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**What Joy from Misery: the Pleasures of Horror**

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD

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### **Abstract:**

This thesis investigates the allure of narrative genres, such as horror, that have historically been viewed as philosophically (and often morally) problematic owing to their negative content and the painful emotional responses they elicit. It departs from the majority of classical and contemporary solutions to the alleged paradox posed by such genres, in that it does not attempt to render their pleasures explicable by appealing to their fictive status, thematic or ideological meanings or the more comprehensibly-pleasurable meta-responses they inspire. Rather, this account suggests that we choose to consume stories – fictional and factual – that depict violent or distressing situations and evoke discomforting emotions, for the same reason we choose to engage with less obviously conflict-filled narratives.

Fictions compel our attention insofar as they resemble potentially salient information, appealing to a set of deeply ingrained and unconscious cognitive biases that prompt us to attend to certain kinds of stimuli. We are capable of finding narrative genres such as horror, tragedy and the ‘misery memoir’ compelling – without, it is important to note, finding their content in any way *pleasant* – because we are predisposed to find some types of mental effort rewarding. While horror is often criticised – and defended – on the grounds that its pleasures must lie in slaking anti-social appetites, this thesis criticises the model of fiction’s appeal on which such assumptions are based. Instead it suggests that narrative pleasure characteristically resides in intellectual and emotional absorption or stimulation rather than any straightforward fulfilment of our real life desires.

In support of this contention, this account incorporates analyses of a number of related topics, examining subjects such as the alleged rationality of the emotions, whether our attraction to non-factual narratives represents an adaptive trait and how fiction-making, criticism and consuming function as cultural practices.

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Finally, I would like to thank Tom, my most dedicated and partisan reader, and my parents, without whose support and encouragement none of this would have been possible.

## Method of Citing Books and Articles

Throughout this thesis I will reference books and papers in the following fashion:

(author, year of publication [if applicable year of first edition]: page number(s))

However, the most frequently quoted works will be cited as follows:

(abbreviated title: page number(s))

Full and abbreviated titles of often quoted texts:

Full Title	Abbreviation
Aristotle (trans. Butcher, S. H.) (1997 [1895]) <i>The Poetics</i> , New York: Dover Publications.	<i>Poetics</i>
Boyd, B. (2009), <i>On the Origin of Stories</i> , Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.	<i>Origin</i>
Buckingham, D. (1996), <i>Moving Images</i> , Manchester: MUP.	<i>Moving</i>
Burke, E. (1958), <i>A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful</i> , London: Routledge.	<i>Enquiry</i>
Carroll, N. (1990), <i>The Philosophy of Horror</i> , London and New York: Routledge.	<i>Philosophy</i>
Carroll, N. (2002), 'The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature and Moral Knowledge', <i>The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism</i> , Vol. 60, n. 1, pp.3-26.	'Wheel'
Cherry, B. (1999), 'The Female Horror Film Audience: Viewing Pleasures and Fan Practices', University of Sterling, Department of Film and Media Studies.	'Audience'
Clover, C.J. (1992), <i>Men, Women and Chainsaws</i> , London: BFI Publishing.	<i>Chainsaws</i>
Damasio, A. (2006 [1994]), <i>Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain</i> , London: Vintage.	<i>Error</i>
Dutton, D. (2007), <i>The Art Instinct</i> , Oxford: OUP.	<i>Instinct</i>
Freedman, J.L. (2002), <i>Media Violence and Its Effect on Aggression</i> , Toronto: University of Toronto Press.	<i>Media</i>
Gaut, B. (1993), 'The Paradox of Horror', <i>The British Journal of Aesthetics</i> , vol. 33, n. 4, pp. 333-345.	'Horror'
Kerekes, D. & Slater, D. (2000) <i>See No Evil: banned films and video controversy</i> , Manchester: Critical Vision.	<i>See</i>
Lamarque, P. & Olson, S.H. (1994), <i>Truth, Fiction, and Literature</i> , Oxford: OUP.	<i>Truth</i>
LeDoux, J. (1998), <i>The Emotional Brain</i> , New York: Phoenix	<i>Emotional</i>
Martin, J. (2007), <i>Seduction of the Gullible</i> , Cornwall: Stray Cat Publishing.	<i>Seduction</i>

Nussbaum, M. (2001), <i>Upheavals of Thought</i> , Cambridge: CUP.	<i>Upheavals</i>
Pinedo, I.C. (1997), <i>Recreational Terror</i> , Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.	<i>Recreational</i>
Radford, C. (1975), 'How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?', in: John, E. and Lopes, D.M. (eds) (2004), <i>The Philosophy of Literature</i> , Oxford: Blackwell.	'Karenina'
Rhodes, R. (2000), 'The Media Violence Myth' <a href="http://www.scribd.com/doc/63405843/The-Media-Violence-Myth">http://www.scribd.com/doc/63405843/The-Media-Violence-Myth</a>	'Violence'
Robinson, J. (2005), <i>Deeper Than Reason</i> , Oxford: Clarendon Press.	<i>Deeper</i>
Rowe, M.W. (1997), 'Lamarque and Olsen on Literature and Truth', <i>The Philosophical Quarterly</i> , Vol. 47, n. 188, pp. 332-341.	'Lamarque'
Schechter, H. (2005) <i>Savage Pastimes: a cultural history of violent entertainment</i> , New York: St. Martin's Press.	<i>Savage</i>
Solomon, R.C. (1976), <i>The Passions</i> , Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday.	<i>Passions</i>
Trend, D. (2007), <i>The Myth of Media Violence</i> , Oxford: Blackwell	<i>Myth</i>
Walton, K. (1990), 'Fearing Fictionally', in: John, E. and Lopes, D.M. (eds) (2004), <i>The Philosophy of Literature</i> , Oxford: Blackwell, pp.177-184.	'Fictionally'
'Fearing Fictions' Kendall L. Walton <i>The Journal of Philosophy</i> , Vol. 75, No. 1. (Jan., 1978), pp. 5-27.	'Fearing'

## i. Introduction

*“What Int’rest springs from barb’rous deeds?/ What Joy From Misery?”*

– William Hogarth, 1751: *The Four Stages of Cruelty*

This thesis investigates the appeal of genres which characteristically elicit negative emotional responses, deciphering the “unaccountable pleasure[s]” (Hume, 2004 [1742]:25) afforded by horror, tragedy and other narrative media defined by their aversive content. Horror is often figured not only as paradoxical but as abhorrent: while tragedy’s perplexing pleasures have historically been seen as cause for introspection and philosophical inquiry, horror is as likely to be viewed as *morally* problematic, warranting urgent corrective action in the form of critiques, boycotts and even censorship. For this reason, popular writings on the paradox of horror often adopt an implicitly defensive or supplicating posture, with many justifying the genre’s existence by means of appealing to its ostensible therapeutic properties: horror does not inflame our aggressive impulses but purges us of them: and it is attractive because it provides a safe outlet for our darkest, most misanthropic desires, ultimately reaffirming the status quo.

More scholarly considerations of the genre have also tended to present its pleasures as peculiarly psychological, with theorists such as Robin Wood, Judith Halberstam, Linda Williams, Barbara Creed, James Twitchell and Carol Clover interpreting horror narratives in terms of repressed wishes and culturally-reviled Others: if I find myself transfixed by *Psycho* or repulsed by *Dracula* it is in part because I am enacting the “work of abjection” (Creed, 1993:10), ritually disavowing the “castrating mother” figure (Creed, 1993:1) or racialised others who threaten to pollute the boundaries of the clean and proper self. While not all of these accounts are intended as totalising or general ‘solutions’ to horror’s appeal, and undoubtedly offer valuable insights into particular themes and narratives within the genre, such analyses serve once again to position horror as having a specialised function, a genre notable for being tasked with the “dirty job” (King, 1993 [1981]:205) of engaging and appeasing our fearful fantasies.

Any discussion of the paradox of horror unavoidably occurs against the background of its cultural disreputability, the perennial popularity of psychological ‘answers’ to its enduring appeal. It is for this reason that this thesis begins with an exploration of horror’s seamy reputation. Throughout the first three chapters I examine, and contest, the charges most commonly levelled against horrific media, explaining why the genre owes its perpetually problematic status not to its effects but to the apparently paradoxical nature of its pleasures. I have chosen to focus on horror’s cultural reception in such depth not chiefly in order to mount an extended apologia for the genre or to attempt to rehabilitate its (decidedly shabby) reputation, but because of the ways in which its continued ignominy usefully illuminates the operation of certain assumptions about narrative pleasure. Horror is so often viewed as aberrant, and its pleasures as necessarily extra-aesthetic in nature, because of the way in which deep-seated misapprehensions about our engagement with fictions shape cultural discourse about aversive genres.

Marshalling evidence from across several disciplines, I will argue that, far from representing anomalies, curious exceptions to the customary ‘rules’ of narrative pleasure, genres such as horror and tragedy in fact serve as more extreme instantiations of the same agonistic principle: fictions are overwhelmingly, and cross-culturally, organised around some central problem, conflict or goal-oriented activity. These genres do not call for extraordinary explanation, or necessitate appeals to mysterious (and often subjectively-inaccessible) internal drives or processes. Rather, when we find horrific and tragic fictions attractive it is largely for the same reasons that we find any fiction attractive – because they succeed in eliciting our curiosity and engaging our emotions.

The view that agonistic curiosity provides the main impetus for our consumption of horrific and/or tragic narratives – and the suggestion that suspense or fascination is often integral to our interactions with fictions in general – has been expressed elsewhere, albeit in comparatively undeveloped, flawed or variously-interpretable forms. In ‘Of Tragedy’ Hume conducts a tantalisingly brief and ambiguous exploration of the paradox of tragedy, which is both rich with insights into the genre’s seemingly-paradoxical pleasures yet, at

times, frustratingly opaque (indeed, the variety of interpretations provoked by this essay serves as testament both to its perception and its polysemousness). I have chosen to focus, and build, on his observations about the necessity of narrative conflict and his striking appraisal of the relationship between our enjoyment of a fiction and our affective engagement with it.

In Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, he suggests that our desire to witness scenes of misery and destruction – which he refuses to limit to fictions, arguing that audiences would unanimously abandon the performance of “a most sublime and affecting tragedy” (*Enquiry*:47) in order to flock to a public execution – in fact represents the promptings of a divinely-instilled and adaptive drive to attend to other people's suffering. Like Hume, Burke also identifies tragedy's pleasures with its pains, arguing that it is precisely *because* the tragic and the sublime arouse violent passions and sensations that we find them attractive. Burke hypothesises that we seek out the negative pain or “delight” (*Enquiry*:136) afforded by sublime and tragic stimuli because it acts on the mind like a species of exercise: just as uninterrupted physical relaxation or indolence weakens the body, “tak[ing] away the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the natural and necessary secretions” (*Enquiry*:135), so unimpeded mental relaxation is detrimental to one's health, and we are in fact benefited by the rousing effects of a dose of diluted “terror” (*Enquiry*:134).

Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror* represents the most detailed exposition of the fascination hypothesis, with Carroll offering nuanced and persuasive analyses of recurrent horror plot-structures and themes in support of his account. In contrast to Carroll, however, in whose coexistentialist account fear and disgust are incidental to our attraction to horror fictions – the compound emotion of art-horror representing “the price we are willing to pay [in order to satisfy our curiosity about] that which is impossible and unknown” (*Philosophy*: 186) – I will emphasise the central role negative emotions play in narrative pleasure. As Hume notes, “we are pleased in proportion as we are afflicted” (Hume, 2004 [1742]:25): our sorrow in response to a tragedy's content and our pleasure in its eloquence are crucially intertwined. I attempt to clarify the nature of this relationship between

painful emotions and narrative absorption. Although, as I have noted, several other theorists have espoused variants of the agonistic curiosity thesis, there are several major points of departure between my own account and previous formulations.

The majority of writers and audience members are intuitively aware of the conflict-driven nature of most narratives; it is well known that fictions stall in the absence of convincing and emotionally-arresting jeopardy, whether it is physical or emotional, grimly realistic or utterly fantastical. However, despite the fact that ‘everybody knows’ that stories require some kind of conflict, there have been surprisingly few in-depth analyses of why this might be the case. Those theorists, like Hume, Burke and Carroll, who note the significance of this association identify curiosity and affective entanglement as the main snares by which fictions secure our attention. While building on this common observation, I undertake what I hope is a far more pervasive analysis, assembling a theoretical framework which renders the relationship between apparently aversive content and narrative pleasure explicable. Because my thesis straddles disciplinary boundaries, adducing and interpreting the discoveries of theorists from a number of fields, I have been able to develop a comprehensive and empirically-grounded solution to the alleged paradox posed by horror and related genres that incorporates a detailed assessment of our interactions with fictions in general.

My model also differs from many existing solutions to the paradox in two other respects. First, like Burke, I suggest that our responses to horrific or tragic fictions are not completely divergent from our responses to factual narratives. I will argue that fictions are in fact shaped by the same attentional biases that prompt us to attend to certain kinds of information or perceptual stimuli in real life, and that many of us are equally fascinated by factual tragedies and horrors. Secondly, I will stress the ambivalent and at times genuinely painful nature of our engagement with aversive narratives. Historically, theorising about the pleasures of tragedy (which considerably predates horror as a recognised genre) has sought to dissolve the genre’s paradoxicality by stressing its fictive nature and/or attributing its allure to its more comprehensibly pleasurable or rewarding features. Indeed, Michelle Gellrich charges tragic theory with ‘digesting’ tragic practice, arguing that much

theory essentially amounts to an ethically and rationally ameliorative project, concertedly minimising tragedy's subversive or disquieting aspects. Even those theories, like Hegel's, that focus upon the agonistic elements of tragedy arguably neutralise its representation of conflict by presenting it in rationalising and affirmative terms: while Antigone's suicide and Creon's loss of his family are terrible, their suffering is ultimately necessary or justified, embodying a higher *telos*. Gellrich asserts that the need to find intelligibility in tragedy's depictions of suffering and disorder results in an over-emphasis on the aspects of tragedy, and its pleasures, that conform to the requirements of such theories, and a concomitant lack of critical attention to the parts of tragedy that are interrogative and unsettling (Gellrich, 1988).

Certainly, many prominent theories of tragedy emphasise its affirmative aspects, as well as characterising our pleasure in positive terms (i.e. we do not simply enjoy being sad, but experience more comprehensibly enjoyable emotions or reflections in response to various features of tragedies e.g. imitation, the delineation of vice and virtue, feeling the "sweetly melting softness" (Wasserman, 1947:291) of compassion etc). For example, theorists such as Schiller and D.D. Raphael argue that tragedy's end, and the source of its pleasures, is its evocation of the sublimity of human effort, our heroic capacity to demonstrate moral resistance in the face of insuperable external forces. We enjoy and esteem tragedy because, in Raphael's words, the genre "exalts man in our eyes" (Raphael, 1960:31). Suffering of the wrong sort cannot, therefore, attain the status of the 'tragic' – while, in colloquial terms, the dreary, unrelieved misery of those too downtrodden to even apprehend their plight might *seem* tragic, "[the pitiable] by itself is not tragic because it is not uplifting" (Raphael, 1960:32): tragedy (in the normative sense of the word), thus becomes anti-tragic (in the everyday sense of the word), a potent antidote to common or garden sadness.

Contemporary theorist Susan Feagin presents a similarly rosy view of tragedy's pleasures, arguing that tragedy affords us "profound feelings of satisfaction" because it speaks to "important human interests" (Feagin, 2004 [1983]:186) rather than "superficial ones" (Feagin, 2004 [1983]:186): our positive valuation of a genre that is dedicated to depicting

human suffering, to inspiring human sadness, is not due to some perverse desire to wallow in negative emotions but our normal, or even laudable, appreciation of the morally-edifying meta-responses it provokes. Finally, while theories such as the Lucretian return upon the self do not present the pleasures of tragedy as particularly ethical or improving, instead appealing to *schadenfreude* and self interest, they still act as a neatening or rationalisation of what appears to be a decidedly paradoxical enjoyment of negative emotions.

I would argue that Burke and Kant's theories of the sublime perfectly instantiate two poles of theorising about the problematic pleasures of genres such as horror and tragedy. While Burke's theory ascribes our enjoyment to our direct responses, founded in instinct and entailing an ecstatic suspension of reason and self awareness, Kant locates the pleasures of the sublime wholly in the favourable, self-directed meta-responses it elicits. Such theories simultaneously render our enjoyment more circuitous and more straightforward, purging it of any disquieting or paradoxical implications.

In contrast to this tendency, my theory is genealogically related to the rarer accounts of tragedy and horror that link our attraction to these genres to the intense and often alarming responses they elicit, and those that recognise the commonalities between our fictive and factive emotions. I assess the strengths and shortcomings of the models of theorists such as Hume, Burke, Schier and Gaut, building on their insights as I construct my own solution to the paradox. I will argue that our engagement with fictions, and with narratives in general, can often best be characterised less in terms of simple or easily-recognisable 'pleasure' so much as a wholehearted absorption or fascination. By organising my account of fiction's appeal so that attentional and affective engagement, rather than any narrowly-construed pleasure, is foregrounded, I will attempt to dissolve the paradox entailed by painful genres, as well as elucidating our responses to fictional and factual narratives as a whole.

## **Outline of Thesis and Methodology**

### **Chapter 1:**

In my initial chapter, I discuss the history of social concern about violent and horrific media, arguing that the regular eruptions of intense cultural anxiety about populist and youth-oriented media with aversive content can be identified as moral panics. These periods of pronounced concern seem to be cyclical in nature, and do not reliably correspond to any rise in crime or drastic increase in media violence – notable examples include the Victorian belief that penny dreadfuls were inciting copycat crimes among working-class youths, the 1930s crackdown on what were perceived as dangerously imitable horror and crime films and the popular denunciation (and effective criminalisation) of so-called video nasties in the eighties and nineties. I analyse how discourse about seemingly-disparate forms of violent and aversive media betrays important underlying similarities that indicate *why* these anxieties prove so recurrent, so resistant to being dispelled. I suggest that people readily – and insistently – identify violent narratives as a source of social ills, despite the noticeable lack of evidence to suggest that any of these vilified genres were linked to real-life crime waves or increases in moral degeneracy, because the causal hypothesis possesses a certain ‘charm’ or intuitive quality. We are primed to accept as plausible the notion that violent narratives lead to violent people, that like creates like, in part because genres with aversive content subvert the model of narrative pleasure I term the ‘fantasy model’. This folk-theory is seldom explicitly discussed except in those cases where it most obviously breaks down; while, as I have noted, the vast majority of fictions feature some central conflict, most genres do not so clearly throw into relief the assumption that we typically engage with fictions in order to gratify our real life desires and to stimulate uncomplicatedly pleasant feelings.

This chapter plays an important role in the exposition of my solution to the paradox of horror because it illustrates how the genre’s culturally problematic status hinges on its philosophically problematic aspects *when viewed through the filter of certain pervasive misapprehensions about our interactions with fiction*. In other words, the persistent construal of horror and related media as criminogenic is predicated on the assumption that

anomalous genres must have anomalous audiences, that narratives with morally questionable content can only appeal to morally questionable individuals. By highlighting the ways in which the fantasy model informs mainstream and theoretical discourse about aversive fictions, this section is designed to illustrate how a revised model of narrative engagement would dispel the view of certain genres as paradoxical.

In the next two chapters I address two potential objections to my contention that horror (and other populist genres with aversive content) is primarily viewed as morally objectionable because of assumptions about the nature of its pleasures rather than owing to the observation of any legitimately worrisome effects.

## **Chapter 2**

First, I assess the body of research dedicated to investigating whether exposure to violent media encourages violent or aggressive real-life behaviours. During recent moral panics about the popularity of violent and distressing fictions, concerned commentators often adduce this area of research as confirmation of such media's harmfulness, appealing to an overwhelming critical consensus that (narrative) violence breeds violence. I will reject the version of the causal hypothesis espoused by prominent effects-proponents and organisations such as the American Academy of Paediatricians – according to which media violence presents a grave risk to social order, sowing moral turpitude and sparking imitative acts of aggression – arguing that the available evidence in no way justifies this view. I criticise the methodology of several high-profile experiments and studies which are frequently cited as proof of violent media's negative effects, as well as questioning dominant interpretations of the resulting data. I also note that more direct investigations into risk-factors for criminality and violence (those which begin by studying those known to have committed crimes and examining their lifestyles) typically find no correlation between above-average exposure to violent media and aggressive and unlawful behaviours.

## Chapter 3

In the third chapter I address another possible criticism of my hypothesis: the charge that horror and other violent (and populist/low-brow) media are generally viewed with suspicion because their audiences *are* anomalous, comprised largely of those individuals who are “disposed to derive positive enjoyment from seeing [acts of] violence” (*Seduction*:34) presented in ways that could only repel the morally normal. I challenge this assumption, exploring the research of theorists who study neglected and invisibilised audiences, as well as discussing how textual analyses of those horror texts most commonly seen as exploitative and straightforwardly misogynistic belies the claim that viewers are commonly invited to identify with killers and vicariously participate in acts of metaphorical and literal sexual violence.

This section also begins to develop my earlier claim that curiosity and emotionally-ambivalent compulsion are crucial to the appeal of genres characterised by their negative content. Brigid Cherry’s and David Buckingham’s qualitative studies both include in-depth interviews specifically designed to investigate how audience-members themselves characterise their engagement with violent and distressing media, how they describe its pleasures and pains. Their respondents’ testimony evinces certain themes, shared preferences and experiences that are highly relevant to any discussion of the paradox of horror. Significantly, both the female and child participants in these studies reported experiencing considerably ‘mixed feelings’ in response to horror narratives, most valuing those narratives that afforded them genuine fear, and feeling compelled to revisit the fictions or themes that scared them most.

Having anticipated and addressed two potential criticisms of the claim set forth in my introductory chapter – that much of the cultural disapprobation of genres such as horror is in fact attributable to the folk-theory that we paradigmatically engage with narratives in order to access feelings and experiences we find uncomplicatedly pleasant – I begin to lay the conceptual groundwork for my own theory.

## Chapter 4

In my fourth chapter I discuss different philosophical theories of the emotions, assessing the respective merits of cognitivist models and neo-Jamesian accounts. I will argue that, while cognitivists have generated some important insights about our emotional lives, such theories are unable satisfactorily to accommodate recent empirical discoveries which seem to problematise the conflation of emotions with judgements. I particularly focus on how these two competing theories approach cases in which we seem to exhibit paradoxical, recalcitrant or illogical affective responses – a category our emotional responses to known fictions are often thought to occupy. This chapter plays a pivotal role in elaborating my theory for two reasons.

First, in a later chapter I discuss integrationist solutions to the paradox of horror (and related genres) which rely on cognitivist models of the emotions. Theorists such as Kendall Walton, Alex Neill and Berys Gaut argue that we are able to enjoy genres, like horror and tragedy, that elicit negative emotions because emotions are defined by evaluations rather than feelings. In other words, I can affectively judge the events depicted in a fictional narrative to be pitiable or horrific without finding my emotional state displeasurable because negative emotions are not necessarily identified, or accompanied by, an unpleasant hedonic tone. I will object to this cognitivist-inflected answer to the paradox, advancing my own theory in which physiological responses and phenomenological feelings are central to the character, and the allure, of our interactions with fictions, even when these emotions are genuinely painful. For this reason, it is important to justify my later rejection of solutions grounded in the judgement model, as well as clarifying the theoretical framework on which my account is founded.

This chapter on the emotions is also integral to my thesis because of its bearing on the paradox of fiction: in later chapters I argue that our attraction to fictions is due to their ability to act as super-normal stimuli. In Steven Pinker's words, fictive narratives serve as simulated gossip, mimicking, in enticingly exaggerated form, the sort of information to

which we are predisposed to attend. This hypothesis is clearly incompatible with cognitivist views of the emotions, which stress the rational and information-sensitive nature of the passions. In contrast, I present our fictive emotions as a form of ‘affective illusion’: just as we are inclined to be visually ‘taken in’ by optical illusions, even when we are consciously aware that our eyes are deceiving us, so many of us respond emotionally to the travails of non-existent others.

In my fifth and sixth chapters, I continue to explore the nature of our affective, attentional and critical engagement with fictions, defending two theoretical positions that undermine the assumption that we characteristically consume fictions in order to gratify our real-world appetites and experience unadulteratedly pleasant emotions.

## Chapter 5

In chapter 5, I enter the ‘ancient quarrel’ about fiction’s epistemological value, assessing the arguments of ‘no truth’ theorists such as Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen who reject the notion that literary works can impart non-trivial truths or that considerations of truth and falsity play any role in our appraisals of fictive narratives. In stark opposition to this view, I will argue that fictions (and similarly immersive, emotionally-involving factual narratives) are particularly well-suited to conveying *certain kinds* of information, eliciting insights and refining our deliberative faculties: in some respects fictions act like thought-experiments – forcing us to occupy unfamiliar and often uncomfortable perspectives, exposing us to novel points of view and experiences and presenting us with thorny moral dilemmas or ideological conflicts that can compel us to re-examine our assumptions. I will also emphasise that if (like Lamarque and Olsen) one disputes the notion that evaluations of works in terms of truth and falsity are aesthetically relevant, one must nonetheless concede that they are commonly practised. Even if the widespread tendency to deplore works whose narratives are deformed by excessive sentimentality, pessimism or implausibility represents a lamentable lapse from the correct aesthetic attitude it still reflects the way in which we spontaneously view and engage with fictions. Our inability imaginatively to ‘decouple’ when consuming a fiction – entirely insulating our evaluation

of a text's literary worth from our appraisal of its perspicacity, its mimetic accuracy as regards important human concerns – indicates that the evaluative criteria for a fictional work do not conform to the model of narrative pleasure suggested by the fantasy model. We at least treat fictions as if they represent potential sources of information or enlightenment – comparing them against our own experiences, our knowledge of related subject matter, and disvaluing those we find to embody trite, misleading or morally impercipient worldviews.

## Chapter 6

In my sixth chapter, I expand on this point, examining how naturalistic analyses of the human propensity for fiction-making and consuming serve to clarify certain aspects of our interactions with fiction. As I stress during this section, naturalistic accounts are not interchangeable with adaptationist ones: while proponents of both begin from the premise that apparently cross-cultural and trans-historical human traits and behaviours are the result of evolution's operations on human biology and psychology, adaptationist theories suggest that the phenomena they are explaining serve some *adaptive* function, prevalent on a species-wide level because they increased fitness in our ancestral environment. Meanwhile, one can interpret behaviours – in this case, our unlikely predilection for elaborate, known falsehoods – as the product of evolution, without suggesting that they exhibit the tell-tale traces of adaptive 'design' or that they conferred any advantage in our environment of evolutionary adaptedness (EEA).

I assess the theories of those, like Denis Dutton and Brian Boyd, who view our eagerness to engage with fictions as an evolved adaptation. According to these theorists, humans are the possessors of an innate 'fiction instinct': we crave stories and feel moved to invest our time and efforts in fabricating accounts of the activities of non-existent people because it is, or has been, adaptively advantageous for us to do so. They suggest that regular exposure to fictions helps to refine certain mental faculties, acting as a form of cognitive play that serves as a pleasurable way of honing skills such as practical deliberation and mind-reading. Dutton and Boyd invoke certain traits of fiction as a human practice in support of

this hypothesis, emphasising its universality, costliness, anthropocentricity and pleasurable, and – most pertinently to my thesis – its puzzling preoccupation with conflict. This feature suggests that “*the pleasure specific to literature* does not limit itself to vicarious participation in fantasy fulfilments [my italics]” (Carroll, 2004a:133). As I note in the previous chapter, however ‘paradoxical’ it might seem, narrative pleasure is typically grounded in pain and conflict: we attend to fictions that depict problematic situations and arouse a spectrum of emotions, and esteem those that are ‘intelligent’, ‘truthful’ and ‘perceptive’, because our affinity for fictional narratives does not stem from the desire to realise our fantasies, to avoid all mental effort or emotional discomfort.

While I ultimately reject the notion that there is sufficient evidence at this time to support Boyd and Dutton’s adaptationist account of fiction’s origins and allure, I will build on their persuasive analysis of apparently cross-cultural/trans-historical storytelling norms, their incisive description of our engagement with fictions as a form of pleasurable stimulating cognitive play. I suggest that our fiction instinct may well represent a fortuitous exaptation or spandrel: we seem to seek out fictions insofar as they act as a form of super-stimulus or simulated gossip, appealing to genuinely adaptive traits – such as our craving for social information, our fascination with the anomalous, our compulsion to monitor potentially threatening beings and situations – in order to secure our attention. In other words, while fictions act as a pleasure technology of sorts, the magnetism they exert has little to do with any straightforward gratification of our real life desires but in their calculated frustration. Depicting conflict, and eliciting negative emotions, is so often central to fiction because attention, rather than any narrowly-defined pleasure, is the chief ‘currency’ of storytelling.

## Chapter 7

In this chapter I develop, and explore the implications of, several points touched on in earlier chapters, this section representing the fullest and most explicit articulation of my central argument. Initially, I reiterate how fictional narratives’ typical structure is inconsistent with the fantasy model or set of assumptions that render genres such as tragedy and horror paradoxical. I suggest that if fictions were paradigmatically designed to

allow us access to straightforwardly pleasurable experiences and emotions they would surely display less of an overwhelming preoccupation with conflict, less of a determination to deny their characters any stretch of uncomplicated, unthreatened happiness until the *end* of a story. I argue that these observed ‘rules’ of storytelling are, however, perfectly consonant with a model that foregrounds cognitive and affective engagement and stimulation: it is precisely by calculatedly thwarting our desires, expectations and values that fictions contrive to ensnare our attention, exploiting our attraction to certain kinds of information by mimicking them in intensified form.

I discuss how my model has been influenced by earlier theories that ascribe the pleasures of aversive genres to their content and the direct responses they inspire (rather than resolving the paradox by appealing to more traditionally pleasurable narrative features and meta-responses). Theorists such as Du Bos, Burke and, according to certain interpretations, Hume evoke a more expansive vision of narrative pleasure, capturing the contrarieties, the peculiar charge and ambivalence of engaging with painful fictions. Gilbert Ryle characterises pleasure in general as a form of wholehearted attention or engrossment: according to such a model, our attraction to tragic and horrific fictions does not imply that we find their negative content agreeable in itself, but that we are inexorably drawn to it because it serves to magnetise our attention to the narrative. If one discards the assumptions which coalesce to form the fantasy model, rejecting the notion that narrative pleasure necessarily coincides with that which we would customarily regard as pleasant, then such genres no longer appear paradoxical.

I go on to formulate a hypothesis as to *why* conflict-driven fictions are so effective at compelling our attention: after all, even if we do not select narratives in order to gratify our real life desires, it remains unclear why we should often specifically seek out stories that flagrantly contradict them. Rather than inventing counterfactual accounts about the obstacles encountered by human (and psychologically human-like) beings it is theoretically possible that we could instead choose to devise affectively-neutral stories, or to compose fictional histories of (non-anthropomorphised) golf balls, planets, colours or numbers. As Hume observes, emotions, and particularly negative ones, play a vital role in fixing our

attention on a story; in the absence of some central problem or conflict which is significantly humanly-salient that we feel ourselves to have an emotional stake in its outcome, fictions remain inert and lifeless.

In Chapter 4, I suggested that the ‘quick and dirty’ nature of our affective responses could help to explain why we are able to experience emotion in reaction to known fictions. Because our unconscious, affective appraisal of a stimulus occurs prior to our cognitive evaluation of it, we can experience illogical or recalcitrant emotions, many of which cannot entirely be suppressed. Emotionally-involving fictions essentially act as an affective *trompe l’oeil*, sufficiently immersive, detailed and affectively-relevant to elicit these initial, unconscious and automatic appraisals despite our rational awareness that the depicted events are imaginary.

In this section, I link my earlier analysis of fictive emotions to the role that negative emotions in particular play in our engagement with fictional narratives. I argue that fictions typically focus on problematic situations, events and themes calculated to inspire at least mildly negative emotions, because painful passions serve to ‘flag’ their eliciting stimuli as noteworthy, giving them an illusory sheen of personal salience. As I will discuss, there is empirical evidence to suggest that we preferentially attend to words and images that are negatively-valenced, instinctively keeping an eye on those aspects of our environment that might be potentially harmful or contrary to our interests. We immediately and reflexively classify stimuli as either positive or negative, the intrinsic “highlighting” (*Error*:174) properties of negative emotions directing our attention toward those ideas and objects we affectively appraise as a possible threat or obstacle. Fictions turn on conflict because it represents the most reliable means of ensnaring audience members, usurping our attention and eliciting our curiosity.

I next address one possible objection to this model, discussing Berys Gaut’s contention that we can enjoy fictions that arouse negative emotions because there is nothing *intrinsically* displeasurable about being in such states – an elegant solution which, if true, obviates the need for theories such as my own. While my account stresses the importance of negative

emotions, the integral role they play in the pleasures of genres such as tragedy and horror, I argue that such emotions are not only defined by their evaluative content but by their painful or negative hedonic tone. Drawing on the research of theorists such as Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux, I argue that emotions such as fear are themselves distinctively “uncomfortable” (*Emotional*:232), exerting powerful effects on cognitive processing and behaviours, whereas ‘cold’ cognitive evaluations of risk which are unaccompanied by any affectively “painful body state” (*Error*:180) are not equivalently motivating. As with physical pleasure and pain, affective appraisals are indispensable *because* they are quick and dirty, capable of redirecting our attention and prompting behaviours conducive to our survival or flourishing in advance of any cognitive deliberation.

However, while I present negative emotions as intrinsically painful and broadly *eudaimonistic* insofar as they generally serve to ward us away from potentially harmful stimuli, this does not imply that we are incapable of deriving pleasure from consuming narratives that elicit emotions such as fear, disgust, sorrow and pity. Because narrative pleasure often inheres in curiosity rather than comfort, stimulation rather than fantasy-fulfilment, the additional “impulse or vehemence” (Hume, 2004 [1742]:26) that negative emotions lend our engagement with a narrative can sometimes be desirable.

Finally, I argue that there is evidence to suggest that we are typically attracted to painful fictions for much the same reason that we are attracted to factual narratives with negative content, owing to an essentially epistemological drive that prompts us to attend to certain kinds of information. This claim is founded on my solution to the paradox of fiction – the assertion that fictions act as a sort of affective illusion, compelling to the extent that we affectively appraise them as potentially relevant information – and observations about the broad similarity of our preferences and reactions when selecting and consuming narratives from both of these categories.

## Chapter 8

In my final chapter, I assess horror-specific solutions to the apparent paradox posed by aversive genres. This section is critical to the development of my thesis because – having given a full explication of my own account in the previous chapter – in this section I address why I rejected existing solutions as sufficient explanations of the genre’s appeal. I argue that the expressivist, psychoanalytic and ideological readings which represent the most popularly-adopted accounts of horror’s pleasures are inadequate when evaluated as *comprehensive* solutions to the paradox. I also discuss two highly influential philosophical theories that were explicitly intended to serve as general accounts of horror’s appeal: Noël Carroll’s coexistentialist model and Berys Gaut’s integrationist theory. I argue that, while each of these theorists offers a nuanced analysis of the genre’s pleasures, they too fail to capture important dimensions of our engagement with horrifying fictions.

My discussion of these latter models is particularly significant because of the extent to which my own theory is indebted to them, influenced by both their insights and their omissions. Like Carroll, I postulate that agonistic curiosity plays a pivotal role in our attraction to horror; however, whereas, in Carroll’s model, negative emotions merely coincide with our pleasure, springing from the same source – “the self-same features of the monster that give rise to fascination also give rise to fear and disgust” (Carroll, 1995:67) – I suggest that fear and disgust positively contribute to our narrative experience. Similarly, like Gaut, I reject those theories of horror’s appeal that require us simply to discard audience members’ own description of their pleasures, arguing that the negative emotions horror fictions elicit are observably central to their allure. However, in addition to the theoretical objections to his theory laid out in the previous chapter, in this section I anatomise the ways in which his account of horror’s pleasures subtly mischaracterises our emotional engagement with fearful fictions.

## Final Notes

Before embarking on the main text, it is important to stress that this thesis, and the solution to the ‘paradox’ of horror elaborated herein, is chiefly intended to address *narrative* media with fearful, violent or otherwise distressing content, encompassing fictions such as novels, films, short stories, comics and oral folk tales or urban legends, as well as detailed factual accounts including memoirs and documentary programmes and films. This is for two main reasons. Firstly, it is because this solution is grounded in my account of our relationship with narratives in general, and my critique of the fantasy model – building on the central proposition that we characteristically value narratives for their ability to excite our curiosity and engage us emotionally, rather than to gratify our real life aspirations or afford us pleasing meta-responses and reflections on the self. Secondly, while there are undoubtedly paintings, sculptures and even pieces of music that captivate our interest while evoking feelings of fear and/or disgust and depicting (or referring to) horrifying objects, horror has *most* flourished in narrative formats, and, accordingly, the majority of cultural consternation and puzzlement about the genre arises in response to such media. Since it was this history of social concern that provided the catalyst for this project – demonstrating the extent to which horrifying fictions are popularly regarded as morally and, I suggest, philosophically, problematic – this thesis primarily addresses itself to the ‘paradox’ posed by narratives with aversive content. However, this does not mean that this account might not also apply to the pleasures of relevantly similar media that are partially or wholly non-narrative based. For example, although ‘survival horror’ games such as *Resident Evil* and *Silent Hill* surely derive some of their appeal from extra-generic and non-narrative factors (e.g. visually-pleasing graphics, well-designed strategy problems etc), much of their success must also be attributable to their arresting and suspenseful content, the tantalising questions they raise and the charged feelings they engender .

It is my hope that this account contributes to the body of research about philosophically-problematic genres such as horror by providing a clear and detailed hypothesis as to how

certain widespread – and arguably adaptive – human traits combine to result in our attraction to narratives that depict undesirable situations and evoke painful emotions.

## Chapter 1: A Disreputable Genre

### Introduction

In this chapter I will analyse the ways in which the horror genre is commonly positioned as problematic or aberrant, identifying the unspoken common sense assumptions about the nature of horror's appeal that drive much anti-horror sentiment. I will also analyse how certain folk-theories of fiction's pleasures drive moral panics about horror (and other related, and equally maligned, forms of entertainment) in the media and, finally, discuss the ways in which theories that purport to explain horror's attractions reproduce, are shaped by, and defend against such assumptions.

I will begin by discussing the 1980s controversy about 'video nasties' (a loose category composed, for the most part, of little-seen horror and exploitation films), arguing that the hyperbolic and frequently unsupported claims employed by anti-video campaigners and the exaggerated sense of threat built up by news media meet the defining criteria for a moral panic. I will support this contention by demonstrating the lack of any verifiable causal connection between the video nasties and the high profile crimes that they allegedly inspired – events that were then and now adduced as conclusive evidence of horror's harmfulness. In addition to this, I will examine how studies and discourse that supported the view that violent horror videos posed a significant risk to society were afforded consistently greater or more favourable media coverage than those which seemed to contradict this contention, even in those cases when supportive studies were methodologically inferior.

I will next discuss how certain titles have recently been granted certification despite the fact that throughout the eighties and much of the nineties they were regarded as legally obscene – likely to kindle moral corruption in a significant percentage of those exposed to them. I will argue that the BBFC's changing assessments of, and statements about, such films expose discrepancies between their declared reasoning for prohibiting any title and their actual decisions, and betray other, murkier motivations that may be at work.

In the following section I will relate the media-driven crisis about video nasties to the history of moral panics and disquiet about the violent/distressing elements of populist media, analysing the clear commonalities in the claims and rhetoric employed by those speaking out against, for example, the penny dreadfuls of the Victorian era, the burgeoning cinema of the twenties and thirties, the horror comics of the fifties and the video nasties. In each case, critics of the new (or newly popular) genre/technology emphasised how radically they differed from earlier media, crediting them with unprecedented levels of violence and malign influence over an impressionable youth audience. As theorists Martin Barker, John Springhall, Graham Murdock and Julian Petley note, such campaigns are often saturated with a “potent strain of class dislike and fear” (Petley, 1997:87), invoking the spectre of a degenerate underclass whose unmonitored children are not only attracted, but dangerously susceptible, to the violent media which we instinctively recognise as artistically vacuous and morally repugnant. Although the aforementioned theorists emphasise the socio-political dimensions of these moral panics I will adopt a somewhat different perspective. While drawing on their insights I will argue that the chronic cultural unease about horror (and violent media in general) proves so resistant to being dispelled because it is motivated as much by an ingrained set of common-sense intuitions, persistent misgivings about the appeal of narratives with aversive subject matter, as by any evidence of harm.

I will then relate the video nasties panic – which was framed as the response to a surge in acts of imitative violence – to the misgivings about another lowbrow genre whose pleasures seem to reside in its exquisitely detailed evocation of others’ pain. A rash of articles published in the late ‘noughties’ identified both a new genre and a problem: “the bestseller lists [were] full of memoirs about miserable childhoods and anguished families”, books which shops such as Waterstones housed under the label ‘Painful Lives’, and that the *Bookseller* magazine dubbed “‘mis lit’ or ‘misery memoirs’” (O’Neill, 2007). As with the horror videos of the eighties, people’s desire to consume misery memoirs soon came to be figured as a “shameful appetite” (Sarler, 2008), indicative of a perverse enjoyment of other people’s suffering. Yet, for various reasons, it was not possible to position “misery

porn" as a credible threat to public order: unlike horror, which is (probably undeservedly<sup>1</sup>) seen as an overwhelmingly masculine genre, publishers asserted that "the market for these memoirs is "80% or 90% female" (O'Neill, 2007). In other words, in contrast to the presumed audience for the video nasties – composed mostly of impressionable adolescent boys and sinister 'rogue males' – misery memoirs attract a demographic group who are markedly less likely to commit crimes in general, and particularly violent crimes. There were no high profile alleged copycat crimes which could be adduced as proof of its malignancy or any body of research devoted specifically to assessing its risks. Despite the absence of any equivalently plausible threat of concrete harms, misery lit was described in strikingly similar, and similarly disapproving, terms to the video nasties. I will argue that this genre and horror inspire disquiet for the same reason: each are defined by their preoccupation with human suffering, and, unlike tragedy (another genre whose pleasures are often identified as paradoxical) are unambiguously populist and generally lowbrow.

Finally, I will look at how this disquiet about violent and distressing media, these generally unspoken axioms about the appeal of popular fictions, also permeate and structure the counter-discourses intended to defend/decipher horror. I will argue that certain models which are regularly invoked in propitiatory explanation of horror's pleasures – such as the theory that violent narratives are valuable because they allow us to purge ourselves of aggressive impulses, or that a liking for horror narratives is necessary/unremarkable at certain developmental stages – ultimately serve to perpetuate the view of horror as an aberrant genre. By locating its appeal in its alleged psychological/therapeutic functions, such theories further entrench the conception of horror as an atypical genre whose pleasures must be extra-aesthetic in nature. In contrast to such accounts, throughout this thesis I will argue that the nature of horror's allure – as well as that of other equally 'paradoxical', if less frequently vilified, genres such as tragedy – does not differ from that of more comprehensibly pleasurable genres as radically as it is typically thought.

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<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 3, in which I discuss Brigid Cherry's analysis of how female horror aficionados are commonly erased in mainstream and fan discourse about the genre.

## 1.1 Anatomy of a Panic

The increasing popularity of home video recorders in the early nineteen eighties ushered in a – perhaps inevitable – backlash; one that started “relatively innocuously [...] the general anxiety that comes with any new technology manifest[ing] itself in public fears of burglary and addiction” (*See:27*). It “was feared that people were becoming *addicted* to watching videos, especially late at night. Without the discipline of television’s midnight termination, it was believed that video would wean a nation’s worth of insomniacs” (*See:26*). These initial concerns, however, were rapidly superseded by more ominous worries about the new technology’s *content*. The catalyst for the ensuing media storm, which was to rage intermittently across the pages of the British tabloids over the next decade (and was revivified in 1993 amidst allegations implicating ‘video nasties’ in the murder of James Bulger, as I will later discuss) was the “appearance of lurid advertisements for video films in the early months of 1982 [which] sparked off criticism from members of the public and the BVA” (*See:27*).

Tabloids such as the *Daily Mail* began to castigate the ‘video nasties’ for their alleged sadism, conflation of sex and violence, corruption of the nation’s children and degradation of women. As the panic gathered steam, media and public alike became more sensitised to the subject, with unsubstantiated claims about the morally corrosive effects of the films being widely reported in newspapers. Unease was heightened by the fact that this new technology allowed consumers to rent/purchase and view films that had often not obtained theatrical certification, and, most crucially, to enjoy them in the privacy of their own homes rather than in a public theatre. Headlines at the time emphasised this point, stressing the alarming new possibilities afforded by this combination of clandestine consumption and novel technology – such as slow motion and freeze frame – that would allow viewers to furtively “revel in the gory bits as often as they like” (*Seduction:14*). James Ferman, the Director of the BBFC, argued that there was a particular need to prohibit violent videos, since they could be “viewed over and over again by people teetering on the edge of using material the wrong way” (*Seduction:47*)

Equally pronounced among the newspapers, public figures and politicians who led the charge was, as aforementioned, an emphasis on the dangerous likelihood of children being exposed to inappropriate material via this new medium: “Wardell, the MP for Gower argue[d] that [...] ‘It is appropriate today that the House should focus attention on the heavy responsibility carried by any parent that permits a video machine in the home. It is a potentially dangerous weapon that may be used to attack the emotions of our children and young people’ (*Seduction*:17). ‘Video nasties’ possessed viral properties, infiltrating and defiling the minds of the innocent, “as great a danger to a child’s mind as any infectious disease is to the body”.<sup>2</sup> Such films were repeatedly likened to dangerous, habit-forming drugs or demonic agents, with mainstream newspapers describing how children had been “taken over” or “possessed”<sup>3</sup> following exposure, and speculating as to whether rapists’ and child molesters’ crimes could be attributed to their “addict[ion] to ‘video nasties’” effecting drastic “changes [in] personality”<sup>4</sup>. Video “chillers [were charged with] unleashing mad killers”<sup>5</sup>, with the mainstream media, public figures and researchers such as Dr Clifford Hill collectively arguing that “continued exposure to scenes of violence” leads to “desensitivisation [sic]” and addiction, viewers eventually becoming dependent upon screen violence “just as if they were hooked on drugs” (*Seduction*:51). Newspapers even invited readers to “burn [their] video nast[ies]”<sup>6</sup> in order to counteract the disastrous moral pollution they could otherwise wreak.

During the period when nasties were the focus of the greatest public concern, research supporting the hypothesis that simulated violence incites imitative acts was widely reported and presented as authoritative and dramatic new findings. Meanwhile, equally or more methodologically sound studies with less arresting conclusions were granted comparatively little media attention.

For example, in 1983 The ‘Parliamentary Group Video Enquiry’ (in fact a research group commissioned and privately funded by a coalition of churches and individuals, and led by

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<sup>2</sup> September 25<sup>th</sup> 1982, the *Daily Mirror* (*Seduction*:22)

<sup>3</sup> August 4<sup>th</sup> 1982, the *Daily Mail* (*Seduction*:22)

<sup>4</sup> August 5<sup>th</sup> 1983, the *Times* (*Seduction*:22)

<sup>5</sup> May 2<sup>nd</sup> 1990, the *Sun* (*Seduction*:68)

<sup>6</sup> November 26<sup>th</sup> 1993, the *Sun* (*Seduction*:74)

the sociologist Dr Clifford Hill) released a widely-publicised report designed to coincide with the Video Recordings Bill's passage through the House of Commons. During the course of their research they claimed to have discovered that 45.5% of children have been exposed to at least one video nasty (*Seduction*:22). This figure went on to be repeated across mainstream newspapers, with both the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* featuring headlines to that effect. Problematically, however, the report's list of 'Children's Top Ten Nasties', gleaned through surveying 6000 children, contained a nonexistent film known as *Zombie Terror* (a later study undertaken by different researchers (Bates and Cumberbatch) found that 68% of their eleven-year-old correspondents purported to have seen similarly nonexistent nasties when counterfeit titles were deliberately included in questionnaires). There were further troubling revelations subsequent to the publication of the study's results; the Oxford Polytechnics Research Unit (who had been tasked with carrying out the research) alleged that before they had had a chance to process the data it had been seized, "misused" (*Seduction*:29) and publically misrepresented by Hill and his fellow researchers.

As with the later Newson report, although those involved in the study claimed to have discovered worrisome new proof about the ubiquity and/or harmfulness of violent videos, the bulk of the report was in fact composed before any statistical evidence was available. Perhaps most damaging to the report's credibility was its mysterious inclusion of two Coventry children's comments on video nasties – "Warren 'I like all the blood coming out' and Steve 'I like the bit in *Driller Killer* where he puts a man up on sticks and then he gets a drill and puts it through his stomach and he screams for ages'" (*Seduction*:29) – when no Coventry primary schools had participated in the survey<sup>7</sup>. Such discrepancies at the very least suggest a lackadaisical approach towards methodology, and at worst leave the researchers involved vulnerable to charges of distorting or even falsifying evidence in service of a pre-existing agenda. Despite the problems with this prominent study, and the remaining lack of evidence that that video violence constituted a significant threat to society, the Video Recordings Act passed on July 12<sup>th</sup> 1984, making it a prosecutable

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<sup>7</sup> The information on which the study was based was gathered by providing a number of schools with questionnaires designed to investigate children's viewing habits and preferences.

offence to supply uncertified videograms. The Act also empowered the police to search video suppliers and seize suspected legally prohibited material at will.

Cultural anxieties about media violence flared once again following the high-profile murder of James Bulger (a crime which was erroneously linked to *Child's Play 3*). Amidst the furore provoked by the killing, Professor Elizabeth Newson (head of Nottingham University's Child Psychology Unit) and 25 co-signatories from related fields submitted a letter to the Home Secretary testifying to the perils of simulated violence. The media widely heralded Newson and co.'s paper as a "startling admission [...] by 25 leading child psychologists that they had underestimated the link between video and real life violence"<sup>8</sup>. Newspapers which had previously led the charge against video nasties presented the letter as a dramatic about-face precipitated by compelling evidence of violent video's harmfulness: "Britain's top psychologists finally admitted [...] that the *Daily Mirror* got it right"<sup>9</sup>. "Astonishing"<sup>10</sup>, "unequivocal"<sup>11</sup> new proof had forced formerly "wishy-washy liberal"<sup>12</sup> academics to concede that video nasties spark imitative violence, vindicating the common-sense view that many had held all along.

There was one glaring problem with this interpretation of events. Professor John Morton, head of the Medical Research Council, disputed Newson's characterisation of her findings, arguing that the paper "should not be taken as an independent report by psychologists [but a] commissioned piece by David Alton" (*Seduction*:81), a vociferously pro-censorship MP. In fact, the report contained no new research, but relied extensively upon detailed case studies of allegedly media-influenced acts of violence such as the Bulger killing.

Despite the fact that the report contained no new research, dubious reasoning/methodology, and consisted chiefly of unsubstantiated (and later discredited) claims about individual cases it was widely disseminated and promoted as an important new study demonstrating the dangers of violent media. It was able to become so

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<sup>8</sup> April 1<sup>st</sup> 1994, the *Guardian* (*Seduction*:79)

<sup>9</sup> April 1<sup>st</sup> 1994, the *Daily Mirror* (*Seduction*:79)

<sup>10</sup> April 1<sup>st</sup> 1994, the *Star* (*Seduction*:80)

<sup>11</sup> April 1<sup>st</sup> 1994, the *Daily Telegraph* (*Seduction*:80)

<sup>12</sup> April 1<sup>st</sup> 1994, the *Nottingham Evening Post* (*Seduction*:79)

influential, even given its paucity of evidence and argument, because its sweeping assertions seemed intuitively plausible, resonating with people's sense of what was obvious, what was self evident. Even following the release of a – considerably more methodologically-sound – contradictory study by the Policy Studies Institute, many mainstream newspapers continued to present the dangers of violent media as self-evident: asserting that “*we all know* [that video nasties] breed imitative horrific rapes and other brutal crimes”<sup>13</sup> extolling the virtues of those studies that “support [...] *the common-sense view* that video violence [does] corrupt the young [my italics]”<sup>14</sup>.

Shortly after Newson's much-publicised letter, The Policy Studies Institute released their own report on *Young Offenders and the Media*. In striking contrast to the view then being propagated by many mainstream news sources, they found that the viewing habits of convicted young offenders did not differ in any significant way from those of non-offending teenagers, other than that young offenders had “less access to television and videos than other children” (*Seduction*:84). While some newspapers reported on this research, many others ignored it and any possible implications it held for the campaign against the nasties, continuing to print articles in favour of a protective “crackdown”<sup>15</sup> on the grounds that violent films were known to “warp [...] young minds”<sup>16</sup>.

The video nasties furore could, like earlier crusades against media violence, reasonably be classified as a ‘moral panic’. The term, coined by Stanley Cohen in 1964 in response to sensationalistic British media coverage of youth gatherings in the mid nineteen sixties, designates a “‘fundamentally inappropriate’ reaction by much of a society to certain relatively minor events and conditions [During panics] the seriousness of events [pertaining to the area of concern tends to be] exaggerated and distorted” both in terms of scale and damage: “obviously false stories [may be] repeated as true [and] unconfirmed rumours [...] taken as fresh evidence of further atrocities” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 2009 [1994]:22). Once the community has become sufficiently sensitised to this new hazard an

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<sup>13</sup> April 17<sup>th</sup> 1994, the *News of the World* (*Seduction*:87)

<sup>14</sup> July 14<sup>th</sup> 1994, the *Daily Express* (*Seduction*:88)

<sup>15</sup> April 13<sup>th</sup> 1994, the *Times* (*Seduction*:84)

<sup>16</sup> April 13<sup>th</sup> 1994, the *Daily Mirror* (*Seduction*:85)

“overheated and exaggerated sense of threat” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 2009 [1994]:22) begins to permeate discourse about the designated behaviour, with relatively minor events attracting unwarranted press and/or police attention. Owing to their intensity, panics are inherently short-lived, too fervid and volatile to be sustained, although some may flare up intermittently over the space of some years. The concept of disproportionality is equally central to the notion of the moral panic, inevitably exposing those who use the term to charges of fraudulently assuming a mantle of neutrality in order to dismiss public concern over issues that seem unproblematic from their own ideological perspective. However, although this criterion is obviously subjectively applied there remains an objective, measurable dimension to it – while one cannot conclusively demonstrate that media violence does not play any role in real life violence one can certainly demonstrate that it did not play a role in the individual, highly publicised cases it was popularly believed to have inspired, and around which much of the video nasties controversy eventually came to be centred.

For example, following his 1987 murder spree the tabloid press initially dubbed Michael Ryan the ‘Rambo’ killer owing to putative similarities between his acts and the film’s plot, arguing that his crime constituted the indisputable, “tragic proof”<sup>17</sup> of video violence’s virulence. In fact, there was no evidence to suggest he was even in possession of a video recorder, lending scant support to the widely-reported claim that he had been obsessed with, or ‘inspired’ by, this particular film.

Similarly, in the wake of the James Bulger murder, the trial judge Mr Justice Morland ventured a tentative hypothesis as to the killers’ motivations, commenting that “how it came about that two mentally normal boys aged ten and of average intelligence committed this terrible crime is hard [...] to comprehend [...] I suspect that exposure to violent video films may in part be an explanation” (*Seduction*:71). These remarks were soon widely publicised, and had the immediate effect of prompting calls for further restrictions to be imposed upon the sale of “horror videos” (*Seduction*:71). David Alton (a Liberal Democrat MP) and Michael Alison (a Tory MP) jointly argued that the situation called for an urgent

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<sup>17</sup> August 20<sup>th</sup> 1987, the *Sun* (*Seduction*: 64)

investigation into “the role played by violent films in the psychological impulses that led to [the Bulger] murder”, as well as still “tighter controls of violence on TV and through videos” (*Seduction*:71). Alton and Alison were the first to name *Child’s Play 3* as a particular nasty that could have instigated the crime. The day after Morland suggested a possible link between violent media and the killing, the *Daily Mail* printed an article in which it was claimed that the judge had specifically mentioned *Child’s Play 3* in connection to the crime, the headline reading ‘Film a Judge Damned – Did this Grotesque Video Inspire a Boy to Murder’<sup>18</sup>. The *Sun*, the *Star*, the *Express* and the *Mirror* soon followed suit, anatomising how the film’s influence was discernible in features of the crime, describing Bulger’s murder as a “chilling replay”<sup>19</sup> of the video. Several papers cited anonymous experts and police sources attesting to the dangers of violent media in general and the *Child’s Play* series in particular, with the *Express* asserting that “detectives [...] strongly suspect that Venables, and perhaps his fellow killer, watched the film”<sup>20</sup>. The *Independent* featured an editorial which spoke of the “uncanny resemblance”<sup>21</sup> between the film and certain aspects of the murder, and the *Guardian*, while relatively reticent on the subject, perpetuated the claim that *Child’s Play 3* had been “referred to by the judge in the James Bulger murder trial”<sup>22</sup>

To this day *Child’s Play 3* – a relatively innocuous and decidedly fantastical horror sequel starring a homicidal doll – remains notoriously linked in the public imagination with the murder of James Bulger. As I have indicated, the film was widely “held up as being causative in James Bulger’s murder [...]because] it was suggested that a copy of the film had been in Jon Venables’ home three weeks before he and Thompson murdered Bulger” (*See*:325). In fact, there was no evidence that the boys had viewed the film, or indeed any video nasties, prior to committing the crime. Dr Susan Bailey, the consultant forensic psychologist who had been tasked with writing a report on Venables reported that the child “recoiled from violent scenes in videos and his favourite film was *The Goonies*”<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> November 1994, the *Daily Mail* (*Seduction*:72)

<sup>19</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> November 1994, the *Star* (*Seduction*:72)

<sup>20</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> November 1993, the *Express* (*Seduction*:72)

<sup>21</sup> 26<sup>th</sup> November 1993, the *Independent* (*Seduction*:73)

<sup>22</sup> 26<sup>th</sup> November 1993, the *Guardian* (*Seduction*:73)

<sup>23</sup> 25<sup>th</sup> November 1993, the *Liverpool Echo* (*Seduction*:73)

Furthermore, the detectives who had been investigating the case denied such a link, stating that they had found no material during the course of their enquiry that could “have influenced a boy to go out and commit murder?”<sup>24</sup> Contrary to Morland’s characterisation of the boys as otherwise “normal” children who might have been compelled to kill by the film’s malign influence, both exhibited troubled tendencies long before the murder, with a known “track record of arson and animal torture” (*Seduction*:73). The putative similarities between Bulger’s death and acts of violence depicted in the film also dissolve under closer inspection. “Bulger had been splashed with paint and the doll in the film is struck with a paintball; Bulger died on a railway line and a set-piece in the movie takes place on a ghost train ride; the killers admitted that Bulger constantly got back on his feet no matter how hard they hit him and the doll in the film shows a similar indestructibility” (*See*:325). Suggestive though such parallels might have seemed at the time, the boys had originally planned to push Bulger into traffic in order to disguise the nature of his death, and Thompson had previously informed schoolmates of his “long-standing plan to push a child under a bus” (*Seduction*:73). All the evidence available strongly suggests that the way in which Bulger was killed did not reflect an obsessive desire to recreate fictional events, but the murderers’ childish lack of effective planning and forethought; after abducting Bulger Venables and Thompson wandered around for miles (their incriminating journey witnessed by numerous passersby) discussing and attempting several different means of killing him, before eventually planting his body on a railway line in an effort to make it appear as though he had wandered onto the tracks.

The Bulger killing is not the only high-profile crime that remains linked in the public imagination to *Child’s Play 3*. In 1992, Suzanne Capper was kidnapped, tortured and finally murdered by six of her acquaintances. Insofar as a satisfactorily explanatory ‘reason’ for such an act could ever be provided, there is nothing to suggest that media violence played any role in the killers’ motive or *modus operandi*. The accomplices claimed to have been motivated by minor personal grievances against Capper, suspecting that she might be responsible for their contraction of pubic lice and for the theft of a “pink duffel coat worth [fifty] pounds” (Foster & Connett, 1993). The charges of media influence

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<sup>24</sup> 26<sup>th</sup> November 1993, the *Independent* (*Seduction*:73)

arose from the fact that one of the tapes the murderers used as part of their torture of Capper featured a song which contained lines sampled from the film. The media extrapolated from this fact to suggest that the killers must have been inspired by Chucky's actions, becoming "programmed" for violence through their contact with the "demonic doll" (Jones, 2009). There are several reasons to suspect that the connection drawn between the murder and *Child's Play 3* is spurious. Most importantly, the police who had been investigating the crime explicitly disavowed any link, describing the putative connection as "tenuous" (*Seduction*:77) and utterly unsupported by their interviews with the offenders themselves. As with Michael Ryan (the 'Rambo' killer), two of the crime's chief instigators did not in fact own a video player, which hardly buttresses the claim that they were obsessively interested in violent videos, or that excessive exposure to such films must have played a causal role in their crimes. Finally, there is no reason to suggest that the track played as part of Capper's torture was especially selected because of its link to the film; rather, it was a popular song that the killers happened to have recorded when it was being broadcast from a local radio station.

The hyperbolic claims that came to pervade discourse about violent media and their social effects throughout the early eighties to mid-nineties, the mass of articles in which videos were credited with near-diabolical influence, capable of compelling otherwise ordinary people to kill, are, simply put, flagrantly untrue and as easily falsifiable now as at the time of their publication. Indeed, the fact that such assertions continued to be uncritically published by mainstream newspapers is, I would argue, illustrative of an underlying sense of resonance, an instinctive 'rightness' about such claims that – as the numerous appeals made to self evidence attest<sup>25</sup> – is not primarily contingent upon empirical evidence.

