An Animated Examination of Cinematic Horror

Elisa Stanis

Spring 2019

Thesis Director: Devin Bell, Animation

Faculty Reader: Brian Ferguson, Animation

"The night is dark and full of terrors"

- George R. R. Martin

"What are common tropes in horror movies, and how have they evolved over time?" By researching the history of horror-related storytelling in cinema, I designed an animated short that pays homage to cinematic horror. My research explores the evolution of horror-related movies and alters the aesthetics of animation to fit differing visual themes. I delve into the details of designing a character that can be altered to exist in these conjoining sections, as well as how to best cinematically tell my story. Additionally, I specifically examine the role of young women in horror movies, as well as the idea of turning mundane actions into terrifying experiences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For my parents, who love and support me through both academic and creative endeavors

For my thesis advisor Devin Bell, who provided me with so much guidance and perspective

For my faculty reader Brian Ferguson, and the rest of the DePaul animation program

For my amazing roommate, wonderful friends, and the rest of my family, for helping me to grow and refine myself as an artist and student throughout this thesis process

For any person who finds delight in a good story

Thank you to DePaul University and the Honors program for providing me this research opportunity and for allowing me to study and explore what I love.

Introduction

For the three years of my college career thus far, I have lived in a dorm. And every day, at some point, I walk down a long hallway within the building. From my room to the shared bathrooms as a freshman, or to the laundry area, shared kitchen, or down to the stairwell. And very often as I walk down these long hallways by myself, I feel a sudden and strange sense of fear. Something about the emptiness of such a long hallway, the ambiance of nighttime solitude, and the vulnerability of being in a state of relaxation and wearing at-home clothing creates an atmosphere of sudden anxiety. Turning to look behind me, I often felt a sense of dread, as if I expected someone or something to be chasing me. It is this primal fear in such a modern setting that inspired my thesis exploration. Some of the oldest written stories contain scenes of horror and "the attempt to come to terms with death" (Kawin 3). The idea of creating a story centered on the experience of a young woman venturing down the hallway of her dorm to complete a simple task and then returning is so simple yet has so much potential for horror. Much of what scares us as a species relates to the sort of danger within our comfort zones. When a safe place becomes unstable, where is there to turn? The idea of having control over our emotions in this regard makes the experience of enjoying a scary story pleasant; we know we can leave the theater whenever we want (Blakemore 4). Whether it be the allure of a gripping narrative, the rush of adrenaline, or the allure of "indulging" in something emotionally intense (Blakemore 7). Just as our ancestors did, we crave a spot around the fire "where stories are told, with the dark at [our] back" (Kawin 3), even if the mesmerizing fire has become a movie screen.

Concept to Creation

The process of turning an idea into a fully realized pitch takes a lot of time and critical consideration. While the feelings left behind by a specific experience, such as my feelings of fear in an empty hallway, are very vivid within my own mind, in order to communicate them visually to others, I have to consider the most effective way to do so. I begin by turning the idea into a narrative, choosing a specific reason for the character's actions, as well as how the story will begin and end. For the sake of this piece, I settled on a relatively simple story: A girl who lives in a dorm goes down the hallway, brushes her teeth, and returns to her room. While the concept itself might not sound necessarily exciting or horrifying, this is a cognizant choice. One common theme that runs through all genres of horror is the idea of playing on the mundane or familiar. When something we are comfortable with becomes unsafe, we find ourselves in a more fearful state, because we have lost our sense of security.

With my narrative chosen, the next step in development is to decide on the more detailed elements of the plot. I choose specific ways in which I want to build tension, where I want certain scares to play out, and how I want the layout of the dorm and bathroom to look. Once I have created a sense of how I want to tell my story, the next step is to create a storyboard from which to work. Storyboarding in this context takes the preexisting script and sets a visual element to it. When creating a storyboard, I must give consideration to the cinematography and visual aesthetics involved. Every shot is meant to not only tell the story, but make the viewer feel a certain way. Character-centric shots that allow for the protagonist's emotions to be seen can help the audience feel more connected to her, while

scenes designed with strange shot composition or tilted camera angles may create a sense of uneasiness. The entire story is laid out visually by shot and action, and it is during this time that I work with a trial and error approach, constantly altering shot composition and visual layout in order to refine the piece further. For a concept as sizable as this one, I worked digitally, drawing and shading the shots in order to provide an accurate reference to look back on.

