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The Paradox of Suspense

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THE PROBLEM

It is an incontrovertible fact that people can consume the same suspense fiction again and again with no loss of affect. Someone may reread Graham Greene's *This Gun for Hire* or re-view the movie *The Guns of Navarone* and, nevertheless, on the second, third, and repeated encounters be caught in the same unrelenting grip of suspense that snared them on their first encounter. I myself have seen *King Kong* at least 50 times, and yet there are still certain moments when I feel the irresistible tug of suspense.

However, although the suspense felt by recidivists like me is an undeniable fact, it appears to be a paradoxical one. For there seems to be agreement that a key component of the emotion *suspense* is a cognitive state of uncertainty.[1] We feel suspense as the heroine heads for the buzzsaw, in part, because we are uncertain as to whether or not she will be cleaved. Uncertainty seems to be a necessary condition for suspense.

However, when we come to cases of recidivism, the relevant readers and viewers know Anne Crowder will stop the onset of world war, that the guns of Navarone will plunge into the sea, and that King Kong will be blown away. After all, we have already read the novel or seen the film; we know how the fiction ends, because we have read it before.

[1]Examples of theorists who take uncertainty to be a key element of suspense include Chatman (1978), Vale (1982), Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988), Walton (1990), Gerrig (1993), and Michaels (1992).

How then can it be possible for us to feel suspense the second, the third, or the 50th time around? Or is it possible only because recidivists with respect to suspense fictions are somehow irrational, perhaps psychically blinded by some process of disavowal or denial, of the sort psychoanalysts claim to investigate?

And yet this variety of recidivism with respect to suspense fictions hardly seems to portend any psychological abnormality or pathology. It is well known that successful suspense films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark, Die Hard*, and *The Fugitive* require repeat audiences in order to be the blockbusters that they are, and it is also a fact that there are classic suspense stories, like "The Most Dangerous Game" by Richard Connell, that are often reread without diminution in their capacity to deliver a thrill. Furthermore, there are lots of classic suspense films (like *North by Northwest*), as well as TV and radio shows, that entice re-viewing and relistening.

So there is, in short, too much recidivism for it to be regarded as so pathologically abnormal that it requires psychoanalysis, unless nearly everyone is to be diagnosed. Yet, nevertheless, the phenomenon is still strange enough—indeed, some researchers even call it *anomalous suspense* (Gerrig, 1989a, 1989b, 1993)—that an account is in order of the way in which it can be rational for a reader or a viewer to feel suspense about events concerning whose outcomes the audience is certain.

To state the paradox involved here at greater length, we may begin with the assumption that, conceptually, suspense entails uncertainty. Uncertainty is a necessary condition for suspense. When uncertainty is removed from a situation, suspense evaporates. Putatively, if we come to know that the heroine will not be sawed in half, or that she will be, then we should no longer feel suspense. Moreover, if a situation lacks uncertainty altogether, no sense of suspense can intelligibly arise. It would be irrational for people to feel suspense in such contexts. And yet, apparently rational people are seized by suspense on re-encountering well-remembered films like Alfred Hitchcock's *The Thirty-Nine Steps* or novels like Tom Clancy's *Patriot Games*. Indeed, such consumers often seek out these fictions in order to experience once more that same thrill of suspense that they savored on their first encounter with the fiction. But surely, then, they must be irrational.

Of course, one might try to explain away the recidivism here by saying that with something like *The Thirty-Nine Steps*, filmgoers do not return for the suspense, but for something else—Hitchcock's cinematic artistry, the undeniable humor, the acting, the ambience, and so on. And undoubtedly, these features of the film, among others, certainly warrant reviewing. However, although we need to acknowledge that such features might reasonably motivate recidivism, it is not plausible to suppose that we can rid ourselves of the paradox of suspense by hypothesizing that every case of recidivism can be fully explained away by reference to good-making features of the fiction that have nothing to do with

suspense. For recidivism may recur not only with respect to works of substantial literary merit by people like Greene, Elmore Leonard, and Eric Ambler or works of substantial cinematic achievement by people like Hitchcock, Fritz Lang, and Carol Reed; we may also be swept into the thrall of suspense on the occasion of re-viewing a fairly pedestrian exercise like *Straw Dogs*.

In some cases, our propensity to be recaptivated by an already encountered suspense fiction may be explained by the fact that we have forgotten how it ends. This happens often. However, I do not think this can account for every case; I know it does not apply to my 49th reviewing of *King Kong*: Instead, I think that we must face the paradox head on. There are examples—I think quite a lot of examples—where the consumers of fiction find themselves in the enjoyable hold of suspense while responding to stories, read, heard, or seen previously, whose outcomes they remember with perfect clarity; in fact, quite frequently, these audiences have sought out these already familiar fictions with the express expectation that they will re-experience the pleasurable surge of consternation and thrill that they associate with suspense once again.

But how can they rationally expect to re-experience suspense if they know—and know that they know—the outcome of the fictional events that give rise to suspense? For, *ex hypothesi*, suspense requires uncertainty and I certainly know how *The Thirty-Nine Steps, This Gun for Hire*, and *King Kong* end. To put it formulaically, the paradox of suspense—which might be more accurately regarded as an instance of the paradox of recidivism[2]—may be stated in the following way:

1. If a fiction is experienced with suspense by an audience, then the outcome of the events that give rise to the suspense must be uncertain to audiences.
2. It is a fact that audiences experience fictions with suspense in cases where they have already seen, heard, or read the fictions in question.
3. But if audiences have already seen, heard, or read a fiction, then they know (and are certain) of the relevant outcomes.

Although each of the propositions in this triad seems acceptable considered in isolation, when conjoined they issue in a contradiction. In order to solve the paradox of suspense, that contradiction must be confronted. However, before we are in a position to dismantle this contradiction, we need a more fine-grained account of what is involved in suspense.

[2]What I am calling the paradox of suspense may be regarded as a subparadox in the family of paradoxes that might be titled *paradoxes of recidivism*—that is, paradoxes that involve audiences returning to fictions whose outcomes they already know—such as mystery stories and jokes as well as suspense tales—but which they enjoy nonetheless for their being twice- (or more) told tales.

