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The Paradox of Suspense Realism

I. INTRODUCTION

What exactly motivates a theory of suspense?¹ Considered at least pre-theoretically, our work-a-day lives appear largely suspense-free enterprises. Presumably then, the notion of suspense strikes us as interesting largely because of its significance with respect to our engagements with (fictional) narratives: primarily as a putative emotive descriptor picking out a certain sort of emotional response (“feelings of suspense”) that narratives evoke in engaged audiences, and secondarily as a genre descriptor picking out a narrative category comprising those narratives sufficiently disposed to evoke (or being intended to evoke) “feelings of suspense” in a properly engaged audience. For instance, when I indicate a preference for suspense novels, I indicate a preference not only for reading novels with certain narrative structures or content, but also for novels that in virtue of their narrative structure or content, when properly engaged, evoke in the reader a certain sort of emotive response, that is, feelings of suspense. But what exactly is this “state” or “feeling” of suspense?

One possible answer is that the relevant feeling in play just is the *emotion* of suspense. Call this view *suspense realism*.

Suspense Realism: suspense is itself a real emotion, that is, suspense is a distinct, genuine emotion (singular or composite) right alongside other genuine, distinct emotions (for example, anger, sadness, fear. . . suspense).

On this view, motivating a theory of suspense looks to be rather simple: suspense is a genuine, distinct element in our emotional framework and so just as much a substantive target

of philosophical inquiry as any other genuine, distinct emotion—whatever motivates a theory of the emotions, broadly construed, so too motivates a theory of suspense. Moreover, when viewed against this background of suspense realism, the principal philosophical debate between competing theories of suspense unsurprisingly concerns just how to specify the substantive conditions that must be satisfied in order for someone genuinely to be in the emotive state of suspense (and *ipso facto* for someone accurately to report such feelings). As a result, this ostensibly renders suspense realism as an implicit precondition on productivity for any theory of suspense: in other words, *the correct theory of suspense must be a suspense realist theory*.

On the contrary, I claim that suspense realism runs directly counter to the basic motivations behind and the work required of a theory of suspense, such that, for a theory of suspense to entail suspense realism is for that theory to entail a contradiction. That is, if a theory of suspense must entail that suspense is itself a genuine, distinct emotion, then we ought to be eliminativists about suspense. Call this view *suspense eliminativism*. Notice that while suspense eliminativism entails that there is no genuine, distinct emotion that is the emotion of suspense, it does not entail that there is no such thing that is suspense (that is, that theories of suspense are bankrupt *tout court*), nor does it entail that *suspense* cannot coherently and productively pick out something of philosophical interest, nor is it shorthand for an ontologically conservative theory in which suspense reduces fully to the taxonomies of genuine, distinct emotions.² Accordingly, suspense eliminativism remains consistent not only with there being such a thing that is suspense but also with that thing

being of philosophical interest and with there being a substantial emotive component to that thing. So, while I claim that there is no genuine, distinct emotion that is the emotion of suspense, I nevertheless take *suspense* to pick out something of philosophical interest, namely the class or subclass of emotion(s) chiefly demarcated by the necessity of uncertainty and primarily the province of theories concerning how we emotionally engage with narratives.³ Given this, suspense eliminativism should be seen as the claim that with respect to the work required of a theory of suspense, the background assumption for any minimally adequate theory of suspense must be that there is no genuine, distinct emotion that is the emotion of suspense: in other words, *the correct theory of suspense must be a suspense eliminativist theory*.

II. SUSPENSE THEORY AND THE PARADOX OF SUSPENSE

I assume that one goal (among others) of a theory of suspense is to provide an at least prima facie viable answer to the paradox of suspense, which for now assume to be as follows:

- (1) Suspense requires uncertainty (uncertainty premise).
- (2) Knowledge of a story's outcome precludes uncertainty (knowledge preclusion premise).
- (3) We feel suspense in response to some narratives when we have knowledge of the outcome (repeater suspense premise).⁴

Here I must make a crucial distinction between *dissolving* and *resolving* a paradox. Taking a paradox to be an inconsistent set of independently prima facie plausible premises, to *resolve* a paradox is to deny one or more of those stated premises and to endorse the remainder. To *dissolve* a paradox, however, is to claim (a) that there is no paradox, only the appearance of one, (b) that the appearance of paradox trades on an imprecision in at least one of the premises, and (c) that there is at least one precise reading upon which the conjunction of all premises could be consistently and coherently held true. With this distinction in mind, we can now informatively carve the theoretical terrain in terms of resolving or dissolving the paradox of suspense (that is, resolving theories versus dissolving theories).

i. Dissolving the Paradox of Suspense. Noël Carroll dissolves the paradox of suspense by offering the following more precise reading of the uncertainty premise: suspense requires *actual* uncertainty or *entertained* uncertainty (the former, epistemic; the latter, suppositional).⁵ Since knowledge precludes actual but not entertained uncertainty, there can be repeater suspense, but it must be predicated on entertained uncertainty. Kendall Walton adopts a somewhat similar approach, claiming that knowing that *p* in the actual world does not preclude being uncertain that *p* in the fiction world (that is, actual knowledge does not preclude *fictional* uncertainty).⁶

