the epitome of orderliness and civilization—and an unruly, disheveled, hairy, and smudged clown—the lord of disorder and mischief. Indeed, even where the white clown is absent, the unruly clown generally finds a foil in the suavely tuxedoed or smartly uniformed ringmaster. Comedy, that is, naturally takes hold in contexts where incongruous, contrasting, or conflicting properties are brought together for our attention.

In addition to Hutcheson’s, incongruity theories of humor have been advanced by James Beattie, William Hazlitt, Sören Kierkegaard, and Arthur Schopenhauer.19 As we saw in an earlier quotation, Edgar Allan Poe also seems to have subscribed to this opinion, while Henri Bergson’s well-known thought that comic laughter is provoked by the apprehension of the mechanical in the human may be regarded as a special instance of the incongruous yoking together of disparate properties—in this case, those of the human and the machine. More recently, Arthur Koestler, D. H. Monro, John Morreall, and Michael Clark20 have defended variations on incongruity theories.

The basic idea behind the incongruity theory of humor is that an essential ingredient of comic amusement is the juxtaposition of incongruous or contrasting objects, events, categories, propositions, maxims, properties, and so on. Stated this way, the incongruity approach can seem insufferably vague. However, the view can be given immense precision. Schopenhauer, for example, hypothesized that the requisite form of incongruous juxtaposition in humor was the incorrect subsumption of a particular under a concept—i.e., a sort of category error. What he had in mind can be illustrated by the following joke.

On a planet in deep space, the inhabitants are cannibals. One butcher shop specializes in academic meat. Teaching assistants go for two dollars a pound, assistant professors cost three dollars a pound, philosophy professors with tenure are only one dollar and fifty cents a pound, but deans—deans are five hundred dollars a pound. When latter-day astronauts ask why deans are so expensive, they are asked, in turn: Have you ever tried to clean a dean?

On Schopenhauer’s view, the crux of the humor here is the incorrect subsumption of a particular—the moral regeneration of a dean—under a very different concept of cleanliness, one pertaining to the preparation of animals for cooking. Similarly, when I define comedy as “you falling down and breaking your neck,”21 a
major part of the humor resides in the conceptual inappropriateness of counting a pinprick as tragic. The errors here are logical; they involve the misapplication of or the confusion in applying a given concept to a particular case. One might also speak of the relevant incongruity, as Kierkegaard does, as a contradiction.

Thus, on one very rigorous construal of the incongruity theory of humor, the incongruities that underlie comic amusement are contradictions, indeed, contradictions in terms of concepts and categories. This version of the incongruity theory is very elegant and tidy. But it is also rather narrow, too narrow, in fact, to cover the wide gamut of comic data. Juxtaposing a tall, thin clown and a short, fat one may invite comic laughter, but it is hard to see how such laughter can be traced back to a contradiction.

As a result, the ways in which incongruous juxtaposition is to be understood with respect to comedy, while including contradiction, must also be expanded to encompass other forms of contrast. And some extended ways of understanding the notion of incongruous juxtaposition include: simultaneously presenting things that stand at extreme opposite ends of a scale to one another, like placing something very tall next to something very short; or mixing categories, as in the title Rabid Grannies; or presenting a borderline case as a paradigmatic case—a diminutive Buster Keaton in an oversized uniform as a representative of the All-American football hero; or breaches of norms of propriety where, for example, an inappropriate, rather than an illogical, behavior is adopted—for example, using a tablecloth as a handkerchief. Or the incongruity may be rooted in mistaking contraries for contradictions, as in the following exchange: “Would you rather go to heaven or to hell?” “I’d rather stay here, thank you.”

Though the relevant incongruity in a comic situation may involve transgressions in logic, incongruity may also be secured by means of merely inappropriate transgressions of norms or of commonplace expectations, or through the exploration of the outer limits of our concepts, norms, and commonplace expectations.

