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Edgar Wright and the Cornetto Trilogy

Final Essay

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In recent years, comedy films have fallen under a formula that movie studios believe “work” to catch audience attention and sell movie theater tickets. Certain camera techniques, sound cues and lines have shown to survive the test of time, and have been implemented frequently in some way, shape or form in a lot of comedy movies of late. Although there have been some notable “black sheep” films in the comedy genre that manage to stand out despite following the formula, not many derive as far as Edgar Wright’s Cornetto Trilogy and still turn out to be very memorable and hilarious. The Cornetto Trilogy consists of three films that fall under completely different genres, but connected thematically and in other non-traditional themes: *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Hot Fuzz* (2007), and *The World’s End* (2013). The films use established filming techniques in creative ways to create a unique style that subconsciously alerts a viewer they are watching an Edgar Wright film. To better understand the unique production style of Edgar Wright, one must understand his background before the creation of his trilogy.

Edgar Wright was born in Poole, Dorset in 1974, but spent most of his young life in Somerset England. Wright’s introduction to moviemaking started when he was a teenager with a Super 8 camera. He created multiple short films with said camera, and made even more with a Video 8 camera he later won in a Comic Relief contest with his film *I Want to Get Into the Movies*.[[1]](#footnote-1) At age 20, he directed *A Fistful of Fingers*, a parody of Sergio Leone’s *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) starring Clint Eastwood. His film had no budget, starred a bunch of local teenagers, and was shot on a 16mm camera. It had a limited theatrical release in England, and was given a one star review from *Empire*, UK’s biggest selling monthly film magazine. To this day, Wright is still angry with *Empire* for writing “There’s just enough talent in the director to predict that he might be ashamed in the future…”[[2]](#footnote-2) Editing the film and reading the review, however, helped Wright realize the big difference between an amateur film and a professional film. While still in his 20s, Wright directed several comedy shows for BBC that eventually led to his production of popular television sitcom *Spaced*, which starred Simon Pegg, with Nick Frost in a supporting role, two men who later becomes heavily involved in Wright’s future projects. The series ran for two seasons and won several awards, which gave Wright enough money and reputation to create the first movie in his Cornetto Trilogy: *Shaun of the Dead*.

The Cornetto Trilogy did not receive its name until the promotion of the second film in the trilogy, *Hot Fuzz*, which will be discussed later. When *Shaun of the Dead* was in production in 2003, it was considered a standalone film by all involved. The title of the film is a reference to George A. Romero’s 1978 film *Dawn of the Dead*, with multiple plot references scattered throughout Shaun’s story. The film was inspired by an episode of *Spaced* written by Simon Pegg where his character is under the influence of amphetamine while playing a video game about zombies. After playing for a while he begins to hallucinate fighting off an actual zombie invasion, which is where most of the inspiration of the film is taken from.[[3]](#footnote-3) Written by Wright and Pegg, and starring Pegg and Nick Frost, *Shaun of the Dead* is a horror comedy film that follows the story of Shaun, played by Pegg, and his lazy friend Ed, played by Nick Frost, trying to survive the zombie apocalypse while Shaun tries to simultaneously get his life together. Wright calls the film “The nonchalant Londonist takes on the zombie apocalypse.”[[4]](#footnote-4) It is in this first film in the trilogy that viewers get to experience Wright’s unique use of close ups, whip panning, and matching scene techniques.