A THEORY OF THE NATURE OF SUSPENSE[3]

Before proceeding further, it will be useful to be clear about our topic. First, we are talking about suspense as an emotional response to *narrative fictions*. Inasmuch as we are focusing on fictions, we are not talking about suspense with respect to "real-life" experiences, although some comments about the relation between the two will be made. Furthermore, inasmuch as we are speaking about narratives, we are not talking about so-called musical suspense.

Suspense, as I am using the term, is an emotional response to narrative fictions. Moreover, these responses can occur in reaction to two levels of fictional articulation. They can evolve in reaction to whole narratives, or in response to discrete scenes or sequences within a larger narrative whose overall structure may or may not be suspenseful. For example, the attack on Jack Ryan's home is a suspenseful episode or sequence in Tom Clancy's novel *Patriot Games*, which novel, on the whole, is suspenseful, whereas the ride of the Klan to the rescue in D. W. Griffith's film *The Birth of a Nation* is a suspenseful sequence within a work that is probably not best categorized as a suspense film.

Sometimes fictions are categorized as suspense because they contain suspenseful scenes, especially where those scenes come near the end and appear to "wrap up" the fiction. In other cases, the entire structure of a fiction appears suspenseful—not only are there suspenseful scenes, but these suspenseful episodes segue into larger, overarching suspense structures. For example, in *This Gun for Hire*, scenes in which Anne Crowder averts discovery and death are not only locally suspenseful; they also play a role in sustaining our abiding suspense across the whole fiction about whether she can stop the outbreak of war in virtue of what she knows, a prospect about which we are highly uncertain, because she confronts so many dangers, but which uncertainty is kept alive every time she eludes apprehension or, at least, destruction.

Finally, before proceeding, it needs to be emphasized that the emotion of suspense takes as its object the moments leading up to the outcome about which we are uncertain. As the frenzied horses thunder toward the precipice, pulling a wagonload of children toward death, we feel suspense: Will they be saved or not? As long as that question is vital, and the outcome is uncertain, we are in a state of suspense. Once the outcome is fixed, however, the state is no longer suspense. If the wagon hurtles over the edge, we feel sorrow and anguish; if the children are saved, we feel relief and joy.

However, suspense is not a response to the outcome; it pertains to the moments leading up to the outcome, when the outcome is uncertain. Once the outcome is finalized and we are apprised of it, the emotion of suspense gives way to other emotions. Moreover, the emotion we feel in those moments leading up to the

[3]This section represents a refinement and attempted updating of earlier essays by me that advance a theory of suspense, including Carroll (1984), and Carroll (1990).

outcome is suspense whether the outcome, once known, is the one we favored or not.

Suspense is an emotion that besets us when we are confronted with narrative fictions that focus our attention on courses of events about whose outcomes, in the standard case, we are acutely aware that we are uncertain. However, suspense fictions are not the only narrative fictions that traffic in uncertainty. So, in order to refine our conception of suspense, an instructive first step is to differentiate suspense from other forms of narrative uncertainty, of which, undoubtedly, mystery is the most obvious.

The mystery story, which engenders a sense of mystery in us, is a near relative to suspense fiction. Indeed, it seems to me that the two species are so close that some theorists often confuse them.[4] However, although they belong to the same genus—call it fictions of uncertainty—they are clearly distinct. For in mysteries in the classical detection mode, we are characteristically uncertain about what has happened in the past, whereas with suspense fictions we are uncertain about what will happen.[5]

In mysteries in the classical detective mode, our uncertainty about the past usually revolves around how a crime was committed and by whom. This is why this sort of fiction is most frequently referred to as a *whodunit*. The TV programs *Perry Mason* and *Murder, She Wrote* are perfect examples of the whodunit. To become engaged in a whodunit is to be drawn into speculation about who killed the nasty uncle, along with the related questions of how and why it was done. We conjecture about an event whose cause, although fixed, is unknown to us. Of course, the cause will be revealed in the process of the detective's analysis of the case, but of that outcome we remain uncertain until it is pronounced.

However, our uncertainty here does have a structured horizon of anticipation. The outcome about which we are uncertain has as many possible shapes as we have suspects. If the nasty uncle could have been killed by the maid, the cousin, the butler, or the egyptologist, then our uncertainty is distributed across these four possibilities. A mystery of the classical whodunit variety prompts us to ask a question about whose answer we are uncertain and about which we entertain as many possible answers as there are suspects. But suspense is different.

With suspense, the question we are prompted to ask does not have an indefinite number of possible answers, but only two. Will the heroine be sawed in half or not? Moreover, when looking at the distribution of answers available in a mystery fiction, one realizes that one has no principled guarantee that the competing answers are ultimately exclusive. After all, some or even all of the suspects can

[4]For example, I would argue that Dove (1989) mistook suspense for mystery throughout his book *Suspense in the Formula Story*, which might have been better titled *Mystery in the Formula Story*.

[5]I do not mean to preclude the possibility of fictions that mix elements of suspense and mystery hierarchically. *This Gun for Hire* is probably an example of such a mixed genre case—because, up to a certain point, there are whodunit questions about who is ultimately behind the assassination—however, in the main it seems to be a suspense novel.

be in cahoots or, as occurs in *Murder on the Orient Express*, a knave can be killed by more than one culprit. So, the classical detective story not only encourages uncertainty about an indefinitely variable number of answers to the question of whodunit, but those answers need not bear any special logical relation to each other.

However, in the case of suspense, the course of events in question can have only two outcomes, and those potential outcomes stand in relation to each other as logical contraries—either the heroine will be torn apart by the buzzsaw or she will not be. Both mystery fictions and suspense fictions confront us with questions, but the way in which those questions structure our uncertainty differentiates the two kinds of fictions. For with mystery, our uncertainty is distributed over as many possible answers as there are suspects, whereas with suspense, we are "suspended" between no more than two answers, which answers stand in binary opposition. The answers we entertain with respect to mystery fictions are, in principle, indeterminate and logically nonexclusive, whereas the answers pertinent to suspense are binary and logically opposed.

However, even if we have established that suspense proper in fictions of uncertainty takes hold only when the course of events that commands our attention is one whose horizon of expectations is structured in terms of two possible but logically incompatible outcomes, we still have not told the whole story about fictional suspense. For clearly, one can imagine fictions in which characters and readers alike confess that they simply do not know whether it will snow or not tomorrow (in the land of the story), but where, nevertheless, at the same time, there is still no question of suspense.

