

Dragging you to Utopia Laughing and Screaming: How Horror-Comedy Establishes Queer Futurity

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[Over the top horror/eerie music plays in the beginning]

RT: Your pulse quickens, your heart races, you can hardly breathe as the blood rushes to your face, bulging it, forcing tears from your eyes. It has you writhing in pain, gasping for air, anxiously awaiting the next moment, the moment when it will strike, the moment when it will end—and it will end...after all, nothing kills better than a good joke.

[Eerie music stops abruptly, mellow music begins to play]

Well, I guess a knife would be a good runner up...Anyway, my name is Roxanne Tuckman and this is “Dragging you to Utopia Laughing and Screaming,” a podcast looking at how the horror-comedy subgenre imagines queer alternatives to normative reality. In this podcast we will be looking at several horror-comedy films, including Drew Goddard’s and Joss Whedon’s *The Cabin in the Woods* (2011), Karyn Kusama and Diablo Cody’s *Jennifer’s Body* (2009) and Brad Michael Elmore’s *Bit* (2019).

The attempt at a joke you just heard uses a concept that Noel Carroll describes as incongruity humor—a type of misdirection or presence of something completely opposite of

what you would expect. In her article “Horror and Humor,” Carroll discusses this type of humor and its parallels with the concept of horror—the two essentially being equal halves of the same coin, both distinct on the faces they put on but nevertheless conjoined together.

Horror can often times lead to feelings of dread and anxiety, creating an intense amount of tension, while comedy can be the liberating force to save one from this state. Conversely, what we see as either humorous or horrifying walks a very fine line—namely that of perspective. The process I first described in the opening is a good example of perspective. What initially was seen as an ominous prelude to some horrifying scene, was changed by the incongruity of the last few words—leading to a relief of that initial tension.

With the connection between comedy and horror made the next obvious question would be, well what the hell does this have to do with queerness? Well, as Carroll states in her article, another commonality horror and comedy share is that “[h]orror equals categorical transgression of jamming plus fear; incongruity humor equals, in part, categorical transgression or jamming minus fear. Figures indiscernible 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” (157). One concept that queerness prizes is the concept of transgression—the subversion of norms. In standard horror films this transgression is often on the part of the monster, killer, or otherwise villain of the story who embodies a non-normative or queer existence. This connection between the queer and the subversive evil in typical horror has been touched upon extensively by academics, most notably by Jack Halberstam in their book *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*. Likewise, comedy has had its large share of queer influence and subversion in the form of camp and drag. What is interesting about

horror-comedy, then, is how this seemingly incompatible relationship perfectly forms the basis for a celebration of the queer, a queer futurity.

[Previous music fades out, new, lofi music fades in]

When I speak about queer futurity, I am invoking the late, great José Esteban Muñoz, and his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. In his book, Muñoz discusses the utopian aim of queerness, and how its very existence in our normative world means that change is indeed possible. Queerness here does not necessarily denote sexuality—though it can and often does—but rather an act of being or doing, an act of subverting an otherwise normative society. As Muñoz argues, “[q]ueerness is utopian, and there is something queer about the utopian. Fredric Jameson described the utopian as the oddball or the maniac. Indeed, to live inside straight time and ask for, desire, and imagine another time and place is to represent and perform a desire that is both utopian and queer” (26). The oddball or maniac in this case could equally refer to the comic relief in a comedy or bloodthirsty villain in a horror. As I have discussed, the history between queerness with horror and comedy is an old one, one that has been discussed inside and out. What I pose then, is that while on their own horror and comedy are subversive and transgressive in their subject matter, the molding of them together is itself another transgressive act which both introduces anxiety and tension (or fear as Carroll describes) of queer bodies and ideas to a normative audience, while also allowing a release from that anxiety (or absence of fear) and a chance to embrace these bodies and ideas.

What also makes this subgenre especially queer is the ways in which horror and comedy are understood by critics. In “Subverted and Transgressed Borders: The Empire in British Comedy and Horror Films,” Rami Mähkä, discusses the concept of verisimilitude—that is “the appearance of reality, plausibility” (286). Mähkä argues that the ways in which an audience

readily accepts the events or experience happening on the screen before us is due to our expectations of the genre,

[Stabbing/Slicing sound effect is played here to denote such a scene]

after all, your immersion in a Jane Austen period drama would be shattered if the Predator came down and skewered Mr. Darcy.

