

TALES OF DREAD

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'Tales of dread' is a genre that has received scant attention in aesthetics. In this paper, I aim to elaborate an account of tales of dread which (1) effectively distinguishes these from horror stories, and (2) helps explain the close affinity between the two, accommodating borderline cases. I briefly consider two existing accounts of the genre – namely, those of Noël Carroll and of Cynthia Freeland – and show why they are inadequate for my purposes. I then develop my own account of tales of dread, drawing on two theoretical resources: Freud's 'The "Uncanny"', and Tzvetan Todorov's *The Fantastic*. In particular, I draw on Freud to help distinguish tales of dread from horror stories, and I draw on Todorov to help explain the fluidity between the genres. I argue that both horror stories and tales of dread feature apparent impossibilities which are threatening; but whereas in horror stories the existence of the monster (the apparent impossibility) is confirmed, tales of dread are sustained by the audience's uncertainty pertaining to preternatural objects or events. Where horror monsters pose an immediate, concrete danger to the subject's physical well-being, these preternatural objects or events pose a psychological threat to the subject's grasp of reality.

I

In his book *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll identifies a narrative genre that he calls 'tales of dread'. Unlike horror stories, Carroll claims, tales of dread do not feature monstrous entities or beings, but rather a distinctive kind of preternatural event. These events are designed to evoke in audiences an emotion which Carroll calls 'art-dread':

The uncanny event which tops off such stories causes a sense of unease and awe, perhaps of momentary anxiety and foreboding. These events are constructed to move the audience rhetorically to the point that one entertains the idea that unavowed, unknown, and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe.¹

Tales of dread have been prevalent since the late Romantic period. Examples of the genre include short stories by Edgar Allan Poe ('The Fall of the House of

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¹ Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 42.

Usher'), Charlotte Perkins Gilman ('The Yellow Wallpaper'), Guy de Maupassant ('Le Horla'), Robert Louis Stevenson ('The Body Snatcher'), and Algernon Blackwood ('The Willows'). Tales of dread can also be found in contemporary works of literature, including novels by José Saramago (*The Double*) and Mark Z. Danielewski (*House of Leaves*); and films by David Lynch (*Lost Highway*), David Cronenberg (*Videodrome*), and Duncan Jones (*Moon*). Moreover, recent episodes of the television series *Twin Peaks* and *Black Mirror* show the continuing appeal of the genre, and how these stories have adapted to encompass new uncanny technological possibilities, such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality.

Given the enduring popularity of tales of dread, it is unfortunate that the genre has received scant attention in aesthetics. In this paper, I aim to elaborate an account of tales of dread which (1) effectively distinguishes these from horror stories, and (2) helps explain the close affinity between the two genres, accommodating borderline cases.

Notwithstanding certain challenges that it faces, in what follows I shall assume that Carroll's account of horror is broadly correct.² Carroll defines monsters as 'beings not believed to exist now according to contemporary science.'³ Monsters are presented in horror stories as both threatening and impure. This combination of features is intended to elicit in audiences a peculiar blend of fear and disgust, which emotion Carroll calls 'art-horror'. I argue that both horror stories and tales of dread feature apparent impossibilities which are threatening; but whereas in horror stories the existence of the monster (the apparent impossibility) is confirmed, 'art-dread' – the emotion that tales of dread specialize in evoking – is sustained by the audience's uncertainty pertaining to preternatural objects or events. Borderline cases are those that are designed to centrally evoke both art-dread and art-horror. This can be achieved either by withholding confirmation of the monster's existence until late in the narrative, or by maintaining a sufficient degree of ambiguity as to the monster's existence.

² Of primary concern here is the charge that Carroll's definition of horror is not extensionally adequate: specifically, that it cannot accommodate cases in which the 'monster', such as the psychopathic killer Norman Bates in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*, appears to be of a kind that is believed to exist now according to contemporary science. It may be necessary to acknowledge that some narratives which we typically think of as works of horror lie outside the genre which Carroll's definition circumscribes. Though I agree with Carroll when he comments that even if his theory is not 'invulnerably comprehensive, it does offer at least a clear picture of the central or core cases of art-horror', especially when one considers that 'slasher' films and the like are a fairly recent development of the genre (*ibid.*, 38). To be clear, then, when I speak of works of horror in this paper, I mean narratives which centrally feature a monster the existence of which is not countenanced by contemporary science. Such monsters come in both supernatural and sci-fi variants.

³ *Ibid.*, 27.

In the next section I consider two existing accounts of tales of dread – namely, those of Noël Carroll and Cynthia Freeland – and show why they are inadequate for my purposes. I then develop my own account of the genre. In the third section I draw on Freud’s account of the uncanny to help pinpoint what is distinctive of these stories by specifying the object of art-dread. I argue that ‘tales of dread’ is another name for uncanny stories, and that ‘art-dread’ is another name for the feeling of the uncanny evoked in narrative fiction. I aim to clear up some misunderstandings about Freud’s work on the uncanny, especially in terms of how it relates to horror, and propose some important revisions to Freud’s theory. In the fourth section I draw on Todorov’s account of the fantastic to help schematize the distinction between horror stories and tales of dread – specifically, using Todorov’s distinction between the genres of ‘the fantastic’ and ‘the fantastic-marvellous’ – and explain how individual works can cross that boundary to varying degrees. I also address some terminological ambiguities concerning the use of the word ‘uncanny’ in Todorov’s work. Finally, by way of conclusion, I offer some brief remarks about the value and appeal of tales of dread, and suggest a reason why I think these works tend to be more valuable and interesting than horror stories.

