The functional relationship between laughter, thrills and suspense in the comedy thriller screenplay:

An inquiry into the writing of the comedy thriller.

VOLUME ONE

An exegesis submitted in (partial) fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Description of research

It is the central aim of this study that I write a feature film screenplay that blends two genres, the comedy and the thriller. In order to accomplish this I need to know more about the way both comedy and thriller genres achieve their specific aims.

Theorists have examined and analysed thriller screenplay principles, conventions and techniques across thriller sub-genres. However, few have examined the blended comedy thriller genre beyond identifying it as a problematic form of the thriller.

Comedy thriller films are considered by many to be difficult to write. According to John Truby, this blended genre is problematic because ‘the comedy element sits uncomfortably with the tone required to generate chills and thrills’ (Truby, 2010). The screenwriter’s problem lies in the attempt to mix two contrasting audience states. Why do audiences laugh at a character’s pain in a comedy and yet flinch from it in a thriller?

The lack of specific critical analysis in the comedy thriller screenplay genre represents a gap in the literature which I have attempted to fill.

It was the aim of this study to examine the bodies of knowledge fundamental to the writing of my screenplay. These included the discipline areas of screenwriting, genre, psychology and theatre and performance. I also observe the psychoanalytic theories that underpin the writer’s attempt to generate audience laughter and suspense thrills.

It is my intention to examine the principles, conventions and techniques by which the screenwriter may blend the two genres of comedy and thriller without sacrificing the key emotional mandates of either - laughter and suspense. The insights gained from this study may assist in the writing of my own comedy thriller screenplay, *Project Daybreak*. It is hoped that my findings may be of some practical use to other screenwriters in the field attempting this difficult blended genre. It may also be useful to writers of theatre and popular literature who wish to explore the combining of dissimilar audience emotions in their creative works.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Title of work

The functional relationship between laughter, thrills and suspense in the comedy thriller screenplay: An inquiry into the writing of the comedy thriller.

Description of screenplay project

It is the aim of this study to identify the principles, conventions and techniques that may inform the writing of a screenplay that blends elements of two genres, the comedy and the thriller. One outcome of this research will be a comedy thriller feature film screenplay entitled *Project Daybreak*, and is defined below.

The protagonist, Michael Day, risks his career and reputation to develop a cold fusion generator. He is introduced to the nuclear power industrialist Sir Leo Greene by Dr Elaine Frank. Michael is offered money by Sir Leo Greene to relinquish his cold fusion machine, but refuses, making a powerful enemy of Greene. With Greene’s henchmen trying to kill him, Michael discovers Greene’s plan to destroy civilization by blowing up a nuclear plant and irradiating the planet.

Michael is captured while trying to steal back his invention. Greene locks Michael in a radiation chamber to die as Elaine, his new love interest, is taken hostage. After escaping the chamber, Michael rescues Elaine and develops a plan to stop Greene. In a dramatic confrontation with Greene, Michael defeats him and averts the nuclear plant apocalypse. Michael wins Elaine’s heart and demonstrates to the media how his invention saved the day, scoring massive investment dollars to roll out his invention, the cold fusion generator.
Rationale

The comedy thriller screenplay attempts to blend two popular and distinct screenplay genres, the comedy and the suspense thriller. In blending these two genres the screenwriter is challenged to deliver audience laughter and suspense thrills in the one screenplay. Commentary by theorists, practitioners and reviewers suggest that combining laughter and suspense is difficult, indicating that comedy thrillers are problematic to write (Truby, 2010; Dethridge, 2010; Bradshaw, 2009; Rubin, 1999; Bergson, 1911). Hollywood script consultant John Truby points out:

This form [the comedy thriller] is not used much nowadays because combining comedy with thriller creates real problems of tone. If the opponent is too deadly the jokes aren’t funny (Truby, 2010).

Despite this, comedy thriller feature screenplays continue to be written and produced, indicating a sustained audience interest.

A review of the literature in the fields of genre and screenwriting reveals a lack of specific critical analysis in the hybrid screenplay form that blends the comedy and thriller genres. This gap in the field assisted me in determining a focus for my own research.

It is my intention to examine the bodies of knowledge fundamental to the writing of the comedy thriller screenplay and focus on the principles, conventions and techniques by which the screenwriter may blend the two genres without sacrificing the key emotional mandates of either - laughter and suspense thrills.

Insights gained from this study will assist in the writing of my comedy thriller screenplay *Project Daybreak*. 
Methodology

This study will be based on the principles and techniques of the ‘practice-led’ research model. According to Professor Linda Candy, of the Sydney University of Technology, there are two types of practice related research:

1. If a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, the research is practice-based.
2. If the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice, it is practice-led.

In providing a definition of practice-led research, Candy states:

Practice-led research is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has operational significance for that practice. The primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice. Such research includes practice as an integral part of its method and often falls within the general area of action research (Candy, 2006).

Practice-led research leads to new understandings of the practice under examination. In this iterative/recursive model of research the questions may be suggested by the work itself. The process of creation is said to inform the questions. This feeds back into the creation in a model that results in a creative work and exegesis that evolve in a cycle of ‘mutual inter-dependence’ (Colbert, 2009).

Under this model, I conduct an examination of film genre theory; specifically the principles, conventions and techniques routinely used by the screenwriter in suspense thriller and comedy genre feature films. I observe how these principles, conventions and techniques are utilised in two case studies.

In the first case study, *Charade* (Stone, 1963), I will examine how the principles, conventions and screenwriting techniques of the thriller are used in conjunction with those of the comedy feature screenplay.

In the second case study, *Project Daybreak*, I will apply the insights I have gained from my examination of the thriller and comedy screenplay genres and the psychology underpinning the generation of audience laughter and suspense thrills.

The following questions will serve to focus my study.
Research question 1a:

According to Hicks, how may we understand the principles, conventions and techniques of the thriller genre screenplay?

To answer this question I will examine the writing of screenwriter and screenplay consultant, Neill D. Hicks. Hicks states ‘All of the theorizing on genre by scholars and social critics, while interesting in its own right, has accomplished very little to categorize the principles of film types in a systematic way that is useful to screenwriters’ (Hicks, 2000, p. 7).

I will examine the common principles, conventions and techniques of the suspense thriller using Hicks’ ‘Cosmos of Credibility’ and its four principles of the thriller. Hicks’ Narrative Trajectory principle is the overarching structure that establishes a sense of completeness for the story. His Bounded World principle describes the environment and objects that impact the physical actions and psychological responses of the characters. The Timescape principle frames the chronological and psychological time frame in which the story takes place and Character Ethos is the moral code that influences character’s dramatic choices (Hicks, 2000).

In examining Hicks’ four principles of the suspense thriller, I hope to gain understanding of the screenwriting techniques specific to the generation of audience fear and suspense.

Additional writers will contribute to my understanding of the thriller genre and to the psychological underpinnings of audience suspense; Charles Derry, Martin Rubin, Ralph Harper and Altan Löker.

Research Question 1b:

According to Horton, how may we understand the principles, conventions and techniques of the comedy genre screenplay?

To answer this question I will look at the work of Andrew Horton. Andrew Horton (2000) discusses comic conventions important to comedy screenwriters. These comic conventions are Repetition, Inversion, Reciprocal Interference, Disguise and Exaggeration, Interruption and Reaction. Used by the writer or performer, singly, or in combination, they define character behavior and reaction to circumstances and assist in the generation of audience laughter.

Horton theorises that an overarching atmosphere or environment ‘conducive to laughter’ pervades a good comedy screenplay. The screenwriter’s use of the six comic conventions contributes to the environment conducive to laughter.
Writing some ninety years before Horton, Henri Bergson discusses the psychological mechanisms he deems necessary for the generation of laughter and underpins Horton’s discussion of the six comic conventions (Bergson, 1911). Bergson also notes several conditions that he believes must be met before audience laughter is possible, which counterpoint Hicks’ conditions for the generation of audience suspense.

By contrasting the psychological analysis of audience fear conducted by Altan Löker with Bergson’s psychological underpinnings for audience laughter, I hope to gain valuable insights that may inform the writing of my comedy thriller screenplay.

As a comprehensive examination of the nature of comedy is beyond the scope of this study, I have restricted my examination to the specific question of combining the two audience states of suspense and laughter in the feature film screenplay.

Research Question 2:

*How may we observe these principles, conventions and techniques in the comedy thriller screenplay Charade, by Peter Stone?*

In Research Question 1 I observe the principles, conventions and techniques important to the thriller and comedy screenplay genres. In Research Question 2 I will apply these insights and observations to an examination of the screenplay case study *Charade*, by screenwriter Peter Stone.

*Charade* (1963), written by screenwriter Peter Stone, most closely achieves the blend of audience suspense and laughter that I am aiming for in the writing of my comedy thriller screenplay. His screenplay for *Charade* was the basis for a popular film, winning critical acclaim in 1963, and its popularity has grown over subsequent decades. Original and contemporary reviews for it are overwhelmingly positive; crediting the thriller film stylings of Alfred Hitchcock as an influence (Greydanus, 2000; Brenner, 2008; Boeder, 2012; Frederick, 1963).

A thriller, a comedy and a romance, this genre-spanning classic film from 1963 holds up beautifully, thanks to a clever plot, witty dialogue and irresistible stars romping through Paris. The movie is often compared to Alfred Hitchcock’s work for its combination of suspense, humor and well-crafted plot (Boeder, 2012).
Research Question 3:

How useful, or not, are these principles, conventions and techniques to the writing of my comedy thriller screenplay, Project Daybreak?

I use the insights gained from an examination of the principles, conventions and techniques of the comedy and thriller genres and apply these to a discussion of my own screenplay, Project Daybreak.

In writing this screenplay I observe the four principles of the thriller under Hicks’ Cosmos of Credibility genre framework. In order that I may induce audience laughter reliably, I also observe Horton’s ideas around the creation of an environment conducive to comedy and the techniques suggested by his six comic conventions.

Lisa Dethridge’s discussions of structure and the ‘seven structural plot points’ help me to consolidate Hicks’ and Löker’s ideas and theories within the classic three act structure of the Hollywood screenplay form and are as follows:

- The set-up: Establish the protagonist and their world with a brief sketch of where they are and what they do, their central need, goal, and/or problem.
- The inciting incident: Describe how the protagonist responds when they are challenged by an event that shifts the course of the action and affects their goal or need by presenting a central dramatic problem and conflict.
- Act one turning point: Describe the protagonist’s response to a further shift or complication that adds more conflict and heat to their main problem.
- The mid-point: Describe the protagonist’s response as they hit their lowest ebb when the central problem threatens to overcome them.
- The act two turning point: Describe the protagonist’s response to a key conflict that is the result of their central problem. Consider how this must steer the drama towards the climax of act three.
- The climax: Describe the protagonist’s response when all the key elements of the problem come into conflict at once.
- The resolution: Describe how the protagonist resolves or deals with the outcome of all this – do they ride off into the sunset? Cap the story off and tie up all the key storylines. (Dethridge, 2003, p. 191-192).

I will apply these plot point distinctions to the three act structure of Project Daybreak, as they may assist me in applying Hicks’ principles of the thriller within the required chronology of the classic feature film screenplay. As Dethridge states ‘The rules relating to the chronology of a suspense story will be highly specific and technical’ (Dethridge, 2003, p. 79). I will also observe whether these structural plot points are evident in Peter Stone’s Charade.
I utilise practice-led research methodologies to identify the strengths and weaknesses in the developing screenplay and to systematically inform and direct analysis of the genre forms and techniques under study. Linda Candy emphasises that in practice-led research ‘The primary focus of the research is to advance knowledge about practice, or to advance knowledge within practice (Candy, 2006).’ This focus of ‘practice-led’ research methodology supports my aim of writing a quality comedy thriller screenplay.

Review of literature

In the course of this study, I refer to four main bodies of theory; genre, the theory specific to the comedy and the thriller genres, screenwriting structure and the psychology behind audience fear and of laughter.

My examination of screenplay genre is informed by the genre theorists Leo Braudy (1992), Robin Wood (1992), Bruce Kawin (1992), John Cawelti (1992) and Robert McKee (1999) and forms the basis of an exploration of the specific thriller and comedy genres. The Oxford dictionary describes ‘genre’ as: ‘Kind, Type; esp. a style or category of painting, novel, film, etc., characterized by a particular form or purpose’ (Oxford University Press, 1993). As part of this study I considered it important to understand the term ‘genre’ as it applies to feature film screenwriting. The comedy and thriller genre studies focus on the writings of Andrew Horton and Neill D. Hicks and are examined through the filter of the principles, conventions and techniques used by writers of these distinct genres.

Under screenwriting practice I examine the classic Hollywood form with its seven structural plot points and three act structure, informed by Lisa Dethridge and Robert McKee.

The writings of Altan Löker (1976, 2006) and Henri Bergson (1911) contribute to my understanding of the psychological underpinnings of audience fear and audience laughter. Their psychoanalytic theories complement the ideas expressed by the aforementioned theorists.

Bergson’s ideas on the generation of audience laughter also have particular application to theatre and live comic performance.

Genre

In seeking to analyse screenplays through the filter of genre, Neill D. Hicks suggests it may be useful to first examine what is meant by the term. At its simplest, a genre film carries audience expectations of a distinct set of themes, characters and outcomes specific to that genre. A western will feature a hero, a villain (outlaw, gang or Indians) and a homestead or remote town that, by the end of the film, will require rescuing by the hero. The hero, though perhaps a loner and initially ambivalent to the
plight of the townspeople, will learn and demonstrate by the film’s conclusion that ‘some things are worth fighting for.’ Writing a screenplay within a genre locates a specific audience for the film. The audience has enjoyed westerns before and they will go to see yet another in order to experience emotions similar to those evoked by their past western encounters.

Robert McKee is a wildly popular screenwriting instructor who lectures around the world in the art of storytelling and screenwriting. His book, *Story: Substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting* (1999) is a seminal work in screenwriting practice, and was useful in gaining insight into writing to audience genre expectations. While some screenwriters decry the pressure to write to genre, script consultants such as Robert McKee emphasise the advantages of doing so.

While scholars dispute definitions and systems, the audience is already a genre expert. It enters each film with a complex set of anticipations learned through a lifetime of movie going. The genre sophistication of movie-goers presents the writer with this critical challenge: He must not only fulfill audience expectations, or risk their confusion and disappointment, but he must lead their expectations to fresh, unexpected moments, or risk boring them. This two handed trick is impossible without a knowledge of genre that surpasses the audience’s (McKee, 1999, p. 80).

This ‘two handed trick’ is made even more difficult when the screenwriter attempts to fulfill the audience expectations of two distinct genres in the one film.

To write what the audience knows and expects, and yet to keep it fresh and exciting; that is the screenwriter’s challenge. In discussing audience genre awareness, Lisa Dethridge states ‘The audience of a traditional science fiction film will expect to be transported to another world in a space ship or to be shown elements of today’s science in a future context’ (Dethridge, 2003, p. 32). The thriller theorist, Neill D. Hicks asserts ‘The audience has developed an innate anticipation for the context elements it expects a particular genre to satisfy’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 8).

To deny genre conventions is to ignore a pre-defined target market; a recognised audience demographic that is ready and eager to view a new film crafted in the style of a favourite genre. Leo Braudy also argues that audiences have expectations about genre and that these may be a reasonable predictor of ticket sales.

First, genre films forge a deliberate connection between each new instance of the genre and its past tradition and manifestations. Second, genre films, because of their popularity and familiarity have a more powerful impact on their audience – and a highly democratic one – converting the audience into a unified cultural force (Braudy, 1976, p. 430).

From the screenwriter’s point of view, writing within genre carries a sense of security in that the audience expects known character types, themes and events; making the task of creating a story world less random. Dethridge discusses the challenge to the screenwriter of writing to genre:
Above all, you need to be familiar with the requirements of the genre you are working in. For instance, the rules relating to the chronology of a suspense story will be highly specific and technical, while those relating to a drama or comedy will be more transparent and easier to manage (Dethridge, 2003, p. 79).

Writing entirely within the constructs of the genre, however, risks producing a screenplay that is cliché ridden or conformist. Paul Schrader, the American film critic, director and screenwriter, in his *Notes on Film Noir* (Schrader, 1972), argues that not all cinema can be categorised in terms of genre, that some ‘non genre art films’ owe nothing to tradition or audience expectation.

Disagreeing with this proposal, Leo Braudy argues ‘Such absolute creativity is finally a fraud because all art must exist in some relation to forms of the past, whether in contrast or in continuation’ (Braudy, 1976, p. 437).

Audiences bring expectations to the cinema by their knowledge of the Hollywood genre system. As a consequence, screenwriters are compelled to write within or closely to genre, or risk alienating the paying audience. As the product of this study is a screenplay that promises to fulfill the audience expectations of both the comedy and thriller genres, I am compelled to observe genre rules closely.

**Thriller genre theorists**

The selected writers outline their observations of the feature film thriller in terms of screenplay construction, principles, conventions, techniques, sub-genres and the audience experience of suspense.

Neill D. Hicks is a screenwriter, international script consultant and author of several books on the art of genre screenwriting, including *Screenwriting 101: The Essential Craft of Feature Film Writing* (2004) and *Writing the Thriller Film: The Terror Within* (2002). His book *Writing the Thriller Film: The Terror Within* (2002) offers a screenwriter’s framework for the writing of the suspense thriller feature film. As a screenwriter, Neill was the screenwriting consultant and script editor on the box office hits *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995) and *First Strike* (1996). Hicks argues that in order for the audience to experience suspense, the natural laws of life and death must be seen to apply in the screenwriter’s story world (Hicks, 2002). According to Hicks, this environment of realism must be sufficient to convince the audience that the danger to the protagonist is real.

Hicks provides a thematic and structural analysis of the suspense thriller feature film in a form of use to the screenwriter. He offers an overarching framework, his ‘Cosmos of Credibility’ that includes four basic principles important to the thriller genre.

Those principles fall under the headings: Narrative Trajectory, Bounded World, Timescape, and Character Ethos. Hicks’ ‘Cosmos of Credibility’ framework was of significant practical value to the writing of my screenplay and serves as the principal lens through which I examine the thriller genre.
Dr Charles Derry is a Professor at Wright State University, where he has lectured in Film for many years. In his book *The Suspense Thriller – Films in the Shadow of Alfred Hitchcock* (Derry, 1988) and echoed in his doctoral thesis *The Suspense Thriller: A Structural and Psychological Examination of a Film Genre* (Derry, 1978), Derry isolates the primary suspense thriller elements of a diverse range of thriller film ‘types’ and categorises them under six suspense thriller sub-genres. Derry has much to say on the matter of the audience’s *identification* with the thriller protagonist. He defines the types of thriller protagonist found in several thriller sub-genres:

The *thriller of murderous passions*… is organised around the triangular grouping of husband/wife/lover. The central scene is generally the murder of one of the members of the triangle by one or both of the other members (Derry, 1988, p. 63).

The protagonist here is usually the murderer, and, while our sympathies may be with him in part, understanding the motivation for the murder, it is more difficult for the audience to empathise with this character, and so, identification is compromised.

The *political thriller*… is organised around a plot to assassinate a political figure or a revelation of the essential conspiratorial nature of governments and their crimes against their people (Derry, 1988, p. 65).

The protagonist in these films is usually already in a position to pursue investigation of the plot or conspiracy, and, as such, may not be entirely powerless or innocent. Either they have some limited authority or inside knowledge or they are implicated in some fashion. Audience identification with a morally compromised protagonist is minimalised.

The *thriller of acquired identity*… is organized around a protagonist’s acquisition of an unaccustomed identity, his or her behavior in coming to terms with the metaphysical and physical consequences of this identity, and the relationship of this acquisition to a murderous plot (Derry, 1988, p. 65).

