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Scared Sheetless: *Beetlejuice* and the Ghost Comedy

Tim Burton's *Beetlejuice* (1988) has been described as "pie in your face existentialism" (David Breskin qtd. in Nathan). It is a story that deals with life after death but steers away from obvious sentimentality. As Burton has said, "[it's] hard to describe this [*Beetlejuice*] as just one thing. It has elements of horror but it's not really scary and it's funny but not really a comedy... *Beetlejuice* is one of those movies that just does not fit in *any* place" (*Tim Burton: Interviews*, 4). The film's treatment of its subject matter and reaction against classical Hollywood storytelling make *Beetlejuice* seem to exist outside the confines of genre and conventions, but this is not the case. *Beetlejuice* is a ghost comedy influenced by its predecessors in the subgenre, including *Topper* (dir. Norman McLeod, 1937), *Blithe Spirit* (David Lean, 1945), and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* (Joseph Mankiewicz, 1947). Each of these films utilizes conventions of the comedy and horror genres while developing the conventions of the ghost comedy subgenre.

Genre

Leger Grindon, a professor of film studies, writes, "A genre is a more precise set of conventions, including plots, characters, and settings, which portrays long-standing dramatic conflicts vital to the culture" (44). Author Torban Grodal defines genre as "a category or a set of categories used to describe some general features in works of fiction" (162). Some films clearly

fit into one genre, though many exhibit traits of multiple genres. Films from the Golden Era of Hollywood are especially likely to blur genres' boundaries as Professor Janet Staiger notes "the lack of [genre] purity broadened the film's appeal in terms both of the likely audiences who might enjoy the movie and of the film's originality" (213). *Topper*, *Blithe Spirit*, and *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* were all produced during this time when belonging to more than one genre was seen as a benefit and laid the groundwork for future movies that do not belong "any place" like *Beetlejuice*.

The horror genre features some of the most easily recognizable conventions of any genre. There is often suspense, screams, supernatural forces, and semblances of German Expressionism. Tim Burton had an affinity for classic horror films as a child: "Before I could walk I was watching these movies, and I was never afraid of them. Because, that was really the interesting thing—the movies...were meant to be frightening, but there was something about [Christopher Lee] and all those people—Boris Karloff in *Frankenstein* [1931]—coming through something" (qtd. in Lee, 80). Along these same lines, Professor Bruce F. Kawin argues that horror films "lead us through a structure that shows us something useful or worth understanding" (Kawin, 365). Horror defamiliarizes us with the world we know not only to give us a fright but to comment on some larger issue. In ghost comedies, this issue is likely death and/or the afterlife, though, as we shall see later, they also touch on some other subjects. In the ghost comedies I am focusing on, horror is "employed as a device for generating humorous situations" (Hoppenstand, 63). The films subvert expectations of the supernatural and horror to make light of death through comedy. These moments show that each of the movies relies, to some degree, on dark humor and irony to link its more horrific qualities to its comedic scenes.

The films are inspired by screwball and situation comedies in particular. Film historian and professor Wes Gehring describes five elements of screwball comedy: “abundant leisure time, childlike nature, urban life, apolitical outlook, and basic frustration” (qtd. in Hoppenstand, 62). In ghost comedies, the characters have plenty of leisure time because they are dead. They also tend to be apolitical and frustrated with remaining in between worlds. Childlike characters exist in all of the films as well, such as the playful Kerbys in *Topper* and the cartoon-ish Betelgeuse in *Beetlejuice*. The urban life aspect holds true in *Topper*, which takes place in New York, but rural, isolated life is actually an important factor in the other examples. Situation comedy, on the other hand, “thrives on aggressive, physical humor... We find humor in another’s misfortune” (Hoppenstand, 62). In ghost comedies, the misfortune is death and remaining on earth instead of proceeding to the afterlife. Humor then stems from the situation and the characters’ attempts to rectify it. However, my argument is not that these films are simply horror-comedies but that they are ghost comedies. Ghosts are the main part of their plots, and the ghosts do not turn out to be the result of a rational explanation as so often happens in haunted house comedies (such as *Hold That Ghost* (1941) wherein the “ghost” is revealed to have been a gangster hiding his loot).

