Romantic Comedy and Horror Films: A Study of What Makes a Genre

Submitted by

Marguerite Wasinski

English

To

The Honors College

Oakland University

In partial fulfillment of the

requirement to graduate from

The Honors College

Mentor: Adam Gould, Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies

Department of English

Oakland University

01 March 2016

Summary

Genre films are films that adhere to a specific set of rules in order to successfully represent a particular genre. These rules—formally known as film conventions—are patterns shared among each film within its genre. Through the production of two short films, I will be exploring the ways in which directors manipulate cameras, lights, dialogue, etc, in order to create films that belong to the horror and romantic comedy genres. A comparison and contrast between the two films' genres will also be included for heightened understanding of the differences between the conventions that each film employs.

PRE-PRODUCTION

It is common knowledge to most filmmakers that pre-production, done right, often ends up being the longest stage in the filmmaking process. The pre-production stage of feature-length films range between a few months and a few years, with the latter being most common. This is because of a few reasons: first, as it is for most artists, it is difficult taking something abstract—an idea—and fleshing it out into something concrete; then, after the concentrated idea is introduced to more people, it takes years of drafting and re-drafting its story and script. For example, the director of *Inside Out* (2015), Pete Docter, began developing the story in 2009, and it was only after years of other projects, consulting several University of California, Berkeley psychologists for research on the film's subject matter, attending college-level psychology classes, bringing together a cast, and finally producing a polished script that they were able to begin its production. Scheduling, though not as much an issue for major studios nor successful independent filmmakers, also becomes a very large issue for local independent filmmakers, such as students—and it was this step of the pre-production process that was the hardest hurdle for me to overcome.

FROM HEAD TO PAPER

It took a couple months before I was writing anything down. It was more difficult than I anticipated to think of a story that would be able to function as both a horror film and a romantic comedy. This difficulty with thinking in such stark duality was what would eventually set the tone for the screenwriting process, as well. After talking aloud about my project to colleagues and close friends, I got the idea of making the story about a date. However, as soon as I started

writing about the date, it was becoming much too vast and deep of a story. One day, my friend

was telling me all about her experiences with going on dates through the popular dating app,

Tinder; I noticed that I was as horrified by these stories as I was laughing at them. Thus, the idea

that the script be specifically about a first date was born.

The next step was researching all I could about existing genres in the industry. Film

genres are identified by unique patterns of specific film conventions that connect together a

certain group of films. The three main conventions that film theorists study in order to categorize

a film are the film's iconography, its character types, and its narrative tropes. The iconography of

a film refers to its visual aspects such as location, props, and costume; character types refer to the

way certain characters are always portrayed such as femme fatales in film noir; and narrative

tropes refer to similar plot structures or dialogue found in genre films such as the brief falling-out

of prospective lovers in the second acts of romantic comedies.

While genre films are static and share the same basic surface tropes, what set films in the

same genre apart from each other are the films' various depths[1]. For example, the classic horror

films *Dracula* (1931) and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) both deal with a monster's

unbridled eroticism, though the monsters and the settings and their stories are drastically

different from one another[2].

To understand how these genre films are constructed in order to fit their film genres is the

next step. Horror and romantic comedy films have become genres because they contain

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[1] Schatz, Thomas. "Film Genre and the Genre Film." In *Film Theory and Criticism*, 564-575. 7th ed. Oxford University Press, 2009.

[2] Buxton, Rodney A. "The Horror Film: An Introduction (review)." *Journal of Film and Video* 61, no. 2 (2009): 70-71.

conventions that have been repeated and re-produced throughout the history of film. These

conventions are successful because the spectator can easily mimic the sensations being portrayed

on screen[3]. In other words, those who like horror and romantic comedy films like them because

they can physically engage in the "ecstatic violence" of horror films and the "ecstatic woe" of

romantic comedies[4]. Through a close analysis of the construction of two films acting within each

of these genres, one will be able to understand exactly how these conventions are created in the

filmmaking process. With this research, combined with films I have seen throughout my lifetime,

I was finally ready to write the script.