Generally, in this scenario, the protagonist has acquired the identity for personal advantage and has run afoul of the new identity’s associations. Sometimes, though, acquired identity can be accidental, as in Hitchcock’s *North by Northwest* (1959).

The *psycho-traumatic thriller*… is organized around the psychotic effects of a past trauma on a protagonist’s current involvement in a love affair and a crime or intrigue. The protagonist is always a victim – generally of some past trauma and often of real villains who take advantage of his or her masochistic guilt. The protagonist may occasionally be a criminal as well (Derry, 1988, p. 65).
Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

The protagonist in this thriller sub-genre starts in a state of extreme guilt or psychological dysfunction. The audience has little choice but to sympathise with him or her; but sympathy is not empathy and may not contribute much to audience suspense.

The thriller of moral confrontation... is organized around an overt antithetical confrontation between a character representing good or innocence and a character representing evil (Derry, 1988, p. 65).

This type of film usually involves a protagonist who has an existing relationship with the antagonist or forces of antagonism, such as; the employee of a nuclear power plant who discovers worker safety violations and places her life at risk to right the wrong, in the feature film Silkwood (1983), or a minor CIA employee who uncovers a company plot to murder all the members of his local branch and must run for his life, in Three Days of the Condor (1975). The final category in Derry’s taxonomy of thrillers carries the potential for maximum audience identification with the protagonist.

The innocent-on-the-run thriller is organised around an innocent victim’s coincidental entry into the midst of global intrigue; the victim often finds him or herself running from both the villains as well as the police. The protagonist proceeds to have an extensive series of adventures, meeting in the process a romantic interest whom he or she must learn to trust and who ultimately helps to provide a change in his or her moral outlook. In the course of the adventures, the innocent victim becomes, of necessity, the detective force. (Derry, 1988, p. 270).

This innocent on the run thriller character best describes the protagonist of my comedy thriller Project Daybreak.

Martin Rubin (1999) argues that the existing body of research in the thriller genre is inadequate to comprehensively define the form. ‘The existence of critical and theoretical writings that deal explicitly with the thriller as a general category (rather than with one particular thriller-related genre, such as detective or horror) is limited (Rubin 1999, p. 9).’ He argues that the thriller, rather than being easily containable within a neat genre box, should be viewed rather as a ‘meta-genre.’

The concept of ‘thriller’ falls somewhere between a genre proper and a descriptive quality that is attached to other, more clearly defined genres – such as spy thriller, detective thriller, horror thriller. There is possibly no such thing as a thriller thriller (Rubin, 1999, p. 4).

Charles Derry observes a lack of critical analysis related to the thriller genre. He suggests this lack has something to do with the runaway success of the auteur director, Alfred Hitchcock.

Thrillers written post-Hitchcock era are almost universally benchmarked against Hitchcock’s films, rather than against the conventions and themes of an identified thriller genre.

Although there exists no real critical vocabulary to deal with these films because they generally have been ignored by theorists, cursorily pigeon-holed, or discussed only in terms of
their creators, these films can nevertheless be studied as a group. Perhaps the most important contributing factor to this critical lack is that Alfred Hitchcock’s reputation as a suspense thriller director has been so great, that any genre concerns have unfortunately been regarded as irrelevant (Derry, 1988, p. 4).

Derry argues that ‘Hitchcock no more owns the suspense thriller than John Ford the western’ and agrees that detailed study in the genre is long overdue (Derry, 1988, p. 4).

**Comedy genre theorists**

I investigated the conditions required for the generation of audience laughter through the filter of Horton’s six comic conventions; Repetition, Inversion, Reciprocal Interference, Disguise and Exaggeration, Interruption and Reaction.

Andrew Horton is the Jeanne H Smith Professor of Film Studies and Director of Film and Video Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He has authored several books on screenwriting, including *Writing the Character Centered Screenplay* (2000) and *Screenwriting for a Global Market* (2004). Horton’s *Laughing Out Loud – Writing the Comedy Centred Screenplay* (2000) is the key text used in my examination of the use of comedy in screenwriting. Among his produced scripts are *Virgina* (1991), *The Dark Side of the Sun* (1989), *Something in Between* (1983) and *The Great American Foot Race* (2002).

Horton suggests that audience laughter is influenced by the construction of a story environment that convinces the audience the protagonist will not get hurt. I examine this proposal in light of the contrary audience state proposed by theorists, such as Hicks, Derry and Harper, for the generation of suspense and thrills in the thriller screenplay.

In addition to this contemporary commentator on film comedy, I examine the writings of the influential French philosopher, Henri Bergson (1859 – 1941). Bergson won the 1927 Nobel Prize ‘in recognition of his rich and vitalizing ideas and the brilliant skill with which they have been presented.’ Among several significant essays on human consciousness, his *Laughter: an essay on the meaning of the comic* offers a theory that he claims explains the conditions required to make an audience laugh (Bergson, 1911).

As Andrew Horton’s work clarifies and extends Bergson’s own arguments for the generation of audience laughter, I focused chiefly on Horton’s discussion of the topic.

Bergson proposes that laughter is made possible when the character’s natural actions are overlaid with ‘the mechanical’ aspects of an automaton, or ‘robot’ as we might conceive of the term today. The robot has no humanity, no soul – it cannot feel pain and is therefore ‘unworthy’ of our concern.
When a ‘mechanism is superimposed upon life’ (Bergson, 1911, p. 16b), as in Bergson’s example of a public official undergoing the solemnity of ceremony, the stiff and starched formality of his actions suggest to us the unnatural motion of a marionette puppet. His humanity momentarily forgotten, we are free to laugh at him if he suddenly falls off the stage. At such a point, we are not emotionally connected to the character and may review the incident from an intellectual and unsympathetic viewpoint. Because this character is momentarily perceived as a puppet, or robot, we do not perceive he/it feels pain as a result of the fall. We laugh, because this is comedy, and in comedy nobody gets hurt.

What, therefore, incited laughter was the momentary transformation of a person into a thing, if one considers the image from this standpoint (Bergson, 1911, p. 20a).

But what if, instead of the puppet public official getting up and brushing down its suit, it lay there, still, with a pool of blood slowly spreading from beneath its head?

Bergson argues that the audience would stop laughing. With the appearance of blood, the puppet becomes a real person and our empathy is re-engaged. The atmosphere conducive to laughter, the writer’s pact with the audience that ‘nobody gets hurt,’ is broken.

Consider the example of a Punch and Judy puppet show.

Time and again Judy thumps Punch over the head with a mean looking club, drawing riotous laughter from children and adults alike. If this activity was recreated with a cast of human beings the reaction of the audience would be quite different. It is only by the audience’s ability to dissociate from character realism that allows them to laugh at an otherwise violent scenario. Bergson argues that laughter is obstructed where an emotional connection exists between the audience and the character.

This ‘de-humanisation’ of characters in the comedy environment may have important implications for my comedy thriller screenplay protagonist.
Screenwriting structure

The discussion around comedy and thriller genre themes may be considered in context with the structural and narrative paradigms characteristic of Hollywood screenplays. Professional screenwriting instructors such as Syd Field, Linda Seger and Lisa Dethridge each outline seven structural plot points that are recognized as being integral to contemporary screenwriting practice.

Dr Lisa Dethridge is the author of *Writing Your Screenplay* (2003) and lectures in screenwriting and media communications at RMIT University, the American Film Institute, the Writers Program at the University of California and New York University. She has served as a script consultant for Fox, Warner, Working Title Films, MTV, CBS, NBC, Granada, SBS, the Australian Film Commission and ABC Australia.

The table at Figure 1 gives a visual representation of the seven structural plot points described by Dethridge. These seven structural plot points are embedded in the classic three act structure characteristic of classic Hollywood screenwriting practice and theatre based plays.

*Psychoanalytic theories of suspense*

As my aim is to generate audience suspense at planned points in my screenplay, a psychoanalytic examination of the audience state of suspense, I believe, is warranted. Altan Löker examines the psychological state of suspense experienced by audiences in the context of the suspense thriller feature film (Löker, 1976, 2005). Underlying each instance of audience suspense, Löker argues, is a disquieting sense of ‘free floating anxiety’ generated by a feeling of repressed guilt.
Löker proposes that audience suspense is induced by the experience of guilt over the current plight of the protagonist. This ‘audience guilt’ relies on the screenwriter first having created an illusion of realism in the story world.

Löker’s dominant idea here is that the spectator’s increased participation in film [as opposed to a stage play] derives from film’s basic realistic sense; and it is this participation in the fictional experience which promotes suspense (Derry, 1988, p. 42).

Löker reasons that the limited physical scope of a stage play restricts the audience experience of story realism, and that the generation of audience suspense is largely reliant on this willing acceptance of realism. Löker argues that the audience closely identifies with the protagonist early in the classic thriller film. An inciting incident occurs which threatens the equilibrium of the protagonist’s life. Though they identify with the protagonist, the audience makes a conscious wish for him to make choices that will advance the action of the story.

This places the main character in peril, which results in the audience feeling vaguely guilty and partly responsible for his predicament.

This guilt is experienced as a result of the audience’s wish for screen action. Löker asserts this carries an expectation of punishment in the viewer’s mind – punishment for the protagonist and, vicariously, for themselves. The ‘responsibility’ felt for the protagonist’s predicament intensifies audience identification and induces an agonizing protraction of the ‘flight or fight’ response in the audience.

If the cause of the suspense is the audience’s guilty wish and the guilt that it provokes, the effect is of an audience state of ‘free floating anxiety’ over the possible outcome for the protagonist; the threat of punishment. Löker borrows the term ‘free floating anxiety’ from Freud (1894, cited in Löker 2005, p. 19) to describe the tense, unrelenting conviction that punishment is very near, and the ‘fight or flight’ response will need to be enacted. The protraction of this audience state produces the discomfort and tension Löker identifies as suspense. Derry would appear to agree with Löker.

Suspense is our continued hesitation in choosing between two different actions, both of which create tensions. In a sense, suspense is a complex dialectic of the continuing conflicts engendered by our desires and our fears (Derry, 1988, p. 50).

Suspense, then, is a simple word that may suffice for discussion of the many types of sustained audience anxiety experienced in the thriller.

Curiously, though, Löker considers Derry’s notion that empathy for the protagonist contributes to audience suspense as ‘idealistic and self-ennobling.’ Rather, Löker contends that fear in the viewer is not primarily generated through empathy with the main character, but that they respond anxiously to onscreen events that invoke fear in the viewer personally.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Thus, if the protagonist wanders into a dark cave, lights a torch and finds himself covered from head to feet in hairy tarantulas, the audience is going to shiver self-consciously, as a fear of spiders is an almost universal one.

Derry comments on Altan Löker’s analysis of film suspense.

In general, Löker’s book is a fascinating conjecture on the psychological underpinnings of suspense. … It attempts to get at the suspense thriller not through a strict content analysis but through an analysis of the psychological relationship between films and their audiences (Derry 1988, p. 41).

Löker’s psychoanalytic theory of the generation of audience suspense has been criticised by thriller theorists, such as Noël Carroll (Carroll, 1984, pp. 65-89). Derry, though, disputes Carroll’s comments on Löker’s theory of audience guilt in the suspense thriller:

Although Carroll rejects without refuting Altan Löker’s theories as “thoroughly unsupported speculations,” his own essay ultimately demonstrates the need for some psychoanalytic theory which will take into account the psyche of the spectator and the spectator’s response (Derry, 1988, p. 41).

Derry, though, doubts that evidence can be presented for much of Löker’s theorising. He states ‘Thus, although Löker’s argument is elaborated upon a Freudian basis, his argument is basically theoretical, rather than demonstrable (Derry, 1988, p. 41).’

After declaring Löker’s work as ‘theoretical musings – intuitive and unproven’ Derry insists it is nevertheless ‘an important accomplishment relevant to our understanding of film suspense (Derry, 1988, p. 54).’ He concludes ‘For the moment, though, Löker’s theories remain just that: Fascinating theories upon which others will have to build (Derry, 1988, p. 54).’

In the second edition of Film and Suspense (2006), Löker devotes an entire chapter in response to his critics; specifically, Charles Derry.

So, Derry believes that reliable knowledge about films and film suspense can be obtained only through the strict analysis of the contents of films, which yields only empirical knowledge about contents. He ignores that there is also a theoretical method of scientific investigation and that theoretical knowledge is demonstrable, although not from deduction from data (Löker, 2005, 2nd ed. p. 114).

In chapter eight of Film and Suspense (Löker, 2006) Löker directly challenges Derry’s methodology for his analysis of the thriller genre. He further refutes Derry’s assertion that his ‘audience guilt’ theory of audience suspense cannot be tested, and contends that his theory is provable in ways other than by ‘mere’ content analysis. Löker also challenges Derry’s notion that ‘suspense arises from audience awaiting the subconscious expectations of genre to be fulfilled’ (Derry, 1988).
This notion suggests the audience is aware a major character is going to die, and waiting for the inevitable to come is suspenseful.

Derry does not explain what suspense is and how it is related to those [audience] expectations. Although he tries to understand how suspense is generated and talks about sub-conscious expectations, both of which belong to the spectator’s mind, he analyzes only the contents of films and not the contents of the spectator’s mind. He therefore loses the chance of understanding what suspense is and how it is generated (Löker, 2005, 2nd ed. p. 118).

As the inclusion of a comedy element into a thriller screenplay framework threatens to subvert the potential for audience suspense, it is important that I understand Löker’s *psychological* underpinnings for suspense.

Löker’s original proposal states that audience suspense arises *solely* from guilt and the audience’s personal fears of the onscreen action. It is difficult, however, to find sufficient justification for Löker’s rejection of the part empathy plays in the generation of audience suspense. Unfortunately, Löker’s relentless pursuit of a *singular* cause for audience tension in the thriller threatens to limit the value of his work to the screenwriter.

The general disagreement over what suspense is or how it is generated in an audience nevertheless assists me in my examination of the functional relationship between comedy and suspense. Though opinion over Löker’s theory ranges from ‘somewhat useful’ to outright rejection, I have not encountered any thorough third party examination of Löker’s ‘guilt principle’ involving screenplay case studies. Therefore, as I explore the relationship between audience and protagonist in my two case studies, I will take care to scan for instances of Löker’s theory in play.

Ralph Harper is a noted philosopher, writer and theologian who has written many books exploring existential themes in modern literary forms. In his book *The World of the Thriller*, Harper categorizes the various forms of the thriller (Harper, 1974). He proposes various psychoanalytic and philosophical reasons for the genre’s popularity with audiences and contributed to my understanding of the relationship between the audience and thriller protagonist. Of note, without reference to Löker, he agrees that audience restlessness, born of feelings of guilt, may induce feelings of dread and anxiety in the audience.

No doubt there is some measure of guilt mixed with our restlessness. Need we assume [however] that there is nothing but guilt, or, further, that this is the deepest explanation of the restlessness that is the motive behind the world of the thriller? (Harper, 1974, p. 98).
Combining comedy and suspense

Early film-makers sometimes achieved success in the blending of suspense with laughter where contemporary screenwriters fail. The silent film actor/writer/director Harold Lloyd was adept at blending laughter with thrills. His memorable silent film *Safety Last* (1923) was a prime example.

In the movie, Harold, a naïve department store salesman struggling to find enough money to marry his sweetheart, is offered a thousand dollars if he can find someone to climb the outside of the twelve story department building as a publicity stunt to aid the struggling business.

When the stunt man Harold has lined up to perform the stunt goes missing, Harold is forced to make the climb himself. A nail-biting series of dare-devil sequences follow as he strives to prove his worth and claim the girl. As he climbs the building he encounters a new obstacle at each floor. Audiences sat sweaty palmed as he negotiated the last and most suspenseful obstacle – a giant clock – from whose minute hand he famously hangs.

Lloyd’s protagonist employs nothing of Bergson’s ‘mechanical puppet’ or the exaggeration typical of many comic characters. Lloyd’s hero is an everyman; a little innocent, naïve and bookish, but a real person. His character offers no barriers to audience identification. The fear of height is an almost universal audience fear, and Lloyd placed a character the audience could identify with in a deadly situation.

Such realism caused some critics of the time to speculate that the film’s tangible sense of danger would dampen its comedy – the audience members would be too busy biting their nails to laugh (Rubin, 1999, p. 67).

The audience watching *Safety Last* is trapped within a state of ‘free floating anxiety,’ between the opposing possibilities of thrill and laughter, awaiting the inevitable next obstacle. Lloyd’s protagonist exists in a story world characterized by realism, but to whom wild and crazy things happen as a consequence of the central dramatic problem.

Henri Bergson’s theory of audience laughter provides the psychoanalytic counterpoint to Altan Löker’s theories on the generation of audience suspense in the thriller.

The contradictory conditions writers advance for the specific aims of the thriller and comedy genres suggested it would be useful to examine audience genre expectations to gain an understanding of the effect of their blending.
Conclusions

In this introductory chapter I identified theorists in the thriller and comedy film genres whose collective discussion suggest the difficulty of blending the two genres.

Though various writers have contributed to a working definition of the thriller film genre, none have attempted a thorough examination of comedy thriller, beyond identifying it as a problematic combination.

Of these writers, Neill D. Hicks offers a writing framework and set of principles of use to the writer of the thriller screenplay. His ‘Cosmos of Credibility’ for the thriller encompasses four principles: Narrative Trajectory, Bounded World, Timescape, and Character Ethos. These four principles serve as the primary lens through which I focus my examination of the blended comedy thriller screenplay.

Dr Lisa Dethridge’s discussion of the seven structural plot points of the contemporary Hollywood screenplay provides a solid framework within which to analyse the principles, conventions and techniques of the thriller and comedy genres under examination; as do the observations of screenwriting consultant, Robert McKee.

According to the examined writers the conditions required by the screenwriter to generate audience suspense appear to be diametrically opposed to those required to induce audience laughter; the difference between an audience perceiving an environment of unreality or one of reality.

Two writers separately propose underpinning psychoanalytical theory on the conditions required to evoke laughter and induce fear in an audience; Henri Bergson and Altan Löker. As this study aims to shed light on the screenwriting techniques that may provoke specific emotional responses in the audience of a comedy thriller, the inclusion of such psychoanalytic writers was deemed appropriate.

In the next chapter I examine theory that helps me to describe and define the principles, conventions and techniques of the thriller feature film screenplay.
Chapter 2: Examining the thriller and comedy genres

Question 1a: According to Hicks, how may we understand the principles, conventions and techniques of the thriller screenplay?

In the introduction to this study I identified key writers who have contributed definitions of the thriller and comedy feature film genres. In this chapter I examine theory that assists in the definition of the principles, conventions and techniques routinely employed in the thriller feature film screenplay.

Neill D. Hicks puts forward a set of four conditions/principles that he asserts must be met before a credible thriller genre story world is achieved. These principles assist in the creation of a story world that conveys realism and a sense of danger to the audience. Hicks calls this his ‘Cosmos of Credibility’ and it consists of these four structural principles:

- The Narrative Trajectory
- The Bounded World
- The Timescape
- The Character Ethos

Hicks states that, for the timeframe of the thriller movie, the audience must willingly ‘suspend their disbelief’ in the fabricated onscreen story world; to grant a level of belief in the reality of the characters. To assist the audience in this suspension of disbelief, the writer must ensure that the constructed story world of the screenplay offers a plausible facsimile of reality.

To sell them on that world, the writer promises to tell the story within limits, that is, to establish a substitute reality that the audience can easily accept for the time being. This Cosmos of Credibility is composed of a Narrative Trajectory, a Bounded World, the Timescape and a Character Ethos that are consistent within a given genre (Hicks, 2002, p. 8).

