

DISSERTATION

LIVE-MEDIATED HORROR ENTERTAINMENT:
THE CULTURE, HISTORY, INDUSTRY, AND EXPERIENCE OF
HAUNTED ATTRACTIONS

Submitted by

Riana Slyter

Department of Communication Studies

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Doctoral Committee:

Advisor: David Scott Diffrient

Kit Hughes

Evan Elkins

Ryan Claycomb

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ABSTRACT

LIVE-MEDIATED HORROR ENTERTAINMENT: THE CULTURE, HISTORY, INDUSTRY, AND EXPERIENCE OF HAUNTED ATTRACTIONS

Haunted attractions are as much thrill-based amusements as they are complex, deliberately designed spaces where fear, technology, labor, and performance converge. This dissertation examines the industrial and affective dimensions of live-mediated horror entertainment (LMHE), a term I use to describe immersive horror experiences such as haunted attractions, immersive theater, and interactive horror events. While “liveness” in media theory has often implied mediation, the term LMHE emphasizes how these experiences merge co-presence and embodied performance with mediated aesthetics and narrative structures, highlighting how these experiences extend beyond broadcast liveness or theatrical co-presence by foregrounding embodied participation, mediated storytelling, and labor-intensive infrastructure. Rather than relying solely on “liveness” or “immersion,” LMHE highlights how horror depends on visceral immediacy, technological mediation, and intensive affective labor to create its impact. Framed in this way, haunts reveal how fear is produced through industrial practices that require physical, emotional, and economic investments from both workers and audiences. It also underscores how horror’s physical and emotional intensities enable negotiations around identity, social tension, and collective anxiety. Through LMHE, I argue that

haunted attractions act as ideological texts that expose the contradictions of contemporary life, where fear and spectacle are tightly bound to the labor, aesthetics, and infrastructures that produce them.

Haunted attractions remain critically understudied within performance and media scholarship, despite their cultural ubiquity and economic success. Haunts are spaces made legible through their relationship with the horror genre, which heightens and exaggerates the very tensions, paradoxes, and anxieties embedded in contemporary life. By staging fear, horror enables a visceral confrontation with themes often repressed in other entertainment forms: death, trauma, monstrosity, and social breakdown. As a genre defined by its affective charge and bodily address, horror is well suited to illuminate the ideological work of LMHE. These attractions stage real-life ideological struggles in exaggerated form, often with minimal subtlety, making them powerful cultural texts that mirror and manipulate collective fears.

Methodologically, this dissertation integrates empirical fieldwork and affective observation with theoretical analysis grounded in performance studies, media theory, and cultural criticism. Site visits, interviews with industry professionals, and immersive encounters provide the empirical foundation. This empirical work is complemented by a historical and theoretical framework that situates haunted attractions within a broader hauntological lineage, allowing for a circular reading of how the past echoes through affective and industrial forms. The historical emergence of haunted attractions is traced through a genealogical hauntology, a recursive framework that shows how past trauma resurfaces through entertainment, echoing across time in aesthetic, thematic, and economic form. This hauntological lens reveals how haunted attractions recycle and recode societal anxieties, particularly in the wake of historical ruptures, such as the

post-World War II era, the 9/11 attacks, and the COVID-19 pandemic. I analyze how haunted attractions restage affective rituals of haunting, through which audiences confront both real and symbolic fears.

Throughout, the dissertation foregrounds the role of labor, technological mediation, and performance aesthetics, emphasizing how affect is not only experienced but also produced and regulated through behind-the-scenes infrastructures. Interstitial narratives and site-specific disruptions—such as Althusserian moments of hailing, recursive hauntings, deliberately disorienting dramaturgies, and improvisational play—are shown to call audiences into new subject positions, blurring the line between spectator and participant. The dissertation proceeds in four chapters: (1) a genealogical history of haunted attractions and their relationship to cultural trauma; (2) an analysis of immersive design and genre hybridity; (3) a look at the industrial logics and economic tensions that shape haunt production; and (4) an exploration of labor, performance, and embodiment, focusing on how monstrosity is enacted and internalized. Reinforcing the claim that haunted attractions serve as ideological texts, my project makes legible the affective, ideological, and infrastructural work performed by LMHE. Haunted attractions offer a potent site for examining how contemporary culture processes fear, trauma, and control, and how horror functions as a vehicle to render social paradoxes grotesquely visible. While they may initially be dismissed as mere entertainment, haunted attractions serve as a mirror to the ideological hauntings that permeate everyday life, offering a critical lens through which to understand media, performance, and affect in a fear-driven world.

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One morning, during yet another conversation about my dissertation, my partner, Tof, said, “I know exactly why you chose your topic.” With the straightest face and deadpan delivery, he continued, “You are haunted by your past.” I was stunned by the pithy statement; it felt like a line straight out of a slasher film. In fact, it echoed one from *Haunt* (2019), where the protagonist says, “I grew up in a haunted house.” Maybe it’s a little cheesy, but maybe it’s also a little true. I am, in many ways, haunted by the familial histories that shaped me, and by the quiet presences of those no longer here. That lineage includes not only a love of people that resonates in my research but also an ethic of care within my teaching.

My paternal grandparents were both dedicated educators, and I often heard my Grandma Hazel speak with genuine affection about her students. Growing up with that influence, I now find myself echoing those same sentiments after teaching, surprised at just how much joy and meaning it has brought into my life. Over the past four years of teaching at CSU, I have had the pleasure of working with many thoughtful, creative, and generous students. I am especially grateful to my Fall 2024 *Gender and Genre in the Horror Film* course, where I had the privilege of teaching some of the most exceptional students I have ever encountered. It had long been a dream of mine to teach that course, and I am thankful to the Department of Communication Studies for helping make it a reality. I often reminisce about that class as it reinvigorated my love of teaching and reminded me why I care about this subject. Since then, my horror classes have continually shown me that horror and haunts are not just about fear; they are about community, compassion, and even love.

Teaching reminded me that the most meaningful work often occurs through relationships, and I would not have completed this dissertation without the love and support of my family and friends. I am especially grateful to my partner's family, who live nearby and were a constant source of help during my time at CSU. Parker Tipton, thank you for helping us move in and out of our space and for saying, upon first arrival, "This would be a great place to write a dissertation!" Turns out, you were right. I am thankful to Paula Chapin, Charlie Chapin, Cathy Chapin, Gary Shanahan, Bob Chapin, and Wendell Dyck for always being in my corner, supporting my dark interests and believing in me from the start.

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alive, sometimes a genuine concern during dissertation season. You were exactly the kind of support system I needed through the most grueling stretches. You are the kind of people who would drop everything to attend a haunted attraction, sit with me in quiet frustration over a beer, or celebrate with ice cream. It takes a special kind of person to laugh, cry, and scream with you through it all, and I will miss the community we built together. Lastly, I would like to thank Kiah Bennett, who helped me find my footing during that daunting transition into graduate school. You took me under your wing when I needed it most and have never stopped showing up with encouragement. Each of you has shaped this journey in ways that go far beyond words. Thank you for your care, your conversations, and your unwavering presence.

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Of course, no haunted attraction would be complete without the dedicated and passionate people working behind the scenes, and this project is no exception. I extend my deepest thanks to the local scare crews in Colorado, especially those at *Terror in the Corn* and the welcoming community at *Fear Factory*. Your creativity and commitment to the art of haunting inspired this dissertation in ways I could not have anticipated. I am especially grateful to the managers, operators, and scare actors who welcomed me into your dark worlds and shared your stories so generously. These conversations were invaluable to my research and provided some of the most meaningful moments, leaving me more curious, inspired, and connected. Horror and haunted

attractions, at their core, revolve around fear, but not just the immediate, surface-level reaction. Fear is the spark that ignites these experiences, yet it is what we do with that fear that reveals something far more profound about ourselves and our communities. We can turn away, close the door, or refuse to look. Or we can choose to lean in, with curiosity, compassion, and even love. The people I met through this work, often outsiders to mainstream perceptions, embodied this choice. Their thoughtfulness and self-awareness demonstrated how facing fear can open rather than harden us.

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DEDICATION

To my Teta Renee and Jiddo Marcel Fairhart,

*Though you never saw me in the classroom, your warmth, care, and generosity endure,
shaping how I learn, teach, and live.*

Your legacies gently haunt this work.

I miss you every day.

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INTRODUCTION – MANUFACTURING SCARES:

A Critical Analysis of Haunted Attractions as Live-Mediated Horror Entertainment

Beneath the radiant California sun, the bustling theme park pulses with vibrant energy. A kaleidoscope of joyful scenes transpires as families indulge in freshly baked churros, siblings smile hand in hand, and friends chatter animatedly while waiting in long lines. They all seem to be enjoying their time in what is known as “the happiest place on earth”—or so it appears. The lively snapshots fade as I approach the foreboding iron gates of a Victorian white mansion. Shadows cast over me, hinting at an ominous presence and something more sinister lying within. Anticipation hangs heavy in the air as I weave through the serpentine queue lines, passing the tombstones on the front lawn. A potent mix of excitement and nervousness swirls in my throat as I step into the haunted house. Momentarily, I am blinded by the transition from bright sunlight to a dimly lit foyer. My eyes adjust to see flickering candlelight casting dancing shadows along the walls. The narrator welcomes the guests with a booming, sonorous voice, saying, “Whenever the candle lights flicker where the air is deathly still, that is the time when ghosts are present, practicing their terror with ghoulish delight.” Supernatural whispers seem to permeate the air, and it is within these eerie corridors and doorless chambers at Disneyland’s *Haunted Mansion* (1969–) that I first experience the paradoxical enjoyment of fear and fun.

At the young age of seven, I deeply feared everything associated with horror. Monsters, Halloween, and scary stories were subjects I actively avoided, and so the prospect of visiting the *Haunted Mansion* filled me with apprehension and dread. Despite my protests, my parents persisted, convincing me of the enjoyment that awaited within the mansion’s walls. With their reassuring presence behind me, I reluctantly ventured forth. Inside, expanding portraits and

concave figureheads seemed to follow me as we walked. We boarded omnimovers (also known as “doom buggies”), which transported us into a ballroom of dancing ghosts and various spooky scenes, creating an alluring darkness amid the magical trickery and depictions of macabre mortality. Little Leota’s ghostly voice beckoning us to return with our death certificates epitomized the Latin phrase inscribed on the *Haunted Mansion* gift shop cart, *memento mori*, as a reminder of death’s inevitability. Unbeknownst to my parents and even myself at the time, the *Haunted Mansion* sparked a lifelong fascination with the art of manufactured horror entertainment.

The reminders of death in this lively spectral world showcased a seamless merging of opposing realms—life and death, reality and fantasy, fear and fun—within the confines of the mansion’s walls. Disneyland’s ability to transport audiences into a humorous home housing 999 happy haunts captivated me, perhaps because the dark themes around death were presented lightheartedly. My first visit to the *Haunted Mansion* sparked a curiosity of dark entertainment, leading me to seek out horror films and haunted attractions to rekindle similar feelings. Over time, I gradually overcame my fear of the dark stories I once avoided. The more I engaged with horror content, the more I transitioned from a fearful participant to an industry insider. I began learning more about the production of horror films through my academic research and at the Museum of Pop Culture (MoPOP) in Seattle, Washington, as a part of the team developing the exhibit *Scared to Death: The Thrill of Horror Film*. Working on this exhibit, I collaborated with the Sammamish haunted attraction, *Nightmare on Beaver Lake* (2003–), and their zombie horde, filming promotional material and videos within the exhibit in downtown Seattle.¹ My behind-the-scenes experience with the zombie hunters, who applied latex prosthetics and fake blood as they perfected their zombie grunts, piqued my interest in haunted attractions. From there, I soon

stumbled into the haunt industry as a marketer for some of the longest-running and most highly-rated haunted attractions in the United States, including *The Edge of Hell* (1975–), *The Beast* (1991–), and *Macabre Cinema* (2007–), all located in Kansas City, Missouri. It was this work that inspired my pursuit of knowledge in this realm, and I have continued researching haunts over the past six years, uncovering the intricate production processes behind manufacturing scares for mass audiences.

My fascination with horror began in childhood and continued to refine through personal, professional, and academic experiences, ultimately beckoning me to haunted attractions. While haunts are often celebrated for their spectacle and sensory immersion, I have always been captivated by what happens behind the scenes: the labor, the people, and the meticulous work required to bring these monstrous worlds to life. The haunt industry is driven by an eclectic workforce, including artists, technicians, performers, hobbyists, and entrepreneurs, whose collaborative and often grueling efforts produce ghoulishly chilling experiences for audiences. Despite their increasing popularity, burgeoning economic impact, and unrelenting cultural presence, haunted attractions are frequently dismissed as lowbrow or ephemeral, rarely receiving the critical attention afforded to other forms of media and performance.

The scarcity of scholarly insight, coupled with the opacity of the industry, has created a significant gap in our understanding of haunted attractions as both entertainment forms and cultural texts. Such oversight has real consequences. It obscures the material conditions and creative labor that make immersive horror possible, while overlooking the ethical and regulatory challenges faced by performers, producers, and audiences. Moreover, this neglect allows fictional horrors to overshadow the very real risks embedded in these spaces—from exploitative labor conditions to safety hazards—leaving audiences and critics alike unaware of the

infrastructures that sustain them. As sites associated with the horror genre that embrace exaggerated affect and heightened theatricality, haunted attractions offer a potent space to explore the ideologies, contradictions, and anxieties that structure everyday life.

To better account for these layered dynamics, I introduce the term live-mediated horror entertainment (LMHE), a category encompassing immersive horror experiences such as haunted attractions, immersive theater, and interactive events. LMHE draws attention to how horror is constructed through both live performance and mediated aesthetic elements, and to how audiences' affective responses are inseparable from the labor, technology, and narrative design that make such experiences possible. As the chapters that follow demonstrate, LMHE offers a conceptual framework for understanding how horror entertainment functions as spectacle, but also as a form of embodied labor and ideological storytelling. Shaped by both grassroots creativity and corporate infrastructure, haunted attractions emerge in this study as cultural texts where affect, performance, and industry converge, staging fear in ways that are as revealing as they are unsettling.

Toward a Theory of Live-Mediated Horror Entertainment

Just as Disney solidified my fascination with spooky entertainment, the haunt industry's formal commercialization is attributed to the opening of Disneyland's *Haunted Mansion* in 1969. The haunt's opening marked a significant milestone in the history of haunted attractions, creating an homage to earlier haunted house attractions prominent in "the early 1950s."² The haunted attraction has since become a staple in Disney parks worldwide, including Walt Disney World (*Haunted Mansion* at Magic Kingdom [1971–]), Tokyo Disney (*Haunted Mansion* [1983–]), Disneyland Paris (*Phantom Manor* [1992–]), and Disney Hong Kong (*Mystic Manor* [2013–]). According to Lisa Morton, the haunted attraction is both "successful" and "influential" due to its

“startling new technologies and effects,” setting a standard for immersive, technologically advanced haunts.³ Although their historical lineage can be traced back to earlier fun houses, dark rides, horror theater, and other immersive entertainment, haunted attractions have emerged in recent decades as an industry and set of cultural practices all their own.

Haunted attractions are tied to immersion through their strategic use of technology, narrative, interactive challenges, and sensory manipulation to enhance environments and fully envelop visitors in emotionally intense, fear-inducing experiences. Immersion, a ramified theoretical term used across various entertainment realms (from video games and virtual reality to literary works of fiction and interactive media), can be understood as a characteristic of both the technology itself and the user’s subjective experience created by the technology.⁴ As Janet Horowitz Murray defines it, immersion is “the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality.”⁵ The haunt industry now offers a wide spectrum of immersive experiences, from local Halloween hayrides to professional Disney-level entertainment. These attractions leverage both rudimentary and advanced technologies to produce disorienting environments that manipulate the audience’s senses. On the simpler end, they employ static props, makeup, practical effects, black-out mazes, confined spaces, tilted floorboards, mirrors, and optical illusions. More sophisticated haunts incorporate motion sensors, LED lighting, holographic displays, projection mapping, RFID technology, animatronics, virtual reality, and even biometric sensors. The range of tools, from practical effects to cutting-edge digital innovations, allows haunted attractions to craft increasingly complex and personalized experiences, seamlessly transporting visitors into the heart of the story world, where fear and suspense become palpable realities.

Haunted attractions are immersive entertainment experiences that blend horror, performance, and technology to create visceral, multisensory environments. This definition builds upon the work of Madelon Hoedt, a pioneering scholar in the field of haunted attractions. Hoedt describes haunts as a “theatrical performance in which guests move from room to room, from scene to scary scene, with the majority of attractions operating around the Halloween season.”⁶ She further elaborates, “A haunted attraction is a venue, designed to frighten its audience [...] Effects used can include live actors, animatronics, theatrical sets, and sound and light effects.”⁷ While using Hoedt’s definition of haunted attractions, which incorporate these manufactured *effects*, I argue that these venues, rooted in the horror genre, fundamentally hinge on emotional *affects* that provoke bodily responses. They skillfully *affect* visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory sensory perceptions to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality, evoking visceral reactions of fear and excitement through disorienting *effects*, such as theatrical performances, technology, and constructed environments. The playful positioning of *affects* and *effects* enables audiences to engage with the ambiguity and threat of the unknown, reinforcing horror’s crucial role in heightening the immersive nature of these spaces.

This project examines haunted attractions as immersive sites where sensation, affect, and narrative are fused through design and performance. Building on the interplay of sensory manipulation and emotional provocation, I introduce LMHE as a conceptual tool for understanding how horror is staged, felt, and navigated in physical space. LMHE emphasizes the convergence of live presence and media-driven environments, where audiences are not just witnesses but co-creators of affective states. Through improvisational encounters and visceral feedback loops, these attractions push participatory horror to new heights and heightened states. Informed by years of industry experience and interviews with creators and performers, this

framework reveals how fear is architected through embodied labor, technological mediation, and interactive world-building, positioning haunted attractions as cultural texts that expose and animate contemporary anxieties.

Cultural and Scholarly Significance

Haunted attractions, while rooted in the horror genre, have evolved into a commercially significant component of Halloween, reflecting its transformation into a broader, seasonally fluid cultural phenomenon. This expansion is evident in trends such as “Summerween,” where Halloween aesthetics are adapted into summer gatherings, and retailers begin Halloween merchandising as early as July.⁸ The blending of seasonal boundaries parallels the success of recent horror releases, including spring’s *Sinners* (2025) and summer titles like *MaXXXine* (2024), *A Quiet Place: Day One* (2024), and *28 Years Later* (2025), underscoring horror’s mainstream appeal in what some describe as a new golden age.⁹ Halloween’s growing popularity is further evidenced by record-breaking consumer spending, reaching \$12.2 billion in 2023, and the rapid growth of the haunted attraction industry, now a year-round enterprise for some. Reports from the *BBC* and industry surveys show increasing attendance at haunted attractions, with many expecting upwards of 5,000 to 10,000 guests annually.¹⁰ This surge reflects the cultural and economic integration of horror-themed entertainment into the American calendar, demonstrating Halloween’s flexibility, commercial strength, and enduring audience appeal.

Despite their cultural and economic significance, haunted attractions have been largely overlooked in academic discourse, only recently garnering scholarly attention.¹¹ The academic oversight may stem from the industry’s correlation with transient entertainment and the stigma surrounding popular culture and fandom “within horror-related industries.”¹² Reflecting a broader trend in media studies, Timothy Havens, Amanda Lotz, and Serra Tinic highlight a

historical “dearth of attention to popular culture (or entertainment) production,” favoring news media research.¹³ They contend that entertainment, often dismissed as “escapist” or “low culture,” is actually a crucial site of struggle and resistance, though it “has not been taken seriously as a political force within these sectors.”¹⁴ Horror entertainment, long cast as escapist and a form of low culture,¹⁵ offers emotional enrichment and an avenue to reflect on societal issues through its sublime landscapes. As Edmund Burke wrote, the sublime evokes a state of astonishment, “with some degree of horror,” in which the mind is “so entirely filled with its object” that it is unable to reason.¹⁶ Fear, he contends, “effectually robs the mind of all its powers of acting and reasoning.”¹⁷ In haunted attractions, this suspension of rationality is not a limitation but a key aesthetic and political strategy. Horror’s embodied provocations of fear, awe, joy, and wonder disrupt normative modes of thinking, centering sensory and affective experience.

By examining how these landscapes engage audiences and producers, I position horror entertainment as a powerful site of cultural production and reflection. Just as horror exaggerates to expose hidden truths, haunted attractions magnify the tensions and tactics increasingly visible across mainstream entertainment, in which spectacle, affect, and bodily intensity are commodified to capture attention and generate profit. Their immersive format intensifies these encounters, inviting participants to physically and emotionally engage with themes of death, monstrosity, and moral transgression. Haunts, then, reveal pressure points in a media economy increasingly reliant on sensation, immersion, and emotional manipulation. This dissertation responds to the political necessity of producing scholarly insight into popular culture industries with local and global impact,¹⁸ analyzing a range of haunts, from small, locally driven DIY attractions (bottom-up) to large-scale, professionally produced experiences by major global entertainment companies (top-down). Haunts both *influence* and are *influenced* by popular

culture, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of horror entertainment's role in contemporary society and everyday life. Such sites challenge the notion that these experiences are mere escapism and instead assert their importance as sites of cultural production and meaning-making.

Combining Empirical and Empiricist Approaches

To analyze how horror entertainment impacts the everyday life of production cultures, I employ an interdisciplinary approach combining both empirical and empiricist methods. Havens, Lotz, and Tinic advocate for a critical media studies approach focused on “empirical (not empiricist) research into media industries with an eye toward the struggle over ideological hegemony in the production of popular culture.”¹⁹ Supporting this argument for the need to prioritize empirical research, Tudor’s examination of the horror genre reveals the limitations of purely theoretical or empiricist methods, noting that despite extensive research, a satisfactory explanation of horror’s appeal remains elusive.²⁰ Acknowledging that an empirical study alone cannot fully grasp the complexity of horror’s appeal and affective possibilities, this research adopts an interdisciplinary approach by combining empirical data collection through interviews with scare actors (also known as haunt actors or monsters), and haunt operators, alongside empiricist affective approaches on sensory experience. To address concerns with what Tudor characterizes as “problems of circularity,” where the “theories used to generate evidence are not the same theories as those being assessed against that evidence,”²¹ my research advocates for a dual approach that integrates empirical data collection with empiricist inquiry.

Incorporating empirical data provides a grounded understanding of how horror operates in practice, while empiricist inquiry explores horror’s cognitive and corporeal dimensions. My empiricist inquiry is informed by Linda Williams’ body genres, exploring “the notion that there

may be some value in thinking about the form, function, and system of seemingly gratuitous excesses” like those found in the horror genre.²² Inspired and further elaborated on by David Scott Diffrient’s affective and sensorial approach exploring horror as a body genre, which engages audiences’ bodies through visceral means, fleshing out the “*flesh itself*” and being careful to dissect “not only the surface but the *substance* of cinematic horror,” through embodied textual analysis.²³ Diffrient characterizes horror as “the most corporeally intense of all cinematic genres (with the possible exception of melodrama and pornography...),” highlighting how such genres elicit strong sensations such as fear, disgust, arousal, and empathy through the manipulation of sensory stimuli.²⁴ Aligning with Diffrient’s analysis of low-budget exploitation films, haunted attractions similarly “do not fit prescription categories of artistic value or cultural worth,”²⁵ yet garner praise in horror subcultures, problematizing the evaluative criteria for anomalous experiences.

Haunts provoke particularly heightened corporeal responses by constructing immersive spaces, playing with light, sound, temperature, and spatial awareness to create unsettling and affectively charged environments. Amy Avalos extends these ideas by applying Francis T. McAndrew’s “psychological mechanisms” to haunted attraction design,²⁶ identifying specific spatial and affective cues such as darkness (legibility), enclosure, ambiguity, and unpredictability/mystery.²⁷ These mechanisms, and the feelings of entrapment, social isolation, or disorientation that they engender, capitalize on the tension between the known and unknown. Legibility, or the difficulty of perceiving one’s surroundings, and mystery, or the uncertainty of what comes next, are key strategies that manipulate perception and anticipation. Understanding these physical and sensory interactions is crucial for grasping the genre’s impact on both audiences and creators, as horror encourages a turning toward or away from horrific objects,

constantly shifting moral positions, and inviting audiences to find “joy and excitement in horror.”²⁸ Due to horror’s fleshy demands, its reflexive connection to the human sensorium provokes physical reactions necessitating a comprehensive examination of its operation within the cultural and social implications surrounding the affective experiences. By integrating empirical data and empiricist inquiry, I expose the commercial underpinnings, cultural implications, and the specific visceral, bodily impacts of horror entertainment, spotlighting an often-misunderstood genre and its production practices within an equally opaque industry. In doing so, I reveal how horror serves as a cultural barometer for navigating fear, identity, and power, while also raising questions about how and why we commodify emotion and consume fear for pleasure.

Literature Review

Emerging within the intersection of fear and fun, haunted attractions offer a rich site for investigating how horror is produced, performed, and felt. I survey interdisciplinary literature from media studies, horror studies, and performance theory to establish the theoretical foundation for this project, situating haunted attractions as immersive cultural sites within the conceptual framework of LMHE. In the first section, I distinguish haunted attractions from traditional “haunted houses,” tracing how they have evolved in form, function, and cultural meaning. The second section outlines the conceptual development of LMHE, drawing on literature that explores interactivity, immersion, and embodied spectatorship. In the third section, I engage theories of horror and affect to explore the appeal of haunted attractions for both audiences and creators, focusing on the pleasures of fear, emotional intensity, and participatory

experience. I conclude the chapter by presenting my research questions, methodological approach, and chapter descriptions, foregrounding the cultural, industrial, and affective dimensions that guide this study.

Defining Haunted Attractions

Although the terms “haunted attraction” and “haunted house” are often used interchangeably, distinguishing between them is essential for scholarly clarity. In this section, I argue for a more precise definition of haunted attractions as fictional, performative, and affectively engineered experiences, distinct from traditional haunted houses, which are rooted in beliefs about real supernatural phenomena. Clarifying this distinction enables a more accurate analysis of the haunted attraction as a form of LMHE.

Quickly parsing the distinction between “haunted attractions” and “haunted houses,” Hoedt briefly explains:

The term, [haunted attractions], does not apply to sites that claim to be haunted by actual ghosts. Instead, the venues have a basis in fiction or “horrible history.” Haunted attractions are site specific (though the contents are not always directly related to the actual location of the venue) and contain a number of performance elements.²⁹

Haunted attractions, also known as haunts, mazes, scare houses, or scare attractions (the last particularly common in the U.K.), are walk-through or drive-through shows that often incorporate theatrical performances from scare actors.³⁰ These attractions allow guests to navigate from one frightening scene to another, with many operating primarily during Halloween.³¹ While haunted attractions and haunted houses share roots in the human fascination with death, conflating the two terms obscures their fundamental differences and impedes scholarly research in these respective domains.

Comparatively little has been written about haunted attractions, while much has been written about haunted houses and their enduring image in popular culture, with scholars tracing

their origins to ancient Greek and Roman depictions of death and the afterlife. In ancient Greece and Rome, “inconsistencies in belief about the survival of the soul after death were accompanied by a lack of consensus in antiquity as to whether ghosts ever existed.”³² Regardless of people doubting or believing in supernatural occurrences in haunted houses, these stories endure because “just about everybody is curious about death.”³³ Popular culture’s fascination with haunted dwellings is further exemplified by the ghost story genre, which Sylvia Grider argues gained prominence in the eighteenth century through “Romantic literature” and the “Gothic novels of England,” such as Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818).³⁴ According to Grider, ghost stories set in haunted houses typically involve interactions “with supernatural forces—usually ghosts or revenants—within the confines of a haunted setting, usually a remote castle or a deserted, multistoried house.”³⁵ Consequently, the traditional notion of a haunted house revolves around the belief that such dwellings are inhabited by paranormal entities like ghosts, phantoms, revenants, and specters, thus providing grounds for supernatural occurrences.

In contrast to traditional haunted houses, this dissertation focuses primarily on haunted attractions, a distinct form of immersive entertainment that uses technology and illusions to simulate hauntings and provoke fright. In contrast, a haunted house is one in which individuals experience hauntings, defined as “repeated manifestation[s] of strange and inexplicable sensory phenomena—sounds, tactile sensations, smells, and visual hallucinations—generally said to be caused by ghosts or spirits attached to a certain locale.”³⁶ The main difference between the terms is that, instead of the ghosts being the cause of these sensory shifts (as in a haunted house), in a haunting attraction, humans purposely create the sensory shifts to manufacture a scare,

mimicking a haunting. Nevertheless, the distinction between the two terms does not preclude haunted attractions from overlapping with the paranormal at specific locations, nor the possibility of the haunted house from echoing within haunted attractions, as many haunted attractions contain stories of ghosts or supernatural entities as a part of the storyline and set design.

Obscureness persists within the haunt industry, as the term “haunted house” refers to a specific building or structure inside a space with multiple attractions, such as scare zones, themed food areas, shows, etc. One of those attractions may be referred to as “houses,” or “haunted houses” as a distinct structure through which guests walk and in which they experience a self-contained horror narrative or series of scare scenes, featured in large haunted attractions such as a theme park or a haunt complex. The overlaps make it difficult to separate the two completely, leading the industry to conflate haunted houses with haunts, mazes, or attractions regardless of their specific meanings or connotations. Salient themes present may be inspired by the location of the haunted attraction itself, such as *Pennhurst Asylum* (2010–), a former institutional building now operating as a haunted attraction themed as a psychiatric hospital, which has drawn criticism from disability advocates.³⁷ *Pennhurst Asylum*, as a contested site, illuminates the entanglement between traditional haunted houses and modern haunted attractions, as it is said to be haunted by supernatural entities and operates as a haunted attraction.

Even with the interchangeable use of “haunted attractions” and “haunted houses” in social, academic, and industry contexts, it is crucial to delineate these terms for future scholarly work to trace a clear lineage and for the sake of definitional specificity. The two terms share the word “haunted,” which carries connotations of familiarity, arousal, and frequentation.³⁸ “Haunt”

is related to the word “home,” referring to a spot frequented by the deceased, “but as folklorists and parapsychologists point out, there is really no general pattern to a haunting.”³⁹ While “haunted” alludes to a place, particularly a home or house, the term “attraction” etymologically stems from the Latin *attractionem*, meaning “a drawing together.”⁴⁰ In 1829, its definition shifted to “a thing which draws a crowd, interesting or amusing exhibition.”⁴¹

The term attraction can also provide a way of acknowledging how groups of fear-goers may feel after the experience, as attracted and connected to one another after facing something frightening together. As David Skal writes, haunts are “a controlled confrontation with forces of darkness from which one emerges triumphantly unharmed, renewed, and bonded with one’s companions.”⁴² Haunted attractions may merely depict what we fear, but in a controlled setting, audiences can experience an “us” versus “them” survival mentality, developing a strong sense of togetherness and unification that may occur after the experience. Combining the two terms into the phrase “haunted attraction” conveys a fabricated thrill-seeking experience, with written records of this usage dating back to 1975, although it may have been employed earlier.⁴³ Through the pairing of “haunted” with “attraction,” audiences recognize these spaces as designed for horror entertainment and amusement purposes, breaking away from associations with the location primarily featured in a home or house and carrying only supernatural themes to broader associations with Halloween and horror culture.

An additional difficulty in understanding the haunted attraction landscape is due to the remarkable diversity in their locations, operating times, levels of intensity, business models, and sizes, ranging from multi-million-dollar theme parks to modest hayride experiences. While these attractions have gained prominence in the United States since the 1970s, and in the United Kingdom and Europe since the early 2000s,⁴⁴ the haunt industry has grown exponentially,

encompassing various categories. A broad mapping is provided by classifications based on profit models, attendance charges, throughput (or theoretical hourly ride capacity [THRC], the number of guests going through the haunt per hour),⁴⁵ level of audience intensity/interaction (no-touch haunts, physical haunts, and extreme haunts),⁴⁶ and the number of attractions in operation. However, nuances still exist. Home haunts created by horror and Halloween enthusiasts may accept donations but not charge fees. Non-profit charity haunts, staffed by volunteers, can vary in size, with some competing with for-profit haunts in production and detail. For example, *Doom Haunted Attraction* (2018–2023) in Idaho Falls, Idaho, produced top-tier scares, and all proceeds went to the local DARE program.⁴⁷ For-profit haunts range from small-scale to large professional operations and multi-attraction franchises. There are also haunted attractions within theme parks, with accompanying scare zones. Size is measured by physical space and visitor attendance, which directly impact revenue.

Excluded from these categorizations are hell houses and what might be termed “pseudo-haunts” like McKamey Manor, both of which have become infamous for prioritizing real psychological and/or physical distress over entertainment. Hell houses, often run by churches or faith-based communities, use staged trauma to promote religious conversion, warning visitors about their fate “awaiting them in the afterlife.”⁴⁸ As Ann Pellegrini explains, “Where haunted houses promise to scare the bejeezus out of you, Hell Houses aim to scare you to Jesus.”⁴⁹ These performances frequently demonize LGBTQ+ identities, abortion, suicide, and any rejection of Christian salvation. McKamey Manor, on the other hand, is not recognized by the haunted attraction industry as a legitimate haunt. McKamey Manor is known for its brutality toward guests, with some referring to it as a “torture chamber.”⁵⁰ Russ McKamey, the creator and operator of the attraction, was arrested in July 2024 for attempted murder, rape, and domestic

assault.⁵¹ Prior to this event, in 2019, the Haunted Attraction Association (HAA) publicly disavowed McKamey Manor, with then-president Brett Molitor emphasizing that professional haunts aim to “provide a good scare” while maintaining “a fun and safe environment for guests.”⁵² While haunted attractions vary in intensity, from no-touch haunts to those with limited physical interaction, to more extreme engagements, they remain distinct from experiences that impose a religious or moral agenda or inflict harm. This dissertation aligns with industry standards by excluding such outliers from the category of haunted attractions under analysis, as these spaces are designed to entertain, not brutalize.

Beyond their diverse business models, sizes, and classifications, haunted attractions exhibit remarkable geographical diversity, manifesting in various spaces and environments, from schools, prisons, farms, and hayrides to urban retail stores, malls, museums, factories, trains, boats, and even aquariums, necessitating a move from “house” to “attraction” to accommodate the wider classification of various haunted attraction types and locales. While some haunted attractions present a cohesive narrative with recurring characters, others opt for a collection of disparate scenarios designed to elicit scares from audiences.⁵³ Even if they operate in these various spaces, constructed hallways and rooms can be built to make the attraction feel like a house.⁵⁴ As “site-specific” enterprises,⁵⁵ they creep into and transform these spaces across rural and urban landscapes, further complicating classification due to their multifaceted characteristics and cultural contexts. While most haunted attractions operate seasonally around Halloween, with varying start and end dates, some remain open year-round by converting sections into escape rooms or other ventures to generate continuous revenue. To increase yearly attendance and

profits, they may also open with other holidays, like Valentine's Day, St. Patrick's Day, Christmas, and Mardi Gras. However, capitalizing on Halloween increases revenue and attendance, particularly for theme parks.⁵⁶

Inside, haunted attractions offer a wide range of experiences, including horror stage shows (comedic, campy, horrific, gory, or fun), outdoor scare zones and queue lines with roving actors, and indoor haunted mazes featuring elaborate scenes and characters. Many also provide “add-on” experiences such as escape rooms, axe throwing, zombie paintball, speakeasies, tarot readings, VIP packages, and photo opportunities with themed merchandise and food and beverage options.

Haunts side with the Disneyization-producing marketing efforts and are meant to narrate the haunted attractions and attempt to capture the narrative within them. Disneyization is “the process by which the principles of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society and the rest of the world.”⁵⁷ Alan Bryman contends that Disney's domination comes from one practice called *theming*, whereby the franchise incorporates narratives, such as the Wild West, into aspects of amusement parks. These narratives give customers a thematized experience of amusement park rides, gaming, and restaurants. Haunted attractions attempt to thematize the experience by grafting these spaces onto familiar Halloween tropes, while implicitly or explicitly referencing horror film and television. Transmedia storytelling is one aspect of Disney that the haunted attraction industry parallels, creating a narrative of the haunted attraction before entering the doors through promotional material and social media platforms. The haunted attraction industry strives to achieve Disney-level quality entertainment, such as using transmedia storytelling across different platforms and channels and synergizing their own intellectual property.

Haunted attractions encompass various types of scary experiences and include multiple elements beyond just a house, such as mazes, outdoor areas, or themed zones, with special effects, animatronics, and scare actors bringing the narratives to life. As Carissa Baker notes, Halloween horror festivals at theme parks typically center around three primary entertainment elements:

Stage shows (often comedic, sexual, and/or gory), scare zones (outdoor spaces with light sets and roving scare actors), and haunted houses (generally enclosed mazes with scenes and characters, though some have outdoor sections). They also include specialized merchandise, food, and alcohol.⁵⁸

Haunts can be produced on large and small scales, from complex to simplistic designs, tied to multi-attraction franchises and commercial enterprises or small businesses, and extend to amusement parks and fall festivities within local seasonal operations. Academic scholarship has categorized haunted attractions within broader business frameworks such as Fright Tourism,⁵⁹ Gothic Tourism,⁶⁰ agritainment (agricultural entertainment) in rural farm landscapes,⁶¹ heritage attractions,⁶² Halloween entertainment,⁶³ and theme parks.⁶⁴ As such, haunts have primarily been defined and categorized by their *location*, limiting the broader structures and industry crossovers with their connection to horror and Halloween.

Given this wide range of experiences, locations, and times of the year that encompass haunted attractions, I instead define haunts on the basis of their primary function, teleology, or unified purpose: generating scares or laughter through immersive horror entertainment experiences. Their ambiguity stems from their colloquial and academic classification and their varied places, spaces, and times of operation. Haunts employ theatrical design with lights, props, actors, makeup, and special effects. They draw heavily on the genres of Halloween and horror, and moreover, as technologically mediated experiences influenced by media, their primary objective is audience entertainment. Regardless of format (walk-through, drive-through, mobile,

or static) or extent of performative/non-performative elements, haunted attractions function as vehicles to deliver scares and thrills. Their ability to generate fear, excitement, and amusement remains the core unifying principle underlying these diverse, immersive entertainment experiences associated with their horror and Halloween thematic foundations. Defining haunted attractions with this level of specificity situates them within the broader category of LMHE, a category that includes theme park scare zones, immersive horror theater, escape rooms, and other affective experiences that rely on co-presence, performance, and design to generate fear.

Haunted Attractions as Live-Mediated Horror Entertainment (LMHE)

LMHE disrupts entrenched disciplinary boundaries in media, performance, and cultural studies by occupying a hybrid space shaped by immersive theater, themed entertainment, transmedia storytelling, and experiential marketing. These attractions collapse long-standing binaries, “live” versus “mediated,” “theatrical” versus “digital,” “reality” versus “fiction,” while navigating the commercial terrain of the experience economy.⁶⁵ Rather than forcing LMHE into any single disciplinary silo, I position it as a deliberately expansive framework that both draws from and unsettles existing discourses. Central to this framework are affective environments and embodied labor: haunted attractions are designed to provoke fear, anticipation, and disorientation through immersive engagement. These experiences hinge on the coordination of backstage production systems and the co-performance of guests. As such, LMHE operates not only as a descriptive term but as a critical intervention, one that renders visible the media, economic, and affective infrastructures that shape contemporary horror entertainment.

LMHE refers to immersive experiences that combine live performance and media technologies to create emotionally charged environments shaped by both performers and audiences. The hyphen in “live-mediated” signals more than a combination of terms, it marks a

theoretical claim about the interdependence of live and mediated forms. Rather than treating them as separate categories, the hyphen emphasizes their ongoing interaction. While “liveness” has historically been associated with broadcast media, such as television and radio, recent scholarship has expanded its definition to include social media, streaming platforms, and other digital technologies that support real-time engagement.⁶⁶ These developments complicate traditional distinctions between live and recorded forms, showing how technological systems simulate or amplify the sense of presence. At the same time, media histories remind us that film, radio, and television evolved from live performance traditions, all of which are rooted in the capacity to convey human expression through technological means.⁶⁷ LMHE brings these histories together, relying on both physical presence and media infrastructure to heighten emotional impact and audience involvement.

The evolution of performance and media forms demonstrates that “liveness” is not an essential property but a constructed concept shaped by technological developments and audience perception. Marshall McLuhan recognized the continuity between live and mediated forms, framing new media technologies as extensions of human senses rather than discrete domains.⁶⁸ Philip Auslander builds on this lineage by challenging the binary between the live and the mediatized, advocating “a view that emphasizes the mutual dependence of the live and the mediatized.”⁶⁹ He argues that, in mediatized culture, “live events are increasingly either made to be reproduced or are becoming ever more identical with mediatized ones,” including even small, intimate performances.⁷⁰ In this context, liveness is not the absence of technology but a mode of experience conditioned by it—a perceptual effect shaped by media epistemologies. LMHE extends these insights by showing how haunted attractions stage this interdependence deliberately. As Auslander notes, mediatization is now “explicitly and implicitly embedded

within the live experience,” and performance itself has become “embedded in the economy of media production.”⁷¹ In immersive horror experiences, proximity is not just spatial, it is engineered through orchestrated responsiveness, where audience gestures are echoed, amplified, or modulated by the environment and its technical systems. The hyphen in “live-mediated” marks this reciprocal circuitry, not as a contradiction but as a structural and affective condition through which liveness is produced. Rather than naming two separate realms, the term identifies a fused system in which horror is experienced as both immediate and constructed. While some may argue that all liveness is already mediated, I deploy “live-mediated” not as a redundancy but to foreground the co-presence of corporeal immediacy and technological infrastructure as an operational logic. The term insists on the visibility of the labor, systems, and affective design that make the live experience legible, and impactful, as mediation.

In immersive performance, the entanglement of live and mediated elements is not incidental—it is foundational to how presence and affect are structured. As Rose Biggin argues, immersion is not guaranteed by aesthetics or format alone; rather, “the relationship [must be] reciprocal,” with audience members retaining agency within the theatrical environment.⁷² She frames immersive “eventness” as a dynamic reciprocity between performers, participants, and cultural context, interactions that unfold across time and space and operate along “a continuum, not a binary.”⁷³ This relational exchange enables immersive experiences to extend beyond the event itself, reinforcing emotional and sensory engagement through feedback loops between action and response. Haunted attractions exemplify this logic: they stage liveness through direct performer-audience interaction and spatial immediacy, while deploying media elements—lighting, soundscapes, animatronics, and digital effects—to intensify affective response. Co-presence, the shared occupation of space and time, becomes a felt condition structured by design.

The result is a hybrid mode of horror performance in which live and mediated components are inseparably intertwined, generating emotionally potent experiences that resist disciplinary containment. The hyphen in “live-mediated” marks not contradiction but co-functionality—an operational logic where screens, sensors, bodies, and infrastructures coalesce to produce heightened perceptual states. What is “live” in this context is not defined by purity or immediacy, but by a sustained reciprocity between bodies and systems, between intention and uncertainty, that renders the experience vibrantly unstable.

If liveness emphasizes the co-presence of performer and audience in a shared moment, interactivity extends this dynamic by enabling participants to influence or shape the unfolding of that moment in real-time. David Z. Saltz similarly connects interactivity to live performance, noting that it “relates closely to the way theatre and performance artists have long valorized the concept of ‘liveness.’”⁷⁴ Interactivity involves a dynamic exchange between the participant and the system. Aaron Smuts offers a useful definition: “Something is interactive if and only if it (1) is responsive, (2) does not completely control, (3) is not completely controlled, and (4) does not respond in a completely random fashion.”⁷⁵ This highlights interactivity as a nuanced balance between control and responsiveness, where neither party dominates, and outcomes are shaped in real-time. Smuts emphasizes that interactivity must be understood relationally: “In themselves, things are not interactive; it is only in relation to our ability to control something that it is interactive *for us*.”⁷⁶ These perspectives raise critical questions about how interactivity operates within immersive environments more broadly, where participation may be encouraged but participants are not always granted the agency to meaningfully alter the narrative, spatial, or affective contours of the experience.

Immersion is a multidimensional and fluid process through which attention, emotion, and sensory perception converge to create a powerful sense of presence, one that blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction. Scholars across literary theory, game studies, and performance studies agree that immersive experiences captivate through both cognitive and embodied engagement.⁷⁷ Immersive experiences such as virtual reality captivate attention and elicit emotional investment. As literary theorist Marie-Laure Ryan explains, “The emotions experienced in make-believe in the fictional world may carry over to the real world, causing physical reactions.”⁷⁸ For Ryan, immersion is a transmedial phenomenon that directs attention across both the physical and mental planes, often provoking psychological and physiological responses. Game studies scholar Jan-Noël Thon refines this notion by framing immersion as a dynamic and shifting state rather than a fixed condition—closely related to the feeling of presence, or being “there.” He writes that “computer game players’ experience of psychological immersion [results] from a shift of attention to and the construction of situation models of certain parts of the game,” illustrating how immersion depends on the player’s agency and perceptual engagement.⁷⁹ From a performance studies angle, Hoedt underscores how haunted attractions function as liminal spaces “where the boundaries between reality and fiction collapse,” heightening suspense through bodily disorientation.⁸⁰ Scott Lukas expands the scale, focusing on theme park design and how immersive spaces generate emotional resonance and a “sense of completeness” by seamlessly integrating sensory cues with coherent narratives.⁸¹ Together, these perspectives underscore that immersion is not a singular effect but an ongoing, responsive process shaped by interaction, space, and sensation.

In haunted attractions, immersion is not a singular or static state but a layered and embodied process shaped by sensory design, narrative framing, and physical challenge. Guests move through shifting zones of tension and release, continually recalibrating their sense of orientation, vulnerability, and engagement. Drawing from a wide survey of immersion literature, Niels Christian Nisson, Rolf Nordahl, and Stefania Serafin propose a taxonomy that classifies immersion into three dimensions: system immersion (the technological affordances that reproduce natural perception and action), narrative immersion (mental and emotional engagement with story, characters, and space), and challenge-based immersion (absorption through interactive problem-solving or sensorimotor tasks).⁸² Haunted attractions activate all three. Technological elements—such as strobe lights, fog effects, disorienting architecture, and synchronized audio—create the conditions for system immersion. Themed environments and unfolding scenarios draw guests into fictional logics that support narrative immersion. When participants are asked to crawl through tight corridors, escape enclosed spaces, or react to jump scares, they encounter challenge-based immersion driven by timing, decision-making, and movement. These overlapping strategies do more than simply frighten; they produce horror as a physically navigated and emotionally absorbed experience. In LMHE contexts, immersion becomes the foundation of engagement, turning spectatorship into participation and fear into a lived, spatial, and affective encounter.

Moving from media form to media feeling marks a crucial affective turn in understanding how haunted attractions immerse audiences through technology, narrative, and interactive experiences. Affect theory facilitates the analysis of how haunted attractions engage audiences through bodily sensation, relational intensity, and emotional circulation. Affect theory emphasizes what moves between bodies, which are the intensities that register before emotion

becomes conscious or narratively legible. As Brian Massumi explains, “affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late-capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered.”⁸³ He distinguishes affect from emotion by highlighting affect’s immediacy and pre-cognitive quality, arguing that it “is marked by a gap between content and effect [...] There is no connection and no logic,” only intensities that stand apart from (and may even contradict) the meanings we ascribe.⁸⁴ These intensities are especially significant in haunted attractions, where physical stimuli (fog bursts, shrieks, sudden light shifts) evoke pre-cognitive reactions such as flinching or freezing. In LMHE contexts, these moments reflect a central principle: presence is not just being-there, but being *moved*—tensed, jolted, or thrown off balance. At a broader level, this mobilization of affect operates within a late-capitalist entertainment economy that commodifies sensation. Attractions deliberately stage affective environments to capture attention, intensify engagement, and sustain emotional investment, mirroring how affect is leveraged across contemporary media industries to produce immersive (and profitable) experiences.

Haunted attractions choreograph emotional and physical responses, making them prime sites in which to explore affective traffic and relational embodiment. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth describe affect as emerging as a form of “*in-between-ness*: in the capacities to act and be acted upon.”⁸⁵ Haunted attractions are rife with affective intensities, where audience and actor become mutually constituted through proximity, motion, and energy. Visitors are caught in constantly shifting relations: between actors, props, sound, and space. Fear is not just depicted; it is distributed, performed, and felt. While affect is often defined as a pre-cognitive, visceral intensity (felt prior to conscious recognition and distinct from emotion), Sara Ahmed offers a complementary framework that emphasizes how such intensities circulate through social and

cultural contexts, giving rise to emotionally meaningful responses. For Ahmed, emotions are not simply private feelings or internal states, but public and performative orientations that “stick” to bodies and objects, shaping how subjects inhabit and navigate space. She explains that emotions like “fear shape[...] the surfaces of bodies in relation to objects,” involving “(re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects.”⁸⁶ Her perspective is especially helpful for analyzing haunted attractions, where affective intensities become legible as emotion through their attachment to culturally charged figures, spatial arrangements, and narrative cues. As Ahmed writes, “The circulation of objects allows us to think about the ‘sociality’ of emotion,” pointing to the ways emotions emerge through encounters with specific objects and bodies.⁸⁷ Presence, then, becomes more than a matter of being in the room and “being here”; it’s about being *moved*—startled, on edge, in awe, or caught off guard—through orchestrated atmospheres of anticipation and proximity. Haunted attractions stage emotional environments in which bodily responses are provoked through design and embodied movement shape what is felt and how those intensities are made recognizable. As Ahmed elaborates, naming an emotion “involves different orientations towards the objects they construct,” underscoring how emotional experience is shaped not just by bodily sensation, but by how feelings are made legible and actionable within a social world.⁸⁸

The physicality of fear, tense muscles, flinching reactions, quickened breath, coexists with emotional jolts such as surprise, awe, and dread. These moments collapse the division between body and emotion, situating haunted attractions as potent sites of affective embodiment. Experiences like these forcefully place audiences back into their bodies, prioritizing feeling over thinking. As Michael Richardson argues, embodiment is never isolated, but always relational, shaped by entanglements with other bodies, sensations, and forces. He writes that affect and

posthumanism alike engage with “the idea of aliveness, or animation,” and that these theories “share an insistent commitment to displacing exclusionary knowledges.”⁸⁹ This commitment centers “the body,” which, “like the human, is understood as blurry, relational, situated, and subject to all manner of energies, materialities, forces, and others.”⁹⁰ These attractions—often filled with animatronics, soundscapes, scent machines, and shifting lighting effects—create more-than-human environments where the body is entangled with objects, others, and atmosphere. Horror becomes a way of *thinking through* these entanglements, not merely representing terror, but activating it through touch, proximity, and motion. Haunted attractions do not just represent horror, they *produce* it through affective encounters across flesh and atmosphere. Horror’s heightened emotional register, its tendency toward exaggeration and excess, makes it an ideal space for studying affect in entertainment: here, feeling is not subtle, but screaming, sprinting, sweating, and embodied in every sense.

The emotional and affective intensities staged in haunted attractions reflect horror’s longstanding investment in provoking and manipulating embodied response. As a genre, horror has always been grounded in affective intensities. It demands a reaction—fear, revulsion, laughter, or shock—and works through the body: the jolt, the gasp, the flinch. Angela Ndalians emphasizes this sensory range, noting that:

Horror media offers a gamut of experiences—horror, laughter, fear, terror, the cerebral pleasures of intertextual play—and, depending on the sensory, emotional and intellectual encounters each example throws our way, we perceive, sense and interpret the fictional spaces of horror in diverse and distinctive ways.⁹¹

Her framing highlights horror’s multiplicity, as well as its capacity to blend terror with play, recognition, and sensation. Building on this attention to horror’s sensory dimensions, Diffrient calls for a move beyond “ocularcentrism,” encouraging scholars to attend to the genre’s engagement with “marginalized sensory pathways and organs”—sound, touch, smell, and

proprioception.⁹² His call expands Ndaliansis's account by challenging the dominance of the visual and foregrounding horror's potential to activate other, often overlooked, sensory experiences. This decentering opens the door to what Diffrient describes as "left-field theorizing,"⁹³ particularly as horror moves off the screen and into physical space, producing variable affective intensities and emotional experiences.

Haunted attractions push horror's affective and immersive tendencies into real-time spatial experience. Participants are not separated by a screen or a theater seat—they are physically embedded in the scene. This proximity to actors and effects enhances horror's impact: participants are startled not by a cut or edit, but by a body lunging toward them. Suspense is not paced by a score but by footfalls in the dark. The result is an experience that is both cinematic and theatrical, but also corporeal. Patrick Braillard has called haunted attractions "visceral theaters," which he characterizes as "non-contained artwork[s], existing solely on the predication of the blending of audience member and performer."⁹⁴ Braillard articulates that the audience's instinctual awareness and physiological responses, driven by sensory overload and themes that evoke primal fears, create an immersive and emotionally impactful experience.⁹⁵ Therefore, haunts must be understood as *felt experiences*: emotional and corporeal intensities that reverberate through the sensing body. The immersive environment is *lived*. Affect theory may be used to understand haunted attractions and how they generate emotional atmospheres and bodily responses that exceed rational interpretation. Bodies are shaped through their capacity to affect and be affected—how emotions stick, circulate, and cohere around spaces, gestures, and sensations. This is especially evident in the affective labor of scare actors who embody fear, rage, menace, and other extreme emotional states to provoke immediate reactions from guests. Audiences flinch, run, scream, and laugh. They tense, sweat, and shiver. They are moving

through and experiencing horror. In this way, affect and embodiment become central to the experience, turning haunted attractions into *immersive systems of affective design*. Horror as a genre traffics in intensities—suspense, disgust, unease—and haunted attractions amplify these sensations into three-dimensional, participatory environments.

In connection with these aspects of the phenomenon under investigation, the framework of LMHE becomes a useful, if purposefully broad, category. I am less concerned with drawing boundaries around what counts as LMHE and more interested in how naming this category mobilizes interdisciplinary research. LMHE facilitates the legibility of these attractions by using concepts already employed across entertainment industries and emphasizing the fusion of live performance, technological mediation, and embodied audience participation. The term could be expanded to include other immersive forms by dropping the horror component and referring to live-mediated entertainment (LME), but it is precisely horror that sharpens LMHE's edges.

In this approach, horror's exaggeration, sensory overload, and aesthetic excess become analytically rich rather than incidental.⁹⁶ As Rick Altman argues, "excess is one of the many ways in which genres embody counter-cultural expression," allowing genre texts to both reflect and resist dominant cultural formations.⁹⁷ Horror's heightened states, its visceral intensity, obvious artifice, and over-the-top spectacle, offer a uniquely fertile space to examine how culture stages its own anxieties and contradictions. This excessive quality makes haunted attractions especially productive for analyzing sensation, mediation, and immersive affect in ways that disrupt normative ideologies. To be sure, I am not advocating for replacing existing terms or discarding prior theories, but for examining how they converge. Haunts thrive on blurred boundaries and categorical slippage. They rely on ambiguity and unpredictability to create fear. As such, they are ideal spaces for exploring how affective intensities emerge and circulate in

LMHE environments. My definition of LMHE remains broad by design, intended to reflect the layered, hybrid nature of these media forms. These experiences communicate through shared technologies, aesthetics, and modes of participation, even if their “newness” is up for debate.⁹⁸

At its core, LMHE captures the interplay between the live and the mediatized, fiction and reality, artistry and commercialization. These experiences weave together actors, animatronics, special effects, sound, lighting, and spatial design to create immersive worlds drawn from film, television, video games, and beyond. Haunted attractions exemplify LMHE not just by bringing horror to life, but by exposing the mechanics behind it, how genre, fear, and pleasure are simultaneously constructed, embodied, and consumed. These attractions are inherently paradoxical: they rely on visceral immediacy yet follow choreographed scripts; they evoke spontaneous reactions while demanding technical precision, much like the horror genre.⁹⁹ Audiences scream and laugh in the same breath, while scare actors oscillate between monstrous embodiment and spatial control. Horror here is both exaggerated spectacle and deeply affective encounter, both product and experience. LMHE does not resolve these contradictions—it foregrounds them. Through layered systems of production, haunted attractions reveal the architecture of affect, the labor of immersion, and the tension between control and unpredictability. They bring horror into the realm of the living not by collapsing fiction and reality, but by relentlessly pressing against the line that separates them.

The Pleasure of Horror: Theoretical Accounts

Understanding the appeal of haunted attractions requires moving beyond psychological responses to explore how fear is intentionally produced, staged, and experienced within broader cultural, industrial, and labor contexts, including the often-overlooked perspectives of those who create these experiences. While psychological studies provide insights into fear and enjoyment,

they do not fully capture the complexity of haunted attractions as cultural and economic entities. Scholars studying haunted attractions have explored why people seek frightening experiences for entertainment. The paradoxical relationship between fear and enjoyment has been examined in performance studies, film studies, and sociological, psychological, and philosophical research on horror, with several vital theories emerging to explain this phenomenon.

Hoedt argues that enjoyment stems from a combination of control, distance, and catharsis,¹⁰⁰ stating that, “Scare attractions are a form of release, a way in which to experience scares in a closed environment, more direct, more primal than any horror movie could ever be.”¹⁰¹ The interplay of control and distance plays a crucial role in how audiences experience fear in haunted attractions, shaping the boundaries between real threat and staged horror to create a pleasurable sense of unease. Hoedt insists that visitors can engage with horror in controlled environments, unlike traditional horror media. She offers John Morreall’s theories of control and distance as potential ways audiences may enjoy haunted attractions.¹⁰² Morreall discusses the interrelationship between control and distance as it refers to the power an audience has over their experience, stating, “*Control* is usually easiest to maintain when we are merely attending to something which has no practical consequences for us, as when we watch from a *distance* some event unrelated to us.”¹⁰³

In the context of haunted attractions, visitors have limited control once they enter the venue. They cannot stop or start the experience at will, which heightens the sense of fear. However, there are mechanisms in place, such as emergency exits, that allow visitors to escape if they feel overwhelmed, giving audiences a semblance of control over their voluntary experiences with fear-inducing entertainment. Overall, the idea of control in haunts contributes to the thrill and excitement of the experience, as visitors are placed in situations where they are at the mercy

of the attraction's design and the actors' performances. The distance is defined by the physical and psychological separation between the audience and the horror elements of the attraction. While visitors are physically present in the haunted attraction, a level of distance still allows them to engage with the experience without facing real danger. This distance can be both physical (the audience is not harmed) and mental (the experience is understood as fictional). As Hoedt explains, "Although the physical events in a scare attraction do have direct consequences for the audience (actors jumping out at you, etc.), it is still a game of make-believe."¹⁰⁴ The anticipation of fear plays a significant role here, as visitors can distance themselves mentally from the events around them, which can reduce the intensity of their fear. The voluntary immersion into the world of fear develops a sense of distance and control that allows audiences to feel safe enough to enjoy the sensations experienced.

Hoedt's work also examines haunted attractions from the perspective of the idea of catharsis, via theories offered by Aristotle and Freud. Hoedt posits that these attractions provide opportunities for visitors to confront their fears in a controlled environment, allowing for the purging of negative emotions akin to Aristotle's definition of catharsis. For Aristotle, Greek tragedies allowed the Greek populace to rid themselves of the emotions of "pity and fear" and restore themselves to rationality.¹⁰⁵ This mindset allows people to experience fear through entertainment, enabling them to purge and reorient behaviors associated with their character. In this safe setting, individuals can experience intense emotions without lasting consequences, as they are "scared in a (relatively) safe environment."¹⁰⁶

Margee Kerr invokes a different classical precursor: the Stoics of the third century BCE. Investigating the physical and psychological responses to fear, Kerr emphasizes that "research is just catching up to" the wisdom of the Stoics, and specifically the notion that "confronting one's

mortality is good for the soul.”¹⁰⁷ Haunts utilize ancient practices of confronting the inevitability and ambiguity of death while harnessing modern “psychological mechanisms” to reduce predictability and increase intensity.¹⁰⁸ This emphasis on unpredictability aligns with Avalos’s assertion that, much like the mirrored walls and loud noises of amusement park funhouses, the extreme visual and auditory cues in haunted attractions disorient audiences and construct a sense of “ambiguity” and “mystery”—features still central to haunts today.¹⁰⁹

Examining the motivations behind seeking out frightening experiences from her own travels, attending and working at haunted attractions,¹¹⁰ Kerr’s work suggests that confronting one’s mortality in safe, controlled environments can lead to positive outcomes, including increased empathy, creativity, and cognitive flexibility: as a result of such experiences, she writes, “People display greater empathy, forgiveness, compassion, love, creativity, and tolerance, and they adopt a more egalitarian perspective and cognitive flexibility, meaning they are better able to appreciate different points of view.”¹¹¹ Additionally, Hoedt incorporates Freud’s notion of the “return of the repressed,” suggesting that haunted attractions facilitate a controlled experience of repressed emotions and unconscious desires. By engaging with these fears, visitors can achieve a sense of relief or catharsis, as they can confront and process their anxieties in a thrilling and therapeutic manner. Together, these concepts of control, distance, and catharsis create an environment in which visitors can experience fear and excitement in a controlled, safe setting, leading to enjoyment and catharsis.

Other studies have similarly found psychological and physiological benefits of experiencing fear in controlled environments. Kerr’s collaborative study with Greg J. Siegle and Jahala Orsini (2019) on haunted attractions demonstrates that voluntary engagement in high-arousal negative experiences “to ‘practice’ aspects of endurance and distress tolerance” can

potentially result “in bolstered resilience” in participants.¹¹² The authors used a combination of self-report assessments and EEG measurements to examine changes in affect, neural reactivity, and subjective experiences before and after participants engaged in these high-arousal negative experiences, illuminating how confronting fear can lead to beneficial outcomes for audiences.

Marc Malmdorf Andersen et al. argue that fear is not inherently negative; in recreational contexts, it can produce a blend of enjoyment and pleasure.¹¹³ To describe this paradoxical enjoyment of fear, they introduce the term “recreational fear” (akin to Isabel Cristina Pinedo’s concept of “recreational horror”), which captures the emotional paradox of simultaneously feeling fear and enjoyment in response to fear-inducing experiences, from mild scares to horror films.¹¹⁴

The affective appeal of haunted attractions, as spaces where fear is safely simulated, has been further examined through empirical studies that investigate real-time physiological and emotional responses to immersive threat experiences. Similar to attending haunted attractions, Andersen et al. contend that audiences can respond to horror films “with negative emotions such as fear, anxiety, dread, and disgust without being in actual danger. Like a child responding to suspenseful delight to being playfully chased by a caregiver, the horror-film viewer engages playfully with a form of threat simulation.”¹¹⁵ Expanding on this idea of recreational fear and its affective complexities, Sarah M. Tashjian et al. investigate how social and environmental factors influence real-time physiological responses to immersive threat environments, as in haunted attractions. These researchers investigated human physiological responses to threats in a social context, focusing on how factors such as friends, subjective fear, and unexpected attacks influence arousal. Their findings show the range of emotions haunted attraction attendees may experience based on the predictability of scares, expectations, physiological arousal, and

“important information about how the human body dynamically responds to different features of immersive threat experiences.”¹¹⁶ The authors used wearable technology to measure electrodermal activity (EDA) during a haunted house experience designed to create an immersive threat environment without actual danger, allowing for real-time monitoring of sympathetic nervous system responses.