Throughout the film, and subsequent projects, Wright likes to start his scenes late and end them early, following famous novelist and screenwriter William Goldman’s quote written in his book *Adventure in the Screen* (1983): “You always attack a movie scene as late as you possibly can. You always come in the scene at the last possible moment.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In the first half of the film, Wright uses quick close ups accompanied by action film “whooshing” sound effects to make mundane tasks more interesting. As an example, as Shaun gets ready for work in the beginning of the film, the camera does a quick close up, “whoosh” sound, then cut to the next scene on Shaun brushing his teeth, putting on his name tag, grabbing a butter knife from a drawer, using said knife to spread jam on toast, mixing milk into his coffee, putting the milk jug away, then finally ending with him checking his phone’s voicemail. All these boring tasks are shown within 10 seconds, but effectively establish a sense of realism in Shaun’s character. The technique is used several times throughout the film on equally boring tasks, to which Wright explains are his way of poking fun at “tooling up” sequences seen in action films, where the main protagonist loads himself up with fighting gear (guns, armor, cool sunglasses) in the same fashion.[[6]](#footnote-6) The scenes build up to a true “tooling up” sequence for Shaun near the end of the film, which Wright believes in more satisfying than just introducing it once. Another technique frequently used in the film is “whip pan” technique used in scene transition. To "whip pan" is to pan quickly to give a blurred picture, usually from moving the camera from left to right or vice versa to change what’s going on in a film. Wright was fascinated by the whip panning and close ups used in Martin Scorsese’s films such as *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Goodfellas* (1990) and wished to do something similar in *Shaun of the Dead*. Interestingly enough, David Dunlap, the director of photography for *Shaun*, was the camera operator for *Goodfellas*.[[7]](#footnote-7) In multiple scenes, and whip pan and close up are used simultaneously to focus on an object directly in the center, which is easy to pull off in reverse, but Dunlap achieved it with reversion, making the shots feel more fluid. Also used in the film are matching scene techniques that are both funny and unique to Wright’s work. During the opening “mundane sequence” with Shaun getting ready work mentioned previously, Shaun opens a drawer to get a butter knife for his jam and toast. In the second half of the film when zombies show up at his home, the same scene, with the same lighting and angle, is shown again. The second time around, however, Shaun grabs two handfuls of utensils to fight said zombies. The comedic timing is perfect, even though it is such a small and fast scene that could have been missed during an audience’s first-time viewing. The most notable scenes that use the matching scene technique is when Shaun gets up in the morning and goes out to a shop to pick up a Cornetto ice cream cone for Ed, who says they help him get over hangovers, in the first half of the film. A long, uncut shot follows a sleepy Shaun leave his home, walk up the street, enter a small store, buy a Cornetto, and walk back home without acknowledging his neighbors who are going about their days. In the second half of the film, Shaun and his friend are so caught up in their lives that they don’t notice the zombie apocalypse is occurring around them. On a different morning, the same Cornetto scene is re-done, but this time with a sleepy, unaware Shaun walking to the store with zombies around him. He goes through the same motions, completely oblivious to the destruction and undead around him. The only difference in the scene is that Shaun momentarily slips and regains balance on spilled blood, but pays no mind to it because he’s too busy reading the label on a can of soda in his hand. All three techniques explained make for a very stylish comedic film, however there are a few more techniques that are used more sparingly, yet still add to the comedy and style. The “There and Back Again” technique and “action synched to music” are used a few times through *Shaun*. The “There and Back Again” technique is hard to explain, so to put it in an example: There is a scene where Shaun enters a dark basement to flip a breaker to turn on the lights in a building, when he flips said breaker, the lights that come one show that the window behind him is blocked by multiple zombies. Shaun sees the zombies, turns flips the breaker off, pulls the blinds over the window, and goes back upstairs. The scene is something one would see in a cartoon, but when shot as well as it was in the film, it is incredibly funny. Later in the film, “action synched to film” is used when Shaun and his group of survivors fight a zombie while “Don’t Stop Me Now” by Queen is playing on a nearby jukebox. Each hit the zombie takes by said crew is synched to the beats of the song, which make an intense scene more lighthearted and hilarious. After its release in theaters, *Shaun of the Dead* received multiple awards and critical acclaim, giving Wright and Pegg funds to make more movies together in the future. A few years later, in 2007, Wright and Pegg release *Hot Fuzz*, and every technique and shot used in is the first film of the unconventional trilogy is improved upon and added to in the second.