Richard Gerrig proposes a view that blurs the line between dissolution and resolution. He claims that in some (but not all cases) and given certain conditions and dispositions, repeaters when narratively engaged can be sufficiently immersed in or transported by the narrative so as to render their experiences saliently approximate to non-repeater experiences. They know the outcome, but that knowledge fails to be operative in their engagement, so their experience is as if they did not know.⁷ Here Gerrig does not appear to be denying the knowledge preclusion premise so much as providing a more precise reading of it: knowledge operative in narrative engagement precludes uncertainty.⁸

Of course, one might argue that Gerrig employs far too broad a notion of *repeater* and so merely substitutes one imprecision for another. That is, his repeaters are not really repeaters in the strict, operative sense but instead more loosely akin to narratively functional amnesiacs (or operatively offline repeaters). The real problem of repeater suspense concerns *true repeaters*, where being a true repeater entails operatively knowing the relevant outcomes in repeat encounters.⁹ More precisely:

For *A* to be a true repeater for narrative *N* is for *A* to know the relevant *N*-facts from having previously and properly engaged with *N*, such that, ceteris paribus when properly engaged with *N*, there is no time at which *A* does not operatively know the relevant *N*-facts.¹⁰

Just as some take the paradox of suspense to concern actual (and only actual) uncertainty, so too do some take the paradox of suspense to concern only true repeater suspense. Presumably then, those purporting to resolve the paradox of suspense,

prior to any such attempt, must first provide a more precise reading of its premises so as to eliminate imprecision upon which the dissolutionist trade.

ii. *Resolving the Paradox of Suspense.* A more precise reading of the paradox of suspense I take to be as follows:

- (1) Suspense requires actual uncertainty (uncertainty premise).
- (2) Knowledge of a story's outcome precludes uncertainty—(operative) knowledge that p at t precludes actual (operative) uncertainty as to p at t (knowledge preclusion premise).
- (3) We feel suspense in response to some narratives for which we are true repeaters (repeater suspense premise).

Unless otherwise indicated, assume all uncertainty to be *actual* uncertainty, all knowledge to be *operative* knowledge, and all repeaters to be *true repeaters*.

Given that to resolve the paradox of suspense is to deny one of the above (and endorse the remainder), denying the knowledge preclusion premise seems a comparatively poor place to start. Not only does it seem the least controversial of the three (if not itself *prima facie* evident), but its denial seems to require also denying the repeater suspense premise (that is, having to claim that there cannot be any true repeaters or at least that true repeaters can constitute only a negligible portion of the relevant domain of the repeater suspense premise). The facts that most consider this a nonstarter and that most theories purporting to resolve the paradox of suspense deny either the uncertainty premise or the repeater suspense premise should sufficiently warrant setting aside considerations from this option. Given this, I take my principal targets for the remainder of the article to be the following:

The emotional-misidentification theory: proposed by Robert Yanal, this theory explicitly denies the repeater suspense premise, and so entails that repeaters cannot, even in principle, feel suspense. Therefore, if repeaters report feeling suspense, then repeater reports of suspense must be mistaken. Repeaters experience emotions in repeat encounters; they simply misidentify those emotions (ones for which uncertainty is

not required) for the altogether distinct emotion of suspense.¹¹

The desire-frustration theory: proposed by Aaron Smuts, this view explicitly denies the uncertainty premise, and instead claims that the frustration of a (strong) desire to affect the outcome of an (imminent) event is both necessary and sufficient for suspense. Though it rejects uncertainty as necessary, and thereby allows at least in principle for repeater suspense, it claims uncertainty to be nonetheless important. Moreover, this view purports to best explain the phenomena of *narrative imbalance* (suspense seems a prevalent response to narratives but comparatively absent from our ordinary lives) and *diminishing returns* (feelings of suspense diminish with repeated encounters).¹²

It should now be clear what I take the dissolving versus resolving distinction to track.

Theories of suspense resolving rather than dissolving the paradox of suspense appear to be essentially underwritten by a theory of the emotions—little surprise that the theories purporting to resolve the paradox of suspense are also the most straightforwardly suspense realist theories.¹³ In contrast, theories dissolving rather than resolving the paradox of suspense appear either directly derived from or essentially underwritten by a theory of narrative engagement—theories of suspense entailing the dissolution of the paradox of suspense I take to be *mutatis mutandis* compatible with suspense eliminativism. If to resolve the paradox of suspense is to approach suspense principally from a theory of emotions, and to dissolve the paradox of suspense is to approach suspense principally from a theory of narrative engagement, then with respect to the paradox of suspense, suspense realists *resolve* and suspense eliminativists *dissolve*. My project then is to show that any suspense realist resolution to the paradox of suspense must fail for precisely the same reason: suspense realist resolutions to the paradox of suspense entail the denial of suspense realism. This is what I call the “paradox of suspense realism.”