Recurring Themes

There are certain themes and plot devices that appear throughout the films I am examining. One important feature of the ghost comedies is that their ghosts are relatively harmless; they are agents of humor, not horror. These limitations affect the plots of the films, provide comedic complications, and keep them from turning scary. Audiences can feel at ease when watching the movies, perhaps making them more receptive to the serious topic of death. Despite dealing with death, often a tragic subject, the films are funny, in part because their characters’ deaths are often humorous in and of themselves. By not depicting the deaths or

funerals of the characters, the movies avoid scenes that would change the tone from comedic to sad. Instead, they focus on life and their humorous imaginings of the afterlife. Because these films make death appear not-so-scary, their real conflict is not life versus death; it is often one way of life against another. Author Gary Hoppenstand calls it a conflict “between normalcy and aberration, between the mundane and the bizarre, between mortal man and supernatural force” (62). In each of these films, the dead teach the living how to live and suggest that death is not the worst of fates, not living life is.

The Ghost Comedies

Beetlejuice tells the story of Adam and Barbara Maitland, a happily married and recently deceased couple who must haunt their home for 125 years before they can move on to the afterlife. This would not be a problem except that the Deetz family moves in and begins renovating the Maitlands’ domestic paradise. The living then torment the dead, so to speak. While the story does flip the usual haunted house narrative, *Beetlejuice* is not the first film to make the undead funny. Most often, the Burton film has been compared to *Topper*, which follows the carefree George and Marion Kerby to the grave and beyond as they try to perform one good deed so that they may enter Heaven. Tim Burton, when talking about his film said, “The whole gist to me with them [the Maitlands] was that these are people that like being boring. It’s like that thing in old movies where the bland characters need to get goosed a little; they need to get their blood going a little bit” (*Burton on Burton*, 68). *Topper* is one such movie. The Kerbys liven up Cosmo Topper’s existence by turning it upside down, and Betelgeuse leads to a happy ending for both the Maitlands and the Deetzes by causing a little chaos.

Topper, being the first of our ghost comedies, sets up many of the previously mentioned conventions. In the movie, the ghosts of the Kerbys can only cause minimal mayhem because

moving and making themselves visible requires “ectoplasm,” of which they only have a limited amount. This prevents them from seeming dangerous, but it also keeps them from resuming their old lives. Furthermore, the Kerbys (and later Cosmo Topper) all die as a result of their own reckless driving, making their demises less pitiable. Only for a second does a wide shot linger over their lifeless bodies before their ghosts get up and dust themselves off. The audience then sees that they are okay; they’re just dead. The comedy can then continue on without a pause for grief. *Topper* begins the trend of contrasting lifestyles, too, by contrasting the Kerbys and the Toppers at the start of the movie. The Kerbys spend all night bar-hopping and end up catching a few hours of shut-eye in a convertible parked on the street. The Toppers, on the other hand, live their lives scheduled minute by minute. They eat the same thing every Tuesday, Wednesday, and so on. This is why when the Kerbys die, they decide to help Topper break free from his humdrum chains. They let him drink, dance, flirt, and do all the things Mrs. Topper would not let him. As a reaction, Mrs. Topper decides to let loose, too, in order to keep her husband happy.

Blithe Spirit is based on a Noel Coward play and keeps the same basic plot of Charles Condomine and his wife Ruth dealing with the ghostly presence of Charles’s first wife Elvira, whom they have accidentally brought back from the dead. Due to its sparse special effects budget, the film adaptation of *Blithe Spirit* had to get imaginative, or rather *unimaginative*, with its presentation of Elvira. The movie ended up following the stage production’s lead by dressing Elvira in gray clothes and makeup and shining a green spotlight on her to make her look ethereal. Similar to the other ghost comedies, *Blithe Spirit* uses dark humor to balance between the genres of horror and comedy. Near the beginning, Ruth questions Charles about his first wife, wondering if she was “of the earth, earthly.” “She is now anyhow,” retorts Charles. These kinds of off-handed remarks continue throughout the film, such as Madame Arcati saying to Charles,

“Someone [from the great beyond] wants to talk to you,” and Charles responding, “Tell them to leave a message.” When Elvira first emerges to haunt Charles, she explains that she cannot appear to Ruth because it “takes years of study,” a creative joke that later plays into *Beetlejuice*. But, unlike in the characters in *Topper*, the Condomines live outside of town, leaving Charles and his two wives to play out their domestic comedy undisturbed.