Once the storyboard was completed and then revised, with whole chunks of plot being cut out or changed, the next step is to convert the storyboard to an animatic. The animatic, which is treated like a storyboard laid out to how long the piece will end up being, is meant to serve as a guide for timing. How long to hold on establishing shots, how quickly backgrounds need to move, and how quickly certain things will read to an audience are all questions that become answered as the animatic is created. From that point, I create certain pieces of background art for the more important shots within the story. The establishing shots that are meant to set the scene were created in a program outside of the animation software and then imported in order to ensure the best image quality and that I could use specific brushes for textures. While I don't usually create all the backgrounds before beginning to animate, in this case I prioritized having a set style for aesthetic purposes and wanted to have a reference from which to work. It is only after these prerequisites and plans are made that I begin the process of animating. For most of my shots, I create a certain amount of keyframes that align with the animatic and storyboard. These keyframes serve as a reference for staying on model and provide an outline of timing for the actions and shot changes. While most of my scenes use keyframes to guide the motions, others are animated with only the start and end concept in mind. Shots such as

the falling rain and the view of the protagonist from inside the peephole are created frame by frame, edited and revised as needed. Throughout the whole process of working on the animation, I am constantly paying attention to the mechanics of movement, the smoothness of the drawings, and how easily the scene reads. The only section that has been animated to date is the first, which is inspired by classic horror movies and has a great deal of realistic character movement. By studying the movement of the human body as well as other source materials, I am able to create smooth character actions that come across as more realistic and graceful than other types of animation. However, in order to reach the point in my project where I animate the character, first she needs to be designed.

Creating a Character

In creating a character to serve as the protagonist for my thesis project, I settled on a goal: Designing a main character who both embodied specific horror tropes of the designated time and yet remained the same person throughout the piece. Because my proposed idea for an animated short involved separating the piece into sections based on era, I decided that the character's portrayal and design would be altered in order to have her fit better within the scene itself. Just as the content within each section would be changed to fit the time period, so would the character design shift to match it.

1

The first section is meant to center around the older and more traditional horror movies, specifically those of the 1960s. Therefore, in terms of animation, I researched the popular animated styles of the time, and decided to work in a way similar to that of classic Disney movies. The linework would eventually be done in digital pencil, a nod to the sketchy hand-drawn pencil tests used for preliminary animation in an age before computer art was possible at the same scale as today. The lines are smooth, whether they be for clothing or parts of the figure. The character is made to appear graceful and feminine, with

---

[1] **Error! Main Document Only.**Character concept art: [R to L] Early Horror "Traditional", 70s-90s "Action", 2000- "Modern"

good posture and a clean, neat appearance. Her features are dainty and sweet, with very few hard edges. The large doe-like eyes are meant to convey the character's innocence, though her short hairstyle and choice of shorts over a skirt tell the viewer that she may be more capable than we first imagine. Her short haircut is a reference to the heroines who inspired much of this section; Marion Crane, *Psycho* (1960), Rosemary Woodhouse, *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and Melanie Daniels, *The Birds* (1963). The entire first section would consist of a greyscale palette, with emphasis on dark shadows and bright white when called for. The character's black and white outfit is meant to stand out against the grays and shadows of the background, making her the prominent figure in most shots.