III. THE CASE AGAINST SUSPENSE REALISM

To resolve the paradox of suspense, the suspense realist has two *prima facie* workable options: deny the necessity of uncertainty or deny repeater suspense. Smuts's desire-frustration theory opts for the former, Yanal's emotional-misidentification

theory the latter. Since Smuts's theory is best understood when viewed as a reaction to Yanal's theory, I begin with the emotional-misidentification theory of suspense.

i. The Emotional-Misidentification Theory of Suspense. Yanal's theory of suspense attempts to resolve the paradox of suspense by denying both the repeater suspense premise and endorsing both the uncertainty premise and the knowledge preclusion premise. According to Yanal, when repeaters report feeling suspense, though they are not feeling the emotion of suspense, they are in fact feeling an emotion (for example, apprehension, anxiety, anticipation), which they then *misreport* as suspense. These repeater reports of suspense are not merely mistaken; they are necessarily mistaken—repeaters cannot feel suspense. If repeaters cannot feel suspense, then why do they seem so routinely to misreport it? Yanal claims:

We can easily go wrong with a prima facie answer to the question, "What emotion am I feeling?" The prima facie answer goes first for the gross contours of the "raw feel" of the emotion. . . . On second thought, the prima facie answer may be corrected: we think the situation through a bit more, we identify the intentional object of the emotion, and so on. We often "reason out" what emotion we are properly feeling. It is, I suggest, the prima facie misidentification of emotions that creates the appearance of suspense in true repeaters.¹⁴

Consider Nicolas Roeg's 1973 film *Don't Look Now*. In the film, John and Laurie Baxter travel to Venice in part to recover from the recent and tragic drowning death of their young daughter. While there, John begins to have flashes of a mysterious, childlike figure wearing the same red raincoat that his daughter was wearing when she drowned. Laurie meets and, much to John's dismay, comes under the influence of two elderly sisters, one of whom purports to be a psychic in contact with the Baxters's dead daughter. When Laurie informs John that the sisters think that he too has the gift of supernatural sight (thereby implicitly suggesting that the mysterious figure in the red mackintosh is in fact their recently deceased daughter), John quickly dismisses it. However, a disturbing series of events erodes John's initial skepticism, ultimately leading him to confront the mysterious, red-mackintoshed fig-

ure in a bell tower and, in the desperate hope that it be his deceased daughter, to reveal its true identity.

Suppose that I correctly report feeling suspense during the initial viewing of *Don't Look Now* (specifically during the film's finale). Presumably I do so largely in virtue of the phenomenal character of that experience being of a certain sort, which is presumably largely underwritten by an uncertainty (for example, my uncertainty as to the truth of the proposition that the figure in the red mackintosh is John Baxter's dead daughter). After my initial viewing of *Don't Look Now*, I update my epistemic status from the initial uncertainty as to the identity of the figure in red to the rather chilling certainty of its identity as revealed in the film's finale, and by so doing, thereby *centeris paribus* become a true repeater for *Don't Look Now*. Further suppose that even though I am now certain as to the identity of the mysterious figure in the red mackintosh, upon repeat viewings of *Don't Look Now*, I nevertheless report feeling suspense during the final scene. According to Yanal, given that I am a true repeater for *Don't Look Now*, my reported experience cannot in fact be of suspense but must instead be the misreporting of some other emotion (for example, anticipation about the upcoming revelatory final scene, anxiety about what I know happens to John Baxter immediately following that revelation).

For Yanal, repeater misidentification just is the misidentification of one genuine, distinct emotion (apprehension, anxiety, anticipation) as another genuine, distinct emotion (suspense), nothing more than a specific instance of a more general form of emotional misidentification, which to correct repeaters need only reflect beyond the raw phenomenal character of the experience.¹⁵ Notice, however, that what explains prima facie misidentifications of suspense seems to be just what explains prima facie identifications of suspense: repeater and nonrepeater appeal to phenomenally indistinct "raw feels."¹⁶ More precisely, the explanation of how repeaters routinely *misidentify* some other emotion as suspense appears to be largely in terms of how nonrepeaters routinely *identify* suspense. As a result, repeater misidentification of suspense looks to be a rather strange case of emotional misidentification. However, the less repeater misidentification of suspense looks to be a standard sort of emotional misidentification, the less the emotional-misidentification theory of

suspense looks to plausibly fit within the standard taxonomies of a theory of the emotions, and subsequently, the less suspense itself looks to be a standard sort of emotion.

ii. Phenomenal Character and the Problem of Standards. I take it that any prima facie plausible theory of the emotions would presumably endorse the following:

A standard (commonsense) method of individuating and identifying emotions in standard cases is via their phenomenal character.

To be sure, in some cases, appealing to phenomenal character can lead to a misidentification, and when such cases occur, we may correct misidentification by appealing to other appropriate sorts of individuating conditions (for example, formal or intentional objects, cognition, propositional attitudes, action tendencies, neurological processes, or behavioral or dispositional effects).¹⁷ Regardless, it is a fact of the matter that many different emotions have different feels (for example, anger feels different than guilt, suspense feels different than fear), and placing an epistemic constraint on suspense is not itself sufficient to call into doubt the phenomenal reports of repeaters.¹⁸

Note that I do not assume that phenomenal character must be exhaustive of individuation; nor do I endorse the feeling theory of emotion over perceptual or cognitive theories.¹⁹ In fact, I take as prima facie evident that given the satisfaction of certain background conditions, two distinct emotions may have respective phenomenal characters sufficiently resembling one another such that via the appeal to phenomenal character we misidentify one emotion as the other. Such cases, however, show only that we should not view phenomenal character as exhaustive of the individuation of emotion. For my purposes, what matters is that such cases are prima facie taken to be nonstandard cases—where otherwise phenomenal character would not be a commonsense method of individuating or identifying emotions.²⁰ So, while for Yanal the misidentification via appeal to phenomenal character explains the appearance of repeater suspense, repeater cases are quite clearly standard cases rather than strange curiosities or bizarre outliers—repeater suspense is not analogous to phantom limb pain in amputees or auditory hallu-

cinations in schizophrenics.²¹ To claim otherwise is simply to abandon resolving the paradox of suspense in favor of dissolving it.

