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The Psychology of Suspense in Dramatic Exposition

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In this chapter, I focus on cinematic suspense as a phenomenon that defines a most popular genre of contemporary media entertainment and that permeates numerous other entertaining endeavors. I explore the informational structure of suspenseful drama and examine the cognitive and affective reactions to the information flow in such drama. I investigate affective dispositions toward entities in drama as a result of unfolding events, but also as a consequence of traits that respondents bring to the screen. I also probe the consequences for euphoric and dysphoric reactions of these dispositional factors.

After analyzing suspense in conceptual terms, I specify its unique evocative and experiential characteristics. I concentrate on different strategies of informational layout, as well as on cerebral and emotional aspects of elicited experience and, in particular, its appraisal as joyful. In all of this, I proceed from an intuitive analysis to formal psychological and psychophysiological theory. I consider various theoretical approaches and then pursue those best supported by pertinent research findings.

CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SUSPENSE IN DRAMA

According to dictionary definitions, the suspense concept has at least three shades of meaning. Common usage of the term is said to reflect (a) a state of uncertainty in the sense of doubtfulness and indecision, (b) a state of anxietylike uncertainty, and (c) a state of pleasant excitement about an expected event. In other words,

suspense is seen as an experience of uncertainty whose hedonic properties can vary from noxious to pleasant. The experience of uncertainty, moreover, is thought to apply to all anticipated social events and environmental happenings considered likely to upset or gratify. Who instigates these events or happenings, the uncertain persons themselves or others, appears to be immaterial in this conceptualization.

The usefulness of such broad definitions for the consideration of suspense in drama specifically, particularly of the enjoyment that the experience of suspense can foster in its wake, is very limited. To obtain a workable definition, it would seem desirable to exclude, first of all, decisional conflict about outcomes that persons are able to influence by their own action, and to restrict the concept to anticipations of events that are merely witnessed. In suspenseful drama, outcomes lie, after all, outside the respondents' control, and the notion of indecision simply does not meaningfully apply to the consumption of fixed narrative.

More importantly, however, the view that uncertainty can assume any conceivable hedonic valence is troublesome. Uncertainty about a future event is obviously the more pronounced the closer the subjective probability of the event's occurrence is to that of its nonoccurrence. Uncertainty is thus at a maximum when the odds for a desired or a feared outcome are 50–50. In the face of such even odds, the experience of uncertainty about a desired outcome should prove noxious because of the relatively high perceived likelihood that the outcome will not materialize. By the same token, the experience of such uncertainty about a feared outcome should prove noxious because of the relatively high perceived likelihood that the feared event will occur. In short, uncertainty at high levels is unlikely to be hedonically neutral or positive. It tends to produce decidedly noxious states (Berlyne, 1960; Zillmann & Zillmann, in press).

The fact that the experience of suspense, in and of itself, has been considered a pleasant one indicates that, in conceptualizing suspense, the experiential properties of uncertainty have been poorly understood. There is no impetus for euphoria in uncertainty per se. Pleasant excitement, it would seem, can result only from the anticipation of desired outcomes when this anticipation is not tempered by a substantial likelihood of alternative, undesirable outcomes. In other words, uncertainty about favorable happenings is likely to be pleasantly experienced only when this uncertainty is negligible. Uncertainty, then, especially at high levels, is unlikely to evoke joyful reactions. Its removal might. However, as it turns out, the concept of uncertainty is altogether less critical to the experience of suspense than its popular definition suggests and many writers pondering suspense have presumed. We return to this issue as I examine the suspense concept for drama specifically.

If general definitions of suspense fail us, so do most that have been provided by scholars struggling with suspenseful narrative as such. Rabkin (1973), for instance, equated suspense with curiosity in proposing that anything that motivates continued interest in a story constitutes a suspenseful element. Barthes (1977) furnished the following opaque elaboration: "Suspense . . . is a game with

structure, designed to endanger and glorify it, constituting a veritable 'thrilling' of intelligibility: by representing order . . . in its fragility, 'suspense' accomplishes the very idea of language" (p. 119). Uncounted similar and equally esoteric assessments seem to mystify the suspense phenomenon rather than elucidate it.

Fortunately, there also exist definitions that highlight aspects of drama that seem critically involved in the creation of suspense. A most useful definition of this kind was offered by Carroll (1990): "Suspense in popular fiction is (a) an affective or emotional concomitant of a narrative answering scene or event which (b) has two logically opposed outcomes such that (c) one is morally correct but unlikely and the other is evil and likely" (p. 138). Although this definition does not specify how and why entities (b) and (c) have an emotional concomitant, we accept it as a guide. I clarify the various definitional elements in terms of our conceptualization of suspense, and I explain how and why particular conditions of information flow generate affect and bring about the experience of suspense.

Expositional Properties of Suspense in Drama

I should reiterate that, in suspenseful drama, respondents are witnesses to events involving others, and that the respondents are neither directly threatened nor directly benefited by the witnessed events. Whatever mechanism is presumed to mediate the respondents' affective reactions, suspense can manifest itself only through the anticipation of outcomes that either endanger or benefit others (i.e., protagonists or other members of the cast). It may prove useful, in addition, to be cognizant of further unique and seemingly universal restrictions that apply to the experience of suspense in drama:

1. Drama must preoccupy itself with negative outcomes.
2. Liked protagonists who are deserving of good fortunes must be selected as targets for negative outcomes in order to make these outcomes feared and dreaded by the respondents.
3. High degrees of subjective certainty (rather than uncertainty) about the occurrence of outcomes that threaten liked protagonists must be created in the respondents.

Apprehensions About Harm and Doom. It is generally accepted that *conflict*, especially human conflict, constitutes the very essence of drama (Marx, 1940; Smiley, 1971). The clash of two or more antagonistic forces is viewed as a basic, necessary condition for drama. Any and every dramatic situation is said to arise from such conflict, and it is explicated or implied that drama cannot exist without the display of conflicts and crises in one form or another. Suspense in drama, in turn, has been viewed as the experience of apprehension about the resolution of conflicts and crises (Carroll, 1984, 1990).

This experience of apprehension can derive, in principle, from (a) the fear that a favored outcome may not be forthcoming, (b) the fear that a deplorable outcome may be forthcoming, (c) the hope that a favored outcome will be forthcoming, (d) the hope that a deplorable outcome will not be forthcoming, and (e) any possible combination of these hopes and fears. It has been shown that the fears and hopes in question are largely a function of respondents' affective dispositions toward the antagonistic parties (Zillmann, 1983a; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994; Zillmann, Bryant, & Sapolsky, 1989; Zillmann & Cantor, 1976).

The indicated disposition-theoretical considerations lead to the expectations that: (a) respondents will hope for outcomes that are favorable for liked and deserving protagonists and deplorable for disliked and undeserving ones; and that (b) respondents will fear outcomes that are deplorable for liked and deserving protagonists and favorable for disliked and undeserving ones. With hopes and fears thus confounded, the question arises as to whether suspenseful drama thrives on hopes or on fears.

The issue can be construed in two ways. First, favorable and deplorable outcomes can be thought of as entirely interdependent. A sympathetic protagonist may be up against a hostile environment, for example, and respondents are placed in suspense by watching him face a thousand dangers as he struggles through savage swamps toward safety. The respondents' affective reactions to these events could be regarded as mediated by the fear that the protagonist will be injured or killed. However, they could equally well be considered to result from the hope for the protagonist's welfare. It could be argued that if respondents had no such hopes, they would not have the fear that things might go wrong—that is, the very fear that presumably produces the gripping experience of suspense. This reasoning suggests that hopes and fears are inseparably intertwined in the apprehensions that produce suspense. In fact, the conceptual separation of hopes and fears would seem to be pointless because the two concepts appear to constitute two alternative ways of describing the same phenomenon of apprehension about an outcome.

Second, and in contrast, outcomes can be thought of as events that cause experiences that are hedonically classifiable as either negative or positive. Outcomes can be noxious or pleasant to protagonists, and they can assume the one or the other hedonic valence to different degrees. Death, mutilation, torture, injury, and social debasement can be categorized as negative outcomes, whereas gain of money, glory, and privileges can be classified as positive ones. Essentially, the distinction is between outcomes that constitute annoyances and outcomes that constitute incentives.

If outcomes are conceptualized in these terms, it becomes clear that suspense in drama is predominantly created through the suggestion of negative outcomes. As in the man vs. swamps example, protagonists often fight for dear life. Although some glory may be attached to sheer survival and the avoidance of injury, the provision of incentives is obviously not a necessary condition for the experience

of suspense. Generally speaking, the attainment of incentives in suspenseful drama is secondary to the creation of apprehensions about deplorable, dreaded outcomes. Suspenseful drama consequently features events such as bombs about to explode, dams about to burst, ceilings about to cave in, ocean liners about to sink, and fires about to rage. It features people about to be jumped and stabbed, about to walk into an ambush and get shot, and about to be bitten by snakes, tarantulas, and mad dogs. The common denominator in all of this is the likely suffering of the protagonists. It is impending disaster manifest in anticipated agony, pain, injury, and death. Suspenseful drama, then, appears to thrive on uneasiness and distress about anticipated negative outcomes. Put more directly, it thrives on fear—on empathic fear, to be precise.