II

Carroll only briefly mentions tales of dread in *The Philosophy of Horror*; he comments that ‘art-dread probably deserves a theory of its own’, though he does not have one ‘ready to hand’.⁴ Carroll first introduces the distinction by observing that there are stories, such as Stevenson’s ‘The Body Snatcher’, which are often classified as horror but do not feature a monster. Although Carroll acknowledges that these share a close affinity with horror stories, he does not think that they evoke the same kind of emotion in the audience. In contrast to horror stories, tales of dread do not feature disgust as a central element; and although tales of dread sometimes feature monstrous beings, Carroll comments that ‘in the main their energy is spent constructing a psychologically disturbing event of preternatural origins.’⁵

Since Carroll offered these brief remarks in *The Philosophy of Horror*, two attempts have been made to elaborate an account of the genre. I will briefly outline both these accounts and the key reasons why I think neither is adequate for my purposes.

First, in a chapter titled ‘Horror and Art-Dread’, Cynthia Freeland sets out to describe tales of dread, but without accepting that there is a clear distinction

⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁵ Ibid.

between these and horror stories. For Freeland, tales of dread are rather a subset of horror – one in which the ‘horror is subtle and lingering, a matter of mood more than monsters.’⁶ Freeland is right to emphasize the closeness of tales of dread and horror stories. But while the two genres certainly have much in common, and while there are doubtless borderline cases, such as those that Freeland discusses, I nonetheless maintain that there is a useful distinction to be drawn between them.

Unlike Carroll, Freeland is not interested in providing a definition of horror. In the introduction to her book on horror, *The Naked and the Undead*, Freeland expresses scepticism about whether any one definition could capture the diversity of the works that go by the name. As she puts it, the genre ‘is just slippery: It blends at the edges with many other genres such as science fiction and the thriller.’⁷ Surely it is true that horror ‘blends at the edges’ with other genres – not least with tales of dread. But while the boundary between the genres may be fuzzy, it may still be possible to arrive at a definition by identifying a set of paradigm cases. The basis for the distinction between horror stories and tales of dread is the intuition that tales of dread aim to arouse a different kind of emotion in the audience. This also provides an important motivation for the theoretical project. If it is true that these stories aim to arouse a different kind of emotional response in the audience, this is not merely of theoretical interest; it also carries important consequences for the critical evaluation of individual works.⁸ For what makes for a good tale of dread is not the same as what makes for a good horror story.

I suggest that all of the examples that Freeland discusses in her chapter ‘Horror and Art-Dread’ are borderline cases that blend central elements of horror stories and tales of dread. This limited set of examples gives the false impression that there is no categorical distinction to be drawn between the two genres. That there is such a distinction is highlighted by stories which exemplify tales of dread but cannot easily be categorized as horror stories; for example, Poe’s ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ or Lynch’s *Lost Highway*.

Even if one concedes Freeland’s position that tales of dread are instances of a broader category of horror – that is, by delineating horror stories in a sufficiently broad way – there is still an interesting and, on Freeland’s account, unanswered question about what distinguishes tales of dread as a subgenre of horror. In other

⁶ Cynthia Freeland, ‘Horror and Art-Dread’, in *The Horror Film*, ed. Stephen Prince (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 189.

⁷ Cynthia A. Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead: Evil and the Appeal of Horror* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 10.

⁸ On the evaluative implications of genre classification, see Catharine Abell, ‘Genre, Interpretation and Evaluation’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 115 (2015): 25–40.

words, the question still remains, what is this peculiar emotional effect that tales of dread specialize in evoking?

Second, Carroll has elaborated an account of tales of dread that occur in the television series *The Twilight Zone*. In this text, Carroll narrows his notion of the genre by making it a necessary condition that a character is punished for some wrongdoing in an ironic or 'mordantly humorous way', such that 'audiences entertain [...] that the universe is governed by an all knowing and controlling intelligence that metes out justice with diabolical wit'.⁹ In contrast to Freeland's, this latter account of Carroll's runs the risk of being too exclusive. Stated in full, Carroll defines a tale of dread as: '(1) a narrative fantasy; (2) about an event in which a character is punished; (3) in a manner that is appropriate (the punishment fits the crime); and (4) mordantly humorous (for example, often ironic)'.¹⁰ He calls these stories '*Tales of Dread* because they mandate that audiences entertain paranoid or anxious imaginings', specifically that the universe is governed by some all-knowing intelligence.¹¹ However, not all tales of dread – including many which I take to be paradigmatic of the genre, such as Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' – imply a moralistic universe that metes out diabolical punishments. Carroll's stipulation may be adequate to tales of dread in *The Twilight Zone*, but not to instances of the genre as a whole. Carroll was right to observe in *The Philosophy of Horror* that these stories 'often correlate with some sense of cosmic moral justice. But they need not'.¹²

Nor do I subscribe to Carroll's distinction between monstrous entities and preternatural events. As Freeland points out, horror monsters 'will not be effectively horrific or threatening unless they *do* things'.¹³ More importantly, though, for my purposes, the emotion that Carroll calls 'art-dread' can focus on preternatural objects or entities as well as events. A case in point is the recurrent narrative motif of the double or doppelgänger – an object of dread par excellence. Consider the narrator's description of his uncanny double in Poe's 'William Wilson':

I looked; – and a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame. [...] I lowered the lamp in still nearer proximity to the face. Were these – *these* the lineaments of William Wilson? I saw, indeed, that they were his, but I shook as if with a fit of the ague, in fancying they were not.¹⁴

⁹ Noël Carroll, 'Tales of Dread in *The Twilight Zone*: A Contribution to Narratology', in *Minerva's Night Out: Philosophy, Pop Culture, and Moving Pictures* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 223.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 42.

¹³ Freeland, 'Horror and Art-Dread', 196.