Of course, the reason for this is obvious, once we think in terms of "real life" suspense. For in "real life," suspense only takes charge when we care about those future outcomes about which we are uncertain. We are not inclined toward suspense about whether or not the bus will start unless we have some stake or concern in its starting or not starting. Where we are impervious to outcomes, even though the relevant outcomes are uncertain, there is no suspense, because "real life" suspense requires a certain emotional involvement with the outcome, along with uncertainty about it. Interests, concerns, or at least preferences must come into play. I feel suspense about the results of my blood test not only because I am uncertain about what they will be, but also because I have a vested interest in them.

Similarly, when it comes to fictions, suspense cannot be engendered simply by means of uncertainty; the reader must also be encouraged to form some preferences about the alternative outcomes. As Rodell (1952) put it, speaking from the author's point of view, suspense is "the art of making the reader care about what happens next" (p. 71). Moreover, as an empirical conjecture, let me hypothesize that in suspense fiction, the way in which the author typically provokes audience involvement is through morality.

"Real life" suspense requires not only uncertainty about which outcome will eventuate from a course of events; it also requires that we be concerned about

those outcomes. In constructing suspense, authors must find some way of engaging audience concern. Of course, the author has no way of knowing the personal concerns and vested interests of each and every audience member. So in order to enlist our concern, the author must find some very general interest that all or most of the audience is likely to share. One such interest is what is morally right. That is, one way in which the author can invest the audience with concern over a prospective outcome is to assure that one of the logically opposed outcomes in the fiction is morally correct as well as uncertain. In the novel *Airport* by Arthur Hailey, it is morally correct that the jetliner not be destroyed, but whether this outcome will eventuate is uncertain; similarly, in the novel *Seven Days in May* by Fletcher Knebel and Charles Bailey what is presented and perceived to be morally correct—democracy as we know and love it—is at risk.

If the emotion of suspense presupposes not only uncertainty but concern, then presumably a crucial task in constructing a suspense fiction involves finding some way in which to engage the concern of audiences, of whom the author possesses little or no personal knowledge. Nevertheless, the author is typically able to overcome this debit by resorting to morality in order to appeal to the ethical interests of viewers and readers alike. For, all things being equal, the general audience will recognize that sawing the heroine in half is morally wrong, and this will provoke concern about an outcome of the event about which they are uncertain. Likewise, in *This Gun for Hire*, it is presented and perceived that averting war is morally correct, whereas in *The Guns of Navarone* it is given and accepted that the destruction of the Nazi battery is morally right. In suspense fictions, the audience is provided, often aggressively, with a stake in one of the alternatives by having its moral sensibility drawn to prefer one of the uncertain outcomes.

In general in suspense fictions, then, one of the possible outcomes of the relevant course of events is morally correct, but uncertain. In *Patriot Games*, it is righteous that Ryan's family and the Prince and Princess of Wales survive, but when Miller and the terrorists take over Ryan's property, that survival is uncertain. Indeed, it is not merely uncertain; the odds are against it. Moreover, this is the pattern that recurs most frequently in suspense fictions from classic stories like Karl May's *In the Desert* to recent bestsellers like Robert Ludlum's *The Scorpio Illusion*. There are two competing outcomes to the relevant course of events, and one of those outcomes, although morally correct, is improbable or uncertain or unlikely, whereas the logically alternative outcome is evil but likely or probable or nearly certain. Or, to be even more precise, suspense takes control where the course of events that is the object of the emotional state points to two logically opposed outcomes, one of which is evil or immoral but probable or likely, and the other of which is moral, but improbable or unlikely or only as probable as the evil outcome.

Of course, the defeat of the moral outcome cannot be an absolutely foregone conclusion; there must be some possibility that the good can triumph. That is why there can be no suspense about whether the protagonist in the movie

Philadelphia can survive AIDS. For suspense requires that, although what is presented and perceived to be morally right be an improbable option, it must be a live option (i.e., not a completely foregone conclusion) nonetheless. And, for related reasons, in stories, where it is given in the fictional world that the hero cannot be defeated, as it is in many of the scenes in the contemporary film *Crow*, there is no suspense.

Summarizing then, as a response to fiction, generally suspense is

1. an emotional concomitant to the narration of a course of events
2. which course of events points to two logically opposed outcomes
3. whose opposition is made salient (to the point of preoccupying the audience's attention)[6] and
4. where one of the alternative outcomes is morally correct but improbable (although live) or at least no more probable than its alternative, while
5. the other outcome is morally incorrect or evil, but probable.

Surely this formula works for run-of-the-mill cases of suspense—as the heroine is inexorably pulled toward the buzzsaw, it seems hardly likely that she will live. On the other hand, the alternative outcome, her death, is evil but probable.

Perhaps one way to confirm this formulation would be to accept it provisionally as a hypothesis and to see how well it accords with our pretheoretical sorting of the data; another way might be to use it as a recipe for constructing fictions and to assess how viable it is in inducing audiences to experience suspense.

This analysis of suspense in fiction corresponds nicely with the the definition of suspense advanced by the psychologists Ortony, Clore, and Collins (1988), who stated: "We view suspense as involving a Hope emotion and a Fear emotion coupled with the cognitive state of uncertainty" (p. 131). What we hope for is the moral outcome (which is improbable or uncertain), and what we fear is the evil outcome (which is more likely).

The evil that plays such a key role in suspense fictions need not be human evil, but may be natural evil, as it is in the novel *Jaws* or the film *Earthquake*. In these cases, we still regard the destruction of human beings by brute, unthinking nature to be morally offensive. Of course, it is generally the case that suspense fictions involve pitting moral good against human moral evil: the settlers against the rustlers, the Allies against the Nazis, civilization against the barbarians.