Hicks offers his ‘Cosmos of Credibility’ as a framework under which screenwriters may observe the internal consistency of a specific genre. Hicks asserts that the rules of the thriller universe must be consistent. The thriller audience is encouraged to accept that all that happens in a thriller could actually happen in real life. If a fantasy or wildly comic element is introduced it endangers the audience’s perception of the realism of the story. For example: if a thriller antagonist is possessed of superhuman powers, the credibility of the thriller realism is ruptured. This violates the audience’s expectation of the thriller genre and threatens to disrupt their willing ‘suspension of disbelief.’ The result may diminish the audience’s experience of suspense.
If the consistency is broken, if the Cosmos of Credibility [for the thriller] is ruptured, the audience loses not only its belief in the special reality of the story, but its trust in the storyteller as well (Hicks, 2002, p. 8).

Hicks argues that if the audience witnesses the protagonist take a hit that would fell a real person then they will lose their trust in the writer to sustain the realism of the story world. Without the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief, suspense will be difficult to generate. As such, thrillers based in a fantasy story world must work harder to achieve audience suspense.

**Hicks’ 1st principle of the thriller; Narrative Trajectory**

Hicks’ ‘Narrative Trajectory’ is the overarching structure that establishes a sense of completeness for the story (Hicks, 2002, p. 28). It is defined and driven by the protagonist’s journey; the problem the protagonist is presented with, how the protagonist attempts to overcome the problem and how, finally, the problem is resolved. This structure is described by Hicks, allegorically, as the flight path of an arrow.

![Diagram of Narrative Trajectory](image)

**Attraction** (the shot arrow) is identified as the point where the audience takes an interest in the predicament of the protagonist.

**Anticipation** (the high-point of the arrow’s arc) defines the middle act where the audience expects an escalation of conflict and tension between the protagonist and the forces of antagonism.

**Satisfaction** (where the arrow lands) is what the audience experiences when the protagonist overcomes internal as well as external obstacles to defeat the forces of antagonism or to resolve the central dramatic problem.

Suspense is generated between the shooting and the landing of the arrow. It is the **Anticipation** that is the fertile space for the generation of audience suspense.

The Narrative Trajectory corresponds with the classic three act structure of the contemporary Hollywood screenplay (Dethridge, 2012). Hicks’ Attraction equates to Act One, his Anticipation to Act Two and Satisfaction to Act Three.
According to Hicks, the audience is ‘attracted’ to the protagonist’s predicament as it occurs in Act One. He tells us that the point of Anticipation (situated in Act Two) is where the conflict between the main character and the antagonist reaches new heights and levels of complexity. Hicks (and Derry) suggest the audience’s ‘fear of what is to come’ contributes to a state of suspense:

Tension builds because the actions taken by the characters do not produce the expected results, and therefore the characters must make new decisions that will have new unknown results. It is the pressure of the unknown that creates suspense for the audience (Hicks, 2003, p. 32).

In other words, actions taken by the protagonist to right the wrong only makes things worse, increasing audience anxiety and suspense. As tension in the Narrative Trajectory mounts in Act Two, it is important that the audience identifies with the protagonist and their predicament. As the writer Ralph Harper argues:


Hicks argues that if the protagonist and predicament meet his thriller criteria the audience is given an opportunity to imagine their own reaction to crisis. Ralph Harper agrees:

The thriller appeals directly to the reader’s dreams of decisive, successful action in a situation of significance beyond his destiny (Harper, 1974, p. 103).

The audience is invited to ‘play act’ the role of the protagonist. Martin Rubin, writing on genre, quotes the British communications professor, Jerry Palmer³:

Palmer insists that the thriller hero monopolize the reader’s sympathy and allegiance. We must approve of the hero’s actions and adopt his moral perspective to the virtual exclusion of all others; this unequivocal desire to see the hero succeed is what, in Palmer’s view, creates thriller suspense (Rubin, 1999, p. 11).

Audience identification with the protagonist is important to the audience’s experience of Anticipation, under Hicks’ Narrative Trajectory for the thriller.

In Act Three the audience anticipates Hicks’ Satisfaction via the success of the protagonist as he/she heroically defeats the antagonist. Hicks says this success must come as a result of real character growth. The protagonist must be changed a little, or a lot, by the magnitude of the opposition they have overcome.
Because the antagonist is stronger than the main character, the hero must overcome internal fears as well as external obstacles. Only through character growth is the audience’s anticipation satisfied by a complete story that, unlike the chaos of normal life, makes sense out of capricious reality (Hicks, 2002, p. 32).

Hicks’ observes that the audience sits in tense anticipation of the fate of the protagonist with whom they identify.

**Hicks’ 2nd principle of the thriller; Bounded World**

According to Hicks, the ‘Bounded World’ is the confined area that the protagonist is constrained by in the thriller. This confined area may be geological, physical or even psychological in nature. It defines the limited avenues of escape for the protagonist and is a prime device for the generation of panic in the protagonist, and suspense in the audience. ‘[The] Bounded World is the environment and objects that impact the physical actions and psychological responses of the characters’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 28).

The Bounded World is the cage the protagonist must fight their way out of.

The restrictions may be physical, such as a prison, or behavioural, such as a military or corporate organization, or both. In each case, though, there are strict boundaries within which the character is expected to conduct affairs, and outside of which the character may not stray (Hicks, p. 43).

An example of Hicks’ Bounded World is plain to see in the plot of the space based thriller *Alien* (1979). Adrift in the vastness of space, the plot of *Alien* plays out within the confines of the space mining vessel *Nostromo*. Here, the crew, with nowhere to run, is hunted mercilessly by an inhuman antagonist. By the climax, screenwriter Dan O’Bannon had manoeuvred the protagonist into an even tighter Bounded World. The protagonist, Ripley, climbs into a cramped escape pod, only to have to battle it out with the alien in an area no larger than the average living room. The tension builds significantly with the loss of escape options. The writer attempts to induce an audience state akin to the primal ‘fight or flight’ response. If there is nowhere left to run, the person must turn and fight the aggressor.

A further example of Hicks’ Bounded World is evident in the suspense thriller film, *The Panic Room* (2002). The film’s protagonist, Meg, moves into a four story house with her twelve year old daughter. The house has been outfitted with an impenetrable ‘panic room, a state of the art security system, and a ‘yet to be connected’ emergency phone line. On the night the two move in, the house is broken into by three desperate men. Meg wakes her daughter and they lock themselves in the panic room, in which they are ‘bound’ for the duration of the story. Desson Thompson reviews *The Panic Room* for The Washington Post:
The movie, which suggests a combination of "Wait Until Dark" and "Rear Window," not only takes your breath away on an aesthetic level, it eloquently evokes the mother's and daughter's vulnerability (Thompson, 2002).

This screenplay presents a frightening but plausible story scenario and readily summons the claustrophobic panic invoked by an extremely small Bounded World. Audience empathy for the protagonist is intensified by a heightened sense of their vulnerability. For example, in *Wait Until Dark* (1967) the protagonist is not only a slightly built young woman, and much less physically powerful than her stalker, she is blind. In *Rear Window* (1954), the protagonist is confined to his room by the inconvenience of a broken leg and he is unfit to defend himself from a murderous antagonist. In *The Panic Room*, not only is the protagonist no physical match for her attackers, she has an ill daughter in respiratory distress. All of the above protagonists present as ordinary everyday people with whom the audience may easily identify. Audience empathy is intensified by the writer creating characters with an additional handicap and offering them no apparent avenue for escape; Hicks Bounded World of the thriller protagonist.

**Hicks’ 3rd principle of the thriller: Timescape**

Hicks asserts the screenwriter’s observance of the thriller Timescape principle is critical to the generation of audience suspense. He argues that human beings need a sense of an expected future in order to remain sane. The need to predict tomorrow and next week’s events, even in terms of the weather, fulfills our hunger for security and provides us with the comfort born of certainty. Hicks asks:

> But what if there is no future? What if the mind is so engorged with fear that it cannot even conceive of tomorrow? What if there is only an unrelieved, excruciating, adrenalin-garroted now? (Hicks, 2002, p. 85).

Unrelieved suspense may exhaust the audience just as it does the protagonist. But what is suspense? In seeking a definition, Charles Derry quotes the French crime writers Boileau-Narcejac, in their book *Le Roman Policier*, when they asked the question ‘if we call this concept ‘suspense,’ what exactly is it that is being suspended?’ Their answer was:

> Time. During those moments that suspense is operative, time seems to extend itself, and each second provides a kind of torture for a spectator who is anxious to have his or her anticipations foiled or fulfilled (Derry, 1988, p. 32).

When death may strike at any second a minute can seem an eternity. Hicks’ Timescape may also see a moment of terror stretched into an excruciatingly long period of sustained anxiety. Altan Löker (Löker, 1975, 1st ed.; 2006, 2nd ed.) defines the anxiety experienced by the audience as a type of fear experienced in the presence of ‘dangers of insufficiently known origin and type.’
If the danger does not provoke action within a reasonable period of time, the feeling persists as an uncomfortable state of ‘free floating anxiety’ (Löker, 2005, p. 17). It is this ‘free floating anxiety’ that Löker identifies as ‘suspense’ in the thriller film. Derry summarises Löker’s theory of film suspense:

Tension, related to conflict and often accompanied by stasis, becomes “the psychological state of holding energy in a condition ready for action, mental or motor” (Derry, 1988, p. 48).

Derry describes that anxiety filled moment a person experiences between making the decision to flee immediate danger or to stand and fight. Whether the aim is short duration terror or sustained anxiety, audience suspense is influenced by the writer’s conscious manipulation of time experienced in the thriller. ‘[The] Timescape is the chronological and psychological time frame in which a story takes place’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 28).

Hicks points out that thrillers typically play out within very strict and narrow timeframes. A common device for increasing tension in a thriller, for instance, is the displaying of a digital countdown on a detonator. As the threat to the protagonist becomes more immediate, their mental state may build from alarm, through fear to outright terror as time runs out. Hicks cites Dr Bruce Perry to explain the progressive nature of the neuropsychology of panic.

The human panic reaction occurs in an observable, unremitting progression where successively more primitive areas of the brain take over the responsibility for controlling behavior until the sense of time is virtually destroyed (Hicks, 2002, p. 85).

The table below illustrates this progression, and can be applied to the psychology of the Thriller protagonist.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CALM</th>
<th>AROUSAL</th>
<th>ALARM</th>
<th>FEAR</th>
<th>TERROR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neocortex</td>
<td>Subcortex</td>
<td>Limbic</td>
<td>Mid brain</td>
<td>Brainstem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended future</td>
<td>Days/Hours</td>
<td>Hours/Minutes</td>
<td>Minutes/seconds</td>
<td>Loss of sense of time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Hicks: ‘This tyranny of fear causes even the most rational characters to act irrationally as the reptilian brain of survival knocks the rational brain out of the box’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 85). Hicks considers the compressed timeframe an essential element of the thriller genre ‘Regardless of the supposed timeline of the story… all Thrillers seem to take place over extremely compressed time spans’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 84).

Each Bounded World sequence is coupled with a ‘ticking clock’ countdown in line with Hicks’ Timescape principle for the generation of audience suspense. During her space walk, astronaut Ryan’s space shuttle is destroyed by debris from a deliberately exploded Russian satellite and she is cast adrift in space.

She is trapped within her EVA space suit, the smallest Bounded World imaginable, with mere minutes remaining until her oxygen tank empties. This is Hicks’ Bounded World principle working in rhythm with his Timescape principle to generate stress in the protagonist and audience.

Seconds from unconsciousness and death, Ryan gains entry into the abandoned International Space Station, with the intention of boarding its Soyuz escape pod and returning to Earth. Though larger than her space suit, the station still represents a Bounded World from which she must quickly escape – as the debris field that destroyed her space shuttle has already orbited the Earth and will strike the station in seven minutes. Add to this the fire that now rips through the station’s cramped living quarters and you have Hicks’ Bounded World again, coupled with a compressed time span in which she must escape the twin threat of the approaching ballistic debris field and station fire.

Her only escape is to yet another Bounded World, the tiny one man Soyuz craft docked with the station. And so the story continues. Ryan lurches from one Bounded World scenario to another, each with a specific compressed time span in which she must escape to the next one. Additionally, every ninety minutes, wherever Ryan finds herself, the speeding debris field slams into her. The thriller clock ticks relentlessly throughout Gravity’s 91 minute running time. Hicks’ Bounded World and Timescape principles are manifest in every one of the film’s sequences.

The compressed time span technique employed in the suspense thriller cannot, however, be said to have originated with the work of its greatest 20th century proponent, Hitchcock. As Dethridge states:

Aristotle’s wisdom about portraying drama within a narrow, manageable time frame is still observed as the key to dramatic suspense in mainstream cinema. For instance, the thriller, drama, action and suspense genres tend to work within a highly coherent, linear chronological style where the writer observes Aristotle’s unity of space and time (Dethridge, 2003, p. 87).

Aristotle also declares that the action and events of the story must make sense according to the laws that govern our everyday lives. This agrees with the thriller reliance on realism and a believable, consistent story world that Hicks’ four principles for the thriller help to define.

A factor that may contribute further to the audience suspense generated by Hicks’ Bounded World and Timescape principles is the technique of permitting the audience ‘foreknowledge of the danger’ (Hicks, 2002; Derry, 1988; Löker, 2006). Derry discusses how the audience’s foreknowledge of danger contributes to suspense, with an example given by Hitchcock.
Chapter 2: Examining the thriller and comedy film genres

The example begins by considering two men coming into a room, sitting at a table, and carrying on a long conversation. At the end of the conversation, a bomb suddenly goes off and kills both of them. Certainly this course of events would provide a surprise; and while the conversation was going on, the spectator may also have responded with curiosity as to where the sequence was heading (Derry, 1988, p. 32).

Here, Hitchcock makes an important distinction between giving the audience a quick thrill, and holding them in suspenseful anticipation of the thrill.

Imagine, on the other hand, that this sequence is preceded by a scene in which a third man comes into the room, unseen by the first two men, and hides the bomb under the table. Because extra information has been provided to the spectator, but not provided to the first two men, the long conversation scene would be virtually transformed (Derry, 1988, p. 32).

In this instance, the audience is given foreknowledge of the danger. Derry argues that at some point in most thrillers, the audience is given more information than the protagonist, contributing to audience suspense.

Instead of asking the general question “What will happen next?” the spectator would now ask questions such as “When will the bomb go off?” and “Will the two men get out of the room in time?” Every time one of the men ended a sentence, the spectator would anticipate a termination of the conversation; indeed, the conversation would take on a new meaning because it ironically would become significantly irrelevant (Derry, 1988, p. 32).

Here, audience tension is generated by foreknowledge of a bomb under the table and the short timeframe before it explodes and kills the protagonist. Hicks’ Timescape – the compressed time span of the thriller – combines with audience foreknowledge to build suspense. The audience is aware of the danger, but the protagonist is not. The audience is conscious of the compressed time span and anxiously count off the seconds until detonation.

In another example, a protagonist in a thriller is held in a police interrogation chamber under suspicion of murder. After gentle grilling, a police officer leaves and is replaced by the real killer posing as a police detective. The audience recognizes the killer but the protagonist doesn’t. The killer locks the chamber door and sits opposite the protagonist. Audience suspense is heightened by foreknowledge of the danger. They are further aware of the danger posed to the protagonist by the Bounded World of the chamber and by the antagonist’s Character Ethos.

These examples suggest that the protagonist need not be aware of the dangers posed by Hicks’ Bounded World, Timescape or Character Ethos, as it is often enough that the audience is aware of them. Additionally, a subliminal sense of responsibility for the danger the protagonist subsequently faces as a result of their ‘wish for action’ may induce Löker’s ‘audience guilt’ principle.
Hicks’ 4th principle of the thriller; Character Ethos

The ‘Character Ethos’ is one of Hicks’ four organising principles of the suspense thriller that defines the psychology and moral codes of the protagonist and antagonist. ‘Character Ethos is the moral code that influences characters’ dramatic choices’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 28). The screenwriter should clearly delineate the character ethos of the protagonist to assist the audience with their decision to identify with him/her.

Crafting a protagonist who is identifiable as an ordinary person aids in this identification process. The audience must be able to relate the ‘ordinariness’ of the protagonist’s life to their own. Utilising an international spy, like the invulnerable James Bond, or superhero as protagonist would be unlikely to achieve the requisite level of audience identification. No ordinary viewer (who isn’t actually a spy or super hero) could imagine themselves as participants in the action of the story. As Hicks’ argues:

Thriller films require the making of choices that explore the main character’s doubts and weaknesses of “What should I do?” At the same time, the audience is also trying to figure out how they would respond in the same circumstances because the choices arise from a shared ethos, which keeps the audience intensely identified with the protagonist’s dilemma (Hicks, 2002, p. 96).

Hicks underlines eight factors that define the Character Ethos of the thriller protagonist (Hicks, p. 97 – 104):

1. The Thriller protagonist is an everyman thrust into an extreme situation
2. The Thriller protagonist does not possess martial skills
3. The Thriller protagonist does not come equipped with official sanction
4. The Thriller protagonist is baffled by the dilemma
5. The Thriller protagonist is a dabbler in life, a person who is marked by the avoidance of commitment
6. The Thriller protagonist has the simple objective of trying to stay alive
7. The Thriller protagonist discovers that personal salvation is also the only method to save society from a larger menace or conspiracy
8. The Thriller protagonist has untested personal courage, honor, or principles

These eight factors comply with Derry’s description of the ‘innocent on the run’ thriller protagonist. I apply these protagonist factors to the two case studies in later chapters. Hicks contends that drama, being about conflict, requires a fight between opposing forces. How each character engages the fight has to do with their personal character ethos. The antagonist must also be clearly defined by his/her moral choices.
While the protagonist is, indeed, trying to escape death, the choices available do not include the same options as those of the antagonist. Because the antagonist comes from a different moral ethos, however, the single-minded pursuit of a goal permits any action, including murder, in the achievement of that goal (Hicks, 2002, p. 107).

Hicks points out that the character psychology of the thriller antagonist is as important as that of the protagonist. His ‘Cosmos of Credibility’ for the thriller dictates that the antagonist presents as a credible menace to the protagonist and to society. The antagonist is willing to kill, but the protagonist is permitted to kill only as a last resort to save his life. This highlights a vital aspect of the ‘innocent-on-the-run’ thriller; in order that they may survive, the protagonist must change. Not only does the thriller protagonist battle an external antagonist, but an internal one, as well.

A good Thriller story, then, is satisfying to the audience not merely because the main character escapes death or puts a stop to the malevolence of the protagonist, but because in achieving these ends the character is required by the pressures of the story to grow – to overcome the terror within (Hicks, 2002, p. 124).

As the protagonist is changed by his clash with the antagonist, so too, is the audience in some small way. The protagonist in *Project Daybreak* is terrified of radiation, but in the climax, he must face dread fear in order to defeat the antagonist and save the community. The audience shares his victory, as if they had been fighting side by side with him all the way. The protagonist in *Gravity* (2013) is terrified of the openness of space, but she must conquer her fear if she is to survive and give meaning to the character who sacrificed his life so that she may.

**Conclusions**

As a result of this examination I draw certain conclusions regarding the principles, conventions and techniques of the suspense thriller feature film screenplay.

The identified writers agree it is useful for the screenwriter to observe audience genre expectations. Genre helps define a target audience and the potential of return for financial investment in the screenwriter’s product (McKee, 1999; Dethridge, 2003; Derry, 1988; Hicks, 2002; Horton, 2000). To write what the audience knows and expects, and yet, to keep the plot or action fresh and exciting, is the screenwriter’s challenge.

According to Hicks, the generation of suspense in the thriller relies on audience acceptance of the credibility, or realism, of the story world and its central dramatic problem. According to this theory of realism, the audience must believe that the protagonist can be seriously hurt or killed. Hicks’ four principles, under his Cosmos of Credibility framework, contribute directly to this perception of realism and to audience suspense.
Hicks’ 1st principle of the thriller, Narrative Trajectory, traces the audience’s interest in the protagonist and their dramatic problem.

His 2nd principle of the thriller, Bounded World, contributes to the audience’s experience of suspense by trapping the protagonist in a confined area out of which they must escape to survive.

