THE REEL THING

IN THE DARK.

TT21

ISSUE 7

EDITOR'S NOTE

This last year has felt like an extended jumpscare – a moment of perpetual terror before the monster reemerges; 2020 was spent half-hiding our eyes from the screen as the coronavirus villain reared its head again and again, with brief moments of tense reprieve before it returned in force. There is an extended scene in *Get Out* (2017), in which the protagonist's girlfriend desperately searches for her keys to release Chris from the house – minutes of frantic searching suddenly stops, her entire expression changing as she calmly holds the lost keys to her face: "You know I can't give you the keys." That moment of realisation, the drop in the stomach as you realise that everything you've been told is a lie, is how negotiating this year has felt. A government that consistently flips, twists, inverts, shocks and terrorises with its incompetence has taken inspiration from horror: we have lived in paranoia over the monster rearing its head again.

And we've missed the safety cinema grants us, that feeling in the dark we subject ourselves to, of eye-popping images and thrilling sound effects. Of knowing that the only way to see the story unfold is to wait patiently with our eyes open, without the option to fast forward. That same darkness, while producing calmness and horror alike on screen, shields us from reality, including the blender noise from the kitchen that has accompanied our watching experience in the living room ever since the onset of the pandemic.

Ultimately, a dark cinema is perhaps comparable to a black hole: it's magnetic and enthralling, trapping our attention in the same infinite space with sounds and light.

EDITORS: Eleanor Zhang
Millie Butler Gallie
Eliott Rose

WRITERS: Mia Sorenti
Jonathon Honnor
Chris Poole
Sophie Tucker

DESIGNER: Harry Andrews

DIRECTOR: Nina Jurković

GRIEF ON HEREDITARY & DON'T LOOK DOWN

'HERR, UNSER HERRSCHER': THE FEAR OF THE LORD IN (SOME) A24 HORROR FILMS

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT: THE ANATOMY OF A JUMPSCARE

9 DEATH, LAUGHTER AND THE SLASHER ICON

GRIEF IN HEREDITARY & DON'T LOOK NOW

Hereditary (2018) has been lauded by critics as one of the most terrifying films of the century. The film opens with the Graham family dealing with the loss of their matriarch. Only 30 minutes in, the narrative is violently thrown on its head with the brutal death of Charlie, the family's youngest child. Consumed by the loss of her daughter, Annie (Toni Collette) descends into the supernatural, desperate to connect in some way with the afterlife. The final half hour of the film reveals after a grisly series of events the sinister, demonic cult that has been present in the family all along.

Supernatural elements aside, *Hereditary*'s fuel is grief. While Charlie's brother Peter (Alex Wolff) self-medicates with weed and distances himself from his mother, Gabriel Byrne portrays a grieving father struggling to keep his family from fragmenting. Charlie's death is the catalyst for Peter's eventual submission to the demon Paimon. In fact, Charlie is resurrected through the union of Peter and Paimon. Whilst demonic cults are not something many can relate to, holding a part of the deceased in each other is and the emotional intensity of the film is recognisable for anyone who has dealt with the trauma of loss.

The frightening part of their story comes from the fact that Annie's actions are scarily recognisable: irrationality, desperation, bargaining. Her initial choices are entirely justifiable in the context of grief. Surprisingly, the scene that stayed with me more than any of the gore or paranormal imagery was the moment Annie is confronted by Charlie's death. We watch from the corridor as she screams into the carpet *"Oh God! It hurts too much! I just want to die"*. Her pain is animalistic, she writhes on the ground, the noises coming out of her sound almost inhuman. The camera pans away, and we feel as though this was not something we were meant to see.

But *Hereditary* is by no means the only film of this genre to explore loss. Grief lends itself well to horror – people need to relate to the fear that they see on screen and grief is something that most people have experienced or can at least recognise the magnitude of.

