

# Cognitive and Philosophical Approaches to Horror

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Philosophical work on horror has been predominantly focused on the horror film, though little of what has been written on horror is medium specific. It is just that the overwhelming majority of examples in the literature are movies (Schneider and Shaw, 2003). Here, I continue the trend. This entry concerns a relatively small topic in a sub-area of film theory that is often called the *analytic-cognitivist tradition*. This tradition has no clear unifying, positive doctrine (contra Sinnerbrink, 2011: 4–5). Instead, the tradition is best described negatively. Two aversions are important: first, film theorists of the analytic-cognitive stripe exhibit a pronounced suspicion of psychoanalytic accounts of mental activity, preferring instead explanations from contemporary cognitive psychology. Second, analytic-cognitivist film theorists tend to have a strong antipathy to much of what is called *continental philosophy*, whatever that might be. They align with the dominant approach in the English-speaking world, that of analytic philosophy (Carroll, 1996).

Although these labels are much maligned, there are important differences between analytic and continental philosophical practice. This is not a mere sociological divide (Leiter, 2013). Analytic philosophy is primarily problem driven, rather than book or figure focused. One does not do philosophy in the analytic style through another philosopher. No, one simply does philosophy. Similarly, analytic philosophy emphasizes work on live problems, not on what others have had to say about the issues. Analytic philosophers tend to address small problems rather than aim for systematicity, though there are lots of exceptions. The analytic tradition emphasizes clarity of thought and rigorous argumentation, not textual interpretation. Stylistically, the traditions differ greatly, though there is a lot of bad writing on both sides of the divide. These are crude, but characteristic differences between the two schools. At its worst, analytic philosophy is logic-chopping legalistic philosophy of no clear relevance to

larger human concerns. But work in the tradition need not be so uninspiring. The caricature is undermined by some of the work we find on horror.

## The Main Issues

Four main issues have occupied center stage in the analytic-cognitivist work on horror: (i) What is horror? (ii) What is the appeal of horror? (iii) How does it frighten audiences? (iv) Is it irrational to be scared of horror fiction?

The first question asks for a definition. This is clearly the driest question in the bunch. But it has important implications for how we answer the others, particularly the second question. The appeal of supernatural horror and slasher movies might be very different. There might be no common source of appeal between the two. If so, only a definition that excludes slasher movies would allow for a general account of horrific appeal. We will look at just such a definition in the next section.

The second question is closely related to the general problem in the philosophy of art, a problem that is sometimes called the *paradox of tragedy* or, as I prefer, the *paradox of painful art*. Why do people seek out horror films, melodramas, sad songs, bleak conspiratorial thrillers, and works in other genres that arouse unpleasant emotions? It is puzzling that people so readily subject themselves to horror films that arouse fear and disgust. How can we account for this?

The first question also has important implications for the third and fourth. These both concern, what has become known as, the *paradox of fiction*. We can state it as a question for now: If audiences know that no one is really threatened by the monster in *Jeepers Creepers* (2001), can they, nevertheless, feel genuine, rational fear? Surely, it must be irrational to fear a monster that one knows is merely fictional! The rest of this chapter is structured around these four questions.

### *Issue 1. What is Horror?*

Years ago, before Netflix and Amazon streaming, there were these curious places called *video stores*. They were for-profit lending libraries holding movies. Most video stores were arranged in a predictable manner. Numerous copies of new releases were grouped in one area, but most of the rest of the store was arranged by genre: comedy, drama, action, horror. When we ask, “What is horror?” we are trying to determine the features a work should have in order to be properly classified under the horror section. We might say that we are looking for the essence of horror. We want a definition of horror.

If you asked a video store clerk, “What is a horror movie?” you would have likely received a snide answer: “Look over there. See that movie: *Suspiria* (1977) is a horror movie.” The irritated clerk would have offered you an ostensive definition—a definition by pointing. But that is not what we are looking for. We are not looking for instances of horror; rather, we are wondering what makes it appropriate to

classify all those instances under the same category. We want a real definition. A real definition tells us the properties that an object must have in order to be a work of horror. More precisely, a real definition lists the necessary and jointly sufficient conditions an object must have in order for the concept to apply. It tells us both what properties are required and what properties in combination are enough.

In the philosophy of horror, we find very few definitions of horror. The most well-developed definition is one proposed by Noël Carroll (1990). According to Carroll, a work of horror must include, or at least suggest the presence of, a monster. This is key. By “monster” he has something very specific in mind: a monster is a fearsome creature whose existence is not acknowledged by current science (presumably in the world of the fiction). A silly, harmless ghost is not a monster on this conception. It is not a monster because it is not fearsome (Carroll, 1999). Typically, monsters are also categorically interstitial. They do not fit into our conceptual scheme cleanly, occupying something between categories—human and wolf, or animal and vegetable as in *The Thing from Another World* (1951).