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, 'William Wilson', in *Selected Tales* (London: Penguin, 1994), 106–7.

Just like the preternatural events of tales of dread which Carroll describes, the appearance of one's doppelganger can lead one to entertain the idea that mysterious, inexplicable forces rule the universe. While a doppelganger could, in the right kind of narrative context, count as a horror monster on Carroll's definition, most doppelganger stories sit more readily alongside tales of dread: the emotion that doppelganger stories typically aim to evoke is art-dread, not art-horror. Clearly, though, it is more intuitive to think of one's doppelganger as a preternatural entity or being rather than an event.

III

The underlying assumption here is that, like horror stories, tales of dread are defined by the emotion which it is their central purpose to evoke in audiences. So what exactly is this emotion that Carroll and Freeland call 'art-dread'?

Let us consider Freeland's characterization of art-dread as a starting point. According to Freeland, art-dread is just the name for dread 'evoked by or in response to an artwork'.¹⁵ Freeland characterizes dread as 'an ongoing fear of imminent threat from something deeply unnerving and evil, yet not well-defined or well-understood'.¹⁶ She offers the following example of an object of dread: the threat of anthrax being transmitted through the mail. Like fear, Freeland claims, dread involves a sense of danger, but is different in that it is 'looser and less focused on a particular object'.¹⁷ In contrast to anxiety, dread involves an anticipated encounter with something 'profound', something 'powerful, grave, and inexorable'.¹⁸

This characterization of Freeland's may be true enough of the emotion of dread – in general. But as a characterization of art-dread it misses something crucial about the kind of stories we are interested in. And that is not just because not all objects of dread occur in the context of art. Not all fictional objects of dread are objects of art-dread, either. In short, art-dread is not a common-or-garden variety of emotion. All things being equal, a story about a terrorist threat which played on people's anxieties about anthrax being transmitted through the mail would not count as a tale of dread. That this should be so is highlighted by the recent cinematic examples of art-dread which Freeland identifies: *The Sixth Sense*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Others*, and *Signs*. Surely it is not incidental that all of these stories involve a dread of

¹⁵ Freeland, 'Horror and Art-Dread', 193.

¹⁶ Ibid., 191.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., 192.

something supernatural. What we need is to pinpoint this relationship between art-dread and the supernatural.

Now, I suggest that another – and perhaps better, in the sense that it is more descriptive – name for the emotion of ‘art-dread’ is the ‘uncanny feeling’. The uncanny describes the effect of certain phenomena, found both in art and in life, that are characteristically eerie, creepy, and weird. As Freud put it in the opening of his now famous essay on the topic, the uncanny is ‘undoubtedly related to what is frightening – to what arouses dread and horror’.¹⁹ Now, Freud’s theory of the uncanny, which is often referred to in the literature under the heading of ‘the return of the repressed’, has oftentimes been co-opted as a theory of horror. For example, the film scholar Robin Wood extends Freud’s theory to a general understanding of horror films, claiming that ‘the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses’.²⁰ Carroll thinks that it is ‘fair to surmise’ that horror monsters fall within the class of phenomena that Freud identifies as ‘uncanny’, ‘along with a lot of other stuff’.²¹

Contrary to this common theoretical understanding, what I want to show presently is that Freud’s essay on the uncanny actually offers the resources for distinguishing narratives which aim to evoke art-dread (the ‘uncanny feeling’) from those which aim to evoke art-horror. ‘Tales of dread’, I suggest, is just another name for stories the central purpose of which is to evoke this feeling of the uncanny.²² In order to do this, it is first necessary to distinguish between two different explanations that Freud offers for why we experience certain phenomena as uncanny – the ‘return of the repressed’, and another explanation, more often overlooked, that Freud offers, which has to do with the apparent confirmation of ‘surmounted primitive beliefs’.

According to Freud’s theory of the return of the repressed, the uncanny is the feeling that arises when something repressed – namely, some infantile sexual

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’, in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 17, *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage, 2001), 219.

²⁰ Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 68. In applying this theory of Freud’s to horror film, Wood acknowledges that he goes beyond the strict Freudian understanding of repression, which I discuss below, to a broader understanding of the term which encompasses social norms.

²¹ Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 174.

²² To be clear, I do not mean to imply that classification of a work is contingent on any given audience member’s emotional response. The purpose of a story to evoke an emotional response can be identified by reference to the author’s (or the hypothetical author’s) intention, independently of whether the work does in fact manifest such a feeling in the audience.

complex – is revived in the subconscious by some impression. For example, in his well-known reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's 'The Sandman', Freud locates the uncanny effect of the story in the threat posed to the protagonist Nathanael's eyes by the fabled Sandman and his dubious human avatars, Coppelius and Coppola. In the context of the narrative, Freud claims that this threat to Nathanael's eyes functions as a substitute for Nathanael's (and presumably also the reader's) repressed Oedipal dread of castration.

Until quite late in the essay, Freud maintains that all uncanny phenomena can be explained in terms of repressed infantile complexes. In the opening of the third and final section, Freud clearly states that 'the uncanny [...] is something which is secretly familiar [...] which has undergone repression and then returned from it', and that 'everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition'.²³ However, just a few pages on, Freud goes on to distinguish another explanation for why we experience certain phenomena as uncanny. This has to do with the apparent confirmation of 'surmounted primitive beliefs'.

According to the latter theory, we all inherit, both from our individual and collective past, certain 'primitive' beliefs in animistic and magical phenomena – such as belief in the existence of spirits and in the 'omnipotence of thoughts' – which most of us have largely, but not totally, 'surmounted'. 'As soon as something actually happens in our lives,' Freud writes, 'which seems to confirm the old, discarded beliefs we get a feeling of the uncanny.'²⁴ Say, for example, that as a child I believed in the power of telepathy, but now later in life I have 'surmounted' this belief. If something actually happens in my life that appears to confirm my previously held belief in telepathic powers – say that a friend rings me up because she 'knew' I was feeling upset about something – Freud's theory predicts that I will experience the event as uncanny.