Based on the Daphne du Maurier novella of the same name, *Don't Look Now* (1973) dissects the journey of a grieving couple. After their daughter Christine is killed in an accidental drowning, John (Donald Sutherland) and Laura Baxter (Julie Christie) travel to Venice for work, where they encounter a blind psychic who not only claims to see their deceased daughter, but also warns John that his life is in danger. Like Annie in Hereditary, Laura is initially desperate to cling to Christine's presence in her life.
Like *Hereditary*, *Don't Look Now* is shrouded in fatalism, not only in the figure of the psychic that prophesises John's demise, but also stylistically. Roeg unfolds the story in a kaleidoscope of melancholic imagery. Venice's labyrinth of alleyways and waterways are haunting even before any supernatural elements are revealed. Alongside this, the fragmented storyline narrates the family's journey through grief with an unusual realism and intimacy for the genre. Roeg subverts the linearity of time, determining John's fate well before we are even aware of it. It's an accurate metaphor for grief – there's no turning back the clock, no control of the outcome. Ultimately, the loss of Christine leads to John's death, and to Laura's own tragic fate.

The common thread in these films is that the true horror lies within the family. The loss of a child is one of the most truly terrifying, visceral experiences that a family can go through. The psychics, cults and premonitions in these films are simply manifestations of the innate horror of the storylines. In general, horror films act on pre-existing fears, either individually or collectively. It's no secret that a movie like *Godzilla (Gojira)* (1954) was born out of post nuclear fear in Japan, or that *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) – often heralded as the first true horror film - was a reflection on Germany's post-WW1 economic crisis. Instead of acting on a collective social anxiety, grief thematically appeals to a universal fear between individuals. Horror allows its viewers catharsis and the freedom to examine their own personal fears, to explore their fragility, and this is especially true when death is a part of someone's life. Loss will always be terrifying, and so cinema will always find a way to reimage this fear into new stories.

By Sophie Tucker

'HERR, UNSER HERRSCHER': THE FEAR OF THE LORD IN (SOME) A24 HORROR FILMS

(Spoiler warning for Midsommar, Hereditary, The Killing of a Sacred Deer)

Horror occurs at realising one is being controlled by unintelligible forces. Aristotle said that, in tragedy, it is the discovery of a previously unknown element that will evoke pity or fear in the audience[1]. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, horror comes from the discovery that the Delphic Oracle's prophecy has already been fulfilled, despite Oedipus' drastic efforts to combat it: it is a tragedy in the pluperfect tense. Whatever Oedipus chooses to do over the course of the play's action has no effect. In his hubris he claims to have control over Thebes, yet he does not have control over his own life. Control is reserved for fate – specifically, the gods.

Tragedies usually centre around divine control, or ritualistically, the relationship between the human and the divine. Oedipus may be the scapegoat punished by Athens for its collective guilt,[2] an endlessly repeated blood sacrifice as communal catharsis. This aspect of community is especially important in Nietzsche's conception of tragedy: the collective is the Dionysian element, contrasted with the Apollonian *principium individuationis*. We watch tragedy collectively to feel uplifted from the Apollonian delusion that we have individual agency. Tragedy has its roots in the Dionysia, the Athenian festival dedicated to Dionysus. The first Greek tragedy according to Athenian tradition was called 'Pentheus', presumably portraying the same plot as Euripides' *The Bacchae*: Pentheus is brutally ripped apart by the Maenads and his own mother for his impiety towards Dionysus.

Modern horror movies work in the same way as tragedy. Viewed collectively, we are forced to watch by those around us, losing our agency to simply leave the theatre in fright. Even on our own, still we do not have 'agency'; we are forced to watch as a means of cathartic completion. It is relieving to overcome what might scare us, and more anxiety-inducing to leave a horror movie unfinished. When alone, we become (especially in the internet age) part of the movie's collective and 'captive' audience. *Climax* (2018) noticeably plays upon the idea of a Dionysian collective: there is no main character, only a troupe of dancers. Each dancer is introduced in individual interviews, but in the dancing (another Dionysian element) they become one. They are drawn into a hysterical frenzy of sex and violence by a spiked bowl of sangria, just as the raving Maenads are intoxicated by wine. The audience too is caught in the dance, in a Bacchanalian orgy of pleasure-seeking and self-destructing. No-one knows, however, who spiked the sangria, and we are left powerless against the supernatural.