The Cornetto Trilogy does not follow the same formula as what you would expect in a trilogy, such as *The Lord of the Rings* (2001). The films are connected thematically, and through other non-traditional means rather through an overarching story told through three films. During promotion of *Hot Fuzz*, Wright said that there will be a third movie that would wrap up the themes of both *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*, which turned out to be *The World’s End* (2013), which will be discussed later. These three films were deemed “Three Flavours Cornetto trilogy” (known simply as the Cornetto trilogy) by Wright, and stated the title originated from a “silly joke”. As mentioned before, there is a scene in *Shaun* where Ed asks Shaun for a Cornetto ice cream cone from the shop to cure his hangover. This line was based off Wright’s own experiences from college, where he believed Cornetto’s really did cure hangovers after long nights of partying.[[8]](#footnote-8) A Cornetto ice cream cone was then added in throwaway scenes in subsequent films as a running joke between Wright, Pegg, and Frost. Once the trilogy was wrapped up, it was given its name, which Wright says is a reference to Krzysztof Kieslowski’s French *Three Colours* trilogy. *Three Colors: Blue* (1993), *Three Colors: White* (1994), and *Three Colors: Red* (1994) are movies named after the colors of the French flag, and each story is based on the three political ideals of the French Republic.[[9]](#footnote-9) The stories of Wright’s trilogy have a common theme of “individuals in a collective [….] about growing up and […] about the dangers of perpetual adolescence.”[[10]](#footnote-10) What really makes the trilogy stand out is that the lead roles of all three movies are played by both Simon Pegg and Nick Frost. The protagonists of all three films have no connection with each other besides being played by the same two people, and a lot of supporting actors and actresses from *Shaun* have unrelated roles in the other films as well. Where *Shaun* was about a man trying to better piece his life together, *Hot Fuzz* is about a man who has his life more together than he should, accidentally alienating himself from those he cares about.

*Hot Fuzz* follows the story Police Constable Nicholas Angel, played by Simon Pegg, who is so good at his job in the Metropolitan Police Service that he makes the rest of the staff look bad. His superiors transfer him to the sleepy village of Sandford, Gloucestershire, where he meets and befriends police officer Danny Butterman, played by Nick Frost, who is the son of the town’s chief inspector. What starts off as a boring new job quickly turns into an investigation of a village-wide conspiracy that Angel should have never discovered. According to Wright, he and Pegg researched over a hundred action films to create the script for this project. Wright calls this film the “pacifist British policeman’s take on a Michael Bay film” and is arguably called the best of the trilogy by critics and fans alike.[[11]](#footnote-11) The filming techniques are very similar to *Shaun*, but as mentioned before, they are vastly improved thanks to experience gained from the first film. Close ups are once again used to make mundane tasks interesting, but instead of everyday tasks, they are used on the less glamorous parts of police work. Paperwork, booking criminals, fingerprinting, and other police tasks are shown in quick secession to better express this film is not an average “buddy cop” action flick. Matching scene transitions are brought back with scenes such Angel’s journey to the village and the start and end of his days on his bed. While a lot of films use protagonists driving on highways, helicopter shots of a city, close ups of recognizable landmarks, and popular travel songs of the time to simulate travel, Wright uses his close up montages to convey the same message at the beginning of the film. When the montage starts the audience sees a taxi, Angel looking out a window of a train, a close up of his phone with full signal service, and Angel waiting at a station for a different train. By the end of the montage we see similar scenes backwards starting with a new train picking up Angel, his phone service now at minimum signal, Angel looking out a window of a train again, and ending with a different taxi found more commonly in rural areas of the UK. Just like *Shaun*’s montages, this lasted about 10 seconds, but the audience is fully aware that Angel is no longer in the city, but rather in a rural area. Wright’s whip panning also makes a comeback in the film, and used just as effectively to transition scenes as it did in *Shaun*. Newly introduced and improved techniques to the trilogy include perfectly timed sound effects, super dramatic lighting queues, recurring jokes, and the “tooling up” montage.