The incongruity theory of humor, of course, is especially suggestive in terms of our questions about the relation of horror and humor. For on the expanded version of the incongruity theory of humor, comic amusement is bound up with transgressive play with our categories, concepts, norms, and commonplace expectations. If the incongruity theory of humor is plausible, then for a peripient to be in a mental state of comic amusement, that mental state must be directed at a particular object—a joke, a clown, a caricature—that meets a certain formal criterion, viz., that it be apparently incongruous (i.e., that it appear to the peripient to involve the transgression of some concept or some category or some norm or some commonplace expectation).

Just as the mental state of fear must be directed at a particular object subsumable under the category of perceived harmfulness, the mental state of comic amusement requires being directed at a particular subsumable under the category of apparent incongruity. Moreover, since apparent incongruity is a matter of the transgression of standing concepts, categories, norms, and commonplace expectations, the relation of horror to humor begins to emerge, since in the previous section it was argued that a necessary condition for being horrified is that the emotional state in question be directed at an entity perceived to be impure—where impurity, in turn, is to be understood in terms of violations of our standing categories, concepts, norms, and commonplace expectations. Thus, on the incongruity theory of humor, one explanation of the affinity of horror and humor might be that these two states, despite their differences, share an overlapping necessary condition insofar as an appropriate object of both states involves the transgression of a category, a concept, a norm, or a commonplace expectation.

So far, I have proceeded as if the incongruity theory of humor is unproblematic. But it is not evident that it is a perfectly comprehensive theory of comedy. For the kind of incongruity that the theory identifies as the quiddity of humor requires structure—a structure against which opposites, extremes, contrasts, contradictions, inappropriateness, and so on can take shape. But not all comic amusement would appear to require this sort of structure in order to be effective. Sometimes we laugh at pure nonsense—a funny sound, perhaps, or a dopey expression, like “see you in a while, crocodile”—where no explicit or implicit foil of the sort the incongruity theory presupposes can be specified (no contrasting category or concept or norm or expectation).
However, even if the incongruity theory is not a comprehensive theory of comedy, it may still be useful for our purposes. For it does appear to identify at least one of the major recurring objects of comic amusement with some precision. That is, the incongruity theory of humor may succeed in identifying part of a sufficient condition for some subclass of humor, and this may be all we need to explain why some horrific imagery can be transformed into an object of laughter.

Of course, the domain of even such a modified incongruity theory of comedy is much broader than that of the theory of horror presented earlier. The object of comic amusement of the incongruity variety can include jokes, people, situations, characters, actions, objects, and events, whereas the object of horror according to my theory can only be an entity or being of a certain sort—what I call a monster. However, it should be clear that this sort of being can be accommodated within the incongruity theory of humor because there is something already straightforwardly within the compass of that theory which is generally very like a monster and, on occasion, can be easily transformed into one.

What I have in mind is the figure of the clown. The clown figure is a monster in terms of my previous definition. It is a fantastic being, one possessed of an alternate biology, a biology that can withstand blows to the head by hammers and bricks that would be deadly for any mere human, and the clown can sustain falls that would result in serious injury for the rest of us. Not only are clowns exaggeratedly misshapen and, at times, outright travesties of the human form—contortions played on our paradigms of the human shape—they also possess a physical resiliency conjoined with muscular and cognitive disfunctionalities that mark them off as an imaginary species.

Moreover, clowns are not simply, literally monstrous. Clowns are also frequently theorized in the language of categorical transgression with which we are already familiar from our discussion of horrific monsters. For example, in “The Clown as the Lord of Disorder,” Wolfgang Zucker describes the ritual clown in these terms: “Self-contradiction ... is the clown’s most significant feature. Whatever predicates we use to describe him, the opposite can also be said with equal right.”

Noting the origin of the word “clown” in words that meant “clod,” “clot” and “lump”—i.e., formless masses of stuff, like earth or clay, coagulating or adhering together—the anthropologist Don Handelman claims that “clown-types are out-of-place on either side of the border, and in place in neither. They have an affinity with dirt (Makarius, 1970: 57), primarily through their ability to turn clearcut precepts into ambiguous and problematic ones.” Handelman goes on to note:

These clowns are divided against themselves: they are “clots,” or “clods,” often “lumpish,” that hang together in seemingly ill-fitted and disjunctive ways. The interior of this clown type is composed of sets of contradictory attributes: sacred/profane, wisdom/folly, solemnity/humor, serious/comic, gravity/lightness, and so forth. Given this quality of neither-nor, this type can be said to subsume holistically, albeit lumpishly, all of its contradictory attributes.