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<sup>25</sup> A *Times* article published in the wake of James Bulger's murder (November 26<sup>th</sup> 1993) entitled "Child's Play – screen sadism is immoral whether or not it causes crime" argues that "the speculation over whether [Venables] may have watched one particular film is ultimately of less significance than [...] members of a whole generation of children [...] growing up in a culture saturated by images of gratuitous cruelty and bestial violence [...] a society that accepts vividly enacted brutality is ipso facto making such acts conceivable and even encouraging the belief that they are commonplace. *This is not a matter for proof. It is self evident* [my italics]." (*Seduction*:75) Meanwhile, an article published a few days later in the *Mirror* harangues *Child's Play 3* producer David Kirschner for his disavowal of responsibility for the Bulger killing, stating that "our gut tells us [the Bulger killers] must have seen your evil doll Chucky[my italics]" (*Seduction*:77).

## 1.2 Disturbing Effects or Disturbingly Effective: Conflicting Rationales for Film Censorship

Significantly, many of the notorious banned nasties of the 1980s have since been quietly granted certification for home viewing by the BBFC. David Cooke, the board's current Director, justifies what critics might perceive as a tacit admission of past error or arbitrariness by arguing that it is the board's duty to "classify for contemporary standards", aiming to "reflect [...] broad scale public opinion" (Cole, 2012). He argues that, because many such films have grown "dated", they have now "lost much of their impact and power to shock", thus no longer posing a "significant harm risk" (Cole, 2012). Cooke's wording here seems to suggest that the board's past decisions regarding video nasties were predicated primarily upon the desire to protect unsuspecting audience members from emotional trauma; only now that the average viewer is relatively inured to cinematic violence, habituated to the superior special effects and stylistic conventions of modern day nasties like *Saw*, is it safe for these films to be released for home viewing.

However, James Ferman, the presiding Director of the BBFC until 1998, describes the board's motivations and remit very differently. In a 1999 article reflecting on his career, Ferman defends his (successful) efforts to "bring films within the Obscene Publications Act" (Ferman, 1999). Because of this move, "*the test of criminality would no longer be offensiveness, but harm to the morality of a significant proportion of the likely audience.* The 'deprave and corrupt' test could have been conceived to hold the line against the exploitation of sexual violence and torture, the biggest problems of the 1970s. It might also have been framed to provide the ideal weapon against the video nasties of the 1980s, where it proved its effectiveness repeatedly" (Ferman, 1999). In other words, if one accepts the reasoning of the board members during the period in question, the populace's increasing desensitisation to violent media surely implies that society is in urgent need of censors who are even *more* firm-handed. If the films that rightly horrified audiences of the 80s and 90s are now viewed as quaint and ineffectual it must indicate a significant deterioration in our moral character.

If the BBFC's job lies in the protection of audience members from ethical corruption, it is the *acceptance* of media violence that should prove most troubling, representing a tendency that is imperative for censors to counteract rather than merely acquiescing to the public's tolerance for escalating levels of onscreen brutality. In some cases, it is indubitably true that the public's willingness to countenance violent/negative content in fictions can function as a barometer of what is socially regarded as acceptable. The waning public tolerance of (certain forms of) gendered violence has indeed been reflected by a marked reduction of the kind of light-hearted, normalised depictions of domestic violence that used to appear in otherwise non-violent programmes/films such as *I Love Lucy* or *The Honeymooners*. Similarly, characters who are nowadays intended to be perceived as sympathetic seldom make overtly racist statements or use racially derogatory terms. In other words, the fact that mainstream audiences of the period during which such scenes and references were more common did not, for the most part, find them offensive or objectionable was both genuinely problematic and indicative of certain moral blind spots.

However, I would contend that our eagerness to engage with violent narratives does not necessarily act as an equivalent gauge of our real life attitudes towards violence. The central misapprehension that powers much anti-media violence discourse is the presumption that, in order to derive any pleasure from violent narratives, one must in some way side, sympathise, or, in effects-researchers' parlance, identify with the perpetrator(s). Viewers' capacity to enjoy witnessing acts of simulated violence thus serves as an indictment of their moral fibre. As I discuss in further detail in Chapter 3, there is actually very little empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that the 'sympathy for the devil' model represents our prototypical mode of engagement with violent fictions. In fact, in those instances where media influence seems to have played a significant role in inciting real life violence, the violence in question is generally conceived of as (or justified as being) *retaliatory/defensive* in nature, figured as a means of taking action against those depicted as threatening aggressors-in-waiting.

For example, "according to FBI statistics, anti-Latino and Latina hate crimes [in the US] increased 40 percent between 2003 and 2007 – the same period that politicians started

using anti-immigration platforms to garner votes for elections [...employing rhetoric that presented the demographic as] dangerous lazy criminals set on violating and destroying the American way of life [...some of whom are even capable of] ‘coming to kill you, and you, and me, and my children and my grandchildren’<sup>26</sup> (De La Torre, 2011). Equally, Rwandan news media prior to and during the 1994 genocide have been charged with both “inciting the hatred that led to violence [...and, even more crucially,] spreading fear, rumour, and panic by using a kill-or-be-killed frame”, urging Hutus to exterminate their Tutsi neighbours before it was too late (Kellow & Steeves, 2006:112). The media researchers Christine L. Kellow and H. Leslie Steeves argue that Radio-Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RLTM) was particularly culpable for the ensuing persecution and murder of Tutsi citizens (and insufficiently anti-Tutsi Hutus, who were portrayed as insidious ‘collaborationists’). The network regularly “broadcast [...] inaccurate and inflammatory” (Kellow & Steeves, 2006:117) claims about the Tutsis, repeatedly telling its audience that “‘the RPF is coming to kill people, so defend yourselves’” (Kellow & Steeves, 2006:120). The RLTM consistently “emphasised a ‘risk and danger’, ‘kill or be killed’ frame”, legitimising acts of violence against Tutsis by presenting them as self-protective: one “May 20 1994 broadcast described Tutsis as gathering guns, killing Hutu families and burning down their houses” (Kellow & Steeves, 2006:120).

However one conceives of the pleasures of violent narratives, the fact that formerly-banned films have now been made available for private viewing without generating any appreciable rise in violent crime and imitative acts, indicates that the BBFC’s stated justification for prohibiting certain films – their judgement that the video nasties exhibited the “tendency to deprave and corrupt (e.g. make morally bad) a significant proportion of those likely to see [them]” (BBFC, 2012) – is invalid. I would suggest that Cooke’s description of how the board determined that once-dangerous nasties like *Salo* or *Cannibal Holocaust* no longer posed a threat – a complex calculation involving “questions of stylistic treatment, whether the material still looks credible, whether it now seems ridiculous, or whether it still carries a significant charge” (Cole, 2012) – provides a compelling alternative explanation for the board’s dramatic reversal.

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<sup>26</sup> Quote from former Republican congressman Tom Tancredo

One of the most notorious – and critically acclaimed – films that was for a long time refused certification, widely unavailable for public or home viewing until as late as 1998, is *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. It is important to note that Tobe Hooper, the film’s director, had deliberately included little graphic violence and gore in the hope of attaining a (more commercially desirable) PG rating; the BBFC’s “misgivings” could not be assuaged by cuts to the most violent acts or scenes because “the film relied for its effect upon creating an atmosphere of madness, threat and impending violence” (SBBFC, 2012). Instead, two successive heads of the BBFC (Stephen Murphy and James Ferman) denied the film certification altogether, perturbed by its pervasively “disturbing tone” and “focus on ‘abnormal psychology’” (SBBFC, 2012). Ferman in particular related the board’s decision to the disquieting “sense of menace” that is sustained throughout the film’s latter half, likening it to a “pornography of terror”, *in that its intention seemed to be to invite the audience to revel in a vulnerable woman’s distress* [my italics] (SBBFC, 2012). Such remarks cumulatively support a reading in which Hooper’s film can be seen as a victim of its own success; so effective at evoking human anguish and depravity, at eliciting negative emotions, that it also serves to activate underlying concerns about the nature of other people’s attraction to violent material. Significantly, the BBFC explained their eventual decision to grant the film certification for video release in 1999 by appealing to changing stylistic conventions and expectations: by contemporary standards, the film seemed comparatively “dated and feeble” (SBBFC, 2012).

Following the passage of the Video Recordings Act, the Attorney General Sir Michael Havers produced an outline of features that could render films obscene/prosecutable, most liable in the eyes of censors to deprave and corrupt. In addition to naming specific acts that would be considered taboo (such as cannibalism or violence perpetrated by children) he warned that films that “portray [...] violence to such an extent, or so explicitly, that its appeal can only be to those who are disposed to derive positive enjoyment from seeing such violence” (*Seduction*:34) are especially likely to be judged obscene. Similarly, he cautioned that “the more convincing [a film’s portrayal of violence is], the more [morally] harmful” it will be (*Seduction*:34). The reasoning behind these edicts is far from self-

evident if one is in fact approaching the subject from a harm-reduction perspective: decades of effects research has failed to establish whether realistic violence is more or less likely to elicit imitative aggression than fantastic violence, whether perfunctory or lingering depictions of suffering are more morally perilous (indeed, it is most unclear why representing victims' suffering in great length and detail is more likely to glamorise or normalise violence than a cartoonish, emotionally shallow treatment would). However, such stipulations closely conform to those traits one might predict to cause viewers the most visceral, emotional and philosophical *discomfort*.

### **1.3 From Video Nasties to Penny Dreadfuls: Recurrent Concerns about Violent Media**

Throughout this thesis, I argue that much discourse and theorising about media violence/media with negative content operates according to one implicit assumption (or set of assumptions) that I term the fantasy model. It is this folk-theory of fiction's appeal that generates the putative paradoxes of tragedy and horror, rendering our attraction to painful genres problematic insofar as it departs from this model. In this section I will highlight the commonalities between superficially quite dissimilar media panics, not in order to present critics of various iterations of violent/distressing media as irrational or ill-motivated, but to point out how strikingly persistent, and deeply culturally embedded such misgivings are – apparently as spontaneous and ubiquitous as our propensity to be attracted to such media in the first place.

The desire for violent representations is not a deviation from the social or historical norm; while critics of contemporary media often characterise today's fictions as unprecedentedly bloodthirsty and 'infective', or appeal to a bygone age of kinder, gentler entertainments, violent fictions and anxieties about violent fictions seem to be equally perennial. While the populist entertainments and 'nasties' of the past tend to strike us as quaint and ineffectual, highly unlikely to spark imitative acts or indeed to rouse any strong feelings whatsoever, they too were often the focus of intense public concern.

In his *Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers*, Henry Fielding attributes this spreading evil or “disease” (Fielding [1751]:xi) in the “lower Branches of our Constitution” (Fielding [1751]:x) to the great changes wrought in the “Customs, Manners, and Habits” (Fielding [1751]:xxi) of the Commonalty by their access to popular entertainments. Unlike the industrious, humble working classes of the past, Fielding argued that today’s Commonalty had been corrupted by a historically unprecedented “Torrent of Luxury”, preferring to disport themselves in a fashion more befitting their “Superiors” (Fielding [1751]:6), and to sustain themselves by criminal means, than to labour honestly.

In his exploration of the ‘Seven Curses of London’, the Victorian writer James Greenwood attributed the “growth of juvenile criminality” (Greenwood, 2012 [1869]) to the popularity of penny dreadfuls or ‘gallows literature’ such as *The Skeleton Band*, *Tyburn Tree*, *The Black Knight of the Road*, *Dick Turpin*, *The Boy Burglar* and *Starlight Sall*, likening them to the vectors of some contagious disease. Just as a “tainted scrap of rag [can] spread plague and death through an entire village [so] a stray leaf of *Panther Bill* or *Tyburn Tree* may sow the seeds of immorality amongst as many boys as a town can produce” (Greenwood, 2012 [1869]). Greenwood also argues that, while middle class boys are likely to prove immune to the poisonous wiles of such publications, having “minds too pure either to seek out or crave after literature of the sort in question”, their “poor brother[s] of the gutter” are all too often led astray by these “open encouragers of boy highwaymen”, their malleable young minds easily primed for criminality by tales of “‘daring exploits’” (Greenwood, 2012 [1869])).

Critics of the nineteen thirties decried films such as *The Raven* for “exploiting cruelty for cruelty’s sake” (*Seduction*:195) and censors forced cuts to films that could be considered to demonstrate criminal uses for everyday objects. For example, Tod Browning’s controversial film *Freaks* (1931) concerned censors because it displayed a close up of a woman pouring poison into her husband’s bottle of champagne, and they demanded it be cut from the film “lest it incite real life crimes of a similar nature” (Skal, 1993:172). Similarly, in *Mystery of the Wax Museum* (1932) the New York authorities imposed cuts on a scene in which “a character [lights] a piece of paper with a cigar in preparation to burn

the museum for its insurance money" (Skal, 1993:172). Finally, horror and crime comics of the fifties were deplored for "introduc[ing] the element of pleasure into violence"; unlike the "comics which charmed [the] childhood[s] [of past generations, which] did nothing but good to those who read them", critics accused these publications of "encourag[ing] sadism" and juvenile delinquency (Edelman, 2012 [1952]).

The controversy that led to the moral panic about the video nasties clearly conforms to an ongoing, cyclic trend, "fitting a pattern that can be traced back through campaigns against comics books and cheap paperbacks in the 1950s, Hollywood gangster and horror films in the 1930s, and the Penny Dreadfuls and Penny Theatres of the Victorian era" (See:33), each of which "inspired a clampdown of some form or a complete ban, the primary motivation of which was always cited as being the protection of juveniles" (See:33). The very fact that commentators during this period stressed what they perceived as a radical discontinuity between old, 'safe' horror – the decorous "spine-chillers in a tradition that stretches back to Conan Doyle and Edgar Allan Poe<sup>27</sup>" – versus this new wave of "nasties [which they deemed to be] far removed from traditional suspense and horror films" (*Seduction*:8), closely parallels criticisms made about the dethroned 'nasties' that appalled previous eras.

As Julian Petley notes in his analysis of historical and contemporary discourse about media effects, just as the youth of each era is judged by its elders to be peculiarly disreputable, more feckless, cosseted and disrespectful than any earlier generation, so certain elements of its media tend to be identified as posing an unprecedented threat to the cultural order, acting to foment social unrest and juvenile delinquency. While this fact does not in itself discredit the claim that violent media could exert culturally/ morally-deleterious effects – it is possible that societies might be ever-lamenting various phenomena because they are legitimately objectionable – this pattern of recurrence does seem to belie many effect-theorists' claim that current levels of media violence represent a completely novel, and uniquely perilous, departure from previous cultural norms.

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<sup>27</sup> 30<sup>th</sup> May 1983 the *Daily Mail* (*Seduction*:8)

In other words, it is would-be censors' damaging historical myopia, their ignorance of this recurring phenomenon, that leads them to drastically overestimate the dangers of new cultural forms. As Petley and Barker point out, the past crises about media that have been obliquely discredited by their subjects' uneventful demise/absorption into the mainstream "fade into history" (Barker, 1997:26). This results in persistent misapprehensions about the comparative virulence of one's own era's entertainments. It is possible for mainstream papers unselfconsciously to claim that "the traditional horror film did not encourage imitation [while] the modern slasher and gang-rapist films [...] rape the imagination and [engender] copycat crimes"<sup>28</sup> only because they lack crucial context for their view of modern media as uniquely violent, corrupting and perilous to society.

As research on the long history of moral panics about violent media (and the striking lack of any observable surges in copycat crimes) demonstrates, the recurrence and obvious resonance of this spectre does not reflect any dramatic empirical discoveries about the emotional/behavioural effects of our engagement with fictions. Nor yet do panics about unprecedentedly violent media necessarily correspond to any radical increase in media violence. Rather, I would argue that horror (and other narrative genres characterised by their violent/aversive content) is so often construed as morally problematic because of the ways in which it is *philosophically* problematic.

Descriptions of the undesirable audience, the audience who consumes violent media in what then-secretary of the British Board of Film Censors termed "the wrong way" (*Seduction*:8) betray a pervasive anxiety about the dangers of insufficiently or incorrectly civilised human nature. Graham Murdock argues that, despite its continued inability to provide compelling evidence of harm, the "banal science" of the "dominant 'effects' tradition [that seeks to demonstrate a causal connection between viewing violent media and becoming desensitised to real life violence or behaving more aggressively] has proved so resilient partly because it chimes with a deeply rooted formation of social fear" (Murdock, 1997:83). The very premise of censorship presupposes the division between an impervious 'us' and a suggestible 'them': "as Horace Kallen [observed of censorship of Hollywood

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<sup>28</sup> October 27<sup>th</sup> 1993 the *Times* (*Seduction*:71)

films in the 1930s] ‘When a censor proclaims that a state of danger has been created by... a motion picture... whose is the danger? His own? Never’ (Murdock, 1997:83). Murdock’s argument (as it is framed here) is flawed, since his ideological opponents could simply note that there are cases where we recognise as unproblematic the need for qualified individuals to peruse materials that are off-limits to the general population. Indeed, in the case of experts whose job involves researching child pornography, their presumed lack of enjoyment of what they are looking at is far from unimportant: it is hardly contentious to note that those with the most interest in viewing such images are the least ‘qualified’ to do so, the most likely to be susceptible to any dangerous influence or messages. So by analogy could film censors be immune to any corrupting effects precisely because of their distaste for what they are watching, unlike those audience members who seek out violent entertainments of their own volition (who surely, according to the reasoning of those opposed to violent media, are more predisposed than most to violence already)?

Barker advances a more plausible variation of Murdock’s anti-censorship argument, suggesting that the dominant effects-model is predicated upon the (illegitimate) assumption that the researchers themselves are superior to, or at least different from, the subjects they study for signs of media-induced aggression. While the researchers’ work “brings them into regular contact with the supposedly corrupting material [...] they] are unconcerned for their own well-being as they implicitly ‘know’ that the effects could only be on others” (Gauntlett, 2005:61). In fact, as Gauntlett states, this division between a responsible, known ‘us’ and a shadowy, unspecified ‘them’ seems to be central to common sense thinking about the risks of media violence – “surveys typically show that whilst a certain proportion of the public feel that the media may cause other people to engage in antisocial behaviour, almost no-one ever says that they have been affected in that way themselves” (Gauntlett, 2005:61)

Of course, this fact, while suggestive does not constitute an unassailable rebuttal of the researchers’ claims. It is similarly true that, while most of us accept in principle that social conditioning and cultural norms shape human behaviour and personality, we can often be highly resistant to viewing our own lives through such an impersonal and deterministic

lens. It might therefore be the case that, prone though we are to believe ourselves to be especially insulated against adverse media influences, we are *all* affected negatively, with some vulnerable outliers exhibiting even stronger effects than the rest of us.

However, given that effects-researchers' experiments are often structured in such a way that a single dose of media violence is administered to randomly sampled and developmentally typical subjects who are then tested for aggressive or antisocial behaviours and attitudes, it does, as Gauntlett notes, seem that by their own logic the researchers in question should themselves be *more* vulnerable. If otherwise typical subjects' short term behaviours are perceptibly altered by a single exposure then those researchers who are in regular proximity should surely display an even more noticeable shift in behaviour or attitudes. The next chapter will discuss how this flaw in effects researchers' reasoning is reproduced in their problematic attribution of behaviours more consistent with short-term arousal to social learning/modelling.

This implicit double-standard is, paradoxically, particularly evident in discussions of the moral danger of works that have some claim to being art (in the evaluative sense) as opposed to merely entertainment. Even as opponents concede that enlightened readers may be able to discern and appreciate the aesthetic qualities of provocative works such as *A Clockwork Orange* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover* they argue that the masses cannot read in a similarly critical fashion, must instead be stuck at surface level, remaining passively transfixed by a text's sensational subject matter rather than engaging with its haunting themes or satirical insights. Thus any interest such individuals evince in violent or disturbing narratives is immediately rendered suspect.

This "bifocal vision" (Murdock, 1997:84) remains surprisingly evident across historical, recent and contemporary discussion of contentious works and genres. While this view may be most perfectly and notoriously encapsulated by the prosecution's question in the 1960 *Lady Chatterley* trial – "Is it a book that you would [...] wish your wife or your servants to read?" – in a 1993 edition of the *Independent* Bryan Appleyard unwittingly echoed the lamentations made thirty (or 130) years earlier. Appleyard argued that the putative laxity

of film censorship in Britain results not just in the free availability of “vicious drivel for the masses [...but] unarguably fine films such as *Taxi Driver* and *Goodfellas*, which, if you are honest, you would rather were not watched by certain types of people” (Petley, 1997:97). Equally, during the video nasties panic of the mid-eighties Ken Penry (then deputy director of the BBFC) remarked that that “now and again, you get clever dicks who say [of violent horror films] ‘Ah, this is art, this is bigger than it seems.’ But I think of Joe Bloggs who’s going to the Odeon on a Saturday night who’s not on that wavelength. He’s going along seeing it literally, and I always keep that in mind. Joe Bloggs is the majority and film censorship is for the majority” (Petley, 1997:94). Strikingly, Appleyard and Penry do not view those likely to be affected adversely by violent films as an anomalous minority whose responses must nonetheless be taken into account (a possibility I briefly discuss in the next section of this chapter), rather, they view certain works as intrinsically unfit for mass consumption.

John Springhall and David Buckingham also emphasise the continuities between moral panics elicited by “fears of new technology interacting with revised forms of popular culture” (Springhall, 1998:157), pointing out the ways in which new or newly popular media are repeatedly framed as uniquely dangerous, utterly divorced from the ‘safe’ media of the past. Springhall argues that modern fears about the moral threat posed by, for example, gangsta rap and video games, “have their roots in nineteenth century anxieties about the ‘ill effects’ of popular forms of amusement on the ‘children of the lower classes’” (Springhall, 1998:2), particularly emphasising the paedophbic overtones of many moral panics. However, like Barker and Buckingham, he attributes adult disapproval of youth-oriented and populist media as being, in part, due to a pervasive cultural *idealisation* of childhood.

Insofar as “‘childhood’ equals hope for the future” (Barker & Petley, 1997:6), acting as the repository of our own aspirations, we are heavily invested in preserving (the myth of) children’s innocence. As Buckingham argues, the combination of children and modern culture/novel technologies is “bound to invoke profound concerns about the continuity of the social order and of *fundamental human values* [my italics]” (Buckingham, 1997:32) If,

as in the common sense intuitions cited by many critics of popular media, violent/sensational popular fictions are pleasurable because they enact our darkest desires, their ubiquity, and particularly their consumption by children, is profoundly discomforting, appearing to indicate that sadism is not inculcated but inborn. By decrying violent narratives and striving to limit their availability, by framing their popularity as a novel, and unnatural, state of affairs and, above all, by charging the mass media with indoctrination of an ultimately passive and undiscerning youth audience, public figures could be seen to be attempting to defuse and contain the *ideological* threat posed by violent media. According to such a reading, moral panics about the corrupting effects of various media can be seen to reflect a kind of paradoxical utopianism, operating to defend the belief that humankind is perfectible against the (perceived) counter-evidence constituted by our attraction to violent fictions.

#### **1.4 Video Nasties, Misery-Lit and other Despised Genres**

Horror is actually just one among a number of disreputable, low-brow genres that is frequently invoked in connection with pornography, popularly viewed as a means of gratifying primitive appetites. While horror's lurid and often patently fantastical violence renders it particularly vulnerable to this type of critique, a similar cultural unease lingers around other populist media defined by their preoccupation with human torment. Significantly, such misgivings also attach themselves to those narratives/genres where the suffering in question is largely psychological or unlikely to spark imitative acts. The semi-recent boom in popularity of 'misery lit' or 'misery porn' saw a spate of articles expressing consternation about the appeal of the trend, and what it implies about its voracious readers. Vocal critics of the genre, such as Carol Sarler, accused readers of being "in thrall to paedophilia [...and vicariously] wallowing in the muck of it" through the medium of these texts (Sarler, 2008). Significantly, Sarler concedes that "the majority of the purchasers of such books [would not themselves be] able, willing or prepared to damage a child", but maintains that "for an adult reader to enjoy any kind of frisson [...] from the suffering endured by the authors of these memoirs is abhorrent" (Sarler, 2008).

Another critic from within the publishing industry, Danuta Kean, equated the publication of memoirs of sexual abuse with an “emotional striptease”, arguing that the “vivid”, “explicit” level of detail provided risks teetering into titillation (Kean, 2007). Kean decried readers’ eagerness to “revel in the pornography of misery” (Kean, 2007). The genre united the *Guardian* and the *Daily Mail* in shared disapprobation, with writers from each publication describing such books as “distasteful” and worryingly “titillating” (Kean, 2007), “bacteria”- like in their virulent “infect[ion] of the bestseller charts” (Addley, 2007). Tim Adams queried why we are “so addicted to other people’s agony”, again highlighting the degree of “minutely described [...] stark, compendious detail” (Adams, 2006) in which abuse is described. Esther Addley also questioned why it is, given that these books are “rarely mediated by much literary merit”, that people are so quick to “whisk [...] such tales off the shelves”, speculating that some element of “prurience, or worse,” (Addley, 2007) must play a role in this genre’s popularity. Notably, as with the video nasties, the fact that such narratives are defiantly lowbrow and populist, sold, as critics repeatedly noted, in “stacks in the aisles [of] supermarket[s]” (Kean, 2007), renders them intrinsically suspect. The set of tacit assumptions that form the fantasy model dictate that we select non-literary texts for their easy pleasures; had we wished to be in any way challenged or provoked we would not have chosen to immerse ourselves in “parodically named”, mass market paperbacks known for their reliably leaden prose and bathetic cover images of pretty, “saucer-eyed” (Addley, 2007) child victims. Instead, the consumers of such texts must be “pander[ing] to their baser voyeuristic instincts” (Mangan, 2010) or seeking the thrill of ‘sudden glory’ that attends the appreciation of one’s good fortune in comparison to another.

In summation, I would argue that much of the popular concern about misery memoirs was not based in any posited causal relationship between actual wrong-doing and the enjoyment of sad memoirs, but in a non-consequentialist moral revulsion at the insatiable avidity with which its readers appear to regard human suffering. Populist narratives that, like the misery memoir or ‘shock doc’, foreground and detail suffering, and apparently do so with the end of pleasantly diverting the reader, are regarded by their critics as morally repugnant, indulging readers’ vicarious sadism. As I will argue in a later chapter, this

(mis)characterisation of the emotions afforded by narratives that are based around violence or suffering, or indeed, depict undesirable acts of any kind, as uncomplicatedly *pleasant* or positive, falsifies the nature of such narratives’ – bittersweet – pleasures. Certainly, it is possible to be *compelled* by a tragic or otherwise upsetting narrative without deriving any sort of clearly discernible *enjoyment* from one’s engagement with the text – rather, one can be gripped by a queasy, sweaty-palmed fascination, a compulsion to read on and determine what happens next, that cannot properly be characterised as either strictly pleasurable or displeasurable so much as intensely arresting.

### **1.5 ‘I Know Very Well What They Are’: Common Sense and the Philosophy of Horror**

In June 1983, Mary Whitehouse asked the DPP to prevent the documentary *A Gentleman’s Agreement* from airing “on the grounds that it contain[ed] excerpts from the convicted videos *S.S Experiment Camp* and *I Spit on Your Grave*” (*Seduction*:20). While Whitehouse admitted that she had not actually viewed the offending programme (or indeed the now-censored films from which the clips had been excerpted) she maintained that “it really would not have made the slightest difference, because I know very well what they are” (*Seduction*:20). While many more moderate, mainstream critics of media violence might chafe at being compared to Whitehouse, I would argue that her statement here reflects in microcosm the reasoning behind the video nasties panic in particular, and indeed, much anti-horror/anti-media violence sentiment in general: according to such a view, “there are ‘bad materials’ out there, and we only have to look to know that they are bad” (Barker, 1997:17) (although dangerous others will find them positively enticing).

As David Mellor stated after viewing the notorious ‘mondo’ film *Faces of Death*: “I found it particularly offensive and revolting as did everyone else who saw it [...] it was a disgusting film *plainly intended to stimulate particularly base and deplorable instincts* [my italics]” (Barker, 1984:22). The “reasonable person” (*Seduction*:20) standard relies upon a shared view of what is plain, what is self-evident, and this common sense view is inherently selective about what constitutes evidence of a narrative’s harmfulness and what

is merely happenstance. It is obvious that someone who views a horror film (or even an unassuming sex comedy like *Confessions of a Window Cleaner*<sup>29</sup>) and goes on to rape or murder someone might have been adversely influenced while, in the (perhaps more representative) case of a father who murdered his infant daughter as a religious “sacrifice” (Barker, 1997:15) after viewing a film about the life of Christ, no newspapers recounting the event thought to trace any causal link back to his viewing habits. The narratives mobilised in response to, for example, the suggested link between *Child’s Play 3* and the Bulger and Capper murders, simply *fit* such cases, resonating with many people’s common-sense assumptions about the appeal of violent media. On the other hand, instances such as the adolescent boy who committed suicide in order to become a Lion King,<sup>30</sup> or Fred West’s improbable affection for Disney videos, do not possess the same aura of significance, of explanatory power.

As I discussed in the first section of this chapter, the 1994 Newson report about the effects of violent media on children exemplifies the intractability of this sort of reasoning, serving as a “classic case of ‘common sense writ large’” (Barker, 1997:12). Similarly, despite the refutation of claims that *Child’s Play 3* played a role in various high profile murders, no retractions were issued in the newspapers responsible for promoting the charges, many of which still allude to the discredited connection to this day<sup>31</sup>. Barker cites such erroneous but enduring associations as emblematic of the way that “quick-fix explanations that seem to ‘make sense’” (Barker, 1997:14) linger in the collective imagination, even when such explanations are lacking in evidential support, or have been debunked outright.

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<sup>29</sup> In 1983 a 16-year-old being tried in juvenile court for attempted rape cited the film as an inspiration: “I watched the film and then went out because I wanted to have sex with a girl.” (*Seduction*:19)

<sup>30</sup> In fact, the link in this case was, unlike the vast majority of crimes attributed to video nasties, quite well founded (although, as in the case of those claiming that viewing violent films provoked their crimes, it is debatable to what extent it can really be said to have induced the subject to act): the fourteen year old had been fixated by *The Lion King*, and left a suicide note that explicitly cited the film as the inspiration for his act: “I killed myself because I wanted to become a Lion King” (*Seduction*:92).

<sup>31</sup> For example, this recent article in the Sun perpetuates the notion that there was a connection between *Child’s Play 3* and the Bulger and Capper murders: “James Bulger’s killers Robert Thompson and Jon Venables were fans of *Child’s Play 3* [...] The same year gang victim Suzanne Capper, 16, was also taunted with lines from the film as she was murdered”. (Lowe, 2009)

It is perhaps hardly surprising that mainstream discourse about violent media/narratives with aversive content should be pervaded with ungrounded assertions and appeals to self-evidence. However, the series of assumptions that structure anti-horror arguments are equally discernible even in many of the counter-discourses designed to defend, or make comprehensible, horror's attractions.

As Steven Jay Schneider notes “there is no dearth of scholarship on cinematic horror”, indeed, he acerbically argues, the (fittingly) monstrous proliferation of writing about horror in recent years suggests that “the horror film’s oft-noted propensity for redundancy, sequelization, and overkill has found its non-fictional correlates in the world of academia” (Schneider, 2004:131). Yet, as Matt Hills asserts, much contemporary writing on horror still retains a curiously defensive tone, having, he suggests, “unwittingly adopted media discourses surrounding horror via its willingness to view horror’s pleasures as a puzzle, conundrum or ‘problem’” (Hills, 2005:3). If mainstream, common sense views of the genre all too often characterise its pleasures as aberrant, it is a symbolic equation that persists even in many sympathetic studies of horror. (That it should do so to an extent is unsurprising given the pervasive cultural antipathy towards horror, an antipathy that is not, as one might think, restricted to “UK newspapers participating in moral panics” (Hills, 2005:4) but also emerges in an academic contexts).<sup>32</sup> Horror remains, in a sense, perpetually on trial, the counter-discourses constructed by ostensibly pro-horror writers reproducing problematic mainstream assumptions even as they attempt to defend against them.

In his study of the horror genre (*Dreadful Pleasures*) James Twitchell argues that horror narratives serve as “formulaic rituals coded with precise social information” (Twitchell, 1985:7), crypto-conservative fables of sexual identity evolved to induct adolescents into

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<sup>32</sup> For example, “moral philosopher Colin McGinn has argued that sympathetic pain (at another’s suffering) can be replaced by pleasure taken in the other’s pain if an ‘association’ is set up between ‘the pleasure of entertainment’ and the witnessing of suffering” (Hills, 2005:4). Even within the field of aesthetics (which one might have thought would be more congenial to non-literalist readings of the pleasures of horror) many hold stern views on horror: in Susan Feagin’s essay ‘The Pleasures of Tragedy’, in which she argues for the morally beneficent properties of tragic narratives, she discusses the related genre under the unpromising subheading of ‘Immoral Art’, attributing the attraction of slasher films such as *Halloween* to a misogynistic audience’s desire to vicariously experience, and collude in, the actions of a gynocidal maniac.

reproductive maturity and warn them away from non- or mis-procreative sexual practices such as onanism and incest. Twitchell certainly takes as his study's starting point the common sense viewpoint that horror's pleasures are anomalous, indicative of some psychological peculiarity on the part of its audience; horror's hold on its audience is, he asserts, not "artistic" but "psychological" (Twitchell, 1985:127), as inadvertently revealing as one's response to a Rorschach inkblot. Twitchell depicts an attraction to the horror genre as both formatively essential and essentially juvenile, a phase through which one must necessarily pass and slough off upon reaching maturity: "If you think back you will probably recall with amazing clarity the first instance where you were shocked by horror images, and then, after a few years you ceased to be frightened and turned to other sights, other myths [...] But you were; in fact there was a time in your life when you were probably fascinated by them [although] it may be a little shameful to admit" (Twitchell, 1985:66-67). Horror is, in Twitchell's estimation, child's play, fairy tales for the pubescent which, in place of the younger child's fear of parental abandonment, deal with adolescents' anxiety about their newly burgeoning sexuality, inculcating in them the sexual norms and taboos of their society.

Those who persist in consuming horror post-adolescence, the solitary 'rogue males' who, Twitchell asserts, lurk at the back of the theatre like "sour Humbert Humberts" (Twitchell, 1985:69) are judged in a rather less indulgent light. Twitchell argues that they are "not there to be frightened but to participate" (Twitchell, 1989:69), ascribing to them a sadistic desire to punish sexually active young women – "the older males mutter [encouragement to the antagonist] 'yeah, get her, get even, knife her, punish her!' – everything but what they may really be thinking, which is rape her! Rape her!'" (Twitchell, 1985:70) Like those mainstream critics of horror who routinely collapse together the real and the fictional, so that pleasure derived from ersatz violence becomes indistinguishable from pleasure derived from real violence, Twitchell presents an ongoing attraction to horror as the result of sadism and sexual neuroses, perpetuating the common sense perception of lifetime horror fans as maladjusted loners and oddballs.

If horror's audience amounts to a crowd of conflicted voyeurs, both titillated and repelled by the sexual fantasies/cautionary tales played out before them then its creators become unwitting exhibitionists. Twitchell interprets the self-deprecating utterances of many horror authors about their chosen genre – “where academic practitioners like Le Fanu, M.R James, Blackwood and the rest are downright apologetic about manipulating ‘those devices’ and ‘that claptrap’” (Twitchell, 1985:74) – as betraying an uneasy consciousness that “he knows that he is doing something in public that is really rather private” (Twitchell, 1985:74).

Through such a reading authorship too becomes a form of (implicitly sexualised) self exposure, the indiscreet outpourings of a troubled unconsciousness. Although Twitchell's analysis of the horror genre is not, for the most part, overtly antagonistic it certainly reproduces troubling common sense assumptions about the aberrance of its devotees and in places perpetuates the crude elision of fantasy and reality that contributes to much of the mainstream hostility against the genre.

In *Savage Pastimes*, Harold Schechter undertakes a detailed study of the history (and historical ubiquity) of violent media, including the horror genre, in order to challenge one common-sense assumption – the view that contemporary entertainment media are suffused with unprecedented levels of violence (and, concomitantly, the notion that modern society is infinitely more perilous than the idealised past against whose wholesome, pro-social media our own are unfavourably juxtaposed). However, despite working to counteract certain claims of critics of violent narratives, Schechter implicitly replicates, and reinforces, another central assumption that, as I have argued, lies behind much of the antipathy towards media violence in general and horror in particular: the notion that violent narratives flourish because they speak to some primitive craving for bloodshed, that our narrative preferences necessarily mirror our real life desires. I will discuss Schechter's reasoning – and unexamined assumptions – at length since his work acts in many ways as an expanded, more thorough-going iteration of an argument often employed in defence of violent media: that by emotionally engaging with fictive violence we are somehow purged of our antecedent aggressive impulses.

Since, Schechter argues, his survey of violent media throughout history demonstrates that “explicit violence has always been an integral feature of popular culture [... it follows that] there is only one conclusion to be drawn from this fact – namely, that one of the main functions of the popular arts is precisely to provide us with fantasies of violence, to allow us to vent – safely, in a controlled, socially acceptable, vicarious way – those ‘undying primal impulses which, however outmoded by civilisation, need somehow to be expressed’” (Savage:136). Schechter, like King and many other critics who defend horror/fictive violence on the grounds that it affords us some kind of catharsis, retains the premise central to his opponents’ critique of media violence – that fictions, and particularly low-brow or popular fictions, primarily depict events and situations that their audiences desire to enact, granting audience members licence to satisfy their darker appetites in a consequence-free fashion – while rejecting their accompanying conclusion that such fictions are morally pernicious and should be discouraged or suppressed. I would argue that by founding their arguments on this imported – and unexamined – equation of fictions with fantasies, by solving the paradox of horror (or, more generally, of narratives with aversive subject matter) in the same way as their ideological opponents, proponents of this variation of the purgation/catharsis theory render their arguments vulnerable to the same criticisms.

For example, Schechter argues that the historical omnipresence (and perennial popularity) of violent narratives indicates that media violence serves a necessary function, acting as some sort of pressure valve for our atavistic, antisocial instincts. However, just as moral guardians’ insistence that contemporary media are unprecedently violent and responsible for a dramatic (or impending dramatic) increase in crime is problematised by the aforementioned availability of equally violent media in the idealised past, so Schechter’s assertion here jars with his own historical analysis. As Schechter himself notes, while our fictions may be more *convincingly* grisly than those devoured by past audiences, it is because of our access to more technologically sophisticated special effects; in terms of inventive/excessive narrative cruelty we rival, rather than outstrip, the pop culture of the past. If media violence does indeed act as a proxy for real life violence, if it satisfies, and

so defuses, our aggressive impulses, it seems hard to account for the ubiquity of similarly violent media in times when the violent or ‘bad death’ that fictions obsessively recreate was far less removed from the average person’s real life experience.

Similarly, Schechter shares such critics’ view that populist entertainment acts, by its very nature, as a form of wish-fulfilment, arguing that “pop fantasy [including non-violent genres such as the romance...] celebrates all kinds of taboo behaviour” (*Savage*:11). Unbound by the aesthetic concerns of more self-consciously artistic genres, populist media are pleasurable by virtue of the fact that they are utterly servile to our repressed desires, our unacceptable appetites, devoted to “feed[ing] our less decorous selves” (*Savage*:11). For this reason, he views alternative explanations as to violent media’s popularity as a “form of denial” (*Savage*:7), bad-faith attempts to disavow our aggressive impulses, our discomforting fascination with violence. This reductive view of violent media’s pleasures, and scepticism about any alternative explanation of its attractions, permeates his analysis of the historical texts he discusses.

Since violence/suffering is so clearly the ‘point’ of the popular media he analyses, the pivot on which the narratives turn, Schechter is dismissive of (what he perceives as) any superfluous moralistic or thematic trappings that seem designed to obfuscate this basic function, ascribing such efforts solely to cynical paratextual concerns such as the desire to evade censure: “these crudely printed publications [detailing sensational trials in the mid-nineteenth century] adopted the traditional pose of piety, presenting themselves as morally edifying works, complete with ‘long warnings about God’s anger against criminals and man’s need to beg forgiveness in the face of divine wrath’” (*Savage*:61). His normative account of violent narratives’ pleasures reflects, if in a negative/inverted form, the comments made by many of those calling for their censorship, who are highly resistant to any alternative readings of what violent texts ‘mean’, what feelings they are destined to provoke. Just as, during the 1980s video-nasties moral panic Roger Scruton described the pro-nuclear disarmament polemic *The Day After* as a “particularly disgusting video nasty”, castigating it for being both morbid and (insincerely) sanctimonious, “larded with

moralising cant" (Barker, 1984:14), so Schechter figures violent narratives with artistic or moral aspirations as essentially inauthentic.<sup>33</sup>

Schechter is equally cynical about the true allure of more 'literary' treatments of violent or disturbing subject matter, arguing that "great literature offers something besides Beauty and Truth – [also providing] an escape into realms of forbidden experience" (*Savage*:7). He cites Edgar Allan Poe's continuing popularity – particularly compared to other notable, and arguably more deserving, authors from the same period – as an illustration of our underlying inclinations: "of all the great American writers of the mid-nineteenth century, Poe is far and away the most widely read by modern audiences, and it's definitely not the 'formal felicities' of his writing [...] that accounts for his appeal [...] There's only one explanation for this state of affairs: the over the top, sadistic violence of his most famous tales" (*Savage*:7). Schechter suggests that those attributing Poe's popularity to other aspects of his storytelling are engaging in a form of denial, "invoking the talismanic word 'art'" (*Savage*:7) in order to obscure their real motivations. He rejects other standard solutions to the paradox of horror/tragedy, including the doctrine of catharsis-as-clarification, arguing that "the only moral to be gleaned from a story like 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is the inadvisability of entombing your sister alive" (*Savage*:7).

In fact, I would argue that populist fictions, including those whose appeal could be said to reside in their ability to act as a form of wish-fulfilment, frequently set out to deny and frustrate audience members' desires for as much of the narrative as possible. As I suggest in my later discussion of adaptationist views of fiction, since conflict generates story, narrative impetus tends to ebb once characters attain their goals. Even in the genre that is arguably most premised upon a hedonistic identification with the protagonist's desires – the romance – authors invariably litter obstacles along the characters' path to blissful union. Insofar as narrative dynamism (and unsatisfied romantic longing, the genre's emotional 'hook') necessitates the depiction of a problematic state of affairs, there can be

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<sup>33</sup> As I will argue in further detail during my chapter relating the pleasures of horror to those of tragedy and the sublime, Schechter and many critics of violent media succumb to the same fallacy in their thinking about (particularly populist/low brow) fictive violence/suffering: they share the assumption that narrative pleasure is essentially uncomplicated and unambivalent, that if one enjoys a text it is because fulfils and reflects, rather than thwarts or transgresses, one's desires and values.

no uncomplicated conflation of the audience's interests with the protagonist's, or of an audience member's real life and narrative desires: romantic fictions teem with antagonistic, sparring couples, doomed lovers and infidelity, among other situations most of us recognise to be undesirable in reality but appealing in fictions.

The theories of horror's appeal formulated by theorists such as Twitchell, King and Schechter manage to serve both as a corrective to mainstream perceptions of horror – a direct inversion of that still-popular view of horror as a source of moral contagion – while paradoxically also affirming horror's status as the product of regrettable human drives. Schechter and King's (familiarly literalist) equation of fictional and real violence positions horror as necessary but ultimately ignoble. While none of these theorists depict an enjoyment of horror as inherently pathological they reproduce, to a surprising extent, mainstream assumptions about the psychological derivation of horror's appeal.

## Conclusion

Horror, like tragedy, poses a paradox. In contrast to the sunny, readily comprehensible pleasures afforded by genres such as the comedy or the romance, horror's appeal is initially obscure. Insofar as violence/suffering is the point of horror, the organising principle of an otherwise heterogeneous genre, it is perhaps inevitable that many interpret the horror genre as essentially sadistic, by definition entailing that its audience wittingly seek out, and derive pleasure from, others' pain.

Despite the extravagant claims made by horror's more vehement critics, there exists no compelling empirical evidence of any clear, causal relationship between the consumption of violent media and the committing of violent acts, let alone of the direct, almost coercive model of media effects promulgated at the height of the video nasties panic. Rather, I would argue that the (self-) evidence of horror's perniciousness does not reside in any readily determinable external harms; where it is reviled it is reviled, first and foremost, because of the ways in which it appears to be a product of humanity's darker appetites, indicative of some essential malignancy of the human heart.

As Susan Sontag notes, depictions of human suffering are intrinsically charged, often making conflicted voyeurs of us, because they extend an implicit challenge to prospective viewers – “invit[ing] us to be either spectators or cowards, unable to look” (Sontag, 2003:38). Yet even as they command our attention, such images provoke a powerful unease. Because they are “circulated so diversely [...we know that] there is no way to guarantee [that pictures are seen in properly] reverential [viewing] conditions” (Sontag, 2003: 108). Stripped from their original context, such ‘orphaned’ images might be received in any number of ways, viewed in an unsuitably prurient or salacious manner.

Although Sontag is specifically discussing photographic depictions of real life suffering, her description of the tensions such images arouse in viewers, her evocation of what might loosely be termed the ethics of representation, is equally applicable to our relationship with non-visual media and with known fictions. Violent or otherwise distressing images and narratives inspire disquiet about the reactions of unknown others for the same reason they elicit our attentional and emotional engagement in the first place: they touch upon basic human issues, primitively, reflexively compelling insofar as they appeal to our craving for certain kinds of information. In short, other people’s responses matter to us because such issues matter to us; the cultural anxiety about people deriving pleasure from violent media stems from a more general concern about our inability to anticipate or influence people’s interpretations of (or reactions to) critical subjects. The desire to monitor, control or even restrict other people’s access to potentially volatile material periodically erupts into moral panics about reviled genres – such as horror – whose appeal can be cast as morally problematic.

In other words, horror is not reviled solely, or even primarily because of “what [it] *does*, [but because of] what it *is*” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009 [1994]:45). Like those anti-pornography feminists who view pornography as a kind of secular “blasphemy” (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009 [1994]:45), an affront against women whose very existence constitutes an act of rhetorical violence, irrespective of what dark deeds it might inspire in its audience, I would contend that horror is similarly felt by its most persistent critics to be

inherently, rather than consequentially, wrong, that it provokes uneasiness because of what it says (or is believed to say) about human nature rather than owing to any concrete harms it might conceivably cause. While this point might seem initially contentious it is, I would maintain, congruent with cultural anxiety about other forms of entertainment that foreground suffering – such as the ‘misery memoirs’ mentioned earlier in the chapter – without being contingent upon similar claims of harm. Articles about the consumption of ‘misery-lit’ unambiguously display a non-consequentialist moral discomfort with the idea of suffering-as-entertainment, while utilising otherwise eerily similar language and tropes as those employed by horror’s critics.

## Chapter 2: The Case Against Horror

### Introduction

As I argued in the previous chapter, horror remains a peculiarly disreputable genre, in large part because it is – axiomatically – concerned with fear, pain and violence. In this chapter I will address one potentially damaging counter-argument to my contention that horror is reviled primarily for its *affects*, the ostensible implications its popularity holds for human nature, assessing the validity of claims about the morally questionable appeal and effects of media violence. I will address two strands of the research concerning media violence – first concentrating upon the more overtly politicised question of simulated violence’s effect upon its audience, and, in my next chapter, examining various theories about what it is that attracts people to violent media, in particular querying whether there exist neutral, or even benign explanations for why people might find simulated violence appealing.

The precise model of media effects that I am interrogating is the hypothesis that violent “mass media will commonly have direct and reasonably predictable [negative] effects” (Gauntlett, 2005:55) on a significant percentage of those exposed to them; that simulated violence is criminogenic, awakening (or intensifying) sadistic urges, desensitising people to real life violence, and ‘modelling’ or normalising the use of force so that frequent viewers are more likely to behave in a violent fashion in their everyday lives. To question this model does not entail that one must deny all media effects, however, or view audience members as impervious, immaculately media-savvy monads. Indeed, even the most vociferous critics of mainstream effects-research accept that our interactions with various media can have all sorts of effects on our lives, both negative and positive – alerting us to important events and phenomena, shaping public opinion, sparking trends and introducing us to new ideas and interests. In fact, in the final section of this chapter I will address what might be termed the ideological dangers of violent media, assessing whether *certain kinds* of violent representations might work to contribute to a sense of individual disempowerment or to legitimise state violence and punitive ‘law and order’ politics. However, I will reject the notion that media violence in itself constitutes a meaningful

category which can coherently be judged to be dangerous or morally infective, as well as the claim that there is a wealth of research that overwhelmingly supports this characterisation of violent media.

In this chapter I will review the corpus of empirical research devised to test the effects model, paying particular attention to those trends and experiments that are commonly adduced as staunch evidence for the causal hypothesis. Just as, in the previous chapter, I interrogated the assumptions on which this research is premised, throughout this chapter I will evaluate the design and execution of notable studies and experiments. I will also emphasise that – contrary to the hyperbolic claims of effects proponents such as Brad Bushman or Craig Anderson – far from yielding unanimous and strongly affirmative conclusions, this research in fact generates a significant proportion of mixed or non-supportive results. I will not assess such studies, since their results do not impinge upon my central thesis. However, given this omission, it is important to note that, as effects sceptics like Jonathan Freedman, Christopher Ferguson and John Kilburn point out, those studies which contradict or offer no support for the effects model employ, on average, larger sample sizes and more reliable and standardised measures of aggression than those that yield positive results. Throughout my own discussion of these studies, I will refer frequently to meta-analyses and reviews conducted by theorists critical of the view that media violence reliably inspires imitative violence and aggression, particularly drawing upon Freedman's detailed summary and critique of the existing research on media's influence on aggression.

Popular discourse about the public health risks of media violence tends to be dominated by vivid, emotionally-compelling and, crucially, *memorable* narratives. Many more of us are familiar with the image of the Columbine killers as friendless, trench-coated outcasts operating under the malign influence of Marilyn Manson, *The Basketball Diaries* and *Doom* than the more mundane reality – that Harris and Klebold in fact both enjoyed middling popularity, that they had never been members of the 'Trenchcoat Mafia' and that the boys, particularly Harris, were more infatuated with Nazi Germany than any contemporary cultural phenomenon. Equally, as I discussed in depth in the previous

chapter, the Bulger and Capper murders remain linked in the public imagination to the unremarkable horror sequel *Child's Play 3* despite the utter lack of evidence that the film played a role in either crime.

While scholarly proponents of the causal hypothesis tend to eschew the simplistic, anecdote-based mode of analysis employed in mainstream discussions of media violence, many of their public proclamations are nonetheless equally flamboyant and conspicuously lacking in evidential support<sup>34</sup>. As Jonathan Freedman points out, a “long list of prestigious scientific and medical organisations [including the American Psychiatric Association, the Canadian Psychological Association and the American Academy of Paediatrics] have said that the evidence is in and the question has been settled” (*Media*:8): media violence has conclusively been proven to increase aggression and/or inspire imitative violence, particularly in children.

For example, “the policy statement from the American Academy of Paediatricians published in 1999 [asserts that] ‘more than 1000 scientific studies and reviews conclude that significant exposure to media violence increases the risk of violent behaviour in certain children and adolescents’” (*Media*:9). A later statement from the same organisation, released in November 2001, claimed that over “3500 research studies have examined the association between media violence and violent behaviour [and] all but 18 have shown a positive relationship” (*Media*:9). The American Psychological Association, which takes an equally vehement stance against violent media, was comparatively restrained, citing mere “‘hundreds’” (*Media*:13) of studies. Nonetheless, they argue in various statements that “there is absolutely no doubt that higher levels of [media violence] are correlated with increased acceptance of aggressive attitudes and increased aggressive behaviour” (*Media*:13), claiming that affiliated groups had “reviewed [the existing research] to arrive at the irrefutable conclusion that viewing violence increases violence” (*Media*:13).

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<sup>34</sup> For example, the effects researchers Brad Bushman and Craig Anderson argue that the association between media violence and real life aggression is comparable to the correlation between smoking and lung cancer. As Ferguson and Kilburn point out in their meta-analysis of effects research, “by the most liberal estimates available ( $r^2 = .02$  compared with  $r^2 = .16$  for smoking/lung cancer), the effects seen for smoking and lung cancer are at least 8- times stronger than for media violence exposure [and imitative violence/aggression.] By using the more conservative figures of  $r=.9$  for smoking and lung cancer and  $r=.08$  for media violence exposure, that number is close to 135- times stronger.” (Ferguson and Kilburn, 2008:4)

Yet there is far less evidence to support such authoritative-sounding claims than these organisations' pronouncements at first suggest. First of all, it is impossible for the groups involved to have examined thousands of studies since, during his own analysis of the existing research, Freedman discovered that "there are not that many studies now [in 2002] and there were certainly not that many when [the excerpted] reviews were done" (*Media*:13). In fact, there are around "200 separate scientific studies that directly assess the effects of exposure to media violence on aggression and on desensitisation" (*Media*:24).<sup>35</sup> In their public pronouncements these organisations repeatedly appeal to an overwhelming critical consensus, arguing that such unanimity must surely compel us to recognise violent media's role in increasing aggressive behaviour and desensitising viewers. As I will argue throughout the course of this chapter, not only is there no decisive 'smoking gun' – with many of the studies frequently cited as such marred by significant methodological failings – but even the overall trends which moderate point to as evidence of violent media's harmfulness are in fact fairly weak and far from inexplicable by other means. According to the reviews and meta-analyses conducted by theorists such as Freedman, Cumberbatch, Ferguson and Kilburn the preponderance of studies in fact "show no ill effects of exposure to media violence [and] there is virtually no research showing that media violence desensitises people" (*Media*:10) to real life violence. Although vocal opponents of violent media employ analogies which suggest that the case is already closed, likening "the effects of video game violence on aggression [to those of] smoking [on] lung cancer [...] (Bushman & Anderson, 2001)" (Ferguson, 2011), the alleged perils of media violence actually remain highly contentious, with the body of effects research leaving considerably more room for alternative interpretations than such comparisons imply.

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<sup>35</sup> These inflated figures may have originated with the effects researcher John Murray, who, when associated with a 1982 review of television conducted by the National Institute of Mental Health, estimated that there were "approximately 2,500 publications of all kinds that were relevant to [the study, including] articles in the popular press and theoretical articles" (*Media*:24) and pertaining to all aspects of the review, rather than just the effects of television violence on aggression.

## 2.1 Laboratory Experiments

Of the eighty-seven laboratory experiments testing the causal hypothesis, it is arguable that “fewer than half” (*Media*:57) can be classified as supporting the contention that exposure to violent media increases aggression. As with the survey-based research designed to investigate whether there is an *association* between aggressive behaviour and media violence, these laboratory studies generated inconsistent results. However, while individual surveys differed greatly, with the observed correlations ranging from “strongly positive to essentially zero” (*Media*:42) even amidst a set of cross-national studies using consistent measures and methodology, the pattern of results as a whole indicated a positive correlation for some demographic groups (children under ten). In contrast, the laboratory experiments lacked any such overall trend.

In this section I will anatomise the ways in which these – already underwhelming – results are rendered dubious by certain endemic structural failings of laboratory-based effects research. The five main flaws I will discuss are:

- 1.) An overreliance on proxy measures of aggression
- 2.) A failure to control for general arousal
- 3.) A failure to replicate normal conditions of viewing
- 4.) A failure to take the sponsor effect/demand cues into account when interpreting subjects’ responses.
- 5.) Anomalous or expedient statistical measures

### 2.1.1 Questionable Analogues

Because, for obvious reasons, experimenters cannot encourage participants to engage in overtly hostile or violent behaviours, they often rely upon analogues or alternative measures designed to reflect any increase in aggression – such as recording subjects’ thoughts and associations after exposing them to a violent film. It is questionable how far such measures really approximate/predict genuinely aggressive and violent behaviours: in

one (admittedly extreme) instance “the measure of aggression was to ask a child whether he would pop a balloon if one were present” (*Media*:61 referring to Mussen & Rutherford 1961).

Importantly, Albert Bandura’s 1961 study (arguably one of the most frequently cited, and formative, inquiries into the causal hypothesis) uses such a dubious proxy, with Bandura’s aggression measure being child participants’ readiness to terrorise an inflatable ‘Bobo’ doll. The Bobo experiment was designed to assess the importance of observational learning in the acquisition of aggressive behaviours by children. Observational learning or ‘modelling’ does not necessarily involve the exact replication of an observed novel behaviour (although, as in the case of the Bobo experiment, it often can) but describes the process through which we adopt new behaviours or modify our existing behaviour in response to viewing novel actions by others.

The experiment (which originally took place in 1961, though Bandura also conducted modified versions in 1963 and 1965) involved exposing nursery school aged children to footage of an adult physically attacking and verbally berating a five foot tall inflatable doll: “after observing an adult strike the Bobo doll on the head with a mallet; throw it and kick it about the room; and saying verbally aggressive statements such as, “Sock him in the nose”, “Throw him in the air”, and “Kick him”, preschool children mimicked those aggressive actions toward the doll during a period of free play.” (Kirsch, 2006:119) In contrast, a second, control group of preschool children, who were not exposed to this violent behaviour, failed to behave in a similarly aggressive fashion.

In 1965 Bandura “replicated and extended” (Kirsch, 2006:120) this earlier research, modifying certain aspects of the original experiment in order to investigate additional concerns. In this version of the experiment “preschool children were randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions, ‘model-rewarded’ and ‘model-punished’, or the control condition, ‘no consequences’. In the ‘model-rewarded’ condition, children witnessed an adult getting rewarded for hitting and kicking a doll. The reward consisted of being given candy and soda and being called a ‘strong champion’ by the experimenter. In

the ‘model-punished’ condition children observed the adult getting punished for brutalising the doll. The adult model who was punished was verbally chastised (i.e. ‘You quit picking on that clown. I won’t tolerate it.’), sat on, and spanked with a magazine. Finally, in the ‘no consequences’ condition, children were spectators to the model’s severe maltreatment of the doll, but no rewards or punishments were doled out.” (Kirsch, 2006:120). Children in both the ‘model-rewarded’ and ‘no consequences’ groups imitated the modelled acts to a similarly greater extent than their counterparts in the ‘model-punished’ group. When offered a monetary reward in exchange for imitating the assault on Bobo all children were able to perform equally well indicating that the ‘model-punished’ group too “had *learned* the modelled acts of aggression” (Kirsch, 2006:120) but had also learned that violent actions reap negative consequences and so modified their behaviour accordingly.

Given that Bandura’s study is often cited by those who believe there to be a link between media violence and aggressive behaviour as evidence of simulated violence’s negative effects upon a youthful audience it is important to reiterate effect-sceptics’ critique of such aggression ‘analogues’: namely, that the actions of the children in the study can just as easily be interpreted as ‘rough and tumble’ play as “aggressive behaviour aimed at hurting someone” (Kirsch, 2006:121). Since the acts in question are directed against an inanimate object, whose very design encourages a somewhat ‘aggressive’, physical manner of play (as an inflatable doll that bobs back upright after being hit) it seems likely that the children simply experienced hitting the doll as a novel game rather than as an act of aggression. Furthermore, as Richard Felson also points out in his analysis of this study, generally, definitions of what constitutes violence or aggression would include some notion of harmful intent, which seems questionable in this case.

Another unaddressed, and potentially subversive, point is the fact that that the ‘punishment’ incorporated into the 1965 experiment in itself constitutes an act of physical aggression (and against a sentient being rather than an inanimate<sup>36</sup>, if anthropomorphised,

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<sup>36</sup> Kirsch notes that those laboratory experiments which found no relationship between viewing violent cartoons and an increase in aggression in early childhood recorded only peer to peer acts of aggression rather than also looking at preferential selection of aggressive toys (toy guns etc) and ‘aggression’ against objects. He argues that the apparent lack of a link could thus be due to socialisation: most children are aware that peer

object at that) and was not, presumably, imitated by the children who witnessed it. Arguably, the mini-narrative played out in this chain of events more closely approximates the types of media violence young children might be exposed to (such as superhero cartoons in which the protagonists perpetrate textually-justified, retributive violence against those villains who prey on the weak) than the isolated act of aggression presented in the original scenario. As David Buckingham contends, “violence should not be treated as a singular category whose meaning could be taken for granted” (*Moving*:5). In other words, all forms of media violence are not created equal; although there is certainly much evidence to support Bandura’s assertion that we learn through observing others, manifestations of ‘media violence’ are sufficiently heterogeneous that we may never arrive at *one* clear answer as to whether, and how, it causes, influences or shapes aggressive behaviour.