In addition to exploring *why* people are drawn to haunted attractions, researchers have also examined *who* attends these events and how individuals manage their fear responses. Mathias Clasen et al. (2019) classified haunted house visitors into two main types based on their fear-regulation strategies: Adrenaline Junkies, who seek to maximize fear arousal, and White Knucklers, who aim to minimize it. While Adrenaline Junkies reported stronger fear responses, both groups experienced comparable levels of consumer satisfaction, suggesting that different approaches to fear can result in equally rewarding experiences.¹¹⁷ Building on this work, Coltan Scrivner examined the relationship between horror enjoyment and personality traits such as empathy and compassion. Contrary to stereotypes, Scrivner found that enjoyment of horror is not associated with lower empathy, complicating assumptions about horror fans’ emotional makeup.¹¹⁸ Scrivner adds a third category to Adrenaline Junkies and White Knucklers: Dark Copers, who engage with horror as a way to process and cope with darker themes and emotions. His three-part classification offers a more nuanced understanding of horror audiences and the varied motivations behind their engagement. Together, these studies underscore the complexity of horror’s psychological appeal and highlight the genre’s potential to fulfill diverse emotional and social functions.

As research into horror audiences expands, it remains crucial to interrogate the assumptions embedded within these studies and to redress a longstanding blind spot: the labor of horror production itself. Although scholars and scientists alike have demonstrated the emotional and psychological rewards of haunted attractions for audiences, these studies rarely account for the workers whose emotional, physical, and creative labor makes fear “feel real.” While recent psychological and empirical work has demonstrated the benefits of engaging with horror, particularly in haunted attractions, it tends to remain focused on the audience. These studies—often grounded in physiological measurements, surveys, and interviews—reinforce what film and cultural scholars have long argued: that horror’s pleasures are complex, and fear-based entertainment can offer meaningful psychological and emotional engagement.¹¹⁹ Yet despite these overlaps, this work often upholds the normative belief that seeking fear for pleasure is deviant, positioning horror fans as emotionally atypical. More importantly, such research continues to overlook the perspectives of those who produce horror experiences. Scare actors, producers, and designers, frequently questioned for their involvement in horror entertainment, develop thoughtful, reflexive approaches to their work. Their insights reveal how horror shapes not just audience affect but also labor conditions, creative practices, and cultural production. By centering these producers, my research bridges longstanding theoretical analyses with emerging empirical approaches, grounding critical horror scholarship in lived experience. It reveals haunted attractions as not only sites of consumption but also complex spaces of labor and creativity. This approach expands our understanding of horror’s cultural power (illuminating the interplay between fear, pleasure, and economic production) and affirms that those who produce horror are just as essential to the genre’s meaning and impact as those who consume it.

Methodology

My study is grounded in an interpretivist epistemology and draws on frameworks from critical cultural studies and media industry scholarship. Each chapter addresses one or more research questions through a critical media industry studies approach that examines the haunted attraction industry, which centers on how cultural constructions, power relations, and tacit assumptions shape media producers' everyday practices.¹²⁰ Qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with haunt managers and scare actors, textual analysis of trade publications, and participant observation at industry tradeshow and haunted attractions, are used to capture the situated meaning-making of producers, workers, and audiences within haunted attraction environments where narrative, labor, performance, and industrial ideology are tightly interwoven. These methods are further informed by insider knowledge of the haunt industry, allowing for a more comprehensive and grounded understanding of its cultural, affective, and economic dynamics. Informing the empirical foundation of this study, my methodological approach attends to the sensory and affective dimensions of haunted attractions while treating them as texts shaped by production cultures and industrial processes. The following sections map out the methodological research design, participant recruitment and selection, data collection and analysis procedures, and my role as a researcher, analyzing my positionality and reflexivity throughout the project.

Research Design

Rejecting a rigid divide between media theory and production labor, I adopt John Thornton Caldwell's integrated cultural-industrial method, which combines textual analysis, interviews, ethnographic observation, and political-economic critique. As Caldwell writes, "scholars should look beyond the standard split between film 'theory' and film 'work,' and

consider how film industrial practices, technologies, discourses, and interactions also involve critical analysis, theoretical elaboration, and aesthetic sense making.”¹²¹ Building on this, I treat haunt operators and scare actors not only as laborers but as theorists of their own production cultures, whose self-reflections and practices are connected to broader industrial logics and creative decisions.

Alongside interviews and industry texts, I also draw from audience-centered data gathered during immersive fieldwork. Visiting over eighty haunted attractions, I documented embodied experiences, affective atmospheres, and audience reactions, both my own and those of attendees who accompanied me. These observations contribute to a layered ethnographic perspective that situates horror as a genre grafted on lived, sensorial, and participatory phenomena. My interpretation of these encounters foregrounds affective analysis, sensory design, and experiential meaning-making as central to the cultural work performed by haunted attractions. Exploring media production through “an anthropological sense” delivers a robust assessment of the business cultures shaping industry knowledges, practices, texts, and audiences.¹²² This perspective resists simplistic empirical realism, instead viewing the media industry as a site of ongoing self-reflection and cultural theorizing by its practitioners. By embracing this hybrid model, the project moves beyond conventional distinctions between theory and labor, capturing how cultural production is simultaneously affective, reflexive, and situated within broader industrial and economic frameworks.

Additionally, adopting perspectives sensitive to aesthetics illuminates how media texts emerge from mid-level industrial practices, reflecting broader cultural trends and societal fascinations. The critical media industry studies framework emphasizes a mid-level “helicopter” view of industry operations, generating a perspective on complex interactions among cultural

and economic forces that balance between a zoomed-out, macro perspective and a zoomed-in, micro perspective.¹²³ From a helicopter-level vantage point, the analysis opens an awareness of power dynamics and their operation within the haunted attraction sector; it recognizes that power is not solely concentrated at the top but is distributed among various agents and practices throughout the industry. This qualitative, multi-method study integrates semi-structured interviews, ethnographic fieldnotes, and the analysis of both industry and audience-facing texts to examine how horror is produced and experienced within an industrial context shaped by cultural anxieties, creative aspirations, and commercial imperatives.

Participants, Recruitment, and Selection

My study draws on qualitative data primarily collected through semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders or “exclusive informants,” known as interview participants who are seen as individuals who provide insight into the production of mediated objects, like haunted attractions.¹²⁴ The primary purpose of analyzing media production “is to gain insight into what is going on ‘backstage,’ and certain individuals possess the specific knowledge needed to construct the analytical object.”¹²⁵ These exclusive informants include operators, managers (above-the-line workers),¹²⁶ and scare actors (below-the-line workers).¹²⁷ Interviews with these two groups reveal latent industrial practices and power asymmetries. Above-the-line operators are central to institutional coordination and the circulation of media products, while below-the-line workers often occupy more precarious roles, navigating identity, labor expectations, and performance under constrained conditions. The interviews explored participants’ professional backgrounds, creative processes, labor practices, and reflections on the design and operation of haunted attractions. By utilizing these participants for research within their respective organizations, roles, and working environments, the project foregrounds how cultural production is negotiated

on the ground, shaped by institutional logics, creative labor, and genre-specific conventions. Industry insiders narrate their experiences, shaping self-theorization and introspection on industrial structures.

Participants were recruited through ongoing fieldwork at haunted attractions across the United States and through networking at the Transworld Haunted Attraction Tradeshow, the largest event of its kind, affiliated with the Haunted Attraction Association (HAA), the only official trade organization for the haunted attraction industry. Transworld served as a vital access point for connecting with high-level professionals, including seven of the thirteen HAA board members, all of whom met the association's criteria of owning or operating a haunt for at least five years. Snowball sampling followed, expanding the participant pool to include two designers affiliated with major IP-based productions (*Halloween Horror Nights* and Eagan Productions Escape Rooms) and twelve scare actors from various regions, including Washington, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, Texas, Illinois, and Florida. A couple of participants were traveling performers, offering trans-regional insights into haunt labor and performance.

Interviews were conducted between Spring 2023 and Fall 2024, in person and via video conferencing, depending on participant availability, geographic location, and participant preference. Interviews ranged from thirty to 120 minutes, followed a semi-structured protocol, were audio-recorded with participant consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis. To integrate audience perspectives, I also conducted eight informal interviews with novice haunt attendees who accompanied me to attractions, offering insights into their affective and experiential reception. All participants gave informed consent prior to participation, and no

compensation was provided. The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Colorado State University. All interview data were anonymized, securely stored, and handled in accordance with institutional research ethics protocols.

Data Collection and Analysis

My methodological framework draws from Caldwell’s “integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis,” which synthesizes ethnographic observation, textual analysis, industry interviews, and political-economic critique.¹²⁸ Data were collected over a four-year period (Fall 2021–Fall 2025), including site visits to over eighty haunted attractions, attendance at trade events, participation in industry mixers, and interviews with haunt professionals and attendees. Field notes were recorded during and after visits and interviews to document contextual details and nonverbal cues. Caldwell’s concept of “deep texts” serves as a central analytic tool, guiding how I categorize and interpret various forms of industry discourse.¹²⁹ Fully embedded deep texts entail behind-the-scenes perspectives, such as visiting haunted attractions during their operational season experiences (a complete list of haunted attractions attended can be found in Appendix A) and attending exclusive industry events such as haunt mixers. Semi-embedded texts refer to trade show materials, professional newsletters (e.g., from *The Haunted Attraction Network*), and conference seminars attended at events like the Transworld Haunted Attraction Conference (see Appendix B for a list of seminars). Publicly disclosed texts, such as documentaries, online walkthrough videos, and promotional web content, offer insight into how the industry self-represents and manages its public image.

Analyzing these layers of industrial discourse allows for a nuanced account of reflexivity in the haunted attraction industry. As Caldwell examines a notion of industrial “reflexivity,” showing how haunt operators and workers make sense of their labor, production, and industry

dynamics while exposing power relations, discursive strategies, and creative innovations.¹³⁰ Focusing on reflexivity clarifies how communities and subcultures within the industry reshape identities, legitimize contributions, and interact ritualistically to survive and prosper.¹³¹ This notion of embedded theorization extends to haunt operators and scare actors, whose practices, reflections, and texts collectively articulate how the horror genre is constructed, commodified, and lived.

Seminars and interviews were crucial to answering research questions related to genre conceptualization and labor dynamics. These materials revealed how genre operates as both a symbolic and economic force within the industry. Genres prove useful from executive and management perspectives, connecting audiences' tastes to cultural products and buying potential (like-minded individuals produce genre-specific texts catering to genre-specific audiences). Ana Alacovska's examination of genre production underscores that genres are not fixed but always in flux, with certain semblances, "features, and functions that remain invariable for extended periods that are intertextually shared and historically reproduced."¹³² Industry-produced cultural objects adhere to "genres-in-process," infusing and influencing social life and embedding economically in genre-specific worlds of production.¹³³ Haunted attractions exemplify this dynamic, merging narrative tropes, cultural taboos, and sensory manipulation into affectively charged, economically viable experiences.

The multi-layered textual analysis, combined with interview data, represents the first step toward comprehensively understanding haunted attractions' industrial practices, cultural influences, and embodied experiences. Reflexive industrial conversations within the haunted

attraction industry intertwine personal experiences with broader practices of generic influence. This methodology allows for a deeper understanding of how horror is crafted, performed, and theorized across different levels of the industry.

Research Positionality and Reflexivity

My embeddedness in the haunt industry, through prior experience, extensive field visits, and participation in conferences, has shaped how I interpreted data and engaged with participants. This proximity enabled access to insider knowledge and nuanced cultural dynamics, but it also required continuous reflexive awareness to mitigate potential bias. To navigate this dual role as researcher and partial insider, I employed reflexive practices including detailed note-taking, peer-debriefing, and iterative analysis.¹³⁴ These reflexive strategies helped bring to the surface, rather than suppress, my position within the field. Conversations with participants (whether during interviews, haunt visits, or industry events) were contextualized through my own affective and sensory responses. My experiences attending haunted attractions alone or with others allowed for the collection of not only firsthand observations but also informal audience insights, which helped triangulate my interpretations of design, labor, and affective experience.

Haunt site visits were selected based on access, geographic diversity, and relevance to industry trends as identified through trade publications, social media, and recommendations from participants and insiders. My fieldwork followed a “situated, multi-locale” model, engaging with haunted attractions across urban and rural settings, high-budget and grassroots productions, and different regional aesthetics, “theorizing from the ground up.”¹³⁵ In line with Caldwell’s “over-the-shoulder” ethnographic approach,¹³⁶ I attended behind-the-scenes haunt events, listening and observing operations. I took notes before, during, and after each visit; these notes recorded spatial design, narrative structures, visitor interactions, and my own sensory and affective

experiences. Additionally, participation in exclusive industry mixers and trade shows allowed me to observe the professional rituals, discourses, and networking performances that structure the industry. This immersive, multi-sited fieldwork enabled me to draw connections across labor, aesthetics, and organizational practice, enriching both the empirical and theoretical dimensions of the research.

Sensorial and affect-based approaches complement the textual analysis, focusing on the corporeal impact of haunted attractions and exploring the relationship between horror media and embodied experiences.¹³⁷ These methods are instrumental in answering my research questions, providing a broad understanding of haunted attractions' industrial practices, cultural influences, and the narrow embodied experiences they offer. By interweaving theoretical frameworks with empirical data, haunts illustrate how the power dynamics within production practices contribute to cultural significance within media landscapes.

Research Questions

Broadly, I seek to answer the following research question: *How do haunted attractions function as immersive cultural texts that reflect, construct, and negotiate fear, identity, labor, and entertainment within contemporary media and economic landscapes?* I pursue this inquiry through chapter-specific questions that each address facets of this overarching concern:

1. How have haunted attractions evolved historically and culturally to reflect and construct societal fears, and what does this reveal about how fear is produced, circulated, and consumed in society?
2. How do haunted attractions utilize intertextual references, genre conventions, and immersive sensory design to reshape the horror genre through LMHE?

3. How do haunted attraction operators manage the tension between transgressive creative expression and the demands of commercialization, safety, and mainstream appeal in the immersive horror industry?
4. How do scare actors navigate identity, labor, and embodiment within haunted attractions, and how do their performances challenge or reinforce norms around power, monstrosity, and the Other?

These research questions were selected to address LMHE by engaging with key themes of power, identity, embodiment, and the economic forces that shape cultural production. Collectively, the questions explore how haunted attractions operate as evolving cultural texts: how they reflect and construct historical and contemporary fears (Q1), how they reconfigure genre conventions through sensory immersion and intertextuality (Q2), how industry professionals negotiate the competing demands of creativity, safety, profitability, and mainstream appeal (Q3), how performers navigate labor, embodiment, and identity within immersive environments (Q4). This selection demonstrates a commitment to understanding haunted attractions as sites of affective and aesthetic innovation, as well as nodes in a broader entertainment economy. By focusing on historical transformations, sensory experiences, creative labor, and economic infrastructures, these questions shed light on an often-overlooked segment of LMHE and its contributions to contemporary entertainment culture.

Chapter Descriptions

The chapters of this dissertation guide readers through the winding corridors of haunted attractions, where the boundaries between the familiar and the unknown blur. Each chapter in my dissertation builds upon various elements that help construct LMHE, a broader category pertaining to entertainment trends. In Chapter One, “The Evolution of Fear: Haunted Attractions

Through History and Culture,” my central argument is that haunted attractions cannot be traced to a singular origin but emerge from a complex intersection of historical, cultural, and technological influences. By employing a genealogical approach, I contend that haunted attractions are not static, fixed entities, but rather evolving assemblages of power, practice, space, and bodies. These attractions both reflect and actively construct societal fears, challenging traditional notions of haunted spaces and transforming them into public, commercial spectacles. Haunted attractions evolved, particularly after World War II, as spaces for inducing fear, where commercialization and technological innovation marked the expansion of the horror genre. Understanding haunted attractions requires viewing them through their historical trajectory, from ritualized performances of death to their current role in the cultural economy of fear. This chapter sets the stage for the LMHE framework, demonstrating how haunted attractions combine liveness and mediation to create participatory experiences that blur the lines between fiction and reality.

Genre influences in haunted attractions are emphasized in Chapter Two, “The Genre of Fear: Horror’s Corporeality in Haunted Attraction Design.” I argue that haunted attractions represent a distinct subgenre of horror entertainment that operates at the intersection of performance, spectacle, and narrative while negotiating the boundaries between traditional horror tropes and emerging, immersive forms of engagement. Haunts, then, reshape audiences’ positionality to the horror genre by transforming experiences into active, participatory ones, where audiences engage physically, emotionally, and cognitively. By drawing from cinematic, theatrical, and video game genres, haunted attractions carve out a space that requires closer proximity and immediacy, elevating horror’s corporeal dimensions. I also explore how interactive performances and technological effects combine to create multisensory experiences,

pushing the genre beyond traditional forms. This chapter is central to the LMHE framework, as it positions haunted attractions not only as genre-bending phenomena, but also as expressions of horror's "body genre" and the blurred boundaries between reality and fiction. The often exaggerated and ambiguous genre classifications offer models for understanding horror media that integrate live performance, intertextuality, and technological elements.

In Chapter Three, "The Business of Fear: Managed Experience and Economy of Haunted Attractions," I argue that haunted attractions operate within a complex economic framework where the performance of fear must be balanced with the commercial demands of profitability, safety regulations, and consumer expectations. Haunted attractions are not merely spaces of terror; they are highly managed environments that require careful orchestration of resources, including technological innovations, set design, staffing, marketing, and customer experience. This chapter explores the tension between artistic subversion (creating transgressive horror experiences) and the constraints of capitalist structures (profit, scalability, regulation). I show how operators balance creativity with operational efficiency to sustain their businesses while also adapting to consumer trends and expanding beyond traditional seasonal offerings. The chapter demonstrates that haunted attractions are complex, evolving entities that combine performance, technology, and commercial strategies to redefine immersive horror experiences. This approach aligns with the LMHE framework, illustrating how haunted attractions carefully structure live, participatory experiences to meet both artistic goals and economic imperatives.

Finally, in Chapter Four, "The Art of Fear: Labor and Performance in Haunted Attractions," I argue that the labor of scare actors and other performers within haunted attractions plays a crucial role in shaping the immersive, participatory experience of horror. Haunted attractions present dynamic, co-created performances in which scare actors embody fear and

facilitate the narrative. I emphasize the behind-the-scenes physical, emotional, and mental demands on scare actors, showing that their work goes beyond delivering scares to creating emotional and sensory experiences that challenge societal conventions around identity, power, and monstrosity. Scare actors negotiate their monstrous identities, often reclaiming labels of “otherness” and “abnormality” through their performances, which offer new interpretations of empowerment and agency in the horror context. The embodied nature of scare acting aligns with the LMHE framework, in which liveness, seen as co-presence, hinges on audience interaction becoming integral to the immersive experience, centralizing scare roles in the generation of fear.

The concluding chapter, “Redefining Haunted Attractions in the Era of Live-Mediated Entertainment,” synthesizes this dissertation’s key findings by situating haunted attractions within the broader framework of LMHE. Opening with personal reflections on my research journey, the chapter connects my engagement with the haunted attraction community to wider scholarly conversations. I return to the foundational concept of LMHE, demonstrating how haunted attractions exemplify the convergence of live performance and technological mediation. As immersive, localized experiences grow in cultural and commercial relevance, haunts are examined as vital case studies within the evolving terrain of LMHE.

My final chapter also draws from both successful ventures and spectacular failures (such as the ill-fated 2024 Willy Wonka experience in Dublin), not simply to contrast them, but to show how failure often reveals the mechanics of immersion just as powerfully as success. Analyzing how the haunted attraction industry adapts to digital innovations and shifting audience desires, I explore how it stays relevant by embracing new technologies while preserving embodied forms of participation. The LMHE framework is also used to critique the cultural and economic structures that shape these experiences, from 4D effects to more personalized and

intimate modes of horror. By spotlighting the sense of community, ritual, and co-presence that haunted attractions foster, the chapter challenges the isolating tendencies of contemporary social life. In doing so, it argues for the scholarly legitimacy of haunted attractions, aligning them with once-dismissed media forms—like comics—that have since gained critical recognition.

Ultimately, haunted attractions emerge not as fringe curiosities but as vital cultural texts that reflect and reshape the aesthetics, technologies, and social dynamics of twenty-first-century entertainment. As the boundaries between live and mediated experience continue to blur, haunted attractions stand at the threshold, beckoning us to revisit fear, technology, and immersive play.

CHAPTER ONE – THE EVOLUTION OF FEAR:

Haunted Attractions Through History and Culture

Over the years, I have encountered numerous haunted attractions that claim to be the nation's oldest and longest-running. Initially, I responded with admiration to these assertions, with an enthused, "Wow, good for you!" However, hearing the same claim repeatedly raised my skepticism. These statements began to feel like marketing tactics designed to inflate credibility within the industry and the public. Such claims are difficult to verify due to limited documentation in the early years of operation, the ambiguous definition of what constitutes a "haunted attraction," and their sporadic operations and fleeting moments of fame. During my research, I came across whispers of a "haunted attraction archive" that could substantiate these claims. What began as an innocent search for a forgotten facet of Halloween history quickly became an unsolved mystery.

Reaching out to experts, sifting through digital records, and consulting archivists yielded no definitive results. As one horror historian humorously noted in an email, my search resembled the beginning of a horror film: an "intrepid researcher" seeking an elusive archive, only to "stumble upon something monstrous." The horror in this narrative, however, lay not in a gruesome discovery but in the pursuit itself—a continuous and fruitless quest. While the elusive archive remains undiscovered, my search illuminated something deeper. Haunted attractions, like the quest to define their history, thrive on ambiguity and the interplay of myth, history, and fear. This realization reframed my inquiry: What are haunted attractions, and how do we understand

their place in our cultural landscape? Beyond mere entertainment, they are spaces where audiences engage with fear, death, and memory, blending ancient rituals with modern commercial practices. They reflect our deepest anxieties and societal fascinations.

Haunted attractions resist a fixed origin point. Like horror itself, they are defined less by a clear lineage and more by the fear they are designed to elicit. If fear alone were the defining factor, then any site capable of terrifying someone would qualify. Instead, haunted attractions must be understood as evolving assemblages of power, practice, space, and bodies—engines of fear that reflect cultural and historical forces rather than a singular, traceable genesis. The ambiguity inherent in horror, haunts, and history is itself a source of threat and fear, mirroring the genealogical method's challenge to stable, linear narratives of the past. Michel Foucault's genealogical method proves particularly useful in this regard, as it resists the impulse to locate a stable base and origin point for history and instead examines the "transformations that serve as new foundations [and] the rebuilding of foundations."¹ Rather than adhering to a linear historical tradition that seeks a motionless base beneath the thick layer of events, genealogy maps the contingent and recursive processes, revealing haunted attractions under the thick surfaces of seemingly prescribed histories. What may seem natural or essential, such as the structure of a haunted house or the seasonal association with Halloween, emerges instead from historical repetitions that reinforce particular relations of power and discourse. Haunted attractions do not simply reflect cultural anxieties, they actively produce and reorganize them, shaping the ways fear is spatialized, commodified, and embodied.

This genealogical pursuit intersects with Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, which describes how the past persists within the present, never fully disappearing but instead haunting contemporary structures. As Derrida asserts, "haunting is historical, to be sure, but it is not

dated.”² Haunted attractions operate within this spectral logic, continuously resurrecting past fears in new forms while simultaneously presenting themselves as contemporary spectacles. They function as palimpsests of past anxieties, layering historical trauma, Gothic iconography, and horror tropes onto modern fears.

Haunts may serve as a form of haunted media, articulated by Jeffrey Sconce’s observations on electronic technologies, which have long been perceived as mediums for ghostly presences, highlighting “an uncanny and perhaps even sinister component in ‘living’ electronic media.”³ Television, for example, creates “direct, personalized, and immediate contact” with audiences, electrifying the inanimate into spectral life and unsettling boundaries between the familiar and unfamiliar, the living and the dead, the real and the unreal.⁴ By the 1960s, this “once wondrous ‘otherworld’” of electronic telecommunications had devolved into “a vast reservoir of cultural anxiety,” with broadcasting provoking fears of “the invasion and even the dissolution of the private sphere.”⁵

Similarly, haunted attractions invert the traditional domestic haunting, where ghosts formerly lurked in private homes, into a shared, commercialized spectacle. Once rooted in small-scale home haunts before expanding into large-scale attractions post-WWII, these spaces externalize personal anxieties into public performances of horror. The haunted house, historically a symbol of intimate domestic horror, is now a manufactured spectacle as a haunted attraction that invites audiences to reenact their fears within an explicitly commodified space. As products of late-stage capitalism, they encapsulate fears surrounding technological encroachment, modernity, and the dissolution of stable identity. This dynamic encapsulates hauntology’s core tenet: the past never fully disappears but instead re-emerges in mutated, uncanny forms, unsettling distinctions between past and present, reality and illusion.

This chapter introduces what I call a genealogical hauntology framework, an analytic method that fuses Foucault's emphasis on contingency and power with Derrida's insistence on the spectral persistence of the past. I do not propose genealogy and hauntology as entirely distinct theoretical positions, but rather see haunting as a feature of genealogical analysis. Genealogy, in its refusal of linearity and its attention to ruptures and recursions, is already a haunted method, one that uncovers the ghostly reappearances of past forms within present cultural logics. Hauntology, in turn, extends genealogy's attentiveness to discontinuity by foregrounding the unresolvable uncertainty of temporal collapse: the past as a flickering presence that cannot be laid to rest. By combining these two modes, I aim to foreground how haunted attractions emerge from recursive histories and spectral returns, structured less by continuity than by *uncanny* repetition. I situate haunted attractions within broader media and cultural history discourses, primarily exploring Western developments while acknowledging global influences. Haunts embody the recursive history of age-old rituals, trick-or-treat traditions, technological terrors, and ghostly performances, all of which inform the shifting logics of fear embedded in these attractions (see Appendix C for a brief chronological timeline).

Through this genealogical hauntology, I argue that haunted attractions are extensions of the horror genre or reflections of cultural anxieties, but more importantly, recursive cultural sites where the past continually resurfaces to unsettle the present. I treat these attractions as immersive media forms that perform the instability of history itself. Rather than offering a stable narrative of horror's evolution, haunted attractions expose how fear is repeatedly reorganized through shifting technologies, economies, and social rituals. They do not simply depict horror, but operationalize it, materially enacting the spectral persistence of history and the uncanny return of

cultural traumas. In doing so, haunted attractions resist linear historiography and instead animate a haunted cultural memory that reveals how power, identity, and entertainment are always already entangled with ghostly returns.

To illustrate this argument, I trace the historical developments of haunted attractions chronologically, emphasizing cultural and technological shifts across time. This approach impresses how haunted attractions have evolved alongside broader social transformations: from religious rituals and death pageantry to Enlightenment spectacle, industrial-age innovation, and neoliberal commodification. Across this timeline, I highlight recurring threads: how fear is spatialized, how immersion is narrated and performed, how aesthetics mutate, and how commercial logics intersect with cultural desires. Each section of the chapter explores a different historical period, moving from early modern death rituals to Victorian ghost shows, from spiritualist spectacles to postwar home haunts, and into the hyper-commercialized, sensorily overloaded attractions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. While these periods are not strictly linear or discrete, they illustrate the recursive logic at the heart of genealogical hauntology: a haunted, non-totalizing history in which the past continually infiltrates and reshapes the present. By accentuating the spectral persistence of past horrors and the evolving power dynamics embedded in these spaces, this chapter positions haunted attractions as ephemeral seasonal amusements that nonetheless serve as cultural traditions and sites where collective fears materialize, transform, and endure.

Ancient Rituals to Medieval Festivals of Life and Death

From ancient crypts to modern frights, the history of haunted attractions is rooted in cultural practices that mix fear, death, and supernatural storytelling. Some creators and designers in the haunted attraction industry draw architectural parallels between today's haunted

attractions, also known as haunted mazes, and the labyrinthine burial chambers of ancient Egypt, which were designed to instill fear in tomb raiders through traps, false passages, and curses meant to deter intrusion.⁶ The architects of this ancient, mummified madness set the stage for modern haunts with their death-themed and maze-like constructions evoking similar senses of fear. However, the history of haunted attractions is more entangled thematically in the cobwebs of Halloween traditions stemming from ancient Celtic festivals in Ireland, Northern France, and the United Kingdom, which have long been centered around celebrating death, the supernatural, and changing seasons.⁷ Haunted attractions are modern expressions of ancient and medieval cultural practices that ritualize death, fear, and transformation through storytelling, spectacle, and seasonal timing, especially through Halloween, which functions as a cyclical celebration that persists despite institutional efforts to control its meaning.

While haunted attractions may operate year-round, they reach their fullest cultural and emotional power during Halloween, a carnivalesque season that transforms fear into communal ritual and symbolic renewal. Halloween mirrors Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the *carnavalesque*—a celebration that marks a temporary suspension of the established order, social hierarchies, and norms through role reversal, grotesque bodies, and parody—turning fear into entertainment and fostering communal exploration through playful yet sinister rituals.⁸ In Bakhtin's view, carnival exists outside the normal temporal order, offering a “second life” detached from everyday constraints, where transformation and renewal are celebrated and encouraged.⁹ Haunted attractions embody this dynamic, serving as a kind of “sacred pilgrimage,” where fears are confronted and mastered within “controlled situations” that bracket fear in time and space.¹⁰ Halloween provides the time, and haunted attractions provide the spaces, cyclically granting these seasons of fear to be experienced throughout people's lives. Jack Santino observes

Halloween's invariable shape-shifting, explaining that its transformation "occurs in a context,"¹¹ adapting to its autumnal setting, cyclical return, and cultural moment predicated on religious, political, and commercial demands. Just as haunted attractions map physical spaces of carnivalesque engagement, Halloween's cyclical return serves as a metaphorical renewal of the human experience, marking the season as one of transformation, confrontation, and communal celebration of life and death.¹²

The tradition of eerie storytelling, from ancient myths to modern urban legends, positions Halloween as a folkloric celebration of fear that evolves with the times yet retains its ritualistic power. As summer fades and autumn's chill sets in, Halloween becomes a sacred time for supernatural storytelling, a tradition that dates back to ancient cultures' rituals surrounding seasonal transitions and the afterlife.¹³ Comprising of myths and legends, folklore has been passed down through oral traditions and is defined by Debbie Felton as "the traditional beliefs, practices, and tales of people [...] characterized by various units of traditional material that are memorable and consequently repeatable."¹⁴ Halloween's history draws from these age-old spooky stories, from ancient myths to modern urban legends, overlapping fear with fun in ways that continue to captivate audiences with its temptingly sweet concoctions. Halloween is like a box of sweet but sinister chocolates, including age-old myths drizzled with seasonal changes and modern urban legends dipped in death, all wrapped up in a folkloric box that defines this candy-coated holiday. The tradition of storytelling—spanning from ancient mummies and folklore to modern myths like razor blades in apples and cyanide-filled candies—continues the long-held custom of sharing eerie tales, linking the origins of Halloween to ancient Celtic practices.

Halloween's roots twist deep into the ancient soil of Ireland and England, intertwining Celtic folkloric traditions that predate written history.¹⁵ The holiday, now known as Halloween, a night of candy and costumes, has evolved from "ancient rituals of sacrifice and supplication [...] to guarantee a good harvest and, by extension, continued earthly existence."¹⁶ The ancient Celts (Irish, Scottish, and Welsh) marked November 1st as Samhain (pronounced SOW-win), "considered by many to be a predecessor of our contemporary Halloween."¹⁷ Samhain marked the end of the summer harvest and the beginning of winter, the Celtic New Year.¹⁸ The Celts believed this night thinned the veil between our world and the supernatural, a time when "graves open and the departed return,"¹⁹ allowing for an eerie mingling of the living and dead.²⁰ This return was not simply spectral but social and spiritual: it reaffirmed ancestral ties, permitted contact with otherworldly knowledge, and required ritual attention to ensure protection, prosperity, and communal balance. As David Skal aptly puts it, death has always been the "grand marshal of the Halloween parade."²¹

Halloween emerged as a hybrid ritual, shaped by both pagan traditions and Christian institutional authority, revealing how cultural celebrations of death and transformation resist being fully subsumed by dominant ideologies. Halloween's connection to mortality remained central as the holiday evolved, even after the rise of Christianity, illustrating the shift from pagan to Christian holidays as an institutional negotiation over meaning and ritual authority. Pope Gregory IV established All Saints Day on November 1st in the early ninth century, followed by All Souls Day on November 2nd.²² These holidays were part of the Church's broader effort to subsume pagan rituals by offering Christian alternatives that redirected worship toward saints and the doctrine of eternal life. The night before All Saints Day, October 31st, was known as "All Hallows Eve"—with "Hallow" being an old word (before AD 1500) for a saint or holy person—

and eventually morphed into “Halloween.” The early Church sought to tame the pagan celebration, but its secular and pagan appeal endured. While Christian doctrine emphasized remembrance and prayer for the dead rather than actual visitations from spirits, the older belief in a porous boundary between life and death persisted in popular traditions.²³ The fusion of Christian and pagan traditions eventually gave rise to the name “Halloween,” which, despite its Christian origins, evokes a distinctly pagan atmosphere for modern celebrants, shaped by centuries of ritual negotiation between institutions and communities.²⁴

Halloween’s enduring power lies in its patchwork origins, stitched from pagan reverence and Christian condemnation, transforming spiritual figures once seen as sacred into playful icons of mortality. Halloween, like Frankenstein’s monster, is stitched together from disparate parts, a patchwork of pagan rituals and Christian observances that have electrified into vibrant life. Halloween is “a folk holiday, generated by everyday people,” blending “parodistic images of death, harvest, evil and the grotesque.”²⁵ Visions of life and death are blurred with iconic symbols and “stylized images” like “skeletons, ghosts, skulls,”²⁶ inviting celebrants to don the guise of the departed or the never-living. These images have ancient roots: in pre-Christian Celtic belief, Samhain’s “wild and powerful” spirits represented ancestors, nature spirits, and otherworldly beings who could offer wisdom or wreak havoc depending on how they were treated.²⁷ Their return served a cultural function—reinforcing bonds between the living and the dead, honoring the past, and ensuring balance with the unseen world. But to the early Christian Church, such spiritual openness posed a threat. As Christianity spread, the Church sought to suppress these beliefs, casting such spirits not as familial or sacred but as demonic. Santino explains:

The church maintained that the gods and goddesses and other spiritual beings of traditional religions were diabolical deceptions, that the spiritual forces that people had

experienced were real, but were manifestations of the Devil, the Prince of Liars, who misled people toward the worship of false idols.²⁸

In this worldview, ancestral reverence and cyclical notions of life and death were recoded as dangerous illusions, threatening the Church's authority over salvation, the afterlife, and moral order. Symbols of death—ghosts, skeletons, witches—were demonized, transformed from figures of reverence or fearsome balance into icons of evil. Yet despite these efforts, Halloween retained its deep allure. It offered a space to confront death, not with solemnity alone but with creativity, laughter, and theatricality.²⁹ From its inception, Halloween illustrated the enduring desire to acknowledge mortality not as something to fear alone, but as something to ritualize, mock, and ultimately, humanize.

As a haunted hinge between past and present, Halloween activates hauntological and carnivalesque energies that unsettle temporal boundaries and social hierarchies. Halloween remains a steadfast, cyclical, topsy-turvy celebration that “runs the world upside down,” but also creates a temporal break, where the ordinary rhythms of time are suspended, and the past momentarily bleeds into the present. On a night of inversion, Halloween opens a liminal zone, where identities are swapped like trading cards, authority figures become punchlines, and the dead walk the earth.³⁰ This recurrence evokes Derrida's notion of hauntology, in which the past refuses to stay buried and returns, as a disturbance that troubles linear historical progression. In this return, the past not only disrupts temporal continuity but also unsettles social hierarchies, allowing suppressed voices and subversive energies to reemerge and critique dominant class structures. Angela Ndalians elaborates, noting that the historical spectacles, such as the “carnival pageants” that parodied “feudal rituals” or “ecclesiastical ceremonies,” create a dialogic rupture “between folk and official culture.”³¹ These events “contested, ridiculed, laughed at, and overturned the serious and oppressive nature of the ruling culture,” offering fleeting but powerful

disruptions to social norms.³² Halloween's inversive qualities closely align with Bakhtin's carnivalesque, exploring these festive, grotesque spaces as moments when bodies, roles, and power structures were destabilized, recalling medieval events like the "Feast of Fools" (1100s–1500s), where social roles were reversed and the grotesque was celebrated.³³ However, it was not immune to ridicule and condemnation from the church, who banned the practice in the fifteenth century, due to the debauchery and disruption of sacred rituals.³⁴ Haunted attractions inherit this legacy, where the rules of time, identity, and order can be suspended, reshuffled, and momentarily reimaged.

In dark times, religious institutions turned to dark measures. As the Middle Ages progressed, the Church strategically harnessed spectacle and fear as tools of spiritual instruction, using emotionally charged performances to reinforce obedience and ritual engagement. Public fascination with death and the macabre, heightened by the devastation of the plague, shaped cultural expressions across art, ceremony, and entertainment. As Skal examines, "The public's appetite for stylized encounters with images of death has always been whetted by troubled times."³⁵ This appetite extended beyond imagery into performance, where fear became a potent pedagogical force. During the Medieval and Renaissance periods, religious dramas incorporated theatrical innovations, such as mechanical stage effects in religious dramas, to evoke awe and assert theological authority. For instance, fifteenth-century productions at the San Felice in Piazza church featured mechanical angels and cosmic imagery that inspired "a growing sense of wonder and amazement" in audiences.³⁶ While these spectacles aimed to glorify the divine, they also served as visceral reminders of sin's consequences and the presence of supernatural forces.

The Church's use of fear was not incidental but fundamental, blending terror with wonder to draw audiences into emotionally immersive encounters with salvation, damnation, and the cosmic stakes of moral life.

The spooky symbols, stories, and rituals of Halloween, rooted in themes of darkness, transformation, and the grotesque, form the cultural and seasonal foundation for haunted attractions' cultural and seasonal relevance. Haunted attractions, in particular, owe their existence to Halloween's allowance for carnivalesque spaces to emerge. These attractions thrive precisely because Halloween invites the emergence of carnivalesque spaces. As Bakhtin argues, carnival is not merely spectacle but a participatory event that collapses the division between "actors and spectators," offering a collective, temporary suspension of social order.³⁷ The modern haunt amplifies this ethos, inviting participants to momentarily inhabit spaces of fear, chaos, and absurdity. Carissa Baker further links "the contemporary notion of Halloween" to Bakhtin's theory, suggesting that it enculturates children into adult roles that transgress boundaries, reinforcing the idea that Halloween rituals, especially through haunted attractions, offer a cathartic space for both children and adults to explore the taboo and the grotesque.³⁸ Haunted attractions further invite wonderment toward experiences by simulating death, danger, and decay in heightened environments. These performances echo pre-Christian rituals of seasonal change and spiritual liminality, dramatizing a modern desire to confront mortality on controlled, imaginative terms. In doing so, haunted attractions help anchor Halloween's temporal resonance: they are ephemeral, seasonal, and cyclically repeated, mirroring the rhythms of harvest, decline, and eventual renewal. Ultimately, they sustain Halloween's role as a ritual of cultural recalibration, fusing ancient practices with modern performance in a celebration of symbolic death and imaginative rebirth.

Fear, Spectacle, and Technology from the Medieval Era to the Nineteenth Century

The haunted attraction is not merely a product of Halloween's commercialization but an affective spectacle rooted in centuries-old traditions that blurred boundaries between narrative, ritual, and technological illusion. From medieval religious dramas to Renaissance automata, public performances of fear used spectacle to shape belief, emotion, and behavior. In this context, immersion refers not simply to visual spectacle or narrative engagement but to the physical, affective, and spatial strategies by which experiences of fear envelop the audience, manipulating sight, sound, proximity, and setting to simulate haunting as a total environment. These early theatrical forms fused storytelling with sensory manipulation, crafting immersive experiences that foreshadowed the technologically mediated hauntings of today. As industrialization accelerated and technologies of sight and sound advanced, these traditions evolved into more elaborate, commercialized performances that provoked awe and dread. Haunted attractions thus emerge as a culmination of cultural practices that transformed fear into entertainment through innovations that turned death and the grotesque into visceral, multisensory encounters designed to both unsettle and enchant.

The interplay of fear and illusion, so central to medieval and religious performance, also spurred proto-technological experimentation aimed at shaping perception and behavior. Giovanni de Fontana's *Liber Instrumentorum* (1420), for instance, includes a device that projects a horned, winged, talon-footed demon across a room—an invention he labeled “a nocturnal appearance for terrifying viewers.”³⁹ Though secular and speculative, this apparatus is thought to be a precursor to the Magic Lanterns, illustrating a fearsome imagery to invoke the supernatural and shape

behavior through spectacle. This idea for visual manipulations laid the groundwork for more immersive illusions, by turning darkness, wonder, and fear into affective tools for ritual engagement.



Figure 1. Projected lantern from *Liber Instrumentorum* (c. 1420) by Giovanni de Fontana, showing a devil image meant to terrify viewers. Inscription reads: Apperentia nocturna ad terrorem videntium (“A nocturnal appearance for terrifying viewers”).

As the immersive logic of fear and wonder evolved, Enlightenment-era public exhibitions transformed emerging technologies into theatrical experiences, inviting audiences to engage directly with spectacle as both entertainment and embodied education. By the late seventeenth century, this fascination with the unknown began manifesting in public exhibitions, like those in Paris in 1683, showcasing new technologies as both marvels and mysteries. These exhibitions, spreading across Europe—appearing in France, Germany, Austria, England, and other countries—in the eighteenth century,⁴⁰ featured a significant shift toward blending entertainment

with awe-inspiring technological feats, inviting audiences to not only witness but also engage with the enigmatic power of these innovations. In Enlightenment-era fashion, technological innovations were seen as means to view societal achievement and “diffusing knowledge.”⁴¹ Electricity, for example, sparked interest in audiences as “spectators could feel on their own bodies the effects of electricity... [and] livid light of electrical sparks was displayed in the dark to increase theatricality.”⁴² The early science and technology exhibited capitalized on entertainment, presenting “a magical framework of astonishing effects to present the latest scientific and technological achievements, experts hoped to win over their audiences and persuade them that experts made the best magic of all.”⁴³ They turned scientific progress into theatrical experiences, blending technological innovation with public spectacle.

Fusing technology and theatricality reached a new milestone with the invention of the Magic Lantern, a device that turned visual projection into a haunting medium of fear, illusion, and spectacle. The magic continued with a significant leap in macabre entertainment with Christiaan Huygens’ invention of the Magic Lantern.⁴⁴ The magic lantern marked a significant step in the evolution of mediated spectacle, offering a versatile projection technology used across educational, religious, and entertainment contexts. Yet its application in horror-centered performances, particularly in ghost and apparition shows, helped transform it into a powerful tool for macabre storytelling. X. Theodore Barber explains that the early magic lantern exhibitions featured “phantoms, devils and other macabre subjects.”⁴⁵ Often dubbed the “Lantern of Fright,” in this context, the device projected spectral images such as “a soul in purgatory and a skeleton holding an hourglass and scythe,” heightening its capacity for eliciting fear.⁴⁶ From its development in the late seventeenth century to its peak in the nineteenth, the magic lantern became central to ghost shows, where it created the illusion of otherworldly presences.

By the late eighteenth century, this technology culminated in the rise of phantasmagoria performances—magic lantern shows dedicated entirely to projecting ghostly imagery. Phantasmagoria performances marked a turning point in media spectacle, where sensory manipulation and emotional intensity converged to craft affective illusions. Magicians like Paul Filidort and Etienne-Gaspard Robert (known as Robertson) pioneered these spectacles using darkened rooms and atmospheric effects, including music and sound, to heighten the illusion of supernatural activity. Eerie projections of skeletons, ghosts, and other macabre images elevated the art of frightening audiences and laid the groundwork for creating haunting experiences with technological innovations. The visceral engagement with technology impacted immersive entertainment, Muray Leeder explains, “From the magic lantern and the phantasmagoria’s complex dynamics of demystification and mystification... the fascination with supernatural implications of the projected image has a long history before cinema’s debut.”⁴⁷ Phantasmagoria shows evolved into a modern leisure activity, appealing to mass audiences with its blend of spectacle, terror, and technological wonder.⁴⁸

The immersive quality stemmed from the visuals and the surrounding atmosphere: dim lighting, haunting soundscapes, and confined spaces created a multisensory disorientation that simulated supernatural encounters. For example, in 1797, Robertson staged a performance inside a Paris cemetery, turning the tombs into a haunted theater.⁴⁹ As Ndalianis describes, “Crowds flocked to the dimly lit tombs” to witness ghostly projections of skulls, hear atmospheric effects, and feel the chill of fear in a carefully orchestrated environment.⁵⁰ These phantasmagoria shows reveal how media technologies were mobilized to manipulate sensory perception, provoking all senses and producing an affective encounter with fear that blurred the lines between spectacle and belief. By merging visual illusion, sound, and physical space, such performances foreshadow

horror media's enduring use of technology to create emotionally charged, immersive experiences. The phantasmagoria, as a part of early media spectacles, entertained and helped define horror's long-standing relationship to technological enchantment. Marina Warner describes the phantasmagoria as a "Gothic horror spectacular," transforming spectators into "willing, excitable victim[s]." ⁵¹ In another account from an 1895 phantasmagoria show, *The Red Woman of Berlin*, reveals audiences reacting with hysteria and panic with screams and scrambling for the exits, demonstrating the frightening impact of these illusions. ⁵² While such reports may have been amplified for promotional effect, they nevertheless reveal the show's intent to provoke intense emotional responses and underscore how these illusions were marketed and received as genuinely frightening experiences.

As nineteenth-century audiences grew increasingly captivated by the spectacle of death, macabre exhibitions like Madame Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors transformed fleeting illusions into enduring, bodily encounters that deepened public engagement with violence, history, and the grotesque. Public interest in macabre attractions surged in the early nineteenth century, exemplified by Madame Marie Tussaud's Chamber of Horrors. In 1802, Tussaud opened this landmark exhibition in London, showcasing death masks and wax figures of those executed during the French Revolution. Chris Heller describes how, "Tussaud scandalized British audiences with an exhibition of wax sculptures of decapitated French figures," offering a visceral, tangible encounter with death and infamous historical figures within her permanent exhibit. ⁵³ This exhibit marked a turning point in grotesque attractions—not simply for its content, but for its form. Unlike ephemeral illusions, Tussaud's waxworks introduced a lasting, bodily realism that invited close inspection of violent history, transforming spectators into both

mourners and voyeurs. The blending of artistic craftsmanship with morbid historical representation created a new kind of spectacle, one that blurred the lines between education, entertainment, and revulsion.

As immersive entertainment grew in tandem with industrial modernity, new technologies of illusion helped transform ghostly encounters into scientifically mediated spectacles. One of the most influential was Pepper's Ghost, patented by John Pepper and Henry Dircks in the mid-nineteenth century. This visual trick, which relied on a sheet of angled glass to project the reflected image of a hidden actor (see fig. 2), became foundational to the visual language of modern haunted entertainment. Though originally conceived as a scientific experiment in optics, the illusion's theatrical debut in Charles Dickens's *The Haunted Man* at the London Polytechnic in 1862 proved its emotional and commercial appeal.⁵⁴ As Ndalians explains, while Pepper "was primarily interested in the technique as an experiment in optics and science," its presentation in entertainment contexts "brought science to the people."⁵⁵

These "Ghost Shows" gained popularity at the height of Victorian spiritualism—a cultural movement from the 1840s to early 1900s centered on the belief that the living could communicate with the dead through séances and mediums. As J.A. Secord notes, "Pepper's highly public displays of 'stage ghosts' offered a rational explanation for what skeptics called a 'mass delusion,'" directly challenging spiritualist claims by revealing how ghostly effects could be manufactured.⁵⁶ In this way, Pepper's Ghost did more than frighten; it fostered what Secord calls a "rational wonder," offering audiences the thrill of supernatural imagery grounded in empirical science.⁵⁷ This merging of education and entertainment exemplified a broader cultural shift: rather than merely debunking belief in ghosts, attractions like these rechanneled that belief into a controlled, visible, and mechanical form. Pepper's Ghost and the Magic Lantern became

tools not only for storytelling but for shaping how fear was produced and experienced. These technologies externalized terror through mechanized, reproducible effects, turning abstract fears—ghosts, death, the uncanny—into tangible illusions. In doing so, they helped solidify a distinctly modern site where science and spectacle meet to stage the supernatural.

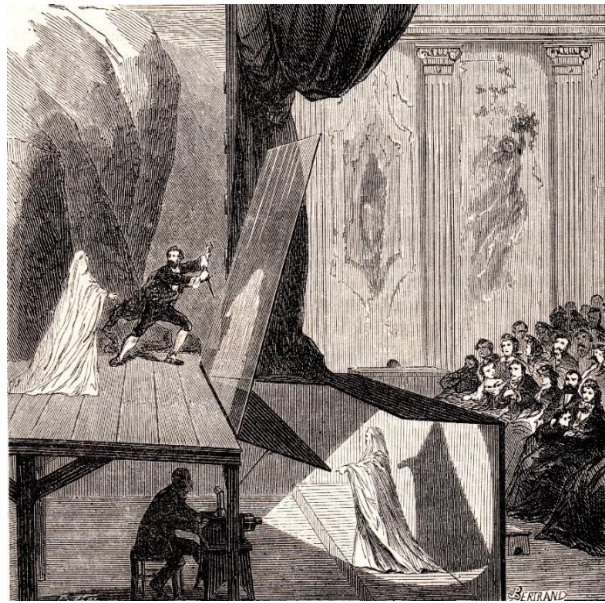


Figure 2. Illustration of Pepper's Ghost stage illusion. Source: Bertrand, "Pepper's Ghost Stage Set Up," *Le Monde Illustré*, no. 406, January 21, 1865, p. 48.

By the nineteenth century, grotesque entertainments had become a dominant mode of popular spectacle, extending earlier experiments with fear, illusion, and technology into theatrical and scientific displays that invited audiences to confront the bizarre, the monstrous, and the macabre. The grotesque, an aesthetic marked by the bizarre, unnatural, and monstrous, played a pivotal role in shaping early attractions. As Fiumara discusses in his work on the origins of horror films, these cultural forms, including melodramas (mystery plays on Broadway and the Grand Guignol Theater in Paris), phantasmagoria shows, and "popular amusements and scientific

displays,” like sideshows (more commonly known as “freak shows”), shared common themes of fear and the grotesque.⁵⁸ Fiumara defines these precursors to the horror film as “grotesque attractions” emerging in venues such as dime museums, carnivals, and amusement parks like Coney Island, which displayed the “grotesque, the strange, and the marvelous for paying spectators.”⁵⁹ As Fiumara suggests, these attractions were not only about instilling fear—they encouraged an active engagement from the audience, a dynamic that would become central to the evolution of horror films and haunted attraction experiences alike.

The latter half of the nineteenth century marked a significant shift in how fear was institutionalized as a form of entertainment, particularly through carnival sideshows, amusement parks, and dime museums. These spaces did not merely reflect a growing public fascination with the grotesque—they actively shaped how audiences perceived difference, danger, and deviance. After failing “to bring Tussaud’s waxworks to New York,” P.T. Barnum opened the American Museum in 1841, offering curated spectacles of oddities and so-called “human curiosities” that both titillated and reassured the public.⁶⁰ Skal notes that “morbid spectacle” quickly became the main attraction, drawing crowds with displays of “deformity and disease.”⁶¹ These exhibitions, often called “freak shows” or sideshows, served a complex social function, institutionalizing them as “viable economic model[s].”⁶² LeRoy Ashby explains that sideshows “both thrilled and reassured audiences, who viewed human oddities with combinations of fear, inquisitiveness, and feelings of superiority.”⁶³ Such shows flourished in a “rapidly industrializing” and “urbanizing society,” where traditional social structures were shifting.⁶⁴ Fear operated as a regulatory tool: by gazing upon bodies marked as “abnormal,” audiences reinforced normative boundaries around gender, race, class, and sexuality.⁶⁵ These performances offered a sense of stability amid the upheaval of modern life, positioning the sideshow stage as a place where anxieties about

difference could be contained and made visible. Found in amusement parks, circuses, and World's Fairs, these exhibitions institutionalized fear within entertainment infrastructures, linking spectacle to systems of social control. Barnum's "The Greatest Show on Earth" exemplified this dynamic, rebranding the circus from "unsavory" entertainment into a family-friendly event, though still reliant on the display of "otherness" to generate awe, discomfort, and fascination.⁶⁶ These spaces did more than satisfy curiosity—they crafted fear into a powerful pedagogical force, training audiences to see the abnormal as both dangerous and safely distant.

In addition to reinforcing social hierarchies around race, gender, and class, sideshows also played a formative role in shaping cultural perceptions of disability through fear and spectacle. Robert Bogdan's research reveals that these exhibits also contributed to societal understandings of disability, often demeaning those "with physical, mental, and behavioral anomalies" to provoke fear and contempt and contribute to society's "present understanding of disability."⁶⁷ Rachel Adams explains that side shows "promised to shock and amaze, but also encouraged their audiences to question what they saw," promoting "vigilance about the possibility of deception."⁶⁸ Audience members reacted boldly to the spectacle of performers' anomalous bodies, often with "shouts of laughter or outrage, knowingly incredulous comments, or rude prodding intended to prove its unreality."⁶⁹ Fiumara argues that the interactivity in sideshow performances mirrors the interactions between audiences and text when watching horror films, as they are "varied, diverse and interactive,"⁷⁰ underscoring the broader connection between these early forms of spectacle and the evolution of horror film reception.

The legacy of early technological spectacles underscores a long-standing cultural investment in staged fear, where innovation served the purpose of emotional and sensory manipulation. These media experiments did not exist in isolation; they emerged through the

convergence of advancing technologies, public fascination with death and the grotesque, and evolving modes of exhibition. The spectacles discussed here reveal a continued reliance on presenting anomalies—whether technological, social, or grotesque—to provoke shock, awe, and fear. The use of the grotesque served to represent societal “immoralities, abnormalities or evils,” making visible the degenerative underbelly of society and drawing a stark contrast between the “normal, healthy, rational, and civilized from the abnormal, unhealthy, irrational, and uncivilized.”⁷¹ As Fiumara notes, while the underlying social and political implications of degeneration were troubling, they offered a powerful aesthetic and thematic structure through which horror narratives could take shape.⁷² These early attractions, then, did more than frighten—they modeled a grammar of fear and spectacle that laid crucial groundwork for how audiences would come to engage with the monstrous across media forms, from live performance to Gothic literature and beyond.

From Gothic Fiction to Early Film

The turn of the twentieth century marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of horror, as new technological advancements merged with established storytelling traditions, giving rise to a new era of cinematic terror. The rise of horror films revived horror’s origins in “written or spoken narratives” and “theatrical presentations designed to thrill and horrify audiences.”⁷³ By the early 1800s, narrating horror stories or engaging in haunted ghost storytelling had already become a popular Victorian-era tradition,⁷⁴ but advancements in technology, such as early cinema, stagecraft innovations, and sound design, extended horror’s sensory impact, creating immersive experiences that drew audiences and grew into a cultural phenomenon. The turn of the century marked a significant change in how fear was performed and consumed as both spectacle and storytelling as theater and cinema advanced. By exploring the convergence of media forms

during this era, I show how narratives and technologies reshaped the relationship between horror stories and the experiences of fear, setting the stage for the modern haunted attraction and emphasizing the importance of sensory and affective engagement in horror's progression.

Horror narratives, rooted in the Gothic tradition, laid the base for modern horror media, although "the origins of the horror story may be traced to the beginning of narrative itself."⁷⁵ Many narratives contained the archetypes of horror, "monsters, demons, and ghosts appear" across various genres of literary history, like Greek and Roman mythology and medieval epics like *Beowulf* (975-1025 AD) and Dante's *Inferno* (in *The Divine Comedy*, 1321).⁷⁶ While these stories were not classified as "horror" at the time, they contained "horrific moments or characters" that inspired the genre.⁷⁷ The term "horror" itself would not enter common usage until the 1930s, during the era of Universal monster films like *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931). Some scholars have traced its application to works from the early twentieth century,⁷⁸ but any use of the horror genre predating this period can be considered anachronistic.

Before the term horror emerged, the Gothic genre dominated, beginning with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or The Modern Prometheus* (1818).⁷⁹ Alongside the many novels, stage productions like Matthew "Monk" Lewis' theatrical success, *The Castle Spectre* (1797), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), and Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* (1831), emerged as "stagecraft becomes more technically sophisticated, with the Gothic as an early adopter of the new possibilities."⁸⁰ The nineteenth century saw a proliferation of Gothic media, including stage adaptations of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

(1897) and silent films like *Frankenstein* (1910). This period was pivotal for transporting Gothic themes, like fear, the supernatural, and the macabre, into alternative forms of horror entertainment.

In the late nineteenth century, Gothic popular media became a battleground for cultural and political anxieties, as horror stories challenged elite control over the representation of death, morality, and social order. Inexpensive serialized literature, such as *Penny Dreadfuls*, introduced sensational horror stories to working-class readers, captivating young audiences with lurid tales of crime, supernatural threats, and adventure. While their popularity democratized access to horror, it also ignited fierce cultural debates over morality, class, and control. As Kate Summerscale explains, these periodicals were blamed for a range of societal ills—from petty theft to homicide—and were seen as dangerous precisely because they allowed the working class to engage imaginatively with death, violence, and monstrosity on their own terms.⁸¹ Critics feared that such narratives not only corrupted youth but also undermined elite control over the representation of death and social order. The growing political agency of newly literate readers posed a threat, especially as horror offered symbolic tools to question dominant ideologies and envision rebellion. Publications like *The Pall Mall Gazette* in 1886 decried these periodicals as “poison [...] threatening to destroy the manhood of the democracy,” framing them as insurgent texts capable of inspiring ambition, disruption, and a reimagining of who holds power over life, death, and meaning.⁸²

As literacy expanded, emerging technologies embedded Gothic themes within modern media, such as “telegraphy, photography, and cinema,” broadening their reach.⁸³ At the same time, spiritualism merged with technology, using advancements like spirit photography and mechanical effects in staged séances to simulate tangible evidence of the supernatural and

abilities to communicate with the dead. This convergence defied scientific rationality, cultivating many skeptics, and allowed audiences to experience fear through both mediated storytelling and live performances. Scholars Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren highlight how ghost stories evolved during this period, intertwining with Romanticism, the fantastic, and Gothic genres, unlocking “other worlds and dimensions—material, psychic, and supernatural—that characterized both spiritualism, in its entanglement with new religious movements [...] and the invention of penetrating yet intangible new media.”⁸⁴ By fusing Gothic themes with technological and spiritual innovations, the genre enriched its lexicon and expanded its modalities, evolving from page to stage and, eventually, to the screen.

While Gothic novels thrived on atmospheric dread and subtle terror, their stage adaptations often sacrificed this nuance for exaggerated spectacle and shock, prioritizing visual and visceral impact over narrative intricacy.⁸⁵ This transition from literary subtlety to theatrical intensity found one of its most influential expressions in the Grand Guignol Theater in Paris. Active from 1897 to 1962, The Grand Guignol redefined horror for the stage, delivering raw, immersive performances that reflected the social and cultural anxieties of the times.⁸⁶ Set against the backdrop of industrialization and social upheaval, the Grand Guignol offered a cathartic space where audiences could confront the horrors of modern life, like crime, mental illness, and modern warfare. Departing from the restrained terror characteristic of “the Gothic mode,” the theater embraced graphic depictions of violence and human depravity, addressing “contemporary fears” rather than supernatural threats.⁸⁷ Employing advanced stagecraft, the Grand Guignol used realistic special effects to simulate gruesome acts, as Skal describes, the theater “developed an arsenal of realistic illusions by which actors could be stabbed, hacked, skinned, blinded, and mutilated onstage,” generating a spectacle that was both disturbing and engaging for audiences.⁸⁸

Even with brutal depictions of violence, the Grand Guignol struck a balance blending humor with terror to intensify the theater's emotional impact and formed foundational features of the Gothic drama, which is predicated on its "affective power."⁸⁹

The Grand Guignol pushed the boundaries of theatrical terror, "bringing the various special effects, tricks, and prosthetic makeup devices used in theatrical presentations [...] to a considerably larger audience,"⁹⁰ influencing the visual and experiential elements of modern horror cinema and haunted attractions. The pioneering use of prosthetics, illusionary techniques, and suspenseful narratives set the stage for horror's evolution as a medium, bridging the gap between live performances and emerging visual technologies. In tandem with the visceral spectacles of the Grand Guignol, the invention of movie cameras in the 1890s introduced horror to the burgeoning medium of cinema.

At the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, cinema debuted as a "celebration of modernity and technology," reflecting the rise of "an emerging visual culture."⁹¹ The rise of cinema was shaped by a range of earlier visual and popular entertainments—such as magic lantern shows, stereopticons, panoramas, kinetoscopes, and illustrated lectures—which laid the groundwork for film's narrative conventions, subject matter, and techniques for representing motion.⁹² The rapid growth of film and amusement parks, emerging in tandem between 1894 and 1896,⁹³ exemplified the increasing public appetite for sensational experiences. Concurrently, the proliferation of other "artificial distractions" and "commercial entertainments," such as "nightclubs, restaurants, vaudeville, melodrama theaters, dime museums, [and] penny arcades," transformed urban landscapes and expanded opportunities for public engagement with sensory spectacles.⁹⁴ Amusement parks, in particular, leveraged "mechanical attractions, live theater, moving pictures, and pyrotechnical displays" to create embodied engagements that

complemented the visual stimulation of cinema.⁹⁵ While these attractions were celebrated for their ability to distract and delight by calming “fears about new technologies and living conditions of an industrialized society,”⁹⁶ they also sparked concerns among reformers who viewed their sensationalism as morally and intellectually suspect.⁹⁷ Critics accused these spaces of promoting “uncritical physical and emotional reactions,” coining terms like “spectatoritis” to pathologize the supposed over-absorption of audiences in sensational entertainment.⁹⁸ These anxieties reflect broader fears about the democratization of popular culture and its challenge to traditional social hierarchies.⁹⁹ However, the very spectacle qualities that drew criticism—intensified sensory engagement, emotional immediacy, and immersive techniques—became central to horror’s affective power. The spectacle-driven foundations of early cinema and amusement parks shaped horror’s emergence as a genre and established its enduring appeal through visceral and emotional intensities.