Apprehensions About Losing Out on Good Fortunes. This is not to say that suspense cannot be built on the anticipation of good fortunes. As the popularity of television game shows attest, people can be thrilled with uncertainty about grand prizes hidden behind curtains and in chests. This treasure-hunt type of suspense appears to derive in large measure from the expectation of great rewards. The contestants in such games are obviously not placed at risk. The only misfortune that can befall them is the lack of good fortune. Oddly, it is conceivable that the very possibility of losing (i.e., the fear of not winning) is what produces the experience of suspense in these respondents. At any rate, even a cursory inspection of suspenseful drama should suffice in convincing anyone that suspense is characteristically generated through the creation of apprehensions about bad fortunes rather than good ones. In order to be truly suspenseful, drama must show more than the respondents' likely failure to gain incentives. Something more than not winning must be at stake. A car race, for example, devoid of threats and dangers, without risks to the liked protagonist, and with prizes and glory for all, not only would be uncharacteristic of suspenseful drama, it also would fail to induce suspense reactions of appreciable magnitude. The successful creation of the gripping experience of suspense apparently depends on the display of *credible endangerments*. The audience must think it likely, for example, that the protagonist's car will skid on the oil slick, that a wheel will come off, that the motor will catch on fire, or that the driver will fly out of the curve and tumble down the mountain.

In summary, suspenseful drama relies heavily on the exhibition of threats and dangers to protagonists. The information flow is designed, primarily, to evoke apprehensions about decidedly noxious experiences the protagonists are about to undergo. Although suspense can be generated through the anticipation of favorable, pleasing outcomes, this technique of suspense induction is uncharacteristic, even alien, to suspenseful drama as such. It should be recognized, however, that in suspenseful drama the primary technique of suspense induction, namely the creation of apprehensions about deplorable outcomes, is often confounded with the creation of the anticipation of favorable outcomes as a secondary technique (Zillmann, Johnson, & Hanrahan, 1973).

Dispositions Toward Protagonists and Antagonists. It has been stated already that the respondents' hopes and fears regarding likely events that would affect the welfare of protagonists are dispositionally mediated. Research evidence (Zillmann & Cantor, 1977) indicates that (a) a positive outcome is enjoyed when the protagonist whom it benefits is liked or, at least, not disliked. In sharp contrast, (b) a positive outcome that benefits a disliked protagonist is deplored. The inverse applies to negative outcomes: (c) a negative outcome is deplored when the protagonist whom it victimizes is liked or, at least, not disliked; and (d) a negative outcome that victimizes a disliked protagonist, again in sharp contrast, is enjoyed. Note that what I refer to as disliked protagonist is commonly defined as antagonist.

If it is assumed that these affective reactions are precipitated by hopes for and fears about certain outcomes, it follows that the hopes and fears regarding the same events will be totally different for liked and disliked protagonists. Whereas liked protagonists are considered deserving of positive outcomes, the very possibility of disliked protagonists' benefaction becomes deplorable and distressing. Even more important for suspenseful drama, whereas liked protagonists are regarded as undeserving of negative outcomes, the impending victimization of disliked protagonists is usually not only not deplored, but very much enjoyed. After all, disliked protagonists—typically mean, obnoxious, and evil antagonists who demean and torment others—are merely getting their just deserts (Zillmann & Bryant, 1975).

Obvious as the dispositional mediation of suspense may seem, it is not generally recognized. Smiley (1971), for instance, insisted that "suspense *automatically* occurs during all crises" (p. 68, italics added). Expressed in dramaturgical nomenclature, he proposed that any "hint" that (a) two identified, opposing forces will fight, and that (b) the one or the other party will win, produces the experience of suspense in the "wait" (i.e., the period of time in which the fighting is about to erupt or is in progress) for the "climax" that comes with the resolution of the conflict.

Smiley's automatic suspense reaction is not only at variance with what is known about the dispositional mediation of affective reactions, but is noncompelling intuitively. In the case where two intensely disliked parties fight to the finish, for example, onlookers are likely to be utterly indifferent about, rather than fearful of, any particular outcome. In the case where a resented agent is about to walk into an ambush set by liked protagonists, the only source of suspense appears to be the possibility that something could go wrong with the hoped-for destruction of the villain. Not surprisingly, then, suspense in drama favors the projection of negative, feared outcomes for beloved protagonists—not the projection of such outcomes for just any member of the cast.

Moral Considerations. Our treatment of disposition, it should be noticed, entails elements of justice and morality. The assumption that liked characters are judged to be undeserving of bad fortunes, whereas disliked characters are judged

to be deserving of them, accords with moral considerations. So does the complementary assumption that liked characters are judged to be deserving of good fortunes, whereas disliked characters are judged to be undeserving of them. It seems that liked characters are always moral and good and disliked characters are always immoral and evil. It would be premature, however, to conclude that moral judgment follows disposition. The opposite is more likely: As characters do things that respondents deem moral, a favorable affective disposition toward them is formed; and as characters do things that respondents deem immoral, an unfavorable affective disposition toward them is formed. The disposition then mediates the moral judgment of subsequent actions and events (Jose & Brewer, 1984; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977).

Carroll (1984, 1990) emphasized the role of moral considerations in the creation of suspense. He argued, essentially, that respondents hope for morally correct outcomes and fear evil ones. To the extent that morally correct outcomes translate to benefaction of protagonists and evil outcomes to their calamity, this accords with our dispositional conceptualization. However, Carroll granted fiction sole responsibility for the moral judgment of events in drama. Morality is seen "in terms of the values inherent in the fiction" (Carroll, 1990, p. 138). Here our conceptualization differs. We recognize that the moral judgment of respondents is highly personal and varies considerably (Kohlberg, 1964), and that respondents bring their own, unique moral considerations to fiction—considerations capable of overwhelming the morality built into narratives.

It might be argued that, for all practical purposes, fictional morality and the respondents' moral judgment coincide, and that consideration of personal morality is an unnecessary complication. This may well hold true for drama that paints characters morally in black and white. Not all drama takes this form, however, and complex characterizations are bound to foster divergent reactions in respondents who see things different morally. Consider a film that features a woman who has been repeatedly stalked by her estranged abusive husband, and who fears for her life as he confronts her again. Women who have suffered similar abuse might find it morally correct to see the abuser shot dead. Men who have abused their spouses are unlikely to see it that way. They might show little sympathy for the woman's plight, experience little if any suspense when seeing her in a state of panic, and consider her defensive action a heinous crime—suggesting that the outcome was "morally incorrect" for them.

This is to make the point that in suspenseful drama, the morality of an outcome is a function of the respondents' potentially idiosyncratic moral judgment. It is not inherent in fiction. At best, fiction can anticipate the pertinent moral considerations of the large majority of respondents and express itself in terms of these presumed considerations.

The conceptualization of subjective affective dispositions toward characters, in part the result of subjective moral considerations, thus appears to be more useful in explaining suspense. On the other hand, it might be considered limiting

because of its focus on people, and because it seems to require the anthropomorphization of nonhuman entities in drama. Both impressions are erroneous, however. Affective dispositions are not limited to persons. We obviously hold them toward spiders, snakes, dogs, and racehorses. Nothing needs to be anthropomorphized as we witness, for instance, a lion chase an impala. Those who detest seeing a brutal kill, for moral or other reasons, may find themselves in suspense, fearing the worst, and rejoicing when the impala gets away. Those with the mentality of a hunter may experience suspense only because the impala might escape unscathed. This example illustrates that liking and disliking need not be based on moral judgment. Respondents may morally accept predation for what it is, but still shiver as the disliked lion gains ground on the liked impala.

Affective dispositions, then, are by no means limited to human targets. They can be held toward any agent or event capable of inducing emotions. However, in suspenseful drama such agents or events tend to assume significant roles only to the extent that they can function as protagonists or antagonistic forces. A lightning-sparked inferno, for instance, can be antagonistic to a group of protagonists. Although events of this kind may be interpreted in moral terms, post facto, it appears that suspense can manifest itself on the basis of entities in conflict toward whom or toward which affective dispositions exist that are not the result of moral reasoning.

