My love of horror movies started with a rickety old cartoon of skeletons cavorting in a graveyard. I remembered it so vaguely that I might have made it up, but a quick search revealed it to be the 1929 Silly Symphonies short "The Skeleton Dance." Far from the errant bit of cultural detritus I imagined, it is in fact a well-known and well-regarded piece of early animation, #18 on an industry list of the "50 Greatest Cartoons of All Time." It was directed by Walt Disney himself and animated by Ub Iwerks, who also co-created Mickey Mouse.

The five-and-a-half minute long cartoon begins with a crash and a bolt of lightening, followed immediately by a pair of wide eyes that take up the entire screen. These eyes resolve themselves into those of an owl, sitting blinking on a bare branch in a dark, wind-swept graveyard, framed against an impossibly large full moon. His hoots sound more like the thin cries of afflicted children than anything explicitly avian. A church bell strikes midnight and the owl is soon joined by a pair of yowling black cats, and then by the first in a series of antic dancing skeletons. It was here that I remembered one of the most unsettling parts of the cartoon: this skeleton, tiptoeing through the headstones with exaggerated caution, seems *scared of himself*. There is a convention in horror, particularly children's horror, that the denizens of the darkened forest or the haunted manor rule the place with cackling confidence. What can a ghost or a vampire have to fear in a graveyard? By contrast, this ambling, fleshless corpse is clearly living in a state of disgust at his own grotesqueness. Imagine the agony of living as an animated pile of semi-decomposed matter if you still have sense enough about you to be terrified by an animated pile of semi-decomposed matter. Now that's horror.

This ghastly realization is abandoned as the skeleton is joined by his undead compatriots and they all begin a lengthy dance sequence lightened by moments of slapstick silliness. (The original tag line for "The Skeleton Dance" was "A laugh riot from start to finish!")The skeletons use each others bodies as pogo sticks; they torment a cat. One plays another's spine as a xylophone, a bit Disney found so enchanting they recycled it in several more cartoons. The skeletons also join hands and dance around in a ring in a near-perfect copy of any number of medieval *danse macabre* illustrations. (And if the Middle Ages had had pogo sticks, that joke would have killed then too.)

I encountered "The Skeleton Dance" on home video, as part of a clip show compilation of scary Disney moments called either *Disney's Halloween Treat* or *Donald's Scary Tales* (and trying to differentiate these two near-identical clip shows from 1982 and 1983, respectively, let me down an internet rabbit hole of Disney minutiae, including dozens of blogs and message boards dedicated to the chaste love of Disney cartoons, where I discovered that an adult's ardent love of children's media is somehow even *more* creepy when it's not obviously sexual).

Disney's Halloween Treat was released on VHS in 1984, when I was five years old. I would have watched it at home on a rented video tape, the fear I felt at watching Death itself command a cartoon mouse to play piano compounded by the eeriness of the video rental store itself, its empty, fluorescent-lit aisles where I would occasionally wander into the proper grown-up Horror section just to dare myself to look at the box covers. I remember the cover art on each of the four Disney compilations as clearly as the content itself, including the specific feel of the thick, yellowish plastic coating they used to protect the boxes and the sharp plastic spines that would form at the edges when it inevitably fell apart anyway. At home I would often watch the movie while holding the empty box, turning it over and over in my hands.

This week I watched both Disney's Halloween Treat and Donald's Scary Tales again, as well as the

1977 compilation *Disney's Greatest Villains* and the 1983 *A Disney Halloween*. "The Skeleton Dance" appears in all four movies, though in *Disney's Halloween Treat* and *Disney's Greatest Villains* it is colorized and relegated to the credits. I will spare you the tedium of recounting which clips appeared and reappeared on which tapes, but together these four compilations contained dozens of scary Disney highlights including *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow, Fantasia's* "Night on Bald Mountain," and the witch transformation sequences from both *Sleeping Beauty* and *Snow White* (both of which were much darker and more beautiful than I had remembered).

What stood out again, though, were the earliest black and white shorts, the 1937 Silly Symphony "The Old Mill" and the 1929 short "The Haunted House," in which Mickey Mouse seeks shelter from a storm inside a haunted house. It, too, is marked by goofy slapstick bits, including Mickey battling an inside-out umbrella. Which might be a little funny, if it weren't immediately followed by the Grim Reaper pointing a bony finger at the piano and commanding Mickey to "Play!" in a metaphor too self-evident to need elucidating here. A long dance sequence follows. There is the same humor and grotesqueness, the same primitive feeling made more jarring by the weird, constant bouncing movement that early cartoon characters are always doing, like they're trying to escape their skin. As with Grand Guignol or Macbeth's porter, the coarse humor brings the horror into starker relief. (As a child I didn't notice that "The Haunted House" also contains several moments of racist humor for which it was later banned, but now that only seems to add to its sense of crudeness badly disguised as fun.)

So why was "The Skeleton Dance" so scary to me as a child? Well, it involved skeletons, of course, but more than that, it seemed completely otherworldly, less like a proper cartoon and more like something I had found by accident and ought to put back again right away. Largely this was because it was already fifty years old when I first saw it, and it was in black and white, and it had no dialogue and no plot, and its relatively crude animation and ghoulish, goofy gags made it seem primitive in a way that was authentically terrifying. That it was supposed to be funny made it more scary, of course, because what kind of sicko would find that kind of thing funny?

"The Skeleton Dance" contains everything I look for in a horror movie today: it is weird, old, uncanny, and unselfconsciously, almost offhandedly, terrifying. This five-minute short also contains everything I love about Halloween, itself a blend of the goofy, the benign, and the depraved: the candy corn and plastic lawn zombies and the softly rotting porch pumpkins, the costumed kids and the costumed coeds, the trashy orange jello shots and the cutesy seasonal lattes and "It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown." In its sentiment and sadness and sexiness and silliness and scariness it is the holiday that best typifies the human condition. And of course, it happens in the fall, that time of plentiful harvests and gathering dark, where trees are burning with their brightest color even as the days get shorter and the year weaker and very little seems to separate us from whatever is on the other side. This year, I suggest celebrating Halloween by watching cartoon skeletons dancing gayly in a graveyard, coarsely living in the midst of death.