Like *Beetlejuice*, *Blithe Spirit* was compared to *Topper* upon its release. Indeed, it follows some of the same patterns *Topper* put forth. Elvira (and later Ruth and Charles) is restricted by only being visible to the person she is haunting. She cannot touch or speak to others, but she can move objects. In one scene, she attempts to hit Ruth over the head with a chair. When Ruth returns to haunt her, she chases her around the house. They are not completely harmless, but they are still limited in abilities. Though the deaths in *Topper* were not heartbreaking, the deaths in *Blithe Spirit* are downright comical. Elvira’s death, which occurred before the action of the story, was caused by a heart attack she suffered after laughing too hard at a BBC musical program on the radio. She, effectively, died laughing. Ruth dies in a typically madcap, sitcom scenario: Elvira tampers with the brakes in Charles’s car, but Ruth drives it before he can. Finally, Charles dies after making a grand speech about how, for the first time in his life, he is free from controlling women. His two wives then wreck his car, and he sulkily joins them as a specter. And again, we see a conflict between two different ways of living. In *Blithe Spirit*, the conflict is between the life Charles had, and is trying to regain, with Elvira and the life he has with Ruth. Charles at one point suggests they all three live under the same roof, but Ruth rejects the idea. She will not settle until Elvira is gone. After she dies, none of the characters rest until Madame Arcati sends them both back to the other side.

The Ghost and Mrs. Muir, adapted from a novel of the same name by R. A. Dick, is the tale of young widow Lucy Muir who moves into a house haunted by Captain Gregg and the relationship that grows between the two. *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* is the first of these films to have the living and the dead cohabit, but it combines conventions of horror and comedy just as the others do. Captain Gregg has a sinister laugh, and he first appears as a looming silhouette over Mrs. Muir's sleeping frame. It even includes dark and stormy nights as well as howling wind and fog that add to the atmosphere. After their first encounter, much of the film's comedy comes from their bickering. For example, when Lucy's in-laws arrive, she asks the captain to "decompose." "Dematerialize!" he quickly corrects her. Like the Condomines in *Blithe Spirit*, Captain Gregg and Mrs. Muir live outside of town, allowing their story to play out in privacy, away from people who might question Mrs. Muir's relationship with a ghost. What makes *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* exceptional is Bernhard Herrmann's score. The score matches the changing moods of the film, generating suspense in the beginning, adding a light note to humorous scenes, and culminating in a "sound of solitude, loneliness, and loss" that follows Captain Gregg's absence (Kovacs, 42). Its effect on the film reaches much further than the previous two movies' scores.

In *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, Captain Gregg is also limited, being able to touch only objects, though he can make himself seen and heard by anyone he chooses. It is because of his restrictions that the idea of Mrs. Muir sleeping in his bedroom comes across as funny, not immoral, in Hayes-Era Hollywood. We also spend no time grieving Captain Gregg as his death takes place off screen, as do the deaths of many other ghost comedy characters. He dies before the film begins by accidentally kicking over a gas heater in his sleep after shutting his windows to keep out the rain. When his maid testifies that he always slept with the windows open, his

death is ruled a suicide. This embarrasses Captain Gregg, who complains “How the devil would she know how I slept!” Because his death was so unexpected, he had no will and so haunts his house to protect it. Then comes Mrs. Muir, who is his seemingly his opposite. She is a demure woman, and he is a rough-and-tough sea captain. But, the differences between Captain Gregg and Mrs. Muir are not the problem; they are the answer to Mrs. Muir’s problematic relationship with society. According to author Lee Kovacs, “*The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* represents [a] shift that satirizes the manners, conventions, social attitudes, and scientific advances of late Victorian England” (31). Mrs. Muir has had to deal with others making decisions for her, such as her in-laws and the local realtor who tries to tell where is proper for a young woman to live. When the captain’s brutish manner and colorful language rub off on her, she can express herself to the world. She tells her in-laws to “shove off” and learns to live on her own.