THE SCRIPT

It easily became the most laborious part of the entire project. Finding the motivation for

the girl to want to be obsessed with the guy in such a short amount of time was what

continuously tripped me up. I already had an actor for the guy selected, my close friend Steve, so

I called upon him to arrange a brainstorming session with me since I was running into roadblocks

everywhere. Using a laptop and several sheets of paper, first we thought it would be clever if the

girl (who, along with the guy, remained nameless until the end) worked at a bakery so that at the

end of the story, she would run over and "hug" him with a tube of icing that she was wielding

rather than a knife—and it was red icing from the tube in the romantic comedy that the script

said dripped down his shirt rather than blood from the knife in the horror. This story worked for a

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[3] Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." In *Film Theory and Criticism*, 602-616. 7th ed. Oxford University Press, 2009.

[4] Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." In *Film Theory and Criticism*, 602-616. 7th ed. Oxford University Press, 2009.

while, but it was quickly getting too complicated: for both versions to work, she'd have to be baking a cake or have some other reason to suddenly have a red icing tube in her hand, and we couldn't find believable enough reasons for her to be doing either in the horror version.

It was around then that we realized the only part of the story that was preventing us from fleshing out the rest was the ending: how do we convey an ending in the horror film that the guy dies while also conveying that he doesn't in the romantic comedy version? We called it a day to think more on it; however, only a few hours after Steve left and I allowed my mind to relax and drift, I found my answer. In the kitchen in my apartment, we have a holder that keeps all of our sharp knives along with a single pair of sharp, cooking scissors. It suddenly flooded into my mind that the objects at the end could be sharp objects, a knife in the horror film and scissors in the romantic comedy. Though I'd mostly leave it up to interpretation, both the knife and the scissors would be wielded by her due to her long-standing, crazy obsession with brunette hair, and throughout the date portion of the film, she deems his hair as an unruly disgrace to "brunettes everywhere." So, in the horror she kills him for it, but in the romantic comedy she attempts to cut it for him. In order for the romantic comedy to not be too creepy in its obsession, I envisioned the girl's character as Sandra Bullock's character from Traill's *All About Steve* (2009). Polishing the rest of the script became easy until I had to face the ending yet again; however, after an attempt to think completely outside the box, I decided to give it no definitive ending—just a cliffhanger.

After reading the script multiple times and alternating my mind's eye between imagining it as either a horror film or a romantic comedy, all that were left were the names. During our

brainstorming session, Steve and I, on a tangent, had begun discussing one of our favorite horror

films of all time, Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991). We had jokingly begun relating it to

my script, going so far as to name the female lead Hannah Belle, after the infamous Hannibal

Lecter in the film, and the male lead Maurice, after the lead character Clarice in the film. The

notion of using those names gave my script a different dimension of self-actualization that I

loved, so I wrote them in. The last thing that was added to the script was the element of Maurice

continuously messing up Hannah Belle's name, mistaking her first name for Hannah when both

were her legal first name. I thought this would add a flavor of characterization on both

characters' parts: even though she introduces herself as Hannah Belle in the beginning, Maurice

is so disinterested and desperately trying to get away that he doesn't even care to remember; for

Hannah Belle, each time she corrects him it adds comical moments in the romantic comedy and

more fuel for her motive to murder him in the horror.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

Once I had my script, I was ready to bring together a cast and crew. Due to my

involvement with the Cinema Studies department on campus, I was quickly able to find a team

of five people who were willing to help me on crew with this project; we started a group chat on

Facebook and laid out a month-worth of days that we could shoot. When I asked for actresses I

knew at OU and in the area, each either already had a project they were working on or were too

busy to fit anything else into their schedules. Feeling anxious and desperate, I posted a casting

call for a brunette female lead on Facebook and was greeted with a number of responses. After

discussing dates and plans with the potential actresses, I found Bernadette, who I've had the

pleasure of being in English classes with before but never knew she could act. I sent a couple of quick emails to my friends in Filmmakers Guild about using their equipment to complete this project, and before I knew it, we were ready to make the films.