There are in fact many contextual and genre-specific cues that can affect viewer perceptions of violence. Two major factors in the recognition of violence levels are cognitive transformation and perceived reality. Cognitive transformation refers to the process through which violent acts occurring in certain genres tend to be ‘camouflaged’ i.e. they are not perceived by viewers *as being* violent. Priming is a “reading process in which related thoughts, emotions and concepts residing in memory are activated” (Kirsch, 2006: 164). In most cases where acts of violence are depicted, such as in violent drama or crime narratives, the activation of related, aggressive thoughts, emotions and concepts will occur. However, if depicted in a comedic context, such as in cartoons, “priming not only occurs in aggression-related thoughts, concepts, and feelings but in humor-related thoughts, concepts, and feelings as well.” (Kirsch, 2006:164) As a result of this “dual priming” (Kirsch, 2006:164) the perceived level of violence may be diminished. Howitt and Cumberbatch (1975) found that “most adults do not perceive humorous cartoons as violent” (Kirsch, 2006:162), while Gunter and Furnham (1984) found that “violence depicted in humorous cartoons is perceived [by adult viewers] as less violent than the same

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to peer violence is viewed unfavourably by those in authority and will reap negative consequences for perpetrators, while object-oriented aggression is not viewed as negatively, so channel their increased aggressive impulses into rough play with objects. Kirsh’s commitment to a definition of aggression that encompasses object-directed acts could perhaps explain his contrasting characterisation of many of these experiments.

behaviour enacted by live actors" (Kirsch, 2006:162). Obviously unrealistic violence, of the sort which predominates in cartoons, science fiction and fantasy, tends not to register as violence in the same way as violence that appears in a more realistic context. Some theorists (Potter 2003) suggest that the level of perceived violence depends upon a sense of personal salience, which tends to be missing from fantastic or animated narratives.

In other words, different types of media almost certainly differ in their potential to move, harm and heal. Exposure to sensitive, thoughtful examinations of violent subject matter will probably reap different consequences than exposure to more perfunctory, sensationalistic treatments, and individual differences will, to a certain extent, determine meaning; my own experiences and character might lead me to interpret an act of cinematic violence as textually justified and admirable while yours might lead you to view it as unprovoked and morally repugnant, resulting in very different affective and behavioural responses.

Problematically for proponents of the causal hypothesis, when studies using questionable analogues for aggression are excluded, the resultant body of research provides considerably less support for the theory. When Freedman reviewed only those experiments using more plausible measures, he found that a mere 28% supported the thesis that violent media increase real life aggression. Even more significantly, multiple theorists have found another systematic difference between experiments yielding supportive and unsupportive results: while sample size seemed to have no particular effect on the conclusions of experiments featuring adult subjects, among studies with child participants sample size was *inversely* correlated with supportive results (contrary to what the causal hypothesis would predict). According to Freedman's analysis, "the experiments [with child subjects] that found supporting results had an average of 51.6 children, those that got mixed results had an average of 63, and those that did not support the hypothesis had an average of 100.8" (*Media*:65). This trend indicates that the effects attributed to violent media in some smaller-scale experiments might be due to chance.

## 2.1.2 Aggression versus Arousal

There is another significant problem with the methodology of many laboratory studies. There is evidence to suggest that the results of those studies which seem to hint at a causal connection between violent media and aggressive/violent behaviours could in fact be the artefact of a confounding variable that is already known to influence aggression: arousal.

In laboratory-based experiments studying the affective/behavioural effects of violent media it is imperative that “the violent and non-violent films or television programs or live models must [otherwise] be as similar as possible” (*Media*:76). Ideally, in order to completely isolate the effects of violence from those of additional variables that are incidental to the hypothesis, the films would be identical in all dimensions except that one film contains violence while the other lacks it. In actuality, there are many difficulties extricating the behavioural repercussions of violent media *per se* from the effects of the type of media that often contain violence. In his analysis, Freedman notes that almost all the films shown during laboratory-based research differed in one important dimension *other* than the presence (or absence) of violence. Little deliberation or effort seemed to have been put into ensuring that the non-violent films were as exciting, as physically arousing, as the violent ones. Given that violence is in itself stimulating, as well as typically coinciding with other factors that can cause arousal, such as high-stakes conflict, physical peril, strong action, loud noises and fast-paced music, the failure on researchers’ part even to attempt to control for such elements indicates a lack of rigour. In fact, in some studies violent, and presumably exciting, programmes were paired with no alternative stimulus – one experiment “involved showing some children a twenty-two minute episode of the *Power Rangers* while showing other children nothing (Boyatzis, Matillo & Nesbit, 1995)” – while in others, control groups were shown films hardly calculated to elicit an equivalent degree of excitement, “the most extreme [disparity being] a study that compared the effect of a film about a violent, bloody prize fight with that of a film about canal boats” (*Media*:78, referring to Berkowitz, Corwin & Heironymus 1963).

Effects sceptics' concerns about this aspect of researchers' methodology could be dismissed as merely speculative or ideologically-motivated, the efforts of dedicated opponents of the effects model to discredit results that are inharmonious with their thesis. However, the effects of arousal on aggression levels are far from contentious; indeed, Craig Anderson and Brad Bushman – who are, ironically, among the most vehement proponents of the causal hypothesis – argue that that “arousal from an irrelevant source can energise or strengthen the dominant action tendency [meaning that] if a person is provoked or otherwise instigated to aggress” (Anderson & Bushman, 2002:39) after being exposed to an exciting stimulus their reactions may be intensified. Equally, arousal resulting from irrelevant stimuli such as exercise and unusually hot temperatures can be “mislabelled as anger in situations involving provocation” (Anderson & Bushman, 2002:39), resulting in more ‘angry’ or aggressive behavioural responses. Dolf Zillman’s influential experimental research into ‘excitation transfer’ – the process through which residual arousal from one stimulus can heighten subjects’ excitatory response to a subsequent stimulus – serves as evidence of this tendency. Significantly, Zillman points out that although media-inspired arousal inflates aggression in the short term, the effect is demonstrably impermanent: a simple “cooling off” period suffices to negate violent media’s ‘instigational’ or aggression-promoting properties by allowing viewers’ arousal to “decay” (Zillman, 1971:427) to normal levels before they engage in any other activities. Furthermore, Zillman found that equally arousal-producing *non-aggressive* media exert similarly inflammatory behavioural effects; indeed, when he exposed one group of subjects to a film clip depicting a couple “tender[ly]” engaging in “intimate, apparently pre-coital behaviour” (Zillman, 1971:426) and another to a “violent prize fight” (Zillman, 1971:425), the “instigational effect of the aggressive film was *lower* than that of the erotic film [my italics]” (Zillman, 1971:430). In light of Zillman’s research, I would argue that, contrary to the claims of theorists such as Bandura, when subjects display increased aggression levels directly after exposure to violent film clips this effect is likely to be due to temporary excitation transfer rather than any form of imitative/social learning.

### 2.1.3 Atypical Viewing Environments

As David Trend points out in *The Myth of Media Violence*, the very feature of laboratory experiments that makes them seem so reassuringly scientific – their ability to isolate, and so, theoretically, render measurable and predictable, complex interactions between specific environmental factors and human behaviours – also means that their results may be of questionable generalisability when extrapolated to the outside world. Trend criticises experiments of this sort on the grounds that they decontextualise violent media by ‘administering’ them to subjects in amounts and environments “quite unlike everyday viewing” (*Myth*:41). Like Trend, Freedman argues that the behavioural effects of exposure to a brief and isolated excerpt consisting only of violent scenes might well differ considerably from a ingesting a varied daily ‘diet’ of media in which episodes of violence are, rather more realistically, interspersed with many other types of content. If, as many theorists argue, arousal itself is linked to a temporary increase in aggressive impulses or behaviours, the use of short clips unintegrated into any overarching plot may act to exaggerate and misrepresent the behavioural effects of violent media. In real life, films and television programmes rarely consist of uninterrupted blocks of arousal-producing violence; the most depraved of horror narratives or thrilling of action films naturally incorporate lulls or less eventful periods, if merely in service of preventing audience members from succumbing to adrenaline-fatigue (after one hour of continuous explosions the most gung-ho of viewers are likely to grow jaded). In fact, Zillman and his co-researchers noted that under more prolonged exposure to violent media (i.e. the length of a full horror/action film, rather than a brief clip) arousal does tend to ebb due to habituation or exhaustion, resulting in a subsequent fall in aggression levels.

### 2.1.4 Demand Cues

As in any other social context, participants in laboratory-based research are likely to register, and respond to, behavioural/environmental cues, modifying their behaviour accordingly. For this reason, results from laboratory-based effects research are likely to be distorted by experimenter demand unless careful counter-measures are taken. In his article

‘Mass Media Effects on Violent Behaviour’, Richard Felson argues that the apparently suggestive findings of the many laboratory experiments in which participants are shown violent film clips and then observed for an increase in aggressive behaviours may be muddied by demand cues and the sponsor effect. Demand cues are “instructions or other stimuli that indicate to subjects how the experimenter expects them to behave” (Felson, 1996:105-6). At their most flagrant, demand cues could even communicate the desired outcome/hypothesis of the experiment. So, Felson argues, subjects who perceive that they are ‘supposed’ to act more aggressively post-viewing might well comply. In fact, this phenomenon is likely to be particularly pronounced in laboratory-based studies since such settings tend to exaggerate “the effects of conformity and social influence” (Felson, 1996:106) owing to subjects’ underlying awareness that they are being monitored by socially “prestig[ious]” others in a novel situation/environment (Felson, 1996:106).

Similarly, he argues that, if insufficiently careful in the design of their study (e.g. neglecting to absent themselves before the film is shown, showing the film in the same room in which the rest of the experiment occurs), experimenters showing violent films can create a generally permissive atmosphere by implication, which encourages non-aggressive as well as aggressive anti-social behaviour. Indeed, meta-analyses seem to show that “exposure to violence is related to non-aggressive forms of antisocial behaviour. Hearold (1986) performed a meta-analysis of experiments that included studies of effects of exposure to media violence on antisocial behaviour generally. The effects of media violence on antisocial behaviour were just as strong as the effects of media violence on violent behaviour. A more recent meta-analysis that focused on all types of studies yielded similar results (Paik and Comstock 1994)” (Felson, 1996:115). These findings are consistent with a sponsor effect rather than a ‘modelling’ one. Furthermore, one study found that participants in an experiment where they were instructed to deliver electric shocks to another subject were willing to deliver greater shocks when they *anticipated* being shown a violent film, without actually being shown one at all (Leyens et al, 1975). It seems likely that this was due to experimenters being perceived as permissive or as endorsing more violent behaviour, rather than the insidious influence of even unseen screen violence.

### **2.1.5 Flawed Statistical Measures**

Finally, in their meta-analysis of media violence studies, Christopher Ferguson and John Kilburn suggest that the “invalid and unreliable” (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2008:759) aggression outcome measures employed by many effects researchers are responsible for the alleged causal relationship between media and real life violence. They investigate this hypothesis by testing the following predictions:

- 1) Aggression outcome measures that are unstandardised or unreliable will produce higher effects than established standardised and reliable measures.
- 2) Aggression measures with poor validity will produce higher effect sizes than those with well-established validity.
- 3) Effect sizes for outcomes will decrease the closer that outcomes approximate actual physical aggression or violent criminal behaviour (Ferguson & Kilburn, 2008:759).

Their findings were consistent with these predictions, indicating that the prevalence of results supportive of the causal hypothesis could be the artefact of unsuitable aggression measures, flawed use of statistical measures (most notably in the case of Anderson and Bushman’s comparison of the carcinogenic effects of smoking to the pernicious behavioural effects of violent media exposure), and publication bias.

In conclusion, I would argue that, even when one excludes such methodological problems from one’s consideration of the research, overall the laboratory experiments offer at most very qualified support for the contention that violent media pose a significant public health risk. Of equal significance is the fact that they are by no means in collective agreement about important questions such as which type of violent narratives are more morally perilous (those that present acts of violence as justified or unjustified; those depicting realistic or fantastic/comedic violence) or the mechanisms by which violent media increase violence (increasing overall aggression or inspiring acts of imitative violence; inducing

audience members to view violence as positive/everyday or merely unconsciously ‘priming’ them to respond in violent ways when provoked). Those who invoke the ‘majority’ of effects research when arguing that media violence is deleterious neglect to note the major issues on which ostensibly positive studies disagree. I would argue that the theoretical incoherence of such appeals reflects one central problem with the effects model: a general lack of *internal* critique or adequate interrogation of its core claims and precepts.

## 2.2 Field Experiments

One famously non-supportive field experiment arguably highlights several problems with the crude, ‘hypodermic’ conception of media effects employed in much public discourse about the perils of violent fictions. “In a now famous study conducted in the 1970s [...a group of American researchers (Fesherbach and Singer)] decided to study teenage boys who lived in residential facilities and boarding schools where television viewing could be completely controlled. For a period of six weeks, half of the boys were permitted to watch only violent programs and the other half non-violent shows.” (*Myth*:1) In accordance with the hypothesis endorsed by the dominant effects model – that imitative violence/increased aggression is a reliable consequence of regular exposure to violent media- the researchers predicted that those boys consuming a televisual ‘diet’ composed solely of violent programmes would display a marked increase in aggressive and antisocial behaviour. In fact, “as the weeks went by [it was] the boys watching the non-violent shows [who began] start[ing] fistfights [...] and vandalising the schools [...] while the groups viewing the violent shows remained peaceful and studious” (*Media*:1).

This study’s counterintuitive results cannot, Trend argues, be taken as confirmation of the discredited ‘purgation’ model promoted by some defenders of violent media, however tempting it might be to construe them in such a way. Rather, upon further investigation it was determined that the boys’ misbehaviour could be attributed to their mounting frustration at being forced to miss their favourite shows – “they were especially upset about *Batman*” (*Media*:1). Media violence itself could not be demonstrated to have played any significant role in subjects’ aggressive behaviours; as anti-‘effects’ theorists have long

argued to be the case, each boy's overall situation and mental state proved a considerably more reliable instigator/indicator of subsequent aggression levels. Equally, this increase in aggression was observed only among boys living in the residential facilities, suggesting that their environment played an important role in how they experienced, and managed, quotidian frustrations of this sort.

Since the majority of field experiments offer similarly non-supportive or mixed results, I will not address this body of research in great depth, again focusing upon those few studies that are problematic for my thesis (that media violence cannot be demonstrated to pose a significant public health risk).

Field studies are differentiated from laboratory experiments by their setting, occurring in the less artificial-seeming environment of the subjects' own 'habitat'. For the purposes of his review, Freedman defines field experiments as "studies in which subjects are exposed [to violent films or programmes] in their own homes, or classes" (*Media*:85), or other locations in which they might expect to view films anyway. Because they take place in more naturalistic settings, field studies have greater ecological validity, better-suited to obtaining reliable and generalisable data about the behavioural effects of violent media by virtue of their minimisation of demand pressures. While laboratory-based studies tend to employ very brief film clips as their violent stimulus – a typical laboratory experiment "shows children or adults [a film that is] sometimes as short as three minutes [in duration, and] rarely longer than ten minutes" (*Media*:86), with subjects tested for increased aggression shortly afterwards – field experiments allow researchers to observe participants' behaviours in response to a more leisurely-paced and representatively varied televisual diet. For this reason, field experiments are likelier to capture the (surely more worrisome and socially deleterious) effects of longer term exposure to violent films and to assess accurately how long-lasting such effects might be. Equally, rather than relying upon questionable measures of aggression such as subjects' willingness to pop a hypothetical balloon or assault an inflatable doll, field experiments observe subjects' propensity for engaging in real aggression against real people. Since, as Freedman, Trend, and Felson all argue in their critiques of the predominant interpretations of effects research, many

experimenters testing the causal hypothesis fail to adequately distinguish between ‘rough and tumble’ play and intentional acts of aggression calculated to harm others, this represents a valuable methodological refinement.

In contrast to the laboratory experiments – which, while producing highly inconsistent results did overall indicate a slight positive correlation between media violence and higher levels of aggression – Freedman concludes that the field experiments “provide little or no support for the causal hypothesis” (*Media*:107). As with the laboratory-based studies, the experiments that yielded positive results had smaller sample sizes, whereas “at least some of the experiments that obtained non-supportive results had quite large samples, in the hundreds” (*Media*:107). Only three of the field studies Freedman reviewed suggested any positive relationship between media and real life violence/aggression.

The researchers who conducted the first of these supportive studies (Black and Bevan, 1992) interviewed adults either before or after they viewed the films available at a local cinema. Some subjects were attending a violent Chuck Norris film about a soldier mounting a rescue attempt to retrieve American prisoners of war (*Missing in Action*), while others planned to view the rather more sedate and contemplative *A Passage to India*. Subjects were given a questionnaire designed to measure feelings of hostility. The researchers administering the questionnaires found that “those at the violent film scored higher in hostility, both before and after the viewing [with] the hostility scores of those at the violent movie increas[ing] significantly” (*Media*:97) after having watched the film, while those of audience members at the non-violent film remained stable. Although these results appear to offer support for the effects thesis there are several problems with the design of this piece of research.

First, since the subjects were not randomly-assigned to the violent/non-violent conditions, this cannot be classified as an experiment as such: because the different groups were self-selected they are likely to already differ in some significant ways. Those who choose to attend action-oriented B-movies starring the notoriously macho Chuck Norris might be willing to profess to higher levels of trait and reactive hostility than those who go to see

films based upon E.M Forster novels. As Buckingham repeatedly emphasises throughout his discussion of the interviews he conducted with children, responsible researchers must always take into account the performative/self-defining nature of subjects' responses to such questioning. Since the interviews occurred outside a cinema (already an intrinsically social and highly public space) participants had already decided to view their respective films 'in the open', implying that their choices conformed to a cultural persona or profile with which they were comfortable (or even aspired to). More seriously, not only does the study contain no behavioural measure, relying solely on people's (hardly neutral or transparent) testimonies about their own aggression levels, but the two films chosen to serve as the violent and non-violent stimuli differ in almost every *other* respect. *Missing in Action* is likely to be highly arousal-producing, unabashedly built around a succession of action scenes. Meanwhile, *A Passage to India*, while addressing serious and potentially disturbing themes, is, for the most part, decidedly lacking in explosions. The wildly varying quality and content of these two films reflects the aforementioned lack of care taken by effects researchers to ensure that the stimuli presented to each group are – apart from the inclusion or absence of violence – as similar as possible.

There were similar problems with the design and execution of the other two apparently supportive field experiments (Parke, Berkowitz, Leyens, West and Sebastian, 1977; and Leyens, Camino, Parke and Berkowitz, 1975). During these related and methodologically-similar studies, groups of boys at residential homes were shown either violent or non-violent films over the course of a week, with their subsequent behaviours monitored for any fluctuations in aggression. While, unlike the Black and Bevan study, the researchers involved monitored their subjects' actual behaviours in a relatively unconstrained, naturalistic setting, rather than relying on aggression analogues or survey-responses, they still failed to differentiate between essentially good-humoured, if boisterous, play-fighting and willed, malicious acts of aggression. In fact, the observers were explicitly instructed to ignore the intent of the actions, perhaps in order to minimise their interpretative role. Crucially, although the participants' increase in (ostensibly) aggressive behaviour immediately after their exposure to violent stimuli is consistent with the causal hypothesis, Freedman is careful to note that there was no *cumulative* effect from multiple viewings. In

fact, the boys' aggressive behaviour subsided shortly after the films were shown, with “no consistent effect of the films on [subjects’] aggression” (*Media*:100) over any sustained period.

This short-lived rise in aggression can certainly be construed as supportive of the effects model – as it frequently has been by effects proponents – but it also contradicts the model in an equally important sense. Surely, according to the predictions of the effects thesis, if subjects’ increased hostility is due to modelling or imitative learning, the new behaviours they acquire after exposure to a violent stimulus should intensify over time/with each exposure. Indeed, such a result is equally, if not more, consistent with another plausible theory discussed in my analysis of the laboratory research: that the participants’ temporary rise in aggression was caused by a similarly short-term rise in arousal, or that this heightened arousal ignited (a basically playful and non-aggressive) desire to engage in energetic, rough and tumble play.

### **2.3 Longitudinal Studies**

In this section, I will discuss those longitudinal studies most frequently cited in support of the causal hypothesis, again drawing upon the critiques of anti-effects theorists. Longitudinal research begins from the premise – established by the survey research – that exposure to media violence is somehow associated with increased aggression levels. Owing to their impressive complexity and breadth, longitudinal studies are ideally situated to investigate the precise *nature* of this association. It therefore seems reasonable to assume that such studies could determine whether if, as proponents of the causal hypothesis would have it, exposure to violent media really causes an increase in aggressiveness; if aggressive individuals tend to prefer, and so consume more, violent media; or if some other, as yet unaccounted-for, variable causes people to both enjoy (or to be more likely to confess to enjoying) violent media and to be more aggressive.

### 2.3.1 Centerwall

Subsequent to the introduction of television to the United States and Canada in the 1950s, both countries experienced a precipitous rise in violent crime. Brandon Centerwall, an epidemiologist and psychiatrist, holds that this natural experiment serves as incontestable proof of the malign influence of violent media. In a famous 1989 paper, Centerwall attributed this rise to children's exposure to violent television programmes, arguing that children born during this period had been affected by their access to unprecedented amounts of fictional violence, with many more than the norm committing violent crimes upon reaching maturity.

Centerwall took advantage of the wide scale social experiment posed by the introduction and popularisation of television in various nations in order to investigate his hypothesis that increased exposure to media violence results in increased real life violence. Centerwall "graphed the murder rates for whites in Canada and the U.S. from 1945 to 1974 against television ownership and compared them to the white murder rate in South Africa<sup>37</sup> [where television was banned until 1975] during the same period" ('Violence':3). Centerwall found that while the white murder rate in South Africa remained stable during this period, the murder rates for whites in the two control populations doubled during the same period. Centerwall extrapolated from this striking disparity, venturing to speculate that if "television technology had never been developed, there would today be 10,000 fewer homicides each year in the United States, 70,000 fewer rapes, and 700,000 fewer injurious assaults" ('Violence':3, quoting Centerwall).

As many other theorists point out (including later effects researchers such as Steven J. Kirsch who are essentially in sympathy with the causal hypothesis), a more plausible, albeit mundane, explanation for this increase is the demographic shift that occurred due to the surge in births between 1947 and 1964. This boom resulted in a higher than normal number of young males (who commit most murders) maturing at around this time. This

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<sup>37</sup> Notably, in South Africa during this period whites represented "fewer than five per cent" ('Violence':3) of all murder victims, which, Rhodes argues, makes his chosen populations so dissimilar in dimensions other than television exposure/ownership that they cannot reasonably be compared.

latter explanation is supported by the fact that levels of murder have not continued to rise (as one might expect given the further increase in the average child's exposure to violent television programmes), in fact "when America's violent crime statistics are extended beyond Centerwall's cut-off date of 1975 and beyond the dates of his publications, the weakness of his causal argument becomes clear. Violent crime in the 1980s remained high, but as the baby boom cohort members aged past their 30<sup>th</sup> birthdays in the 1990s crime began to decline. FBI statistics show that from 1991 onward the violent crime rates have decreased each year. Moreover, rates for property crimes have been decreasing since 1980. Thus, as more entertainment violence has become available on television, crime rates in the United States have been decreasing." (Kirsch, 2006:10)

In order to explain this apparent divergence from his model, Centerwall modifies his thesis and methodology in two significant ways. First, he concedes that the design of his original study was flawed; he should, he notes, have factored countries' respective economic conditions into his research. It is, he states, well known that a nation's economy influences its murder rate, with prosperity bearing an inverse correlation to violent crime. Thus, although the U.S and England remain barraged as ever by violent media, their recent declines in homicide rates could, he suggests, be due to the ameliorating influence of increased national wealth. Furthermore, Centerwall argues that the lack of any further increase in imitative violence/aggression following his period of study (a trend which seems to contradict his hypothesis as it was originally formulated) merely indicates that violent media's effects do not spread or worsen *indefinitely*. He maintains that the basic pattern/relationship observed in his 1989 study reflects a genuine causal relationship between violent media and violent crime, accounting for such apparent discrepancies by suggesting that television's negative behavioural effect "eventually saturates, after which its influence on the murder rate is steady-state" ('Violence':3).

In addition to this revised model's suspiciously *ad hoc* provenance (formulated long after the original study was conducted in order to encompass conflicting data, and in response to serious criticisms regarding his theory's lack of predictive power) Centerwall does not

offer any thorough or convincing explanation of how this saturation process works, venturing no predictions as to when and how the expected levelling off might occur.

Equally problematically, other countries experienced a similarly vertiginous rise in televised violence during this period without exhibiting any accompanying increase in violent crime. In order to investigate this issue further, two legal scholars named Franklin E. Zimring and Gordon Hawkins tested Centerwall's hypothesis by examining the homicide rates in four other industrial democracies excluded from Centerwall's original study: France, Germany, Italy and Japan. The theorists discovered that "the incidence of murder in those countries either remained more or less level (Italy) [during the period that television's morally deleterious effects allegedly became visible] or actually declined (France, Germany and Japan) with increased television exposure. These counterexamples, they write, '*disconfirm* the causal linkage between television set ownership and lethal violence for the period 1945-1975.'" ("Violence":3)

For these reasons I would argue that Centerwall's theory amounts to a not particularly well-camouflaged iteration of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy, substituting correlation/temporo-spatial contiguity for adequate causal investigation.

### **2.3.2 Eron and Huesman**

Another frequently-cited and influential longitudinal study covering violent media's behavioural/temperamental effects is the twenty-two year study into aggression in school children, conducted by Leonard D. Eron (and, from 1970 onwards, L. Rowell Huesman). The study took place between 1960 and 1982, and followed a mixed-sex group of 875 third graders (or 8-9 year olds) as they matured. Unlike many of the studies Freedman and others criticise for their use of dubious aggression analogues, Eron and Huesman employed peer-ratings, questioning parents, teachers and other children about subjects' overall levels of aggression and the frequency with which they committed violent acts. Although this study later came to be widely known in relation to its findings regarding media effects, the researchers originally intended to investigate which "childhood experiences correlated with

mental health problems later in life" (*Myth*:5), focusing upon aggression in particular as they believed it to be more objectively measurable than other personal traits.<sup>38</sup> They additionally recorded subjects' family values, popularity, anxiety, IQ and exposure to violent media.

In 1963, Eron reported finding a positive correlation between "aggressive behaviour at school (as estimated by classmate peers) and violent television watching at home" ('Violence':5). Notably, this correlation did not apply equally to both sexes – while boys who watched more violent programmes were evaluated as more aggressive by their peers, female subjects exhibited no equivalent trend. Furthermore, the researchers found that those subjects who watched the most television overall displayed the least aggression, and Eron himself later asserted that, at the time, he was doubtful about the significance of this association.

In 1970, however, the U.S. Surgeon General's committee became interested in this earlier finding: the third graders of 1963 were now nearing their high school graduations, and the governmental body came to appreciate the possible implications such an association might hold for future crime rates. The National Institutes of Mental Health awarded Eron and his colleagues (a group which now included Huesman) a \$42,000 grant to investigate this correlation further.

After securing this funding, Eron and Huesman were able to find and re-interview 436 of their subjects. Following this additional research they found a .31 correlation between male subjects' preference for violent television programmes at age 8 and peer-rated levels of aggression at 18. This finding indicates that exposure to violent media during childhood could account for 10 per cent of the variance in male subjects' aggression as young adults. However, once again, Eron and Huesman found no correlation for their female subjects in

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<sup>38</sup> In fact, Eron, who had originally been sceptical about the public health risks posed by violent media – including data about his subjects' viewing habits "almost as an afterthought" ('Violence':5) – later confessed to feeling pressured by government officials who were eager for the researchers to provide them with decisive evidence for the causal hypothesis. He described the media violence component of the study as "the tail that wag[ged] the dog" ('Violence':5), attracting the support and funding of the NIMH and other interested parties, even though it only represented a peripheral concern of the researchers themselves.

any of the measures. This means that “only one of six possible correlations [turned] out to be significant, and that one only weakly” (‘Violence’:6).

The psychologist David Sohn suggests that there are deeper problems with these findings. He argues that one would generally predict childhood influences of this sort to weaken over time, modulated by subsequent experiences and influences. At age 8, Eron had discovered a .21 correlation between stated preference for/exposure to violent media and peer-rated aggression (i.e. he and his co-researchers at the time found that violent television exposure could account for 4 per cent of the variance in aggression). Indeed, at age 13, when a partial sample of 64 boys was re-interviewed, the correlation seemed, as anticipated, to have significantly lessened, in fact disappearing entirely. This unusual and intermittent upwards trend implies that “an eight year old’s television exposure influences his aggression immediately, has no measurable influence five years later, then mysteriously re-emerges five years after that” (‘Violence’:6) to exert renewed –and increased – behavioural effects on an eighteen year old. Huesman explained this discrepancy by attributing it to incompetence on the part of those conducting the interviews, charging the researchers involved during this period with amassing “incomplete and clearly biased” (‘Violence’:6) information. Once he became Analysis Director of the project in 1970, Huesman argued against “analyzing or reporting at all on the 8<sup>th</sup> grade data” (‘Violence’: 6), meaning that the famous .31 correlation was generated by excluding some of the (potentially relevant) data. While, as I have discussed earlier, it *is* likely that sample sizes as small as the eighth grade pool of interviewees could have distorted the findings, resulting in a ‘false negative’, Huesman’s decision to refrain altogether from including them in his subsequent analysis could lead to a equally misrepresentative final outcome. (His decision to omit this set of findings on the basis of sample size is also deeply suspicious given his later actions, as I will explain).

After the impressive findings of the 1970 study, Eron and Huesman were awarded further funding, again collecting information about, and re-interviewing, as many subjects as possible between 1980 and 1982 (by which point their participants were around thirty years old). Following this round of interviews, the researchers reported uncovering a

dramatic correlation between adult criminality and early exposure to violent television (as well as television viewing in general). In fact, Huesman (when serving as an official representative of the American Psychological Association in 1986) supplied the senators to whom he was presenting the results with a bar graph designed to serve as “a visual illustration of the correlation between age 8 TV violence viewing and adult criminality” (‘Violence’:6) The graph recorded subjects’ ‘Seriousness of Criminal Convictions by age 30’ (from a scale of 1-10) and charted these figures against ‘Boys’ Preference for Violent Television at Age 8’. It consisted of three black bars “stepping up from low preference (4.23 on the seriousness scale) to medium preference (4.71 on the seriousness scale. The high preference group at 9.71 almost doubled on seriousness of criminal convictions, bumping the 10 limit” (‘Violence’:7). As Rhodes notes in his review of the study, the implications of this graph are clear: sustained exposure to simulated violence during childhood drastically increases subjects’ likelihood of growing up to become “a rapist or a murderer” (‘Violence’:7).

As one might expect, these alarming findings were taken to present a strong case for further inquiry into the causal hypothesis, if not justifying immediate prophylactic action. Indeed, in the early 1970s when the U.S. Surgeon General founded a committee to investigate and evaluate effects research, Eron and Huesman’s study played a key role in determining the reviewers’ conclusions. Equally, Rhodes points out, years later effects proponents continued to appeal to their work when pushing for legal reforms designed to protect children from violent media: as recently as 1996 when Congress passed a Telecommunications Act requiring all new television sets to come equipped with a ‘V-chip’<sup>39</sup>, the text of the Act “implicitly invoked Eron and Huesman’s findings to justify its intrusion [stating that]: “Studies have shown that children exposed to violent video programming at a young age have a higher tendency for violent and aggressive behavior later in life than children not so exposed.” (‘Violence’:5)

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<sup>39</sup> A device enabling parents to control their children’s viewing, minimising their exposure to simulated violence (among other unsuitable content).

Troublingly, while Huesman's interpretation of his and Eron's research was widely promulgated, influencing both mainstream and political discourse about media violence for some time, there is evidence that he may have been far less confident in his conclusions than his public proclamations seem to indicate. For example, the strong association between exposure to simulated violence and adult criminality "went unmentioned in the final report on the 22-year aggression study that he and Eron published [in] *Developmental Psychology* in 1984" ('Violence':7), as did the alleged .31 correlation between childhood viewing habits and aggression at eighteen.

Notably, this report was, unlike Huesman's public testimonies, reviewed by fellow psychologists (prior to its inclusion in a "prestigious" ('Violence':7) and peer-reviewed journal). In fact, Rhodes observes, none of the researchers' sensational findings regarding the effects of violent media were included in this piece, instead, they commented mainly upon the cyclical, banal nature of violence, noting that "early aggressiveness predicts later violence and that violence runs in families" ('Violence':7). This set of findings presents a very different picture of how violent criminals are formed: far from spreading unforeseeably through insidious sites of contagion – with violent television programmes acting to 'deprave and corrupt' otherwise unremarkable individuals – the acquisition of violent behaviour emerges as a drearily predictable process, very much a family affair.

In his review of Eron and Huesman's study, Rhodes argues that the striking absence of media-violence related content from the researchers' final summary calls for further investigation. During his inquiry into the reasons for this omission, he unearthed a potentially significant statement by Huesman. In a 1994 paper on 'The Long Term Effects of Repeated Exposure to Media Violence in Childhood', the researcher cautioned readers that the sample on which his conclusions about the link between violent media and violent criminality was founded was "unfortunately[...] very small because of technical difficulties [...] mostly reflect[ing] the behaviour of a few high violence viewers" ('Violence':7). Rhodes contacted Huesman and asked for further information about the original data. In response, Huesman disclosed his methodology, revealing that, in actuality, his sensational conclusions about the public health risks of violent media were based on the actions of

only three subjects. The notorious bar graph that he presented on behalf of the APA acted to obfuscate his methodology and findings; as Rhodes points out, since “all three boys scored ‘High’ on TV violence viewing [...Huesman] had no factual basis for presenting ‘Low’ and ‘Medium’ bars” (*Violence*:8), indicating that these measures were falsified and included for effect.

### **2.3.3 Other explanations for any association between simulated violence and real life aggression**

Like Rhodes, Freedman is highly critical of the claim that the existing longitudinal research offers strong support for the causal hypothesis. He argues that the “only clear support for [the effects thesis] comes from three studies [including Eron and Huesman’s twenty two year study]” (*Media*: 128), each of which are undermined by similar methodological problems to the laboratory research – namely an utter failure to distinguish between malicious/aggressive behaviours and rough and tumble play and/ or the employment on dubious statistical methodology.

Even if one takes these few weakly positive results at face value, once they are placed in the context of the many non-supportive studies, it becomes apparent that the longitudinal research does not support the causal hypothesis. However, although Freedman is sceptical about the effects paradigm, and highly critical of many of its proponents’ methodology, he acknowledges that, as with the survey research, even though the longitudinal studies “found almost no *significant* effects [my italics]” (*Media*:125) of violent media exposure on aggression, they nonetheless yielded a “preponderance of positive associations” (*Media*: 125). While “many of the coefficients were close to zero and explained virtually none of the variance in aggression” (*Media*:130), he reasons that, from a ‘no effects’ perspective, one would predict that such non-significant correlations are purely due to random variation or statistical ‘noise’ and, as such, would be evenly divided between positive and negative. This pattern of associations can be explained in one of two ways. First, one could construe this effect as indicating that “viewing violent programs has a small effect on aggression” (*Media*:131). While such an effect would be markedly weaker

than the majority of effects theorists claim, accounting for only a “tiny percentage in the variation in aggression” (*Media*:131), it would still constitute mild support for the causal hypothesis.

An alternative explanation is that this pattern could be the result of a third factor “that differentially affect[s] both the] viewing of violent programs and aggression” (*Media*:131) For example, Milavsky and his co-researchers – who themselves conducted a multi-wave study into the effects of media violence (Milavsky, Stipp, Kessler & Rubens, 1982) – posit that the influence of an individual’s peer group could lead to both a predilection for violent media and a propensity to behave more aggressively over time. They hypothesise that if a child joins a social group which values “action, adventure and aggressiveness” (*Media*:131), initially she may adopt “milder behaviours such as watching violent programs and being slightly aggressive” (*Media*:131), creating the appearance of a causal relationship between these two variables. If, over time, she becomes cumulatively more influenced by the values and behaviour of her peers and begins to participate in serious acts of aggression or violence, “this would produce the pattern [displayed in some effects research] – a same age correlation between viewing violence and aggression, and a positive coefficient between early violence viewing and later aggression even after early aggression was controlled” for (*Media*:131).

Similarly, other environmental factors such as subjects’ familial parenting style and social background could be responsible for such a pattern. Indeed, the researchers conducting Milavsky’s multi-wave study found that “controlling for socioeconomic status reduced the plurality of positive effects for boys, and that controlling for school, SES (socio-economic status), and gender had the same effect for boys and girls combined” (*Media*:131), although in each case there was still a lingering positive correlation between exposure and later aggression. Freedman argues that focusing upon factors associated with socioeconomic status represents a fruitful angle of inquiry into this residual effect. He points out that poor parents (and particularly single parents, with their accompanying single-incomes and necessarily arduous lifestyles) tend also to be *time*-poor, forced to spend less time with their children. As a result of this relative lack of parental supervision,

poorer children are, on average, likely to spend more time watching television in general (and thus, violent television, in particular), particularly given their lack of access to other recreational activities. He suggests that this hidden factor of amount of time spent un- or under-supervised (and, therefore, being the recipients of less socialisation against committing aggressive acts) could cause both an increased average exposure to violent media and an increase in aggressive traits and behaviours.

There is evidence to support Freedman's 'hidden third factor' hypothesis. Despite the positive association between increased exposure to violent media and aggressive behaviours, several studies directly investigating the leisure habits of offenders found that, when "like [was matched] with like" (Cumberbatch, 2004:17) – comparing the viewing habits of violent offenders with those of a law-abiding control group *from a similar socio-economic background* – there were no significant differences between "the delinquent sample and the working class controls" (Cumberbatch, 2004:15), while "middle class controls were much less likely to prefer aggressive programmes than the other two groups" (Halloran, Brown and Cheney 1970). Similar later studies (Kruttschnitt, Heath and Ward 1986) also found no disparity between the viewing habits of offenders and non-offenders from shared backgrounds.

One investigation mentioned in the previous chapter (Hagell and Newburn 1994), undertaken by The Policy Studies Institute in response to wide scale public concern about violent media, in fact found that habitual offenders had "*less* access to television, video and other [media] equipment" (Cumberbatch, 2004:16) than the control group, "*had more* difficulty in thinking of anyone on television they identified with [...] were *less* able to name any favourite television programme [...] and] went to the cinema *less* often (50% said they rarely or never went compared with only a quarter of the control group)" (Cumberbatch, 2004:16). Similarly, when the '1998-1999 Youth Lifestyles Survey' presented a list of risk factors for serious and persistent offending in adolescents and young adults, violent media went completely unmentioned while other pastimes – such as drug use, regular alcohol consumption and frequently hanging "around in public places [...] because there was nowhere better to go or nothing better to do" (Campbell & Harrington,

2000:5) – were argued to have a “cumulative [adverse] effect” (Campbell & Harrington, 2000:5). In other words, rather than being the product of particularly high exposure to violent media, regular and violent young offenders are more likely to spend large amounts of time unsupervised (with parents who “rarely or never know their whereabouts” (Campbell & Harrington, 2000:5) and *unoccupied*, resorting to criminal acts out of a sense of boredom, frustration and “disaffect[ion]” (Campbell & Harrington, 2000:4) from mainstream society.

It is possible that the critical meta-analyses and reviews I have discussed throughout this chapter contain statistical irregularities and errors of their own, or that other, equally careful, theorists might well come to quite different conclusions about this body of research. My aim throughout this review of investigations of the effects model has not necessarily been to offer conclusive arguments or evidence *against* the causal hypothesis, but to demonstrate that there exists no unanimity, no ‘smoking gun’ or single, irrefutable conclusion about the public health risks of media violence to which we must defer before offering timorous defences of culturally-abyssal genres such as horror. I also sought to problematise this research’s disproportionate role in public discourse (and even governmental policies) by pointing out its more evident flaws and inconsistencies, without suggesting that such problems should foreclose or invalidate future inquiry.

In his generally critical review of effects research Richard Felson concedes that media violence can alert unstable, dispositionally aggressive individuals to novel forms of violence of which they might not otherwise have been aware. In other words, as the pop-culturally savvy killers of the post-modern slasher *Scream* argue, “movies don’t create psychos. Movies make psychos more creative”. While exposure to violent media is highly unlikely to exert any significant or long-term behavioural effects on the general population, it is probable, even demonstrable, that aggressive/violent individuals may react in unusual and aberrant ways, taking cues from narratives that speak to their already aberrant urges. As Felson states, “the anecdotal evidence is convincing in this area. There appear to be documented cases in which bizarre events on television are followed by similar events in the real world” where the similarities are simply too pronounced to be coincidental.

Notably, however, the most influential form of media in this sort of copycat event is not necessarily the more demonised, such as horror films, violent comics or death metal music, but the news itself.<sup>40</sup> While our emotional and cognitive responses to fictions may in some ways parallel our responses to narratives about real life events, even morally-aberrant individuals are more likely to take their behavioural cues from factual media than fictive ones. Fictions can certainly broaden our imaginative horizons, expanding the realm of the conceivable by exposing us to novel concepts, characters and situations and inducing us to inspect and reconsider our unexamined assumptions. Yet where criminal ‘inspiration’ is concerned, it is arguably entirely predictable that individuals with villainous ambitions are more likely to model themselves on their real life peers: consuming a fictional narrative in which the protagonist enacts an enviable feat may kindle in me some vague aspiration to do the same, but is surely less encouraging, less concretely *helpful*, than exposure to factual accounts of other people undertaking such actions.

Indeed, would-be criminals are perhaps more likely to be emboldened by real life reports than popular crime dramas, which are, after all, generally designed to provide emotional satisfaction and narrative closure for a general audience: many crime fictions present law enforcement as near-infallible, detecting and despatching even the most ingenious of villains within a single episode. In contrast, some of the more quotidian forms of interpersonal violence face notoriously low conviction rates; only 4% of reported domestic violence incidents result in conviction, and in 30% of reported cases no action is taken by

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<sup>40</sup> In fact, prominent criminal profilers such as Park Dietz suggest that the news media’s obsessive, round the clock coverage following high profile acts of violence such as school or workplace shootings or other spree killings, particularly those reports that highlight and foreground the body count, depict the killer/s as powerful, ingenious or as anti-heroes, and/or scrutinise and publicise details of the killer/s’ life, has a visible, predictable short-term effect on levels of similar crimes. Dietz’s research indicates that “in a country the size of the US, “saturation-level news coverage of mass murder causes, on average, one more mass murder in the next two weeks”. In particular, he alleged that hysterical media coverage led to a “copycat epidemic” following the infamous product-tampering ‘Tylenol’ poisonings of 1982: “Seven people died. It became the most covered story since the Kennedy assassination – and there were suddenly thousands of copycat cases or threats. By 1986, there were more than 4,000 a year. Each new case made the hysteria balloon further. Dr Dietz suggested the media coverage had created an epidemic of copycatting. He implored journalists to restrict their coverage of product-tampering to the local area in which it occurred, where it would be presented in a more sober, restrained tone. They finally agreed. Within months, the cases of product-tampering were in dramatic decline” (Hari, 2010).

the police (Women's Aid, 2012). Similarly, while fictional rapists are likely to be vilified and punished, research suggests that in actuality "between 75 and 95 per cent of rape crimes are never reported to the police" (HM Crown Prosecution Service Inspectorate, 2007:35), and that a third of people surveyed believe that a woman was partially or totally responsible for being raped if she was drunk at the time (Amnesty International UK, 2005).

Furthermore, due to the nature of those individuals who tend to commit impulsive, media-inspired acts of (self) violence, the impetus for such acts can seem tenuous and unpredictable to an outsider: at around the period during which 'video nasties' were being (as it turned out, erroneously) linked to the murder of James Bulger, a fourteen year old boy hanged himself citing the Disney film *The Lion King* as his inspiration for the act in his suicide note. More recently, the horrific murder of a seventeen year old was linked to otherwise blandly inoffensive comedy-horror film *Severance*. Although the killing was motivated by "sexual jealousy" (Child, 2009) (the murderers had been having a sexual relationship with the same woman as the victim) the murderers decided to kill him in the manner they chose after viewing the film, at the time apparently remarking "Wouldn't it be wicked if you could actually do that to someone in real life?" (Child, 2009) Such reactions are, mercifully, as anomalous as they are unaccountable; to take such horrendous, outlying examples as being generally representative of the effects of media violence upon its audience is akin to taking Mark Chapman's assassination of John Lennon as being representative of the effects of reading reclusive American authors.

## **2.4 What are the Real Perils of Violent Media?**

In *The Myth of Media Violence* David Trend argues that we should "extend the conversation about media violence beyond simple [assertions] of condemnation or support" (*Myth:2*), rejecting both the unwarrantedly damning conclusions of effects researchers and the loftily dismissive polemic of theorists like Martin Barker and Julian Petley.

Like many of the other theorists whose reviews and meta-analyses I discuss throughout this chapter, Trend is deeply sceptical of the version of the causal hypothesis promoted by mainstream effects researchers. However, unlike those such as Barker, Petley, Gauntlett, Freedman and Rhodes, Trend criticises the methodology, reasoning and presuppositions underlying much effects research without altogether rejecting the central premise that certain kinds of violent/distressing media could exert morally or socially deleterious effects.

In order to sidestep the unproductive “standoff” (*Myth*:47) between proponents of the causal hypothesis and fiercely-opposed theorists like Barker and Petley, Trend proposes that we adopt some of the critical techniques developed in film, media and cultural studies. If the scrupulously scientific media effects community often ignore context altogether, parcelling out carefully controlled doses of televisual/cinematic violence, he argues that an awareness of genre could prove immensely helpful in understanding the pleasures, and perils, of violent media.

As Trend reminds us, narratives do not “occur in a social vacuum” (*Myth*:51): the ever-popular genre of crime films/television programmes remains so prevalent because it serves, in many ways, to provide viewers with widely-resonant fables of “good against evil”, staging “eternal conflicts” that, some theorists argue, become particularly relevant during “time[s] of distress” (*Myth*:51) and conflict. These broad-strokes modern “morality tales” (*Myth*:51) offer succour by providing viewers with the gratifying sense that justice has, at least in this instance, been served. Trend points out that, during television crime dramas, when the “good-guy police or detectives use violence against criminals” audience members – who are almost invariably emotionally aligned with the heroic detective rather than her villainous quarry – experience some measure of vicarious satisfaction owing to their sense that the protagonists’ violent acts are both “necessary and justified” (*Myth*:52). Trend argues that such narratives, while understandably pleasurable for viewers living in an often unjust world, could also work to reinforce “the broader social endorsement of aggression by those it *sanctions to commit violence on its behalf* [my italics]” (*Myth*:52).

Importantly, Trend is not arguing that exposure to crime narratives will spur viewers to commit acts of imitative violence; as he asserts, the research investigating this possibility remains unconvincing (and often deeply flawed in theory and in execution). Rather, his concern is with what could be termed the *ideological* effects of certain forms of media violence. If crime dramas (and, surely to a far greater extent, news media) constantly confront audiences with context-less, alarmist and stereotyped visions of criminality – motivelessly malicious serial killers, inscrutable terrorist Others, faceless, unreasoningly thuggish ‘chavs’ – then we, as a society, will be more likely to excuse and normalise police brutality and incursions on our civil liberties. Concomitantly, as David Gauntlett notes (though not specifically in support of the notion that depictions of just police/state violence legitimise the use of force), defining violence is in itself far from an apolitical exercise. He argues that mainstream effects-researchers have too often

taken for granted the definitions of media material, such as ‘antisocial’ and ‘prosocial’ programming, as well as characterisations of behaviour in the real world, such as ‘antisocial’ and ‘prosocial’ action [...] These can be ideological value judgements; throwing down a book in disgust, sabotaging a nuclear missile, or smashing cages to set animals free, will always be interpreted in effects studies as ‘antisocial’ not ‘prosocial’ (Gauntlett, 2005:59).

In a society that readily condemns protesters’ destruction of property as inexcusable – while collectively turning a blind eye to the violence everyday enacted on the bodies of workers in the developing world (whose labours provide its material comforts in the first place) – Gauntlett’s point is certainly worth consideration.

Similarly, Trend criticises the elision and misrepresentation of marginalised people that typified the unreconstructed/traditional Western, as well as their role in sculpting (rigid and often pernicious) cultural ideals about how ‘real men’ behave. In such films, the American frontier was “depicted as a colonial wilderness of utopian promise and anarchistic lawlessness [...in need of forceful] taming” by ruggedly individualistic “white-skinned good guys” (*Myth*:52).

I would argue that while the ideological defects and dangers Trend ascribes to certain types/sub-genres of violent media are highly plausible, such problems, although genuinely worrisome, are hardly unique, or inherent, to violent narratives. In fact, as Trend himself notes, while the much-vilified slasher film revels in depicting the stalking, mutilation and murder of young women, they usually also inject “an element of subversion” (*Myth*:64) by featuring unusually active, plot-driving female leads who vanquish the monsters quite without the aid of a passing ‘woodsman’. In contrast, the more mainstream genre of ‘chick flicks’ often reifies dubious and essentialist notions of gender, uncritically endorses superficiality and consumerism, and romanticises behaviours like stalking and sexual harassment that are, in real life, perturbing to say the least. Equally, the recent boom in Apatow-esque comedies depicting slobbish, immature and often sexually predatory ‘man-children’ as the masculine norm presents a similarly dispiriting, and unrealistic, worldview.

More pertinently, Trend also argues that media violence contributes to people’s fear that “they live in a violent world” (*Myth*:58), casting an all-pervading cloud of anxiety over our everyday lives. Trend asserts that this “culture of fear” (*Myth*:59) is not an inevitable consequence of being human; while some awareness of the dangers potentially lurking nearby is natural, he attributes much of the paradoxical hypervigilance attending our (unprecedentedly safe and palatial) modern existence to our bombardment with media images of violence. He cites George Gerbner’s concept of the ‘Mean World Syndrome’: a malaise developed by frequent television viewers, whose sufferers acquire an amplified perception of risk and an exaggeratedly pessimistic, fearful worldview. As Trend argues, news media, which are often tactfully exempted from mainstream discussion of the dangers of media violence, are inherently “driven by stories that produce fear” (*Myth*:59) operating according to a strict economy of urgency – notoriously governed by the dictum that ‘if it bleeds, it leads’. Equally, advertising works by feeding, and then exploiting, “various insecurities and anxieties” (*Myth*:59) (inner peace being insufficiently profitable).

Once again, I raise these comparisons not in order to (fallaciously) grant violent media immunity from criticism since other types of media can also be subject to charges of negative influence, but to problematise the repetitive, alarmist and unproductive nature of

much mainstream discourse about media effects. As Trend, Buckingham and many others argue, it would be ludicrous to deny that violent media exert *any* effects on their audience (such stolidity and emotional imperviousness would surely negate the point of engaging with fictions in the first place), but they aim to challenge the artificially narrow conception of *which* responses are relevant to public inquiry. Rather than trying to suppress debate about media effects, these theorists in fact advocate for a broader and more nuanced dialogue, arguing that the historical focus on imitative violence and aggression has in fact served to obscure equally interesting and important issues.

## Chapter 3: From Perils to Pleasures

### Introduction

In my last chapter I disputed the claim – widely disseminated by effects theorists, public figures and a significant proportion of the mainstream press – that exposure to violent media reliably depraves and corrupts audience members, inflaming nascent aggressive drives and spurring acts of imitative violence. In this section I will begin to examine the less obviously contentious question of why horror is experienced (by some people, at least) as pleasurable. As I have noted previously, horror is a genre that, by definition, depicts frightening and at times repulsive events and beings, a genre whose very purpose is to incite traditionally aversive emotions. The common-sense critique of horror and similarly violent/negative low-brow genres discussed in my introductory chapter presupposes that, because such works seem unambiguously displeasurable from a ‘reasonable person’ standpoint, the key to their appeal must therefore lie in the atypicality, the *unreasonableness*, of their target audience. That material which repels the morally- and affectively – normal viewer, provoking thoroughly unpleasant emotions, can only, through a process of elimination, be attractive to those who are too callous or sadistic to form a more appropriate response.

The assumption that narrative’s pleasures characteristically lie in its provision of unadulteratedly positive emotions and desirable simulated experiences renders horror doubly problematic, casting either its audience, or its appeal, as aberrant. Accepting this premise logically entails that one must either concede that horror, and related genres are ‘traditionally’ if not widely enjoyable, providing the anomalous few with illicit thrills, or present genres with negative content as exceptional and somehow paradoxical, explicable only through appeals to unconscious drives or favourable meta-responses. Throughout this thesis I will criticise the fantasy model, offering a radically different account of narrative pleasure which focuses on the role of attentional and affective engagement.

As in my last chapter, there is one potentially damaging objection to my account of the pleasures of violent and distressing media: the suggestion that the empirical data available clearly supports the dominant conception of horror and related genres. After all, it may be that horror's fans *are* atypical in some way – overwhelmingly composed of adolescents struggling with their burgeoning sexuality, or aggressive, misogynistic 'rogue males' – or that horror narratives are indeed, as many of its most vehement critics argue, commonly structured so as to entice viewers into identifying with the killer, disproportionately targeting female victims and invariably including scenes of sexual violence. If textual analyses and research into the composition and preferences of audience members bear out these assumptions, then it would severely weaken my argument.

Many theories of horror and similarly agonistic genres such as tragedy dispel such genres' morally and philosophically problematic status by appealing to events that occur 'behind the curtain', as it were, attributing their pleasures to unconscious/subjectively inaccessible mental events. Theorists such as Lucretius, Kant, Schiller and Susan Feagin resolve the paradoxes of the sublime and tragedy by ascribing their appeal to gratifying meta-responses or reflections upon the self. Proponents of the purgation model of catharsis argue that violent narratives are attractive because they allow us pleasurable to unburden ourselves of fear, sadness and/or aggressive impulses. The psychoanalytic accounts formulated by critics like James Twitchell, Barbara Creed, Robin Wood and Carol Clover contend that horror is compelling because it invokes, in safely encoded form, our most deeply-buried fears and fantasies. In contrast to these models, I will argue that narrative genres with affectively-negative content do not need to be rendered explicable by any extraordinary underlying mechanisms of this sort. Rather, I aim to demonstrate that the descriptive and predictive failures of the fantasy model are clearly discernible in mainstream, as well as genre, narrative conventions, as well as in audience members' and critics' characterisation of their experiences.

In fact, there is little data to support the view that horror's pleasures reside in its ability to allow viewers to wreak vicariously those sadistic acts that they cannot commit in real life. In contrast to many philosophical solutions to the paradox, the studies and content analyses

I will next discuss are not, for the most part, intended as totalising models of how horror ‘works’. Indeed, the works I will discuss in this section are purposely limited in scope, concentrating on particular audiences or sub-generic norms and employing close textual readings of horror narratives or detailed analyses of interviews with audience members. Rather, I have chosen to examine the following theorists’ work in depth because their research into critically-neglected topics and audiences seriously problematises the dominant view of horror’s appeal and effects that I explored throughout the previous two chapters. The fantasy model – like many influential philosophical explorations of the paradox – is largely bereft of empirical support, grounded in folk-psychology, armchair theorising and seductively plausible intuitions. Focused research into more concrete questions not only serves as a valuable corrective to this abstracting tendency but also demonstrates *where* and *how* the fantasy model fails: it is harder to assert that horror films must appeal to some sort of primordial bloodlust in child viewers when there is research available showing that most children report empathising with fictional victims rather than villains<sup>41</sup>.

### **3.1 She who refuses to ‘refuse to look’ – A profile of the female horror fan**

In ‘The Female Horror Film Audience’, Brigid Cherry examines the pleasures of horror for the spectatrix, questioning problematic mainstream assumptions about the female ‘refusal to look’ (or characteristic displeasure in response to horrific spectacle). Cherry interrogates the popularly-accepted notion that women comprise, at best, a small, reluctant, and

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<sup>41</sup> At times these theorists employ the (elsewhere often nebulous and imprecisely-defined) concept of ‘identification’. Without uncritically accepting the notion that we *must* identify or empathise with protagonists in order to be imaginatively or emotionally invested in a narrative, or that our thoughts and feelings routinely align exactly with those of fictional characters, I would defend Buckingham and Clover’s particular application of the concept as enlightening. Even if one views our characteristic mode of engagement with fictions as more akin to that of an interested and sympathetic observer – feeling for characters without necessarily replicating their depicted emotions or somehow taking on their plight as our own – Clover’s textual analyses nonetheless complicate the traditional view of the slasher or rape-revenge film as systematically prioritising, or encouraging viewers to adopt, the aggressor’s point of view and to revel in his violent acts. Equally, Buckingham’s investigation of children’s responses to horrific and violent narratives – and his discovery that child audience members who enjoyed horror commonly reported feeling fear and indignation in response to violent predatory acts rather than vicarious glee – usefully undermines the common-sense view that horror narratives are only pleasurable because they slake anomalous individuals’ aggressive appetites.

generically-incompetent segment of the audience for horror films by conducting qualitative research designed to present a profile of avowed female horror fans and followers.

It is as if a rhetorical “female exclusion zone” (‘Audience’:1) has been erected around horror as a genre, with criticisms and acclamations of the genre alike tending to construct its audience as overwhelmingly young and male, implicitly positioning post-adolescent and female fandom as aberrant. As Jean Auerbach notes, “the most sophisticated and best-known experts on American popular horror insist that it is and always has been a boy’s game. Twitchell, Skal and Kendrick construct a compelling paradigm of adolescent boys chafing against the smug domestication of the 1950s, but this paradigm assumes by definition that girls were contented domesticators” (‘Audience’:18). Women constitute an “invisible” (‘Audience’:vi) – or invisibilised – audience for horror: even when (as semi-regularly occurs via various pieces of consumer research) it is found that women constitute a non-trivial share of the audience for horror, it is “appear[s] to be a constant [and ever-renewed] source of amazement, however frequently research reveals it” (‘Audience’:24).

There is a striking disparity between women’s presumed lack of interest in or outright aversion to horrific filmic images and their response to other forms of horror, since “contemporary surveys of computer game players, visitors to Madame Tussaud’s Chamber of Horrors and readers of *Goosebumps* and *Point Horror* pre-adolescent’s and young adult’s horror fiction have revealed that women continue to be as, if not more, attracted to [non-cinematic] horrific entertainment than men” (‘Audience’:5)

In fact, Cherry argues, “demographic profiles of contemporary cinema audiences suggest that women can comprise up to 50% of horror film audiences” (‘Audience’:1). For example, the Cinema Advertising Association estimates that female viewers comprised around 50 per cent of the audience for (then-recent) horror and ‘new brutalist’ films such as *Man Bites Dog*, *Silence of the Lambs* and *Scream*, and up to 40 per cent of the audience for *Alien*<sup>3</sup>, *Reservoir Dogs* and *Natural Born Killers*. *Scream 2* even averaged 55 per cent female and 45 per cent male attendance. Certainly, there is much evidence to suggest that pre-pubescent and pubescent girls’ appetite for non-cinematic horror fictions matches or

even outstrips that of boys. For example, it is known that girls “make up a large proportion of the readership of the young adult Point Horror books and Goosebumps horror fiction aimed at pre-teens” (‘Audience’:20). Cherry also cites a piece of market research commissioned by computer games company Sierra On-Line (Cumberbatch and Wood, 1995). The researchers conducting this survey interviewed 305 teenagers (195 male and 110 female) regarding their hobbies and interests. Among other questions, participants were asked to rank their favourite film genres. As Cherry points out, despite the common conception that horror is an overwhelmingly masculine genre, completely orthogonal to female tastes and attitudes, 27 per cent of the survey’s female respondents claimed that horror was their favourite film genre, in contrast to only 14 per cent of boys. The boys involved in this survey in fact “much prefer[red] Action films [to horror films] ([with] 44 per cent selecting it as their favourite type against 14 per cent of girls)” (‘Audience’:17).

Horror in literary form is also known to appeal “across the sex and age ranges” (‘Audience’:1), with women historically being regarded as the primary audience for the “gothic horror literature of the past centuries” (‘Audience’:14). Perhaps because horror is so unignorably a ‘body’ genre (to employ Linda Williams’ term), exacting unpredictable physical effects upon the vulnerable, compliant bodies of audience members, in the past it was associated with female audiences; as Jean Auerbach points out in *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, “Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* reminds us that in the eighteenth century, horror was by definition a woman’s genre” (‘Audience’:18), a peculiarly feminine folly or diversion.

Equally, there is widespread recognition that one related genre addressing horrific and aversive content – that of true-life crime books – “have a majority female readership and [that] there are large numbers of women who read magazines such as *True Life Crimes* (see Smith, 1994, p.25), indicating that women in particular might be fascinated by violent events or psychopathologies” (‘Audience’:24).

However, whatever the veracity of this association, “since the rise of the slasher film in the late 70s, the horror fan has been regarded as consisting primarily of adolescent boys and

men under the age of twenty-five" ('Audience':4), and, as such, has been subject to a great deal of psychoanalytic textual analyses aimed at uncovering its relation to "adolescent male psychosexual processes" ('Audience':4). Since such analyses tend to position horror as "a problematical genre for female spectators" ('Audience':41), female viewers are, in popular discourse, presented as either "reluctant or immasculated" ('Audience':41) – shrinking from horrific spectacle in proper, feminine revulsion or able to derive pleasure from onscreen violence and terror because they are in some way anomalous, gender traitors complicit with a sadistic male gaze. Cherry argues that both mainstream and feminist models of horror cinema have historically proven inadequate at decoding the pleasures the genre holds for the spectatrix, and suggests constructing "alternative models of generic and gendered spectatorship" ('Audience':41).