Beetlejuice

In his film, Tim Burton wanted to “[react] against [the idea that] people expect to be taken care of when they die” (Burton qtd. in Nathan). Indeed, the Maitlands’ troubles really being after they die. The same is true of the other three films; they all counter our typical expectations of life after death. They tell the stories of ghosts who are not unaffected by the world of the living. Remaining on earth forces them to reexamine their own lives and the lives of those characters still living. *Beetlejuice* borrows from these films individually and continues the trends they set forth. Like the others, *Beetlejuice* “constantly refers to B-movie and horror film conventions, despite being a comedy,” which makes sense as it is an original script by horror writer Michael McDowell (Odell, 51). The hallway in the afterlife scenes epitomizes German Expressionism with its dim lighting, crooked doorways, and dizzying pattern. Even the Maitlands’ home, a house on a hill, harkens back to others seen in *Nosferatu* (1922),

Frankenstein (1931), and *House on Haunted Hill* (1958). *Beetlejuice* also has comedic moments with such zingers as “We’re very unhappy.” “What did you expect? You’re dead!” and “I’ve seen *The Exorcist* about a hundred and sixty-seven times, and it keeps getting funnier every single time I see it!” And despite checking some of Gehring’s boxes for a screwball comedy, the Maitlands live on the outskirts of town because they prefer to be alone together, which serves as a basis for trouble when the Deetzes move in.

Though it was made forty years after the previous ghost comedies, *Beetlejuice* follows their leads and embraces the same themes. Adam and Barbara are limited as ghosts: They can only be seen and heard by Lydia, who is, herself, “strange and unusual” like they now are. Without their restrictions, the film would have no plot as they could scare the Deetzes away immediately and never need to call on Betelgeuse for help. It also paves the way for a series of comedic moments in which the Maitlands make themselves look terrifying, but because they are invisible to Delia Deetz and her interior designer, the pair only reacts in disgust to the décor. Before this, the Maitlands, like the Kerbys and the Condomines, die in a car accident, though it is funnier than the others. They crash through a covered bridge, barely balancing on the edge. A little dog on a plank is the only thing keeping them from falling into the water. They look at the dog. The dog looks at them. Then the dog hops off of the plank, sending the Maitlands down. Next, we see Adam and Barbara return home soaking wet and startled. We are spared from seeing their actual drowning and can instead move on to their comical realization of what has happened. Again, death is not frightening, nor is it a source of conflict. The Maitlands’ main problem is that the people living in their house are not more like themselves. Delia Deetz redecorates the house, ruining everything the Maitlands loved. Charles Deetz jumps at the first chance to sacrifice a small town to financial gain. Professor Samuel Umland remarks, “The

ending of the film is all the more triumphant, not just because it is traditionally happy— the families end up ‘living’ under the same roof— but because it shows that these lifestyle choices are largely surface level” (39). The film suggests that we are not so different after all and that petty differences can be overcome. As Hoppentstand puts it, “the unknown thus molds itself to domestic conformity and romantic bliss.” (62). By putting the supernatural and horror beside comedy, the ghost comedies make the unknown of life after death familiar. They are a comfort to anyone who has lost a loved one.