Moreover, the reader's or spectator's moral allegiances in response to a suspense fiction do not always precisely correlate with his or her normal repertory of moral

[6]Some fictions may contain courses of events that may have rival outcomes that are uncertain but the text may make nothing of them. Thus, they do not generate suspense. The preceding condition acknowledges this possibility and, in consequence, requires that the course of events in question must be one that is made salient, that is, ones where the audience is alerted to the importance of the rivalry between alternative outcomes.

responses, and, indeed, the audience's moral responses are frequently shaped by fiction itself. For example, caper films represent persons involved in perpetrating crimes that we do not customarily consider to be upstanding ethically. However, the characters in such fictions are standardly possessed of certain striking virtues such that, in the absence of emphasis of countervailing virtues in their opposite number, or possibly given the emphasis on the outright vice of their opponents, we are encouraged to ally ourselves morally with the caper. The virtues in question here—such as strength, fortitude, ingenuity, bravery, competence, beauty, generosity, and so on—are more often than not Grecian, rather than Christian. And it is because the characters exhibit these virtues—it is because we perceive (and are led to perceive) these characters as virtuous—that we cast our moral allegiance with them.

Quite frequently in mass fictions, characters are designated as morally good in virtue of their treatment of supporting characters, especially ones who are poor, old, weak, lame, oppressed, unprotected women, children, helpless animals, and so on. Good characters typically treat such people with courtesy and respect, whereas your standard snarling villain, if he notices them at all, usually does so in order to abuse them—to harass the woman sexually, to taunt the child, to kick the dog, or worse. With respect to mass fictions, we may generalize this point by saying that the protagonists typically treat their "inferiors" with courtesy and respect, whereas the villains treat such characters with contempt and disdain, if not violence. I suspect that it is fairly obvious that when it comes to mass entertainments, there is a clear-cut rationale for investing the protagonists with democratic or egalitarian virtue, whereas the villains are painted in the colors of elitist vice.

As these conjectures suggest, it is my view that character—especially at the level of virtue—is a critical lever for guiding the audience's moral perception of the action. This is why one may find oneself morally sympathetic to characters who represent moral causes with which one usually does not align oneself—for example, one may find oneself rooting for the colonialists in *Zulu* even if one is, on the whole, anti-imperialist. Here we are drawn into the film's system of moral evaluations by its portrayal—or lack thereof—of characters with respect to virtues. That is, in many suspense fictions—involving imperialism, war, international espionage, and the like—the protagonists are represented as having some virtues, whereas their opposite number are presented either as having no virtues whatsoever or, more pointedly, only negative personal and interpersonal attributes. And in these cases, the balance of virtue is sufficient to fix our moral assessments of the situation.

If the protagonists are represented as possessed of some virtues and their opponents are less virtuous, altogether bereft of virtue, or downright vicious, suspense can take hold because the efforts of the protagonists and their allies will be recognized as morally correct in the ethical system of the film. Of course, it is probably the case that generally the actions of the protagonists are morally correct in accordance with some prevailing ethical norms that are shared by the

majority of the audience. However, in cases in which this consensus does not obtain, the protagonist's possession of saliently underlined virtues will project the moral valuations of the fiction and, indeed, incline the audience toward accepting that perspective as its own. Thus, it turns out that sometimes even an antagonist can serve as an object of suspense, as long as he or she is presented as possessed of some virtues.[7]

The emphasis that I have just placed on the relevance of the characters dovetails significantly with some recent psychological research.[8] There appears to be experimental evidence that suspense is generated in cases in which spectators or readers are said to "like" characters. However, when one looks closely at the factors that contribute to this pro-disposition toward characters on the part of spectators or readers, the most important ones seem to be moral. For example, whether the character is an antisocial recluse, a good man, or a fine individual is relevant to the spectators' or readers' registration of suspense.[9]

Some researchers are prone to discussing this relation between the characters and the spectators in terms of identification (see Brewer & Jose, 1984). But I, like others, think this is ill-advised, insofar as most often characters and spectators are cognitively and emotionally too unalike to warrant any presumption of identity—that is, we know more than Oedipus does for a large part of *Oedipus Rex* and, at the conclusion, when Oedipus is racked by guilt, we are not; we feel pity for him.[10] Thus it makes little sense to talk about identification in cases like this, which are quite frequent, and, if we can do without identification in cases like this one, economy suggests that we can probably do without it in other cases as well.

Of course, I would not say that suspense necessarily requires that we focus on characters who are presented as virtuous. Suspense may take hold when our attention is not riveted on individual characters but on movements that are perceived to be morally correct—as in the case of the socialist mass hero in films like *Potemkin*. Nevertheless, I suspect that we will find empirically that more fictions project the moral assessments relevant for suspense through the virtues of individual characters than through the rightness of social movements perceived as aggregates.

The factors that I have hypothesized that go into appreciating the morality of the outcomes in a suspense framework are broader than what would be considered

[7]This happens with the character Raven at points in *This Gun for Hire*.

[8]See, for example, Zillmann and Cantor (1977), Zillmann, Hay, and Bryant (1975), Zillmann (1980), and Comisky and Bryant (1982).

[9]See Comisky and Bryant (1982) for experimental testing along these lines. These experiments were suggested by earlier findings by Zillmann and Cantor (1977) that indicated that subjects responded positively to the euphoria of a boy character when that was subsequent to benevolent or neutral behavior on his part, whereas they responded negatively when the euphoria was subsequent to malevolent behavior by the boy.

[10]For opposition to the identification model, see Zillmann (1980), Carroll (1990), and Harding (1968); Harding's article is a development of an earlier article entitled "The Role of the Onlooker," in *Scrutiny, VI*(3), December, 1937.

matters of morality in certain ethical theories, because in my account, what constitutes the morally correct is not simply a matter of ethical purposes and efforts, but virtues, including pagan virtues, and mere opposition to natural evil. Admittedly, this is a wider conception than what many ethical philosophers would include under the rubric of "morality," but I think that it does converge on the way in which people tend to use the terms "good" and "bad" in ordinary language when they are speaking nonpractically and nonprudentially; and, furthermore, I suspect that one should predict that such an expanded, everyday conception of morality would be the one toward which suspense fictions, which aspire to popularity, would gravitate.

Suspense requires not only that consumers rate certain alternative outcomes to be moral and evil; suspense, with respect to fiction, also requires that the moral outcome be perceived to be a live but improbable outcome, or, at least, no more probable than the evil outcome, whereas the evil outcome is generally far more probable than the moral one. That is, readers, listeners, and viewers of fictions not only rate the alternative outcomes in terms of morality, but also in terms of probability. Of course, the sense of probability that I have in mind here is the probability of the outcomes prior to the moment in the fiction at which one of the alternatives is actualized, because after that moment there is no uncertainty.

