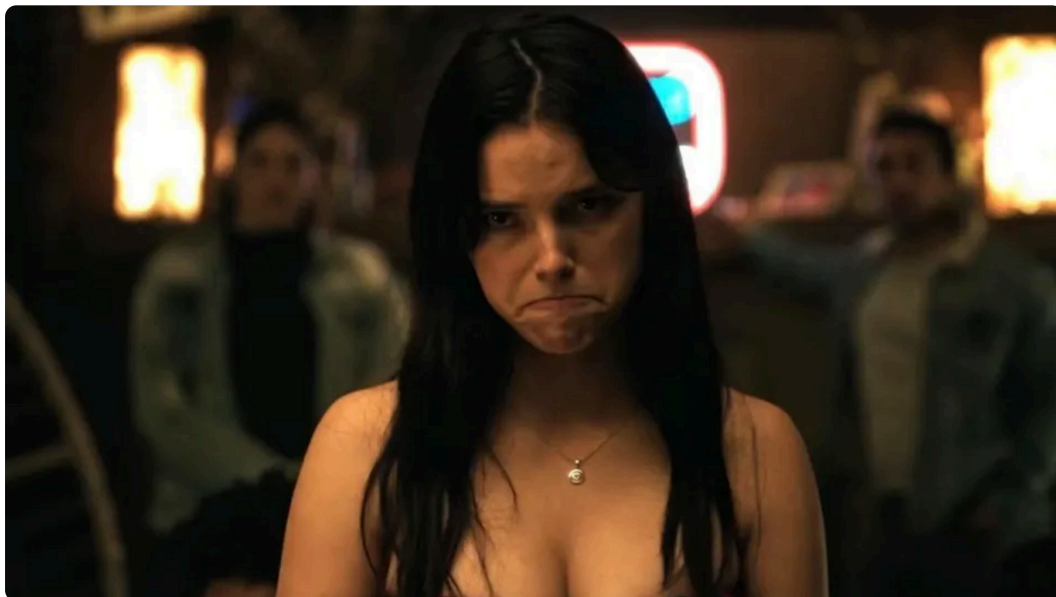


Blog

Why Comedians Make Such Good Horror Directors

With *Obsession*, Curry Barker joins a growing cohort of comedians who have successfully transitioned into being hit horror directors. Research on the cognitive links between humor and fear can help us make sense of this comedy-to-horror pipeline.

Marc Hye-Knudsen • 9 June 2026



With the surprise success of his independent psychological horror film *Obsession* (2025), Curry Barker has officially staked his claim as a horror director worth taking note of. Before making *Obsession*, which has now grossed more than \$148 million against its budget of just under a million, Barker had regularly been making comedy sketches online with Cooper Tomlinson, who plays the character Ian in the film, on their YouTube channel *that's a bad idea*. As such, he joins a growing contingent of recent hit horror directors who got their start in comedy, including Jordan Peele from *Key & Peele*, Zach Cregger from *The Whitest Kids U' Know*, and *Danny and Michael Philippou*, who like Curry started out making comedy sketches on YouTube.

Why are we seeing so many comedians successfully transition into being horror directors? The fact that people who are gifted at making audiences laugh should also be good at making them scream is perhaps not surprising in light of the research we

have conducted here at the Recreational Fear Lab on the **intersections of humor and fear**. As we argue in a **recent research paper**, humor and fear can rightfully be regarded as two sides of the same coin. Although they have opposite neurochemical and physiological effects on us, with fear generally being experienced as negative and stressful while humorous amusement is positive and restorative, the things that elicit them are surprisingly closely related at a cognitive level.

Fear is elicited when we appraise something as being a threat. In that circumstance, it serves to prepare us to deal with the potential threat. When we watch a horror film, we see someone going through a horrific life-threatening situation, and everything in the movie, from its characters and plot to its visuals and soundtrack, **is designed** to immerse us in the story to get us to feel vicarious fear on behalf of its characters. In *Obsession*, we follow Bear (Michael Johnston), who uses a magic wish to get his crush Nikki (Inde Navarrette) to love him “more than anyone in the world.” His wish is granted, but Nikki’s infatuation snowballs from being needy to obsessive to demonic, with Bear coming to fear for his own life and the lives of those around them.

Humor is instead elicited when we appraise something as a **benign violation**. A violation is something that violates our sense of how things “ought” to be, being somehow wrong, bad, or threatening. So anything scary also has the potential to be funny. Yet, for a violation to elicit humor as opposed to a negative emotion like fear, it has to ultimately be appraised as benign: somehow normal, harmless, or okay, something we don’t have to worry about. Think of a **scare prank** ▶: When someone first jumps out and screams “boo!” at you, you are startled and scared. But when you get your bearings, reassess the situation, and understand that you are not actually in danger, you are free to join the prankster in finding the violation benign and therefore funny.