I have argued elsewhere that compared to the return of the repressed, Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs faces fewer serious objections and carries greater explanatory power in respect of the uncanny.²⁵ Perhaps the biggest problem with Freud's return of the repressed is that it fails to explain anything that is distinctive about uncanny phenomena. This becomes clear when one considers that Freud uses broadly the same theory to account for a whole range of psychological phenomena, including dreams, jokes, errors (or 'parapraxes'), and neurotic symptoms. In contrast, Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs provides a fairly rich, and persuasive, explanation

²³ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 245.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 246–47.

²⁵ Mark Windsor, 'Freud on the Uncanny: A Tale of Two Theories', *Philosophy and Literature* (forthcoming).

for why we experience certain phenomena as uncanny: because they create the dubious appearance of the supernatural in the context of one's experience of reality.

Carroll may be right that horror monsters qualify as candidates for uncanny experiences according to Freud's return of the repressed. Indeed, presumably almost anything can qualify as a candidate for an uncanny experience according to this theory. That is because, according to the Freudian model, repression necessarily involves unconscious processes of 'dream-work' which transform the latent, unconscious content of an infantile complex into its manifest, conscious content. For example, the threat posed to Nathanael's eyes in 'The Sandman' is purportedly the displacement of Nathanael's latent Oedipal fear of castration. In order to unearth this latent content, Freud referred to the psychoanalytic study of dreams, myths, and fantasies, which supposedly reveals a common symbolic link between the eyes and the male genitals. But consider the plethora of common symbols for the male genitals, which psychoanalysis claims to have discovered. These include pens, fountains, umbrellas, trees, balloons, and a virtual menagerie of animals.²⁶ Presumably, all of these things would qualify as likely candidates to elicit uncanny feelings by reviving in the mind repressed Oedipal fears and desires. Thus, it turns out that Freud's return of the repressed theory of the uncanny is no more apposite to horror monsters than it is to trees and umbrellas.

Things are different when it comes to Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs. There are two key features of the theory which are important for us here. First, the object or event that appears to confirm the surmounted primitive belief must be experienced as taking place in reality. As Freud writes, the 'whole thing is purely an affair of "reality-testing", a question of the material reality of the phenomena.'²⁷ Conversely, in cases which involve the return of repressed infantile complexes, 'the question of material reality does not arise.'²⁸ Second, this incongruous object or event must cause uncertainty about what is real. As Freud puts it, this class of uncanny things cannot arise unless there is 'a conflict of judgement as to whether things which have been "surmounted" and are regarded as incredible may not, after all, be possible.'²⁹

At the same time that it captures what is distinctive about the object of uncanny feelings, this theory of Freud's provides the means of distinguishing

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1973), 188–89.

²⁷ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 248.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 249.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

the object of art-dread from the object of art-horror.³⁰ Nevertheless, I do not want to adopt Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs wholesale, for there are significant problems with the theory as it stands. Freud's genetic account of infantile and 'primitive' beliefs is a lot to take on board. It is far from clear that Freud's views about infantile and 'primitive' beliefs are well founded; nor does Freud furnish any clear model for understanding either how these beliefs may be passed down from earlier stages of development to later ones, or what exactly is involved in 'surmounting' such beliefs. Perhaps most importantly, though, it does not seem tenable that in order to experience some apparent magical or animistic phenomenon as uncanny, one must have previously held, and later 'surmounted', a belief in its existence. If I had never believed in telepathic powers, does that mean I cannot experience an apparent act of telepathy as uncanny?³¹

I suggest, however, that these problems can be overcome if we reframe Freud's sense of the uncanny as the dubious appearance of the supernatural in the context of one's experience of reality, but without the dubious and burdensome genetic postulates pertaining to infantile and 'primitive' beliefs. Specifically, I suggest that we reframe this dubious appearance of the supernatural in terms of an apparent impossibility. As such, we can circumscribe the kinds of phenomena that we are interested in without any reference to infantile or 'primitive' belief systems. Moreover, on this revised account, whether or not I or my 'primitive' ancestors used to believe in, say, telepathy, an apparent act of mind reading is still apt to have an uncanny effect – if I believe that telepathy is impossible. Thus, I propose that the object of uncanny feelings is something that appears to be really happening, which appears to be impossible, which causes uncertainty about what is real, and in virtue of which uncertainty is evaluated

³⁰ Steven Jay Schneider is one of the few authors to champion Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs. But contrary to my approach, Schneider applies Freud's theory to horror films. Specifically, Schneider claims that horror monsters can be understood as 'metaphorical embodiments' of surmounted primitive beliefs. Whatever the merits of Schneider's approach, it is important to recognize that horror monsters fail to satisfy Freud's condition that an uncanny phenomenon must bring about a conflict of judgement about what is real in the story. Hence Schneider's claim that horror monsters can be understood as metaphorical (rather than literal) embodiments of surmounted primitive beliefs. See Steven Jay Schneider, 'Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror,' in *Horror Film Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight, 2000), 167–91. For critical discussion, see Noël Carroll, 'Psychoanalysis and the Horror Film,' in *Minerva's Night Out*, 145–57.

³¹ For more on the problems pertaining to Freud's theory of surmounted primitive beliefs, see Windsor, 'Freud on the Uncanny,' and Cynthia Freeland, 'Explaining the Uncanny in *The Double Life of Véronique*,' in *Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmare*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87–105.

as a threat.³² Thereby we can identify the peculiar kind of threat evoked by the uncanny object: a psychological threat to one's grasp of reality.