Subjective Certainty of Apprehensions. It has been suggested already that maximal uncertainty associated with feared outcomes does not necessarily constitute the point of maximal suspense. In fact, it seems quite unlikely that the degree of uncertainty about outcomes and the intensity of the experience of suspense vary proportionally. One would expect, for instance, that witnessing the endangerment of an intensely liked protagonist produces less fearful apprehensions, and thus less suspense, when the odds for her safety are perceived to be 50–50 rather than, say, 25–75. It would appear that suspense will be more intensely experienced the greater the respondents' *subjective certainty* that the liked protagonist will succumb, this time, to the destructive forces against which she is struggling.[1] Carroll's (1990) earlier cited definition echoes this proposal: Suspense is seen to be pronounced when an evil outcome is deemed likely—and its good fortune alternative unlikely.

However, although even odds (i.e., maximal uncertainty) may indeed constitute a condition of rather moderate endangerment, total subjective certainty about the liked protagonist's forthcoming victimization does not, in all probability, produce maximal suspense. It may be argued that as soon as respondents are confident that

[1]The implications of subjective uncertainty, as projected here, are specific to the experience of suspense and the enjoyment of suspenseful drama. Subjective uncertainty about outcomes has entirely different consequences for the enjoyment of mystery. The genre differences between suspense and mystery have been detailed by Zillmann (1990, 1991b). A similar but somewhat sketchy account was provided by Carroll (1990).

a feared outcome is indeed forthcoming, they are no longer in suspense. The respondents may, at this point, start to experience disappointment and sadness. There is reason to believe that certainty about a forthcoming deplorable event will serve a preparatory appraisal function, which protects against overly intense noxious arousal in response to the depiction of the event once it materializes (Leventhal, 1979). Subjective certainty about a deplorable outcome not only seems to terminate the experience of suspense, it also may be expected to minimize the emotional impact of tragic happenings. According to these considerations, then, uncertainty is a necessary condition for suspense, but the experience of suspense will be more intense the greater the onlookers' subjective certainty that a deplorable outcome will indeed befall a liked protagonist. However, as extreme levels of certainty are reached and the outcome is no longer in doubt, the experience of suspense vanishes and gives way to more definite dysphoric reactions.

This proposal concerning the relationship between subjective uncertainty and the experience of suspense has been validated experimentally. The intensity of suspense increased with ascending levels of certainty, as proposed, up to a maximum just prior to total certainty (Comisky, 1978; Comisky & Bryant, 1982).

Episodic Suspense. It might be argued that most popular dramatic fare is incapable of producing intense experiences of suspense because liked protagonists are hardly ever credibly endangered. In television drama series, with recurrent characters and formats, it is clear from the outset that the main protagonists will survive all conflicts in which they are engaged. The situation is not all that different for the movies. Usually there are cues that permit respondents to infer, with considerable certainty, which parties will be victorious in the end. Fearful apprehensions about deplorable outcomes may seem groundless under these circumstances.

The *macrostructure* of drama, the overall plot or theme (Marx, 1940) that terminates with the ultimate resolution of a dramatic presentation, may indeed contribute little, if anything, to suspense. However, in the course of a single play, the experience of suspense can be produced many times over in pertinent episodes. In the *microstructure* of drama, specific plots can show the liked protagonists credibly endangered. Scores of secondary protagonists can suffer fatal blows. Similar loss of life may not be a viable threat to primary protagonists, but loss of limb may have considerable credibility for these characters. Moreover, the possibility that heroes and heroines are beaten, tortured, stabbed, shot, or otherwise subjected to painful, agonizing, and humiliating treatment certainly can have great credibility. Respondents thus need not fear for the primary protagonists' life, but there can be ample cause for worrying about their being hit, raped, strangled, or severely injured.

Suspense thus tends to be created in chains of potentially independent episodes in which endangerments are indicated, dwelled on, and resolved. The overall plot is unlikely to meet these conditions because of the necessary frequent interpolation of information that connects the elements of a story.

Grand Resolution. It would appear that novel, unpredictable dramatic themes lend themselves more than predictable themes to the creation of high levels of suspense. Because the fate of primary protagonists is unknown and their ultimate survival not guaranteed, respondents can more readily reach the point of subjective certainty about these protagonists' victimization, including their death. The likely contribution of unpredictable overall plots to the enjoyment of drama through the facilitation of suspense seems less important, however, than the theme's contribution in moral terms (Carroll, 1984, 1990). The theme's unique contribution to enjoyment, however, has to await the resolution of the narrative and thus is virtually defined by the play's ultimate outcome. This outcome is undoubtedly morally appraised. More specifically, during the course of a play, respondents will have formed notions, however vague, of what fortunes particular protagonists (as well as antagonists) deserve or do not deserve; resolutions that meet these moral dispositions to sanction then are applauded and foster great enjoyment, whereas resolutions that fail to meet them are deplored and cannot be enjoyed as much, if at all (Jose & Brewer, 1984; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975; Zillmann, Hay, & Bryant, 1975). To the extent that the grand resolution is to serve the enjoyment of drama, the principal function of the ultimate outcome is to ensure euphoric reactions to the final events. This objective, it seems, is best accomplished by the provision of a morally acceptable, applaudable final outcome—usually one that yields glory and other incentives to good and liked characters, mostly because they triumphed over and destroyed all evil agents, at the very least the primary antagonist.

Enjoyment of suspenseful drama is, of course, not entirely dependent on morally appropriate final happenings. The reasoning that has been applied to the grand resolution applies equally to all resolutions of dramatic episodes throughout the narrative. The more satisfying the resolutions of suspenseful plots, the more enjoyment can be attained. The experience of such enjoyment can be repeated in plot chains, unlike the necessarily singular euphoric reaction to the grand resolution. Drama that features suspenseful episodes frequently and that accomplishes joyful reactions to the resolution of most of them should be deemed enjoyable overall, irrespective of the grand resolution's contribution to enjoyment.

The Experience of Suspense

I now can define the experience of drama-evoked suspense, in agreement with the various rationales that have been presented, as a noxious affective reaction that characteristically derives from the respondents' acute, fearful apprehension about deplorable events that threaten liked protagonists, this apprehension being mediated by high but not complete subjective certainty about the occurrence of the anticipated deplorable events.

According to this definition, the experience is compromised when protagonists are insufficiently liked or disliked and/or when the subjective certainty about the anticipated deplorable outcome is either at very low levels or total. We can, moreover, define *suspenseful drama* as dramatic exposition that features sympathetic, liked protagonists in apparent peril, frequently so and in a major way, thus having the capacity to instigate sustained experiences of suspense.

Essentials of Information Flow

The preceding definitions entail a prescription for effective suspenseful drama. They emphasize, first and foremost, the importance of character development. Characters toward whom respondents feel indifferent are unlikely to engage the respondents' concerns about their bad or good fortunes (Hoffner & Cantor, 1991; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977). It is imperative, therefore, that narratives create pronounced favorable dispositions toward the chief protagonists by displaying their admirable attributes and their virtuous behavior. The analogous creation of unfavorable dispositions toward antagonists or antagonistic conditions is equally essential. In order to be credibly evil, antagonists must initially succeed in doing evil things. Their eventually faltering deviousness must be reserved for particularly satisfying resolutions, usually the grand resolution.

Once liked protagonists and disliked antagonists are in place, the information flow must concentrate on the creation of conditions that credibly endanger the protagonists for appreciably long periods of time. The suspense-mediating noxious apprehensions would seem to be more intensive the stronger the positive affective disposition toward the endangered protagonists and the greater the risk to their welfare.

Recipes for the creation of acute experiences of suspense tell us little, however, about the enjoyment of suspense. On the premise that the experience of suspense, per se, is noxious, the basis for enjoyment must lie outside the suspense experience proper. Seemingly paradoxically, it is on the termination of the suspense experience, not during its acute manifestation, that enjoyment is determined: Satisfying resolutions will liberate joyful reactions and dissatisfying resolutions will prevent them, fostering disappointment instead (Carroll, 1990; Zillmann, 1980, 1991b). The outcome of the struggle between good and evil characters or forces is the most obvious condition for the hedonic transition from negative to positive. I have already emphasized the involvement of moral considerations in this transition. The temporary or ultimate triumph of the protagonists over the antagonists appears to define the winning formula for resolutions. I return to this crucial issue in explaining the enjoyment that noxious suspense can instigate.

INVOLVEMENT AND EMOTIONS IN RESPONSE TO SUSPENSEFUL DRAMA

Suspenseful drama has, no doubt, the capacity to engage our emotions. Respondents subjected to "torturous" suspense scenes have been observed to break out in sweat, bite their fingernails, become exceedingly restless altogether, and cover their

eyes, should the experience become too disturbing. Moreover, they are known to cheer and applaud approvingly when their heroes and heroines eventually humiliate and destroy the evil opposition, seemingly irrespective of the degree of brutality and cruelty involved in the accomplishment. Such noxious or joyous affective reactions exhibit an intensity that rivals that of emotions fostered by actual interpersonal conflict or by gratification obtained in direct social exchange.

