

# Ghostbusters

By Adam Bertocci

Like any classic joke, “Ghostbusters” endures. It’s as funny the hundredth time around as the first, because half the fun of any joke is in how it’s told.

In the case of “Ghostbusters,” the joke is built on a rock-solid foundation, because the movie would still work played perfectly straight. The notion of a ghost-extermination squad taking on the paranormal hordes makes a compelling setup for a big-budget adventure of any stripe. Indeed, the film as it stands frequently allows time to pass without a gag. But then comes the punch line: the characters are funny. And because we’ve been hooked by the story, the humor the characters provide is all the richer. Director Ivan Reitman expertly marries the film’s seemingly conflicting tones of horror and hilarity, striking a pleasing chord where a lesser hand might have made a muddle.

“Ghostbusters” is a comedic cocktail of actors and creators bringing their best and beyond, a fascinating fusion of elements that, in a word, click. It’s alchemy as much as art, the kind of comedic convergence no one can fully explain (and believe me, I’ve tried)—it’s a movie about people who trap spirits in a box that somehow captures lightning in a cinematic bottle.

It’s easy to spot the spark of this collaboration in the cast, of course; Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis’ improvised riffs on Aykroyd and Ramis’ inventive script are legendary, and when Ernie Hudson joins the ensemble, he instantly fits in as if he’s been there all along. Sigourney Weaver and Rick Moranis play two roles apiece and give all four unforgettable moments. Annie Potts’ brassy Brooklynite provides a vital dose of Noo Yawk attitude. Each character has their own voice and their own unique point of view, which the dialogue scrupulously honors, to the comedy’s benefit—because the lines aren’t merely clever, they’re true to the characters we know.

A similar chemistry bubbles behind the scenes. Reitman carefully stages the film to minimize the chance of actors’ work getting drowned out by Hollywood pyrotechnics. The camerawork isn’t flashy, but care is nonetheless taken: László Kóvacs,



*Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd and Harold Ramis monitor poltergeists in a library. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

best-known for lensing low-budget iconoclastic fare, shoots for the story and eschews the bright look traditionally associated with comedy, and the result boasts a bit of grit and shadow, with a sense of real Manhattan street life in the exteriors and a hint of eerie purple lurking in the images. Composer Elmer Bernstein treats the film’s horror, its romance and its heroes’ scrappy pluck as seriously as anything in the grand epics he’d previously scored.

And so the joke is perfectly told. The filmmakers deploy the movie’s increasingly outlandish elements piece by piece, organically and elegantly, neither sacrificing verisimilitude nor bogging down the flow with exposition—and slowly but surely the film builds up to its ultimate punch line, the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man. By the unveiling of this comic climax, we’ve been on the journey with the Ghostbusters from a simple haunting to a credible invocation of the end times, and we’re fully geared to accept the impending revelation as the avatar of apocalyptic evil. But we’ve also been subtly primed with recurring mentions of junk food and ample consumer capitalism. Simultaneously, the film has explored a theme of order vs. chaos, and so the sheer illogic of Mr. Stay Puft’s arrival is not merely funny but a pleasing final step in that progression. The gag is good enough by itself. But the movie has put in the legwork to make it magical.

A similarly felicitous confluence of elements turns up

in the film's political relevance to its times. Both "Ghostbusters" and Ronald Reagan enjoyed massive success in 1984; the man who famously warned America that "The ten most dangerous words in the English language are, 'Hi, I'm from the government, and I'm here to help'" loved the film, and his advisors gushed about "Ghostbusters." It's not hard to see what they saw: on one hand, it's got the reliable slob-versus-snobs strain of comedic populism, as our everyman heroes take on the establishment and win; on the other, it's an unabashed love letter to big business with a libertarian streak, wherein innovative entrepreneurs save the world after overcoming the oppressive regulations of the federal government.

Yet the cultural legacy of "Ghostbusters" didn't end in 1984. Its impact resonates in the children of the eighties who grew up with it—your correspondent included. Millennials are the "Ghostbusters" generation. The endless parade of think pieces and hand-wringing in the media about just what drives us, who we are and what we want, are easily answered with a quick glance at the boys in gray themselves. We're self-starters and freelancers, zipping around from gig to gig. We're opinionated. We're suspicious of society's institutions, we don't respect the old religions' rules and we're comfortable using technology to shape the world to our whims, ideally for a profit.

But "Ghostbusters'" timelessness is most easily proven with a simple experiment. Purchase and don a t-shirt depicting the logo. Walk down a busy street.

(For best results, choose Manhattan.) Count the minutes until someone loudly and excitedly inquires as to who you're gonna call. It won't take long.

I've learned to develop a standard response for when passersby holler the question at my shirt—or, when I wear it, at my jumpsuit and proton pack. I just smile and nod. Shouting back never quite worked for me. It's not that the answer doesn't deserve to be heard. It's because we all already know.

You see, Ray Parker, Jr.'s irresistible song doesn't work the way people think it works. The song isn't asking you to cheer for a movie. It's letting you cheer for a movie that earned it.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Adam Bertocci is a filmmaker and screenwriter working in and around New York. His critical analysis of "Ghostbusters," the perhaps-aptly-titled "Overthinking Ghostbusters" (<http://www.runleiarun.com/ghostbusters>), launched a letter-writing campaign that drew support for the film's inclusion in the National Film Registry. He is also the author of the acclaimed Shakespearean mashup "Two Gentlemen of Lebowski." He is currently studying the effect of negative reinforcement on ESP ability.*