While fear prepares us to deal with a potential threat, humor instead signals that something apparently wrong, bad, or threatening is not actually a threat to be taken seriously but can instead be appreciated as an **opportunity for play**. Comedy most often revolves around **pain and misfortune** just like horror does, people doing the wrong thing and experiencing bad outcomes, but instead of recoiling from it in fear it asks us to sit back disinterestedly and laugh at the spectacle. Barker’s back catalogue of comedy sketches is full of premises that could fit straight into a horror film. Just try watching **this compilation** ▶ released by the *that’s a bad idea* channel last Halloween, compiling all of their sketches with horror-related, “spooky” elements.

Consider **this sketch** ▶, as an example. In a café, a customer (played by Tomlinson) notices a sign by the counter that says “Ask me how to get 50% off your smoothie.” The barista (played by Barker) emphatically tells him: “Don’t ask me that question.” When the customer does ask, the barista is exasperated, telling him “It’s something fucked up.” He then promptly hands the customer a Stanley knife, handcuffs, and a

map, and asks him to go “finish off” a guy in the trunk of a Honda Civic parked out back. At first the customer is horrified, then he laughs and thinks it’s a joke, and then he is horrified again when the dark reality of the situation is underscored by another customer returning covered in blood, asking for his 50% discount.

Why is this funny instead of thrilling? For one thing, the sketch has a runtime of only one minute, too short of a time to realistically build up and make this world where people have to kill for a smoothie discount believable for audiences. We also don’t actually see any killing. Most importantly, the entire thing is played in a perfectly understated manner. Barker is excellent at playing dumb, detached, and uncomprehending characters, incapable of grasping just how insane the thing they are saying or doing is. Instead of creating the verisimilitude required to get the audience to immerse themselves in the scenario, it is thereby played for laughs. Yet, the joke, as in many of Barker’s comedy sketches, is just how horrific the depicted scenario actually is.

Obsession starts from a premise that could just as well have been a sketch. In fact, it **was inspired** by Barker watching an episode of *The Simpsons*. That episode, in turn, was parodying W.W. Jacob’s horror short story “**The Monkey’s Paw**” (1902), about an enchanted monkey’s paw that grants wishes but at a gruesome price to those who use it. In *Obsession*, the enchanted device is a “One Wish Willow”, a novelty stick toy that the main character, Bear, buys on a whim at a crystal store. He uses it to make Nikki, who he has yearned after for years, fall madly in love with him, but he comes to regret this decision when he sees the demonically obsessed form her love for him takes. Her behavior gradually escalates in how bizarre and frightening it is.

While *Obsession* is horror rather than comedy, it leans into Barker’s comedic sensibilities at several points. Most notably, the director himself makes **an off-screen cameo** ▶ as the customer support representative for “One Wish Willow,” whom Bear calls for help once Nikki’s obsessed behavior starts becoming untenable. Barker plays the role with the same dazed, detached incomprehension that defines his sketch performances, seemingly unbothered by Bear’s distress. The scene plays as comic relief until it suddenly and sharply turns incredibly dark: the representative casually asks whether he should put Nikki on the phone, implying that the “real” Nikki is trapped somewhere else, and her tortured screaming can be heard in the background.

The film’s ending (which I won’t spoil here) repeats this pattern, with a climactic moment parodying rom-coms, which certainly had everyone laughing in the cinema where I watched the movie, before turning back from humor to horror again just before the credits roll. These turns, from horror to humor and back to horror again, underscore just how closely related the things that frighten us are to the things that amuse us. In an instant, a slightly off-kilter performance can pull us out of the film’s tight grip, allowing us to appreciate its macabre contents as

benignly funny rather than frightening, only for the gravity of the stakes to be underscored in the next moment, putting us right back in the position of experiencing dread and horror again.

Humor is always about straddling the line between pure violation and pure benignity, finding the “sweet spot” between what is too messed up to laugh about and what is too harmless to be funny in the first place. Horror has to straddle a similar line, being gruesome enough to be exciting without becoming too macabre to be stomached by audiences. As Rec Fear Lab has documented in multiple studies, it is in the “[sweet spot](#)” between the two extremes of too much and too little fear that the optimal recreational fear experience resides. As we argue in [our paper on humor and fear](#), humor is in fact often one of the tools that horror media make use of to straddle this line, providing audiences with moments of comic relief in between the gore to keep them going.

It is hardly surprising that comedians, who have honed the ability to creatively straddle one line to get laughs, should also be good at creatively straddling the line that good horror relies on. Either one requires the ability to observe human behavior, hone in on a particular observation, and then present it in the ideal way to get your desired emotional response from your audience. As Barker himself puts it himself in [this excellent interview](#) ▶:

When you are always thinking about being funny, ... you're studying people, and you're studying psychology, and you're studying the way people react to things... I think if you're making a sketch, you're kind of making fun of what we do as humans. So it lends itself really well to horror because if you understand psychology, if you can get inside the head of an audience member, you've got a pretty good leg up.

If Obsession is any indication, Curry Barker has a future in both making audiences laugh and making them scream.