The issue for comedy and horror, then, is that its verisimilitude is considered “to be inferior to more ‘serious’ genres because their verisimilitude are less committed to ‘realism’” (286). What I find particularly interested about this observation is the concept of realism—what type of reality are we talking about? If we are talking of normative reality then of course the two genres rife with queer potential would seem “inferior,” just as queerness has been viewed as a lesser existence to heteronormative society. The critique’s they offer of normative society as noted by Mähkä are also an interesting attribute that are inherent of the genres, as a normative society would denigrate any critiques to its status quo—would also explain why they get snubbed at the Oscar’s.

The rejection of horror and comedy—and by extension the horror-comedy subgenre—as a serious entity, owing to its queer, utopian aims, is of course a very normative reaction, though normative society (at least in the western sense) was not always like this.

[Sound of a record scratch]

I swear the movie analysis is coming in fast.

[Music resumes]

In the book *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the concept of carnival or the carnivalesque, a concept that is more than just a performance, but rather a state of being and living that embraces any and all peoples—it breaks down all established barriers of class and rank and allows for the free and fluid intercourse where one need not be shackled by normative notions of acceptable behavior. As Bakhtin states, “During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part” (7). This indelibly queer place and time of carnival can then be reasoned as exactly what Muñoz had argued earlier about utopia. The decimation of rank, status, and normative law and order is undoubtedly a form of queer liberation, one that shines most prominently in the sites of modern-day carnival—the horror-comedy subgenre.

[Music fades]

We’ve finally made it to the film analysis, I will now provide a 1-second-long pause for all of us to clap and pat ourselves on the back.

[Audible sounds of cheering plays]

Now then.

[Electronic/Rock music plays]

The first film we will be analyzing is Goddard and Whedon’s *The Cabin in the Woods*, with special attention paid to how the parody nature of this film aids in critiquing normative society. The start of the movie, from the college coed montage to even the title itself, is a type of metanarrative or parody of the standard horror film. Curt Vaughan, played by Chris Hemsworth is the prototypical Jock, Jules Loudon, played by Anna Hutchison is the appointed “whore,”

Holden McCrea, played by Jesse Williams is the nerd or ‘scholar’ in this specific case, Marty Mikalski, played by Fran Kranz is the comic relief or “fool,” and Dana Polk, played by Kristen Connolly is the titular virgin of the group. The group ventures off for a fun night at Curt’s cousin’s cabin in the woods—title card drop—only to be assailed by a pain-loving, “redneck” zombie family. While this may initially appear as a straightforward horror movie, it is the dark underside of society—quite literally—that is shown to be the real villains of the story. You see, the group is an unknowing participant in a millennia old blood ritual that’s being perpetuated by a bunch of pencil pushers underground that spy on the group of coeds and are even revealed to have used mind altering substances to force these college kids into their prescribed roles to be sacrificed. This is evidenced by one scientist admitting to using blonde hair dye to make Jules the anointed “dumb blonde,” stating “it works its way into the blood through the scalp—very gradual. The chem department keeps their end up.” (19:38). Other members of the group are shown to be influenced in different ways, like Curt and Jules being blasted by pheromone mist and Marty’s weed stash being spiked with some substance that induces an even heavier high state(?)

The first blow to the idea of normative society is the very idea that these scientists even need to influence and alter the college group’s personalities to align with their ritual. If such cliché’s and stereotypes were widespread, surely they would have had a wide range of bodies to choose from. This idea is even realized by Marty who questions the events going on around him, stating “You [Dana] seriously believe nothing is going on?” “the way everybody is acting. Why is Jules suddenly a celebutard? And since when does Curt pull this Alpha-Male bullshit? I mean, he’s a sociology major. He’s on full academic scholarship and now he’s calling his friend an egghead?” (37:02-37:22). This is then touched upon again when he claims that there are

mysterious “puppeteer” that are influencing their actions. This train of thought is almost immediately dropped as the weed in his system reduces him back to a severely baked Shaggy Rogers.

The second blow to normative society that opens up the route to queer futurity, is how Dana and Marty fight back against the pencil-pushers downstairs. In *Horror and the Horror Film* Bruce F. Kawin states that “comedies often confront chaos or some other radical upset, and sometimes absorb it into their world by the conclusion” (198). The chaos in this scenario are the different monsters locked up and contained by the office workers below, and the “old one’s,” whom they try to appease through blood sacrifice. These entities represent an imminent threat to the normative society humankind knows and must be reined in for our status quo to remain. Dana and Marty, however, transgress and instead work with—or at least utilize the monsters as a form of rebellion to the system that had already decided their fate. The horrible and terrifying monsters that the two see on their way down—and whom they were afraid of back in the cabin—are now turned into comedy when they’re unleashed upon the hapless office workers and their security. Giant worms eat them, reptiles tear them apart, werewolf’s claw at them, and even an out of water merman slowly crawls to obtain its first kill—and really we have no choice but to be proud of him. What was once foreign and alien to the survivors have become friendly, and what was once assumed to be normal and regular—the office—has shifted into nightmare.