Moreover, I am talking here about the probability of the event in the fictional world, or, to state it differently, the probability internal to the fiction, or what falls within the scope of the fictional operator (i.e., "It is fictional that . . ."). It is the audience's access to this internal probability (henceforth usually called just "probability") that is relevant, because from a viewpoint external to the fiction, there is no probability that King Kong will be killed because King Kong does not exist.[11]

Suspense correlates with the course of events prior to, but not including the relevant outcomes. For after one of the rival alternatives eventuates, there can be no suspense. Morever, the sense of internal improbability that possesses the audience for the duration of its experience of suspense is relative to the information provided within the scope of the fiction operator to the audience by the narrative up to and including the moments when we are gripped by suspense. This is meant to preclude the relevance of such "real-world" knowledge, as that

[11]This notion of internal probability is crucial to specifying the content of what the audience is to imagine in the course of consuming a suspense fiction. For from a point of view external to the fiction, we do not believe that the events in question have any probability. Likewise by focusing our attention on what is internal to the fiction, we do not imagine that the fiction was, for example, written by Karl May. From the external point of view, we know that *In the Desert* is by Karl May, but we do not imagine that as part of what it is to follow the story. It is not part of the story, nor should it be part of our imaginative response to the story. This is also why our knowledge that heroes almost always triumph in stories does not disturb our internal probability ratings. For it is not information that is inside the fiction operator. It is not part of the story and, hence, not something we are supposed to imagine.

the hero always wins the day, from our estimates of the probabilities of certain fictional events. Instead, we gauge the relevant probabilities relative to the information available in the story preceding and during the interlude of suspense but bracket the information available after and including the moment when one outcome emerges victorious.

The idea of probability that the spectator works with is not technical; it is not a product of deriving probability from a calculus. Rather, when the reader, listener, or spectator entertains the thought that some outcome is either internally probable or improbable, that means that he or she thinks it is likely or unlikely to occur, or that it can reasonably be expected to occur or not, given all the available information provided for the consumer by the relevant parts of the fiction. This hardly requires a consumer deriving specialized probability rankings subvocally; instead, just as I surmise immediately and tacitly that a baseball headed toward a bay window is likely to shatter it, so my estimate that, in a given fiction, it is unlikely that the detailment of the bullet train can be averted, requires no specialized calculations.

It seems to me that much of the suspense sequence in a novel or a film or whatever is preoccupied with establishing and re-emphasizing the audience's sense of the relevant probabilities of alternative lines of action. That is, it appears to be the case that with most suspense sequences we are already apprised of the moral status of the rival parties before the various episodes of suspense take hold. So, what primarily comprises those interludes—at least most frequently—is an emphasis on the relative probabilities of the competing outcomes.

In film and TV, suspense scenes are often elaborated with cross-cutting.[12] As Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen are apprehended by bandits, we cut to Superman who is struggling to resist the effects of kryptonite. This establishes the probability that evil will befall Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen and the improbability of their rescue by Superman. By the time that the bandits are mere seconds away from executing Lois and Jimmy, there is a cross-cut to Superman finally aloft, but because he is so far away, the shot re-emphasizes how unlikely it is that he will be able to save them.

Likewise, toward the end of *The Guns of Navarone*, the director, J. Lee Thompson, cuts between shots of the British rescue armada and shots of the ammunition hoist for the Nazi artillery, stopping just before the demolition charges that the Allies hope will take out the cannons. But each cut, insofar as they carry the information that the charges fail to detonate, makes it more probable in the fiction that the guns will have the opportunity to wreak havoc on the fleet once it is in range. A great deal of the work that goes into a suspense sequence—whether it is visual or verbal—depends on keeping the relative probabilities of the alternative outcomes of the relevant course of events vividly before the audience.

Certain sorts of events—including chases, escapes, and rescues, among others—are staples of popular fiction just because they so naturally accommodate suspense, possessing, by definition, logically exclusive, uncertain outcomes that

[12]Of course there are comparable narrative structures in literature as well.

can be so readily invested with moral significance. Also, suspense scenes often feature such recurring devices as time bombs. In my view, bombs attached to fizzling fuses or ticking timepieces work so well in generating suspense because, as each moment passes, time is running out on the good, and therefore evil is becoming ever more likely, even as the prospects for righteousness become more and more improbable. I would not want to diminish the importance of time bombs and chase scenes for suspense. I only urge that one be wary of reducing suspense to these devices. Rather, the serviceability of the devices themselves needs to be explained by the kind of general theory of suspense fiction that I have advanced in this section.[13]

[13]Because establishing and re-emphasizing the relative probabilities of the competing outcomes to courses of events will undoubtedly take time, the expositional duration of the event will reflect this. Thus, I would not deny that the passage of time figures in the articulation of suspense. However, I have not included it as a central ingredient, in its own right, of suspense. In this I perhaps reveal my suspicions with regard to theorists of suspense who claim that it arises as a consequence of time being "distended" or outcomes being "delayed" in the exposition of suspense scenes.

My problem here is that notions like that of temporal distension entail a contrast with something else—presumably the event represented is supposed to contrast to the duration of the event "in nature." However, with fiction, there seems to be nothing "in nature" to which we can compare the represented event.

Recently, however, there has been some psychological research that maintains that—at least in film—there is an available contrast to the representation of the event, which contrast makes talk about temporal distensions and delayed outcomes intelligible. And that contrast is the time that the audience expects the event to take in order to resolve itself. So, for example, suspense will be accentuated where the outcome of an event occurs after that point in time when the audience expected it. Researchers have not claimed that such a temporal prolongation can carry suspense by itself. Rather, they have only claimed a role for time structures in exacerbating or undercutting suspense.

This research is certainly intriguing. However, I still have some reservations. Because so many representations of events in film differ in duration from the same kind of events "in real life" (e.g., wars and the decisive battles of world history are always shorter in the movies than they are in "real life"), one wonders how audiences form expectations about how long cinematic representations of events should take. Here, it has been suggested that we form our expectations insofar as we develop norms about event lengths on the basis of the other representations in the film. But how, then, do we undergo suspense with respect to the opening scenes in a film?

