A Study on Chiaroscuro Lighting as Horror Aesthetic in Courage the Cowardly Dog

L. Neeharika Lankalapalli, Dr. Julia Oinam

Department of Media Studies, CHRIST (Deemed to be) University, Bangalore Yeshwanthpur Campus, India

Abstract

Children's television has long engaged with horror conventions, yet the visual language underlying these conventions remains critically underexamined in existing scholarship. Researchers have largely directed attention toward feature-length cinema, leaving the aesthetic mechanics of horror in animated television series largely unexplored. Courage the Cowardly Dog, a Cartoon Network series widely recognised for its sustained and distinctive use of horror imagery, remains particularly unexamined under a lighting analysis lens despite its cultural significance. The absence of systematic empirical study into its visual techniques represents a meaningful gap in animation and media studies scholarship. This study addresses that gap by analysing chiaroscuro lighting across three selected episodes — "King Ramses' Curse," "The Moon from Nowhere," and "Violin Girl" — each representing distinct horror registers across the series. Employing qualitative content analysis with a coding scheme applied in DaVinci Resolve, the study examines four key visual verticals: contrast ratio, colour, shadows, and compositional framing, through frame-level histogram analysis. This study argues that chiaroscuro lighting functions as a deliberate horror aesthetic element in Courage the Cowardly Dog, systematically shaping viewer tension through the manipulation of contrast, shadow, and visual composition across narrative contexts. It contributes by positioning Courage the Cowardly Dog as a significant and underrecognised example of horror aesthetics in children's animated television.

Keywords*:* Animated Series; Children's Television; Chiaroscuro Lighting; Histogram Analysis; Horror Aesthetic