The second section, which focuses on the action horror aesthetics and content of the 1970s-90s, was visually inspired by the popular cartoons and anime of the time. The characters are more stylized, yet still retain a lot of 'realistic' details, such as multiple eyelashes, specific body shapes, and hair broken into smaller sections instead of being one mass. While both this character's rendition and the first share similar body types, there is no longer an unrealistic sense of gracefulness and femininity. Anime from the time period, specifically the *Devilman* OVA (1987), *Akira* (1988), and *Sailor Moon* (1991-97) are the main inspirations for how this style would be portrayed. This part's character was designed to be more of a rugged tomboy type, with an outfit inspired by the aesthetics of action horror characters such as Ripley from *Alien* (1979) and MacReady from *The Thing* (1982). Practical and versatile, the clothing from the first section has been redesigned to appear less formal and stiff, and more flexible. The lines within the clothing are not as graceful and flowing as the first section, and there is a sense of movement from these details. Her sleeves are rolled up informally, and even the socks are bunchy and loose, showing a more

relaxed and action-based design. This character was meant to seem like someone ready to leap into the fray and fight a monster or knife-wielding killer. Unlike the other two sections, this character was designed to appear as someone who can fight back and take care of themselves, which is meant to accentuate their fall into paranoia.

The third section, focusing on modern horror, has a character inspired by many modern cartoons. With bold lines and a simplistic design, she appears more childish, and is the easiest to animate. Many newer animated shows (especially ones for children and young adults) follow a similar formula in their character design, including lots of big eyes, round faces, and form-fitting clothes. Working from the inspiration of styles of shows such as *Steven Universe* and *Star vs The Forces of Evil*, the protagonist still has a body shape more detailed than purely straight lines, but still reads as being stylized. In terms of movement, this character is bouncy and more energetic, and her poses are more simplified than those of her counterparts. The bright colors worn by the character are more highly saturated than the prior section, contributing to a sense of innocence. Inspired by shows such as *Over the Garden Wall* (2014), in which the character designs are much less complicated than the backgrounds and combine to create a unique aesthetic, the cutesy and diminutive design of the protagonist is meant to directly contrast with the dark subject matter often explored by modern horror.

Thematic Content

The first section of the animation focuses the most on building tension, rather than skipping purely to scares and reveals. There is a great deal of focus on building a certain mood, as well as establishing the main character as someone for the audience to follow throughout the narrative. The choice to work in a greyscale color palate is in reference to the aesthetics of old movies, as well as to draw attention to shadows and contrast within the piece. The pathetic fallacy of the establishing shot, complete with cliched lightning, is a reference to the classic beginning of many scary stories: "it was a dark and stormy night". In this way, the premise of the story itself pays homage to the most recognizable of themes. As the heroine exits the dorm room and ventures into the hallway, shots track her movement in varying ways, building a sense of growing tension as she walks. The framing of a door's keyhole shows her as a blurry shadow, moving in a vaguely unsettling way as she walks past. Whose door this is and why someone may be watching her is left unaddressed, meant to create a sense of uneasiness and confusion in viewers. The length of time spent on each shot grows progressively longer, paying homage to the haunting cinematography of many classic Hitchcock films. The only true "scare" of the first section occurs as lightning startles the protagonist, inconveniently striking as she passes a window. In the dark and rain, she feels as if she may have seen something else, and continues, unsure. While the character may have reassured herself, the lingering shot on the window assures viewers that there is danger lurking out of sight. Though no true threat ever makes itself known within the first section, the strange cinematography and drawn-out shots

build a sense of danger and uneasiness, creating tension that continues into the second study.

When it came to adapting the horror movies of the 1970s-90s, I faced a dilemma in terms of which type of thematic content to focus on. The emerging subsections within the genre are divided between movies related to slasher villains, action horror, and the supernatural/demonic. The most iconic movie that comes to mind in the realm of popularizing horror would be *The Exorcist* (1973), which terrifies audiences to this day and has rooted Mike Oldfield's iconic theme, Tubular Bells, within the minds of so many as a terrifying tune (Carroll 51). However instead of focusing on a specific movie, I made the decision to examine the subgenres and weave in elements between different aspects of the scene. While many movies overlap and share similar subgenres, I chose to emphasize the tropes and themes related to the action horror genre in order to draw more contrast between the other parts. While there is no physical force chasing the main character with a machete or chainsaw, I wove elements of slasher films into the section by including iconic audio-based scares, as well as the threat of other people being semi-apparent. The second section of the piece is the only one that includes characters aside from the protagonist and plays with the theme of distrust of self and others. Inspired by the idea that the true horror can be found in other humans rather than supernatural forces, I wished to combine the seemingly innocent encounter of seeing other people with the growing suspicion and paranoia of a frightened main character. As she enters the bathroom, the door slams shut behind her suddenly. While the action itself is not necessarily supernatural in nature, the drastic change in audio and scare type signals to the viewer that the thematic content is drastically shifted. There are a series of unsettlingly close shots that center on the character