Furthermore, as with horrific monsters, these conflicting attributes may be strictly biological. As described by Pinna Werbner, the clown figure at a migrant Pakistani wedding, who is the magical agent of the bride’s transition from a presexual being to a sexual one, is a composite—an old man, played by a nubile young woman—whose shape-changing eventually marks ritual transformations.

The anthropological literature on ritual clowns identifies clowns as categorically interstitial and categorically transgressive beings. That aspect of the ritual clown is still apparent in the perhaps more domesticated clowns of our modern circuses. In my previous allusion to European circus performances, I noted that the unruly clown functions as the double or doppelgänger of the more fastidious clown or of the ringmaster or of some other matinee-idol type, such as the lion tamer or the knife thrower or the equestrian. Not only does the clown, like a horrific monster, indulge in morally transgressive behavior—butting people about and taking sexual liberties—but like the dark doppelgängers of horrific fiction, the clown-monster is a double, a categorically interstitial figure that celebrates antitheses or “ab-norms.”

Moreover, given the strong analogy between the clown-figure of incongruity humor and the monster-figure of horror, it should come as no
shock that the clown can be and has been used as a serviceable monster in horror fictions. Perhaps the best known recent example of this can be found in Stephen King’s novel *It*, which has been adapted for television, in which the presiding monster takes the form of Pennywise the Clown through much of the story. But another, rather imaginative, recent example is the film *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, where the hero correctly surmises of the eponymous man-eating aliens that they are really animals from another planet that just happen to look like clowns. *And* they also store their victims in huge cocoons that just happen to look like cotton candy.

If, typically, clowns function in incongruity comedy in a manner analogous to the way in which monsters function in horror fictions—i.e., as the objects of the relevant mental states—then our question can be focused concretely by asking: what does it take to turn a clown into a monster or to turn a monster into a clown? To answer the latter question, it is instructive to recall a short 1965 stand-up comedy monologue by Bill Cosby. He says:

I remember as a kid I used to love horror pictures. The Frankenstein Monster, Wolfman, The Mummy. The Mummy and Frankenstein were my two favorites. They would scare me to death. But now that I look at them as a grown-up, I say to you anyone they catch deserves to die. They are without a doubt the slowest monsters in the world. Anyone they catch deserves to go.29

Here Cosby very efficiently transforms his favorite monsters into comic butts. How does he do it? By effectively erasing one of their essential characteristics. Earlier I offered a theory of what it takes to be a horrific monster. Among the features that were most crucial in that analysis were that the horrific monsters had to be both fearsome and loathsome, where the basis of that loathsome was impurity borne of categorical transgressiveness. What Cosby does in this routine is to subtract the fearsomeness from this monstrous equation. By alerting us to how very slow these monsters are, he renders them no longer dangerous or fearsome. Once their fearsomeness is factored out, what remains is their status as category errors, which, of course, makes them apt targets or objects of incongruity humor. Similarly, in a film like *Beetlejuice*, when the ghostly young couple attempt to haunt their former house, they cause laughter despite their horrific appearance because we know that they are ineffectual, insofar as their victims can neither see them nor be harmed by them. Subtract the threatening edge from a monster or deflect our attention from it, and it can be reduced to a clownish, comic butt, still incongruous, but now harmless, and, as a result, an appropriate object of laughter.