Horror films not only include monsters, they are designed to arouse fear and disgust directed at a monster. The fearsomeness of the monster arouses fear. The categorical interstitiality arouses disgust. This combination of reactions directed at a monster is what distinguishes horror from all other genres. Thrillers evoke fear and sometimes disgust, but not at a monster. Gross-out comedy might arouse disgust and sometimes fear, but, again, not at a monster. Science fiction may include creatures that are not acknowledged to exist by current science, but they are not monsters in the fiction. In the world of *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), Chewbacca is acknowledged to exist by the leading scientific authorities (though not in our world). And he is not fearsome. Hence, he is not a monster. No, he is just the furry pal of Han Solo. That is why *Star Wars* is not a horror movie. But *Alien* (Scott, 1979) is. The face-huggers are fearsome! Their mother, more so. Monsters make horror.

Carroll’s definition properly excludes comedies, thrillers, fantasy, and science fiction, and it accurately includes a wide array of what we classify as horror fiction. Any number of classic examples fit the theory perfectly. For Carroll, it is fair to say that the paradigm of a horror movie is something akin to *Bride of Frankenstein* (1935). This is indeed a good model. But many worry that his definition is under-inclusive.

As Carroll notes, his definition excludes movies such as *Psycho* (1960), *Silence of the Lambs* (1991), *Halloween* (1978), and maybe *Jaws* (1975). Norman Bates is not something unaccounted for by contemporary science. Nor are Hannibal Lecter, Buffalo Bill, and Michael Myers. They are all species of psychopaths. Our prisons are full of them. In reply to this worry, Carroll argues that his theory can account for why we are tempted to classify these kinds of films as works of horror. They arouse fear and disgust directed at something that is monster-like. Norman Bates is “nor man, nor woman.” He is categorically interstitial and disgusting when dressed as mother or carrying around her skeleton. So, Carroll concludes, his definition is not uninformative. It tells us why these are edge cases. But these edge cases are just that, edge cases. They do not technically fall under the category when we draw a clear border. So be it.

But few have found this reply palatable. The titles above are probably some of the first that we would list if asked to name some key horror movies. Carroll's definition appears to exclude too many central cases. *Silence of the Lambs*, or better, *Manhunter* (1986) is not an edge case. It is a paradigm of the genre. But it does not include a supernatural monster. It does not even suggest one. The problem is that a successful definition must account for the paradigm cases. Carroll's does not.

If we accept the force of this objection, there are roughly two options available: (i) reject the requirement that horror films must feature a monster or (ii) reject the supernatural conception of what it is to be a monster. Since it is hard to imagine a horror movie without at least a suggested monster, the second option seems more promising. There do indeed appear to be more kinds of monsters than just the supernatural type. Slasher movies, such as *Halloween*, feature naturalistic, or realistic, monsters. Michael Myers, for instance, is not supernatural. He's mean, creepy, and very hard to kill, but not supernatural. Nor are the hillbillies in *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre* (1974). Looked at this way, horror appears to be a genre with two main sub-types, supernatural horror and realist horror.

Unfortunately, I know of no plausible way to precisely characterize realist horror monsters. That's not to say it can't be done, but I don't know how to do it. They are evil, but this isn't sufficient. The presence of the evil Darth Vader doesn't make *Star Wars* a horror movie. Nor does Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes' evil Nazi character) make *Schindler's List* (1993) a horror movie. Evil is not sufficient, nor does it seem necessary. The monsters in *Alien* are not evil. The chief monster is simply a mother defending her offspring. They are parasitic, ugly, and very dangerous. But I'm reluctant to call them evil. Are birds of prey evil or simply dangerous to little lambs?

There are few competing accounts of what it is to be a monster in the literature. They are all failures. For instance, consider the idea that a monster is something that has failed to achieve its natural end, that has in some way subverted its nature (Yanal, 2003). This won't do. The monster in *Jeepers Creepers* is doing exactly what a creature of its kind does. It realizes its nature effectively. The same holds for the face-huggers in *Alien*.

Since the prospect of a formal definition rides on our ability to define what it is to be a monster, we are left at this point without a workable real definition. We are not in a much better position than the irritated video store clerk who flippantly offered an ostensive definition. But we have come to an important insight: the contemporary horror genre, as popularly understood, has both supernatural and realist traditions. This will complicate things as we proceed.