Let me offer an example to illustrate. Near the beginning of David Lynch's film *Lost Highway*, one of the two leading male characters, Fred Madison, is approached at a party by a pale, sinister-looking man. This 'Mystery Man' tells Fred that they have met before. Fred does not recognize the man and asks him where he thinks they met. The Mystery Man replies: 'At your house. Don't you remember? [...] In fact, I'm there right now.'³³ At first Fred is incredulous. Then the Mystery Man produces a mobile phone and suggests that Fred ring his house, which he does, hesitantly. Apparently, the same Mystery Man answers on the other end. Fred responds mirthfully to the event '*as if it's a party trick of some kind*', but after a few moments he '*suddenly turns serious*.'³⁴ Angrily, Fred demands to know who the Mystery Man is and how he got into his house. '*The man laughs – identical laughs – both over the phone and in person*.'³⁵ The voice of the Mystery Man on the phone demands: 'Give me my phone back.'³⁶

Notice how Fred's emotional response to the Mystery Man's apparent bilocation changes. At first he responds light-heartedly as if it were a 'party trick of some kind', but then, once his attempts to rationalize the encounter fail, he '*suddenly turns serious*'. This marks the point at which Fred's uncertainty about what is happening causes him to evaluate the apparent impossibility as a threat, the point at which the apparent impossibility becomes, for Fred, an object of the uncanny.

Some caveats must be offered here when applying the theory to works of fiction. First, if the preternatural object or event is going to have an uncanny effect on the audience, it must appear to be impossible in the context of the fictional world of the work, and not merely appear to be impossible relative to the audience's beliefs about the actual world.³⁷ Many things can be found in fiction which would be impossible in the actual world but are perfectly commonplace in their respective fictional worlds. Witches, wizards, spirits, magic potions, and the like are part and parcel of fairy tales and other kinds of fantasy fiction. As Freud

³² Elsewhere I have elaborated a definition of the uncanny as an anxious uncertainty about what is real caused by an apparent impossibility. Mark Windsor, 'What Is the Uncanny?', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 59 (2019): 54–65.

³³ David Lynch and Brian Gifford, *Lost Highway* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Here I adopt the view that audiences are guided by what Stacie Friend calls the Reality Assumption: 'the assumption that everything that is (really) true is fictionally the case, unless excluded by the work.' Stacie Friend, 'The Real Foundation of Fictional Worlds', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 95 (2017): 29–42.

observes, in these cases we 'adapt our judgement to the imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer, and regard souls, spirits and ghosts as though their existence had the same validity as our own has in material reality'.³⁸ Part of what makes the scene from *Lost Highway* described above so memorable and affecting is that it marks the first time in the film that the audience is presented with something that clearly appears to contradict the natural laws that are assumed to govern the fictional world of the work.³⁹ What makes the film a tale of dread and not merely a work of fiction which features an uncanny event is the extent to which it sustains the audience's uncertainty about what is real in the fiction.

The second point concerns the nature of the audience's emotional response to something which is known to be fictional. Unlike Fred, of course, we know that the Mystery Man and his uncanny double do not exist. How then can the Mystery Man and his double pose a psychological threat to our grasp of reality when we know that he is merely fictional? Here we have a particular instance of a much broader problem in aesthetics concerning the nature of emotional responses to objects that are known to be fictional – namely, the so-called 'paradox of fiction'. What must be accounted for here is that the audience's emotional response stems from an imaginative engagement with the represented contents of the work. When I watch *Lost Highway*, I make-believe that the Mystery Man and his double are incongruous relative to what I believe is possible in the fictional world of the film. The Mystery Man and his uncanny double do not threaten my grasp of reality. Rather, I make-believe that they do.⁴⁰ Whether the emotional response I have in virtue of this imaginative engagement with the work should be understood as a fully fledged instance of uncanniness or rather some quasi-form of emotion is a question that I shall here leave open.

A final point: notice how in this example from *Lost Highway* it is ambiguous whether the object of uncanny feelings should best be thought of as an entity or an event. Carroll's distinction between monstrous entities and preternatural events is orthogonal to the real distinction between the objects of art-horror and art-dread. It is true that tales of dread may be associated with preternatural events rather than preternatural objects. That is because events tend to be less epistemically robust than concrete objects: events tend to admit of a greater variety and nuance of explanation. But we must be careful here not to conflate the object or target of art-dread with its cause. Contrary to Freeland's characterization of the emotion, art-dread may be focused on particular (fictional)

³⁸ Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 50.

³⁹ Thanks to Karen Simecek for highlighting this point.

⁴⁰ I draw here on Kendall Walton's *Mimesis and Make-Believe: On the Foundations of the Representational Arts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

objects, but the cause of the emotion is necessarily something mysterious and elusive: uncertainty about what is real (in the fiction) caused by an apparent impossibility.

To sum up, just as art-horror is not any common-or-garden variety of horror, neither is art-dread any common-or-garden variety of dread. In both cases, it is the nature of the object that distinguishes the emotions in question. Art-horror is directed at threatening, impure beings that are not believed to exist now according to contemporary science. Art-dread is directed at apparent impossibilities which cause uncertainty about what is real, and are threatening on account of that very uncertainty. Where horror monsters typically pose an immediate concrete danger to the subject's physical well-being, uncanny objects and events pose a psychological threat to the subject's grasp of reality: horror monsters are objects of fear or panic; uncanny phenomena are objects of dread or anxiety.