The great intensity of emotional reactions that drama can elicit, suspenseful drama in particular, has baffled uncounted scholars. Why is it that people exposed to drama lose or, at any rate, abandon their cognizance of the artificiality of the situation? Why do they fail to recognize the contrived, make-believe nature of the setting and respond to it as an interesting retelling or enactment of an actual, liberally modified, or totally imagined occurrence? How can so-called rational beings fall prey to the actors' personas and respond to them as if they were real persons in their immediate environment—either friend or foe?

The Identification Doctrine of Involvement

The seemingly nonrational emotional involvement in fiction, whatever its particular narrative form, has spawned numerous somewhat mystical conjectures that have been accepted as patent explanations. First and foremost in this is the concept of *identification.* The notion that people identify with fictional heroes (Gabbard, 1987; Metz, 1982; Rimmon-Kenan, 1976; Skura, 1981), even with the cruelest of fictional villains (King, 1981), in order to attain "vicariously" the gratifications that these personas experience, has become commonplace psychology (Mendelsohn, 1966). It is the gospel, still, in much of narrative and cinematic analysis (Altenbernd & Lewis, 1969; Kaplan, 1990). Notwithstanding the popularity of the identification concept in considering drama and drama appreciation, the concept's usefulness in this context has been called into question (Zillmann, 1994).

Identification is a Freudian concept (Freud, 1923/1964a, 1921/1964b) whose meaning has been lost to a large degree. Hall (1954), in a popular primer of Freudian psychology, defined it as "the incorporation of the qualities of an external object, usually those of another person, into one's personality" (p. 74). He went on to suggest that "we always tend to identify with people who have the same characteristics that we have" (p. 74). Such an interpretation may have intuitive appeal. However, it seems to reverse the sequence of events specified by Freud. His sequence projects trait likeness to result from identification, rather than to be the cause of it.

Freud developed the concept of identification in connection with the Oedipus complex. To him, identification characterizes the earliest emotional bond between a child and another person. He focused on the male child, who develops an ideal conception of his father, and then seeks to attain this ideal by adopting all aspects of the father's behavior (Freud, 1921/1964b). It is the adoption of mother-directed libido, of course, that eventually creates the Oedipal dilemma.

Irrespective of these complications, Freud apparently believed that identification serves to attain valued, wanted traits, and that it fosters behavioral emulation and the adoption of traits. He insisted, however, that identification is more than overt imitation (Freud, 1900/1968), and that the desire "to be like" an external agent results in the assimilation of this agent. The fact that the specifics of the proposed more-than-imitation assimilation have never been adequately articulated opened the door to interpretations ranging from pretended or actual emulation to transitory or permanent ego confusion.

The concept, as commonly used now, was succinctly articulated by Friedberg (1990): "Identification is a process which commands the subject to be displaced by an *other*; it is a procedure which refuses and recuperates the separation between self and other" (p. 36). If only for a fleeting moment, then, self and other become one (in some unspecified fashion), and eventually separate again to normalcy. Contempt for such magic is rebuffed by the argument that identification is subcognitive and "draws upon a repertoire of unconscious processes" (p. 36). It is implied, of course, that the processes in question are empirically inaccessible, which makes all contentions nonfalsifiable.

Metz (1982) was most specific in his conception of *cinematic identification.* Primary identification, he suggested, is with the vision- and sound-reproducing systems. These systems substitute for eyes and ears in the structured path of camera and microphone. The camera, in particular, forces the respondent's head into a scripted walk during which such primary identification is thought to occur. In Metz's scheme, identification of the Freudian variety—with actors, their personas, or the stars in their extracinematic existence—is secondary identification.

Surely, there have always been a few who thought to be someone else, pathologically so if they had difficulty to return to self. Equally certain is that a great many people, dissatisfied with themselves and their lot, envy others and wish to be in their place. They may well try, as best as they can, to imagine themselves in these others' place and thereby seek access to the gratifications denied them in their own lives. Whether such efforts bear fruit or result in further despair remains to be seen. Particularly unclear is whether the unimaginatives' or the imaginatively passives' imagination is mechanically engaged by merely witnessing persons or their personas who display desired traits and fortunes.

Freud's (1905–1906/1987) answer is unmistakably positive. He pointed to the powers of the playwright and actor. These agents are seen as providers of a *Scheinwelt* that enables the spectator, characterized as "a poor soul to whom nothing of importance seems to happen, who some time ago had to moderate or abandon his ambition to take center stage in matters of significance, and who longs to feel and to act and to arrange things according to his desires" (pp. 656–657), to attain the fulfillment of his thwarted wishes. The spectator, said Freud, "wants to be a hero, if only for a limited time, and playwrights and actors make it possible for him through *identification* with a hero" (p. 657, author's translation). Accordingly, the cinema and all other narrative formats may be seen as forums that offer a cast of

heroes and heroines or others with desirable characteristics among whom respondents, depending on their desires, can choose a party for identification. In fact, they are free to enter into and abandon identifications. However, it is generally held that there be identification with only one party at a time. Lastly, identification with fictional characters is presumed to be rather effortless, not requiring particular imagination skills or deliberate cognitive maneuvers.

The question is whether these proposed mechanics can explain the affective behavior of respondents to cinematic presentations and alternative narrative art forms. Do respondents place themselves, however tentatively, into essentially envied personas and then "share" the emotions displayed by these personas? Can respondents vicariously (i.e., in place of others) experience the personas' emotions and thereby gain access to the gratifications experienced by them?

A *Gedankenexperiment* should help to clarify the issue. I call on early childhood experiences that most of us are likely to have had: experiences with the puppet theater, like the Punch-and-Judy show or the German *Kasperletheater*. In order to avoid the sexism of Punch and Judy, I focus on Kasperle, a paragon of goodness who fights all evil with a club he usually holds over his shoulder.

Anybody who has ever watched the behavior of children in response to Kasperle's antics will be able to confirm that this character, although thoroughly liked, does not evoke parallel, congruent, or concordant affect through identification. This is most apparent in the characteristic suspenseful tease of the children, when Kasperle enjoys, say, a present he has received while a crocodile or the devil himself is sneaking up behind him, ready to inflict harm. The onlooking children will simply *not* share and display the euphoria of their hero—which they should, had they put themselves in his stead. Rather, they surely will scream in distress, trying to avert harm to Kasperle. Shouts like "Watch out!," "Look behind you!," or "There's a crocodile coming!" signal a desire to intervene and thereby reveal that the children respond as observers, as third parties, who did succumb to the theatrical illusion that social reality unfolded before them. They respond to Kasperle and his foes in much the same way they respond to friends and foes in their actual, immediate social environment. When their theatrical hero finally manages to bring justice to the situation, the children can enjoy this restoration of justice. The assumption that they enjoyed a just resolution because they thought to have been Kasperle and acted on his behalf is simply not necessary, violates parsimony of explanation, and most importantly, is empirically unfounded.

This assessment is not changed by the likely emulation of Kasperle. Children are encouraged to emulate positive models and are generally rewarded for doing so. Thus, even if some children were to adopt Kasperle's mannerisms, it would be premature to infer that they seek to enter into the totality of his existence—or that they must have identified with their hero during his theatrical existence.

Adolescent and adult audiences have learned to inhibit intervention attempts. Theatrical convention condemns attempts of this kind as inappropriate. They disclose, after all, the succumbing to a somewhat embarrassing illusion. Oddly,

the expression of approval of action is allowed, and audiences are free to applaud, literally, the protagonists' triumph over evil, even the often brutal restoration of justice. Such behavior gives further evidence to the respondent-as-observer interpretation of affect mediation.

Independent of intervention attempts and action approval, any suspense cliché provides evidence against identification. The wild west hero, for instance, who calmly and collectedly rides into an ambush, with shotguns aimed at him from all rooftops, is unlikely to project his sense of security on the audience. The audience, instead, is likely to be taken in by the impression of impending harm. This reaction reveals once again the audience's concern for the welfare of heroes, responding to them as if they were personal friends.

Hitchcock's (1959) suspense prototype of a couple on a sidewalk, approaching an open manhole while engaged in lively conversation, makes the same point. As witnesses, respondents to the cinematic event experience emotions that are based on the fear that the couple, although only a reflection of light off a screen, might stumble, fall, and knock their teeth out.

All these examples show that respondents treat theatrical personas as friends or foes similar to friends and foes in their immediate social environment, that they experience emotions accordingly, but that they eventually learn to hold back any actions to intervene in the activities before them.