She asserts that "there is evidence to suggest that, firstly, women have always enjoyed horror and continue to do so and, secondly, that women's consumption of horror may have been [suppressed or] forced 'underground'" ('Audience':19), with female viewers constituting a 'hidden audience'. Even many of the confessed horror followers to whom she spoke denied being 'fans' and consumed horror fictions in isolation (a common practice with other "despised genres" ('Audience':65) such as romances and soap operas). Most were eager to distance themselves from mainstream perceptions of horror fans as depraved and/or dangerous. As Cherry points out, declaring oneself to be a female horror fan is triply transgressive of mainstream norms – as "fans they are geeks or nerds, as horror fans they are depraved, and as female horror fans they are unfeminine" ('Audience':174). Relatedly, some of her participants communicated a "dislike of watching horror films in a cinema because of the behavior of other viewers" ('Audience':70), as well as being disinclined to participate in mainstream fan culture due to marginalization and endemic sexism.

Cherry recruited avowed female horror fans and followers by placing advertisements in horror magazines, as well as by soliciting participants through fan societies and online discussion groups/mailing lists. After an initial questionnaire she invited subjects to participate in open-ended group interviews, discussing a wide range of topics including

their histories as horror fans or followers, their cinematic preferences and viewing habits, their own thoughts on the appeal horror holds for viewers in general (and for themselves in particular) and their thoughts on mainstream perceptions of the genre and its devotees.

The participants typically dated their burgeoning taste for horror to a very young age, their accounts diverging markedly from those of well-known theorists like Twitchell (in whose model horror appeals because it caters to the psychosexual drives of – implicitly male – adolescents, its allure originating with the emergence of such drives during pubescence and palling at the onset of adulthood). Because the subjects' interest "almost always predate[d] the accepted age" ('Audience':96) for actually viewing horror films, the films or programmes they cited as the catalyst for their induction into the genre were rarely "hardcore, graphic or violent [...] or even films classified as horror" ('Audience':97). Typically, Cherry's respondents traced their first memorable experiences with 'horror' to being severely frightened by (relatively innocuous) materials such as "Disney films, children's science fiction serials, or adult science fiction films or television programmes" ('Audience':98) and then becoming aware of a paradoxical desire to repeat this experience.

Perhaps problematically for those analyses of the genre that attribute its pleasures to thematic or structural elements unique to horror narratives, after reviewing her subjects' responses Cherry concludes that a predilection for certain kinds of emotional affect – morbid fascination, curiosity about the unknown/attraction to the fantastic, and, above all, fear – is in fact central to female fans' attraction to horror. As she argues, this would explain why the women to whom she spoke employed such catholic definitions of the genre, and why, when describing their formative experiences with horror, they were often unable to remember anything specific about the film or programme that had scared them, while able to recount how this stimulus made them feel in great detail.

The female horror viewers Cherry interviewed evinced "a strong attraction to [...] frightening and horrific material" ('Audience':94), with most professing to "enjoy [...] being scared" ('Audience':71). Notably, many claimed always to have been gripped by a

“strong fascination” (‘Audience’:98) with the characters that frightened them as children, simultaneously repulsed and transfixed by the macabre and the monstrous.

These respondents’ descriptions of their reasons for liking horror lend qualified support to Noël Carroll’s contention that art-horror is pleasurable because it appeals to our native curiosity about interstitial beings. In Carroll’s model, the somehow enjoyable affective ambivalence that characterizes our engagement with art-horror derives from the genre’s ability to simultaneously attract and repulse viewers with its depiction of categorically-subversive (and thus monstrous) beings.

However, as I discuss in further detail in chapter 6, there is one crucial and frequently-noted problem with Carroll’s theory that the testimony of Cherry’s subjects does nothing to alleviate. Carroll asserts that we enjoy horror in spite of, rather than because of, the fear and disgust it excites, tolerating these genuinely displeasurable emotions solely in order to satisfy our curiosity about monstrous beings. According to Carroll, such negative feelings are the inevitable by-product of our fascination-born desire to study ontologically transgressive creatures. The curiosity and fear monsters inspire in us are inextricably linked; both derive from their flagrant violation of our categorial schemes.

Problematically, as many theorists have pointed out, there are numerous other genres that cater to this same interest in biologically impossible beings without eliciting the traditionally negative emotions in which horror traffics. Fantasy, science fiction, fairy tales and magical realism all depict similarly impossible beings and situations without (necessarily) evoking fear and disgust. In fact, Cherry’s research shows that many female horror fans also follow these related genres. If, as in Carroll’s hypothesis, we experience the emotions associated with the horror genre as an undesirable side-effect, then surely genres, like fantasy and science fiction, that depict benign, attractive and non-threatening preternatural creatures (e.g. mermaids, phoenixes, glamorous ‘gynoids’ etc) should supplant horror altogether? Therefore, while Cherry’s research suggests that there is indeed a link of some sort between fascination, fear and the allure of the horrific, I would argue that Carroll’s theory is marred by its failure adequately to account for the co-

existence of horror with such related genres (as well as only encompassing supernatural horror).

Cherry also discusses prior studies into the nature of horror's appeal which link an attraction for violent, frightening and macabre material to certain personality traits. In his research on the topic Zuckerman characterizes sensation seeking as "a trait defined by the seeking of varied, novel, complex, and intense sensations and experiences" ('Audience':111). While women tend to score lower than men on some measures on the sensation seeking scale (SSS), including thrill and adventure seeking, susceptibility to boredom and disinhibition, they exhibit similar levels of experience seeking (defined as the desire to seek novel experiences "through the mind and senses" ('Audience':111) Female horror fans' attraction to the genre may originate in such a drive to seek out new or intense experiences, a need to interrogate, "confront and explore [that which most] frightens them" ('Audience':112), investigating their own responses to the strange and the horrifying. Cherry posits that curiosity of this sort "might be a foundation of the profile of horror film fans and followers" ('Audience':114), with the majority of her participants reporting a "strong fascination with images of monstrosity" ('Audience':117). In fact, in a related study, Zuckerman and Little (1986) found that curiosity about morbid experiences (CAME) was positively correlated with horror film attendance among women.

As I argue in later sections, particularly during my analysis in the penultimate chapter, there is evidence to suggest that all narrative genres rely upon agonistic curiosity to varying extents to attract and retain audience members' attention. Violent and distressing fictions differ from more comprehensibly pleasurable genres in degree rather than in kind: while lighter-hearted genres may not employ equally intense and/or physical conflict in order to secure our attention, stories overwhelmingly focus upon problematic situations and goal-oriented activity. In other words, the fantasy model not only fails to capture the piquant pleasures of horror or tragedy, but lacks explanatory power even when it comes to narrative sub-genres that are typically viewed as low-brow and nakedly aspirational, such as the romance.

Conversely, many of Cherry's participants described undergoing a paradoxical process of "reversal" ('Audience':101) whereby an initially *displeasurable* sensation of fright or aversion was later converted into an at least ambivalently pleasurable sense of attraction and mastery. Unlike the first group of respondents, whose immediate enjoyment of apparently aversive stimuli is consistent with integrationist or coexistentialist models like Gaut's and Carroll's, these women's experience appears to support the control thesis. According to this view, horror is enjoyable – in spite of its negative content and the traditionally unpleasant emotions it excites – because it affords audience members a gratifying sense of self-mastery. Only by first exposing oneself to emotionally-challenging stimuli can one experience the subsequent satisfaction of learning to manage and subdue the negative feelings they evoke. Indeed, one of Cherry's participants explicitly identified the consciousness that she was "getting inured to the goriness [...] and toughening up" ('Audience':110) as one of the pleasures of horror fandom.

Such accounts of horror's appeal are thematically aligned with venerable philosophical theses including Kant's model of the sublime and Lucretius' solution to the paradox of tragedy. In my later discussion of the topic I will argue that this group of theories serves simultaneously to complicate and neaten our relationship to seemingly *displeasurable* aesthetic stimuli – rendering our pain-inflected pleasures more circuitous, more self-reflexive and thereby defusing any perturbing or paradoxical implications. Although such theories are often positioned as an alternative to 'one stage' or integrationist accounts, I will argue that the control thesis can in fact complement and coexist with the theory that horror and related genres are attractive precisely because they excite strong emotions and address negative subjects.

### **3.2 Sheep in Wolves' Clothing: Identification and Exploitation Horror**

In *Men, Women and Chainsaws* Carol Clover offers a compelling, if at times counter-intuitive, account of the pleasures that exploitation horror affords the male viewer. Mainstream (and particularly feminist) analyses of horror often remain transfixed by the genre's grimy trappings, its butchered women and predatory males, insisting that audience

members' identification with a sadistic or 'assaultive' gaze must therefore be "its cause, its effect, its point" (*Chainsaws*:182) However, Clover argues that sub-genres like the rape-revenge or slasher movie, which are typically construed as unambiguously misogynistic, in fact serve to engage male viewers' *masochistic* fantasies, indulging their (unspeakable and thoroughly sublimated) desire to occupy a passive or 'feminised' position.

For example, Clover argues that comments Stephen King makes while analyzing the success of his debut novel *Carrie* are inadvertently revealing, affording us a glimpse of this implicit substitution in progress:

For me, Carrie White [the novel's eponymous monster-victim] is a sadly misused teenager, an example of the sort of person whose spirit is so often broken for good in that pit of man-and woman-eaters that is your normal suburban high school [...] and one reason for the success of the story in both print and film, I think, lies in this: Carrie's revenge is something that any student who has ever had his gym shorts pulled down in Phys Ed or his glasses thumb-rubbed in study hall could approve of" (King, 1993 [1981]:171-172).

Clover notes that "although the 'his' [in King's examples] may in principle refer to the universal subject, the 'any student' in question here looks a lot like an adolescent boy [with the forms of bullying noticeably characteristic of, and limited to,] things boys do to each other" (*Chainsaws*:4). Through some sleight of hand, King's putative 'everyperson' Carrie White comes to stand in for every *boy*. She argues that this unconscious slippage between female victim and male audience member suggests an intriguing possibility: the notion that "male viewers are quite prepared to identify not just with screen females [but (perhaps especially) with] screen females in fear and pain" (*Chainsaws*:5). Along with some proponents of the catharsis-through-clarification model, Clover argues that horror is appealing because it speaks to (male) viewers' innermost "fears and desires [reigniting] the residual conflict surrounding those feelings" (*Chainsaws*:11).

Clover cites the ubiquitous 'Final Girl'<sup>42</sup> survivor of slasher movies as evidence of this persistent cross-gender identification. Clover argues that the Final Girl is archetypically

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<sup>42</sup> So called because she is the lone/last survivor of the villain's murderous attentions.

“boyish” (*Chainsaws*:40), an interstitial, boundary-straddling figure, who eschews the pneumatic, over-the-top femininity of her (soon-to-be-felled) friends and so escapes their fate. Her gender is “compromised from the outset” (*Chainsaws*:48) and, owing to her possession of certain qualities – such as “smartness, gravity [...] sexual reluctance [...] and ability to fight with the killer] energetically and convincingly” (*Chainsaws*:40) – she is implicitly allied with “the very boys she fears or rejects, not to speak of the killer himself” (*Chainsaws*:40). Indeed, as Clover points out, the Final Girl’s very name is often gender-ambiguous, citing a list of prominent examples of this trend: “Stevie, Marti, Terry, Laurie, Stretch, Will, Joey, Max” (*Chainsaws*:40). Equally, her unladylike assumption of the interrogative gaze – a function often reserved for male heroes in traditional horror narratives – further signals her androgynous status.

Many theorists critical of the horror genre argue that filmmakers’s frequent use of the “I-camera” (*Chainsaws*:45) (which allows viewers to see events through the villain’s eyes) forces audience members to identify with the killer, implying that the pleasures of such films must therefore reside in their ability to provide viewers with the vicarious experience of terrorizing and murdering women. Clover argues that this leap in reasoning is far more problematic than it might first appear; in fact, she asserts, “the relationship between camera point of view and the processes of viewer identification [are] poorly understood” (*Chainsaws*:45), and it is common for filmmakers to deploy I-camera shots even under circumstances in which viewers are highly unlikely to empathise with the point of view represented. For example, Steven Spielberg “stage[s] an attack in *Jaws* from the shark’s point of view [...] while Hitchcock presents] an attack in *The Birds* from the bird-eye perspective [...] with] the locus classicus in this connection [being] the view-from-the-coffin shot in Carl Th. Dreyer’s *Vampyr*, in which the I-camera sees through the eyes of a dead man” (*Chainsaws*:45). Such instances suggest either that viewers’ identificatory capacity is improbably elastic, or, more realistically, that “point-of-view shots can sometimes be pro forma” (*Chainsaws*:45). Even if one uncritically accepts this conflation of point of view shots with ‘intended’ identification, Clover notes that we tend only to be linked to the killer in this manner early on in the film. By the latter stages “our closeness to him wanes as our closeness to the Final Girl waxes” (*Chainsaws*:45). By the end, viewers are firmly aligned

with victim-hero rather than villain, viewing the killer through her eyes, cowering with her in her hiding space while he attempts to find her.

Clover's (and others') observation of audience responses seems to bear out this textual reading. Observers collectively attest to the ability of the “‘live’ audience to switch sympathies in midstream” (*Chainsaws*:46), readily alternating between cheering on the killer and his victims, empathizing now with predator and now with prey.

While the films she analyses encourage the viewer to occupy “a variety of positions and character sympathies” (*Chainsaws*:8) in their preliminary stages, the viewpoint of the victim-hero prevails during the climactic phase. As Clover points out, the slasher films she analyses are typically bereft of any focal male characters with whom viewers could realistically identify; “on the good side, the only viable candidates are the boyfriends or schoolmates of the girls [who tend for the most part to be] marginal, undeveloped characters [who] die early in the film” (*Chainsaws*:44). Meanwhile, the rarely-glimpsed killers present similarly uncongenial targets for viewer-identification. Even “when we finally get a good look [at these masked, shambling and wheezing figures, they] hardly invite immediate or conscious empathy” (*Chainsaws*:44) or admiration. In contrast, the Final Girl is introduced at or near the beginning of the story, and the initially multi-perspectival narrative coalesces decisively around her viewpoint by the film’s end-game. She is “intelligent, watchful and levelheaded [...] the only one whose perspective approaches our own privileged understanding of the situation” (*Chainsaws*:44). Because of the ways in which her experience duplicates the viewers’ own – her vigilance, her active, inquisitive ‘gaze’, her superior knowledge in contrast to other characters – she must be considered the “undisputed ‘I’” (*Chainsaws*:43) of the slasher genre.

The victim-identified nature of slasher and rape-revenge movies belies the frequently-levelled charge that they serve as misogynistic fantasies. Clover argues that there is something suspicious, something obfuscatory, about mainstream critics’ refusal to countenance the possibility that a mostly male audience could identify with a female victim, suggesting that this reticence is in itself “evidence that something crucial to the

system of cultural representation is at stake" (*Chainsaws*:227). The notion that horror is pleasurable because it caters to male sadism is more consonant with mainstream gender roles – and therefore, in an important sense, more *palatable* – than the suggestion that, as Clover asserts, that which masquerades as “male-on-female violence [...might in reality be standing in for] male-on-male sex” (*Chainsaws*:52).

Clover also challenges the view that slasher narratives are pleasurable insofar as they act as a form of misogynist wish-fulfillment by suggesting alternative explanations for the increased focus on female victims. She emphasises the role that cinematic conventions play in perpetuating the ‘femaleness’ of victimhood. Because, (per Laura Mulvey) the cinematic gaze is implicitly masculine, “just as that gaze [automatically] ‘knows’ how to fetishise the female [but not the male] form” (*Chainsaws*:50), so it ‘knows’, in the same way, how to depict female but not male terror. Filmmakers are the inheritors of a pre-established visual shorthand for evoking feminine fear, with a set of cinematic customs/clichés we no longer even notice that “simply ‘see’[...and accustom viewers to seeing] males and females differently” (*Chainsaws*:51).

An even more significant contributory factor to this disparity is the “broader [or different] range of emotional expression traditionally allowed women [...] crying, cowering, screaming, fainting trembling [and] begging for mercy belong to the female” (*Chainsaws*:51), gendered feminine just as displays of overt hostility, anger and strength are implicitly coded as masculine. Female characters’ greater lassitude to portray helpless, unrestrained fear (without uncomfortably transgressing and upsetting culturally-ingrained notions of gender) is responsible for at least part of this pervasive filmic “double standard” (*Chainsaws*:51).

Textual analyses carried out by other theorists support Clover’s hypothesis. In ‘Content Trends in Contemporary Horror Films’, Barry Sapolksy and Fred Molitor investigated the frequently-levelled charges that slasher or “exploitation” films (Sapolksy & Molitor, 1996:33) “disproportionately portray vicious attacks on women and tie images of extreme violence to scenes of sexual titillation and precoital behaviour” (Sapolksy & Molitor,

1996:33). During their analysis of 83 films from this sub-genre they found no significant differences between the mean number of male versus female victims per film. Significantly, they also argued that, contrary to mainstream critiques of the genre, “direct acts of sexual aggression are not commonly portrayed in slasher films” (Sapolsky & Molitor, 1996:41). Only “between one-sixth and one-third of the murdered females were presented in a sexual or erotic situation before or at the time of the attack”, with the three content analyses they employed finding that the slasher film’s notorious and allegedly constant “juxtapositions of sex and violence” (Sapolsky & Molitor, 1996:41) occurred only about one time per film, on average. However, while gender did not affect characters’ probability of being victimised, “females were shown in fear significantly longer than were males [...] and the average number of seconds of threats directed at males was significantly shorter than the threats directed at females” (Sapolsky & Molitor, 1996:45). Having demonstrated that certain basic and oft-repeated assumptions about the slasher film are false, Molitor and Sapolsky hypothesise that these misconceptions live on because “those scenes that dwell on the woman’s terror [are more effectively unsettling and] offensive to many viewers than are more direct acts of physical violence” (Sapolsky & Molitor, 1996:46).

At times, Clover’s generally deft analysis of horror characterization and tropes lapses into tautology. For example, her broad and textually unsubstantiated assertion that “male victims are shown in feminine postures at the moment of their extremity” (*Chainsaws*:12) can only be interpreted to suggest that being prone, terrorised or victimised is in itself somehow quintessentially (rather than merely culturally and generically-coded as) feminine. In fact, as Sapolsky and Molitor (and Clover herself elsewhere in the text<sup>43</sup>) note in their discussion of the sub-genre, although male deaths in the slasher film tend to rival female deaths in *quantity*, there have historically been marked differences in their *quality*. While female victims are almost invariably allowed a moment to appreciate the mortal danger they are in, the camera lingering pointedly on their tearstained faces and wide, fearful eyes, male characters are often taken completely unawares or killed in a brief,

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<sup>43</sup> “The death of a male is nearly always swift; even if the victim grasps what is happening to him, he has no time to react or register terror [...] the death of a male is moreover more likely to be viewed from a distance, or viewed only dimly” (*Chainsaws*:35) or to occur entirely offscreen.

anticlimactic struggle<sup>44</sup>. It is as if the camera itself shies away from portraying male characters undergoing the kind of protracted, helpless terror and vulnerability through which the Final Girl must, by definition, pass and surmount – the “screaming, crying, fleeing, cringing and [for the Final Girl’s less fortunate female cohorts] dying” (*Chainsaws*:18) constitutive of the slasher sub-genre.

Clover’s central thesis – that certain types of horror enact a “politics of displacement [...with female victims’ mutilated, multiply-penetrated bodies serving as a proxy] through which the boy can simultaneously experience [and disavow his] forbidden desires” (*Chainsaws*:18) – requires that this transposition is in fact legible in the texts she analyses. While she imputes this overdetermined “one-sex logic” (*Chainsaws*:16) to horror films themselves, arguing that horror is a realm in which gender necessarily “inheres in [character functions like victim or villain] – that there is something about the victim function that wants manifestation in a female, and something about the monster and hero functions that wants expression in a male” (*Chainsaws*:12), in some cases Clover enforces this reading even in the absence of clear textual evidence. As Cherry argues in her critique of Clover’s analysis, her insistent assumption that “those who save themselves are [incontrovertibly] male” (*Chainsaws*:59) “leave[s] unquestioned a gender order that assigns activity to males and passivity to females” (‘Audience’:47), recreating, rather than merely exposing, the stale binary in which “active female desire [and power] can only be defined as [...] masculinised” (‘Audience’:47).

However, while I would dispute Clover’s central thesis – that certain sub-genres of horror are pleasurable for male viewers insofar as they “trade [...] in incest” (*Chainsaws*: 217), allowing them to explore their masochistic desire to be “humiliatingly and violently penetrated” (*Chainsaws*:217) or impregnated by a dominant paternal figure – Clover makes many valuable and incisive ancillary points that are well-rooted in the texts she examines. Her analyses constitute a powerful rebuttal to many frequently-levelled criticisms, and assumptions, about the pleasures, of ‘low’ or exploitation horror. In

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<sup>44</sup> This trend is notably absent from the video nasties *du jour* – ‘torture porn’ films including *Saw*, *Hostel* and (proto/ur-example) *Cube*, which tend either to terrorise both male and female victims in equal measure or even to visit the worst torments on male characters.

particular, I would endorse her claims that male viewers are not simply capable of, but encouraged to, identify with victimised female characters, that this tendency to identify with the Final Girl/victim-hero is the generic norm, rather than the exception, and that the frequency with which female rather than male characters are protractedly stalked, terrorised and murdered is due primarily to a profound cultural discomfort with male expressions of fear and vulnerability.

As Cherry argues, there is much textual evidence to suggest that audience sympathies readily cross gender lines, that (the assumed-to-be-predominantly male) viewers' enjoyment is not predicated upon a sadistic identification with the killer, and that while, like many genres, horror's gender politics are imperfect to say the least, it contains notable subversive elements.

### **3.3 David Buckingham on children's responses to negative content**

Like many of the theorists I discussed in the previous two chapters, David Buckingham argues that the dominant effects research model is fatally limited, not just by the “many inadequacies” (*Moving*:5) of methodology and analysis identified by effects sceptics, but by its narrowness of focus, its fixation with one *sort* of effect. He suggests that the “concern with imitative behavioural effects which has dominated the debate [about the moral status of violent media] for so long has proven to be profoundly unproductive” (*Moving*:8). In *Moving Images*, Buckingham adopts a different angle of approach, investigating the *emotional* impact of media depicting violence (and other negative content) on children, addressing how the painful responses elicited by such narratives – fictional and factual – are often inextricably entangled with their pleasures. He also examines the ways in which “‘negative’ emotions may have positive consequences” (*Moving*:2), arguing that children are often drawn to precisely those narratives that most effectively dramatise their concerns, “provid[ing] comparatively ‘safe’ opportunities [...] to learn to cope with them” (*Moving*:3).

Buckingham spoke to both children and their parents throughout 1993-4, initially conducting “a series of small, group-focused interviews with a total of 72 children in four age groups: 6-7, 9-10, 12-13 and 15-16” (*Moving*:8). During the first set of interviews, the researchers allowed children to steer the conversation, asking open-ended questions about “the kind of things they found [...] frightening, sad, disgusting and worrying” (*Moving*:9) on video and television, and encouraging them to discuss specific examples in greater detail. After this followed a second phase, in which the researchers re-interviewed groups of children about particular programmes or genres that had, during the first round of interviews, been identified as “rais[ing] interesting questions about [children’s understanding of] the relationship between television and reality” (*Moving*:9). While conducting these more focused interviews with the children, the researchers also interviewed a (demographically-balanced/representative) sample of their parents, asking about how they monitored and regulated their children’s access and responses to television.

Although the researchers did not introduce the issue of imitative violence themselves, owing to its then-prominence in the news (in connection with the alleged link between *Child’s Play 3* and the murder of James Bulger) concerns about media violence arose frequently. Interestingly, while “parents [interviewed for Buckingham’s research...] occasionally expressed the belief that *other* people’s children might be led to copy what they watched, their concerns for their *own* children were primarily to do with them being disturbed or upset” (*Moving*:6), particularly by *factual* accounts of violence or distressing events. Equally, many of the children to whom he and his co-researcher spoke discussed imitative violence only in the context of what younger children might do, displacing concerns about the corrupting effects of violent media onto others, “expressing [their] concern about such matters [and by so doing,] implicitly positioning themselves as somehow immune” (*Moving*:77). As Buckingham notes, it seems that the dangerous others who might fall prey to the moral perils of violent fictions are “by definition, always elsewhere” (*Moving*:78): “ten year olds will say, *we* aren’t influenced by what we watch: it’s only little kids who copy what they see [...] and yet, when you talk to those little kids, the story is the same” (*Moving*:80) Children and parents alike readily admitted that they/ their offspring sometimes incorporated things they saw in violent media into their play but

emphasized their awareness of the all-important distinction between ‘real’ violence and play-fighting.

In stark contrast to the prescriptive account of the pleasures of violent and horrific narratives offered by their critics – who posit that viewers *must* identify with the predator rather than his prey in order to engage with and enjoy such narratives – Buckingham found that in most cases, far from adopting the “masterful, sadistic ‘male [/monstrous] gaze’”, the children to whom he spoke assumed “the position of the victim rather than the ‘monster’” (*Moving*:106). When watching horror films, his subjects identified with “the experience of victimization” (*Moving*:107), instinctively relating the harrowing events onscreen to their own bodies, their own lives: “Jenny (15) [reported thinking after watching *Hellraiser*] ‘imagine if this happened, imagine if your skin got ripped off’ (*Moving*:107) Equally, when children incorporated aspects of violent narratives into their play, (a subject of particular concern to many of those opposed to media violence) play-acted “revenge on the monster was often the central aim” (*Moving*:107).

Despite this uncomfortable identification with onscreen victims, Buckingham stresses the paradoxical eagerness with which child viewers engage with frightening or disturbing narratives, describing how, “while many of [his subjects] had been scared and given nightmares as a result of watching horror, their prime motivation for doing so was clearly to do with pleasure” (*Moving*:112) While, like Cherry, Buckingham notes the role that more comprehensibly pleasurable meta-responses clearly play in viewers’ enjoyment of violent/horrific narratives, he also observes that, in many instances, a film’s scariness was “seen to be synonymous with [its] pleasure[s]” (*Moving*:112). For example, his subjects repeatedly expressed the desire to revisit precisely those parts of films and television programmes that had frightened them most: “many children claimed to have seen favourite horror films ‘over and over again’; while others described how they would use the video to fast-forward to the ‘best bits’ – that is, the scary bits – or to watch those parts again” (*Moving*:113). As Buckingham points out, part of this compulsion to repeat that which was once experienced as frightening, even traumatic, can be attributed to the desire for mastery – increased familiarity dulling the feelings that were at first unbearably intense. However,

while the desire for pleasurable meta-responses (i.e. feelings of bravery, generic-competence and maturity) clearly played a role in the children's desire to engage with horrific narratives – with many of Buckingham's participants describing how they learnt to cope with negative emotions and conquer their fear through repeat viewing – ineffectual horror films that *failed* to inspire an appropriate amount of fear were also experienced as lacklustre and “frustrating” (*Moving*:115). As Buckingham points out, even for avowed fans of the genre, “the pleasure[s] [of horror were] seen to be inextricably tied up with the possibility of pain” (*Moving*:115), with viewers always experiencing some measure of cognitive and affective ambivalence.

For example, numerous subjects recounted how they were able to manage their fear while viewing a frightening film or programme by employing a coping strategy Buckingham refers to as ‘modality judgements’, consciously reminding themselves of the unreality and improbability of the events depicted. However, among Buckingham's subjects “the experience of fear [...] frequently appear[ed] to intensify” (*Moving*:104) *after* viewing, with many participants describing how they acquired “bizarre” (*Moving*:104) quasi-phobic avoidant behaviours in response to things they had seen on television or video despite their awareness of their fictive nature: “as Angela said, in relation to her fears of walking over drains [after viewing the film *IT*, in which an evil, sewer-dwelling clown menaces and devours children] ‘I know that it’s not real but at the back of my mind I think I may as well not chance it’” (*Moving*:106). Buckingham suggests that horror often works by exploiting this chink of uncertainty. What frightened the subjects to whom he spoke was not the thought that “‘they’ will actually come out of the television and ambush [viewers]” (*Moving*:106) – nothing so affirmative – but a lingering, paradoxical “doubt” (*Moving*:106) that somehow coexists with their knowledge that such things are impossible.

As I discuss in the fourth chapter, it is arguable that any emotional engagement with fiction implies some degree of cognitive dissonance. Just as optical illusions are generated by certain inbuilt biases of human perception and cognition, fictional narratives seem to act as a kind of emotional *trompe l'oeil*; we often respond to fictions as if we are reading about (or watching) real, if geographically/temporally distant, events, with narratives that we

know to be entirely false nonetheless serving to compel our attention and emotional engagement if they are sufficiently vivid and well-executed.

Buckingham likens this contradictory epistemological stance to Noël Carroll's 'thought theory' (formulated in response to the paradox of fiction). Just as, in Carroll's view, emotional responses to horror fictions do not require that "we ever give up our belief that the monster is fictional" (*Moving*:106), but only that we *entertain* the thought of what might happen if they were (and how we would feel about it), Buckingham attributes viewers' fear to "a general *doubt* about the supernatural" (*Moving*:106).

This cognitive dissonance is complemented by an equally "fundamental [affective] ambivalence" (*Moving*:115) Participants reported feeling compelled to view/re-view horror films or programmes, attraction and fascination mingling with fear and even repulsion:

Stella described a scene from *The Fog* [as] 'disgusting', even though she had seen it several times: 'I just had to, I didn't want to go back and watch it, but I wanted to see it again, so I just went and watched it'. Likewise, Jane (15) said of horror films in general: 'They all scare me. I don't like them, they scare me too much. I like to watch them though' (*Moving*:115).

Significantly, Buckingham's research seems to contradict one persuasive and influential hypothesis as to why many of us derive pleasure from engaging with distressing narratives – the clarificationist model of catharsis. It is often postulated that tragedy and other similarly 'paradoxical' genres may be experienced as gratifying, despite their apparently displeasurable content, because they offer either a just resolution or some degree of narrative "closure" (*Moving*:115) (however bleak) that is unavailable in real life. However, he notes, while many children attributed their compulsion to continue viewing to a desire to know the outcome of the story, a surprising proportion of them in fact "appeared to be unable to recall the endings of films, even when they had described the films themselves in considerable detail" (*Moving*:115). While the most frightening, macabre and transgressive scenes from favoured horror films retain something of their original charge, lingering in

the memory due to their residual capacity to evoke a thrill of fear or disgust, it seems that happy endings do not make a similar impression.

For this reason, Buckingham suggests that “much of the appeal of horror must surely lie not only in the pleasure of watching evil destroyed or controlled, but also in watching it triumph” (*Moving*:116). Although, as I discuss in my concluding chapter, this is a reasonable contention, and certainly represents a valid interpretation of his subjects’ remarks, I would argue that this phenomenon also reflects an important facet of the psychology of storytelling. While ambiguous, unresolved or otherwise unsatisfying narratives pluck at the imagination, seeming to demand some sort of redress, in an important sense the very aspect of happy (or at least narratively ‘tidy’) endings that renders them satiating also often ensures that they do not snare in the memory – too smooth, too *completed*, to retain our attention for long<sup>45</sup>.

## Conclusion

As I will argue in greater depth in my penultimate chapter (‘The Problem with Pleasure’), genres such as horror and tragedy intrinsically pose a challenge to commonly-held theories about why we engage with and enjoy fictional narratives, in addition to problematising otherwise reasonable assumptions about our desires and emotional responses. The divided or ambivalent character of these genres’ pleasures, the contradictory desires they evoke (we both do, and do not, want Desdemona or Marilyn Crane to die, our sense of narrative necessity or logic warring with our attachment to fictional characters), our simultaneous knowledge of a narrative’s unreality with our emotional ‘knowledge’ that its outcome matters deeply to us, all contribute to a perturbing sense of paradoxicality, of estrangement from our own motivations and affective responses.

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<sup>45</sup> Perhaps relatedly, many of Buckingham’s subjects reported that they found horror novels more effectively, and lastingly, frightening than films “precisely because the books were less explicit, and hence left more to the imagination” (*Moving*:106)

The theorists whose work I discussed in this last section offer nuanced accounts of the pleasures of horror, acknowledging the contrarieties at the heart of our experiences with such genres. As Cherry, Clover and Buckingham argue, we evince a counter-intuitive attraction to what might be termed confrontational narratives: we are drawn to fictions that dramatise our worst fears, our uncomfortable certainties, our most shameful, conflicted desires. Just as Cherry's subjects emphasise the role that fascination or 'morbid curiosity' plays in their affection for the genre, so Clover's male viewers are attracted and repulsed in equal measure by the encoded representations of their fearful fantasies (or rather, by depictions of the unrestrained emotionality and passivity that they usually disavow), and Buckingham's child participants are driven to re-view and re-enact precisely those scenes that most terrified them. I would argue that genres, like horror, that specialise in arousing traditionally-aversive feelings and depicting negative content thrive despite their genuinely unpleasant aspects because they fulfil the *telos* central to all storytelling – compelling our curiosity and emotional engagement.

## Chapter 4: Special Affects

### Introduction

In the previous three chapters I investigated how horror and similarly low-brow narrative genres with aversive content remain culturally reviled, a perpetual source of societal concern and disparagement, despite the lack of any compelling evidence that they really serve to deprave and corrupt the populace. I argued that such genres are so often viewed as morally dubious because of the ways in which they are *philosophically* problematic, the occasion of “unaccountable [and therefore alarming] pleasure[s]” (Hume, 2004 [1742]:25), and suggested that these genres’ alleged paradoxicality is, in actuality, the artefact of a particular model of narrative pleasure. These chapters were broadly empirical in nature, dedicated to exposing how certain misconceptions about fictions’ allure generate (and sustain) the alarm that surrounds violent and/or negative genres despite the paucity of evidence that such narratives are criminogenic or morally corrosive. Having deconstructed the prevailing model of horror’s appeal throughout the previous sections I will now begin to assemble an alternative account, laying the theoretical foundations for my own theory.

Philosophical solutions to the alleged paradox posed by genres such as horror and tragedy often seek to dispel their problematic implications by emphasising the ways in which our interactions with these genres are atypical, strictly insulated from our responses to real life tragedies and horrors. So, for example, Robert Solomon suggests that we can enjoy art-horror “precisely because it is *not* [authentic] horror [...which axiomatically precludes] the very possibility of pleasure” (Solomon, 2003:234), while Susan Feagin and many proponents of the Lucretian return argue that fictional tragedies please because they afford us gratifying meta-responses about our comparative status or moral character that are unavailable to us in everyday life.

In contrast to such theories I will highlight the commonalities between our affective engagement with fictional and factual narratives, the suggestive overlap between the ‘rules’ for creating compelling fictions and compelling news stories, memoirs and

documentaries. I will argue that we seek out stories with distressing subject matter because of the ways in which our emotional responses to known fictions *mimic* our responses to factual accounts, postulating that fabricated narratives work by exploiting our desire to keep abreast of certain kinds of information. In order to assert this position, it is necessary to explain how my theory fits into prevailing philosophical theories of the emotions, and to defend it against obvious objections. Many cognitivist-inflected responses to the paradox of fiction categorically reject the notion that we can experience genuine affective responses to known fictions, and while others contend that fictions may *prompt* emotional reactions they rationalise such responses by arguing that, despite appearances, these emotions are not directed at fictional characters or events but at some hypothetical real-world analogue. I will reject such answers to the paradox, and argue that traditional cognitivist models have been superseded by recent accounts of the emotions which build on judgement theorists' insights while accommodating the discoveries of researchers such as Ekman, Zajonc and LeDoux.

In this chapter I will discuss two competing theories of the emotions: the first, known as cognitivism, conceives of emotions as judgements, rational (if not always conscious) evaluations that necessarily engage our desires, beliefs and values. The second, held by theorists such as Robinson and Prinz, retains the judgmentalist claim that emotions act as some sort of (provisional and pre-reflective) appraisal of significance rather than representing mindless feelings, while denying that they necessitate belief or constitute judgements as such. They also emphasise the primacy of affect and the centrality of patterned physiological changes in our experience of the emotions.

I will first discuss the theories of two prominent cognitivists, Robert Solomon (*The Passions*) and Martha Nussbaum (*Upheavals of Thought*), summarising their views of how our emotional evaluations function. I will next look at the implications this view of the emotions has when considering our emotional responses to fictions, arguing that, while the theories of many avowed cognitivists explicitly make room for fictive emotions, their putative paradoxicality is nonetheless contingent upon the (often implicitly assumed, rather

than theoretically-justified) equation of emotions with judgements/beliefs. I will delineate four major problems with the cognitivist model.

Proponents of the cognitivist model often appeal to folk-psychological observations about human behaviour or invoke our subjective experience of various emotional states in order to persuade us that emotions are more than irrational, semantically-empty bodily perturbations. However, while such arguments successfully discredit this reductive view and lend the judgement theory a certain intuitive plausibility, cognitivism's reliance upon this form of argumentation renders it vulnerable to objections drawn from the same pool of knowledge-by-acquaintance. I will first discuss the various 'armchair' objections to the cognitivist model, arguing that, while cognitivism succeeds in sketching a broadly accurate outline of our consciously-accessible emotional experience, there are nonetheless a plethora of needling counter-examples that illustrate the sometime separability or non-identity of our evaluations and emotions and the divergence between our conscious and affective appraisals in many circumstances.

I will next criticise cognitivism's concerted minimisation of the embodied aspect of emotional experience, and its implications, discussing thought experiments by 'feeling' theorists such as William James, research by those who posit that different emotions exhibit distinct patterns of physiological activity and, most significantly, the work of Paul Ekman, who identifies "universal facial expressions" (*Deeper*:33) that recur across cultures.

Thirdly, I will address the empirical research undertaken by psychologists and neuroscientists such as Robert Zajonc and Joseph LeDoux which indicates that the sort of appraisals that initiate emotional episodes occur "prior to and independently of any cognitive evaluation" (*Deeper*:42). Experiments devised by these researchers studying various emotion-related phenomena suggest that affect actually antecedes cognition. Theorists like Robinson and Prinz argue that this corpus of research, and its demonstration of the important differences between judgements and affective appraisals, in fact elucidates exactly why the emotions are so crucial to human survival and flourishing.

Finally I will discuss research that supports the facial feedback hypothesis i.e. the claim that one can induce a particular emotional response in subjects by manipulating their facial musculature into the configuration associated with the desired state. If such research is correct, this phenomenon holds perhaps the most damaging implications of all for the judgement model, since it appears to demonstrate that emotion can be manufactured in the absence of any evaluations – that the physiological changes previously thought to be the result or byproduct of our cognitive judgements are, in some circumstances at least, sufficient cause for an affective appraisal to be made.

After advancing these objections to the judgement model, I will explain why the embodied appraisal theory promoted by Robinson and Prinz not only has the potential to defuse the paradox of fiction (or rather, since according to this model our emotional responses do not inherently involve *belief*, illustrates that no contradiction is entailed in the first place), but offers important insights into the nature of our emotional engagement with fictions with aversive subject matter.

#### **4.1.1 Emotions as Acts: Solomon's *The Passions***

Cognitive or judgement theories of emotion are predicated upon a rejection of any reductive identification of emotions with mere feelings or physiological symptoms, instead positioning them as judgements, inherently valenced evaluations of aspects of one's environment salient to one's wellbeing. While proponents of the cognitive theory differ in the details of their criteria for what constitutes such judgements, the central features remain relatively constant: emotions possess an inherent 'aboutness'. If I am angry it is in response to a particularly aggravating stimulus, not due to some ineffable internal tempest.

Cognitivist theories of emotion are attractive for several reasons. They present emotions as intelligent responses to our environment rather than blind internal forces. Emotions arise in response to, and encompass beliefs about, intentional objects, objects which I take to be in some way relevant to my personal flourishing. Unlike behaviourist views which identify

emotions with action-tendencies, the judgement theory is capable of distinguishing between fine gradations of emotion (as in Jenefer Robinson's example, the related sensations of "shame and embarrassment" (*Deeper*:6)) that may appear externally identical, and they recognise the significance of internal motivations/subjective experience – for example, diligently caring for a loved one versus diligently caring for someone to whom one is indifferent out of duty. Furthermore, they account for the way in which we expect emotions to be responsive to new evidence. My anger at what I perceive to be an offensive comment dissipates if it emerges that I misheard a perfectly innocuous remark – if it does not many would say my anger was unwarranted and irrational, suggesting that the passions are not entirely orthogonal to reason. Emotions are thus tacitly considered to be within the realm of argument, distinct from unthinking physical phenomena: one "would not try to argue someone out of a twinge, a pain, or an accelerated heart-rate" (*Deeper*:12). Most importantly, cognitivist theories recognise and justify the centrality of the passions in our lives – because emotions constitute evaluations they are ideologically eloquent and ethically important insofar as they reflect, and even disclose to us, our most foundational goals and values.

Central to Solomon's version of cognitivism is the assertion that emotions are intentional, and, in some sense, rational, evaluations concerning "our selves and our place in the world" (*Passions*:187). Emotions constitute judgements, appraisals of how their objects impinge upon one's interests and desires, one's sense of self. They interpret and structure our experience, imbuing the otherwise drab facts of "anonymous and scientifically ascertainable Reality" with personal significance, rendering them vivid. These affective appraisals are constitutive of each individual's personal 'surreality', and as such are inherently self-involved and partial – the "Self is an essential pole of emotional judgement" (*Passions*:189). In fact, Solomon goes so far as to state that "the ultimate object of our emotional judgement is always our own sense of personal dignity and self esteem" (*Passions*:190). Emotions both embody, and are formed within the context of, a dense evaluative framework; they are performative, ideological, daily acts of self-creation. My anger asserts that within my system of values such-and-such is unacceptable, that I, or another, have in fact been wronged. Furthermore, it is inherently motivating. Within most

emotions lie action-tendencies, demands for specific actions that logically follow from one's affective evaluation. Anger is "essentially a judgement of condemnation, setting up a judicial mythology in which one is both judge and jury" (*Passions*:215), a judgement to which the demand for retribution is implicit.

According to Solomon, emotions are not happenings but self-constitutive acts – contrary to the traditional view whereby during an emotional episode our 'higher' rational side is assailed (as if from without) by blind [and] stupid forces" (*Passions*:87), Solomon argues that we are in a crucial sense "responsible" (*Passions*:133), *culpable*, for our emotions. As judgements (albeit heated and pre-reflective ones) our emotions can be categorised as well- or ill-founded, apposite or unfair. For this reason, Solomon rejects what he terms the "Myth of the Passions" (*Passions*:132) – the notion that our emotions simply represent unpredictable and uncontrollable bodily perturbations, "secretions of the autonomic nervous system" (*Passions*:131). Solomon argues that this common view of the emotions amounts to a "strategic confusion of cause and effect" (*Passions*:130): we mistakenly identify the involuntary "feelings and flushings" (*Passions*:131) that herald, and are caused by, an affective evaluation with the emotion itself. It is because the judgements that precipitate our physical turmoil are often "undeliberated, unarticulated, and unreflective" (*Passions*:131) that they appear to us as pre-established facts, imposed upon us rather than being the result of any volitional activity. He argues that that this belief serves as a means of absolving ourselves from assuming responsibility, conveniently preventing us from recognising that "we make ourselves angry, make ourselves depressed, make ourselves fall in love" (*Passions*:132). Indeed, Solomon asserts that "there is no Reality so degrading that a man cannot mythologise himself as a martyr [...] there is no loss that cannot be used as a cause for mourning, a celebration of the transience of happiness [...] no person whom we cannot love" (*Passions*:151).

Solomon argues for a defiantly subjective view of emotions: while he concedes that subjectively inaccessible or contingent external factors may make us more likely to experience certain emotions or make certain 'judgements' – over-ingestion of stimulants such as caffeine might predispose me to evaluate minor problems or unintentional slights

as outrageous offences – he argues that such causes are not particularly relevant to our experience of emotions, the role they play in our personal ‘surreality’. Although, he asserts, it may be true that my unusual quickness of temper can be attributed to the physiological changes wrought by three cups of coffee, caffeine is not the object of my ire, rather, I am annoyed by (what I perceive as) the flagrant malice or incompetence of those I encounter. Yet for all his emphasis on the primacy of subjective experience, I would argue that Solomon’s theory crucially fails to capture an important aspect of our emotional lives. Solomon’s determination to interpret emotions as *acts*, his Sartrean insistence that external circumstances cannot compel us to any emotional ‘conclusion’ belies the sense most of us have at times of being passive before, or surprised by, our emotional reactions. In the same way that we can – paradoxically but not unintelligibly – experience our bodies as something other, some obtuse and frustrating appendage to which we are irremediably anchored, we can, without rejecting the insights of the judgement theorists, sometimes experience our emotions as unpredictable and counter-productive impositions, the result of shadowy and ungovernable subterranean forces. While, as Solomon argues, the appraisals such emotions reflect do not originate from outside the self neither are they precisely within our conscious control, and they are certainly not always amenable to rational correction or adjustments. If Solomon’s version of cognitivism is notable for its depiction of the passions as being, in some sense, volitional, creations or affirmations of self, the next theory I will discuss shares this view of the emotions as being ideological, while highlighting the ways in which they disturb and subvert the apparently stable patterns of our ‘rational’ thoughts and judgements.

#### **4.1.2 Emotion as an ‘Assent to an Appearance’: Nussbaum’s Neo-Stoic Model**

In *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum describes emotions as “intelligent responses to the perception of value” (*Upheavals*:1), eudaimonistic judgements which by their nature “ascribe to things and persons outside the person’s own control great importance for that person’s own flourishing” (*Upheavals*:4). Like Solomon, she perceives the emotions as inherently self-involved and partial. My grief does not simply assert the tragedy of *a* loved one dying, but of *my* loved one in particular. “Even when [my emotions] are concerned

with events that take place at a distance, or events in the past [or, even more pertinently, fictional events]” it is because I have managed to implicate these events in my own “scheme of ends and goals” (*Upheavals*:31), investing them with the sense of personal significance and urgency necessary to elicit emotion.

Nussbaum acknowledges the apparent incongruity of describing emotions as judgements, which we tend to envision as coolly deliberate and self-reflexive calculations. Indeed, she accords the emotions great ethical importance precisely because of their propensity to surprise and besiege us, to make us feel invaded by the world: emotions act as ‘upheavals of thought’, making us aware of the ways in which our flourishing, our very existence, is conditioned by unpredictable and often uncontrollable external objects and agents. Nussbaum argues that the emotions – and their prompting of this recognition of our frailty, our vulnerability to chance and reversal – act as a salutary check to our (misguided) aspirations to Stoical self-sufficiency and imperviousness. My emotional response to an object or situation is predicated upon the (not necessarily consciously accessible) belief that certain externalities are in some way relevant to my scheme of goals and values, that such objects have the power to either help me to attain, or dislodge me from, a state of *eudaimonia*.

In contrast to Solomon’s strikingly existentialist account – in which he argues that our emotions serve as everyday acts of self-fashioning, that, in a crucial sense, we *choose* to respond to situations in a fearful or loving or wrathful way and can be held culpable for our choices – Nussbaum holds that our sense of at times being assailed by our emotions, our feelings of helplessness or passivity before their tumultuous onslaught, is far from being in bad faith. Although the emotions are, in Nussbaum’s view, intelligent and discriminating, the ‘judgements’ they represent can and do contradict our reasoned evaluations of a situation or object’s significance, can be based upon beliefs we no longer consciously hold and reflect archaic or conflicting values. Our emotional responses often stem from the “evaluative beliefs that we lay down in childhood, frequently in connection with attachment relations of deep intensity” (*Upheavals*:36), explaining both their intractability and their ability to contradict our reasoned evaluations of a situation. Indeed their ethical

importance derives from their power to surprise us, urging us to confront our “neediness before the world” (*Upheavals*:90), and compromising the self-protective (but ultimately pernicious) ambition to close ourselves off from the vulnerability of being attached to, and affected by, external objects. So, while one might, like Proust’s Marcel when contemplating his relationship with Albertine, complacently conclude that a loved one is easily replaceable, the unexpected and devastating pain one experiences upon their departure represents a deeper recognition of their indispensability and vital importance to one’s life.

Nonetheless, like Solomon, Nussbaum also views the emotions as being in some sense voluntaristic and self-defining, actions or processes over which we have a measure of control rather than passive states: according to the Stoics, on whose theory of the emotions Nussbaum’s is closely modelled, a judgement represents an “*assent* to an appearance [my italics]” (*Upheavals*:37). The emotions evidence and embody our implicit recognition of the ways in which our wellbeing hinges upon external objects, therefore, Nussbaum argues, “the acceptance of such propositions says something about the person [experiencing the emotion]: that she allows herself and her good to depend upon things beyond her control. That she acknowledges a certain passivity before the world” (*Upheavals*:43). Emotions are our weakness and our strength, both “record[ing] that sense of vulnerability and imperfect control” (*Upheavals*:43) central to being human, and by doing so imbuing our lives with richness and significance.

It is clear that the main claim of the judgement theory – that emotions represent not “unthinking [bodily] movements” (*Upheavals*:35) or “objectless feelings of pain or pleasure” (*Upheavals*:35) but some form of appraisal, marking or identifying aspects of our environment as potentially significant to our flourishing – is essentially valid. However, while the advantages of the various formulations of the judgement theory are obvious, less glaring are the problems that are nonetheless implicit in this model of the emotions. Before assessing these flaws in depth, I will first look at one area of human response in which cognitivism notably lacks explanatory power, giving rise to a much-discussed paradox.

## 4.2 The paradox of fiction (and its relationship to judgementalism)

If one takes the accounts of theorists like Solomon and Nussbaum to be true, it poses problems when considering the apparent human propensity to respond emotionally to known fictions. If emotions are merely sensations, opaque and unreasoning bodily forces, the question of how fictional narratives can inspire certain emotional responses is not particularly compelling, since the passions are already held to be unaccountable to any of our ‘higher’ faculties. If however, emotions necessarily engage our *beliefs*, if they indicate that an object or situation is significant to me, that it impinges upon my wants and needs, my view of the world, our emotional responses to fiction are rendered either illusory or perturbingly irrational. The paradox of fiction is inarguably contingent upon a judgementalist view of the emotions, generated by the tension between certain assumed facts:

1. We experience what seem to be emotions in response to fictional stimuli.
2. We realise that that portrayed in fictions is not factual.
3. We can only experience genuine emotions in response to factual, or, at the very least, hypothetically possible, events.

Despite the origin of this paradox, it does not follow that all cognitivists deny the possibility or coherence of fictive emotions. In fact, cognitivists often defuse the paradox by reframing, rather than refuting, proposition number 1: according to such theorists, while it is true that fictional narratives evoke genuine emotions in their readers/viewers, the *objects* of our emotions are not the imaginary characters or situations at which they appear to be aimed, but their real life analogues. Indeed, Nussbaum accords great value to literature (and tragedy in particular) precisely because it “invites spectators [... to] have emotions of various types toward the possibilities of their own lives” (*Upheavals*:241) and others’, prompting us to consider “the vulnerability of human beings to reversals and sufferings” (*Upheavals*:240).

Others such as Noël Carroll or Peter Lamarque contend that the paradox of fiction only arises when one insists upon a “strong cognitivist commitment to belief as the cognitive component of an emotional state, [whereas if one subscribes to] weaker cognitive theories of emotion that maintain that the cognitive component of an emotional state may be less than a belief (a thought imagined rather than asserted, a construal, or a pattern of attention)” (Carroll, 2003:521), the conundrum can be dispelled. However, while many avowed judgementalists deny that our emotional responses to fictions entail any kind of paradox, the arguments of those like Radford and Walton who argue to the contrary are, explicitly or implicitly, indebted to cognitivist ideas about the emotions.

#### **4.3.1 Radford on the irrationality, and incorrigibility, of fictive emotions**

In ‘How can we be moved by the fate of Anna Karenina?’ Radford assesses, and rejects, various postulated explanations as to how it is that we can feel genuine emotions in response to fictional situations. Unlike Kendall Walton, Radford does not resolve the paradox by denying the reality of fictive emotions; he holds that it is both a “brute fact” (‘Karenina’:172) of human psychology that we can be moved by known fictions and that this phenomenon is inescapably paradoxical, utterly contradicting our behaviour in other contexts.

In order to highlight the peculiarity, the exceptional nature, of our emotional responses to (known) fictions, Radford presents readers with a hypothetical scenario in which we “read an account of the terrible sufferings of a group of people” (‘Karenina’:170), experiencing the appropriate negative affective responses to their plight, only to find out that the account is false. Surely, he argues, this newfound knowledge would harden our hearts, our pity perhaps curdling into indignation at having been so duped. Equally, Radford argues, if an acquaintance regaled us with a harrowing story about his sister then, after enjoying witnessing its effects upon us, revealed that the tale was a complete fiction, our sympathy would evaporate along with our belief in the story’s events. Typically, then, sorrow requires the belief that someone has suffered.

Radford's choice of examples here is somewhat eccentric (a more apt analogy would be cases in which we mistakenly conclude that some catastrophe has occurred only to discover that we were wrong), since he introduces an unnecessary additional variable – in the type of situation he describes, it is not simply a lack of belief that nullifies our pity, but also the perception that we have been manipulated. The perceived intention of the storyteller, whether he means to beguile or inform us, or humiliate and deceive, is not a trivial detail, but is in fact central to our emotional responses – in Radford's examples the narrative to which we thought we were responding is replaced by one in which we star as the over-trusting dupe, our sorrow not just extinguished but very probably supplanted by anger or shame at being fooled. The cases Radford describes are therefore utterly disanalogous to the practice of engaging with known fictions, and do not effectively demonstrate his thesis (that our emotional responses to fictions are exceptional and unaccountably divergent from our usual emotional behaviours). Just as we might be swayed by the persuasive power of a fable, if it is presented as such, while angrily rejecting the conclusions to which a carefully manufactured 'history' has steered us, we are in fact readily capable of responding emotionally to, and even being impelled to action by, similar fabricated 'hard luck' stories: the kind of miniature composite narratives presented in charity advertisements. Such narratives, while false in their particulars, aim at a kind of Aristotelian necessity, representing 'things as they might happen'. Of course, one could argue that such narratives derive much of their emotional power from the fact that we know very well that they do happen, in the general if not the particulars. But the same is arguably true of the stories related by Radford's plausible liars (depending upon the outrageousness of the torments they visit upon their fictive victims) – human suffering exists, and it is probable that someone somewhere is undergoing similar difficulties, thus the requirement that one must "believe someone suffered" (*'Karenina'*:171) is as much met in this expanded sense as in the case of the described advertisements. In such cases, then, the sense of being manipulated (and, if so, whether to a nefarious or noble end) is important to our emotional responses, making the difference as to whether we choose to suppress our emotional responses or attend to/allow ourselves to experience them. (Curiously, this seems to apply to fictional narratives too: one can become disgruntled by

narratives whose authorial manipulations are too overt or intrusive, obviously intended to induce ‘unearned’ or sentimental emotional responses.)

Since Radford concedes that some might view the preceding examples as somewhat “handpicked” (*‘Karenina’*:171), contrived specifically to cast our fictive emotions as puzzling and anomalous, he goes on to address our responses to counterfactual scenarios. Again moving through a series of examples, Radford strives to demonstrate that, were people to respond, in their daily lives, to the hypothetical situations they conjure for themselves as they readily do to fictions, we should regard it as excessive, aberrant and illogical except in those cases in which the imagined scenario was both personally relevant and probable. For instance, if “a mother hears that one of her friend’s children has been killed in a street accident” (*‘Karenina’*:172), her relieved embrace of her own offspring when they return home seems to indicate that the death of her friend’s child has not only saddened but also frightened her, somehow “bring[ing] home” and “mak[ing] real” (*‘Karenina’*:173) the possibility of her own children’s death by forcing her to imaginatively confront it. Radford argues that this scenario is not problematic (and not analogous to our responses to fictions), since the mother’s fearful feelings are in response to a realistic, although not particularly likely, threat, rather than a fantastical narrative with little relevance to her own life. Similarly, if a man (who is himself terrified of travelling by air) is provoked to tears when he imagines his sister’s upcoming flight crashing and killing her, his sorrowful reaction, while “silly and maudlin” (*‘Karenina’*:173) is not paradoxical, since his admittedly hyperbolic response is due to the fact that (in the moment at least) he regards this as a likely scenario.

Radford acknowledges that such cases seem to demonstrate that we routinely respond emotionally to anticipated, as well as actual, suffering and death, but crucially, he insists, the less likely the outcomes of our imaginary disasters, the less reasonable and sympathetic are our responses. Other than in those cases where our conjectures have a reasonable chance of coming to pass, we do not tend to weep over imaginary events, and would, he argues, view others unfavourably for doing so. Radford’s point here is implicitly cognitivist: embedded in his argument is the normative assumption that emotions are, as a

general rule, rationally-governed, proportionate and congruent with our beliefs and judgements about what is the case. From such a perspective, pronounced emotional responses to outlandish and unlikely counterfactuals, (and so, by analogy, to most fictions) represent strikingly “divergent behaviour” (*Karenina*:173), explicable only through reference to the exceptional characteristics of the feeling individual – a man who regularly moves himself to tears by inventing elaborate and improbable scenarios must be a “sort of Walter Mitty, a man whose imagination is so powerful and vivid that, for a moment anyway, what he imagines seems real [...rendering his tears] intelligible, though not of course excusable” (*Karenina*:173) – or, in the case of fictions, through the anomalousness of the situation as a whole.

Having made the case for the peculiarity of our emotional responses to fictions, Radford considers the possibility that theorists such as Walton are correct in surmising that such stirrings represent something lesser (or different) than our workaday emotions, a new category of feeling. While he rejects this solution to the paradox, he discusses the experiential differences between our factive and fictive emotions, emphasising how these distinctions further mark such responses as anomalous and paradoxical, markedly insulated from our real lives and values. For, he asserts, fictive emotions do appear to differ from factive emotions in both duration and intensity – while I may appear to be weeping inconsolably for Mercutio in his death throes, there is a part of me that stands aside, savouring the sublimity of his dying words, and my distress begins to dissipate at the falling of the final curtain.

Certainly, we would regard someone who entered a lengthy grieving process every time they read of the death of a fictional hero as a self-indulgent sentimentalist (and, conversely, view as callous one who shrugged off the death of a real-life friend as quickly and easily as that of even a beloved character). However, while the comparative mutedness and transience of fictive emotions may indeed distinguish them from our emotional reactions to personally significant and proximate events, I would argue that our emotional responses to true accounts of historical or physically distant events have something of the same misty, faraway, and crucially, often temporally limited, character. If, as cognitivists would have it,

any emotional episode represents an urgent, embodied judgement to the effect that the object or event to which one is responding is significant to one's goals, values and flourishing, it follows that our emotional responses to those objects that are usually far from our experience, with little to no effect upon our personal wellbeing, will often be less intense or less long-lived. While there are exceptions, cases in which a documented event or situation is so far contrary to one's values or previous knowledge that it compels a significant reorganisation of one's life and/or worldview involving sustained emotional commitment, or cases which, despite first appearances, somehow touch one personally (if, for example, an account of the subjugation of Afghan women provokes strong and lasting emotions in me partially because I too am a woman, and imagine myself in a similar situation), in many cases one's emotional responses to such true accounts recede markedly once one is no longer engaging with them, much in the manner that Radford describes happening with fictive emotions.

In *Upheavals of Thought*, Martha Nussbaum argues that we are capable of having emotional responses to fictions because the simulated proximity to fictional characters that narratives entail makes us perceive them as momentarily important to our flourishing. I feel sorrow and frustration when Emma Bovary's stultifying life and romantic delusions lead her to commit (an unintentionally grisly) suicide, or fear for Offred when she decides to entrust her fate to her possible betrayers because I temporarily take their goals and flourishing to be linked to my own. Other problems with Nussbaum's theory aside, it is evident that, as she notes, our emotions tend to ebb after the closure of a narrative (although they may well be reawakened if we later contemplate its events in detail or read/view the narrative again). Again, while our fictive emotions may well be *typically* weaker or at least less enduring than our emotional responses to personally significant events, there are also cases in which fictions can assume deep personal significance or move us such a way as to force us to re-examine or even lastingly reorganise our views and values. I would argue that in this respect, rather than being exceptional, far removed from our emotional responses to non-fictional stimuli – as Radford or Walton would contend – our fictive emotions strongly resemble at least some of our factive emotions: those evoked by hypothetical scenarios and accounts of (non-personally significant) true events.

Radford ultimately concludes that our emotional responses to fictional narratives “though very ‘natural’ to us and in that way only too intelligible involve us in inconsistency and so incoherence” (*‘Karenina’*:175). He compares such responses to a dread of oblivion; an emotion which is similarly incoherent since there is, quite literally, “nothing to fear” (*‘Karenina’*:175). When one regards the prospect of one’s future non-existence with fear one commits a logical error, thinking one could somehow be aware of one’s very lack of awareness, conscious of all that one is missing. Radford’s analogy here is, I would argue, telling, since it highlights the ways in which the emotions quite productively depart from considered judgements. The fear of death that most of us harbour to some degree may, like our emotional engagement with fiction, be illogical or incoherent in a sense but it is, more importantly, conducive to our survival as individuals and as a species. If one expects emotions to behave like conscious evaluations then such phenomena remain problematic, baffling in their resistance to facts or counter-arguments. The version of the judgement theory upon which theories like Radford and Walton’s are implicitly reliant is inadequate in this respect, unable to convincingly account for the experience of emotionally engaging with fictional narratives. In order to dissolve the ‘paradox’ of fiction one must therefore look to alternative models of emotion.