Hicks’ 3rd principle of the thriller, Timescape, sets a compressed timeframe in which the protagonist must execute escape from their Bounded World. This ‘countdown to doom’ combines with the other principles to contribute to the state of audience suspense.

Hicks’ 4th principle of the thriller, Character Ethos, contributes to audience suspense by drawing a contrast between the moral codes of the protagonist and the antagonist; the antagonist is willing to kill the protagonist in order to achieve his aims.

Complementing Hicks’ four thriller principles are certain psychological factors that underpin the state of audience suspense. Derry and Löker contend that audience suspense is intensified when the protagonist is trapped in a psychological state of indecision between two opposite but drastic actions; both of which are unpleasant to contemplate. I have observed that an additional psychological factor in the generation of suspense may be the audience’s subliminal experience of guilt over the protagonist’s predicament (Löker, 2006; Derry, 1988). Audience foreknowledge of the dangers sharpens this sense of guilt and intensifies the audience experience of suspense.

From this examination I conclude the following.

The writer’s observance of Hicks’ four principles of the thriller: Narrative Trajectory; Bounded World; Timescape; Character Ethos; underpins audience suspense and contributes to an atmosphere of story realism. This atmosphere of realism is a pre-requisite for the generation of audience suspense in the thriller screenplay. The audience’s acceptance of the realism of the story environment contributes to their perception that the characters can get hurt or killed.

Complying with Hicks’ imperative for realism, the thriller protagonist is a character with whom the audience can easily identify (Hicks, 2002; Derry, 1988; Harper, 1974; Löker, 2006). The audience must be convinced of the realism of the thriller protagonist and his central dramatic problem in order to experience empathy and a shared state of suspense.

Psychoanalytic factors, such as the audience’s subliminal guilt over the protagonist’s predicament, may contribute to the suspense experienced by thriller audiences (Löker, 2006).

The table at Figure 2 summarises key points of what I have learned of the thriller screenplay framework. In the next chapter I will examine theory that helps to describe and define the principles, conventions and techniques of the comedy feature film screenplay.
Chapter 2: Examining the thriller and comedy film genres

The thriller screenplay framework:
Creating an environment of realism where the laws of life and death apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act One</th>
<th>Act Two</th>
<th>Act Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set-up</td>
<td>Inciting incident</td>
<td>1st Act turning point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes the realistic world of the protagonist’s everyday life.</td>
<td>Protagonist crosses paths with the antagonist and establishes the central problem.</td>
<td>The point of no return. Some action compounds the central problem and there is no going back.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mid-point</th>
<th>2nd Act turning point</th>
<th>Climax</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The protagonist fails to defeat the antagonist; all hope seems lost.</td>
<td>Protagonist finds strength to fight back and climb out of the pit of despair.</td>
<td>The final battle with the antagonist. The protagonist uses everything he has learned to defeat the antagonist.</td>
<td>Shows the protagonist’s life after the problem has been solved.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hicks’ four principles of the thriller

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Narrative Trajectory</th>
<th>Bounded World</th>
<th>Timescape</th>
<th>Character Ethos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Audience is Attracted to protagonist’s problem. Audience Anticipates the solution to the problem. Audience expects Satisfaction and solution to the problem by the end of the story.</td>
<td>Protagonist is confined by space or circumstance as they battle the antagonist and the solution to the central problem. Confined spaces build tension.</td>
<td>The chronological time span in which the story plays out. In the thriller, this time span is compressed in order to contribute to protagonist and audience tension.</td>
<td>The contrasting moral character of the protagonist with the antagonist. The antagonist will stop at nothing to achieve their goal. The threat of murder contributes to suspense.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The audience guilt that contributes to suspense

| The protagonist has a goal, a wish, or the potential for advancement in career, finance or romance made evident in the Set-up. | The audience makes a wish for the protagonist to achieve this advancement/connect with the lover, because they empathise with the protagonist and have a desire to advance the action of the story. | The audience’s wish fulfilment puts the protagonist in danger, moving the audience to feelings of guilt. Sustained guilt carries an expectation of punishment and contributes to an audience state of suspense. |

Figure 2: The thriller screenplay framework
Question 1b: According to Horton, how may we understand the principles, conventions and techniques of the comedy screenplay?

In the last chapter I identified the principles, conventions and techniques that contribute to the writing of a suspense thriller screenplay. In particular, Hicks’ four principles of the suspense thriller contribute to the audience sense of character and story world realism, and subsequently assist the generation of audience suspense. Central to this generation of suspense is the audience belief that the rules of life and death apply in the story world and that the protagonist really can get hurt or killed. An examination of Löker’s theory of film suspense also suggests that the audience may feel a sense of guilt over the protagonist’s predicament, and that this has potential to contribute to the state of audience suspense.

In this chapter I examine theory that helps describe and define the principles, conventions and techniques of the comedy genre feature film screenplay and its protagonist.

**Horton’s ‘environment conducive to laughter’**

Horton argues that an audience’s inclination to either laugh or experience suspense is governed by whether the writer has created an environment conducive to laughter or one of fear. ‘Comedy is a way of looking at the universe, more than merely a genre of literature, drama, film or television’ (Horton, 2000, p. 5).

Horton argues that comedy is reliant on this audience perspective, suggesting that almost any thriller or drama screenplay could be converted into a comedy with minimal effort.

… nothing is inherently funny or sad, humorous or tragic. It all depends on how you look at it. The story of lovers who face family obstacles in getting together is the formula for romantic comedy. But it is also the plot of Shakespeare’s tragic Romeo and Juliet and many sad headlines in our daily newspapers (Horton, 2000, p. 5).

Horton states that the difference between suspense and comedy is a ‘tightrope walked by the screenwriter’ (Horton, 2000). So, as a screenwriter, if I am not careful to construct the required atmosphere for the genre, the audience may laugh at my thriller or cry at my comedy.

The screenplay *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) was originally written as a crime thriller, with action star Sylvester Stallone pre-cast in the protagonist’s role. It is the story of a Detroit cop, assigned to a Beverly Hills precinct to hunt down the drug lord killer of his best friend. The screenplay was written from the first page as an action thriller in the classic mold. When Stallone pulled out of the venture, however, and comedian Eddy Murphy expressed interest, the project was filmed as a (box office success) comedy, with minimal script modification and a degree of on-set improvisation.
Horton identifies a subtle underpinning condition for audience laughter:

This theory of comedy suggests that the key to any definition is the awareness on the part of the players (audience or performers and writers) of a non-threatening zone that has agreed upon boundaries, so that all involved feel safe, comfortable, receptive. Call this a 'comic atmosphere' that a comic work establishes and that we recognize through cues, clues, expectations (Horton, 2000, p. 6).

The audience, armed with comedy genre awareness, does not tend to expect the writer will allow the character to come to any real harm. Robert McKee supports this contention.

Comedy contains myriad subgenres… each with its own conventions, but one overriding convention unites this mega-genre and distinguishes it from drama: Nobody gets hurt.

In Comedy, the audience must feel that no matter how characters bounce off walls, no matter how they scream and writhe under the whips of life, it doesn’t really hurt. Buildings may fall on Laurel and Hardy, but they get up out of the rubble, dust themselves off, mutter “Now what a fine mess…” and on they go (McKee, 1999, p. 87).

There is strong argument among the selected theorists that audience knowledge of genre conventions greatly influences their preparedness to either laugh or to react in fear. This is influenced by the writer having constructed the story either within a comic non-threatening zone or within one that conveys realism. McKee supports this contention with an example.

In A FISH CALLED WANDA Ken (Michael Palin), a character with an obsessive love of animals, tries to kill an old lady but accidentally kills her pet terriers instead. The last dog dies under a massive construction block with his little paw left sticking out. Charles Crichton, the director, shot two versions of this moment; one showing only the paw, but for the second he sent to a butcher’s shop for a bag of entrails and added a trail of gore draining away from the squashed terrier. When this gory image flashed in front of preview audiences, the theater fell quiet. The blood and guts said: “It hurt.” For general release Crichton switched to the sanitized shot and got his laugh (McKee, 1999, p. 88).

McKee adds:

By genre convention, the comedy writer walks the line between putting characters through the torments of hell while safely assuring the audience that the flames don’t really burn (McKee, 1999, p. 88).

The pain and injury suffered by the protagonist in a comedy is perceived by the audience to either illusory or temporary. Bergson would appear to support this contention. He argues that audience empathy and concern for the character works directly against the generation of audience laughter.
Here I would point out, as a symptom equally worthy of notice, the ABSENCE OF FEELING which usually accompanies laughter. It seems as though the comic could not produce its disturbing effect unless it fell, so to say, on the surface of a soul that is thoroughly calm and unruffled. Indifference is its natural environment, for laughter has no greater foe than emotion (Bergson, 1911, p. 4a).

A scene of violence in Dinner for Schmucks (Guion; Handelman, 2010) depicts a rising young executive, Tim, accidentally running down Barry in his Porsche. He brakes; Barry rolls off his bonnet and lay prostrate on the road. Tim runs to the still body and cries out:

TIM
Are you okay?

Barry springs to his feet like a jack-in-the-box.

BARRY
Ah… yeah, I’m okay. Is that a Porsche?

He walks toward Tim’s car.

BARRY (cont.)

Oh, wow! I’ve been hit by a Datsun before – never a Porsche.

Barry takes a shot of the car with his phone.

This is one of the film’s biggest laughs. It is a combination of the comic ‘Inversion’ convention (the unexpected) and Bergson’s mechanical puppet character, and permits the audience to disconnect emotionally from the realism of the scene in order to laugh with the intellect. The character’s pain is not real – nor is he. No real person could survive such an impact and jump up unharmed. Barry is Bergson’s de-humanised robot, a mechanical toy, a puppet inhabiting the comic universe.

Bergson discusses the comic mechanisms for rendering a character as a de-humanised robot. The accepted techniques for achieving this state in a character are encapsulated in his three comic conventions. Horton, writing ninety years later, describes Bergson’s three conventions and adds a further three.

**Horton’s six comic conventions**

According to Henri Bergson, there are three conventions fundamental to comedy and the generation of audience laughter. These are ‘Repetition,’ ‘Inversion’ and ‘Reciprocal Interference,’ and he insists that no other processes are possible (Bergson, 1911, p. 29a).
Horton acknowledges Bergson’s three comic conventions, disagrees on his limitation of three possible comic processes, and proposes three more; ‘Disguise and Exaggeration’, ‘Interruption’ and ‘Reaction.’ These conventions describe writing used specifically to invoke audience laughter. As the conventions are mostly manifested by the physicality of a human being, however, they also inform writing for performance. As such, the examination of Horton’s six comic conventions is of equal interest to the writer of stage plays.

Writing in 1911, prior to the existence of the Hollywood studio system, Bergson had identified three comic devices evident in the live performance stage plays of his time. With the advent of cinema and television, Horton observes several others that have since become mainstream.

While Horton describes the practical use of these comic conventions in contemporary screenwriting, Bergson provides his analysis of why the conventions move audiences to laugh.

**Repetition**

Repetition is one of the most often used and reliable comic devices in contemporary comedy screenplays. Repetition can also be observed in the standard joke form ‘An Englishman, a Scotsman and an Irishman walk into a bar…’ A problem is posed to each and three culturally stereotypical responses given. The Irishman usually delivers the punch-line, which may involve a reversal of expectations.

According to Horton, Repetition promises ‘if it’s funny once, it will be funny again, especially with slight variations’ (Horton, 2000, p. 26). Horton argues that comedy thrives on repetition.

Hugh Grant says “fuck” at least a dozen times in the opening of *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and, never mind whether some audiences might be offended by such Anglo-Saxon speech, with his harried British accent and because each situation for this verbal outburst is slightly different, the laughter builds and builds (Horton, 2000, p. 26).

Henri Bergson, speaking of the comedy techniques of playwrights typical of his era, states:

Contemporary light comedy employs this method [Repetition] in every shape and form. One of the best known examples consists in bringing a group of characters, act after act, into the most varied surroundings, so as to reproduce, under ever fresh circumstances, one and the same series of incidents or accidents more or less symmetrically identical (Bergson, 1911, p. 29b).

Bergson overlays the comic principle of Repetition on a Punch and Judy puppet show; the standard characters in such a play being Punch, his wife, Judy, and a policeman who typically breaks up a pantomimed scene of domestic violence.

No sooner does the policeman put in an appearance on the stage than, naturally enough, he receives a blow which fells him. He springs to his feet, a second blow lays him flat. A repetition of the offence is followed by a repetition of the punishment. Up and down the
constable flops and hops with the uniform rhythm of the bending and release of a spring, whilst the spectators laugh louder and louder (Bergson, 1911, p. 23b).

Repetition may be used in the frequent build-up and release of tension, in a series of related comic set-ups. A joke, or visual ‘gag,’ may be run three times in slightly different contexts. The third repetition of the gag usually delivers the biggest laugh.

The ‘Rule of Three’ might also be considered a sub-set of the Repetition principle. It relates to three actions, events or responses that manifest in sequence and share a connected meaning with a twist in the third. For example, an overweight man tip-toes out onto a high diving board at a pool. He nervously tests its flexibility. The movement of the board startles him and he scampers back out of camera sight.

On the second attempt he becomes more adventurous. With his arms out for balance he rhythmically pumps the board, and although his feet never leave the surface, he gains confidence. He turns to his off camera mates and signals that he’s now ready. With a confident swagger he moves off camera once more to get a run up.

On his third appearance he takes a magnificent running jump onto the end of the diving board, and it snaps off completely; chunks of wood and screaming diver dumped into the churning water below.

According to Horton, repetition works best in sets of three, as audiences have learned to expect a punch-line on the third iteration.

**Inversion**

Laughter may be induced if the screenwriter or performer inverts a situation. This may take the form of a man masquerading as a woman, a situation that resolves in the most unexpected of fashion or in the struggle of characters completely out of their normal environments, for example. Horton describes the comic plot device, Inversion:

> Turn most things upside down or inside out, and through inversion, you have laughs. [For example] City Slickers allows Billy Crystal and a gang of friends to turn their daily city lives upside down as they become modern dude ranch cowboys, and the Czech film Kolya turns a dedicated and aging bachelor’s life inside out as he is forced to care for a Russian boy he finally comes to love (Horton, 2000, p. 26).

Screenwriters also employ this Inversion device in ‘gender bender’ films where male protagonists struggle to cope with their temporary female disguises. Popular examples include *Some Like It Hot* (1959) and *Tootsie* (1982). Chaplin inverted his Jewish Barber by having him pass for the Fuehrer in his World War II comedy, *The Great Dictator* (1940). Danny Kaye based much of his career on the comic device of mistaken identity; his meek and mild protagonist being mistaken for another of more
sinister intent. These instances of character inversion also rely heavily on the comic device of Disguise.

Explaining Inversion, Bergson asks us to: ‘Picture to yourself certain characters in a certain situation: if you reverse the situation and invert the roles, you obtain a comic scene’ (Bergson, 1911, p. 30b). Bergson illustrates the timelessness of this comic principle as he lists examples in life and on ‘the stage.’

Thus, we laugh at the prisoner at the bar lecturing the magistrate; at a child presuming to teach its parents; in a word, at everything that comes under the heading of “topsy-turvydom.” Not infrequently comedy sets before us a character who lays a trap in which he is the first to be caught. The plot of the villain who is the victim of his own villainy, or the cheat cheated, forms the stock-in-trade of a good many plays. We find this even in primitive farce (Bergson, 1911, p.30b).

Reciprocal interference

The effect that several groups or characters, can have on the central dramatic problem, as they all intersect and interfere with each other at the film’s climax, can bring comic mayhem and plot resolution. A situation, understood in two entirely different ways by separate groups/characters, is given a third interpretation as those two groups intersect. This third interpretation of the situation carries the comic potential that induces audience laughter. Horton examines the use of Reciprocal Interference in contemporary screenplays.

Either through crosscutting or a split screen, ‘reciprocal interference’ can often guarantee laughter. Four Weddings and a Funeral has us laughing out loud as we follow at least four individuals or groups preparing to attend a wedding in very different manners. This technique emphasizes contrasting actions happening simultaneously (Horton, 2000, pp. 26-27).

Bergson talks of ‘the reciprocal interference of two independent series’ of actions, goals or plans that provokes a misunderstanding between the characters involved. According to Bergson, the playwright sets up a situation that is ambiguous – open to more than one interpretation by the written characters. The writer allows the protagonist to take away the unintended interpretation of the situation while the audience is made aware of the real one.

We [the audience] see the real meaning of the situation, because care has been taken to show us every aspect of it; but each of the actors knows only one of these aspects: hence the mistakes they make and the erroneous judgments they pass both on what is going on around them and on what they are doing themselves. We proceed from this erroneous judgment to the correct one, we waver between the possible meaning and the real, and it is this mental seesaw between two contrary interpretations which is at first apparent in the enjoyment we derive from an equivocal situation (Bergson, 1911, p. 31b).
Chapter 2 : Examining the thriller and comedy film genres

Disguise and exaggeration

Shakespeare’s comedies abound with characters in disguise; it is a comic device he frequently used. The central character tries desperately to maintain the disguise, as he battles the story’s central dramatic problem, and flaws and cracks inevitably appear. The character in disguise is not himself; he is a construct, a puppet, a poorly concealed actor. A character in disguise creates an atmosphere of unreality that may be conducive to audience laughter, wandering often into Exaggeration. Horton identifies Exaggeration as one of the easiest to recognize and important comic plot devices:

In ‘The Gold Rush’ it’s not just that Chaplin is hungry but that he is so starved he winds up eating his boot and shoelaces as if they were spaghetti. Hunger is thus depicted with such exaggeration that we laugh (Horton, 2000, p. 27).

Horton observes that, in comedy, a need or desire produces an action that is so exaggerated that the audience suspends belief in the realism of what they are witnessing and find it humorous. If Chaplin’s character were merely to hang around the tables of the well fed, begging for scraps and slowly growing more desperate and ill, it would not be funny. The exaggeration suggested by eating his shoe allows the audience to detach from the seriousness of the character’s predicament and to laugh at an unrealistic representation of a person facing starvation.

Horton points out that disguise permits a protagonist to act in a manner contrary to their true nature. The constant struggle to conceal their true identity masks the struggle they must face in overcoming the central dramatic problem. Disguise may entail a character affecting an accent of such exaggerated proportions that it invokes audience laughter. The hiding of the protagonist’s identity provides many opportunities for the building and releasing of audience tension.

This comic device is the basis for many of the laughs in comedy screenplays such as Mrs Doubtfire (1993), Tootsie (1982), The Master of Disguise (2002), The Inspector General (1949) and Some Like it Hot (1959).

Interruption

Horton argues that the interruption of an action, or speech, may be funny in itself, especially if the interruption is repeated several times – each time with a fresh twist. A classic visual gag is that of a golfer trying to make an important final stroke being interrupted prior to each swing by his competitor wishing him good luck.

Alternatively, two characters secretly attracted to each other find themselves in an intimate situation in a moment rich with romantic tension. They draw close, prepared to kiss, and a secondary character bursts into the room declaring the football scores.
In Horton’s description of the Interruption comic principle, we see the potential interconnectness of several principles at once.

*The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) concerns a group of upper-middle-class folk who are interrupted every time they try to eat, each instance funnier than the one before (Horton, 2000, p. 27).

Interruption works exceptionally well with Repetition. Interruption in dialogue clearly expresses ‘the clash of opposing personalities’ (Horton, 2000, p. 27).

Interruption may also involve the last of the comic principles – Reaction. ‘The humour surrounding interruption comes not just from the action itself but the reaction as well: what effect does an interruption have for each character involved?’ (Horton, 2000, p. 27).