Metz's (1982) cinematic concept of primary identification,[2] an identification that is supposedly forced on respondents by the subjective vision of the camera, also is far from compelling and can readily be accommodated by the witness conceptualization. The iconic trace produced by camera and microphone simply can be considered a first-witness record that is rewitnessed by respondents. Even if we were to grant the camera the status of a first experiencer, there is no reason to assume that presentation of such first experience compels anyone to abandon consciousness of self and to place himself or herself existentially in the camera's stead—or in place of a person whose perceptual experience the camera record is thought to represent. The latter pertains to the simulation of another person's vision by a roaming camera. The makers of horror, for instance, insist that having the camera chase a victim through the bushes, having it look down on the fallen, pleading person, and having it show how the far end of a dagger moving away from the camera right through the victim's abdomen ensures identification with the murderer and thus provides the thrill of forbidden experiences to anybody who cares to watch (King, 1981). However, identification is not ensured. Respondents simply rewitness what the murderer must have witnessed during primary experience. This, at least, is what must be concluded from the scarce research on this topic (Sapolsky, cited in Zillmann, 1994).

Notwithstanding the lingering popularity of the identification concept in discussions of involvement with fiction, then, the concept is without empirical foundation

[2]A detailed discussion of Metz's conceptualization and its problems was presented by Zillmann (1994).

and amounts to an act of faith. It would appear that the time has come to abandon the notion and replace it with a conceptualization whose components and interdependencies can be demonstrated empirically.[3]

Empathic Mediation of Involvement

Empathy is a concept that, in contrast to identification, has generated a considerable amount of research and now can be considered firmly established empirically. Moreover, the empathy concept is entirely compatible with the respondent-as-witness approach that we have advocated. It is, in this context, capable of explaining much of the respondents' affective reactivity that is instigated by fictional as well as nonfictional events.

The empathy concept is comparatively new. It is said to derive from German aesthetics at the turn of the century (Brentano, 1874/1924; Lipps, 1903, 1906, 1907; Prandtl, 1910; Worringer, 1908/1959). The term *Einfühlung*, translatable as "feeling into" another entity, gained acceptance during this period and eventually entered into general psychology (Wispe, 1987). Titchener (1915) appears to have popularized the concept in U.S. psychology.

It would be misleading, however, to credit German aesthetics with the invention of the concept. Under the heading of *sympathy*, empathic processes have received much attention and have been scrutinized by numerous scholars (Baldwin, 1897; Ribot, 1897; Scheler, 1913; Spencer, 1870; Spinoza, 1677/1985). The British philosopher Smith (1759/1971) might be considered the authority on the subject, having dealt with it more sensitively than others. Smith recognized the automatic features of many empathic responses, as well as the cognitive instigation and mediation of complex feeling states. He also identified the anticipatory nature of numerous empathic reactions, stating that, "When we see a stroke aimed and just ready to fall upon the leg or arm of another person, we naturally shrink and draw back our own leg or our own arm" (p. 3). Perhaps most importantly, he recognized the empathy mediation of the pleasures that may be derived from any kind of storytelling: "How selfish soever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it except the pleasure of seeing it" (p. 1).

The various conceptualizations of empathy have been reviewed by Zillmann (1991a) and integrated as follows: *Empathy* is defined as any experience that is

[3]It should be noted that the discussed problems with the concept of identification concern identification with a singular unique entity, such as a particular human being. The concept of *social identification*, as used in theories of social identity (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel, 1982) and social categorization (Turner, 1985), is devoid of these problems. The simple reason for this is that persons who believe themselves to be members of a group, however tentatively defined this social aggregate may be (e.g., fans of a rock group or a sports team; cf. Zillmann & Bhatia, 1989; Zillmann & Paulus, 1993), fully retain cognizance of the separation of self and others.

a response (a) to information about circumstances presumed to cause acute emotions in another individual and/or (b) to the bodily, facial, paralinguistic, and linguistic expression of emotional experiences by another individual and/or (c) to another individual's actions that are presumed to be precipitated by acute emotional experiences, this response being (d) associated with an appreciable increase in excitation and (e) construed by respondents as feeling with or feeling for another individual.

This definition allows one to consider empathic, first and foremost, any concordant reflexive or reflective emotional reaction to witnessing others express emotional reactions. The condition of concordance (Berger, 1962) must be met, at least in terms of hedonic compatibility, to ensure that respondents can construe their reactions as feeling with or feeling for these others. However, the definition extends to causal circumstances that eventually may foster emotional expression in affected others, as well as to others' emotionally nonexpressive actions that imply their emotions.

Such extended conceptualization of empathy allows us to consider the experience of suspense and the accompanying excitatory activity as an anticipatory emotion that is primarily elicited by the comprehension of causal circumstances that threaten harm to an entity of concern (Frijda, 1986). Returning to Hitchcock's (1959) manhole illustration of suspense, suspense cannot be considered elicited by affect expressed on the part of the potential victims. The protagonists are oblivious to the impending disaster and express, if anything, positive emotions. Empathy thus cannot be in response to the protagonists' facial or bodily expression of their recognition of danger. It must come, and according to Hitchcock it does, from the respondents' appraisal of the situation. This appraisal, in turn, must activate the anticipatory emotion of suspense.

Hitchcock's illustration should not be misconstrued as a claim that protagonists need to be oblivious to their potential victimization. They may eventually, if not from the outset, comprehend their dilemma and express their concern verbally, paralinguistically, facially, or bodily in the appropriate emotions: anxiety, acute fear, or panic. Such expression provides ample opportunity for empathy, for feeling for or with, by respondents. In the creation of suspense, then, both the respondents' appraisal of conditions threatening protagonists and the immediate empathic reaction to their plight are essential contributors.

It should be noticed that we limited the list of emotional expressions capable of eliciting or intensifying the experience of suspense to withdrawal-linked emotions, such as fear. The protagonists' expression of approach-linked affect, such as anger and rage, is considered to signal their ability to cope successfully with the endangering conditions, thereby diminishing apprehensions. The expression of positive emotions, such as belittling amusement, should have the same consequence. An investigation by Bergman (cited in Zillmann, 1980) shows, in fact, that a protagonist's apparent ability to ward off and punish an assailant compromises the respondents' concern and thereby the experience of suspense.

Theories addressing empathic phenomena are usually grouped into three categories: (a) those that posit that empathy is due to innate, reflexive processes, (b) those that posit that empathy is acquired through processes that entail neither awareness nor deliberate cognitive operations, and (c) those that focus on deliberate cognitive maneuvers.[4] The proposed mechanisms actually correspond rather closely with a commonly employed taxonomy of empathic processes. Innate, reflexive empathy models (Lipps, 1907; McDougall, 1908) concentrate on motor mimicry. Models suggesting deliberate cognitive efforts at putting oneself into another's place (not in the sense of identifying with that other, but as an attempt at understanding as much as possible of this other's experiential state) address perspective or role taking (Rogers, 1967; Stotland, 1969). The learning-theoretical approaches (Aronfreed, 1970; Berger, 1962; Hoffman, 1973; Humphrey, 1922) focus on affective reactivity and, especially, empathic reactivity. The latter is a part of the former, the part that subsumes emotional reactions that are concordant with explicit, implicit, or impending similar reactions witnessed in others.

The empirical research pertaining to these mechanisms of empathy and emotional involvement has been presented and discussed elsewhere (Zillmann, 1994). Suffice it here to say that all of them attracted considerable research support. In response to suspenseful expositions, we thus may expect relatively primitive mimicry reactions to expressed emotions and actions (such as respondents' jerking their heads backward on seeing a protagonist receive a blow to the face that jolts his head backward) and largely acquired concordant affect (such as crying on seeing a protagonist cry or becoming tense as a protagonist is witnessed becoming tense), as well as perspective taking (such as a better comprehension of a protagonist's dilemma by imagining oneself in a similar situation). Reflexive and acquired response dispositions, because they do not require cognitive elaboration, are most directly responsible for immediate empathy. Perspective taking can be considered a modifier, primarily, of empathy induced by other mechanics. However, its frequent application may result in greater empathic sensitivity as a trait (de Wied, Zillmann, & Ordman, 1994). High empathic sensitivity, formed in this fashion, may then be expected to foster particularly strong suspense reactions to expositions that thrive on the expression of apprehensions and fear.

Empathic reactivity, however, it should be recalled, does not depend on emotional displays by protagonists and other cast members. It can be instigated by the comprehension of threatening circumstances and the anticipation of harm to entities of concern, usually persons, in the absence of anybody's expression of emotion.

Consideration of the role of empathic reactivity to drama, of the enjoyment of drama in particular, would be patently incomplete, however, without recognition of conditions under which concordant affect does not materialize—in fact, of

[4]The interested reader is referred to a review by Zillmann (1991a) that features a comparative and integrative analysis of the pertinent empathy theories.

conditions under which discordant affect comes about. Suspenseful drama is obviously laden with situations in which some individuals' humiliation and destruction prompts euphoria. This situation is essential to satisfying resolutions, especially to grand resolutions. However, this very situation is one that calls for the suspension of all empathic inclinations. There must be conditions, then, under which respondents can readily abandon empathic concerns and behave in ways that are utterly inconsistent with empathy. We now turn to such counterempathic emotional behavior.