Furthermore, the mere fact that we can go wrong by identifying our emotions according to their phenomenal character does not entail that in standard cases, we go wrong by so doing (let alone do so routinely). For example, suppose that in some cases embarrassment and shame have sufficiently indistinct phenomenal characters, such that I routinely misidentify embarrassment as shame. Presumably what explains this misidentification is the following:

- (i) In standard cases, I identify embarrassment via its phenomenal character.
- (ii) In standard cases, embarrassment does not have a phenomenal character sufficiently indistinct from that of shame.

If (ii) were not the case, then (i) would not be the case, so cases in which embarrassment and shame have sufficiently indistinct phenomenal characters must be nonstandard cases, and as such, what explains my misidentification must be the switch from a standard to a nonstandard case. Perhaps, then, we should expect repeater misidentification of one emotion as another to be explained largely in terms of repeaters mistakenly employing individuating conditions of an inappropriate sort.

According to the emotional-misidentification theory, however, repeaters misreport apprehension as suspense as the result of employing an individuation method not only recognized by the operative theory (that is, a minimally adequate theory of the emotions), but also recognized by that theory as standard. Moreover, it seems that in all cases, standard and nonstandard alike, the phenomenal character of suspense as a matter of fact sufficiently resembles the phenomenal character of apprehension so as to render identification and individuation of suspense via its phenomenal character itself wholesale ineffective. As a consequence, the emotional-misidentification theory entails that the standard method by which we identify our emotions in standard cases (suspense included) also underwrites in standard cases the routine misidentification of one emotion (apprehension, anxiety, anticipation) as another altogether distinct emotion (suspense). Something decidedly nonstandard must be afoot.

If repeater cases must be standard cases and the standard (commonsense) method of individuating and identifying emotions in standard cases is via their phenomenal character, then suspense must be itself nonstandard. Perhaps, then, what best explains repeater misidentification is that suspense just is not like other emotions. In standard cases, suspense has a phenomenal character sufficiently indistinct from that of several other distinct emotions, yet its standard method of identification in standard cases is nevertheless via that very phenomenal character. Therefore, if suspense must be a genuine, distinct emotion, then suspense must be a *singularly and decidedly deviant* genuine, distinct emotion. According to a theory of the emotions, however, there can be no such sui generis emotion, and so there can be no such genuine, distinct emotion that is the emotion of suspense. To resolve the paradox of suspense, the emotional-misidentification theory requires that suspense be an emotion of the sort that according to a theory of the emotions does not exist. That is, if suspense itself is a genuine, distinct emotion, then suspense must also be a singularly and decidedly deviant, genuine, distinct emotion, and so one for which there can be no home at any level of analysis (even one fully reductive) in a theory of the emotions and thus one that does not exist.²²

iii. The Desire-Frustration Alternative. Aaron Smuts's desire-frustration theory of suspense neither rejects uncertainty out of hand nor denies that uncertainty is the primary underwriter of suspense as typically experienced in our initial narrative encounters; it simply claims that uncertainty need not be exhaustive. For Smuts, having the frustration of certain desires ground suspense allows him both to recast uncertainty in terms of the desire to know an outcome and to broaden the suspense-relevant desires so as to include desires that certain outcomes obtain that are nevertheless informed by some certainty (that is, the relevant desires frustrated can be not only an epistemic sort but also of a purely affective sort). For uncertainty to play any role in suspense, it must be in terms of a condition on having a desire to know, that is, one desire among many for which frustration gives rise to feelings of suspense.

To better illustrate Smuts's view, consider George Sluizer's 1988 film *Spoorloos* (English title: *The Vanishing*). During our initial viewing of

Spoorloos, we, just like the main character, Rex, develop an overwhelming and perverse desire to know what happened to his girlfriend, Saskia, after she vanished from a heavily trafficked roadside gas station. *Spoorloos*, however, is not a whodunit; we as viewers are told quite early on in the film that Raymond abducted Saskia. Yet despite being so informed, we are little better off epistemically than Rex, who spends the three years following Saskia's disappearance utterly consumed by his obsession to know what happened to her. Toward the end of the film, Raymond finally presents himself to Rex to offer him a one-time chance to learn the truth. Rex need only drink a cup of drugged coffee and upon awaking from the drug-induced sleep will experience exactly what Saskia experienced when she awoke from being similarly drugged.

We the viewers, just like Rex, believe that drinking the coffee is the only way to know what happened, and we, just like Rex, believe that drinking from the cup will most likely lead to a horrible death. In fact, we want Rex to drink from the cup for roughly the same perverse reason that Rex wants to drink from the cup: *to know what happened to Saskia*. This uncertainty drives both Rex's desire to drink and our desire that Rex drink. For Rex, the satisfaction of his desire to resolve the uncertainty ultimately leads to his death. For us, the satisfaction of our desire to resolve the uncertainty only dissipates the feelings of suspense generated via its frustration—after the initial viewing, that uncertainty, that desire to know, like Saskia, vanishes.²³ Of course, when we again encounter *Spoorloos*, as repeat viewers we know what happens to Rex and therefore what happened to Saskia, yet we appear to have feelings of the same sort experienced as initial viewers, so we likewise report these as feelings of suspense.