**Reaction**

Reaction combines well with Interruption. A comic character, once interrupted, may react in a physically exaggerated manner, inducing audience laughter. Thus, we may observe three comic conventions in the one action. Reaction may employ Exaggeration or it may be subtle, but it conveys to the audience an expectation of either humour or seriousness. If subtle, it may indicate seriousness, and contribute to the story world’s atmosphere of realism. It may also enhance, or top, a subtle turn of onscreen humour. Reaction may involve merely facial expression, or it may encompass an extended gesture expressed by the entire body. It may be an unexpected verbal riposte from the interrupted character, involving inversion. It becomes apparent that any one of Horton’s six comic conventions is usually accompanied or supported by one or two others.

Horton describes the Reaction principle in terms of one of its greatest proponents.

Buster Keaton was a master of the slow burn, the stone face, that pause as he considers what has happened or is about to happen. So much of comedy depends on the reaction evoked in the characters (Horton, 2000, p. 28).

An exaggerated form of the comic reaction is the classic ‘double-take’. According to an entry on WikiPedia (2013) ‘A double-take is a body language gesture that occurs when a person glances at something without specific expectations, turns away, then realizes that what he has just seen is unusual, and quickly turns back to look at it again, sometimes accompanied by additional body language to express surprise.’

We have seen how the comic conventions can induce audience laughter, but, according to Horton, the screenwriter’s use of the conventions erodes an audience’s acceptance of the realism of the story environment (Horton, 2000). Additionally, Bergson argues that the protagonist who exhibits comic conventions takes on the dimensions of a *caricature* in the eyes of the audience, rendering the character ‘less than real’ and difficult for the audience to connect with (Bergson, 1911). Both agree
that these comic conventions tend to strip characters and story environments of the illusion of realism. This erosion of realism contributes to what Horton refers to as the environment conducive to laughter (Horton, 2000).

Now, it appears, the writer of the comedy thriller is faced with a problem. Derry and Hicks both assert that a close emotional connection with the protagonist is essential to the generation of audience suspense. This suggests that the distancing of the audience from the protagonist in film comedy is incompatible with the aims of the suspense thriller.

Bergson, however, suggests it might be possible to have your character ‘oscillate from one [state] to the other’ from a mechanical state to the living, something inelastic within the elastic. If there is something in the character of a habitual or obsessive nature then ‘…you will get the image we have so far found in all laughable objects, something mechanical in something living; in fact, something comic’ (Bergson, 1911, p. 25b). If the written character exhibits exaggerated or obsessive behaviour within an otherwise realistic personality, then, the ‘comic’ may reside within the real.

In writing my comedy thriller I must consider whether the audience is capable of momentarily anesthetizing their hearts in order to laugh, without compromising their acceptance of the overarching story realism. Bergson offers a clue.

To produce the whole of its effect, then, the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple (Bergson, 1911, p. 4b).

The capacity of a character to become momentarily mechanical might go some way to explaining how audiences can laugh and cry at Charlie Chaplin from one moment to the next. Chaplin’s crazy clockwork body performances have audiences in stitches, but, when he needs to elicit empathy from the viewer, his mechanical hyperactivity melts smoothly into the natural, fluid human movement that permits the audience to emotionally identify with his character once again.

**Conclusions**

As a result of this study I draw certain conclusions regarding the principles, conventions and techniques of the comedy feature screenplay.

I have heard from Horton that a story environment in which ‘nobody gets hurt’ is conducive to audience laughter. Horton states that the comedy protagonist operates within a ‘non-threatening zone,’ where no key character gets hurt. Audiences are generally unwilling to laugh if the violence to the character seems too real. This environment in which pain is not real – the environment conducive to laughter - is also enhanced if the protagonist him/herself is presented as ‘not quite real.’
Chapter 2: Examining the thriller and comedy film genres

Toward this goal, Bergson states that the comedy character should take on an aspect of physical invulnerability, an element of the mechanical, the unhurt-able puppet. When the protagonist presents as a ‘thing’ rather than a person, the audience’s heart is disengaged and the generation of laughter is made easier. Laughter requires that an audience become momentarily indifferent to the misfortune suffered by the protagonist. The audience must be encouraged to ‘de-identify’ with the character. Evidence has been presented to conclude that people laugh with the intellect and cry with the heart. Real pain is unfunny.

The techniques by which the writer may construct this environment in which ‘nobody gets hurt – the not quite real world of the screen comedy – are embodied in Horton’s six comic conventions. Horton’s Repetition, Inversion, Reciprocal Interference, Exaggeration, Disguise, Interruption and Reaction comic conventions define the comic environment and imbue the protagonist with characteristics of the ‘artificial.’ The screenwriter may utilise these comic conventions to suggest a ‘de-humanised’ character that is incapable of being truly hurt, maimed or killed.

The de-humanising of the protagonist makes it easier for the audience to suspend empathy and to laugh at their misfortune. This works well for the generation of audience laughter in the comedy, but runs counter to Hicks’ conditions for the generation of audience suspense in the thriller. Hicks’ conditions dictate audience belief in the realism of the character and story environment for the generation of audience suspense.

Bergson suggests, however, that it may be possible for the protagonist to ‘oscillate’ between the de-humanised state required for laughter and the character realism required for suspense. This may be an important observation for the writer of the comedy thriller screenplay.

The table at Figure 3 summarises key points of what I have learned of the comedy screenplay framework.

In the next chapter I observe how the principles, conventions and techniques of both the comedy and the thriller are incorporated by the screenwriter Peter Stone in the comedy thriller screenplay Charade, and how Bergson’s ‘oscillation’ between the real and the unreal protagonist has been practised.
Chapter 2: Examining the thriller and comedy film genres

The comedy screenplay framework:
Creating an environment in which nobody gets hurt.

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<td>The central dramatic problem is established.</td>
<td>The central problem all but defeats the protagonist. They are farthest from their goal and all hope is lost.</td>
<td>The protagonist’s life after the problem has been solved.</td>
</tr>
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Horton’s comic environment and six comic conventions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment conducive to laughter</th>
<th>Six comic conventions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The writer constructs an environment conducive to laughter. This is a story world in which the audience believes nobody will get hurt or killed. The writer calls on the audience’s awareness of comedy genre conventions to reassure them that no real harm will come to the players in this story. Free of concern for the characters, audience laughter is generated with greater ease.</td>
<td>Horton’s six comic conventions describe writing techniques that assist in the generation of audience laughter. These comic conventions are Repetition, Inversion, Reciprocal Interference, Disguise and Exaggeration, Interruption and Reaction. Used by the writer or performer, singly, or in combination, they define character behavior and reaction to circumstances and assist in the generation of audience laughter. The conventions contribute to the audience perception of a story world in which ‘nobody gets hurt.’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 3: The comedy screenplay framework
Chapter 3: Examining the comedy thriller case study

Question 2: How may we observe these principles, conventions and techniques in the comedy thriller screenplay Charade?

In the last chapter I examined the principles, conventions and techniques that characterise the comedy feature film screenplay. I examined the six comic conventions of Andrew Horton and Henri Bergson and the underpinning psychoanalytic theory that sought to explain why people laugh. Horton argued that a story environment in which ‘nobody gets hurt’ is conducive to audience laughter. Further, Horton’s six comic conventions induce audience laughter but tend to ‘de-humanise’ the characters in the process. The audience accepts that these ‘de-humanised’ characters cannot get hurt or killed and are more likely to laugh at their misfortune.

In the chapter prior to that, I examined Hicks’ contention that the generation of suspense in the thriller relies on the audience’s acceptance of the realism of the story world and protagonist. According to this thriller theory the audience must believe that the protagonist can be seriously hurt or killed; the normal rules of life and death apply. Hicks’ four principles of the thriller screenplay contribute directly to this realism and to audience suspense. In this chapter I observe how the principles, conventions and techniques of both genres are utilised by the screenwriter Peter Stone in the comedy thriller Charade.

The official movie trailer for Charade (1963) pictures a kitchen blender, into which is poured equal quantities of red suspense, yellow comedy and blue romance. These qualities remain in discrete layers until the blender is switched on, whereupon they are vigorously blended.

This is an interesting analogy that promises the audience will experience laughter, suspense and romance in more or less equal quantities. To what extent did Charade achieve these aims?
Chapter 3: Examining the comedy thriller case study


The protagonist of Stone’s *Charade*, Regina Lampert (played by Audrey Hepburn) is an unhappily married socialite of about thirty years. She returns to France to find her wealthy husband, Charles Lambert, has been murdered after converting all their assets into cash and attempting to flee the country by train. Further, after a discussion with the CIA administrator, Bartholomew, she discovers Charles was not the man he claimed to be. His wealth was a result of gold stolen from the United States Army, as part of a WWII scam executed by himself and his soldier buddies, Leo, Tex, Scobie, and Carson Dyle. Dyle is presumed dead, after being fatally wounded in a German ambush. They now appear at Charles’ funeral looking for their share of the quarter of a million dollars.

The three men threaten Reggie for the money but she has no idea where it is or into what form it has been converted. A benevolent Peter Joshua (played by Cary Grant) appears on the scene, offering to help her find the money, outwit her husband’s former army friends and avoid being murdered herself.

When Scobie telephones Reggie to tell her not to trust Peter, as he is only interested in the money for himself, she confronts him. Caught out, Peter confesses he is actually Carson Dyle’s brother, Alexander, but his intentions are true. As the treasure hunt continues, Scobie, and then Leo, are found murdered, narrowing the candidates for the identity of the real killer. Despite the uncertainty over whom she can trust, Reggie finds herself falling in love with Alexander Dyle, and is disturbed when the CIA Administrator, Bartholomew, tells her Carson Dyle *had* no brother. Alex admits to Reggie he is really Adam Canfield, a professional thief, but no murderer. Despite this admission, she finds herself trusting him.

When it is revealed that the money is held in the value of three rare stamps on an envelope on Charles’ travel bag, Adam and Tex race back to Reggie’s hotel room to get them. Reggie recovers the stamps from a stamp fair dealer that her naive nephew handed them over to in exchange for a bagful of cheap stamps. The dealer, not being a thief, hands them back to Reggie, explaining their worth. When Reggie arrives at her hotel room she finds Tex murdered, which points to Adam being the real killer. Reggie telephones Bartholomew, who asks her to meet him with the stamps by the colonnade at the Palais Royale. When their paths intersect Adam chases Reggie for the stamps through the streets of Paris.
When Reggie arrives at the meeting point she is caught out in the open between the two armed men, Adam and Bartholomew. From behind opposing stone columns, each accuses the other of being the murderer, whilst training their guns on her. When it is revealed that Bartholomew is the real Carson Dyle, and the murderer, Reggie puts her faith in Adam. After another chase through the Palais Royale theatre, Adam finds a novel way to kill Bartholomew and save Reggie.

In the resolution it is revealed that Adam is really Brian Cruikshank, a government administrator responsible for recovering stolen government property. Though operating under four identities since he first met her, Brian nonchalantly proposes marriage to her in the final scene.

Let us now observe how Hicks’ thriller principles and Horton’s theories on comedy may be useful in understanding the tension between suspense and comedy in the comedy thriller screenplay Charade.

Hicks’ 1st principle of the thriller; Narrative Trajectory

The opening scene of Charade describes a very slow pan across serene farm country cast in the last throes of evening light. Into this calm a speeding train intrudes, roaring past as a murdered man is thrown from it. The body rolls crazily down the slope to rest, bloodied, in the undergrowth alongside the tracks. By opening the screenplay with a murder, the audience is made immediately aware of the high stakes in relation to the characters in the film. This scene delivers the first jolt of the thriller the film promises to be. Dethridge states ‘The opening scene signals the flavour or tone of the whole story’ (Dethridge, 2003, p. 194).

This is a world in which people can get hurt.

The promise of murder and suspense thus established, the writer introduces the protagonist, Reggie, on holiday in Megeve, where she talks of divorcing her husband. Reggie returns from Megeve to her luxurious Paris apartment, intending to tell her husband that she wants a divorce, only to find their apartment empty of all furniture and belongings. Opening every empty cupboard and wardrobe, she runs anxiously from room to room and smack into the arms of a man standing in the entranceway. It is the police detective Edwouard Grandpierre, who asks her to accompany him to the station. There, he asks her to identify the body of her husband Charles Lampert, as he lay in a cold morgue drawer.

GRANDPIERRE

Well, Madame…?

She nods.

GRANDPIERRE

You are positive?

She nods again.
GRANDPIERRE

You loved him?

REGGIE

I’m very cold.

This scene renders the character of Reggie human and vulnerable. She is seen to feel something, deeply – even if that something is numbness. The reality of death and loss highlights the real world pain Hicks says the character must be capable of experiencing, in order to engage audience empathy and generate suspense.

Finding herself alone and destitute in Paris, the audience is attracted to Reggie’s predicament, and the Attraction point in Hicks’ Narrative Trajectory is established.

As the story progresses, a mystery killer progressively murders Scobie, Gideon, and finally Tex in their quest for the stolen money. The primary antagonist remains an anxiety inducing mystery, piquing the audience’s interest and their Anticipation of the revelation of the antagonist’s identity.

The suspense inherent in the Anticipation phase of Hicks’ Narrative Trajectory is, perhaps, enhanced by a factor that typifies Löker’s theory of audience guilt.

The audience has presumably made an unconscious wish to see Reggie and Peter become romantically involved. It is possible that this ‘guilty wish’ may induce subliminal feelings of guilt in the audience, now that the consequence of the wish has put Reggie in danger.

REGGIE

Please help me, Peter… you’re the only one I can trust.

Peter takes out his handkerchief and dries her eyes.

REGGIE

Peter, you’ve got to promise me something. Promise you’ll never lie the way Charles did. Why do people have to tell lies?

PETER

Usually it’s because they want something… and they’re afraid the truth won’t get it for them.

REGGIE

Do you tell lies?
As the audience has already been tipped off that he is lying, this foreknowledge contributes to audience tension. Additionally, Löker argues that the audience experiences guilt – hence suspense - as a consequence of their wish that this attractive couple engage romantically.

There is a frequent tension between the comic and the suspenseful in *Charade*. The audience is never totally convinced of Peter’s malicious intent, but neither are they convinced of his pure intentions. This leaves the character in a kind of moral middle ground. From the point of view of the comedy thriller screenwriter, this is an ideal space for the character to be. If the character of Peter Joshua became too sinister he could no longer function in the comic interludes. ‘If the opponent is too deadly the jokes aren’t funny’ (Truby, 2010).

According to Löker, the audience’s continued willingness to accept the Grant character as a romantic partner for Reggie contributes to their unresolved feelings of guilt, and thus suspense. Reggie must determine who is friend and who is foe in the short span of time left to her; her life depends on it.

As the screenplay advances through the second act Anticipation arc, the climax looms. This is where the Hicks’ promise of Satisfaction is delivered.

After concluding that Adam is the murderer, and agreeing to meet the CIA administrator Bartholomew at the Palais Royale, Reggie finds herself exposed in an open space between the two potential killers. As the two liars battle for Reggie’s trust, one or both of them ready to shoot her if she takes a single step toward the other, Adam makes a final plea.

\[
\text{ADAM}\\
\text{Reggie, I beg you. Just trust me once more.}
\]

\[
\text{REGGIE}\\
\text{Why should I?}
\]

\[
\text{ADAM (a pause)}\\
\text{I can’t think of a reason in the world why you should.}
\]

Reggie relaxes, smiles, and takes a step toward Adam. Adam has demonstrated empathy for Reggie’s position that resonates with the ring of honesty. She makes a life and death decision with her heart and not her intellect. Equally important, the audience believes him and relaxes. The audience’s ‘guilty wish’ for the romantic union is vindicated, and audience anxiety based on the guilty wish is dispelled. The audience experiences their first taste of the Satisfaction point on Hicks’ Narrative Trajectory arc.
This particular anxiety generating setup has run its course and the writer must now rebuild suspense by utilising the tension inherent in the current life and death situation between Reggie and Bartholomew. Bartholomew is Carson Dyle, the murderer, and has a gun trained on her.

**DYLE**

Stop right there, Mrs Lampert, or I’ll kill you!

Reggie flees into the auditorium of the Palais Royal, marginally hidden in the on-stage prompt box. As the antagonist stalks Reggie, his footsteps toward her counting down the remaining seconds of her life, Adam makes a painfully calculated decision and opens a stage trapdoor under his feet. The antagonist falls through the trapdoor to his death.

It is a shocking action and the audience is delivered the promised thrill that relieves the suspense of the chase. The Narrative Trajectory complete, the audience has experienced the Satisfaction they have craved since they first became aware of the protagonist’s goal and central dramatic problem. Hicks’ Narrative Trajectory is completed.

**Hicks’ 2nd principle of the thriller; Bounded World**

True to Hicks’ Bounded World condition for the thriller protagonist, Reggie is isolated from help by physical circumstances and by betrayal (Hicks, 2002, p. 17). Told she dare not leave Paris, or even the hotel she is staying at, Reggie’s Bounded World has a physical existence. She must share adjoining hotel rooms with all the suspects in her drama; with the suspicious Peter Joshua and her late husband’s ex-soldier buddies, any one of which may try to kill her. She must find the fortune her late husband hid and to determine who she can trust. As everyone around her appears to be lying, her opportunities for escape are also complicated and bound by deceit.

Reggie’s inability to take decisive action creates a state of locked indecision; the situation requires that she escape, but to where and with whom? Derry reminds us that ‘Tension, related to conflict and often accompanied by stasis, becomes the psychological state of holding energy in a condition ready for action, mental or motor’ (Derry, 1988, p. 48).

In the second act, when the Grant character’s nefarious colleagues grow suspicious of his true intentions, he is forced to the rooftop of a seven story building by Herman Scobie. Scobie tries to kill Peter Joshua by walking him backwards off the roof at gunpoint. Though there are no physical walls, Peter’s Bounded World is defined by the locked fire escape door and the sheer drop on three sides of the rooftop.

As Stone wrote the Grant character to occupy the moral middle ground for the bulk of the story, sufficient audience empathy had been elicited to generate suspense at the prospect of him falling from the roof of a building.
A person with a fear of heights will experience sweaty palms even if they watch a friend lean back on a railing overlooking a steep drop. They need only witness this to experience the dread and fear of falling themselves. This appeal to a universal audience fear or phobia proves an effective technique to generate audience suspense and gives some weight to Löker’s argument that the audience experiences dread directly and not through empathy with the protagonist. The audience shares the tension induced by the Bounded World Peter Joshua finds himself in.

Late in the second Act, the minor villain Leo is disturbed from his slumber by a phone caller who summons him to the hotel foyer at 3:30 am. Throwing a dressing gown over his pajamas he punches a button and descends in the cramped hotel elevator. Two floors down the elevator stops and the lights go out momentarily. He calls out and the elevator recommences its descent. Audience anticipation and tension builds. Gideon is alarmed as the elevator moves beyond the chosen floor.

**LEO**

Hey, how do you stop this thing?

Leo’s Bounded World is a wire cage, no bigger than a phone booth, descending to the ground floor. The character demonstrates the violent sneezing that defines his character, and the audience suspects it is not gratuitous, but significant to the moment. Gideon’s last sneeze blends with his death scream.

As the elevator reaches the ground floor, we see that his throat has been slashed. The scene prior to this had established an atmosphere conducive to laughter. That safe environment where ‘no-one gets hurt’ has been obliterated in this instance of graphic mortality. The previous scenes of romance and sincerity between the two leads have been capped by suspense and a genuine thrill. We have oscillated back to the real and very dangerous world of Stone’s unseen antagonist.

Twice in the screenplay, Reggie is trapped inside an actual phone booth by threatening characters. A phone booth from which there is no immediate escape represents the smallest possible Bounded World the thriller protagonist could find herself in. On being threatened by Leo on the Kit Kat club dance floor, Reggie escapes to a foyer phone booth to call Bartholomew, the CIA administrator. Tex appears and traps her against the back of the booth, lighting match after match and dropping them in her lap as he asks for the money.