Dispositional Override of Empathic Involvement

Theories of empathy naturally concern themselves with concordance of affect in model and observer. Situations of nonconcordance and outcomes opposite to concordance, usually referred to as *counterempathy*, are acknowledged, but their prediction has not been systematically integrated in the theories.

McDougall's (1908, 1922) theorizing constitutes an exception to the rule. He held that empathy is an innate response disposition that continually compels observers to experience the emotions of witnessed others. McDougall feared, in fact, that individuals could get so caught up in empathizing with the miseries and joys of others, especially with the former, that this innate disposition would prove pathogenic. His apprehensions forced him to develop theoretical amendments capable of saving those who would come to grief over the grief of others—or as in suspenseful drama, over the anticipated grief of others. Focusing on persons who are resentful toward those they witness undergo misfortunes, he proposed a theory of amusement that essentially projects gaiety as a response that relieves morally inappropriate empathic grief. The conversion of empathic grief to amusement was, of course, to secure the welfare of all innately motivated, universal empathizers.

Zillmann (1980, 1991b) similarly focused on affective dispositions toward witnessed agents, but proposed very different consequences of these dispositions. Based on the three-factor theory of empathy that integrates reflexive, acquired, and deliberate empathic reactivity (Zillmann, 1991a), it is suggested that, with the likely exception of reflexive reactions, affective dispositions toward persons or their personas virtually control empathy. Specifically, it is posited that positive affective dispositions toward models foster empathic reactions, whereas negative affective dispositions impair, prevent, or hedonically reverse them. The intensity of these empathic or counterempathic reactions is in turn projected to be a function of the magnitude of positive or negative initial affect toward the observed entity: The stronger the positive affect, the more intense the empathic reactions; the stronger the negative sentiment, the more intense the counterempathic reactions.

These expectations are associated with the assumption that positive affective dispositions motivate the approval of good fortunes and the disapproval of misfortunes that are experienced by observed persons or personas, whereas

negative affective dispositions motivate the disapproval of good fortunes and the approval of misfortunes. Such correspondence between affective disposition and the approval or disapproval of outcomes derives from appraisals that entail moral judgment. In turn, this presupposes that the conduct of persons or personas is monitored and judged as appropriate and good or inappropriate and bad.

Thus, it is argued that once persons or personas are liked, their benefaction seems appropriate and can be sanctioned; empathy with their positive emotions is free to unfold. In contrast, their victimization seems inappropriate and cannot be sanctioned; empathy with their negative emotions again is free to unfold. This situation reverses for negative sentiments toward entities. Once persons or personas are resented, their benefaction seems inappropriate and cannot be sanctioned; empathy with their positive emotions cannot materialize, and distress is likely. In contrast, their victimization seems appropriate and can be sanctioned; empathy with their negative emotions again cannot materialize, and euphoria is likely. We share, then, the emotions of happy occasions and threatening or tragic events with those we consider friends. However, our enemies' good fortunes distress us, and their misfortunes give us pleasure.

This reasoning extends to actively wishing or fearing particular outcomes. Positive affective dispositions toward persons or personas make us hope for good fortunes, and we share the emotions that the attainment of these good fortunes liberates. At the same time we fear misfortunes, and we suffer, in the experience of suspense, their prospect and, in tragedy, their occurrence. In contrast, negative affective dispositions toward persons or personas make us fear good fortunes, and we are disturbed by their occurrence. At the same time we hope for victimization, which we can freely enjoy in the name of justice.

Figure 11.1 summarizes the involvement of moral judgment in disposition formation, as well as the involvement of both moral judgment and active expectations in empathic reactivity. The indicated interdependencies among moral judgment, affective disposition, and empathy in the form of affect from both the anticipation of relevant events and the witnessing of outcomes have been established in numerous investigations (Jose & Brewer, 1984; Wilson, Cantor, Gordon, & Zillmann, 1986; Zillmann & Bryant, 1975; Zillmann & Cantor, 1977; Zillmann, Hay, & Bryant, 1975). The pertinent research has been discussed elsewhere in considerable detail (Zillmann, 1991b, 1994).

THE STRATEGIC EVOCATION OF EMOTIONS IN SUSPENSEFUL DRAMA

I am now in a position to articulate the validated principles that govern affective responding during suspenseful drama and on its conclusion.

For the effective creation of the experience of suspense, two components are indispensable.

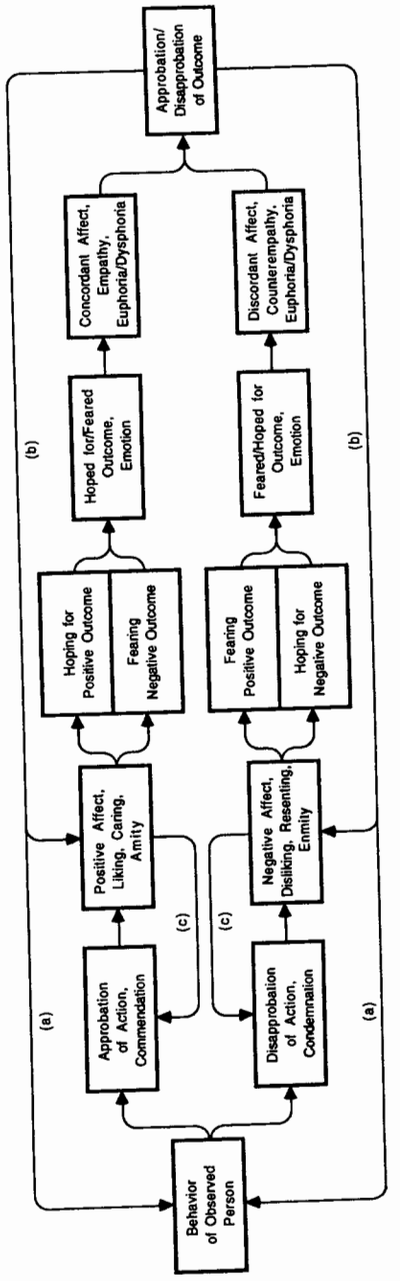

FIG. 11.1. A model of dispositional mediation of affect from witnessing the actions and experiences of others. Stages 2 and 7 indicate the involvement of moral considerations in the formation of affective dispositions, and Stages 3 and 4 indicate the resulting affective dispositions and their influence on anticipatory affects. Stages 5 and 6 specify affective reactions to pertinent outcomes, such as gratification or aversion, and to their expressive consequences, such as elation or distress. Feedback Loop c indicates the influence of formed dispositions on moral judgment, such as amity fostering tolerance and enmity fostering strictness. Loop b suggests a similar influence of witnessed outcomes through their impact on dispositions. For instance, punitive treatments deemed overly severe are likely to foster sympathy and promote liking, and gratifications deemed too generous might dismay and promote disliking. Feedback Loop a, finally, indicates that the process described in Stages 1 through 7 is recursive and can be chained to arbitrary length. The experience of suspense and the reaction to suspense resolution are specified in the upper half of the graph. Specifically, a protagonist's amiable conduct fosters liking and caring (Stages 2–3), negative outcomes are acutely feared and their prospect manifests itself in the suspense-defining experience of distress (Stage 4), and hoped-for positive outcomes, should they come about, are applauded (Stage 5) and prompt euphoric empathy (Stage 6).

1. Protagonists or substitute entities toward whom or which favorable affective dispositions are held.
2. Antagonists or conditions who or that can credibly threaten the welfare of the protagonists or substitute entities.

The narrative merger of these components will produce the noxious experience of suspense. The affective intensity of this experience of suspense is influenced by the following conditions, which may act in concert.

1. The intensity of experienced suspense increases with the magnitude of the respondents' positive affective dispositions toward protagonists or substitute entities.
2. The intensity of experienced suspense increases with the respondent-assessed magnitude of harm threatening protagonists or substitute entities.
3. The intensity of experienced suspense increases with the respondents' subjective certainty that the threatened harm will materialize, short of certainty about this outcome.

In addition to the experience of suspense, noxious affect is generated by witnessing antagonists or conditions victimizing third parties. Such victimization is necessary to establish credible threats to the welfare of protagonists. The witnessed victimization determines, of course, the magnitude of unfavorable affective dispositions toward antagonists.

Euphoric or dysphoric reactions manifest themselves on the resolution of suspense.

1. Euphoria is elicited when anticipated, feared harm to protagonists is averted either entirely or to a significant degree.
2. The intensity of euphoric reactions to averted harm to protagonists increases with the magnitude of favorable affective dispositions toward these protagonists.
3. The intensity of euphoric reactions to averted harm to protagonists increases with the magnitude of unfavorable affective dispositions toward the antagonists.
4. The intensity of euphoric reactions to averted harm to protagonists is the greater, the more this outcome can be attributed to the protagonists' own deliberate action.
5. The intensity of euphoric reactions to averted harm to protagonists is the greater, the greater the antagonists' perceived power to inflict harm.
6. The more the antagonists come to harm and the more the protagonists are benefited, the stronger the euphoric reactions.