### *Issue 2. What is the Appeal of Horror?*

Much like the genres of comedy and suspense, horror is named after the characteristic response it engenders in audiences. Accordingly, we might say that horror horrifies, or at least tries to (though some deny that this is the case: Solomon, 2003). This seems right, but it depends on what it is to be horrified. As we saw in the previous

section, a plausible characterization of what it is to be horrified is to experience fear and disgust. Both fear and disgust are often called *negative emotions* (with the qualification that disgust might not be an emotion proper), or, better, species of negative affect. But, once again, it is not entirely clear what this means. Affects are feelings. That is clear. But just what makes a feeling warrant the label “negative” is ambiguous. There are two ways in which one might characterize an experience as negative: (i) by its typical action tendency and (ii) by its felt quality. We might say that an affect is negative if it is avoided, or if subjects typically avoid objects that elicit such feelings. Alternatively, we might say that an affect is negative because it feels bad. It has a negative hedonic tone. This is likely the more important meaning.

Regardless of how we characterize negative affect, if fear and disgust are indeed negative, we have a puzzle on our hands: people go to horror movies knowing full well they will experience fear and disgust. We do not have to be tricked into buying tickets to a comedy to sit through a horror movie. Here is the problem: if fear and disgust are the kinds of feelings that people typically avoid, or, if they feel bad, then why in the world do people go to horror movies? This problem is known as the *paradox of horror*. It is a species of the *paradox of tragedy*.

The more general paradox of tragedy concerns the question of why people pursue works that they know are likely to arouse negative emotions. In some cases, such as those of profound sadness, we would go so far as to say that the emotions aroused are painful. Hence, the general issue under consideration could be called the *paradox of painful art*. The problem encompasses far more than mere tragedy. In fact, the breadth of negative emotional experiences to which audiences willingly submit themselves is incredible. For example, the religious bio-pic *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), designed specifically to disgust and outrage viewers, became a box-office hit. This is not a rare case. A tremendous amount of religious-themed art in the Western tradition seeks to provoke painful emotional reactions via depictions of the suffering of Christ and the martyrdom of saints.

The paradox of painful art can be stated as follows:

1. People voluntarily avoid things that provide painful experiences and only pursue things that provide pleasurable experiences.
2. Audiences routinely have net painful experiences in response to putatively painful art (PPA), such as tragedies, melodramas, religious works, sad songs, and horror films.
3. People expect to have net painful experiences in response to PPA.
4. People voluntarily pursue works that they know to be PPA.

The paradox boils down to a simple question: if people avoid pain then why do people want to experience art that is painful?

Most of the literature on the paradox of tragedy has been concerned with a motivational question: what motivates audiences to pursue artworks that arouse negative emotional responses? The problem is that the motivational question is seldom stated in the same way, and it is rarely shown to be a formal paradox. And depending on

how one asks the question, different solutions drop out. As it is typically stated, the paradox of tragedy asks how it is possible for audiences to feel pleasure in response to the fictional portrayal of events in a tragedy. But this formulation of the issue begs a central question, namely, whether or not tragedies afford pleasurable experiences. And even if they do, there are certainly works in other genres, such as melodrama, that are not clear sources of audience pleasure. Surely, the lovelorn do not always, or even typically, listen to sad songs to feel better!

There are a variety of answers to the paradox in the philosophical literature (Smuts, 2009). *Control* theorists argue that the putative painfulness of some artworks is mitigated by our ability to stop experiencing them at will (Morreall, 1985). *Compensation* theorists typically argue that any painful reactions must be compensated for by other pleasures, either in the craft of the narrative or in the awareness that we are sympathetic creatures responsive to the suffering of others (Feagin, 1983). *Conversion* theorists argue that the overall experience of painful artworks is not one of pain but of pleasure, as the pain is converted into a larger, more pleasurable experience (Hume, 1985). *Power* theorists argue that we enjoy the feeling of power that arises from either the realization of the endurance of humanity, or through the overcoming of our fear (Price, 1998; Shaw, 2001). *Rich experience* theorists argue that there are many reasons why people do things other than to feel pleasure. The overall experience of painful art may be one of pain, but the experience can still be seen as valuable, and, as such, motivating (Smuts, 2007).

The most popular style of solution to the paradox of horror, and to the paradox of tragedy in general, is the *hedonic compensatory solution*. This solution holds that the negative affect, the fear and disgust, is compensated hedonically. That is, the bad feelings are overshadowed by the good. We get more pleasure than displeasure, or pain, from watching horror movies. The pleasure compensates for the pain.

Hedonic compensatory theories differ in what they indicate as the source of the pleasure. Carroll, for instance, defends a hedonic compensatory solution to the paradox of horror (Carroll, 1990: 158–214). He argues that fear and disgust are “the price we are willing to pay” for the cognitive pleasures we take from watching horror movies. On his account, the cognitive pleasures come from thinking about how one might go about responding to the threat of a monster. (Recall that his theory is specific to supernatural monster horror.) The pleasures derived from such curiosity would be impossible if there were no monsters. And if there is a monster, there will be fear and disgust. Hence, the pleasures and displeasures are linked. You need a monster for the curiosity and the accompanying pleasure, but the monster also gets you fear and disgust. You cannot have one without the other. But it is ultimately the pleasure that we are after. Fear and disgust are necessary evils for the cognitive pleasures that works of horror afford.