Early films prioritized spectacle and audience engagement over narrative coherence, exemplifying what Tom Gunning describes as “The Cinema of Attractions”—a style focused on visual “playful tricks” and sensational displays.¹⁰⁰ As Gunning observes, “the earliest years of exhibition, the cinema itself was an attraction,”¹⁰¹ underscoring how film initially drew audiences through its visceral novelty and emotional stimulation. As Lauren Rabinovitz further elaborates, the cinema of attractions challenges traditional notions of cinema “as a mode of realistic representation and ultimately storytelling,” binding “the viewer to more than what is being depicted” on screen.¹⁰² Rabinovitz explains that cinema’s “magnetism” lies in the apparatus’s ability to summon novel points of view, “extending the panoptic gaze,” and elicit a

physical “sensation of delight and pleasure in the viewer’s body.”¹⁰³ The cinema of attractions “foregrounds” the viewer’s body “as a site of sensory experience within a three-dimensionally contained space,” creating a “spectatorship of sensory fascination” with the medium.¹⁰⁴

The emphasis on sensory stimulation and spectacle was embraced by early filmmakers like Georges Méliès, a magician and pioneering filmmaker, embraced this potential, crafting “trick films” that captivated audiences with illusions and transformations rather than linear storytelling. Méliès’ 1896 short film *Le Manoir du diable* (*The House of the Devil* or *The Haunted Castle*), often considered the first horror film (aside from *The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots*, 1895), showcased a three-minute sequence of supernatural imagery in which bats, cauldrons, ghosts, vampires, skeletons, and witches appeared and disappeared with magical precision, using stop-motion techniques. Within this virtual haunted castle, Méliès applied his background in magic to create apparitions and grotesque transformations, thrilling audiences with both his innovative use of cinematic effects and his ability to manipulate space to evoke fear and wonder.

Technological innovation was crucial to the development of the nickelodeon theaters, which emerged in the early 1900s, and were small, inexpensive theaters that showed continuous films to audiences for a nickel, a major step in making cinema widely accessible. Many nickelodeons were located within or adjacent to amusement parks,¹⁰⁵ where inside “many nickelodeons made audience participation and crowd conviviality part of ‘the show’ through added sing-alongs and amateur shows.”¹⁰⁶ By the mid-1900s, audiences could watch and experience films as part of immersive sensory entertainment. As Lauren Rabinovitz highlights, these innovations transformed spectator experiences, turning them into a “new set of detached subject-object relationships to the world-at-large as spectacle.”¹⁰⁷ She argues that “both cinema

and amusement parks were steeped in the sensorial reorientation,” extending “it from the railway journey to their structural organization,” and made this shift “the subject of their pleasures and thrills.”¹⁰⁸ This shift in audience engagement emphasized a form of immersion that combined visual, physical, and social elements to create a more holistic, affective entertainment experience.

At the intersection of Gothic tradition and technological innovation, horror’s history becomes a haunted space, where the spectral echoes of past storytelling traditions are reanimated through the mediums of literature, theater, attractions, and cinema. Whether staged or filmed, horror has always relied on theatricality, spectacle, and the manipulation of space to elicit visceral reactions. The first horror film depicts a haunted attraction or haunted castle drawing on Gothic traditions and theatrical spectacle, functioning as an archival space where these elements are preserved, reimagined, and repackaged for audiences through the film form.

Affectively Driven Immersive Entertainment at the Turn of the Century

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, societal shifts, especially those driven by industrialization and urbanization, fostered new modes of sensory engagement that would lay the groundwork for the horror genre. Early amusement parks, cinema, and technological innovations such as dark rides capitalized on these shifts, using immersive experiences to engage the body and psyche. These various attractions were not only thrilling, they also embodied the disorienting nature of modern life itself, which became a fertile ground for horror. As society grappled with rapid changes, the sensory intensities offered by these spaces offered an escape, but also reflected the growing fears of modernity’s unnatural disruptions. What began as an immersive engagement with novelty evolved into horror’s most potent form, a genre built on emotional intensities and technological sophistication. Horror, in this sense, is not merely an escape from reality, but a confrontation with the terrifying effects of modernity’s

advancements, embodied in the spaces we create for sensation, disorientation, and fear. I argue horror entertainment, specifically through dark rides and other entertainment forms, arose from the sensory intensities and technological innovations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and that these experiences generate “startles of horror,”¹⁰⁹ which are deeply connected to the “shocks of modernity.”¹¹⁰ More specifically, I argue fears of modernity heightened emotional engagement, leading to the evolution of horror as a genre and immersive experiences.

Turn-of-the-century World’s Fairs cultivated immersive spectatorship by teaching audiences how to see, feel, and move through new environments, laying the groundwork for horror’s embodied and affective modes of engagement. These exhibitions familiarized the public with technological innovations while simultaneously reshaping how people perceived space, time, and sensation. Panoramas, for instance, enveloped viewers in massive, continuous painted landscapes that mobilized the body through optical illusion and scale.¹¹¹ Rather than merely observing, viewers felt physically encompassed by the scenery, experiencing a spatial immersion that anticipated later multisensory attractions. This emphasis on bodily engagement intensified with innovations like the Cinéorama at the 1900 Paris Exposition, where ten synchronized projectors surrounded spectators with a 360-degree moving image, simulating hot-air balloon flights over distant locales. These experiences didn’t just represent travel; they evoked its sensations. George Hale’s “Tours and Scenes of the World” (1905) made this bodily simulation explicit, seating viewers inside a stationary railway car while films and mechanical motion created the illusion of international travel.¹¹² These early cinematic “rides” collapsed the boundary between visual media and physical experience, foreshadowing the affective immersion and sensory trickery that define horror’s future spatial environments.

Horror's affective possibilities rose with the sensory intensities of early amusement parks and cinema, both relying on the spectacle and maintaining a "synergistic relationship" by the turn of the century.¹¹³ Thrill-driven attractions emerged by the late nineteenth century, leveraging affective ways to engage the body and the senses. Mechanical rides like the Switchback Railway, introduced at Coney Island in 1884 as the first roller coaster, allowed audiences to engage with a six-miles-per-hour ride, which followed along a straight but hilly track designed for amusement.¹¹⁴ Riders felt an intense physical experience of acceleration, wind, and excitement, creating a heightened sensory response. These rides were more than just fun, they provided the illusion of risk and excitement, allowing participants to shed inhibitions and experience something beyond the ordinary temporarily. By the early twentieth century, eerie amusements had taken root alongside the rise of modern entertainment, from ghost houses debuting at English fairgrounds in 1915 to haunted hayrides weaving ghost stories into rural landscapes. Integral to this lineage is the dark ride—an indoor, track-based amusement attraction that guides riders through a sequence of themed environments using controlled lighting, sound, and motion to evoke narrative and emotional response. As Baker notes, both the haunted dark ride and the haunt itself are "multisensory forms, which fit the core spatial orientation of a theme park," highlighting the shared techniques of disorientation and immersion that defined these early attractions.¹¹⁵

Ndalianis explains that audiences' engagement with horror entertainment like dark rides produces an emotional state akin to "startles," she says, "The startles of horror are responses to the unknown that the world of horror opens up: death and the dead, phobias, the dark, confrontation with the monstrous, and moral decay."¹¹⁶ The difference is that in these spaces, audiences do not utilize an intermediary like a character to empathize with in a horror film—

audiences become the main characters. For Ndalianis, she writes, “In horror rides, the intermediary is no longer present, and it’s we—the ride participants—who become the main character and enter “real” spaces that we can see, smell, touch, hear and even taste; the sensory experience is intense and immediate and relies less on the process of synaesthetic transfer. For the horror rider, the fear of death and bodily destruction is one step closer to being a real threat.”¹¹⁷ The shocks of modernity and the startles of horror compound the experience of engagement in these dark rides and entertainment spaces, overlapping technological thrill and horror-driven fear.

Modern haunted attractions, including walk-through haunts and live-actor performances, owe much to the technological and narrative developments pioneered by these early dark rides. Ndalianis underscores how the “radically new technologies” of modernity—including animatronics, advanced lighting, and ride systems—transformed earlier traditions like phantasmagoria, magic lanterns, and ghost trains into hybridized spectacles emblematic of the theme park experience.¹¹⁸ In this way, dark rides, by integrating the technologies and storytelling strategies of their era, became not only a cornerstone of amusement parks but also a vital precursor to the immersive and sensory-driven haunted attractions of today. In becoming a monster itself, the dark ride exemplifies how technology and storytelling converge to craft immersive, otherworldly experiences that captivate participants. Early dark rides such as Coney Island’s “Cages of Wild Wolves” (1895) and Denmark’s Ghost Train at Tivoli Gardens (1935) laid the groundwork for this transformative medium by combining movement, darkness, and simulated danger.

These early rides, though relatively simple, demonstrated the potential of technology to generate escapism, offering riders a vicarious thrill through their carefully designed settings. The riders want to be deposited into a different world and gain experiences they would not otherwise enjoy, “the purpose of dark rides is to enable a rider’s feeling of escapism by produc[ing] a compelling narrative.”¹¹⁹ As technology advanced, optical illusions like Pepper’s Ghost, and meticulously crafted narratives to engage all the senses. Disney’s use of Omnimovers, or “doom buggies,” exemplified how ride vehicles could be strategically designed to guide audience perspectives, creating controlled, film-like experiences while maintaining the immersive quality of physical spaces. This innovative blend of storytelling and spectacle ensured consistent experiences for massive audiences, leveraging both narrative coherence and technological sophistication. Importantly, such attractions did not pit narrative against spectacle but instead utilized their interplay to spark affective responses from participants.

Dark rides serve as a crucial intersection of horror and attraction history, exemplifying how the genre’s affective power extends beyond cinema into embodied, spatialized experiences. Emerging in the early twentieth century, dark rides rely on the horror genre’s visceral appeals, shocks, jolts, screams, and disorientation, to immerse audiences in tightly choreographed encounters with fear. While not all dark rides are horror-themed (as seen in Disneyland’s *Peter Pan* or *It’s a Small World*), many lean into horror’s structure and aesthetic. As Angela Ndalianis explains, the genre’s impact on the body and senses is “far more direct and with an immediacy that’s absent in film spectatorship,” emphasizing the distinctive affective mechanics of horror in themed attractions.¹²⁰ Drawing on Noel Carroll’s theory of “art-horror,” these rides provoke fear, dread, and disgust—emotions that define the genre across media but become especially intensified in immersive environments.¹²¹ Noel Carroll explains that horror is fundamentally

affect-driven, stating, “The cross-art, cross-media genre of horror takes its title from the emotion it characteristically or rather ideally promotes; this emotion constitutes the identifying mark of horror.”¹²² Ndalianis builds on this by showing how dark rides adopt the same narrative logic as horror films: “an entry into an enclosed space—a journey into the dark,” where participants surrender control as the horror unfolds around them.¹²³ Dark rides entertain, while ritualizing the confrontation with mortality. Brandon Kwiatek describes them as “a ride through Halloween,” drawing from the “Western imagination of death, evil, hell.”¹²⁴ These rides echo mythic journeys—Gilgamesh, Odysseus, Orpheus—inviting participants into symbolic underworlds via the vehicle of the ride buggy, plunging them into orchestrated horrors that speak to deeper cultural anxieties around death and the unknown.¹²⁵

Societal understandings of horror must expand to account for the hybrid nature of dark rides. Ndalianis argues that while modern attractions like *The Amazing Adventures of Spider-Man* or *Indiana Jones Adventure* are not strictly horror in their narrative content, “from the perspective of a body’s reaction to being hunted, haunted and terrorized by the horror machine that drives the ride technology, such attractions come very close to being horror experiences.”¹²⁶ Ndalianis draws on Carroll’s notion of the cinematic monster as a “violation of nature,” suggesting that the hybrid machines powering rides like *Revenge of the Mummy* or *Jurassic Park* embody their own monstrosity.¹²⁷ Sophisticated technologies like these create unnatural, hybrid experiences where mummies and tyrannosaurs seem to occupy the same space as the visitor, threatening their existence. In this sense, the dark ride not only showcases monsters but becomes one itself, embodying the transgressive and terrifying essence of horror.¹²⁸ These emotional intensities define the horror genre, emphasizing its power to affect and immerse audiences. It’s not entirely surprising that horror thrives in spaces that foster such visceral engagements, as they

provide a direct conduit for the intense feelings that characterize the genre. What I aim to reveal is not so much a new concept, but a redefinition of the boundaries of horror, where affective experiences rooted in modernity, whether through amusement or technological innovation—are sensed as monstrous. These experiences deviate from nature, disrupting human norms and environments, and in doing so, embody a form of harm.

These immersive experiences entertained as much as they responded to the sensory overload of industrial life, escalating the threshold of shock in a culture increasingly defined by noise, novelty, and technological distraction. Interestingly, experiencing modernity was likened to a “shock” or jolt.¹²⁹ Modernity, spanning the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is defined by “societies organized around industrialization, urbanization, and mass communication and transportation.”¹³⁰ This era, as Rabinovitz describes, inundated individuals with “shocks”—sensory and physical jolts arising from the rapid noise, speed, and congestion of city life.¹³¹ These “shocks of modernity” reoriented individuals to the “speed and distance” while “assault[ing]” their senses with “noise, congestion, and visual bombardments in the modern city.”¹³² Rabinovitz continues, stating, “movies and amusement parks served their audiences by adjusting them to new features of city life, its modernization, consumerism, and alienation,” providing entertaining distractions that mirrored the intensity of the modern world.¹³³ With every piece of technology the affective intensities continued to climb, making the mediation of terror more immediate.

Haunted Attraction Industry From the 1900s to Present

The evolution of haunted attractions from the 1900s to the present day encapsulates the convergence of Halloween traditions, technological advancements, and cultural shifts, predicated on social desires and fears. These attractions blend ancient fears with the growing influence of

horror cinema, special effects, and immersive entertainment, all of which have become central to contemporary horror. Haunted attractions, once small, community-driven events, have transformed into elaborate, large-scale spectacles that now dominate the fall season, mirroring the broader consumer evolution of Halloween. As Hoedt explains, haunted attractions although “lacking a formal history,” haunt culture is largely “based around oral storytelling, sharing best and worst scares,” discussing the creation of theatrical sets, makeup, and props.¹³⁴ The haunted attraction industry has grown into a multi-million-dollar global business,¹³⁵ marked by significant milestones, technology innovations, tragic events, and challenges. Hoedt writes haunted attractions have been “integral” to celebrating Halloween and developed a “thriving subculture with a turnover of millions of dollars, numerous trade conventions and armies of loyal followers, the scare industry and its fans are often regarded in a negative light as many questions these ‘weirdos’ who like to scare and be scared.”¹³⁶ Although being regarded with skepticism, with outsiders questioning the appeal of those who enjoy being scared, the haunted attraction industry has flourished into a vibrant subculture driven by creativity, passion, and innovation.

Today, they continue to evolve, adapting to new technologies and shifting social contexts while meeting the demands of increasingly sophisticated audiences. In this final section, I sketch the history of haunts from the modest, homegrown Halloween parties of the early twentieth century to the sophisticated entertainment complexes of today. I trace the industry’s professionalization, economic impact, and cultural relevance, contextualizing how haunted attractions continue to evolve in response to shifting technologies, societal demands, and changing tastes in horror and immersive experiences. Building on earlier discussions of affective

intensity and sensory engagement, this section will demonstrate how haunted attractions are both a product of and a reflection of contemporary consumer culture, continuing to serve as sites where fear, spectacle, and innovation intersect.

1900s–1940s: The Era of Commodification

Horror entertainment truly hit a stride in the late 1920s and 1930s, providing “cheap thrills to a Depression-staggered public.”¹³⁷ Amusement parks in the U.S. by the 1930s had firmly established eerie staples like “classic wooden roller coasters, creepy fun houses, and dark rides.”¹³⁸ The motorized “Laff in the Dark” ride, “in which a swiveling passenger car followed a single, sinuous track” filled with “pop-up images of skeletons, devils, and witches, through the traditional fun-house maze,” exemplified the macabre appeal of these attractions.¹³⁹ The fun-house maze, in particular, would go on to inspire future generations of Halloween-themed attractions.¹⁴⁰ During the same period, Halloween hayrides and midnight “spook shows” gained popularity, with magicians combining magic tricks, live séances, and horror-themed performances to add a touch of suspense and mystery to the season.¹⁴¹ The attractions of amusement parks evolved into horror realms, as much as the cinematic experiences enhanced these spaces with spectacle and audience interaction. Just as the cinema of attractions prioritized spectacle and audience engagement over narrative coherence, offering a “plotless [...] series of transformations [were] strung together with little connection and certainly no characterizations.”¹⁴²

As entertainment evolved, however, spectacle and narrative began to intertwine, creating a hybrid form that captivated audiences. “Spook shows” or “midnight ghost shows” became popular fixtures in movie theaters, and as Beth Kattelman describes, “Midnight ghost shows (also known as ‘midnight spook shows,’ or ‘spookers’) were magic shows presented on the

stages of movie theatres across America throughout the first half of the twentieth century.”¹⁴³ The shows blended magic, horror, and theatrical illusions, creating suspenseful atmospheres culminating in luminous apparitions materialized throughout the theater. Figures like Philip Morris, a prominent ghost show operator, bridged the gap between stage and screen with ventures such as *Dr. Evil's Horror Theatre* (1960–1968), merging live performance with cinematic elements to satisfy the public's appetite for horror.¹⁴⁴ The midnight “ghost shows” transitioned to being labeled “horror shows” or “monster shows,” which featured performances prior to horror film screenings becoming “exemplars of a horror-fan culture.”¹⁴⁵ Additionally, these presentations provided a “trans-medial synergy between their staged magic shows and the merging motion-picture industry that allowed them to thrive.”¹⁴⁶ These entertainment innovations were built on a shared interest in fear and spectacle, mobilizing interested audiences into what would become a key element of Halloween culture—the haunted attraction.

Filmmakers like William Castle further advanced this convergence in the mid-twentieth century, capitalizing on cinema's supernatural ties with material tricks to evoke fearful pleasures during screenings. Castle likened the suspense of horror films to a rollercoaster ride, describing the viewing process as one of “excitement, screams, [and] thrills, without any real danger.”¹⁴⁷ Through interactive gimmicks, such as vibrating seats, flying skeletons, and audience props, Castle illustrated cinema's potential to be a theatrical, spatial, and sensational experience. This evolution of spectacle, narrative, and technology directly influenced the haunted attractions of today. As immersive horror experiences continue to draw from theater, cinema, and emerging technologies, they bridge the past and present to produce shock, fear, and fright for audiences

both on- and off-screen. Haunted attractions, blending Gothic storytelling traditions with innovative technologies and interactive elements, have become a cornerstone of the horror genre, maintaining its rich tradition of immersive fear experiences.

The rise of haunted attractions, however, cannot be directly linked to these burgeoning dark public amusements and cinematic shows alone. The precise origins of the haunted attraction industry remain elusive, but their emergence can be traced to the broader evolution of Halloween festivities. At their core, these spaces offered a playful confrontation with death—not the literal deaths of loved ones, but symbolic death: fear of the unknown, anxieties about the afterlife, or the eerie passage of time marked by the changing seasons. By the early 1900s, U.S. schools and communities had adopted the concept of “haunted houses” to keep children occupied and prevent mischief on Halloween. In 1906, in the *Los Angeles Herald* the Tri Sigma fraternity entertained with a “haunted house,” where “the rooms were prettily decorated with the club colors and Halloween oddities and amusements.”¹⁴⁸ In 1910, the *Winslow Daily Mail* in Arizona reported on a Halloween party that featured a “haunted house” with an “old witch and her den” as one of the main attractions.¹⁴⁹ These early haunted attractions were often staged within private homes or community centers, blending spooky fun with familiar settings. Significantly, many of them were also organized for charity or civic fundraising, such as the 1920 haunted house hosted by the Wilson School P.T.A. in Phoenix, which included “ghost stories told by a real ghost” and a “harrowing and nerve-racking” maze to raise money for the school library.¹⁵⁰ The pairing of fear-based entertainment with moral or educational causes points to haunted houses as communal rituals, or spaces where fear could be safely experienced, reimagined, and even put to work for the public good.

Particularly significant during the Great Depression, a time marked by economic uncertainty, fear, and widespread hardship, Halloween collectivized the efforts of the community. Halloween-themed social gatherings and festivities increased in the 1930s, Publications offering advice on hosting Halloween parties recommended using “fun-house techniques at home,” such as “dark walkways” where guests could handle “wet, slimy objects meant to represent human eyeballs and brains.”¹⁵¹ When really, these objects would be “peeled grapes and congealed masses of cold pasta, chicken giblets, and the like.”¹⁵² Around the same time, the Great Depression spurred the rise of charitable “haunts.”¹⁵³ According to Morton, this period likely marked a pivotal moment for the haunted attraction industry, with parents and communities creating “trails of terror” to keep pranking children entertained and out of trouble.¹⁵⁴ Morton highlights an example from a 1937 party pamphlet that describes a “trail of terror” with eerie sensory experiences: “An outside entrance leads to a rendezvous with ghosts and witches in the cellar or attic. Hang old fur, strips of raw liver on walls [...] Weary moans and howls come from dark corners [...] At one place ‘Tige,’ a guard dressed as a dog, suddenly jumps out, barking and growling.”¹⁵⁵ This detailed description reveals the sensorial immersion that became central to haunted houses, with thematic sections like “Ghouls Gaol,” “Mad House,” and “Tunnel of Terrors,” offering tips like renting a creepy house for the event or using electric shocks for added scares.¹⁵⁶ This suggests a transition from simple neighborhood fright to an elaborate, theatrical form of entertainment.

As these early haunted events became more elaborate, they also began to take on symbolic significance, providing a momentary escape from societal fears and the materialistic culture of the time.¹⁵⁷ As Skal notes, the house itself is an “elastic and evocative symbol of the self,” suggesting that these early haunted experiences—whether in a school, a community event,

or at home—were not just about terror but about confronting deeper psychological and cultural tensions.¹⁵⁸ Haunted houses offered a temporary “respiritualization” of a secular world, allowing participants to momentarily step outside of the harsh realities of economic distress and social upheaval.¹⁵⁹ Haunts became a communal act, reaffirming bonds and offering a brief escape from the harshness of the era.¹⁶⁰ In 1933, across the U.S., “Black Halloween” became infamous for the extensive property damage caused by “mischievous boys” and pranksters, including “sawing down telephone poles, overturning automobiles, opening fire hydrants to flood city streets, and openly taunting the police.”¹⁶¹ The local governments, “already struggling economically, were overwhelmed” by the chaos and “considered banning Halloween altogether.”¹⁶² In response, more organized efforts were put in place to entertain children and manage the disruption. Organizations large and small from civic groups like the YMCA and the Boy Scouts, to schools, chambers of commerce, and other merchant associations “took an active part in distracting would-be Halloween pranksters” by offering “boys other ways to celebrate Halloween, including parties, parades, costuming, carnivals, and contests.”¹⁶³ Money during the late 1920s and 1930s “was scarce,” and planning elaborate Halloween parties were not “cheap,” leading to neighbors pooling their resources to create “house-to-house party,” where “groups of children were led from one house to the next, each home hosting a different themed activity.”¹⁶⁴ This practice would soon evolve into one of the most cherished of all American Halloween traditions: trick-or-treating.

As trick-or-treating spread, children began going door-to-door for candy, a practice that reflected the desire for simple joys during a time of economic and social uncertainty. These candy-driven rituals helped create a sense of normalcy and communal engagement in the midst of hardship. As communities sought low-cost ways to celebrate during the Depression, the rise of

“home haunts” became a popular solution. In *The Little Rascals* 1938 comedy short film, “Hide and Shriek,” the growing trend of haunted houses and candy consumption in popular culture is humorously captured. In the episode, a group of detectives investigating a “case of the missing candy” is suddenly trapped in a haunted house attraction at an amusement pier.¹⁶⁵ As the characters encounter fake ghosts, skeletons, monsters, and eerie sounds, their over-the-top fear mirrors the real-world growing influence of haunted houses. In a comedic twist, Alfalfa, overcome with fright, declares, “Please don’t ever mention candy or detectives to me again,” humorously closing his “Eagle Eye Detektive-Agency [sic]” for good.¹⁶⁶ The candy element in this episode ties into the broader context of Halloween’s commercialization, linking the ritual of candy consumption with the emerging popularity of haunted attractions. The term “trick-or-treat” first appeared in national discourse in 1939 in an article titled “A Victim of the Window-Soaping Brigade?” in the magazine *The American Home* (1928-1977). The piece referred to “trick or treat” as an “age-old Halloween salutation,” suggesting that it had evolved from a tactic to redirect rowdy pranks into a more controlled, playful tradition.¹⁶⁷

Despite this early mention, the practice of going door-to-door for candy did not become widespread until after World War II, when the end of rationing and the return of luxuries like candy made the tradition possible on a national scale.¹⁶⁸ Sugar rationing began in 1942 and severely limited the availability of treats for trick-or-treaters. The war also affected iconic attractions like Madame Tussaud’s, which suffered damage when a German bomb hit its London location in 1940.¹⁶⁹ These setbacks may have dampened Halloween attractions, but they resumed when the war ended, recovering in the late 1940s, as sugar supplies returned to normal and trick-or-treating resumed in full force by 1947. Upon resuming, “trick or treat had infiltrated virtually every area of America, spurred on by a huge boom in developing new suburban neighbourhoods.

It had become the pre-eminent activity of Halloween.”¹⁷⁰ The trick-or-treating tradition was furthered by the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), popularizing the tradition with charity-driven efforts with a launched campaign in 1950.¹⁷¹ By distributing cardboard boxes for children to collect spare change while trick or treating, the campaign raised over “\$175 million for the U.S. Fund for UNICEF.”¹⁷² In the 1950s, Disney helped solidify Halloween practices in popular culture with its 1952 animated short *Trick or Treat*, featuring iconic characters like Donald Duck. Alongside comics, magazines, and radio and television shows, this solidified the phrase “trick or treat” in public consciousness.¹⁷³

Halloween retains elements of its history as a time to confront death and celebrate life, but it has become an incredibly commercialized holiday. From its humble beginnings as a localized tradition, Halloween has taken on various forms, starting as a “harvest festival,” a moonlit stage for young romance, an “autumnal party” for the grown-ups, and a trick-or-treat playground for candy-hungry kids.¹⁷⁴ The enduring appeal of Halloween lies in its flexibility. Halloween’s symbolism and customs are flexible enough to appeal to diverse groups, varying enough to encompass many regions, ethnicities, religions, and occupations.¹⁷⁵ As Russell W. Belk observes, Halloween’s “spooky effects” reflect its commercialization,¹⁷⁶ with haunted attractions emerging as both cultural and commercial spaces where fear is explored through encounters with the permeability of life and death. Belk further emphasizes Halloween’s growing significance as a vehicle for corporate and consumer interests, noting that marketplace trends subtly co-op the holiday.¹⁷⁷ This commercialization extends beyond the United States, transforming Halloween into what Lisa Morton describes as “a heavily commercialized product”

with global appeal.¹⁷⁸ Halloween's most astonishing transformation may be its shift from a regional tradition to a worldwide celebration, balancing its localized roots with its commercial reinvention.

1950s–1960s: The Era of Professionalization

In the postwar years, Halloween evolved from a holiday dominated by mischievous pranks to a more family-oriented celebration. The transition from outward public to inward private events and entertainment is examined by Lynn Spiegel who writes, in the years following WWII, “the primary site of exhibition for spectator amusements was transferred from the public space of the movie theater to the private space of the home.”¹⁷⁹ In this postwar era, Spiegel observes, public forms of entertainment, like movie theaters, were replaced by more intimate, private forms of entertainment within the home, like television. However, this period's rise of haunted houses is directly tied to this domestic shift. Just as women had orchestrated home-based Halloween parties and smaller haunted house charity drives in the past, they also became central figures in organizing these early haunted attractions. Haunted houses were not just an entertainment trend, but they were an extension of women's role in shaping domestic, family-friendly holiday celebrations. The home, now the central space for Halloween activities, also became a space of spookiness, where women's organizing efforts continued to bring the community together through larger charity-driven haunts. These haunted houses were deeply intertwined with the domestic sphere—conceived, planned, and executed largely by women who sought to bring a bit of the thrill of the outside world into the family-centered, safe space of home and community.

The significance of women's work in Halloween entertainment by spearheading events in their homes, schools, and communities is reflected in the entertainment of the time. In 1948, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* radio show (1944-1949) aired an episode in which the couple sneaks into a supposed haunted house. Ozzie invites his wife, Harriet, to tag along because he is too scared to go alone, and one of the jokes of the episode centers around the reversal of traditional gender roles, while Ozzie is fearful, Harriet remains calm and collected, even shushing his worried ramblings with a line, "Shhh. You might frighten the ghosts." Ozzie also reminisces on his childhood days when he would go and break into empty and haunted houses, which is what sparks his sons to also be interested in the same practice. However, the paranormal haunted house is more seen as a artificial attraction. The real scare turns out to be their friend Thorny, who jumps out to frighten them, illustrating the haunted house is really haunted by people playing pranks. This lighthearted portrayal of women's cool-headedness in the face of spooky situations reflects the gender dynamics of Halloween celebrations, which became more staged, artificial, and manufactured, stemming from supernatural ghost stories. Women's roles in Halloween festivities were further highlighted when the radio show turned into a sitcom for television with the same name, *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (1952-1966), with an episode titled "Halloween Party" (1952), where the men try to take charge of the party planning with what Ozzie refers to as "typical masculine efficiency." However, their plans quickly fall apart when they fail to secure a venue or even arrange refreshments, exposing their lack of organizational skills and said, "masculine efficiency." The humor arises when the women step in and save the day, quickly taking over and easily managing the party's details. This dynamic, although fictional, highlights how women were central to the domestic planning of family-centered events and increasingly took on leadership roles in organizing community-wide

activities within the home and Halloween charity events revolving around kids. As Halloween became more commercialized and charity-driven, it became more gendered, normalizing women-led organizations that uphold Halloween traditions by utilizing haunted houses as a means of both entertaining the community and raising funds for important causes.

In the 1950s, women-led organizations in California began organizing haunted house attractions as a way to bring the community together and raise funds for charitable causes. One of the earliest examples was the San Mateo Haunted House, which opened in 1956 and operated for two decades, sponsored by the Children's Health Home Junior Auxiliary.¹⁸⁰ Many haunted houses were developed and presented at schools, playgrounds, churches, or abandoned haunted houses in the area. What became formidable was the annual reoccurrence of these women-led haunted houses, building on their equipment, knowledge, and makeup and making the haunts better every year. Although little is known about their early operations, the impact inspired other organizations to follow suit based on their success. For example, in 1964, the Contra Costa Times talked about a new National Assistance League, opening a chapter and to qualify for full status as this "social-philanthropic organization," they suggested holding a fundraiser similar to the "Haunted House" that is "run by the San Mateo County League."¹⁸¹ The same year another organization called the Assistance Guild was also planning a sophisticated haunt with trick wiring and special effects. As Mrs. John Selley, the "chairman" of the organization, said, "We got the idea from the San Mateo group. They raised \$100,000 on it in 1963, and even more this year although they had difficulty getting a house that wouldn't be used again." The San Mateo haunted house had a reputation all its own and was quite successful for the time. Interestingly, these early haunted attractions were built from condemned houses that would be torn down after the holiday. The San Mateo haunted house became a model of seasonal innovation and civic

engagement, raising substantial funds while generating regional interest. That these early haunted attractions were often built inside condemned houses, spaces on the verge of demolition, speaks to Halloween's liminal power. Although safety regulations still needed to be met to operate the haunted attractions, according to an article in the *Oakland Tribune* in 1960, stating, "the 'haunted house' project was a worthy one," so long as, "the insurance companies and the building inspector are satisfied."¹⁸² These were not just fundraising sites, but temporary thresholds: between public safety and controlled danger, between ruin and reinvention, and between the everyday and the uncanny. Even as regulations had to be met, their success hinged on embracing the instability and creative possibility that the Halloween season affords as ephemeral and fleeting.

Before the rise of the Jaycees (a notable reference to the origins of haunted attractions from the industry), women-led organizations like the San Bernardino Junior Women's Club played a foundational role in shaping the modern haunted house industry, transforming Halloween into a space for imaginative community-building, playful horror, and charitable innovation. In 1958, the San Bernardino Haunted House opened,¹⁸³ and in 1959, it introduced an "International Spooks" theme, showcasing frightening figures and Halloween customs from around the world.¹⁸⁴ These attractions became integral parts of local Halloween celebrations, as traditional spook shows began to wane,¹⁸⁵ they were replaced with community-driven haunted experiences. In an article from the *San Bernardino Sun-Telegram*, The Junior Women's Club took over the San Bernardino Haunted House in the late 1950s, and to keep up with the growing popularity of these events, they hired a make-believe public relations "haunted house expert" featured in photos as a skeleton wearing a top hat (see fig. 3).¹⁸⁶ This expert, a tongue-in-cheek character named Montgomery Thaddeus Bones Jr. (M. T. Bones), was promoted as having

extensive experience in spooky matters, but unfortunately had to leave after their first season to serve as a technical advisor for none other than Boris Karloff for his upcoming movie.¹⁸⁷ But thankfully, Bones left Hyman (Hy) O. Spirit in his place, a more than qualified PR person with qualifications including “five years at a cemetery in New England,” “fifteen years at a haunted house in South Carolina,” and of course a degree from “Death Valley University with a major in Poltergeistery.”¹⁸⁸

Hilariously, this running gag of hiring haunt experts went on between 1960-1963 in the *San Bernardino Sun-Telegram*. The women’s efforts to promote the haunted house, with playful public relations stunts like staging a photo op with Spirit off the plane (see fig. 4), infusing playful humor and creativity into their marketing efforts. These humorous, pun-filled publicity tactics highlight how these women not only organized community events but also pioneered innovative ways to put the fun in fundraising and the spirit in spirited Halloween celebrations. These early women-led organizations producing haunted houses are important, as the history of haunts is usually attributed to the work of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, or the Jaycees, originally a men’s organization in the 1970s. However, this evidence suggests that they were preceded by the charity efforts of women’s organizations which inspired the creation and implementation of the Jaycees’ haunts across the U.S. These early women-led organizations producing haunted houses are important, as the history of haunts is usually attributed to the work of the Junior Chamber of Commerce, or the Jaycees, originally a men’s organization that rose to prominence in the 1970s. However, this evidence suggests that they were preceded by the charity efforts of women’s groups who laid the groundwork for what would become a national model of organized fright. Whereas women’s haunted houses often framed Halloween as a time for

humorous roleplay, community spirit, and creative philanthropy, the Jaycees increasingly positioned Halloween as an opportunity for professionalized thrills, larger-scale spectacle, and civic branding.



Figure 3. Junior Women's Club haunted house promotion featuring Mr. Bones. *San Bernardino Sun-Telegram*, 1960.



Figure 4. Junior Women's Club haunted house promotion featuring Hyman O. ("Hy") Spirit. *San Bernardino Sun-Telegram*, 1961.

By the 1960s, haunted attractions were entering a new phase, spurred by technological innovations and increasing professionalization of attractions, reflecting the broader rise of consumer culture. A pivotal moment came in 1961 when Disney began developing animatronics, debuting its first dancing man figure.¹⁸⁹ This development marked a new era in immersive experiences, exemplified by Disney's *Enchanted Tiki Room* (1963) and the animatronic Abraham Lincoln at the 1964 Worlds' Fair.¹⁹⁰ These innovations set a precedent for integrating technology into haunted attractions, transitioning them from simple charity haunts to sophisticated,

interactive experiences. As Ndalianis notes, Disney's innovations blended past visual traditions with cutting-edge technology, creating hybridized, high-tech spectacles that would redefine theme park attractions and,¹⁹¹ subsequently, haunted attractions. While Disney set the stage for technological advancements, traditional charity haunts remained prevalent. For example, the Peter Rabbit Chapter of the Children's Home Society in 1964 developed haunted houses to raise funds for children's adoptions (see fig. 5).¹⁹²



Figure 5. Newspaper advertisement for the Peter Rabbit Haunted House. *The Californian*, 1964.

As haunted attractions evolved in the late 1960s, home haunters and grassroots community organizers played a pivotal role in transforming Halloween from a neighborhood-based celebration into a widespread cultural phenomenon, blending cinematic spectacle, DIY innovation, and public engagement. Mrs. Ben Barnes in Santa Rosa, California, attracted over 400 children with her home haunts witchy displays that same year.¹⁹³ Home haunts continued to

flourish, like Bob Burns' Halloween Extravanzas, starting in 1967, bringing his elaborate yard haunt to life, drawing over 1,200 visitors.¹⁹⁴ He was known for his intricate creations while involving talented technicians from nearby film studios (like Dennis Muren and Rick Baker) to reference horror films and bring his visions to life.¹⁹⁵ His status as a home haunter pushed the boundaries of home-based attractions with interactive effects, laying the groundwork for the increasingly theatrical and sophisticated DIY spirit in haunted attractions. As interest in haunted experiences morphed and expanded beyond suburban homes and into public spaces. The Indianapolis Children's Museum, run by the Women's Guild, opened the longest-running haunted attraction in the country in 1964,¹⁹⁶ while other notable haunted attractions appeared at locations like the Spook House nightclub in San Antonio (1966),¹⁹⁷ the San Mateo Haunt at the Hillsdale Shopping Center (1964),¹⁹⁸ and the Valley Assistance League Haunted House in the Broadway Shopping Center (1968).¹⁹⁹ The Huntington Jaycees Haunted House in Indiana, which began in 1966, was part of a growing network of community-driven events that helped popularize haunted houses as seasonal entertainment nation-wide.²⁰⁰ The Jaycees also contributed to a haunted house in Tulare, California, alongside other local organizations like the Junior Women's Club and Girl Scouts.²⁰¹

1970s: The Era of Commercialization

The growing interest in haunted attractions and fall-themed festivities can be attributed to the surge of charity-sponsored haunts, which boosted engagement with the holiday across the country.²⁰² The 1970s marked the beginning of the commercialization of the haunted attraction industry gaining recognition and prominence in the U.S., with the decade transforming the scope and scale of these events.²⁰³ In the early 1970s, several haunted attractions opened across the nation, like the WSAI Jaycees Haunted House in Cincinnati, Ohio and the opening of the

Hudson Haunted House in Ohio in 1970.²⁰⁴ A key moment came in 1971, when the Jaycees created and distributed a handbook on how to create haunted houses, which sparked a dramatic rise in attractions nationwide.²⁰⁵ The concept spread like wildfire to charity organizations like March of Dimes and Campus Life, and for-profit haunts soon followed, further fueling the popularity of seasonal attractions. In 1973, Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, California, made history by creating one of the first Halloween experiences. "Knott's perfected the formula for transforming an [existing location of their] entire theme park for Halloween, incorporating atmospheric redesigns and walk-through mazes," setting a new standard for commercial haunted attractions.²⁰⁶ Fueled by the success of events like Knott's Scary Farm, this period saw the commercial evolution of haunted attractions.²⁰⁷ More charities began using haunted attractions to earn funds, until "several charity haunts around the country [...] started doing huge numbers, and it wasn't long before the entrepreneurial element noticed and started contracting with charities for a percentage of the gross, or just doing it themselves."²⁰⁸ Leonard Pickel adds, "Slowly but surely, in almost all markets, the for-profit haunted houses pushed the nonprofit haunted houses out of business, either to extinction or to a much more limited role."²⁰⁹ The haunted attraction industry out-grew the smaller charity organizations for haunts created for-profit because as Pickel explains, "A for-profit haunted house can spend five thousand dollars on a prop, it can spend one hundred thousand dollars on advertising if it wants to. A nonprofit event just can't compete with that kind of capital."²¹⁰ As for-profit haunted houses entered the scene, the financial divide between nonprofits and commercial ventures led to the decline of charity-run haunts.²¹¹ With larger budgets and the ability to invest in elaborate props and extensive advertising, for-profit operations quickly dominated the industry, turning toward the industry's commercialization.

While the for-profit haunted house industry was transforming in the 1970s, another significant development emerged within religious spaces, specifically, churches began shaping Halloween-themed events with a distinct moral focus. Although churches had been hosting haunted houses for Halloween as early as the 1920s, those early events were centered on mystery-solving and community engagement, not religious conversion.²¹² Decorations often included typical Halloween imagery like “cornstalks, witches, cats, and all other things that go to make up a real Hallowe’en party,” as reported by the *San Pedro Daily News* in 1921, referring to a local Methodist Church’s haunted house.²¹³ It was not until the 1970s that Christian haunted houses, such as Scaremare, Hell Houses, and Judgment Houses, emerged, introducing a morality-driven format that sharply contrasted with the secular haunted house tradition.²¹⁴ The establishment of Scaremare at Liberty University in Virginia in 1972 makes it the oldest Hell House and set the stage for a nationwide expansion of Christian-themed haunted attractions.²¹⁵ That same year, Youth for Christ and Campus Life Clubs oversaw the creation of similar events, even producing a Haunted House Manual.²¹⁶ These Christian attractions focused on illustrating the consequences of sin through depictions of abortion, suicide, and LGBTQ+ lifestyles as morally reprehensible. As Hoedt points out, secular scare attractions are designed to thrill and entertain with “fear for fun,” whereas Christian haunted houses have been critiqued for using fear as a tool to encourage conversion.²¹⁷ Unlike their secular counterparts, which create fictional, immersive experiences, Christian Hell Houses depict real-world scenarios, offering a stark contrast in both purpose and execution. Despite these differences, both secular and Christian traditions share a common ancestry in using horror and supernatural imagery to reflect on morality, death, and the consequences of human behavior, linking them to Halloween’s broader themes of confronting existential fears. While this project focuses on the secular haunted

attraction industry, it is essential to consider the role of Christian haunted houses within the wider history of Halloween celebrations. Halloween, rooted in ancient Celtic traditions and religious observances, has long been associated with death, the supernatural, and the afterlife—concepts explored in mythologies, religious texts, and works like Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* (the first part of *The Divine Comedy* [1321]), where the horrors of hell and the consequences of human actions were depicted in vivid ways to evoke fear and encourage salvation. Christian haunted houses draw on this deep connection, and while their purpose differs from that of secular haunts—seeking moral instruction rather than entertainment—their use of fear-based storytelling aligns them with the broader tradition of using fear to confront death.²¹⁸

The 1970s were nothing short of transformative for the haunted attraction industry, as they not only solidified haunted houses as a staple of Halloween but also integrated them into theme parks, local farms, and year-round entertainment. The 1970s marked a defining period of expansion and innovation for the haunted attraction industry, cementing its place in both seasonal entertainment and theme park strategies. Halloween-themed events proved a viable way for amusement parks to boost off-season revenue, with many quickly adopting similar tactics.²¹⁹ In 1974, the opening of The Haunted Schoolhouse in Akron, Ohio, added to the industry’s evolution and remains one of the oldest continuously operating haunted attractions in the U.S., making it a landmark example of the haunt industry’s staying power outside of theme parks or museums.²²⁰ The year-round haunted experiences gained attention with the 1974 debut of the London Dungeon, which is a hybrid of a museum and theatrical performance. The Dungeon initially relied on static displays of historical events, but in the 2000s, began incorporating live theatrical performance displays, featuring actors impersonating historical figures such as plague doctors,

torturers, or judges, to heighten immersion and interact directly with audiences. This shift toward theatricality combined with immersive storytelling attracts audiences, diversifies scares, and influences the future of haunts.²²¹

For-profit haunted attractions continued opening across the country, including locations like Edge of Hell in Kansas City, Missouri, which introduced a thrilling five-story spiral slide to enhance its scares in 1975.²²² That same year, Tom Hilligoss launched The Haunted House Company and released a Haunted House Coloring Book, helping to popularize and standardize the industry.²²³ By 1976, Hilligoss had also created the Jaycees Haunted House Success Kit, which contributed to the continued growth of local haunted houses.²²⁴ The latter part of the 1970s saw the creation of nationally recognized attractions, including Six Flags Great Adventure in New Jersey, adding The Haunted House attraction in 1978.²²⁵ Despite the tragic fire at Luna Park's Ghost Train ride in 1979, which killed seven people and raised safety concerns worldwide,²²⁶ the decade closed on a high note with the establishment of Allen's Haunted Hayrides in Smock, Pennsylvania, which would go on to become the longest-running haunted hayride in the nation. The decade saw the rise of for-profit ventures like The Haunted Schoolhouse, The Edge of Hell, and Allen's Haunted Hayrides, alongside the establishment of permanent attractions like the London Dungeon. All of these haunted attraction experiences, including the charity-driven haunts, such as The Hudson Haunted House, continue to operate to this day. The 1970s laid the groundwork for the massive commercialization and evolution of the industry, forever changing the way Halloween is celebrated and securing haunted attractions as a vital and enduring part of America's entertainment landscape.

1980s–1990s: The Standardization and Cross-Industry Integration

The 1980s were a decade of both significant growth and tragic events for the haunted attraction industry. Haunted hayrides became a national sensation, with new attractions opening across the country, like Fright Manor in Indianapolis (1982) and the Rocky Point Haunted House in Salt Lake City, Utah (1986) gained prominence.²²⁷ The decade also saw the industry confront devastating tragedies. In 1984, a fire at Six Flags Great Adventure's Haunted Castle killed eight teenagers, sparking a major reevaluation of safety standards.²²⁸ The fire, caused by a lighter igniting flammable materials in the attraction, led to Six Flags implementing a \$5.2 million fire-safety system.²²⁹ Legal battles over the fire's aftermath brought heightened scrutiny to local and state regulations.²³⁰ Then, in 1986, Universal Studios faced a tragic incident during their Halloween Horror Night event when 20-year-old employee Paul Rebalde was killed by a tram while performing a horror stunt.²³¹ The company pledged to improve safety measures, but the incident left the Universal Studios workers in shock, and unprecedented in its twenty-two year history.²³² Despite these setbacks, the 1980s further solidified the haunted attraction industry's growth and pushed it to prioritize safety alongside the thrills. However, the lack of uniform federal regulations remained a challenge. While theme parks have more standardized safety measures, many local haunts are subject to varying municipal fire and safety codes. Without another major disaster, the industry's safety issues have often been overlooked.

The late 1980s to the 1990s marked a transformative period for haunted attractions, blending traditional scares with new technologies, mainstream appeal, and the strategic inclusion of horror icons. The 1980s marked a crucial era for haunted attractions, as the real-world challenges of safety concerns collided with the fictional thrills of horror movies. The rise of the horror film genre, particularly slasher films like *Friday the 13th* (1980) and *A Nightmare on Elm*

Street (1984), influenced many haunted houses to adopt similar themes, incorporating iconic villains like Freddy Krueger and Jason Voorhees. This shift signaled a broader cultural change, as younger audiences, shaped by television and film, brought different expectations to community-based haunted events. In an interview with James, a former Jaycee and HAA president, he recalled his experience implementing horror movie characters into their haunted house. He joined the Jaycees in 1986, where their haunted house was already an established tradition dating back to 1967. While he wasn't initially familiar with the horror genre, he learned quickly. He shared a humorous story about how, after *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was released, children kept asking for Freddy Krueger.²³³ Not knowing who he was, James joked about whether Freddy was a member of their group. He stated, "It's funny because, like I said, I wasn't the horror movie guy and I was just trying to help run things and just learn as I went along. I learned I didn't know my characters."²³⁴ Eventually, the team acquired a Freddy Krueger costume, marking a turning point in the haunt's transformation. This moment not only illustrates how haunts began to incorporate pop culture references to stay relevant but also underscores a generational shift in the meaning of Halloween—from locally produced, community-centered fright to a more commercial, media-saturated experience driven by fan expectations.

Universal Studios was a major driver of this change. Following the success of Knott's and Disneyland, the park introduced *Fright Nights* in Orlando in 1991, later rebranding it as *Halloween Horror Nights* in 1992.²³⁵ This event, which featured multiple no-touch haunts and scare zones, set the standard for large-scale theme park Halloween events. Its success led to a 1997 (re)expansion to Universal Hollywood, incorporating elaborate maze designs and partnerships with celebrities.²³⁶ Following their success, "more than two dozen theme park Halloween events began in the 1980s–1990s."²³⁷ The decade also shifted towards more

integrated collaborations between haunts and famous personalities. Horror writer and filmmaker Clive Barker was hired in 1998 to design *Freakz* at Universal, marking a departure from mass-produced attractions with his custom-designed characters and sets.²³⁸ This trend of celebrity involvement was not limited to theme parks. *Spookyworld* (1991) in Massachusetts,²³⁹ for example, featured a roster of horror celebrities such as Linda Blair, Elvira, Mickey Rooney, and Tiny Tim, capitalizing on their star power to attract visitors.²⁴⁰

Pasaje del Terror inspired other attractions, including *Terror on Church Street*, which set the standard for theatrical haunted houses in the U.S. It was one of the first year-round, permanent haunted attractions and was renowned for its high-level production, complete with street performers, gift shops, and exclusive photos capturing guests' reactions. Its dramatic presentations and use of high-end theatrical videos helped elevate the haunt experience and set a new precedent for the industry. While large-scale theme park events were gaining traction, independent haunts also flourished globally. One notable example is *Pasaje del Terror*, which originated in Spain in 1988. Combining elements of horror, special effects, and theater, it quickly became a sensation.²⁴¹ The attraction's success led to its expansion across Europe and beyond, with permanent installations in theme parks in cities like Madrid, Barcelona, and Malaga. By 1991, *Pasaje del Terror* made its U.S. debut as *Terror on Church Street* in Orlando, where it became a major attraction, even though it was juxtaposed by the presence of nearby Disney's "happiest place on Earth."²⁴² The success of *Terror on Church Street* was further amplified by the involvement of horror icon Anthony Perkins, best known for his role in *Psycho* (1960). Perkins became the spokesperson for the Orlando attraction, praising its ability to push the boundaries of fear. His fascination with the experience led him to collaborate closely with *Pasaje del Terror*, contributing promotional ideas through his knowledge of horror, helping expand its reach and

becoming the promotional face and voice of the show in Spain.²⁴³ “I am a theatre lover above all else,” Perkins declared, “This show has been able to get the essence of horror cinema and turn it into a unique theatre experience.”²⁴⁴ His involvement helped boost the attraction’s credibility, leading to its continued expansion in over thirty cities worldwide, including Cancun, Rome, and Tokyo.

The success of haunts in some places contribute to the success of attractions in others, like *The Darkness* (Missouri, 1993), *House of Shock* (Louisiana, 1992), despite concerns about devil worship,²⁴⁵ and *Terror Behind the Walls* at Eastern State Penitentiary (Pennsylvania, 1991) all demonstrated a growing demand for high-quality, non-theme park or franchised haunts.²⁴⁶ These independent venues often functioned as “indie” alternatives, offering impressive sets, art direction, and special effects on a more localized scale.²⁴⁷ For example, Randy Bates capitalized on the success of his family’s haunted hayride, eventually expanding his operation to include the *Bates Motel* and attracting over 60,000 visitors annually by the late 1990s.²⁴⁸ The early 1990s also saw a surge in iconic standalone haunts, many of which became staples of the Halloween season. Attractions such as the *Mt. Healthy Haunted Hall* opened (Ohio, 1990),²⁴⁹ *The Beast* (Missouri, 1991),²⁵⁰ *Haunted Hoochie* (Ohio, 1991),²⁵¹ *Headless Horseman Hayrides* (New York, 1992), *Headless Horseman Hayrides* (1992), *Thrillvania Thrill Park* opened (Texas 1996),²⁵² *Bates Motel* (Pennsylvania 1996),²⁵³ *Netherworld* (Georgia 1997),²⁵⁴ *USS Nightmare* (Kentucky, 1998),²⁵⁵ and in New York,²⁵⁶ brought large-scale haunts to a broader public. In addition to these for-profit ventures, charity-based haunts like *Hangman’s Haunted House* (Texas 1988) continued to flourish, demonstrating the continued flourishing of haunts even outside the profit sector, though not as many as decades previously.²⁵⁷

Technological advances and the rise of the Internet in the mid-1990s played a pivotal role in shaping the haunted attraction industry and fostering a connected trade community. In 1994, Pickel, a key figure in the haunted attraction world, co-founded *Haunted Attraction Magazine*, which became a vital resource for professionals in the industry.²⁵⁸ Building on this momentum, the founding of Hauntworld.com in the mid-1990s created an online hub where enthusiasts and professionals could exchange ideas, share advice, and promote best practices. These platforms helped lay the groundwork for the formation of the International Association of Haunted Attractions (IAHA) in 1997.²⁵⁹ Spearheaded by Leonard, the IAHA marked a milestone in standardizing safety and operational guidelines for haunted attractions. The association quickly grew to 150 members and expanded its influence throughout the decade. Additionally, Randy Schadel's influential haunted house reviews, launched in 1996, further raised awareness about quality and safety standards, helping to professionalize the industry.²⁶⁰ The haunted attraction industry also experienced a wave of professionalization and technological innovation. The mid-2000s saw increased media coverage and the launch of the industry's first national PR campaign in 2005, paid for by America Haunts, which pushed haunted houses into a mainstream phenomenon.²⁶¹ These attractions were no longer just dark spaces, with sheets on the walls, splattered in fake blood, haunts they became showcases for cutting-edge technology. Additionally, the tradeshow for haunts grew with the *Midwest Haunters Convention* in 2004,²⁶² and HAuNTcon (Haunted Attraction National Tradeshow and Convention) was established in 2004, also by Pickel.²⁶³ The growth of interest in haunts was pushed through educational efforts in media and tradeshow organizing, further solidifying the industry's cultural relevance, marking a period of both creative expansion and increased public interest.

One of the most transformative events in the 1990s was the rise of digital and mechanical effects, made more accessible through vendors like Distortions Unlimited. Founded in 1978 in Greeley, Colorado, Distortions revolutionized the industry with high-tech animatronics and props. This success sparked a boom in the haunt vendor industry, as more companies began offering innovative props, animations, and special effects. At the 1994 Transworld Halloween Show, Distortions introduced *The Electric Chair*, a motorized animatronic prop priced at \$4,500—a steep cost at the time (see fig. 6).²⁶⁴ The prop featured a lifelike prisoner violently convulsing and screaming as if being electrocuted, complete with shaking, smoke, and flashing lights. Despite its price, it became a massive hit, with haunted attractions across the U.S. featuring it as a key attraction.²⁶⁵ The *Electric Chair* elevated the aesthetic of haunted houses and demonstrated that haunts were willing to invest heavily in cutting-edge technology.²⁶⁶ By the turn of the millennium, haunted attractions were firmly established as a key component of Halloween entertainment, with significant advancements in safety, artistic direction, and technology setting the stage for future growth and innovation. Distortions' risk paid off, establishing them as a leader in the industry and inspiring the creation of a diverse marketplace for haunted house products.

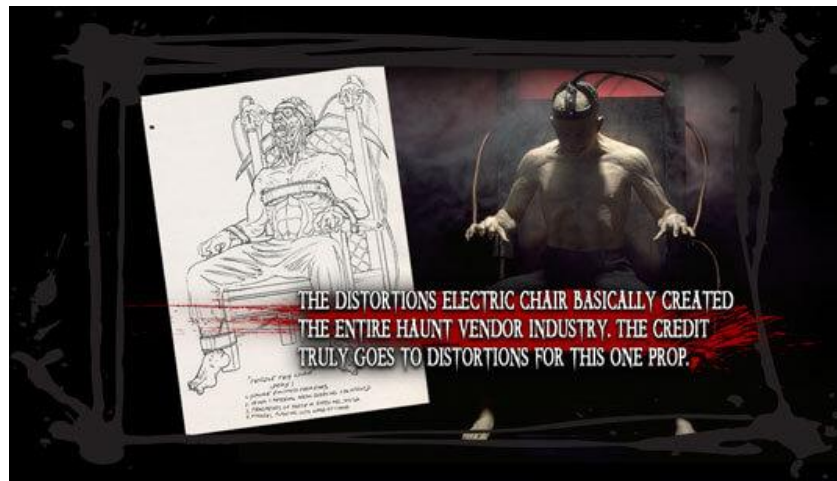


Figure 6. Electric Chair animatronic with sketch by Distortions Unlimited. Image courtesy of HauntWorld.com, Larry Kirschner.

2000s–Present: The Era of Modernization and Corporate Expansion

The early 2000s marked a period of significant international growth for the haunted attraction industry, transforming it into a global entertainment phenomenon. In Europe, Halloween-themed events began to take hold in countries like Belgium, France, the Netherlands, and the UK, establishing haunted attractions as a cultural fixture and developing a growing haunt industry.²⁶⁷ In 2007, *Walibi Belgium* introduced *Fright Nights*, a Halloween festival that drew record crowds by converting the park's attractions into intense mazes and scare zones, showcasing a bold new approach to audience interaction.²⁶⁸ In Denmark, *Tivoli Gardens* created a family-friendly Halloween event, drawing large crowds and highlighting the growing demand for Halloween experiences across various demographics.²⁶⁹ Meanwhile, in Asia, *Ocean Park* in Hong Kong led the charge in bringing Western-style haunted attractions to the region. In 2001, the park's *Halloween Bash* introduced Halloween to Hong Kong, a city where the holiday had previously been unfamiliar.²⁷⁰ The event laid the foundation for Halloween's rise in the region,

with media and movies helping to introduce Western horror icons.²⁷¹ Experts like Todd Hougland, Alan Ostrander, and Joel Talacko helped shape the event, making it a pivotal moment for Halloween celebrations in Asia.²⁷² The success of *Ocean Park* inspired other parks, including *Hong Kong Disneyland*, which launched its own Halloween event in 2007, complete with mazes, live actors, and immersive experiences.²⁷³ Halloween's popularity quickly grew in Hong Kong, becoming a major social event that encompassed costume parties, themed restaurant menus, and large-scale celebrations. This expansion was not just cultural but also professional, with U.S. and European experts consulting on new events and training local staff. By the end of the decade, haunted attractions had become a year-round global phenomenon, offering a distinctly international flavor and opening new opportunities for growth in markets worldwide.²⁷⁴

In the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks, many industries feared a sharp decline in consumer spending and a general shift in public sentiment. However, haunted attractions in the United States defied these expectations, continuing to thrive and even grow in terms of monetary capital, technology, and audience interest. While comprehensive data on post-9/11 attendance trends remains limited, industry veterans have frequently pointed to this period as a surprising moment of resilience and even expansion. Allen Hopps—longtime haunter, board member of the Haunted Attraction Association, and creative director of the well-regarded *Dark Hour Haunted House* (Texas 2013) and Stiltbeast Studios—has become one of the most vocal proponents of this narrative. In a 2022 Transworld seminar, Hopps reflected on how the industry has weathered multiple global crises, including 9/11 and the war between Russia and Ukraine, noting that, “The day it happened, we had Russia invading Ukraine, and there was a significant dip in sales, but people came back.” Hopps emphasized that in difficult times, audiences often seek out haunted attractions as a form of catharsis or temporary escape. He shared that Texas had

one of its strongest haunt seasons following the events of 9/11, attributing this success to the public's need for emotional release and communal distraction. While his observations are anecdotal, they were echoed by other panelists and attendees, often receiving nods and affirmations from the crowd. In a later seminar titled "Haunting in the Covid World – The Positive Impacts of the Pandemic," Hopps reiterated this point, arguing that horror-themed experiences offer a unique form of emotional regulation during turbulent times. Although more empirical research is needed to measure these trends precisely, Hopps's perspective offers valuable insight into how haunt producers interpret consumer behavior during times of crisis, seeing fear-based entertainment not as escapism alone, but as a meaningful form of coping and connection.

The rise of distinct haunt categories in the 2000s—no-touch haunts, physical haunts, and extreme haunts—marks a significant step in the maturation of the haunted attraction industry. These categories reflect not just varying intensities of fear, but a diversification of audience preferences and a more refined understanding of affective engagement. There are three distinct categories that reflect varying degrees of intensity and audience interaction: no-touch haunts, physical haunts, and extreme haunts. These categorizations, as identified by Eliot Bessette, help differentiate the types of experiences audiences can expect, ranging from mild sensory thrills to intense physical and psychological challenges.²⁷⁵ No-touch haunts are the most common, using visual, auditory, and atmospheric effects to create fear without any physical contact.²⁷⁶ These attractions focus on triggering sensory responses, often relying on jump scares and sudden noises. Physical haunts take the experience a step further by introducing direct interactions between performers and guests, ranging from light touches to guiding participants down dark hallways, sometimes even incorporating interactive elements such as puzzles or one-on-one

encounters.²⁷⁷ These haunts require a higher level of trust and participation, with guests often signing waivers to acknowledge potential discomfort. Finally, extreme haunts push the boundaries of fear and discomfort to a new level, featuring intense physical and psychological challenges, such as suffocation, electric shocks, or simulated violence.²⁷⁸ These experiences are often highly exclusive, with small groups of participants, and the level of intensity can be so high that a safe word is often incorporated to ensure consent.²⁷⁹ While extreme haunts remain a niche within the broader haunt industry, their existence speaks to the public's fascination with testing the limits of fear and endurance. By the late 2000s, extreme haunts like *Blackout* (various cities 2009), *Shanghai Nightmare* (China 2010) and *Heretic Horror* (California 2012-2018) began to shape a subculture around pushing the limits of what audiences were willing to endure, setting a new standard for the industry's potential to challenge psychological and physical boundaries.²⁸⁰ These experiences remain a small segment of the industry, with the majority of haunted attractions still focused on no-touch and physical haunts. Nevertheless, extreme haunts continue to captivate audiences, reflecting an ongoing curiosity about exploring fear in new and extreme ways, even for those who may not experience them firsthand. This typology also mirrors broader moves in entertainment culture—toward personalization, intensity, and bodily engagement—suggesting that haunted attractions are no longer defined by a singular formula but by a dynamic range of affective experiences. In this way, the diversification of haunt types underscores a broader professionalization and artistic ambition within the industry.

The 2010s were a pivotal decade for the haunted attraction industry, characterized by record-breaking milestones, the rise of extreme haunts, and an increasingly prominent role for Halloween within the broader entertainment landscape. In 2010, the *Factory of Terror* in Canton, Ohio, earned a Guinness World Record for the longest indoor walk-through haunted house,

setting a new standard for immersive experiences at over a mile long.²⁸¹ Similarly, in 2013, Kansas City's The Beast haunted attraction made headlines by showcasing Medusa, the largest reticulated python in captivity, which also earned a Guinness World Record.²⁸² These feats highlighted the industry's ambition to push boundaries and create more jaw-dropping experiences. At the same time, theme park Halloween festivals like Universal Studios' Halloween Horror Nights, Six Flags' Fright Fest, and regional events contributed to longer operating seasons, further solidifying Halloween as a significant revenue generator, with other haunts.²⁸³ This expansion of operating calendars helped shape Halloween as a mainstream entertainment force, while regional and independent haunts also thrived. For example, *The Dent Schoolhouse* expanded its offerings with a new *Christmas Nightmare* event in 2018,²⁸⁴ blending Halloween into other holidays, extending its seasonal appeal and increasing revenue. As Baker notes, "Some parks have capitalized on this by adding haunted houses at other times of year: for instance, a Mardi Gras house at Six Flags Fiesta Texas or Six Flags Over Georgia's Scream Break."²⁸⁵ This trend reflects how parks have continued to expand Halloween-themed experiences throughout the year, further solidifying the cultural and financial significance of spooky attractions.