I would feel more comfortable with this conjecture in general if more could be said about the computational mechanism that putatively enables us to estimate what we feel is the right amount of time, for example, for a suspenseful battle to take in a film about intergalactic revolution. Without a convincing specification of such a mechanism, I am not sure I can make much sense of what people say about their expectations concerning when fictional representations of events should (as a matter of prediction) end.

Also, we experience suspense not only while watching films, but in reading literature. It seems to me that the experience of suspense, whether seen or read, is pretty much the same. However, it is virtually unfathomable to me how people could form expectations about on what page a scene should end. Indeed, on the basis of introspection, I find it difficult to observe such expectations in me. Consequently, if the analysis of suspense in literature and the visual arts should be roughly the same, and if it seems unlikely that readers predict what they take to be the appropriate length of the exposition of events in literature, then why should we suppose that a prediction of the length of the exposition of the event is an essential ingredient in film suspense?

SOLVING THE PARADOX OF SUSPENSE

Suspense, in general, is an emotional state. It is the emotional response that one has to situations in which an outcome that concerns one is uncertain. Uncertainty and concern are necessary conditions or formal criteria for suspense. Where care and uncertainty unite in a single situation, suspense is an appropriate or fitting emotional response. That is, suspense is an intelligible response to such a situation. If I have no concern whatsoever for the outcome in question, a response in terms of suspense is unintelligible. Indeed, if I claim to be in a state of suspense about something about which I genuinely protest that I have not one jot of concern, then I sound as though I am contradicting myself; but if I believe that an outcome that I care about is uncertain, then suspense is in order.

The care and concern required for suspense are engendered in audiences of fictions by means of morality. That is, the audience is given a stake in the outcome of certain events in the fiction when the relevant outcome is presented as morally righteous, at the same time that the rival outcome is represented as evil. When the righteous outcome appears improbable, relative to the information provided in the story up to that point, suspense is a fitting or intelligible reaction.

Improbability, relative to the information available at the relevant point in the fiction, and moral righteousness are typically the standard conditions or formal criteria for suspense when it comes to fiction. Where a morally righteous outcome is imperiled to the point where it is improbable, our concern for the morally right can be transformed into suspense. For consternation at the prospect that the morally correct is in danger or that the good is at risk is an appropriate or fitting response. That is, just as fear is an appropriate response to the prospect of harm, suspense is an appropriate response to a situation in which the morally good is imperiled or at risk.

Of course, when we say that fear is an appropriate response to the prospect of harm, we do not thereby predict that everyone will feel fear when confronting what is harmful. After all, bungee jumpers, lion tamers, and mountain climbers do exist. Nevertheless, it is always intelligible to feel fear in the presence of the harmful, and it is always intelligible to feel suspense when we perceive the good to be imperiled.

When we feel suspense with regard to our own projects and prospects, it is because we believe that some outcome about which we care—say winning at bingo—is not certain. Here, the cognitive component of our mental state is a belief. We believe that it is uncertain or improbable that we shall win at bingo. But when it comes to fictions, we need to modify our conception of the cognitive

On the other hand, if these sorts of worries can be allayed, perhaps I shall have to grant that time plays a more integral role in the generation of suspense than I have acknowledged heretofore.

For interesting research on this topic that favors the conclusion that time is an integral element of suspense, see de Wied (1991).

component of our emotional states; since my anger at Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* cannot be based on my belief that he is an unjust person, because I do not believe that there is someone, Leontes, such that he is an unjust person. Leontes is a fictional character, and I know it.

However, it is not the case that the only mental state that can do the requisite cognitive work when it comes to emotion is belief. Emotions may be rooted in thoughts as well as beliefs.[14] What is the difference? If we describe believing *p* as a matter of holding a proposition in the mind as asserted, then thinking *p*, in contrast, is a matter of entertaining a proposition in the mind unasserted, as one does when I say "Suppose I am Charles the Bald."

Furthermore, one can engender emotional states by holding propositions before the mind unasserted. Thus, when I stand near the edge of the roof of a high building and I entertain the thought that I am losing my footing, I can make myself feel a surge of vertigo. I need not believe that I am losing my footing; I merely entertain the thought. And the thought, or the propositional content of the thought (that I am losing my footing), can be sufficient for playing a role in causing the chill of fear in my bloodstream. For emotions may rest on thoughts, and not merely on beliefs.

Fictions, moreover, are readily conceived to be stories that authors intend readers, listeners, and viewers to imagine. Indeed, fictions are the sorts of communication where the author intends the consumer to recognize the authorial intention that the consumer imagine the story. That is, in making fictions, the author is intentionally presenting consumers with situations that they are meant to entertain in thought. The author, in presenting his or her novel as fiction, in effect, says to readers "hold these propositions before your mind unasserted"—that is, "suppose *p*," or "entertain *p* unasserted," or "contemplate *p* as a supposition" (Scruton, 1972).

Furthermore, insofar as thoughts, as distinct from beliefs, can support emotional responses, we may have emotional responses to fictions concerning situations that we believe do not exist. For we can imagine or suppose that they exist, and entertaining the propositional content of the relevant thoughts can figure in the etiology of an emotional state.

Needless to say, in maintaining that the imagination of the consumer of fiction is engaged here I do not mean to suggest that the activity is free or unbounded. The consumer's imaginative activity is, of course, guided by the object—by the fiction in question. That object—the fiction—has certain properties. Specifically, it presents certain situations as having certain properties (in terms of morality and internal probability) which properties, given the psychology of normal consumers, induces certain emotional responses or, as Hume might have it, sentiments in us.

That is, I maintain that the fictions in question can be identified as suspenseful in terms of features of the fiction (such as the logical exclusivity of outcomes,

[14]For further arguments on behalf of this contention, see Greenspan (1988).

and their morality and internal probability ratings) that we can specify independently of the responses they induce in a regular fashion in consumers of fiction. These features are naturally suited to raise the affect of suspense in us. The extension of what counts as being suspenseful in fiction is, then, codetermined by the normal (as opposed to the ideal) appreciator's tendency to respond with feelings of suspense and the independently characterizable structural features of suspense fictions adumbrated earlier.[15] In the relevant cases, the appreciator's attention must be focused on those structural features of the the fiction, and his or her imagination is guided or controlled by them. In such cases, the thoughts that he or she is prompted to entertain as unasserted by what is in the fiction (as opposed to whatever passing fancies fleetingly strike her) will raise appropriate feelings of suspense.