According to Smuts's desire-frustration theory of suspense, we as repeaters can feel suspense not just in spite of a certainty but often precisely because we know what happens. That is, knowing what we now know as repeat viewers, we form the desire that Rex not drink from the cup; such a desire, however, cannot help but be frustrated and when so frustrated gives rise to feelings of suspense. This explains why we report feeling suspense on repeat viewing of certain scenes for which feelings of suspense were absent in the initial viewing. For instance, when Rex notices the thermos of coffee in the backseat of Raymond's

car, we notice it too but in a much different manner as repeat viewers than we did as initial viewers. In our initial viewing, we, like Rex, casually noted it and perhaps even thought it somewhat sinister merely by being present (for Rex, the thermos being in the car, for us, the thermos being an object of filmic attention). Upon repeat viewings, however, we depart from Rex and from our initial-viewing selves in that as repeaters, noticing the thermos gives rise in us the occurrent desire that Rex not drink from it; unlike Rex, we know what happens if he drinks. Of course, Rex must drink from the cup; he knows this and we know it too (though for additional metaphysical reasons). It is then the frustration of our desire (among others) that he refuse to drink which gives rise to the same sorts of feelings had by our initial-viewing selves to which uncertainty played a role. For Smuts, however, these feelings are both feelings of suspense, the difference being only that uncertainty in terms of frustrated desire to know gave rise to one and the frustration of a desire that required certainty gave rise to the other.

iv. The Problem of Deviant Predication. At first blush, Smuts's theory looks preferable to Yanal's. It accounts for rather than denies repeater suspense, and although it denies that uncertainty is necessary in the strict sense, it clearly assigns uncertainty a prominent, if not indirectly necessary role. There is, however, one rather daunting worry one might have with Smuts's desire-frustration theory: insofar as encounters with fictional narratives are concerned, his theory seems to predicate suspense on the formation of singularly and decidedly deviant desires. On Smuts's view, the requisite desires (beyond those driven by mere uncertainty) in standard cases of suspense are essentially desires to have affective relations with fictional worlds (for example, the desire to stop Rex from drinking in *Spoorloos*, the desire to warn Lisa of Thorwald's return in *Rear Window*). Repeater suspense then requires forming desires that *necessarily* cannot be satisfied (for example, Rex cannot but drink, and Lisa cannot be but blissfully unaware of Thorwald's impending return) and desires for which being occurrent is sufficient for being frustrated.²⁴ Note that my argument that follows will not turn on the legitimacy of any particular normative analysis of desire.²⁵ What matters for my purposes is that the operative desires

upon which Smuts predicates suspense in standard cases are desires of a strikingly nonstandard sort that any plausible analysis of desire would regard as being of a deviant (if not essentially deviant) sort.²⁶

Perhaps in an attempt to forestall the objection, Smuts might claim that motivating productive philosophical debates about the emotion of suspense should not be hostage to issues concerning emotional responses to fictions (for example, the paradox of fiction)—no plausible theory of the emotions takes emotional response to fiction to be standard (that is, either foundationally or motivationally constitutive). For example, no plausible account of the emotion of pity takes as its principal task to resolve the paradox of fiction for pity (for example, rational analysis of feeling pity for Anna Karenina). Why then should a suspense realist theory be any different (for example, the rational analysis of feeling suspense on repeat viewings of *Rear Window*)? To be sure, any plausible theory of narrative engagement must take emotional response to fiction to be a central, primary concern, but that need not run inconsistent with a theory of the emotions regarding emotional responses to fictions as being largely irrelevant, cognitive aberrations of only vestigial interest. So, Smuts could claim, as a suspense realist, he need not be any more than peripherally concerned with problematic ground for repeater suspense in response to fictions.

Rather than forestall the objection, I think the above reply serves only to highlight the distance between a theory of suspense and a theory of the emotions. Consider the following: repeater suspense constitutes a nontrivial (if not substantial) part of the paradox of suspense, the resolution of which is a primary task for suspense theory. Therefore, cases of repeater suspense must constitute a nontrivial (if not substantial) part of standard cases for a theory of suspense. If repeater suspense is predicated on affective desire of the sort necessarily frustrated, then suspense must be a genuine, distinct emotion for which standard cases are in nontrivial (if not substantial) part predicated on singularly and decidedly deviant desire. And so, if suspense is itself a genuine, distinct emotion, then suspense must itself also be a singularly and decidedly deviant emotion. If suspense must itself be a singularly and decidedly deviant emotion, then according to any minimally adequate theory of the emotions, there can be no such

genuine, distinct emotion that is the emotion of suspense. Given this, the consequence of preserving suspense realism looks to be the same not just for Smuts and Yanal but for any theory of suspense. That is, the failure of the theories of Yanal and Smuts does not itself undermine suspense realism; instead, suspense realism itself underwrites the failure of the theories of Yanal and Smuts precisely because suspense realism itself undermines a theory of suspense—if resolving the paradox of suspense is a primary task of a theory of suspense, then a suspense realist theory can resolve the paradox of suspense only by entailing a contradiction. This is the “paradox of suspense realism.”