With the embracing of the monsters comes the chance for queer futurity, and the destruction of the current world. When Marty and Dana enter the lowest sanctum, the last chamber above the “old ones,” below, they’re met by The Director, played by Sigourney Weaver. The Director tells them that if they do not fulfill the ritual within the next eight minutes, then mankind is doomed, and the world will go with it. Marty interjects as the Muñoz inspired

oddball or maniac, stating “maybe that’s the way it should be. If you’ve got to kill all my friends to survive, maybe it’s time for a change” (1:25:02). While The Director instinctively scoffs at this comment, and rebukes this claim, stating that the “old one’s” need to see the young punished to prevent their wrath, one has to consider why The Director’s concept of doom is valid while Marty’s is not. The monsters thrust upon Dana and Marty—as well as the possibility for a multitude of other monsters that could’ve been unleashed upon them—were merely tools used to enforce the power of and adherence to the system. The crew themselves would have never ventured into such a situation of their own volition, they had to be coerced or otherwise brainwashed into their actions, punishment in this regard is artificially constructed. Dana however does not initially share Marty’s conviction and attempts to shoot him before being mauled by a werewolf. After the werewolf and The Director are dealt with, the two lay dying together, ready to embrace whatever new world will be raised by their action. The final scene shows a comedically giant hand raising from the ground in almost typical zombie fashion—eschewing the idea of the “one last scare” analogous for horror and introducing instead one last laugh, a laugh that allows for Bakhtian’s carnival notions of renewal and rebirth as the world is changed forever.

[Electronic/Rock music fades, dark synth/techno music plays]

Transgressive notions in the form of normative displays of behavior, sexuality, and gender roles appear in our next film *Jennifer’s Body*. The movie follows the sexy and seductive titular Jennifer Check, played by Megan Fox and her friend and foil Anita “Needy” Lesnicky, played by Amanda Seyfried. In the movie, the two attend a rock show at a local bar, only for the entire establishment to go up in flames. Amidst the chaos, Needy sees Jennifer taken by the

band in their van, unable to do much of anything to stop them. It is only when Jennifer arrives back at Needy's house that she realizes that something otherworldly has happened to her friend.

The chaos and horror expressed in this movie is most evidently portrayed by Jennifer, of whom Needy experiences a gradual anxiety over. After Jennifer's "change," she completely disengages from the imposed niceties and expectations of normative society. When their teacher Mr. Wroblewski announces the death of a Spanish teacher of the school, Jennifer's immediate, auditory response is "no way, Erickson ate shit?" (28:15), to an otherwise shocked Needy. As everyone else around Jennifer is mourning someone in their small town, she herself is loving her newfound abilities, and the power she now wields. While multiple characters chastise her for her open sexuality and beauty—even to the point where Needy's boyfriend Chip is inexplicably uncaring about Jennifer possibly being kidnapped by the band, stating "who cares about Jennifer and those douchebags with their douchebag haircuts and their man-scara? (20:30-20:34), Jennifer relishes it and uses it to her advantage to find new victims to feed on.

The chaos that is Jennifer slowly "corrupts" Needy too, as she eventually becomes disengaged and disillusioned by how normative society around her is reacting to the death and exploitation of their community. When Mr. Wroblewski states that the band that had abducted Jennifer—Low Shoulder—have decided to release...a benefit single. [with] 3% of the profits will go to the families affected by loss. 42:08-42:14," Needy is incredulous, stating how they're being exploited by the band as a community. The students and teacher in her class however, are rendered uncomfortable by her actions and ostracize her. Her further obsession of finding out what's happening with Jennifer also causes her boyfriend Chip to wonder about her mental health state, stating that she should "see the school shrink." The more Needy is pulled into the otherworldliness of Jennifer's reality, the more rejected she becomes by normative society. This

ultimately comes to ahead when she embraces the bloodlust that Jennifer had towards her victims and kill's her friend, only for her to be found by Jennifer's mother and promptly sent to a maximum security prison. At this point however, she has inherited some of the powers Jennifer had from the bite she sustained from her, and upon mastering them, escapes the prison to exact revenge on her dead friend. What follows next is a type of "behind the scenes" band-type video that portrays the antics of the bandmates, which goes from a fun-loving good time to pictures straight out of forensic files, with their screams and cries of terror filling the audio in a comedic fashion.