If one truly views the emotions solely as declarative judgements, assertions with a truth-value about aspects of my environment that I perceive to be important to my flourishing (as both Solomon and Nussbaum do), emotional responses to fiction are rendered bewildering or even pathological, explicable only by arguing that when one engages with fiction one invariably extrapolates from the particular fiction universal values pertinent to oneself, and that it is always these to which one responds emotionally. In fairness, Nussbaum’s theory may be applicable in many cases, however as Radford himself points out, to argue that when I cry for Anna Karenina I am really crying for the fate of all women in her situation and how their tragic fate conflicts with my personal values, elides the particularity of my response: I may cry in part for her real-world analogues but the more significant bulk of my sadness is *for her*, the individual character whom I have followed through the narrative. In contrast, the theories I will later discuss explain why the capacity

to respond emotionally to fictional narratives is adaptively intelligible if not logical in the narrower sense. As Patricia Greenspan notes, the ways in which emotions *differ* from evidentially-“warranted” beliefs or judgements is precisely what renders them so instrumentally useful (Greenspan, (1988) :6-7). Their unabashed partiality, ability to impel us to action and sometimes divergence from our ‘all things considered’ view make them adaptively rational. By redefining emotions, moving away from a cognitive view of them as either appropriate or mistaken judgements to looking at them as provisional, embodied appraisals of significance one can better understand how it is that one can engage emotionally with fictions.

#### **4.3.2 Accommodating Irrationality: Walton’s ‘make-believe’ theory**

In Kendall Walton’s ‘Fearing Fictions’, he advances the view that our apparent emotional responses to fictions in fact represent ‘quasi’ or make-believe emotions. Walton describes a case in which, ordinarily, one might be tempted to refer to one’s psychological involvement with a fiction in emotional terms: “Charles is watching a horror movie about a terrible green slime. He cringes in his seat as the slime oozes slowly but relentlessly over the earth, destroying everything in its path. Soon a greasy head emerges from the undulating mass, and two beady eyes fix on the camera. The slime, picking up speed, oozes on a new course straight towards the viewers.” (‘Fearing’:5) Charles’ ensuing shriek and “desperate” (‘Fearing’:5) clutching at his chair may appear to mimic genuine fear, Walton argues, but, despite Charles’ shaken testimony to the contrary, he was never really frightened. His reaction may, in certain physiological respects, resemble genuine fear, he may protest that he was terrified *and believe that he is telling the truth*, yet Walton maintains that in fact “Charles is not really afraid” (‘Fearing’:9). While inducing some of the physical symptoms of fear (or pity, or wrath etc), fictions cannot provoke real fright. In order to be afraid of the slime, Charles would have to *believe* that he was actually imperilled by it; it is “a principle of common sense [...that fear is necessarily] accompanied by, or must involve, a belief that one is in danger” (‘Fearing’:7).

Genuine fear is also inherently motivating – rather than being transfixed by the gelatinous monstrosity onscreen, if his protestations that he was “*really terrified*” (‘Fearing’:7) were true he would surely run from the room, or at least attempt to warn others of the oozing threat to their safety. In Walton’s view, actions speak louder than words, and Charles’ placid inactivity in the face of the ostensibly menacing slime overrides any assertions he makes about his fear. In the absence of these constitutive beliefs and action tendencies, the thrills and fibrillations Charles takes to be full-blown terror amount to a kind of “quasi-fear” (‘Fearing’:13). Like a child who “flees, screaming, into the next room” (‘Fearing’:13) in gleeful terror when his father pretends to be an attacking monster, Charles’ sweaty palms and shudders are performative, essentially all part of the fun. By enacting terror, by speaking as if he is really frightened of the slime, Charles is participating in his own “game of make-believe” (‘Fearing’:13). It is not true but fictional that he fears the slime: like an actor portraying himself in some imaginary realm, Charles “generates make-believe truths” (‘Fearing’:16) about himself. However, in order for it to be fictional that Charles is afraid it is nonetheless necessary for him to undergo some approximation of the physical changes that he presents as real fear, to feel “his heart racing [and] his muscles tensed” (‘Fearing’:16). This stipulation raises questions. If my ‘fear’ is make-believe or performative in any non-trivial/meaningful sense – rather than, as I would suggest, simply falling foul of Walton’s question-beggingly stringent normative definition of fear – why, as Noël Carroll inquires, should I not simply be able to choose to feel quasi-fear in order to enliven a dull viewing experience? Equally, could those who claim to find horror films too frightening, or tragedies too upsetting, not take their performances down a notch so as to be able to sit comfortably through the rest of the narrative?

Walton claims that while fictions can in fact invoke real emotions, they are distinct from the make-believe emotions that take fictional characters or situations as their objects. Walton’s argument mirrors those cognitivists who argue that some or all of the apparent emotional power of fictional narratives is derivative, the product of our awareness that, even if the particular characters and events about which we are reading are false, there are similar people and events in real life. If I appear to cry for Anna Karenina, I am really crying for those actual women whose predicaments and sufferings happen to resemble

hers. Any emotional lustre that fictions possess is essentially borrowed, reflecting the glare of our real life preoccupations (although such explanations do not so easily account for our responses to utterly fantastic narratives of the sort Charles is watching). However, unlike such theorists, Walton does not attribute Charles' seeming fear in the cinema to the film's evocation of any antecedent terror of real life slimy objects ravaging the world. Any real emotions that fictions happen to spark are essentially tangential to Walton's account. Rather than experiencing real (but derivative) terror, Charles is simply not frightened according to any usual sense of the word.

Since Walton's argument hinges, to a large extent, upon certain contested definitions, one might well apply to his own theory the criticism he levels at thought-theorists such as Noël Carroll: that of circularity. Since, in his view, it is "dangerously presumptive" ('Fictionally':179) to take Charles at his word, subjective experience cannot serve as any form of counter-argument or counter-example: if Charles says that he is indeed afraid his protestation "no more establishes that he [really thinks this] than the fact that children playing a game of make-believe say 'There is a monster in the basement!' shows them to believe that a monster is in the basement" ('Fictionally':180). While Walton's reluctance to accept Charles as the ultimate arbiter of his own psychological attitudes may be prudent (after all, as the studies I discuss later demonstrate, people can and do misinterpret the nature or origin of their emotions), it is unclear why Walton should assume that it is "pretheoretically more plausible" ('Fictionally':179) to assume that *every* 'Charles' is inevitably mistaken about his feelings or playing at being afraid than that his own theory of the emotions may be too prescriptive if it excludes such cases wholesale. By defining emotions in such a way that the feelings aroused by fictions cannot possibly meet the criteria for inclusion, Walton is as guilty of question-begging as those theorists who, he argues, incautiously assume that such feelings must be emotions, and adjust their theories accordingly, without properly interrogating this assumption.

Furthermore, I would argue that at least one of Walton's justifications for recategorising fictive emotions is inconsistent with his explicit appeals to cognitivism. In his view, fictive emotions are immediately rendered shadowy and suspect by the elusiveness of their object:

“to allow that mere fictions are objects of our psychological attitudes while disallowing the possibility of physical interaction severs the normal links between the physical and the psychological. What is pity or anger which is never to be acted on? What is love that cannot be expressed to its object and is logically or metaphysically incapable of consummation?” (‘Fictionally’:177) Walton’s apparent equation here of ‘genuine’ emotions with the (at least possible) fulfilment of action-tendencies ill-befits his otherwise cognitivist emphasis on the primacy of belief – one of the main strengths of the judgement theory as compared to behaviourist views is, as Robinson argues, its ability to account for the distinction we instinctively draw between externally similar but subjectively discriminable emotional states, to explain how we can be said to be having or experiencing an emotion without it being evident in our outward expressions and behaviour.

Equally, the parameters he sets here for non-paradoxical emotions seem unfeasibly restrictive, denying the existence not only of fictive emotions but of emotions evoked by any remote or (no longer) existent situation. After all, one can, with varying degrees of reasonableness, experience a chill of fear when considering the heat death of the universe, feel a surge of pity or indignation upon reading about the activities of the Spanish Inquisition, fall in love with dashing historical figures such as a long-dead Lord Byron or feel angry with a God in whom one has ceased to believe. To identify emotions with action, or the possibility of action, dispenses with all such cases, as well as with our fictive emotions.

#### **4.4 Problems with the Judgement Model: Untidy emotions, Facial Feedback and the Primacy of Affect**

Cognitivists adduce the emotions’ expected responsiveness to new information as evidence of the intuitive correctness of their thesis: we at least treat emotions as if they *should* be governed by our rational beliefs and knowledge. However, as Robinson points out, while this normative view of the emotions is indeed widely-held, we also understand that the reality may depart from this ideal. Without subscribing to the reductive ‘hydraulic’ theory of the emotions that Solomon and Nussbaum deride, we know that anger about a certain

situation, or directed at one person, can often linger and spill over into the subject's other interactions, that phobias are often better dispelled by gradual desensitisation and habituation rather than logical argument, that one can fall in love with someone because one perceives him or her to embody certain traits without falling out of love if it becomes apparent that he or she no longer possesses these traits (or never did in the first place). I would argue that while judgementalism succeeds at sketching a broad outline of our emotional responses, there are lingering questions about its predictive power, messy loose ends for which it seems unable to account. If the judgement theory acts as a reasonable broad-brush description of the emotions it is because, as Jenefer Robinson points out, cognitivist analyses often employ “the resources of ordinary language and the terms of folk psychology” (*Deeper*:98) in order to arrive at plausible “after-the-fact classification[s]” (*Deeper*:98). Conversely, while much of the empirical research that I will later discuss yields utterly counterintuitive results, it sheds light upon those murky recesses of emotional experience that still elude the explanatory efforts of the judgement theorists. However, I will first discuss the ways in which cognitivism falters even in its generally convincing characterisation of our *conscious* emotional experience.

#### **4.4.1 Recalcitrant Emotion and Fictional Fears**

Quasi-cognitivist Patricia Greenspan offers one incisive theoretical objection to the standard judgement model, delineating how our emotions seem to depart significantly from workaday judgements. She raises the spectre of recalcitrant or ‘outlaw’ emotions – a term denoting those instances in which our emotions seem to be at odds with our reasoned judgements – presenting us with the example of an agent gripped by a self-consciously irrational, yet intractable, phobia of dogs. After being attacked by a vicious dog, this individual becomes terrified of all dogs, including those he knows very well to be friendly, like placid, “harmless old” Fido (Greenspan, 1993 [1988]:17). Every time he sees Fido he experiences “characteristic sensations of agitated discomfort” (Greenspan, 1993 [1988]:18), his heart beating wildly, gripped by the urge to flee and with thoughts of a possible attack clamouring in his head. Contrary to the cognitivist model, this unhappy cynophobe does not *judge* dogs as a species to be dangerous; his behaviour fails to support

such a reading since even when Fido approaches others he cares about he feels no urge to alert “others to the object of [his] phobic fear” (Greenspan, 1993 [1988]:162).

Many cognitivists dismiss as counter-evidence those occasions on which our affective evaluations – and sometimes our resulting behaviours – seem to conflict with our rational/conscious judgements, framing this phenomenon as the result of “contradictory beliefs” (*Upheavals*:35). Nussbaum likens such emotions to the after-effects of her own childhood misapprehension that the U.S. Supreme Court is based in California: “I have known for about 45 years that this is a false belief, and yet I still retain the belief in some form. I find myself using it to make inferences about how far colleagues will be travelling when they go there, and what sort of weather they are likely to encounter” (*Upheavals*:36). Such rationally outgrown beliefs, often deeply ingrained in our infant psyches, can linger at an unconscious level, influencing both our emotional responses to those objects that engage or ‘activate’ the relevant belief and our resulting behaviours. However, Greenspan argues, there are times when our emotions appear to be based on something considerably more tentative than judgements, occasions on which – rather than engaging even archaic or unconscious beliefs – our emotional responses seem to function more as a kind of construal or ‘seeing as if’.

In fact, our ongoing emotional responses to certain kinds of fictions represents one instance where the cognitivist equation of emotions with affirmative, rational judgements breaks down. As Kendall Walton notes in ‘Fearing Fictionally’ “*Jaws* caused a lot of people to fear sharks” (*Fictionally*:180), even prompting some people to avoid swimming in the ocean (Walton of course distinguishes any genuine fear resulting from exposure to fictional narratives such as *Jaws* from the emotions directly elicited by the narratives themselves, which, he assures us, are entirely ‘make believe’). Walton suggests that this newfound fear differs from any fright viewers might claim to feel when viewing the film itself since it appears to stem from the belief that they might be preyed upon by real sharks *like* ‘*Jaws*’, rather than believing that they are somehow in danger from the titular shark itself. I would dispute his characterisation of such responses as judgements – ‘anthropophagous sharks pose a real and significant threat to my safety’ – again arguing that our emotional

responses can in some cases act more as a kind of ‘seeing as’, a sensitisation to certain (in this case alarming) possibilities of particular objects/environments. As Robinson asserts, it may be helpful to think of emotions not as judgements or thoughts directed towards propositions but as a way of interacting with our surroundings, “provoked by the environment [...] viewed under a particular *aspect*” (*Deeper*:19).

Given that many such people report a frisson of fear upon entering – or even avoid altogether – *any* large body of water after viewing *Jaws* (including entirely landlocked/indoor ones such as lakes and swimming pools) it seems unlikely that even an illogical or excessive acquired terror of sharks (as they exist in the real world) can always be responsible. Rather, it seems more likely that many of those afflicted by such fears experience intrusive and qualitatively unpleasant feelings and mental images triggered by those aspects of their current environment (a large, possibly murky body of water) that evoke the sequences from *Jaws* that frightened them. The searingly embedded emotional memory of these frightening scenes cues them to respond to large bodies of water as if they represent a potential threat, initiating the physical changes associated with fear. While the lack of any belief that they are really in danger may well allow them to suppress or manage this initial fearful response, it could still render the experience of swimming sufficiently stressful that they subsequently choose to avoid it, without their modified behaviour necessarily being predicated upon the *judgement* that they are imperilled. In accordance with Jenefer Robinson’s thesis that emotions are rarely describable in terms of discrete, easily definable states but in fact represent ever-shifting processes, consisting of pre-cognitive, hair-trigger affective appraisals that are only subsequently monitored and modulated, I would suggest that such illogical or unfounded fears can exist in the absence of (even unconscious) beliefs. If our emotional responses necessitated *belief* it might well bring them more into conformity with our reasoned judgements about a situation or object, but would be considerably less adaptive than the coarse-grained, often over-reactive appraisals that in fact initiate an emotional episode. If the threshold of certainty sufficient to induce an emotional response were raised, the incidence of irrational ‘false positive’ reactions like those of the *Jaws*-influenced hydrophobes would decrease, but there would also be a resulting increase in more devastating ‘false negatives’ – situations that in fact

urgently warrant a fearful response, and are time-sensitive enough that rational deliberation could prove deleterious.

#### 4.4.2 The Case for Basic Emotions

According to the judgement model, emotions are defined by the evaluative cognitions that instigate/instantiate them, rather than any of the accompanying physical upheavals. This hypothesis suggests not only that emotions can be expressed in somewhat culturally-inflected ways or directed towards culturally- and individually-variable material objects (claims to which most non-cognitivists would assent) but surely also implies that our basic emotional repertoire, attendant physical symptoms and expressions should be amenable to the forces of socialisation, emerging in distinct, conventionalised forms determined by our particular cultural milieu.

One venerable, non-empirical objection to the judgement model is a thought-experiment formulated by William James, an early proponent of the view that “physiological change is essential to emotion” (*Deeper*:28). By way of argument James invites his readers to imagine themselves in a state of strong emotion, and then to mentally divest this emotion of each of its “characteristic bodily symptoms” (James, 1884:193). He anticipates that when we have stripped our imaginary emotions of their physical accoutrements we will come to intuit that “there is nothing left behind” (James, 1884:193), that there is no defining, intangible “mind stuff” (James, 1884:193) beneath our frowns or shivers or laughter. In short, because “emotion dissociated from all bodily feeling is *inconceivable* [my italics]” (James, 1884:194), James argues that the substance, the emotionality, of the passions must inhere in what are typically thought of as their mere accompaniments. Significantly, James does not seek to deny emotion’s semantic nature – he posits that, in the absence of its physical manifestations, anger would amount to no more than a “feelingless cognition” (James, 1884:194) that “a certain person or persons merit chastisement for their sins” (James, 1884:194) – but maintains that such dispassionate judgements cannot *in themselves* be equated with emotions.

Given that cognitivists themselves often seek to command our assent by appealing to our intuitions, our conscious experience of emotional states, James' point here is problematic for proponents of the judgement model. Interoception tells us that our blood boils when we are angry and runs cold when we are afraid, that different emotional states *feel* different. As James' thought-experiment suggests, it is near impossible to imagine being gripped by a feeling of petrification, despair or exultation while remaining physically cool and unruffled. The judgementalist determination to minimise (or elide altogether) the role that physiological changes play in our emotions is itself as contrary to human experience as the notion that the passions are merely aimless bodily sensations.

Neo-Jamesians build upon James' compelling, but empirically-ungrounded, assertion of the centrality of bodily sensations, positing that the character or "feeling component" (Kreibig, 2010:396) of various emotions derives from our perception of the associated "pattern[s] of somatovisceral activation" (Kreibig, 2010:396). If, as such theorists argue, this hypothesis is borne out by research demonstrating that emotions exhibit distinct physiological 'signatures', it would serve to undermine the judgement model by illustrating that emotions are defined and differentiated by something other than evaluative cognitions. Recent reviews of the body of research into emotions' autonomic profiles suggest that there is evidence of "a number of notable differences between emotions" (Kreibig, 2010:408), with different emotions displaying distinct patterns of effects across various dimensions including the cardiovascular, respiratory and electrodermal systems. For example, Robert Levenson reports discovering several reliable autonomic differences between anger, disgust, fear and sadness during his research into facial feedback, summarising his results as follows: "a) anger produces a larger increase in heart rate than disgust; b) fear produces a larger increase in heart rate than disgust; c) sadness produces a larger increase in heart rate than disgust; and d) anger produces a larger increase in finger temperature than fear" (*Deeper*:31).

However, as Jenefer Robinson points out, while such findings may be promising they are also decidedly preliminary. Although the research into autonomic specificity disproves the strong counter-position popularised by an early critic of James, Walter Cannon, (according

to whom all emotions involve the same, undifferentiated form of bodily arousal), it has yet satisfactorily to demonstrate that “each emotion has a uniquely identifying physiological profile” (*Deeper*:31). Notably, even in those reviews which argue that the research supports the notion of autonomic specificity, the reported physiological patterns do not necessarily align neatly with our existent folk-psychological emotional categories. In her analysis, Sylvia D. Kreibig differentiates between “contamination-related” and “mutilation-related” (Kreibig, 2010:16) disgust, a sub-categorisation that emerged from the fact that data demonstrated that these eliciting-events produce distinct patterns of response (for example, “contamination-related disgust is associated with HR [heart rate] acceleration” (Kreibig, 2010:403), while mutilation-related disgust “was characterised by HR deceleration” (Kreibig, 2010:404).

More encouragingly, during the course of his research into basic emotions Paul Ekman claims to have uncovered “robust, consistent evidence of a distinctive, universal facial expression for anger, fear, enjoyment, sadness, and disgust [...This evidence ranges from] high agreement across literate and pre-literate cultures in the labelling of what these expressions signal [to] studies of the actual expression of emotions, both deliberate and spontaneous” (Ekman, 1992:175-176). Ekman argues that there are “a number of separate, discrete emotional” (Ekman, 1992:170) ‘families’ with accompanying, cross-culturally recognisable facial expressions. Members of each of these distinct families share definitive “commonalities in expression, in physiological activity [and] in nature of the antecedent events which call them forth” (Ekman, 1992:170). While, during the course of their research, Ekman and Friesen uncovered over sixty anger expressions, each of these individual expressions acted as “variations [on an underlying] theme” (Ekman, 1992:173), sharing certain central “configurational (muscular patterns) features” (Ekman, 1992:172) – such as lowered brows, raised upper eyelids and tightened lips – that served to reliably differentiate them from expressions signalling other emotions.

Ekman’s research undermines the judgement model since it seems to indicate that certain physiological changes are spontaneously, rather than merely conventionally, associated with certain emotions, that humans are ‘hardwired’ for some kinds of emotional

experience. Our emotional repertoires are thus defined, and, to a certain extent, constrained, by the ancestral “fundamental life tasks” (Ekman, 1992:169) in response to which they evolved.

#### **4.4.3 Bypassing the High Road: When Affect Precedes Cognition**

The central cognitivist claim that emotions constitute judgements or propositional attitudes is problematised by the fact that evidence increasingly suggests that “there are certain emotional states that are inbuilt in human beings [...and other species that] do not appear to require cognition” (*Deeper*:38). For example, LeDoux notes that Neil Schneidermann and Phil McCabe’s research into conditioned fear in rabbits demonstrates that “emotional responses can occur without the involvement of the higher processing systems of the brain” (*Emotional*:104). These researchers’ leporine subjects were repeatedly played two similar tones, only one of which was paired with a shock. After regular exposure to these stimuli, “the rabbits eventually only expressed heart rate responses to the sound that had been associated with the shock” (*Emotional*:104), indicating that they had learnt to discriminate between the shock-paired and ‘harmless’ tones. However, when the auditory cortex was lesioned the subjects began to respond fearfully/with an elevated heart rate to *both* stimuli. This is because the neurons in the thalamic areas that project to the amygdala are more “broadly-tuned” (*Emotional*:104) than those that project to the auditory cortex, communicating “essentially the same information” (*Emotional*:104) in response to similar but (cortically-)discriminable sounds.

LeDoux argues that in humans the subcortical paths to the amygdala facilitate the kind of rapid, apparently instinctual fearful reactions we experience in response to paradigmatic fear elicitors like snakes (and other ancestrally-programmed fears including “sudden noises, angry faces, sudden loss of support, creeping bugs, looming objects and total darkness” (Prinz, 2003:77). LeDoux suggests that these thalamo-amygdala pathways survive not as some vestigial “relic” of our evolutionary forebears but because they confer an adaptive benefit. He argues that the “lowly thalamic road” (*Emotional*:105) acts as a “quick and dirty” (*Emotional*:106) shortcut. Owing to the fact that the thalamo-amygdala

pathway bypasses the cortex it is almost twice as fast as the ponderous-but-particular cortical route. In other words, its apparently deleterious inability to convey fine distinctions is linked to its adaptive utility: because “the information from the thalamus is unfiltered and biased towards evoking responses” (*Emotional*:106-107) it readies us to act quickly in ambiguous situations. Inappropriate affective/autonomic responses can be subsequently managed and suppressed by the cortex as necessary.

Similarly, Robinson and other critics of judgementalism cite the ‘mere exposure effect’ experiments conducted by Zajonc as further evidence of the primacy of affect. These experiments appear to demonstrate that subjects “prefer stimuli to which they have been exposed more often, even when the stimuli are presented so fast that the subjects cannot consciously recognise what they are seeing” (*Deeper*:39). Zajonc and his colleague Kunst-Wilson argue that, since subjects evince definite preferences for familiar “objects in the in the absence of conscious recognition and with [limited] access to information” (*Deeper*:39), the experiments suggest that we are capable of making affective ‘appraisals’ “without extensive participation of the cognitive system” (*Deeper*:39). Zajonc subsequently conducted related experiments designed to study the effects of ‘nonconscious affective priming’. In these experiments Zajonc and his colleagues exposed non-Chinese speaking subjects to neutral stimuli – various Chinese ideographs – ‘priming’ the ideographs by preceding each with either a positive or negative affective picture, such as a smiling or frowning face. When these affective primes were exhibited for a suboptimal period (i.e. when the duration of exposure was beneath the threshold of conscious perception) they “generated significant shifts in subjects’ preferences for the target ideographs” (*Deeper*:41), influencing subjects to prefer those ideographs preceded by positive pictures.

I would argue that the cognitivist conception of emotions as judgements is fatally undermined by the abundant experimental data demonstrating that affect can antecede cognition. Cognitivists like Nussbaum dispute the notion that such research undermines their position, maintaining that pre-conscious, rough and ready appraisals of this sort can nonetheless be classified as “cognitive” (*Upheavals*:115) in nature since they involve some

rudimentary “processing of information” (*Upheavals*:115). However, Zajonc rejects such attempts to cast these empirically-grounded objections to the judgement model as mere semantic quibbling, asserting that “cognitions need not be deliberate, rational or conscious [they] must involve some minimum ‘mental work’” (Zajonc, 1984:118). As this body of research shows, emotional responses can be elicited by essentially raw, unfiltered perceptual input, subverting the cognitivist claim that our emotions act as rational and even, at some level, volitional judgements, necessarily implicating our deepest beliefs and desires.

#### **4.4.4 Facial Feedback**

Finally, multiple experiments conducted by researchers including Zajonc and Ekman seem to demonstrate that emotions can be induced in the absence of either conscious or unconscious judgements simply via the “reconfiguration of [unwitting subjects’] facial muscles” (Prinz, 2003:75) into expressions associated with various emotions. For example, in one 1988 study conducted by Fritz Strack and Leonard Martin subjects were asked to fill out a questionnaire while holding a pen between their lips or teeth. One group of subjects were asked to hold the pen between their puckered lips while others held it between their teeth with parted lips, “conforming to a sour grimace and a smile-like facial configuration, respectively” (Prinz, 2003:75). In one part of the questionnaire the respondents were asked to rate the amusement level of comic strips. ‘Smiling’ subjects, or those who were holding the pen between their teeth, consistently “rated the comics as more amusing” (Prinz, 2003:75). A similar experiment conducted by Paul Ekman (1990) suggests that the assumption of different emotional facial expressions also results in appropriately differentiated patterns of autonomic activity; so, for example, subjects adopting ‘angry’ expressions evinced larger increases in finger temperature than those simulating ‘fearful’ expressions.

The apparent causal relationship between (unwittingly adopted) facial expressions, concomitant physiological changes and self-reported emotional state represents a significant threat to the cognitivist model; while cognitivists can engage in *post hoc*

semantic wrangling when presented with evidence of recalcitrant emotions or non-cognitive emotional responses such as the startle reflex, there seems to be no plausible way in which facial feedback can be cast as involving any sort of judgement. Rather, this phenomenon seems to indicate that, in some cases at least, our emotional reactions are elicited by physiological factors rather than even unconscious or rudimentary appraisals. Long promoted by non-cognitivists such as William James, the hypothesis that purely physiological changes or manipulations can meaningfully effect our emotional responses has clear implications for those cognitivists, like Nussbaum, who seek to minimise or negate the role of affect/feelings.

Like the existence of recalcitrant emotions this phenomenon seems to controvert the voluntarist and belief-oriented aspects of the judgement theory. Theorists such as Solomon and Nussbaum argue that the emotions are not only rational (in the sense of embodying intentional, though not necessarily conscious/reflective, responses to our environment) but in some sense *chosen*, at the very least deeply reflective of our personal desires and values. If subceptive stimuli and covert physiological manipulations are capable of modifying our responses entirely unbeknownst to us, if judgements are utterly superfluous to some types of emotion, then cognitivism of the sort espoused by Solomon and Nussbaum cannot be valid.

#### **4.5 The Advantages of Embodied Appraisal Theories**

While the aforementioned experiments and phenomena render many cognitivist arguments problematic, embodied appraisal theorists such as Robinson and Prinz draw upon the information yielded by such studies to devise and strengthen their own models of the emotions. Both retain one central judgementalist claim, maintaining that the emotions are in fact bearers of a semantic content rather than merely constituting empty feelings of pain or pleasure, while nonetheless rejecting several of its other important theses.

Prinz criticises cognitive theorists' failure to account for the ever-burgeoning empirical evidence that emotions can exist even in the absence of any judgements. He also condemns

non-cognitive theories of the emotions for being ultimately “explanatorily anaemic” (Prinz, 2003:77), dismally incapable of capturing the ways in which “emotions are meaningful” (Prinz, 2003:77). As he asserts, it is evident that the emotions are, as cognitivists would have it, “meaningful, reason sensitive and intentional” (Prinz, 2003:78). However, such theorists’ emphasis on beliefs and judgements, the conceptual content they assign to the most basic of emotional episodes, belies the fact that since some (fairly paradigmatic) emotional responses “arise without the intervention of the neocortex” (Prinz, 2003:78) the emotions cannot necessitate cognitions of that sort. Like Robinson, Prinz argues that emotions act as embodied appraisals, that they are (per James) “internal states that register bodily changes” (Prinz, 2003:79), intrinsically both somatic *and* semantic. Emotions “represent” (Prinz, 2003:80) the core relational themes discussed by judgementalists without describing them, reliably initiated or ‘tokened’ by the “patterned changes in the body” (Prinz, 2003:79) that occur in response to danger, loss, offence etc. The emotions are “semantically primitive” (Prinz, 2003:80) in that they predictably herald various kinds of “organism-environment relations” (Prinz, 2003:80) without involving concepts or judgements.

Robinson’s conception of the emotions also preserves the insights originally attributable to judgement theorists such as Solomon and Nussbaum – that emotions are, in a broad sense, evaluative, priming us to focus upon and respond appropriately to significant features of our environment – while rejecting other of their claims, elaborating an understanding of the emotions that is more congruent with the discoveries made by experimenters such as LeDoux, Zajonc and Ekman. Like Solomon and Nussbaum, Robinson sees emotions as a means of “tun[ing] us in’ [...] or ‘turn[ing] us off”’ (*Passions*:132) to significant facets of our environments, unlike them, however, she emphasises the processual, *ad hoc* nature of affective evaluations.

In *Deeper than Reason*, Robinson plots the progression of the physiological and mental changes that constitute even the simplest of emotional “episodes” (*Deeper*:59), a process that begins with a “rough and ready” (*Deeper*:58) precognitive affective appraisal that serves chiefly to *focus* the subject’s attention on potentially significant features of her

surroundings. In contrast to judgement theorists who conceptualise emotion as “mental states directed at propositions” (*Deeper*:17), Robinson sees emotion as a *process*, a way (not unique to humans) in which “organisms interact with their environments” (*Deeper*:18). Affective appraisals are cued automatically by “events in the environment (either internal or external) [...] set[ting] off physiological changes that register the event in a bodily way” (*Deeper*:89). These initial appraisals serve to draw attention to stimuli that are potentially “significant to me or mine and get [...] my body ready for appropriate action” (*Deeper*:59). So, if I glimpse a black, coiled shape on the ground through my peripheral vision I am able affectively to appraise it as a potential threat before I consciously register what it is I am looking at. It is this initial, automatic appraisal that prompts me to freeze, catch my breath and, most importantly, visually to ascertain whether or not this snake-like object *is* in fact a snake by forcefully directing my attention to it.

Building on the work of ‘basic emotion’ theorists such as Ekman, Robinson hypothesises that there are “a limited number of basic emotion systems each identified by a specific non-cognitive appraisal and the particular suite of behaviour[s]” (*Deeper*:89) it urges and facilitates. Different affective appraisals trigger different physiological changes, which contribute to the varying action tendencies and phenomenological feelings that distinguish the emotions from one another. Although these non-cognitive appraisals evolved as a ‘quick and dirty’ means of readying us for recurrent human challenges, the kind of “important situations of loss, danger, threat etc” (*Deeper*:94) that we would have confronted in our ancestral environment, because humans are more cognitively sophisticated than other organisms we are able to experience emotions in response to thoughts and beliefs as well as simple perceptions. I am as capable of experiencing an overpowering fear response in reaction to words printed on a page or to a “quiet ultimatum” from my boss as I am to occurrent perceptual stimuli such as a “large hairy bear” (*Deeper*:94) advancing upon me. However, whether my fear is triggered by an immediate physical threat or a complex cognitive judgement, its *emotionality* – the characteristic ‘heatedness’ or internal upheaval that differentiates it from a dispassionate evaluation – is “always caused by a particular kind of non-cognitive affective appraisal” (*Deeper*:94) and its associated physiological changes.

When I feel a bolt of fear or a rush of indignation after reading a newspaper article, the emotional process begins with an affective appraisal, “a kind of ‘meta-response’ evaluating in a rough and ready way [...my] already existing cognitive calculation” (*Deeper*:62) Equally, while subsequent cognitive monitoring can override or adjust this preliminary ‘rough and ready’ appraisal, the distinctive quality that renders it an emotion rather than an affectively-neutral judgement derives from this initial phase rather than from the higher cognitive activity that follows: indeed, the reason we sometimes experience emotions as passive, almost weather-like phenomena rather than Solomon’s performative acts is that “we are never fully in control of our emotions: once an affective appraisal occurs, the response occurs too” (*Deeper*:97) and can only indirectly be managed through postliminary cognitive monitoring . For this reason, it can be nearly impossible to extinguish ingrained inappropriate or illogical emotional responses completely. While, to borrow Greenspan’s example, a severe cynophobe’s knowledge that ‘Fido’ is friendly and harmless might help him to modulate his fearful *behaviours*, allowing him to suppress his urge to shriek or run from the room, he is unlikely to be able simply to reason away his fright: even as he manages to smile and chat with Fido’s owners, his heart rate may continue to be elevated and his palms clammy, in spite of his rational appreciation that there is nothing to fear.

In fact, such scenarios are not particularly uncommon. The affective appraisals that serve to focus our attention upon potentially important stimuli, to prime our bodies for appropriate action, are in many ways a blunt instrument, prone to overreaction rather than underreaction. These responses err on the side of caution, as it were, initiated prior to the conscious cognitions that could process the finer details of the situation. For this reason, it is not necessary that I *believe* or judge myself to be under threat in order to experience a fearful response, it is only necessary that I make a rough, non-cognitive appraisal of my situation that, as a precautionary measure, induces in me the physiological changes appropriate to the stimulus (which on this occasion happen to be those approximating a fear response). While some recent defenders of the cognitive theory have argued, in light of these discoveries, for a more capacious definition of the term ‘judgement’ that would

encompass such rough and ready affective appraisals I would argue that Robinson's distinction between the affirmative 'beliefs' and 'judgements' described by the cognitive theorists and her own emphasis on emotions as a process initiated by non-cognitive, hair trigger *appraisals* better accounts for both the evidence of psychological research on the emotions and for the human propensity to emotionally engage with hypothetical scenarios and known fictions.

Although Robinson subscribes to the theory that there are a finite set of basic emotions, and that higher cognitions can be surprisingly ineffective at checking or moderating these emotions once they have been initiated by an affective appraisal, she maintains that cognitive monitoring plays a vital role in our emotional lives. After all, we reflect on our emotions and catalogue them in accordance with "the words available to [us] in [our] language and culture" (*Deeper*:89). The English language has no name for the blend of "compassion/love/sorrow" (*Deeper*:80) that residents of one South Pacific island call *fago*, and while such a mixture of emotions is far from 'untranslatable' in affective terms, its absence from English-speakers' emotional vocabulary is likely to affect how we experience and discuss this blend when it arises, the importance we attach to it and the mental prominence we grant it when ruminating about relevant events and individuals.

Equally, there are closely-related emotions such as guilt and shame that we commonly view as distinct, despite the fact that any differences between the two are probably physiologically-imperceptible: people who are archetypically ashamed- or guilty-looking appear functionally identical, blushing and hanging their heads, and there may well be no detectable differences in typical ANS activity. Robinson suggests that we differentiate between emotions within a given basic emotional 'family' by means of introspection, with "cognitively-complex emotions [being] triggered by the same non-cognitive appraisals as 'primitive' emotions [...but] succeeded by complex cognitive activity" (*Deeper*:89). My after-the-fact classification of an emotional episode hinges upon multiple factors, such as my appreciation of the broader context, my current view of the eliciting stimulus and the way I see myself as a social and moral agent. Equally, my understanding of my emotional responses changes over time: if my "husband were to abandon me for a younger woman

[...] my emotions are [initially] likely to be in turmoil”, a nauseous mixture of “grief, anger, shame, and despair” (*Deeper*:81). I might at the time choose to interpret this blend of emotions as indignation, a variation of anger which is culturally viewed as a “powerful” (*Deeper*:82) and socially-acceptable emotion, however, I later realise that my behaviour and physiological responses were more characteristic of “shame and grief” (*Deeper*:81).

If cognitivists like Solomon and Nussbaum conceive of emotions as something we *do*, decisive, declarative judgements we make about the world and our place in it, proponents of the embodied appraisal model stress their temporal/dynamic nature, describing them in terms of the multiple, interacting processes that make up each emotional episode and ready us for “adaptive agent performance” across various “agent-environment” (Lowe et al, 2007:1) situations. In Robinson’s words, while “the beliefs or thoughts or wants [cognitivists] posit as crucial to some particular emotion may well figure in the causal chain *eventuating* in an affective appraisal [my italics]”, the firm propositional attitudes they anatomise are by no means identical with, nor alone sufficient to initiate, the “emotional process” (*Deeper*:98) as a whole. In fact, it is precisely the ways in which emotions tend to depart from our considered judgements that render them so invaluable and betray their adaptive functionality. As I suggested earlier, the charge that our affective responses to fictions are somehow paradoxical, wildly irrational or out of place amongst our typical emotional behaviours, presupposes that ‘strong’ construals of the cognitivist model are correct and that one’s ability to experience a fictive emotion such as terror of a mythical monster implies that one has made a definitive, emphatic *judgement* to the effect that that one is in imminent danger. However, if, as embodied appraisal theorists assert, emotions operate according to a much less exacting standard of proof than the sort of cognitions discussed by Solomon and Nussbaum, the paradox of fiction can be dissolved.

Emotions serve to bias our “attention to the processing of particular survival-relevant stimuli” (Lowe et al, 2007:1), inducing us to attend preferentially to the sort of information that has historically been most salient to our continued wellbeing. Significantly, this intensification or re-focusing of concentration precedes any *conscious* appraisal of

significance: the “amygdala responds to the emotional content of a situation rapidly [...] and prior to awareness” (Phelps et al, 2006:1). In other words, emotions contrive to magnetise one’s attention to potentially important stimuli before one could consciously register their presence, let alone evaluate their relevance to one’s values and flourishing. I would argue that this view of the emotions elucidates the allure of fictions, and especially fictions with aversive subject matter.

As I discuss in further detail in my chapter on naturalistic and adaptationist analyses of fiction, theorists such as Steven Pinker suggest that we find fictions attractive because they act as ‘supernormal’ stimuli, compelling our attention by titillating our appetite for certain kinds of information. Successful fictions are calculated to appeal to our cognitive and aesthetic biases, exploiting our propensity to attend to those aspects of our environment that are anomalous, threatening and/or potentially relevant to our interests. Fictional narratives do not simply share a cross-cultural preoccupation with conflict but are as a class *defined* by it: as Denis Dutton notes, when distilled to their barest essence the overwhelming majority of stories amount to dramatisations of “1. A human will and 2. Some kind of resistance to it” (*Instinct*:118).

#### **4.6 Fictive Feelings as ‘Emotional Illusions’**

In ‘Emotions, Perceptions and Emotional Illusions’, Christine Tappolet argues that we can view perceptual illusions and counter-rational emotions as analogous instances in which our “non-conceptual” (Tappolet, forthcoming:13) perception or evaluation of a situation clashes with, and often overrides, our conscious appraisal. Neither “emotions nor sensory perceptions are directly subject to the will” (Tappolet, forthcoming:8): even when our cognitive appraisal of a situation is utterly at odds with our emotional reaction, we are often incapable of completely suppressing our affective response. Just as one cannot choose to ‘see through’ an optical illusion, even when one has been forewarned about its precise nature, it is possible to believe, with complete sincerity, that house spiders are harmless and hygienic creatures, yet simultaneously to be overwhelmed by a sense of loathing and disgust every time one encounters one. Such examples are far from

unrecognisable or divorced from our everyday emotional lives. Although emotions are by no means as cognitively impenetrable or impervious to reason as the perceptual biases that render us vulnerable to optical illusions, they are far from synonymous with the judgements invoked by theorists such as Walton. Our emotional perceptions and cognitive judgements sometimes diverge because they are the product of “distinct [if often harmonious/synchronous] evaluative systems” (Tappolet, forthcoming:12) or modules. While Tappolet did not develop her analogy specifically in response to the paradox of fiction, or extend her analysis to fictive emotions, I would argue that viewing some kinds of recalcitrant emotion as akin to perceptual illusions helps to shed light both on our paradoxical propensity to feel for fictional characters, and certain widely observable – yet initially counter-intuitive – structural traits of narratives designed to compel human interest.

Some theorists who by and large assent to the Waltonian definition of emotion – a definition that axiomatically excludes any feelings aroused by known nonexistents – maintain that in some cases we can experience real (i.e. belief-engaging) emotions in response to fictions. Jerrold Levinson suggests we may be particularly likely to evince these atypical, genuine reactions to certain media. It is perfectly logical that media, like horror films, which employ “vivid and lifelike images” (Levinson, 1996:302) of fearful events and objects should characteristically elicit primitive or ‘Darwinian’ affective responses because of their perceptual immediacy, momentarily overwhelming our conscious awareness that the events we are viewing are fictional. Levinson argues that we may experience flickers of genuine fear in response to filmed horror narratives because they exploit our inability to completely suppress or neutralise our instinctual reactions to perceptual stimuli, effectively ambushing viewers into having real, albeit brief, episodes of fright or startlement. Cinematic depictions of fearsome creatures achieve their emotional effect by exploiting the “disjunction” (Levinson, 1996:302) or temporal delay between our ‘rough and ready’ emotional appraisal of a potentially threatening stimulus – one based on the sensory evidence available to us, and engaging corporeal “protobeliefs or propositions our evolutionarily based visual system automatically gives credence to on the basis of [perceptual] data (Levinson, 1996:302) – and our rational recognition that we are watching

a film, once our “beliefs proper” (Levinson, 1996:302) override our initial alarm. In other words, Charles *reflexively* shrinks from the suddenly lunging slime before he can – sheepishly – remind himself of its nonexistence.

Psychologists such as Joanne Cantor and Mary Beth Oliver propose a similar mechanism for fictional fear, asserting that, according to the principle of stimulus generalisation, “if a [real life stimulus commonly] evokes either an unconditioned or a conditioned emotional response, other stimuli that are similar to the eliciting stimulus will evoke similar, but less intense emotional responses” (Cantor & Oliver, 1996:65). Mediated images of universally fear-inspiring events are central to the horror genre, which is defined by its insistent focus on the threat of injury or violent death, and film’s “visual realism [enhances our pre-existing tendency emotionally to] generalise from the real to the mediated stimulus” (Cantor & Oliver, 1996:65). These accounts are initially persuasive. Anyone who has viewed a horror film in a crowded theatre can testify to the wave of shrieks and quickly ensuing laughter that immediately follows a jump scare. Our initial response when confronted with sudden, loud noises or unexpected and apparently threatening visual stimuli seems to be both uncontrollable and rapidly superseded by our conscious recognition that we are viewing a fiction; we jump and immediately laugh at ourselves for being taken in by a mere fiction.

However, I would reject any solution to the paradox of fiction which takes such responses to be the *only* genuine or non-make-believe fictive emotions, or, more pertinently to my thesis, which presents them as central to the appeal of any narrative genre. While modern horror may be primarily associated with visually-realistic, flinch-inducing films, to identify such narratives with horror as a whole can only offer a blinkered and historically-limited perspective of the pleasures of a diverse genre, which encompasses Gothic novels and spectral short stories, grisly Grand Guignol plays and gore films and subtle, suggestive works like Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*.

Furthermore, even within the context of contemporary, cinematic horror, jump scares of the sort identified by Levinson are widely *disvalued*, viewed as hackneyed and ephemeral

in contrast to more enduring ‘cognitive’ scares which derive additional power from calling on audience members’ own imaginative resources. In fact, I would argue that Levinson’s characterisation of our engagement with fearful fictions as an audio-visual “roller-coaster” (Levinson, 1996:302) in service of his argument highlights one reason why this often-employed analogy misses the mark. Roller-coasters have no conceptual content – in contrast to our “terror-reaction to the sights and kinaesthetic sensations occurring when on a roller-coaster” (Levinson, 1996:302), which dissolves as soon as we disembark the ride, at their most effective, at their most *pleasurable*, fictions stay with us. To deem a narrative forgettable, or even to dismiss it as serviceable, but ultimately disposable, entertainment, is generally seen as a negative evaluation. While we might, at a stretch, look to a rollercoaster to learn about *ourselves*, hoping to elicit the meta-responses many view as central to the appeal of paradoxical genres – pleasantly surprised by one’s own mettle, or ashamed of one’s unexpected faintheartedness – I would argue that we value fictions at least in part because they promise us a window into *other* people’s minds and lives, affording us varying perspectives of the world in which we live.

In short, Levinson’s model of ‘Darwinian’ or reflexive emotional responses is flawed not in concept but in application. Just as most of us are irresistibly prone to seeing the Müller-Lyer arrows as different lengths, even after verifying for ourselves that they are in fact the same, so we may be inclined to experience emotional responses to some kinds of pseudo-information, even when we are quite aware of their fictive status. According to such a model, *all* of our emotional responses to fictions could be classified as ‘Darwinian’ ones.

In his inquiry into *The Origin of Stories* the adaptationist theorist Brian Boyd suggests that, because “emotional responses to events evolved long before representations of events, and therefore before the representation of untrue or unreal events, our emotional systems did not evolve to be activated only on condition of belief”. Rather we are predisposed to “have an ‘interested party response’” (*Origin*:173) to certain kinds of narrative. Detailed, emotionally-salient accounts of human activity behave very much like Tappolet’s ‘emotional illusions’, reliably inducing certain responses in us even in the face of our conscious knowledge that the characters whose actions we are following do not exist.

While, as I previously noted during my discussion of the paradox of fiction, our fictive emotions tend to be less forceful and enduring than our emotional reactions to occurrent and personally-relevant situations, this fact in itself does not significantly distinguish them from the majority of our affective responses to mediated accounts of the activities of unknown others.

## Chapter 5: Truth, Lies and Pleasure

### Introduction

In the introductory chapter of this thesis I examined how the pleasures of horror and related narrative genres are culturally coded as illicit and morally dubious, founded in an unwholesome desire to revel in others' suffering. During my analysis of the genre's cultural disrepute, I suggested that the popular conflation of narrative pleasure and real life desire, emotionally-ambivalent compulsion and avid complicity, belies the appeal not just of genres with obviously aversive content but the nature of our engagement with fiction as a whole. I would dispute the problematic assumption that we are characteristically attracted to, and motivated to consume, fictions (particularly low-brow, genre and populist fictions) because they provide us with desirable simulated experiences. However, by contesting this view of the allure of fiction in general, and 'paradoxical' genres such as horror in particular, I do not mean to imply that no works (or parts of works) act as vehicles for this kind of fantasy fulfilment, or that our engagement with fictions is anhedonic, motivated principally by a conscious desire to learn and broaden our experiences. Rather, I would suggest that the pleasures of fiction are contingent upon, and often inextricable from, its pains; and that those fictional situations that most excite our curiosity and engage our emotions are, in many cases, in direct opposition to our real-life wishes and worldview.

In place of this account of fiction's pleasures (which, for the sake of brevity, I will from now on refer to as the fantasy model), I will advance the view that fictions are attractive insofar as they compel our attention and ensnare our emotions. In fact, I argue that the narrative centrality of conflict – the striking (and cross-cultural/historical) ubiquity of fictional situations that seem specifically calculated to frustrate our desires, thwart our expectations and transgress our values – suggests that we typically enjoy fictions that provoke, stimulate and challenge us rather than those which cater to our real life predilections.

In the next two chapters I will defend two theoretical positions that undermine the fantasy model and lend support to this view of fiction's appeal. First, I will discuss the notion that fictional works can communicate truths or inspire insights about the human situation. In opposition to the claims of 'no truth' theorists such as Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen I will argue that fictions are not only cognitively valuable, capable of embodying truths and eliciting valuable shifts in our thinking about various topics, but, more centrally to my main thesis, that appraisals of fictional works in terms of truth and falsity are both commonplace and aesthetically relevant. In other words, many writers, readers and critics' documented responses to fictional narratives contradict 'no truth'-theorists' contention that we characteristically perceive fictions to be innocent of any social, moral or philosophical significance, undercutting the notion that our enjoyment of fiction is essentially idle, our emotional, intellectual and evaluative responses to fabricated narratives completely insulated from our responses to other (potentially educative) forms of discourse. In the second of these interrelated chapters, I will assess the validity of the adaptationist theory of fiction espoused by Denis Dutton and Brian Boyd, who posit that fictions are attractive because they act as a form of cognitive play, pleasurable honing our social cognition and problem-solving skills. I will argue that – even if one rejects their contention that the human propensity for storytelling represents an adaptive and selected-for trait, viewing it instead as an exaptation or spandrel – their analysis of salient, apparently universal features of fictional narratives nonetheless subverts the claim that fictions serve primarily as a form of 'mental cheesecake', a consequence-free means of gratifying our more impractical or socially unacceptable appetites.

The theory that fictional narratives can divulge truths, enrich moral and social perception or bring about epiphanies is an instinctively appealing, if somewhat paradoxical, idea, and a venerable defence against historic characterisations of fiction as intrinsically escapist or deceptive. In the 'ancient quarrel' between literature and its detractors, the claim that that which is axiomatically false in its particulars can, on some level, impart a more encompassing truth (and perhaps even that it can serve as a superior vehicle for transmitting some types of truth than other, more factually constrained, disciplines)

represents the most powerful argument in fiction's favour, inverting those ontological hierarchies that position *mimemata* as inherently trivial, derivative and hollow.

In order to assess the validity of this claim I will examine the various theories on how it is that fictional works enlighten us, and what sort of truths or principles literature can convey, addressing the arguments for and against these conceptions of literary truth. Are literary 'truths' confined to propositions, whether stated directly or implied thematically? Or are we to assess works for their verisimilitude, their ability to provide us with accurately-rendered simulated experiences? Perhaps, as Noël Carroll suggests, fictional narratives act as thought-experiments, literary analogues to the ship of Theseus or Descartes' malevolent deceiver, not necessarily making novel assertions but facilitating a reorganisation, reassessment and refinement of our existing knowledge that allows us to see that which, figuratively speaking, has been under our noses all along. Finally, as in one interpretation of Aristotle's remarks on mimesis, it may be that literary works allow us to appreciate or assimilate knowledge emotionally, making us feel moral truths more keenly by garbing them in fictional details. After all, one can understand something at a conscious level without fully registering its emotional significance, and there are some truths that one cannot properly be said to comprehend without appropriately responding to them emotionally.

### **5.1 Addressing Lamarque and Olsen's Critique of Truth Theories**

In *Truth, Fiction and Literature*, Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen espouse a 'no-truth' theory of literature. In their particular formulation of the theory this means that, while they defend a humanistic view of literature (one that locates the value of the medium in its capacity to serve as a vehicle for the exploration of "humanly interesting content" (*Truth*:288), and accept as unproblematic the notion that literature can contain minor, incidental truths about the world, they reject the notion that literary works can properly be said to yield non-trivial truths about their content, or that any assessment of the truth-value of statements contained or implied within a work is relevant to our aesthetic appraisal of it.

Lamarque and Olsen divide theories arguing for the existence of literary truths into two camps: the ‘Theory of Novelistic Truth’ and the ‘Propositional Theory of Literary Truth’. They first examine various iterations of the former theory, the most convincing of which is the version concerning literary realism. Proponents of this theory argue that literature, or rather, certain modes of literary writing that can be broadly characterised by a shared commitment to depicting the sort of situations that arise in reality and to describing these happenings in a faithful, ‘true to life’ manner, bears a positive relation to the real world. Realist literature, even when false in its particulars, truthfully depicts *kinds* or universals, faithfully depicting the type of person, the type of relationship or situation or conflict, that abounds in reality, representing even if it does not refer.

The subjective knowledge or ‘acquaintance’ theory of literary truth can be summarised as the argument that while fictional narratives are, by their very nature, not reliable sources of facts or ‘knowledge that’ (although narratives set in a realistic world will *contingently* contain and refer to many such facts) they are uniquely suited to conveying ‘knowledge of what it is like’. There are several forms of non-propositional knowledge or knowledge by acquaintance that are at least glancingly relevant to any discussion of literature and truth: writers often evoke perceptual information during descriptive passages, attempting to communicate ‘what it is like’ to view a Gothic, crumbling castle by candlelight or to enjoy a sumptuous feast amidst fantastical surroundings; narratives might serve as a form of surrogate social/moral experience or practical knowledge, broadening one’s pool of (salutary and cautionary) examples and thereby helping one to choose well; some stories attempt to communicate what it is like to possess various forms of ‘know how’, following the activities of a skilled chef or an intuitive detective; and many fictions seem designed to impart empathetic or subjective knowledge, prompting us to consider how it might feel to be placed in some moral quandary, to grow suddenly disillusioned with one’s life work or to toil hopelessly under a ruthless and oppressive regime.

Proponents of the novelistic theory of literary truth suggest that socially realistic fictional narratives are cognitively valuable because of their ability to instil this latter category of non-propositional knowledge, allowing readers to simulate, or envision themselves

undergoing, unfamiliar experiences, to occupy viewpoints that would ordinarily be unavailable to them, and extend “the range of [their] humanistic understanding” (*Truth*: 371). The immersive, richly-detailed nature of literary narratives ensures that fiction is an ideal medium for the transmission of this sort of knowledge, enabling fictional narratives to convey those aspects of a situation that are not easily codified or expressed in conventional propositional form (or that, once distilled to such forms, cannot be as readily assimilated or ‘known’ in an emotional sense).

Literature’s alleged ability to facilitate ‘second-hand’ experiences in this way is of moral as well as cognitive worth, confronting readers with vividly-realised instantiations of unpalatable truths (as in Dickens’ depiction of the dehumanised urban poor in *Hard Times*), bridging socially-determined failures of empathy by disclosing the ‘Other’s’ common humanity (as in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s historically formative *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) and allowing us to contemplate the moral significance and status of unfamiliar experiences and situations (as in the case I will now discuss). So, for example, one might already be cognisant of the fact that medical experts in the late nineteenth century believed that excessive mental exertion was psychologically harmful to women, and that they customarily prescribed ‘rest cures’ for depressed or ‘neurasthenic’ female patients (inducing them to lie in bed all day, forbidding them from any “brain work” (Martin, 2007:737), and keeping them in near-total seclusion). However, as Noël Carroll puts it, one can know the “fact” of such a situation while remaining ignorant of the “flavour” (“Wheel, 2000:362): reading a cursory description of the rest cure provides one with only a dim sense of what it was like to undergo such a treatment.

Conversely, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wall-Paper’, written as a fictionalised account of her own experience of the rest cure (which, she claimed, drove her “so near the borderline of utter mental ruin that [she] could see over”) vividly evokes the horrifying and complete infantilisation inherent to the process: the protagonist is installed in a nursery that has its windows “barred for little children” (Perkins Gilman, 1995 [1890]:5) and rarely permitted to leave, her weight and sleeping habits are monitored and conferred about by her husband and sister-in-law, their smothering solicitousness to her

bodily needs combined with a repressive attitude towards any and all mental activity. The narrative itself is circling and repetitious, the lack of external events or markers of time passing combining with the protagonist's obsessive reiteration of certain points – her increasing “nervousness”, the oppressive, somehow repugnant character of the repeating, bar-like pattern of the wall-paper, her husband's warnings against giving in to “fanc[y]” (Perkins Gilman, 1995 [1890]:6) – giving the reader a visceral sense of the suffocating (and, in some cases, literally maddening) tedium of living in an environment where time passes without incident or progression. As Martha Nussbaum argues throughout *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, the form and style in which information is conveyed are not neutral, incidental nuances of presentation that have no effect upon meaning: one ‘knows’ an experience differently, arguably less completely, if one is provided with a sparsely written, though factually correct, summary about it than with a richly particular, vividly realised narrative built around the same basic facts.<sup>46</sup>

As I will address further in my later discussion of literature's capacity to facilitate emotional epiphanies, the immediacy, the fine-grained particularity, of literary narratives may be conducive to the apprehension of certain, important forms of knowledge because of the way fiction is able to engage our emotions (one of the very traits that renders fiction so morally dubious according to Plato). There are certain truths – those concerning what might loosely be called the ‘human situation’, those in which literature is primarily interested – that one can both ‘know’ in a blandly abstract, propositional sense without comprehending at a more intimate level. To know such truths in the former way without registering their moral and emotional significance is, in a sense, not to know them at all.

Lamarque and Olsen reject the notion that the vicarious subjective experiences afforded by fictional narratives can constitute knowledge, arguing that, while knowledge might *result* from such experiences, the experiences themselves cannot properly be categorised as knowledge. They also argue that, even if one concedes that fictional approximations of

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<sup>46</sup> Importantly, while some proponents of the notion of literary truth argue that fictional narratives are *uniquely* suited to imparting certain kinds of knowledge, throughout this thesis I will maintain that non-fictional narratives of comparable detail and emotional resonance are equally qualified to transmit those truths that are inexpressible through conventional prose or argument.

subjective experiences do constitute some sort of knowledge, the fact that there appears to be no clear mechanism by which ‘true’ or authentic experiences can be distinguished from ‘false’ or inauthentic ones is problematic. This worrisome latter objection evokes Plato’s criticisms of poetry in *The Republic*: given that authors of fictional texts are under no obligation to offer accurate renderings of the experiences they describe (aiming at credibility or “lifelikeness” (*Truth*:294) rather than strict verisimilitude), perhaps at worst fictions can act as a kind of corrupt or counter-philosophy, their illicit powers of emotional persuasion leading us to believe we have learned something whereas in reality we have merely blundered further from the truth.

In “Simulation, Subjective Knowledge and the Cognitive Value of Literary Narrative”, Scott Stroud defends the subjective knowledge theory against these objections, arguing that Lamarque and Olsen’s critique of the subjective knowledge theory rests largely upon a wrongful conflation of two interrelated, but distinct, types of knowledge linked to consuming fictional narratives: the direct ‘knowledge’ or experience afforded by the fictional narrative, and any subsequent changes in values or beliefs instigated, although not necessitated, by this initial experience. By outlining a (more cautious) variant of the theory that more clearly delineates these two types of knowledge Stroud aims to defuse Lamarque and Olsen’s criticisms.

First, Stroud makes the case for subjective experiences constituting a sort of knowledge, stating that the theorists’ insistence that an experience cannot constitute knowledge is predicated upon the assumption that “knowledge must be able to be stated in determinant propositional form. Thus, an experience of a situation may give *rise* to knowledge (“This fire hurts when one touches it”), but the experience itself does not count as knowledge.” (Stroud, 2008:27) However, as he argues, the “propositional accounts that some take as the only candidates for ‘knowledge’ could actually be *effects* [or indicators] of the sort of experiential knowledge one has” (Stroud, 2008:27): someone who has actually been to a beach will probably be able to give a more detailed account of its features than someone who has merely been told about it, her access to the memory, the *knowledge*, of what it was like at that particular beach translating into an increased ability to provide details about it

when questioned. As Stroud argues, “If one cannot answer such questions, one surely cannot say she ‘knows’ about the experience of the blinding sun on *that* beach. Being able to reflectively think about and discuss a certain topic is due to that experience, and thus the experience is integrally bound up with the issue of knowledge of some aspect of the world.” (Stroud, 2008:28)

Stroud also disputes Lamarque and Olsen’s second main objection to the subjective knowledge theory: the lack of supporting evidence as to the authenticity or verisimilitude of fictional subjective experiences. Without a means of separating “genuine” and “merely putative” (*Truth*:371) knowledge, all subjective experiences are rendered epistemologically dubious. Stroud argues that when engaging with *any* argumentative texts one must check the internal assertions against external sources and one’s own experience. This defence initially seems somewhat glib and unconvincing – the other texts to which Stroud alludes are explicitly making truth-claims and usually cite supportive references whereas fictional narratives, by their very nature, make no such claims, and often present anomalous rather than representative circumstances in the service of plot (a narrative might detail a bootstrapping protagonist’s rise from rags to riches while neglecting accurately to depict the factors inherent in poverty that prevent most people from doing the same). Nonetheless, as Stroud states, we “detect mistakes and deception primarily through *communal* and *experiential* efforts” (Stroud, 2008:30): after we read a text our engagement with it continues. Fictions enjoy a kind of interpretive ‘afterlife’ during which we reflect upon what we have read, comparing it against our own experience, assessing its authenticity, and looking at the author’s ‘credentials’ in the relevant topic before deciding whether the subjective ‘knowledge’ it imparts is accurate, generalisable and personally relevant. Whether or not we conclude this process by integrating any insights generated by our engagement with the narrative into our values as a whole, the primary knowledge afforded by fictional experiences (‘what it is like’ for person *x* to lose a child) retains a value independent of any secondary insights it yields (that social standards about how long it is appropriate to openly grieve are damaging or misguided).

Lamarque and Olsen raise a further objection to the novelistic or subjective theory of fictional truth, suggesting that factoring a work's realism into one's evaluation of its aesthetic status is "logical[ly] strange" to say the least, for, they argue, "it is not part of the literary stance to construe literary works in terms of their probability" (*Truth*:318). Although they concede that readers may in fact adopt "the vocabulary of probability" in their appraisal of literary works by criticising incidents as being "highly improbable" (*Truth*:318), they argue that this term is ill-chosen and readers in fact mean to impugn a work's lack of credibility. While it is true that readers will usually accept improbable events or situations with equanimity as long as they are presented in an engaging manner, I would argue that a lack of psychological and/or social verisimilitude can indeed be sufficiently glaring as to impact negatively one's aesthetic evaluation of a literary work. If characters behave in improbable ways or display improbable or anomalous responses to events – behaviour and/or reactions that we would regard as extremely unlikely to occur in real life – unless the author justifies it by appealing to explanatory events or tendencies in the character's past that would *believably* effect the necessary changes in the character, many readers will adjust their estimation of the work in its disfavour.