An extra layer of comedy is added to a lot of scenes in *Hot Fuzz* simply by adding commonly heard noises in a goofy fashion to already funny scenes. For instance, when Angel interviews a supermarket manager in his office behind the store’s warehouse, the manager says a snarky line to Angel and smiles while standing to the right side of the scene’s frame that has a self-portrait in the same angle and the same smile on the left. When his smile is at its peak, a warehouse buzzer goes off and the scene ends, adding an extra layer of “funny” to the absurd looking scene and goofy smile. Dramatic lights are occasionally used as scene transitions, which are usually hard to pull off, yet Wright makes them both effective and funny. When Angel is at a local bar in the village, he slowly realizes that the bar patrons around him are all underage. At the end of his realization montage, he looks at a young boy with braces and a beer in his hand. When the boy laughs, the braces reflect light into Angel’s eyes, blinding him and the audience. The light is then expanded across the entire frame of the scene, and is quickly transitioned to Angel bring the underage drinkers to the police station for booking. Recurring jokes are used in this film since their establishment in *Shaun*. These jokes are more of a treat to Wright’s fans than the audience who only watch *Hot Fuzz*, but they are also fun and easy to catch even if the trilogy isn’t watched in order. The biggest one is the Cornetto scenes the trilogy is named after. In *Hot Fuzz*, Danny is seen eating Cornetto’s in the passenger side of Angel’s cop car throughout the film, but makes no reference to them curing hangovers. In *Shaun*, there is a scene where Shaun tries to jump a fence, but accidently breaks it instead. A similar scene is found in subsequent films with the same outcome, which is, as stated, a treat for fans. Finally, Wright brought back the “tooling up” montage for Angel, where the previous close up montages lead up to a cool tool up sequence. Without spoiling much, the film’s ending has Angel realize that being the best at what he does can negatively affect those who care about him, so he learns to loosen up because, as the old proverb expresses, “all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy”. After finishing up production on *Hot Fuzz*, Wright and Pegg began their work on the third and final film of the trilogy: *The World’s End*. This last film wraps up the themes brought in the first two films to bring overarching “closure” to the Wright’s trilogy.

*The World’s End* follows the story of 40-something alcoholic Gary King, played by Simon Pegg, a man stuck in the past that rounds up his old friends together and takes them on a trip to finish a pub crawl they failed to accomplish when they were in high school. Among those friends is Andy, played by Nick Frost, who has a rocky history with Gary after an accident between them when they finished high school. The men once again try to finish the “Golden Mile”, a challenge of drinking a pint of beer in all 12 pubs across their hometown, ending the crawl at the pub called “The World’s End”. As the crew makes their way through the crawl they begin to slowly notice that their hometown isn’t how they remember it, and they soon discover that the citizens of the hometown have been replaced by other-worldly entities. Wright calls his last film in the trilogy “a quest movie with an extremely irresponsible King Arthur at the helm of it”.[[12]](#footnote-12) Just like the last two film, close up montages, whip panning, and matching scene transitions make their welcomed return to the final film. This time the montages focus on the beer being poured into glasses in every pub throughout the film. In an interview, Wright states that “pouring scene” for each pub becomes more and more “queasy and sinister” as the plot and inebriation of the crew progresses.[[13]](#footnote-13) When it came to fight sequences in the film, long flowing shots are opted in instead of quick cuts found in the first two films. These scenes end up looking more stylish as every action “flows” and are a tad bit more humorous because of the decision. For example, King pours himself a pint in one of the pubs and slowly drinks it as a fight breaks out around him. Once his pint is finished, he smiles and quickly joins into the fight as the camera stays on the same scene and follows the fights around the pub involving King’s crew. A similar scene is done in a bathroom when King and his friends fight a bunch of other-worldly “teenagers”. Matching scene transitions also focus on the beer in the film with scenes that show empty glasses in one pub, then transition to full ones in another pub in the same positions. Recurring jokes such as the fence jumping scene and the Cornetto make their returns as well to conclude the trilogy’s minor sections. As for the ending of *The World’s End*, without spoiling much, Gary King realizes that he needs to change his way of living to better himself, and the relationships he holds with his friends and loved ones. The wording of the finale’s monologue is relatively ambiguous to fit the endings of both *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz* and nicely wrap up the trilogy’s overarching theme of “growing up” and caring more about friends and family rather than selfish, personal goals.

As one can see, the Cornetto Trilogy is a collection of three British comedy films, each being part of a completely different movie genre, that uses the same two leads in different roles to tell stories that thematically connect together and create both funny and memorable experiences for audiences. Edgar Wright showed the world that comedy films can be stylish and fun without having to following the cookie-cutter comedy formula established by modern films. Unique camera techniques such as matching scene transitions, people and things entering and leaving scenes in funny ways, dramatic lighting, close up montages, and the “There and Back Again” technique make Wright’s trilogy stand out in a sea of comedy films that have come out in recent years. Although the trilogy has come to an end, Wright hopes that aspiring filmmakers take inspiration from his films to create equally, if not funnier, films in the future.

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