from strange angles, giving the impression of something being watched closely. A strange sound from the vent gives the protagonist pause and makes her feel vaguely uneasy and suspicious, despite no visible threat. This is a direct reference to *Alien*, one of the biggest sources of inspiration for the action horror aesthetic of the character. As she looks back into the mirror, the increasingly shaken protagonist studies her reflection, and feels as if there is something strange about it. A reference to both *Carrie* (1976) and *Poltergeist* (1982), movies with iconic mirror-based scenes, these shots are meant to explore the themes of self-doubt and suspicion that often arise within the horror genre. Paying homage to *The Thing*, I constructed a scene in which the protagonist finds herself frightened by the mere presence of other people, and even refuses to turn her back on them while leaving the bathroom. The feeling of self-doubt in the midst of danger is one often experienced by women in certain situations where politeness ends up being prioritized over safety. Choosing to have a female character experiencing an increasing amount of fear and even doubting her instincts was a deliberate choice meant to draw attention to this fact.

   The third section pays homage to modern cinematic horror through specific attention to the sense of dread communicated through the ambiguity of the ending and unseeable threat. There is a focus on showing the contrast between the dark themes of the piece with the cute aesthetic of the modern art style, creating difficulty in gauging whether the piece will end happily or not. Instead of the threat being something you can fight, many newer horror pieces have antagonistic forces more within the realm of demonic or supernatural, sometimes focusing on a purely psychological sense of dread and destruction. There is a

scene within my piece where the lights go out one at a time down the hallway, causing the main character to turn and sprint towards her room. This scene, inspired by one of the opening shots in the 2005 movie *The Descent* never shows an external or physical force turning off the lights, but leaves the viewer with more questions than answers, causing them to feel the same paranoia as the character, There is a focus on safety; if your home isn't a place where you can feel safe, then where is? Taking something familiar or playing on an aspect of human experience and adding horror elements to it is an effective way to immerse audiences and make the situation feel more real. Horror movies have the power of bringing us "uncomfortably close to the worst that could ever happen- to a character or to ourselves" (Kawin 2). When we relate to characters in media, we automatically want to view ourselves in their positions, wondering how we ourselves would fare in the same state. When watching a horror film, "our emotions are supposed to mirror those of positive... characters" (Carroll 53). The emotional responses felt by the audience, whether it be sympathy, fear, or disgust are "modeled on that of a character's" (Carroll 53). Using social commentary to create a premise and playing off real people's experiences with racism it is part of what made *Get Out* (2017) so terrifying. In a parallel way, taking something that we see as an essential part of being human, such as making noise in the case of *A Quiet Place* (2018), and turning it into a life or death situation causes viewers to consider their own odds of survival. Found footage films such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and *Paranormal Activity* (2007) scare audiences because of their presentation as realistic. A shot within the piece is one from the character's point of view as she runs down the hallway as the lights go out; we are meant to feel as she does and see what she sees.

The status quo is the safety and familiarity of daily life that is threatened by the antagonistic force of the movie, and we as an audience are searching for its reestablishment (Kawin 11). As the protagonist finally makes it back into her room and closes the door, she has a brief moment of relief before the lights shut off suddenly and the title of the piece appears. In this way, the ending is left up to audience interpretation. While such open endings have become somewhat expected, most of them still "send the audience out with a shot of unresolved fear, to carry the chill outside" (Kawin 13). The popularity of such ambiguous endings waxes and wanes; it seems that "as the world becomes more unsettled, we are starting to feel the need for more resolution in our horror endings" (Kawin 13). *The Descent*, for example, has two endings, each released differently in the United States or the UK, respectively. US audiences reacted poorly to the hopeless ending of the original, feeling unfulfilled by the bleak ending (Collins 6). When an ending is such a hopeless scenario, audiences are left to make their own verdicts as to why they spent two hours watching it (Collins 3). In the case of movies which artfully end with a sense of ambiguity such as *The Thing* or *The Birds*, audience members are able to assign their own resolutions and can choose whether to believe whether or not the characters were saved. Playing from the previous knowledge of past movies, the modern horror section culminates in a way that combines all of the previous troupes, while creating new spins on the preexisting genre.