Haunts also strived to find more shocking ways to differentiate themselves from the many haunts opening. For example, *Shocktoberfest* in Pennsylvania, which introduced the controversial "Naked and Scared Challenge" in 2013, inspired by the reality TV show *Naked and Afraid* (2013–), after facing backlash, the event shifted to a "semi-clothed" version.²⁸⁶ Similarly, in 2014, Midnight Syndicate's multimedia horror-themed concert, *Midnight Syndicate Live! Legacy of Shadows*, debuted at *Cedar Point's* "HalloWeekends," blending live music, theater, and film to enhance the haunt experience.²⁸⁷ However, not all haunts survived with about sixty

percent failing in the first three years (on par with other small businesses).²⁸⁸ It becomes difficult keeping up with the increasing demands and technologically elevated immersive spaces and increased costs, proving to be difficult for haunts to stay open more than one season. Even long-term haunted attractions were not impervious to significant losses, like *Rocky Point Haunted House* in Salt Lake City closing in 2007. In 2016, *The Chamber of Horrors* at Madame Tussauds closed (although it reopened in 2022),²⁸⁹ and the *Springboro Haunted Hayride* folded in the same year.²⁹⁰ Despite these closures, new haunts emerged, such as *Brimstone Haunt* in 2017, which incorporated elements of the *Springboro Haunted Hayride*, keeping the spirit of traditional hayride haunts alive.²⁹¹ Meanwhile, the closure of the *Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus* in 2017 marked the end of an era for traditional circus entertainment, further highlighting shifts in the broader legacy entertainment with 146 years in operation.²⁹²

By the end of the decade, the haunted attraction industry had evolved into a global entertainment powerhouse, with Western-style Halloween events continuing to spread internationally due to Halloween and horror's globalization, audience interest, and consumerist backing. In the Middle East, emerging markets like *Motiongate Dubai* (2018) and *IMG Worlds of Adventure* (2018) began adopting Western-style Halloween events, further cementing the global spread of haunted attractions.²⁹³ Even Saudi Arabia has in recent years witnessed public Halloween weekend celebrations in Riyadh since 2022,²⁹⁴ and horror-themed year-round restaurants like TREND (see fig. 7), illustrating the rise in Halloween and horror entertainment in non-western cultures that do not normally celebrate the holiday. As the industry continued to innovate, the influence of haunted attractions only grew stronger, not just in the U.S., but across the world.



Figure 7. Ghostface actor at TREND horror-themed restaurant in Jeddah, August 2023. Photo by Marae Slyter.

From the early days of the haunted house industry, where themes often mirrored popular horror films, to the present, where haunted attractions now generate their own media and fandoms, illustrates a clear maturation of the industry. Haunted attractions have transformed from seasonal novelties into professionalized cultural institutions, producing their own content, training resources, and star figures. For example, Stiltbeast Studios launched their YouTube series in 2010, offering expert insights on haunting techniques, mask creation, and operational tips, which helped cultivate a new wave of professional haunters. Similarly, the *Days of the Living Dead* YouTube web series, starting in 2010, captivated a younger audience with its behind-the-scenes look at the art of scaring, following the journey of scare actors and haunted house creators as they faced obstacles and celebrated victories. The series, which traces the evolution of *Statesville Haunted Prison* (Illinois 1996-2021) from its humble beginnings as a theater troupe managing *Statesville Haunted Prison* (1996 – 2021) to *HellsGate* (2022 –)

haunted attraction. Their series sparked an unscripted documentary that earned two Emmys for Outstanding Crafts Achievement for Editing and Outstanding Achievement for Arts/Entertainment Programming in *Feeding the Beast: 25 Years of Statesville Haunted Prison* (2022),²⁹⁵ underscoring the rising celebrity culture within the haunt industry. With another documentary on the way entitled, *The Fright Stuff* (2025), the Zombie Army Productions team will continue to chronicle the haunt industry from within.

The rising media presence of haunters reflects the industry's increasing self-awareness and self-referentiality. At attractions like 13th Gate in Louisiana, industry legends are commemorated with gravestones in a themed cemetery called Necropolis 13, effectively mythologizing their contributions within the attraction itself. This kind of intra-industry recognition parallels the practices of Hollywood—where creators become part of the spectacle. Furthermore, the influence now flows both ways: where haunted houses once borrowed heavily from horror films, horror cinema is now borrowing from the haunt world. Films such as *Frightworld* (2006), *The Houses October Built* (2014), *Haunt* (2019), and *Haunt Season* (2024) are set in or structured around haunted attractions, blurring the line between documentary and fiction, fabricated scare and real fear. This oscillation between horror cinema and haunted attractions points to a circular relationship that signals a new phase in the industry's development. Rather than merely reflecting cinematic tropes, haunted houses are shaping them—contributing characters, aesthetics, and narrative structures to the broader horror genre. The maturation of the industry lies in its capacity to be both a cultural product *and* a producer of culture. As haunts generate their own content, personalities, and fan communities, they assert

themselves as central players in contemporary horror media. This mutual exchange not only expands the reach of both film and haunt industries, but also reinforces the idea that fear, now more than ever, is a shared, immersive, and highly marketable experience.

As the 2020s progressed, the haunted attraction industry proved remarkably resilient, even in the face of global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite initial closures and financial uncertainty, many haunts adapted quickly, implementing timed ticketing, socially distanced walkthroughs, and alternative experiences like drive-through attractions. Some owners prepared for the worst, considering selling off properties, only to find that operational pivots, such as reducing staff, shifting away from hayrides, and streamlining concessions increased profit margins.²⁹⁶ Supply chain disruptions created new challenges, from sourcing animatronics to securing food for concessions, but demand never wavered. By 2021, attendance surged past pre-pandemic levels, as audiences sought catharsis through controlled fear, mirroring historical patterns where dark times fuel a hunger for horror

Despite these obstacles, the industry remained resilient, recovering from COVID-19 and continuing to grow through innovation, advocacy, and an increasingly global presence. In recent years, the haunt industry has evolved from isolated, independent operations into a highly interconnected network. Franchising opportunities, such as those developed by 13th Floor Entertainment Group, exemplify the standardization of fear into scalable entertainment ventures. Formal organizations like the Haunted Attraction Association (HAA) further legitimize and professionalize the field. Industry-specific media platforms, including the Haunted Attraction Network, serve as hubs for news, resources, and networking. A significant trend during the 2024 HAA TransWorld trade show emerged during a “State of the Industry” seminar. An industry veteran expressed astonishment at the conference’s international diversity, noting the presence of

participants from various global regions—a testament to TransWorld’s evolution into a globally significant haunt conference. This mirrors Halloween’s own permeation across national lines. Outgoing HAA President Spencer Terry highlighted the association’s growth over the past five years. From 2020 to 2025, memberships increased by over 42%, and the operating budget and savings grew more than fivefold. The HAA also developed a sexual harassment and youth safety online video training program.²⁹⁷ However, alongside this expansion, the haunted attraction industry also faced policy-driven challenges, particularly during the early months of the Trump administration in 2025. IAAPA (International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions) identified key concerns, including stricter immigration policies that exacerbated staffing shortages in an industry heavily reliant on immigrant labor, based on seasonal employment. Economic hurdles also emerged as tariff increases raised the cost of imported materials, driving up expenses for new attractions and guest experiences.

The haunted attraction industry’s adaptation to technological advancements has transformed it from a niche market into a highly sophisticated sector. As Emily McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza noted for the *BBC*, haunts are no longer makeshift operations in “school gyms” but increasingly resemble “big-budget spectacles of theme parks, film, and television productions.”²⁹⁸ Technology has driven this transformation, with innovations in sound design, special effects, and animatronics turning once-simple attractions into immersive, high-tech experiences. Where basic cassette tapes and minimal effects once sufficed, modern haunts now feature advanced digital systems, computer-controlled effects, and intricate storytelling in state-of-the-art complexes. As Kirschner notes, “The quality in many haunted houses has caught up to Disney and Universal parks as well as Hollywood movie sets, leaving them always in search for the next big thing.”²⁹⁹ Kirschner further questions:

Are haunted houses still haunted houses, or have they developed into interactive big-budget Hollywood movies? Which is better to the paying public? [...]Watching an explosion on the big screen or FEELING, HEARING and SEEING that same explosion just 15 feet away at a live, interactive attraction?

This evolution underscores a crucial point: haunted houses now offer an experience that surpasses traditional horror films, with interactive thrills that Hollywood does not match with the same intensity and close proximity, like feeling the warm heat and force of air after an explosion. Each year, new technological marvels push the boundaries of what is possible in a haunt. This evolution not only reflects technological growth but also responds to the increasing demand for immersive, interactive entertainment. Haunts grow from small-scale setups to extravagant spectacles, offering a visceral experience that allows audiences to confront their fears in new and exciting ways.

Conclusion: Legacy, Community, and the Ongoing Evolution of Haunted Attractions

The history of haunted attractions, from ancient rituals to today's multi-sensory spectacles, reveals a continuous cultural dialogue about society's relationship with fear. Mapping a hauntological genealogy through various eras of history, it becomes clear how haunted attractions evolve, reflecting the specific historical, technological, and cultural conditions that shape them. Haunted attractions do more than reflect the past, they continue to haunt the present. A hauntological genealogy illustrates how the historical states of those fears are etched into the present, like an impression or palimpsest, leaving a permanent, haunting mark on contemporary culture. What began as macabre displays have transformed into sophisticated, technology-driven spectacles that fuse theater, cinema, and amusement park thrill-driven experiences. Haunted attractions are haunted by the seasons of fear, the spectacles that captivate, the stories that

frighten, the sensations that thrill, and the sites that ground these experiences within their respective contextual time and place. These elements combine to create multi-layered encounters with terror that evolve alongside audiences' shifting thresholds of fear.

Within haunted attractions, fear is an emotional state that escalate in intensity, creating an agitated or anxious condition that pulls the audience through a visceral journey of heightened terror and self-reflection. Also, fear is not just a primal emotion but is a socially constructed and culturally contingent mediated experience. As Hoedt defines them, these attractions are “designed to frighten its audience” through a combination of live actors, animatronics, theatrical sets, and various sensory effects.³⁰⁰ These haunts aim to provide “fear for fun,” creating a “terrifying in-your-face experience.”³⁰¹ Over time, haunted attractions have become more immersive, drawing on the conventions of exhibition and theater culture while adapting to place fear directly within arms-length distance. The decreasing physical separation between participants and technology has increased audiences' emotional and physical engagement. The blurring of boundaries between objects, space, and people in these immersive environments forces the audience to feel part of the story.

Haunts offer a form of live-mediated entertainment where the goal is intellectual engagement and visceral emotional involvement. Fear-based entertainment continues to haunt us, from confronting the Medieval Black Plague to the Great Depression, 9/11, and COVID-19. The success of haunted attractions, even during times of cultural, political, and economic uncertainty, speaks to our continued cultural hunger for controlled spaces of fear, where narratives that prioritize sensory experiences disrupt normalcy, making audiences feel disoriented and alive. As

haunted attractions continue to evolve, they serve as a testament to the enduring power of fear to unite us, challenge us, and remind us that our confrontation with terror may forge a path that intertwines imagination and community.

CHAPTER TWO – THE GENRE OF FEAR:

Horror’s Corporeality in Haunted Attraction Design

Contained, contaminated, and concerned, audiences watch a dark figure emerge from the fog, wearing a gas mask and glowing red goggles. Breathing heavily, the figure looms ominously against an industrial metal wall marked by corroded yellow and black hazard stripes. This mechanical, steampunk aesthetic is set against a scene littered with toxic waste cans and butchered bodies. Created by the Creature Collective, this chilling, nuclear Chernobyl-inspired display was one of 372 intricately designed booths at the 2022 Transworld Haunted Attraction Association (HAA) conference. The annual event transforms the streets of St. Louis, Missouri, into a Halloween-themed space, with attendees in black attire representing their various haunted attractions from around the world. The convention center serves as a hub for haunted attraction owners, employees, and vendors to connect, exchange ideas, and inspire innovative designs and strategies for producing and operating horror experiences. As the world’s largest international haunted attraction industry trade show, the conference links vendors and buyers with the HAA network, offering seminars on safety, marketing, and more—reinvigorating excitement for the haunting season and eliciting both “screams and laughter.”¹

Industry creators and marketers specifically designate these venues as “haunted attractions” or “haunts,” aiming to construct thrilling, fear-inducing experiences for audiences.² Each year, vendors stretch the limits of horror with new masks, costumes, props, lighting systems, and special effects, drawing heavily from contemporary horror films, cultural trends, and pressing societal anxieties. A dominant theme at the 2022 convention was industrial steampunk horror, visibly shaped by the containment, contamination, and uncertainty of the

COVID-19 pandemic. Haunted attractions, therefore, extend the horror narratives while they reflect, refract, and even shape real-world fears through densely affect-laden, immersive experiences.

As experiential venues, haunted attractions are central to Halloween culture and transmedia horror storytelling. In the seminar "Social Media Workshop: Activating Social Super Fans" at the 2022 Transworld HAA conference, Laura Kilpatrick of FearWorm, a marketing agency for haunts, described these venues as the "Halloween authority."³ She explained how haunted attractions respond to seasonal demand and actively define the Halloween holiday, positioning themselves as cultural cornerstones within their communities. Through social media campaigns, fan engagement, and narrative extensions via websites, comics, and games, haunted attractions create year-round horror ecosystems that sustain and expand their reach. The fusion of digital storytelling and live, site-specific performance demonstrates how haunted attractions blur the boundaries between physical and virtual space, crafting immersive horror experiences that persist across platforms and seasons. Haunts make visible the mechanics of live-mediated horror entertainment (LMHE), showing how horror functions as more than narrative. It shapes spaces, mobilizes affect, and structures audience engagement. Rather than serving solely as story containers, these attractions operate as embodied infrastructures in which participants actively engage, perform, and confront fear within constructed environments.

The production of LMHE depends on the interplay between sensory design, affective engagement, and industry knowledge—an interplay I explore through both textual and experiential methods. Haunted attractions employ a multisensory arsenal: scare actors, set design, animatronics, soundscapes, fog, and scent cues that blur the boundaries between fantasy and reality. These tactics, adapted from and expanding on narrative and aesthetic horror

traditions, generate cognitive and corporeal affects that together produce what I call LMHE. I analyze these spaces through textual analysis and supplement my findings with interviews conducted with haunt operators, scare actors, and visitors. Additional data were gathered by attending seminars at the Transworld Haunted Attraction Association (HAA) Tradeshow from 2022 to 2024 (see Appendix B for a complete list of attended seminars), led by both industry experts and enthusiasts. I also draw on fieldwork conducted at top-rated haunts, including *Fear Factory* in Salt Lake City, Utah, and *The Frightmare Compound* in Westminster, Colorado. These visits provided valuable behind-the-scenes insights into the operations of both small and large haunted attraction businesses across the U.S. Through this exploration, I observed a collective fascination with the evolving techniques, economies, and affective strategies that define haunted attractions today.

Haunted attractions operate as immersive environments for horror's affective, cultural, and theoretical dimensions. These are spaces where horror, as a noun, is constructed and, as a verb, enacted in community, reinforcing the genre's cultural resonance through shared participation. Like the horror genre itself, haunted attractions carry a certain baggage, as they do not always "dispel prejudices," nor are they easily defended as an entertainment option.⁴ As Madelon Hoedt observes, haunts and horror share "an intriguing relationship with fiction and reality, and how this plays out within its locations and settings,"⁵ bringing both the genre's complexities and strengths into the experience.⁶ Rather than simply reflecting horror, haunted attractions help *shape* it, pushing the genre into more embodied, immersive, and participatory terrains. They allow participants to engage with cultural anxieties in controlled environments where the uncanny is intensified, where familiar spaces become strange, and societal fears take material form. Scare actors, sensory cues, and spatial design work together to activate the body,

demanding audience involvement and electrifying the experience of fear. In haunted attractions, horror is not just an aesthetic, it becomes an operational force that reveals the tensions and paradoxes of live-mediated entertainment (LME): between labor and play, performance and reality, control and chaos. Horror, in this context, becomes a critical method of analysis.

In this chapter, I analyze how haunted attractions combine reality and fiction, a core element of their design and performance strategies. These spaces create liminal environments that challenge perceptions and invite visitors to co-create horror narratives. First, I explore the connections between horror and haunted attractions, definitionally (what), theoretically (why), and historically (when), tracing their evolution alongside societal anxieties and their dual nature as both narrative and spectacle. The integration of innovative technologies amplifies fear by enhancing the unknown and deepening audience immersion, echoing the central themes of the horror genre. However, haunted attractions are not mere reflections of established horror narratives or Halloween tropes. They actively push the genre's boundaries through original storytelling and evolving performance techniques. By examining the cognitive, corporeal, and historical dimensions of haunted attractions, I argue that these spaces play a critical role in the cultural relevance of horror, continuously shaping and reimagining its meaning and impact. I reposition horror from a subcultural fringe genre to a central force, essential for understanding the boundaries of LME and how they are constructed and subverted. Horror is not merely part of the conversation about immersive media; it is central to shaping its framework and understanding. Studying haunted attractions reveals how fear operates in public spaces, how performance transforms into participation, and how horror challenges us to confront entertainment's affective and structural dimensions.

The Theoretical Convergence of Horror and Haunts

Defining Horror's Cognitive Operations

Haunted attractions, as integral components of Halloween culture, embody the cognitive operations of horror, leveraging key genre themes to craft immersive experiences that blur the line between fantasy and reality. The following section examines the definitions and cognitive operations that shape the immersive experiences of haunted attractions. As integral elements of Halloween culture, haunted attractions help to shape narratives and trends that resonate within both local and global communities. They engage audiences using various methods, including scare actors, sound design, and intricate set pieces, crafting experiences that blur the line between fantasy and reality. Horror as a genre is no stranger to the transgression of boundaries, particularly in blurring the lines between reality and fiction. Indeed, Reyes identifies that the attraction of horror lies precisely in its “transgressive nature,” as it delves into topics often excluded from other genres, seen as “too extreme” or “harmful.”⁷ The raw violence, death, and taboo subjects presented in horror compel audiences to confront uncomfortable truths about human existence. Its power lies in its ability to display truths about the human condition while evoking visceral emotions, fear, disgust, shock, and a lingering sense of dread and suspense.⁸ Reyes argues that horror is “defined by its affective pretenses,” deriving its name from the physical “effects that it seeks to elicit in its audiences,” such as trembling or shuddering.⁹ The genre’s effectiveness stems from its capacity to engage the imagination, pushing audiences to confront the impossible and process discomfiting information.¹⁰

Horror’s power therefore lies in its ability to transgress boundaries, confronting societal anxieties through symbols like monsters, and haunted attractions amplify this effect by physically manifesting these fears in immersive environments. While familiar elements like

monsters and mad scientists may not guarantee a universal response, horror succeeds by engaging with themes that challenge conventional categories of propriety. Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic model of film genre helps clarify this dynamic: semantic elements like recurring figures (monsters, gore, haunted houses) provide recognizable visual codes, while syntactic patterns, such as narrative structures of revelation, containment, and transgression, shape how audiences make sense of those symbols.¹¹ According to Matt Hills, this transgressive quality elevates horror to an aesthetic experience, where monsters, whether new or familiar, serve as symbols for societal anxieties.¹² Noël Carroll specifies the paradoxes in horror: people fear monsters that are not real and actively seek out these unsettling experiences, suggesting a complex relationship between belief and emotional response.¹³ As Carroll writes, horror narratives "revolve around proving, disclosing, discovering, and confirming the existence of something impossible," often defying standing conceptual schemes.¹⁴ Monsters, central to horror's appeal, defy categorization, straddling the boundaries of human, animal, and supernatural. Haunted attractions intensify this process by physically manifesting monsters, turning abstract fears into concrete encounters. The immersive design of these attractions builds spaces where cultural anxieties are confronted in embodied forms, blending traditional horror conventions with physical environments. In doing so, haunted attractions provide both entertainment and social commentary. Like horror films, they provoke complex emotional responses, addressing contemporary fears and positioning horror as both a cultural practice and a visceral experience.

Haunted attractions, like the horror genre itself, blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, creating liminal spaces that challenge participants' perceptions of truth and narrative. The horror genre, despite efforts to define it, resists simple classification and reflects broader shifts in

both societal anxieties and narrative conventions.¹⁵ As Susan Stewart notes, horror “spans both preindustrial and post-industrial modes of fiction-making,” adapting timeless themes of dread to contemporary fears.¹⁶ A notable example of this adaptation can be seen in *The Houses October Built* (2014), a film the action of which focuses on a haunted attraction. Hoedt’s analysis of this film illustrates how these venues provide liminal spaces that challenge participants’ perceptions. By incorporating real locations and existing scare attractions, the film grounds its narrative in tangible reality while constructing fictional stories that enhance the authenticity of the encounter.¹⁷ Hoedt draws on Michel Foucault’s concept of heterotopia in her analysis, describing these attractions as spaces that invert conventional understandings of reality and narrative, transforming the audience’s relationship to space and time. As Hoedt writes, the “fluidity of the heterotopia, on its illusory nature, and its connection to transient time” helps define scare attractions as “liminal venues that only exist for a brief duration,” yet use various strategies to “extend themselves beyond mere fakery and fun.”¹⁸ Haunted attractions also engage in mythmaking, crafting narratives that blur the line between truth and fiction, such as claims of real human remains or tragic histories,¹⁹ forcing participants to question the authenticity of their experiences. For example, *Fear Factory* in Salt Lake City, Utah, situated in a century-old cement factory, has long been associated with worker deaths, enhancing its reputation as a site of supernatural activity.²⁰

Manufacturing fear in haunted attractions includes cultivating overt scares, with jump scares and loud noises, and inviting audiences to immerse themselves in a realm of make-believe. As Reyes observes, “Horror has to work harder to create a sense of atmosphere,” often relying on minimal elements to disturb and unsettle.²¹ Less becomes more, as subtlety engages audiences emotionally, provoking unease through ambiguity and mystery while leaving much to

the imagination, thus simulating sensations of real threat. Holly, a scare actor, reflects on this idea, describing the work as a transformative journey “into a different reality.” Whether through elaborate set designs or improvisational acting, escapism becomes a break from everyday life, offering an immersive experience into another world. Alana, another scare actor, describes haunts as “playgrounds for actors [...] and playgrounds for the people coming through,” spaces where people face irrational fears. Haunts become collective act of play and pretend, regardless of age, individuals embrace the fantastical world of monsters and imagination. A significant part of the appeal of haunted attractions is the opportunity to become fully immersed in these realms, blurring the cognitive operations of haunted attractions with the corporeal environments, immersing scare actors and audiences into the horror. These venues immerse visitors in controlled environments, where they engage with fear while maintaining psychological distance. The result is a “game of make-believe,” where physical consequences feel real, yet participants remain aware of the fiction.²²

Haunted attractions heighten the uncanny by blending mystery and ambiguity, where shifting environments and unpredictable narratives keep visitors on edge, blurring the line between the familiar and the alien. While horror cinema prompts the uncanny through controlled visual and auditory cues, haunted attractions create immersive, multisensory experiences that amplify the Freudian dimension of the uncanny as the familiar transformed into something alien through repression.²³ Freud argues that the uncanny “is all that arouses dread and creeping horror.”²⁴ In film, the uncanny is often evoked through techniques like the uncanny valley, where inanimate objects, like a doll’s head slowly turning or footsteps echoing in an empty house, evoke a sense of unease. Similarly, haunted attractions manipulate this boundary between the animate and inanimate, constantly shifting the audience’s sense of reality. By integrating maze-

like features and unexpected twists, they reduce predictability, forcing guests to remain unsure of what will happen next. This uncertainty taps into Francis T. McAndrews and Sara S. Koehnke's definition of creepiness as "anxiety aroused by the *ambiguity* of whether there is something to fear or not and/ or by the ambiguity of the precise nature of the threat (e.g., sexual, physical violence, contamination, etc.) that might be present."²⁵ The deliberate ambiguity of haunted attractions thus turns an otherwise playful or fun environment into one charged with unsettling tension, transforming the ordinary into the horrific.

The use of lifelike mannequins and dolls in haunted attractions amplifies the uncanny by blurring the boundary between reality and illusion, creating moments of hesitation and uncertainty for even the most seasoned visitors. During my numerous visits to haunts, I have often encountered lifelike mannequins or dolls that give me pause. Their colored lighting, glimmering eyes, and smooth surfaces jutting out of the darkness make me question their authenticity (see fig. 8). As David Norris explains in his research on haunt design, creators intentionally exploit this uncanny feeling through "human-like" figures that elicit both empathy and unease.²⁶ Even as a seasoned haunt enthusiast and scholar, I still find myself questioning, "Is it real?" during certain moments in haunted attractions or when encountering new technologies at events such as the Transworld HAA tradeshow. For instance, at the tradeshow, I observed a scare actor with mannequin-like features, moving robotically to a sound emanating from a speaker. She was playing a "man-cello," a man's body repurposed as a cello, and her sharp, mechanical movements led me to stare for several minutes before I finally realized she was real, only by her holding my gaze for an unseemly amount of time (see fig. 9). While the mannequin-like features may suggest she was not real, the mechanical movement, juxtaposed with the realistic-but-fake

quality within the context of Original Sin Designs' other products (like the other realistic mannequins on the showroom floor) was the distinguishing factors that blurred the line between reality and fiction.



Figure 8. Mannequin with dislocated jaw at *Nightmare on 13th* in Salt Lake City, fall 2023. Image by author.



Figure 9. “Man-cello” with scare actor at the 2024 TransWorld Haunted Attraction Conference in St. Louis. Image by author.

The uncanny in haunted attractions is not merely a psychological response but a physical one, as sensory manipulations within the environment transform the familiar into something unsettling and corporeally experienced. Visitors navigate spaces where objects once thought of as lifeless take on an eerie, disturbing presence. In this space, even the air itself can feel uncanny—through cold spots, the sensation of being watched, or sounds that seem to emanate from nowhere. These experiences transform Freud’s notion of the uncanny, from “dread and creeping horror,” into a corporeal encounter, where touch, smell, and spatial disorientation blur

the boundary between the familiar and the strange.²⁷ The uncanny is not just a cognitive response; it is an embodied one, where the known becomes unsettling, transforming and recontextualizing everyday objects in haunts to instill fear. For instance, during the Transworld HAA seminar, haunt operator Allan Hopps suggested using an umbrella as a tool to unsettle visitors: by having a scare actor open an umbrella, the once mundane object becomes a source of fear. He noted, “An umbrella is not inherently terrifying, but if you open an umbrella at people, it scares them a lot.” These seemingly ordinary actions in the context of a haunted attraction space generate unnerving responses, demonstrating how the uncanny arises not from something entirely unfamiliar, but from something familiar that has been repressed, only to resurface as unsettling.

Haunted attractions elevate the uncanny from a psychological effect to a visceral encounter, where sensory engagement with the environment forces audiences to question the boundaries of the familiar, as demonstrated during my time attending *Terror in the Corn* in Erie, Colorado. I encountered a grass-like creature in a swamp scene as I waded through opaque waist-deep fog with blue LED lights dancing on the surface, challenging visual and spatial certainty. The creature’s head, barely visible above the fog, lacked distinct features, arousing initial confusion. But unlike film, where the frame can constrain our investigation, I physically approached the ambiguous figure, moving through space, leaning in, and peering more closely. “Is it real?” I asked aloud, my voice adding to the sensory experience as it echoed slightly in the misty space. The creature’s sudden animation, accompanied by both its grunt and sloshing of its movement, triggered a full-body response. My immediate scream and physical retreat were not just reactions to a visual surprise and eradication of doubt, confirming that the object was a scare actor all along. This moment exemplified how haunted attractions expand the uncanny beyond

visual uncertainty into a sensory experience where reality fluctuates around you, keeping audiences in a state of constant sensory negotiation. In an anxious, anticipatory state, audiences survey how every surface might move, every shadow could breathe, and every cool draft might signal a presence, attempting to predict the inevitable animation of a seemingly inanimate object. Audiences become more aware of their environment and their bodies are on guard, touching walls to navigate, straining their ears for approaching threats, and constantly reorienting themselves in spaces designed to confound normal spatial perception.

The uncanny in haunted attractions transcends simple fear, tapping into personal and cultural memories, transforming the experience into a personalized and ever-changing experience for each individual. Freud connects the uncanny to feelings of dread, fear, and horror—emotions often tied to repressed memories or beliefs, which resurface unexpectedly in real life. Furthermore, the cultural context and personal memories associated with the uncanny can significantly influence how individuals respond to these experiences, making the engagement with horror both a collective and deeply personal journey. In haunted attractions, the design may intentionally or unintentionally spur memories of childhood fears or past traumas, making the experience more personal and unsettling for the audience, while shifting and changing with ever encounter. Fiction allows for a broader range of uncanny effects that might not be possible in everyday life, though the awareness of fiction influences how these effects are perceived.²⁸ In fiction, readers engage with the uncanny differently: aware that what they are

experiencing is not real, they can still be affected by the narrative's use of uncanny elements. The experience of the uncanny is not uniform; it is shaped by individual perceptions and contexts, which can differ widely. However, the way in which the uncanny becomes a meshing between the real and unreal is central to how haunted attractions cultivate a space where fear is safely explored yet intensely felt.

Elevating the Corporeal Experience

Horror entertainment spans a wide spectrum of media, each establishing relationships between the audience and the narrative through varying degrees of psychological distance and bodily engagement. While some view mediated forms of escapism with skepticism, Holly finds personal joy in them, likening a visit to a haunted attraction to “reading a book, watching a movie, or attending a play or musical.” She highlights the various forms of make-believe in entertainment, yet the levels of immersive engagement differ across media. Books activate the reader's imagination to conjure fear through written description, while films provide audiovisual cues but maintain a protective barrier in the form of a screen. Video games introduce interactivity yet still mediate the experience through controllers or virtual reality (VR) headsets. Dark rides similarly devise a barrier, such as a cart or omnimover, limiting the participant's view to 180 degrees and maintaining a physical distance from the experience (keeping participants farther than arm's length away, while requiring them to keep their hands, arms, feet, and legs inside the vehicle at all times).

Haunted attractions, by contrast, remove these barriers entirely, demanding immediate bodily engagement that transforms how horror affects its audience. As Reyes observes, “The body, and its inextricability from the mind and thought, has grown to become the main character of the Horror film.”²⁹ Horror fundamentally “proposes an entertaining, scary ride”—a concept

made literal in haunted attractions, engaging both the body and mind like traditional horror media but evoking more immediate and tailored scares as participants react in real-time to the design and performance in the haunt. Haunted attractions center the audiences' experiences with sensory stimulation and unpredictable movements of actors and prioritize the participants' reactions, which influence the unfolding narrative, positioning them as the protagonists and adapting the story according to individual responses. In this section, I explore how affect and the body shape the haunted attraction experience, marking the ways these environments engage audiences physically and emotionally.

Contemporary horror scholarship increasingly attends to the genre's visceral dimensions, reflecting a broader "affective turn" in critical theory that privileges pre-cognitive, bodily experience over intellectual interpretation.³⁰ Affect resists easy definition, operating not as a fixed concept but as a force or intensity—what Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth call "forces of encounter" that emerge in the space between bodies, sensations, and environments.³¹ These encounters, while not always "forceful," accumulate and reverberate through the body, often before conscious recognition.³² Rather than equating affect with emotion, scholars emphasize its autonomous, pre-subjective nature—what pulses through the corporeal matter of our flesh, blood, and organs. Affect happens in the simmering space of potential, like a cauldron on the verge of boiling, where encounters can spark transformation or unease. In horror, these affective intensities are not merely responses to narrative or symbolism but emerge through sound, movement, rhythm, and atmosphere. They overwhelm rational comprehension, as though the removed heart still beats—an image that captures horror's uncanny ability to provoke

visceral recognition before interpretation. Understanding horror through affect thus demands attunement to the ways sensation, perception, and bodily movement shape the genre's power to disturb, unsettle, and engage.

Building on these foundations, horror scholars such as Xavier Aldana Reyes, Julian Hanich, Adam Daniel, and David Scott Diffrient have mobilized affect theory to better understand how horror films elicit bodily responses and emotional intensities.³³ Rather than focusing solely on symbolic meaning or genre conventions, their work emphasizes how horror “moves” audiences—through jump scares, atmosphere, and sonic disruption—foregrounding the genre's capacity to generate visceral, affective engagement as central to its appeal and cultural function. Angela Ndalani's concept of the horror sensorium extends this affective lens into the realm of immersive experiences, offering a framework for understanding how horror operates across sensory, corporeal, and intellectual registers.³⁴ In these spaces, visitors confront fears in “real” environments they can “see, smell, touch, hear and even taste,” leading to a more immediate, visceral engagement than traditional media forms allow.³⁵ Like theme park rides, haunted attractions also disorient audiences by manipulating and misdirecting senses with dim lighting, eerie sounds, sudden movements, and tactile sensations to cultivate a sense of unease and suspense, engaging participants on both physical and emotional levels. This manipulation of the sensorium triggers the body's fight-or-flight response, heightening arousal and adrenaline.

These experiences manipulate sensory input (dim lighting, sudden movements, eerie sounds, and tactile jolts) to activate the body's fight-or-flight response, eliciting heightened states of arousal and awareness. Ndalani foregrounds proprioception and equilibrioception as crucial to these encounters, arguing that in environments like dark rides, “it's the body and its position in relation to space that becomes crucial to perception.”³⁶ Here, sensation overtakes narrative; the

startle becomes a reflexive survival mechanism, rather than a storytelling device.³⁷ Unlike horror films or games—where mediation occurs through characters or avatars—haunted attractions remove the intermediary, placing the participant directly in spaces where fear feels physically consequential. These affective and sensory intensities, interwoven with the thrill of fear and intertextual references to horror media, position haunted attractions as sites where horror is not only witnessed but profoundly felt. Such experiences blur the line between reality and fiction: “In theme park attractions, the art of horror impacts the body and the senses far more directly and with an immediacy that’s absent in film spectatorship.”³⁸

Ndalianis suggests that traditional notions of the five primary senses are limiting, pointing out that there are over twenty distinct senses, each contributing to the way we perceive the world.³⁹ Ndalianis references a few of those senses, including proprioception, which is the body’s ability to sense movement and immediately act without cognitive awareness. This multisensory engagement allows haunted attractions to foster an environment where visitors confront deep-seated fears and phobias in a controlled, playful way. The combination of thrill, sensory stimulation, and the exploration of death and the monstrous makes haunted attractions a captivating and immersive form of entertainment. These spaces draw from various media—such as set design inspired by horror films and interactive elements similar to video games—to craft intertextual narratives that resonate with audiences. However, the narrative is not always an essential component to haunted attractions or theme park rides. Ndalianis suggests that in horror literature and film, audiences’ reactions converge with those of the protagonists in the story. But in rides, there is not the same need to map our emotions onto main characters to elicit responses, “Leaving the story behind, dark rides that incorporate wild roller coasters, for example, have no need of a mediator to make them shudder, feel nausea, cry out in pain, or scream.”⁴⁰ The visceral

nature of haunted attractions, where bodily reactions take precedence over narrative, underscores the unparalleled ability of these spaces to engage participants in a profoundly physical and emotional confrontation with fear.

Horror and haunted attractions function as powerful sites of sensory manipulation, where disorientation and embodied experience provoke reflexive engagement with both the self and societal norms. The horror sensorium mediates participants' interactions with the environment, shaping spatial awareness, emotional responses, and overall immersion. This aligns with David Scott Diffrient's concept of horror as a "body genre." Diffrient adopts an affective and sensorial approach to show how horror films engage the body viscerally, carefully fleshing out the "flesh itself" to dissect "not only the surface but the substance of cinematic horror."⁴¹ He argues that horror is the most corporeally intense of all cinematic genres due to its capacity to provoke fear, disgust, arousal, and even empathy. In this way, horror demands a reflexive engagement with the human sensorium, prompting audiences to turn toward or away from the monstrous, shifting emotional and physical states in the process. Understanding these interactions reveals horror's impact on audiences and creators alike, as it continuously invites disorientation and moral reorientation. Sara Ahmed's concept of "queer orientations" offers a useful framework for understanding how haunted attractions reorient bodies in space. She examines how "bodies are gendered, sexualized, and raced by how they extend into space [...] What is offered, in other words, is a model of how bodies become oriented by how they take up time and space."⁴² The very notion of orientation contrasts with the disorientation that haunts, as they blur societal norms and physically unsettle perception. By disorienting participants, haunted attractions expose how we are already oriented, offering opportunities to confront ingrained expectations and rethink identity, fear, and pleasure.

Haunted attractions achieve immediate bodily engagement through the sophisticated manipulation of multiple sensory channels, transforming horror into a tangible, embodied experience. The aptly named *The Darkness* maze exemplifies this by deploying both sensory deprivation and overload: guests navigate pitch-black corridors drowned in jarring metal music, forced to rely on underutilized senses like touch while the dominant sense of sight is stripped away. As a regular haunt attendee typically resistant to scares, I found myself profoundly disoriented and anxious—separated from my group, moving in circles, pushing against walls to find my way. This visceral fear stemmed not from visible threats but from sensory uncertainty: what lay hidden in darkness, what might happen next, and whether escape was even possible. As Ndalianis suggests, this immediacy heightens emotional intensity and the thrill of danger, even within a controlled environment.⁴³ Such spaces prompt visitors to question their orientation and agency within the narrative. When I finally emerged from *The Darkness*, heart racing, I realized how completely my sense of control had been disrupted. The experience resists passive spectatorship, demanding active engagement with props, costumes, lighting, and sound. As technology evolves, tools like fog, creaking floorboards, and shifting lights further obscure reality, deliberately removing familiar sensory cues. Whether by enhancing or withholding stimuli, the manipulation of sensory experience lies at the core of haunted attractions' ability to evoke fear and create encounters with the unknown.

The technical implementation of sensory effects in haunted attractions enhances bodily engagement, particularly through scent technology. Atmospheric effects affect immersive multisensory experiences that push the boundaries of traditional storytelling. At the HAA trade show, manufacturer of synthetic aromas for use in haunts, Froggy's Fog showcased a wide range of scents, from pleasant aromas like chocolate chip cookies, cotton candy, and gingerbread, to

more malodorous options such as skunk, sulfur, and raw sewage. These scents, permeating the trade show floor, immediately evoke feelings of attraction or repulsion, tapping into horror's ability to elicit both disgust and delight.⁴⁴ In haunted attractions like *The Darkness*, scent plays a major role in shaping the narrative. For example, in the circus scene, the sweet smell of cotton candy contrasts with the eerie presence of creepy clowns, resulting in an unsettling dissonance.

Scent operates as a powerful narrative device in haunted attractions, enhancing immersion by layering sensory cues that manipulate emotional and physical responses. In a hospital setting, in *Fear Factory*, sterile smells mingle with hints of decay, heightening the sense of discomfort. Layering of scents provides an entirely new dimension to the experience. Sweet cotton candy, although attractive, felt uneasy in a setting built with creepy and disorienting clown imagery, while the hospital scene's combination of sterile and rotting smells intensified an already unsettling atmosphere, especially for those afraid of doctors. This sensory layering opened new narrative possibilities and forged vivid memories, illustrating how scent can transport the body and deepen emotional and physical reactions. These scent-based atmospheric effects deepen immersion, encouraging visitors to engage not only with what they see but also with what they smell, further complicating the boundaries between fiction and reality. Scents also serve to enhance or obscure certain sensory experiences, such as sight. Fog, for instance, reduces visibility, forcing guests to rely more on their sense of smell to navigate the environment. Like dim lighting that encourages reliance on haptic navigation, fog and scent push participants to engage with unfamiliar sensory cues, heightening their bodily responses. Froggy's Fog's promotional material emphasizes that "scents are key for deepening your

narrative,” directing attention to the importance of scent in shaping the atmosphere an emotional impact of a scene (see fig. 10). In haunts, scents become a tool for narrative immersion, balancing attraction and repulsion to enhance the overall experience.



Figure 10. Froggy Fog marketing poster at the TransWorld 2022 tradeshow, promoting scents for “deepening narrative.” Image by author.

Lighting similarly becomes significant to storytelling within haunted attractions, enhancing both the fun and fear aspects of the experience. While technological advancements in haunted attractions aim to heighten the emotional impact, lighting design serves a dual purpose: it can enkindle awe and excitement but also induce fear, manipulating visitors' expectations and emotional responses. At the HAA conference, lighting designs were showcased across various holidays—from Halloween to Christmas and Easter—demonstrating how lighting can evoke both whimsy and terror. For instance, the singing pumpkins—designed to synchronize with music—are a playful use of lighting that engages audiences in a fun, lighthearted way. These installations provide elements of beauty and wonder, producing a festive atmosphere that Disney parks are famous for (see fig. 11). However, the same lighting technologies are also used in darker contexts to provoke fear. Lighting in haunted attractions is carefully crafted to set a mood: red and blue lights engender a tense, moody atmosphere, while eerie blacklight effects heighten supernatural or unsettling moments. The contrast between fun and fear is especially evident in the use of blacklight, a technique traditionally associated with dark rides. Under normal lighting, spaces might appear innocuous (see fig. 10), but with the strobe of a blacklight, hidden elements are revealed—transforming a child's bedroom into a scene of terror, as seen in *Nightmare on 13th*, where monstrous paintings emerge on the walls (see fig. 11a-c). This sudden shift from playful to frightening underscores how lighting can shape emotional responses, swinging from delight to fear in an instant.



Figure 11. Blachere Illuminations light installation at the HAA TransWorld convention, spring 2022. Image by author.



Figure 12 a–c. Transformation of a child's bedroom scene in *Nightmare on 13th* in Salt Lake City, fall 2023. **(a)** The room under normal lighting appears warm and innocuous. **(b)** Under blacklight, hidden demonic imagery emerges through strobe effects. **(c)** The shift from innocence to horror highlights lighting's emotional impact. Images by author.

Pepper's Ghost illusions, like those used in the same haunt, further emphasize lighting's ability to switch between these two emotional registers of playfulness and fear to disorient, guide, and immerse guests (see figs. 13a-b). The use of blacklight and other lighting effects in the haunt's scenes—such as the projection of a ghostly figure from a noose—uses lighting to provoke fear while still relying on theatricality. Likewise, blinding red lights shooting through fog impair depth perception and relying on vision to navigate an unfamiliar space, adding a sense of danger and disorientation (see fig. 14). The vortex tunnel, with its spinning neon patterns, manufactures the illusion of instability, forcing guests to grip the rails in a moment of fear, even though they remain on solid ground (see fig. 15). As such, lighting becomes an essential tool for emotional engagement and narrative development in immersive horror environments.



Figure 13a–b. Pepper's Ghost illusion featuring a noose and ghostly figure in *Nightmare on 13th* in Salt Lake City, fall 2023. **(a)** A noose floats midair, the eeriness of its appearance enhanced by lighting. **(b)** The illusion reveals a ghost who appears to have died by hanging. Images by author.

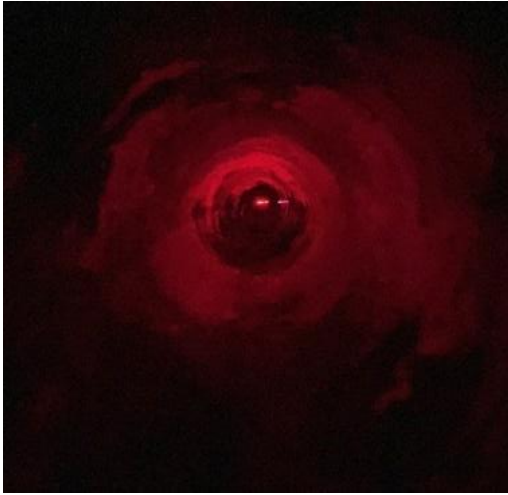


Figure 14. Red laser light cutting through fog as a blinding effect in *Nightmare on 13th* in Salt Lake City, fall 2023. Image by author.

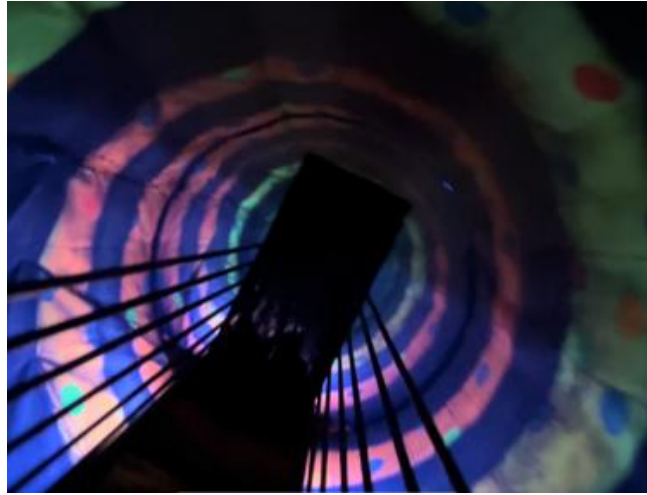


Figure 15. Vortex tunnel illusion at *The Darkness* in St. Louis, spring 2022, shown at a Dutch angle to emphasize its rotating, disorienting effects. Image by author.

The immediacy of haunted attractions can generate lasting emotional impacts, revealing fears audiences may not have previously been aware of or exposing them to threats and fears not readily recognized. This entanglement of fear and fun derived from haunted attractions demonstrates the prioritization of narrative storytelling incorporated into the set, optical illusions, and scare actor performances that cross the boundaries between reality and fiction to develop immersive and visceral scares, delivering a lingering impact. During the 2023 haunting season, I attended a Nebraska haunted attraction built in a strip mall parking lot. The haunt is no longer in operation, but it was entitled *Shadow's Edge*. I experience a scarring moment while navigating a “white-out” maze with a friend. The “white-out” maze is an enclosed, maze-like space pumped full of dense white fog. The claustrophobic fog was so thick I could not see the tip of my nose, making breathing, seeing, or hearing difficult; the experience felt suffocating. I also knew that the scented fog was not meant to be inhaled for long periods due to the health impacts on the lungs, so I tried to hold my breath, which in turn increased my sense of anxiety at being trapped

in a claustrophobic space. Given the emotional duress I faced in this haunting scene, I have asked every haunt since that event if they had a white-out maze so I could excuse myself from that experience—or at least be prepared for it again. This illustrates the extent to which people do not know their thresholds of fear until they interact with a specific event and stimuli.

The heightened emotional intensities produced by haunted attractions, derived from the immediate manipulation of sensory stimuli, distinguish them from horror films. It is one thing to turn off the television, but when I physically could not see out of that space or work out how to get out if there was an emergency, it scared me profoundly. In other words, the experiences of physical and locational contingencies make it feel more real. The intertextual relationship between media—film, literature, video games—illuminates how haunted attractions serve as an experiential extension of the genre, enhancing the emotional responses elicited by these forms.

Through sophisticated manipulation of sensory experiences and technical effects, these attractions achieve what Ndalianis describes: “For the horror rider, the fear of death and bodily destruction is one step closer to being a real threat.”⁴⁵ This immediacy distinguishes haunted attractions from other horror media forms, inducing visceral experiences that engage audiences on fundamental physical and emotional levels. The bodily engagement proves vital for comprehending how different horror media forms give rise to varying degrees of psychological distance and immediacy, ultimately affecting how audiences experience and process fear.

Historical Convergence of Horror and Haunts

From Spectacle to Narrative and Back Again

Having established the definitions and cognitive operations of haunted attractions, along with the role of affect theory, I now turn to consider how these elements actively contribute to the evolution of horror narratives in haunts. The nature of spectacle and narrative in haunted

attractions mirrors the foundational elements of the horror genre and haunted attractions, designating a distinct yet familiar experience. The relationship between haunted attractions and the horror genre merges spectacle, narrative, and affect, shaped by their shared entertainment history. Horror's historical reliance on short, concentrated bursts of affect parallels the immediate, immersive encounters found in haunted attractions, whether in a short story or film. These moments of balancing spectacle and narrative in haunted attractions mirror the horror genre, as it has been historically rooted in both. While the visual spectacle of elaborate sets and animatronics captures attention, it is the underlying narratives that provide context and depth to the experience. Haunted attractions intertwine traditional horror tropes, allowing visitors to engage with both the story and sensory stimuli, positioning them as active participants in a living horror narrative. Haunted attractions embody horror's fundamental duality as both spaces of spectacular display and narrative meaning-making. Tom Gunning's concept of the "Cinema of Attractions" illuminates how early films prioritized spectacle over linear narrative, a technique that parallels the methods used in haunted attractions.⁴⁶ Haunts rely on jump scares, optical illusions, and the visceral presence of scare actors to thrill and terrify audiences.

Gunning also traces the relationship between early cinema and the rise of major amusement parks, "such as Coney Island, at the turn of the century," suggesting that these parks provided fertile "ground for rethinking the roots of cinema."⁴⁷ A pivotal illustration of this connection is found in George Méliès' landmark film, *Le Manoir du Diable* (*The Devil's Manor*, 1896), one of the first horror films, which stresses visual spectacle and playful trickery,⁴⁸ featuring a haunted house populated by bats, ghosts, and skeletons that frighten two explorers. Méliès uses startling effects similar to those found in contemporary haunted attractions, serving as an early film example of the entanglement between horror cinema and haunted attractions,

both aiming to evoke immediate emotional responses through visual and thematic elements. Rather than adhering to a traditional narrative structure, haunted attractions manufacture intertextual spaces in which horror tropes and iconic characters come alive in immersive environments, leveraging technological innovations and evoke fear, dread, and awe, further reinforcing the complex comingling between cinema and haunted experiences.

James J. Fiumara's concept of "grotesque attractions" further reinforces the historical connection between horror film and haunts, highlighting how early horror entertainment shaped the "formal and thematic conventions of the classic era horror film as well as their promotion, exhibition, and reception."⁴⁹ Tracing the history of haunted attractions reveals their entanglement in early technological experiments with motion pictures. As outlined in Chapter One, horror entertainment has consistently utilized technology to amplify emotional impact, from the phantasmagoria of the late eighteenth century, which used magic lanterns to present macabre tales, to the innovations of early cinema.⁵⁰ Created in France in 1799, the phantasmagoria exemplifies the intersection of technology and performance, captivating and scaring audiences with visual effects and macabre storytelling.⁵¹ Grotesque attractions like "circuses, dime museums, wax museums, vaudeville houses, amusement parks, and freak shows"⁵² were precursors to modern haunted attractions, as Chris Heller identifies performances at the Grand Guignol Theater and Marie Tussaud's Wax Museum, *The Chamber of Horrors*, in the early nineteenth century as examples.⁵³ These attractions laid the foundation for the horror genre, illustrating the interconnectedness of film, haunts, and horror entertainment. Today, these historical threads continue to influence modern haunted attractions where technological spectacle and narrative intertwine in immersive experiences.

These attractions laid the foundation for the horror genre, illustrating the longstanding interplay among film, haunted attractions, and horror entertainment. As Fiumara observes, horror filmgoing has historically been an active experience, mirroring the interactivity of carnivals, dime museums, and amusement parks, where audiences were invited to engage physically and emotionally. Rather than presenting films as passive viewings, studios often used stunts, props, and contests to immerse audiences in the horror narrative, deliberately collapsing the boundaries between fiction and reality. Fiumara contends that:

The desire to intensify the audience's emotional engagement with the film by encouraging interactivity and self-consciously blurring the boundaries between the film world and the world of the audience has long been an essential part of both horror film publicity and [...] the narrative conventions by which horror films tell their story.⁵⁴

This tradition continues in today's haunted attractions, where technological spectacle and storytelling work together to produce immersive environments that demand an active, embodied, and often disorienting mode of engagement.

A compelling example of this interactive tradition in horror marketing and exhibition can be found in the work of William Castle, who transformed the cinema into a participatory spectacle. William Castle capitalized on cinema's supernatural associations by incorporating material tricks to enhance the viewing experience. For example, during the 1959 *House on Haunted Hill* screenings, Castle used the in-theater trick "Emergo," in which a skeleton on a zip line "glided above the audience."⁵⁵ Castle likened the suspense in horror films to a roller coaster ride, describing the viewing process as one of "excitement, screams, [and] thrills, without any real danger."⁵⁶ His gimmicks, tricks, and props illustrate cinema's theatrical, spatial, and sensational functions. The development of more elaborate illusions, sound design, and narrative-driven experiences in cinema and haunted attractions integrate advanced technologies to produce shock, fear, and fright in both cinematic and immersive environments.

The technology behind cinema can be viewed as inherently ghost-like, encompassing the cinematic apparatus, spectral performances, and immersive spatial experiences. Projecting images onto a screen provides a sense of presence without physical substance. Murray Leeder describes cinema as a “haunted medium, a haunting medium, a medium that puts us in touch with ghosts.”⁵⁷ He argues that “cinema does not need to depict ghosts to be ghostly and haunted,”⁵⁸ even suggesting that “cinema is a haunted house.”⁵⁹ While metaphorical, this assertion aligns with the thematic exploration of darkness, death, and the in-between in horror films, linking cinema and haunted attractions to spectral qualities. Cinema acts as a ghostly medium by capturing and reviving moments from the past. The moving images and performances of actors—some of whom are no longer alive—continue circulating on screen, embodying the unresolved issues that ghosts represent.

Jeffrey Sconce broadens the concept of spectral hauntings in cinema by examining the evolution of communication technologies, particularly radio and television, which blur the lines between physical and virtual spaces. The merging of these realities has fueled American culture’s ongoing fascination with—and anxiety over—the uncanny presence of new media. Sconce warns that television’s “lurking presence of electronic nothingness” threatened to consume the real world, undermining culture, politics, and life itself.⁶⁰ What once bridged the “real and fantastic” has now transformed into a “crucible for an uncanny electronic space capable of collapsing, compromising, and even displacing the real world.”⁶¹ The content of the stories presented on these mediums (such as *The Twilight Zone* [1959–1964] and *Outer Limits* [1963–1965]) explores how technologies were connected to societal misfortune, illustrating “the real cost of technology” on human relationships.⁶² Television’s “liveness,” Sconce notes, creates an illusion of “direct, personalized, and immediate contact” with its audience.⁶³ This sense of liveness

connects to the medium's inherent state of "becoming," where opaque technologies imbue apparatuses with "living qualities" that haunt the liminal space between presence and absence, familiar and unfamiliar.⁶⁴ Haunted attractions embody similar qualities, combining technology, performance, and artistic design to manipulate living environments. Spectacle and narrative converge within these spaces to evoke fear and unease, paralleling the effects of media technologies Sconce describes.

In haunted attractions, animatronic figures become fruitful examples that tap into deep-seated anxieties about technology while simultaneously serving as powerful storytelling devices. The use of animatronics makes possible a direct connection to narratives, allowing the storybook or horror narratives to come to life. Many animatronics are used to set the stage for an immersive experience by directly singing or talking to the audience, triggered by motion sensors or set to a timer. They may reference familiar Halloween songs (see fig. 16) or famous videogame characters (see fig. 17). The animatronics' direct engagement of the audience—especially when paired with still mannequins—can prompt audiences to feel fear, not knowing which will move or come to life. The fear then lies in anticipation of the unknown. Animatronics can also become tripped by sensors or timed to engineer the same homogenized scares, which Disney often uses in their dark ride experiences. Technology adds to the mystery, becoming an alluring element of these mediated spaces. The innovative technologies sit well in the horror space as they have, and may always be, sources of fear for audiences. The scare is directly connected to the mysterious workings of technology in these sought-after experiences. Many horror television shows during network-era television touched on the fears of electronic media, like *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*. These horror stories find similar appeal in haunted attractions where people can confront the technology directly, with uncanny animatronics.



Figure 16. Pumpkin King animatronic flying overhead and lip synching to song “Jack’s Lament,” from *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993). Transworld trade show floor, 2022. Image of author.



Figure 17. Small animatronic teddy bear speaking to guests, referencing the character Nightmare Fredbear from *Five Nights at Freddy’s*, Transworld tradeshow floor, 2022. Image by author.

The horror genre draws on fear, and one persistent source of fear has been the technologies that produce the very media audiences consume. From early anxieties about film’s mysterious manipulation of space and time to contemporary concerns about technological dominance and loss of human control, new media technologies have long stirred public unease.⁶⁵ Haunted attractions harness these cultural anxieties, both thematizing and amplifying them through their use of cutting-edge tools. The optical illusions and sensory effects embedded in these experiences play on visitors’ uncertainties about what is real, further unsettling the

boundary between human perception and technological trickery. As audiences become more technologically literate, the industry responds with increasingly complex and sophisticated scares. Haunted attractions thus become sites where technological fear is both staged and felt, blending fear and delight in controlled environments that mirror society's evolving concerns. In doing so, they reflect a broader cultural narrative: one where the very tools that promise entertainment and progress are also a source of unease.

Contemporary horror films such as *The House October Built* (2014), *Hell House LLC*, *Hell Fest* (2018), *Haunt* (2019), and *Haunt Season* (2024) increasingly use haunted attractions as central settings, signaling a growing recognition of their narrative and aesthetic significance. These films highlight a reciprocal relationship: while haunted attractions borrow from horror cinema's visual and narrative conventions, they also shape the genre's evolution by reimagining how horror is experienced and structured. Rather than being derivative, haunted attractions push the boundaries of horror storytelling by emphasizing physical, immersive, and affectively intense engagements. As traditional cinema adapts to digital fragmentation, haunted attractions offer a site where horror's core affective logic—shock, suspense, dread—can be delivered live. In his 2024 seminar, “Unlock Amazing Acting Potential,” presented at the Haunted Attraction Association's Transworld Tradeshow, designer Allan Hopps stressed the importance of pacing and emotional resonance over relentless, high-intensity scares. He argued that a well-structured haunt, like a compelling horror film, builds and releases tension with care, using contrast and rhythm rather than constant escalation. To illustrate this point, Hopps compared a poorly paced haunt to *Sin City* (2005) animatedly expressing, that even though the film was black and white,

the action was so intense that “The second time I saw a guy get his testicles ripped off with someone else’s bare hands, I didn’t even care! Because it hits the same note, over and over and over again.”

Hopps went on to emphasize the importance, when planning one’s show, of “think[ing] of how a movie goes,” because too much intensity does not always provide the reactions desired. Setting the haunt up with slow, suspenseful moments can be just as effective. If the haunt is constantly intense with a jump scare, loud sound effect, or animatronic every few feet, the audience will be too desensitized to react. Setting the haunt up with slow, suspenseful moments can be just as effective. Hopps, therefore, advocates for variety and pacing to maintain emotional investment and keep audiences engaged in both spectacle and storytelling. This comment underscores a key insight: without dynamic shifts in affect, even the most graphic spectacle loses its power. For practitioners like Hopps, narrative structure and emotional modulation are essential to delivering memorable scares. His perspective offers a potent rebuttal to critiques of haunted attractions as “low-brow” or purely sensationalist; instead, it positions them as thoughtful compositions of affective peaks and valleys, perhaps akin to the best traditions of cinematic horror.

Transforming the Genre Through Narrative and Performance

Interstitial Narratives

While haunted attractions function as immersive experiences that blend the sensory elements of horror with participatory storytelling, they also serve as complex narrative spaces. The evolution of these attractions reveals a shift toward more elaborate, interstitial narratives, where the story is fragmented, sensory-driven, and highly dependent on the visitors’

engagement. Carissa Baker further expands on this development, examining how contemporary haunted houses use environmental cues and spatial design to convey a form of narrative that is both incomplete and interactive. She mentions that incorporating more narrative in haunted attractions is a growing trend, noting that this shift is partly due to the horror genre and the elaborate backstories developed by contemporary haunts.⁶⁶

Baker describes haunted houses as exemplifying “spatialized narratives,” engaging visitors with a fragmented, incomplete storyline that unfolds as they move through the space.⁶⁷ She observes that “the conception of narrative itself has changed, with spatial stories that narrate with the environment.”⁶⁸ However, Baker also acknowledges the limitations in structuring fully realized narratives in these attractions, which differ from dark rides that offer fixed, linear experiences. In haunted houses, scenes may be missed, and the story shifts depending on the visitor’s path. While the narrative lacks a clear structure, Baker argues it is pieced together through “multisensory design, visceral environments, grotesque imagery, and other techniques,” allowing guests to engage their imaginations and form personal interpretations of the story.⁶⁹ This dynamic relationship between design and audience participation highlights the unique narrative potential of haunted attractions, where visitors’ active engagement shapes their experience.

Building on Baker’s insights, I propose shifting to an interstitial framework better to understand the narratives and technology in haunted attractions. Carroll’s concept of interstitiality, which describes monsters that “specialize in formlessness, incompleteness, categorical interstitially, and categorical contradictoriness,”⁷⁰ aligns with the fragmented narrative structure of haunted attractions. Haunts resist traditional narrative forms by embedding subtle storytelling elements—fragmented symbols, eerie motifs, and environmental design—that

engage visitors' knowledge of horror culture. Carroll's theory of "fission and fusion" illustrates "symbolic structures that facilitate the linkage of distinct or opposed categories,"⁷¹ helping to explain how haunted attractions constitute immersive experiences. Fission, in this context, allows for distinct characters and narratives to emerge as visitors move through different rooms or scenes, each offering a unique facet of fear. This fragmentation engages guests, encouraging them to piece together a broader narrative from the varied elements they encounter. In contrast, fusion blends distinct horror archetypes—witches, serial killers, and monsters—into hybrid entities or immersive spaces, triggering confusion and disorientation. By combining fission and fusion, haunted attractions craft a rich, layered narrative that challenges visitors' perceptions and manufactures a more profound, memorable experience.

Carroll's framework illuminates how haunted attractions demonstrate how fission and fusion incite a disjointed, yet compelling narrative. Visitors navigate a fractured storyline, interpreting the juxtapositions of horror tropes. Unlike traditional linear storytelling, these attractions use disorientation and unpredictability to foster active participation. As visitors decode the scattered narrative elements, they form their own personal interpretations, which asserts the shifting, open-ended nature of the experience. This dynamic interplay invites deeper emotional engagement and encourages visitors to confront the unknown, much like the monsters they encounter—ever-present but never fully defined. This interstitial storytelling model offers a participatory form of narrative construction. Haunted attractions do not simply present fragmented cues. Instead, they invite visitors to fill in the gaps, transforming the experience into a dynamic journey. These spaces blur the lines between reality and fiction through sensory engagement and audience participation, allowing guests to actively shape their narrative.

Embracing interstitial narratives clarifies how haunted attractions shape horror experiences, blurring the lines between reality and fiction and ensuring a lasting impact through dynamic, sensory-rich, and participatory storytelling.

Design Intertextuality: Recognizing the Familiar in the Unfamiliar

Haunted attractions utilize intertextual references to enrich their narratives, blending familiar horror tropes with innovative storytelling techniques. Haunted attractions often employ interstitial narratives that draw on established horror conventions and horror histories while simultaneously inspiring new storylines and characters. The storytelling power of haunted attractions lies not in linear narratives but in their creation of interstitial spaces where meaning emerges through the interaction between cultural knowledge, intertextual references, and the audience's interpretive processes and creative input, exemplifying fission and fusion in horror. As Ndalians observes, "Horror media offers a gamut of experiences—horror, laughter, fear, terror, the cerebral pleasures of intertextual play—and, depending on the sensory, emotional and intellectual encounters each example throws our way, we perceive, sense and interpret the fictional spaces of horror in diverse and distinctive ways."⁷² These elements work together in immersive experiences to challenge traditional horror conventions and invite visitors to explore their fears in a participatory and emotionally resonant manner.