Beetlejuice also parallels the other ghost comedies individually. *Beetlejuice* and *Topper* both feature happy couples who meet their ends in a car accident. After crossing to the other side, they realize they can be happy as long as they are together. In *Blithe Spirit*, Elvira has to study being an apparition. Likewise, the Maitlands have to practice the art of haunting and study their *Handbook for the Recently Deceased* before they can hope to scare away the Deetzes. Cinematographically speaking, the two films both make interesting use of green light. A green light is shined on the Maitlands in *Beetlejuice* during the séance scene, though it is intended to seem sinister and disorienting rather than simply supernatural as was the case with Elvira’s green spotlight. This brings us to *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, which likely seems like the least Burtonesque of the ghost comedies examined thus far, but that does not mean it bears no similarities to *Beetlejuice*. Just as *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* parodies life in Victorian England, *Beetlejuice* satirizes the gaudy and greedy culture of the 1980s via the Deetzes, the villains throughout most of the story. *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* is also the first of these films to have the living and the dead cohabitate, as is the happy ending of *Beetlejuice*. Additionally, the scores of the films help them blend genres. For *Beetlejuice*, Danny Elfman utilizes a driving beat that “emphasizes some

of the more cartoon aspects of the film.” His repeated use of “Day-O” creates humor in its juxtaposition to the horror elements and “places [the story’s] events anywhen” (Odell, 52).

Author Colin Odell writes, “What sets *Beetlejuice* apart...is the way it plays with conventions and expectations about the genre. Usually a haunted house film has the humans being haunted by ghosts, not the other way round” (51). *Beetlejuice* does not stop at haunted house comedies, however; it plays with the conventions of ghost comedies, too. The biggest difference is that, unlike in the three previous films, the audience gets to see at least some aspect of the afterlife. The Maitlands journey out to “Saturn” (where giant, Claymation sandworms pop up to snap at them) whenever they step out of their door, and they visit “the other side” when they go to see Juno, their caseworker. Perhaps the other films avoided depicting the afterlife because they did not want to subject themselves to people’s opinions about the afterlife. Conversely, Tim Burton shows an afterlife only he could imagine. He said, “If you’re talking about death, you could imagine it in a cruel and horrific way— either that or you could go for the *Heaven Can Wait* approach with clouds and the guy walking along surrounded by fog” (*Burton on Burton*, 58). His neither/nor version of the afterlife is a German-Expressionist slant on our reality and provides some of the most memorable scenes of the movie. The afterlife is a disorganized bureaucracy wherein people take numbers and sit in waiting rooms while they read magazines. The humor in the scene comes from these similarities to daily life as well as the differences: a sign reads “No Exit,” colorful characters look the way they did when they died (a man who died smoking is burnt to a crisp, a magician’s assistant is cut in half), and the office space is littered with thousands of discarded papers. Hoppenstand believes “such a life-after-death change is socially comforting because there is little change. The horror story frightens us by zeroing in on our fear of the *unknown*. In, the Ghost Comedy, there is no unknown” (69). So,

though Burton was bold enough to depict the hereafter, the earthiness of it prevents it from being a statement on what happens when we die.

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Tim Burton has often emphasized the importance of having a connection with his films. He once said, “what I get out of fairy tales, folk tales, myths, are these very extreme images, very heightened, but with some foundation to them. It means something, but is fairly abstract and if it’s going to connect with you it will connect with you, and if it’s not then it won’t” (*Burton on Burton*, 94). The themes of life and death in *Beetlejuice* and the other ghost comedies ought to connect with everyone, as the audience is (presumably) alive and will (presumably) die someday. Many have also dealt with the death of a loved one. Richard Stiner wrote that supernatural romance is a “therapeutic genre...that seeks to counteract moods of despair in the face of tragic loss,” but the same could be said of ghost comedies (181). In them, “[death] is ridiculed, and life happily triumphs” (Hoppenstand, 63), even when death seems like the better route. In *Topper* and *Beetlejuice*, characters want to join their friends in the afterlife but find happiness in living life instead. In *Blithe Spirit*, Charles’s demise at the hands of his wives is a comical ending but not a happy one for him. *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* may be an exception at first glance as its happy ending is Captain Gregg and Mrs. Muir walking into the great unknown after her passing, but that ending only comes after Mrs. Muir lives a long life on her own, seeing her daughter and granddaughter achieve the happiness in life she never had. Though ghost comedies make death funny, they all emphasize that it is not a solution. In the words of Captain Gregg, “You must make your own life amongst the living and, whether you meet fair winds or foul, find your own way to harbor in the end.”

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