Dionysus is especially terrifying as a pagan figure, who therefore cannot be fully comprehended within Western spiritual categories. Paganism is the incomprehensible unknown in *Midsommar* (2019) and its spiritual forbearer, *The Wicker Man* (1973). In both movies, the audience are given the perspective of the Christian visitor to an unknown pagan land. *Midsommar*, the tourists are horrified by rituals that display the Norse/Germanic warrior code, such as the noble suicide of the elders, violating the Christian ethic that death should occur naturally. In *The Wicker Man*, the Christian, prudish protagonist is horrified by free expression of sexuality. Like Oedipus, the Christian visitors are blind to the fact they have been chosen for sacrifice. They are also caught in a dance, but it is the dance of the May Queen. They take part in spring festivals, Bakhtinian 'carnivals' which reverse traditional values, alongside the Christian conception of the world. In traditional symbology it is Christianity associated with light and paganism with darkness; in *Midsommar* there is always daylight in the pagan world, whereas the brief scene we are shown of the Western world is only a stormy darkness. The 'fabulous, formless darkness'[3], as Yeats claims, belongs to Christianity. Some modern horror movies do the reverse – they do not present the pagan unknown but make us fear the darkness of Christianity. *mother!* (2017) notably uses Biblical allegory to show humanity's iniquity and its destruction of the environment, but also the fear of a seemingly inept God whose motives are incomprehensible. Ari Aster's *Hereditary* (2018) may be the Christian companion to his later pagan *Midsommar*. It takes place not in the light, but in the dark. The final shot shows the son having 'inherited' his possession by, and sacrifice to, the Demon King Paimon – but one may be reminded here of Christ the King, also a sacrificial lamb.

The Killing of a Sacred Deer (2017) uses the fear of the sacrifice of the Son. The structure is loosely based upon Euripides' play *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Yet into this pagan structure, through the figure of Martin and the recurring number three, the movie infuses Christian elements. The 'antagonist' Martin is terrifying because he has supernatural powers that are inexplicable to the sheer rationality of modern medicine. The 'protagonist' Dr Murphy cannot kill Martin, because, like Christ, Martin would be victorious in death. Martin's power is proven by a series of horrible ailments on Steven's family, reminiscent of the plagues in *Exodus*. To end the plagues, Steven must irrationally sacrifice one member of his family. He eventually kills his son at random through a blindfolded ritual: becoming a signifier of the ultimate human blindness against the supernatural. To not only, as Kierkegaard says, 'learn how to be horrified at the monstrous paradox'[4] of Abraham and Isaac, but then to go further and carry out that irrational leap of faith into the absurd – that is only the beginning of wisdom.

By Jonathon Honnor

[1] Aristotle. *Poetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), (p. 30)

[2] Fagles, Robert. in *Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays*, (London: Penguin, 1984), (p. 134)

[3] Yeats, W. B. *Collected Plays*, (London: Macmillan, 1934), (p. 594)

[4] Kierkegaard, Søren. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alistair Hannay (London: Folio, 2014), (p. 51)

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT: THE ANATOMY OF A JUMPSCARE

The jumpscare epitomises my love/hate relationship with horror films. I am such a wimp that one spook will leave me on edge for days, but I love *how* filmmakers construct ways to scare us, and the clever ways horror films can tease out interesting bits of the human psyche. Jumpscares certainly feel psychologically cheap, and have received much criticism in the past as a result — it is easy to write lazily when anything that leaps out of the dark with a loud noise will make our stupid animal brains go "FIGHT/FREEZE/HIDE BEHIND THE SOFA."

The startle reflex is, unsurprisingly, a biological safety mechanism to help us to avoid being eaten. A healthy concoction of tension and the fear of the unknown, punctuated with a sudden burst of sound and motion, helps trigger such a response and release adrenalin that keeps horror viewers coming back for more.

Tropes can easily become cliché; the 'killer returns' scare became a hallmark of 80s slashers, as filmmakers scrambled to copy the 'lake scene' featured in the 1980 original *Friday the 13th* (where Jason's rotting body bursts from the lake) until it became an expected feature. Others such as the 'mirror scare' (where a character closes a medicine cabinet or mirrored door to reveal a monster just behind them) have similarly become almost meme-worthy: when the exact formulation of the scare is so expected, its effectiveness is reduced.

However, horror creators are constantly formulating fresh and fun ways to make us jump out of our seats. Inventive filmmakers are cognizant of audience expectations, and sometimes work to subvert or reinvent them. When writing the script for *Sinister (2012)*, C Robert Cargill claims to have "composed a list of all the tropes and clichés that appear in all the mainstream horror movies that people are tired of." The audience's expectations could be used and subverted - at times in *Sinister*, filmmakers used tropes to suggest the camera lens's perspective was going in one direction — only to hit viewers from a different angle altogether.