IV. THE PARADOX OF SUSPENSE REALISM

I take the paradox of suspense realism to be constituted by the following inconsistent set:

- (1) *The paradox of suspense*: a principal task of a theory of suspense is to resolve the paradox of suspense. The paradox of suspense largely concerns issues in narrative engagement. So, issues in narrative engagement must be standard for suspense theory (that is, both foundationally and motivationally constitutive of suspense theory).
- (2) *Theory of the emotions*: a theory of the emotions takes issues in narrative engagement to be nonstandard (that is, neither foundationally nor motivationally constitutive of a theory of the emotions).²⁷ If an emotion takes as standard what analysis in a theory of the emotions takes as nonstandard, then there can be no such emotion as that emotion (that is, according to a theory of the emotions, that emotion does not exist).
- (3) *Suspense realism*: suspense is itself a genuine, distinct emotion.

To deny (1) is to undercut the basic motivation for a theory of suspense, and so is likely only to signal an altogether change of the subject. Moreover, if a theory of suspense need not resolve the paradox of suspense, but only dissolve it, then if dissolution theories are (as they evidently appear to be) *mutatis mutandis* compatible with suspense eliminativism, then the correct theory of suspense ought to be *mutatis mutandis* compatible with suspense

eliminativism. So, the correct theory of suspense cannot be suspense realist.

The denial of (2) looks patently implausible. No theory of the emotions carves its constituents according to narrative and non-narrative significance. Moreover, even were it to do so, suspense would nevertheless be the lone “narrative” emotion and to that extent, singularly and decidedly deviant—commitment to suspense as a genuine, distinct emotion is commitment to a *sui generis* genuine, distinct emotion. Surely the cost of preserving suspense realism vastly outstrips its worth.

Denying (3), however, appears quite plausible, if not thoroughly intuitively obvious. *Prima facie* interest in the notion of suspense derives not from a theory of the emotions but rather from a theory of narrative engagement (that is, theories about how we engage with and respond to narratives). Notice that simply because we respond emotionally to narratives does not entail that uncovering a putatively shared character among those responses itself signals or warrants a theoretical shift from a theory of narrative engagement to a theory of the emotions.

i. A Final Objection and Concluding Reply. I suppose one could claim that none of my arguments reveal there to be a problem with suspense realism itself. That is, perhaps all I show is that two very disparate theories of suspense employing two very disparate, idiosyncratic mechanisms (uncertainty, desire-frustration) fail to be plausible suspense realist theories because their disparate, idiosyncratic mechanisms are themselves implausible and as such, when imported into a theory of the emotions, the theories rather unsurprisingly result in an implausible suspense realism. That the disparate and idiosyncratic failures of these two theories somehow reveal there to be a fundamental incoherence in suspense realism itself is certainly not at all obvious, and so to claim as much seems *prima facie* unwarranted (if not also irresponsible). As such, any supposed paradox of suspense realism comes across as little more than window dressing for showcasing the failures of the suspense realist theories of Smuts and Yanal.²⁸

Notice, however, that the emotional-misidentification theory of suspense does not fail because Yanal employs a mistaken account of emotional misidentification and the desire-frustration theory of suspense does not fail because Smuts

employs a mistaken account of desire—in fact, both accounts employed are themselves of a plausible standard sort. The theories fail because the sort of emotion that suspense must be in order for either to resolve the paradox of suspense fails to coherently conform to the taxonomies standard for a theory of the emotions. In Yanal's case, a standard account of emotional misidentification forcibly fitted to suspense thereby becomes a nonstandard, deviant account according to which the phenomenal character underwriting *prima facie* identification in standard cases for nonrepeaters must also underwrite *prima facie* misidentification in standard cases for repeaters. In Smuts's case, a standard account of desire forcibly fitted to suspense thereby becomes a nonstandard, deviant account according to which the standard cases of an emotion must be predicated upon the formation and frustration of a nonstandard, deviant sort of desire. In both cases, for suspense to be a genuine, distinct emotion, suspense must be of the singularly and decidedly deviant sort, and as a result, both theories fail to be a minimally adequate theory of suspense because for both theories, suspense fails to be a genuine, distinct emotion on any minimally adequate theory of the emotions. So, both theories fail to be plausible theories of suspense for precisely the same reason: both are suspense realists and the suspense realist lacks even a *prima facie* reason to expect the taxonomies standard for a theory of suspense to remain standard when imported into a theory of the emotions. If the taxonomic scheme for a theory of the emotions simply is not sensitive to the principal concerns motivating a theory of suspense (for example, the paradox of suspense, diminishing returns, narrative imbalance), then to force those concerns onto a theory of the emotions just is to force unproductive *sui generis* taxa into its taxonomy (that is, taxa under which no emotion other than that of suspense may fall)—any emotion falling under a *sui generis* taxon is *ipso facto* a *sui generis* emotion.