In the build up to the climax, when the Grant character, now known as Adam, chases her through the Paris underground railway, she hides in the bottom of another phone booth as Adam prowls around it with gun drawn.

In the climax, Reggie once again finds herself trapped in a space the size of a phone booth, the prompt box under the Palais Royale stage. As the antagonist approaches her with gun drawn there is no escape. Audience tension runs high.
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*Charade’s* protagonist is frequently trapped in small spaces designed to heighten audience suspense. Screenwriter Stone utilizes Hicks’ Bounded World principle to great effect.

**Hicks’ 3rd principle of the thriller: Timescape**

In Act One, Reggie is informed by the CIA administrator, Bartholomew, that her life is in danger and she may be murdered at any time by the three men she met at Charles’ funeral. Hicks’ compressed time span for the thriller (Timescape principle) is established by Bartholomew when he implores her to find the money her late husband absconded with.

**BARTHOLOMEW**

Look for it, Mrs. Lampert – look just as hard and as fast as you can. You may not have a great deal of time. Those men know you have it just as surely as we do. You won't be safe until the money's in our hands. Is that clear?

*Charade’s* compressed timeframe is also defined by the dwindling number of story characters left alive. The last man alive *must* be the killer and when that time arrives, Reggie will be next. As each character is murdered the audience’s experience of suspense is intensified. When the last of Charles’ ex-soldier buddies is killed, Adam chases Reggie through the streets of Paris with a drawn gun. She races to a pre-arranged meeting with the CIA official she believes will save her as the clock ticks down the minutes of her life.

The compressed timeframe characteristic of the thriller is now defined by this fevered chase sequence. Reggie runs from the ‘murderer’ Adam to the one person she believes is authentic, the CIA administrator, Bartholomew.

A review of Hicks’ anxiety scale, below, reveals that as the protagonist timeframe compresses down to mere minutes, Reggie’s anxiety levels progress from Alarm to outright Fear (Hicks, 2002, p. 85).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CALM</th>
<th>AROUSAL</th>
<th>ALARM</th>
<th>FEAR</th>
<th>TERROR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neocortex</td>
<td>Subcortex</td>
<td>Limbic</td>
<td>Mid brain</td>
<td>Brainstem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended</td>
<td>Days/Hours</td>
<td>Hours/Minutes</td>
<td>Minutes/seconds</td>
<td>Loss of sense of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>future</td>
<td></td>
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The audience is aware that when a person experiences raw fear they make poor decisions. This danger, supported by the audience’s thriller genre awareness, contributes to the suspense. Audiences know that by the end of the chase, someone will die; the genre dictates it.
At a point in the chase sequence, Reggie crouches in a phone booth while the Adam prowls around it hunting her. She rings the American Embassy and leaves a desperate message for Bartholomew. It is then revealed to the audience that the CIA administrator, Bartholomew, is a fake. The audience once again knows more than Reggie, which further contributes to audience guilt and suspense.

When Reggie reaches the agreed upon meeting place she is trapped halfway between Bartholomew and Adam, both armed, on the colonnade at the Palais Royale. Her final steps toward Bartholomew are halted when Adam cries out:

**ADAM**

Reggie, stop! That’s Carson Dyle!

The plot and identity of the real antagonist immediately falls into place for the audience, if not yet for the protagonist. Caught out in the open with two guns trained on her, Reggie has seconds to make a life and death choice between two proven liars.

On this scale, having only seconds to make this decision, Reggie falls into Hicks’ Terror space, where the protagonist may be expected to lose a sense of the passage of time, and snap decisions are made by the primitive animal brainstem and *not* the intellect.

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Audience suspense is increased as the time span available to Reggie to make a life and death decision shrinks to mere seconds. When Reggie next crouches in the prompt box under the Palais Royale stage, with Bartholomew approaching with gun cocked, the thriller time span is compressed to its logical limit.

**Hicks’ 4th principle of the thriller; Character Ethos**

Peter Stone’s opening scene delivers the first clue to the Character Ethos of the story’s antagonist. In line with Hicks’ thriller villain, Stone’s antagonist is not afraid to kill, has already killed, and will most certainly kill again in the pursuit of their goal.

According to Hicks, the antagonist drives the suspense by the relentless pursuit of his goal. In doing so, ‘the antagonist creates an unrelenting climate of fear’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 108).
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The screenplay’s light comic moments are balanced with violent murders committed by the antagonist, each more gruesome than the last. Charles is thrown from a train, Scobie is drowned, Leo’s throat is slashed and Tex is suffocated in a plastic bag with his hands cuffed to a bed post. This succession of murders leaves no doubt as to the antagonist’s moral code/Character Ethos.

When he is finally unmasked as the villain, Bartholomew himself admits his total lack of restraint in regard to his goal. In the climactic stand-off between Adam and Bartholomew at the Palais Royale colonnade, Bartholomew recounts how he killed all his ex-soldier buddies after they left him for dead as a prisoner of the Germans in WWII. From the shooting script for *Charade*:

BARTHOLOMEW (now called Dyle)
Stop right now, Mrs Lampert, or I’ll kill you.
REGGIE stops in alarm.

ADAM
It won’t get you the stamps, Dyle. You’ll have to come out and get them, and I’m not likely to miss at this range.

BARTHOLOMEW
Maybe not - but it takes a lot of bullets to kill me. They left me with five of them in my legs and my stomach – they knew I was still alive but they left me. I spent ten months in a German prison camp with nothing to stop the pain. They left me there, Mrs Lampert, they deserved to die.

REGGIE
But I had nothing to do with it!

BARTHOLOMEW
You’ve got the money now – it belongs to me. Mrs Lampert, they knew I was still alive but they left me there. That’s why I had to kill them – all four of them. Please believe me, Mrs Lampert, I’ll kill you too – it won’t make any difference.

In stark contrast, the protagonist, a petite socialite with a heart of gold, has no option but to try to outwit and elude the antagonist. Her moral code would never permit her to kill, even in self-defense.
Peter Stone provides plenty of Character Ethos contrast, outside of the antagonist/protagonist relationship. Reggie holds the human quality of honesty in high regard. In contrast, every man in her life has lied repeatedly to her; Charles, Leo, Scobie, Tex, Bartholomew and Adam. Each of Charles’ ex-soldier buddies threatened Reggie indirectly with murder – though they each realised they were trading off the threat of someone else’s actions.

At the funeral service, in Act One, Scobie, Gideon and Tex turn up to inspect Charles’ body. Each walks up to Charles’ body in its casket and test whether he is truly dead. Scobie takes a pin from his lapel and thrusts it brutally into the corpse’s hand. This startling lack of respect for the dead, and his grieving wife, underlines the contrasting Character Ethos of the characters that inhabit Peter Stone’s Charade. Any one of these men may be the murderer of her husband and will probably murder again to attain their goal.

Central to Reggie’s sense of insecurity and the generation of audience suspense is the uncertainty induced by Grant’s character when it is revealed to the audience that he is conspiring with three criminals holed up in the same hotel, and is apparently only after the money. The complication presented by this subterfuge contributes to the overall theme of dishonesty and deceit that plays throughout the story, and gives evidence to the value of Hicks’ Character Ethos thriller principle.

This incident, Derry reminds us, is a thriller convention that contributes to audience tension by showing the audience the danger before the protagonist is aware of it. We, the audience, suspect that Adam’s moral code may not be all that it seems, but we cannot warn Reggie. This relates to the ‘bomb under the table’ example given by Hitchcock to define the difference between the generation of audience suspense and simple surprise (Derry, 1988, P. 32).

Is the Cary Grant character friend or foe to Reggie? The tension generated by this uncertainty is intensified by the audience knowledge that it is a life or death matter. It is not a question of one being a pleasant fellow or possibly an unpleasant one – but is the difference between the Grant character being either a potential lover or a killer. This is the stark contrast that is drawn between friend and foe in Charade, and the principle illuminated by Hicks under his thriller Character Ethos principle (Hicks, 2002).

Horton’s ‘environment conducive to laughter’

In Stone’s Charade, Reggie and the Cary Grant character are introduced to the audience, and each other, in the scene following the opening murder. With the promise of murder and suspense thus established, the writer works to create an environment conducive to laughter.

On the balcony of a ski resort in the French resort town of Megeve, Peter Joshua (Cary Grant) approaches a pensive Regina Lampert (Audrey Hepburn). Regina, referred to as ‘Reggie’ in the script, is seated at a table with her friend, Sylvie, admiring the view of the snow covered Alps.
Chapter 3 : Examining the comedy thriller case study

Peter brings a small boy to the table.

PETER

Is this yours?

Reggie

It’s hers. Where’d you find him, robbing a bank?

PETER

He was throwing snowballs at Baron Rothschild. (a pause)
Do we know each other?

REGGIE

Why, do you think we’re going to?

PETER

I don’t know… how would I know?

REGGIE

Because I already know an awful lot of people and until
one of them dies I couldn’t possibly meet anyone else.

PETER

Well, if anyone goes on the critical list, let me know.

Here we have a forcefully comic performance by two characters whose rapid-fire interchanges
demonstrate the comic devices of Interruption and Inversion. Combined, they contribute to Horton’s
environment conducive to laughter. The rapid fire dialogue conveys little of the humanity of the
characters however; the verbal parry and thrusts call to mind Bergson’s mechanical characters rather
than real people. According the Bergson, this helps the audience dissociate from the characters’
humanity and engage in laughter. Bergson claims we laugh because we view the scene with our
intelligence, ‘in the absence of feeling’ and insists that ‘laughter has no greater foe than emotion’
(Bergson, 1911, p. 4a).

The audience may find it difficult to accept, however, that they gain absolutely no emotional release in
laughter. It is in this point of disagreement with Bergson that Horton becomes the stronger focus of the
study of audience laughter. Horton acknowledges the positive emotional value of laughter. His pre-
requisite for audience laughter is defined largely by a perceived ‘absence of danger’ to the characters,
rather than an absence of feeling. In this introduction to the protagonist, the writer briefly breaks with
the realism required of the thriller. The audience is put at their ease in this scene; there is no danger
here. The environment conducive to laughter continues in this character introduction.
REGGIE
I'm afraid you're blocking my view.

PETER
Sorry. Which view would you like?

REGGIE
The one you're blocking. This is the last chance I have – I'm flying back to Paris this afternoon. What's your name?

PETER
Peter Joshua.

REGGIE
I'm Regina Lampert.

PETER
Is there a Mr. Lampert?

REGGIE
Yes.

PETER
Good for you.

REGGIE
No, it isn't. I'm getting a divorce.

PETER
Please, not on my account.

REGGIE
Oh, no, you see, I don't really love him.

PETER
Well, at least you're honest.

REGGIE
Is there a Mrs. Joshua?

PETER
Yes, but we're divorced.

REGGIE
Oh, that wasn't a proposal, I'm just curious.
The ‘clever’ vocal duel between the two lead characters reveals the use of the several comic conventions. Any normal conversation Peter may have intended is thwarted by Reggie interrupting the logical flow (Interruption) with her right angled or inverted responses (Inversion) to the questions posed. Peter’s polite but stunned reactions to her responses (Reaction) are amusing, as are the blunt comebacks he is forced to deliver in order to remain on an equal footing in the conversation. The frequent misinterpretation of Reggie’s questions induces responses that alter the direction of the discourse (Reciprocal Interference). Horton’s comic conventions are used freely in this laughter inducing character introduction.

After Reggie returns to Paris, discovers her husband’s death and has her initial meeting with the CIA administrator, Bartholomew, she meets up with Peter in a park and they watch a Punch and Judy puppet show. The comic conventions used by Stone in their introductory scene are mirrored in the Punch and Judy puppets. A group of children watch Punch and Judy have a terrible fight, with Judy batting Punch over the head with an oversized stick. Punch is defeated and falls from view.

A policeman puppet arrives on the stage and confronts Judy with the accusation that she killed her husband – all in puppet gibberish. The Judy puppet starts thumping the puppet gendarme with the same ‘murder weapon’ and the audience of children laugh uproariously.

According to Bergson, the children’s laughter is made possible by their acceptance of the puppets as simple mechanical representations of real people (Bergson, 1911, p. 16b). The players have been de-humanised; indeed, they are not even remotely human. In terms of Bergson’s conditions for laughter, the children witness the action with their intellect, rendering it funny instead of tragic. Is this why the audience laughed at Reggie and Peter in the introduction scene?

Later, after significant story progression and two more murders, Stone permits the romantic leads time out to get to know each other better. As they prepare for a nighttime cruise on the Seine, Alex, trapped in the coquettish Reggie’s room, takes a shower fully dressed in his suit. Reggie delivers no comic banter. She plays the scene straight to Alex’s vaudeville routine and the scene induces audience laughter. It is hard not to smile at the antics of Alex as he extols the drip dry qualities of the suit. He takes the soap and begins washing as if he were washing himself without the suit. He exhibits Bergson’s non-human mechanical behavior.

REGGIE

How often do you go through this little ritual?

As he takes out his handkerchief and rinses it.

ALEX

Every day. The manufacturer recommends it.
REGGIE

I don't believe it.

He opens his coat and reads a label inside.

ALEX

"Wearing this suit during washing will help protect its shape."

Peter Stone takes note of both comic and romantic rhythms. On a night cruise on the Seine, after having revealed his real name is Adam, the Grant character confesses:

ADAM

Don't you know I'm having a tough time keeping my eyes off of you?

REGGIE reacts in surprise.

ADAM

Oh, you should see your face.

REGGIE

What about it?

ADAM

(taking her hand, nicely)

It's lovely.

The audience is lulled back into the world of the real, and the fresh romance acknowledges its own existence. Once this union receives the blessing of the audience any threat to it carries the potential for audience tension. This ‘time out’ the writer takes from the task of delivering either laughs or building suspense is well spent. The writer has cemented the romantic ties between the two central characters and created a third potential source of audience tension.

It is here that I detected the effect of Löker’s ‘audience guilt’ principle in Stone’s screenplay. The audience is encouraged to sanction the union between the Grant character and Reggie, but suffer anxiety over the possible outcome of their ‘guilty wish’ for the protagonist. They feel a degree of responsibility, and thus, anxiety, over any danger this wish puts the protagonist in. According to Löker, once the audience accepts some level of guilt, identification with the protagonist is heightened and tension increases. Once the Grant character is exposed as the likely murderer, the audience is moved to regret their sanctioning of the romantic union – their guilty wish – and suspense, apparently borne out of regret or guilt, is intensified.
Horton’s six comic conventions

As the second Act plays out, Reggie struggles to find the missing money and stay one step ahead of the anonymous killer, as one by one the her husband’s associates are murdered. Peter Stone achieves an interesting ‘oscillation’ between audience states of emotion between each of the story’s shocking murder scenes. Frequently, a comic environment is momentarily enforced through the sharply punctuated use of Horton’s comic conventions.

After Herman Scobie is murdered he is found by the police inspector, drowned in bed, in his pajamas. Horton’s Inversion convention is in play as the Inspector voices his objection to this unlikely death scenario. How does a man drown in his bed… in his pajamas?

Additionally, this is the middle point in a Rule of Three comic setup. The Rule of Three operates in conjunction with the Repetition convention that states ‘if it’s funny once, it will be funny again, particularly with variations’ (Horton, 2000). The Rule of Three specifically recognizes that audiences are attuned to expect Repetition to last three instances, varying slightly in detail each time. In Charade, this Rule of Three routine involves individuals being murdered in their pajamas. Each is murdered in a different fashion, but found in an unlikely place:

1. Reggie’s husband is thrown from a speeding train, and is found dead in his pajamas.
2. Scobie is drowned in a bathtub, and is found dead in his pajamas.
3. Gideon’s throat is slashed, and is found dead in his pajamas.

The person who reports these odd occurrences is the French police inspector, who caps the humour by glancing at the Grant and Reggie characters and advising them not to remain in their pajamas.

Stone’s use of the comic conventions is never more in evidence, or more successful, than in his introduction to the protagonist at the Megeve chalet. Peter Stone wrote a very funny scene to introduce the protagonist and her love interest. The scene utilises many of Horton’s comic conventions.

The protagonist is in no obvious danger at that point in the story and the writer may have realised that he had time here to have the characters inhabit an environment conducive to laughter – a zone where nobody gets hurt. As the story progresses, however, and Stone’s story environment oscillates from Horton’s ‘nobody gets hurt zone’ back to Hicks’ environment of thriller realism, the comic conventions are used more sparingly. No scene is funnier than the characters’ introduction scene. Care has been taken to gently emphasise the predominance of the thriller environment as the story progresses toward its thrilling climax.
Chapter 3: Examining the comedy thriller case study

An instance of the writer’s misstep in this environment oscillation between comic and thriller worlds occurs just prior to the Act Two turning point. Reggie and the Grant character, now revealed as Alex, take a walk along the banks of the Seine, discussing who among them might be the murderer. This scene takes a moment to recap the events of the story, indulging in what may be gratuitous and somewhat out of place comic banter.

Reggie’s style of conversation becomes a continuous stream of deflection, inversion and interruption of Alex’s dialogue. Alex poses a question and receives what he thinks is an answer from Reggie, but is really the beginning of a wildly new topic. Reggie flip-flops erratically between topics, flings ice creams on suits and fantasizes about Gene Kelly in *An American in Paris*. She regresses, for this scene, to the un-natural puppet behavior she exhibited in her introductory scene. She becomes abruptly unreal; a manifestation of Bergson’s automaton character. This is too sudden a character change for the audience, so soon after fearing for her safety, and they may not be ready to accept the writer’s creation of an ‘environment conducive to laughter’ or the ‘environment where nobody gets hurt’ this close to the climax. Too many people have died gruesome deaths for the character to be behaving in such a blithely carefree manner. Reggie has been rendered real and vulnerable over the preceding fifty pages, and the comic devices no longer function to instantly raise audience laughter.

The scene fails to either amuse, to advance relationship or to reveal plot.

The comic potential of the protagonist has been reduced by this point in her timeline, and she is now perceived as a woman in love and under threat of her life. I see this scene as a misfire by the writer, and an instance wherein the use of Horton’s comic conventions to create an environment conducive to laughter utterly fails. Peter Stone’s *Charade* succeeds to an admirable degree in its mission to blend comedy with thrills. Its instances of failure are almost inconsequential. Time and again, Peter Stone manages to re-establish the psychological parameters necessary for the generation of audience suspense after interludes of comic relief. It could be argued, however, that the intensity of suspense is only moderate throughout as a result of this oscillation.

So, how much suspense should we really expect of a comedy thriller?

**Conclusions**

I have demonstrated in this chapter how Hicks’ four principles of the thriller and Horton’s six comic conventions may be applied to a case study. Peter Stone’s *Charade* exhibits all four principles identified under Hicks’ Cosmos of Credibility framework for the suspense thriller. The Narrative Trajectory, Character Ethos, Bounded World and Timescape specific to the thriller are all in evidence within the structure of the screenplay for *Charade*. Comic interludes were successfully integrated into the spaces between the suspenseful structural plot points, using many of Horton’s comic conventions.
Does this screenplay, however, overcome the tension relieving comic interludes to become truly suspenseful?

Yes, it does, for at least one sequence – the climax.

Though Stone created many comic sequences in the first half of the screenplay, these periods where ‘nobody gets hurt’ become fewer in the last half. With each successive comic interlude, the dialogue slows and becomes more considered and contributive to plot. Humour is delivered with greater consideration to the revelation of character, and the protagonist begins to reveal her humanity and vulnerability.

By the climax, Reggie has revealed the requisite humanity to garner close audience identification, which greatly assists in the generation audience suspense. The de-humanisation that occurred as a result of the character’s use of Horton’s comic conventions in her introductory scene has dissolved away to reveal a frightened and vulnerable young lady.

In this chapter I observed Peter Stone’s successful oscillation between an atmosphere conducive to laughter and the environment of realism required to induce audience suspense.