Approaching our question from the opposite direction, clowns, of course, are already categorically incongruous beings. Thus, they can be turned into horrific creatures by compounding their conceptually anomalous status with fearsomeness. In Stephen King’s *It*, this is achieved by equipping Pennywise with a sharp, cruel, yellow maw, while in *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, the monsters not only benefit by having rows of incisors that haven’t been brushed for centuries, but also through the possession of super-human strength, quasi-magical powers, and intergalactic blood-lust.30 Moreover, the latterly horrific potential of clowns—along with puppets and ventriloquist’s dummies—is well known to the parents of small children who are often terrified by such “funny” creatures exactly because they have not yet mastered the conventions of so-called comic distance.

The movement from horror to humor or vice-versa that strikes us as so counterintuitive, then, can be explained in terms of what horror and at least one kind of humor—viz., incongruity humor—share. For the categorical interstitiality and transgression that serves as one of the most crucial necessary conditions for the mental state of horror plays a role as part of a sufficient condition for having the mental state of comic amusement, especially of the incongruity variety. Of course, if we allow that there is a sub-genre labeled incongruity humor, then incongruity will be a necessary condition of that type of humor as well as part of a sufficient condition. On the map of mental states, horror and incongruity amusement are adjacent and partially overlapping regions. Given this affinity, movement from one to the other should not be unexpected.31 The impurities of horror can serve as the incongruities of humor, just as, in certain circumstances, mere reference to the feces, mucus,
or spittle we were taught to revile was enough to make us the class wit in second grade.

Often a very bad horror film, like The Attack of the 50 Ft. Woman (the first version), will provoke particularly thunderous laughter. On my theory, that can be explained by suggesting that the fearsomeness of the monster has not been sufficiently projected, often because of inept or outlandish make-up and special effects. Parodies such as Attack of the Killer Tomatoes succeed, on the other hand, because it is nearly impossible to imagine a tomato being dangerous.

In addition, people have told me that when I read selections from horror novels, such as the earlier passage from Needful Things, out loud, the effect is often amusing. And I have also been told that some horror fans enjoy reading lurid parts from horror novels to their friends for fun. In these cases, it seems to me that once one excerpts these quotations from their narrative contexts, the danger that has been building up in the story disappears, and primarily only the anomaly remains in a way which, my theory predicts, is apt to cause laughter.

Of course, standardly, horror does not blend into humor, nor vice versa. The reason for this is that though horror and incongruity humor share one condition, they diverge in other respects. Horror requires fearsomeness in addition to category jamming. So, where the fearsomeness of the monster is convincingly in place, horror will not drift over into incongruity humor. But where the fearsomeness of the monster is compromised or deflected by either neutralizing it or at least drawing attention away from it, the monster can become an appropriate object for incongruity humor. Likewise, when typically humorous figures like puppets, ventriloquist’s dummies, and clowns are lethal, they can become vehicles of horror.

The boundary line between horror and incongruity humor is drawn in terms of fear. Two visually indistinguishable creatures—such as the monsters in The House of Frankenstein and Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein—can be alternately horrifying or laughable depending upon whether the narrative context invests them with fearsomeness or not. Invested with fearsomeness, the categorically interstitial figure is horrific; bereft of fearsomeness, it is on its way toward comedy. Horror equals categorical transgression or jamming plus fear; incongruity humor equals, in part, categorical transgression or jamming minus fear. Figures indistinguishable in terms of their detectable, categorically anomalous, outward features can inhabit either domain, depending upon whether we view them or are led to attend to them in terms of fear.

Moreover, this conclusion is consistent with experimental data. In a series of papers, psychologist Mary Rothbart has argued that exposure to incongruity can elicit a series of different behavioral responses, including fear, problem-solving, and laughter. The same stimuli can evoke a fear response or a laughter response, depending upon whether or not it is threatening.32 For example, a child is more likely to respond with laughter to the antics of an adult when the adult is familiar or safe, such as a caregiver.33 Where a situation is not safe or nonthreatening, for example, where the adult is a stranger, the response to incongruity is more likely to be distress.