An important discrepancy arises from this distinction between the objects of art-dread and art-horror. Art-dread is directed at phenomena which appear to be impossible, cause uncertainty about what is real, and are threatening in virtue of causing such uncertainty. These uncanny phenomena occur in life as well as in art. Art-horror, on the other hand, is directed at phenomena – namely, monsters – which, by definition, do not exist. Art-dread is another name for the uncanny feeling evoked in fictional narratives, whereas art-horror has no real-life analogue. This discrepancy between the two emotions points us in the direction of being able to draw a line between tales of dread and horror stories. It is to this question that I now turn.

IV

In his classic work of literary theory, *The Fantastic*, Todorov provides a taxonomy of narrative genres which centrally feature preternatural events. He calls these genres 'the uncanny', 'the fantastic', and 'the marvellous'. Membership of each genre depends on the reader's interpretation of preternatural events; whether, on the one hand, events are given a natural or psychological interpretation, which genre he calls 'the uncanny', or whether, on the other hand, they are given a supernatural interpretation, which genre he calls 'the marvellous'. The genre of 'the fantastic' exists between the uncanny and the marvellous: the fantastic takes place for the duration of the reader's hesitation between a natural and a supernatural interpretation of narrative events.⁴¹

⁴¹ Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic*, trans. Richard Howard (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975).

As Todorov points out, pure cases of the fantastic are rare. Most narratives that engage fantastic hesitation will, at some point before the end of the story, confirm either a naturalistic or supernatural interpretation of preternatural events. These narratives then fall into one of two intermediate genres: either 'the fantastic-uncanny' (the supernatural explained), or 'the fantastic-marvellous' (the supernatural confirmed). Todorov offers Henry James's 'The Turn of the Screw' as a rare example of the pure fantastic, that is, a story which effectively maintains fantastic hesitation through to the end.

Tales of dread, I claim, are instances of fantastic, or else of the uncanny bordering on the fantastic, whereas horror stories are instances of the fantastic-marvellous.⁴² To be clear, Todorov's genre categories are not sufficient to distinguish horror stories and tales of dread. Todorov's genres are dependent solely on the reader's interpretation of narrative events, whereas horror stories and tales of dread are both dependent on the kind of emotion that each is designed to evoke in the audience. Many examples of fantastic narratives – including one of Todorov's central examples of the genre, Jacques Cazotte's *The Devil in Love* – do not aim to evoke the uncanny feeling in the audience. Nonetheless, Todorov's account is helpful for understanding the boundary between horror stories and tales of dread, and how individual works can straddle that boundary to varying degrees. But before I go any further, I need to address some apparent terminological inconsistencies.

Of course, it should be clear that what Todorov calls 'the fantastic' does not coincide with the typical meaning of the word 'fantasy' (and its cognates) in English, which coincides with what Todorov calls 'the marvellous'. What is more problematic, though, is the apparent incompatibility here between Todorov's uses of 'uncanny' and mine. For, on my account, the uncanny feeling is dependent on just the kind of uncertainty about what is real that Todorov posits as the defining feature of the fantastic, which uncertainty is precluded by the genre that Todorov calls 'the uncanny'. However, what I want to show is that, although these two uses of 'uncanny' are not coextensive – in particular, Todorov's use of 'uncanny' is much broader than mine –, neither are they incompatible.

To begin with, it is helpful to point out a discrepancy between two different uses of the word 'uncanny' in Todorov's work in its English translation. First, Todorov uses 'uncanny' to refer to the genre of 'the uncanny', using the substantive '*l'étrange*' (literally, 'the strange'). Second, Todorov describes

⁴² Todorov describes Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher', which is one of my central examples of a tale of dread, as an instance of 'the uncanny bordering on the fantastic'. *Ibid.*, 47.

a certain kind of narrative event as 'uncanny' using the adjective '*étrange*' (literally, 'strange').⁴³ Let us examine each of these uses more closely.

Contrary to what one might expect, uncanny (*étrange*) events are not, on Todorov's account, proprietary to the genre of the uncanny (*'l'étrange'*). In fact, uncanny events are as central to the genre of the fantastic as they are to the genre of the uncanny. For Todorov, an 'uncanny event' is another name for 'an apparently supernatural event'.⁴⁴ Such events are just the kind of events that bring about 'fantastic hesitation', that is, uncanny events are what cause the reader to hesitate between natural and supernatural interpretations of a story. As such, uncanny events are a necessary feature of the genre of the fantastic. As Todorov puts it, 'without "uncanny events", the fantastic cannot even appear'.⁴⁵

Todorov's usage of 'uncanny' to describe uncanny events, then, is closely aligned with my usage of the term to describe the feeling of the uncanny. The uncanny feeling is the emotional response had by characters and the audience to uncanny events if the uncertainty about what is real caused by such events poses a threat to characters' and the audience's grasp of what is real (in the story). But what about Todorov's usage of the term to describe the genre of the uncanny? This is what Todorov has to say about the genre in its 'pure state':

In works that belong to this genre, events are related which may be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, but which are, in one way or another, incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected, and which thereby provoke in the character and in the reader a reaction similar to that which works of the fantastic have made familiar.⁴⁶

What distinguishes the genres of the uncanny and the fantastic is that uncanny events in the former can be readily accounted for by the laws of reason, whereas in the latter they do not admit of any ready natural explanation – they cause uncertainty about the nature of the world represented in the fiction. But notice that in both cases uncanny events tend to provoke a similar reaction. Conversely, in the genre of the marvellous, Todorov observes that 'supernatural elements provoke no particular reaction either in the characters or in the implicit

⁴³ For a useful discussion of this terminological discrepancy, and support for the alignment of the Freudian concept of the uncanny with Todorov's genre of the fantastic, see Maria M. Tatar, 'The Houses of Fiction: Towards a Definition of the Uncanny', *Comparative Literature* 33 (1981): 168n2.