Gender roles are a major point of contention in the film as many characters enforce normative notions of gender performativity. Chip and Roman are guilty of mocking the band Low Shoulder for their metrosexual or feminine type of appearance. Equally, Colin Gray is mocked by Chip who feels insecure about Colin's security with his emotions, stating "Oh. Well, I'm like that too. I mean, I can relate. You know, I'm not all obvious about it like a poser" most likely owing to Colin's obvious 'emo' attire (30:32-30:39). Jennifer and Needy, however, subvert normative notions of gender performativity by standing up to these masculinist claims. Conversely, whereas the threat of predatory men exemplified the first half of the film, the second half of the film places men within the same vulnerable category of women—with Chip's mother even handing him a can of pepper spray stating how "there's obviously a sicko out there who likes boys" (1:14:45). The world has shifted in that possible vulnerability now exists for men and women equally, and where masculinity or male bodies or not assumed to be a place of safety. Finally, the climax of the film, resurfaces all of the romantically intimate tensions that Needy and Jennifer have, by her proclaiming that she "goes both ways," when she threatens to kill Needy for preventing her from feeding on Chip. When Needy goes on to do some final battle

confrontation with Jennifer with a box cutter, Jennifer cranks up queer innuendo's when states "do you buy all your murder weapons at home depot? God, you're butch." The aftermath—while initially dark and sad, quickly turns to comedy as Needy embraces the gift she has been given by Jennifer and exacts revenge for her fallen friend. What was once horrifying and scary has now become a useful tool in changing the world, at least for Needy.

[Dark synth/techno music fades out, electronic music fades in and plays]

While Needy and Jennifer were only able to change the circumstances of their own, personal surroundings, our next group of bloodsuckers imagine a much grander goal—enter, the Bite Club.

In Brad Michael Elmore's *Bit* (2019), the audience follows a young, recent high school graduate named Laurel played by Nicole Maines (a transwoman actually getting a transgender role? Scarlet Johansson must've been booked.). Attracted to the prospects of a new beginning, Laurel travels to Los Angeles to live with her brother and gets the full L.A. treatment upon entering the city

[Music stops. Audio of cars honking plays]

insane traffic on the freeway that just about justifies homicide.

[Music resumes]

Attending a club for her first night in the city, Laurel becomes quickly acquainted with a girl named Izzy who shows romantic attraction to her. The two make their way to the roof of the club where the magic happens—magic of course being Laurel's neck being mauled by a hungry Izzy who then leaves with her other vampire kin.

It is here where Laurel becomes acquainted with the rest of the all-women vampire group, the Bite Club, consisting of Izzy, Frog, Roya, and their official but not official leader, Duke. The women pick up Laurel from her brother's house and tell her about her chance to become a vampire. What in most horror movies is initially a cause for anxiety or concern, that is the possible unalterable change from the normal to the monstrous, comes off more as a group of friends trying to figure out where to eat. In response, Laurel, still being understandably peeved that Izzy was basically going to kill her, decides "what the hell" and, not needing much convincing says she's up for it, stating "My life's already kind of been like a horror movie. Most of it, so... Fuck it" (39:15-39:23) before hopping in a convertible with the four other women. Here, Laurel learns the aims of the Bite Club—namely that they feed on abusive or violent men primarily—though when a girl's gotta eat she's gotta eat and most anyone will do.

The next important bit (hah) of information that Duke provides to Laurel is that "You never, ever, turn a man. It's off limits. Men can't handle power. They have it already and look at what they've done with it (42:33-42:44). This information is compounded by the story she tells Laurel about the vampire who 'turned' her—the original vampire, Vlad. In the flashback-backstory she dictates how she lived on the streets and eventually found her footing and her people—the people depicted being the lesbian community. However, just as she finds her people and her personal place in the world, she is transfixed, and quite literally hypnotized by Vlad (who at this point looks like a goofy dude in disco clothes). His laughable appearance creates a type of incongruity humor to Duke's statement that "He was beautiful. Magnificent. Like an archangel. I was mesmerized. But I knew that couldn't be right. I mean, I'm a full-blown, fucking dyke. (53:49-54:05). While this scene and the scenes that follow—over the top dancing with Boney M.'s "Rasputin" playing in the background—are quite comedic, the underlying

horror of male power and domination against the will of women is poignant. When Duke finishes her story, she states that she pictures “a world where every woman is a vampire. Let men be the ones who are afraid to fucking jog at night (57:54-58:02). A pensive Laurel then asks, “well what about me” indicating that the implication that she is a transwoman that’s been going on during the movie is in fact reality, to which Duke responds “never crossed my mind.” This moment following the grief-riddled story that Duke explains is admittedly very tender and affirming for both women—Duke having found a new sister for their family, and Laurel being accepted as the woman she is.