Haunted attractions depend heavily on audiences' cultural literacy and genre knowledge, allowing them to construct meaning from carefully placed references and thematic elements, deploying fusion as disparate horror elements combine to bring about new meaning. While walking through *The Darkness* haunted attraction in Kansas City, Missouri, during the 2022 Transworld Haunted Attraction Conference, I found myself navigating the space alongside horror fans, haunted attraction enthusiasts, and industry professionals. As we toured the

attraction, the space was filled with intertextual references to popular horror films and stories, which sparked moments of joy and recognition among those familiar with the connections. One memorable such moment occurred when I entered a haunted hotel room with “REDRUM” etched into a mirror—a subtle reference to Stephen King’s *The Shining*. Fans immediately recognized the phrase, recalling and mimicking the character Danny Torrance’s guttural and scratchy vocal impression of “REDRUM” (or “MURDER” spelled backward) accented by its placement on a mirror meant to be read in reverse (see fig. 18). This small but significant detail elicited smiles and laughter, as horror fans delighted in identifying the reference. Haunted attractions depend on these culturally recognized motifs to imbue the set design and scenes with meaning, making them more engaging for audiences.

As we continued through *The Darkness*, another scene evoked connections to Stephen King’s *It*, but without explicitly naming the characters. The sewer scene featured a clown and a little boy in a yellow raincoat, images instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with the *It* story. No direct mention was made of Pennywise or Georgie, but the reference was clear to the horror fans around me, who enthusiastically pointed it out. Their recognition of the scene was met with expressions of joy akin to the satisfaction of answering a trivia question correctly or reconnecting with an old friend. This recognition was deeply nostalgic, as the scene tapped into memories of formative experiences with horror, particularly with those who are already fans of horror and haunt content. The interstitial storytelling method enhances immersion and fosters a deeper emotional connection to the horror genre, offering an experience that is as much about the journey of discovery as it is about fear.



Figure 18. The word Redrum etched into a dirty mirror at The Darkness Haunted Attraction in St. Louis, 2022. Image by author.

This transformation of narrative techniques within haunted attractions illustrates my broader argument about their relationship to the horror genre, regarding how they function as sites where horror's meaning and impact are continuously constructed and reimagined. The horror genre has influenced the inspiration and creation of haunted attractions. Interviewees referred to the horror genre to contextualize the design decisions within haunted attractions, through generic appreciation and intertextual reference. The references provided connections to

horror film monsters, scenes, and narratives produced, while also pulling from Halloween trends. Kenneth, a scare actor-manager, mentioned that when developing ideas on characters, they lean heavily on the horror genre. He stated, “I watch a lot of horror movies [...] It’s the weirdest things that you’ll steal from a movie. It’s not necessarily the main things [...] but you’re like, ‘That’s a cool scene. How can we do something like that?’”

Kenneth and his team of haunters are not the only haunts in the industry to draw on inspiration from horror films to produce intertextual references to the genre. Scare actors across the country often referenced key figures and narratives from within the horror genre, relying on intertextuality to provide context for the design choices within haunted attractions while shaping scare actor performances. The interviews touched on horror film monsters, iconic scenes, and narrative themes, often drawing inspiration from prevailing Halloween and horror trends. As recent horror film and television shows such as *It* (WB 2017), *Stranger Things* (Netflix 2016-2024), *The Last of Us* (HBO 2023-), and *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010-2022) have gained prominence in society, they have also made their way into haunted attraction spaces. Childhood shows take on new meanings when evoked in performances of adult scare actors such as one I interviewed, named Sarah. Her interest in characters like Raven from *Teen Titans* (Cartoon Network, 2003 – 2006) is characterized by her brooding, moody presence and sarcastic remarks. Also, Sarah references *Courage the Cowardly Dog* (Cartoon Network, 1999-2002), expressing that she feels the show is “emblematic of learning that things aren’t as scary as you think they are.” She went on to explain how media consumed in childhood helped her realize that darkness is not as ominous as many believe.

What is particularly striking in the realm of haunted attractions is how the seemingly most unlikely sources of inspiration—ranging from childhood cartoons to unconventional horror figures—are transformed into powerful elements that shape the characters, performances, and overall atmosphere of these spaces. While many haunters draw on iconic horror monsters and scenes, there is a fascinating process of intertextuality at play whereby influences from childhood television shows, obscure horror performances, or even contortionist actors come together in surprising ways. This process reveals that the overlap between horror film references and haunted attraction performances is about not just mimicking well-known tropes, but creatively reinterpreting and reinventing them. For example, Sarah also draws significant inspiration from Doug Jones, a renowned contortionist and mime artist known for his roles in Guillermo del Toro films, such as *Mimic* (1997), *Hellboy* (2004), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *The Shape of Water* (2017), etc., as well as television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire* (episode “Hush”) and *Tales from the Crypt* (episode “Food for Thought”).

Jones visited *HellsGate* (2022-present) haunted attraction before the 2023 Halloween season to provide a movement class for the scare actors. Featured on the *Days of the Living Dead* (2010-present) YouTube series 2023E5, “We Dig Doug!,” Jones explains to the room full of scare actors, “We do the same thing. You and I. We’re in the [...] same family, really. We create dreams and escape and magic and memories for our audience.”⁷³ Jones’ guidance to scare actors underscores how subtle body movements and contortionist techniques become vital in crafting a sense of otherworldliness—blurring the line between human and monstrous. The convergence of these unusual influences in haunted attractions speaks to a broader, often-overlooked trend in the horror genre: that sometimes the most chilling experiences arise not from obvious references to terror, but from the reimagining of familiar, yet unconventional, figures. By drawing from the

most unexpected corners of horror and pop culture, haunters actualize immersive experiences that captivate and unsettle, illustrating how the genre's reach extends beyond traditional boundaries, weaving together interconnected narratives.

Even small references provide nuanced connections for those well-versed in both pop culture and horror, enriching the haunted attraction experience. One example is the scattering of mushrooms along a wooden path in a scene featuring zombies, intertextually referencing the transference of the disease through Cordyceps fungi featured in *The Last of Us*. Lisa Morton has discussed how horror movies, such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), have played a significant role in shaping Halloween traditions and decorations.⁷⁴ Such movies have inspired costumes, decorations, and haunted attractions, linking the horror genre closely with the Halloween holiday. The same successful horror films that influence Halloween also shape the haunt industry. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* was so influential that one of my haunt operators, James recalled how audiences pushed them to incorporate elements from popular horror films directly into their shows. James noted that growing societal interest in horror compelled haunts to reflect the characters and themes of these widely recognized films. He said:

It's funny because *Nightmare in Elm Street* came out, all these kids were asking if Freddy Krueger was there, in our house. I didn't know who Freddie Krueger was [...] [We] went to a costume shop and picked up the Freddy Krueger costume. We had Freddy Krueger from that. It's funny because, like I said, I wasn't the horror movie guy [...] I learned I didn't know my characters.

The audiences demanded more of an incorporation of horror film scenes, requiring haunts to be aware of horror's new trends, killers, and characters. Nevertheless, haunted attractions have become a popular form of entertainment, drawing inspiration from horror movies, video games, and special effects for visitors.

While intellectual property restrictions might seem limiting, they actually drive haunted attractions to innovate beyond simple recreation of familiar horror narratives. Haunted attractions continually innovate, especially for creators who cannot use established intellectual properties due to copyright infringement. The evolution of haunted attractions narrative strategies demonstrates how haunted attractions actively contribute to the development of horror entertainment while maintaining connections to the genre's traditional elements and conventions. Embarking on a journey through the intricate set designs of *Nightmare on 13th*, I become immersed in the elaborate spectacles of thirteen nightmares loosely constructed through the thematic set design: from a frozen wonderland named "Deep Freeze," adorned with snowscapes and looming yeti monsters, to a chilling section titled "I Scream," dedicated to the presence of killer clowns and sweet treats (see fig. 19 and 20). Traversing these haunting spaces, I encounter a blend of familiar horror themes with novel architecture and composition. It is not until I walk through the "Dark Ride of Terror" section, referencing dark ride histories intertwined with carnival aesthetics (see fig. 21 and 22), that I witness a tell-tale intertextual reference to the Crypt Keeper from *Tales of the Crypt* (see fig. 23). The inclusion of this animatronic serves as a deliberate homage to horror's rich legacy, resonating profoundly with audiences entrenched in the nuances of horror media. The integration of the Crypt Keeper becomes a source of immense delight for audiences who recognize the reference and illustrates the intersection between haunted attractions and the broader horror genre, even while developing their own scenes and overarching narratives.



Figure 19. “I Scream”-themed truck in the courtyard of *Nightmare on 13th*, Salt Lake City, fall 2023. Two monsters flank the truck, offering guests an interactive photo-op tied to the attraction’s “I Scream” section. Image by author.



Figure 20. Ice Cream Factory sign in the “I Scream” section of *Nightmare on 13th*, Salt Lake City, fall 2023. The signage blends horror with carnival aesthetics, contributing to the section’s eerie, clown-themed environment. Image by author.



Figure 21. Dark Ride of Terror photo-op in the courtyard of *Nightmare on 13th*, Salt Lake City, fall 2023. Positioned at the haunt’s entrance and exit, the cart invites guests to engage with the dark ride theme beyond its narrative context. Image by author.



Figure 22. Dark Ride of Terror section at *Nightmare on 13th*, Salt Lake City, fall 2023. Red lighting enhances the eerie atmosphere, merging carnival aesthetics with haunted attraction horror. Image by author.



Figure 23. Mid shot of the Crypt Keeper from *Tales from the Crypt* (1989–1996), featured in the 2023 *Nightmare on 13th* haunted attraction, Salt Lake City. Image by author.

The connection between the haunted attractions and horror films continues to form burgeoning relationships that mutually benefit the industries. Robert, a haunt operator, recalled the haunt *Rocky Point Haunted House* (1979-2007) in Ogden, Utah, which operated for almost thirty years, and “at a really great connection to the film industry. All of [the] sets were from [the original] film [sets].” A scare actor, Josh, who knew the owner and operator of *Rocky Point*, Cydney Neil, also attested that she acquired actual pieces from the original *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) movie set and placed them in her haunted house. Neil even knew Tom Savini, the special effects artist who sculpted a specific mask for the movie, because she was a makeup artist in Hollywood. Through her connections in the industry, she was able to reach out to Tom Savini, who still had the mold for the mask he sculpted for the movie. Tom Savini poured a replica of the mask for her to use in her haunted house attraction. Additionally, the woman knew

Bob Burns, the production designer from the movie, who had saved many original pieces from the set, including items from the bone room and living room set with chairs made of skeletons. The woman expressed interest in purchasing these original props from Bob Burns to use them in her haunted house attraction. Bob Burns agreed to sell the pieces to her, and they were then enshrined in her haunted house for the public to view. This acquisition allowed her to incorporate authentic props from the iconic horror film into her attraction, adding a unique and nostalgic element for visitors to experience.

Film executives also demonstrate a knowledge of the haunted attraction industry as they begin to shift into more experiential entertainment to expand their film worlds. For example, the *Saw* franchise (owned by Lionsgate) licenses its work to Jason Eagan Productions, which has owned and operated a haunted attraction in Las Vegas, Nevada, and now has used this knowledge to produce escape rooms directly with entertainment companies accessing intellectual properties (IP) such as *The Blair Witch Project* (Lionsgate 1999) and *It: Chapter 1* and *Chapter 2* (Warner Bros 2017; 2019). Recently, the company made a deal to develop an immersive experience for *John Wick* (Lionsgate 2014–present).

However, while having the backing of horror IP is a huge draw for audiences, developing original material is still regarded highly and considered by producers and consumers alike. This can be seen in the fact that studios with access to popular franchises often push boundaries by introducing original concepts. Universal Studios' *Halloween Horror Nights 33* (HHN, 2024) exemplifies this balance of honoring tradition while innovating within the genre. By combining licensed properties like *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire* with original experiences such as *Goblin's Feast*, the event showcases how haunted attractions can expand narrative possibilities while maintaining familiar horror frameworks.

One example in the *HHN 33* line up, *Universal Monsters: Eternal Bloodline*, demonstrates how these attractions can reframe classic horror tropes to address contemporary themes. Designed, scripted, and acted entirely by women, *Eternal Bloodline* reimagines the legacy of iconic monsters through a female lens. The story centers on Saskia Van Helsing, the last surviving member of the Van Helsing family, who seeks vengeance for her brother's death at the hands of Dracula's daughter. As Saskia grapples with grief and her family's legacy, she embarks on a quest to stop Dracula's bloodline from obtaining the powerful Amon-ra amulet. In confronting monsters and her own doubts, she evolves from a reluctant heir to a fierce protector of humanity. This narrative, steeped in themes of loss, vengeance, and family legacy, adds depth to the Universal Monsters lore while presenting a strong, complex heroine.

Despite its layered storytelling, however, audience reactions to the attraction's conclusion reveal that immediate physical experience often trumps narrative clarity in haunted attractions. At the end of the *Halloween Horror Nights* event, my group's tour guide asked the group to explain what happened at the conclusion, to see if we all caught what had happened to Saskia. I was the only one to identify that Saskia had been killed at the end of the story. The convoluted end signals how haunted attractions are adaptations and evolutions of the genre, developing interstitial narratives that are not always easily grasped through walking through the haunt. As they blend cinematic conventions with immersive, embodied horror that challenges traditional storytelling through new technologies, innovative narratives, or a focus on the sensory experience, these attractions reshape how we engage with fear and demonstrate the genre's continued sensorial evolution.

Some haunted attractions, such as *Terror in the Corn* (2001–), in Erie, Colorado, have taken transmedia storytelling a step further by pioneering comic books and video games that extend their original IP narratives beyond the physical space of the haunt. *Terror in the Corn* was the first to develop a comic-book series and an interactive video game based on characters and lore from its attraction, allowing fans to explore the haunt’s mythology outside of the seasonal event. These additional media forms allow visitors to engage with the story and fictional worlds by priming their connection to the attraction and its characters through multiple mediums.⁷⁵ Top haunted attractions increasingly draw on this strategy, creating original narratives, monsters, and intellectual properties (IPs) that can be monetized across platforms—including merchandise, games, and comics. Many also reference popular horror films and iconic monster characters to layer intertextual appeal. This diversification contributes to the definitional ambiguity of haunted attractions, especially as well-established haunts begin to resemble theme parks by offering multiple forms of entertainment under one branded experience. By providing multiple entry points into the narrative, these attractions offer a more comprehensive and immersive experience that encourages ongoing fan engagement across media platforms.

Horror media plays a pivotal role in shaping the production and culture of haunted attractions, helping to prime audiences for the loosely constructed narratives they encounter while influencing the performances of scare actors. Many scare actors are not only knowledgeable about the horror genre but are also fans of it themselves, drawing inspiration from movies, TV shows, and iconic horror actors to craft their own terrifying characters. Ndalians explores the intertextual references in horror media from horror television, film, and even dark rides, describing an

[i]ncreased expectation of media literacy both on the part of media creators and consumers. In the case of cult media—which many horror examples often become—this

activity on the part of the media consumer is amplified further still, especially when fan activity enters the picture. The horror genre, whether expressed through film, comic book or television, is notorious for amassing followers who possess an obsessive understanding of the genre, its rules and its history.⁷⁶

This fan culture plays a significant role in the design of haunted attractions, where the creators and audience share a mutual enjoyment of recognizing familiar horror references. In haunted attractions, the set designs and scenes often draw directly from these horror media inspirations, but the performances of scare actors go beyond mere homage. Scare actors imbue their roles with personal meaning, molding their characters on the basis of both their own experiences and the genre's iconic aesthetics. While these positions may be seasonal, many actors invest significant time year-round in developing their characters—working on their voices, movements, and overall storytelling. For these performers, unpredictability is imperative; they know that if a guest has seen a certain horror film, they may already have expectations about what to expect from a character. For example, a scare actor dressed as Michael Myers with a butcher's knife may prompt an audience member to anticipate being chased. In this way, scare actors frighten by association and tell stories through gesture, timing, and genre awareness, contributing to the fractured yet evocative narratives that define haunted attraction experiences.

Storytelling is a fundamental aspect of human culture,⁷⁷ and what makes a story compelling is its ability to engage the imagination. A narrative need not always follow a logical sequence to provoke an emotional response. Effective storytelling techniques often include unexpected twists, emotional involvement, and cultural references, all of which help to build a connection with the audience. Similarly, haunted attractions prioritize immersion over seamless storytelling. While their narratives may be fragmented or non-linear, they draw on familiar horror themes, tropes, and intertextual references, which allow the audience to piece the story together.

Nevertheless, like narrative more generally, the haunted attraction industry is not without its clichés. William, a haunted attraction designer, points out that overdone references, such as the ubiquitous chainsaw chase at the end of a haunt, can detract from the experience. To combat this predictability, he focuses on creating more immersive and realistic environments. To keep people on their toes, he often tries to avoid those overdone or overly “low-brow” performances:

Realism is critical. If you really want to scare someone, you got to make them forget they're in a manmade haunt. They need to be immersed in something that feels very real. Production value to me is very important. Non-predictability. When we first opened our haunt, I refused to do a chainsaw at the end because it's so darn cliché and predictable. For the first two years, no chainsaw. Our customers complained so much about us not having a chainsaw at the end that I finally gave in. Now they're thrilled. I refuse to do clowns though, because clowns are so cliché. Our customers still complain about not having clowns, but that's where I draw the line.

William's frustration highlights a central tension in the haunt industry: the desire to elevate the art of fear while still meeting audience expectations shaped by genre convention. His rejection of clowns and chainsaws is not simply about creative preference, it illustrates a quiet resistance to the accusation that haunted attractions rely on vulgar spectacle. By emphasizing “realism,” “production value,” and “non-predictability,” William reframes haunting as a craft, grounded in aesthetic choices that prioritize emotional authenticity over formulaic scares. His remarks reveal that originality and artistic intention are not only present in the industry but actively defended. Even as he eventually relents to the chainsaw due to customer demand, his line in the sand (the refusal to include clowns) signals a commitment to distinguishing his haunt from the predictable, carnivalized forms of horror that critics may dismiss as unserious. In doing so, he exemplifies how haunters work to strike a balance between innovation and audience satisfaction.

This quest for originality extends beyond simply avoiding clichés; it drives the creation of new horror worlds. As much as haunted attraction designers draw inspiration from prevailing trends in horror films and media, they increasingly aim to develop their own monsters, characters, and intellectual properties.

The creativity of both designers and performers sustains the believability and freshness of haunted attractions, as their narratives avoid the constraints of predictable structures. As Kenneth repeatedly emphasizes when training scare actors, “Don’t say ‘Boo!’” when popping out of hiding areas, because such a predictable response diminishes the impact of the scare. The goal of haunted attractions and their interstitial narratives is not merely to replicate familiar tropes, but to innovate, pushing the boundaries of fear and narrative expectations. It is in this context that the concepts of *fusion* and *fission* come into play.

Fusion refers to the blending of traditional horror elements with new, original ideas to formulate fresh, hybrid experiences, while *fission* involves breaking apart established conventions and reinterpreting them in unexpected ways, allowing for a more complex, evolving narrative. Haunted attractions embody this dynamic by using intertextuality—not just as homage to horror films and television, but as a springboard for creation. They take familiar references and build something new, imagining original stories and characters while drawing on the rich legacy of horror to challenge audience expectations. This process is deeply intertwined with immersion—the way in which the audience is enveloped in the sensory and emotional experience of the attraction. Immersion intensifies the psychological impact, as recognition of intertextual references is not just a passive act of recollection, but an active part of the visitor’s emotional journey, blurring the lines between the imagined world of horror and their own lived experiences. By fostering this immersion, haunted attractions invite guests to move beyond

passive consumption of horror and into a more participatory and imaginative space, where their engagement is integral to the unfolding narrative. In doing so, they redefine the horror experience, turning it into something both deeply familiar and provocatively new.

This distinction becomes especially vivid when comparing immersive theatre with haunted attractions. Both rely on sensory design and co-presence, but haunted attractions offer more immediate and affectively intense forms of interactivity. In haunted attractions, guests are often addressed directly, physically isolated, or prompted to make choices, producing responsive, reciprocal exchanges that heighten emotional intensity. Where immersive theatre often seeks aesthetic distance, haunts demand emotional immediacy. Performers wear the masks; audience members are granted a recognizable self—one constantly under threat. This inversion constructs a theater of vulnerability, in which affect is generated through confrontation, not contemplation.

Haunted attractions also differ from immersive theatre in their design logic. While immersive theatre may aim for narrative coherence, haunts prioritize affective engineering: dark corridors, strobe lights, sudden sound cues, disorienting spatial arrangements, and jump scares work together to elicit fear, anxiety, laughter, and release. Presence here is not just spatial—it is embodied and affective. A whisper in the dark, a performer blocking your path, a scream erupting nearby: these are not passive moments but charged encounters that collapse the boundary between fiction and reality. Unlike theme parks, where performer–guest interaction is mediated by hospitality, haunts trade in improvisation and unsettling intimacy. In other words, while immersive theatre and haunted attractions share formal elements—site-specificity, sensory immersion, blurred fictionality—they diverge in their affective and participatory stakes. Immersive theatre often fosters introspective engagement; haunted attractions weaponize

interactivity to produce shared, embodied, and emotionally potent experiences. These are not just participatory—they are felt, and that feeling is central to the cultural and emotional focus of LMHE.

Performance Tactics: Moving Spectators to Participants

Performance is fundamental to understanding and defining haunted attractions, particularly the role of scare actors and their techniques in generating fear. Scare actors employ a variety of physical and vocal techniques to maintain unpredictability to elicit fear. The workings of audience affects and production transforms passive spectatorship into an active, visceral engagement with fear. Performance strategies contribute significantly to the overall immersive experience, offering moments of interactivity for the audience, which heightens their emotional involvement. Haunted attractions exist as *interstitial spaces*—they are neither fully real nor completely fictional, neither strictly performed nor passively observed. These attractions are fragmented, sensorily-driven, and deeply dependent on the visitor’s participation in constructing meaning from the environment. In haunted attractions, “The audience is not only visible, but a clear target for the scares that are delivered.”⁷⁸

As Hoedt observes, haunted attractions tap into societal anxieties, transforming the audiences’ role from “passive spectators to active participants.”⁷⁹ These anxieties can range from fears of confinement and loss of control to the vulnerabilities of social performance or spiritual uncertainty. For example, during my visit to *The Nightmare Realm* in Dublin, Ireland, a scare actor broke from the crowd and beckoned me and a friend into a small, hidden room. There, under dim lights, she performed a mock séance using tarot cards, orchestrating a scene that blurred theater and ritual. At one point, I was singled out, mockingly shamed for “being scared”—a performance that reflected and amplified real social anxieties around vulnerability,

shame, and bodily risk. The room had one entrance and one exit, and although I knew I was safe, the spatial disorientation and tight physical confinement created a subtle tension between play and panic. By collapsing the boundary between performer and spectator, haunt attractions develop fluid spaces where fear can flourish and reality and fiction blur. This *interstitial* quality is crucial, as it creates a space where participants are actively engaged in piecing together the narrative from environmental cues, grotesque imagery, and subtle symbols. In this particular haunt, which evoked the atmosphere of a late-nineteenth-century vampire story, the narrative was fragmented—more suggested than stated—populated by seedy characters and crumbling cobblestone streets. While the horror theming was intentionally ambiguous, it invited visitors to interpret the world and their place within it, offering a personalized encounter with broader cultural tensions embedded in gothic and supernatural horror.

Despite technological advancements, haunted attractions continue to rely on the human element—live performers—who transform these spaces into dynamic, personalized experiences (this topic is discussed further in Chapter Three). At the Transworld Haunted Attraction Conference, seminars have explored whether a haunt can function without scare actors, as they are costly and often considered among the most “difficult” to manage, according to haunt owners and operators. However, as Disney discovered in the 1980s, during a brief experiment with live actors in the *Haunted Mansion*, human interaction can intensify fear in ways animatronics are unable to. Scare actors create personal, interactive moments that heighten emotional responses, push the boundaries of predictability, and deepen immersion. The *Haunted Mansion*’s blend of humor and horror—where whimsical singing and jovial ghosts coexist with eerie surroundings—engages guests in a more lighthearted way than is common in contemporary haunts. However, when Disney replaced animatronics with live actors who jumped out at guests, the

unpredictability and immediacy of human performers overwhelmed the intended levity, intensifying fear beyond expectations and were then promptly removed.^{80, 81} This shift shows how live actors disrupt predictability, establishing a space where immersion and emotional intensity thrive. Disney's brief experiment with human actors reveals how live, liveness-driven moments in haunts can build intense, personalized experiences, underscoring the danger and realism that animatronics fail to replicate.

Live performances in haunted attractions create shared, participatory spaces where actors and audiences engage in close physical proximity.⁸² As “the boundaries between reality and fiction collapse,” performers frequently “break the fourth wall,” crafting immediate, visceral interactions.⁸³ Patrick Braillard identifies haunted attractions as a form of *visceral theatre*—a performance mode that draws on instinctual reactions and popular cultural knowledge to provoke physiological and emotional responses through the overstimulation of the senses. He says haunts are what he classifies as visceral theater, which is:

A form of theatre that uses the instinctual awareness of the audience—the audiences' perception of popular culture, societal contexts both historical and geographical, as well as their instinctual-physical aversion to danger—to cause physiological and emotional responses through the overstimulation of the senses in a non-tactile attack.⁸⁴

Although he emphasizes that this form of theater depends on audience engagement: guests willingly embrace fear and enter into unstable, unpredictable environments. Sensory overload sustains immersion. Visceral theatre, then, is a means to entertain and to provoke raw, lasting emotional response.

Halloween Horror Nights (HHN) continues to evolve the visceral theatre model by reimagining audience–performer dynamics in ways that challenge traditional horror conventions. At *HHN 33* California's *A Quiet Place 2* experience, performers communicated exclusively through sign language, urging guests not to scream—not for the guests' own safety, but to protect

the actors from being taken by a predatory creature. Here, audience participation dictated the outcome of the scene; the actors' survival depended on guest restraint. This inversion of horror logic reframes the performers not as agents of fear but as potential victims, complicating the conventional power hierarchy. Instead of the "final girl" survivor trope, audience members become agents in a gamified structure where their choices produce consequence. In this setup, emotional and ethical engagement replaces passive spectating, with direct human contributions again representing a vital component in this regard too.

Ryan, a longtime scare actor and scare actor-manager, emphasizes the irreplaceable intensity of the human element in such performances. "We could put an animatronic in there," he says of large-scale haunts, "but it's not the same. It needs to have the human intensity, the human element." For Ryan, unpredictability is the key to a successful scare. He trains actors to play with physicality, vocal modulation, and tempo—"quiet, loud, big, small, slow, fast, jittery, smooth"—to prevent guests from being able to predict what comes next. "Sometimes you can work with predictability to build anticipation," he explains, "but most times it's the death of horror if they know exactly what you're going to do." The scare hinges on real-time, embodied performance that blurs the line between fiction and reality. The audience becomes a deliberate target, and scare actors respond in kind with layered performances that range from exaggerated physicality to subtle, psychological tension. These encounters redefine horror storytelling: they break down the divide between spectator and performer and turn fear into an immersive, co-authored experience.

The recognition of familiar horror tropes in haunted attractions does not just invite nostalgia, but actively engages visitors in the creation of an interstitial narrative. At *The Frightmare Compound* in Westminster, Colorado, in the fall of 2024, my friend and I were

immersed in a world of horror film references, where the boundaries between the attraction's environment and our memories of classic and contemporary films blurred. From the moment we stepped through the doors, it was clear that the creators were horror fans. Every homage, from *Donnie Darko* (2001) to *The Exorcist* (1973), was more than just a callback—it was a dynamic element that encouraged us to fill in the gaps of the story, piecing together a fragmented narrative through our own knowledge of horror cinema. The moment we recognized an actor embodying the unsettling “tall man” figure from *It Follows* (2014), the experience shifted from passive observation to active participation. The film reference was tangential to how the scare actor inserted us directly into the story, as it seemed it had been waiting for just us to emerge from around the corner. The scare actor did not rush at us with a typical scare. Instead, they stood silently, their presence expanding to fill the entire doorway with an unnerving stillness. embodying that film's unsettling tall man who lurks in plain sight. There was no sudden leap toward us, no shriek or unexpected pop-out; instead, the figure simply stood there, its unnerving stillness amplifying its presence. As it slowly turned and walked away, we were forced to follow, feeling a palpable tension as the figure's towering form lingered in our minds. Scare actors often tailor their characters to their own unique physicality and personality traits. Someone who is 6'5" might be an intimidating presence simply by lingering and following guests at a slow, deliberate pace, while an actor who is more extroverted may enjoy crafting an interactive, talkative character to engage with guests. Each scare actor's physical and personal attributes contribute to the diversity of roles in the attraction, with every performance offering a distinct interpretation of fear.

Later, we encountered the same tall actor in a bedroom scene, where the dread of their physical grandeur remained, adding a layer of eerie anticipation that stuck with us. This embodied horror trope became a part of our own emotional and physical experience, engaging us in a real-time narrative that was shaped by our interpretations of the actor's actions and the tension they generated. Yet, the true magic occurred in the moments when recognition triggered a sense of active participation, shifting us from passive observers to engaged agents in the unfolding narrative. As I noticed the buttons sewn into her eyes, a thrill shot through me, and without missing a beat, I whispered, "It's *Coraline*!" The scare actor slowly turned, offering a chilling smile that confirmed the nod to Neil Gaiman's dark, animated heroine. The atmosphere lightened with my friend's surprised giggle—her nerves easing as the recognition reminded us that, for all its terror, we were part of a larger, playful horror narrative. We were not mere bystanders in this world of fear, we were participants in its ongoing story, formulating our own connections between these beloved films and the haunted space surrounding us. In haunted attractions, the function of recognition and active participation constructs a fractured, interstitial narrative that invites guests to shape the story. The actors are facilitators of this dynamic storytelling process, where audience knowledge, recognition, and engagement fill in the narrative gaps. These live performances do not only incite fear but also transform the haunt into a hybrid space—one that invites guests to actively engage in a horror story that is ever-evolving, interactive, and uniquely shaped by their own interpretations.

More than a haunted attraction, *The Frightmare Compound* felt like a horror lover's playground, a space where our knowledge and memories of these films held the key to deeper immersion. On completing the haunt, my suspicions that it had been designed by horror fans were strengthened when we were greeted with a small museum showcasing artifacts from

previous Frightmare seasons, including signatures from actors who had played iconic horror figures (see fig. 24). This exhibit, a testament to the rich history and craftsmanship behind the attraction, added another layer to our experience—transforming it into a living tribute to a beloved genre. Horror film actors find connection to the haunted attraction entertainment, just as much as horror fans feel when piecing the haunted attractions together, as homages to horror films or developing unsettling entertainment from their own imaginations.



Figure 24. Memorabilia display at *The Frightmare Compound*, fall 2024. Includes posters, photos, masks, and other horror-themed items signed by actors who played the associated roles. Images by author.

Scare acting in haunted attractions requires a sophisticated blend of improvisational skill, physical control, and audience awareness. Haunted attractions dissolve clear lines of actor and audience, engendering shared spaces where both the actor and audience are part of the experience. This dynamic is particularly evident in interactions that vary from subtle moments of connection to more overt, improvisational exchanges. Whether it is a scare actor poking fun at my American accent in a Dublin haunt, or playing along as a group of friends sings to calm their nerves, these moments—both positive and negative—linger long after the experience. The emotional and physical reactions these interactions provoke are integral to the lasting impact of haunted attractions. The immediacy of these encounters extends to the emotional and physical impacts of the experience. Film, although an impactful and effective medium, offers an option to passively engage, where audiences' emotional engagement can be more detached; in contrast, scary actors in haunted attractions demand a direct response. Their proximity, unpredictability, and ability to play off the audience's reactions force a more visceral engagement. For example, when a figure like Jack the Ripper suddenly appears behind you, asking, "Where are you ladies heading tonight?" the response is immediate, whether it's a nervous laugh or a physical cringe. This physical presence forms a heightened sense of urgency and immersion that is difficult to replicate through traditional media.

The direct interaction between scare actors and the audience cultivates a dynamic form of horror storytelling, where the actor's performance and the audience's responses coalesce into a deeply engaging, often uncanny, experience. One of the most striking aspects of scare acting is the use of personalization to pull guests deeper into the narrative. I have personally been called into scenes by actors simply identifying a trait like my "curly" hair—suddenly, I was no longer a passive observer, but a character in the unfolding horror. This personalized hailing can be

explicated via Louis Althusser's theory of interpellation: by naming or identifying something about the guest, the performer effectively calls them into the reality of the haunt. Kenneth, a scare actor-manager, explained that his team encourages these interactions. "We allow people to make fun of the customers," he said, but with careful boundaries: actors are trained to comment only on changeable traits like clothing, hairstyle, or behavior—not race, gender, disability, or other inherent characteristics. "You put on those clothes, you did your hair that way, and then you came to my room." This method keeps the interaction playful but pointed, contributing to an immersive, high-stakes experience that is also ethically calibrated.

Yet even these "changeable" comments can produce lasting effects. After being repeatedly identified as "curly," I've left haunts wondering if I should change my hair. A former professor once admitted he shaved his beard after being called "Santa Claus" throughout a haunt. These moments show how easily the fictional space of the haunt can leak into real life. Stacey, another manager, emphasized this uncanny personalization further, describing how actors sometimes use real names overheard in the queue line. "All it takes is one of us to hear it," she explained, "and it's wildfire throughout the haunt." Guests, unable to discern how the actors know their names, are left with a lingering discomfort. These techniques collapse the boundary between fiction and reality. Guests are not just watching horror—they are becoming horror's subject. What is real and what is scripted becomes increasingly blurred, and in that liminal confusion, horror finds its most potent form.

Conclusion: The Future of Fear and Fun

The spatiality, interactivity, and embodiment within haunted attractions is central to their legibility of as a form of horror entertainment, as they transform passive spectatorship into an active, visceral engagement with fear. The performance elements within haunted attractions not

only enhance the immersive experience but also push the horror genre forward by crafting real-time encounters with fear. Engaging both cognitive and corporeal senses, haunted attractions foster an affective feedback loop—one where visitors interpret and contribute to the experience through their presence and actions, enhancing the emotional impact. This process challenges the conventional linear storytelling typical of other horror genres, offering new experiences that resist a fixed narrative and instead unfold dynamically as the visitor navigates through the space. Haunted attractions, through these interstitial, fragmented structures, invite terror not only through their content but through the participatory role they encourage, where the lines between reality and fiction are continually redefined. By integrating sensory immersion with interstitial storytelling and audience interaction, these attractions push the genre's boundaries, serving as complex cultural artifacts, inviting a deeper engagement that involves both the cognitive and visceral responses of the visitor in constructing a personalized narrative that is ever in flux.

Haunted attractions serve as dynamic sites of horror production and consumption, blending traditional genre conventions with immersive experiences that reflect and shape contemporary cultural anxieties. As I experienced firsthand during my visit to *The Darkness*, these attractions are not merely about eliciting screams; they engage audiences in a complex interweaving of fear and joy, allowing for a cathartic release of pent-up emotions. Ndalani emphasizes that the pleasure derived from horror often involves a playful interaction with fear, akin to the “jolt of surprise” followed by laughter when a parent suddenly says “Boo!”⁸⁵ Beneath the surface of the spectacle, haunted attractions echo the Latin phrase “memento mori,” reminding us of our mortality and the fragility of life. Haunted attractions allow individuals to confront themes of death and the monstrous in a controlled environment, engaging with deep-seated fears and phobias. By triggering fight-or-flight responses in a controlled environment,

they provide a safe yet thrilling space for audiences to confront their fears and anxieties. Utilizing all the senses—sight, sound, and even smell—haunted attractions trick the brain into experiencing fear in visceral ways.⁸⁶ Through intertextual narratives, disorienting technology, and transformative scare actors, these venues immerse guests in horror storytelling that challenges and expands knowledges of fear. The synthesis of interstitial narratives, technical innovation, and live performance positions haunted attractions as a distinct form of horror storytelling, evolving alongside changing cultural perceptions of fear and entertainment.

Moreover, owners of haunted attractions view their work as a “public service,” providing audiences with a necessary outlet for emotional release amid the stresses of daily life. Allen Hopps of *Dark Hour Haunted House* noted that haunted attractions allow people to wrap their fears in a tangible experience, offering a space to scream, run, and ultimately laugh. In a world that often feels overwhelming, the allure of these experiences grows stronger, as they provide both thrills and a sense of community. The more the world tends to “suck,” the more people are willing to invest in experiences that make them feel good.⁸⁷ Ultimately, haunted attractions confront audiences with the presence of death, making them feel more alive. They exist in a liminal space, marketing fear while producing fear and joy, manufacturing monsters while fostering community, and navigating unhomogenized experiences while prioritizing safety. In doing so, they reflect our contemporary anxieties and offer a lens through which we can explore the complexities of fear, identity, and the human experience.

CHAPTER THREE – THE BUSINESS OF FEAR:

Managed Experience and Economy of Haunted Attractions

With the sun casting its last golden rays on a mid-September Friday evening, I find myself standing alone in a surreal juxtaposition. Surrounded by the mundane—parking lots, towering apartment complexes, bustling shopping centers, and streets alive with the hum of rush hour traffic—I gaze through iron bars at a scene directly out of a Gothic fantasy. In the shadows of an artificial castle, a grim reaper of colossal stature silently guards the courtyard (see fig. 27). I am the sole participant in the parking lot until the thrums of a lowering drawbridge jolt to life and staff members wearing all-black clothing and earpieces, attached to radios, invite me to cross. I step over the threshold into the Nightmare Courtyard, where I journey past the ticket booth, photo opportunities of dark ride design, and a horror-themed merchandise store with Freddy Kreuger, Michael Myers, and Ghostface figurines and other macabre memorabilia. Guided to the front of the fast-pass line, I find myself at the entrance of the castle, captivated by the spectacle above: a nine-headed jack-o-lantern animatronic gripping the ankle of an upside-down animatronic child. The child dangles, kicking and screaming, in a perverse inversion of childhood innocence, clearly dispelling any misconceptions that this castle belongs in a Disney storybook fantasy (see fig. 28). One jack-o-lantern head jokes about the fate of the child, “Don’t drop him, or these people will be eating pumpkin pie tonight,” sparking nervous laughter from me, laughter that grows as my eyes wander beyond the gates, landing on the ordinary sight of a Walmart Supercenter across the street.



Figure 25. Large Grim Reaper figure overlooking the courtyard at *Nightmare on 13th*. Image by author.



Figure 26. Nine-headed pumpkin animatronic holding a small animatronic child. Image by author.

The odd contrast persists: on the one hand, shoppers amidst banal routines of buying groceries and household items; on the other, me, now with a long line full of fear-goers behind me, taking part in the nightmarish immersion that is the *Nightmare on 13th* haunted attraction in Salt Lake City, Utah. This collision of the ordinary and the supernatural—where commercial spaces bleed into horror-themed escapism—captures the essence of the haunted attraction industry. Haunts are immersive horror experiences of artistic design, but they are also complex, regulated commercial ventures that must function as profitable businesses while promising otherworldly thrills. Haunted attractions embody this dual nature, blending macabre Halloween tropes and the archetypes of horror with the expectations of a mainstream entertainment experience. From corn mazes and pumpkin patches to the unexpected scares in family fun centers, theme parks, malls, zoos, and aquariums, haunts thrive in a variety of site-specific environments.¹ They merge performance and technology—animatronics, live actors, sound,

lighting, and scenic design—to craft a terrifying, immersive world.² Behind this dark allure lies an industry that operates within stringent economic, legal, and operational constraints. In order to sustain themselves, haunted attractions must not only deliver thrilling horror experiences but also adhere to regulations governing safety, finances, and public approval.

The regulatory and governing bodies of the haunted attraction industry are relatively new, and reflect the expansion of the booming horror entertainment industry. Mark, an owner and board member of the Haunted Attraction Association (HAA), uses the metaphor of the “goldfish bowl era” to describe the early years of the haunted attraction industry, when each haunt operated as an isolated, self-contained entity. As Mark recalls: “when I first started doing haunted houses, every haunted house was a little island. I called that the goldfish bowl era of haunting because we lived in our own little goldfish bowls, and you didn’t go into different goldfish bowls.” In these early years, haunts were disconnected, innovating independently without much collaboration or shared knowledge. However, as the industry has expanded over the past fifteen years, these “goldfish bowls” began to connect, share resources, and collaborate. This growth illustrates how the demand for legitimacy and the increased competition within the industry led to the need for networking, standardization, and resource-sharing, thereby introducing a new paradox: how can haunts, as subgenres of horror, retain their transgressive potential while operating within a framework that values profitability, safety, and broad mainstream appeal?

This chapter analyzes the business and management strategies that shape the haunted attraction industry, focusing on how operators navigate the tension between subversive horror narratives and the commercial demands of profitability, safety regulations, and consumer appeal. Horror, as a genre, is inherently ambiguous and disorienting—both subversive and transgressive

in some instances, yet potentially exploitative or harmful in others, as explored in Chapter Two. The paradoxical nature of horror, mirrored in haunted attractions, underscores the complexities of negotiating artistic transgression within a commercial framework, with evidence of this in Chapter Three. While haunts market themselves as spaces that challenge societal norms and embrace monstrosity, they must simultaneously balance these transgressive elements with the constraints of capitalist structures. Through interviews conducted with above-the-line haunt managers and operators, as well as insights from Transworld seminars, reports from The Haunted Attraction Network (HAA), and books written by industry insiders, this chapter analyzes how the industry's internal critique (through its reflexive self-awareness) helps shape the narratives and identities of those within the haunt community as they plan for the industry's future. I discover how intellectual property rights, insurance demands, and safety protocols provide avenues for operators to navigate the delicate balance between subversion and commercialization in the haunt industry.

The haunted attraction industry's attempt to operate in a manner—and to be perceived as being—equivalent to any other business (comparable to a Walmart or shopping entertainment centers) poses a fundamental challenge to the core of what horror represents. Indeed, it may even seem like a fruitless endeavor based on colloquial misunderstandings of the horror genre and its fandoms. I argue that haunted attractions exist within a paradoxical tension: they market themselves as transgressive spaces while operating within rigid capitalist structures. They promise boundary-pushing experiences that align with horror's countercultural, unpredictable nature, but they must also conform to the commercial realities of profitability, safety regulations, and consumer expectations. This struggle is not merely theoretical: it manifests in the everyday operations of haunted attractions—from business strategies to safety measures—underscoring

the internal conflict defining the industry. The balance between creative subversion and regulatory compliance, unpredictability and profit, and inclusion and exclusion are at the heart of the haunted attraction industry's complexity. The tension between artistic and business goals is not unique to haunted attractions (being a challenge present across the entertainment sector), but the haunted attraction industry represents a paradigmatic example of this paradox. Its connection to the horror genre not only highlights these tensions but also exposes the absurdity of the systems themselves, further complicating the complex relationship between creativity and commercial viability in the industry.

The Profitable Pleasure Paradox

Live-mediated horror entertainment exists not only in the visceral, on-site experiences of fear, but also in the staggering financial impact the haunted attraction industry generates. While often overlooked in academic and mainstream discussions of media industries, haunted attractions have become an increasingly visible part of Halloween's commercial landscape. In 2023, the National Retail Federation projected record-breaking Halloween consumer spending at \$12.2 billion, a sharp increase from \$10.8 billion in 2022.³ While Christmas dwarfs this with \$964.4 billion in spending, Halloween remains the second-largest commercial holiday, with substantial expenditures on costumes, candy, decorations, and, importantly, immersive experiences like haunted attractions.⁴ Massive increases in profit followed the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions in 2022, seeing younger consumers, particularly Gen Z, eagerly return to Halloween traditions, "participating in classic Halloween activities like dressing up, visiting haunted houses, and throwing or attending parties more than anyone else."⁵

Increased Halloween spending has fueled the ubiquity of haunted attractions, which are now fixtures in both local economies and global entertainment markets. Industry advocates such as American Haunts claim that haunted attractions “solely drive the popularity of Halloween and Halloween retail,” and report annual advertising investments of around \$85 million.⁶ While this may be an overstatement, it does signal the increasing promotional infrastructure and commercial stakes surrounding haunts. Historian Lisa Morton noted that by the end of 2010, the haunt industry was already “claiming sales figures of \$6.5 billion a year.”⁷ While it is difficult to pinpoint exact numbers due to the challenge of defining what qualifies as a haunted attraction, ranging from small-town hayrides and home haunts to multimillion-dollar theme park productions, the industry’s financial footprint is undeniably significant. Estimates suggest the haunted attraction industry generates hundreds of millions, if not billions of dollars annually, though precise figures are hard to track due to the decentralized nature of operations and lack of standardized reporting. The economic impact and widespread appeal of haunted attractions challenge the long-held perception of horror entertainment as marginal and insignificant, advocating for greater recognition and legitimacy within both cultural and business sectors.

Despite the financial impact of haunts, Madelon Hoedt observes that haunted attractions “remain a subculture,” unfamiliar to many outside their niche.⁸ Even so, they are among the most profitable seasonal experiences, and as demand for immersive horror grows, so does their calendar footprint. No longer confined to October, haunts are expanding into off-season events from Valentine’s Day to summer “Halfway to Halloween” celebrations (e.g., 2024’s “Summerween”).⁹ For example, in early 2025, ninety-five haunted attractions across twenty-eight states opened for Valentine’s Day, signaling a major expansion beyond Halloween.¹⁰ Major players like Universal Studios are capitalizing on this trend. *Halloween Horror Nights (HHN)*,

Universal's most profitable seasonal event, effectively double-sells park inventory by charging separate admission for daytime and nighttime guests.¹¹ Now, Universal is experimenting with expanding its horror model beyond Halloween, as seen in its upcoming year-round haunted attraction, *Universal Horror Unleashed* in Las Vegas. This 100,000-square-foot facility will feature four haunts, scare zones, bars, pyrotechnics, and circus-style horror shows, offering continuous, evolving immersion distinct from *HHN*'s limited seasonal run.¹² Unlike a theme park attraction, this venue will be completely horror-focused year-round, rotating intellectual properties (IPs) and catering to a more adult demographic with nightlife-style entertainment.¹³

Universal is also testing fandom-based immersive pop-ups with Universal Fan Fest Nights, a series of one-night events focused on diverse franchises (spanning television, films, role-playing games, video games, and themed lands in theme park) such as *One Piece* (1999–), *Back to the Future* (1985), *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), *Star Trek* (1966–), *The Wizarding World of Harry Potter* (2010–) and *Super Nintendo World* (2021–). While not strictly horror, these pop-ups function as brand legitimization tools, reinforcing Universal's presence across multiple niche demographics. As industry expert Scott Swenson notes, Universal has “at least a foothold in all these demographics and legitimizing their overall product to these niche markets.”¹⁴ If these events prove successful, they could set the stage for monthly ticketed horror events, further reshaping the seasonality of haunted attractions. Across the industry, theme parks, independent haunts, and trade associations are embracing horror's year-round appeal. These expansions signal a fundamental shift, proving that haunted attractions are no longer confined to a single season but are instead adapting to engage audiences throughout the calendar year.

As Halloween's cultural, economic, and seasonal influence expands globally, haunted attractions adapt to local traditions, consumer behaviors, and economic landscapes. Tokyo Disney, for example, has heavily invested in Halloween to boost attendance during slower seasons and increase merchandise and food and beverage sales.¹⁵ Recent earnings reports from Oriental Land Company, which operates Tokyo Disney facilities, highlight how seasonal activations like Halloween are critical for maintaining visitor engagement, particularly in regions with historically less prominent haunted attractions.¹⁶ However, while haunts are becoming global enterprises, they remain rooted in local contexts. As Hoedt explains, "Haunted attractions are site-specific (though the contents are not always directly related to the actual location of the venue)."¹⁷ While their narratives often draw from mass media influences, they reflect community-specific fears, histories, and cultural identities. This localization underscores horror's adaptability, allowing it to thrive across different geographies while retaining connections to local storytelling. The haunt industry has become an elastic, transnational, multi-holiday enterprise, leveraging consumer demand to expand beyond seasonal limitations into a year-round profitable phenomenon.

As haunted attractions blur the boundaries of horror between fantasy and reality, the juxtaposition of everyday life and theatrical horror remains central to their economic and cultural success. The horror genre itself plays a paradoxical role in shaping the industry's expansion. In her book *So You Want to Be a Haunt Entrepreneur* (2005), Kelly Allen claims to have seen tremendous financial growth, stating that the "haunted attraction industry has become a Halloween fanatic's or horror genre lover's land of opportunity."¹⁸ On the one hand, genre conventions create a built-in audience and strong community affinities, ensuring financial viability by offering recognizable horror tropes, narratives, and aesthetics. Ana Alacovska

outlines three key functions of genre in cultural industries: 1) reducing financial risk by catering to established audience expectations, 2) shaping creative production to fit genre-specific demands, and 3) serving as a legitimacy mechanism, evolving over time through cultural critique and formal recognition.¹⁹ As Alacovska asserts, genres remain in flux, simultaneously shifting and maintaining historically reproduced features that embed them within social and economic frameworks.²⁰ Haunted attractions exemplify this “genres-in-flux” model, operating within horror’s longstanding cultural and commercial cycles while continuously adapting to new audiences, technologies, and spatial contexts while leaning into the genre’s ambiguity to generate unexpected scares.

On the other hand, haunted attractions’ reliance on horror tropes reinforces negative perceptions of the industry. Although genres build legitimacy mechanisms, horror as a genre is not taken as seriously or seen as commercially viable entertainment. Due to its association with the horror genre, the haunted attraction industry struggles for legitimacy, often being dismissed for its dark themes, emphasis on sensation-seeking, and corporeal focus, as well as Halloween’s historical reputation as a night of transgression and revelry. Business owners frequently encounter challenges securing loans, fire code approvals, and police permits, as the industry is not widely regarded as a serious, sustainable economic enterprise, or worthy of investment. The very elements that attract both workers and consumers—the ability to engage with horror, monstrosity, and theatrical spectacle—are the same ones that complicate public perception and regulatory approval. This tension between economic viability and cultural marginalization illustrates the haunted attraction industry’s struggle to gain broader acceptance within both the entertainment and business sectors. The industry exists within a paradox: it is an economic powerhouse yet continues to be categorized as a fringe entertainment sector, as it successfully

commercializes fear but struggles to be recognized as a fully legitimate cultural institution. Examining haunted attractions through the lens of genre theory provides a framework for understanding their economic role within the broader circuit of culture, which explores how horror is “represented, what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use.”²¹

Rather than existing as a monolithic industry, haunted attractions comprise interconnected communities and creative labor networks, each contributing to the evolving landscape of horror entertainment. Jonathan Caldwell’s concept of “work worlds” further contextualizes this phenomenon, describing these “professional communities and subcultures” acting much like “other social groups do: 1) to forge and remake their identities” through shared creative practices, “2) legitimate their significance and value to neighboring” entertainment and business communities, and “3) to interact ritualistically in ways that allow them to survive, change, and prosper.”²² The haunt industry thrives on affinity networks, where shared cultural interests in horror and Halloween bind creators, performers, and audiences together. Despite ongoing struggles for recognition, haunted attractions continue to shape and reflect contemporary horror culture, demonstrating their resilience as both an artistic and economic force. This paradox of being both a cultural outlier and an economic giant illustrates how haunted attractions navigate between subversive, transgressive entertainment and the commercial interests that allow them to thrive, continuously reshaping their cultural role while facing the challenge of achieving legitimacy in mainstream society.

The Industry’s Definitional Uncertainty

The haunted attraction industry faces difficulties establishing a clear, standardized definition, which complicates efforts to gain recognition as a legitimate sector. This ambiguity makes it challenging for mainstream businesses, the public, and the media to fully embrace the industry. The term “haunted attraction” itself encompasses a broad spectrum of experiences, differing in scale, setting, intensity, and business model. Haunted attractions can be for-profit (pro haunts), non-profit haunts, or home haunts, and they operate in diverse formats, including haunted houses, hayrides, theme parks, dark rides, mazes, trails, and forests. Their themes range from classic graveyards and tombs to supernatural occurrences, nuclear apocalypses, and mad scientist laboratories. The breadth of these experiences complicates efforts to standardize the industry, making it challenging to categorize, regulate, and legitimate. One of the biggest challenges lies in terminology, as the interchangeable use of “haunted attraction” and “haunted house” contributes to public confusion; the latter can also refer to paranormal dwellings rather than constructed entertainment spaces. The HAA has worked to address this issue by shifting away from “haunted house” terminology to better reflect the industry’s expansion beyond traditional walk-through haunted houses, or its supernatural connotations. As Robert, a representative from the HAA, explains:

That’s part of why we made the decision from being a Haunted House Association to being a Haunted Attraction Association because there’s a very big gap. We start with small home haunts, where people decorate their yards or set up small walk-throughs in their garages. Then you have mid-tier attractions, which can range from haunted houses to corn mazes, pumpkin patches, and kid-friendly experiences. From there, attractions expand into larger, more immersive environments—hayrides, outdoor haunts, and even dark rides at major amusement parks like Six Flags.

This shift in terminology reflects the increasing diversity of haunted attractions, recognizing that

they are not confined to a single format or setting. However, this definitional flexibility also creates challenges in regulatory oversight, as different attraction types require different safety protocols, business licensing, and operational structures.

In addition to defining the types of haunted attractions based on settings, the industry has classified haunts based on their scale and visitor volume. The HAA differentiates between three categories of haunted attractions based on attendance numbers: low-volume haunts, with fewer than 10,000 attendees per season; mid-tier haunts, with 10,000 to 50,000 attendees per season; and high-volume haunts, with over 50,000 attendees per season. The typical haunt would likely average around 5,000–10,000 guests.²³ High-volume haunts remain rare, making up less than 1% of the industry. Robert estimates that only 40 to 50 haunted attractions globally reach those attendance figures. Haunted attractions are still predominantly located in the United States, with less than 5% located internationally.²⁴ The terminology also varies by region, further complicating standardization. For example, in the United Kingdom, haunted attractions are referred to as “scare houses,” which Robert believes is a more precise and marketable term, as it more directly aligns with the purpose of the haunts: to scare.

While the HAA acknowledges the difficulty of crafting streamlined language and a singular definition, it has taken active legal measures to establish boundaries within the industry. One of the primary motivations for these efforts is safety. Without clear industry definitions, extreme haunts and controversial experiences risk being lumped together with traditional haunted attractions, which can negatively impact public perception and regulatory oversight. As Robert explains:

There’s not really a definition to any of it. It really is about *what* you are doing and *how* you are doing it. That said, as an association, we do make that decision. We’ve sent plenty of cease-and-desist letters. There’s one haunt that is infamous for what some would call borderline torture. We specifically sent a cease-and-desist. Our legal team

unanimously agreed, our board of directors agreed, and we sent a cease-and-desist not only to that business but also to *CNN* and *USA Today*, stating: “If you use the name of this location alongside the term *haunted house*, be prepared for a lawsuit.” That allowed us to really draw a line in the sand between what people can and cannot do under the banner of “haunted attractions.”

Nevertheless, the phrase “line in the sand” is perhaps unintentionally revealing, in this context, given the impermanence of such a mark. Efforts to define and regulate such slippery terms might seem paradoxical in an industry built on illusion, ambiguity, and affective intensity. But for the HAA, these attempts at linguistic and legal precision are less about rigid standardization and more about reputational management. Haunted attractions often occupy a liminal space in the entertainment world, operating on the margins of mainstream respectability, yet adjacent to institutions with far greater regulatory scrutiny.

The distinction Robert makes between “what you are doing and how you are doing it” is an important factor to focus on. While many fear-based experiences share the same goal of providing scares, the HAA emphasizes *how* those scares are delivered: through safe, controlled, and ultimately entertaining means. The issue is not intensity per se, but whether that intensity crosses ethical or safety boundaries. For the HAA, the line is drawn not at the presence of fear, but at the method by which that fear is produced—prioritizing guest well-being and the expectation of entertainment, rather than trauma or torture. As a result, defining what haunted attractions are—and, perhaps more crucially, what they are not—becomes a form of protective self-governance. The concern is not necessarily with what a haunt is doing (eliciting intense emotional responses), but how those experiences are produced in a way that aligns with safety and ethical expectations. Even in the absence of a universally accepted definition, these legal efforts help clarify what falls outside the industry’s self-defined boundaries.

Haunted attractions have grown far beyond their grassroots origins, when community groups or volunteers would transform abandoned buildings into temporary haunts to raise money during Halloween. As the industry has expanded into a wide array of fear-based experiences—from hayrides to immersive theatrical events to large-scale theme park spectacles—this diversification has introduced new complications around classification, legal oversight, and public image. At the end of the day, Steven, a HAA board member and haunt manager, distills the work down to its core: “For me, it’s just entertainment [...] It’s just a very, very fun form of entertainment.” Yet, the HAA’s regulatory efforts demonstrate that this “fun” form of entertainment is also engaged in a complex negotiation for cultural legitimacy. Drawing the line, however shifting, between immersive horror and unethical extremity remains a crucial strategy for safeguarding the industry’s future and claiming space within the broader entertainment marketplace.

Although haunted attractions generate much in revenue, many struggle with public perception and legitimacy. In some cities, local governments and community members resist the establishment of haunts, believing them to be associated with crime, drinking, and even Satanic worship. Steven explains the difficulty of securing permits and city council approvals:

If somebody wants to open a haunt and they go to city X and they want to build a haunt there, trying to get past any city council or getting whatever permitting they need [...] It’s like, “Well, we don’t want a haunt in our community.” They think it’s a carny thing, that it’s going to bring drugs, drinking, devil worshippers. Which, none of that is true. You have a few bad apples, but they’re such a minority. Most folks in this business are just creative people trying to build a legitimate business.

One of the biggest obstacles to legitimacy is industry presentation. Steven argues that haunt owners must present themselves professionally when engaging with city officials, banks, and regulators. He says, “If you’re going to go to the city council, don’t show up wearing a kilt and a shirt with demon horns on it. Go looking like you’re a serious businessperson.” Steven’s

comments capture the tension between the cultural associations of haunted attractions and the reality of those working within them. His remarks offer concrete detail on how operators must navigate the disconnect between their creative identities and the expectations of legitimacy imposed by formal institutions. This struggle goes beyond mere optics, it reveals the broader issue of how certain forms of labor and artistry are devalued or dismissed when they do not conform to professional norms. As haunters increasingly emphasize their roles as entrepreneurs, artists, and local contributors, they challenge the marginal status of their work and demand recognition within both civic and cultural economies.

This tension between presentation and perception reflects what John Thornton Caldwell calls the “speculative world” of informal creative labor, where legitimacy must be performed even as the work remains economically precarious and structurally under-regulated.²⁵ The haunted attraction industry exemplifies neither fully informal nor fully institutionalized. Haunted attractions fit this mold: they range from highly corporatized events to ad hoc, passion-driven haunts run out of suburban garages, relying on passion labor, unpaid volunteers, seasonal gigs, and loosely defined job roles. Derek Johnson’s work on media franchising deepens this analysis by showing how cultural production increasingly relies on networks of collaboration that cross industrial and amateur domains.²⁶ While haunted attractions are not traditional franchises, they operate similarly: independent creators borrow shared horror tropes, rely on regionally specific labor pools, and negotiate their legitimacy through creative identity. Like franchise producers, haunt operators must craft distinction and local relevance while participating in a broader genre system that shapes both aesthetic choices and industrial expectations. This distributed model of

cultural labor complicates clean divisions between “professional” and “amateur,” mirroring the layered affiliations and unequal power structures that Johnson identifies in networked production cultures, and illustrating a hybridized space where labor is both passionate and precarious.

At its core, the haunted attraction industry is caught between a desire for legitimacy and the subversive essence of the horror genre. Haunted attractions have long struggled to be viewed as legitimate businesses by the public and, more importantly, by other industries. This struggle has been compounded by the definitional ambiguity of the industry itself. Haunted attractions resist categorization: they do not fit neatly into any single business model or form of entertainment. For example, a single haunted attraction may encompass options as varied as secret Halloween-themed cocktail rooms, zombie laser tag, VR experiences, escape rooms, axe throwing, horror retail, photo ops, pumpkin picking, and dark rides. In their quest for legitimacy, haunted attractions must contend with the fact that the horror genre itself is subversive, anti-commercial, and often considered “illegitimate” by broader cultural and business norms. Horror, by its nature, challenges societal conventions, existing as a genre that thrives on unpredictability, shock value, and discomfort. However, for haunted attractions to remain financially viable and avoid negative scrutiny, they must align with conventional business standards. Ultimately, this creates a paradox: the desire for mainstream acceptance and business success often runs counter to the subversive spirit of the genre that both attracts audiences and gives haunted attractions their individualized and highly scrutinized identity.

Putting Business in Show Business: Producing a Show with Safety in Mind

The haunted attraction industry’s transition from an unregulated, niche market to more structured and profit-driven enterprises highlights the tension between maintaining the subversive thrill of horror and meeting the demands of commercial viability. As the industry has

grown, operators have increasingly had to navigate a delicate balance between artistic integrity and business acumen. The underlying goal of creating a thrilling, unpredictable experience for customers often clashes with the need for operational efficiency and profitability. Operators are caught between delivering an experience that feels raw, dangerous, and chaotic—all essential elements of horror—and the need to present a business that is legitimate, regulated, and safe for both customers and workers. Haunted attractions are inherently subversive, offering an escape from societal norms and a chance to confront the darkness within, yet their profitability hinges on balancing an intense, unpredictable experience with the need for operational predictability. This paradox, where profit-driven goals must coexist with artistic and subversive aims, is a central tension the industry faces. The haunted attraction industry finds itself caught between artistic expression and the realities of running a commercial, regulated business. Key operational, financial, and staffing challenges highlight the broader paradox between subversion and commercial viability. In this section, I examine haunted attractions' economic and managerial realities, exploring the delicate balance between creative vision and business sustainability as they pursue legitimacy.

As Scott Swenson, a professional haunted attraction consultant, states, “Haunted attractions are a theater piece that you walk through.”²⁷ Haunted attractions are immersive and theatrical spaces of world-building, which is all second to being, first and foremost, a business. Behind every meticulously designed scare is a complex network of financial planning, operational management, legal compliance, and employee relations. Emily McCrary-Ruiz-Esparza (BBC) highlights the numerous factors that are needed to run a successful haunt:

First, companies need a location (if you don't already own a spot, prepare for a long-term lease). Next, a storyline for the spooky scenario (writers and consultants are available for that). The labor and materials for lighting, tech, and special effects will run thousands,

alongside wages for engineers, makeup artists, security personnel, and staff. Don't forget marketing, concessions, food and alcohol, licenses, and insurance.²⁸

Haunted attractions must navigate licensing, safety regulations, insurance, marketing, and customer experience—all while balancing the volatile challenges of seasonal business operations. While passion for horror and immersive entertainment drives many haunt operators, passion or profit-seeking alone does not sustain a haunted attraction. There has to be a balance of both passion and profit.

As industry veteran Robert cautions, “I will consistently remind people that if you are in this industry to make money, I will be happy to talk you out of it right now.” Running a haunted attraction is a high-risk business, and many haunts do not survive beyond their first season. The costs of launching a haunt add up quickly, including securing a location, meeting safety requirements, hiring actors, and investing in props, animatronics, and special effects. Even successful haunt operators warn against underestimating the financial and logistical hurdles of running a haunt. Larry Kirschner, owner of *The Darkness* in St. Louis, Missouri, offers blunt advice to aspiring haunt owners: “Don't. I don't recommend starting a haunt.”²⁹ Kirschner's skepticism is well-founded. Although he now operates a multi-million-dollar attraction that includes year-round escape rooms and a horror retail shop, most haunts do not reach this level of profitability. Many of these haunts file for bankruptcy within their first few years, unable to generate sustainable revenue or overcome operational costs. However, those who survive the first few seasons can become staples in their communities, creating a lasting economic impact and intergenerational business legacies.