Nor should it seem bizarre that thinking various thoughts, in addition to having certain beliefs, should figure in the generation of emotional states. For from an evolutionary perspective, it is certainly a distinctive advantage that humans have the capacity to be moved by thinking *p* as well as by believing *p*, because this capacity enables humans to be educated about all kinds of dangers that may come to pass in the future, but that do not exist and do not confront us in the here and now. The imagination is surely an asset from the Darwinian point of view; it provides a way in which not only cognition but the emotions, as well, can be prepared for situations that have not yet arisen. Adolescents vicariously learn about love and parental responsibility by imagining these things, and these acts of imagination serve to educate their feelings.

Certain emotions are cognitively impenetrable, and this impenetrability can be explained in terms of the adaptive advantages it bestows on the organism. Adopting the role of armchair evolutionary biologists, perhaps we can speculate that, in the case of many emotions, they can be induced by mere thoughts and thereby are insulated from exclusive causal dependency on particular beliefs, because of the overall adaptive advantage this delivers to humans in terms of educating the emotions in the response to situations and situation types not already at hand.

However, be that as it may, suspense fictions present audiences with situations that we are to imagine. For example, we entertain (unasserted) the thoughts that the train is about to derail with the much-needed medical supplies and that this outcome is all but unavoidable. Because we entertain this thought as unasserted, we do not call the police to alert them. Nevertheless, this thinking does help generate the affect of suspense in us. And this affect, in the case under discussion, is appropriate, fitting, and intelligible. For it is always intelligible that we feel consternation when we entertain the supposition that the good—something that is morally correct—is threatened or is unlikely to come to pass.

[15] I am indebted to Dong-Ryul Choo for pointing out some of the realistic commitments of my theory of suspense. He develops his insights in his *How to be an Aesthetic Realist*, a doctoral dissertation in progress at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

What does all this have to do with the paradox of suspense? According to the paradox, if a fiction is experienced by readers, listeners, or viewers as suspense, then the outcome of the events that give rise to suspense must be uncertain to said listeners, readers, and viewers. On the other hand, it seems that it is simply a fact that audiences experience suspense in reaction to fictions they have already seen, heard, or read. But how is that possible, since if they've already seen, heard, or read the fiction, then they know how the fiction ends—that is, they know the relevant outcome—and, therefore, they cannot believe, for example, that the righteous alternative is uncertain? This contradicts the earlier presumption that audiences gripped by suspense must be uncertain of the outcome.

However, if what has been claimed about the emotions in general, and the emotion of suspense in particular, is right, perhaps there is a way out of this conundrum. A presupposition of the paradox is that the response of suspense on the part of audiences requires that they be uncertain of the relevant outcomes. I understand this to mean that the audiences must *believe* that the relevant outcomes are uncertain or uncertain to them. For example, they must believe that the relevant moral outcome is improbable. Yet the audience cannot believe this if they actually know the relevant outcomes already, because they have encountered the fiction in question beforehand.

But notice that the problem here resides in the assumption that suspense would only take hold if the audience believes the outcome is uncertain. But why suppose this? The audience may not believe that the relevant outcome is uncertain or improbable but, nevertheless, the audience may entertain the thought that the relevant outcome is uncertain or improbable. That is, even though we know otherwise, we may entertain (as unasserted) the proposition that a certain morally good outcome is uncertain or improbable. If an emotional response can rest on a thought, then there is no reason to remain mystified about the way in which audiences can be seized by suspense even though they know how everything will turn out.

For they are entertaining the thought that the morally correct outcome is improbable relative to the information within the scope of the fiction operator that is available up to the relevant point in the fiction. That is, the paradox of suspense disappears once we recall that emotions may be generated on the basis of thoughts, rather than only on the basis of beliefs. Indeed, emotions may be generated in the course of entertaining thoughts that are at variance with our beliefs.

Nor is the recidivist reader, listener, or viewer of suspense fictions irrational or perverse in any way. For in contemplating the proposition unasserted—that the heroine in all probability is likely to be killed—the recidivist, despite what he or she knows about the last-minute rescue, recognizes a situation in which the good is unlikely, and it is always appropriate or intelligible to undergo consternation in reaction to even the thought of such a prospect.

In terms of the way in which I set forth the paradox of suspense in the opening section of this chapter, the strategy that I have just employed to dissolve the

paradox involves denying its first premise, viz., that if a fiction is experienced with suspense by an audience, then the outcome of the events that give rise to suspense must be uncertain to the audience. This seems to me to be the best way to dispose of the contradiction.[16]

Competing proposals might suggest that we reconsider the second proposition in our inconsistent triad, to wit: It is a fact that audiences experience fictions with suspense in cases where they have already seen, heard, or read the fictions in question. The motivation for this seems to be a theoretical conviction that it is just impossible to undergo suspense when one knows how a fiction will end—impossible, that is, for anyone who holds the first and the last propositions in the paradox. But here it seems to me that theory is recasting reality in its own image; for it appears obvious that people do re-experience suspense with certain fictions with which they are already familiar. As I noted earlier, the existence of blockbuster movies like *The Fugitive* and *Jurassic Park* depends on recidivists for their astronomical success; it is the people who go back to see the films from 6 to 16 to 60 times who turn these films into box office legends.

Perhaps a more popular route in negotiating the paradox of suspense is to deny the last proposition in the triad—if audiences have already seen, heard, or

[16]As I understand him, Kendall Walton makes a similar move in dissolving the paradox of suspense. He draws a distinction between what one knows to be fictional and what is fictional that one knows. Thus, if I have already seen *The Guns of Navarone*, then I know it to be fictional that the artillery is destroyed; but as I watch the film a second time and play my game of make-believe, I make believe that I am uncertain about whether the guns will be destroyed, or, to put it differently, it is fictional that I am uncertain about whether the guns will be destroyed (in my occurrent game of make-believe).