⁴⁴ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

reader'.⁴⁷ As such, there is an important asymmetry regarding the relationship between the genres of the fantastic and the uncanny on the one hand and the relationship between the genres of the fantastic and the marvellous on the other.

How can we explain this asymmetry and, in particular, the closeness of the uncanny and the fantastic? Recall that for something to have an uncanny effect in fiction, the fictional world must be assumed by the audience to be bound by the same natural laws as the actual world. Likewise, the hesitation that is constitutive of the fantastic requires that the fictional world is assumed by the reader to be bound by the same natural laws as the actual world. Thus, Todorov defines the fantastic as 'that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event'.⁴⁸ Conversely, in a marvellous world, an apparently supernatural event will not merely appear to be supernatural – it will simply be supernatural. It will not cause the audience any uncertainty about the nature of the fictional world. There is no such thing as an uncanny event in a marvellous world.

I propose that what Todorov calls uncanny events tend to provoke a similar reaction in both the genre of the fantastic and of the uncanny because in both genres uncanny events may bring about fantastic hesitation, but to different degrees and with different consequences pertaining to the interpretation of the narrative as a whole. Consider that a preternatural event in real life may be experienced as uncanny if it appears to be impossible and causes anxious uncertainty about what is real. For example, a strange coincidence, such as repeatedly encountering the same number throughout the day, might suggest something ominous and fateful going on.⁴⁹ But such a coincidence need not seriously disrupt one's higher-order beliefs about how the world works in order to be experienced as uncanny (even though it might do). Rather, it may just bring about a momentary, doubtful tension; a flickering feeling of uncertainty. I suggest that such an uncanny coincidence in life is analogous to an uncanny event as it occurs in Todorov's genre of the uncanny. In both cases, the uncanny event can all along be readily accounted for by laws of reason – it was 'just a coincidence'. What distinguishes uncanny events as they occur in Todorov's genre of the fantastic is that they bring about higher-order disruption to one's beliefs about the fictional world in question. This, I take it, is what Todorov means when he writes that the 'fantastic is defined as a special perception of uncanny events'.⁵⁰ The difference is in the degree of uncertainty caused by the events in question.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 54.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁹ I borrow this example from Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 237–38.

⁵⁰ Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 91.

There is something right about Todorov placing the uncanny on the naturalistic side of the fantastic, then. For in the genre of the marvellous, supernatural elements 'provoke no particular reaction': the uncanny cannot take hold. What is infelicitous about Todorov's choice of terminology is the implication that the genre of the uncanny is incompatible with the feeling of the uncanny, as I, developing Freud, define it, and the implication that uncanny events are less than central to the genre of the fantastic. Both these implications turn out to be unfounded.

We are now ready to apply Todorov's schema to help us understand the distinction between horror stories and tales of dread. The boundary between tales of dread and horror stories can be schematized using Todorov's boundary between the fantastic and the marvellous. Both tales of dread and horror stories involve the appearance of the impossible in an otherwise ordinary world; but with horror stories, the audience eventually comes to accept the existence of the apparently impossible being – the monster. At this point the narrative transitions from the fantastic to the marvellous. As Carroll writes: 'whereas the fantastic is defined by an oscillation between naturalistic and supernatural explanations, horror requires that at some point attempts at ordinary scientific explanations be abandoned in favor of a supernatural (or a sci-fi) explanation.'⁵¹ Once the existence of the monster is confirmed, the uncertainty about what is real, which is necessary for art-dread, is precluded. After this transition point, the supernatural or sci-fi elements of the narrative may still appear unnatural or, in Carroll's terminology, 'impure'. But the fictional world of the work must be accepted by the characters and the audience as one that accommodates the existence of the monster. Characters may still react to monsters as to 'extraordinary beings in an ordinary world', yet both the characters and the audience know that the monster exists.⁵² The monster cannot threaten the audience's grasp of what is real in the story.

An upshot of this account is that horror stories often evoke art-dread for a time: specifically, up to the point at which the existence of the monster is confirmed. This explains how, as Carroll observes, 'some fictions may traffic in both art-horror and art-dread', and how 'the admixture may take a range of forms in different stories.'⁵³ From the point at which the audience first glimpses the incongruous presence of the monster, to the point at which the monster is fully revealed, the emotions of art-dread and art-horror may blend to varying degrees.

⁵¹ Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 145.

⁵² Noël Carroll, 'The Nature of Horror', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46 (1987): 52.

⁵³ Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 42.

The point of transition from the fantastic to the marvellous is not cut-and-dry, nor is the distinction between works of horror and tales of dread. That is because the uncertainty about what is real, which sustains art-dread, admits of degrees. Specifically, uncertainty about what is real in a story – prompted by the appearance of an uncanny object or event – can vary along two dimensions. First, the point at which the audience gives up a natural interpretation can vary along the timeline of the narrative. Second, there are degrees of certainty and uncertainty about how to interpret a story. Given these variables, we can see both how the point of transition from art-dread and art-horror will be shaded by degrees of ambiguity, and how some individual works may not be more readily categorized as either a horror story or a tale of dread.