The haunt industry thrives on spectacle, but behind the show is a carefully managed business operation. Robert emphasizes that many aspiring haunt owners focus too much on the show and not enough on the business, often leading to failure. He says, “This industry is about

show business, and a lot of people are all about the *show*, and they're not about the *business*."

Haunted attractions prioritizing financial planning, employee management, and strategic marketing are more likely to succeed. Even high-volume attractions that push through 50,000+ customers per season do not automatically turn their owners into millionaires. Robert explains that while haunts may seem like cash cows, their expenses are substantial, with some operators spending upwards of \$15,000 per day to keep the lights on and the doors open each night. Producing a successful haunted attraction is expensive and fraught with the challenges inherent in horror entertainment. Without proper financial management, these factors can lead to crumbling infrastructure and, ultimately, one-season haunts.

In the haunted attraction industry, performance and safety are inextricably linked, and their tension is part of the industry's dualistic positioning between subversion and regulation. The performance of scare actors (who must deliver genuine fear to the audience) often stands in direct contrast to the safety guidelines that operators must adhere to. Scare actors are tasked with evoking the primal emotions of fear, terror, and unease, and they must do so within strict boundaries that prevent harm and ensure a safe experience for everyone. Natalie, a seasoned traveling actor and scare actor consultant, discusses the importance placed on actor safety, despite the rawness and danger that horror often implies. She emphasizes, "We make sure that all actors are trained to handle risky situations—scaring someone is part of the job, but they can't get hurt doing it." Oscillating between uncontrolled fear and regulated safety illustrates that haunts must be at once a place where guests are both pushed to the limits of fear, but also protected from any real danger. This immersive, interactive experience relies heavily on actors, set design, and operational flow, all of which must be meticulously orchestrated to balance creative vision, guest experience, and workplace safety. Theatrical performance, improvisation,

and scare actor training are fundamental to maintaining engaging and effective haunted attractions. All of these elements of the show must also align with strict safety regulations, emergency preparedness protocols, and staff well-being.

The primary challenge haunts face is staffing issues.³⁰ The secret ingredient to making haunts scary and successful is the employees, who are also the most difficult to retain, manage, and motivate. The haunts that are the most successful prioritize their employees, and haunt management must care for their employees for the haunt to be sustainable. Swenson explains, “Actors make or break your haunt experience, so you need to take care of them. They’re the lifeblood of any haunted attraction.”³¹ Successful haunts recognize the importance of actor retention and staff morale, providing meals, awards, and team celebrations to keep employees engaged. Robert is aware of the importance of treating actors well, for both ethical and business reasons, “We do it because we love our team, but let’s be honest, at the end of the day, there’s a selfish component as well—because I don’t want to have to train 300 new people every year.” Investment in actors and staff directly impacts success. Haunts that foster a strong community among performers and crew members benefit from higher-quality performances, better retention rates, and more consistent customer experience. Without engaged staff, there is no show, and without the show, there is no business.

Labor represents one of the highest operational costs for haunted attractions, and recent labor shortages have raised concerns. Due to the seasonality of the industry, “less than 5% of haunted attractions can sustain a year-round team.”³² Due to the Trump administration’s immigration policies, there is a growing apprehension that the labor force in haunted attractions could drastically shift in the coming years.³³ In response, the 2025 HAA State of the Industry report discussed these labor shortages and brainstormed cost-effective strategies to address them.

Hopps, a prominent figure in the industry, suggested a “daisy method” to improve crew efficiency, where a single actor’s station “hits” multiple guest paths, maximizing coverage and reducing staffing needs.³⁴ Similarly, Jim Werner, current president of the HAA, emphasized that a properly trained crew reduces operational costs by preventing broken props and minimizing fog fluid consumption, thus making the season more cost-efficient.³⁵ In light of these challenges, haunts continue to focus on training and efficiency while maintaining a commitment to actor engagement and retention.

Many operators emphasize paying for actor training, ensuring better engagement, performance, and long-term retention, particularly as haunted attractions face increasing pressure to maintain both creative quality and financial viability. Many scare actors are not paid well, so it is essential to provide other incentives for people to continue working in the haunts. Hopps identifies the following as a “big issue”:

Most haunted attractions do not pay their actors. They are working for your for-profit business. If you aren’t paying, then it’s a hobby. You can’t claim that it is a business. You have to pay your staff. If you can’t afford to pay your staff, adjust your business. When you get to pay and insurance, that legitimizes any industry. The history of haunted houses were made widespread by [...] volunteer organizations that worked for a charity. Not paying actors was standard. That era is over. Most haunted attractions are for-profit houses. I don’t know that it is a professional business unless you are taking care of your staff. How can we claim to be a legitimate industry when 80 percent of people are supported by a different industry?³⁶

Hopps highlights a fundamental truth: without compensating actors, haunted attractions cannot be considered legitimate businesses. Paying actors acknowledge their professionalism and the vital role they play in creating an immersive experience. This investment in staff not only improves performance but also contributes to actor retention, which ultimately benefits the business’s long-term success. By compensating workers, the haunt industry gains greater legitimacy, proving that it is a serious, professional entertainment sector rather than just an amateur endeavor.

For many scare actors, haunts become more than just seasonal jobs, serving as creative outlets and communities of belonging. Top haunted attractions recognize this and prioritize staff retention and workplace culture to build a dedicated, long-term workforce. Many haunts emphasize actor training, recognizing that investment in actors—through workshops, on-site exercises, and compensation—leads to better performance, higher engagement, and long-term retention, providing year-round opportunities. In their seminar “60 Ways to Hire and Maintain Staff,” *Netherworld Haunted House* operators Ben Armstrong, Alex Burgraff, and Island Chance emphasized that the key to actor retention is fostering a strong corporate culture, stating, “People want to work in haunted attractions because they love scaring others and being creative. But beyond that, they want to find a sense of community. They want to know people like them.”³⁷ Successful haunts create this sense of community year-round by providing staff incentives (such as patches, T-shirts, and recognition awards for veteran scare actors), organizing social events outside of haunt season (including arcade outings, movie nights, and team dinners), ensuring a culture of safety and respect (training actors in de-escalation techniques and guest interaction management). Steven emphasizes:

All I know is the number one thing that you need to do if you’re going to have actors in your haunt is that you need to take care of your actors, and you need to treat them as if they’re the most important thing in your haunt because they are. That’s one of the stories that unfortunately I hear from some haunts. People do things different ways. I hear from haunts where they don’t treat their actors very well. We feed our actors every night. At the end of the show, everybody meets, we talk about the show for the night. As a community, we come together.

By treating their actors as an integral part of the business, rather than just seasonal hires, haunted attractions can build a loyal and experienced workforce that enhances the performance quality and the overall customer experience.

Workers' performative labor in haunted attractions goes beyond merely reacting to guests—it involves creating an interactive horror narrative, transforming haunted houses from passive spectacles into immersive, participatory experiences. Scare actors must not only maintain their character but also navigate unpredictable, high-intensity settings, requiring physical endurance, improvisation, and the ability to manipulate fear and anticipation. As Hopps explains, “Acting in a haunt is about more than just scaring—it’s about controlling space, manipulating tension, and reacting to guest energy.”³⁸ These skills are honed through proper training, which is essential for both the actors' effectiveness and the overall quality of the haunt experience. Unlike Disney's model of positive emotional labor, which focuses on uplifting experiences, haunt performers must tap into darker emotions—crying, screaming, laughing maniacally—to enhance the terror. This additional emotional labor requires careful calibration of how actors engage with their work. In a 2024 TransWorld seminar on “Unlocking Your Haunt Actor's Potential,” Hopps emphasized that understanding the mindset of your actors is crucial, noting, “The scariest thing I do is send young men and women into the dark, to wait, for young men and women to come through. When I think about it like that, I want to know their mindset.”³⁹ Building trust and understanding between management and actors is key to ensuring that actors feel safe, supported, and capable of creating an authentic, thrilling experience for guests.

Hopps also recommends that management reflect on their own actions, as their behavior influences the actors' performance and mindset. Understanding their mindset and making sure their intentions and actions are not going to harm themselves or others requires trust. Hopps ultimately explains that this class on “Unlocking Your Haunt Actor's Potential” is a “trick,” in the sense that it is not as much about unlocking the actor's potential as it is about reflecting on

management's behaviors to encourage their staff and actors to reach their potential. He explains it this way:

It's like when you watch an episode of *Dog Whisperer*. They call him in to fix the "problem" dog. What does he do? He fixes the person. He says, "The dog is like this when you are like this. The dog is doing this because you are doing this. If you change this, then your dog will change." I am not saying that actors are dogs. I am just saying that most relationships and behaviors are contingent.⁴⁰

Rather than simply critiquing staff for challenges, haunt operators should take accountability for how their own actions may impact actor morale and retention. Although this is crucial advice for any business, it becomes especially vital in an industry where the labor itself revolves around fear, violence, and unsettling imagery. The emotional and physical demands placed on performers are compounded by the paradoxes of the genre: actors are expected to simulate chaos while remaining in control, to embody horror while ensuring safety. In an industry historically associated with exploitation, sensationalism, and reputational risk, the stakes of management's care are amplified. Respecting and protecting workers in these spaces is not only a matter of ethical leadership—it's a prerequisite for sustaining a form of entertainment that walks a razor's edge between thrill and harm. By investing in actor training and understanding their emotional and physical needs, haunted attractions ensure not only better performances but also greater legitimacy within the entertainment industry.

While the thrill of danger is central to the guest experience, haunted attractions must operate within rigorously controlled environments. Industry leaders stress that safety is not only about protecting guests but also ensuring the well-being of actors and maintaining operational sustainability. The "show" aspect of haunted attractions is inseparable from the logistical and safety management required to keep the experience safe and engaging. The three issues that most commonly shut down haunted attractions before they get started is: "lack of funding, lack of leadership," and "lack of resources."⁴¹ While scare actor performance, set design, and guest

immersion are essential to creating a thrilling experience, they must be carefully balanced with business logistics, safety protocols, and risk management. Haunt operators must invest in actor training, community-building, and emergency preparedness, recognizing that a successful haunt is about not just scaring guests, but ensuring that fear is kept within controlled boundaries.

Haunted attractions thereby create safe spaces on two fronts: they provide a secure environment for guests to experience fear without actual danger, and they prioritize safety for their staff, ensuring their well-being throughout the operation. Effective haunts blend performance, business strategy, and safety to demonstrate that behind every good scare lies a meticulously managed operation.

Safety, Liability, and Legalese: The Regulatory Maze of Haunt Operations

Haunted attractions must create an atmosphere of fear and excitement while ensuring the safety of their guests. The challenge lies in striking a delicate balance: if safety is compromised, the experience shifts from thrilling to traumatic; but if the baseline for safety is not met, the fear itself cannot be enjoyed as part of the fun, and the experience becomes dangerous rather than entertaining. As John Morreal's concept of control and distance suggests, there must be psychological and physical separation, allowing guests to face their fears in a safe environment and making the fear enjoyable and cathartic.⁴² Robert highlights this paradox, explaining how customers are essentially exchanging money for safety while seeking the thrill of fear:

You've got this really strange connection to me as a customer. I'm essentially exchanging money for safety. I'm going to give you my money because I know that I'm going to get scared. I'm going to have fun, but I am able to do it in a safe environment and I'm trusting you as a company to take care of me. I think that power dynamic is really interesting in how do we better take care of our customers and make sure that we are giving them what they need, giving them what they want, but also giving them something that wants them to come back.

Robert's comment illustrates the industry's need to balance fear with trust: guests must feel secure even as they are immersed in an environment designed to unsettle them. However,

increasing regulations and legal liability complicate this balance. Operators must meet strict safety standards, which can dilute some of the raw intensity that horror thrives on. Haunted attractions operate in a paradox where they simulate danger but must be meticulously engineered to avoid harm. While marketing themselves as spaces of subversion, they must comply with professional and legal standards to ensure safety, a necessity for the industry's legitimacy and survival.

Safety and legal compliance within haunted attractions became a serious issue after the 1984 tragedy at the Six Flags Great Adventure amusement park in New Jersey, where a fire claimed the lives of eight young people in the *Haunted Castle*. David Skal notes, "Fire marshals and safety codes are an issue of common concern in the haunted-attraction business."⁴³ This incident was particularly devastating, as the fire broke out in a dark, maze-like structure with no emergency exits and was illuminated only by malfunctioning strobe lights. In an attempt to see, an attendee used a lighter, unintentionally igniting the highly flammable interior, much of which was constructed from untreated materials that lacked any fire retardant. The tragedy prompted widespread reforms in haunted attraction safety standards, particularly within theme park settings. According to haunted attraction consultant Leonard Pickel, "Before that, haunted houses kind of fell through the cracks."⁴⁴ In the wake of the fire, regulations began requiring the installation of sprinkler systems, the use of nonflammable building materials, and the implementation of smoke detection systems in all haunted attractions. The importance of smoke detection, in particular, cannot be overstated, as it is often smoke inhalation, not the flames themselves, that proves fatal.⁴⁵ This tragedy brought the issue of fire safety to the forefront of the haunted attraction industry and underscored the critical importance of clear, enforceable safety codes.

Although the *Haunted Castle* fire is a well-known example of safety issues, depicted as a cautionary tale for the industry to follow, there are still haunters who do not comply with those rules or regulations due to local safety codes. Natalie, a traveling scare actor and haunt actor training consultant, has worked in many haunted attractions across the United States. She mentioned that she is known for being a “safety monger,” explaining that if the show is not safe, then it is not fun. She says:

I’m known for yelling about fire code. I’m known for yelling about actor safety, and I’m known for yelling about how we need to do better regarding sexual assault in the haunt industry [...] I am very much team safety, so [unsafe haunts] don’t give me a thrill. They just piss me off or make me like, “Nope, not having fun. I’m done.”

Natalie emphasizes that the industrial settings in the USA, unfortunately, tend not to “make changes until something tragic happens.” She mentions 9/11 influencing TSA at airports, saying, “It takes some tragic event, and thousands of people dying to suddenly be like, ‘Oh, we should make a change.’” In the haunt industry, that moment came during the Six Flags fire, which set the standard for fire safety in theme parks. One tragic event can impact the entire industry, for good or for bad. Preemptively providing safety structures in place is important to maintain legitimacy and retain the safe practices of haunts.

While professional haunts have adhered to these safety standards, the problem remains that unregulated haunts continue to pose significant risks, especially those in rural or less-regulated areas. Fire safety, emergency evacuations, security protocols, and guest behavior management are all critical components of a successful haunt business. William, a haunt operator, describes the dangers posed by such operations:

The problem isn’t the professional haunts—the big ones like *13th Floor Entertainment* and *Fear Factory* follow strict safety codes. The problem is the haunts in the boonies, the ones without fire codes or safety regulations [...] They’re fun, but they’re death traps. [And] the public doesn’t distinguish between a well-regulated haunt and a dangerous one. If something bad happens at one haunt, it affects the entire industry [...] That’s the stuff that keeps me up at night.

The dangers posed by unregulated haunts can impact their customers and local communities, and accidents in even a small or local haunt can have far-reaching consequences for the reputation of the entire industry. Safety codes and regulations vary across jurisdictions but also change depending on whether the haunts are private dwellings or commercial, for-profit models. While most reputable haunts adhere to stringent safety standards, unregulated or poorly managed haunts present serious risks. Because the public rarely distinguishes between regulated and unregulated haunts, a single safety failure (even in a small or rural operation) can tarnish the reputation of the entire industry, making it all the more vital that even simulated danger is underpinned by real safety precautions. William's comments also reveal a telling irony in the industry's own efforts to professionalize: even as haunters seek to shed public stereotypes of illegitimacy, they sometimes reproduce these very distinctions internally. His reference to "haunts in the boonies" echoes the same classed and regional perceptions of backwardness or irresponsibility that haunt operators often combat when negotiating legitimacy with local governments or the public. This internal boundary-drawing underscores how legitimacy is not just something imposed from the outside, but also policed from within, by differentiating "serious" or professional haunters from their informal or amateur peers. The result is a layered and sometimes contradictory discourse around credibility, where the struggle for industry-wide recognition coexists with exclusionary narratives about who counts as a "real" haunter.

Safety is important not just as a legal obligation but as a fundamental part of delivering an enjoyable experience in spaces of horror entertainment. The stakes are high for haunt operators, who understand that poor safety measures can ruin both the experience and their business. Natalie recounts her experience visiting a haunt that ignored basic safety regulations, creating a fire hazard. One haunt she visited featured a mattress that a scare actor would crawl

out of. Mattresses are highly flammable and are therefore typically kept out of haunted attractions unless heavily fireproofed. Since that part of the building was not well climate-controlled during the cold months of the haunt's operating season, "the mattress caught fire because it was placed too close to a space heater. That's why you don't have them inside haunted houses unless fireproofed, but it was never addressed [... in fact] the singed mattress is still in there now." This lack of basic safety oversight not only put actors and guests at risk but also undermined the show's integrity. In addition to fire hazards, poorly secured props can also become dangerous. Natalie describes how a large glass jar, left unsecured in a vulnerable position, was grabbed by a guest and thrown at an actor, resulting in broken glass and injury. "There are still four of them sitting out," she notes, highlighting the failure to learn from past mistakes. After that training day, Natalie did not return to the haunt, saying her schedule for the season was "booked"—because, for her, "If I don't feel safe in a show, I am not doing it." Safety is not just about meeting minimum standards; it is about fostering a culture of responsibility and care.

Haunted attractions face significant liability concerns, and managing these risks is essential for long-term business sustainability. Robert emphasizes the importance of safety, saying, "It's an expensive business that comes with a lot of liability, but I think that's where safety is important. The more safe you are, the more you're able to do great things for customers, and it gives people jobs to do what they love." The idea that prioritizing safety is not only a legal necessity but a cornerstone of a successful business model resonates within the industry. However, safety also entails an ethical responsibility: ensuring the well-being of both guests and employees reflects the inherent dignity of all human beings—a value that transcends business or

legal concerns. A commitment to safety affirms the respect we owe others, not merely as customers or workers, but as individuals worthy of protection and care.

The high-stakes nature of creating an immersive, thrilling experience means that ensuring guest and employee safety becomes of paramount importance. One of the most crucial ways to mitigate risk is through liability waivers. These waivers not only help inform guests of the potential dangers involved but also fulfill legal requirements set by insurers. Peggy McLaurin of *Woods of Terror*, during the State of the Industry 2025 address, explained, “We can’t even renew our insurance unless we present a waiver.”⁴⁶ Many insurance providers require proof of signed waivers before renewing a policy. This makes it essential for haunted attractions to adopt clear and simple waiver language. Overcomplicating these documents with dense legalese can confuse guests and potentially invalidate the waiver itself.⁴⁷ There is a growing recognition of the need for universal waivers across haunted attractions, a strategy that fosters collaboration and consistency within the industry. While many haunts include waivers as part of the ticket purchase or display them at the entrance, some go further by having actors verbally read the rules to guests or utilize cameras that ensure participants nod or physically acknowledge the waiver. This constant reinforcement ensures guests know what they are signing up for and contributes to a safer, more informed experience. Alongside liability waivers, the haunted attraction industry has faced significant challenges in securing insurance coverage. In recent years, several attractions have lost their coverage, sometimes with little to no explanation, leading the HAA to call this a “real insurance crisis.”⁴⁸ Jim Werner, HAA President, noted, “People see our industry as a quick payout [...], but a safety-minded haunt is statistically safer than going to the grocery store. We just look like an easy target.”⁴⁹ His comment speaks to a dual challenge: on one hand, insurance providers often assume haunted attractions are dangerous and litigious spaces, leading them to

deny or revoke coverage with little explanation. On the other hand, some individuals may perceive haunts as lucrative targets for injury claims, believing the dramatic, high-intensity setting makes it easier to allege harm. This perception, whether from insurers or the public, has made it increasingly difficult for haunt operators to obtain or maintain reliable insurance. In response, the HAA is exploring a sponsored member insurance program designed to offer more stable, long-term coverage and counteract negative assumptions about the industry. As haunts strive to meet the rigorous safety standards required for these policies, they must also navigate local regulations, which vary dramatically from one jurisdiction to another. Some areas enforce strict codes, while others leave safety measures largely unregulated.

Even with these efforts, the haunted attraction industry continues to face challenges with insurance coverage. As industry insiders like the team at Granite Insurance point out, “The insurance industry has paid insurance ten times, and the claim got denied,” highlighting that claims management remains a major concern. For this reason, it is essential for haunted attraction owners to be not only proactive about safety protocols but also vigilant in understanding their insurance policies. Many programs are filled with fine print—exclusions, warranties, and sublimits—that can leave attractions vulnerable when an incident occurs. As Devon Goolsby and Cameron Annas from Granite Insurance emphasized at a 2023 TransWorld seminar, insurance policies often contain clauses that exclude coverage for specific activities, such as physical contact with patrons or the use of slides (metal plates attached to scare actors’ knees that allow them to slide on the ground, creating sparks and loud grinding sounds for alternative scares). These fine print details must be carefully reviewed to avoid surprises during the claims process.

Robert notes, “I get concerned about public safety in private homes and the liability that’s connected to that.” This concern becomes especially pressing when haunted attractions decide to “go pro,” transitioning from home haunts or charity events to collecting payment as a business. Craig Watt is a seasoned insurance agent and professional hunter who spoke to the issues of haunts and insurance, stating that the haunt industry “knows fire code as well as firemen do, but we are lousy at insurance.”⁵⁰ Likewise, “insurance companies don’t really understand what haunted houses or escape [rooms] are—escape rooms are just as bad when it comes to identity—[insurance companies] don’t know where to put them. They are categorized all over the place.”⁵¹ For home haunts, all that is covered is homeowner’s insurance, which excludes business practices. Therefore, if home haunts ever charge admission, insurance does not have to pay out because their insurance excludes business practices. Home haunts often ask for donations or give to local charities but cannot charge admission, but every state is different. In response, operators are being advised to regularly perform internal reviews of their operations and insurance coverage, updating their policies to reflect changes in activities or regulations.⁵² If money is taken, a special events policy would be necessary for home haunts for that night. Ensuring that the insurance program is designed to meet the specified needs of each haunt—whether it’s adding new activities like axe throwing or adjusting for the specifics of a hayride—can help secure the coverage needed to protect both business and guests. This industry-wide focus on transparency and education is essential in establishing haunts as legitimate, safety-conscious businesses, despite their reputation for thrills and chills.

To combat these challenges, industry organizations like the HAA are working hard to standardize safety protocols nationwide. The HAA has fueled this growth, reporting a 14% revenue increase from 2022 to 2023, with investments in trade shows, marketing, and training

efforts.⁵³ Through initiatives like the Certified Haunted Attraction Operator Safety (CHAOS) training program, sexual assault training, and youth safety program, the HAA helps operators stay up to date with safety regulations and best practices, minimizing the risk of accidents and violations. Moreover, issues such as sexual assault, youth protection, and active shooter preparedness are major concerns in the industry that have been developed into training courses. As part of this broader safety initiative, haunts are also developing region-specific training programs to account for local nuances and regulations. For instance, the HAA is working with the Department of Agriculture in Pennsylvania to create a new certification program for hayride safety, responding to a recent spike in incidents involving hayrides.⁵⁴

Liability concerns also extend to the staff working in haunted attractions. As John LaFlamboy of Zombie Army Productions discussed at the 2024 TransWorld seminar, “Background checks [...] You need to do it. There was a time I didn’t do it, but background checks can save your show from losing everything.”⁵⁵ Haunted attractions often rely on a mix of paid and volunteer staff, making background checks even more critical. The risk of hiring individuals with a criminal history, especially in sensitive roles like working with children or in close contact with the public, is significant. LaFlamboy emphasized that one incident, such as a predator on staff, could destroy a haunt’s reputation overnight. The HAA has worked to make background checks more accessible and affordable, partnering with services that offer them at a discounted rate for members. This initiative, which reduces the cost per background check from \$25 to as low as \$11.50, ensures that all workers (paid or volunteer) are properly vetted before joining a haunt.⁵⁶

For reputable haunt operators, safety is not just a legal necessity—it is a business and industry priority. Safety is paramount in the haunted attraction industry, as emphasized by the HAA, which champions safe practices and comprehensive training for all involved. To mitigate risks, leading haunted attractions implement a series of comprehensive safety measures. They institute procedures like emergency protocols and security codes. These protocols, such as Code Red (violent guest behavior requiring immediate intervention), Code Blue (medical emergencies), and Code Black (physical altercations requiring law enforcement intervention), ensure staff can respond quickly and appropriately to any situation. They develop and train fire and evacuation drills, often following the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) evacuation guidelines to ensure that all guests and staff can exit within 90 seconds in an emergency. These drills are crucial in managing the large crowds often occupying these spaces. Practicing active shooter preparedness by adapting Homeland Security’s Run, Hide, Fight method, staff are trained to respond to active shooter situations, and security teams are equipped with surveillance systems to monitor high-traffic areas and prevent escalation. As Robert explains, safe actor training and safety drills are critical components in ensuring the success of these safety measures. For example, Robert’s haunt conducts drills that simulate emergency scenarios to test staff responsiveness:

On the operation side, you have everything from EMTs, how we train our EMTs, how we train all of our safety and security team to make sure that if there is an emergency, we train essentially that you have 30 seconds to move between 90,000 square feet, which is mission impossible.

This level of emergency preparedness is essential, as haunted attractions can be crowded and labyrinthine, often with multiple groups of people moving through at once. Training staff to be ready for anything, from medical emergencies to violent incidents, ensures a safe and controlled experience for guests and workers.

Despite lingering apprehension about artificial intelligence, many haunted attraction operators are cautiously exploring how emerging technologies can enhance safety, streamline operations, and manage high-risk, high-volume environments. Some owners are particularly interested in tools like thermal heat scans, which can help identify potentially intoxicated guests or those experiencing health issues—allowing for quicker, more targeted responses to in-attraction incidents. Yet even current technologies such as cameras, radios, metal detectors, and surveillance systems bring their own logistical and security challenges. Kenneth, a scare actor-manager, noted that his large-scale haunt experiences “about twenty issues an hour,” underscoring the complexity of crowd management and safety monitoring.

AI’s potential in the industry extends beyond creative functions like music production. Hopps, a proponent of AI integration, encourages its use across operational domains—from marketing automation and personalized guest experiences to real-time monitoring systems that adjust traffic flow and flag safety concerns. “At this point, saying ‘I don’t like AI, I’m not going to use it’ is about the same thing as saying, ‘I don’t like the sun, I’m not going to use it,’” he stated during the *State of the Industry 2025* report. His hyperbolic analogy captures a prevalent sentiment among tech advocates: resistance is futile, as AI is already embedded in many systems, often invisibly.

However, this forward-looking stance also raises concerns. As AI adoption becomes more widespread, it begins to feel less like a choice and more like a necessity. Critics warn that this perceived inevitability blurs the line between innovation and coercion, mirroring broader anxieties about AI as a tool of capitalist compulsion rather than empowerment. As the haunted attraction industry evolves, it must grapple with the dual imperatives of embracing technological

change while safeguarding its ethical, legal, and human dimensions. The integration of AI may well be a necessary evolution—but it should be approached with critical reflection as much as enthusiasm.

Uncanny Intellectual Property: The Tenuous Balance Between Familiarity and Fear

Haunted attraction operators face the challenge of balancing creativity with commercial viability, especially in the evolving landscape of intellectual property (IP) rights. As the industry grows, its reliance on IPs—such as Universal Studios’ use of established horror brands—has become increasingly prominent. While horror thrives on the unpredictable, haunted attractions often embrace the familiarity of well-known IPs to attract audiences and ensure profitability. This use of familiar characters and themes helps maintain consumer trust but can undermine the originality that makes haunts truly compelling. The tension between IP-driven commercial success and the desire for innovation reveals a fundamental conflict in the industry: while originality is valued, financial security often rests on catering to audiences’ love for the familiar. At events like the Transworld Haunt Show, this duality is evident. For example, with the copyright on Disney’s Steamboat Willie expiring in 2024, vendors at Transworld introduced props and mask that creatively referenced this character, which hadn’t been available in previous years (see fig. 29 and 30). These new items allowed for a fresh take on nostalgic characters, offering both innovation and familiarity.

However, the line between homage and infringement is thin, and some haunts and vendors cross this boundary. One such example is Little Spider Creations, a prop and scene fabricator, which created a castle scene resembling the Wizarding World of *Harry Potter*. After the season, the company received a cease-and-desist letter due to the obvious resemblance, illustrating how the lure of IP-driven concepts can sometimes lead to legal pitfalls. This

underscores the precarious balance haunted attractions must strike: relying on familiar, commercially safe IPs while trying to create original, unpredictable content that sets them apart. Relying on recognizable horror franchises ensures financial success, but at the cost of limiting the genre's subversive potential. The industry must constantly navigate this tension, reconciling the commercial allure of the known with the creative drive for originality, illustrating how the haunted attraction industry both resists and embraces mainstream business practices.



Figure 27. Mask and outfit inspired by Steamboat Willie, incorporating eerie elements such as blood splattering and a sinister smile. Transworld 2024 tradeshow. Image by author.



Figure 28. “Murder Mouse” mask and outfit inspired by Mickey Mouse. Created by a vendor at the TransWorld 2024 tradeshow. Image by author.

Much like theme parks, the success of a haunt can often hinge on its ability to leverage popular IPs, driving audience interest and creating memorable, branded experiences. Universal Studios’ *Halloween Horror Nights* (HHN) stands as a prominent example of this trend, utilizing a mix of beloved IPs such as *Stranger Things* and *Ghostbusters*, alongside their own iconic

Universal Monsters. However, this blend of IP and original content in *HHN*'s strategy reveals a crucial tension within the industry: the balance between creativity and commercialism. Timothy, the Vice President of Art and Design at *HHN Orlando*, notes that the industry has seen significant changes in IP management in recent years: "Intellectual property, any artistic type of work, is now being definitely looked at and scrutinized a lot more than it was even just 5 to 10 years ago," he explains, recognizing the importance of protecting the original work and preventing infringement. This has become increasingly relevant as haunts, especially those with realistic designs and immersive experiences, have sometimes found themselves on the receiving end of cease-and-desist letters for unintentionally mimicking established IPs.

However, while some operators view these legal threats as a compliment to the level of their artistic prowess, the industry has evolved to better navigate these boundaries, with many haunts opting to develop original content rather than rely heavily on external IPs. The use of IPs, both owned and licensed, remains a powerful draw for haunted attractions. *HHN* in California normally sticks to branded IP, while *HHN Orlando* uses original content in about half of its haunted houses. "What we've seen is that that great mix of branded IP gets people interested who maybe have never been to *Halloween Horror Nights* before," says Timothy, which can then lead them to venture into other non-branded houses. At the same time, Orlando's version of *HHN* balances this by offering original scare zones and haunted houses like *Slaughter Sinema 2* and *Goblin's Feast*, ensuring that guests still encounter the excitement of new, uncharted horror.

For operators in the horror and haunt industry, trust is not just a marketing asset—it is a survival tool in a space where fear must feel both thrilling and safe. Jacob, operator of several horror-themed escape rooms in Las Vegas, highlights the trust factor when working with established intellectual properties (IPs): "The branding of an amazing IP establishes trust

between the customer and the producer.” For example, with the *Saw* franchise, customers are more willing to pay a premium because they associate the brand with a guaranteed level of quality and authenticity. IP-driven experiences, Jacob explains, reduce both financial and creative risk. The massive marketing campaigns behind major horror franchises ensure these brands are embedded in the public consciousness, giving operators like Jacob a pre-established audience. “They’ve already done millions, tens of millions of dollars in marketing for these franchises already, too. So, you have that trust, too.”

Trust operates on two levels: earning the audience’s confidence and securing the trust of production companies to develop immersive experiences that promote and protect their IP. The financial advantage of IP-based attractions is clear. “I can’t go to an investor and say, ‘Hey, I need two million dollars to build this,’” Jacob admits. But with a recognizable brand like *The Blair Witch Project*, he can point to existing demand and a narrative framework that reassures investors. Nevertheless, reliance on IPs comes with constraints. Operators must innovate within tightly controlled brand guidelines. As Jacob notes, the trade-off is worthwhile: the trust that comes with an established IP helps reduce risk and create a product that audiences already desire, which is critical in an industry where “time is your most valuable possession.” In horror, trust becomes uniquely entangled with fear—IP offers both reassurance and legitimacy, making fear feel not only worth the price of admission but safe enough to seek out.

While IPs bring in significant revenue, they also present logistical challenges, particularly regarding copyright law. Timothy notes that intellectual property rights are “hard to police.” As haunts push the boundaries of immersive realism, operators must remain vigilant about unauthorized use of IP. However, the industry’s growing interest in creating original content has also shifted the landscape. Timothy observes that it is now easier to protect non-IP characters

than in years past, when haunts often felt compelled to rely on recognizable figures like Michael Myers or Freddy Krueger to draw crowds. This shift does not signal the decline of IPs—franchises like *The Walking Dead* (2010–2022) and *Stranger Things* (2016–2025) continue to serve as reliable drivers of public interest—but it does highlight an evolving balance. Haunted attraction operators are increasingly blending the familiar appeal of IPs with the novelty of original content. While IPs offer structured, predictable narratives, original creations tend to offer more ambiguity, mystery, and surprise—elements that keep audiences alert and engaged. As the industry continues to evolve, intellectual property will remain central to both the creative direction and financial sustainability of horror attractions.

The Dark Sides of Haunts: Marginalized Voices and Exclusionary Practices

Haunted attractions, often seen as problematic due to their depictions of horror content, are plagued by the same issues of sexual harassment and assault that persist in many industries. The compounded themes of violence and fear in horror contribute to the public perception that the industry may inherently foster abusive behavior, with some arguing, “Of course, people would harass their actors, look at how scary they are!” Such hasty generalizations further impact industry perceptions and advocacy for survivors. These stereotypes are further problematized by the demographics of haunt workers, many of whom are marginalized or feel out of place in mainstream society. While haunted attractions claim to promote inclusivity—welcoming women, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and people of color—many still replicate the power imbalances and exclusionary practices that permeate the broader culture. One of the industry’s most pressing paradoxes is its struggle to achieve both inclusivity and responsibility in supporting diverse groups.

Failing to create a genuinely safe and inclusive space may undermine the haunted attraction industry's credibility and their claims to empower marginalized groups. As Natalie points out, harassment and discrimination within the industry can often go unaddressed, with many victims opting for silence in order to protect their careers. While some operators have made strides toward diversity and inclusion, these efforts remain inconsistent across the industry, revealing the gap between symbolic gestures of inclusion and meaningful, systemic change within organizational structures. Betty, a haunt owner and HAA board member, notes that she does not perceive the industry to be male-dominated, and feels that navigating the haunt industry as a woman presents no "difficulty at all. I don't have any issues with it. But that's me, you know, in my own experience." Given her family's longstanding involvement with haunts and her work in the boating industry (which she believes is much more male-dominated), her experience may contrast with that of others facing more obstacles, especially in less established roles. However, individual perceptions like Betty's can obscure broader structural disparities that persist across the industry.

While women have long been central to the haunt industry—particularly in the history of the original charity haunts, creative design, and acting—their representation in ownership and leadership roles remains limited. In my interviews, I found that, in many haunt casts, women outnumber men. Jan Knuth, the co-author of *Not Afraid to Slay: Women of the Haunt Industry* (2021), stated, "I would venture to guess in the fourteen years I've been in the industry, from the home haunt for seven years and then Grey House Haunts, 75 to 80 percent of my cast has been female."⁵⁷ However, the gender imbalance persists in leadership and technical positions, with

what Hopps estimates to be a roughly “70:30 actor ratio for women.”⁵⁸ The increasing number of women in leadership roles, though still a minority, signals a shift toward greater recognition of their leadership potential.

Many haunts, while claiming to foster diverse environments, have faced ethical dilemmas surrounding the sexual harassment, and or the physical and mental abuse of employees. Reports of incidents that were ignored or covered up by management expose the dark side of an industry that promotes safety and fun as its core tenets. Open conversations reflecting on the industry’s benefits and challenges occur on panels at HAuNTcon, as Hoedt emphasizes, “Opening up discussions about prejudice, but also the importance of representation, diversity, and mentorship, and how to structure a business in order to support these [...] allows some insight into an often-forgotten aspect of haunting.”⁵⁹ The passion for horror and the artistry behind haunted attractions is undeniable, but the industry is also aware of the work needed to elevate diverse employees, addressing concerns over perpetuating harm. Hoedt observes, “Haunting is traditionally a male-dominated industry, often right-wing in its politics and still wrestling with established tropes of, for example, negative portrayals of mental health as entertainment.”⁶⁰ Beneath the thrilling scares and immersive design, the industry struggles with the ethical treatment of workers—especially marginalized individuals. Rooted in power imbalances and perpetuated by poor management and oversight, these issues have long been ignored. However, recent efforts to expose these dark corners and push for change signal hope for a safer, more inclusive future in the haunt industry.

Sexual assault has long been a silent epidemic within the haunt industry, with many actors sharing painful experiences of harassment, often perpetrated by audience members but more frequently by fellow cast members. As Natalie explained, “More often than not, the sexual

assault happens from within the cast, not from customers.” When such incidents occur, the victim is immediately removed from the situation, but it’s left to them to decide whether to press charges. For years, many of these incidents, especially those involving teenagers, went unreported, often ignored by those in power who prioritized their business reputation over protecting staff. Natalie recounted, “I dealt with an actor who preyed upon teenage girls, and when we reported it, we were told, ‘What were you wearing? How were you acting? You were asking for it.’” This toxic, predator-friendly environment persisted unchecked due to the industry’s hierarchical, profit-driven, male-dominated structure. As Natalie reflected, “I wasn’t going to report it to the police because there was no physical evidence, but constantly getting groped and having inappropriate comments made—it was impossible to get anyone to listen. We were always blamed, and it was just part of the system.” For years, harassment was dismissed, and actors were expected to “suck it up.”

However, in recent years, cultural shifts have brought greater accountability to the industry, fueled by the #MeToo movement and broader societal changes. The increasing presence of women in leadership roles raised awareness of issues like sexual harassment and exploitation. As Natalie noted, “Having more women in these management and owner roles has made people more aware [...] We won’t tolerate that behavior anymore.” These changes have led to tangible improvements, such as Natalie’s idea to implement anonymous reporting systems. “If someone sees something uncomfortable, they can report it without fear of retaliation,” Natalie explained. “We would rather people be overly cautious and report things than let something happen.” While this proactive approach can help foster safer environments, it also raises questions about how to ensure fair investigations and prevent misuse. Nevertheless, Natalie recalls an instance where, when an inappropriate actor behavior was reported, the response was swift: “I instantly called the

guy down [...] and you're done." The power to act decisively and protect staff members from harassment is one of the growing strengths of a more diverse and inclusive leadership. This proactive approach has been crucial in reducing tolerance for inappropriate behavior, though these changes are still relatively recent and have not been universally adopted across the industry.

While the haunt industry is generally open about issues of youth safety and sexual assault, the situation in 2024 involving board member John Schwarz's conviction hit too close to home, and the narrative surrounding it went silent. Schwarz, a HAA board member convicted of sexually assaulting a teen actor, highlights both the historical and ongoing blind spots within the haunt industry.⁶¹ Despite his conviction, the response from the HAA board was notably subdued, prioritizing organizational stability over addressing the severity of the situation. In an ironic twist, Schwarz, the owner of *Scare USA* in Wisconsin, had used the phrase "You can't spell scare without CARE," a statement now seen as disturbing, given his actions and the failure of those in power to protect their staff. His words at the 2023 Transworld seminar during the yearly State of the Industry address, where he spoke about the importance of care for volunteers and crew, now ring hollow in light of the abuse that he inflicted on juvenile workers.

The haunt industry also faces issues with marginalizing diverse voices and identities, particularly concerning children as volunteers who may be neglected in these dark, chaotic environments. The industry's failure to protect vulnerable employees is evident, with children being placed in unsafe situations. In the same 2023 seminar, the HAA board discussed the rollout of a Youth Protection and Safety Training course, emphasizing the importance of treating young employees differently and conducting background checks to avoid placing them in risky environments. While the industry had started addressing these concerns more openly, Schwarz's

conviction highlighted the difficulty of confronting these issues, with industry leaders and those in positions of power hesitant to acknowledge the industry's deeper problems due to its already precarious and controversial connection to horror entertainment.

Reflecting on the Schwarz situation, Natalie said, "The worst part wasn't just that this happened—it was how quickly [the HAA] tried to sweep it under the rug, hoping it would go away." Natalie's outspoken passion for addressing sexual assault within the industry drew attention to this issue, but she quickly received messages urging her to stop, as it was making everyone in the industry look bad, especially during October, the height of the season. She responded, "Sometimes we all need to look bad because we all need to do better." She continued, "As someone who was victimized as a teenager, I empathize with what these kids are going through, and I am not going to let this story be buried." The industry's reluctance to publicly address such issues reveals a more insidious problem—one that undermines its reputation and its commitment to creating a safe space for all involved. Natalie's awareness of the industry's profit-driven focus is clear; she has advocated for years to host a seminar at TransWorld about sexual assault in the industry but has been met with responses like, "Do you know how many people you are going to piss off in the industry?" Her response is calm and self-aware, stating, "You guys want to protect your money, and I get it. At the end of the day, it is a business, and it is all a business, but that dollar is still more important than all of us [who] have been victimized." The overemphasis on "business" is, at its core, a focus on money and capitalist gains. In this context, the human element—the very core of what makes a haunted attraction special, the scare actors and the people within the haunt—gets minimized. The subversive and admirable qualities of acceptance, community, and care is lost. Unfortunately, sexual assault and harassment remain prevalent in the haunted attraction industry. While the argument of "it's not all haunts," much

like “it’s not all men,” is often used to dismiss the issue, it does not change the fact that nearly all women in the industry face this harassment. Even in the past four years of conducting research, I have personally experienced sexual harassment multiple times as an attendee at haunted attractions and during events like TransWorld. I’ve often found myself in difficult and precarious situations where my safety was in question. As someone who has worked within the haunt industry and researched it, these incidents have occurred far too often not to warrant equivalent prevalence in industry discussions.

Reclaiming the Monster: Women’s Empowerment and Transformation

Although women often experience victimization behind the scenes through harassment and assault, this does not translate to their work as scare actors, where they embody powerful, aggressive versions of monstrosity. The very nature of the horror genre, and specifically the haunted attraction industry, allows women to defy the typical victimization narrative that society often imposes on them, like the embrace of Barbara Creed’s “Monstrous Feminine” or Carol Clover’s “Final Girl.”⁶² As Knuth explains, “Men tend to be visible in the haunt industry not because men are dark, but [because] it’s acceptable for men to be into dark things.”⁶³ In contrast, women often find empowerment in subverting traditional societal roles, stepping away from the passive victimization typically assigned to them. Knuth articulates this shift in perspective, noting:

There’s a lot of freedom and diversity in the haunt industry. It’s very attractive to women. [...] Most women from my generation and previous ones were raised to not speak up. *Don’t act crazy. Don’t jump around. Cross your legs.* But when someone comes to my haunt to be an actor, I tell her to “be really loud and do all the things that society, for generations, has commanded us not to do” [...] Then I make them aggressors.⁶⁴

Women undergo a monsterization, enabling them to reclaim agency through monstrosity. The victim is transformed into the aggressor, and in doing so, women take control of their narrative, exercising authority within spaces typically dominated by male representations of power.

However, while this transformation offers a form of liberation, it still operates within a cultural economy that valorizes aggression and domination, traits long coded as masculine. As such, the empowerment available through monstrosity may not fully escape the logic it seeks to subvert, raising the question of whether reclaiming violence constitutes true emancipation or a reinvestment in existing hierarchies. Knuth's commitment to casting women as aggressors—rather than relegating them to the victim role—nevertheless creates room for more dynamic and disruptive haunt narratives, complicating simplistic readings of gender, power, and performance in horror spaces. Shifting to embodying the monster also mirrors a broader societal trend, where women increasingly reclaim their right to occupy space, voice their desires, and assert their power, both within and beyond the haunted attraction industry. The subversion of victimhood and the embrace of monstrosity offer a form of radical empowerment that, while disruptive of traditional norms, creates a more nuanced and diverse representation of women in both horror and reality.

Notably, women also hold the financial power behind Halloween spending. In 2019, women accounted for nearly half of the online sales at major retailers like Home Depot and Lowe's, and a striking 68 percent of Wayfair's sales were driven by women.⁶⁵ This purchasing power is reflected in the haunt industry, where women not only make up a significant portion of the workforce but are also the key demographic driving ticket sales. As Hopps suggests, if Holidays were gendered, then "Christmas is the guy, and a haunted house is female," highlighting how women have long been the backbone of the industry, even if they continue to be disproportionately neglected in leadership. In fact, while many women have contributed significantly to the creative and operational aspects of haunts, it has often been male-dominated

at the helm. However, for all women's contributions, the industry still faces challenges in ensuring equitable representation and creating a culture that values their leadership. Nonetheless, the increasing presence of women in management roles promises a more inclusive and supportive environment for all involved, helping to shape a future where haunted attractions are not only thrilling but also safe and empowering for everyone.

However, the culture of exclusion persists for some. Caisey Cole, a scare actor who is a woman of color, reflects on her experience, noting that, for marginalized groups, haunts can be a place to reverse the fears they already face in everyday life.⁶⁶ Cole says:

Seeing the capabilities to be scary go beyond racial trauma, victimhood. A lot of people of color are afraid of being stereotyped and put into a thing that will stereotype them. The haunt is such a collaborative, grassroots thing so if someone is experiencing discomfort, it's listened to, acquiesced and addressed. This doesn't happen in every industry. As a person of color, I would enjoy more advertising toward that.⁶⁷

For Black women, particularly, haunted attractions provide a space for empowerment—an opportunity to take control over the very things that society fears. This unique aspect of haunt culture has made it an important arena for self-expression and visibility. Cole explains that she does not care if she plays a “victim or perpetrator because you still know where the story goes.” The audience does not know where the narrative is leading and the “power to create the narrative” is what Cole finds “liberating.”⁶⁸

Despite this, the haunting issue of systemic inequality remains prevalent, and ensuring that all actors—regardless of gender, race, or background—feel safe and valued continues to be a significant challenge. As the industry begins to address these deep-rooted ethical issues, it must also contend with the balance between the allure of fear and its responsibility to protect its workers. As valuable as the embrace of monstrosity is for marginalized voices, haunts, like all entertainment spaces, must prioritize the safety and well-being of their staff and performers. More open conversations about the dark sides of the industry are beginning to occur, but the real

challenge lies in ensuring these conversations lead to long-term, substantive changes in the industry's culture. The industry's future depends not just on its ability to terrify but on its willingness to protect and empower those who make it come alive.

Charity, a woman who runs a haunted attraction with her mother, adds a unique perspective on how women's roles in the industry are evolving. Her haunt has been shaped to cater to both male and female audiences, but emphasizes creating spaces where women are not simply victims but powerful agents of horror. Charity describes a salon room that "was a hit," and although "we had female-presenting dolls and props [...] a woman was the killer." She explains how their haunted salon room catered to women's experiences, emphasizing:

It was painted in pink. It had girly stuff in it. It had empty bottles of shampoo, conditioner, a hair curling machine, a bunch of dresses, like the most girly thing you could think of, and then it had several mannequins that were scalped [from a bad haircut] or they had their face peeled off [from a bad facial] [...] It was one of those ones where it was like, "Ooh, this is really creepy." At least, from the girl's perspective. We were catering towards our women audience. They were like, "Yes, that's horrifying. Now I'm scared I'm going to accidentally get nicked if I'm at the hairstylist."

By avoiding the overused tropes of women as victims and centering women's stories through women's experiences, like with the hair salon, the mother-daughter duo presents a refreshing take on female empowerment within the horror genre.

Charity's insights are deepened by her acknowledgement of the sexualization of female characters in haunted attractions, and her response to this. She reflects, "There is a lot of what haunted houses do that can be over-sexualized in some way, or has always had a very big nuance in nudity and sex [...] but it's like, 'You don't always need that necessarily.'" Charity and her mother have actively worked to avoid these stereotypes, opting for more original concepts where women are not subject to violence in the typical "man-on-woman" dynamic, but are instead "the monsters." "None of our haunted houses brutalize women," Charity affirms. "We have multiple areas where women and the doll room essentially are the horror. They are the scary thing." She

also explains how her mother's position on the HAA board has been instrumental in encouraging other women to consider careers in the haunt industry: "My mom is on the board [...] and she shows other] women that are interested in it that, 'Oh, look, you can do this. Don't feel afraid. It's not just men doing it.'" This shift is part of a broader movement in the haunt industry toward recognizing the contributions of women, who are increasingly taking on roles that were once the domain of men and diversifying the horror narratives traditionally centered on men. Women are not merely victims to be saved—they are now the monsters, the creators of horror, and the budding leaders of the industry.

Reimagining Fear: Inclusion and Identity

The industry's growth toward more inclusive practices can be juxtaposed with its ongoing structural challenges. Alongside gender diversity, discussions pertaining to LGBTQ+ inclusion, people with disabilities, and people of color are growing in the industry. Historically, the haunted attraction industry has been overwhelmingly white and male, and though diversity and inclusion have become central concerns, real structural change remains slow and inconsistent. The haunt industry's paradox is evident: while it increasingly strives for inclusivity—a key cultural value, though often contested today—it is still held back by its historical roots and entrenched power dynamics, which limit the full realization of this goal and perpetuate exclusionary practices. Still, the increasing representation of marginalized communities in haunted attractions signals progress, but true inclusion requires overcoming the institutional inertia perpetuating exclusion.

Such growth pertains not just to audience size but also to the willingness of the industry to adapt to new cultural dynamics. Haunts have also become spaces for social advocacy, as seen with initiatives such as *Haunters Against Hate*, which arose in response to the tragic Pulse nightclub shooting and "some extremely negative speech made by a haunt review team."⁶⁹ Knuth

speaks highly of this initiative, which helps raise funds for LGBTQ+ youth, stating, “Haunters Against Hate was formed in response to the most unpleasant of circumstances [...] this started a chain reaction that resulted in over twenty haunts endorsing an open letter, which was posted to Facebook. The letter stated to the reviewers that hate is unacceptable, and that they were not welcome at any of their venues.”⁷⁰ This strong stance against hate has been integral to creating a safe and welcoming space within the haunt community, which has historically struggled with issues of prejudice and discrimination. Haunts are spaces where diversity can and should be celebrated, but they must also confront the challenges of historical exclusion and bias to create an environment where all workers can thrive, regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation, can thrive.

Although substantial work continues to be needed to support diversity and inclusion, Hoedt has observed an increasing awareness of this lack. Noting “only a small presence of BIPOC haunters” at HAuNTcon, she claimed that it was nevertheless “encouraging to see a big convention actively engaging with these concerns.”⁷¹ This recognition signals a shift towards greater inclusivity, with industry professionals beginning to take responsibility for improving representation and challenging old tropes. These discussions emphasize that diversity is not just about visual representation but also about creating supportive environments for marginalized voices, ensuring that everyone can thrive within the industry, regardless of their background.

Additionally, as the industry expands globally, with international attendees now more common at events like Transworld, there is a marked shift toward a more inclusive, international perspective. An audience member commented on the changing demographics of the conference, noting its increasing international and global focus, especially in 2024: “There are so many foreign people at the show this year,” adding that it was the largest turnout Transworld had ever

seen. The conversation about global representation marks a significant evolution of the haunt community, recognizing that the culture of haunting extends far beyond American borders. This is not just a trend; it is a movement that embraces global diversity, recognizing that the essence of haunting—evoking fear and excitement—transcends cultural boundaries. James highlighted the industry’s international growth, noting, “Even though they are ‘American Holidays,’ they are growing internationally.” Opening new avenues for diversity to flourish draws talent and audiences from different parts of the world.

The haunted attraction industry is evolving to become more inclusive, particularly for individuals with disabilities, but it faces significant challenges in this area. While some haunts have made strides in accessibility—like offering wheelchair access and accommodating visitors with disabilities—many still struggle to fully comply with ADA regulations, especially those housed in older or temporary buildings. James, a haunt operator, shares how his attraction works to accommodate guests with disabilities, stating, “We always make sure that when we build, we can get wheelchairs through it. If someone comes with a wheelchair, we help them navigate the alternative routes.” However, he also points out that some haunts, particularly those in non-compliant buildings, cannot fully offer the same experiences to wheelchair-bound guests, which highlights the limitations still present in the industry. While some operators waive entrance fees for guests with disabilities, the issue of compliance remains inconsistent across the sector. Beyond physical accessibility, neurodivergent and disabled workers are also part of the growing shift toward a more inclusive haunt industry.

Many haunts now intentionally hire actors with disabilities, providing a space for people to feel valuable where they otherwise feel marginalized. This inclusion, while positive, is not without its complexities. Haunted attractions celebrate the “other”—those who are perceived as

different, scary, or freakish—but this celebration often occurs within a structure that still marginalizes them. The double-edged sword of this inclusion lies in the difficulty of truly supporting these marginalized groups within a space that thrives on making those who are different feel like outsiders. Haunted attractions, in their paradoxical desire to provide an alternative and empowering environment, often reinforce the very societal perceptions of what is “scary” or “freakish.” As a result, while actors and audience members with disabilities may feel a sense of belonging within the subversive space of a haunt, the industry still faces the challenge of structurally accommodating them in ways that go beyond mere representation. These tensions reflect the broader paradox within the haunt industry: while it strives to challenge societal norms by elevating marginalized voices, it still grapples with the logistical and cultural obstacles that prevent full, meaningful inclusion.

Haunts fit within horror’s broader culture, which has historically empowered marginalized groups by embracing the “other,” yet still faces internal contradictions regarding true inclusivity. While some haunted attractions claim to embrace diversity—welcoming people of all races, genders, and abilities—the internal culture often contradicts these assertions. While many haunts continue to confront challenges around diversity, there is also a sense of camaraderie that fosters inclusivity within the industry. Knuth interviewed Swenson, and he said, “There are always exceptions to the rule of inclusion.”⁷² He continues:

If you go to any haunted attraction and look through the cast, you will find an assortment of people. In casting for a theme park, we had to cast 1,000 people each year for six different haunts, scare zones, shows, and you would have everything from lawyers to homeless people. Predominantly women. There is not a single ethnic background not represented [nor] the spectrum of sexual orientation. Once you’re in a haunt, you have the same passion as common ground and it’s not a passion that everyone gets. We become protectors of one another. I refer to all of these people I work with as my “after-dark family.” During haunt season, I spend more time with them than anyone. Diversity is fostered by acceptance and recognizing that we are here for the same purpose: Fly our freak flags and scare the snot out of people.⁷³

Swenson highlights the sense of unity that comes from shared passion, explaining that diversity is cultivated through the collective desire to embrace the weird and the enjoyment of the scare.⁷⁴ This inclusivity is not just superficial. It is about creating an environment where all types of people, regardless of their background, feel welcomed and empowered. Many haunts, despite hiring diverse talent, still fail to provide equitable opportunities for marginalized groups, particularly in leadership roles. The haunt industry continues to wrestle with the paradox of wanting to be inclusive, as it is their biggest power source while replicating the power imbalances found in larger, more mainstream sectors. In this context, the industry must balance celebrating the differences between its workers and audience with creating genuinely safe, accessible, and inclusive spaces for all.

Conclusion: Reflecting on a Reflexive Industry

Throughout this chapter, I have examined the haunted attraction industry as a dynamic intersection of art, entertainment, and social commentary. More than just a space for thrilling scares, the industry is community-driven and ever-evolving within the broader entertainment marketplace. As I reflect on the research findings, it becomes clear how the industry challenges traditional frameworks of horror and media studies—particularly its engagement with presenting societal norms through an immersive space predicated on fear and the growing emphasis on diversity and inclusivity. Haunted attractions exist in a constant tension between subversion and mainstream legitimacy, navigating the complexities of consumer expectations, safety, and ethical concerns. This duality pushes the industry toward greater self-awareness and growth, presenting an opportunity to redefine its identity and become more inclusive, though this requires overcoming persistent power dynamics. Haunted attractions are paradoxical spaces, simultaneously challenging and conforming to societal norms and resisting simple definitions.

From its humble beginnings, where haunts operated as niche individual “goldfish bowls” operating as independent entities, the industry has grown into one defined by collaboration, shared knowledge, and mutual support. As Werner noted, “The industry is one giant network,” underscoring the power of community in times of adversity. The industry’s evolution is a testament to its adaptability and passion for delivering immersive, fear-inducing experiences. Terry emphasized, “The important thing the industry does is connect dots,” highlighting the role of networking and community-building. This spirit of collaboration has elevated the quality of haunted attractions as operators learn from each other’s experiences. As Mark put it:

We don’t need each other, but we choose to work together. We choose to all meet up. We all choose to talk about our common problems and our common joys, and those things are huge, but it’s not the normal things that an industry has. We’re also one of the few industries where there’s a lot of people who just do it for fun.

Despite its fragmented past, the industry’s decision to work together reinforces the importance of collaboration. Terry added, “We try really hard as an industry to support each other, because we want to lift all those ships at the same time.” Healthy competition within this community encourages continuous innovation, which benefits both haunts and customers. This partnership fosters the subversive spirit that remains central to the industry, though it must be carefully navigated to survive in a commercial world.

The haunted attraction industry has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability, embracing new trends while responding to longstanding challenges. Haunted attractions have continually adapted to external pressures, from societal disasters like 9/11 to the COVID-19 pandemic. This period of adjustment led to the development of more immersive and controlled environments, as well as an increase in networking and collaboration within the industry. During the pandemic, many haunts implemented strict hygiene protocols and adjusted their operations, but their survival was also fueled by their ability to fulfill the psychological needs of their

audiences. Haunted attractions offer a form of catharsis, a safe and socially acceptable space to confront fear and anxiety, which, during times of widespread uncertainty, can function as a kind of public service. Even with these successes and seemingly altruistic motives, however, the industry remains deeply entwined with the capitalist structures in which it operates. As haunted attractions become more mainstream and commercialized, they face the same profit-driven pressures and rising legal and operational costs that affect any industry. Still, the industry's innovative spirit persists. The post-COVID expansion of the haunt industry has also brought unprecedented growth, with haunted attractions gaining popularity beyond the traditional American context. This globalization reflects the genre's cross-cultural appeal and opens up new opportunities for collaboration and innovation. While many haunts continue to draw from Western horror tropes, international adaptations often integrate regional folklore and local fears, contributing to a more diverse and globally relevant haunt culture. The rise of global networking, conventions, and digital forums has made it easier for international haunters to exchange ideas and develop best practices, further proof of the industry's adaptability and growing cultural influence.

The haunted attraction industry's connection to the horror genre and Halloween often leads to it being considered unserious or culturally insignificant. As a result, the industry places a strong emphasis on legitimization. However, many other media industries seek legitimization, but to what end? Is the goal to be better regarded by society? If so, perhaps keeping the industry on the fringes allows it to remain more experimental and transgressive, though this marginalization can also lead to the exploitation of vulnerable individuals who form strong affinities in these spaces. Industries driven solely by passion and fun, such as haunts, can sometimes slip into the cracks of exploitation, hurting those who are most invested. This mirrors

the experience of the comic book industry, which has long been in a similar struggle for legitimacy. As Ramzi Fawaz argues, the effort to legitimize comics as form of literature is not only misguided but distracts from what we can learn from the medium itself, its form, its representation, and its ability to challenge traditional reading norms, performing a “queer disruption of the field’s existing logics.”⁷⁵ Comics, like haunted attractions, provide a unique form of artistic expression that resists conventional categorization.

Haunted attractions, with their live performances, diverse entertainment offerings, and subversive affiliations, challenge traditional boundaries and offer what I term “interstitial narratives” (in Chapter Two). These narratives, built from visceral performance and audience interaction, disrupt established hierarchies, creating space for diverse and often marginalized stories. However, if the industry moves toward a more standardized model, like Universal Studios’ *Halloween Horror Nights* (HHN), much of this queerness and disruption may be lost. In HHN, actors do not speak directly to guests; instead, they mouth pre-recorded lines over speakers, often repeating the same movements. Animatronics and lighting sometimes misalign with the flow of guests, as the focus shifts to throughput, maximizing the number of people shuffled in and out of the attraction. While this approach is financially lucrative, it sacrifices the intimacy and personalization found in smaller, local haunts. These localized performances offer more than just a thrill: they can forge affective, transformative connections with audiences, creating lasting memories and engagement. As the industry grapples with commercialization pressures, its subversive power—rooted in its ability to challenge societal norms and offer transformative experiences—risks being diminished by excessive standardization. In striving for mainstream approval, the unpredictable, boundary-pushing qualities of haunted attractions may

be compromised, limiting their potential for personal and collective growth. The broad scope of the haunt industry invites diverse interpretations and experiences, but excessive conformity could stifle the freedom that makes these spaces impactful.

Haunted attractions stand as cultural spaces that encapsulate the tension between commercial success and artistic freedom—a freedom not only confined to the haunts themselves but also extending to the industry’s struggle for autonomy in a society shaped by external pressures. As they grow and adapt to societal expectations, they continue to evolve not only as entertainment venues but also as platforms for reflection, personal growth, and community-building. The industry’s ongoing journey, marked by its attempts to balance safety with thrill, inclusion with tradition, and mainstream recognition with its countercultural roots, reflects the broader dynamic of all artistic and entertainment fields constantly navigating commercialization pressures. Haunted attractions are more than just a product of the horror genre; they are the battleground where societal anxieties, human desires, and creative expression collide. Haunts, like the industry (and much like monsters and people, for that matter), are not wholly good nor wholly bad; they operate within the center of many paradoxes. As the industry continues to confront its challenges, it remains a vibrant and complex entity driven by the fundamental human need to face and overcome fear. Whether they are ultimately fully legitimized or remain on the fringes, haunted attractions will persist as spaces of radical transformation, always shifting, always unsettling, and always ready to provoke and inspire.

CHAPTER THREE – THE ART OF FEAR:

Labor and Performance in Haunted Attractions

As I step into the scene, flickering red lights cast ominous reflections against the backdrop of overgrown foliage, imbuing the space with life. The air hums with the sounds of creaking set pieces and animatronics. I move through a rickety doorway and into a dusty, cluttered hotel lobby, where the air hangs thick with tension. Surrounded by a 360-degree view of a realistic haunted hotel, the environment blurs the boundaries between reality and fiction, aided by the overwhelming set design, dark lighting, and eerie sound effects that distort both sight and sound. My group, composed of friends and strangers alike, feels the blend of excitement and apprehension, trapped momentarily within this cramped space. Suddenly, an animated hotel manager shouts, “Come in! Come in! I must tell you about the death dealer...” Before anyone can respond, he thrusts a plastic anatomical heart into my hands. In that instant, everything shifts, and we are no longer passive observers, but active participants in the unfolding narrative.