Final analysis reveals the path from suspense realism to suspense eliminativism to be short, steep, and unavoidable. For a theory of suspense to be a suspense realist theory, that theory must entail that suspense is itself a genuine, distinct emotion. For a suspense realist theory to be a minimally adequate theory of suspense, that theory must resolve the paradox of suspense. Suspense realist resolutions to the paradox of suspense require

that suspense be an emotion of the sort unable to coherently conform to the standard taxonomies of a minimally adequate theory of the emotions. Any emotion of the sort unable to coherently conform to the standard taxonomies of a minimally adequate theory is an emotion about which any minimally adequate theory of the emotions must be eliminativist. So:

There can be no such genuine, distinct emotion that is the emotion of suspense. No suspense realist theory can resolve the paradox of suspense. No suspense realist theory can be a minimally adequate theory of suspense. Any minimally adequate theory of suspense must be *mutatis mutandis* compatible with suspense eliminativism.

There is a paradox of suspense realism and its only plausible resolution entails that the correct theory of suspense must be an eliminativist theory of suspense.²⁹

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1. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Aaron Smuts for his selfless assistance and willingness to indulge me in numerous conversations about the nature of suspense. I also must thank Robert Yanal, Richard Gerrig, Susan Feagin, and the two anonymous referees for their helpful comments, criticisms, and suggestions.

2. On the idea that an eliminated concept can still pick out a philosophically interesting category, consider, for example, eliminativism about *dinosaur* as a biological kind and *jade* as a mineralogical kind. Although there is no biological kind that is the kind *dinosaur*, we nevertheless take *dinosaur* to coherently and productively pick out something of largely pragmatic interest, namely the class of organisms chiefly demarcated by membership in certain extinct, Mesozoic Era orders. Although *jade* (unlike both *jadeite* and *nephrite*) fails to be a mineralogical kind (as would any disjunctive kind), we take *jade* to be of interest in virtue of its falling under the nonnatural but financially salient kind *gemstone* (specifically the *semiprecious* variety).

For the general worry about eliminativism and reduction, see William Lycan and George Pappas, "What Is Eliminative Materialism?" *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 50 (1972): 149–159, and Steven Savitt, "Rorty's Disappearance Theory," *Philosophical Studies* 28 (1974): 433–436. For the standard contemporary example of eliminativism (in philosophy of mind), see Paul Churchland, "Eliminative Materialism and the Propositional Attitudes," *Journal of Philosophy* 78 (1981): 67–90.

3. This holds regardless of whether one thinks emotions are natural kinds (as most do) or nonnatural kinds. For examples of the latter, see Paul Griffiths, *What Emotions Really Are: The Problem of Psychology Categories* (University of Chicago Press, 1997), and Amelie Rorty, "Explaining Emotions," *Journal of Philosophy* 75 (1978): 139–161.

4. I do not claim that answering the paradox of suspense is the only goal or the only principal or primary goal of a theory of suspense. In fact, I am sympathetic to the claim made by Aaron Smuts that too much attention has been paid to answering the paradox of suspense, to the detriment of other equally if not more pressing issues, that is, the phenomena of narrative imbalance and diminishing returns (see Aaron Smuts, "The Desire-Frustration Theory of Suspense," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66 (2008): 281–290, at p. 282). Of course, Smuts still regards answering the paradox of suspense to be a substantive goal of a theory of suspense, and this is all I require.

5. Noël Carroll, "The Paradox of Suspense," in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 254–269.

6. Kendall Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 259–271.

7. See Richard Gerrig, "Re-experiencing Fiction and Non-Fiction," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 47 (1989): 277–280; Richard Gerrig, *Experiencing Narrative Worlds* (Yale University Press, 1993); and Richard Gerrig, "Is There a Paradox of Suspense? A Reply to Yanal," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 37 (1997): 168–174.

8. I assume that being a true repeater for a narrative does not itself preclude either imaginatively engaging with that narrative or experiencing emotions (other than suspense) as a result of being so imaginatively engaged.

9. Robert Yanal, "The Paradox of Suspense," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 146–158.

10. Or alternatively, no time at which A's properly acquired true beliefs about relevant N-facts are offline.

11. See Robert Yanal, "The Paradox of Suspense," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 146–158, and Robert Yanal, *Paradoxes of Emotion and Fiction* (Penn State University Press, 1999).

12. Smuts, "The Desire-Frustration Theory of Suspense."

13. Commitment to suspense realism looks obvious for Yanal but less so for Smuts (at least with respect to suspense as a singular emotion). Smuts does appear, however, to broadly endorse a composite account of suspense as a real, distinct emotion. He also explicitly takes his desire-frustration view to be about the causes of "the emotional state of suspense" (Smuts, "The Desire-Frustration Theory of Suspense," p. 281), which should be sufficient to preclude his theory from being *mutatis mutandis* compatible with suspense eliminativism.

14. Yanal, "The Paradox of Suspense," p. 157.

15. An obvious nonstarter is to explain how a host of normal functioning viewers in standard cases come to routinely and repeatedly commit flagrant self-reporting errors as being the fault of repeaters themselves (that is, repeaters failing to be sufficiently reflective or discriminating). Repeaters are obviously no more disposed than nonrepeaters to naked and unreflective appeal to the gross contours of raw feels.

16. In standard initial encounters, nonrepeaters identify feelings of suspense largely due to the phenomenal character of that experience, and in standard repeat encounters, repeaters have an experience with a phenomenal character sufficiently or saliently indistinct from the initial experience, such that they report those feelings as being of the same sort experienced initially, namely as feeling of suspense.

