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A scene from "TerrorVision," a pop-up attraction in New York City's Times Square, is shown. In addition to the visceral experience, writes Jim McDermott, haunted houses and scary movies "put flesh on the very real and often frightening questions within us." (©Terror 2023/Hal Schulman)



by Jim McDermott

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October 31, 2023

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When an attraction billed as an "immersive horror experience" opened in Times Square last month, I knew I had to pay a visit. Mid-September may seem ridiculously early to open a haunted house, but New Yorkers have a weak spot for the holiday. Halloween costume shops stay open year round here. The [Halloween Parade](#) in Greenwich Village can draw upwards of 2 million spectators.

It's been many years since I visited a haunted house, and most of what I remember about the last time was the overwhelming desire to escape. Luckily, my friend Erin said she'd come with me. As we waited to enter, she confided that she'd never been to a haunted house.

In truth, maybe she still hasn't.

Like most of the pop-up entertainment that you find in Times Square, Horrorwood Studios' "[TerrorVision](#)" is a lot more hustle than satisfaction. A short trip up an elevator found us wandering through random rooms lacking a coherent story. At times we could hear screams in the distance, which was unsettling, but mostly what terror there was came from various ghoulishly dressed forms leaping out from every corner. There were a few moments that were actually frightening, but it quickly became predictable: Turn a corner, find a goblin.

So often the monsters and dilemmas of a scary movie embody our most fundamental, unanswerable questions.

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As Erin and I talked about the experience afterward, I found myself wondering about the appeal of things like haunted houses or scary movies. Obviously, there's the visceral adventure of it all, the sense of throwing ourselves into a situation most of us would normally eschew without exposing ourselves to any actual harm. A slasher flick is just another form of the roller coaster, delivering a largely consequence-free experience of real fear.

"I think I came here to scream," Erin said. I realized the same was true for me. Recreational horror experiences give us a means of release, one that comes with a level of freedom that can be hard to come by otherwise. Scream at the top of your lungs in your neighborhood or apartment building and someone's going to call the police. But do it at a scary movie and you're among friends.



"TerrorVision," a pop-up attraction in New York City's Times Square, features ghoulishly dressed forms leaping out from every corner. (©Terror 2023/Hal

Schulman)

So many horror stories and "immersive experiences" are also built around spiritual situations and figures — ghosts, demons, the possessed or, in this case, the damned and restless dead. On one level I hate that; it usually reduces religious figures and spirituality to unhelpful, cartoonish notions.

But the frequency of those kinds of stories also underlines the degree to which spiritual matters are a source of deep anxiety for people. So often the monsters and dilemmas of a scary movie embody our most fundamental, unanswerable questions: What happens when we die? Is there a life after death? Will we be judged there for the ways in which we have treated people? Is the universe ultimately guided by spirit and grace, or do violence and chance rule? Does God actually save?

Religious people have plenty of texts and teachers that offer answers to those questions. But in a way it doesn't matter what it says in the Bible, the Torah, the Veda or the Quran about life after death, nor what our grandparents, teachers and religious leaders tell us. None of us will know anything for certain about the afterlife until we experience it for ourselves. Of course we're afraid.



Haunted houses and horror movies "embody our most fundamental, unanswerable questions," writes Jim McDermott. (©Terror 2023/Hal Schulman)

And maybe therein lies the spiritual value of horror stories and experiences. They put flesh on the very real and often frightening questions within us. Whether it's in the form of the mangled risen body of a wronged loved one, a masked stalker or a demon-possessed child, our worst fears are made manifest before us. And we face them. That's the key: Moving through a haunted house, sitting through a scary movie, we endure the horror that's being put before us. That is to say, we survive it. As much power as our fears may seem to have, in the end they do not crush us. We come out the other side, back into the light.

In J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, the students are introduced to a creature called a boggart, which takes on the appearance of whatever they most fear. For one, it becomes a massive spider; for another, their least favorite teacher. To defeat the boggart, the students must conjure something that will make it seem silly. The spider is given roller skates; the teacher, a woman's fur coat and a hideous hat.

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When we stumble out of a haunted house or scary movie, often the first thing we do is laugh. In large part it's an expression of our relief — it's over! But I think our laughter also reveals a boggart-like delight. We confronted something we deeply fear, and you know what? It wasn't so bad.

As much tension as they might put us through, maybe we love supernatural horror stories because they reassure us. There may be much that we don't know about our existence or the spiritual realm, and much we can neither control nor prevent. But ultimately, somehow, against all expectations, we're going to be OK. As the disciples learned in the Upper Room, so maybe (bizarrely) today we learn in movie theaters and corn mazes: Even death and destruction are not the end.

After TerrorVision, Erin and I wandered into the Times Square subway station. As we waited for a train, we heard a sudden, loud BANG. We both jumped, frightened at the possible cause of the sound.

Discovering someone had just dropped a glass bottle, we did indeed start laughing. In fact that bottle was the biggest scare we had experienced all night. And here we were, just fine.