There is certainly something plausible about this solution, but it should raise a few eyebrows. Although there are some pleasures to be had from thinking about how one would confront a monster, it is not clear that they compensate for the displeasure of fear and disgust. At least, that is not how people talk about horror movies. Think about what makes a good horror movie. If someone has seen the latest release, our



first question is this: was it scary? There are some good horror movies that are more funny than scary, but an excellent horror movie is one that makes you afraid to turn out the lights before going to bed. Rather than the pleasures of curiosity, it certainly seems that we want to be scared.

Hedonic compensatory solutions assume that we must be looking for some source of pleasure. They assume that the pleasure is what motivates horror audiences to see the latest release (or, at least, to torrent a copy). If this is right, we would expect that people would praise and criticize works of horror based on what it is that brings them pleasure. But few praise horror movies by saying something such as: "It was so interesting thinking about how one might go about confronting such a monster." No, they praise films in reference to how much fear they elicit. Hence, it does not seem that fear is the price to be paid for what we are really after. To the contrary, it appears that fear is precisely what we seek from a good horror movie. It is not the price, but the reward.

This suggests that one of two assumptions is wrong. Either (i) people are not principally after pleasure when they go to horror movies. Or (ii) the fear and disgust we experience in response to horror is not painful or unpleasant. To take the first option is to reject the general hedonic compensatory model. One might be tempted to reject this model for good reasons. It seems to assume a wildly implausible theory of motivation, namely psychological hedonism (or egoism) — the theory that the ultimate source of all human motivation is to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Few take this theory seriously. The proverbial soldier in a foxhole who throws himself on a grenade to save his comrades is a clear counterexample. Sometimes psychological hedonists will try to account for apparently altruistic behavior by arguing that people only help others to avoid feeling bad. But this reply does not help the theory. We only feel bad when someone suffers if we care about them. We would not feel bad otherwise (Butler, 1726). And there is no reason to think that we cannot be motivated by care. Psychological hedonism is a nonstarter.

For those of us not blinkered by a benighted theory of human motivation, when we consider painful art in general, it seems highly plausible to suggest that people are sometimes motivated by more than pleasure. Once again, think of sad songs. Although they may eventually help us work through our emotions, I doubt that this plays any motivational role whatsoever for the lovelorn. Rather, those suffering from heartache seem to want to intensify the pain (Smuts, 2011). The unintentional effects are one thing; the motives another. And here we are interested in the motives. Our apparently self-punishing behavior might be somewhat puzzling, but this does not give us reason to think that there must be some source of hidden pleasure behind it all.

Although rejecting the first assumption is compelling when it comes to some genres, it is far from clear that it applies to horror. I cannot for the life of me figure out why someone would seek out painful fear and disgust for the sake of painful fear and disgust. It does not seem intrinsically valuable. It is not clear that the fear and disgust are instrumental to some kind of cognitive insight or to any kind of value. Nor is it clearly constitutive of any kind of value. Hence, we should take a look at the second

assumption, that the fear and disgust felt in response to horror are unpleasant. This is questionable. On reflection, it seems that the fear and disgust involved in attending to horror fictions are not typically painful (or unpleasant). Rather, they seem enjoyable (Neill, 1992). Of course, there are limits. Many of us do not like to watch horror alone. We become too frightened in the house alone, too frightened to sleep. That is no fun. But we do seem to enjoy a good scare.

Consider disgust: the disgust we feel in response to horror movies is peculiar. To see why, it helps to draw a distinction between two different kinds, or sources, of disgust. Few people would want to attend a horror happening, where the audience was confronted with putrefying flesh, feces, and vermin. Seasonal haunted houses staffed with antisocial criminals do not even go that far. No one wants to have to smell the stuff of horror fiction. Smell-O-Rama is not a technology well-suited to the genre. When David Cromer piped the smell of bacon into the theater during his production of *Our Town* (2013), it might have induced tear-jerking nostalgia. But if we piped the smell of a rotting corpse into a theater showing *Jeeper's Creepers* (2001), everyone would leave. Disgusting images that arouse disgusting imaginings are not typically as unpleasant as disgusting smells. Images do not threaten to taint our orifices with impurities. Typically, but not always, the disgust we experience in watching horror movies is attenuated, or of a different kind. The smell of putrefying flesh is unpleasant; similar images can be exciting in some contexts. Something similar can be said of fear.