17. Some theorists explicitly deny that phenomenal character is ever a correct method of individuating the emotions. For example, Robert Solomon, *The Passions* (New York: Doubleday, 1976) argues that emotions are individuated according to beliefs and beliefs alone. However, broadly construed, it should not be controversial to take phenomenal character to be a *prima facie* commonsense individuation method.

18. Thanks to Aaron Smuts for pointing this out.

19. For an example of a feeling theory, see Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999). For a cognitivist theory, see Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a perceptual theory, see Jesse Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford University Press, 2004).

20. Consider the 1962 Stanley Schnacter and Jerome E. Singer experiment (S. Schachter and J. E. Singer, "Cognitive, Social, and Physiological Determinants of Emotional State," *Psychological Review* 69 (1962): 379–399), in which subjects, when injected with epinephrine, seemed unable from phenomenal character alone to individuate anger from euphoria. Certain external cues were then provided (for example, an angry or euphoric-behaving confederate being placed in the room), and as a result, the subjects were able to identify their emotional states but apparently only relative to their respective confederates' emotive display. While this does not show that phenomenal character fails to be constitutive of anger and euphoria, it does show that for anger and euphoria to be distinct emotions, their respective phenomenal characters cannot be exhaustively constitutive. Presumably, however, in standard cases (for example, when not pumped full of stimulants), we individuate anger from euphoria, at least in part, by appeal to phenomenal character.

21. Analogously, I can imagine cases in which I feel pain but routinely and easily *prima facie* misidentify the location of that pain, but these are far from standard sorts of cases (unless one considers amputation, severe tissue damage, or neurological disorder to be standard).

22. Insofar as he is committed to suspense realism, Yanal cannot preserve his theory merely by retreating into ontological conservatism (for example, that suspense reduces fully to uncertainty-based apprehension, anxiety, or anticipation).

23. Note that it is not the frustration of our desire that Rex drink that underwrites initial viewer suspense for Smuts, but rather the frustration of our desire to know what happened to Saskia, and this desire, once formed, is continually frustrated until the final scene, which explains the continued (sustained) feelings of suspense. In the end, we desire that Rex drink because we desire to know what happened to Saskia, and the continued

frustration of this latter desire drives our sustained feelings of suspense, which then dissipate when that desire is satisfied by the revelatory final scene—so too for Rex, albeit far more tragically.

24. For a desire to be of the necessarily frustrated sort under discussion is both for the desired state of affairs obtaining to be impossible (for example, *nomologically*: to run faster than light; *metaphysically*: to affect a fictional world or to affect the past; *conceptually*: to pursue purely evil moral goods; *logically*: to be a member of the null set), and for the desired state of affairs obtaining to be *epistemically* impossible relative to the epistemic state of the desirer. Note that in place of ‘necessarily’ one could substitute ‘*ceteris paribus*’ without thereby compromising the main thrust of my argument.

25. Presumably, however, if desire can be irrational, then the necessarily frustrated desire will be (necessarily) irrational, and if desire can be defective (fail to perform the desire function, fill the desire role), then the necessarily frustrated desire will be (necessarily) defective.

26. Notice that the desire to affect the past is also of the necessarily frustrated sort and thereby of the nonstandard, deviant sort. Although we may have such desires, clearly such desires can play only a negligible role in our standard desire economy. Moreover, cases in which such desires frequently play a non-negligible role, I suspect, would be swiftly and correctly regarded as psychologically aberrant cases. To avoid this, one might claim that standard cases of the putative desire to affect the past ought to be considered less a *desiring* and more a *wishing* (or a *supposing* or an *entertaining*). (Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting this distinction.) Smuts, however, can make no such move because his theory requires the relevant desires to be strong desires in the strict sense.

27. This is not to say that a theory of the emotions must exclude such instances (it should not), but only that such instances must be nonstandard. For instance, I assume that any theory of pity *prima facie* must capture putative cases of

pity arising in our engagements with fiction; however, this does not thereby suggest that any theory of pity must count such cases as standard instances of pity.

28. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

29. For an account of what suspense looks like according to a straightforwardly suspense eliminativist theory, see Christy Mag Uidhir, “An Eliminativist Framework for a Theory of Suspense,” *Philosophy and Literature* 34 (forthcoming 2011). There I argue for and defend a general framework for an eliminativist theory of suspense and show it able to secure the necessity of uncertainty for suspense, productively ground the relevant intuitions behind repeater suspense, informatively reveal the appearance of a paradox of suspense to result from a category mistake, and better explain the phenomena of narrative imbalance and diminished returns. For purely illustrative purposes, I use *apprehension* to stand in for the operative category a more exhaustively specified eliminativist account may employ.

My Apprehension Theory of Suspense: suspense is not itself a genuine, distinct emotion, but rather a subspecies of the genuine, distinct emotion of apprehension chiefly demarcated by the necessity of uncertainty and primarily the province of narrative encounters. That is, suspense just is apprehension of the sort for which uncertainty is necessary and primarily evoked when properly engaged with narratives having certain sorts of contents or of certain structural sorts.

Again, the above is for purely illustrative purposes and should not be seen as an endorsement of any specification of an emotion or set of emotions (for example, that suspense involves fear, hope, or fear and hope *pari passu*). I take any specification to be *mutatis mutandis* compatible with a general eliminativist account insofar as it does not entail commitment to suspense realism (for example, that suspense is itself a genuine, distinct emotion either simple or composite).