Contingent Violence: Bergson and the Comedy of Horrors in *Schindler’s List*

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**Introduction**

Comedy or horror story? The violent events portrayed in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* are capable of eliciting either interpretation on account of the various audience responses the film has met with: laughter (both at the film’s events and the film makers), and horror (again, both at the film’s events and the film makers). In this essay I want to look at the violence in *Schindler’s List* as both horrific and comical, though not on account of Spielberg’s putatively melodramatic and clichéd treatment of Nazi violence during the second World War (which has been widely ridiculed), but on account of something simultaneously horrific and comical in the film’s cinematic re-telling of those events, a horror-comedy connected to the *contingency* of their violence.

In comparing such seemingly opposed approaches to violent events – comedy and horror – we might normally take either the deflationary route of supposedly neutral description (admitting that they have nothing more in common than their historical content, all else being mere subjective interpretation), or the optimistic route that conflates their formal treatments in some fashion (asserting, perhaps, that the genre of comedy is repressed tragedy, or that the horror genre is ultimately laughable, and so on). My way into the material here will be with a mitigated optimism, for while I do not want to make any universal claims about the respective genres of horror and comedy as such, I will forward a reading of both in terms of what I will call ‘the horrific’, a *mode* of filmic representation which can be found in horror films, comedies, and other genres.
To succeed, of course, we will have to look what theorists have said about the nature of horror and comedy. There have been various suggestions as to what constitutes the essence of horror, some of which will be outlined first. Subsequently, I will show how the horrific elements of *Schindler’s List* belong to more than just the violent nature of the events depicted, but also to their cinematic treatment, a treatment that makes them horrific and comical simultaneously. As for comedy, it is Henri Bergson’s theory of the comical that is most productive here. It is this theory that I will try to substantiate below, but only by showing how, when understood correctly, it verges on and is closely related to a conception of the horrific qua contingent violence. Without making any claims about genres, then, we will still be able to compare comedy and horror as alternative approaches to violent events. This will also lead us to questions concerning the limits of representation (long associated with images of the Holocaust) – and whether laughter is perhaps the only tenable response to purportedly unrepresentable horrors.

**What is horror?**

As with most genres, the meaning and purpose of the horror film is one more bone of academic contention: it is said that horror films are domestic dramas writ large; that they are modern forms of catharsis (as tragedy was once); that they are conformist ideologies that represent the unknown as threatening; or that they actually welcome otherness by thinking of it as sympathetic and victimised, and so on. Working within a cognitivist paradigm, Noël Carroll (who was one of the first to write extensively on art-horror in film) sees horror cinema in terms of the monsters that usually lurk at the heart of the story, for the role of such monsters is to illicit both fear and disgust. In other words, he looks at the affective role of horror, and we will follow him here in avoiding any debates over the semantic definition/interpretation of the genre by focusing on one or two of the generic effects of a horror movie.

It is noteworthy in itself that the horror genre takes its name from the emotion these films hope to arouse in their audience. (Thrillers and suspense films would be other examples of this.) According to Carroll, the fear *and* disgust – fear alone is not sufficient to constitute horror – are motivated by the nature of the monster, for its existence must be ‘repulsive and abhorrent’, an unnatural abomination. Even if these creatures were not dangerous – which they usually are – we would wish to avoid their presence, for it is literally repulsive, repelling us. Carroll adds that they are usually ‘impure’ creatures, ‘categorically hybrid’, compounding