The combination of Propositions 4, 5, and 6 points, of course, to the optimal resolution of suspense: the one in which the hero or heroine, by his or her own initiative, destroys "the forces of evil" and then is duly rewarded for the accomplishment.

The consideration of dysphoria on the resolution of suspense is of secondary importance, but relevant nonetheless. Dysphoria on the grand resolution of suspenseful drama would virtually demand a reclassification of a play under consideration. More or less by definition, suspenseful drama features a satisfying ending. Violation of this prescription converts such drama to tragedy, irrespective of suspenseful episodes that were presented prior to the concluding grand debacle in which the protagonists, although utterly undeserving of misfortunes, come to grievous harm.

Suspenseful drama may, however, feature suspenseful episodes with less than satisfying solutions, and do so rather frequently. For instance, heroes and heroines may emerge from an agonistic encounter bruised, beaten up, and even badly injured. Such outcomes tend to build up the antagonists' potency for malice, but offer little, if any, cause for euphoria. Getting away with life usually is deemed insufficient grounds for jubilation. If friends (i.e., secondary, expendable protagonists) are lost in the encounter, the episodic outcome is truly deplorable and tragic. For episode resolutions of this kind, dysphoric reactions, transitional as they may be, must be expected.

The prediction of these dysphoric reactions merely requires the inversion of the propositions concerning euphoria.

1. Dysphoria is elicited when anticipated, feared harm to protagonists actually materializes, either entirely or to a significant degree.
2. The intensity of dysphoric reactions to harm inflicted on protagonists increases with the magnitude of favorable affective dispositions toward these protagonists.
3. The intensity of dysphoric reactions to harm inflicted on protagonists increases with the magnitude of unfavorable affective dispositions toward the antagonists.
4. The intensity of dysphoric reactions to harm inflicted on protagonists is the greater, the more this outcome can be attributed to the antagonists' deliberate action.
5. The intensity of dysphoric reactions to harm inflicted on protagonists is the greater, the less the antagonists' perceived power to inflict harm.
6. The more the protagonists come to harm and the more the antagonists are benefited, the stronger the dysphoric reactions.

In this case, the combination of Propositions 4, 5, and 6 points to resolutions of episodic suspense that are utterly deplorable and that cannot be enjoyed.

THE PARADOX OF POSITIVE-AFFECT DOMINANCE IN SUSPENSEFUL DRAMA

Given these determinants of negative and positive emotional reactions to dramatic events, on the one hand, and the characteristic flow of information in suspenseful drama, on the other, the fact that this genre of entertainment enjoys an extraordinarily strong following must seem puzzling. Even a cursory analysis of the amount of time dedicated to the elicitation of negative emotions, compared to that dedicated to the elicitation of positive emotions, should make it clear that substantially more time is given to negative emotions. Time dedicated to the induction of suspense is usually stretched to its limits. Additionally, the duration of time in which secondary protagonists fall by the wayside (so as to make later endangerments created by antagonists more credible and of greater, more severe consequence) and primary protagonists are less than triumphant (on the resolution of potentially many suspenseful episodes) tends to exceed, by a great margin, the duration of time in which protagonists dominate with ease and reap glory along with the attached social benefits. Focusing on the time course of emotional experience thus reveals that ample time is given to noxious empathic distress and equally noxious dissatisfying resolutions of suspenseful episodes, whereas comparatively little time is given to truly satisfying outcomes. Suspenseful drama apparently dwells on noxious affect (Zillmann, 1980).

Such disproportionality in favor of negative emotions poses problems for summative models of the enjoyment of suspenseful drama. If respondents suffer distress most of the time during exposure to dramatic exposition, and occasions for unmitigated pleasure are few and far between, the respondents' postconsumption assessment should be one of disappointment, contempt, and condemnation. The fact that this assessment generally yields enjoyment points to hidden sources of pleasure that are to be found and understood.

It might be argued, first of all, that the duration of affect is secondary, if not immaterial, and that the intensity of emotional reactions is crucial in determining enjoyment—immediate euphoric reactions as well as retroactive assessments of enjoyment following grand resolution. However, attempts to separate the stimuli that induce negative affect from those that induce positive affect in order to ascertain experiential intensity are unproductive. In fact, such separation is inconceivable. It would destroy the unique contiguity of negative and positive affect that characterizes fictional suspense and that potentially determines enjoyment on resolution. The actions of heroes and heroines would be next to meaningless if deprived of the endangerments that inspire them. The protagonists' triumph necessitates the preceding perpetration of something evil by antagonists who can be brought to justice or by conditions that can be brought under control. The indicated outcomes, in turn, are necessary for the elicitation of positive emotions in respondents. The suspense-resolution chain, therefore, must be left intact.

Acceptance of the inseparability of suspense and its resolution carries with it the acceptance of the dependence of the enjoyment experience on the resolution-

preceding experience of suspense. This dependence can be construed as a simple semantic dependency: The suspenseful happenings are necessary to give meaning to the suspense-terminating, resolving actions. In such an interpretation, exposure to both the suspense treatment and the resolution creates independently unique affective reactions. Contiguity of these reactions is without further consequence.

The alternative view holds that the intensity of the preceding affective state, empathic distress, influences the intensity of the subsequent affective state, euphoria. More specifically, it posits that the affective intensity of a prior state is capable of increasing the intensity of the subsequent state. In the case of suspenseful drama, this would mean that the more distress is produced by a suspense treatment, the greater or more intense will be the enjoyment at suspense resolution. This expectation would not only apply to grand resolutions, but to all suspense resolutions in the microstructure of drama.

The notion that empathic distress may have a great payoff in enjoyment is not new. Numerous scholars entertained it, if only tacitly (Carroll, 1990; Marx, 1940; Smiley, 1971). In fact, one might consider the matter too obvious to bother with it. More intense distress comes, after all, with greater endangerments whose prompt abrogation gives heroes and heroines a chance to impress us more favorably and lets us more intensely enjoy the outcome. Research evidence actually shows that liking of protagonists and enjoyment of suspenseful drama increase with the magnitude of danger that the protagonists face and overcome (Zillmann, Hay, & Bryant, 1975).

However, enjoyment of suspenseful drama also has been shown to increase with the degree of the protagonists' vulnerability (Bergman, cited in Zillmann, 1980). The blind protagonist in *Wait Until Dark* might serve as an example. She fights off killers for sheer survival. In continual panic, not in self-confident fashion, she succeeds eventually, but other than providing relief from the torture of distress, the grand solution offers little cause for euphoria. Reportedly, the resolution prompted euphoric reactions of great intensity nonetheless.

As much suspenseful drama is built around the vulnerability of protagonists, the intensity of joy on resolutions that has them survive, but that provide little else to cheer about, seems incommensurate with the intensity of euphoria that may be expected on the basis of the outcome that the resolution presents. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, the search for an explanation of euphoria at suspense resolution has turned away from purely cognitive rationales and focused on psychophysiological mechanics.

EXCITATORY FACILITATION IN THE ENJOYMENT OF SUSPENSEFUL DRAMA

Berlyne (1960) offered an explanation for the apparent facilitation of the enjoyment following suspense by focusing on the waxing and waning of physiological arousal during suspense and its resolution. His model has become known as the

arousal jag. Essentially, this model specifies that arousal increases during aversion and promptly decreases during relief. For suspense and its resolution, the presumed sequence of events is this: Suspenseful stimulation activates distress, which manifests itself in elevated noxious arousal; relief manifests itself in a sharp drop of the elevated noxious arousal; analogous to drive reduction, it is pleasantly experienced. Berlyne thus thought the mere reduction or termination of distress a sufficient condition for enjoyment.

Relief as Enjoyment

Berlyne's (1960) proposal that relief, manifest in a sudden drop of noxiously experienced arousal, is in itself enjoyable, is undoubtedly intriguing. It would explain, indeed, why suspense is retrospectively enjoyed, intensely so, although the postsuspense stimuli do not warrant such a reaction. Moreover, it would explain the positive relationship between the intensity of suspense-induced distress and the intensity of enjoyment of resolved suspense. This would be because higher levels of noxiously experienced arousal call for and allow a more pronounced drop that is more pleasurably experienced.