The following are three typical components adopted in jumpscares:

SCORE

If you've ever watched a horror film on mute, you'll understand how powerful sound is in eliciting specific reactions. The score is central to building tension before the jumpscare itself: when the audience receives certain audio cues, we're aware something bad is about to happen. Nonlinear or distressing sounds can greatly add to a movie's atmosphere, whilst high-pitched squeals or crescendoing strings often build tension by inciting chaos. Even silence, the absence of sound, is effective in moments of tension. In addition, sound designers can use 'infrasounds' with such a low frequency, they aren't heard by human ears but are still detectable to the body, creating sensations of oscillation, shivering, and prickling. The jumpscare itself is accompanied by a sudden, loud noise which is central to triggering the startle reflex; according to Christian Grillon, a psychophysiologist who studies fear and anxiety at the National Institute of Mental Health.

VISUAL: SEEING AND UNSEEING

A central part of traditional jumpscares is the removal of a perceptual safety barrier between you and the film. Visual devices help align your perspective with that of the protagonist, enabling you to experience the danger they are facing as an immediate threat. This often involves not seeing the antagonist until the character does — as an audience, we know something startling is about to happen, but like the character in peril, we won't know for sure until it leaps out at us. This explains why 'peephole scares' (when a character is looking through a peephole, a crack in a door etc.) are so effective, as this POV shot limits our line of sight and thus heightens the drama of the revelation. In a similar vein, darkness, whether at night or in a shadowy attic, interferes with the audience's visual agency and keeps them on high alert.

ANTICIPATION

In isolation, the loud noise or fast motion of a jumpscare can easily startle us, but the suspense leading to it is what actually makes it effective. Visual and audio cues alert us to the possibility that danger is looming, and as we watch the protagonist fumble around in the dark basement, waiting for what will emerge from the shadows, we increase the impact of the eventual shock. Grillon explains how when you're hypervigilant, you activate your amygdala, the part of your brain that deals with fear and anxiety. The amygdala also happens to be the end of the direct neural connection involved in the startle pathway, which means when the jumpscare happens, the response is exacerbated. In Grillon's studies, the startle reflex was increased by 100 to 300 percent if the subjects are first made anxious. Thus jumpscares strike the perfect psychological balance between the known and the unknown, the expected and the unexpected, and are guaranteed to trigger a biological fear response every time.

By Mia Sorenti

DEATH, LAUGHTER & THE SLASHER ICON

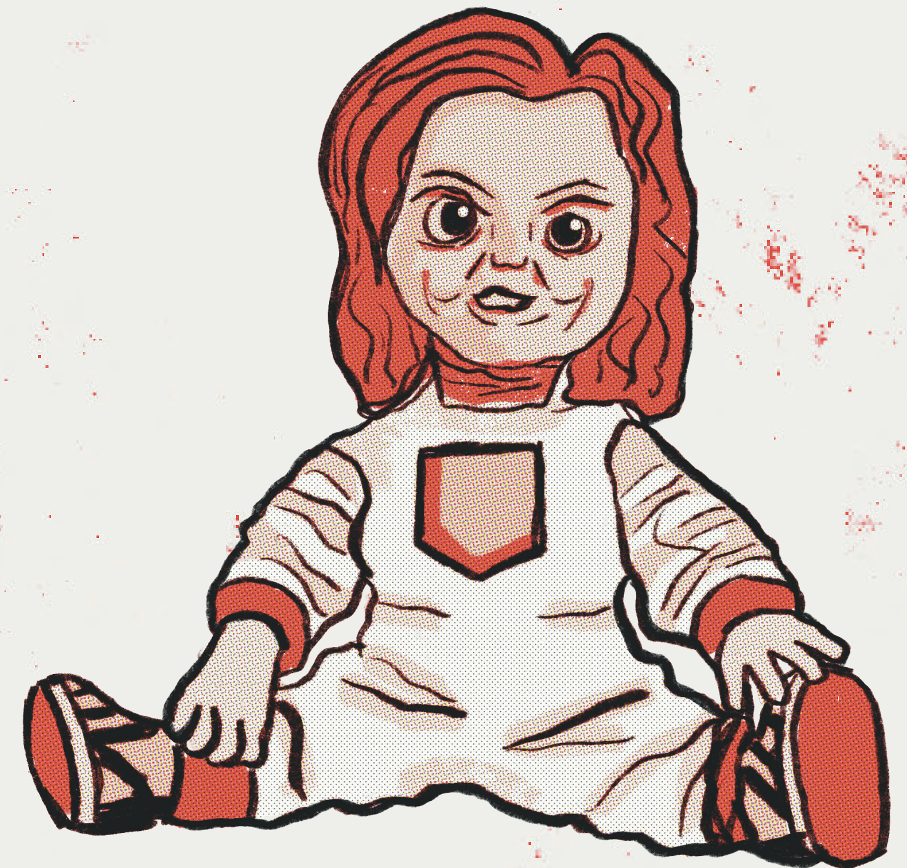
Today's horror fans defending the genre will cite two contemporary darlings: Peele and Aster. This duo is routinely evoked as proof that horror can reconcile commercial success with artistry and 'serious' themes. Both directors reveal a curious fraternity between horror and comedy: the former a sketch comedy graduate whose comedic output contains omens of horror. Peele's lauded explorations of race and class find precedent in his sketch duo, and comedy seamlessly finds its way quite into *Get Out*. Aster, after back-to-back box hits with *Hereditary* and *Midsommar*, has since proposed a four-hour 'nightmare comedy', a prospect that chills as much as his horror. Our first instinct might be that comedy and horror are distinct; but if we look further, both have long been bedfellows and genre-hopping is not the massive leap they might initially seem.