If it is true that fear and disgust are sometimes enjoyable, this does not so much as provide a comprehensive account of the appeal of horror as it provides a solution to the paradox. It shows that there is no paradox, not even if we assume psychological hedonism. But it does not tell us why people choose horror movies over thrillers. An account of the appeal of horror should probably be able to tell us what is particularly appealing about the genre. It should tell us why some love it and why others hate it. Once again, this will likely require developing different stories for supernatural horror and realist horror. Although this is not the place to delve further into the issue, before we turn to the next topic, it would pay to briefly mention one account of the appeal of a subtype of realist horror.

Recently, a violent sub genre of horror has become popular. Movies like *Saw* (2004) and *Hostel* (2005) are often called *torture porn*. Although I am a huge horror fan, I do not like watching torture porn. And I am not alone here. But many do enjoy the subgenre. I assume that the source of the appeal must differ greatly from that of my favorite works of horror. But what could it be? A common psychoanalytic explanation for the appeal of torture porn goes like this: we have powerful desires to do violence to others. In order to live in civilization, these desires must be repressed. Sometimes these desires are interjected, turned upon ourselves in the form of guilt. But some horror movies give us a chance to see our violent impulses realized. By identifying with the killers and monsters in horror fiction, we are able to vicariously satisfy our desire to do harm to others. The movies also give us a way to hide this fact from ourselves. We are able to vicariously satisfy desires that we can happily deny having.



This is a simplified account. Even in a more developed form it would suffer from an array of serious problems (including a suspect psychological theory and a bogus notion of identification). But one problem is most glaring. The problem shows that we do not need to make recourse to psychoanalysis to explain the appeal of torture porn. The problem is this: torture porn audiences do not seem to be in denial. They go to the theater to see fictional torture. There is no disguised wish fulfillment here. It is out in the open. If sadism is indeed involved, it is flagrant.

### *Issue 3. How does Horror Frighten Audiences?*

The question “How does horror frighten audiences?” is not a philosophical problem as stated. It is largely an empirical question best answered by film scholars and psychologists. A comprehensive answer would require a long, psychological detour. I will not take that route. An alternate approach to the question is available. Although this issue is largely an empirical matter, there are important conceptual controversies concerning the nature of the emotions. The most important is whether audiences feel genuine fear in response to horror fictions. An answer to this question depends on the correct characterization of the nature of the emotions.

One of the leading theories of the emotions is called the *cognitive theory*. The cognitive theory of the emotions holds that emotions are object-directed attitudes that essentially involve evaluations. On this view, emotions are not mere feelings or physiological reactions (Prinz, 2004). No, emotions require a cognitive evaluation of a situation, whether the evaluation is a judgment or a way of seeing, a construal (Solomon, 1980; Roberts, 1988). The object-directed character of standard emotions is apparent in that it always makes sense to say “I am [pick your emotion] that.” I am *afraid that* late blight will kill my tomato plants (Roberts, 1988: 195; Helm, 2009: 2). Emotions are directed at objects.

Defenders of the cognitive theory typically distinguish between emotions and mere moods, such as being grumpy or being cheerful, or simply being in a good mood. Some terms, such as “happy,” seem to cover both emotions and moods. One might be happy that something is the case. And one might just be happy. The term is very ambiguous. But, properly construed, moods do not take objects, at least not specific objects. Perhaps moods take everything as their objects. This would account for how they color the way we see the world. But taking everything as the object of an attitude is akin to taking nothing. Consider a simple mood: one is not grumpy that such and such. No, one is just grumpy. One might be grumpy *because* of a hangover. But one is not grumpy *at* the hangover. Nor is one grumpy that one is hung over. Although someone might be ashamed that he was once again unable to resist the siren call of bourbon, this is not the object of his grumpiness. At most, it is the mere cause. Shame is an emotion; grumpiness is a mere mood.

The cognitive theory of the emotions is readily supported by our everyday practice of justifying our emotions. We assume that emotions involve evaluations or something much like evaluations. That is precisely why we try to convince those angry

with us that we did nothing wrong, that a perceived insult, for instance, was merely an accident. If emotions lacked an evaluative component, our everyday practice would be senseless. But it is not. Hence, the cognitive theory appears well supported.

Based on the cognitive theory of the emotions, some deny that we have genuine emotional reactions in response to fiction. Genuine fear requires a belief that we or someone we care about is in danger. But horror audiences, as with children playing cops and robbers, lack such a belief. A child playing a robber does not run away in fear. She does not believe that the “cop” is a genuine threat. She does not believe that she is in danger of having to do serious jail time if arrested. Nor do horror audiences believe that they are or anyone else is in danger. Instead, they make believe that they are in danger (Walton, 1978). And make-believe fear (or quasi-fear) is not real fear. No, real fear requires a genuine belief that one is in danger.