PRODUCTION

This stage would have taken a shorter time than pre-production if it had not been for the several different unforeseen setbacks. I had a couple people on my crew drop out after a couple days of shooting, which caused me to pause the production until I could find other people who could fit it into their schedules. A couple more times, my actor or actress would get called into work unexpectedly, causing me to cancel the shoots for those nights. During the semester break, our schedules varied far too much due to holiday celebrations and vacations to be able to film anything. Once, hours before a scheduled shoot, the actress badly injured herself while at work and had to be rushed to the hospital. She is fine and recovered relatively quickly, but we had to hold off on production until she got the green-light from her doctors.

The process of finding time to shoot wore on me, but I was able to push through and remain positive. Despite these many setbacks, I was determined to see this project through until the very end. It also helped that my team, when we were all together, were incredibly talented, eager to help, and got along very well. To prepare for each day of filming, I watched as many famous film clips as I could. Because of my individual research and classes I've taken throughout college, I knew what to look for.

THE HORROR

  For the horror version, I looked to classic horror guru Alfred Hitchcock. I admire his use

of dutch angles in several films such as *Suspicion* (1941), pictured below, and his use of frantic

string music in the famous shower scene of *Psycho* (1960). Dutch angles are most commonly

used to indicate a negative, dark shift in tone for a character, whether it be the victim who is

about to be killed or the murderer who is beginning to show his or her true colors. In my horror

film, I used dutch angles frequently in the apartment scene with the characters in frame, to

indicate that a definite dark twist of events have occurred for Maurice as well as a dark reveal of

Hannah Belle's character. I also added a behind-the-head tracking shot, most famously used in

another horror film I admire, Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980). A tracking shot is when the

camera stays at relatively the same distance from the subject its filming, but follows the subject

as it moves. In my horror film, I used a tightly framed tracking shot that only followed the back

of Maurice's head and shoulders to indicate an increased feeling of impending doom. Finally,

there are several long, continuous takes in the film due to being influenced by the work of

director Alejandro González Iñárritu in films such as *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of*

Ignorance) (2014) and *The Revenant* (2015). These continuous takes are different that tracking

shots because it can involve any kind of movement by the camera around any kind of movement

by the subjects in the frame. The biggest one I use in my film is directly after the tracking shot,

when Maurice shuts the bathroom door in the camera's face; the camera pushes, and then zooms

out slowly just as Maurice opens the closet door to grab a towel. I did this in order to instill the

feeling that this impending doom is happening in real-time, so that it feels more authentic and

creepy to the audience.

THE ROMANTIC COMEDY

While the horror version focused on extreme close-ups, tight framing, and darkness, I

loosened up completely on the romantic comedy version, instead featuring wide shots, loose

framing, and plenty of light. As mentioned before, I kept Sandra Bullock's character from *All*

About Steve (2009), pictured below, in mind because the one element of the romantic comedy

version that would be most important in setting it apart from the horror would be the acting. My main focus while shooting this version was directing the actor and actress's inflection of each part of the dialogue to twist it into a comical light. This was also the reason I decided to shoot each horror version of the scene first, because laughter is contagious, and it's easier for an actor or actress to first take a scene seriously before spoofing it. For example, the character of Hannah Belle had to be almost two completely different people following the same plot. The moment she delivers her last line of dialogue, it is careful and creepy in the horror. But in the romantic comedy, I urged Bernadette to let loose, swing the scissors around, sound exasperated in a way that says she obviously knows what she's doing, and so on. Because of this difference, the moment becomes a "ha-ha" shock moment rather than an "oh no" shock moment. Although the lighting was a challenge to perfect throughout the romantic comedy version, I think I was still able to get my point across that the two genre films need to look very different from each other because the two film genres are almost complete opposites of each other.

POST-PRODUCTION

This stage in the process was fairly straight-forward. Though I love working with other people, it was a relief to sit down with all of my work in front of me and know that I only had to rely on myself to edit all of the material. To effectively schedule my time, I would edit the scene we just shot immediately. It was easier then, in the end, to string the scenes together to make the final copy. The editing took a lot of long hours and a lot of long nights to complete (approximately 30 hours altogether), but it was all worth it in the end.