Clutching the blood-coated heart, my group and I press forward, receiving other tangible tokens, such as candles to light the way and crucifixes to protect us from vampires. These small but mighty tools help guide and shield us as we confront various monsters in our path. As we interact with creepy creatures and immersive settings, we become completely entangled in the narrative, dissolving what little imaginative division remains between actor and spectator.¹ These moments of unpredictable human interaction, orchestrated by scare actors, transform audiences into active co-creators of the experience. As we navigate the terror-filled rooms, the atmosphere is marked by pulsing heartbeats, nervous laughter, and whispered voices: the crucible where

emotional responses are ignited and amplified. Our story concludes in the climactic moment when I place the original anatomical heart into a zombified corpse, symbolically curing the monster with the transformative power of love.

The 13th Floor in Denver, a haunted attraction show “Love Bites: A Valentine’s Haunted House,” produced by The 13th Floor Entertainment Group, exemplifies live-mediated horror entertainment (LMHE), which refers to immersive, participatory experiences that blend live performances with technological elements to create engaging horror narratives that actively involve the audience in the storytelling process. This show takes a holiday centered on love and infuses it with fear, transforming themes of romance into terror to cement Halloween’s year-round relevance. While these environments vary significantly across the United States and worldwide, one consistent element that ties modern haunts together is the presence of live actors, known as scare actors or monsters, who play an integral role in creating dynamic, participatory experiences. This chapter focuses on the critical role of scare actors, whose performances provide an intense form of entertainment, embodying the variable and complex demands of labor in the entertainment industry. Through my analysis, it becomes clear that the horror scare actors’ provocation in audiences pales in comparison to the physical, emotional, and mental horrors faced behind the scenes. Yet, within these constraints lie opportunities for empowerment and personal agency.

Throughout this chapter, I analyze scare actors as artists and laborers who craft their identities through performance, using their bodies and emotions to navigate a balance of physical toll, mental health, and unexpected rewards. Scare actor labor, often misunderstood, reveals how their performances and identities evolve, challenging societal conventions and creating understandings of monstrosity from the perspective of the monsters. Within the heart of the

attraction, scare actors embrace monstrous identities in ways that challenge societal norms surrounding class, gender, ability, sexuality, and religion. Scare actors do not just enact fear, they negotiate it, using horror's ambiguity and monstrosity to redefine their bodies and power. I argue that within these societally villainous spaces, scare actors find the freedom to inscribe new meanings onto their bodies and willfully resist societal perception (as potentially pitiable, abnormal, frightening, inconvenient, unwieldy) and renegotiate horror tropes to offer an alternative reevaluations of their bodies and themselves, as powerful, threatening, deft, cunning, superhuman. In the following pages, I outline my theoretical frameworks and methodological approach, intertwining media, performance, and horror scholarship with empirical data collected from scare actor interviews. I demonstrate how the horror genre shapes haunted attractions and reveals power dynamics among actors, audiences, and institutions in horror entertainment spaces.

Horror Labor as a Reflexive Practice for Scare Actors

After visiting over eighty haunted attractions worldwide (full list in Appendix A), I found the artificial scents, neon paint, lighting, costume design, sound, and scare actors to be strangely comforting, despite the varying backdrops and localities. My familiarity with these spaces goes beyond frequent visits, as I have worked within the haunt industry and participated in both behind-the-scenes tours and public experiences. Through these efforts, I developed a nuanced understanding of the cultural and industrial dynamics at play. To further this understanding, I conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with current and former scare actors and acting managers (below-the-line workers),² within haunted attractions in rural and urban environments across ten states. These interviews focused on production practices, professional backgrounds, and the lived experiences of those working in the industry. Using Hanne Bruun's concept of "exclusive informants," I engaged participants who were able to offer critical "insight into what

is going on ‘backstage’” of haunted attractions,³ shedding light on the hidden dynamics of this often-overlooked industry. Although participants were initially open to foregoing anonymity, I de-identified all respondents to ensure confidentiality and adhere to ethical research standards, gathering valuable insights while respecting their personal narratives. The interviews revealed how scare actors’ social structures, value systems, and experiences inform the production of horror in these spaces. Throughout the process, I remained mindful of power dynamics,⁴ while focusing on the complex relationships between everyday operational experiences and broader industry practices.⁵

To ground my research in critical media industry studies, I examined how industry knowledge circulates, shapes practices, and influences both the texts and creators involved.⁶ The critical media industry study framework “examines the business culture of the media industries; how knowledge about texts, audiences, and the industry forms, circulates and changes; and how they influence textual and industrial practices.”⁷ Critical media industry studies scholars are interested in questions regarding power in production environments, aiming to locate “industry research on particular organizations, agents, and practices *within* [the context of organizations that...] have become vast media conglomerates operating at a global level.”⁸ I combine scare actor interviews with personal experience to explore how haunted attractions reflect and challenge broader societal values, pushing the boundaries of what is acceptable in popular entertainment while prompting deeper reflection on industry practices. Utilizing John T. Caldwell’s method of uncovering workers’ “cultural self-performances,” I navigate their “self-identity” through “self-reflexive” approaches, prioritizing their voices as theorists rather than as texts in the co-construction of knowledge that helps make sense of production cultures.⁹ The

method of uncovering the interplay between personal experiences and industry practices aligns with the production studies approach. This suggests that scholars might learn from the industry's habitual self-scrutiny, enriching the narratives crafted by these creators.¹⁰

The reflexivity within haunted attraction productions mirrors broader cultural practices of performance. Marvin A. Carlson examines how performance drives self-consciousness, cultural reflection, and the re-negotiation of past experiences.¹¹ Carlson describes performance as “a cultural activity deeply involved with memory and haunted by repetition.”¹² This repetition allows for the intermingling of “collective and individual memories of previous experience,” renegotiating how horror stories operate in these time-specific settings.¹³ In haunted attractions, both scare actors and audiences engage in a repetitive cycle of horror, drawing on collective and individual memories to reshape the experience. The reflexive labor within haunted attractions echoes this process, illustrating how the genre demands critical narrativization. Building on performance and media studies, I explore how haunt workers' everyday experiences reveal both the labor behind horror and its broader cultural implications.

Embodied Horror: Intersecting Labor, Identity, and Community

At the core of this chapter lies an exploration of the body as both a site of identity and a conduit of emotional engagement, illuminating how the embodied experience of scare acting affects the audience's visceral responses and performers' identities. Both embodiment and affect theory fundamentally focus on the body and investigate how individuals are shaped through interactions with other bodies and their environments. While affect theory emphasizes pre-cognitive non-representational aspects of experience, embodiment often examines emotions in relation to identity and experience within specific cultural frameworks. As Michael Richardson explains, affect reflects “how everyday life is composed and textured by objects, relations,

attachments, economies, and sticky signs that not only determine the signification of the particular bodies but also shape their very surfaces.”¹⁴ This intrinsic connection between the body’s capacity to affect and be affected plays a significant role in the interrelationship between performers’ bodies and their constructions of identity. Sara Ahmed adds that “it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others.”¹⁵ The engagements of bodies influence the formation of subjectivity, constructing identities of “I” and “we,” or even an “us” versus “them” dynamic. Scare actors’ embodiment of monstrosity invites internal reflection on villainy and otherness. This constant interrogation of self and other through embodiment involves an intra-subjective unconscious process, introducing what Julia Kristeva describes as “uncanny strangeness.”¹⁶ Further emphasizing this complex depiction of otherness versus the embodied self, Vince Marotta states, “It is only by recognizing our internal strangeness that we come to realize our commonality with the embodied external stranger.”¹⁷ When scare actors perform extremes of otherness through monstrosity, they embody this sense of otherness, prompting a reflective understanding of their positionality, identity, and community. This labor involves negotiating the boundaries of societal norms and expectations, as they confront their positionality in relation to both the roles they play and the audience’s perceptions. Through performing monstrosity, scare actors develop a heightened awareness of their own fluid identities and the complexities of belonging, ultimately transforming their understanding of self within a collective framework.

Understanding the transformative potentials of scare actors and their negotiation of labor structures requires recognizing the fluidity between internal and external strangeness. Drawing on Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of queer temporalities, I argue that scare actor labor represents

an embodied synchronization of time and space. Their actions—ranging from timed scares to embodied gestures—cultivate a sense of belonging within the immersive world of the haunt. Freeman posits that time is actively embodied in our interactions with the surrounding environment, including the rhythms of labor and production. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of *habitus*, which describes the system of durable and transposable dispositions shaped by one’s social context, helps further explain how scare actors adapt to and embody the cultural logics of the haunt industry. Habitus operates through the body—through gesture, posture, timing, and sensibility—and is learned through repetition and participation in social worlds. For scare actors, this means internalizing the expected rhythms of fear, humor, aggression, and play, which are often picked up through informal apprenticeship, rehearsal, and audience interaction. These embodied skills not only sustain the fiction of the haunt but also allow actors to improvise in ways that feel natural within the horror genre’s aesthetic and emotional logics, where ideologies of horror become internalized.¹⁸ As Freeman states, “Where physical appearance and name fail to secure likeness, the hidden rhythms of gesture, giving and withholding, play and humor, courtship, and etiquette, among other things, establish similarities between strangers that seem to be inborn.”¹⁹ Habitus, then, functions as a framework through which scare actors navigate the demands of their roles, blending institutional expectations with personal rhythms and improvisations. Freeman further elaborates that “queer” redefines class relations beyond traditional Marxist frameworks, emphasizing that the relationship between those who own the means of production and those whose greatest asset is their labor power also involves temporal dynamics.

For scare actors, this embodied time manifests as a queer synchronization that disrupts normative expectations of labor in conventional workplaces. The rhythms of the haunt, timing scares, physical exertion, and emotional investment, are closely tied to both the space and the body. This interplay creates a disorienting yet invigorating experience, which can be understood through the lens of queer temporality. Additionally, the labor in haunted attractions often defies mainstream norms of time and bodily control, challenging prevailing notions of class and social belonging. Freeman notes that class is often expressed through our bodily engagement in time and space, a sentiment echoed in the non-normative and emotionally intense labor of scare actors. Freeman states, “We might think of class as an embodied synchronic and diachronic organization [...] failures or refusals to inhabit middle- and upper-middle-class habitus appear as, precisely, asynchrony.”²⁰ This “asynchrony” in scare acting reveals how their performative labor bends time, presenting queer temporality as a framework for “bodily potentiality that neither capitalism nor heterosexuality can fully contain.”²¹ Such asynchronous labor redefines the nature of work, fostering a transformative space where identities can be reshaped, and the body serves both as a tool of fear and a site of personal agency.

Haunted attractions, through the lens of scare acting, facilitate an exploration of queer temporality that is often absent in other performance and entertainment forms. These experiences, marked by non-normative labor rhythms, offer opportunities for cathartic release and collective engagement, illustrating that haunted attractions are not merely spaces of fear but also arenas for radical embodiment and identity transformation. The queer reorganization of time, space, and bodily engagement is essential to the LMHE framework, where live performances and embodied labor converge to generate affective and transformative experiences.

Horror is essential to “queering” the experience of these spaces, as the genre offers opportunities for queer positioning and play. Horror as a genre shapes how haunted attractions operate, blending entertainment, cultural expression, and communal experiences.

Individuals working in these spaces, along with fans, constantly negotiate their enjoyment of horror against its moral and ethical complexities. As David Scott Diffrient argues, focusing on horror’s affective intensities as a “body genre” is essential, noting that even “the bodies of actors and stunt performers, as visible and invisible members of the genre’s corporeal labor force, both reveal and mask some of the more serious, consequential aspects of making ostensibly silly cinematic fare.”²² By examining the bodies involved in horror production, I bring to the forefront the genre’s ethical dimensions, which are often obscured by its sensationalized themes and performative elements. Focusing on the body and the labor it entails helps highlight how horror’s affective power is not only produced but also *contingent* on the physical and emotional labor invested by performers. Acknowledging the darker, often taboo aspects of horror is the linchpin to understanding its appeal and cultural significance. While horror subcultures provide space for marginalized identities, they also require critical engagement with the genre’s content. Horror, whether in haunted attractions or other media, is both a creative and reflexive act, constantly confronting societal boundaries and prompting both creators and audiences to examine their relationship with fear, disgust, and darkness. The labor behind horror, whether performed on screen, on stage, or within haunted attractions, invites a reflection on the genre’s role in shaping cultural norms and ethical considerations.

Yet while haunted attractions offer liberatory potential for queer self-expression and belonging, they are also spaces marked by contradiction, harm, and exploitation. As Lucas Hilderbrand argues, queer spaces are always mediated, shaped by affective, spatial, and material

infrastructures that both enable and constrain identity. He describes gay bars as a “medium [...] a form that gives structure to social actions and worldviews, that poses expressive conventions, and that constrains what’s possible given its inherent properties.”²³ Like all mediums, haunted attractions act as receptacles for that which lingers, they host spectral presences, unresolved narratives, and emotional residues, making them especially apt stages for queer encounters and hauntological disruptions. Haunts, as mediums, offer a space where scare actors (particularly queer and femme performers) navigate a liminal terrain where empowerment through monstrosity collides with vulnerability, especially when roles reenact tropes of gendered violence or trauma. These tensions echo the ontological ambiguity of monsters, figures that embody both danger and power. Haunt monsters function as cultural mirrors: they reflect repressed fears like queerness or racial otherness, yet can also replicate dominant norms under the guise of subversion. Haunted attractions, then, are queer not merely through LGBTQ+ representation, but because they stage ontologically queer encounters, marked by temporal rupture, spectral return, and unsettled identity.

In this way, they enact what Jacques Derrida, in his theory of hauntology, describes as a “radically dis-jointed time... deranged, both out of order and mad,” where time, history, and world are all thrown “out of joint.”²⁴ These disruptions create what Avery Gordon calls “ghostly matters,” which is one of the most important places where meaning—comprehension—and force intersect.”²⁵ Haunting, for Gordon, reveals how people *sense* and *experience* modern power: “the very tangled way people sense, intuit, and experience the complexities of modern power and personhood has everything to do with the character of power itself.”²⁶ Haunted attractions thus become affective stages where unresolved pasts, speculative futures, and embodied tensions collide. This queer temporality helps explain why scare actors describe their labor as deeply

meaningful yet psychologically complex: emotionally generative, physically taxing, economically undervalued. To grasp the progressive potential of these spaces, we must also acknowledge how queerness, labor, and alterity are not only celebrated, but commodified, strained, and made vulnerable.

Reflexivity is crucial when considering horror's history of exploitation and harm, as it requires both fans and workers to question their engagement with a genre that often challenges societal norms. Due to horror's problematic legacy of exploitation (both on screen and behind the scenes),²⁷ it is important to be critical of the genre, especially when one's interests align with its transgressive nature. As a genre, horror thrives on confronting taboo subjects and moral ambiguities. However, the pleasure derived from horror is not just about indulging in fear—it demands introspection. Fans and workers must engage reflexively, questioning why they find enjoyment in fear, or producing fear in others, and how this enjoyment relates to personal and societal desires. This reflexivity is evident in the narratives created within haunted attractions, where the act of producing fear involves a delicate balance between entertainment, artistic expression, and ethical responsibility. Horror's ability to transgress societal norms compels fans to reflect on their engagement with the genre. As Mark, a scare actor, puts it, "I've had to think a lot about it [...] I enjoy waiting in the dark for people to come by and I jump out at them [...] I have to examine that, I have to know, 'Why do I like that? How do I justify this behavior?'" Mark's reflection reveals the discomfiting but necessary process of confronting personal motivations within a genre that thrives on challenging societal expectations. Such introspection is key to understanding why workers participate in the creation of fear and how they negotiate the genre's moral ambiguities. This reflexivity also extends to the workers within haunted attractions, who often find themselves questioning the ethics of their actions, as Mark further

elaborates: “I had to have a mental conversation with myself [...] if I go after young girls in the haunt [...] am I a pedophile? [...] It’s like no, they’re just fun to scare. They scream the best. That’s why [...] And I constantly ask, ‘Why am I doing this?’” These moments of self-reflection are about engaging with the moral and societal complexities that the horror genre constantly confronts. In doing so, haunted attractions become spaces where the genre’s reflexive storytelling invites workers and audiences alike to engage critically with the darker aspects of their desires and pleasures, which challenge dominant social norms.

An emphasis on the labor bodies in haunted attractions illuminates how workers perform fear and horror in entertainment industries and engage in a broader cultural and economic system that both defines and is defined by the genre. As Ana Alacovska argues, genres are dynamic, constantly evolving yet retaining certain invariable features that both shape and reflect audience expectations.²⁸ Workers embody the genre’s familiar tropes, which resonate with the audience’s expectations while also allowing for creative reinterpretation and innovation. In this sense, workers are active co-creators of the horror genre, producing and performing it in ways that challenge and reinforce cultural and economic boundaries. By exploring haunts as industry-produced spaces, I demonstrate how horror draws on established genre conventions while enabling workers to engage with dark, taboo subjects, offering them a platform to confront monstrosity, fear, and the limits of societal norms that lie within the heart of the attraction.

The embrace of genre, both as passion and a marker of identity, motivates workers to endure demanding production and performance tasks in haunted attractions, where they enter a passionate subculture. This reflects what Brooke Erin Duffy defines as “aspirational labor,” work that is “motivated by passion and the infectious rhetoric of entrepreneurialism,” even when it fails to offer material compensation.²⁹ While scare actors may not all be blogging influencers,

their engagement mirrors this affective investment: a willingness to pursue emotionally and physically taxing labor under precarious conditions in hopes of creative fulfillment or recognition. Haunted house performers similarly engage in what R. Tyson Smith identifies as the “coordinated production of emotion,” where workers manage and embody feelings not just for personal expression but to meet audience expectations.³⁰ A parallel can be drawn to professional wrestling, particularly World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE), where performers also navigate a high-stakes blend of spectacle, physical endurance, and emotional storytelling. As with scare acting, the labor of wrestlers is shaped by their ability to maintain character, perform pain, and sustain intense audience relationships, all while enduring significant mental and bodily strain. For many scare actors, genre labor is a deeply personal and affective practice, offering a sense of individuality and access to a community of like-minded individuals. By participating in the monster scare culture, workers affirm their identities, validate their sense of self, and participate in exclusive access to an often-overlooked world of horror production. As Madelon Hoedt observes, the haunt industry “remains a subculture, often unfamiliar to those not in the know,” providing a creative platform for individuals with non-normative identities and marginalized experiences.³¹ While horror often pushes societal boundaries, it also offers a space for fans and workers alike to engage actively with its content, transforming fear into comfort and pleasure. As Xavier Reyes notes, for many horror fans, the genre becomes “more than a pastime; it can determine a lifestyle.”³²

While it is important to avoid essentialist assumptions about fandom, it is also crucial to recognize that, within the context of haunted attractions, fans and workers often find comfort in engaging with horror’s darker themes. This source of comfort is of particular interest alongside horror’s history in othering marginalized groups, inviting critical engagement with issues of

recognition and societal repression. Robin Wood argues that horror films dramatize “the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses,”³³ a dynamic that also plays out in the subculture of haunted attractions. In these spaces, horror performances offer marginalized individuals a chance to engage creatively with themes of otherness by creating horror characters and bringing these worlds to life. Haunt workers and fans find tangible comforts that reaffirm horror’s role as both entertainment and a space for personal connection and expression, embracing their unique “flavors of weird,” as noted by scare actor Alana in one of my interviews. The labor, identity, and affect embodied in scare actors’ performances illustrate horror as a vital medium for exploring and expressing the complexities of otherness and belonging.

Horror Labor as an Emotional Balance for Scare Actors

Horror, despite its cultural relevance and impact, continues to struggle for recognition as a legitimate form of artistic expression. Haunted attractions, as an extension of the horror genre, face a similar challenge, often dismissed as low-brow entertainment despite the immense creativity and skill required to produce these experiences. This marginalization is evident in how certain films, such as *Get Out* (2017), are labeled as “social thrillers” rather than traditional horror, reflecting a broader trend of distancing horror from high art and cultural respectability.³⁴ In haunted attractions, this dismissal is equally pervasive, with the art of scare acting often overlooked or trivialized in comparison to more conventional forms of performance. Ryan, a scare actor and acting manager, captures this frustration, noting, “Horror just isn’t a very respected genre [...] And that applies for haunted houses, as it’s often seen as a bit low-brow.” He challenges this perception, underscoring the remarkable creativity, talent, and effort that goes into crafting immersive horror experiences. Haunted attractions, like their film counterparts, present an artistic space for workers to combat their marginalization and assert the value of their

performances. The intersection of horror and haunted attraction performance not only provides a platform for artistic expression but also demands a deeper recognition of the skill and labor that contribute to these “low-brow” experiences. These workers, through their artistry, confront the genre’s longstanding devaluation and reclaim their space in the cultural landscape. Successively, they epitomize the affective and performative qualities of horror that are often dismissed as mere spectacle.

Horror is defined by its corporeal effects, producing a visceral, fearful response. Often dismissed as mere spectacle, horror transcends surface-level thrills by tapping into a vast emotional spectrum that resonates deeply with the body. While Western society tends to favor cognitive forms of entertainment—those that engage the mind—horror challenges this hierarchy with its corporeal affective power.³⁵ The body’s reactions to fear, humor, and discomfort reveal an often-overlooked aspect of entertainment. As Noël Carroll’s concept of *art-horror* suggests, horror in its most compelling form is about provoking a complex emotional response, intertwining fear, disgust, and fascination, often through the creation of monstrous beings.³⁶ In this context, the creation of monsters is not only an act of horror but an act of art. This is evident in the work of Mark, a monster designer, who describes his process as one of personal expression and artistic creation. In an interview, Mark said, “The best thing about my job is I can have a monster, or character in my head [...] that thing that existed only in my head is walking around scaring people.” For him, monsters transcend their role as mere figures of terror; they are the manifestation of his creative vision, the embodiment of both cultural influences and personal experiences. His belief that “the world needs monsters” speaks to a primal need for these figures

of fear, for their ability to terrify and for their role in helping us process and confront our own inner struggles and anxieties. This perspective echoes the transformative power that haunted attractions hold for both the audience and the artists.

As Hoedt argues, haunted attractions offer a more primal, direct experience of fear, allowing audiences to confront their fears in a controlled environment.³⁷ This controlled space fosters emotional release, a process tied to catharsis, where intense emotions are purged through art.³⁸ In haunted attractions, the oscillation between fear and humor creates a dynamic that provides a safe space for visitors to engage emotionally, confront their anxieties, and maintain a sense of control.³⁹ As haunted attraction scare actor and haunt owner Mark explains, “The perfect scare is when you jump out, scare them, they scream, run three steps, and then laugh. It’s a visual of release: something terrible happens, they react, and then it’s okay, and they feel better.” This shifting between fear and laughter enhances the experience, offering a therapeutic balance of horror and humor. For instance, visitors in a haunted attraction may be startled by a scare but then find themselves laughing at the absurdity of the situation moments later. This ability to laugh in the face of fear is part of what makes horror enjoyable, as it mitigates the tension with a form of release.

Noël Carroll explains that humor in horror arises when the threat or monster is diminished, allowing laughter to emerge alongside fear. As Carroll notes, “In order to transform horror into laughter, the fearsomeness of the monster—its threat to human life—must be sublated or hidden from our attention. Then we will laugh where we would otherwise scream.”⁴⁰ This delicate balance between fear and humor enhances the emotional journey for visitors, providing both thrill and emotional relief. The content of horror narratives is contextualized by the environment and audiences’ relationship to the genre. This complex relationship with the joy of

being scared is illustrated by Hoedt, who utilizes John Morreall's concept of control and distance to analyze audiences' engagement with fear in haunts.⁴¹ This psychological and physical distance or separation allows visitors to confront their anxieties safely, contributing to the cathartic release that horror provides. Horror and humor, as visceral emotional responses, may trivialize the genre. However, the layered emotional experiences that intertwine fear, laughter, and self-reflection in spaces like haunted attractions reveal their embodied complexity. The effectiveness of haunted attractions in promoting social awareness and personal transformation lies in their ability to create authentic emotional experiences that extend beyond mere shock value. Angela Ndalians suggests that the pleasure of horror often stems from a playful interaction with fear, like the "jolt of surprise" followed by laughter when a parent suddenly says, "Boo!"⁴² At the same time, haunted attractions allow individuals to confront darker themes—such as death, monstrosity, and the unknown—in a safe, controlled environment.

This combination of thrill, sensory stimulation, and exploration of existential fears makes haunted attractions an effective medium for engaging with deep-seated anxieties. Yet, even after leaving the attraction, some of these fears may linger, subtly creeping into participants' lives. This lingering effect is exemplified in the personal narratives shared by scare actors and operators, who describe how these experiences can validate and transform real-world emotions. For instance, in Jack the Ripper's performance, the actor delivers the line "Where are you going tonight, honey?" striking a chord with audience members who recognized the resonant theme of harassment. This moment emphasizes how haunted attractions critique societal problems and provide catharsis for both performers and audience members, allowing them to confront and process real-world fears within the context of the horror experience.

The experience of horror in haunted attractions relies heavily on suspending disbelief, allowing audiences to immerse themselves emotionally in the scene. Aaron Smuts' concept of *disbelief mitigation* illustrates how effective horror narratives allow viewers to set aside their disbelief, momentarily fostering deeper emotional engagement: "Disbelief mitigation [is] the sheltering of non-trivial, tenuously held beliefs required for optimal viewer response—that helps make the film work as horror, and prevents it from sliding into comedy."⁴³ In haunted attractions, this suspension of disbelief is crucial for maintaining the oscillation between fear and laughter that defines the experience. Visitors often find themselves caught in a cycle where genuine fear is quickly followed by laughter, offering an emotional release that makes the experience both thrilling and manageable.

As Smuts explains, effective horror engages viewers in a "disbelief mitigation" process, where they are encouraged to accept the fictional nature of the experience while still reacting emotionally to it. The interplay of fear and humor, particularly in haunted attractions, amplifies this process by providing emotional relief through laughter and mitigating the intensity of fear. Smuts demonstrates the importance of ambiguity in horror narratives, stating that "keeping the source of horror ambiguous is a central strategy for disbelief mitigation, since it prevents skeptical thoughts from interfering with emotional reactions that rely on unexamined beliefs."⁴⁴ In haunted attractions, the ambiguity of the experience allows participants to question their beliefs about the supernatural while still enjoying the thrill of the experience. Examples include reliance on sound, hiding or never visually presenting the monster, questioning evidence, or dispelling evidence of what is real and unreal.⁴⁵ As audiences navigate through unknown and ambiguous environments, the shared experience offers moments of fear and laughter, creating a

communal bond among participants. This communal aspect of horror and humor enhances individual experiences and fosters a collective engagement with the narrative to create more memorable and impactful experiences for both scare actors and audiences.

Analyzing the emotional dynamics present in haunts is crucial not only for audience engagement but also for profoundly impacting the role of scare actors. For them, the act of navigating between fear and humor is a means of creating memorable, immersive experiences that challenge the audience's perceptions of reality. To create memorable experiences for audiences and to become comfortable with being seen as other, one scare actor, Holly, dressed up as a werewolf to buy dog food at a grocery store. Holly describes her experience with enthusiasm, saying, "I was hiding. I was a hermit [...] and then all of a sudden, it's like, you know what? Actually, I'm a fun person. And I want to make memorable moments for other people. And I'm sure that cashier that day remembers very specifically the werewolf that came through and bought dog food." For Holly, the role of the scare actor becomes a transformative experience, shifting from self-isolation to embracing a new identity as someone who creates joy and humor through horror. Further illustrating the comedy of this interaction, Holly mentioned she does not even own a dog: she presented herself in society as a werewolf entirely for the sake of intrigue and amusement. Her change in attitude reflects a broader impact on scare actors. Through their immersion in the fluctuating emotional states of fear and humor, they are able to forge connections with the audience—one that extends beyond mere performance into a shared, communal emotional journey. Oscillating between fear and laughter, rooted in disbelief mitigation, enriches the experience for both the actor and the audience, creating lasting memories that maintain a balance of fear and fun.

The emotional experience in haunted attractions is complex, blending fear with other emotions that contribute to the overall atmosphere. A crucial aspect of this emotional dynamic is how scare actors navigate these feelings, balancing empathy and fear to craft the ideal experience of both fear and fun. The emotional labor required from actors goes beyond merely performing scares or utilizing their own bodies as gags or spectacles; they must monitor both their own emotions and those of the guests. As Ben Armstrong, haunt owner, manager, and former scare actor, explains, “I like to scare people, but I don’t want to terrorize them.”⁴⁶ There is an ideal space where fear is fun and does not teeter into the realm of trauma or cause any long-lasting harm to the audience’s psyche. Scare actors must tread a delicate line, ensuring they create an experience that thrills rather than torments. Utilizing jump scares can be effective in providing a quick startle. However, they do not always instill the lingering impact of a slow-burn, chilling scare that builds tension and disorients the audience over time.

Scare actors accordingly emphasize the need to deploy various forms of scares in haunted attractions, from short thrills to lingering chills. Shar Mayor, a veteran scare actor with over 40 years in the industry, emphasizes the importance of empathy in haunting. In an interview on the *American Hysteria* podcast, she explained:

When you are haunting, you’ve got to have empathy. So, you got to understand the person you are making scream [...] you’re not trying to torture them. You are trying to get them to enjoy the terror [...] The right way to haunt is that you have to be able to get in the head of whoever you are working with, so you have to be emotionally attached and have empathy with them.⁴⁷

Mayor draws attention to how developing this empathy takes time and practice. It requires a deep understanding of both the audience and the nuances of scaring, with a focus on achieving the right balance of fear and fun. Learning to find this balance is essential in providing affective and effective scares.

For actors like Steven, who identifies as autistic, reading emotional cues can be challenging. He explained, “Sometimes it’s hard for me to read certain cues. One time, I got called out [...] but they weren’t mad at me.” After apologizing and explaining, “I just got really into it,” Steven added, “Most of the time, I know when I can get too much into it.” His intensity sometimes manifested in getting too close to the audience, which led him to note that, “Because of my autism, I’ve learned to step back. I can get really close to people quickly, but I try to back off right away so I’m not too much for them.” Steven’s experience underscores the importance of self-awareness in maintaining the balance between fear and fun, ensuring the experience remains enjoyable and respectful of guests’ boundaries. This self-awareness allows him to adjust his approach and avoid overwhelming guests, ensuring the experience remains enjoyable and engaging.

Haunted attraction performers must tap into darker emotions, remaining adaptable and dynamic throughout the night. While emotions like screaming, crying, or maniacal laughter might not seem like positive performance choices, they often result in profound personal outcomes for the performers. Alana reflected on the multifaceted nature of haunting, noting the toll it takes on her physical and mental well-being: “It never even occurred to me how much physical effort goes into working at a haunted house!” The long hours of intense performance can lead to mental strain, but Alana also found a sense of satisfaction: “You’re basically doing a cardio workout for four to five hours. And while that was a lot, I noticed I was feeling really good at the end [...] It inspired several life changes.” The physical demand of maintaining a character over hours may lead to exhaustion, but it can also spark positive transformations. For Alana, the emotional and physical challenges of scare acting, while exhausting, have led to increased endurance. As she continues to age, the demands have only intensified, and to manage

these changes, she adjusts her schedule, reducing her hours and taking more breaks. “The last hour and a half becomes a huge mental challenge at that point,” she says, revealing the mental strain of the role. Despite this, her underlying commitment to the work remains, underscoring how deeply haunting has shaped her life.

A similar level of dedication is evident in a story Kenneth shared about one of his scare actors. Despite being in a three-day psychiatric hold, she insisted on returning to work, saying, “She spent the entire weekend screaming and yelling at customers in character appropriately, and by the end of the weekend she says, ‘I feel so much better [...] I don’t know why I was on the psych hold.’” Kenneth, impressed by her commitment to the role, reflected, “Wow, that’s dedication right there.” The scare becomes powerful for both the audience members to relieve any stress or pent-up energy, but also incredibly beneficial for scare actors. For scare actors, scaring folks is a release. This level of commitment reveals the profound emotional and psychological impact that working in haunted attractions has on performers. These immersive performances engage audiences while transforming actors, allowing them to break free from their usual identities and expand their emotional, physical, and psychological boundaries. Haunted attractions create dynamic experiences that blend emotional labor, creativity, and empathy, going beyond traditional entertainment. The haunt industry’s focus on reading and adjusting to audiences in real-time fosters personalized engagement for guests and catalyzes profound personal transformations for actors through their craft.

Training for scare actors involves a combination of emotional labor, improvisational skills, character development, and strict safety protocols. One of the most important aspects of this training is empathy, which allows actors to adjust to guests’ emotional needs, such as de-escalating fear when necessary. This empathy ensures that actors can strike a balance between

fear and fun. This creates a more participatory experience where the audience is actively involved in the narrative. Successful haunts that prioritize their scare actors provide ongoing staff training, with monthly sessions that focus on shock scares, improvisation, makeup, and character development. Those who return each year are rewarded with patches, T-shirts, cups, and other incentives to recognize their continued involvement and growth within the company and mark their involvement in the community. All actors also receive de-escalation training, equipping them to handle any guest-related issues safely and respectfully. This training borrows from Disney's Four Keys—safety, courtesy, show, and efficiency—principles that prioritize guest safety, respectful interactions, staying in character, and using time and resources wisely to maximize the experience.⁴⁸

Steven elaborated on how this training ensures safety while still providing the thrills of the haunt. He explained:

Honestly, they told us, 'Well, the parents go through with little kids. If any of them are too scared, you stop what you're doing. If you have a mask, they would actually appreciate if you take it off,' which I actually have done that, where you take off your mask, you ask the parent, 'Hey, does your kid want to leave?' They give us flashlights and show the exit points. They would have us do stuff like that. If there is an emergency, say if you scared them too much where they actually go into a heart attack or a mental breakdown where they can't breathe or stuff like that, we have a whistle.

This emphasis on safety allows actors to perform their terrifying roles with the confidence that they can adjust their actions if the need arises, ensuring both the actors and guests remain safe throughout the experience.

Kenneth described scare acting as surprisingly addictive, even for first-timers, especially when they're well-trained and set up for success. Having compared the thrill of getting a big scare to the high a stand-up comedian feels making people laugh, Kenneth continued:

Watch as they jump three feet in the air and almost pee, or in some cases actually pee themselves. Once you do that to somebody a couple of times, it's really fun and addictive.

I don't know if it's a power thing, I don't know if it's a control thing. It's about me making you react in a way that I want you to react. That in and of itself is addicting.

Kenneth's description reveals the power dynamics and visceral feedback loop embedded in scare acting. The performer creates a specific emotional experience, and the audience responds immediately. This form of live performance requires a type of emotional labor that aligns with emotional regulation theory, particularly as framed by Anne Reysers and Jonathan Matusitz in their analysis of Disney World employees. At Disney, performers often rely on "surface acting," outwardly displaying emotions they may not genuinely feel, in order to meet customer service expectations, "achieved by meticulously presenting verbal and nonverbal cues—like proper facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice."⁴⁹ In haunted attractions, scare actors frequently engage in what might be closer to "deep acting," which "is an emotional state in which employees do feel the emotions that they are required to express."⁵⁰ They embody exaggerated fear or aggression not just for appearance, but to *truly* provoke real-time emotional responses from guests. This intense connection between actor and audience can be both physically exhausting and emotionally exhilarating.

While Disney's model of emotional regulation is polished and controlled, haunted attractions often operate in liminal, chaotic spaces, where emotional expression is less restrained and more performative in unpredictable ways. As Kenneth explains, the emotional payoff of scaring someone is deeply fulfilling, blurring the lines between control, performance, and personal gratification. It is this combination of performance and response (of feeling something *real* in the moment) that makes scare acting emotionally complex and addictive. Robert, a haunt operator, illustrated how this environment can transform people. He often invites skeptics to join the haunt experience firsthand. One such skeptic was his own mother, who initially dismissed the whole thing as ridiculous. But after some training and a night on the floor, she quickly became

hooked, and stayed the entire season. “I was like, ‘Mom, can you please leave my team? I’m not interested in keeping you on my staff,’” Robert joked. Her transformation reached a peak when she was named “Actor of the Night,” a title Robert awarded her somewhat reluctantly, jokingly worried it might boost her ego. This anecdote highlights how haunted attractions function as liminal spaces where both guests and actors undergo emotional shifts. For Robert’s mother, scare acting allowed her to break away from her everyday identity and immerse herself in an emotionally charged role. That intensity, along with the immediate feedback from frightened guests, can make scare acting fun and fulfilling. In this context, emotional regulation is not just about managing performance, it becomes a gateway to personal transformation and a thrilling escape from the ordinary.

Embracing Monstrosity: The Transformative Power of Horror Performances

Haunted attractions, often dismissed as mere entertainment venues, provide a space for exploring the complex intersections of labor, identity, and performance. Within these darkened environments, scare actors engage in a form of work that demands not only physical stamina but emotional resilience and psychological agility. None of the scare actors interviewed were interested in working in haunted attractions solely because of the pay; instead, the job provides joy, reaffirms their identities, and offers access to like-minded communities. What sustains individuals’ interest and motivation in working within these environments is the ways in which identity becomes central to their work. The passion for scaring and the desire for a like-minded community often outweighs the deterrent effects of the demanding labor environments. Scare actors willingly embrace monstrosity, unraveling the joy and empowerment discovered within haunted attractions. These monstrous mobilizations dissect the transformative power that monstrosity holds for individuals actively choosing to engage in this form of performance art.

Understanding why audiences flock to haunted attractions or, even more, why people would work for them can confound some individuals. Workers in these environments are often unfairly characterized as abnormal or sadistic, simply because they find joy in scaring audiences. These perspectives are underpinned by the fact that haunted attractions serve as effective areas where marginal identities discover and wield personal power. In these horror-driven environments, scare actors bring monstrous characters to life, choosing to embrace monstrosity willingly or willfully. “Willful monstrosity,” as Natalie Wilson theorizes, engages disruptive figures who resist traditional norms and systems.⁵¹ Scare actors are not simply playing roles. Instead, they reshape their own narratives in the process, discovering empowerment and agency through their interactions with audiences. In this way, monstrosity is not merely an academic exercise; it holds the potential to be a powerful tool of resistance, offering modes of empowerment to marginalized communities.

One way to make sense of scare actors’ willingness to take part in haunted attractions is because these spaces become realms of play and improvisation, where scare actors engage in a transformative act of make-believe. As Alana, a scare actor, articulates, haunts are “playgrounds for actors, [... and] playground[s] for the people coming through,” providing spaces to face one’s most irrational fears. “There’s power in facing fear. Even if you’re scared while you’re doing it, it’s empowering,” she argues, contending that the experience can equip one with skills one can take “into other places in your life.” Paralleling the sense of play and immersion in haunted attractions, Alana reflects on her haunting experiences, describing it as a task that “delights me so much [...] it feeds my inner child [...] it’s very pure – that’s one of the ways I would describe working at the haunted house.” Play, although attributed mostly to children, is often taken up in adult work, even outside of haunted attractions. Schechner explains that adults also play in

careers and jobs, such as, “Researchers in science and industry, and even some business people are able to integrate play into their work” and participate in a state of “flow.”⁵² Play is a central way of conceptualizing the immersion and improvisation within scare acting. Alana’s narrative encapsulates the spirit of haunting as a collective act of play and pretend, where individuals, regardless of age, embrace the fantastical world of monsters and imagination.

Part of the joy of working in haunted attractions is becoming fully immersed in the fantastical realms of make-believe, which entails physically transforming into monsters. In the performance of monstrosity, individuals become something distinct from their everyday selves, actively challenging their routine appearances. As Holly expressed during her interview, she is petite and short, saying that on a good day, she may “round up to 4’11”.” Having a “diminutive stature” poses challenges, as she feels that she is not usually a threatening or imposing figure. Nevertheless, there is power in monster-making—the act of “getting into costume and changing my voice and acting.” These physical changes, from wearing stilts (which allow Holly to grow) to taking on monstrous costuming that alters performance, shift unbelievable physical transformations into something believable and possible.

Beyond the physical transformation, Alana explains that embracing these changes necessitates mental flexibility—a willingness to be open to the unconventional. Alana argues that one of the key differences between haunt workers and others is that they are “just comfortable being weird.” Alana acknowledges that although anyone has the potential for such monstrous transformations, those in specific demographics may be more compatible with working in haunted attractions. For example, she states that the commitment to late-night hours may pose a

challenge for those with family responsibilities. Working in haunted attractions is a challenging but rewarding endeavor that appeals to younger individuals with a passion for the unconventional rather than those seeking monetary gain.

The challenges of performing in haunted attractions are shaped by the spatial affordances of proximity to visitors and the constant changing and morphing of characters to adapt to audience reactions and their ever-shifting thresholds of fear. The proximity to visitors fosters effective scares due to the closeness but also poses risks of rule-breaking and inappropriate touching—a phenomenon unfortunately experienced by many actors. Performance in these spaces changes constantly, in contrast to traditional stage performances with clear distinctions between audience and performers, typically marked by a stage or audience seating.

Ryan's insights on the intricacies of scare actor performances are predicated on minimizing predictability. He mentions that the human element of haunted attractions is both the most crucial and the most difficult part of landing a scare. In a large-scale haunted attraction like the one Ryan works in, they could easily add an animatronic instead of a person in that slot, "if that's the desired effect, but it's not. It needs to have the human intensity, the human element." Incorporating physicality, body movement, facial expressions, props, and timing underscores the complexity of haunted attraction performances. Ryan encourages scare actors to experiment with varying elements of physicality, vocal intensity, and pacing to maintain unpredictability. This can range from "quiet, loud, big, small, slow, fast, jittery, smooth." Switching between these delivery styles eliminates predictability. When the audience can "predict exactly what you're going to do, that's less scary [...] Sometimes you can work with predictability to build anticipation." However, he continues, "most times it's the death of horror if [the audience] know[s] exactly

what you're going to do." To support the unpredictable elements of performance, developing specific and thematic dialogue based on the setting can create evocative and immersive stories for audiences.

Performing monstrosities in haunted attractions differs from traditional modes of theater, particularly in the contrast between scare actors' real-life personas and the characters they embody. From Alana's perspective, there are creative and cathartic aspects to portraying characters that starkly contrast with how she envisions herself outside of the haunt. She actively engages in acts of kindness in her daily life, such as volunteering at a retirement community, painting elderly individuals' nails, and giving foot massages. She is also involved in advocacy work for people who are unhoused. In contrast to this real-life work, her haunted attraction role involves portraying Helena, a goddess of the underworld "who is in contempt of all living things and will pull the gods from their golden thrones and bathe in their blood." Her embrace of this duality offers both cathartic and creative liberation. By taking on a persona that is the opposite of her own identity, Alana can safely and imaginatively explore the differences between the character and herself. Scare acting provides an intricate balance of improvisation, physicality, and emotional intensity that distinguishes haunted attractions as a dynamic and complex form of labor, performance art, and horror entertainment.

Transforming Trauma into Empowerment and Resilience

Monstrosity serves as a powerful conduit for empowerment, channeling themes of identity, community, and belonging. Within haunted attractions, traditional societal boundaries blur, creating a sanctuary where identities often marginalized or labeled as "monstrous"—including those within the LGBTQ+, ethnically diverse, neurodivergent, and disabled communities—are accepted. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's monster theory proposes seven theses that

articulate how society's values and views shift over time, thus constructing the figure of the monster. In these narratives, the figure of the monster often serves either to reinforce dominant societal fears and anxieties toward marginalized populations (in terms of gender, sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, religion, and so on) or to challenge those prejudicial fears.⁵³ Like horror films, haunted attractions provide more than just a space for thrill, enabling personal growth and transformation. Michael Chemers and Analola Santana further expand monster theorization with five additional theses, with the fifth contending that the monster makes possible a better world: "In the end, monsters enable us to imagine, and perform, a good future to which we might all belong."⁵⁴ Monstrosity, then, provides a useful formulation of how we might see the past, present, and future transformations of communities centered on difference and belonging.

Some of the top haunted attractions in the industry have found ways to hire and retain their scare actors, creating a corporate culture where individuals want to scare for a living. The HAA seminar "60 Ways to Hire and Maintain Staff" was led by the *Netherworld Haunted House* team Ben Armstrong, Alex Burgraff, and Island Chance. The *Netherworld* attraction has been open for twenty-five years and has successfully maintained and hired staff, developing a robust corporate culture. They advised that businesses should have a strong reputation, so workers reach out and want to work for the haunt directly: "They want to work and scare people and be creative, and one of the core things is to find a sense of community and find people like them. Build that sense of community, and one of the main goals is to be more like a family."⁵⁵

Every aspect of the hiring and staffing experience stems from the idea of building a community. The key to building a community is to make sure employees feel included and welcome. They provide connection and outside entertainment such as group outings to arcades, theaters, etc., welcoming all individuals to the haunt. The haunted attractions are meant to care

about all people. Haunts become a home for people who are monsters in our society. Scholarly literature documents marginalized identities as represented in the monster. Bernadette Calafell contends, “cultural anxieties and fears around Otherness, whether they are about race, class, gender, sexuality, body size, or ability, manifest themselves in literal and symbolic monstrosity representations.”⁵⁶ Haunted attractions hire based on various abilities and disabilities. Often, amputees are employed and are given custom costuming to fit their bodies, and even those with autism are employed for certain scenes in the haunts. Haunts live in this liminal space of both reifying the monstrosity of those who do not fit the dominant norm and giving individuals a sense of community, subverting the monster as Other in narratives.

Monsters are figures of empowerment. The monsters become conduits for society to process the horror of the everyday. Mark said he loves monsters and there is an importance in studying monsters as they help the audience process the real-life horrors in society. Mark said:

There’s a huge value in monsters and telling the story of a monster to get you to know something, learn something, or think a certain way, which has value [...] We’re not supposed to know as much as we do. I should not know about people starving in China because I live in Texas. What am I going to do about that? There’s nothing that I can do about it, and you get all this information that is negative, and that is bad. There is a dude in Ohio who has chopped up twelve women and ate them. Well, that sucks [...] And there’s nothing that I can do about it [...] We need to know about the things right around us and anything bad that happens out there is monsters [...] let it be monsters, because when it shows up in front of you, I’d much rather it be a werewolf or a dragon or goblin, not a serial killer or inbred cannibal.

The emphasis and repetition of Mark saying “there’s nothing I can do about it” illustrates how powerless people feel in their day-to-day lives, particularly with the sheer amount of information, stories, and news people which are all inundated with the use of technology.

However, in a haunted attraction, scare actors do have power. They are able to embody the monster or show you directly who audiences should fear. This allows both the actor and the customer to express their everyday fears and anxieties in the haunted attraction experience. The

monster can represent problematic individuals in society, such as those who are power-hungry or harmful. However, its appeal lies in its ambiguity, which allows audiences to project their own fears, anxieties, and worries onto the creature. Robert shares similar sentiments about the kind of power and empowerment that shifts between the scare actors and the audience, saying, “There’s that power dynamic, certainly from the monster or the scarer and the customer.” These elements of power negotiated in haunted attraction spaces between monsters, scare actors, and customers expose the complexity of relations and emotions permeating the space.

Scare actors often feel different, weird, marginalized, or even monstrous from a societal perspective. Therefore, haunted attractions become community centers that support differences, especially areas that adhere to more conservative values and uphold traditional expectations of social norms. Particularly noting the ostracization from society at large, Ryan states:

There are so many people who have shown up here who have been ostracized in their personal lives outside of the haunt. Whether it’s because maybe, like, they disagree with their family on religious values [...] or maybe they’re bullied and so they’ve been like pushed down, shut off, separated [...] for a lot of them, this is one of the first times they have ever found people similar to them, or at the very least people willing to welcome them, willing to bond with them, treat them like a valuable equal and like a person.

Religion is a significant part of identity in areas with large populations of members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). For Holly, being raised in the Church made her feel that much of the missionary work involved posturing—“outwardly showing this godliness, this holiness [...] you have to present yourself to be this happy little perfect cookie-cutter thing of a person that I just didn’t know how to be, but was desperately trying to be.” As a young woman in the Church, she did not identify with many aspects of traditional religious womanhood, such as having children, cooking, or sewing. Much of growing up in the Church as a woman made her feel isolated from both her body and her community. Raised in a culture that emphasizes proselytization and prescriptive visions of womanhood, Holly experienced a dissonance between

her internal self and the external roles expected of her. For most of her life, she felt she was hiding—suppressing her identity, her views, and her beliefs for the sake of others. She feared rejection by the community she knew and was accustomed to. Now that she has embraced a new community—one that more closely aligns with her values—she willingly hides in plain sight. Holly remarks, “I guess that’s part of what haunting is for me—hiding in plain sight. Nobody knows who I am. But I just embrace this part of me.” This role reversal—from hiding out of fear to hiding in order to fear—has offered her a community through which to explore horror narratives and immersive stories, both familiar and unfamiliar to her personal experience.

Ethical casting is significant in the haunted attraction industry, particularly for transgender and non-binary actors, as it encompasses the mental health implications of casting decisions and emphasizes the need for a compassionate and individualized approach. As Ryan explains, some specific roles or scenes can profoundly affect actors, especially when they resonate with their personal experiences or identities. “As a casting director, I’m perfectly fine putting someone male-to-female into more female-facing roles, but it’s something I need to be aware of for their mental health.” As a casting director, Ryan notes that he must be mindful of assigning actors to more male- or female-presenting roles based on their gender identity. Transgender actors, especially those in the early stages of transition, need their identities to be respected and supported through roles and environments that affirm rather than challenge their gender representation. This reflects Ryan’s commitment to considering the mental health implications of casting decisions, ensuring that actors are respected and supported in identities they feel comfortable embodying.

Individual life traumas, stories, and identities are carefully considered when casting scare actors into roles. The haunted attraction environment requires considerations that go beyond performance ability. Health and safety concerns, such as epilepsy or allergies to materials like silicone or latex, must be addressed. Additionally, certain themes in the haunt may trigger personal trauma. For example, it would be inappropriate to cast someone who has experienced a miscarriage in the role of a grieving mother who killed her child while possessed. The unpredictable element of haunted attractions arises from their participatory nature—audiences engage in an environment meant to evoke discomfort or fear. Ryan states, “A lot of people view it as a power dynamic where the person scaring is in more control, has more power, and if it starts encroaching on people’s ego, then they feel the need to lash out by [...] heckling a trans individual about their gender. Then we’ve had it before where that’s ruined an actress’s night.” This sensitivity highlights the importance of protecting performers from harmful public reactions, especially those targeting gender, which can profoundly affect a performer’s experience. Behind the scenes, inclusivity is a priority, with individuals of all abilities and disabilities contributing to the attraction. This inclusivity enables the narratives to shift and evolve based on audience interaction, allowing for more personalized and subversive scares.

Hecklers are just the beginning of the challenging reality faced by scare actors. Alana articulates how hecklers, particularly those she refers to as “dude bros,” seek to assert their bravery, undermining the actors’ efforts and occasionally resorting to outright hostility or sexual harassment when their ego is bruised. Alana has observed a troubling rise in antagonistic heckling, distinguishing between benign teasing and the more harmful, demeaning interactions that seem intended to belittle the performers. She says these men tend to “want to show off to their friends that they’re brave and haunted houses aren’t scary. They’re the ones who, when you

do scare them, swear at you and get genuinely angry because no, this was their opportunity to like stroke their ego, and you've personally insulted their man[hood]." This behavior not only disrupts the intended immersive experience but also demeans the artistry and hard work behind the haunt. The essence of haunted attractions, as Alana sees it, lies in the mutual connection and interactions between scare actors and guests—a fleeting yet profound exchange that could significantly enhance the experience for both if approached with openness rather than hostile confrontation. Alana states, "People would be surprised at how amazing their experience could be if they were receptive to that rather than seeing us as some sort of challenge or an obstacle to overcome." A notable portion of visitors appear driven not by a desire to engage with the performance art but by a compulsion to diminish it.

There are rules in place to mitigate harmful interactions, with many haunts operating under the maxim, "Don't touch the actors, and the actors won't touch you." Breaking this rule impacts the experience for many. Holly shares a harrowing experience of sexual assault by a guest that led her to file a police report. The incident is not an isolated event: Holly recounts other moments of physical violence, including being punched, and refers to the lingering psychological impact of such encounters. She notes that many visitors, especially those under the influence, fail to recognize the humanity behind the costumes. Holly says that the joy of haunting "was almost ruined for me. But I decided that night I was like, 'No. I'm taking all of my power back [...] and I'm going to keep scaring the pants off people, because that is what I love, and you can't take that away from me.'"

Holly remembers the monster she portrayed the night she was sexually assaulted; the character's name was Cert, "a fire demon from [...] Viking lore [...] it's a silicone mask with these beady black eyes and rows of sharp teeth. He's got black horns that are asymmetrical [...]"



Figure 29. Close-up of the Cert monster mask. Photo provided by Holly.



Figure 30. Holly wearing the Cert monster costume. Photo provided by Holly.

and gray-brown skin, almost like charred wood” (see fig. 25). Holly is completely absorbed in her role, startling guests with tales of fire, brimstone, and mythical dangers, immersing audiences in her world until a significantly larger man invades her space. The incident was shocking, breaching the code of conduct of the haunt establishment (see fig. 26). Fortunately, the management’s actions during this altercation were swift. With surveillance cameras, security, and zone leaders checking on the actors, within minutes of the attack, the owner was by Holly’s side and supported her decision to press charges immediately. This incident prompted Holly to take an active stance against such predatory behavior: particularly because haunts hire teenagers as young as 16 years old, she saw this as an opportunity to safeguard others from potential harm.

Holly’s experience underlines a crucial message about the irrelevance of appearance in sexual assault cases and how the action is ultimately about power. She poignantly shares that even disguised in a monstrous silicone mask with beady black eyes and rows of sharp teeth, “I

am still a human woman with emotional and psychological needs,” deserving of safety simply for existing. Neither Holly’s attire nor the role she is playing diminishes her humanity or her right to be protected. This sentiment serves as a stark reminder that victims of sexual assault are often judged based on their clothing, as seen in exhibitions like *What Were You Wearing?*, which display garments ranging from pajama pants to pretty blouses—none of which imply an invitation for assault. From Holly’s perspective, “I was a horrific monstrosity [...] Imagine [my] mask up in that [exhibit] display just by people’s pajama pants and T-shirts [...] You can’t argue that. ‘Oh, it’s what you were wearing.’ It’s just not. That’s not real. That’s not how this works.” Holly’s grotesque mask and costume underscore the absurdity of victim-blaming based on appearance. With the support of fellow haunted attraction workers and a validating work environment, she felt empowered to pursue the most severe consequences against her perpetrator.

In embracing her inner monster, Holly found a way not only to confront her assailant but also to reclaim her power and autonomy. She turned the tables on him, imposing financial, emotional, and psychological consequences for his actions—forcing him to confront the gravity of his offense through therapy, education on cognitive distortions, and the legal fees incurred as a result of his behavior. She reflected on what she learned about herself in that defining experience:

I decided in that moment, [...] I am going to use all of my power [...] as a woman, as a monster, as an employee of this place, that like trusts me implicitly, and I trust them. [...] I think a lot of what I am trying to say is indicative of me being more [...] honest with myself and with others. I found my tribe in this haunted house environment, full of my coworkers who love black cats. They love cryptids. They love mothman. They love, like *Dungeons and Dragons* and horror movies and monsters, and like all of this other stuff that I enjoy and like, I trust these people. I trust this environment, and the trust is a lot of what led me to take the actions I did. [...] This was my space. It was entrusted to me and I owned it. So, when something happened to me in my space, I was like, “You’re not getting away with that.” And if that ever happens again, I promised myself that not only would I press charges again, but I would fight back tooth and nail. I mean punching, kicking. I’m like, “I am short enough to headbutt somebody in the balls, if I need to.”

Holly's resolve was fortified by the supportive environment of the haunted attraction where she worked, a place that had become her safe haven and a community that shared her passions for the eerie and the fantastical. These seemingly surface-level interests morphed into communities of mutual trust, empowering her to take decisive action. Through her experience, she demonstrates how the seemingly playful world of horror and terror can be an arena for profound personal transformation. Haunted attractions, once considered purely sites of fear and thrill, emerge as spaces of resistance where marginalized identities, such as Holly's, can confront their past traumas and redefine their futures. In reclaiming her power, Holly stood up for herself and reinforced the strength of the community that had embraced her, deciding to ensure her assailant faced tangible consequences. Her transformation from victim to victor is a testament to the resilience and agency fostered in environments where trust, creativity, and a shared passion for the macabre intertwine. Holly's determination to protect her space and to fight back if ever threatened again signifies a profound shift from victim to victor. In these shadowed corridors, monstrous mobilizations become a form of empowerment, where actors and audiences alike confront and embrace the darker sides of themselves, finding strength in the process.

Transforming Otherness into Belonging and Community

Haunted attractions are more than just spaces for thrill and fear—they serve as vibrant subcultures that foster a sense of community among diverse individuals who find connection through shared experiences and performances. These environments, where horror meets creativity, challenge societal norms by transforming perceptions of the workers and performers, who are often viewed with suspicion or disdain. However, behind the scenes, these attractions offer refuge for those who feel marginalized by mainstream society, providing a space of belonging for individuals who identify outside conventional social structures. Through the lens

of *monstrous communitas*, a concept derived from Victor Turner's theory of *communitas*, we can understand how these haunts function as liminal spaces where traditional social roles are suspended, and temporary, egalitarian communities are forged. In these environments, performers and audiences share in an experience that transcends conventional boundaries, creating a sense of collective empowerment and transformation.

As Robert S. Bristow notes, fear both attracts and repels,⁵⁷ raising questions about what horror draws us to and what it pushes away. Entering these environments, audiences step into a horror-filled world designed to provoke visceral emotional responses and spark collective transformation. In these liminal spaces, the boundaries between strangers fade away, as their shared experiences—what Victor Turner refers to as *communitas*—foster emotional connections through screams and laughter, uniting participants in their encounters with horror.⁵⁸ For example, in *The 13th Floor* haunt, the anatomical heart prop serves multiple functions: it acts as a narrative device, a monstrous object, and a token marking the transition into the liminal space. More importantly, it serves as a shared totem that helps forge *communitas* among participants, illustrating that we are navigating this experience together. Understanding the intersection of liminality and *communitas* is crucial for grasping how haunted attractions function as cultural spaces for audiences and scare actors alike. By examining the intersection of performance, identity, and community within these spaces, we can better understand how haunted attractions redefine notions of community, representation, and empowerment, while offering a critique of societal expectations.

The transformational function of haunted attractions hinges upon the communities that comprise the spaces. Betty Aquino's research on agritainment (agricultural entertainment) and rural haunted attractions substantiates the role of these environments in shaping community

identity. Aquino argues that haunted attractions serve as “folk dramas” that reflect rituals of power, where both the performers and audience members engage with the darkness, ultimately learning to tame their own fears. For Aquino, haunts are rooted in rituals of power, defined as “the way groups are supposed to behave within a culture, the initiation of the actors, of the audience into this dark drama provides them with an opportunity to join in the darkness, and by playing with that darkness, they learn how to approach and tame their own darkness.”⁵⁹ In this way, haunted attractions provide opportunities for empowerment through performance, while also functioning as a space for navigating societal anxieties. Similarly, Hoedt’s observations reveal how the haunt industry thrives not only on a shared passion for horror but on a sense of community, saying, “professionals to come together to share and to validate this love, and the effort that goes into these Halloween creations.”⁶⁰ The love for horror entertainment and Halloween bleeds into the interactions and performances producing the scare. Robert similarly speaks to the power dynamics at play in these spaces, noting the complex relationship between performers and audiences: “There’s that power dynamic, certainly from the monster or the scarer and the customer.” The power dynamics between the monster and the audience is an interrelationship of maintaining a sense of control in a simulated uncontrolled space. Amid negotiating these shifting power dynamics, it offers power to marginalized individuals—those who may feel monstrous in society—to find empowerment and community through their performances.

Bridging affinities for horror and embracing monstrosity serve as cornerstones of identity. This connection becomes especially powerful in the context of extreme stress or fear, as these experiences foster connections between individuals. Haunted attractions become homes and community centers for people who are monstrous to society. In response to the query why those

marginalized in society due to their identity (race, disability, gender, sexuality, etc.)—who may already feel monstrous to society—would want to play monsters in haunted attractions, Robert replied:

I think about it every day, I think the easiest way for me to define this is identity. We all identify on some continual path, whether it's gender, if it's race, if it's class, if it's ethnicity [...] whatever it is, we identify on that level. I think the same can be said for our dark alter egos [...] I don't care who you are, you have a dark side [...] I really do think that the more we lean-in to figuring out ourselves, the better we are as humans [...] I think that by allowing people to be in a space where they can either A) experience [fear] or B) be the person who's giving that [as] the monster, I think that's the value [...] From a fear perspective, we're all afraid of something and we can be stronger and we can be more resilient if we lean-in and we face that.

Robert highlights that one's various identities influence how one sees oneself and interacts with the world. In inversive environments such as haunted attractions, people on the margins of society can find spaces to express themselves and confront their vulnerabilities. Fear, in this context, becomes a revealing force, exposing parts of the self that often remain hidden in daily life. However, not everyone enters into this exchange openly. Some participants (particularly those who align with dominant social positions, such as heterosexual white men) may respond with hostility or mock bravado. These “dude bro” figures, rather than confronting fear or vulnerability, often reject it altogether, treating the haunt as a space to reassert control rather than relinquish it. This contrast only underscores the haunt's broader role as a refuge for those who are otherwise marginalized—those for whom playing the monster offers a means of empowerment rather than a threat to their status. Continually navigating our internal “monsters” mobilizes a sense of freedom and agency that is not normally accessible. These differences in identity, between those who embrace the haunt and those who resist its destabilizing potential, reveal the haunt as a potent site of social and emotional reckoning. From this perspective,

haunted attractions enable both the participant and the scare actor to explore elements of their identity, embracing fear rather than hiding from it. Haunts become valuable sources of fear production *and* community-making, though not equally or comfortably for everyone.

Communities in haunted attractions are forged through shared, high-energy experiences that connect both audience members and scare actors. Fear, humor, and the complexity of the scare serve as emotional connectors in these spaces, as they are emotions generated through intense engagements with others. For audience members, the release of pent-up stress through fear and laughter creates a sense of camaraderie, deepening the impact of the horror experience. The same is the case for the scare actors behind the scenes. As one actor, Kenneth, notes, working at a haunt feels like “going to war,” with team members bonding over “war stories” and shared challenges. This communal element reinforces the idea that horror, while evoking fear, also creates lasting emotional connections. Haunted attractions offer a space for participants to engage with fear, humor, and catharsis in a controlled environment. The emotional shifts between fear and laughter, alongside the real-time interactions between actors and visitors, strengthen these connections. As Kenneth explains, “I tell them I’m training soldiers because I see every night of operation as a battle,” illustrating how the intense emotional labor of the night leads to strong bonds and a sense of achievement. In these spaces, the emotional rollercoaster of fear and humor becomes a foundation for deepening relationships, making haunted attractions both a site of horror and a sanctuary for shared emotional experiences impacting the camaraderie and sense of community.