I have identified the parameters and limitations of this strategy, and suspect that this oscillation between the comic and the realistic must segue into a period of uninterrupted realism from the beginning of Act Three until the climax, in order to achieve the necessary build-up of audience suspense for the final thrilling release.

Peter Stone established the parameters of an environment of realism in the first scene; an unforgiving world in which people are being murdered one by one. The writer established this environment of realism before the protagonist and key romantic support were introduced in a comic scene.

Stone’s technique of closing the trap around the protagonist and compressing the timeframe gives evidence to two important principles of Hicks’ Cosmos of Credibility framework for the thriller feature screenplay; the Bounded World and the Timescape.

Additionally, from a psychoanalytic perspective, there is evidence that Löker’s ‘guilty wish’ principle has some effect on the level of suspense experienced by the audience.

Peter Stone’s screenplay for Charade successfully oscillates between the environments conducive to laughter and the realism required for the generation of audience suspense, with the exception of one scene, in the build-up to the climax. This example demonstrates how the de-humanising effects of Horton’s comic conventions on the protagonist work counter to Hicks’ four principles for the creation of audience suspense. Stone’s screenplay gives evidence to my suspicion that the oscillation between the thriller and comedy environments must be restrained in favour of Hicks’ thriller principles in the third act, when the inexorable build-up of suspense is required for a thrilling climax.
An important observation that I bring away from Stone’s structure is the emphasis on life and death consequences at the very beginning and end of the screenplay. The comedy thriller does well to ‘top and tail’ with the realism and life and death consequences indicated by Hicks’ principles of the thriller.

Stone’s screenplay, whether by intention or not, gives some evidence to Löker’s theory of film suspense when the audience’s ‘guilty wish’ for the union of the romantic leads is tainted by the suspicion of betrayal, contributing to audience suspense. This has important implications for the romantic interplay between the lead characters in my comedy thriller screenplay.

In the next chapter I test how useful, or not, these principles, conventions and techniques are to the writing of my comedy thriller screenplay, *Project Daybreak*. 
Chapter 4: Writing the comedy thriller film screenplay

Question 3: How useful, or not, are these principles, conventions and techniques to the writing of my comedy thriller screenplay?

In the last chapter I observed how the four thriller principles under Hicks’ Cosmos of Credibility positively influenced audience identification with the protagonist and contributed to a state of audience suspense in Peter Stone’s screenplay for *Charade*. Hicks’ four principles of the thriller contributed directly to the audience’s shared sense of anxiety with the protagonist as she sought a solution to her predicament.

I also observed Stone’s use of Horton and Bergson’s comic conventions to induce audience laughter, in sequences which were constructed in the spaces between *Charade*’s structural plot points; those moments where the danger to the protagonist peaked and the requirement for realism greatest. In those moments, Horton’s comic conventions were largely absent. Stone oscillated between the environment conducive to laughter and the realism required for the generation of audience suspense.

I observed that Stone’s screenplay began and ended with the life and death actions of the antagonist, the main structural plot points typically being marked by a brutal death. This evoked the audience perception of a trap inexorably closing around the protagonist and employed Hicks’ four principles of the thriller for the generation of audience suspense.

I recognised the working of Löker’s ‘audience guilt’ principle in the audience’s wish for a romantic union, a union that might have proven fatal for the protagonist. This seemed to contribute to the level of suspense generated at key points in the screenplay.

In this chapter I test how useful, or not, these principles, conventions and techniques are to the writing of my comedy thriller screenplay, *Project Daybreak*.

*Project Daybreak* tells the story of a humble inventor who creates a means of cheap, clean, non-nuclear energy after his wife dies of radiation poisoning in a nuclear power station accident. When he is discovered at a science fair by Dr Elaine Frank, he is introduced to the insane nuclear power industrialist Leo Greene, who offers to buy him out and suppress his cold fusion invention. When Michael refuses, Greene sends his henchmen to kill him.

In the process of escape, Michael discovers Elaine’s identity as an undercover government investigator trying to bring Greene down and Greene’s genocidal plans to eradicate Humanity by blowing up his nuclear plant, irradiating the planet, and ruling the survivors. Michael’s invention has unfortunately provided Greene with the last piece of technology to make his plan feasible.
Michael’s various attempts to stop Greene and steal back his invention land him in Greene’s radiation death chamber with Elaine taken hostage with a collar bomb locked to her neck.

Michael escapes the chamber, rescues Elaine and fights off capture by Greene’s henchman to confront Greene minutes before the meltdown of the world’s biggest, dirtiest nuclear reactor. He dispatches Greene and averts a nuclear catastrophe through the application of his cold fusion device to the plant’s cooling system.

Michael is pledged massive investment dollars for his cold fusion invention, and wins the heart of Elaine.

Hicks’ 1st principle of the thriller; Narrative Trajectory

The protagonist is introduced to the antagonist, Greene, by the love interest, Elaine. Greene offers Michael five million dollars to bury the cold fusion project and Michael refuses. The two become instant enemies and the lines are drawn for a battle that will end only when one of them dies. This structural plot point is played for realism to maximise audience suspense, under Hicks’ principles of the Cosmos of Credibility for the thriller.

Hicks’ Attraction, Anticipation and Satisfaction markers in the Narrative Trajectory are clearly evidenced in Project Daybreak. Michael is a bereaved and failed scientist, whose invention finally works. The audience makes an unconscious wish for Michael to benefit from the promotion of his invention, but his potential benefactor tries to kill him to suppress the invention. The audience is ‘Attracted’ to the protagonist’s predicament.

As the story unfolds he meets new characters, most of who try to kill him, and the audience experiences the tension of Anticipation, as they wonder by what mechanism this clearly outmatched character will survive and defeat the antagonist.

By genre convention and awareness, the audience anticipates Satisfaction in the climax, usually by means of the destruction of the antagonist at the hands of the protagonist. This is delivered by Project Daybreak in a dramatically unexpected fashion.

Hicks’ 2nd principle of the thriller; Bounded World

Once Michael crosses paths with the antagonist, attempts are made on his life. Michael is blamed for the attempted murder of Greene’s son, so he cannot go to the police. This is Michael’s Bounded World. He has no recourse for assistance – he is on his own and on the run.

In two dramatic instances, Michael is locked inside chambers and exposed to his worst fear – contamination by a fatal dose of radiation. In the first instance, not only is he locked in a small space in which the radiation levels slowly rise to life threatening levels, but the chamber itself fills with
water. Trapped inside the tiny water filled chamber, he must summon the strength to break the walls of his Bounded World. In another example of a compressed timeframe within a Bounded World, Michael runs out of breath, and must break the walls of the chamber before he loses consciousness.

In a later scene Elaine’s collar bomb is locked to his Michael’s neck. He attempts to rescue Elaine, while being pursued by the police and hatch a plan to stop a nuclear meltdown – all to a compressed time span of an hour. If he is to survive and save the girl and Humanity, he must find the resources in himself to do so.

Hicks argues that close audience identification with the thriller contributes to a shared audience experience. When Michael and Elaine flee the antagonist and dangle from the broken window washer trolley at the 30th floor, tension is very high. When they dangle from this twisted washer trolley, the audience should experience a visceral tingling of suspense and thrills. To emphasise how successful I believe this technique may be, I recall the Harold Lloyd character hanging from the giant clock face in Safety Last (1923).

Such is the situation my protagonist, Michael, finds himself in. In Project Daybreak’s climax, when Michael, Greene and Elaine dangle from a construction crane’s jib, the use of any comic device at all would have adversely affected the generation of suspense thrills, so I engaged none.

Hicks’ 3rd principle of the thriller; Timescape

Hicks determined that ‘The true thriller... relies on a rapid narrative technique that creates for an audience a very swift Perceived Story Time’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 84). Project Daybreak has more than one level of compressed time span. In the Act One Turning Point, the antagonist’s discovery of the protagonist’s game changing invention forces him to accelerate his grand plan for the destruction of the civilised world.

When Greene locks a collar bomb onto the love interest, Elaine, timed to explode at the same time as Greene’s nuclear power station, there are suddenly two of Hicks’ compressed time spans in operation.

The grand countdown to the biggest nuclear meltdown ever imagined serves as a suspenseful counterpoint to the countdown on the collar bomb locked, first to Elaine’s neck, and finally to Michael’s.

Finally, as the second part of the climax is grasped by the audience, Michael battles to re-start a sabotaged reactor coolant system against the backdrop of a computer warning system that counts down the seconds to apocalyptic meltdown. The audience is subjected to a multiplicity of Hicks’ suspense generating compressed time spans.
Hicks’ 4th principle of the thriller; Character Ethos

Previous chapters have emphasised that an environment of realism is required for the generation of suspense, and that this realism is disrupted by the environment conducive to audience laughter, I made it a priority to establish an environment of realism within the screenplay’s opening sequence. I accomplished this by way of introducing the antagonist by his acts in the first scene. As in Charade, a person dies as a consequence of the antagonist’s actions. A mere two scenes later, the antagonist’s Character Ethos is underlined as the audience witnesses him murder a man in cold blood. The characters within Project Daybreak inhabit a story world in which people can and do die.

My findings indicate it may be beneficial to the generation of audience suspense if the opening sequence demonstrates in some visceral way the antagonist’s power and amoral Character Ethos. It is important that from the very outset audiences are made aware that characters in this story can get hurt.

There are many precedents for this strategy, in both the thriller and comedy thriller film genres. In each of the following examples either the antagonist or the central dramatic problem is introduced before the protagonist. Exemplars of this strategy include: Charade (1963); Fargo (1996); Outbreak (1995); Minority Report (2002); Men in Black I, II and III (2012); The Matrix (1999); The Lord of the Rings (2001); Ghostbusters (1983); Jaws (1975); Star Wars (1977); Foul Play (1978); The Da Vinci Code (2006); Stakeout (1987); WarGames (1983); Blade Runner (1982); Spies Like Us (1985).

As the antagonist of Project Daybreak needed to embody a realistic and deadly threat to the protagonist, I determined that any comic conventions employed in the portrayal of the antagonist may undermine his realism and would make him, effectively, less threatening.

In his introductory scene, the antagonist, Sir Leo Greene, poisons a nuclear inspector with a dose of weapons grade plutonium. This is the very material we later discover that our protagonist has an irrational dread of.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, there have been unsubstantiated stories and fears of weapons grade plutonium being sold by powerbrokers in the new Russia to the international black market, and fears of terrorists creating and exploding ‘dirty bombs’ in the cities of their enemies. In this, I adhered to Hicks’ Cosmos of Credibility to establish a credible threat in the minds of the audience. In the opening sequence, I establish the antagonist’s amoral Character Ethos and tapped a real and current fear in the collective western mind.

A comparatively uninvolved character is drawn into an increasingly larger menace, and discovers that the only way to remain alive is through self-reliance, by exposing the malevolent evil before it can assault the larger community (Hicks, 2002, p. 17).
Indeed, in *Project Daybreak* the antagonist does pose a lethal threat to the greater community. In his quest for power he is not averse to a spot of global genocide.

The protagonist and antagonist display diametrically opposed Character Ethos, as indicated by Hicks’ Cosmos of Credibility framework for the thriller film. Michael Day is a moral citizen – what we would call a ‘good’ man. He has laboured long on the creation of a clean energy generator since the death of his wife from radiation poisoning eight years prior. His main aim is to give the world a viable alternative to nuclear energy.

The conflict between the antagonist and protagonist could hardly be contrasted to a greater extreme. Michael is a moderate, but humble, electronics genius. He is ill-equipped to go to battle against one of the most powerful and dangerous men in the world and demonstrates this. This protagonist has no special powers or abilities that will aid him in overcoming the central dramatic problem. Outside of his technical smarts, he is the ‘everyman’ that audiences find it easy to identify with. He embodies the ‘innocent on the run’ thriller protagonist described by Charles Derry (1988) and embodied in many Hitchcock thrillers.

I make mention here of the part I believe Löker’s theory of audience guilt may play in the discussion of Hicks’ Character Ethos principle. The audience makes an early decision with which major character they will identify. That decision will typically be made on the basis of a shared ‘Ethos’ with that written character. Identifying with Michael, when his cold fusion device finally works, they may naturally wish him a measure of fame and financial success. This audience wish brings him into direct conflict with the antagonist Greene, who tries to kill him. The audience may be inclined to regret their original wish as a consequence, which may then fuel a state of guilt over Michael’s predicament. Responsibility is analogous to guilt under these circumstances, which, according to Löker, contributes to audience suspense. If the writer has not clearly and starkly contrasted the Character Ethos of the protagonist and antagonist, audience identification with the protagonist may not be sufficient to induce Löker’s ‘audience guilt.’

When Michael meets with Greene’s representative, Elaine, sparks fly between them. These two are combative and funny together and the audience thinks they would be fun to watch join romantically. I wrote Elaine to be initially combative and dismissive of Michael, largely to deepen audience empathy for the protagonist. When Michael and Elaine do connect, as the audience ‘wishes,’ it catalyses events that threaten both their lives and the future of Humanity. The audience’s wish that they get together becomes ‘guilt laden’ once the dire consequences of the wish are made evident.

I have attempted to craft a deliberate state of audience guilt in the establishment of the protagonist’s radiation phobia, to see if I can manifest Löker’s ‘audience guilt’ that contributes to suspense.

Throughout Act One and Two, Michael exhibits an obsessive fear of all sources of radiation and electromagnetic frequency.
Many may know people who suffer obsessive fear of things that we do not share, and we are compelled at times to wish that the phobic friend would just face their fear and ‘get over it’. The audience’s guilty wish takes the form of wishing Michael to confront his fear of radiation. Once he does, however, it appears he will pay for it with his life. The audience presumably does not wish this character to die, and so, enter a state of guilt in anticipation of his likely death. According to Löker’s ‘audience guilt’ theory, at a sub-conscious level, the audience should feel partially responsible for Michael’s climactic sacrifice. This is Löker’s ‘anticipation of punishment’ that sets up the audience’s state of ‘free floating anxiety.’

I put the audience under deliberate pressure, in accordance with Löker’s theory of guilt, to enter this state of ‘free floating anxiety’ over the fear of his death.

**Horton’s ‘environment conducive to laughter’**

According to Horton ‘Nothing is inherently funny or sad, but becomes so by means of perspective’ (Horton, 2000, p. 23). As Horton insists that audience laughter is dependent on the perception that nobody will get hurt, and Hicks argues that suspense requires the audience belief that the threat to the protagonist’s life is real, I needed the screenplay to carefully oscillate between these two audience perceptions.

I determined, as a result of my examination, that all major structural plot points must convey a perception of realism to the audience in order to maximise the potential for the generation of audience suspense. I carefully plotted in which sequences I could afford to create an environment conducive to laughter and which sequences needed to be effectively insulated from the effect of such an environment.

Events that highlight or punctuate the protagonist’s psychological evolution I contend are free to be comic in tone. These comic moments generally serve to illustrate the steep learning curve Michael must negotiate before he is ready to confront and defeat the antagonist, or in his relationship battles with the love interest.

Once the fatal consequences of the antagonist’s past acts have been witnessed through the death of Michael’s young wife, the introduction to the screenplay’s protagonist plays out in full. Michael’s introduction is gently humorous.

Michael struggles with his scientist friend, Gromlik, for a breakthrough with his cold fusion reactor. As this is not a structural plot point, the comic conventions of Interruption and Reaction and Reversal are used freely towards the creation of an environment conducive to audience laughter. No-one in this scene is currently in danger.
The next sequence I considered was safe for the creation of a comic environment was the science fair at which Dr Elaine Frank discovers Michael and his cold fusion invention. Horton’s comic devices are used liberally in this environment conducive to laughter in order to highlight Michael’s naivety and to underline the stark contrast between his and Elaine’s character.

In order to maintain the realism around the protagonist’s central dramatic problem, however, at no point does the antagonist in *Project Daybreak* deliver comic moments. According to Bergson, the use of comic conventions reduces audience perception of characters to the status of non-human puppets (Bergson, 1922). As the audience is aware that puppets ‘cannot be hurt’ the potential for tension is reduced. As such, *Project Daybreak*’s antagonist is not seen to inhabit any constructed environment conducive to laughter.

The sequence where protagonist and antagonist initially cross paths is played for realism. This is the Act Two Turning Point, a major structural plot point in the screenplay. This, and a scene where Michael rescues Elaine from Greene’s murderous son, Christian, stress a very real threat. The use of comic devices to relieve audience stress at these points would be counter to the aim of Hicks’ four thriller principles and may hinder the generation of audience suspense later on.

For the first half of Act Two, the protagonist struggles time and again to elude capture by the antagonist. The harder he tries the deeper toward the ‘all is lost’ Mid-point he falls.

With no structural plot points for some twenty pages after that scene, the story oscillates back to an environment conducive to laughter. The audience may begin to accept that the danger will ebb and flow, and to recognise when it is safe to relax their guard and fall back into that environment where they are assured that ‘nobody will get hurt.’

The Mid-point of a thriller screenplay usually sees the protagonist all but totally defeated by the antagonist. Being a major structural plot point, I utilised no comic conventions. The scene is written for maximum audience tension, after which Michael has an epiphany that promises to reverse his fortunes.

I wrote a set piece, prior to the Mid-point protagonist defeat, where Michael and Elaine gate crash an elegant party at Greene’s mansion in the country in order to steal back his cold fusion device. The opulence of the setting and the powerful and wealthy guests put Michael in fear of discovery, but the costume theme permits him to hide his identity and operate in relative safety. This safety zone provides a perfect opportunity for the creation of an environment conducive to laughter, without threatening to subvert the realism and danger of the structural plot points to follow.

As the story’s Timescape compressed toward the climax, however, I contrived to minimize the frequency and depth of these sequences in which ‘nobody gets hurt.’ I intended to slowly build
suspense in the third act to maximize the release of audience tension as the protagonist finally defeats
the antagonist.

Horton’s six comic conventions

The costume party setting invited the use of the Disguise and Exaggeration comic conventions.
Reciprocal Interference was employed as Michael mingled with the guests, which lead to the
misinterpretation of certain conversations and lead to an unexpected comic series of events and the
premature dissolution of the party. The Interruption and Reaction comic conventions were used
throughout the scene, in both dialogue and action based set-ups.

The scene where Michael and Elaine first meet contains the highest density use of Horton’s comic
conventions.

In recognition of Bergson’s theory of the de-humanising effect of comic conventions on characters, I
wrote no strongly comic sequences or scenes in the third act, conscious of the need to foster an
inexorable build-up of suspense toward the screenplay climax. Having witnessed Peter Stone’s ill-
timed overly zealous use of Horton’s comic conventions in a key scene prior to the climax of Charade,
I was aware of a comic scene’s potentially negative effect on audience identification with the
protagonist.

In a third act scene, where Michael goes to his friend Gromlik for help in removing the explosive
collar bomb, the only character who engages in Horton’s comic conventions is Gromlik himself. As a
secondary character, I believed he was free to be comic and exhibit Bergson’s mechanical character
traits. This effectively insulates our heroes, Michael and Elaine, from the potentially de-humanising
effects of Horton’s comic conventions. From this point on they remain realistic, vulnerable and mortal
– capable of inducing audience empathy.

Conclusions

As a result of writing this screenplay I draw certain conclusions regarding the use of the principles,
conventions and techniques of the comedy thriller screenplay.

I have observed that the environment of realism required to pose a credible threat to the protagonist
must be enforced at the seven structural plot points. Comic conventions may be used judiciously in-
between, but not during, the structural plot points of the screenplay. The oscillation between comic
and thriller story world environments must weigh in favour of the thriller in the third act. The unreal
must crystallise into the real. Hicks’ four principles of the thriller help define the real world conditions
and predicament of the thriller protagonist. As the threat posed by the antagonist must retain the
highest level of realism I have not associated comic conventions with the portrayal of this key
character.
I employ Horton’s comic conventions only in the periods between the seven structural plot points. This may insulate the overarching story from the de-humanising and suspense destroying effects of the comic conventions. The protagonist, antagonist and story environment all reflect the highest degree of realism at these points in order to reinforce the optimal conditions for the generation of audience suspense.