A story need not sustain uncertainty about what is real through to the end to count as a tale of dread. Tales of dread are not restricted to pure cases of the fantastic. For example, Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' takes the reader right to the cusp of believing that the eponymous house is haunted, only at the very end to pull back and affirm a naturalistic explanation of events. Conversely, M. R. James's 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' for the most part plays on the reader's uncertainty about apparently supernatural events, only at the very end to confirm the existence of the ghost. Tales of dread are stories the primary purpose of which is to elicit the art-dread emotion, just as horror stories are stories the primary purpose of which is to elicit art-horror.⁵⁴ Although 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is an instance of 'the fantastic-uncanny', and 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' an instance of 'the fantastic-marvellous', both may qualify as tales of dread if it is their primary purpose to elicit art-dread. Indeed, it may be typical that tales of dread affirm by the end either a supernatural or natural explanation of preternatural events, or at least, to weigh down on one side or the other, given that pure cases of the fantastic are quite rare.⁵⁵

Borderline cases are those that centrally evoke both art-dread and art-horror, or where it is ambiguous whether the primary purpose is to evoke one or the other emotion. A good example of a borderline case which sits more or less

⁵⁴ For an account of how genre categories are distinguished according to the purposes that works belonging to them are intended to serve, see Abell, 'Genre, Interpretation and Evaluation'.

⁵⁵ Greg Currie and Jon Jureidini offer a valuable discussion of why uncanny effects are difficult to sustain in narrative fiction, which also sheds light on why pure instances of the fantastic are rare. In brief, this is because audiences are too good at second-guessing author's intentions. The audience sees early on that the author intends to explain uncanny events naturalistically or to affirm a supernatural explanation. Greg Currie and Jon Jureidini, 'Art and Delusion', *Monist* 86 (2003): 556–78.

equally across the divide is offered by Freeland in a chapter in *The Naked and the Undead*, aptly titled 'Uncanny Horror' – Stanley Kubrick's film *The Shining*. Kubrick commented that he was attracted to make a film adaptation of Stephen King's novel because the story managed to 'strike an extraordinary balance between the psychological and the supernatural'.⁵⁶ To the extent that the narrative leaves it uncertain whether or not there really are supernatural forces at work in the Overlook Hotel, *The Shining* should be classified as a tale of dread rather than a horror story. Is Jack a monster proper, or just a man going insane?

V

At the opening, I noted that a successful account of tales of dread would need both to effectively distinguish these from horror stories and to help explain the close affinity between the two genres. What distinguishes tales of dread from horror stories is that each aims to evoke a different kind of emotion in the audience. In turn, what defines each of these emotions is an object or event under a certain kind of description. Developing aspects of Freud's theory of the uncanny, I hope to have provided a coherent and convincing account of what is distinctive of the fictional object of art-dread in contrast to that of art-horror. Both the objects of art-horror and art-dread involve apparent impossibilities which are threatening. But whereas in horror stories, the existence of the apparent impossibility – the monster – is confirmed during the narrative, tales of dread are sustained by the audience's uncertainty regarding preternatural objects or events. The object of art-dread is something that appears to be impossible, which causes uncertainty about what is real in the story, and is threatening because of that very uncertainty.

The account that I have offered avoids the problems that I identified with Carroll's and Freeland's respective accounts of the genre. First, contra Freeland, my account provides a principled means of distinguishing tales of dread from horror stories. At the same time it also explains what the objects of art-dread and art-horror have in common, and thereby provides an explanation for the genres' perceived continuity. Second, it avoids Carroll's too narrow requirement that tales of dread imply a moralistic universe that metes out diabolical punishments. Tales of dread do characteristically suggest the presence of mysterious, inexplicable forces in the universe; but these need not be moralistic. Third, contra Carroll's distinction, the account allows that art-dread can focus on preternatural objects as well as events; and contra Freeland's characterization of the emotion, it allows that art-dread can focus on very particular fictional objects, such as the face of

⁵⁶ Quoted in Freeland, *The Naked and the Undead*, 217.

a doppelganger. What makes the object of art-dread psychologically disturbing need not be its lack of concrete particularity, but rather that it appears to be impossible and causes uncertainty about what is real in the story.

In contrast to horror monsters, which, by definition, do not exist, uncanny phenomena can be found in life as well as in art. That is why the boundary between tales of dread and horror stories coincides with the boundary between Todorov's genres of the fantastic and the marvellous. Once a story transitions from the fantastic to the marvellous – when the audience comes to believe in the existence of a monster, such as when we come to accept the existence of the ghost in 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' – the uncertainty about what is real that is necessary for art-dread is lost. But a story need not sustain such uncertainty through to the end to count as an instance of the genre. Tales of dread are stories the primary purpose of which is to evoke art-dread in the audience. Freeland is right to observe that genres blend at the edges: ambiguity about classification of individual works comes in to the degree that it is ambiguous whether a work primarily aims to evoke art-dread or art-horror. Todorov's account helps us understand how the boundary between art-dread and art-horror may be shaded by degrees of uncertainty, and hence how there may be a level of indeterminacy when it comes to categorizing individual works.

There are surely many interesting and pressing questions about tales of dread that I have not touched on. Why, given that art-dread is essentially a negative emotion, do we value and enjoy these tales? One promising solution has to do with the peculiar kind of cognitive frisson elicited by uncanny phenomena – the peculiar and disturbing cognitive tension brought about by something that both appears to be really happening and appears to be impossible. This tension is one that demands resolution. Either what appears to be impossible is not really happening or it is not in fact impossible. The uncanny object is like a puzzle that refuses to be solved.

In contrast to horror stories, which often tend to be quite formulaic, tales of dread often play with or subvert narrative conventions in order to create uncertainty about the events represented. Other works in the genre introduce uncertainty at the level of the narrative itself. For example, Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* would count as a straightforward horror story, were it not for the story's ingenious mode of presentation – comprising found documents, including an academic study of a supposedly lost documentary film, *The Navidson Record*, alongside various first-person commentaries and interviews – which casts layers of doubt and obscurity over the supernatural events pertaining to the titular 'House'. In this respect, then, *House of Leaves* is exemplary: tales

of dread tend to be more diverse, unpredictable, and thereby more interesting than horror stories because in order to sustain art-dread, the audience must be successfully kept in the dark about the precise nature of the fictional object.

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