THE EDITING

The editing for both films were straight-forward: for the horror version, the edits had to be quick and abrupt; for the romantic comedy version, the shots could be extended and the transitions from scene to scene, softer. For example, there are more fade/dissolve transitions in the romantic comedy version than there are in the horror version. In the horror version, these quick cuts are featured mostly towards the end, when Hannah Belle is advancing on Maurice and he is reaching for his phone to call the police. Another stark difference between the films that can be seen due to editing is when Hannah Belle ends up in the kitchen, humming a song and rifling through drawers. I only included the shots of Maurice reacting to these noises in the horror version because it added to the suspense of wondering what the heck she was doing in the kitchen and what was about to happen next. By only allowing a viewer to listen to something they can't see, it adds a feeling of anxiety. On the other hand, I explicitly showed exactly what goofy things Hannah Belle was doing in the kitchen in the romantic comedy version, because the suspense and surprise elements were not needed for the romantic comedy version to function properly. The comedy is in seeing the action, then reveling in Maurice's reactions of it.

THE MUSIC

In the horror version, it was easy to search for a stereotypical horror soundtrack and apply that to my film. I made sure to choose something that was low-key yet changes often and crescendos to build suspension. Since I cut the film before I applied the music, I was pleasantly surprised when there were a lot of moments in the film that already lined up with the music perfectly. However, in order to maximize these occurrences, I manipulated the cuts of the scenes even further: if you watch closely, changes in music often signal a transition from shot to shot or

a particular movement by the character. The rapid strings at the end matched with Hannah Belle

advancing with a knife is, of course, a direct homage to the famous scene in *Psycho*.

In the romantic comedy, the music was much more difficult to find. It had to be a

soundtrack that conveyed just the right mood—not too light, not too fast-paced, and not too

goofy. After cutting the film and trying to match it up with several different soundtracks, I finally

found the perfect piece. It added a playful sort of impending doom tone to the film. This is most

notable in the scene where Maurice goes into the bathroom, shuts the door, and the camera pans

over to reveal Hannah Belle somehow sneaking into the apartment and looking for him. Certain

aspects of the music align with instances such as the toilet flushing, Hannah Belle reacting to it,

and Maurice opening the door to get a towel from the closet. The music was not perfectly

transitional on purpose like the horror version was in order to add that comedic element: for

example, when the music suddenly stops and a scratch disc sound effect plays to interrupt the

mood, signaling Maurice's comical surprise at Hannah Belle's being there.

IN CONCLUSION

The purpose of this self-guided project was to demonstrate how specific filmmaking

techniques can produce a particular film genre, and, in turn, how those techniques can affect how

a viewer will receive the story of the film. For example, a viewer will feel both unnerved and

excited upon viewings of horrific moving images due to an intense release of endorphins in the

brain—those very same endorphins can also be released upon the viewing of a romantic comedy,

where the spectator laughs and empathizes with the main characters' feelings of love or

misguided expectations. Though the same "feel-good" chemicals in the brain are being released

upon the viewing of both genres, they are being released for two very different reasons. This

creative project attempted to explain the steps that are taken by a director in order to elicit these

types of reactions through an analysis of how the films are made. The process has shed light on

several aspects of filmmaking that I am strong in while highlighting several other aspects that I

need serious work on. For this reason, this thesis has been extremely helpful to me as I push

forward as a filmmaker because I have not only gained valuable experience of being the sole

author of two films, but I have also made two strong short films to add to my repertoire.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Marguerite Wasinski is an English major with a double minor in Cinema Studies and Creative

Writing at Oakland University. Her plan is to move out to Los Angeles, California after

graduation because her ultimate goal is to become a screenwriter and/or director of films. She is

currently on the executive board of the Filmmakers Guild at Oakland University and has acted

and directed in four different student-made films. She has had experience in editing two films

though she continues to expand her knowledge in that area. She undertook this creative project in

order to add two more films to her repertoire and to gain further valuable filmmaking experience.

She was also determined to challenge herself in writing her very first script. Her mentor and

professor on multiple occasions, Adam Gould, has an M.F.A. from Savannah College of Art and

Design. His primary research includes film production, documentary film, film editing, and

video essay. He is now an Assistant Professor of Cinema Studies at Oakland University. The

project will be overseen additionally by Dean Graeme Harper of the Honors College at Oakland

University.

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