As readers, we often tend to evaluate fictional works' psychological acuity – at least those works we regard as serious, as 'literary' in the evaluative sense – praising those whose characters and interactions feel 'thick', textured and believable and criticising those that we perceive as flat, laboured and false – stereotypes are aesthetically, as well as politically, galling, offensive, at least in part, because they are *untrue*, falsifying or at best simplifying what is really there. Although I would agree with Lamarque and Olsen that 'truth' or verisimilitude is here, as elsewhere, not necessarily a *deciding* or essential factor in our appraisal of a work, to deny that some kinds of improbability or too-evident unreality may be detrimental to a work's aesthetic status seems unnecessarily sweeping. If works advance generalisations about the human situation that are wildly divergent from reality, they may well still succeed due to other outstanding attributes, but it is in spite of their theses. Additionally, here, as elsewhere, their claims about what characterises the 'literary stance' are reductive, failing to acknowledge how many readers do indeed couch their responses to

works in terms of truth and falsity. While they might feel that such readers are mistaken, it is untrue that discussion of works in these terms is entirely divorced from existing practice.

Lamarque and Olsen next address the Propositional Theory of Literary Truth, which they summarise as the belief that, while “literature at the ‘literal level’ is for the most part fictive i.e. that characteristically its content is fictional and its mode of presentation is not that of fact stating”, on another level, “literary works do, perhaps must, imply or suggest general propositions about human life which have to be assessed as true or false.” (*Truth*:321) They append to this basic formula the additional stipulation that the general statements about life must be ‘non-trivial’ in order to qualify, since while “it is implied in *Middlemarch* that people walk on the ground and do not fly when they move from place to place” this type of truth is “of no interest to the reader” (*Truth*:326). Thematic statements may be explicit, as in the case of philosophical asides made by a narrator, or implicit, in cases where readers extract meaning from a work based on their interpretation of it. They also claim that, if this theory is taken to be true, it follows that “the absolute value of the single literary work, and the comparative value of different literary works” (*Truth*:325), rest upon the truths they convey, meaning that works that “state trivial truths, falsehoods or do not imply any statements about the human situation” (*Truth*:325-326) are inherently inferior. As they note, this theory accounts tidily for the fact that the bulk of literary works are manifestly false by “identifying two levels of description, the subject level and the thematic level” (*Truth*:325), and secures literature’s cultural value alongside other truth-seeking activities like science and philosophy.

Lamarque and Olsen’s criticisms of this theory target what they perceive as its central flaw: that, by conflating “judgements about content” with “judgements about truth” (*Truth*:330), those who subscribe to the Propositional Theory make an unwarranted interpretative leap, misconstruing *themes* as *theses*. First, they argue, while literary works may explore “humanly interesting concerns” (*Truth*: 330), as readers we confer value upon works’ exploration of such themes based upon how interesting we find them, rather than by determining their truth-value. The purpose of general themes is not to impart truths to the reader but to organise and enrich narratives, lending a pleasing coherence to the text as

a whole. Truth-assessment is thus utterly superfluous to an *aesthetic* appraisal of a text, since, while such judgements may be of contingent interest, they have no bearing on how successful a work is fulfilling its *telos*. In order to demonstrate the irrelevance of such thematic statements' truth-value to our appraisal of a literary work, they ask us to envision, and acknowledge the plausibility of, the existence of an equally aesthetically valuable novel embodying the “precise negation” (*Truth*:330) of *Middlemarch*'s purported thesis that human desires and aspirations are always thwarted by forces outside of an individual's control. If, as they interpret proponents of the Propositional Theory as asserting, a literary work's aesthetic value were inextricable from its truth-value, this equivalency would be inconceivable.

Yet I would argue that their thought experiment here is hardly as uncontentious as they take it to be. As M.W. Rowe points out in his essay “Lamarque and Olsen on Literature and Truth”, the very scenario they confidently cite as paradigmatic of the irrelevance of truth-assessment to one's appraisal of a literary work – the possibility that a novel implying that “‘The best human hopes and aspirations are never thwarted by forces beyond human control’” (*Truth*:338) could, hypothetically, be as aesthetically valuable as *Middlemarch* – fails to convince. While one can imagine, or bring to mind, cases of equally valuable works expressing implacably opposed theses, it is generally in instances where the truth is harder to discern and more nuanced – such as the question of whether and when violent political action can be advisable or legitimate – than in the caricatured antitheses they suggest in this example (in addition to which it seems obvious that human aspirations are neither *always* thwarted nor *never* thwarted, and indeed, their distillation of *Middlemarch*'s themes to the former statement is in itself questionable).

Additionally, as Rowe notes, it is easy to imagine thesis statements sufficiently “vicious and implausible” (Rowe, 1997:337) that it would be impossible for a work endorsing them to succeed on aesthetic grounds: “If someone wrote a novel showing that nudism makes you intelligent, or that cruelty to children makes them outgoing and well adjusted, then it is unlikely to be published, let alone read or remembered. How could the people in such novels possibly feel or be motivated by anything remotely human? How could their

behaviour be coherent? How could we possibly be interested in seeing such ideas enacted, explored, developed and imaginatively entertained?” (Rowe, 1997:337) In order to advance such a proposition a work would, by necessity, have to sacrifice convincing characterisation, plausible plotting and psychological insight, rendering it unlikely to appeal to any but the most partisan. While it is true that one can admire a literary work whose thematic statements about the world one judges to be false, and that there are works which, while implying significant human truths, leave one cold aesthetically speaking due to their failure to satisfy other aesthetic criteria, I would maintain that a work implying or asserting a true statement is inherently more valuable than a work of *otherwise identical aesthetic quality* implying or asserting a falsehood. In contrast to Lamarque and Olsen’s ‘strong’ formulation of the Propositional Theory of Literary Truth, I would argue that it is possible to ascribe some value to the veracity of thematic statements implied by literary works without locating a work’s value solely or primarily in its ‘truthfulness’. Although truth may be “neither necessary nor sufficient for literary merit” (Rowe, 1997:335), as Rowe argues, it does not follow that it must not be a factor at all.

Furthermore, Rowe argues, the terms used to express the “general vices” we attribute to authors implicitly appeal to notions of truth and falsity: when we deride a work for its saccharine sentimentality, or label it “improbable” or “adolescent”(Rowe, 1997: 338), we in fact accuse it of being epistemically corrupt, promoting a distorted and misrepresentative view of the world. Lamarque and Olsen acknowledge the presence of such terms in discussion of literary works, but reiterate their earlier claim that aesthetic appraisal of a work’s thematically implied statements should be contingent upon how interesting and well-developed they are rather than upon their substance. They view the use of such terms as indicative of either imprecise language on the user’s part (meaning that a theme is poorly realised and unconvincingly portrayed) or of a lapse from the correct critical stance (meaning that the user has exhausted their supply of aesthetic criticisms and is embarking on an extra-literary, and therefore irrelevant, discussion). However, I would dispute this characterisation of readers’/critics’ appeals to truth or the lack thereof in aesthetic appraisals of literary works, and would instead argue that such comments about

literary works can reflect aesthetically-relevant judgements about the epistemic shortcomings of texts.

As Nada Gatalo argues in her essay “The Problem with Sentimental Art”, in which she uses the Socialist Realist painting ‘Roses for Stalin’ as an “exceptional example” (Gatalo, 2008:22) of the maligned category, certain types of artistic dishonesty are inherently aesthetically corrupt because they aim to entangle the reader/viewer in “morally misleading” and “superficial” (Gatalo, 2008:26) emotional responses. With sentimental works that are designed chiefly to entertain this is not as much of a defect: we can still enjoy films, such as *Rocky*, that are flimsily implausible and that obfuscate, rather than elucidate, our moral commitments in order to provide us with emotional gratification, since they do not ever “purport to moral seriousness” (Gatalo, 2008:28) in the first place. On the other hand, in works, such as “Roses for Stalin” that *aspire* to, but do not attain, moral significance, it amounts to aesthetic failure insofar as it draws audience members’ attention to severe limitations in the author’s perception and/or skill. When we surrender our attention to a fictional narrative, we do with the understanding that we are allowing our consciousness, our emotions, to be manipulated by another, temporarily entrusting our imaginations to the direction of an implied author. However, our readiness to engage with fictive texts (at least according to the terms which the author lays out, as opposed to undertaking ‘resistant’, purposely against-the-grain readings) is far from unconditional; given the extent to which a narrative is informed by an author’s sense of the world, inflected by his or her understanding of human existence, it is difficult to imagine how one could, as Lamarque and Olsen advocate, utterly decouple one’s evaluation of a work’s aesthetic status from an intrusive awareness of its moral or social imprecision. In other words, flagrant errors in perception are simply *distracting*, striking a discordant note and so jarring readers from the aimed-at state of absorption.

I would argue that Lamarque and Olsen’s criticisms of the Novelistic and Propositional Theories of Literary Truth fail to undermine the notion of truth in fictional narratives for several reasons. First, they construe the theories they criticise too narrowly, creating a false dichotomy whereby works advance humanly significant truths, and are therefore valuable,

or advance only trivial truths or falsehoods, in which case they are inferior, regardless of their other merits. However, there exist many permutations of the ‘truth’ theories they describe, most of which exhibit more nuanced views of value than those Lamarque and Olsen attribute to them. Secondly, they argue that debate about literary themes’ truth-value is not part of literary practice, which, they assert, demonstrates that truth-assessments are irrelevant when judging a work’s aesthetic status. However, as I argued earlier, while *explicit* appeals to truth and falsity may not constitute a major part of the critical vocabulary, it is certainly an established part of current literary practice to charge works (at least those purporting to moral seriousness) with promoting a distorted, ‘unrealistic’ view of the world or with advancing implausible theses. In the next section, I will discuss several examples of how writers and critics assess fictional texts in terms of their humanistic truthfulness, going so far as to pen novelistic rejoinders to those works they regard as especially epistemically corrupt, or writing texts with the aim of exploring or discrediting a specific hypothesis.

Equally, I would argue that *some* types of ‘truth’ or verisimilitude do generally enrich a work’s aesthetic status: even in genres, like fantasy and science fiction, where we largely dispense with the usual standards of plausibility, underneath the outwardly fantastical generic trappings psychological realism remains important, at least in narratives that aspire to be evaluated *as* literary works, rather than as throwaway entertainment. As Lamarque and Olsen themselves argue, we value works for their development of themes dealing with humanly interesting content. Works that falsify or distort important aspects of human experience are therefore aesthetically, as well as epistemically (and oftentimes ethically) flawed, because their falsity renders them uninvolved at the most crucial level.

In summation, I would dispute Lamarque and Olsen’s unforgivingly narrow characterisation of the ‘truth’ theories they assess. In particular, their consideration of the notion of literary truth seem largely to hinge upon the question of how one is to extract theses from narratives, and, once one has wrested them from their proper context, of whether it is appropriate to apply transplanted ‘truths’ about fictional worlds to the real world. However, I would argue that this model misses the point of literary truth, eliding the

importance of the ‘journey’ – imaginatively and emotionally engaging with a vividly particularised fictional scenario – in favour of prematurely arriving at the ‘destination’. It is easy to dismiss baldly stated, decontextualised literary truths as banal or lacking in evidential support because, as the next theory I will discuss asserts, literary works are not intended to dispense neatly-packaged truths so much as elicit insights on the part of the reader. Rather than serving as the vehicle for the transmission of universal principles, literary narratives are epistemically and/or ethically valuable because they involve the reader in an active process, helping them to reassess and refine existing knowledge, honing their ability to apply universal principles to diverse situations and to attend to particulars with appropriate discernment, sensitivity and emotional recognition.

## **5.2 Fictions as Thought-Experiments**

In “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature and Moral Knowledge”, Noël Carroll defends the view that literature can act as a source of moral education, outlining what he identifies as several of the most compelling criticisms of the ‘truth’ theory before unveiling a model of literary truth that, he believes, defuses each of the objections. The first of these objections, often referred to as the ‘banality’ argument, rests upon the assertion that the ostensibly valuable, revelatory theses disclosed by literary works are all too often, when denuded of their surrounding finery, platitudinous and trivial, amounting to little more than unchallenging, well-worn clichés (such as “patricide is wrong” or “power corrupts” (‘Wheel’:4). This argument allows that literary works may imply general truths (or, more aptly, truisms) while denying that the thematic advancement of such truths is remotely instructive, since one cannot learn what one already knows. The second line of objection, known as the ‘no evidence’ argument, disputes the idea that the theses literary works advance can be viewed as true knowledge, since while works may *make* or *imply* statements about the human situation they do not *demonstrate* them, and “knowledge, properly so-called, must not only be true, but warranted” (‘Wheel’:5). The alleged ‘truths’ imparted by literary works lack supportive evidence because, unlike those disciplines more traditionally associated with the search for truth such as science or philosophy, literature does not, by definition, deal with facts. Literary works implying, through the experiences

of their characters, generalisations about human conduct essentially argue from anecdote, and concocted anecdotes at that, rendering any conclusions they afford epistemically suspect at best, “cooked from the get-go” (‘Wheel’:5). As Carroll comments, “thus, by a different epistemological route, the contemporary philosopher of literature arrives at the same conclusion Plato reached in Book X of his *Republic*” (‘Wheel’:5). The third and final objection, termed the ‘no argument’ argument, puts forth two claims: first, that literary works may imply or assert generalisations, but that they do not argue for them, and secondly that the critical discourse around literary works tends not to devote much discussion to the truth-value of hypotheses contained within texts. Like the no-evidence objection, this problematises the concept of literary truth by pointing out an endemic lack of justification, as well as by suggesting that notions of truth and falsity are not relevant to critical analyses of literary works (and, by implication, that they cannot therefore be particularly relevant to readers’ evaluation of them).

In order simultaneously to counter each of these three challenges to the notion of literature as a source of moral instruction Carroll devises an artful common solution, arguing that the literary method of ‘argumentation’ is, far from being non-existent, actually distinctively philosophical. For, he states, philosophers themselves “employ a gamut of techniques to produce knowledge and learning that are analogous to those found in literature” (‘Wheel’:7). The use of “thought-experiments, examples, and counter-examples that are often narrative and generally fictional in nature” (‘Wheel’:7) as heuristic devices is, Carroll argues, both common and uncontroversial, and, if such narratives are to be considered valid sources of knowledge and insight, so too should their literary analogues.

If sound, this model is, Carroll argues, resistant to all three of the arguments that, in his assessment, constitute the most damaging objections to the notion of literature as productive of knowledge. First, it quells the banality argument: thought-experiments may invoke ‘obvious’ concepts, or ones that are long known to us, but they induce us to look at them from a different angle, enabling us to discern facets that were previously hidden from view, to perceive unsuspected connections between it and other concepts and to detect formerly unnoticed lacunae in reasoning. Equally, Carroll avers, it is not vulnerable to

charges of a lack of evidence, since the concepts thought-experiments put into play are already familiar to the reader. As Carroll states, thought-experiments are not tools for “reaching empirical discoveries but for excavating conceptual refinements and relationships” (‘Wheel’:7). As such, they are not reliant upon evidential support: because they aim at “mobilising” (‘Wheel’:7) concepts or knowledge we already possess rather than at disclosing new facts, thought experiments, and literary narratives, if one accepts Carroll’s characterisation, require no external guarantors. Rather, their persuasive power, their ‘argument’, derives from their ability to activate, problematise, refine and/or clarify our “antecedent knowledge” by forcing us to apply it in a novel way, which, if successful, can result in a significant shift in our “conceptual map” (‘Wheel’:7). Finally, Carroll argues, the model evades the ‘no argument’ criticism. While thought-experiments are “incomplete” (‘Wheel’:9), requiring readers to make certain interpretative leaps, they still function as arguments in all but the most stringent sense.

Like informal syllogisms, thought-experiments meet us halfway, figuratively speaking: “The analysis occurs [...in the reader’s] own mind, operating on her or his antecedent conceptual stock, and need not be spelled out on the page.” (‘Wheel’:9) They act “maieutically” (‘Wheel’:9), eliciting epiphanies by forcing the reader to think about familiar concepts in a new light, as when, in Plato’s *Meno*, Socrates teaches a slave geometry by questioning him.

Having demonstrated philosophical thought-experiments’ imperviousness to the three arguments he identifies as most dangerous to ‘truth’ theories of literature, Carroll goes on to explain why we should view literary narratives endorsing general themes as analogous to this form of argument. Carroll immediately acknowledges one of the most obvious objections to his claim: that when philosophers devise (or appropriate portions of other) fictional narratives their intent is clear, whereas in the case of literary works the author may just have set out to entertain. In response to this criticism, Carroll concedes that of course there are many such cases; however, he argues, in individual instances one should be able to determine into which category a literary work falls through assiduous examination of the text in question – “where a convincing interpretation of the text renders

that interpretation plausible, there should be no reason, in principle, to treat the artist's thought-experiments – with respect to conceptual knowledge – differently than the philosopher's" ('Wheel':9).

Carroll details several ways in which literary works can fulfil similar functions to philosophical thought-experiments – "defeating alethic claims concerning possibility or necessity or deontic claims of what ought or ought not be done, or of what is or is not obligated; advancing modal claims about what is possible; and, finally, motivating conceptual distinctions – that is, refining conceptual space, rendering what was vague more precise" ('Wheel':9). In particular, he examines how some literary works instantiate subversive counter-examples to universal maxims such as E.M. Forster's assertion that it is better to betray one's country than one's friend, analysing how Graham Greene's screenplay for *The Third Man* hinges around this question. That Harry Lime, and his criminal activities, are non-existent, is irrelevant: it is enough that the viewer realises that the scenario depicted is possible that renders Forster's assertion "untenable" ('Wheel':9).

### **5.2.1 Examples of Fictions Employed as a Mode of Argumentation**

There are numerous other examples of cases in which authors consciously set out to 'argue' a certain point, incorporating strategies similar to those used in philosophical thought-experiments. William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* was explicitly written as a rebuttal of Ballantyne's *Coral Island*, appropriating the premise of the original (a group of boys stranded on an island *sans* adult supervision) in order to correct what he saw as Ballantyne's 'errors' – his racism and idealised presentation of his (white, 'civilised') protagonists. The enthymematic mode of 'reasoning' employed by Golding hinges largely upon how convincing, how *familiar*, one finds the earlier scenes: the verisimilitude of the boys' early interactions, the careful depiction of the simmering social tensions and petty power plays (familiar to most of us from that age) are sufficiently convincing that many readers are persuaded to follow Golding's 'logic' to its grim conclusion. It is because, towards the beginning of the novel, many of us *recognise* Jack's thoughtless, mundane cruelty towards Piggy and the littl'uns, *recognise* the temptation to unite in a pleasurable

“closed circuit of sympathy” (Golding, 1997 [1954]:18) against a lone, reviled outsider, that we are persuaded to reassess our current beliefs in light of Golding’s emerging thesis statement: that humans are, if not inherently evil, at least in possession of a powerful and disturbing capacity for evil.

Parodies often perform a similar function, their calculated mimicry designed to problematise, as well as burlesque, elements of the source material. The Marquis de Sade’s *Justine* is, along with other derivative works such as *Shamela*, clearly positioned as a critique or refutation of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, deftly satirising the implied values or worldview of Richardson’s original text as well as its formal/stylistic features. Like Pamela, the eponymous Justine is beautiful, ‘poor but honest’, pious, obedient and fiercely protective of her perpetually assailed virginity. Following the bankruptcy and death of her parents, she embarks upon a nightmarish picaresque, beset at every turn by the monstrous appetites of the rogues and libertines she encounters. Just as Richardson’s heroine famously safeguards her virtue through argument and sermonising, frequently declaring that she would rather perish than surrender her chastity outside of the religiously-sanctioned bounds of wedlock, so Justine attempts to wring pity from the flinty hearts of her captors by appealing to their compassion, their religious sentiments. However, while in *Pamela* such dedication to virtue is rewarded (insofar as one can regard the prospect of marrying one’s would-be rapist as a happy ending), Justine’s protestations only serve to inflame and enrage her attackers further, while her conscience prevents her from making her fortune/escape on numerous occasions.

Indeed, on numerous occasions throughout the text Nature is pointedly allied with, and invoked in defence of, acts of gratuitous and meaningless cruelty. Although the violence to which Justine is exposed is outlandish in method and extreme in degree, it is not, crucially, presented as exceptional that she is subject to violence in the first place. On the contrary, Sade belabours the ubiquity, the unremarkability, of her exploitation. Justine’s sufferings are to no avail, part of no overarching, redemptive pattern. She is a superfluous martyr, deprived even of the consolatory gravitas of the tragic hero. While the worldview implied by *Justine* is ultimately even more skewed and unpalatable than that offered by *Pamela*, as

Angela Carter argues in *The Sadeian Woman*, Sade's work powerfully documents the futility, the absolute waste of trying to ameliorate one's circumstances, as Pamela does, by being "a good woman in a man's world" (Carter, 2000 [1979]:38); Justine abides by the "rules laid down by men and her reward is rape, humiliation and excessive beatings" (Carter, 2000 [1979]:38). Her adoption of the "cringe as a means of self defence" (Carter, 2000 [1979]:47) only serves to worsen her sufferings, which, Carter points out, are as "gratuitous" (Carter, 2000 [1979]:39), as cosmically insignificant, as they are unceasing. Sade emphasises time and again throughout the text that it is inevitable – indeed "natur[al]" (Carter, 2000 [1979]:92) – for socially disempowered groups like women and those living in poverty to be tormented.

As Ralph Ellison puts it in *The Invisible Man*, one cannot, however one tries, "grin" and "agree [one's oppressors] to death" (Ellison, 2001 [1952]:16). Striving for exemplary conduct according to the self-serving rules set out by the powerful often simply makes it easier for them to more thoroughly oppress one; the notion that the meek inherit the earth serves a useful function for those who wish to possess it in the meantime. Justine's principled refusal to answer violence with violence and her unthinking subservience to her 'masters' are surely, as Carter and several other characters argue, partly motivated by the hope that, on this occasion, her behaviour will cause her antagonists to relent, that it will ensure some earthly, as well as celestial, reward. Justine herself laments the unfairness of her fate by appealing to providence in transactional terms – "I [...] thought that, provided I remained well-behaved at all times, I could be consoled for all fortune's ills" (Sade, 2012 [1791]:71).

Like Pamela, Justine regularly invokes the existence of "an omnipotent God Who shields the [weak] and Who never abandons them" (Sade, 2012 [1791]:119), but her faith in a just world is brutally subverted. In contrast to the panglossian worldview of *Pamela*, Richardson's underlying thesis that "virtue is rewarded in this world and that a scoundrel may be reformed by a virtuous example" (Bullitt, 1980:9), Sade implies that women and the poor will never be able to compel their oppressors to treat them justly no matter how

virtuous or conciliatory their behaviour.<sup>47</sup> Rather, without equality, there can be no meaningful social contract, rendering the poor and disempowered subject to the whims of the wealthy few.

Sade invites us to contemplate how inequalities and injustices of the sort depicted in *Justine* problematise Richardson's account of a morally-orderly world ruled over by an omnibenevolent deity, in its place offering an alternative metaphysical model: that of an arbitrary, indifferent (or even positively malevolent) Nature, red in tooth and claw. *Justine's* narrative logic leads the reader inexorably toward this conclusion, with Sade consistently emphasising the inevitability – the naturalness – of human violence and cruelty, at least under current social conditions, and so implicitly critiquing the worldview espoused throughout *Pamela*.

Similarly, many satires and dystopias act as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum*, exaggerating an existing situation or viewpoint in order to expose inconsistencies and problems inherent to the original. In Margaret Atwood's meticulously researched feminist dystopia *The Handmaid's Tale*, she set out to depict what would happen if “certain casually held attitudes about women [were] taken to their logical conclusions” (Random House, 1998), amassing, during her research, a “large clippings file of stories supporting the contentions in the book” (Random House, 1998). Atwood, like Golding, characterises her novel as a sort of thought-experiment, stressing its relationship to reality and strongly disputing those who would categorise it as ‘mere’ science fiction: “No, it certainly isn't science fiction. Science fiction is filled with Martians and space travel to other planets [...] *The Handmaid's Tale* is speculative fiction in the genre of *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was written not as science fiction but as an

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<sup>47</sup> Given these groups' inability to access traditional channels of power, Dubois, the robber who befriends Justine toward the beginning of her travels, suggests that “the callousness of the Rich legitimates the bad conduct of the poor”, their refusal to “open their purse[s]” (Sade, 2012 [1791]:17) voluntarily licensing more coercive means of gaining alms. Similarly, when Justine attempts to dissuade the villainous Count Gernande from exsanguinating his wife in service of his perverse bloodlust, he reasons that women cannot expect fair treatment from men since there is no “mutuality” between the sexes: “I can agree not to employ force against him whose own strength makes him to be feared; but what could motivate me to moderate the effects of my strength upon the being Nature subordinates to me?” (Sade, 2012 [1791]:114)

extrapolation of life in 1948. So, too, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a slight twist on the society we have now". (Random House, 1998)

Indeed, Atwood asserts, all of the practices included in her theocratic society are plucked from real life, based on something that is believed or "something that has already happened in history or in another country" (Random House, 1998), with many of the attendant attitudes still persisting in muted forms in the contemporary West – patronymic naming systems, the synonymity of female virtue with sexual chastity, extreme natalism, compulsorily 'modest' attire, religiously endorsed polygamy/concubinage and the belief that men are inherently sexually predacious and that women must, in order to gain protection from the rapacious masses, attach themselves to, and serve, an individual male. Atwood's work presents us with a fairground mirror version of the world as it is, extrapolating from and commingling the views of reactionary forces genuinely active in US culture at the time (religious fundamentalists promoting the view of men as head of the family, an obsessive focus on sexual purity, the call for women to desert the workforce and return to the kitchen), historical events (Ceaușescu's disastrous pro-natalist policies), and ongoing practices (Saudi Arabia's gender apartheid, the Taliban's brutally enforced modesty laws and prohibitions against female education). In the tradition of earlier dystopias – particularly the aforementioned *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – Atwood's novel functions as both a dire warning of what could come to be and a fierce critique of what already is, implicitly encouraging the reader to see the subtle affinities, as well as the stark differences, between The Republic of Gilead and the society in which they live.

Finally, Jonathan Littell's 'hard' historical novel<sup>48</sup> *The Kindly Ones* confronts readers with a fictionalised (but scrupulously researched/accurate) first-person account of genuine events and phenomena (the Babi Yar massacre; the death march from Auschwitz; the legalistic wrangling, monstrous, mechanised efficiency and murder-through-bureaucracy that differentiated the Holocaust from previous genocides) in order to lead us to the conclusion that, if placed under similar conditions, we too could be capable of committing

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<sup>48</sup> To appropriate a term generally used in reference to another genre – 'hard' science fiction is defined by its adherence to the laws of physics as we currently understand them – historical fictions like Littell's conform as closely as possible to what is known about their chosen period/milieu

such atrocities. Littell advances his thesis in several ways. First, he relentlessly emphasises the importance of chance, undermining our too-ready distinction between those, like his protagonist Maximilian Aue, whose decisions cumulatively lead him into moral darkness, and those who are never forced to make such choices in the first place. At the beginning of the novel Aue salutes readers as his “brothers” (Littell, 2009 [2006]:4), boldly asserting our shared humanity. Anticipating our likely desire to repudiate any possible commonality or connection with an avowed SS officer and murderer, he constantly reminds us throughout the novel that “in most cases the man standing above the mass grave no more asked to be there than the one lying, dead or dying, at the bottom of the pit” (Littell, 2009 [2006]:17). Like the “good Germans” (Littell, 2009 [2006]:816) whose hands are clean of any direct involvement in the forced labour and death camps but who nonetheless unwittingly benefit from the prisoners’ unceasing labours, their expropriated goods, Littell induces readers to consider the extent to which our comparatively blemishless consciences are a luxury of prosperity and peacetime, highly contingent upon the time and place in which we live.

He attempts also to undermine any perception of the Holocaust as an exceptional and historically aberrant event perpetrated by uniquely evil individuals, questioning the stark line we draw between regrettable, but essentially unremarkable, wartime casualties and incomprehensible horrors, and reminding us that the massacres and pogroms in which he has Aue participate had innumerable historical antecedents. Littell refuses to allow the evil he depicts to remain safely unintelligible, to permit readers to make monsters of his perpetrators. Rather, he insists that, however inhumane Aue and others’ actions, however ‘senseless’ in the colloquial/pejorative sense of the word, they were nonetheless motivated by “human reasons” (Littell, 2009 [2006]:24). As Aue (and, thereby, Littell) acknowledges, his account, and interpretation, of his experiences offers readers no shocking new information; Hannah Arendt’s comments on the banality of evil have themselves been rendered banal, so frequently are they invoked. The image of the Nazi as a bland ‘salaryman’ ploddingly following orders is by now an archetype in its own right. Rather, Littell’s novel vivifies or reawakens our antecedent knowledge about the Holocaust in order to compel us to recognise the disquieting role that chance plays in our moral lives.

Notably, it is not only the authors cited here who treat their works as being, in some sense, arguments against (or in favour of) which evidence might be levelled, of embodying a thesis whose validity is not irrelevant to their aesthetic status; many critics object to the novels discussed in this chapter on the grounds that they imply falsehoods, act as ‘intuition pumps’, shamelessly manipulating readers’ emotions in order to drive them to the desired conclusion, or that they simply adduce insufficient evidence for their claims. For example, numerous theorists including Terry Eagleton criticise *Lord of the Flies* precisely because they take its central claim – that humans are irredeemably sinful – to be inadequately supported by the textual evidence. It may be all too conceivable that a group of public schoolboys stranded on a desert island might “slaughter each other before the week was out” (Eagleton, 2010) but, such critics argue, Golding’s chosen population – exclusively male, almost solely upper-class children – is hardly representative of all humanity. In fact, given that humans are differentiated from most other animals exactly by virtue of our remarkable plasticity, characterised by our ability to modify our behaviour in response to our culture and environment, Eagleton criticises Golding’s efforts to advance any claim about human ‘nature’ by appealing to the likely actions of an isolated and only “semi-socialised” (Eagleton, 2010) group of boys.

Similarly, if critics offering positive evaluations of *The Kindly Ones* cite Littell’s five years of diligent research, the work’s impressive factual accuracy and attention to detail, others justify their negative appraisal of the work by suggesting that his argument fails in one crucial respect. While Littell seeks to remind the reader that mobs are composed of “ordinary men” (Littell, 2009 [2006]:23), that “those who kill are humans, just like those who are killed” (Littell, 2009 [2006]:24), his thesis is, they argue, undercut by the fact that his protagonist is so glaringly atypical. Aue compulsively solicits men for sex while remaining erotically obsessed with his sister, is strongly implied to have murdered his mother and stepfather, and is a more than dutiful participant in the horrors his job demands of him, enthusiastically committing atrocities of his own volition and on his own behalf.

In summation, I would argue that Carroll's characterisation of literary narratives as thought-experiments serves as an ingenious riposte to theorists such as Lamarque and Olsen, effectively undermining their claims that, because of the customary lack of substantiating evidence, literary works cannot facilitate understanding. I will now discuss another theory (also devised by Carroll) that suggests a similar mechanism, but with a more pronounced emphasis on literary narratives' capacity to enrich one's moral reasoning.

### 5.3 Clarificationism and the Search for Emotional Truth

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle describes mimesis as an “instinct of our nature” (*Poetics*:6), an innate human faculty intimately connected to the desire to learn: “through imitation [man] learns his earliest lessons” (*Poetics*:5). Mimesis is pleasurable precisely *because* it is instructive – “men enjoy seeing a likeness [because] in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring” (*Poetics*:6). Tragedy in particular is “a more philosophical and higher thing than history” (*Poetics*:17) since it ideally expresses the universal rather than the specific, the necessary rather than the contingent. While histories will often be episodic, recounting a sequence of events that may have no clear causal connection, tragedies order experience, omitting the merely incidental and foregrounding the causal connections between depicted events. The fact that fiction is selective – a trait that renders it immediately suspect to Plato, in whose metaphysics mimetic art represents the imperfect reproduction of an already derivative tangible realm – is, in Aristotle's view, what enables it to express truths better, filtering out the quotidian irrelevancies, the sediment of the everyday, in order to distil that which is of wider relevance.

By clothing abstract principles with fictional details, tragic narratives are able to convey universal truths while at the same time “eliciting [the type of] emotional response normally reserved for the experience of particular events” (Woodruff, 1992:86). As P. G. Woodruff points out, it is impossible to respond with the same level of emotion to abstract ideas as one would to a specific, personally experienced instantiation of the same idea. So, for example, simply entertaining the idea of death as an abstract entity probably will not

“leave a vivid enough impression” (Woodruff, 1992:86) to inspire a fearful response; if “the fear of death makes your blood run cold, it is the fear of a particular death – your own, or perhaps of someone near to you” (Woodruff, 1992:86). Perhaps there are some truths that are simply too immense to grasp without exposure to the sort of vivid, particularised scenarios literature can provide us with, and it may be that this type of truth is the most important of all.

One morally relevant example of our inability emotionally to comprehend truths of a certain magnitude or those at a certain level of remove from our concrete experience is our counterintuitive response to widespread atrocities, particularly those that occur in faraway countries. Our emotional response to an account or depiction of one hundred imperilled or dying people is not only *not* one hundred times greater than our emotional response to an account of an imperilled or dying individual, but is typically significantly *less* powerful. Above a certain order of magnitude most of us become so desensitised as to be essentially numb, with very large figures literally growing inconceivable, seeming stupefyingly distant and unreal. Indeed, guided by research into how the “psychology of numeracy” (Thompson, 2007) affects our responses to those in need, charities soliciting donations increasingly set out to combat this distancing effect, humanising large-scale problems by depicting a named individual in the relevant predicament, often fleshed out with biographical remarks.<sup>49</sup> I would posit that superficially false narratives’ ability to provide us with vividly rendered fictional instantiations of universal principles could possibly represent a similar mechanism. Because such narratives are capable of arousing the passions in a way that fact alone cannot they may help to bridge the failure of imagination that prevents us from grasping the emotional import of, and dealing appropriately with, some otherwise indigestible truths of which we are *already* aware on a cognitive level. This reading may be understood as a variation of the clarification interpretation of Aristotle’s notion of

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<sup>49</sup> Studies of this phenomenon show that even small increases in the number of individuals depicted in simulated adverts for charities can result in large differences in behaviour on the part of study participants: “In one recent experiment, Slovic presented subjects with a picture of ‘Rokia,’ a starving child in Mali, and asked them how much they’d be willing to give to help feed her. Then he showed a different group photo of two Malinese children – ‘Rokia and Moussa.’ The group presented with two kids gave 15 percent less than those shown just one child. In a related experiment, people were asked to donate money to help a dying child. When a second set of subjects was asked to donate to a group of eight children dying of the same cause, the average donation was 50 percent lower.” (Thompson, 2007)

catharsis; well-executed narratives can train or refine our emotional responses, helping to orient them to their appropriate objects (such an interpretation, though less popularly adopted than the ‘purgation’ variant, is, I would argue, rather more psychologically perspicacious.)

Noël Carroll’s ‘clarificationist’ theory of literary truth builds upon this basic reading of Aristotle’s comments on catharsis while emphasising its ethical dimension, focusing upon literature’s capacity to allow us to emotionally engage with “moral knowledge” (Carroll, 2000:362). Literature’s ability to provide us with “richly particularised” (Carroll, 2000:362) instantiations or examples of universal principles or truths is, Carroll asserts, especially useful for moral reasoning: the vivid fictional scenarios depicted in literature elicit emotional responses from audiences, and because, in many cases, “the appropriate criteria for having the emotion are moral (perceived justice with respect to anger; perceived undeservedness with respect to pity)” (Carroll, 2000:367). Carroll hypothesises that “exposure to certain art can sensitise us to, as Aristotle would say, the right reasons and objects for the emotions in question” (Carroll, 2000:367).

In some cases perhaps literary narratives can even “expand our emotional powers of discrimination by appealing to our imagination in such a way that we come to apprehend some objects, say AIDS victims, as worthy of emotions such as sorrow, where previously we had been oblivious or even hostile toward them” (Carroll, 2000:367), subverting morally unjust but socially entrenched attitudes by using fictional details to humanise a previously faceless minority group. Essentially, narratives allow us to apply and assess abstract moral principles against specific fictional situations, “help[ing] us evolve a sense of how to employ these abstractions intelligibly and appropriately” (Carroll, 2000:368). In this way, Carroll argues, literature, and art in general, can enhance and cultivate our moral understanding.

Like Carroll, I would argue that the emotions play a central role in the apprehension of certain forms of knowledge. As I explained in my discussion of the “psychology of numeracy” (Thompson, 2007), in some cases, when the appropriate emotional responses to

a situation are inhibited by factors such as distance, abstractness or magnitude, cognition is demonstrably impeded, rather than sharpened, by a lack of emotion. Individuals often respond with greater urgency to small-scale, discrete and ultimately lower risk threats than to more statistically significant, but amorphous, ones, fearing terrorist attacks more than pollution, serial killers more than global warming. Paradoxically, the lethal scale of such threats renders them abstract, and therefore emotionally numbing; our inability to conceive of them in concrete terms preventing us from feeling, and therefore fully comprehending, their significance, from recognising what they portend for us as individuals and as a society. I would argue that this equation holds true for our moral impulses as well as our precautionary deliberations. Vivid, detailed depictions of individuals in distress elicit more compassionate, more *apt* responses than abstract accounts of large numbers of people in similar situations. Emotions are not simply a response *to* significant information about human suffering and relationships; it is they that imbue the facts themselves with personal significance, since the content, the import, of certain kinds of knowledge *is* emotional. One could dispassionately know of any number of suffering individuals without comprehending what their suffering *meant*, without being moved to alleviate their pain, because without its emotional resonance such information would have no meaning, rendered as flat and as drably devoid of significance as a map divested of its topographical features.

In *Love's Knowledge* Martha Nussbaum also argues that literature is a more appropriate vehicle than philosophy for certain kinds of knowledge. However, in contrast to Carroll's variant of clarificationism – according to which fictions act as a heuristic tool that can help us to come to appreciate truths that are, in principle, graspable through other means – Nussbaum views fictions as uniquely cognitively valuable. She suggests that “there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it [...] that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose [...] but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars” (Nussbaum, 1990:3). In opposition to what she presents as the prevailing tendency in moral philosophy: the attempt to adopt a ‘god’s eye viewpoint’, standing apart from the messy details of human existence and disdaining particulars in favour of general rules , Nussbaum extols certain literary narratives as embodying – “and setting up in the

reader” (Nussbaum, 1990:6) – an ethical *attitude*, a kind of compassionate, finely discerning, attention to particulars, a responsiveness to unforeseen events and complicating factors.

As with the subjective knowledge theory, Nussbaum’s conception of the relationship between philosophy and literature hinges upon the notion that there are certain kinds of knowledge that are either more readily expressible or only expressible through select literary narratives, by virtue of their stylistic features as well as due to their length and complexity: “Style itself makes its claims, expresses its own sense of what matters. Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is itself part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth” (Nussbaum, 1990:3). Fictional narratives – or at least those, like Henry James’, that succeed in capturing through their precision of indefiniteness, those aspects of life that elude the blunt, ‘neutral’ prose of conventional philosophical enquiry – convey the difficulty, and the importance, of ‘choosing well’. Unlike those philosophical texts that proceed “without surprise, without incident” (Nussbaum, 1990:3), literary narratives like *The Golden Bowl* embody the subtle, shifting complexities of moral deliberation, replicate the atmospheric conditions that cloud our perception ‘on the ground’, rather than adopting the lofty position of many theoretical accounts.

Lamarque and Olsen’s criticisms of Nussbaum’s conception of literary knowledge echo their chief arguments against other ‘truth theories’: they deny that imparting this sort of knowledge is either an intrinsic or universal feature of literary narratives, reject the notion that judgements of truth or falsity (or lucidity and perception) are part of the proper ‘literary stance’, and object to what they perceive as the misguided attempt to appropriate philosophical functions and attribute them to literature. They present those, like Nussbaum, who seek to blur or problematise the traditional boundaries between philosophy and literature as espousing “philosophers’ theories of literature [...theories that are] ultimately about the nature of philosophy and not about the nature of literature” (*Truth*:397). Citing Nussbaum’s description of certain literary narratives as exemplary cases of practical and moral deliberation, they argue that theories like hers, while seeking to secure literature’s

place as a source of cognitive value, in fact subordinate literature to philosophy, demoting it to a repository of convenient philosophical examples rather than treating it as an autonomous discipline with its own distinct functions and values: “if [such works] are ‘exemplary’, ‘paradigmatic’, ‘patterns for public life’, then they are in need of a generalising commentary to elicit their exemplary value”, and such commentaries are, like any interpretation of a fictional narrative, “challengeable” (*Truth*:396), not an inherent part of a work.

I would argue that Lamarque and Olsen’s objection here misses the mark. While Nussbaum does argue that some literary narratives should be seen as paradigms of moral insight, a central part of her theory seems to be that “correct perception” (Nussbaum, 1990:93) is *not* readily codifiable or extricable from its context. Her assertion that “only the style of a certain sort of narrative artist (and not, for example, the style associated with the abstract theoretical treatise) can adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them” (Nussbaum, 1990:6) makes it clear that, in Nussbaum’s account, literature does *not* merely serve an instrumental role by helping to convey truths that are in principle expressible through more conventional means. Although she suggests that literary narratives show us that “much of moral relevance is universalisable” (Nussbaum, 1990:95) helping readers to recognise recurring, as well as novel, facets of human experience, to discern rules as well as isolated or unexpected occurrences, she also suggests elsewhere that the focused, sympathetic, disinterested attention such works command in committed readers trains and clarifies their moral perception, evoking the “interplay between the evolving general conception and the rich perception of the particular” and helping readers learn to “navigate resourcefully between these levels” (Nussbaum, 1990:96). This honing of perception would not be obtainable through reading the insights of the ‘generalising commentaries’ alone. Rather, it is sharpened through the reader’s imaginative and emotional engagement with vivid fictional evocations of morally fraught situations. General rules are not the only, or even the most valuable, means of acquiring knowledge about a given subject – as in Noël Carroll’s analogy of the chess player who studies the course and outcome of notable past games to improve her own

playing, there are distinct cognitive benefits to examining particular instances of, as well as broader trends in, moral deliberation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would argue that, if literature can be said to be epistemically valuable, its significance derives from its ability to allow us imaginatively to engage with truths from which we would otherwise remain emotionally remote, to hone our moral deliberation and perception and to induce us to re-examine and reorganise our existing beliefs. Even if one accepts no-truth theorists' contention that – when stripped from their context – the vast preponderance of literary truths are familiar and banal, literary truths' lack of resilience to being uprooted in this way does not mean that literature is devoid of any epistemic value. Attempting to abstract, and apply, literary truths may often result in banality because literary narratives are not designed to serve as vehicles for dressed-up principles; medium and message are not so easily extricated. As Scott Stroud argues during his defence of the concept of subjective knowledge, experiences cannot always be distilled into propositional form without leaving any significant remainder. Expecting to extract a neat, comprehensible and universally-persuasive thesis from a rich, morally-complex fictional work may be akin to attempting to summarise the 'meaning' of one's personal experiences of a particular place or time. While it might be possible to generate loosely-accurate statements based upon one's impressions, such propositions are hardly identical with the subjective knowledge one gained from undergoing the experiences themselves.

However, it is important to note that, as Noël Carroll states in his essay "Art and Ethical Criticism", criticising or commending artworks on the basis of their putative effects on people's behaviour is far from uncontroversial, given the inconclusive nature of empirical research into the subject. To suggest, as the preceding theorists do, that fictional narratives may be instrumental in the apprehension of emotional/moral knowledge is, therefore, potentially contentious. There are certainly compelling historical cases where literary works *appear* to have been catalysts for social change: novels such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* famously caught the public

imagination, humanising ‘issues’ of the era and provoking widespread debate and shifts in attitude. Similarly, some studies appear to demonstrate that our emotional responses to vivid, detailed and individualised depictions of human suffering are more comprehending, more proportionate, than our dulled reactions to abstract, yet equally or more factually-faithful, accounts, and that this may result in a greater appreciation, and assumption, of our moral obligations. While the generalisability of such cases currently remains unclear, I would argue that fictional narratives are, by virtue of certain inherent features, uniquely suited to facilitating the apprehension of subjective, moral and emotional ‘truths’<sup>50</sup>, and that these forms of knowledge are cognitively valuable even if they do not effect changes in our outward behaviour. This assertion does not require that the transmission of such knowledge is an essential or universal trait of fictional (or even, in the evaluative sense, ‘literary’) narratives, or that it is the sole criterion of literary value, however, I would contend that the explication of a moral worldview, the eliciting of emotional and moral insights, is a non- incidental and critically-relevant feature of many fictional narratives that aspire to ‘literariness’.

Finally, even if one rejects the claim that some fictions are capable of imparting theses or subjective knowledge, eliciting insights or facilitating our emotional recognition of otherwise inassimilable truths, Lamarque and Olsen’s corresponding assertions about the literary stance are both separable from this contention and, I would argue, clearly normative rather than descriptive. Whether or not one views the practice of appealing to notions of truth and falsity, discernment and myopia, as *aesthetically-relevant*, one cannot deny that authors, audience members and critics alike frequently invoke, and accord great importance to, such concepts as evaluative criteria. I will discuss this final point in depth throughout the next chapter, which delves further into the ways in which we commonly engage with, and construe fictions. I will argue that Boyd and Dutton’s identification of certain central, cross-cultural hallmarks of stories should act to dispel the haze of

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<sup>50</sup> That is, I would argue that detailed, emotionally saturated, morally/socially perceptive narratives – *whether true or false in their particulars* – can educate us by providing us with varied and shifting perspectives; as I assert in the next chapter, I reject the claim put forth by some ‘truth-theorists’ that only fictional narratives are capable of enlightening us in such a manner.

assumptions that generate the fantasy model (and so render our attraction to genres with aversive content problematic or paradoxical).

## Chapter 6: What is Fiction For?

### Introduction

As Denis Dutton notes, while philosophical theories of art aim at universality, they are unavoidably “conditioned by the aesthetic issues and debates of their own time” (Dutton, 2006:367), often concerning themselves with contentious and “boundary testing” (Dutton, 2006:368) works like Duchamp’s *Fountain* or Warhol’s Brillo boxes. Adaptationists charge prominent theorists such as Danto and Dickie with according disproportionate focus to *avant garde* art works in their efforts to arrive at a sufficiently inclusive definition, constructing their theories around the hard cases to the extent that they neglect the “uncontroversial” (Dutton, 2006:368) core that renders more liminal works interesting or even comprehensible. Brian Boyd also questions philosophers’ perceived emphasis on a limited category of art works, arguing that that by concentrating “on High Art – on classic works of literature, music and visual art, or on modernist challenges to classical modes – [they] begin near the end of the story of art” (*Origin*:80).

Those, like Boyd and Joseph Carroll, who argue for ‘consilience’ or the integration of aesthetics with Darwinian social science assert that only naturalistic or adaptationist theories of the arts can correct the arcane excesses of philosophical discourse and literary theory, illuminating the “biologically constrained set of cognitive and motivational characteristics [that are both] the source and subject of literature” (Carroll, J., 2004:vii). Castigating mainstream literary theorists for their outmoded attachment to discredited theoretical models like Freudianism and Marxism, Carroll argues that academic resistance to literary Darwinism arises from an ill-founded fear that adaptationist analyses of fiction will result in an arid reductionism or from an ideological opposition to the very notion of human nature. He asserts that by identifying the foundational dispositions and tendencies from which all cultures arise, adaptationists can shed light on central questions about the origin, appeal and meaning of fictional narratives that could never be satisfactorily resolved solely through traditional, humanistic forms of enquiry, giving a unified picture of what art means, and has meant, to us as a species.

In this chapter I will assess two competing naturalistic models of the origins, and appeal, of fiction, assessing the merits of Steven Pinker's byproduct hypothesis and Denis Dutton, Noël Carroll and Brian Boyd's overlapping theories of fiction as a form of cognitive play that serves to refine mentalisation and problem-solving abilities. I will argue that, although Boyd in particular offers compelling analyses of certain cross-cultural features of narrative, making a strong case for his claim that fictions act pleasurable to hone social cognition, that this view is not incompatible with Pinker and others' assertions that the arts might well represent an opportunistic 'pleasure technology' rather than a selected-for trait.

## 6.1 The Byproduct Hypothesis

Evolutionary or naturalistic theories about the near universal appeal of fiction (and art in general) are not synonymous with *adaptationist* ones. In fact, Steven Pinker rejects the notion that our predilection for creating and consuming art arose because it afforded any kind of survival advantage in our environment of evolutionary adaptedness, instead arguing that it represents the fortuitous, but useless, byproduct of an evolved function.

Pinker famously likens our appetite for art to our craving for foods like strawberry cheesecake. In the same way that cheesecake (and similarly nutritionally dubious yet highly palatable foods) serves as an exaggerated or 'supernormal' cocktail of stimuli we evolved to find agreeable – simultaneously evoking "the sweet taste of ripe fruit, the creamy mouth feel of fats and oils from nuts and meat, and the coolness of fresh water" (Pinker, 1997:525) – the arts function primarily as pleasure technologies, creatively devised short cuts to gratifying certain evolved preferences. While Pinker regards the arts as a whole as selectively neutral or non-adaptive, he postulates that, as well allowing us to access pleasurable experiences (or a convincing simulacrum thereof) without exerting ourselves, fictions might also confer some cognitive benefit. Exciting our attention by appealing to our ingrained curiosity about the activities of our conspecifics, fictional narratives not only push the same 'pleasure buttons' as gossip about real life acquaintances but act like thought-experiments in which "the author places a fictitious character in a hypothetical situation [...] and allows the reader to explore the consequences" (Pinker,

1997:541). Our fascination with the activities and conflicts of fictive characters is instructive because fictional narratives “supply us with a mental catalogue of the fatal conundrums we might face some day and the outcomes of strategies we could deploy in them” (Pinker, 1997:543). To employ Pinker’s own analogy, like chess players who ponder and pore over past games rather than just relying on general rules like ‘get your queen out early’, imaginatively and emotionally engaging with the travails of fictional others better equips us to take on real life situations than simply relying on (true but banal and over-general) aphorisms.

Jerry Fodor rejects Pinker’s hypothesis in no uncertain terms, caricaturing his argument with this caustic *reductio ad absurdum*:

What if it turns out that, having just used the ring that I got by kidnapping a dwarf to pay off the giants who built me my new castle, I should discover that it is the very ring that I need in order to continue to be immortal and rule the world? It’s important to think out the options betimes, because a thing like that could happen to anyone and you can never have too much insurance (Fodor, 1998).

I would argue that Fodor’s criticism here fails to refute Pinker’s claim unless one interprets his comments in the narrowest sense – if, as Fodor implies, Pinker is simultaneously arguing that mentally engaging with fictions is both always educative *and* that it is instructive only in cases where there exists a one to one correspondence between depicted events and future real-life events, providing audience members with a blueprint for future courses of action. However, one could more charitably interpret Pinker’s comments to suggest either that a) some fictional narratives educate as well as delight (presumably those narratives whose events most closely resemble those likely to occur in real life) *or* b) that some narratives serve as literal guides to action while others merely act to cultivate and sharpen our deliberative and mindreading skills by immersing us in detailed and emotionally compelling situations that we would not otherwise encounter from such a privileged perspective. Dutton and Boyd’s adaptationist theories of fiction as cognitive play also promote this latter thesis.

Fodor's purposely reductive or literalist account of fantastic fictions is also particularly salient because it reflects one criticism that is frequently employed against the horror genre – the charge that non-realist fictions are by definition escapist and frivolously irrelevant to real life situations, and therefore categorically devoid of any epistemological or artistic value. It is in part the persistent conflation of fantastical narratives with fantasies that renders horror problematic. While I would reject thematic and/or psychoanalytic readings of horror as a comprehensive solution to the genre's appeal<sup>51</sup>, there is one obvious objection to Fodor's peremptory dismissal of the notion that fantastic fictions could in any way serve to educate or enlighten: specific fictional events, however improbable, can correspond to more mundane concerns at a metaphorical level. So, in its early seasons *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was acclaimed for its witty translation of widely-resonant adolescent emotional 'truths' – "high school is hell", "I slept with my boyfriend and he turned into a monster", "if I can't go out tonight it's the end of the world" – into literal/physically-manifest supernatural dilemmas. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter, although speculative fiction deals with what-ifs – often set in temporally or geographically remote societies, or peopled by unearthly and impossible beings – it cannot help but to comment on what-is, the horizons of possibility inevitably constrained by writers' cultural and technological realities.

For example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's first-wave feminist utopia *Herland* describes an idealised society solely populated by women who have, for thousands of years, reproduced through parthenogenesis. Although the work was obviously intended to function as a radical critique and reimagining of dominant social norms – presenting a matriarchal, socialist and exclusively vegetarian nation as an exemplary society distinguished by its "perfect cleanliness" (Perkins Gilman (1998 [1915]:16), order and abundance – the text in many ways uncritically reflects then-prevalent assumptions about gender, race, class and sexuality. The nation is surrounded by "dangerous [and technologically-naive] savages" (Perkins Gilman, 1998 [1915]:122) but itself populated by impeccably-civilised women of "Aryan stock" (Perkins Gilman, 1998 [1915]:46), whose advancement in contrast to neighbouring areas is strongly implied to be the result of their race and carefully-instituted

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<sup>51</sup> As I discuss in further detail during my concluding chapter.

programme of “negative eugenics” (for generations those young women who are “held to be unfit” (Perkins Gilman, 1998 [1915]:59) have been discouraged from childbearing). Equally, although Herland’s occupants live in sisterly harmony, a “multitude activated by a common impulse” (Perkins Gilman, 1998 [1915]:36), they have “no sex-feeling” (Perkins Gilman, 1998 [1915]:78), and greet the unfamiliar notion of recreational (as opposed to purely procreative) sex with incomprehension and repugnance.

In the last chapter I defended the interrelated claims that: 1) fictional narratives can embody truths, refine social and moral reasoning and/or elicit valuable shifts in thinking, and 2) we commonly respond to fictions *as if* they represent potential sources of information, critically assessing them in terms of their veracity and humanistic perception. In this section I will not address the former claim in further detail, but explore how our engagement with fictions as *consumers* as well as critics supports my second assertion. I will examine how, even in those cases when fictions arguably lack any wider applicability or resonance, our interactions with them nonetheless belie the fantasy model. In other words, even if, for the sake of argument, one accepts Fodor’s (and other critics’) characterisation of some specimens and/or categories of fiction as epistemologically worthless, such narratives still seem to be shaped by our attentional biases rather than our real life preferences.

In elaborating his own theory Brian Boyd makes two pertinent criticisms of Pinker’s description of the arts as, variously, “cheesecake, pleasure buttons [...and] ‘a cocktail of recreational drugs’” (*Origin*:82). First, he argues that Pinker’s array of metaphors only make sense if one examines the pleasures of art solely from the perspective of a consumer. His characterisation of aesthetic experience as a quick fix, an inventive means of snatching unearned pleasure, cannot be applied to those who invest considerable amounts of effort in producing art. Any evolutionary explanation of art is incomplete unless it can also account for the – surely more puzzling – corresponding phenomenon of those who are motivated to *create* art.

Relatedly, Boyd's second objection is founded upon a line of reasoning central to adaptationist theories of art – the argument from costliness. Boyd argues that Pinker's baldly stated rejection of the notion that the arts evolved in response to any selective pressures in fact “does the evolutionary explanation of art a great service”, clarifying why the byproduct hypothesis fails, for, he argues:

If art involved no benefit, if it only mimicked biological advantage, as drugs do [...] yet it had high costs in time, energy and resources, then a predisposition to art would be a weakness that would long ago have been weeded out by the intensity of evolutionary competition (*Origin*:83).

Since “nature selects against a cost without a benefit” (*Origin*:64), adaptationists like Boyd argue that the arts’ very omnipresence points towards some underlying function.<sup>52</sup> While I will return to Boyd’s – problematic – critique of the byproduct hypothesis later, I will first examine two adaptationist theories of fiction (and art in general) that proceed according to this line of reasoning.

## 6.2 The ‘Fiction Instinct’: Story as Cognitive Play

Theorists such as Brian Boyd, Denis Dutton and Noël Carroll postulate that our predilection for creating and consuming fiction is “an evolved adaptation” (*Instinct*:105) rather than a (puzzlingly costly) indulgence, that, far from being irrational or unintelligible, the pleasures of fiction are in fact purposive. According to such theorists, narrative art represents an “intensified, functionally adaptive extension of [distinctively human] mental qualities” (*Instinct*:105).

As Noël Carroll argues in “Narrative and the Ethical Life”, simulation, or the propensity imaginatively to project oneself into hypothetical scenarios, is a deep-rooted cognitive instrument vital to everyday deliberation, a potent and pervasive tool enabling humans to

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<sup>52</sup> Boyd's counter-argument here is undermined by the fact that – contrary to his assertions about the benevolent hand of natural selection judiciously pruning out extraneous or counter-productive traits – recreational drug-taking in fact flourishes throughout many cultures, despite potentially incurring significant physical, mental and social costs and affording no obvious benefits other than pleasure.

“think about and communicate information about absent situations” (Carroll, 2010:50-51). Carroll discusses how as we habitually utilise these self-authored narratives as a kind of “cost-free trial run” (Carroll, 2010:51), an “awesomely adaptive” (Carroll, 2010:50) faculty that helps us to mentally navigate, and extricate ourselves from, high risk situations. The human ability to construct and entertain counterfactual scenarios exploring likely outcomes, to, for example, tell oneself a story about “what would happen if one stumbled into the lair of a predator” (Carroll, 2010:51), envision the probable consequences and modify one’s future behaviours accordingly, is central to our deliberative process. As well as arguing that narratives of this sort are indispensable to human decision-making, Carroll suggests that ‘cultivated’ literary narratives can “exercise and sharpen the talent for projecting future possibilities” (Carroll, 2010:51). The situations in fictional narratives tend to “call forth a matrix of future possibilities” (Carroll, 2010:52) about which the reader hypothesises and uses to “organise the incoming story stream” (Carroll, 2010:52) until the suspended possibilities collapse into one actual outcome, thereby, Carroll argues, honing a skill “necessary for practical deliberation of any sort” (Carroll, 2010:52), refining our abilities at connecting past and future events and mentally juggling potential outcomes.

Those who subscribe to the adaptationist view argue that there are several indications that the human propensity for storytelling might, despite appearances, be evolutionarily advantageous, not least being the “brute fact of [its] pleasure and universality” (*Instinct*:105). The fact that fiction is a cross-cultural phenomenon (that is not explicable solely in terms of cultural transmission) is, they argue, in itself highly suggestive: while the norms and mores that shape a historically or geographically remote society’s fictions might baffle or even repel me, I am nonetheless able to comprehend how its members can find factually false narratives emotionally engaging and compelling in the first place. Globally, humans “expend staggering amounts of time and resources on creating and experiencing fantasies and fictions” (*Instinct*:109), with storytelling in various forms arising independently in all known cultures. Given the extent to which the production of art “taxes human resources”, the presence of fiction and other forms of art even in hunter-gatherer societies in which daily living is already rife with challenges strongly suggests that fiction

may confer some kind of survival advantage, somehow serving “the exigencies of human nature” (Carroll, 2004:101). Art production is effortful and costly, apparently squandering valuable time, energy and resources that could otherwise be spent in a more obviously utilitarian fashion, and, as Boyd argued in his critique of Pinker, nature selects against a cost without a benefit. Fictions are experienced as pleasurable, and “pleasure is an evolutionary hallmark of psychological adaptation” (Miller, 2001:21). Finally, children master art-like behaviours with relative ease and in a predictable trajectory (with particular application to the evolutionary status of fictions, evincing gradually increasing competence in imaginative ‘decoupling’ and pretend play).

Yet, as Carroll and Dutton note, the near universal appeal of fictional narratives is initially problematic when viewed from an evolutionary perspective. After all, in addition to being (apparently) non-instrumental like other art forms, fictions in particular are, at face value, a source of corrupt or deceptive information; instead of consuming them with pleasure we could equally plausibly regard them as uninterestingly useless or even repellent, like “dull knives [or] the smell of rotting meat” (*Instinct*:109). Dutton posits three interrelated adaptive functions that fiction could fulfil. First, he (along with others such as Boyd, Carroll and Stephen Pinker) argues that our desire to engage imaginatively and emotionally with fictions prompts us to undertake what essentially amount to problem-oriented thought experiments, providing us with “low-cost, low-risk surrogate experience” (*Instinct*:110). By allowing us mentally to rehearse possible scenarios relevant to our continued flourishing fictional narratives act as “preparations for life and its surprises” (*Instinct*:110). As in Martha Nussbaum’s essay on the *morally* educative properties of fiction, “Finely Aware and Richly Responsible,” Dutton locates the epistemological value of fictional narratives not in their putative generation of maxims but in the way they hone and refine our cognitive faculties, allowing us to “build a store of experience in terms of individual, concrete cases” (*Instinct*:113).