As discussed earlier, monsters serve as conduits for empowerment, allowing both the audience and performers to process societal fears and anxieties. Scare actors in haunted attractions embody monsters, channeling the fears and anxieties that society often cannot

process. The monster, with its ambiguity, allows audiences to project their own societal fears, such as power-hungry individuals or those who inflict harm, onto the character. While it may seem perplexing why people willingly choose to scare others, particularly those who feel powerless in their own lives, haunted attractions offer a space for empowerment. Mark recalls his experience as a young child, saying, “I, a 10-year-old kid, made adults fall down, scream and run. That’s personal power [...] That’s giving me energy.” For marginalized identities, particularly those who typically lack societal power, this experience of gaining control through performance is liberating. As Mark notes, haunted attractions provide a space where individuals, especially those who may feel powerless in other areas of life, can reclaim agency and feel empowered through the act of scaring others.

The identities of scare actors play a significant role in shaping the community dynamics behind the scenes of haunted attractions. Kenneth points out that many of the actors are considered “outsiders” and may have experienced struggles in their personal lives, including issues with school or family. He shares, “We hire as young as 16-years-old. We have people that have trouble in school, people that have family issues, and the biggest thing that I try to do is give the cast a place to go where they feel safe [...] That’s kind of the most rewarding thing for me, is just being able to help people, that in a lot of cases, need some love and attention.” Haunted attractions provide a place for marginalized identities to feel a sense of belonging, which is integral to their sense of empowerment. Kenneth explains the attraction of these spaces for those who might not fit into mainstream society: “A lot of those people back in [the day], run off and join the circus or run off and join the carnival [...] The difference with us is we don’t travel, and you don’t have to run off anywhere. You can still stay home and do the job.” Haunts act as homes for people to express their differences and find safety and community. These spaces

become particularly vital for those who might not feel accepted elsewhere. As William points out, the diversity within haunted attraction communities is remarkable: “I would say at least one-third of our actors are either gay or trans. That’s a much higher ratio than society at large. I think it’s because this is a no-judgment zone where people can be who they want to be [...] We try to make it a very inclusive, welcoming space, and the kids appreciate that.” Haunted attractions, with their emphasis on inclusivity, offer a space where marginalized individuals—whether based on sexuality, race, neurodivergence, or other identities—can find acceptance. In areas with more conservative political climates, these spaces become vital havens for those labeled as “outsiders.” Kenneth reflects on this, emphasizing the importance of providing a sense of belonging: “It’s the fact that they’re looking for some kind of a home, someplace to belong, someplace where they can feel weird and different like everybody else around.” Haunted attractions function as community centers where people who feel “different” can connect, especially in places that uphold traditional societal expectations. In this way, the culture of horror, historically associated with the marginalization of groups, becomes a source of empowerment, allowing individuals to embrace their uniqueness and find solidarity in a shared experience.

While horror is often seen as exploitative, haunted attractions reveal the genre’s potential for empathy and community-building. These spaces transform traditional horror tropes into tools for understanding and connection, especially for marginalized individuals. Through immersive environments and embodied performances, haunted attractions challenge the idea that horror is solely about shock or fear. Instead, they provide safe spaces for exploring identity, processing trauma, and forming meaningful relationships. Haunted attractions become complex sites where performance, cultural critique, and social transformation intersect. By embodying monstrous characters and creating liminal spaces, they challenge societal norms and offer empowerment to

marginalized individuals. The ethical dimensions of haunted attractions are evident in their approach to representation. By subverting traditional horror tropes, they show how monsters disrupt societal expectations and offer new ways to understand identity.

Monsters have long symbolized non-normativity, reflecting cultural anxieties about difference.⁶¹ As Halberstam notes, “Monsters are meaning machines. They can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body.”⁶² This aligns with the scholarly view of horror, where the monster embodies queerness, identity, and the abject, resisting classification.⁶³ Haunted attractions reflect and contribute to these cultural narratives by inviting marginalized individuals to embody monstrosity themselves. These attractions provide a liminal space where those often excluded from mainstream culture can embrace their “monstrous” identities. For individuals who are amputees, autistic, or feel like outsiders, working in haunted attractions offers a sense of belonging and empowerment. A traveling scare actor, who teaches scare acting and works at top haunts across the United States, likens haunted attractions to the “Land of Misfit Toys,” where diverse individuals can find acceptance. Kendra explains:

Haunts are like the land of misfit toys [...] We’re all kind of like marginalized, or there’s something about us that doesn’t quite mesh with the normal part of society. We often are like this unique, safe haven [...] We became like their safe haven [...] a place where they could finally find themselves.

Diverse representation in haunted attractions mirrors broader shifts in the horror genre, which is beginning to center on marginalized stories. For example, women in horror were once typically portrayed as victims, but many haunted attractions now flip this trope by casting women in antagonistic roles as predators rather than prey. In doing so, haunted attractions transform monstrosity into empowerment, enabling marginalized individuals to reclaim power and challenge traditional narratives of fear.

The evolution of the haunted attraction industry reflects an increasing awareness of ethical concerns, particularly in how marginalized groups are represented. The case of *Pennhurst Asylum*, a former psychiatric institution now operating as a haunted attraction, exemplifies the tension between entertainment and the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes, especially regarding mental health. The attraction's portrayal of its setting has sparked significant criticism from disability advocates.⁶⁴ *Pennhurst Asylum* exposes the complex relationship between traditional haunted houses and modern attractions, becoming a contested site that both houses supernatural entities and performs troubling depictions of individuals with disabilities. Sarah Catherine Sutton critiques the attraction for perpetuating negative stereotypes and commodifying suffering. She argues, "Reducing historic artifacts to props is an unfortunate side-effect of the narrative, which is already damaging to people with disabilities."⁶⁵ Sutton points to headlines like "Thrills or Exploitation? Pennhurst Asylum Open for Haunting Season" and "Haunted House Has Painful Past as Asylum," emphasizing the community's recognition of the harm in the attraction's narrative.⁶⁶ The focus on fear and horror associated with mental illness reinforces societal stigmas, portraying people with disabilities as dangerous or frightening. Sutton contends that such representations reduce the complex lives of individuals with disabilities to mere horror tropes, deepening broader societal misunderstandings. By framing the history of Pennhurst State School through a lens of exploitation, the attraction risks dehumanizing people with disabilities and perpetuating stereotypes that hinder social progress and inclusion.

The controversy surrounding *Pennhurst* shows the growing pains of the haunted attraction industry as it shifts from exploitation to empathy. Many contemporary haunted attractions actively work to subvert harmful tropes, recognizing that effective horror stems not from marginalizing others, but from creating spaces where diverse experiences can be explored

and understood. This shift reflects a broader understanding that horror's true power lies in its ability to foster empathy through shared vulnerability and collective experience. While *Pennhurst Asylum* has faced social scrutiny for its problematic portrayals, many haunted attractions are now more mindful of how they include marginalized groups, especially since many of these groups are employed as actors. The role of performance in haunted attractions is central to the industry's success and plays a key role in empowering actors while challenging traditional narratives.

Ryan also discussed the complexity of casting, noting that it requires a nuanced understanding of each actor's background, limitations, and skill sets. "You're working with around seventy people, all of whom have different restrictions, talents, and needs," he says. This reinforces the need to tailor casting decisions to respect each actor's individuality while fostering a supportive environment. Although not all haunted attractions adopt this thoughtful approach, the haunt Ryan works for champions a compassionate casting process. He emphasizes the importance of being sensitive to real-life trauma, particularly when casting roles that may touch on sensitive topics like child death or personal loss.

Ryan also stresses the value of providing actors with support, especially those who may have experienced trauma. "Having a role model, a guide, and that kind of support is so validating and valuable for people," he says. This belief in fostering a nurturing environment is central to his approach, ensuring that actors feel empowered and safe as they embrace their roles. Ryan's approach reflects a growing trend in the industry toward more ethical, inclusive, and compassionate practices. By prioritizing actors' identities and mental well-being, haunted attractions can evolve from potentially harmful portrayals toward more thoughtful and respectful

representations. As Ryan puts it, “Everything can be perfectly in order and look great on paper [...] but you have to be aware of the human factor of it all.” This awareness marks a significant step toward a more ethical and inclusive future for the haunted attraction industry.

The behind-the-scenes community of haunted attractions exemplifies horror’s ability to transform otherness into belonging. Mainstream society frequently marginalizes horror fans and creators as outsiders. However, these subcultural spaces invert this narrative, fostering environments where, as Kenneth notes, being “weird and different” becomes a source of connection rather than isolation. This transformation of stigma into strength underscores horror’s often-overlooked potential to foster empathy and understanding. The liminal spaces of haunted attractions provide unparalleled opportunities for identity exploration and community-building. In these environments, performers often take on roles that allow them to express facets of their identity that may not be visible in their everyday lives. This shared experience of stepping into a different reality creates a sense of *communitas*—a deep connection among individuals who are experiencing a collective journey. Just as audiences confront their fears and engage with the unknown, performers also navigate their own personal transformations. This mutual process of growth strengthens bonds among both actors and audiences, highlighting the communal nature of haunted attractions. In this way, performers and audiences engage in a collective experience that deepens their understanding of fear, identity, and the darker aspects of human nature—showcasing the transformative power of horror.

Conclusion: Scare Actors at the Heart of Live-Mediated Horror Entertainment

Scare actors reshape haunted attractions from fear factories into immersive works of art. Their labor, both cathartic and empowering, establishes the horror genre through the subcultural spaces they inhabit, making them sites of cultural critique, identity formation, and community-

building. This chapter metaphorically operates as the heart, the symbolic beating pulse, of haunted attractions—the workers, laborers, and scare actors who bring haunted attractions to life. Through their labor and performance, they provide nuanced scares that are personalized to each of the audiences walking into the space. Haunted attractions, like the transformation of the anatomical heart within the zombified corpse at Denver’s *The 13th Floor*, exemplify how horror can evolve into a form of healing through collective experience. By strategically deploying fear, haunted attractions entertain and encourage reflection, pushing the boundaries of traditional horror while fostering meaningful connections among participants. Fusing live performance with traditional horror conventions creates opportunities for scares and genuine human connection. Scare actors, drawing from their own experiences of otherness, transform spaces typically associated with fear into sites of belonging and understanding. This transformation illustrates how haunted attractions—and, by extension, the horror genre itself—can simultaneously critique and heal social wounds by offering what might be called a hopeful monstrosity: a form of horror that frightens not to exploit but to foster empathy and positive change.

The growing popularity of immersive experiences signals more than just an entertainment shift; it represents a fundamental change in how we engage with horror as both a genre and a tool for social discourse. As Ndalianis argues, in immersive experiences, the audience becomes the protagonist: “In horror rides, the intermediary is no longer present; it’s we—the ride participants—who become the main character, entering ‘real’ spaces we can see, smell, touch, hear, and even taste. The sensory experience is intense and immediate, making the fear of death and bodily destruction feel more real.”⁶⁷ By removing the intermediary, these attractions blur the line between fantasy and reality, allowing participants to confront their deepest fears in a tangible way. In this way, haunted attractions are not only a form of entertainment but also a

potent space for personal transformation and social reflection. Scare actors offer further immersion into haunted attraction spaces, invoking affective intensities that transform each individual's experiences. In an increasingly overwhelming world, people seem more willing to invest in experiences that offer relief, through the experience of fear. In these spaces, audiences confront death's presence, paradoxically making them feel more alive.

Haunted attractions occupy a distinct intersection of entertainment, social critique, and community-building. Through thoughtful approaches to representation, performance, and engagement, these venues challenge societal norms while offering opportunities for personal and collective transformation. The industry's ongoing evolution toward more ethical and inclusive practices indicates its potential as a source of entertainment and as a catalyst for social awareness and change. At the same time, the industry is still fulfilling its core function of providing a space to experience and explore fear.

Genre represents a vital pillar for understanding the industry and its production, preceding and succeeding the work of producers. Haunts broaden the ways in which horror culture and production evolve. They immerse both audiences and employees in horror by incorporating direct and indirect references to classic tropes, or they may create something completely new. Horror offers opportunities to embrace monstrosity within haunted attractions, emerging as a profound assertion of identity and belonging through performance. Haunt workers illustrate that their identities can be shaped and constructed through monstrosity, making horror an identity. As my tour guide for *Halloween Horror Nights 33* in Orlando, Florida, put it, scare actors can become deeply invested in their roles and in their love for Halloween and horror. This passion often becomes an integral part of their personality and identity. As the tour guide mentioned, working as a tour guide is definitely not for the money, but is part of his passion for

this form of seasonal entertainment. Within haunted attractions, a paradox unfolds: by donning the mask of the monster, individuals find and express their truest selves. The conceptualization of belonging in haunted attraction environments does not irradicate deviant and harmful behaviors or negative impacts from this type of horror labor setting. Throughout truly horrific and traumatizing experiences, Holly has found the following:

Embracing my inner monstrosity, and leaving religion behind, and [through being honest] with myself [...] I have learned that monsters aren't real. Unless, of course, we're talking about human beings [...] In every case I can think of, a human being is behind the monstrosity that we, as a society experience, and that me, as a human has experienced.

By embracing their own monstrosity, these scare actors engage in a form of resistance, challenging the oppressive discourses of who the monsters are in society.

Reflecting on the implications of embracing monstrosity for promoting inclusivity and diversity in performance spaces, I concluded my interviews by asking scare actors, "What is one thing that you wish people knew about haunted attractions that they don't?" In almost every single interview, the scare actors emphasize that under all the masks, makeup, lighting, and technical effects, the scare actors are people too. Famous horror director Guillermo del Toro explains, "I knew that monsters were far more gentle and more desirable than the monsters living inside 'nice people.' And I think accepting that you are a monster gives you the leeway to not behave like one. When you deny being a monster, you behave like one."⁶⁸

It is nevertheless important to consider the ethics behind portraying monstrosity, as it can be a double-edged sword. On one side, it might increase feelings of empowerment, but on the other, it may further justify treating marginalized populations inhumanely. To ensure that embracing monstrosity does not perpetuate harmful stereotypes or further marginalize certain groups, we must shed light on how this industry operates and the daily practices of those involved. It is also important to remind audiences that this work is a creative pursuit, rooted in a

love and passion for horror and Halloween. Audiences are prone to forget that they are interacting with human beings in their place of work. Haunted attraction management and owners need to be mindful when it comes to supporting their employees, as these haunts do not all provide the same levels of support to their diverse workers. Haunts are spaces where differences can be accepted and celebrated. It's important to help haunt owners focus efforts on retention while also providing insight for communities who disregard the social importance of haunted attractions. Haunts can be homes to difference, welcoming all marginalized identities, and giving people places to feel safe. This dynamic not only challenges oppressive discourses permeating society but also fosters a supportive community where transformative experiences emerge for both performers and patrons. In doing so, it amplifies the unexpected power of monstrosity to unite, empower, and celebrate the myriad ways we are human.

Labor is culturally and economically contingent, shaped by the operations and standards of the haunt industry. Issues impacting gender dynamics, diversity, and inclusion are also critical to understanding the labor of scare actors, as well as the emotional and physical toll of their work. Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how performance labor transforms haunted attractions, reimagining the role of the performer and providing an inverting space to enact power for marginalized identities. The emotional labor scare actors engage in, both physical and psychological, creates an affective experience for the audience and empowers the actors themselves. By exploring how scare actors navigate the complexities of their labor, I underscore the hidden artistry and passion that drive the haunted attraction industry, revealing how these spaces foster personal and cultural growth. Haunted attractions function as laboratories for surface-level scares, experimental storytelling, and social commentary. Looking ahead, haunted attractions are poised to continue expanding the boundaries of immersive storytelling. As they

evolve, they present rich possibilities for future research in media studies, performance theory, and cultural criticism. Their skill in combining traditional horror elements with innovative storytelling methods, while also addressing modern social issues, demonstrates that they remain relevant in entertainment and cultural discussions. The power of haunted attractions lies not only in their ability to scare but also in their capacity to create meaningful experiences that resonate long after the final scream fades. The line between performance and reality blurs in these moments, allowing for deeper engagement with personal and societal fears. In the controlled chaos of haunted attractions, participants experience fear and opportunities for growth, connection, and understanding. As we continue to confront evolving social anxieties and cultural tensions, haunted attractions offer spaces for metabolizing these challenges. They remind us that horror, at its best, does more than scare: it illuminates, challenges, and ultimately transforms our understanding of ourselves and society. Ultimately, the most compelling aspect of haunted attractions is their ability to turn our deepest fears into catalysts for positive change, proving that even in the darkest spaces, we can find paths to understanding, empowerment, and community.

CONCLUSION – REDEFINING HAUNTED ATTRACTIONS:

In the Era of Live-Mediated Entertainment

The room was dark, save for the red laser light cutting through the fog and directly into our eyes. In haunted attractions, the lack of light is intentionally disorienting, creating a sense of anxiety and unease. As I moved with my friends, we huddled close, stumbling into walls, each other, and scare actors until we finally reached the end of the room. In those moments of navigating a pitch-black space with a blinding red light, there was an unexpected strength in our closeness. The air was thick with tension, and the palpable fear seemed to pulse through the room as if the space itself was responding to my every move. Suddenly, a figure lunged from the shadows, and instinctively, I jumped back, heart racing. The scare left an impression, along with the room's energy and the shared experience. We were not alone.

Behind me, I could hear the gasps, laughs, and screams of others—each one adding to the collective tension. We were all trapped in the same moment, suspended between fiction and reality. What struck me was not only the terror or the thrill of the experience but how the space allowed for a collective, embodied response. Our screams, our laughter, and our fear were all just as much a part of the experience as the actors and the technology. Haunted attractions are spaces where fear, fantasy, and the audience collide, creating a shared experience that transforms the participants, scare actors, and the environment. They do not merely offer the chance to experience horror; they provide a space to confront it, together. In the dark, with strangers, we find solidarity in our vulnerability, showing that even in an age dominated by technology and mediated experiences, the power of liveness—the immediate, visceral connection between people—can still create something profoundly human.

It is strange to think that something I once feared—something that once terrified me—has now become a place of joy, connection, and nostalgia. The first haunted attraction I ever attended (besides Disney’s *Haunted Mansion*) was in seventh grade: the KUBE 93FM *Haunted House*, now known as *The Georgetown Morgue* in Seattle, Washington. I remember closing my eyes the entire time, clinging to my friends for dear life, letting them guide me through the darkened corridors. Fast forward to today, and the tables have turned. Now, my friends and family are the ones gripping me as we navigate these terrifying spaces together.

My interest in haunts has never really been about the spaces themselves. Instead, it is the people that fascinate me: the audiences who walk through them, the staff and actors behind the scenes who orchestrate the scares, the brave and passionate souls who dare to start a haunted attraction in the first place. These are the people who appreciate all things dark, deadly, and macabre. Each visit to a haunted attraction feels like experiencing it for the first time again, raw, unfiltered, visceral. With each new trip, the memories multiply. Fickle as they may be, they remain vivid snapshots that shape who I am today. I hold these memories dearly: My tiny friend, barely 4’11”, in the midst of her terror standing on tiptoe to point an accusing finger at a clown’s face, shouting “I rebuke you!” The time I whispered to one of the chainsaw clowns at the end of a haunt to chase my terrified friend—and he sprinted all the way to the car, chainsaw buzzing in pursuit. The moment my mom and sister screamed, “Riana! Why did you make us come in here?!” while I giggled through the terror of Universal’s *The Walking Dead* pop-up, mistakenly thinking it was just another ride. Attending *Halloween Horror Nights (HHN)* with friends nervous about haunted attractions, where my confidence and encouragement gave them the strength to enter. The time we navigated a haunted corn maze while my friends sang the viral song “It’s Corn!”—only for a scare actor to pop out and complete the line, “It has the juice!” as

we erupted in laughter. Or when I was so eager to dive into a haunt that I walked in first and accidentally startled a young actor who didn't realize the show had started (do I get extra points for scaring a scare actor?). And, perhaps most meaningfully, the night I chose to walk through a haunt alone, buried under the weight of grad school stress. In those few minutes of fright, everything seemed worse—but somehow, everything felt better. These moments—these incredibly human moments—are etched into my memory. They bring smiles, laughter, and warmth, even amid all the darkness. And it is precisely this dynamic, the blending of terror with moments of joy, that makes haunted attractions so powerful. If this is what horror experiences are like, then I will always crave more.

In these accumulated moments, everything I had been studying and researching came into focus. The fear, the adrenaline, the sense of unity—they were never just about being scared. They were about being together, about participating in something that allowed us to confront the monstrous, both within and around us. The true horror of haunted attractions lies not in the attraction itself but in the human heart. Haunts are spaces where fear and fun converge, where technology and performance intertwine, and where we, as an audience, become part of the story. Each time I leave a haunted house, a strange sense of empowerment lingers—not just because I survived the experience, but because I shared it. David Skal explains that haunts, like Disney's *The Haunted Mansion*, became “metamorphosed into the Halloween machine itself—an eccentric, ever-evolving contraption, sometimes delightful, sometimes disturbing [...] but always a cause for celebration.”¹ Haunts, as expansions of the Halloween season and a part of horror entertainment, are meant to delight, disturb, and celebrate. Haunted attractions offer a chance to enter the unknown, not as individuals, but as a collective, moving through the same world, facing the same terror, and experiencing the same catharsis.

In a fractured world, it seems rare to feel something in unison. When I feel the world crystallizing into a hard, apathetic shell, I know it may be time for me to seek disorientation—whether through a haunting experience or unsettling media. Such moments reveal my orientation and offer an opportunity to reorient myself and reassess my values, beliefs, and expectations. As haunts manufacture disorientation, the audience turns toward or away from horrific objects, encouraging a constant moving, pushing, and shifting of alternative positions, advancing the possibility that “we might find joy and excitement in the horror.”² Provoking emotional and cognitive responses, haunted attractions offer liminal spaces where affective experiences and bodily disorientation offer transformative opportunities. There may be no easy answers, but sometimes, instead of searching for answers, it is enough to feel: the sensations, the emotions—to feel alive. We allow the good, the bad, and the ugly to surface, and in doing so, it is possible to reconnect with ourselves and with others. The sensations of fear, terror, and horror become guides because they illuminate the inevitability of our mortality, maybe so we truly live.

Revisiting Live-Mediated Horror Entertainment (LMHE)

In recounting these personal experiences, I am reminded of the powerful, visceral nature of haunted attractions, which provoke fear and moments of joy, camaraderie, and self-reflection. This intersection of emotional response, performance, and immersive storytelling in haunted attractions is central to my argument. In this dissertation, I argue that haunted attractions, as a form of live-mediated horror entertainment (LMHE), blend live performances with cutting-edge technologies to create immersive, multisensory experiences that actively engage audiences in controlled environments of fear and excitement. These attractions challenge societal norms by offering a space where participants confront taboo themes such as death, violence, and monstrosity in a safe, playful setting, facilitating catharsis and emotional release. They shape

contemporary horror culture by integrating interactive storytelling, spectacle, and transmedia narratives that extend beyond the physical attraction, influencing mainstream media and fan communities.

Haunted attractions push the boundaries of entertainment by transforming audience engagement with horror into an active, participatory experience where individuals navigate, interact with, and influence the interstitial narrative, emphasizing horror's corporeal demands. Furthermore, haunted attractions blur the boundaries between the live and the mediatized, reality and fiction, and audience and actor—placing scare actors at the center of this entangled dynamic. Their embodied performances generate the liveness of the space, while media technologies shape the atmosphere and amplify the emotional intensity. These elements work together to create immersive environments where it becomes difficult to distinguish between the real, the staged, the felt, and the perceived. Audience interaction is built on physical co-presence: participants are not just witnesses but active contributors to the unfolding horror. By requiring bodily movement, emotional vulnerability, and sensory engagement, haunted attractions center embodiment over observation, transforming fear into a shared, affective experience. Their hybridity—as both artistic expression and commercial product—positions them as a cultural form that redefines horror through participation, demanding new frameworks for understanding affect, liveness, and media convergence.

My dissertation illustrates that haunted attractions are not simply commercialized or static forms of horror, but rather dynamic, hybridized experiences that engage audiences in participatory, embodied, and paradoxical ways. The historical context from Chapter One emphasizes that haunted attractions emerge from a broader cultural, technological, and social evolution, challenging traditional notions of haunted spaces and marking their significance in the

cultural economy of fear. Historical, social, and cultural forces shape haunted attractions and the engagement they inspire. Understanding these attractions requires examining how audiences have navigated technology and emotion in other forms of entertainment, illustrating that haunted attractions do not stem from a fixed origin but evolve through social influences, discourse, and power. In Chapter Two, I build on this historical foundation, positioning haunted attractions within the context of the horror genre, emphasizing that haunted attractions must be viewed through the lens of the horror to be legible to contemporary audiences. These attractions are corporeally engaging and require active audience participation. By seeing haunts as an extension and evolution of horror, a genre that prioritizes the body and embodiment, audiences gain insight into horror's transformative and subversive potential through participatory practices.

Haunted attractions showcase the horror genre's ability to blend diverse stories and performances, creating transformative experiences for both scare actors and audiences. These attractions give marginalized identities a space to perform and engage in the spectacle. However, the labor involved complicates this transformation, as performers, often treated as monsters by the public, are, in fact, working by creating immersive worlds for others to experience. Chapter Three demonstrates how haunted attractions operate within a managed experience framework, balancing artistic subversion with the economic imperatives of profitability and safety, ensuring sustainability while maintaining their cultural relevance. Finally, Chapter Four discusses the implications of this situation, exploring the critical role of labor within haunted attractions, where scare actors and other performers co-create the horror experience, making live performance central to the participatory nature of these attractions. Haunted attractions must strike a balance between artistic creativity and economic motivations; focusing too heavily on one can undermine their impact. While these spaces can be transgressive, they are constrained by

business structures and industry operations. Despite the potential for real horrors, haunts can still offer moments of change, care, and compassion. Not all haunts are the same, and while the industry strives for legitimacy, this can sometimes come at the cost of humanity and subversive potential.

Together, these chapters demonstrate how haunted attractions, as forms of live-mediated horror entertainment (LMHE), push the boundaries of horror, performance, and audience interaction. By fusing liveness with media technologies, they offer a compelling model for rethinking entertainment—one that resists easy classification by audiences, industries, or scholars. The broader live-mediated entertainment (LME) framework expands how we understand immersive and affective media, but it is the horror component that brings these dynamics into stark relief. Horror is often trivialized—treated as sensational, juvenile, or culturally marginal—yet its extremity makes visible the emotional labor, social tensions, and structural conditions embedded in entertainment. Far from detracting from LME, horror heightens its stakes: it confronts audiences with fear, vulnerability, and bodily intensity, prompting reflection on power, participation, and performance. While LME can be applied across genres and settings, horror exposes its core operations. It reminds us that any site of entertainment—or labor—can become a space of horror. By illuminating the darkest corners of immersive media, haunted attractions help us recognize the hauntings that underlie everyday experiences of work, identity, and embodiment. To see LMHE clearly is to understand that the haunt is not confined to Halloween—it is everywhere, hiding in plain sight.

The Significance of Live-Mediated Entertainment (LME)

Haunted attractions are exemplary forms of LME in that they challenge the boundaries of conventional entertainment, creating spaces where fear and anxiety are confronted in shared, embodied environments. By revisiting the LME framework, I demonstrate that haunted attractions are not only ephemeral spaces of horror but also living examples of how immersive entertainment can bridge the gap between live experiences and mediated forms. They represent a broader trend in the entertainment industry, where localized, immersive experiences are gaining significant traction at both grassroots and corporate levels. For instance, Netflix's *The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience* invites audiences into Regency-era high society, allowing them not only to observe actors in period costume but to actively participate in dancing and social interaction. Similarly, the *Stranger Things Experience* immerses participants in iconic settings from the show, such as the Hawkins Mall and the Byers' house, blending live-action roleplay with exploration of familiar, fan-favorite locations.

These examples represent top-down entertainment strategies that leverage well-known intellectual properties (IP) to draw audiences into immersive worlds. In contrast, haunted attractions typically emerge from more grassroots, community-driven foundations. Local enthusiasts craft Halloween-themed environments and storylines that, while lacking the branding power of major franchises, offer equally engaging participatory experiences through horror's unique emphasis on the body. This grassroots model parallels industries such as escape rooms, which—though smaller in scale—combine narrative-driven engagement with physical and cognitive challenges. While escape rooms emphasize problem-solving and cognitive stimulation, haunted attractions focus more on corporeal immersion and emotional response.

Much like the early Nickelodeons during the birth of cinema, these immersive experiences demonstrate how audiences are increasingly drawn to entertainment that activates the senses and emotions. LME continues to expand, transforming entertainment into a series of experiential, embodied moments—a trend seen not only in haunted attractions but also in large-scale immersive environments such as Comic-Con, Harry Potter World, and major theme parks. These developments reflect how technological advancements, shifting cultural preferences, and a growing desire for bodily participation are reshaping the future of entertainment. The haunted attraction industry exemplifies this broader shift toward localized, immersive experiences. By engaging audiences on a sensory level—through sound, light, touch, and spatial design—haunts construct environments that feel viscerally real despite their fictional premises. This immersion enables participants to confront fear and dread as cathartic, even life-affirming, experiences. Held in specific local settings, these attractions offer spectacle-driven entertainment, emphasizing direct interaction with the environment and fostering a sense of communal engagement.

This evolution toward sensory and emotional participation has gained momentum in the post-COVID era, as audiences increasingly seek real-world experiences after prolonged periods of isolation. Haunted attractions generate physical and emotional responses that create shared, embodied encounters—ones capable of facilitating transformative engagement. As such, LME offers more than passive amusement; it provides opportunities for emotional release, meaningful connection, and personal catharsis.

The industry's growing emphasis on participation reflects a larger trend in horror entertainment, where liveness, interactivity, and media convergence combine to reshape the cultural, economic, and creative landscape of entertainment. Haunted attractions, with their focus

on sensory disorientation and unpredictability, offer a level of immersive engagement rarely matched in other genres. These trends are especially pronounced in horror, where intensity, physicality, and the pushing of extreme boundaries challenge conventional expectations of what entertainment can be.

I emphasize the importance of media studies attending to these changes, and urge scholars to recognize and adapt to the evolving entertainment landscape. Rather than merely predicting trends, scholars should critically engage with these developments—especially in the realm of immersive and affective experiences. By positioning haunted attractions as examples of Live Media Entertainment (LME), this dissertation demonstrates how they push the boundaries of traditional media forms. Haunted attractions, along with other LME spaces, represent a broader movement toward experiential, embodied media, contributing to an expanded understanding of immersive entertainment. This research highlights the cultural, economic, and technological significance of these forms of media production and emphasizes the importance of studying them as they continue to evolve within the LME framework.

Moreover, by focusing on an industry that has burgeoned in recent decades with limited regulation and oversight, this dissertation helps scholars understand how paradoxical industries—often overlooked due to their ambiguous definitions, unconventional business structures, and fluid genre affiliations—can suffer from mistreatment and lack of recognition. As part of the horror genre, which is itself often marginalized as illegitimate entertainment, haunted attractions raise important concerns around worker exploitation, profitability, and safety. These concerns should not be dismissed; overlooking them risks a serious misjudgment of the industry's broader impact and potential. The horror genre, in particular, plays a central role in how LME spaces like haunted attractions affect and engage their audiences. Like Dr.

Frankenstein's chilling proclamation, "It's alive!" upon realizing his creation had taken on a life of its own, haunted attractions embody a paradoxical liveness—where the inanimate is imbued with unsettling vitality. While horror narratives have undoubtedly shaped the genre conventions of these spaces, they are not strictly defined by them. What is fundamental to haunted attractions is their capacity to create environments that simultaneously thrill and terrify through spectacle, combining technological innovation with thematic horror.

Tracing the history of haunted attractions reveals how they harness the spectral qualities inherent in emerging technologies, generating a sense of liveness that haunts the liminal space between presence and absence, the familiar and the unfamiliar. This uncannily "living" quality mirrors how technology evokes affective responses through its illusionary power—an experience of wonder, fear, and excitement. Haunted attractions rely on this paradoxical convergence of media to craft an immersive sense of liveness, where technology, performance, and artistic design coalesce into a terrifyingly embodied horror experience. In this sense, haunted attractions embrace the self-reflexivity of both horror and media by bringing the inanimate to life. These spaces mobilize objects and environments that would otherwise remain flat, static, or dead, transforming them into active participants in the experience. At their core, haunted attractions exist within the paradox of the "haunted house"—a term that suggests life within a space inhabited by the dead, where the house itself is expected to be animated despite the absence of living residents. This tension between life and death, presence and absence, is central to their appeal. Just as Frankenstein's monster is an amalgamation of disparate, dead parts stitched together to create something unsettlingly alive, haunted attractions merge horror tropes,

technological innovations, and live performance into a living spectacle that feels both terrifying and exhilarating. In doing so, they blur the lines between the dead and the living, making the space itself seem alive with possibility.

These experiences also present a critical paradox within the LMHE framework, illustrating how inanimate and corporeal spaces can be activated through technological and sensory manipulation. By animating the dead and the lifeless, haunted attractions transform fear into a participatory event that engages audiences both physically and emotionally. This paradoxical liveness critiques how new technologies have historically been perceived—as both sources of fascination and cultural anxiety—and demonstrates how immersive horror can produce embodied responses that go beyond the mere consumption of fear, creating emotionally resonant and transformative experiences. It is this dynamic interplay of life and death, presence and absence, that makes haunted attractions a significant and distinctive form of LMHE. They offer a space where audiences not only confront fear but experience it as a powerful mode of engagement.

Future Directions in the Haunt Industry and Media Studies Research

As the landscape of immersive horror entertainment continues to evolve, emerging trends point to increasing demand for more intimate technological experiences and 4D effects. During my time at Comic-Con 2024, presenting at the Comic Arts conference, I attended a panel titled “The Bold Voice of Contemporary Horror and the Future of Horror.” Here, actor David Dastmalchian (known for his role in *Late Night with the Devil* (2024)), emphasized the growing desire for greater immersion in horror. He said, “I think there is something about experiencing technology. I want a *new* experience for horror.”³ Dastmalchian spoke to the future of horror entertainment, where audiences will seek engagement through technologies that heighten sensory

experiences, similar to the immersive techniques used by William Castle and John Waters in their past works. The future, as expressed by industry professionals, points to a demand for 4D effects without the 4DX movie theaters where food and drinks go “all over the place!”⁴ Instead, more intimate, interactive experiences bring the audience into the narrative in profoundly personal ways. To evidence this, each audience member received a USB on which was written the words “THE SUBSTANCE” and a phone number, exactly like the prop used in *The Substance* (2024). When calling or texting this number, the audience was directed toward the exact voice and company, asking, “Have you ever dreamt of a better version of yourself?” Desiring this level of immersion requires technology to frighten and make the audience feel tangibly a part of the horror itself. This trend is building momentum, particularly in horror spaces, and signals an evolving approach to LMHE where the boundaries between fiction and reality become increasingly blurred, offering a shared, collective emotional experience. The importance of this shift for the future of horror entertainment lies in its ability to provide more immersive and emotionally resonant experiences.

While the demand for more immersive horror experiences continues to grow, recent failures in LME reveal that quantity does not equate to quality. For instance, the *Willy’s Chocolate Experience* in Glasgow, Scotland, was an unlicensed event that utilized many AI-generated images to lure ticket purchasers, only to deliver cheap designs, sparse decorations, amateur actors, and poor costuming.⁵ The result was so disappointing that children were left in tears, and the police were called due to the subpar quality and need for ticket reimbursement. The failed event went viral, prompting widespread critique.⁶ In a positive turn of events, a 16-year-

old girl, Felicia Dawkins, who went viral for her scary performance as *The Unknown*, was offered a job at the *London Dungeon*, with the haunted attraction praising her as “clearly a natural when it comes to the art of the scare.”⁷

Despite off-brand AI-generated advertising, it is similarly disappointing to see licensed IPs being unable to guarantee quality. The cancellation of *Insidious: The Further You Fear* in Detroit after the first leg of its tour is an example of this. In early 2025, the live show’s advertising was similar to a haunted attraction but was met with disappointed reviews from the audience who attended, saying, “We were surprised when we sat down, and there was no set,” and quite simply, “it sucked.”⁸ These examples underscore the volatility of immersive entertainment, where a project’s success or failure often hinges on how it resonates with its audience. The cancellation of tours and the closure of experiences due to poor reception illustrate the significant power audiences hold in determining the fate of such high-risk, high-reward productions. Their active participation in co-creating fear and engagement, met with subjective levels of immersion, ultimately dictates the success or failure of these events.

This research opens a number of potentially fruitful directions for future research. Audience analysis of participants in haunted attractions could provide valuable insights, particularly focusing on affective engagements and interests in the horror genre. Additionally, the LME framework could be expanded beyond haunted attractions to include other immersive entertainment forms (such as theme parks, escape rooms, and interactive theater). These spaces similarly blur the lines between performance and media, creating multisensory environments that demand audience participation. By examining these alternative spaces through the LME lens, scholars can investigate how they engage audiences in a collective, embodied experience that transforms traditional forms of media consumption. In addition, technological advancements,

such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), will undoubtedly play an increasing role in shaping the future of haunted attractions and similar immersive spaces. The next generation of haunted attractions will likely harness immersive technologies for audience engagement in more personalized and interactive ways, pushing the boundaries of what it means to experience horror. Further exploration into these technological innovations and their integration with live performance will be critical in understanding how they influence the social and cultural implications of horror as a genre. These technologies can offer valuable insights into how immersive experiences shape the entertainment industry and social interactions, collective anxieties, and shared cultural experiences. Future research can accordingly contribute to a broader understanding of how immersion, technology, and audience engagement are reshaping the landscape of contemporary entertainment for both the academic study of media and the production of immersive experiences moving forward.

Conclusion: Resurrecting Community in Live-Mediated Horror Entertainment

Jeffrey Sconce suggests that the “death of cinema” serves as a broader commentary on the transformation of film as a medium in the digital age.⁹ He argues that the traditional cinema experience, particularly the communal and physical aspects of watching films in theaters, is diminishing. He attributes this decline to the shift from celluloid to digital formats, which alters how films are consumed and how audiences relate to the medium. According to Sconce, what made cinema an art form, its analog and indexical qualities, has been compromised. This shift, as Sconce points out, affects how films are distributed and consumed, ultimately changing cinephiles’ cultural significance and emotional connection to the medium. He states, “The real ‘victim’ here is the gradual dissolution of an affective bond with something once known as ‘the cinema.’”¹⁰ This signals a loss of community and emotional connection, leading to a nostalgic

longing for a bygone era when films and the spaces in which they were experienced mattered. However, rather than the death of cinema, perhaps what we are witnessing is its transformation into new forms of participatory, affective experiences, similar to what is found in LMHE such as haunted attractions, which create shared, emotionally charged experiences that make us feel a sense of community and connection.

In a world that feels increasingly disconnected and fragmented, haunted attractions are one of the few places where shared vulnerability and catharsis are actively encouraged. As Allen Hopps aptly states, “Haunted houses are often seen as darkness, but it does not negate light. In order for light to be successful, there has to be darkness. It’s a balance. Haunted houses put a face on our fears.”¹¹ In these immersive spaces, audiences are invited to confront collective fears, not just those related to monsters or ghouls, but the everyday anxieties that often go unspoken in modern life. Haunted attractions provide a cathartic release, offering an environment where fear is actively shared, transforming it from a solitary emotion into a collective experience. This communal aspect of horror—shared in the screams, laughter, and moments of terror—is particularly poignant in an age where community bonds are fraying. As Skal reflects, “People would come year after year to this one house—they were like beacons. Because of the stability of that particular recurring event, there was an instant sense of camaraderie.”¹² In a time where virtual connections often replace physical interaction, haunted attractions offer a rare opportunity for real-time, embodied engagement, where strangers are united through the shared experience of fear. Facing the fears of the monsters in the dark allows us to face the fears that haunt us collectively and, in doing so, find solidarity in that shared vulnerability.

The importance of these experiences goes beyond entertainment as they reflect our societal need for spaces of catharsis and participation. As society grows more virtual, more impersonal, and more transactional, the rituals of haunted attractions are a reminder that we need these affective experiences to reconnect, process, and momentarily transcend the everyday. As Skal wisely notes, “Haunted houses engage us on a multiplicity of levels, many of them reflecting anxiety and ambivalence about the Good Life, feelings that are playfully exorcised through rituals simulating the Horrible Death.”¹³ Skal continues:

And the most awful death of all, the one we all have to live with, is the death of a sense of community and meaningful social interaction. As American communities become more transient and impersonal, more virtual than visceral, and as civic participation wanes at all levels, the appeal of Halloween rituals may not be so mysterious after all.¹⁴

In an era where the very fabric of community feels tenuous at best, haunted attractions stand as beacons, showing us that even in darkness, there is light. A light appears through shared participation, embodied fear, and collective release. The world, it seems, still needs monsters—and haunted attractions remain the spaces where we face them together. Not just for entertainment, but as a vital social ritual in a fractured world: confronting not only our fear of death, but our deeper, often unspoken need for one another.

ENDNOTES

INTRODUCTION – MANUFACTURING SCARES:

A Critical Analysis of Haunted Attractions as Live-Mediated Horror Entertainment

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CHAPTER ONE – THE EVOLUTION OF FEAR:

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CHAPTER TWO – THE GENRE OF FEAR:

Horror’s Corporeality in Haunted Attraction Design

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CHAPTER THREE – THE BUSINESS OF FEAR:

Managed Experience and Economy of Haunted Attractions

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CHAPTER FOUR – THE ART OF FEAR:

Labor and Performance in Haunted Attractions

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CONCLUSION – REDEFINING HAUNTED ATTRACTIONS:

In The Era of Live-Mediated Horror Entertainment

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

List of Haunted Attractions Attended

#	Season Year	Haunt Name	Location
1.	Fall 2018	<i>The Beast</i>	Kansas City, Missouri
2.	Fall 2018	<i>Macabre Cinema</i>	Kansas City, Missouri
3.	Fall 2018	<i>The Edge of Hell</i>	Kansas City, Missouri
4.	Fall 2019	<i>The Hill Has Eyes</i>	Franklin, Wisconsin
	Fall 2019	Abandoned Haunted House Complex	Mt. Pleasant, Wisconsin
5.	Fall 2019	- <i>Ambush Haunted House</i>	Mt. Pleasant, Wisconsin
6.	Fall 2019	- <i>Hysteria Haunted House</i>	Mt. Pleasant, Wisconsin
7.	Fall 2019	- <i>Stalker Haunted House</i>	Mt. Pleasant, Wisconsin
8.	Fall 2019	<i>Burial Chamber</i>	Neehah, Wisconsin
9.	Fall 2021	<i>The 13th Floor</i>	Denver, Colorado
10.	Fall 2021	Disneyland's <i>The Haunted Mansion</i>	Anaheim, California
11.	Spring 2022	<i>The 13th Floor</i> – Valentine's Day Love Bites	Denver, Colorado
12.	Spring 2022	<i>The Darkness</i>	St. Louis, Missouri
13.	Fall 2022	<i>Terror in the Corn</i>	Erie, Colorado
14.	Fall 2022	<i>Harrington's HAAunted House of Horrors</i>	Loveland, Colorado
	Fall 2022	Universal Studios Halloween Horror Nights	Burbank, California
15.	Fall 2022	- <i>The Weekend: After Hours Nightmare</i> - "It's Music to Your Fears..."	Burbank, California
16.	Fall 2022	- <i>Terror Tram – Us (2019) and Nope (2022)</i>	Burbank, California
17.	Fall 2022	- <i>Halloween 4: The Return of Michael Myers</i>	Burbank, California

18.	Fall 2022	- <i>Universal Horror Hotel</i> (Universal Monsters from 1913-1956)	Burbank, California
19.	Fall 2022	- <i>The Horrors of Blumhouse</i> (<i>The Black Phone</i> , 2021 and <i>Freaky</i> , 2020)	Burbank, California
20.	Fall 2022	- <i>Universal Monsters: Legends Collide</i> (Dracula, The Mummy, and The Wolfman)	Burbank, California
21.	Fall 2022	- <i>Killer Klowns from Outer Space</i> (1988)	Burbank, California
22.	Fall 2022	- <i>La Llorona</i> (2019): <i>The Weeping Woman</i>	Burbank, California
23.	Fall 2022	- <i>Scarecrow: The Reaping</i> (2007)	Burbank, California
24.	Fall 2022	- <i>Sideshow Slaughterhouse</i>	Burbank, California
25.	Fall 2022	- <i>El Pueblo Del Terror</i> (Scare Zone)	Burbank, California
26.	Fall 2022	- <i>Sideshow Slaughterhouse</i> (Scare Zone)	Burbank, California
27.	Fall 2022	- <i>Clownsawz</i> (Scare Zone)	Burbank, California
28.	Fall 2022	- <i>Pumpkinsawz</i> (Roaming Horde)	Burbank, California
29.	Fall 2022	- <i>The Wizarding World of Harry Potter: Attractions: Death Eaters Encounter</i>	Burbank, California
30.	Fall 2022	<i>Haunted Field of Screams</i>	Thronton, Colorado
31.	Fall 2022	<i>13th Floor</i>	Denver, Colorado
32.	Spring 2023	<i>IT Escape Experience</i>	Las Vegas, Nevada
33.	Fall 2023	<i>The Fear Factory</i>	Salt Lake City, Utah
34.	Fall 2023	<i>Nightmare on 13th</i> (Scare Zones)	Salt Lake City, Utah
35.	Fall 2023	- <i>Nightmare Haunted House: 13 Themed Nightmares</i> , including a Day Time Haunt Experience	Salt Lake City, Utah
36.	Fall 2023	- <i>Institute of Terror</i> , featuring a black experience	Salt Lake City, Utah
37.	Fall 2023	<i>Doom</i>	Idaho Falls, Idaho
38.	Fall 2023	Elitch Gardens' <i>Fright Fest</i> (TERRORtories: Scare Zones)	Denver, Colorado

39.	Fall 2023	- <i>Dolls of the Dead</i>	Denver, Colorado
40.	Fall 2023	- <i>Killer Creek</i>	Denver, Colorado
41.	Fall 2023	- <i>Carn-Evil Alley</i>	Denver, Colorado
42.	Fall 2023	<i>Scary Acres</i> (Scare Zones)	Omaha, Nebraska
43.	Fall 2023	- <i>Master's Castle</i>	Omaha, Nebraska
44.	Fall 2023	- <i>House on the Hill</i>	Omaha, Nebraska
45.	Fall 2023	- <i>Haunted Woods</i>	Omaha, Nebraska
46.	Fall 2023	<i>Shadow's Edge</i>	Omaha, Nebraska
47.	Fall 2023	<i>Bloodrush</i>	Elkhorn, Nebraska
	Fall 2023	Vala's Pumpkin Patch	Gretna, Nebraska
48.	Fall 2023	- <i>Pumpkin Lights Trail</i>	Gretna, Nebraska
49.	Fall 2023	- <i>Lost Pumpkin Mine</i>	Gretna, Nebraska
50.	Fall 2023	- <i>Spook Shed</i>	Gretna, Nebraska
51.	Fall 2023	<i>The Nightmare Realm</i> (Scare Zones & Venue)	Dublin, Ireland
52.	Fall 2023	- <i>Sundown Manor</i>	Dublin, Ireland
53.	Fall 2023	- <i>Dead Carnival: Killer Klowns</i>	Dublin, Ireland
54.	Fall 2023	- <i>BioX1ne Laboratories: Science Requires Sacrifice</i>	Dublin, Ireland
55.	Fall 2023	- <i>Shriekers: Return of the Swamp Witch</i>	Dublin, Ireland
56.	Fall 2023	- <i>Death Row 2: Shank Season</i>	Dublin, Ireland
	Winter 2023	<i>13th Gate</i> Escape Room Experience	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
57.	Winter 2023	- <i>The Asylum</i>	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
58.	Winter 2023	- <i>Cutthroat Cavern</i>	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
59.	Winter 2023	- <i>Disappearance of Flight 13</i>	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
60.	Winter 2023	- <i>Spellbound</i>	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
61.	Winter 2023	- <i>The Collector</i>	Baton Rouge, Louisiana
62.	Winter 2023	- <i>Tomb of Anubis</i>	Baton Rouge, Louisiana

63.	Summer 2024	- Disneyland's <i>Haunted Mansion</i>	Anaheim, California
	Fall 2024	Universal Studios Halloween Horror Nights 33	Orlando, Florida
64.	Fall 2024	- <i>Slaughter Sinema 2</i>	Orlando, Florida
65.	Fall 2024	- <i>Goblin's Fest</i>	Orlando, Florida
66.	Fall 2024	- <i>Major Swets Candy Factory</i>	Orlando, Florida
67.	Fall 2024	- <i>The Museum: Deadly Exhibit</i>	Orlando, Florida
68.	Fall 2024	- <i>Monstruos: The Monsters of Latin America</i>	Orlando, Florida
69.	Fall 2024	- <i>Triplets of Terror</i>	Orlando, Florida
70.	Fall 2024	- <i>A Quiet Place</i>	Orlando, Florida
71.	Fall 2024	- <i>Ghostbusters Frozen Empire</i>	Orlando, Florida
72.	Fall 2024	- <i>Insidious: The Further</i>	Orlando, Florida
73.	Fall 2024	- <i>Universal Monsters: Eternal Bloodlines</i> (Saskia Van Helsing, Bride of Frankenstein, Dracula's Daughter)	Orlando, Florida
74.	Fall 2024	- <i>Duality of Fear</i> (Scare Zone)	Orlando, Florida
75.	Fall 2024	- <i>Demon Queens</i> (Scare Zone)	Orlando, Florida
76.	Fall 2024	- <i>Swamp of the Undead</i> (Scare Zone)	Orlando, Florida
77.	Fall 2024	- <i>Torture Faire</i> (Scare Zone)	Orlando, Florida
78.	Fall 2024	- <i>Enter the Blumhouse</i> (Scare Zone)	Orlando, Florida
79.	Fall 2024	- <i>Nightmare Fuel: Nocturnal Circus</i> (Fear Factor, Stage Show)	Orlando, Florida
80.	Fall 2024	<i>Frightmare Compound</i>	Westminster, Colorado
81.	Fall 2024	<i>Night of Mayhem – Colorado State University, Theta Chi Fraternity Charity Haunt</i>	Fort Collins, Colorado
82.	Fall 2024	Vala's Pumpkin Patch	Gretna, Nebraska
83.	Fall 2024	- <i>Pumpkin Lights Trail</i>	Gretna, Nebraska
84.	Fall 2024	- <i>Lost Pumpkin Mine</i>	Gretna, Nebraska

85.	Fall 2024	- <i>Spook Shed</i>	Gretna, Nebraska
86.	Fall 2024	<i>Hillside House of Hell</i>	Glenwood, Iowa
87.	Fall 2024	<i>Terror in the Corn</i>	Erie, Colorado

Appendix B

List of Seminars Attended at TransWorld Haunted Attraction Trade Show 2022-2024

Year	Seminar Title	Speakers	Free/ Paid
2024	Elevate Your Earnings: Halloween Express Guide to Haunt Retail	Halloween Express Team	Free
2024	<i>Feeding the Beast: 25 Years of Statesville Haunted Prison (2023)</i> Documentary Screening and Q&A	John and Kyle LaFlamboy, Zombie Army Productions and HellsGate Haunted House	Free
2024	Financial Fundamentals- Your Business's Secret Sauce	Blue Skies	Free
2024	Digital Marketing is a Monster. We will Help You Slay It	Jake Wellwood Marketing	Free
2024	Unlock Amazing Acting Potential	Allen Hopps, Stiltbeast Studios and Dark Hour Haunted House	Paid
2024	Producing Your Show with Safety in Mind	John LaFlamboy, Zombie Army Productions and HellsGate Haunted House	Paid
2024	Family Friendly Pumpkin Trails, Décor and More!	Debbie Katz, Jack O Lantern Journey	Free
2024	Show Control for Live Interactive Experiences	Tom from Clockwork Dog	Free
2024	The 13 th Gate Presents: Design Your Costume and Makeup Departments for Success!	Christi Ferrell, Sarah Bess Brown, David Ferrell	Paid
2024	State of the Industry- Haunted Attraction Association	Spencer Terry, HAA President and HAA Board	Free

2023	How to Create 61 Scares in 60 Minutes	Allen Hopps, Dark Hour Haunted House, Ben Armstrong, Netherworld Haunted House, Mike Henrie, Nightmare on 13 th Haunted House	Paid
2023	Never Be Short Staffed Again: How to Win at the Recruiting Game	Blue Skies Admin Services	Free
2023	Record-Breaking Marketing Strategies to Supercharge Your Success	Earnest Porter, Tyler Bennett, Laura Kilpatrick, Tashona Smith, FearWorm	Free
2023	Bloody Mary's "Hands On" Wicked Gothic Clown	Bobby Wiener, Bloody Mary Makeup	Free
2023	Top #5 Pitfalls of Your Insurance Program	Devon Goolsby and Cameron Annas, Granite Insurance	Free
2023	How to Sell More Tickets Online	Jake Hirsch and Alex Wait, Tixt Ticketing	Free
2023	Create Large Format Styrofoam Sculpting	Marc and Jordan Brawner, Little Spider Studio	Free
2023	Emerging Trends in Haunted Attraction Business	Ben Armstrong, Netherworld Haunted House, Chris Stafford, CEO of Foundation 16 attractions and Thirteenth Floor Entertainment Group, TJ Mannarino, VP Art & Design, Universal Orlando	Paid
2023	Proven Methods to Increase Revenue and Guest Satisfaction at Your Attraction	Brad Weinstein	Free
2022	Cloud Storage for Your Business	Johnna Murray, CPA	Free
2022	State of the Industry- Haunted Attraction Association Board Meeting	Spencer Terry, HAA President, <i>Fear Factory</i>	Free
2022	Darkness Haunted House Behind the Screams Tour	Larry Kirschner, Owner of The Darkness Haunted House	Paid
2022	Haunting in a Covid World- The Positive Impacts of the Pandemic	Allen Hopps, Stiltbeast Studios and Dark Hour Haunted House	Paid
2022	60 Ways to Hire and Maintain Staff	Ben Armstrong, Alex Burgaff, and Island Chance, Netherworld Haunted House	Paid

2022	Secrets of the Escape Room	William Peirson, Master Controls	Free
2022	Social Media Workshop: Activating Social SuperFans	Earnest Corder, Laura Kilpatrick, Tashona Smith, Fearworm Marketing	Free
2022	Event Marketing Strategies to Transform Your Event Into a Social Occasion	Bryan Jenkins, Ticket Signup	Free
2022	FX Burn Makeup	Bobbie Weiner, Bloody Mary Makeup	Free
2022	CRISIS! Be Prepared When &%\$# Hits the Fan!	Jeremy Karchner, Haunted Attraction Association	Free
2022	How to Use Puppets to Add “Scare” to Your Haunt	Michael Burnett, Fright Night Studios	Free
2022	Growing Your Escape Room Guaranteed	Escape Room Marketing Agency	Free
2022	Managing Your Monsters	Matt and Sarah Bruder, Haunt Scheduler	Free
2022	The Power of Omnichannel Marketing	Jim Hanchett, We Do Digital	Free
2022	Wonderful World of Christmas	Shane Datzed	Free
2022	Choosing the Right Software for Your Business	Johnna Murray, CPA	Free

Appendix C

List of Key Events in the History of Haunted Attractions

Year	Event Description	Location
Pre-1900s: The Materialization of Fear-Based Entertainment		
1659	Christiaan Huygens creates the Magic Lantern, the first projection technology for ghost illusions.	Netherlands

1764	<i>The Castle of Otranto</i> by Horace Walpole is published, marking the beginning of the Gothic genre.	England
1790s	Paul Filidort and Etienne-Gaspard Robert create Phantasmagoria, the first dedicated horror entertainment using projection techniques and supernatural effects.	France
1802	Madame Tussaud opens her “Chamber of Horrors,” featuring wax figures of historical figures, notably executed ones, as a macabre attraction.	London, England
1893	The Columbian Exposition in Chicago introduces cinema as a new form of mass entertainment, along with the Ferris wheel and other technological innovations.	Chicago, USA
1895	Early dark rides such as the “Cages of Wild Wolves” set the foundation for mechanical haunted attractions.	Coney Island, New York, USA
1896	Georges Méliès releases <i>Le Manoir du diable</i> (The Haunted Castle), often considered the first horror film, showcasing supernatural effects and techniques that would influence haunted attractions.	France
1897	The Grand Guignol theatre in Paris pushes the boundaries of theatrical horror, introducing innovative special effects, prosthetic makeup, and suspense-driven narratives. Its influence on visual horror, illusionary techniques, and immersive experiences significantly impacts both horror cinema and the later development of haunted attractions.	Paris, France
1900s-1940s: The Era of Commodification		
Early 1900s	U.S. schools and communities begin adopting “haunted houses” for Halloween as a means of engaging children, marking the first public, community-driven versions of haunted attractions.	USA
1930s	The rise of Halloween-themed social gatherings and public “haunted houses” expands, often involving “fun-house techniques” like dark walkways, spooky sensory experiences (e.g., wet, slimy objects), and eerie atmospheres.	USA

1938	In <i>The Little Rascals</i> comedy short film “Hide and Shriek,” the growing trend of haunted houses and candy consumption is humorously captured. The episode features a haunted house at an amusement pier, highlighting the emerging connection between trick-or-treating and haunted attractions in popular culture.	USA
1939	The term “trick-or-treat” first appears in national discourse in <i>The American Home</i> magazine. This marks the beginning of the widespread recognition of trick-or-treating as a central Halloween activity.	USA
1940s	During WWII, Halloween celebrations are muted due to sugar rationing and wartime hardships. However, Halloween celebrations, including haunted houses, begin to pick up momentum post-war as sugar supplies normalize.	USA
1950s-1960s: The Era of Professionalization		
1950s	Halloween shifts toward a family-oriented holiday, with a greater focus on children and home-based celebrations. Haunted houses, often organized by women’s groups, become integral parts of local Halloween festivities, helping to fundraise and engage communities.	USA
1956	The San Mateo Haunted House opens, one of the first organized haunted attractions in California, lasting 20 years, and leading to other women organized charity driven haunts.	San Mateo, California, USA
1958	The San Bernardino Junior Women’s Club takes over the San Bernardino Haunted House, introducing playful and creative PR stunts (e.g., hiring a “haunted house expert” named Montgomery Thaddeus Bones Jr.). These women-led efforts further popularize haunted houses and contribute to their growth as community-driven attractions.	San Bernardino, California, USA
1961	Disney develops the first animatronic character, a 9-inch tall dancing man, setting the stage for future mechanical innovations in haunt attractions.	Disneyland, Anaheim, California, USA
1964	The Indianapolis Children’s Museum Haunted House opens, becoming the first and longest-running haunt in the U.S.	Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

1969	Disneyland opens its Haunted Mansion, setting a new standard for family-friendly, immersive haunted attractions.	Anaheim, California, USA
1970s: The Era of Commercialization		
1971-1975	Although early Jaycees haunts can be traced to 1966, the Jaycees organization spreads haunted houses across the U.S., turning them into fundraisers and standardizing the format for many attractions.	Nationwide, USA
1973	Knott's Berry Farm launches its Halloween Haunt event, the first of its kind at a major theme park, setting a precedent for seasonal Halloween events.	Buena Park, California, USA
1975	The Edge of Hell in Kansas City introduces the multi-story haunted house concept, a significant innovation in the industry.	Kansas City, Missouri, USA
1975	Jim Gould and Tom Hilligoss create the Jaycees Haunted House Success Kit, providing a blueprint for haunted house creation across the nation.	Nationwide, USA
1980s-1990s: The Era of Standardization and Cross-Industry Integration		
1984	A fire at the Haunted Castle attraction at Six Flags kills eight teenagers, leading to major safety reforms in haunted attractions.	Jackson, New Jersey, USA
1991	Universal Studios introduces Halloween Horror Nights, becoming a major player in the professional haunted event market.	Orlando, Florida, USA
1991	Spookyworld opens in Massachusetts, eventually featuring celebrity appearances, including Linda Blair and Elvira, using star power to attract visitors.	Massachusetts, USA
1991	Pasaje del Terror opens its U.S. version as Terror on Church Street in Orlando, bringing theatrical horror experiences to the U.S., known for its street performers, high-end production, and dramatic presentations.	Orlando, Florida, USA

1996	Distortions Unlimited unveils its Electric Chair animatronic, revolutionizing the technical aspects of haunted attractions.	St. Louis, Missouri, USA
1997	Halloween Horror Nights re-expands to Universal Studios Hollywood, after death of employee on the tram in 1986. The event grows with the addition of elaborate maze designs and celebrity partnerships, cementing its status as a major Halloween event.	Universal Studios Hollywood, California, USA
1998	The IAHA is formed, helping to professionalize the haunted attraction industry and provide a networking hub for haunters.	USA
2000s-Present: The Era of Modernization and Corporate Expansion		
2000s-present	Increase in films featuring, referencing, or filmed at haunted attraction locations, continuing the trend of horror films set in or inspired by haunted attractions, showcasing the cyclical relationship between the two industries.	Los Angeles, California, USA
2001	Ocean Park introduces Halloween-themed events to Hong Kong, marking the beginning of Halloween's rise in Asia.	Ocean Park, Hong Kong
2004	Midwest Haunters Convention is established as a tradeshow helps grow the professional haunt industry by offering networking opportunities and showcasing new technologies.	Chicago, Illinois, USA
2004	HAuNTcon is founded and created to educate and connect professionals in the haunted attraction industry.	Moving Locations, USA
2005	The haunted attraction industry launches its first national PR campaign, elevating haunted houses into a mainstream phenomenon, showcasing them as high-tech, immersive experiences.	USA
2007	Walibi Belgium's Halloween event incorporates intense mazes and scare zones, revolutionizing Halloween celebrations in Europe.	Walibi Belgium, Wavre, Belgium
2009	The Blackout Experience, an extreme haunt, begins, introducing a new level of interactive, intense horror experiences.	Major cities in the USA

2010	Stiltbeast Studios and Zombie Army Productions launch online YouTube series, marking a shift in how haunt professionals shared knowledge and techniques, contributing to the rise of “DIY” haunt culture and the increasing professionalization of the industry.	USA
2020-2025	Growth and professionalization of the Haunted Attraction Association (HAA), with membership growth by over 42%, and emphasis on the introduction of online safety and harassment training, further professionalizing the industry.	USA
2020	Haunted attractions, facing closures, implement new safety measures like timed ticketing, socially distanced walkthroughs, and drive-through experiences, showing resilience during the pandemic.	U.S. (and globally)
2021	Despite earlier struggles, the haunted attraction industry sees attendance surge, as people return to attractions to seek catharsis through controlled fear, similar to post-9/11 patterns.	U.S. (and globally)
2022	Statesville Haunted Prison documentary wins two Emmys showing the growing influence of haunted attractions in the media world, illustrating the rise of haunt culture as a serious, impactful part of both the entertainment industry and pop culture.	Chicago, Illinois, USA
2024	The HAA’s TransWorld trade show features international diversity, highlighting the global expansion of the haunt industry. The event underscores the increasing professionalism and interconnectedness of the industry.	TransWorld, St. Louis, Missouri, USA
2025	The haunted attraction industry faces challenges due to stricter immigration policies and tariff increases, impacting staffing and costs, due to early Trump administration policies.	USA