Emboldened from Duke’s story, Laurel joins the rest of the women in attacking a group of vampire hunters—all men of course—who have been pestering them. The following scene shows the vampire hunters, which honestly looks like a group of LARPerS living in their mother’s basement (no really they’re in a basement). The vampire hunters suit up for battle and recite their training and knowledge of vampires, assuming they will fight how they want them to fight, all while a red alert siren plays in the background. The bite club, however, would really prefer not to go down into their musty basement and instead just toss a grenade through their window. The resulting explosion causes Duke to muse to the other women, saying “Why do they always think we don’t have weapons?” (1:09:20). The following montage includes the typical bullshit that some men do in real life, this includes depictions of the “feminist” man who knows how to spout platitudes to appear approachable to women, the date rapist/molester/guy at party who preys on drunk women, and a peeping tom. All these men meet their end at the hands—or rather teeth of the bite club. The horror of ‘monstrous’ murder here is alleviated by the incongruity humor of the women flipping the script of who is predator and who is prey.

While these actions alone present a new world in which men and women can be both predator and prey to unseen forces in the world—much in the same way that *Jennifer's Body*, did, *Bit* goes further in its aims of queer utopia. At the climax of the movie, Laurel accidentally feeds on her brother Mark. In the hopes of saving him and not breaking her agreement with the Bite club about male vampires, she seeks assistance from her sisters. It is at this point that Duke lets on that there is no cure and that if Laurel didn't agree to join they would've just killed her anyway. Horrified by this conclusion, and in a rush to save her brother, Laurel reawakens Siran, one of the older vampires of the group whom the Bite Club was punishing for her transgression of the rules. Released from her freedom, she herself reawakens the original vampire, Vlad, who intends to reassert his power and authority. He does this by mesmerizing Izzy, Frog, Roya and Duke—with special attention and hate directed towards Duke for keeping him in his vulnerable state (basically a charred heart which Duke was feeding upon for power).

Vlad basically lets it be known that he is the archetypal power hungry, misogynistic man who sees no real issue in anything he has done or will do. Upon Duke stating that he stole her life and changed her forever, Vlad contends that he gave her eternal life essentially, so what is there to even argue about. That he controlled her and used her—among other women—as sexual objects and his obedient “wives” is a small price to pay. Upon Vlad seeing Laurel, he scoffs at her and states “I suppose it is the new millennium” (1:26:28), obviously indicating that he's a bastard in really every sense of the word. Laurel, realizing that such a man cannot remain in a position of power, is able to over power him with the help of the other Bite Club members. The horror here is the very real horror of male dominance and violence within normative society—a type of horror that is only combated, both in the movie and historically within our cultural consciousness, through a shared struggle and determination to seek change from the status quo.

Vlad had, in some way, marked all of these women, whether personally or otherwise, but all of them fought back once the illusory “spell” put on them is broken, and their agency is regained.

Though Vlad is dealt with, Laurel realizes that Duke is unwilling to let any man in a position of power and is still intent on denying Laurel from allowing her brother to become a vampire. Instead of merely killing Duke as would be expected within horror films. Laurel recognizes that Duke is not a monster so much as she is still a victim, a survivor who still hasn't been able to get out of a self-preservation mindset, and one that still deserves a chance to change her mind. Instead, Laurel puts her back into the same chamber where they held Siran, telling her she'll be released one day. When the other vampires ask Laurel what she intends to do with Vlad's charred heart—the essence of power, Laurel responds “maybe what everyone with power should do but never does. Share it (1:29:37-1:29:41). Unlike Duke, Laurel intends to share power evenly between all the vampires and even hopes for a world where not only women are vampires, but everyone is. If everyone has power, everyone has equality, everyone has equity. Notions of men and women are changed, and a queer futurity is finally obtainable.

[End of Transcript]

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Credits

In order of appearance:

"Horror, Violin Tremolo Cluster, B.wav" by InspectorJ (www.jshaw.co.uk) of Freesound.org

"Game music – Jazz loops.mp3" by anechoix of Freesound.org

"2020-01-04.wav" by Doctor_Dreamchip of Freesound.org

"YEAH!.mp3" by shortiefoeva2 of Freesound.org

"Angel-techno pop music loop.mp3" by frankum of Freesound.org

"Eleonor's will.mp3" by frankum of Freesound.org