Thus, to the opening question “How does horror horrify?” this account answers: it does not. Horror fiction, much like other props in games of make believe, is simply used by audiences playing along. Horror does not horrify. No, it helps audiences play games where they make-believely fear monsters. Audiences do not feel genuine sadness, genuine fear, genuine anger, or any other genuine emotion in response to fiction.

But who, apart from a few philosophers, could believe this? This absurd implication only follows if we grant a highly controversial assumption, namely, that real fear requires a belief in the reality of its object. But, we might ask, why should we grant this assumption? The argument merely asserts that real fear requires a genuine belief that one is in danger. But this is widely contradicted by the evidence at hand. People talk about the emotional responses they have in response to art as if they were genuine, not some diminished quasi versions. It simply defies credibility to say that a theater full of weeping audience members does not feel genuine sadness in response to melodramas. Similarly, it is preposterous to say that terrified viewers who sleep with the lights on after watching a scary movie did not experience genuine fear (Smuts, 2003).

Hence, something must go. (i) Either genuine emotions do not require a belief in the reality of their objects, or (ii) audiences must really believe in the reality of fictions. The second suggestion is as absurd as denying that people feel genuine fear in response to movies. The problem stems from a problematic theory of fictional engagement, the *illusion theory* (Schaper, 1978; Carroll, 1990: 63–68; Radford, 1975: 71–72; Walton, 1978: 7). In a popular guise, it holds that audiences “suspend disbelief” when they are engaged with works of fiction. This sounds nice, but it is as suspect as it is vague. Not only is it highly implausible that people can suspend disbelief, it is even less likely that anything of the sort is needed to engage with fiction.

The notion that we suspend disbelief is lacking in phenomenological support. I cannot recall ever actively doing anything of the sort. And I do not see any reason to think that I do so unconsciously. I simply do not experience movies as if they are real. To suggest otherwise fails to accord with our experiences of engaging with fiction. And it fails to explain audience behavior. No one calls the FBI when the aliens land in a science fiction film, nor do we call the police when Michael Myers follows his prey

in *Halloween* (1984). However, if we even partially believed that Freddy Kruger was alive, we would likely wet our pants and hide under the seat. While watching a movie, we may yell “Look out!” or “Behind you!” in frustration, but no sane person thinks that she can communicate with the characters on the screen, or that she is threatened by the monsters on the page. There is no belief in the reality of the characters; there is no illusion. No one ran from the Lumière brother’s *L’arrivée d’un Train* in 1895. Nor do contemporary audiences typically believe that fictions are real. Watching movies is not a form of temporary insanity or pronounced irrationality (contra Radford, 1975; see Joyce, 2000 and Matravers, 2005).

Shakespeare reduced the illusion theory of fictional engagement to absurdity via the Rude Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Worried that the play might scare the women in the audience, Bottom decides that he will remind everyone that what they are about to see is merely fiction:

I have a device to make all well. Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and that Pyramus is not killed indeed. And, for the better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear. (III.1:15–20)

Of course, no such clarification is necessary. Bottom’s well-meaning prolog is funny precisely because the illusion theory is wrong: audiences do not confuse fiction and reality, not even a little. They do not need to be told that Pyramus is Bottom the weaver, or that the lion is Snug the joiner.

If audiences do not believe in the reality of fictional characters and events, and if audiences have genuine emotions in response to fictions, then genuine emotions must not require a belief in the reality of their objects. One prominent suggestion, the thought theory, holds that emotions only require that we entertain, or suppositionally imagine, that the events are taking place (Carroll, 1990; Lamarque, 1981). On this suggestion, we need not believe that anyone is in danger. No, we need only imagine that it is the case. Works of fiction are guides to the imagination. They provide the bulk of the content of the thoughts we are to entertain. Some of these arouse fear and disgust. Why? That is just how we are. We are capable of responding emotionally to merely imagined scenarios. Very roughly, the thought theory answers, that is how horror does it.

#### *Issue 4. Is it Irrational to be Scared of a Fictional Monster?*

Assuming that we do indeed feel genuine fear in response to horror fiction, we can ask a further question: “Is it rational?” Consider what the thought theory seems to imply: we are scared of our thoughts. But how could it be rational to be scared of our thoughts? That sounds downright loony. Thoughts are not dangerous. In comparison with the literature on the “how” question, the literature on the “rationality” question is sparse and often confused. Too often the interlocutors simply talk past one

another. This is due to the lack of clarity around the concept of rationality that gets employed.

