

# **Haunting the House from Within: Disbelief Mitigation and Spatial Experience**

**Aaron Smuts**

In this chapter I attempt to explain the lasting effectiveness and critical success of Robert Wise's *The Haunting* (1963) by roughly sketching the role that spectator belief might play in a revised version of the so-called "Thought Theory" of emotional response to fiction. I argue that *The Haunting* engages viewers in a process of "disbelief mitigation"—the sheltering of nontrivial, tenuously held beliefs required for optimal viewer response—that helps make the film work as horror, and prevents it from sliding into comedy. Haunted house films do not have to extend much effort to keep us from walking away, since most viewers come to the theater ready to entertain the idea that haunted houses exist. Using the experiential philosophy of John Dewey, I propose that this willingness has to do with a fundamental aspect of our relationship with space. It is common to speak of places as "charged" or "tense," to get feelings of dread or nostalgia from certain spots. Some haunted house films leverage this experiential characteristic to fuel the horror, and without it, the subgenre would probably not exist.

## **Should We Believe the "Thought Theory"?**

Noël Carroll's "Thought Theory" is a compelling resolution to the "paradox of emotional response to fiction": the problem of why we respond emotionally to fictional characters and events even though we

know that the characters and events portrayed are not real. Carroll develops his Thought Theory in reaction to both Illusion and Pretend theories.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the Pretend theorist, he argues that there is no reason to suppose that the emotions we feel in reaction to fictions are any less genuine than other real-life emotions. And contrary to the Illusion theorists who argue that a measure of belief in the reality of the fiction is necessary for emotional response, Carroll presents his Thought Theory, which states that “thought contents we entertain without believing them can genuinely move us emotionally.”<sup>2</sup> A useful test of this theory might be to ask why we are willing to entertain certain ideas and not others—why haunted houses, in particular, are not dismissed as absurd.

Steven Schneider criticizes Carroll’s description of the imagination<sup>3</sup> as untethered by belief, arguing that the “mere entertaining in one’s mind of a horror film monster is insufficient to generate fear; at the very least, it renders the production of such an emotional response either mysterious or irrational.”<sup>4</sup> Instead, Schneider differentiates between beliefs in the *possibility* of something and in its *actual* existence, arguing that at least a belief in the possibility of the monster must be present for there to be fear.<sup>5</sup> Carroll might respond that belief in the possibility of something *just is* to “entertain the proposition nonassertively,” or a thought, and is not, properly considered, a belief. However, the belief in possible existence is just as easily entertained assertively, for example, “I believe that there may be ghosts.” If this were merely a thought, then we would have to explain why some thoughts are more plausible (or better candidates to be entertained assertively) than others, which would involve some measure of belief. What we lack is a criterion for what counts as assertively entertaining a thought.

Carroll’s strong definition of belief—meaning “to entertain a proposition assertively”<sup>6</sup>—undergirds the conclusions of his Thought Theory, but the casting of belief and thought in such sharp contrast is unnecessary and confuses the issue. To merely assume the definition that proves the Thought Theory is to beg the question; the distinction could alternatively be described as one of degree, and not of kind. Schneider’s distinction between “belief in actual existence” and “belief in possible existence” meshes with Carroll’s talk of “existence beliefs” and may provide a start for developing a belief/thought continuum compatible with the major arguments of the Thought Theory. To simplify, if we consider the difference between belief and thought as a gradation, then we might be able to determine the location of any given statement by, for instance, the willingness of the person to bet on its truthfulness, as in

Rational Choice theory. Beliefs in possibility might fall somewhere between the two extremes.

We can accept two parts of the Thought Theory—viewers 1) need not confuse film and reality, and 2) need not believe in the *actual* existence of the referent of the fiction—and still attribute an important role to belief in the production of an emotional response. There are obvious limits on the efficacy of the thoughts viewers are willing to entertain; and within the range of acceptable fictional situations, there are those that viewers will less readily consider and ones that effectively provoke strong responses. Carroll gives an example of a person standing stably near the edge of a cliff, in no danger of falling, but able to become frightened by thinking about dropping off. He argues that it is not the belief that we are about to fall that makes us scared, since we are not, but the mere thought of falling that provokes the fear response.<sup>7</sup> However, one could argue, and the thought theorist would agree, that the reaction to this thought scenario is highly influenced by various beliefs. We do not hold the one particular belief that Carroll mentions; however, we do believe (in the strong sense of the term) a great number of trivial things such as: things fall; I can fall; I could get hurt if I fall from high up; or my grandfather broke both of his wrists by falling from a roof. If we believe that we are in danger of falling, or that someone fell recently, then imagining the plummet would certainly produce a greater amount of fear. Thoughts about flying upward uncontrollably and hitting your head on the ceiling are less likely to scare you than they are to make you laugh, since the supporting beliefs are not available.

At a minimum, emotional response is both primed and partially constrained by our web of potentially acceptable beliefs, however minor they may seem. The notion of “possibility beliefs” is too easily confused with “probability” and too monster-specific, hence I find it clearer to speak of the various types of “supporting beliefs.” Some of these are 1) explicit “occurrent” beliefs; others may be 2) low-level unexamined beliefs, better described as “dispositional beliefs”; and many more might be 3) variations on previously surmounted beliefs that still linger in our minds with a sense of possibility and may or may not be candidates for assertive entertainment. Though viewers do not have to confuse fiction and reality, the imagination cannot run wild and still pull the emotions, but serves best when fed by acceptable scenarios backed by supporting beliefs.<sup>8</sup> It is common to hear people criticize a film by saying “It just wasn’t believable. I couldn’t get into it.” The Thought Theory does not need to dismiss the role of such beliefs in the process of rejecting the role of the Illusion theorist’s existence beliefs.