After I had oscillated between the comic and thriller story environments in Act One and Act Two of the screenplay, I settled into the thriller environment for the duration of the Act Three. It was important that I should not risk defusing audience tension in the build-up to the story’s climax. The overuse of comic conventions risks de-humanising the characters and reducing audience identification with the protagonist, which is particularly detrimental to the generation of suspense when it is needed most, at the climax.

Löker’s theory of film suspense may play an important part in thrillers that present a temptation to the protagonist to engage an opportunity or a mate. The audience's wish that the protagonist be granted his desire, and the subsequent dangers he/she encounters as a direct result of attaining it, induces audience guilt, a significant contributor to suspense. I made use of this principle in the relationship between Michael and Elaine in Project Daybreak.

In the next chapter I summarise my conclusions on the principles, conventions and techniques of the comedy thriller screenplay and offer directions for future research.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and directions for further research

In the last chapter I examined the process of drafting my screenplay project. I focused on the principles, conventions and techniques of both the thriller and comedy film genres as they are used in my screenplay project.

In the two comedy thriller case studies I observed the use of Horton and Bergson’s comic devices, which delivered audience laughter and sometimes inconveniently defused audience tension.

I have found that Hicks’ four principles of the thriller provide a substantial underpinning structure for the generation of suspense in the comedy thriller case study Charade.

I observed that Stone’s screenplay began and ended with a death, fulfilling Hicks’ thriller principles that require the creation of a realistic story world in which the audience accepts that characters can get hurt and killed.

I noted how successfully Stone oscillated between the environments conducive to laughter and the realism required for suspense. This oscillation was fluid and successful, with the possible exception of one scene, in the build-up to the climax. The use of Horton’s comic conventions in this instance worked against the build-up of audience suspense toward the climax.

I also recognised the subtle play of Löker’s ‘audience guilt’ theory of suspense in the relationship dynamic between the protagonist and key support character in Peter Stone’s Charade.

In this chapter I present my conclusions on the principles, conventions and techniques observed in the case study comedy thriller screenplays and offer directions for future research. The aim of the comedy thriller screenplay is to deliver audience laughter interspersed with suspense and thrills. How this is best achieved by the screenwriter has been the objective of this study and my findings are as follows.

**Hicks’ 1st principle of the thriller; Narrative Trajectory**

Thrillers engage the audience by ensuring that they are 'Attracted' to the protagonist’s predicament in the First Act. The writer must create a character with which the audience can identify and deal him/her an interesting problem. As the odds against survival are stacked against them, and the central dramatic problem is further complicated by the writer, the audience ‘expects more and more interesting things to happen’ (Hicks, 2002, p. 32). The audience’s Anticipation of a solution to the protagonist’s problem contributes to suspense.
By the end, the audience seeks Satisfaction, usually in the demise of the antagonist at the hands of the protagonist. These three points in Hicks’ Narrative Trajectory correspond with the classic three act structure of contemporary commercial feature films.

**Hicks’ 2nd principle of the thriller; Bounded World**

Audiences can readily relate to the fear of being trapped within a small space or inescapable situation. Hicks Bounded World principle directs the writer to tap a primal human fear by trapping the protagonist in a psychological or physical construct that limits opportunity for escape.

Audience identification with a believable character induces a shared experience of this fear of being trapped. Skillful use of Hicks’ Bounded World principle, in conjunction with his ‘compressed time span’ of the thriller, contributes to the generation of audience suspense.

The protagonist in *Project Daybreak* is trapped by several Bounded World set-ups, each with its own ‘ticking clock’ compressed time frame.

**Hicks’ 3rd principle of the thriller; Timescape**

The thriller’s compressed time span contributes to audience suspense by imposing a time limit on the protagonist to escape their Bounded World. In *Project Daybreak* the protagonist is trapped in a radiation chamber which is fast filling with water. The compressed time span is defined by how long he can hold his breath.

Hicks’ Timescape thriller principle dictates that the story unfolds within a very short but intense time span. This compressed time span is evident in the three day story arc of my screenplay, in addition to several anxiety inducing sequences that operate within their own compressed time spans. Hicks’ Timescape principle is integral to his Bounded World principle for the generation of audience suspense.

**Hicks’ 4th principle of the thriller; Character Ethos**

By opening the screenplay with the ruthless acts of the antagonist, it is quickly established that this is a world where the normal rules of life and death apply. My findings suggest that the opening sequence demonstrates in some visceral way the antagonist’s power and amoral character, according to Hicks’ Character Ethos thriller principle. It is important that from the very outset audiences are made aware that characters in this story can get hurt. Stone applied this strategy in *Charade* as I now apply it in *Project Daybreak*.

As Derry points out, in reference to a Hitchcock quote, audience foreknowledge of the danger facing the protagonist is a prime contributor to suspense.
Chapter 5: Conclusions and directions for further research

My findings suggest that the screenwriter of the comedy thriller could do worse than to foreshadow those dangers in the opening sequence. Firmly establishing Hicks’ real – dangerous - world of the protagonist, at the beginning and end of the story, may serve to counteract the tension reducing effect of Horton’s comic conventions when they are first used.

Horton’s ‘environment conducive to laughter’

Horton’s six comic conventions assist the screenwriter in the construction of a story world conducive to audience laughter. Supporting Horton’s contention, the writings of Bergson state that any belief on the part of the audience that the characters can get hurt cancels the potential for the generation of audience laughter. The audience must observe that the characters operate within a zone wherein any physical mishap that occurs will not result in genuine pain or damage to a real human being.

Horton’s environment conducive to laughter, therefore, is diametrically opposed to the conditions Hicks sets out for the generation of audience suspense in the thriller.

Horton’s six comic conventions

Repetition, Inversion, Reciprocal Interference, Disguise and Exaggeration, Interruption and Reaction are important comic conventions that assist the writer in the generation of audience laughter. Used by screenwriters, playwrights and performers for hundreds of years, Horton defines the usage of the six comic conventions in modern entertainment for contemporary audiences. Bergson argues that by the use of comic conventions, characters are rendered somewhat less than human in the eyes of the audience. Being less than human, the audience is moved to laughter when accidents befall the protagonist, as identification and empathy is reduced with respect to the character.

In regard to the thriller component of the comedy thriller screenplay however, Harper (1974), Dethridge (2003), McKee (2000), Derry (1988) and Hicks (2002) all agree that the primary bonds between the audience and the protagonist influence the degree of audience anxiety. I would like to acknowledge, at this point, the contribution to suspense thriller theory that Altan Löker’s ‘guilty wish’ principle strives to make. Löker contends that a state of audience guilt over the protagonist’s predicament contributes to the generation of suspense. Inducing a sense of responsibility and guilt for the protagonist’s predicament is only possible, however, if the audience accepts the ‘reality’ of the character. This being so, Horton and Bergson’s ‘de-humanising’ comic conventions may work counter to the generation of audience guilt. There is nothing to feel guilty over if the victim is not real.

Contrary to the adage that ‘All comedy is pain’ Horton and Bergson have indicated that audiences tend not to laugh if they perceive the pain is real. This would suggest that it is the audience’s belief that the pain is not real that grants them subliminal permission to laugh. This is a decidedly more benevolent judgment of the human laughter response than is suggested by ‘All comedy is pain.’
If the screenwriter wishes to draw a comic moment from the protagonist then the character must be momentarily reduced to Bergson’s *mechanical* character. Failure to cleanly deliver this oscillation into the momentarily unreal may result in a failure to elicit audience laughter. The audience will not laugh unless they are first convinced that the pain is simulated, rather than real. This observation has never been more important than for the writer of the comedy thriller, whom, I suggest, must skillfully oscillate between the two audience states.

The use of Horton’s comic conventions may generate audience laughter in Act One and Two, but the climax in Act Three should realistically portray a life and death struggle between the forces of good and evil. If comic conventions are blended with the climax, my findings suggest that audience suspense may be irrevocably lost and their expectations of the thriller genre left unsatisfied.

In the end, the audience looks forward to a hero, a real human being with whom they have identified and who will ultimately save the day. Of the thriller protagonist, Ralph Harper wrote:

> Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid… He is the hero, he is everything. He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man (Harper, 1974, p. 27).

His comments remind us that audiences enjoy being able to look up to someone, even a fictional character - for a brief time to walk in the shoes of a hero. The thriller experience is a dream shared by humanity; a fantasy rehearsal of their reaction to emergency and threat to life and family. When an empathetic character defeats a powerful and dark foe, the audience experiences the thrill of what it would be like to fight and win such a battle.

The comedy thriller protagonist is ‘one of us’ an ordinary person caught up in events larger than himself, and, as in real life, laughter surfaces in the spaces between the drama in our lives.

**Conclusions**

The comedy thriller protagonist and the dangers he/she faces must be perceived by the audience to be real, at least within the story context. As a ‘real’ person, the protagonist invites close audience identification and a shared experience of the character’s fear. Charles Derry’s ‘innocent on the run’ thriller protagonist epitomises the everyman who is ‘out of his depth’ and contributes strongly to audience identification. This protagonist is also very much constrained by Hicks’ four principles of the thriller screenplay. Stone’s protagonist, Reggie, and my protagonist, Michael, both fit into this ‘innocent on the run’ thriller character category.
Hicks’ thriller principles and the main structural plot points

Hicks’ four thriller principles - Narrative Trajectory, Bounded World, Timescape and Character Ethos – help define thriller and comedy thriller screenplay structure and inform the creation of the environment of realism required to raise audience tension and anxiety. My findings suggest that Hicks’ thriller realism must be maintained and reinforced at the screenplay’s main structural plot points.

These structural plot points represent the best opportunity to convey the realism of the danger to the protagonist and are best written with adherence to Hicks’ four guiding principles for the thriller. Comic devices used at the main structural plot points may convey to the audience the apparent harmlessness of the situation and work counter to the generation of suspense.

Oscillating between the thriller and comedy environments

Horton and Bergson tell us that the story environment conducive to the generation of laughter is one in which nobody gets hurt. Hicks, Derry and Löker inform us that the story environment conducive to the generation of suspense reflects the real world in which characters really can get hurt. In order that these two diametrically opposed story environments may be successfully combined in the hybrid comedy thriller feature film genre, the screenwriter may oscillate between the two story states.

My findings suggest that the oscillation be not arbitrary, but executed with regard to the seven structural plot points of the standard feature film screenplay. The screenwriter should aim to insulate the seven structural plot points from the suspense reducing effects of Horton’s comic conventions. The realism of, and hence identification with, the human at the centre of the story is compromised by their misuse or overuse.

In constructing the story world of my own screenplay, therefore, I have oscillated between the world in which nobody gets hurt (comic) and the world of realism (thriller), where pain, injury and death exist. In the comic interludes between the main structural plot points, I employed as many comic conventions as I could in order to induce audience laughter. At the main structural plot points, I eschewed the use of the comic conventions and emphasized the mortal danger the protagonist faced.

The structural plot points usually involved the antagonist, a character who was never written with any regard to comic conventions. At the structural plot points, then, a character who carried the threat of death to the protagonist occupied sequences devoid of comic conventions. Whenever the antagonist appeared in the script, the scene was insulated from Horton’s comic conventions.

As the protagonist and antagonist are brought more frequently into face to face conflict in Act Three, the comic conventions were all but absent. It was in this absence of comic conventions that I re-emphasised the realism of the situation which assisted in the generation of audience suspense.
The interplay of guilt in the generation of audience suspense

I have given further consideration to the psychological underpinnings of audience suspense by my observation of Löker’s central ‘audience guilt’ principle. I designed that the protagonist’s life threatening dramatic problem stems from his accidental meeting with the love interest and subsequent introduction to the antagonist.

The initial audience wish that Michael benefit from his invention, their wish for his romantic engagement with the love interest, and their guilty wish for the advancement of story action all have life threatening consequences for the protagonist. These writer set-ups have the potential to induce Löker’s ‘audience guilt’ that contributes to suspense.

In Stone’s *Charade*, audience tension is periodically enhanced by the Grant character’s duplicity in regard to the protagonist, Reggie. As the audience has made a wish that these two charming characters engage romantically, the audience’s uncertainty of his true intentions induces Löker’s ‘audience guilt,’ that he contends underpins anxiety and the audience experience of suspense.

Underlying this instance, is the audience’s ‘wish for action’ in the story once the central problem has been revealed. This ‘wish for action’ has the effect of placing the protagonist in terrible danger. As Stone had written a very sympathetic character in Reggie, the audience experienced a subliminal sense of guilt over their ‘wish for action’ or ‘wish for romance.’ Likewise, in *Project Daybreak*, terrible things happen as a result of the two romantically inclined characters meeting.

If not the sole factor contributing to audience suspense, as Löker would have us believe, his ‘audience guilt’ theory may certainly contribute to it. As an examination of the psychological state of audience suspense, Löker’s theory offers a valuable point of reflection for the writer of both the thriller and hybrid comedy thriller feature screenplay.

The de-humanising effect of comic conventions

Audience laughter relies on the perception that in the characters’ story world, nobody gets hurt or killed. Horton’s comic conventions facilitate this aim, but have the net effect of reducing the characters to Bergson’s non-human mechanical figure, or puppet. This is the condition Bergson argues is essential in order that the audience may ‘de-identify’ with the character to engage in laughter.

When a character exhibits any of the actions suggested by the comic conventions, they provoke laughter but have a distancing effect on the audience. The character takes on aspects of the un-natural, mechanical and puppet-like and Bergson declares that audiences are subliminally aware that ‘puppets’ cannot be hurt.
The result of this distancing effect is that it grants the audience permission to laugh at the character’s pain without experiencing guilt. This is counter to the aims of the suspense thriller, which demand close identification and empathy with the protagonist and a shared experience of their pain.

The comedy thriller protagonist, then, must be insulated from the de-humanising effects of comic conventions in the events that occur at the main structural plot points of the screenplay. At the points of greatest screenplay tension, the ‘un-hurtable puppet’ must become the very real, vulnerable, mortal protagonist.

**Comic conventions cancel audience suspense**

In the course of plotting the oscillation between the thriller and comedy story environments, I have ensured that the thriller environment of realism is emphasised at my screenplay’s main structural plot points.

Hicks asserts that states of audience tension are reliant on the audience’s ability to ‘suspend their disbelief’ in the fictionalised story world; for the screenplay’s running time, to accept a level of realism that permits them to believe that the characters can get hurt. Since use of the comic conventions reduces the audience’s perception of story realism, and thus, the generation of suspense, they must be used discretely in the sequences that exist between the dramatic structural plot points.

In order that the threat to the protagonist, and community, retains an aspect of realism, at no point in the screenplay are comic conventions used in relation to the antagonist. The antagonist must be mired in the ‘real.’

In the Third Act, between the Second Act Turning Point and the Climax, I intended that the use of comic conventions be minimalised; as my intention was to relentlessly build audience tension for a significant final thrill. I attempted to avoid the misstep I consider Peter Stone made in Act Three of *Charade*, a scene in which his use of various comic conventions threatened to subvert the humanity of his protagonist and work counter to the slow build up of suspense required for the climax.

In Figure 4, I offer a diagram that summarises the main points of my conclusions regarding the optimal structure of the comedy thriller screenplay. The diagram sequences the thriller ‘realism’ zones and the environment conducive to laughter ‘nobody gets hurt’ zones, and represents the framework I observed in the creation of the screenplay *Project Daybreak*.

My findings suggest that with due consideration to the oscillation between the story environments described by Hicks and Horton for their respective areas of study, the tensions of both genres may be made to complement each other in the comedy thriller screenplay.
### The comedy thriller writing framework:

Oscillates between thriller ‘zones of realism’ and comedy zones where ‘nobody gets hurt’

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Act One</th>
<th>Act Two</th>
<th>Act Three</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Set-up</td>
<td>Inciting incident</td>
<td>1st Act turning point</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life and death risk</td>
<td>Nobody gets hurt</td>
<td>Life and death risk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mid-point</th>
<th>2nd Act turning point</th>
<th>Climax</th>
<th>Resolution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life and death risk</td>
<td>Nobody gets hurt</td>
<td>Life and death risk</td>
<td>Life and death risk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nobody gets hurt</td>
<td>Nobody gets hurt</td>
<td>Nobody gets hurt</td>
<td>Real life consequence</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The use of comic devices by character type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Protagonist</th>
<th>Antagonist</th>
<th>Secondary characters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Minimal use of comic devices at major structural plot points. Protagonist must reflect mortality when the risk is greatest. Comic devices used in relationship with secondary characters.</td>
<td>No comic devices to be used in regards to the key antagonist, preferably at any time. Antagonist maintains threat potential by being grounded in realism.</td>
<td>Secondary characters – romantic interest, sidekicks – may use comic devices to effect audience laughter. Keep to minimum, or not at all, during main structural plot points.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### The audience guilt that contributes to suspense

| Protagonist has a goal, a wish, or the potential for advancement in career, finance or romance made evident in the Set-up. | The audience makes a wish for the protagonist to achieve this advancement/connect with the girl, because they empathise with the protagonist and have a desire to advance the action of the story. | The audience’s wish fulfillment puts the protagonist in danger, moving the audience to feelings of guilt. Sustained guilt carries an expectation of punishment and contributes to an audience state of suspense |

Figure 4: Comedy thriller screenplay framework
Chapter 5: Conclusions and directions for further research

Directions for further research

In the course of this study, I sought to analyse the structures, strategies and techniques conducive to the writing of the blended genre comedy thriller screenplay. I have examined the psychological underpinnings for the generation of audience laughter and for audience suspense. In doing so, I hope my observations may prove useful to the screenwriter in the aim of inducing both audience laughter and suspense in the comedy thriller screenplay.

Could these findings for the comedy thriller screenwriter be useful to the writers of other mixed genre screenplays?

The screenwriter of the comedy thriller may oscillate between the story environments conducive to laughter (nobody gets hurt) and of realism (where the rules of life and death apply), but what dual environments is the mixed comedy horror genre screenplay oscillating between? In particular, what creates audience suspense in the comedy horror genre if the antagonist is of a supernatural origin; a factor which dis-allows for the suspension of disbelief? How do the audience genre expectations of the horror film impact, interfere or blend with the genre expectations of comedy?

It may be useful for screenwriters and screen theorists to apply my findings to other hybrid feature film genres, such as: comedy horror, comedy adventure, comedy crime and the interesting genre of ‘black comedy.’

An argument may be made that ‘black comedy’ is akin to the ‘comedy crime’ film genre. Their common mandate is to periodically shock the audience while maintaining an atmosphere conducive to audience laughter. Further research may ask ‘What underpinning psychological audience state provokes audience laughter when a protagonist accidentally blows a person’s head off?’

It is hoped the examination of the psychological underpinnings for the generation of audience laughter and audience fear, embedded in this study, may contribute an additional dimension to any future study of mixed genre screenwriting techniques.
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Notes

1 Rubin, along with several of his contemporaries, postulate that the ‘thriller’ may be considered an effect that may be applied across several genres, rather than a specific genre in itself.


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4 Boileau-Narcejac is the nom de plume for the French crime fiction writers Pierre Boileau and Pierre Ayraud, aka Thomas Narcejac in collaboration.

5 Bruce D. Perry, M.D., Ph.D., Neurodevelopmental Adaptations to Violence, Baylor College of Medicine, 1996.

6 The theory put forward by Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889 – 1951) that comedy is a form of ‘games’.


8 The statement ‘All comedy is pain’ is attributed in contemporary times to Groucho Marx.

9 Refers to a scene in Quentin Tarantino’s Pulp Fiction (1994) in which a mob hit-man ‘accidentally’ blows off a man’s head whilst describing what a Big Mac™ is called in France.