One of the issues that interests philosophers of emotion is whether standard emotions admit of rational justification. This issue is often said to concern the rationality of the emotions. But what people mean by this varies radically (Jones, 2004: 333–336). In the literature on the emotions, there is a wide variety of different standards for evaluating the rationality of emotions. We can discern at least five: (i) reasonableness, (ii) aptness, (iii) proportionality, (iv) self-interest, and (v) intelligibility. We might wonder if an emotion is reasonable given the evidence. Alternatively, we might wonder if it fits the situation, if the emotion is apt. For standard emotions, this would require showing that their evaluations are correct. Or we might wonder whether the intensity of an emotion is proportional to its object. Or we might ask if the emotion was in one's long-term best interest. Or we might try to understand why someone would respond that way. If we can understand why they reacted as they did, the emotion is intelligible.

All of these standards are interesting, but only one concerns us here, that of aptness—whether the emotion is appropriate to the features of its object. And, here, it seems that emotional reactions to fiction might be inappropriate. For nearly 30 years, Colin Radford claimed that our reactions to fiction were irrational (Radford, 1975). He argues “that we are irrational, inconsistent, and incoherent in being moved to pity for fictional characters [. . .] and we are nonetheless moved” (1995: 75) (Figure 1.1).

Radford thinks that emotions directed at fictions are irrational because they occur in absence of a corresponding belief in their objects. In this way they are similar to



**Figure 1.1** Is it irrational to fear outright fictions, like mind-controlling worms from outer space, as in *Slither* (2006)? Directed by James Gunn. Produced by Gold Circle Films, Strike Entertainment, Brightlight Pictures, and Slither Productions.

phobias and to sadness felt after one learns that someone was pulling your leg via a tale of woe. Phobias are irrational because the phobic purports to believe that the object is harmless. Our reactions to fiction are similar. We know that the worms in *Slither* (2006) are harmless. They are harmless because they do not exist. No one is threatened. No one except some fictional characters. We feel fear when entertaining thoughts of the mind-controlling little phalluses asserting themselves down our throats, but we lack any corresponding belief in their existence. We are like arachnophobes who are afraid of imaginary spiders. That is beyond silly.

One might object to Radford's claim by noting that there are other instances of perfectly rational emotional responses that occur in the absence of belief. Radford considers such a reply. He asks us to imagine a mother who hears about a bus crash in a distant city. Although she does not think that her own children are in danger, she clutches them in relief when they arrive home from school. The mother is not irrational; she is perfectly normal. If we should not think that she is irrational, then we should not think that we are irrational in responding to fictional characters and events that we do not believe are real. The absence of a belief in the reality of the threat is not sufficient to make the emotion irrational.

This may seem plausible, but Radford replies that there is an important difference between the mother and someone watching a movie. The mother thinks that it is likely that her children could be injured. Hearing about the crash made their vulnerability clear. However, the reader of a novel does not think it is likely that a fictional character could be injured. Fictional characters do not exist! In contrast, Radford argues that feeling bad for a fictional character is akin to feeling bad for your sister who has two children, because had she not had children she would have been miserable. But that would be silly. Why would anyone feel bad for someone over something that did not happen? The object of such sadness is not probable. Not in the least. Sadness at a such a thought would be very odd. So, too, are our reactions to fiction. We are frightened by events that are not likely, events we know are not real.

In response to Radford's charge, Carroll replies that fearing fictions is perfectly normal. We all have the capacity to respond to fictional characters and events. It is probably adaptive, as it helps us understand stories about potential dangers. Hence, it is rational to fear imagined scenarios. But this reply does not meet the challenge. It operates on a different notion of rationality. Whether the capacity to feel genuine emotions in response to merely imagined scenarios has adaptive value is one thing; whether our particular reactions are fitting is another. Further, Radford would be right to reply that what is normal is not necessarily rational. We are normally subject to all manner of irrationalities, such as the gambler's fallacy. In fact, Radford admits that it is perfectly normal to fear fictions. There is no dispute here. What he denies is that it is rational.

Before we accept the claim that our emotional reactions to fiction are all irrational, we should consider another example. Imagine someone who is afraid of the victim in a horror movie, say Laurie Strode (Jamie Lee Curtis' character) in *Halloween*. Or imagine something even more ridiculous: someone scared of the (fake) leaves on the ground in *Halloween*. This would be the height of irrationality. Fearing Michael

Myers and fearing Laurie Strode are very different things. If we want to be able to acknowledge the difference, as we should, we must resist Radford's charge that all fictional emotions are irrational (Gaut, 2007: 216–227).

Up to this point, I have been talking as if people are scared of horror monsters. But this leaves an ambiguity. It is doubtful that people are typically frightened for themselves. That is, they do not fear that the monster will get them. No, audiences fear for the characters. They fear for others. We might be startled and disgusted by horror, but that is different than fear. Neither startles nor disgust are emotions proper. Neither essentially involves an evaluation that can be assessed in terms of evaluative correctness, that is, appropriateness. Startles and disgust are primitive. But when it comes to fear, we are dealing with an emotion proper. It would be the height of irrationality to fear for oneself when watching a horror movie. I would have to be insane to think that one of Herbert West's reanimated bodies in *Reanimator* (1985) is a threat to me. Likewise, it would be ludicrous for me to fear that rapist demon in *The Entity* (1982) might come after me next.