The aptly named "Golden Age" of the slasher flick (1978-84) demonstrates this common ground. The success of *Halloween* spurred a goldrush among Hollywood executives: the genre's minimalist premise— attractive teens butchered by a hulking killer—meant scripts could be hashed out in weeks and filming completed on shoestring budgets. Slasher's double-punch of nudity and gore was enough to entice hordes of teenage viewers, especially when the studio landed the coveted PG-13 rating - minimal investment, maximal reach. While facilitating ingenuity, innovation, and the 'serious' themes later picked up in Aster and Peele, it was easy to put out cheap and nasty hits.

The real difficulty was standing out in this rush. Executive eyes that flashed dollar-signs set their sights on sequels, merchandise and a seat in public consciousness. Their killer was to be *the* suburban boogeyman. And so there opens an advertorial battleground, in which the branding of the slasher himself attains maximum attention. Some tentative efforts build identity around the weapon: chainsaw, drill, hammer. Elsewhere, the mask endures in the memory. But the problem of generic output endures; the killer remains the same even if the mask changes. The generic template of silent pursuit renders these villains devoid of personality, reduced only to intent. Desensitization follows the goldrush, and the slasher grows dull. How else, then, to stand out?

As the genre establishes itself, filmmakers begin to subvert, interrogate, and invert its rules. This is where the comedic killer emerges. Whilst horror icons, slasher killers are inherently ridiculous - certainly representing a visual hyperbole found in slapstick. Rather than resist this parallel, filmmakers like Wes Craven and Tom Holland embrace this comedic potential with *Scream* and *Child's Play* - films which lean further towards the comedic than their predecessors. *Scream* does this with a metanarrative humour only possible where a genre's cliches are well-known, where there is a rigid convention to be defied. Chucky in *Child's Play*, meanwhile, reconciles the scary with silly, exploiting the natural conflation of play and fear—a relic of childhood, where many of our fears originate—to create an icon marked by gratuitous potty mouth instead of stoic silence. Gone are Voorhees' blue boiler suits: Chucky stalks in red-and-blue overalls, squawking misplaced profanities. The film's plot hinges on adult inability to fear the doll; an appearance of innocence, not malevolence, is exploited for tension and suspense.