Examination of Women

The choice to have a young woman as my protagonist was very deliberate. I wished to draw from my experiences as well as work with the troupes that accompany the portrayal of women in cinema. The themes of growing paranoia and self-doubt are meant to be a commentary on the struggle many women face; to trust their instincts or stifle them in the name of politeness and social normality (Stanko 51). The fear of being chased is a very primal one, still experienced often by all, but especially by women. While there may not be prehistoric creatures on the street looking for prey, there seems to be no end to the stories of violence and fear in regard to women being stalked or followed. In the end, there is no confirmation that what is scaring the main character is even a real entity at all. The entire experience could be chalked up to coincidence and paranoia, and even she tries to stifle her feelings in order to try and alleviate her fear, but we as empathetic viewers understand our main character's fear and feel it alongside her (Stanko 54).

The design of the character, as well as her young age are meant to inspire a sense of "purity" and innocence, a major theme regarding women within the genre. It is a common troupe within horror movies that sexual behavior or deviancy is often punished, most dramatically in the case of sexually charged teens in slasher films. Many monsters within the horror genre are categorized as being "impure"' they are changed versions of something we find familiar, a sort of warped version of the mundane (Carroll 55). Characters who become demonically possessed or are some sort of doppelganger are so frightening to us because externally, they are still their original selves in some regard (Carroll 56). Though sometimes not literal monsters, "a human can fulfill the role of a

monster" as horror requires some sort of "monster" and something "impossible or fantastic" alongside it (Kawin 152). Regardless of gender identity, we as an audience are drawn to innocent characters. Catharsis is only satisfying if a person deserves what's coming to them. As empathetic viewers, we want good people to be rewarded, and the bad punished. Still, the correlation between women and their role as a pure force within the horror genre is very prevalent, though slowly changing in modern cinema. The contrast between the role of an innocent woman and the monsters she fights is a common theme throughout the eras of horror I studied. From Hitchcock to Scott to Marshall, women have often been leading characters in these tales of horror, mostly at the direction and writing of men (Kawin 192). There is a wide variety of character archetypes within the genre; some characters such as Ellen Ripley *(Alien)* end up becoming heroes, while others like Marion Crane *(Psycho)* die victims. While not every female character is written the same way, there are many movies where the actions of women are very much framed within the male gaze and are semi-problematic in their execution. Therefore, while creating this piece, I set aside a few deliberate choices and examples of things I would not do, even if omitting them was losing some of the faithfulness to the genre.

First and foremost, I decided that I would not include anything related to sexual violence. I felt uncomfortable depicting any kind of allegory for rape or assault in this piece and chose to write a story in which the protagonist's situation has no relation to her gender identity. Though not related to gender specifically, I also decided that the main character would do nothing to somehow "deserve" what happens to her. The whole situation is brought on by completely mundane actions because I believe playing on the ordinary is much scarier when the protagonist is just trying to go about their daily life. Often there is a

correlation between helplessness and fetishization, and I decided deliberately that my main character would be seen as a dependable character in all sections. While she feels fear and expresses it, there is never a situation where her helplessness is seen as arousing. I decided that her outfit would remain similar throughout the piece, and that at no point would her body be explicitly sexualized. Even within movies such as *Poltergeist* and *Alien*, there are shots and outfits that are explicitly sexualized and have no real bearing on the plot. While she is buttoning her shirt in the opening scene as a reference to these troupes, I decided not to dwell on any sort of explicit content or try to replicate the male gaze often found within cinema. Though voyeurism and the idea of being watched is apparent in all eras of film, from *Psycho* to *The Descent*, while playing with this troupe via the peephole shot, I chose to do it in a way that did not explicitly sexualize the character. The idea of the "Final Girl" is defining of many films and remains true within my piece; while she is smart, brave, and determined to stay alive, she is able to exist this way without being sexualized or fetishized (Kawin 192).