However, I think that my characterization of the mental state in terms of imagination is superior to Walton's discussion in terms of make-believe, because Walton's games of make-believe seem to require so much more activity than mere imagination. For in some games of make-believe, Lauren is paralyzed by her fear for Jack in the Beanstalk, whereas in others, it is fictional that she is hit by the gravity of the situation of Jack's theft of the goose that lays the golden egg, or, yet again, fictionally she is emotionally exhausted when Jack defeats the giant. Playing games of make-believe in Walton's examples seems to involve readers in playing roles or acting. Playing games of make-believe involves more than merely imagining *p*—merely entertaining the proposition *p* unasserted. Thus, solving the paradox of suspense in terms of imagination seems more economical than talking about make-believe.

Although Walton sometimes speaks of make-believe as imagination, when he gives examples of what he has in mind, it seems far more structurally complex than mere imagining. Consequently, I maintain that my solution to the paradox of suspense is more economical than Walton's, because all I require is a notion of the imagination that we are already willing to endorse outside the context of fiction, whereas Walton employs the more complicated machinery of make-believe or fictional games, which even if called the imagination is really an elaborate version thereof. For a discussion of the relevant examples, see Walton (1990).

Moreover, Walton's overall argument for the efficacy of his concept of make-believe is indirect. He advances his case by showing that his own approach solves more puzzles—such as the paradox of suspense—than do contending approaches. Thus, if the solution offered here by me is superior to Walton's, then one of the major struts supporting Walton's theory is undermined. For pressure on some of the other struts, see Carroll (1990).

read a fiction, then they know (and are certain) of the relevant outcomes. One way to do this is to postulate that when confronting fictions, audiences are induced into a special sort of psychological state that might be described in terms of self-deception, denial, or disavowal. This way of dealing with the paradox accepts the phenomenon of anomalous or recidivist suspense as contradictory and then postulates disavowal as a psychological mechanism that enables us to live with the contradiction—it is a mechanism that suffers mental states during which one both knows and does not know by repressing the former. Thus, the disavowal account resolves the paradox (or contradiction) of recidivist suspense by portraying the audience as irrational.

Psychoanalytic theorists are particularly prone to this mode of explanation, because they believe that people are extremely susceptible to disavowal anyway. For example, male fetishists—of whom (if psychoanalytic film theorist Laura Mulvey, 1989, is correct) there are more than you might expect—are said to be involved pervasively in the disavowal of their knowledge that women lack penises, because that knowlege would stir up male anxieties about castration.

Yet if there is some comparable process of disavowal in operation when audiences consume fictions, then this sort of explanation requires, it seems to me, a parallel motivation for our denial or disavowal of our knowledge of the outcomes of fictions. That is, why would we be compelled to disavow our knowledge of the end of a story? It is hard to imagine generalizable answers to that question.

Recently, a nonpsychoanalytic explanation of anomalous suspense, which also appears to undermine the supposition that recidivist audiences in suspense contexts unequivocably know the relevant outcomes, was advanced by Gerrig (1993). He wrote:

> What I wish to suggest, in fact, is that anomalous suspense arises not because of some special strategic activity but rather as a natural consequence of the structure of cognitive processing. Specifically, I propose that readers experience anomalous suspense because an expectation of uniqueness is incorporated within the cognitive processes that guide the expectations of narratives. . . . My suggestion is that anomalous suspense arises because our experience of narratives incorporates the strong likelihood that we never repeat a game. Note that this expectation of uniqueness need not be conscious. My claim is that our moment-by-moment processes evolve in response to the brute fact of nonrepetition. (pp. 170–171)

For Gerrig, we are possessed of a uniqueness heuristic, which evolved under the pressure to secure fast, optimal strategies rather than massively time-consuming, rational strategies of information processing; the fact that we can undergo the experience of anomalous suspense is simply a surprising consequence or a kind of peripheral fallout from one of the optimizing heuristics that we have evolved. Gerrig sees this heuristic as an expectation of uniqueness that resides in the cognitive architecture linking inputs to outputs.

In some ways, Gerrig's resolution of the problem of anomalous or recidivist suspense is more palatable than what the disavowal model promises. However,

it must be noted that Gerrig's approach still does render recidivists irrational, even if in the long run they are victims of a higher rationality (a.k.a. optimality). And this seems to me to be a problem.

Recidivist readers, listeners, and viewers of suspense fictions very frequently re-encounter fictions with the express expectation of re-experiencing the thrill they experienced on earlier encounters. They remember the thrill, and they remember the story, too. Gerrig seems to argue that their cognitive processing of the story the second or 60th time around is insulated from that knowledge. This seems to me to be highly unlikely.

Think of a relatively simple version of the game show *Concentration* in which there are so few squares that it is very easy to hold all the matching pairs and the image fragments and the saying that solves the rebus in mind after the game is over. Run the game several more times. Quickly, I predict, it will become boring. But how can it become boring if we have this uniqueness heuristic? On the other hand, one can sit through several showings of a suspense film like *The Terminator* and never become bored before one is thrown out of the theater. But if it is a uniqueness heuristic that explains anomalous suspense, shouldn't it also predict equal staying power in the *Concentration* example? But that seems hardly compelling.

Suspense recidivists are perfectly normal, and not for the reason that they, like everyone else with the same cognitive architecture, diverge from the canons of strict rationality for the sake of optimality. Rather, it is because it is perfectly intelligible that people respond to suspenseful situations in fictions with consternation, because not only beliefs, but also thoughts can give rise to emotions. Indeed, thoughts that are at variance with a person's beliefs can give rise to emotions. Thus, effectively asked to imagine—that is, to entertain the thought—that the good is at risk by the author of a fiction, the reader appropriately and intelligibly feels concern and suspense.

In this case, we focus our attention on the relevant, available information in the story up to and for the duration of the interlude in which suspense dominates. That we may not use our knowledge of earlier encounters with the fiction to drive away our feelings of suspense here is no more irrational than the fact that our knowledge of entertainment conventions or regularities, such as that the hero almost always prevails, does not compromise our feelings of suspense on a first encounter with a fiction, because our attention is riveted, within the scope of the fiction operator, to the unfolding of the story on a moment-to-moment basis. And so focused, our mind fills with the thought that the good is in peril, a prospect always in principle rationally worthy of emotional exercise.

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