Secondly, Dutton cites those theorists such as Michelle Scalise Sugiyama who argue that, contrary to appearances, the transmission of information and inculcation of problem-solving skills are central to fiction as it was and is practised in many societies. For

example, in hunter-gatherer cultures like that of the Yanomamo, Scalise Sugiyama notes that fiction often serves as a repository of vividly encoded information: she describes a Yanomamo folktale in which “Jaguar is chided by Millipede for walking so noisily through the jungle. Millipede rounds and softens the soles of Jaguar’s paws and teaches him to walk softly, without breaking branches” (*Instinct*:117). Scalise Sugiyama argues that this deceptively simple narrative is saturated with facts vital for navigating the local environment, covering the activities of “jaguars (predators of humans), the importance (for humans) of walking quietly when far from a village or camp, and by analogy also about strategies for ambush and measures to avoid attack by other tribes” (*Instinct*:117). The didactic features Scalise Sugiyama discerns in Yanomamo storytelling are, Dutton argues, equally present in fictions (oral and recorded) from other cultures, which convey knowledge in the form of (seemingly) incidental, background information about social values and customs, and even technical knowledge. Indeed, he asserts, vast quantities of novels and stories “particularly in the nineteenth century and up to the present, are in fact essentially travelogues or tales of exploration [...] dramatic and memorable ways to present exotic information about the South Seas, darkest Africa, or the Wild West” (*Instinct*:115).

Finally, and most importantly, fictions serve to “portray and examine inner experience” (*Instinct*:117), allowing audience members to navigate the mental worlds of others and cultivating our ability to occupy others’ perspectives. Adaptationists like Boyd and Dutton cite autistic individuals’ difficulties in story comprehension and lack of interest in pretend play as evidence that literary competence might be the result of “specialised cognitive subroutines”, since functional dissociability (or the predictable breakdown of a particular mental activity “as a result of genetic defect, disease, or accident” (*Origin*:190) is a hallmark of cognitive adaptation.

As Dutton asserts, pretend play reliably emerges among children of all cultures at around eighteen months to two years – “about the time that they begin to talk and engage socially” (*Instinct*:108). Dutton argues that imaginative play represents a developmental landmark in children’s cumulative acquisition of a theory of mind/simulation abilities, illustrating their

growing ability to imaginatively emulate the thoughts and behaviours of others (although one must exercise caution when speculating about this apparent relationship, since, as critics of this theory note, children consistently fail false belief tests until considerably after this point). Our attraction to such imaginative pursuits is adaptive, he suggests, because our desire to engage in pretend play and with fictional narratives allows us pleasurable to investigate the inner lives of others, honing our predictive and ‘mind-reading’ skills. Notably, autistic children do not typically display the same interest or proficiency in pretend play as neurotypical children, indicating that an attraction to fiction-making and consuming and (eventual) competence in mentalising may well be linked.

Certain notable features of fictional narratives buttress the claims of adaptationists: stories are, with vanishingly few exceptions, about persons<sup>53</sup> and their actions, thoughts and feelings, rather than physical objects or natural events. In addition to focusing upon human agency, fictions turn on problems and conflict. Boiled down to their barest essence, stories involve “1. A human will and 2. some kind of resistance to it” (*Instinct*:118). While the problematic events around which a narrative revolves may be purely internal or remembered, fictions require conflict of some sort to compel audience members’ attention; as Dutton argues “‘Mary was hungry, Mary ate dinner’ narrates a sequence of events” rather than a story, flat and replete where stories should tantalise, whereas “‘John was starving but the pantry was empty’” (*Instinct*:118) at least hints at the beginning of one. Finally, fictions are emotionally engaging as well as imaginatively compelling, affectively “saturated” (*Instinct*:122) from start to finish. By allowing audience members to explore varied and shifting emotions in response to the travails of characters, fictions provide us with “templates” for emotional life, helping readers to “navigate life in control of their emotions rather than being controlled by them” (*Instinct*:123).

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<sup>53</sup> I use the term persons rather than people since stories centring on the activities of nonhuman animals, spectres, gods, demons, aliens or robots are relatively common, particularly in fables, genre fiction and children’s literature. However, as Dutton remarks, in those instances where narratives follow animals etc, they are nonetheless viewed through an anthropomorphising lens, acting very much like humans in furry coats—Hans Christian Andersen’s romantically-inclined tin soldier and Richard Adam’s questing rabbits burn with familiar desires and aspirations, and display decidedly human characteristics. Even in those rarer cases where genuinely ‘alien’ aliens appear in a fiction, the narrative usually focuses on the implications the existence of these ineffable creatures pose for humans.

Each of these features is cross-culturally characteristic of fictional narratives. If fictions function solely as a pleasure technology, servings of ‘mental cheesecake’, it seems hard to explain why conflict is an indispensable narrative ingredient, why stories so often focus upon elements of life that afford us discomfort and evoke a spectrum of (not always pleasurable) emotions. As Joseph Carroll argues in *Literary Darwinism* such persistent features of fictional narratives should make it clear that “the pleasure specific to literature does not limit itself to vicarious participation in fantasy fulfilments” (Carroll, J., 2004:133). It is important to reiterate at this point that by invoking such claims I do not mean to suggest that we do not derive some form of pleasure from engaging with narratives with painful subject matter, or that we choose to read them with a higher, educative purpose in mind. Similarly, some fictions might be particularly pleasurable because they confront us with enduring problems – exploiting our interest in certain especially common or intractable predicaments because they reliably provoke intense attentional and emotional engagement – only to provide us with illusorily neat and satisfactory resolutions of the sort that are rarely available in real life, thereby acting as a more complicated form of wish-fulfilment. Rather, I would argue that the fact that conflict is unquestioningly acknowledged as the *starting point* of any fictional narrative, the necessary ‘hook’ for securing readers’ attention, demands that we re-examine the implicit assumptions about the nature of fiction’s pleasures that underlie the fantasy model.

If, as adaptationists argue, we possess an innate, evolved “storytelling instinct” (*Instinct*:127), if creating and consuming fictions somehow increases our fitness (or did so in our ‘environment of evolutionary adaptedness’), acting as a more sophisticated, ongoing form of pretend play that sharpens our problem-solving abilities and encourages us to adopt others’ perspectives, then these requirements make considerably more sense. Rather than living, as the majority of non-human animals are currently believed to, as “naïve realists” (*Instinct*:106) residing, and responding, wholly in the moment, humans’ distinguishing feature is our ability to ruminate about past and future, to strategise and engage (imaginatively and emotionally) with hypothetical scenarios. Many adaptationists argue that “fictional storytelling [...] does not function separately from this faculty [for supposition] but is an enhancement and extension of counterfactual thinking into more

possible worlds with more possible experiences than real life could ever offer up to an individual" (*Instinct*:114).

### **6.3 Boyd's *On the Origin of Stories***

Brian Boyd defines art as "a kind of cognitive play, the set of activities designed to engage human attention through their appeal to our preference for inferentially rich and therefore patterned information" (*Origin*:85). He argues that our predilection for engaging in, and with, various art forms serves to train and stimulate our minds, just as physical play conditions the body.

As humans, we inhabit a unique "cognitive niche [...] gain[ing] most of our advantages from [our] intelligence" (*Origin*:89). Boyd argues that certain species-wide aesthetic preferences (like our inbuilt affinity for symmetry, our fascination with 'open ended' pattern) reflect an evolved craving for information. We are attracted to particular kinds of stimuli because they help us to make sense of the world. In those cases where "information [...] lacks meaningful pattern" (*Origin*:89) we are unable to glean anything useful from it, whereas completely predictable patterns do not compel our attention for long because we have nothing further to learn from them. An "unpredictable combination of patterns" (*Origin*:90), however, rewards scrutiny, yielding potentially important information upon further consideration. Art, like other forms of play, is both intrinsically pleasurable or "self-rewarding" (*Origin*:92) and beneficial, arresting enough to capture our attention and information-rich in ways that help to hone vital human skills and capacities. As Boyd argues, "the more pleasure that creatures have in play in safe contexts, the more they will happily expend energy in mastering skills needed in urgent or volatile situations" (*Origin*:92), refining key competencies. Fictional narratives pleasurable train our "social cognition, [rendering it] faster, more efficient, and more accurate" (*Origin*:191), improving our capacity to recognise "social and agential patterns" (*Origin*:192).

Boyd argues that fiction also "increases the range of our vicarious experience and behavioural options [exposing us to] possible opportunities and risks" (*Origin*:193) without

incurring any of the penalties associated with real-life risk-taking. Anticipating criticisms such as Fodor's acerbic *reductio*, he argues that it is not necessary for fictional situations to precisely mirror real life in order to act as a guide for action – like thought-experiments, narratives can prompt us to reflect upon reality even when they invoke improbable or impossible situations.

Equally, Boyd contends, an “evolutionary appreciation of [human nature] and social behaviour [...] helps us to highlight authors [...] as strategists” (*Origin*:233), identifying the ways in which narratives are constructed to earn and retain our attention. As in Pinker's cheesecake example, Boyd asserts that fiction is so successful at compelling our attention, at effecting our emotional entanglement, because it acts as “a superstimulus [...] focusing on intense experience and concentrated change” (*Origin*:193). Acting as a distillation of the arresting, information-rich and/or atypical aspects of human existence, stories fascinate us because of the ways in which they diverge from, as well as correspond to, our experience and even our desires. As the cross-cultural appeal of the surprising, the innovative, the taboo and the ontologically-transgressive in fictional narratives illustrates, while we engage with fictions because they afford us pleasure, they do not function as an uncomplicated ‘pleasure technology’ that simply allows us to access gratifying experiences. According to Horace's dictum, fictions please and educate; as Boyd's cross-cultural analysis of fictional narratives illustrates, fictions most often please by fascinating, moving and entralling us rather than by satisfying our real life desires, confronting us with the provocative, disquieting and fearful aspects of life as often as they present us with aspirational and uplifting fantasies. Whatever the origins and educative status of art, I would argue that Boyd's central insight – that narratives are, first and foremost, designed to capture and retain attention, and that we find them so attractive because of the ways in which they excite our curiosity – is itself compelling.

Like many other theorists addressing the appeal and cultural purpose of fictional narratives, Boyd makes some rather exalted claims on fiction's behalf, favourably comparing the cognitive, social, and moral effects of fictional narratives with those of factual ones. According to Boyd, “another feature of fiction – but not of fact – also

encourages the development of a moral sense [...because] story by its nature invites us to shift from our own perspective to that of another" (*Origin*:197), allowing us access to characters' very thoughts. Although it is true that fictional narratives can provoke moral reflection, it is unclear why theorists such as Boyd are unwilling to extend this property to factual narratives of equivalent depth and thoughtfulness. Given that fictions are written by individuals, the multiple perspectives Boyd invokes in fiction's favour are no more likely adequately to reflect real life qualities of character and opinion than, for example, a writer's painstaking attempt accurately to convey the thoughts and experiences of another/others whose life they wish to convert into a fully-realized narrative. I would argue that Boyd's desire to demarcate factive from fictive narratives, and to secure for the latter an autonomous status and value, leads him to exaggerate the uniqueness of fictions.

It is certainly conceivable that there are ideas, experiences and phenomena that fictions *are* uniquely suited to exploring: from novels examining the possible repercussions of minor or major deviations in world history or the invention of fantastical new technologies, to works set in a desolate post-apocalyptic or prehistoric environment, narrated by a lone survivor/inhabitant. It is also highly plausible that, as Boyd *et al* argue, fictional narratives are morally enriching, enhance social cognition, hone our deliberative skills and widen our repertoire of possible responses to challenging or novel situations. However, it is unclear why factual narratives are categorically unsuitable for fulfilling these same purposes. I would argue that Boyd and others' determination to deny similar powers to factual narratives betrays an understandable defensiveness: because fictions have, for a long time, been viewed as suspiciously akin to falsehoods, or equated with indulgent, escapist fantasies, it is tempting for their defenders to accord them not just equal but greater value than fact (for some purposes at least). However, in the case of adaptationist accounts of fiction, this insistent differentiation also serves to underline their opposition to the notion that fiction might act primarily as a pleasure technology; if fictions push quite different 'buttons', if they serve some utterly distinct set of functions, it renders it less thinkable that they were devised simply as an opportunistic means of gratifying our desire for social information and engaging with challenging counterfactual scenarios. I would argue that it is simultaneously possible that fictions act as a form of information-rich cognitive play in

the ways that Boyd argues, fine-tuning various mental faculties, and that they are merely the fortuitous byproduct of some other selected-for trait.

As Katja Mellmann points out in her critique of Boyd's work (which I will discuss in detail in the next section of this chapter), Pinker's description of the arts as mental cheesecake is in fact perfectly reconcilable with Boyd's vision of fictional narratives as 'superstimulating', information-rich play. Although Pinker's description of art in terms of consumerism obscures the costly, effortful nature of art production, the byproduct hypothesis itself does not require such a (mis)emphasis, as Stephen Jay Gould and Mellmann make clear.

#### **6.4 Can the Byproduct Model Coexist with Boyd's Vision of Fictions as Cognitive Play?**

As I briefly discussed earlier, Boyd attacks the byproduct hypothesis on the grounds that "nature selects against a cost without a benefit" (*Origin*:83), arguing that the very costliness and cultural ubiquity of art-making serves as evidence for its status as an adaptation. I will now address this line of reasoning in greater depth, assessing the counter-arguments of Gould and Mellmann and explaining why Boyd's argument fails to refute – or even contradict – Pinker's assertion that many of the arts may serve no particular adaptive function, however many genuinely beneficial post hoc *uses* they fulfil.

In 'The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm', Gould famously criticises adaptationists' quixotic faith in "the near omnipotence of natural selection in forging organic design and fashioning the best of all possible worlds" (Gould & Lewontin, 1979:150), arguing that the adaptationist programme is marred by an over-reliance on reverse engineering and a lack of consideration of how developmental constraints affect phenotype. Gould charges adaptationists and evolutionary psychologists in general with an endemic failure adequately to distinguish between "current utility [...and] reasons for origin", noting that "male tyrannosaurs may have used their diminutive front legs to titillate their female partners, but this will not explain *why* they got so small" (Gould &

Lewontin, 1979:147). In other words, byproducts of selected-for traits may be selectively neutral or even beneficial, despite their lack of functional design (even if, as in the case of art, the byproducts exert costs in time and energy the coincidental benefits they confer may still balance or outweigh the negatives).

Although less sceptical about the adaptationist field of inquiry than Gould, Mellmann, in ‘The Multifunctionality of Idle Afternoons. Art and Fiction in Boyd’s Vision of Evolution’, echoes many of his criticisms when addressing the flaws of Boyd’s theory in particular (as well as identifying further deep-rooted problems with Boyd’s model<sup>54</sup>). Mellmann states that the adaptive purposes Boyd attributes to the arts could equally be interpreted as fortuitous *effects*: art may well serve to fine-tune essentially human skills, increase social cohesion through fostering shared attention and engender more creative problem-solving without having evolved to acquire these functions. For, she argues, “If a trait which is selected as a successful reply to a specific selective pressure also proves beneficial in many other contexts, this does not make that trait an *adaptation* to those contexts [...] although behaviours involving that trait might unsolicitedly *occur* in these contexts very frequently” (Mellman, 2009:4).

Boyd ascribes a multitude of functions to our love of fiction (although he maintains that its chief purpose is the training of social cognition), optimistically asserting that it “may offer one advantage, like echolocation in bats, or many, like an elephant’s trunk, which evolved to sniff, dislodge, grasp, pull, deliver, push, twist, caress, siphon, and squirt” (*Origin*:81). Mellman criticises Boyd’s claims, arguing that Boyd’s identified *functions* represent different *uses* of the trunk as a whole, the result of myriad smaller specialised mechanisms/adaptations including “an entire olfactory system in its perceptual apparatus [...] and a sophisticated muscular system at the end of the trunk” (Mellman, 2009:5).

Mellmann contends that Boyd’s linguistic imprecision, his persistent conflation of uses with functions, reflects pervasive “deficiencies in [his] evolutionary-theoretical framework” (Mellman, 2009:6): “although Boyd [...] seems to employ [the] strictly

analytical concept of adaptation [as it is used in evolutionary biology] in actual fact, he departs significantly from it. The concept he actually employs is a made-up notion of ‘adaptation’, idiosyncratically extended to include multifunctionality.”(Mellman, 2009:6)

In contrast to Boyd, she argues that it is perfectly plausible that art could be both “an eminently cultural behaviour” (Mellman, 2009:3) yet cross-culturally ubiquitous. Rather than positing any crude, binary nature-culture divide, Mellmann means to suggest that the arts could be the inevitable behavioural byproduct of certain indispensable “biological substrates”, repeatedly emerging in varying “conventionalised form[s]” despite their lack of functionality simply because “in order to eliminate those behaviours from the human genetic program” (Mellman, 2009:3), natural selection would have to eliminate the underlying substrates. Boyd’s insistent focus upon the costliness of art-making valuably counters Pinker’s over-emphasis on the purely hedonistic aspects of aesthetic experience but does not address the substance of the byproduct/spandrel hypothesis. In fact, like Gould, Mellmann argues that evolution is rather more forgiving (or less efficient at eliminating maladaptive traits) than many adaptationists would have it, “*simply tolerat[ing]* a lot of potential behaviours that are not themselves adaptive” (Mellman, 2009:3). Byproducts of selected-for traits may be selectively neutral or even beneficial, despite their lack of functional design (even if, as in the case of art, the byproducts exert costs in time and energy the coincidental benefits they confer may still balance or outweigh the negatives).

Costly but instrumentally useless behaviours like art-making may be tolerable, from an evolutionary point of view, solely because they are the unavoidable concomitant to more desirable traits. If humans are designed to crave potentially useful information about those we know (particularly powerful or socially-esteemed others), we may also be predisposed, under certain circumstances, enjoyably to fritter away time reading magazines filled with salacious gossip about faraway celebrities, but it does not follow that we have a ‘celebrity gossip instinct’. While it might be protested that the art forms that Boyd and Miller discuss are cross-cultural, whereas gossip magazines are a more recent and culturally-limited phenomenon, one could argue that adaptationists like Boyd extend their conclusions to a

wide spectrum of related phenomena – conclusions which may well be true of the spontaneous, art-like play behaviours in which even young children and some animals engage, such as pretend play or deriving pleasure from ornamenting themselves/their environments – thus drawing faulty, and falsely generalising, inferences about the adaptive functions of more conventionalised and culturally inflected art forms.

This may seem like a purely semantic dispute; Boyd's theory of art, and narrative in particular, as a form of selected-for cognitive play, is both seductive and intuitively plausible. His argument that art should be regarded as a natural kind because the same approximate forms of art consistently appear across various cultures and throughout history is also persuasive. However, one could argue that, just as a genuinely selected-for and adaptive desire to engage in various forms of physical play – rough-and-tumble games of pretended aggression, games in which players alternate between fleeing or giving chase, games of targeted throwing and catching – can find expression in both ancestrally-programmed, adaptive forms and equally pleasurable but more codified, culturally extrapolated, and no-longer-adaptive iterations, so too could different forms and variations of art differ in origin and adaptive value.

For example, the fact that humans cross-culturally enjoy engaging in games, like football, that serve to improve co-ordination and general fitness, may well indicate that such forms of play fulfil an adaptive purpose in the same way that animal play serves to prepare players for future activities and problem-solving, honing and fine-tuning their natural capacities. However, it remains unclear to what extent football as a modern cultural entity can be considered an adaptation or adaptive, particularly given the ways in which fans demonstrate their fervour for the game, with many lavishing time, energy and money on following a purely recreational pursuit which is not fine-tuning their skills and fitness levels. While, as with the arts, it may well be the case that following a particular team fosters in-group cohesion through promoting shared attention, the ways in which people engage with football (as a cultural phenomenon) might be quite dissimilar to the ways that people participate in informal, football-like games across various cultures, flexing different physical and mental muscles and affording entirely different benefits.

As prominent evolutionary psychologists stress, the proximal mechanisms that prompt us to act in species-typical ways – the love we feel for our close genetic relations, our appetite for sweet, fatty foods, our attraction to facially symmetrical members of our preferred sex and, most relevantly to this chapter, our putative ‘fiction instinct’ or “compulsive delight in fictional representations” (*Origin*:72) – evolved to enhance our fitness not in our current environment, but in our ‘environment of evolutionary adaptedness’ (or EEA): as members of small hunter-gatherer bands in the Pleistocene-era. To quote Leda Cosmides’ and John Tooby’s pithy summation of the concept, according to evolutionary psychologists “our modern skulls house a stone-age mind” (Cosmides & Tooby, 2012 [1997]). Boyd and Dutton criticise contemporary philosophers of art for placing undue emphasis on liminal and meta art, leaving the uncontested majority of art works to languish in a state of critical neglect, whereas, they suggest, definitions and “explanations need to start much further back: [...] with a timeless scene like a father playfully distracting his child by miming an ape [...and] choosing to play up to a few onlookers” (*Origin*:80). Yet one could argue that it is equally questionable as to how far adaptationists can profitably generalise from proto-fiction/art-like behaviours of this sort to their cultural extrapolations. As in Stephen Pinker’s view of humans as canny pleasure-maximisers, gratifying our evolved preferences in an opportunistic fashion, the love of fictional story(telling) that arises in all human cultures could simply represent the inevitable, but unselected-for, byproduct of a genuinely adapted avidity for social information and/or propensity for imaginatively and emotionally engaging with counterfactual scenarios.

While I argue that Boyd and Dutton’s description of fiction’s pleasures and (cultural) purposes does not necessarily entail, or supply sufficient evidence for, the view that fictions represent an adaptation, I would contend that Boyd and Dutton’s account of fiction as a form of cognitive play – attractive because of the ways in which it appeals to our craving for information and pattern – is both intuitively appealing and supported by their incisive analyses of cross-cultural features of narratives. As I argue in my introductory chapter, much of the perturbation and puzzlement aroused by genres that depict violent or distressing content stems from the perception that we value narratives insofar as they allow

us to access gratifying experiences, that we find stories pleasurable only if they remain adequately servile to our real life desires. Boyd and Dutton's identification of ubiquitous and foundational fictional tropes – such as the universal narrative preoccupation with conflict – fatally undermines this viewpoint by presenting a more plausible, and evidentially-grounded, alternative to the fantasy model.

These theorists' work supports my contention – developed in further detail in my discussion of the paradox of fiction and the appeal of the sublime, tragedy and horror – that our responses to fictions are neither strictly insulated, nor wildly divergent, from our reactions to vividly-realised accounts of real or possible events. In other words, although our fascination with fictional representations of violence and suffering is not the product of some perverse predilection for real life cruelty nor yet is this type of curiosity neatly confined to fictions (as many theorists argue when discussing the allure of tragedy). Rather, I would suggest that fictions are pleasurable because of the ways in which they are calculated to stimulate our appetite for certain kinds of knowledge: fictions follow the actions of persons, dwell upon conflict, peril and misfortune and foreground anomalous beings and events (including many cases when such creatures and happenings are depicted as obstructing human interests and flouting aesthetic or moral values) because such features reliably excite feelings of urgency and suspense in audience members. I would argue that this striking correspondence between fictive strife and narrative pleasure suggests a competing model of fiction's appeal – in which fictions excite our curiosity by acting as pseudo-factual accounts of potentially relevant situations and actors, exploiting our desire to keep abreast of novel and pertinent information.

## Chapter 7: The Problem with Pleasure

### Introduction

Throughout this thesis I have suggested that the alleged paradox constituted by our enjoyment of sad or fearful fictions, and, by extension, the view that an attraction to such genres must imply some worrisome want of compassion, is generated by an unduly restrictive notion of pleasure. While this conception of narrative enjoyment is seldom explicitly articulated, I have argued that this tacitly-held definition becomes evident both in the sporadic moral panics about violent and distressing media and, more subtly, in the theories of those seeking to explain their perplexing pleasures.

The theory I advance in this chapter developed in opposition to a theoretical background shaped by two central disavowals: the denial that our direct responses to genres with negative subject matter can ever, in themselves, be pleasurable, and the concomitant refusal to concede any kinship between high narrative forms such as tragedy and the lowly and traditionally disreputable horror genre.

Meta-responses, favourable and otherwise, undoubtedly play a recognisable and important role in numerous kinds of aesthetic experiences: one might feel pride at being the sort of person who is able to decipher and enjoy an allusive, densely written highbrow novel; feel ashamed at one's queasy fascination with a grisly true crime documentary; preen oneself upon one's ability to guess 'whodunnit' or to unflinchingly withstand a frightening scene in a film. However, I would argue that many theorists overstate meta-responses' role in the pleasures of tragedy and related genres while concomitantly neglecting to note the ways in which our direct responses to works involving even emotionally painful subject matter can be experienced as at least ambivalently pleasurable, compelling and/or valuable. If we often use art as mirror of sorts, scrutinising our responses to various stimuli, comparing our situation to that of a fictional character's, I would argue that a more fundamental impulse in our engagement with art is the desire to look outside of ourselves, to experience the

momentary eclipse of self-consciousness that Burke identifies as paradigmatic of the sublime.

Similarly, many prominent theories of tragedy purposefully reiterate and invoke the divide between high and low genres featuring unpleasant content. By explicitly defining its allure in highly genre-specific ways, arguing that tragedy appeals because it offers us otherwise inaccessible insights, consolations or intimations of our own transcendence, such theorists forestall any identification of its pleasures with the tawdry thrills commonly ascribed to other, ‘lower’ genres that share similarly aversive subject matter. For example, while Flint Schier endorses an epistemological solution to the paradox of tragedy – denying that our attraction to tragic fictions is rooted in any traditionally pleasurable feelings, attributing it instead to agonised fascination – he likens any pleasure afforded by the horror genre to the frisson felt by those watching an execution: a sort of “terror tinged with self-congratulation” (Schier, 2004 [1983]:199). We only feel compelled to bear witness to the suffering of tragic protagonists because the type of “moral enormities [depicted by tragedies] *are a part of our lives* [my italics]” (Schier, 2004 [1983]:202). One can infer that, for Schier, the distinction – the justification – lies in the fact that “things are actually like that” (Schier, 2004 [1983]:202). In contrast, there can be no equivalent drive to view “*fantasies of torture and mass murder*” (Schier, 2004 [1983]:202); we cannot feel ourselves to be under any similar duty to attend to the kind of violent acts depicted in horror because they wear their fictionality on their sleeve, bearing no clear relevance to real life suffering. Therefore, those who nonetheless choose to consume such narratives can safely be assumed to be indulging baser appetites.

Those resistant to comprehensive solutions also choose to emphasise another distinction between high narrative genres that deal in human suffering (such as tragedy) and low ones (such as melodrama, horror and the kind of commercially-targeted factual accounts found in misery memoirs, women’s magazines and true crime documentaries). While they undeniably share a common substance – similarly preoccupied with the less savoury aspects of human existence, addressing subjects such as incest, murder, madness and mayhem – such theorists argue against any relaxation of generic boundaries on the grounds

of style. A venerable solution to the alleged paradox (and one that defends against any disquieting implications) is the claim that tragedy's bittersweet pleasure derives not from its content, but the artistry with which it is presented. When viewing a tragedy our pleasure may *coincide* with our pain, but each originate from quite different sources. Our pleasure in a tragedy's eloquence and our pained response to its subject matter do not 'mix' or form a single, hedonically-altered, solution, but coexist in an uneasy suspension. However, the eloquence explanation is, for obvious reasons, rarely extended to despised and low-brow genres like horror.

In contrast to these views, I will present a comprehensive solution to the apparent paradox posed by our enjoyment of narratives designed to provoke negative emotions, rejecting those solutions that attribute the allure of the sublime, tragedy and horror to more straightforwardly pleasurable meta-responses or reflections. Instead, I argue that the pleasures of such narrative genres demonstrably reside in the very intensity of our direct responses, the cognitive and emotional absorption that well-crafted fictions can inspire. I also suggest that, while our emotional responses to 'paradoxical' genres such as horror are genuinely negative, integrally rather than merely typically/conventionally unpleasant, they are far from incidental to such genres' appeal.

Tragedy, the sublime and horror only become problematic if one assumes that that which affords us pleasure is, or should be, coextensive with that which is *pleasant*. While many prominent accounts of these genres strive to translate their bittersweet pleasures into more readily comprehensible terms – hypothesising that immense and terrifying natural objects allow us to appreciate our supersensible essence, that tragedy speaks to our longing for order or transcendence, that horror grants us a pleasurable pang of *schadenfreude* – I will argue that these genres do not constitute a paradox in the first place. In contrast to those theorists who position these genres as anomalies in need of further explanation, wildly divergent from other narrative forms, I would argue that the allure of tragedy and horror is, in actuality, paradigmatic of the appeal of fiction as a whole. In fact, any general theory of fiction's pleasures that fails to account or must make special provision for the appeal of these genres is fatally inadequate.

## 7.1 Reviving the Boredom Model

My account of the pleasures of apparently painful genres builds upon one influential, but deeply flawed, theory known as the boredom model. The Abbé Du Bos advances one among many iterations of this model, arguing that tragedy pleases because it rouses its audience from that most insufferable of states – the torpor that engulfs us when we are deprived of “all passion and occupation” (Hume, 2004 [1742]:25). In Baxter Hathaway’s words, Du Bos’ thesis is predicated upon the notion “that man’s most urgent need is for activity, not serenity [...for] more life, not less” (Hathaway, 1947:678). However unpleasant the emotions that tragedy elicits, Du Bos argues, they are preferable to the oppressive tedium of the unstimulated mind. In frantic search of diversion, we seize more or less indiscriminately upon any means of respite.

Du Bos’ theory has its latter day proponents. In *A Philosophy of Pain*, Arne Johan Vetlesen argues that even if it is true that

all human beings and all known societies [avoid and abhor pain] – it is far from being the whole story. For while it is true that we shun pain, it is equally true that it turns us on, it excites us, and we actively seek it. In short pain is not something neutral: we are not indifferent to it [...] In line with what I have said above, pain, then, is *charged*. What we need to realise is that the chargedness of pain [is in certain contexts experienced as] fascinating, attractive and in that sense positive (Vetlesen, 2009: 11).

While Du Bos’ theory is crudely over-encompassing, failing to discriminate between the desire to engage with painful fictional narratives, to observe or contemplate calamitous and distressing events from a safe vantage point and/or to deliberately expose oneself to emotional or physical pain, it is, with obvious caveats, psychologically perceptive. Equally, although Du Bos fails to offer any convincing explanation as to the *particular* appeal of the genres in relation to which his model is invoked – elucidating why we might prefer viewing a tragedy to, for example, staring at a blank wall, while failing to shed any light upon the question of why we would ever actively choose to consume such narratives when other genres were also available – it nonetheless possesses an important kernel of insight.

Edmund Burke's account of the pleasures of tragedy and the sublime represents a vital fortification of the suggestive, but in itself plainly inadequate, boredom model. As he notes, there is something inherently attention-provoking, some *peculiar* charge or fascination, about the kind of objects we associate with the sublime and tragedy. Burke characterises our experience of the sublime and tragedy as Janus-faced, reflexive and overwhelming, simultaneously intensely pleasurable and alarming. We are instinctively captivated by scenes of human suffering and held in thrall by objects that evoke thoughts of danger because it is adaptively advantageous for us to be so. Burke advances the view that we were divinely fashioned to derive some measure of delight from scenes of suffering, our pleasure "hinder[ing] us from shunning" (*Enquiry*:46) those in need. Our attraction to fictional (and factual) destruction is thus not due to sadism, but its very opposite; like recent theorist Flint Schier, Burke stresses that our appetite for tragedy stems from a compulsion to attend to those elements of existence that are most hostile.

I would argue that this hypothesis also has the potential to elucidate our relationship with fiction as a whole. As I note during my discussion of adaptationist analyses of fictions, the striking synonymy of narrative and conflict suggests that the pleasures of fiction typically reside in fascination rather than fantasy-fulfilment: we seem to engage with stories as a kind of cognitive play, with narratives gratifying our innate hunger for experience, our appetite for knowledge. Just as many common human amusements contrive to elicit our interest by (at least initially) thwarting or frustrating us, exciting our desire to learn and master new skills – the computer game pitched at purposely rising levels of difficulty, the fiendish crossword or intricate jigsaw puzzle – so we find the mental and emotional 'exertion' of consuming narratives focusing on problematic situations stimulating.

If the fantasy model ascribes us a certain imaginative indolence or timidity – assuming that we consume fictions solely in order to be cosseted, to realise our more impractical or unacceptable desires – I would argue that, to the contrary, we enjoy engaging with fictions exactly because we are predisposed to enjoy certain kinds of mental effort. We are compelled by fictional narratives because, as the boredom model suggests, we crave "more

life, not less". Insofar as stories mimic accounts of potentially relevant events, they tantalise our native desire to acquire knowledge and broaden our store of experiences (which in themselves represent a specific kind of knowledge). As previously stated, by rejecting the pleasure model I do not mean to imply that we do not enjoy stories, or that we consume fictions as part of any conscious effort to improve ourselves; rather, I wish to question the unfeasibly restrictive definition of pleasure employed by those who present the allure of tragedy, the sublime and horror as genuinely inscrutable or alarming. The compulsion to rescue such genres from paradoxicality by attributing their appeal to unambivalently agreeable meta-responses illustrates the extent to which this narrow conception of pleasure shapes discourse about our relationship with fictions.

## **7.2 The Necessity of Narrative Conflict: Pleasure and Attention**

As Hume points out in his consideration of tragedy's pleasures, fictive strife has always served as the antidote to narrative ennui and the facilitator of the eloquence many theorists posit as central to tragedy's appeal. Like the irritant grain of sand that allows a pearl to cohere, subject matter that would seem, on the face of it, to command straightforwardly aversive responses serves as a sort of narrative engine, preventing things from stuttering to an uneventful standstill. Stories emerge from the gap between that which is and that which is desirable; while not all fictions require the high-stakes conflict characteristic of the tragedy and horror genres, narrative tension inheres in goal-oriented activity, in striving if not always in strife. While high narrative genres such as tragedy may afford us additional or richer pleasures because of their formal qualities, as Hume observes, their content is far from incidental to their appeal: when "employed on an uninteresting subject, [eloquence alone] would not please half so much [...], or rather would appear altogether ridiculous; and the mind, being left in absolute calmness and indifference, would relish none of those beauties of imagination or expression which, if joined to passion, give it such exquisite entertainment" (Hume, 2004 [1742]:26).

Interpreting the ubiquity, the indispensability, of narrative conflict is pivotal to understanding the nature of our engagement with fiction as a whole. After all, although

more comprehensibly pleasurable narrative genres escape equivalent levels of scrutiny, they employ similar methods to elicit audience members' attention. While characters from lighter hearted genres may enjoy happy endings, we are obliged to leave them soon afterwards; serenity quickly slides into stasis, incapable of sustaining the interest that struggle awakens. If our enjoyment of tragedy or horror is judged to be morally problematic because of the genres' distressing content, then the existence of any fiction must imply some degree of (albeit more muted) sadism, since stories require conflict for their very continuance. In contrast to such a view, I would argue that our attraction to fictional narratives resides in curiosity rather than complacency. We do not engage with stories primarily in order to access gratifying feelings and experiences but to acquaint ourselves with a variety of situations and emotions, pleasant and otherwise.

If fictional narratives are indeed designed with the end of pleasurable diverting us from the travails of real life, tailored to grant us access to desirable scenarios and appetising mental imagery, and to provoke unadulteratedly agreeable emotions, then the overwhelming majority of stories are astonishingly poorly executed. Even those genres that frankly aim at certain 'pleasure buttons' – the aspirational tale of the pauper who becomes a prince, the swooning romance – include a measure of adversity. Rags remain the narrative prerequisite for riches and the artful *deferral* of gratification is the essence of formulaic romantic fictions' appeal. If, however, attracting and retaining attention is of primary importance then one could make certain predictions about narrative structure and focus: while fictions might begin and/or end in relative serenity, such moments would necessarily be fleeting and the story proper would be coterminous with its central conflict; narratives would foreground arresting, anomalous and emotionally-significant events, calculated at times to arouse (attention-magnetising) negative emotions such as pity, fear, indignation and disgust. Similarly, because emotions, and the affective appraisals that they instantiate, generally serve to attune us to potentially important stimuli, to focus our attention on possibly problematic objects or situations, it follows that it is those fictions that speak to our most essential anxieties, that compel negative judgements and excite urgent (if unpleasant) feelings that most effectively command our attention.

While I dispute the fantasy model's account of fiction's appeal, this does not imply some wholesale rejection of the hedonistic nature of our engagement with fictions. Rather, to paraphrase Horace, I mean to suggest that fictions please *because* they instruct. In his *Poetics* Aristotle prefigures similar adaptationist accounts of the pleasures of fiction, suggesting that we are captivated by artistic 'likenesses' because they are informative: "the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood [...] he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons" (*Poetics*:5-6) We relish depictions even of those objects which we would, in real life, abhor, because we derive our "liveliest pleasure" from learning. Significantly, Aristotle attributes our appetite for mimesis to "instinct" rather than some conscious drive to amass knowledge: we are *reflexively* attracted by artistic representations. I would underscore this point since to do otherwise leaves any epistemological theory of fiction's appeal open to a cascade of objections and counter-examples. As Fodor notes when criticising adaptationist theories of fiction's appeal, many stories follow the improbable activities of impossible beings, and detail events that – superficially at least – bear little relevance to audience members' everyday lives. For this reason it is important to emphasise the uncalculated and spontaneous nature of our attraction to fictions. Fictions are pleasurable insofar as they compel our attention and emotional engagement, calculated to appeal to our craving for pertinent information and experiences.

The fantasy model is inadequate because it crucially mischaracterises our engagement with fictions. Consuming (or finding oneself consumed by) narratives with aversive content is fundamentally unlike fantasising – daydreams characteristically require no central conflict, and soon dissipate when one loses interest, remaining lodged in the consciousness only for as long as they continue to afford pleasure. While our engagement with stories is also participatory, inherently drawing upon certain imaginative resources – written narratives inevitably requiring us to 'connect the dots', all fictions inviting us to make certain inferential leaps – I would suggest that our experience with fictions is more akin to another form of rumination. Most humans already spontaneously construct, and respond to, hypothetical scenarios; we are compulsive catastrophisers, forecasters and strategists, ever-preoccupied by the many possible future situations with which we might be confronted

(and particularly by threatening ones). I would argue that our emotional reactions to these self-authored narratives closely parallel our responses to known fictions. Although there is an obvious sense in which we *allow* ourselves to envision, and therefore react emotionally to, imaginary events, there is something darkly compelling about the disasters we conjure for ourselves, a wrenching urgency that is altogether lacking from our more pleasant fantasies.

Similarly, we often *most* value those aesthetic experiences that seem almost to wrest our attention, our emotional energies, towards themselves, praising books we ‘couldn’t put down’, commanding particularly affecting dramas for their ‘tear jerking’ properties. There are moments during our emotional and attentional engagement with fictions when the only prospect more unbearable than remaining in one’s current state of suspense, terror, or indignation is that of having it abruptly dispelled without any form of narrative resolution. We might protest that we ‘cannot watch’ while viewing a particularly tense and nail-biting scene, but would likely take umbrage if a literal-minded passerby simply turned off the television before it had finished. Although one could defend the fantasy model by arguing that such instances represent insignificant outliers in our overall experience with narratives, afforded only by certain, elevated genres or available only to unusually sensitive audience members, I would contend that these moments are far more central to, and paradigmatic of, the appeal of fictional narratives than the often invoked model of fiction-as-daydream.

As Gilbert Ryle notes in his discussion of pleasure, attention is not always describable in terms of a volitional *act*: we do not coolly bestow our attention upon those narratives we enjoy the most, but feel ourselves to be taken up, engrossed and absorbed, our experience at times more analogous to becoming entangled on a piece of “barbed wire” than to picking out objects with a purposeful “torch-beam” (Ryle, 1964 [1954]:199). The “spectator at an exciting football match does not have to try to fasten or canalise his attention” (Ryle, 1964 [1954]:200), rather, it is precisely the fact that he cannot take his eyes off the on field events that signals, and constitutes, his enjoyment. Attention is “sometimes attracted, sometimes lent, sometimes paid and sometimes exacted [...and] sometimes [it is] impossible not to attend” (Ryle, 1964 [1954]:200). Ryle suggests that

pleasure represents a particular *variety* of attending or “giving one’s mind to” (Ryle, 1964 [1954]:202), one that most closely conforms to this latter category. We speak of being absorbed, immersed, compelled, captivated or occupied by especially involving activities, the “partly metaphorical force” (Ryle, 1964 [1954]:203) of these phrases surely deriving from the fact that participants in such activities feel themselves to have been “sucked up, for the moment, without resistance, every drop of [themselves that might have been expended] on other business, or on no business at all” (Ryle, 1964 [1954]:203).

Ryle’s argument echoes one interpretation of Aristotle’s account of pleasure in the *Nicomachean Ethics* – according to which enjoyment is not reducible to any accompanying bodily sensation or “separate sensory effect of our doings” (Brewer, 2009:108) but is a species of *attention* or wholehearted immersion in one’s activity. In Aristotle’s discussion attention emerges as a necessary, though not sufficient, condition of pleasure: it is for this reason that “some things please us while they are novelties, but not so much afterwards” (Aristotle, 1976:321). Such activities are initially immensely pleasing because “at first the mind is stimulated and exercises itself vigorously” (Aristotle, 1976:321) upon them; our enjoyment dwindles as they grow more familiar, our original single-minded concentration unsustainable in the long term. Certainly, ordinarily anhedonic objects or states can afford us pleasure when circumstances cause us to attend to them in a particular way, to view them as noteworthy: when recovering from illness the mere absence of pain or nausea temporarily becomes the occasion of pleasurable reflection, just as the provision of even dull or unpalatable food initially delights us when we had anticipated going hungry. In such instances mindfulness transforms and revivifies otherwise prosaic situations and activities. (Significantly, as Aristotle points out, one cannot purposely enact this kind of fervent attention as a calculated means of maximising one’s pleasure.)

In his analysis of Aristotle’s discussion of pleasure Talbot Brewer accepts Ryle’s contention that to enjoy an activity requires that one “be absorbed or unreservedly engaged in it” (Brewer, 2009:115), but stresses that “pleasant activities [by definition] *attract* or *draw* our attention, while unpleasant activities *arrest* or *extort* our attention” (Brewer, 2009:117). After all, he notes, one can find oneself “unable to keep [...] from listening to

loud music that [one] finds entirely appalling" (Brewer, 2009:117), or have one's attention "captured quite against [one's] will [by some particularly intrusive or jarring stimulus] without giving rise to anything remotely resembling pleasure" (Brewer, 2009:117). For this reason Brewer stipulates that to take pleasure in an activity requires not only that one "be vividly aware of what is good about what [one is] doing [...but that one] must also *lack vivid awareness of what is bad about it* [my italics]" (Brewer, 2009:117). If, as I have suggested, our fascination with distressing media is emotionally ambivalent and at times genuinely painful – our fervent desire to read on intermingled with an equally acute aversion to the events depicted – then it clearly fails to meet Brewer's dual criteria.

Fearful fictions obviously differ from Brewer's examples in that we voluntarily expose ourselves to potentially painful narratives: while we may be suddenly assailed by a clamorous din or a noxious odour many of us *choose* to consume fictions which we already know to have distressing subject matter or unhappy endings. However, I would nonetheless take issue with Brewer's characterisation of the relationship between pleasure and attention, at least as regards our engagement with distressing narratives. As I argued during the previous chapter, there are consistent trends in fictional narratives' structure and content which indicate that, in many cases, our pleasure is inextricably bound up with our pain, our sense of fascination or urgency inarguably *hinging upon* our vivid appreciation of the depicted situation's undesirability and our concomitant desire to find out whether things will worsen or be remedied during the course of the story.

As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, fearful or sorrow-inducing fictions have historically been viewed as problematic or paradoxical in some way precisely because of the culturally-embedded assumption that that which grants us pleasure must, by definition, be "*pleasant* [my italics]" (Brewer, 2009:117), that to enjoy an activity logically entails purposely overlooking, or failing to focus upon, its negative qualities. Such views shape both the widespread moral condemnation of 'low' genres such as horror – critiques of which are often predicated on the assumption that horror's aficionados must find its morally-troubling subject matter agreeable – and the variety of theories which attribute tragedy's allure solely to its more traditionally pleasurable features somehow

overwhelming or mollifying its negative subject matter – such as its eloquence or ability to provide us with pleasurable meta-responses. Without necessarily endorsing the Aristotelian/Rylian view of pleasure in general, I would suggest that *narrative* pleasure at least can most aptly be described as a particular kind of attention or fascination, better captured by Ryle's description of the engrossed and self-forgetful spectator than by those accounts which construe fictions as consumables, appealing to the extent that they remain subservient to our real life desires.

Repudiating the fantasy model does not entail rejecting the notion that fictions engage our real life desires. However, as I have argued it is the *deferral* of gratification that is demonstrably central to most storytelling. In a narrative context at least, wanting is often more compelling than having. Because our appetite for narrative originates in an essentially epistemological drive – our hunger for certain kinds of knowledge, our propensity to attend to information about potentially harmful objects or situations – we are more likely to be drawn in by those works that dramatise our fears than those that depict our fantasies.

In Aristotle's words, humans “enjoy seeing a likeness [...because] in contemplating it they find themselves learning [...] saying perhaps, ‘Ah, that is he’” (*Poetics*:6) Importantly, however, he does not attribute the instructive properties of mimesis primarily to its capacity to acquaint us with entirely novel situations or objects – in fact, he suggests that if one is not familiar with the ‘original’ on which a *mimema* is based then one’s pleasure is not founded in imitation as such, but in some incidental or technical property of the artwork. This statement might initially seem contradictory. Generally speaking, when we hear someone describe something as edifying or enlightening the first interpretation to suggest itself is that it has introduced them to some new piece of information<sup>55</sup>. As I discussed in further detail in chapter 5, the banality objection to truth theories of fiction stems from precisely this assumption; although literary works may advance or embody weighty human truths, their theses are usually sufficiently uncontentious that they cannot

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<sup>55</sup> Equally, such a claim initially seems to controvert our known, apparently cross-cultural/trans-historical aesthetic bias for the novel, anomalous and ontologically-transgressive; few of us clamour for ‘tales of the expected’, or thrill at viewing protagonists’ brushes with ‘normal activity’.

be classified as educational. However, as I argued, even if one accepts the (far from self-evident) claim that literary works can only impart stale truisms of this sort, there are several senses in which fiction's exploration of familiar themes can nonetheless enrich our understanding of various subjects, helping us to appreciate the emotional import of an already-known fact. For example, while emotion has historically been viewed as orthogonal to reason and decidedly perilous to wise decision-making, I would argue that, because the significance of certain kinds of information *is* essentially emotional, one can be at once familiar with the bald facts of a situation while remaining profoundly ignorant of their meaning<sup>56</sup>

Fiction can help us to accumulate practical wisdom, to practise 'choosing well', because it has the capacity to address enduring human questions while remaining evocatively particular. If, as I suggest, fictions are potentially educative, and therefore compelling, in those cases where they prompt some sort of *recognition* in audience members, it also helps to explain their curiously bounded subject matter. By encouraging us to immerse ourselves in vivid accounts and examinations of those recurrent, humanly-significant events and themes that are the stuff of stories – births, deaths, romantic bliss and betrayals, moral quandaries, the perversity of fate, fractured alliances and newly-formed friendships – stories help us to form, and explore, apt emotional responses to possible events, broadening our repertoire of the kind of projected or secondary affective reactions that are indispensable to practical reason. In other words, well-observed fictions act as a kind of surrogate experience, helping us to rehearse or relive particularly probable or meaningful human occurrences, to realise the emotional import of previously unsuspected situations<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> There are, in fact, people who go about their lives largely untroubled by the emotional perturbations that many see as intrusive, irrational and detrimental to decision-making. As I will discuss, such individuals behave nothing like the cool-headed, logical paragons one might suppose.

<sup>57</sup> This latter claim is apparently vulnerable to recursion: if we emotionally 'recognise', or react with appropriate sorrow to, the depicted sufferings of a traditionally-despised Other, surely this implies that we already view such events as pitiable? However, I would contend that such fictions can be at once educative and familiar. In much the same way that analogies aim to persuade by showing us that superficially dissimilar objects possess some salient underlying alikeness, fictions can only prompt emotional recognition of this sort if they are first affectively *intelligible*, affording us some clear emotional foothold – e.g. highlighting that their protagonists are suffering as a result of some loss that is narratively presented as unjust – in order to persuade us that these new subjects are suitable candidates for the elicited response.

Equally, as discussed during my examination of the thought-experiment hypothesis in Chapter 5, fictions often serve to *estrangle* us from the banal, affording us fresh perspectives of already-familiar terrains and allowing us to reconsider entrenched positions and attitudes.

### **7.3 Always Look on the Dark Side: Automatic Vigilance and Attentional Biases**

If one subscribes to the fantasy model, our cultural preoccupation with aversive genres such as tragedy and horror can only appear problematic, flouting its most foundational assumptions. However if, as I have suggested, narratives chiefly function as a means of compelling our *attention*, mimicking those kinds of information to which we are strongly predisposed to respond, then the “highlighting” (*Error:174*) properties of emotions help to dispel the alleged paradox posed by painful fictions. There is empirical evidence to suggest that humans are instinctively inclined to register (and thereby react to) potentially threatening stimuli more swiftly than affectively neutral ones. We immediately and reflexively classify stimuli as either positive or negative, “facilitating rapid avoidance and approach behaviours” (Estes & Adelman, 2008:4). However, attending to and identifying the appropriate response to negative stimuli is particularly important. It is known that “negative information is more easily and quickly learned than other types of information” (Estes & Adelman, 2008:3). Recalling Dawkins’ ‘life-dinner principle’, this is because we can recover from missed opportunities (failing to pursue a suitable quarry as it escapes down a treacherous trail, altering one’s path to avoid danger and thereby reducing one’s chances to gather food) more easily than we can recover from missing limbs. Excessive watchfulness is preferable, from an evolutionary standpoint, to insufficient vigilance. There is considerable experimental evidence to suggest that our performance in certain tasks reflects this dichotomy.

Proponents of the automatic vigilance theory hypothesis claim that we preferentially attend to, and look for longer at, words and images which are negatively affectively-valenced. For example, in one study exploring how affective social information (or gossip) influences conscious visual experience experimenters repeatedly exposed subjects to structurally

neutral<sup>58</sup> human faces paired with descriptions of their subjects' engaging in positive, neutral or negative social behaviour. Researchers then presented each subject with two competing images (one in front of each eye)<sup>59</sup>, selecting pictures both from the pool of pre-'learned' faces and other completely novel/unseen ones. They found that "structurally neutral faces previously paired with gossip of negative behaviours were selected for consciousness and dominated in visual awareness significantly longer than did all other neutral faces" (Anderson *et al*, 2011:1447). The researchers hypothesised that this disparity is due to an essentially protective epistemological drive: we are especially likely to scrutinise those individuals who may pose a risk to us, because our vigilance might help to safeguard us from harm. It is better to be unnecessarily wary of such individuals than to be incautiously oblivious to their nefarious activities. Saints are less compelling than sinners because it is more important to keep our eyes on the latter, both literally and figuratively-speaking.

Similarly, it has been noted that "the human visual system [automatically] gives priority to stimuli that represented recurrent and widespread threat throughout the course of evolution", consistently enabling us to detect, and track the movements of, affectively-significant stimuli such as hostile human faces, snakes and spiders with greater rapidity than we can neutral/unthreatening objects<sup>60</sup>. We linger when examining emotionally-charged pictures or describing affectively negative words because we are predisposed to engage in "prolonged attentional monitoring" (Estes & Adelman, 2008:4) of those stimuli we view as negative.

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<sup>58</sup> Earlier research had already demonstrated that images with overtly negative affective value such as fearful faces or disgust-evoking pictures prevailed over affectively neutral stimuli.

<sup>59</sup> Owing to a phenomenon known as binocular rivalry, when we are confronted with contrasting stimuli in this way we alternate between seeing each image, with "visual input from one eye [being] consciously experienced (and seen) while the visual input from the other eye is suppressed (and [therefore] remains unseen)" (Anderson *et al*, 2011:1446-1447).

<sup>60</sup> Even five-month-old infants (who obviously lack either firsthand experience or prior awareness of any dangers such stimuli might portend) have been observed to look longer at pictures of "schematic" spiders than scrambled ones, while displaying no such preference with respect to neutral images. Similarly, slightly older subjects (aged between 7-9 and 14-18 months) were found to orient more quickly to films featuring snakes than those showing an assortment of other animals.

Affective valence has also been demonstrated to increase the duration of subjects' deliberations when engaging in "lexical decisions and naming" (Estes & Adelman, 2008:2). Notably, subjects exhibited no linear trend relative to *how* negative individual words were. Rather, appraisals of whether words were positively- or negatively-charged appeared to be categorical, meaning that response times varied significantly between affective categories while remaining relatively uniform within each category. This means that "extremely negative (e.g., "poison") and slightly negative stimuli (e.g., "needle") [...can be predicted to] elicit responses that are equally slow [...while] slightly positive (e.g., "candy") and extremely positive stimuli (e.g., "passion") [...tend to] elicit responses that are equally fast" (Estes & Adelman, 2008:6). The experimenters argue that the marked disparity they found between inter-category and intra-category variation (both in their own study and during their meta-analysis of previous research) reflects an ingrained – and adaptive – tendency. By instinctively erring on the side of caution, as it were, we minimise our possibility of making truly dangerous mistakes, since "the benefit of quickly averting an extremely dangerous stimulus outweighs the cost of overreacting to a mildly threatening stimulus" (Estes & Adelman, 2008:4).

Throughout this thesis I suggest that, while our emotional responses to 'paradoxical' genres such as horror are genuinely negative, integrally rather than merely typically or conventionally unpleasant, they are far from incidental to such genres' appeal. As Joseph LeDoux notes, our working memory is what defines our 'here and now', the window through which we catch glimpses of the mind's total contents. In other words, consciousness itself is "the awareness of what is in working memory" (*Emotional*:278). When we undergo an emotional episode, our thoughts are not merely inflected or overlain by the feeling in question; rather, emotions act as invasions of consciousness. Connections from the amygdala to the cortex exert powerful effects on cortical processing, forcefully directing our attention to those events and objects the amygdala marks as significant, activating memories linked to "the emotional implications of currently present stimuli" (*Emotional*:285). It is the passions that endow plain facts with their sense of urgency, of personal salience, and it is for this reason that we can be attracted by narratives that elicit negative emotional responses.

However, integrationist or ‘enjoyment’ theorists such as Berys Gaut argue that we can derive pleasure from experiencing negative fictive emotions because the feelings associated with these emotions are not intrinsically unpleasant. Gaut contests the notion that emotions can be identified with “phenomenologically characterised feelings” (‘Horror’:340) or physiological states, instead affirming the cognitivist view that they constitute judgements, cognitive evaluations about an object or state of affairs. I generally dislike being frightened because of what my goose bumps and fearful trembling *signify* – imminent danger to me and mine – rather than the sensations caused by my shivering and horripilation. When these feelings are experienced in situations where they are divorced from their usual implications – as when we are engaging with a fictional narrative – our enjoying them constitutes no paradox.

As such, it is possible to enjoy an emotion while simultaneously experiencing it as a ‘negative’ one, for “what makes negative emotions negative is not the painfulness of either the emotional response or of the object. Rather, it consists in the fact that objects to which these emotions are directed are brought under negative evaluative concepts [...] Since we can disvalue something without finding it unpleasant, it follows that it is possible to find both negative emotional responses *and* their objects pleasant” (‘Horror’:341). While Gaut concedes that the conceptual connection between negative affective evaluations and qualitatively unpleasant feelings/physiological states is non-contingent, i.e. that for most people and in most contexts it holds true, he argues that in certain, atypical contexts this causal link can be severed, explaining how we are able to enjoy negative emotions and dissolving the paradoxes of tragedy and horror (and related genres).

I would argue that Damasio’s research into certain types of brain damage and its effects on practical reasoning seriously problematises such claims. People with damage to the ventromedial sector of the frontal lobe often exhibit strikingly poor decision-making in their everyday lives, despite retaining “a normal social knowledge base [...] and] higher neuropsychological functions such as conventional memory, language, basic attention, basic working memory and basic reasoning” (*Error*:51)

Damasio argues that secondary or anticipatory emotions are indispensable to everyday decision-making because they function as visceral warning beacons: once we have learned to associate certain stimuli or situations with negative emotions “re-exposure to option x, or thoughts about outcome y, will now have the power to *re-enact the painful body state* [undergone at the time of the original emotional episode] and thus serve as an automated reminder of bad consequences to come” (Error:180). Individuals who have experienced damage to their somatosensory cortices – those regions of the brain in which “past and current body states are represented” (Error:180) – have reduced access to these communiqués from the body proper. This interoceptive impairment, and accompanying flattening of affect, is associated with severe social and personal problems.

Significantly, people with this type of brain damage exhibit some fairly typical reactive or ‘primary’ emotional responses, as capable as anyone else of showing fear if “someone screamed unexpectedly right behind them, or if their house shook in an earthquake”(Error:139). This was demonstrated under experimental conditions when, during Damasio’s gambling study, both frontally damaged and ‘normal’ subjects generated appropriate skin conductance responses immediately after receiving a monetary reward or penalty. However, while most of us lead emotional lives that refer to both internal and external stimuli, present and imagined events, Damasio’s subjects evinced what some characterise as a kind of affective myopia. As other subjects learned through experience to associate the higher-risk decks of cards with financial losses, on those occasions when they decided, nonetheless, to pick from these packs, they generated a skin conductance response “in the period immediately preceding their selection”(Error:220). As the experiment went on, these anticipatory responses became more pronounced, serving as warning bells that urged subjects away from the bad decks. Meanwhile, frontally damaged individuals showed no equivalent reaction and continued to pick from the tainted decks for far longer than normal subjects, despite incurring heavy losses. Even in cases when these subjects knew *cognitively* which decks were high- and low-risk, they seemed unable to implement or act upon this knowledge.

Damasio hypothesises that patients with damage to this area of the brain experience personal and social problems not because of any impairment in their reasoning skills as such but because the observed levelling of their affective landscape results in an attendant flattening of values, a diminishment of their ability to concentrate and prioritise effectively. Emotions play an indispensable role in motivating our decisions – essentially spotlighting that which matters most to us and enabling us to focus upon it for long enough to achieve our objectives. Damasio summarises the problems with the traditional, ‘high reason’ concept of practical wisdom in terms evocative of the frame problem. As his patients’ inability to ‘know when to stop thinking’ suggests, abstract knowledge and cost/benefit analyses are in themselves insufficient for choosing well in the personal and social realms.

In fact, Damasio argues that such individuals display deficits in decision-making because they are too exhaustive, too purely rational in their calculations. He suggests that secondary or anticipatory emotions serve to streamline this process for neurotypical individuals, acting as ‘somatic markers’ that forcefully direct our attention towards an option’s possible negative outcome. These “automated alarm signal[s]” (*Error:173*) help us immediately to discount those options which harbour unacceptable risks. Lacking the emotional biases that usually help draw our attention to, and arrest our progress towards, predictably negative outcomes it is as if they are confronted by a sea of greyly-indistinguishable alternatives, consequently becoming mired in fruitless, ever-proliferating deliberations. In summation, “the apparatus of rationality, traditionally supposed to be *neocortical*, does not seem to work without that of biological regulation, traditionally presumed to be *subcortical*” (*Error:128*). Acting in a judicious and timely manner is as much about knowing which options one can (or should) exclude without hesitation as which to act upon.

As his subjects’ personal difficulties attest, negative evaluations/cognitions lack the motivational impact characteristic to negative emotions. Humans possess a finely calibrated “internal preference system” (*Error:179*), experiencing certain bodily states as disagreeable because they contravene the “innate regulatory dispositions” (*Error:179*)

designed to safeguard us from harmful stimuli. Unless potentially harmful stimuli are ‘marked out’ for us by somatic states which we are predisposed to find *qualitatively displeasurable*, attended by intrusive physiological symptoms that trip the homeostatic mechanisms set up to ensure our organismic survival, is all too easy for them to escape our attention. That the behaviourally aversive effects of these physical profiles do not extend to negative evaluations alone suggests that, contra Gaut’s solution to the paradox of horror, there is something intrinsically painful about such states. As the experience of Damasio’s patients suggests, the kind of cognitive evaluations judgement theorists equate with emotions fall flat when unaccompanied by any physiological upheaval. In other words, I can disvalue a hypothetical state of affairs yet fail to move to avert it because ‘cold’ evaluations or pure cognitions lack the powerful inciting effects of the emotions. It is the passions themselves that exhort us to action; for most neurotypical individuals the mere anticipation of future emotional pain is sufficiently painful to act as a spur, warding us away from self-destructive paths.

Even so, I would argue that is no more incoherent to hold simultaneously that negative emotions are intrinsically aversive and psychically painful and that we can nonetheless, under some conditions, derive pleasure from experiencing them than it is to assert that *physical* pain axiomatically hurts even while acknowledging the fairly quotidian fact that most humans are capable of enjoying some types of physical pain (whether it be scratching an itch with more than necessary vigour, eating capsaicin-spiked foods or exercising to the limit of one’s endurance). We can enjoy certain kinds of ‘good’ pain – generally those that do not signal any serious threat or bodily damage – despite the fact that they remain, by definition, painful, rather than somehow being transfigured into unqualified physical pleasure. Analogously, in opposition to theorists such as Gaut and, according to many readings, Hume, I would contend that the ordinarily painful emotions elicited by distressing fictions do not afford us pleasure in a narrative context because they have been converted into wholly pleasant ones. Indeed, I would go so far as to suggest that identifying such emotions as *in themselves* pleasurable might often be an overstatement. Negative emotions serve to sharpen and fix our attention, drawing us into a narrative by making it, if only for a short time, feel as though its outcome matters to us. Such emotions

are, as Gaut points out, clearly far from tangential to our experience and enjoyment of aversive genres. As Hathaway notes in his analysis of the boredom model, humans often seem to crave stimulation rather than serenity; many of us value the kind of information-rich, affectively-saturated surrogate experiences fictions can provide, even when the experiences on offer are unpleasant ones.