Of course, Rothbart is not examining the contrast between horror fiction and comedy. However, her findings—that responses to identical incongruous stimuli can take the form of fear or laughter depending on contextual factors—is consonant with my hypotheses about the relation of the horror response to comic amusement. The fictional environment of Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein is “safe.” Given Costello’s hijinks, he is marked as a naive clown figure, the sort of being who can take falls and be hit in the head with impunity. He is exempt from real bodily threat and, therefore, the fictional environment is marked as safe.34 On the other hand, the human figures in the House of Frankenstein are ordinary mortals, fragile creatures of the flesh, and their vulnerability induces fear in us for them. Thus, we respond with horror when harmful and impure monsters stalk them.

Nevertheless, we do not regard potentially horrific figures in comedy as horrific because comedy is a realm in which fear, in principle, is banished in the sense that typically in comedy serious human consideration of injury, affront, pain, and even death are bracketed in important ways. Comedy, as a genre, is stridently amoral in this regard. Within the comic frame, though injury, pain, and death are often elements in a joke,
we are not supposed to dwell upon them, especially in terms of their moral or human weight or consequences. Most frequently, we do not attend to or even apprehend the mayhem in jokes or slapstick comedies as having serious physical or moral consequences.\textsuperscript{35} And, as a result, fear and fearsomeness are not part of the comic universe from the point of view of the audience.

Freud claimed that humor involves a saving or economy of emotion. Perhaps I can commandeer his slogan for my own purposes and say that the emotion in question is fear, which disappears when the comic frame causes the burden of moral concern for the life and limb of comic characters to evaporate.

In the horror genre, on the other hand, our attention is focused, usually relentlessly, on the physical plight of characters harried by monsters. Ordinary moral concern for human injury is never far from our minds as we follow a horror fiction. Thus, fear is the métier of the horror fiction. In order to transform horror into laughter, the fearsomeness of the monster—its threat to human life—must be sublated or hidden from our attention. Then we will laugh where we would otherwise scream.\textsuperscript{36}

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10. I have chosen these two films because in both, the Frankenstein monster is played by the same actor (Glenn Strange, who also played the bartender in the television series Gunsmoke).

11. The notion that problems of perceptual indiscernibility are the hallmark of philosophical inquiry is advanced by Arthur Danto in his Transfiguration of the Commonplace (Harvard University Press, 1981).

12. I am not fully convinced that we should construct a theory of horror that includes these psychotics. Thus, what follows above is a conditional extension of the theory that I presented in The Philosophy of Horror under the presumption that the theory should be expanded to accommodate certain psychotics. So, if one wishes to count The Silence of the Lambs as a horror fiction, the above account suggests how that might be done in a way that is maximally consistent with my Philosophy of Horror. A similar approach can be found in Peter Penzoldt, The Supernatural in Fiction (London: Peter Neville, 1952), p. 12, and S. T. Joshi, The Weird Tale (University of Texas Press, 1990), p. 80. My theory of horror is elaborated in The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart (New York: Routledge, 1990).


14. This scene did not appear in the movie adaptation of Needful Things. Perhaps the expenses involved in producing such a scene were prohibitive.

15. I have characterized the relation of fear and disgust above as a complex compound because horror does not merely involve the simple addition of these two components. Horror is not simply the result of adding danger to impurity. For when elements that are independently harmful and impure are yoked together by horrific iconography, the impurity component undergoes a change. It becomes fearsome in its own right. That is, the impurity element comes to be fearsome in itself. It is as if the impurity comes to be, so to speak, toxic. The fearsomeness component in horrific imagery works like a chemical agent in activating or releasing a dormant property of the impurity. It catalyzes the impurity component. The impurity of the monster becomes, in addition to being merely disgusting, one of the fearsome properties of the monster. In Alien, when the creature bursts out of the egg, it is fearsome because of its evident power and speed. But the fearsomeness of the creature in light of its power and speed also encourages us to regard its squishy carapace as dangerous in its own terms. You wouldn’t want to touch it for fear that it might contaminate you. Horror, then, is not simply a function of fear in response to the overt lethal capacity of the monster to maim plus disgust in response to the monster’s impurity. For when fear and disgust are mixed in horror-provoking imagery, what is disgusting becomes additionally fearsome in its own way. Call this process toxification.