For as long as we have existed, we have loved a good story. The awe-inspiring, mysterious, and resonant aspects of horror movies draw viewers in and create unforgettable experiences (Kawin 15). The fear we experience in response to horror fiction can be positive and is enjoyed by many (Blakemore 6). Regardless of the subgenre, we love the exploration of fear, the resilience of a hero, and the catharsis of seeing a villain meet their end. Horror films allow us to be in control of the emotions we experience; we are able to cross the line between life and death with our remotes and pause buttons (Kawin 17). As Stephen King once wrote, "We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones". My research regarding the different eras of horror (much of which was made up of watching

these movies for myself) has given me even more appreciation and understanding of the genre. While to date, only the first section of my narrative has been animated, I hope to continue my research and work on the project and someday bring it to completion. Through my study of animated aesthetics, I have gained a more specific knowledge of how to replicate the styles of different time periods through both animation and character design. Having spent so much time researching and studying horror and the details behind it, I can say confidently that this project has only increased my love for the genre and the stories that can be told.

WORKS AND FILMS CITED

Akira. Directed by Katsuhiro Otomo TMS Entertainment. 25 Dec. 1989.

Alien. Directed by Ridley Scott. 20th Century Fox. 22 June 1979.

A Quiet Place. Directed by John Krasinski. Paramount Pictures. 6 April 2018.

Blakemore, Erin. "Why We Love to Be Scared." *Jstory Daily*. 2 Sep. 2016, daily.jstor.org/why-we-love-to-be-scared

Carrie. Novel by Stephen King. Directed by Brian De Palma. Red Bank Films. 3 Nov. 1976.

Carroll, Noel. "The Nature of Horror." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 46, no. 1, 1987, pp. 51–59., doi:10.2307/431308.

Collins, Brian. "Collins' Crypt: On The Two Endings Of THE DESCENT." *Birth.Movies.Death.*, 10 Mar. 2015, birthmoviesdeath.com/2015/03/10/collins-crypt-on-the-two-endings-of-the-descent.

Devilman: The Birth. Author Go Nagai. Oh! Production Kodansha. 1 Nov. 1987.

Get Out. Directed by Jordan Peele. Blumhouse Productions. 24 Feb. 2017.

Kawin, Bruce F. *Horror and the Horror Film*. Anthem P., 2012.

Over the Garden Wall. Created by Patrick McHale. Cartoon Network. 3 Nov. 2014.

Paranormal Activity. Directed by Oren Peli. Blumhouse Productions. 25 Sept. 2009.

Poltergeist. Directed by Tobe Hooper. Produced by Steven Spielberg and Frank Marshall. SLM Production Group and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. 4 June 1982.

Psycho. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Shamley Productions. 16 June 1960.

Rosemary's Baby. Directed by Roman Polanski. Paramount Pictures. 12 June 1968.

Sailor Moon. Author Naoko Takeuchi. Toei Animation. 7 March 1992.

Stanko, Elizabeth A." Women, Crime, and Fear" *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science Vol. 539, Reactions to Crime and Violence.* May 1995.

Star vs the Forces of Evil. Created by Daron Nefcy. Disney XD. 18 Jan. 2015.

Steven Universe. Created by Rebecca Sugar. Cartoon Network. 21 May 2013.

The Birds. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Alfred J. Hitchcock Productions. 28 March 1963.

The Blair Witch Project. Directed by Eduardo Sánchez and Daniel Myrick. Haxan Films. 16 July 1999.

The Descent. Directed by Neil Marshall. Celador Films Northmen Productions. 10 July 2005 (UK). 6 August 2006 (US).

The Exorcist. Directed by William Friedkin. Hoya Productions Inc. 26 Dec. 1973.

The Thing. Directed by John Carpenter. The Turman-Foster Company. 25 June 1982.