#### 7.4 Dissolving the Paradox of Horror

Like Noël Carroll, I would argue that the allure of the horror genre, and of narrative in general, resides in its ability to fascinate rather than to fulfil fantasies, its activation of our appetite for certain kinds of information and our aesthetic and attentional biases. Theorists such as Berys Gaut reject epistemological theories of horror's appeal, objecting that most horror plots and monsters are sufficiently stereotypical that they would fail to arouse a flicker of curiosity, let alone the mesmerising, 'can't look away', attraction/repulsion complex coexistentialists like Carroll attribute to them. In my discussion elsewhere of the paradox of horror I criticise such assertions, arguing that they misconstrue the pleasures of many narrative genres besides horror (one might well argue that most whodunits are variations on a well worn theme, or that soap opera plots revolve around a limited set of basic events shuffled around various characters and locations).

Contra Gaut, I would argue that novelty is in fact a desirable component of horror (as it is of the sublime) and that a certain degree of newness and obscurity is linked to both fear and fascination. Certainly, in horror, the tantalisingly unseen is generally more effective than the merely visible, exciting both fascination and a nebulous terror that are eased or evaporate entirely once the prosaically embodied threat is itself revealed. As Stephen King remarks in *Danse Macabre*, the "ten-foot-tall bug" (King, 1993 [1981]:132) behind the door is never as frightening (or as *compelling*) as the prospect of what might be behind the door. The horror genre is, like any other, susceptible to the law of diminishing returns: sequels are rarely as frightening as their forebears, and many of the most effective horror films are successful precisely because they judiciously ration the appearances of their antagonists, subscribing to the axiom that less is more. While there are acclaimed horror

narratives that glory in excess, such as ‘splatterpunk’ hit *The Evil Dead* or John Carpenter’s *The Thing*, they are not usually those renowned for being particularly unsettling, aiming for laughs or nauseated groans rather than shivers.

As I noted in the previous chapter, the reflexive, automatically vigilant nature of our emotional responses to certain kinds of narratives is in fact clearly evident in the aesthetic preferences that shape fictions across cultures. Cross-cultural analyses of storytelling indicate that fictions across genres tend to be problem-oriented – far from merely enacting our fantasies stories most often dwell upon protagonists’ efforts to navigate obstacles and surmount personal difficulties. If disturbance denotes upheaval, it also implies movement: narrative itself seems to inhere in conflict, however contrived or perfunctory, with even the flimsiest of fictions featuring an actor, an ambition and some impediment to that ambition. I would contend that fiction’s chronic preoccupation with discord – its tendency to deal in those elements of existence that, one would assume, the uncomplicated pleasure-seeker would most wish to evade – is due to the fact that our appetite for narrative is rooted in an essentially epistemological drive to attend to precisely that which perturbs our sense of what is expected, what is desirable and what is possible.

The desire to demarcate tragedy’s appeal from the ignoble or trivial pleasures afforded by lesser genres causes many theorists to over-emphasise its anomalousness. In contrast, I would suggest that our emotional involvement with tragedy represents part of a continuum of experiences whose appeal derives from their confrontation with, or depiction of, those aspects of our (social and natural) environment that are precisely the most fraught, the most perilous or antagonistic. In order to demonstrate this point one has only to note the striking commonalities between our affective engagement with fictional and factual narratives. Many solutions to the problem of genres which characteristically provoke negative emotions attempt to dissolve their putative paradoxicality by emphasising the differences between our fictive and factive emotions – ascribing their pleasures to eloquence, fiction’s capacity to impose order and sense upon that which is ordinarily experienced as chaotic and meaningless, to our very recognition that the characters whose

travails we are witnessing are not real (or that *their* troubles at least are incontestably not our problem).

However, there are theories within the philosophical canon of answers to the paradox that depart from this prevailing view. For example, in his analysis of tragedy's allure Burke argues that tragedy pleases us more “the nearer it approaches the reality and the farther it removes from us all idea of fiction” (*Enquiry*:48). Indeed, he suggests that dramatic tragedy, however eloquent, “never approaches [in power and allure] to what it represents” (*Enquiry*:47) if one were to “choose a day on which to represent the most sublime and affecting tragedy” and in the middle of a performance informed the audience that “a state criminal of high rank is on the point of being executed” in a nearby square, in a moment “the emptiness of the theatre would demonstrate the comparative weakness of the imitative arts” (*Enquiry*:47). Yet Burke distinguishes strongly between the desire to see an event or the depiction of an event and any implied endorsement of, or callousness towards, its unhappy effects. We can delight in *seeing* things whose existence we abhor, capable of both dreading or ruing an occurrence while “eager enough to see [...it once it is] done” (*Enquiry*:47). Our fascination with sublime and tragic objects is reflexive, deeply-ingrained and essentially epistemological: we are compelled by conflict, fictive and factive alike, because it is advantageous for us to be so.

Like Burke, I would maintain that we evince remarkably similar preferences and reactions when selecting and consuming fictional and factual narratives. In my discussion of the paradox of fiction I argue that our emotional responses to fictional narratives represent a significant subset of what are commonly termed recalcitrant or ‘outlaw’ emotions. Our mounting concern for Desdemona somehow manages to coexist with our conscious foreknowledge that she is a fictional character, that her plight is already fixed and impervious to human intervention. In other words, our rational awareness that a narrative is fictional seems to be at odds with our affective appraisal that its characters matter to us. Although, as theorists such as Colin Radford note, our fictive emotions are more limited in depth and duration than our responses to immediate and personally relevant events, I would suggest that we respond to fictional narratives in much the same way we respond to

similarly detailed factual accounts of the affairs of unknown, absent persons. Humans are unique in our capacity to transcend the present, to project ourselves into hypothetical situations and, crucially, to experience the ‘appropriate’ emotions in response to our imaginings: my ability to envision the possible consequences of passing a tiger’s lair and to experience a corresponding quiver of fear is advantageous because it motivates me to find another route. This ingrained, and adaptive, propensity to react emotionally to imagined scenarios extends to known fictions.

Equally, there are striking and suggestive parallels between that which ‘sells’ in fictional and factual narratives: as newsroom dictums<sup>61</sup> indicate, writers in both categories appeal to similar cognitive biases in order to secure our attention, seeking to exploit our native propensity to concentrate on novel, potentially dangerous/relevant or unusual stimuli. For this reason I would challenge many theorists’ insistence upon completely distinguishing the pleasures of tragedy from the allure of factual accounts of human suffering, instead espousing my own, comprehensive solution. Further, while it may be true that we value fictional narratives’ capacity to grant us privileged access to the thoughts and feelings of another, it does not follow that non-fictional narratives are by definition unsuited to perform a similar function. Owing to the constraints of mainstream reportage it is certainly true that most newspaper articles/television news segments do not encourage audience members to delve into the subjective experiences ‘behind’ the stories. However, the popularity of the more in-depth explorations undertaken by documentarians and memoirists suggests that we can be as compelled by equivalently well-rendered factual narratives that focus upon human suffering.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Most notoriously, stories covering anomalous or violent events predictably attract more attention and are thus given greater prominence, leading to the journalistic axioms “if it bleeds, it leads” and “man bites dog”.

<sup>62</sup> There are in fact an abundance of factual narrative genres purporting to grant us unfiltered access to situations of human extremity: misery memoirs, ‘shock docs’ (documentaries usually detailing the suffering/difficulties of people diagnosed with various unusual medical conditions) and true crime documentaries. One could protest that such accounts are still mediated, still shaped into an overarching narrative that ‘aestheticises’ the experience. This is undoubtedly true; however, (as Burke argues with regard to tragedy) the selling point of such genres tends to lie in their viscerality and immediacy, the illusion that one is seeing things as they happen. Although a degree of distance or evident artifactuality is perhaps necessary to render the experience *pleasurable/tolerable*, I would argue that what renders such experiences *compelling* is, fundamentally, the same drive to attend, to bear witness.

Finally, as I argued in greater depth during my discussion of truth in fiction, the terms in which we couch our evaluations of fictional narratives also lend weight to the notion that narrative's pleasures are, in a sense, epistemological. We praise those works we judge to be perceptive or truthful – to enrich our understanding of the world – while criticising those that we deem to be imperceptive or emotionally false. Narratives that drip with sentimentality or serve too transparently as vehicles for our wish-fulfilment are in fact frequently derided because, contrary to the pleasure model, we do not necessarily want to encounter fictive situations via a Vaseline-coated lens. Rather, a craving to inhabit imaginatively a broad *spectrum* of experiences and emotions is just as central to our engagement with fictions as the desire for escapist fantasy.

Much of the discourse on tragedy, the sublime and horror is, subtly and at times overtly, pervaded by the theme of knowledge: of the quintessentially human craving to know, even if it means to know the worst, of our desire for experience (which represents a kind of knowledge) and intensity, our determination to know ourselves through testing and reflecting upon our limits. Like Noël Carroll, I would maintain that the ambivalent pleasures of the sublime, of horror and of the tragic can often be characterised as a charged state of fascination that is often neither uncomplicatedly enjoyable or straightforwardly aversive but intensely, almost irresistibly, *attractive* or compelling. However, as I have argued, I would strongly dispute his claim that the negative emotions occasioned by fictions are tangential or merely detrimental to our fascination.

## Chapter 8: No One Gets Out of Here Alive: Reading Horror

### Introduction

While the pleasures afforded by other genres such as the western or the romance are relatively transparent, graspable in principle even to those who do not personally enjoy them, the pleasures of horror seem, by contrast, murky and complex, in need of explanation. As a genre that is, *prima facie*, characterised largely by a commitment to confronting its audience with what we would customarily regard as aversive images, to eliciting negative emotions such as fear and disgust, horror seems to *invite* non-literal readings and evocations of deeper meanings. Accordingly, many of the most popularly-acclaimed and influential solutions to the paradox of horror are those that appeal to buried motivations and veiled portents, ascribing audience members' attraction to fearful fictions to a compulsion to revisit repressed incestuous fantasies (Clover), manage their burgeoning sexuality (Twitchell) or reaffirm their sense of self through confrontation with a coded, culturally-reviled Other (King, Halberstam). Equally, although Carroll and Gaut's models superficially bear little resemblance to such theories – given their explicit disavowal of psychoanalytic, expressivist and/or symbolic accounts of horror's appeal – I would argue that their own theories too rely upon a selective focus, a similar excision of theoretically-problematic aspects of our encounters with fearful narratives.

During the previous chapter I detailed my own, comprehensive solution to the paradox of negative genres such as horror and tragedy. In this section I will explain why the thematic and ideological readings of horror customarily offered in explanation of its otherwise perplexing allure are, in themselves, inadequate. Although such accounts often yield insights about the pleasures of specific narratives or sub-genres, I argue that they fail to elucidate the pleasures of horror as a whole. Indeed, insofar as these theories succeed in capturing appealing themes or plot elements native to certain horror sub-genres they merely *shift* the paradox to those narratives which do not share these features.

I will anatomise the problems with two influential, and, in many ways, persuasive, accounts of horror's allure which, like my own, minimise the role of more comprehensibly pleasurable meta-responses, unconscious drives or appetites and symbolic textual analyses. Noël Carroll and Berys Gaut both reject the expressivist and psychoanalytic theories of horror that locate its pleasures in its thematic exploration of submerged or archaic wishes and anxieties, arguing that, while such analyses may yield useful insights about individual works, they cannot be said to offer a general or comprehensive solution to the paradox of horror. I will discuss Carroll and Gaut's shared justifications for their dismissal of the majority of such theories in depth, explaining my (qualified) agreement with their criticisms of many influential attempts to isolate and decode the genre's perplexing pleasures. I will additionally argue that, like the totalising analyses they reject, Carroll and Gaut's own theories break down in the face of horror's heterogeneity, only selectively applicable to our experiences with horrifying narratives.

First, I will discuss Carroll's coexistentialist model. I will endorse his central theses – that our enjoyment of distressing fictions is mingled with genuine pain due to their content, and that narrative pleasure is inextricably linked to curiosity – while rejecting his reclassification of non-supernatural and uncanny horror fictions and minimisation of the role negative emotions play in horror's appeal.

I will next look at Gaut's integrationist model. I will argue that, while his economical account of horror's pleasures renders it less vulnerable to textual counter-examples of the sort that undermine Carroll's theory, his model nonetheless elides significant aspects of our engagement with distressing narratives. As I suggested during chapter 7, the reason genres such as tragedy and horror have historically been viewed as paradoxical is the popular conflation of that which is pleasurable with that which is pleasant. Gaut resolves the paradox by suggesting that, despite initial appearances, our emotional responses to narratives with negative content are not intrinsically painful: it is possible, under certain circumstances, to find fear, sorrow or disgust purely and unambivalently “pleasant” (‘Horror’:341). I previously explained why I reject the cognitivist underpinnings of Gaut's theory, and why empirical research conducted by theorists such as Damasio seems to

contradict Gaut's claim that negative emotions are only contingently displeasurable. In this section I will argue that his theory fails on a more concrete level, crucially mischaracterising our emotional engagement not only with horror fictions, but with narratives in general.

Finally, I will discuss influential expressivist and/or symbolic accounts of horror's appeal, arguing that such models do not provide an adequate comprehensive solution to the paradox. However, I will also examine the ways in which thematic readings do succeed, whether by acting to further our understanding of particular works, elucidating the pleasures of horror as a whole, or, as counter-examples, in revealing the flaws of existing theories purporting to dissolve the paradox of horror.

### **8.1 Fear and Fascination: Carroll's Solution to the Paradox**

In *The Philosophy of Horror* Carroll develops an entity-based definition of horror in which the textual presence of a monster – defined by Carroll as a threatening, categorially-transgressive and impure being – is a necessary (although not sufficient) condition for membership of the genre. While, Carroll notes, it is initially tempting to rely upon the presence of monsters as the sole or chief criterion for a work's inclusion in the horror genre, their not infrequent appearances in fictions from other genres – most notably in science fiction, fairy tales and fantasy – illustrates the untenability of such an approach. Such narratives cannot properly be categorised as horror narratives because, Carroll argues, unlike in works of horror where “the humans regard the monsters they meet as abnormal, as disturbances of the natural order” (*Philosophy*:16), in many fairytales, monsters – while potentially threatening – “are part of the everyday furniture of the universe” (*Philosophy*:16). Since the horror genre is named after the affect it arouses (or is intended to arouse), Carroll argues that this “suggests[s] a particularly tantalising strategy” (*Philosophy*:15) through which to “isolate the ingredients of art-horror” (*Philosophy*:30), both in terms of arriving at an accurate definition and in discerning the origin of its appeal.

The compound emotion Carroll dubs ‘art-horror’ (composed of mingled fear and disgust) is, he argues, depicted again and again in horror fictions as the appropriate , the natural, response to monsters, with characters’ affective reactions acting as cues to how we, the audience, should react and perceive the monster: “this shudder, this recoil at the vampire’s [, or werewolf’s, or mummy’s,] touch, this feeling of nausea all structure our emotional reception” (*Philosophy*:17) of a work. The persistent foregrounding of a certain type of emotional response in horror fictions (lingering close-ups of screaming, wide-eyed heroines, detailed reports of how unutterably frightening and loathsome the protagonist finds the monster) is central to distinguishing it from related genres, because, Carroll asserts, it provides us with an “objective, as opposed to an introspective, picture of the emotion of art-horror” (*Philosophy*:18), allowing us to ground our conjectures about the nature and allure of horror in terms of objectively-occurring features of the works in question. Carroll argues that the persistent presentation of horror’s monsters as noxious, impure and repugnant as well as merely dangerous is significant because of “the kinds of objects that standardly give rise to or cause reactions of impurity” (*Philosophy*:31). Drawing upon Mary Douglas’ influential study *Purity and Danger*, Carroll notes that judgements of impurity are most often levelled at those beings or things that “are interstitial, that cross the boundaries of [a culture’s] deep categories” (*Philosophy*:32).

That which cannot firmly be defined as one thing or the other, that which confounds our conceptual schemes, that which appears “incomplete or formless” (*Philosophy*:32), elicits the “categorical misgivings” (*Philosophy*:32) that underlie cultural notions of impurity. Carroll suggests that Douglas’ analysis might usefully be applied to horror, since, he argues, horror monsters are often “interstitial and/or contradictory” (*Philosophy*:32), promiscuously mingling the living with the dead (ghosts, zombies, vampires et al), the animate with the inanimate (haunted houses, dolls and cars) and the human with the inhuman (werewolves, cat people, humanoid insects). “Categorical incompleteness” (*Philosophy*:33) and disintegration is also a constituent feature of many monsters; “zombies frequently come without eyes, arms, legs or skin” (*Philosophy*:33) and may be in an advanced state of deterioration. Equally, disembodied appendages (most frequently heads, eyes or especially hands) can serve as monsters, while “the rate of recurrence with

which the biologies of monsters are vaporous or gelatinous attests to the applicability of the notion of formlessness to horrific impurity" (*Philosophy*:33).

Having arrived at his definition of what it is that individuates horror from related genres, Carroll develops his related solution to the paradox of horror. Carroll's theory is coexistentialist in nature; in contrast to Gaut, he argues that we do not enjoy our fearful reaction to horror fictions but that our pleasure and our fear are crucially entangled. Those features of horror fictions that elicit qualitatively unpleasant feelings of fear and disgust – the fantastic, categorially transgressive biology of their monsters (and later, in a more encompassing version of his theory, their fantastic *psychology*) – also draw our attention, fascinating precisely because of their revolting divergence from the norm. Because monsters are anomalous, walking (or oozing) perversions of everything we formerly knew about the laws of nature, they fascinate as well as frighten. Horror's pleasures are inextricable from, although not identical with, its pains. We do not, Carroll maintains, *enjoy* being frightened or disgusted (as integrationists would suggest), rather, our fascination with interstitial, category-defying creatures, our desire to learn more about them, overwhelms our fright and revulsion, transfixing us even as we may wish to look away. This double movement of attraction and repulsion characterises the (ambivalent) pleasures of horror.

Equally important to horror's allure is the way in which its distinctive plot structures serve to tantalise and exploit this innate curiosity. Carroll presents the pleasures of horror as peculiarly *philosophical* in nature, residing, "first and foremost, in the processes of discovery, proof and confirmation" (*Philosophy*:184) that, he argues, structure most horror fictions. He identifies two main "deep narrative structures" (*Philosophy*:97) or master plots that recur across the various subgenres of horror. The first of these, which Carroll terms the "complex discovery plot", consists of four basic stages or "movements" (*Philosophy*:99) – onset, discovery, confirmation and confrontation. In the initial stage, a monster is introduced, either directly or through the aftermath of its villainous activities (in those cases where the audience learns about its identity along with the characters). Next, one or more of the human characters learns of the monster's existence, a discovery which is often

resisted by other characters whose scepticism precipitates the confirmation stage. In this third movement the ‘believers’ somehow eventually manage to convince the sceptics of the creature’s existence, before preparing for the fourth stage in which the human characters must confront, and either vanquish or be vanquished by, the creature.

The second underlying structure, the ‘overreacher plot’, is equally concerned with knowledge – specifically, the forbidden sort. If the discovery plot implicitly “chide[s] humanity for being too complacent about the unknown” (*Philosophy*:125), endorsing an attitude of paranoiac hyper-vigilance, the overreacher plot condemns humanity’s greedy and hubristic desire to pursue Nature to her (ever-shrinking) hiding places. Like the discovery plot type, this second structure comprises four basic movements. In the first act, a scientist or would-be necromancer prepares for an upcoming experiment or incantation, readying his materials and developing his moral/philosophical justification for venturing beyond the ‘proper’ borders of human knowledge. This stage is followed by the experiment itself, which, when apparently successful, leads inexorably into the third stage as it grows apparent that the experiment has had unintended consequences. As Carroll points out, in many iterations of the plot, these repercussions will fall upon the family members or loved ones of the experimenter/necromancer, serving as a stimulus for the final confrontation stage, in which the overreacher himself must take on his abominable creation. As with the discovery plot, each of the stages up to, and possibly including, confrontation are structured by questions of gathering evidence and argumentation.

Carroll’s identification of these two plot types (and particularly his analysis of their shared underlying themes of knowledge, rationality, ignorance and humility) is well-observed. As I will argue later, while analysing Isabel Pinedo’s account of horror’s allure, many of the pleasures of horror are, in a sense, ‘epistemological’, with audience members deriving gratification from having their hypotheses or predictions confirmed, from affirming their expertise in generic conventions and from ‘getting’ intertextual allusions. Although, given Carroll’s stringent definition of the genre, he would presumably only apply these two models to a limited subsection of (what I would term) horror, they are applicable to a surprising number of horror narratives, across various subgenres. If much horror deals, as I

will argue, with ‘real life’ anxieties about death, human frailty, the meaning (or lack thereof) of evil/violence and the uncertainty of our place in the universe, Carroll’s characterisation of horror as a genre preoccupied with rationality and (pseudo-) philosophising makes great sense. The two plot-types Carroll identifies present the catastrophic as at least in some way predictable or linked to human agency; the result of a surfeit or lack of rationality, of either an impertinent desire to treat ‘mysteries’ beyond human comprehension as mere, solvable ‘problems’ or a misplaced complacency in the all-knowing, all-conquering status of modern science. While the causality implied by such texts obviously does not hold true in real life, one can understand how fictional plots upholding the idea that life is in some way orderly, meaningful and just – if harshly punitive to those who do *not* abide by certain rules, or maintain a properly reverent attitude before the unknown – might be emotionally attractive. (As I will discuss later, if many ‘classic’ horror fictions offer stern-yet-consolatory visions of this sort, then the typical ‘postmodern’ horror narrative, as identified by Isabel Pinedo, propagates a much bleaker view of the universe.)

While Carroll’s analysis of how horror plot structures whet and exploit our fascination with the monstrous is textually well-grounded and intriguing, there are several problems with Carroll’s solution to the paradox of horror. In Carroll’s view, we are riveted, aghast yet unable to look away, by the monsters of horror fictions because of their utter divergence from the real: Carroll’s monsters are physically impossible anomalies, beings that are, by definition, far removed from our day to day existence. One just, and oft-repeated, criticism of Carroll’s cognitivist theory of horror’s appeal is that, by excluding non-supernatural and non-explicit forms of horror from the genre (relegating them, respectively, to the related genres of ‘art-terror’ and ‘art-dread’), he elevates his own aesthetic preferences to the level of an objective definition. After all, famous yet non-supernaturally horrifying films such as *Silence of the Lambs* fail to meet Carroll’s original criteria for inclusion in the genre while seemingly occupying a fairly central and uncontested position in ordinary language definitions of horror (this and other, similarly non-spectral titles regularly emerge in polls of ‘scariest horror films’).

In response to persistent critiques of his original formulation of the entity-theory, Carroll subsequently conceded that some slasher films might be included as borderline instances of the horror genre if the human killers exhibit traits that, while not attributed to any supernatural force or agency, are *de facto* superhuman (such as an incredible ability to rebound from usually-mortal injuries, or an uncanny way of catching up to its victims without seeming to move fast). However, this adjustment of criteria is clearly insufficient, still excluding seminal horror films such as *Psycho*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Black Christmas*, and *Peeping Tom*. Carroll's reluctance to entertain the notion that texts featuring unambiguously non-supernatural antagonists (or indeed, texts which have no clear villain at all, such as *The Innocents*, *The Haunting*, *The Fly* or *Session 9*) could elicit the compound emotion he terms 'art-horror' is, I would argue, the central weakness of his solution to the paradox of horror. I would assert this both because, as Gaut notes, it merely shifts the paradox to those related genres that do not contain monsters, and because by locating the emotions horror fictions seek to elicit within the body of a monster Carroll remains curiously insensible of the ways in which numerous texts his definition excludes contrive to elicit the same mingling of fear, disgust and horrified fascination.<sup>63</sup>

Certainly, I would argue that Carroll's aesthetic biases prevent him from acknowledging the importance of the ways in which successful horror fictions serve as thematic explorations of that which is *already* horrifying within the everyday, transfixing because of their salience, their thematic resonance, as well as their anomalousness. Because Carroll departs so radically from ordinary language conceptions of horror, discounting vast swathes of works that are customarily considered to be part of the genre (or, when challenged, devising *ad hoc* justifications for their inclusion that stretch his definition of categorial transgression to the point of vacuity) his solution to the paradox of horror only accounts for a subsection of the genre as a whole. Like the ideological and expressivist theories he critiques, I would contend that Carroll's cognitivist theory fails as a *general*

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<sup>63</sup> A good example of an utterly non-supernatural tale which induces a state approximating Carroll's definition of art-horror is the classic urban legend which, with slight variations, proceeds as follows: A young lady is alone in her apartment. She goes to bed with her dog on the floor beside her. In the middle of the night, she is woken up by a strange sound. She is alarmed, but reaches down to the dog, who licks her hand. She is reassured and goes back to sleep.

In the morning she finds the dog hung in the shower. Where the dog slept, she picks up a note which reads "Humans can lick too." (Snopes.com, 2006)

solution to the paradox of horror, despite its applicability to individual works and subgenres.

Equally, I would echo Gaut's criticism of Carroll's theory on the grounds that it negates many audience members' testimonies about their own motivations and preferences: why, Gaut asks, should we not take at face value 'Norman's' complaint that a film was not frightening or disgusting enough? Carroll's assertion that such protestations in fact betray a posturing, macho desire to appear tough or impervious probably has validity with regard to some audiences: as Matt Hills notes in his discussion of the pleasures of horror fandom, among many fan communities "the act of being scared is predominantly located on the side of non-fandom (or casual horror film viewing [public])" (Hills, 2005:74), the province of an ignorant, feminised mass-audience who appreciate only 'inauthentic' mainstream horror (or who appreciate 'true' horror in the wrong way). However, there is no reason to discount all such statements; while Carroll is inclined to do so because, in his view, they are, if taken literally, incoherent, the fact that his theory *requires* such a wholesale disavowal of such testimonies raises questions.

## **8.2 Gaut's Enjoyment Theory**

In 'The Paradox of Horror', Berys Gaut challenges traditional cognitivist and expressivist answers to the titular paradox before putting forth his own solution. Gaut's theory builds on an earlier integrationist account formulated by Kendall Walton and Alex Neill, which contends that negative emotions are not in themselves "intrinsically unpleasant" ('Horror':341). Rather, it is the intentional objects of these emotions that are disvaluable and, presumably due to force of habit, we conflate the inherent unpleasantness of the objects with the only contingently negative feelings they evoke. Gaut raises two major objections to this formulation of the integrationist theory. First, he argues that there is a "conceptual constraint" ('Horror':339) on how far we can conceive of negative emotions such as grief existing in a different hedonic register while still being identifiably the same emotion. If "we came across a tribe who said that they felt a certain emotion at the death of their loved ones, and that this emotion was the most enjoyable one to be had. We would

[...] be justifiably reluctant to translate the word they used to name this emotion as 'grief'" ('Horror':339). Secondly, Gaut argues that surely when we deem an object to be *unpleasant* we are in fact ascribing it the "dispositional property" ('Horror':339) of causing people to have unpleasant experiences.

In order to strengthen and clarify the central premise of Walton and Neill's theory – that negative emotions are not intrinsically qualitatively unpleasant, and can even prove enjoyable in atypical situations and/or for atypical individuals – Gaut dispenses with any discussion of intentional objects in terms of pleasantness and unpleasantness, instead speaking, in more "general evaluative terms" ('Horror':340), of disvaluable or undesirable objects.

Gaut's model is explicitly founded on the cognitivist view of the emotions. As opposed to any system whereby emotions are identified with feelings or physiological states, Gaut maintains that they can be more aptly characterised as judgements, incorporating cognitive evaluations about an object or state of affairs. As such, he argues that it is eminently possible to enjoy an emotion while simultaneously experiencing it as a 'negative' one; "since we can disvalue something without finding it unpleasant, it follows that it is possible to find both negative emotional responses *and* their objects pleasant" ('Horror':341). While Gaut concedes that the conceptual connection between negative affective evaluations and qualitatively unpleasant feelings and physiological states is non-contingent, i.e. that for most people and in most contexts it holds true, he argues that in certain, atypical contexts this causal link can be severed, explaining how we are able to enjoy negative emotions and dissolving the paradoxes of tragedy and horror (and related genres).

There is of course a strong *typical* association between the two sorts of evaluations –if it were not the case that we customarily find sorrow, fear and disgust *unpleasant* as well as merely disvaluing their intentional objects it would not be sorrow, fear and disgust as we know them that we enjoy experiencing in atypical contexts but some other, uncomplicatedly positive emotions. In other words, this "background of typical unpleasant

responses" ('Horror':343) is a necessary precondition for the identification of these emotions as negative ones. Just as one cannot style oneself as modishly rebellious and alternative in the absence of a more staid mainstream, so without the backdrop of the traditional aversiveness of both negative emotions and their objects it would not be possible for us to enjoy these same *negative* emotions in atypical contexts. Because Gaut takes a "holistic" ('Horror':343) view of the emotions, it is only necessary that an informed agent will *typically* "experience the objects of their emotions and the emotions themselves as unpleasant" ('Horror':343), the many occasions that conform to the general rule providing the necessary context and grounding for those exceptional cases, like our emotional responses to fictions, that subvert it. Since the negative emotions are not intrinsically unpleasant (but only habitually/traditionally so) there is no "*a priori*, conceptual problem about the enjoyment of negative emotions in real life, or in fiction" ('Horror':344).

Gaut's theory represents a considerable improvement on the earlier attempts he outlines and criticises. However, as with Gaut's own criticism of the control thesis, there is a puzzling jump or gap in reasoning where one might expect to find a more detailed account of what differentiates typical and atypical cases, and how this distinction renders negative emotions enjoyable rather than merely tolerable or indifferent. Gaut chooses to remain reticent about the precise nature of the appeal of negative emotions in certain contexts, arguing that this related question is "the proper subject of empirical, psychological investigation" ('Horror':344). Although Gaut's parsimonious model allows for a considerably less restrictive – and more reflective – view of horror than either Carroll's or those theorists whose thematic readings I will go on to discuss, I would argue that his account still subtly mischaracterises our affective and cognitive engagement with the genre. Setting aside my main *theoretical* objection to Gaut's model, which is delineated in the previous chapter, I will next outline how some of Gaut's objections to Carroll's thesis in fact highlight these empirical/experiential failings.

### 8.3 Gaut on Carroll

Gaut criticises Carroll's coexistentialist model on several grounds. First, like several other critics, he argues that Carroll's definition of monsters as "beings not believed to exist now according to contemporary science" ('Horror':334) is problematic because, as I earlier noted, it excludes such "important and popular" ('Horror':334) sub-genres as the slasher or serial killer film. Carroll instead defines such films as 'tales of terror', thereby, Gaut argues, merely shifting the paradox Carroll's theory ostensibly solves to related genres that elicit unpleasant emotions such as 'art-terror' or 'art-dread'. Secondly, Gaut rejects Carroll's contention that we consume horror fictions in spite of the fear and disgust they elicit because we are fascinated by their categorially-transgressive, physically anomalous monsters. Gaut asserts that "most horror films are so formulaic in their plots, and their monsters and killers are so stereotypical" ('Horror': 334) that they would struggle to elicit even mild curiosity in audience members. According to Gaut's reasoning, since we already know that the rowdy teenagers are ill-fated – and we may often even be able to foretell the approximate order and manner of their demises – there can be no room for suspense. I would dispute this criticism of Carroll's theory. One might equally argue that because most 'whodunits' re-use the same old gambits to misdirect readers' suspicions that they cannot elicit genuine curiosity or suspense, or that once one has seen one 'space opera' one has seen them all; to make this argument is, in a sense, to misconstrue the pleasures of fiction.

Mainstream crime, fantasy and science fiction dramas routinely place their protagonists in mortal jeopardy in order to secure viewers' attention and – while we know that lead characters are, for both generic and contractual reasons, unlikely to perish 'for real' – this calculated manoeuvre by and large pays off, effectively generating narrative suspense and dynamism. We can simultaneously have an approximate idea of how fictional events will turn out – the heroic detective will finally solve the seemingly perfect murder, the alien invasion will be thwarted in some fashion, the unwary campers will meet a grisly fate – while nonetheless harbouring burning curiosity about the particular *details* of their resolution.

Furthermore, even in cases when we are already aware of the precise nature of a fiction's outcome, many of us are still gripped by the desire to read or watch on, feeling something that seems very much akin to the ambivalent, emotionally-charged fascination Carroll identifies as key to horror's appeal. When re-reading/re-watching a narrative particularly tense scenes or interactions can still provoke an answering anxiety in audience members: while I am well aware that Othello will succumb to Iago's manipulations I may be unable to keep from mentally urging him to resist the villain's blandishments, perhaps even feeling an accompanying sense of physical agitation or 'edginess'. Indeed, the most effective stories often employ foreshadowing in order to *heighten* and prolong suspense, events acquiring greater resonance because they have already been hinted at, made to seem logically-inevitable or fated. Similarly, in horror itself, the most unsettling moments are often not the sudden and arbitrary 'jump scares' but the scenes of creeping, nebulous dread or terrifying after-the-fact cognitive reveals.<sup>64</sup>

For this reason I would argue that Carroll's suggestion that horror, like the mystery, is appealing largely because it elicits our curiosity is a compelling insight, and one that is not intrinsically incompatible with Gaut's own theory. As I argued during the previous chapter, what Gaut terms the enjoyment of negative emotions in an aesthetic context is often felt as something more akin to an intense, electric state of absorption or mesmerisation – pleasurable in the sense that it constitutes an experience that many of us voluntarily seek out, but not straightforwardly, light-heartedly 'enjoyable' in the sense that consuming a comedy or a romance might be. As Gaut's assertion about the enjoyment of horror fictions necessitating a "robust" state of mind suggests, surely if horror's pleasures were so unambivalent they would not require any mental steeliness. The fact that many of us have to fortify ourselves in some way before, during and after exposure to frightening narratives – whether by turning on the lights and checking behind the sofa, shielding one's eyes during gory moments or compulsively making 'modality judgements' to reassure oneself of a fictional monster's improbability – seems to indicate that our affective engagement

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<sup>64</sup> As in Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* when the protagonist turns on the light after a spectral visitation and realises that the hand she has been clutching throughout the ordeal was not that of her roommate – who is in fact lying across the room – but in fact belonged to someone, or something, else.

with horror fictions is more hedonically-complex or ‘mixed’ than Gaut’s account would suggest.

#### **8.4 Why Expressivist Accounts Fail to Offer a Comprehensive Solution to the Paradox**

Like Carroll, Gaut rejects the contention that we are characteristically attracted to horror because it engages, and in some way lightens, our unaddressed anxieties; if, he argues, “watching a horror film is the equivalent of ‘talking out’ one’s fears, it is odd that these films are least attractive if one is in an uneasy or fearful mood [...Indeed,] one needs to be in a fairly robust psychological state in order to enjoy these fictions at all” (‘Horror’:336). Rather than entering the cinema oppressed by antecedent feelings of fear and disgust and leaving with a sense of relief, horrific narratives characteristically “induce[...] and exacerbate[...]" (‘Horror’:336) anxiety, sometimes even sensitising us to potential new horrors. Far from easing our everyday worries, exposure to films that dramatically highlight the dangers of already anxiety-provoking situations – such as *Jaws*’ depiction of the perils of the sea, or *Final Destination*’s vividly-rendered air crash – can cause formerly unconcerned individuals to acquire new phobias.

Horror fictions can also imbue entirely inert or ordinarily harmless objects with a potent sense of menace, alerting us to the uncanny features of dolls, mannequins and clowns. Because horror narratives by their very nature force us to envision the direst possible consequences of any hypothetical scenario, they act as cautionary tales or ‘warnings to the curious’ – showcasing the potentially deadly outcome of being a sexually adventuresome teen (*Halloween*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*) or insufficiently watchful parent (*The Exorcist*, *Don’t Look Now*), engaging in exploitative or culturally-insensitive international tourism (*Hostel*, *Cannibal Holocaust*), displaying an inappropriately irreverent attitude toward the supernatural (*Paranormal Activity*, *The Last Exorcism*) or hubristically seeking to meddle with ‘nature’ (*Frankenstein*, *The Fly*). For this reason, it seems unlikely that horror fictions should typically have an emboldening effect on audience members: if horror can be said to have an ideology, it would be one of timid, small ‘c’ conservatism, strongly discouraging

reckless insouciance and innovation for-its-own-sake. For this reason, as Gaut points out, it usually appears more as though one's anxieties are inflamed rather than assuaged by frightening fictions, given the "lingering sense of fearfulness" ('Horror':336) many feel after consuming a horror narrative.

One could construct counter-arguments of varying plausibility to these points – for example alluding to the suggestive existence of 'cycles' within the horror genre (many theorists have noted that horror enjoys *increased* popularity during periods of social unrest due, they imply, to its propensity to thematise and address topical anxieties), or by suggesting that the mechanisms by which horror eases our anxieties are not subjectively transparent (i.e. that it is ineffable internal forces that drive us to consume, and are appeased by, horror narratives, rather than consciously felt anxieties). However, I would argue that his comments here fairly summarise the problem with most formulations of expressivist and psychoanalytic solutions to horror's appeal. All too often eliding our conscious experiences of engaging with horror or appealing to inaccessible subterranean motivations and drives<sup>65</sup>, such theories offer, at best, a partial account of horror's pleasures. I would argue that many expressivist and psychoanalytic interpretations of horror are weakened by a shared tendency to advance incautiously general, *a priori* statements about a remarkably heterogeneous genre. While James Twitchell's characterisation of horror narratives as adolescent rites of induction, fables of burgeoning sexual identity designed to warn youths away from non- or mis-procreative forms of sexual activity, may well apply to the vampire story (or indeed, those slasher films in which pre-

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<sup>65</sup> This disclaiming tendency is ironically also present in Carroll's cognitivist account. Carroll maintains that "the average consumer of horror" (*Philosophy*:192) does not relish being afraid, even in the face of many fans' insistence that they do:

Norman complains that a novel is not scary enough; Gaut concludes that Norman takes pleasure in being scared. But I am not convinced that we must take Norman's pronouncements at face value. On the basis of my own – admittedly unscientific – sample of such pronouncements, I think that, when they are assessed contextually, these assertions (generally uttered by men, especially adolescent men) most often mean 'I'm too tough to be moved by something like that'. (Carroll, 1995:69)

Carroll argues that even those "specialised" (*Philosophy*:192) audiences – composed, he again suggests, of mostly "adolescent males" (*Philosophy*:193) – who may truly crave more frightening or repulsive fare actually derive pleasure not from their initial responses but from their capacity to manage and withstand them (as in Susan Feagin's theory of meta-reponses).

maritally sexually active young people are especially victimised) it is hard to see how it can have much validity as a model for understanding the appeal of narratives such as *Session 9*, *The Exorcist 3* or *The Changeling* that deal with middle aged or elderly protagonists in a decidedly asexual milieu.

Equally, Barbara Creed's assertion that "virtually all horror texts represent the monstrous-feminine in relation to Kristeva's notion of maternal authority and the mapping of the self's clean and proper body" (Creed, 1993:13) makes perfect sense with respect to those films, such the *Alien* series or *The Thing*, that figure monstrosity in terms of a slimily-encroaching, engulfing threat that violates the bodily boundaries of individuals and threatens to return them to a state of undifferentiated, gooey oneness. However, it is by no means clear that all, or even the vast majority of horror films can be interpreted in this way, without, as Cynthia Freeland suggests in her analysis of Creed's theory, expanding one's definition of the abject to the point of triviality. Further, it is far from obvious that we respond fearfully to, and are fixated by, fictional depictions of death, people being consumed or the penetration of people's bodies, whether by alien seedpods or knives, due *primarily* to repressed familial or sexual anxieties, as the majority of psychoanalytic readings imply. Rather, I would argue that such events are legitimately fear-inspiring even when read literally, and that, with regard to claims of metaphorical import/ deeper thematic resonance, it seems less convoluted, and more supported by textual evidence, to interpret them as the fantastical realisation of more mundane fears about death and threats to bodily integrity or autonomy.

While the majority of films that could be collected under the term 'body horror' offer outlandish, scientifically impossible visions of bodily metamorphosis or disintegration, they in particular map readily onto more realistic anxieties. In a sense, having a body is already sufficient occasion for experiencing 'body horror': by heaping additional levels of oozing, hair-sprouting and growth onto their hapless protagonists, films such as Cronenberg's *The Fly*, *An American Werewolf in London*, and *Ginger Snaps* capture, in Bettelheimian fashion, the momentous, disquieting, *subjective* sense of going through quite routine, outwardly uneventful bodily events (most notably, puberty, sickness and ageing).

For most of *The Fly*, ‘overreacher’ Seth Brundle’s metamorphosis following his disastrous merging with a housefly serves as a radically accelerated and exaggerated version of growing up (and later, sick/old). Initially, ‘Brundlefly’ experiences an enormously increased sense of vitality, virility and strength, becoming an insatiable sexual athlete and voraciously eating junk food. He begins to sprout hair in unusual places and becomes more aggressive, insistently pressing his dubious girlfriend to undergo the same process that (he thinks) precipitated his own ‘improvement’. Soon, however, it becomes apparent that Brundlefly’s transformation is still disastrously ongoing: he begins to lose teeth and nails, he vomits uncontrollably and he undergoes rapid physical deterioration, sloughing off whole external body parts. While in many ways Brundlefly’s metamorphosis differs greatly from the gentler, more gradual processes to which I am comparing it, I would argue that his journey acts as a dramatically amplified reflection of certain, central aspects of human experience and the equally quotidian angst that they induce.

If expressivists locate horror’s pleasures in its therapeutic ability to ease our shared anxieties, another set of readings position horror as covertly reactionary in nature, gratifying to the extent that it appeals to our inner “Republican in a three-piece suit” (King, 1993 [1981]:55), pleasurable in its implicit affirmation of the rightness, the immutability of, the status quo. Although there are a plethora of competing ideological accounts, they can be divided into two main (although overlapping and related) sub-theories.

According to the first sub-type of such theories, horror acts as an “agent of the norm” (King, 1993 [1981]:48), serving as a kind of “ritual of inversion” (*Philosophy*:201), invoking the monstrous, the subversive, the abject, only in order to vindicate the existing cultural order. Because many horror fictions share deep narrative structures, “appear[ing] to proceed by introducing something abnormal – a monster – into the world for the express purpose of expunging it” (*Philosophy*:199), theorists subscribing to this account of horror’s pleasures argue that horror acts as a (fixed) “contest between the normal and the abnormal” (*Philosophy*:199). Horror narratives effect this valorisation of the normal through a distinctive “three-part movement” (*Philosophy*:200), guiding the audience through an initial phase of normality, its later disruption by an ontologically and morally transgressive

monster, and a final stage in which the monster is defeated and normality (and, by implication, our “ontologico-value schema” (*Philosophy*:200) is reinstated and legitimised. Much in the way that speculative fiction inevitably comments (favourably or otherwise) on the here and now, horror is ideologically eloquent despite its apparently fantastic subject matter, its allegiance to the dominant order discernible in its punitive treatment of those who dare subvert its conceptual schemes. In Stephen King’s words, horror “tells us it’s okay to join the mob, to become the total tribal being, to destroy the outsider” (King, 1993 [1981]:47), pleasurable, in part, because it indulges our atavistic desire to expel or annihilate those ‘monstrous’ Others who upset our sense of normality, the monster’s vanquishment symbolising a bloody “reaffirmation of the order we all crave as human beings” (King, 1993 [1981]:56).

Even if one accepts the (possibly contentious) equivalence such theorists draw between the categorially or ontologically subversive and the culturally subversive, as Carroll points out in his discussion of this sort of ideological reading, there is one glaring problem with this characterisation of horror. As he argues, it is a relatively “standard variation of the horror genre that sometimes the horrific being is not expelled or eliminated at the end of the story” (*Philosophy*:201) (indeed, one characteristic of post-1960s or ‘postmodern’ horror is a pronounced tendency towards ambiguous or overtly downbeat endings in which the monster is victorious). In an age of compulsive, commercially-driven sequelisation and remakes, monsters are often the only common thread linking the various instalments of an ongoing horror franchise. However thoroughly Michael Myers, Jason or Freddie Krueger appear to have been vanquished the films will usually end with some teasing hint at their imminent resurrection, and many narratives that initially appear to have happy/normality-restoring endings close on a twist that reveals some further, previously-unsuspected threat (for example, *The Ruins*, *The Hills Have Eyes* and *House of Wax*). If, he suggests, one must read the former variety of horror plot, in which order is restored at the end, as conservative, then surely the latter kind of plot must accordingly be read as subversive, rendering such readings problematic if they aim to be understood as a *general* solution to horror’s appeal.

A second, more compelling articulation of this charge of crypto-conservatism can be found in Judith Halberstam's assertion that horror fiction acts as a "technology of subjectivity" (Halberstam, 1995:2), producing "deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known" (Halberstam, 1995:2). She argues, in Kristevan fashion, that monsters function as the "radically excluded" (Kristeva, 1982:2) objects whose alterity defines and affirms the audience's own normality. Both Gothic and contemporary horror monsters, she asserts, evolve to accommodate cultural anxieties about sexuality, gender, race and nationality, embodying shifting constellations of "deviant race, class, national and gender markings" (Halberstam, 1995:8). The "body that scares and appals" (Halberstam, 1995:8), the notion of the monstrous, changes over time, shedding and assuming characteristics in response to the preoccupations of the dominant culture. Horror serves as a kind of enchanted (or inverted) mirror, pleasurabley affirming its intended audience's status as the normal, the clean and the wholesome by depicting those Others that threaten their self-definition in the guise of the monstrous, the impure and the perverse.

This ideological reading of horror as the crucible of (an oppositionally-defined) selfhood is buttressed by considerable textual evidence, encompassing both persuasive analyses of individual texts and of sub-genres as a whole. In his thematic history of horror, Darryl Jones argues that during the eighteenth century the Gothic novel was "collusive in [...] shoring up the British, Protestant identity of its readers chauvinistically, through its presentation of a catalogue of caricatured, untrustworthy foreigners" (Jones, 2002:8). In the sub-genre he terms the 'regional Gothic', rival nations and cultures were "made to embody all that is venal, reprehensible, archaic or otherwise rejected" (Jones, 2002:8), with novels such as Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* figuring Catholic Spain as the absolute, corrupt inversion of Protestant Britain, a festering den of "homoeroticism, blasphemy, nuns, transvesticism, Satanism, rape, murder, incest and necrophilia" (Jones, 2002:11).

As he notes, this sub-genre still persists in contemporary horror. In films such as *Deliverance*, *The Hills Have Eyes*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Death Trap* and *Wrong Turn* the monstrous Others are relocated to rural North America, in the 1970s Italian

cannibal cycle to the Amazon, and most recently, in *Hostel* and *Hostel 2*, to Eastern Europe. In these films, those who wander from the ‘path’ of Western civilisation fall prey to wolfish (and often literally anthropophagous) primitives. Each film highlights the opposition between the intellectually sophisticated yet effete ‘city slickers’ and the technologically backwards yet physically powerful locals, expertly playing on cultural anxieties about the ‘unnatural’ domestication of modern humans, urban humanity’s uncomfortable dependence upon the (economically marginalised) rural poor, and our alienation from/desire to escape from our fleshly, animal nature. However, it is important to note that the majority of even these films evince a more nuanced view of both ‘normality’ and the economically/culturally marginalised Others than one might at first expect.<sup>66</sup>

While Halberstam’s model is persuasive, and has great validity for *certain* horror narratives/ types of horror, I would argue that it fails to function as a general theory of horror’s appeal. Although it is true that many fictional monsters can be seen to serve as a foil or counterpoint to normative subjectivities it is equally true that there is a strongly conflicting trend whereby horror fictions interrogate and critique the ‘normal’, disclosing what is monstrous *within* the mundane. If horror of the sort Halberstam identifies elicits gratifying meta-responses, affirming, by contrast, the audience’s purity and normality, there are horror fictions that make for much less comfortable introspection. Since Romero’s genre-defining *Night of the Living Dead*, the zombie film in particular has been characterised by a bleakly-pessimistic view of human nature: in each instalment of Romero’s *Dead* trilogy the eponymous zombies, while obviously dangerous to the

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<sup>66</sup> While all of these films engage in chauvinistic stereotyping to some degree, many also incorporate a critical view of their ‘civilised’ protagonists. If the monstrous Others of these films desire, quite literally, to demote their victims to meat, so too are the Westerners themselves often shown to dehumanise and commodify. For the first half of *Hostel*, the putative hero perfectly embodies the stereotype of the ‘ugly American’ abroad, appearing brash, crude, and solely interested in drinking, taking drugs and (purchasing) sex. Most notably, shots of the protagonists walking down a brothel corridor in this initial part of the film exactly mirror shots in the second act where they themselves have been ‘bought’, making explicit the connection between their desire to purchase access to another’s body, to treat economically disempowered others as more or less interchangeable commodities, and their captors’ desire to more radically reduce them to mute, unresisting ‘meat’. Equally, as Jones notes, *Cannibal Holocaust* “continually and explicitly juxtaposes images of American modernity and Amazonian savagery” (Jones, 2002:46) in order to suggest some level of moral equivalence between the two, presenting its would-be filmmakers as rapacious, exploitative and (murderously) unethical.

protagonists, seem curiously passive, almost benign, in comparison to many of the human characters, whose petty, vicious power-struggles and in-fighting prevent them from realising how manageable many of their problems are. The zombie is perhaps horror's most misanthropic monster. In a world beset by overpopulation, overconsumption and ever-dwindling resources the vision of humanity as a seething, self-cannibalising, tumourous mass, rendered most dangerous by its monstrous efficiency in reproducing itself, has obvious thematic resonance. As Barbara cries in the 1990 remake: "They're us. We're them and they're us."

Equally, there is a pervasive tradition within the horror genre whereby films such as *Boy Meets Girl*, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *Man Bites Dog* and *The Last Horror Movie* interrogate the audience's appetite for scenes of ultra-violence, explicitly or implicitly aligning our fascination with the works of human 'monsters' with the fictional killers' own sadism. *Henry* in particular purposefully thwarts the audience's (presumed) desire to witness its protagonist's atrocities firsthand for much of the film, instead showing us their ominous precursor (as when Henry stalks a young woman through the streets) or the bloody, pathetic aftermath. Finally, at the climax of the film, after permitting us increasingly graphic glimpses of Henry in action, we see Henry and his protégée Otis committing a vicious home invasion during which they torture, sexually menace and murder a suburban family – at which point, the camera "cut[s] to Henry and Otis watching the snuff videotape on television much as we the audience have been watching *Henry*" (*Recreational*:102), a pointed juxtaposition which, as many critics at the time uneasily noted, has the effect of making viewers feel as if "we've become accomplices in the making of a snuff film" (*Recreational*:102). We, the audience, are implied to be complicit in such scenes on two levels. First, our willingness to keep watching allows the carnage within the world of the film to continue: despite our disapproval or protestations of moral disgust, we have the ability to walk away at any time, the avidity (ambivalent or not) with which we view scenes of violence belying our professed distaste. Secondly, the film seems to ask whether our fascination with fictional violence might not represent a muted version of Henry's own predilections, symptomatic of some deep ugliness within human 'nature' that manifests itself, to varying degrees, within us all. Whether one agrees with these

aspersions or not, it is hard to see how viewing such films could elicit the kind of pleasurable meta-responses and self-evaluations that many critics deem to be horror's central pleasure.

While I reject those expressivist solutions to horror's appeal that attribute our enjoyment of the genre as a whole to its alleged ability to purge us of 'negative' emotions or to lighten our anxieties, I would maintain that horror is attractive, in part, because of the way it articulates and addresses real life fears, without necessarily resolving them as such. In *Recreational Terror* Isabel Pinedo analyses the pleasures afforded specifically by the 'postmodern' horror film. Pinedo suggests that a fundamental shift occurred between pre- and post-Sixties horror. The classical horror film "exemplified in films such as *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1931)" (*Recreational*:15) has a narrative structure that proceeds approximately as follows: "the film opens with the violent disruption of the normative order by a monster [...] The narrative revolves around the monster's rampage and people's ineffectual attempts to resist it. In the end, male military or scientific experts successfully employ violence and/or knowledge to defeat the monster and restore the normative order" (*Recreational*:15). In such narratives, the monstrous is easily demarcated from the normal and good almost invariably vanquishes evil, "thus producing a secure Manichean worldview in which the threats to the social order are largely external and (hu)man agency prevails, largely in the figure of the masterful male subject" (*Recreational*:15). In contrast, postmodern films such as *Nightmare on Elm Street*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, *Halloween*, *The Thing*, *Night of The Living Dead* and *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* "locate horror in the contemporary everyday world" (*Recreational*:16), blur the boundaries between good and evil, human and monstrous, repudiate narrative closure in favour of disquietingly ambiguous endings, and replace the "efficacious male subject" with "the ordinary [often female] victim" (*Recreational*:16).

Like Carroll, Pinedo identifies overweening rationality as an important theme in both types of horror narrative. Horror "throws into question our assumptions about reality and unreality" (*Recreational*:18), radically cheating our expectations and undermining our faith that "we live in a predictable, routinised world" (*Recreational*:18). In the classical horror

narrative this threat often issues from a geographically remote or exotic location, with evil positioned as thoroughly ‘outside’ and opposed to the normative order. Conversely, “postmodern horror treats violence as a constituent element of everyday life” (*Recreational*:18), a treacherous undertow that is always already lurking beneath society’s apparently placid surface. If the “trajectory of the classical narrative is to deploy science and force [...] to restore the rational, normative order” (*Recreational*:23), the postmodern horror film is “generally unable to overcome the irrational, chaotic forces of disruption” (*Recreational*:23), meaning that its critique of rationality is more sustained and pervasive. Horror films “assert that not everything can or should be dealt with in rational terms” (*Recreational*:23): those who flatly deny the existence of monsters or ghosts or alien invasions rarely live to see the end of the film, as do those who try to reason with them. The “rational sceptic [...] is punished or killed for his epistemological recalcitrance” (*Recreational*:24), and only those who learn to “eschew critical tenets of rationality” (*Recreational*:25) such as the irreversibility of death or the nonexistence of monsters have any chance of survival.

Equally, where classical horror films usually offer a reason or justification for their improbable and unsettling events, however contrived or implausible, “causal logic [...] collapses in the postmodern horror film” (*Recreational*:26). *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* effectively satirises facile attempts at ‘explaining’ evil: Henry’s glibly unconvincing account of childhood abuse and his changing description of how he murdered his mother (he claims variously to have bludgeoned, stabbed or shot her) underlines the inadequacy of such origin stories. In *Night of the Living Dead*, while some believe the reanimation of the dead to be caused by radioactivity from an exploding space probe, this hypothesis is never either confirmed or falsified – or even much discussed – throughout the *Dead* films (more poetically, other characters attribute the dead’s zombification to there being ‘no more room in hell’).

Many expressivist accounts that locate horror’s pleasures in its ability to resolve audience members’ anxieties seem premised on the notion that all or most horror fictions share the normal-abnormal-normal plot structure Pinedo identifies as characteristic of the classical

horror film. As I will argue, while such theories may well apply to certain types of horror narrative – those that close on a state of restored normality, with a just resolution of all conflict/violence – they are ill-suited to explaining the appeal of the type of horror narrative that Pinedo discusses, in which evil just as frequently triumphs or the outcome remains worryingly uncertain. However, there is another frequently proposed (if not often formalised) solution to the paradox that is perhaps more applicable. In Stephen King's words, we find horror compelling, in part, because "we're waiting to be told what we already suspect – that everything is turning to shit" (King, 1993 [1981]:48). Horror appeals to us "because it says, in a symbolic way, things we would be afraid to say right out straight" (King, 1993 [1981]:47).

Similarly, Pinedo argues that postmodern horror's depiction of "an unstable, open-ended universe in which categories collapse, violence constitutes everyday life, and the irrational prevails" (*Recreational*:48) transfixes us not only because of the ways in which it (mercifully) departs from our day to day experience but because of the ways in which it reflects it. Such films, Pinedo argues, "attest to the need to express rage and terror" (*Recreational*:48), affording us a "welcome release from the fiction that life is ordered and safe" (*Recreational*:50). If 'classical' horror films console us by showing evil vanquished and good rewarded, by implying the existence of a guiding intelligence, however unforgiving, behind what at first appear to be random atrocities, then 'postmodern' horror speaks to our growing suspicion that there are no resolutions, no satisfactory explanations, and that happy endings are provisional at best.

## Concluding Remarks

The horror genre is typically characterised as perverse in nature, at best viewed as puerile and cheaply manipulative, and at worst as evincing a ghoulish (and, it is often implied, lascivious) enjoyment of others' suffering. Like tragedy, horror deals in grim subject matter and (often) unhappy endings, yet it is usually viewed as more akin to pornography, affording its audience members an equivalent opportunity to slake socially unmentionable appetites.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the paradox of horror – and the periodic eruptions of fervid cultural anxiety regarding it and other populist genres with aversive content – is the product of a set of tacit assumptions about narrative pleasure. The fact that narrative genres which foreground suffering and elicit negative emotions are seen as problematic – so glaringly atypical as to demand especial psychological explanations such as the purgation hypothesis, or to incite moral panics about their self-evidently anomalous audiences – hinges on the presumption that we ordinarily choose to consume only those fictions that accommodate our real life desires. Despised genres such as horror videos and comics, penny dreadfuls, shock docs and misery memoirs therefore perturb the public because their pleasures seem to emanate from other people's suffering, awakening potent anxieties about social change, the opacity of other minds and human nature itself.

An alternative explanation for media violence's ubiquity is that “violence works” (*Myth*:12), in narrative terms, because of the ways in which it diverges from our desires, expectations and values. Conflict remains a “production staple” (*Myth*:8), playing as pivotal a role in modern storytelling as it did in the *Iliad* or the Old Testament, not because we find brutality intrinsically enticing, wishing vicariously to perpetrate equivalently dark deeds, but because it by and large succeeds in compelling our attention and emotional engagement.

As I have noted, many influential models of our relationship with ‘paradoxical’ genres contrive to reconcile their appeal with more conventional or straightforward notions of pleasure – positing that we can derive enjoyment from tragic or horrific fictions because they allow us to *discharge* painful emotions or to gratify impracticable appetites. In contrast to this view, I have presented a very different account of our relationship with fictions, suggesting that affective and attentional involvement, rather than any straightforward enjoyment, or approval, of depicted events, is central to our attraction to narratives, that our responses to fictions with negative content are genuinely ambivalent. Horror, tragedy and other narrative genres that are defined by their shared preoccupation with suffering and violence (including factual ones such as misery memoirs and true crime documentaries) lay claim to our attention and emotional investment precisely because of the ways in which they calculatedly *confound* our expectations, values and desires.

I rejected accounts of the origin and appeal of fictions which contend that our appetite for fictional narratives represents a selected-for trait, suggesting that the evidence adaptationists offer in support of this position is inconclusive and that equally consistent with the adduced facts is the more conservative hypothesis that our ‘fiction instinct’ is a mere exaptation or spandrel. However, I would maintain that *naturalistic* analyses of the sort offered by Steven Pinker are genuinely instructive, serving to illuminate why certain culturally- and historically-ubiquitous features of fictional narratives are so predominant, reliably exacting our attention and emotional energies. We are demonstrably most compelled by narratives that act as super-normal stimuli, mimicking the kinds of information to which we are predisposed to attend. In other words, fictional and factual narratives alike succeed when they make us feel that their outcome matters to us, stimulating our curiosity and engaging our emotions by confronting us with humanly-salient problems. Narratives with content that excites strong emotional responses, that strongly transgresses audience members’ sense of what is desirable, are particularly effective at commanding our attention because they are camouflaged as potentially important information, playing to the cognitive biases that filter and inflect our conscious experience.

Ultimately, it has been my aim to elucidate the appeal of paradoxical and reviled narrative genres such as horror by placing the problem in a broader human context – grounding my solution to the paradox in my analyses of significant related topics such as the emotions, our putative psychological adaptedness, and fiction-making and -consuming as cultural practices. Adopting a synthetic and interdisciplinary approach has enabled me to draw upon important insights from various fields but also, I hope, to demonstrate that the alleged paradox generated by our attraction to agonistic narratives rapidly dissolves when one views the subject from an adequately ‘holistic’ perspective. Our fascination with fearful and otherwise distressing fictions is far from problematic or aberrant – indicative of a bewildering and “[in]excusable” (*Karenina*:173) lapse from our customary standards of logic, taste or morality – but is in fact perfectly consistent with other foundational, and often *eudaimonistic*, human traits.

Indeed, I would suggest that our attraction to narratives that, by definition, invite negative emotional responses is philosophically intriguing because of the ways in which the phenomenon *highlights*, rather than *controverts*, the operation of such tendencies. While populist and low-brow fictions are often characterised as indulgent ‘mental cheesecake’ for the intellectually-idle masses – providing audience members with neatly-packaged doses of simple fantasy-fulfilment – the overwhelming majority of fictions demonstrate a more complicated relationship between narrative pleasure and our real-life wishes and values. The agonistic, desire-thwarting content of most fictions is so theoretically interesting in part because analysing the human mind at play tells us much about how we perceive and respond to the world in general, reflecting our affective and cognitive hypervigilance, our craving for certain kinds of information and our need to be challenged, provoked and stimulated.

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