This process of toxification, moreover, is important theoretically. For one of the things that happens, as we will see in the next section of this essay, is that when fear is subtracted from potentially horrific imagery—as happens in much comedy—the imagery becomes detoxified. This is why what I
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call category jamming is not a sufficient condition for a horrific response. Impure, incongruous entities can be presented detoxified, so to say, as is the case in much humor.

Lastly, the phenomenon of toxification is important because it suggests a way in which I might be able to answer a recent criticism of my Philosophy of Horror.

In the process of answering what I call the paradox of horror, I maintained that being horrified is unpleasant and that the pleasure we derive from horror fictions comes from elsewhere (notably from our fascination with the design of the monstrosity along with certain recurrent forms of plotting). Berys Gaut, in contrast, argues that the pleasure derived from horror fictions comes from being horrified. One of the ways that Gaut defends this view is by pointing out that even if being horrified is necessarily typically unpleasant, this is consistent with some people sometimes taking pleasure from being horrified. These will be atypical people in atypical situations. And horror audiences, by hypothesis, are of this sort.

Responding to this proposal, I argue that it is strange to regard either the responses of horror audiences or the situation of being art-horrified by horror fictions as atypical. Indeed, I contend that the situation of being art-horrified by horror fictions is the norm, since we are rarely, if ever, horrified, in the sense of art-horror, anywhere else but in response to horror fictions. In ordinary experience there are no monsters. So we have little recourse in real life to be horrified in the sense that I use that term.

But Gaut questions my claim that we rarely, if ever, experience the relevant sort of horror in real life. He maintains that we often experience fear and disgust separately. So, if horror is the result of merely conjoining fear and disgust, then there is no reason to suppose that they might not be experienced together with respect to some object in real life. However, in response to Gaut, I would like to argue that what I call horror involves the toxification process discussed in the first paragraph of this note. Thus, art-horror involves fear (divorced from impurity), disgust, and, as a consequence of the mixture of these two elements, a third element, viz., fear-toxification. This emotion, particularly with regard to the impression of toxification, is not typical in ordinary life. It is primarily an artifact of the horror genre. So, it does not seem right to characterize the horror audience as atypical with respect to art-horror. Rather, they are definitive of it. Therefore, Gaut cannot exploit the typicality operator, in the way that he suggests, in order to dissolve the paradox of horror.


23. Interestingly, Beetlejuice, in the film of the same name, resembles a clown. But certainly he is a clown-monster, if there ever was one.


29. This routine can be seen on Great Comedians: TV—The Early Years, which is distributed by Goodtimes Home Video Corp., 401 5th Avenue, New York, New York (Goodtimes Home Video Corp., 1987; Movietime Inc. Archives, 1986).

30. Similar strategies with respect to the clown-figure are in evidence in the recent film Spawn by A. Z. Dippé, and in the comic book series by Todd McFarlane upon which it is based.

31. Of course, I do not mean to suggest that horror and humor are the only mental states in this neighborhood. Certain types of religious awe are also located in the vicinity of incongruity. Recall that the leading mystery in Christianity—Christ as simultaneously both god and man—revolves around an apparent contradiction.


34. Moreover, where a fictional environment is “safe,” the impurity of incongruity features of the relevant monsters are detoxified. See note 15.

35. There may be certain forms of “black humor” where this generalization does not appear to obtain. In Roman
Polanski’s *Cul de Sac*, for example, we are invited to laugh at the bloody death of a self-satisfied bourgeois character. But in cases like these, I wonder whether the laughter is merely comic, rather than a Hobbesian celebration of superiority.

36. Versions of this paper have been read at a number of universities and conferences. The author wishes to thank these audiences for their generous comments, criticisms, and suggestions. Special thanks go to Ted Cohen, John Morreall, Elliott Sober, Robert Stecker, Michael Krausz, Jerrold Levinson, Stephen Davies, Alex Neill, Annette Michelson, David Bordwell, Tom Gunning, Lucy Fischer, and Sally Banes. Of course, no one but the author is responsible for the errors in this paper.