Humour reinvigorated the stale slasher formula. Yet it comes as a consequence of the genre's financial success, especially in franchisable slashers. Krueger, Chucky and Voorhees share a trajectory towards increasingly comedic roles as they are churned out in sequel after sequel. In part this is natural: comedy is one form of innovation to maintain viewer interest. But it also represents a paradox in the genre's success. As an icon gains public attention, merchandise side-industries spread its image far and wide. Sequels contribute to this proliferation, every year releasing new films to chase new batches of teens. This habituates the public to the slasher, dulling its ability to capture the imagination. The slasher, who thrives on lingering on the periphery, is reproduced a million times over in banal tat. Mystique and unknowability die when its figures are converted into lunchboxes and rubber Halloween masks. Thus, a successful slasher icon cuts off its own efficacy, and sequels offer diminishing returns on its ability to terrify. This is a general issue in horror where reveals often denote anticlimax. Like a good joke, a good jump-scare works only with anticipation: the reveal delivers a burst of terror, but this in turn subsides. As soon as the slasher emerges onscreen, he dissipates the tension which announced him. To *see* ruptures the ability to *imagine*. The slashers who capture imagination—Chucky, Krueger, and Vorhees—grow less scary as they emerge from the shadows into an oversaturated light.



Again, filmmakers chose not to resist but to lean in. Krueger and Chucky in sequels do not try to recapture that first moment of terror, but rather veer into self-parody, perpetually uttering puns and profanities as they slice through their victims. They are defeated, too, in film after film: can a slasher remain straight-faced after they're cut down by inept teens for the third time running? Comedy becomes *the* go-to tool for navigating the sequel slasher's failure to intimidate. This sensibility does allow for ridiculous premises otherwise unachievable: in comedy sequels Jason Voorhees haunts a space station 400 years in the future. This inspires the next generation of outright absurd villains: the inventors of Gingerdead Man, Killer Bong, and Killer Condom perhaps felt emboldened by old-school icons' descent into laughter alongside slaughter. With the sister goldrush of teen comedy flicks, whose protagonists were as vapid and sex-crazed, the comedy-horror union seemed a natural means of justifying another go-round. But as much as these films amuse, there is depressing perversion in seeing the same cadaver perpetually revived, sent out to capture a few extra million dollars. The autocannibalism of this goldrush converts its killer klowns to Pagliaccis, whose ridicule has not only a pathos but the sour taste of corporate greed. To watch symbols rot on camera is just as scary as it is funny.

The DNA of horror and comedy contain many similarities. Hyperbole, tension and flexibility for escapism... the parallels are manifold. What is most interesting is the extent comedy relates to the external factors of commercial Hollywood, its drive to excuse its onslaught of sequels with knowing winks and self-parodying iconography. Unable to profit from prose's fog, where killers are never obliged to take form, film *shows*, and in doing so robs the killer of its sting. It is here that the slasher hangs up his weaponry and reaches for prop gags and wordplay. This is why I'm intrigued by the Aster's future comedic output, eager to see parallels through his transition to Peele's genre of origin. Until then, let's hope no one announces *Hereditary 2: Space Paimon*, else we might be left in stitches.

By Chris Poole

Things to watch:

•*Censor* (2021) trailer

https://youtu.be/KRrhXjH1M70

Looks incredibly unique, centering on 1980s video censorship and the blurring between reality and fiction. Especially pertinent in the age of fake news et al.

•*The Night House* (2021)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Tshycci2ZA

Well received at the Sundance film festival, lots of hype and good reviews.

•*Candyman* (2021)

https://youtu.be/tlwzuZ9kOQU

Produced by Jordan Peele, this should be incredible (!)

•*His House* (2020), on Netflix

An incredible horror using the apparatus of the UK immigration system to explore racial identity, xenophobia and the banality of evil bureaucracy.

•*Under the Shadow* (2016), on Netflix

A disturbing horror set amidst the Iran-Iraq conflict, it successfully blurs genres between horror, history, family tensions and international relations.

•*They Live* (1988), on Netflix

A John Carpenter thriller/horror classic that dissects American

Things to read:

•*Dim the Lights: the spell of watching films in the dark*

https://www.bfi.org.uk/features/dim-lights-spell-watching-films-dark

An interesting exploration of the social connotations of watching films in the dark.

•*Cruel Britannia: six British 'video nasties'*

https://www.bfi.org.uk/sight-and-sound/lists/six-british-video-nasties

•Does the Dog Die: Crowdsourced emotional spoilers

https://www.doesthedogdie.com

Things to listen to:

•*Horror Queers* (2019-present), on Spotify

https://open.spotify.com/show/5uqHoSoZ0JOJOqrNE0bBy2?si=UTkS2OFMSoSWGZR-O_JrtQ

Weekly podcast on queer horror.