Although self-directed fear in response to fictions would be irrational, other-directed fear might not be. Although we know that the teenagers in *Return of the Living Dead* (1985) do not really exist, in the world of the fiction they are threatened by Tarman (Figure 1.2). When we engage with works of fiction, we imagine other possible worlds where the events take place (Neill, 1993). We can even come to care about characters that we imagine to exist in other worlds. Though we do not believe that we are threatened, we do believe that the characters we care about are in danger in their worlds. No one in the world of *The Cure* (1997) should look into the hypnotist's flame. Although it would be irrational to fear the leaves or to fear Laurie Strode in *Halloween*, it is not irrational to fear *for* Laurie while she



**Figure 1.2** Other-directed fear in *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), as fictional teenagers are menaced by Tarman. Directed by Dan O'Bannon. Produced by Hemdale Film, Fox Films Ltd., and Cinema 84.





**Figure 1.3** Do horror movies make us fear for ourselves, or for the characters they depict? “Bughuul” on the prowl in *Sinister* (2012). Directed by Scott Derrickson. Produced by Alliance Films, IM Global, Blumhouse Productions, Automatik Entertainment, and Possessed Pictures.

is stalked by Michael Myers. Hence, we can account for the difference between the normal film viewer and the fool who fears the leaves by distinguishing between fear for others and fear for oneself.

This account is compelling, but it rests on two controversial premises. First, that horror audiences do not fear for themselves. And, second, that it is rational to care about and feel for characters who inhabit merely imagined worlds. These are both problematic. Consider the first: is it clear that audiences do not fear for themselves? If so, why is it that people are scared to turn out the lights after watching a horror movie? Why are people scared to look out the window at night after watching Bughuul in the bushes in *Sinister* (2012)? They surely are not scared for the characters hours or days after watching the movie. No, they seem to be scared for themselves. I confess, Mr. Boogie scares me. Perhaps the movie just induces a persistent, jumpy mood, but I have my doubts (Figure 1.3).

The second assumption seems to deny the charge of irrationality without any argument. The rationality of fearing for the inhabitants of merely imagined worlds is precisely what is at issue. Noting that the characters inhabit an imagined world does not make them any more real. Accordingly, it is unclear how this refinement makes it any more rational to fear for their safety. Of course, this is not the end of the story. But we have yet another unsolved problem on our hands.

### Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I evaluated some of the leading answers to four questions that occupy center stage in the analytic-cognitivist literature on horror: (i) What is horror? (ii) What is the appeal of horror? (iii) How does it frighten audiences? (iv) Is it irrational to be scared of horror fiction?

The first question, What is horror? is hard to tackle. The central difficulty here is in accounting for both supernatural and realist horror. The multi-faceted genre eludes our attempts to pin it down in a classical definition. But this should not be too surprising. Genres are the products of our messy efforts at categorizing works of art. We should not expect to find a neat and tidy arrangement. Genres are not natural kinds. No periodic table of genres is likely to be forthcoming.

As for the second question, we left the appeal of horror unexplained. But what we did discover is that we will likely need separate accounts for the various types of horror movies. Supernatural horror and realist horror have different charms. As do the films in the same broad category. Simply consider the differences between the work of David Cronenberg and Dario Argento. We are likely dealing with a genre too diverse to canvas in a single account. But we were able to develop a plausible solvent for the paradox of horror: It is unlikely that the fear and disgust felt in response to most horror fiction is indeed painful, or unpleasant. It is typically fun to be scared by a horror movie.

The third and fourth questions concern the two faces of the paradox of fiction: How is it that we fear fictions? And is it rational? I dismissed accounts that suggest we only feel quasi-emotions in response to fiction. When we cry at a melodrama, we do not shed mere crocodile tears. No, we are genuinely sad. Likewise, when we are terrified by a horror movie, we feel genuine fear. The fact that we do not run and hide is easily explained: we are watching a movie. The object of our fear is a mere representation. There is no reason to hide.

Although it seems clear that we feel genuine fear in response to horror movies, it is less clear that it is rational. How could it be rational to fear a fictional monster? In attempting to answer this question, I drew a distinction between fear for self and fear for others. When watching horror movies, we fear for characters, not for ourselves, or so it seems. Yes, it would be irrational to fear for our own safety, but not so irrational to fear for the safety of the characters in the fiction. This is helpful, but the distinction does not resolve the problem. It still seems suspect to fear for the safety of characters that do not exist. And, besides, it is unclear that horror audiences do not also fear for themselves.

These are the central problems in the analytic-cognitivist literature on horror. They all await answers.

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