However, new research findings have made it clear that arousal reduction is not necessarily rewarding. Worse yet, they have established that arousal increments can be rewarding. In view of these findings, Berlyne (1967, 1971) modified his original model, allowing for the possibility that both arousal drops and arousal boosts may be rewarding and pleasantly experienced.[5] Unfortunately, the modified model no longer explains the distress to euphoria conversion. It fails, in fact, to explain distress as a noxious experience. Arousal boosts associated with distress are obviously not pleasantly experienced (Grings & Dawson, 1978). Additionally, the arousal jag reasoning suffers from imprecision in the conceptualization of arousal. What kind of arousal is supposed to be jagging? Studies in which autonomic arousal (the kind critically involved in affective reactions) has been measured have failed to show a sharp drop in arousal at suspense resolution (Zillmann, Hay, & Bryant, 1975).

In the face of these problems with the arousal jag, Berlyne's suggestions remain intriguing, but the mechanics of his model cannot be considered established. It would seem prudent, therefore, to return to conceiving relief as an experience that is cognitively determined, rather than determined by arousal changes. However, Berlyne's contention that the magnitude of experienced relief critically influences enjoyment in its wake appears to be worthy of further pursuit. To the extent that arousal levels are proportional with the intensity of experienced suspense, relief from the noxious experience of distress should be more intensely experienced, the higher the preceding arousal level. Although arousal is unlikely to drop sharply, its

[5]A more detailed discussion of Berlyne's proposals concerning the distress–relief–enjoyment chain can be found in Zillmann (1980).

noxiousness may be removed, possibly converted to positive affect, by an altered appraisal of the circumstances. If so, the experience of relief, despite persisting high levels of arousal, can be expected to invite a cognitive transition to euphoria—the more so, the more noxiousness is removed by the indicated appraisal.

Excitation Transfer in the Enjoyment of Suspense

A model of suspense enjoyment that gives equal recognition to cognitive and excitatory processes, and that focuses on the interaction between these processes, has been developed by Zillmann (1980, 1991b). This model is based on the excitation-transfer paradigm, which has been detailed elsewhere (Zillmann, 1978, 1983b, 1984). Suffice it here to present only those of its features that are essential to the explanation of the enjoyment of suspenseful drama.

It is proposed that individuals who anticipate or witness the victimization of agents toward which they are favorably disposed (a) experience an elevation of sympathetic excitation and (b) appraise their reactions as dysphoric. The intensity of these dysphoric reactions, defined as *empathic distress*, is determined by prevailing levels of sympathetic activity.

It is further proposed that, because of humoral mediation of excitatory processes, elevated sympathetic activity decays comparatively slowly. Portions of it persist for some time after the termination of the arousing stimulus condition. Such residual excitation tends to go unrecognized, mainly because of poor interoception. It is therefore capable of combining inseparably with the excitatory activity that is produced by subsequent stimuli.[6]

Finally, it is proposed that the experiential status of subsequent affective reactions is determined by the respondents' appraisal of the environmental circumstances that produce the reactions. The intensity of these affective reactions, however, is determined by the union of (a) excitation specifically produced by the subsequent stimulus condition and (b) residual excitation from preceding stimulation.

In general, then, the experiential status of any affective reaction is viewed as being cognitively determined. The intensity of affect, in contrast, is viewed as being determined by the prevailing level of sympathetic activity. To the extent that an emotional reaction is associated with sympathetic activity that derives in part from earlier stimulation, the intensity of the emotion will be higher than it should be on the basis of present stimuli alone.

This projection of an affective "overreaction" to subsequent stimuli is the key element in our approach to suspense. We conceptualize suspense and its resolution as a sequence of affective reactions in which residues of excitation from the antecedent condition intensify the reaction to the subsequent condition. The

[6]This conceptualization, it should be noticed, denies immediate excitatory changes (i.e., instantaneous arousal drops or boosts). In particular, it denies the excitatory determination of the sudden experience of relief on the removal of conditions that endanger protagonists.

experience of empathic distress during the suspense period should be acutely negative. Regarding excitatory residues from distress that enter the resolution period, the consideration of hedonic valence is not relevant, however. Residues from negative states are expected to intensify positive or negative subsequent states just as much as residues from positive states. Residues of sympathetic excitation are simply impartial to the hedonic quality of the experiences they come to intensify.

Satisfying Outcomes. It should be clear at this point that the transfer paradigm predicts the intensification of euphoria after empathic distress only if euphoria is cognitively achieved. Only if there is a happy turn of events in the resolution of suspense can this be expected. In line with earlier considerations, the mere removal of the threat that produced empathic distress may be regarded a minimal stimulus condition for the cognitive switch from dysphoria to euphoria. Satisfying, happy endings, however, usually offer more than relief alone. They tend to confound relief with a wealth of gratifications that await the protagonists who have faced danger (Zillmann, Johnson, & Hanrahan, 1973). As a rule, suspense resolutions provide ample cause for the hedonic turnabout from distress to positively toned affect.

Once the resolution of suspense accomplishes the discussed adjustment, the resultant feelings of euphoria should be enhanced by residual excitation from the distress response to suspense. The euphoric reaction to a satisfying resolution of suspense should be more intensely experienced, the greater the excitatory residues from the precipitating suspense-induced distress. Whether the microstructure or macrostructure of suspenseful drama is considered (i.e., episode resolutions or grand resolutions), the more suspense initially distresses, the more it is ultimately enjoyed. The better a suspense treatment takes effect, the more enjoyment will be liberated by its satisfying resolution. By the same token, the same satisfying resolution, when not precipitated by arousing events, can only produce flat drama—drama incapable of generating intensely felt enjoyment.

Dissatisfying Outcomes. It should be recognized that predictions for the appreciation of tragic events are quite different. A sad turn of events in drama is likely to produce dysphoric feelings. Analogous to our proposal regarding satisfying resolutions, it is to be expected that dysphoric reactions to dissatisfying resolutions of suspense will be more intensely experienced the greater the excitatory residues from the preceding suspense-induced distress. The more empathic distress is activated by the events preceding the resolutions, the sadder the tragic resolutions (Bergman, cited in Zillmann, 1980; Zillmann, Mody, & Cantor, 1974); and to the extent that the ultimate outcome is tragic, the sadder the tragedy. Consequently, if the creation of profound, deep feelings of sadness is accepted as the central objective of tragedy, distress from suspense (or more accurately, residual excitation from such distress) offers itself as a potent facilitator.

Excitement From Satisfying Outcomes. As suggested earlier, the two principal forms of truly satisfying resolutions (i.e., resolutions that accomplish more than mere stress relief) are the benefaction of good and liked protagonists and the just, punitive treatment of their transgressive and resented opponents. Drama usually features a combination of both. Even tragedy offers such satisfying outcomes in its microstructure (de Wied, Zillmann, & Ordman, 1994). The contribution of these "gratifiers" to the enjoyment of drama should not be underestimated. It must be acknowledged, in fact, that the display of gratifying happenings may foster excitatory reactions of nontrivial magnitude. Pronounced excitatory reactions are certainly not restricted to aversions, and they may well accompany joyous responses to hoped-for outcomes.

The possibility of appreciable to strong excitatory reactions to satisfying suspense resolutions is readily integrated into our theoretical model. It is proposed that the enjoyment of suspenseful drama that features satisfying resolutions of suspenseful episodes and at large will be greater (a) the more residual excitation from suspense treatments persists during the satisfying resolutions of these treatments, (b) the longer the excitatory residues in question persist, and (c) the more excitation the resolutions themselves contribute.

EPILOGUE ON THE ENJOYMENT EXPERIENCE

In our excursion into factors that influence the enjoyment of suspenseful drama we have concentrated, naturally, on suspense and its resolution. Such focus should not be interpreted as a claim that there are no other factors that appreciably contribute to the enjoyment of predominantly suspenseful drama. It should be understood that suspenseful drama is hardly ever purely that. It usually involves elements of mystery and even comedy (Zillmann, 1991b; Zillmann & Bryant, 1991). The likely contributions of these and other "alien" components must, of course, be considered. The contribution of aesthetic factors (e.g., originality and style of presentation, appeal of performers, quality of performance) also should not be underestimated.

Finally, the enjoyment of suspenseful drama should not be equated with pleasure at curtain fall. Immediately following the grand resolution, respondents' assessment of their enjoyment of a play is likely to be dominated by the final outcome. However, enjoyment of the final outcome does not necessarily reflect the enjoyment, in emotional terms, of a play up to this point or overall. Suspenseful drama may have featured numerous highly suspenseful episodes with greatly satisfying, enjoyable resolutions. The grand resolution may not do justice to the enjoyment following these episodes. Once the emotions elicited by the final outcome, or possibly prior to it, have dissipated, respondents should be in a better position to assess their enjoyment overall and pass a more balanced judgment. On the other hand, such a delay might shift attention away from emotional reactivity and ultimately favor consideration of alternative sources of enjoyment.

All this is to make the point that the conceptualization of drama enjoyment is plagued by a considerable degree of ambiguity, and that conceptual refinements of the enjoyment experience are worth pondering.

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