One could reply that this discussion of belief takes place at an unnecessarily high level and that my “flying up” example shows that there are constraints on the emotion-provoking abilities of thoughts, but this has nothing to do with belief. Recent work in cognitive neuroscience suggests that the physiological states of individuals imagining the performance of some bodily movements like tapping a finger are very similar to those of the actual performance of the action.<sup>9</sup> If emotional response is correctly described as a feedback pattern, where physiological states and awareness of those states heightens emotion that, in turn, increases bodily response, then the physiological effects of visualization could be key to explaining emotional response in a manner consistent with the “Thought Theory.” This is even more compelling if we consider recent studies on rats that demonstrate that observation of movements performed by others, imagination of actions, and actual execution of motor performances share common neural substrates.<sup>10</sup> The thought theorist could argue that the lack of response to thoughts of flying up and hitting the ceiling is not the result of missing supporting beliefs; instead, it is the result of a lack of some sort of brain and bodily memory.

In an interview about the making of his films, Italian horror auteur Dario Argento described how he tries to confine displays of pain to common experiences in order to evoke visceral reactions. Rarely will he have a character shot by a gun, since few of us know what it is like to be shot; instead, his victims are either stabbed or, more likely, cut by a broken window. We all know what it is like to bump our heads against a sharp table-edge or to hit our teeth on a drinking-glass, so Argento will couple these two common experiences and show people getting their teeth rammed against a table corner. One could argue that belief has nothing to do with Argento’s strategy. It is not that we don’t believe it hurts to get shot, but that we *know* what it is like to get cut by broken glass. Instead of belief, it is some sort of “physical memory” akin to what Antonio Damasio describes as “dispensational representations,”<sup>11</sup> sparked by visualization, which makes these actions more emotionally provocative.<sup>12</sup>

One might try to characterize these established brain routines that fuel the visualization response as some sort of low-level proto-“embodied” beliefs; however, this would require a more complete description of the underlying phenomena and may require stretching the concept of belief to meaningless proportions. At a high level, the “beliefs” in question can be considered unconscious (or barely conscious) cognitive contributing factors in higher-order consciousness.

They seem to affect the plausibility of emotion-provoking scenarios by somehow lessening higher-order, error-detecting filters.<sup>13</sup> The liberalization of various higher-order filters could be a result of multiple factors. One such factor could be a belief system of sorts whereby bodily memory and filter relaxation patterns that develop from experience partially account for why certain more common thought scenarios are more effective than others.

In dealing with examples like Carroll's "thoughts of falling" and my "thoughts of flying" scenario, we may be oversimplifying the phenomena with which we are dealing. It is difficult to decouple the roles played by fear of the monster and fear of the mechanism of the threat. Perhaps confusing the issue, most discussion has centered around thoughts of the mechanics of danger—the specific devices, often resulting from the powers or weapons of the monster, that threaten the characters—rather than thoughts of the monsters themselves. To exacerbate the problem, in *The Haunting*, as in most equivocal, supernatural horror, the monster and the psychological (if not physical) threat are ambiguous and difficult to disentangle.

*The Haunting* employs higher-order, belief-oriented rhetorical strategies that must be accounted for in order to explain the film's effectiveness, and that cannot be casually dismissed as idle work. Disbelief mitigation, understood as a technique for maintaining inroads to emotional response by protecting higher-order filter liberalization from conscious, rational conservatism, may provide a gross cognitive explanation for the rhetorical strategies evident in films like *The Haunting*.

## **Spatial Experience and Haunted Houses**

Since haunted house movies build on a readily acceptable belief—that spaces are emotionally charged—they have an easier job of overcoming skeptical blockage to their premise than many other types of horror fiction. Instead of having to reconfirm a previously "surmounted" belief, *The Haunting* is in a special position relative to most horror films, since it can capitalize on an actual belief: a real-world phenomenon that provides a foundation—at the intersection of imagination, experience, and belief—upon which the narrative can be built. In what follows, I will argue that if we accept the idea that space is experienced as "funded," or rich with meaning, then everyone is primed to (or might already) believe that spaces in general are, in and of themselves, intelligent or alive in some way. The phenomenological importance of spatial experience may

provide the basis upon which to offer a solution to the particular paradox of emotional response to haunted house fictions. We might ask: Why are tales of haunted houses so often frightening if most of us do not (purport to) believe in them?

Psychologists refer to our personification, or funding, of space as “projection,” according to which feelings associated with our memories of things and spaces are attributed to the things themselves. An excellent account of the phenomenological significance of the matter is found in the writings of the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey, who considers the sustaining environment that one encounters in experience by emphasizing the importance of embodiment and activity. In his essay “The Live Creature and Ethereal Things,” Dewey argues that in experience space “becomes something more than a void in which to roam about, dotted here and there with dangerous things and things that satisfy the appetite. It becomes a comprehensive and enclosed scene within which are ordered the multiplicity of doings and undergoing which man engages.”<sup>14</sup> He might agree with Foucault that space “is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power.”<sup>15</sup> But in some ways, Dewey’s account of space is more interesting and complete than this. It is not only a form of power and control, it is a source of meaning.<sup>16</sup> For Dewey, space becomes a source of meaning as the environment becomes deeply ingrained with memories and desires—a unifying element of experience.

In “The Common Substance of the Arts,” Dewey briefly discusses the importance of space in structuring and controlling experience. He argues that movement in space is qualitative, so that “[n]ear and far, close and distant, are qualities of pregnant, often tragic import—that is, they are stated not just measured by science.”<sup>17</sup> It is not the “homogeneous space”<sup>18</sup> described by Newton or a scientific account of a spatial grid<sup>19</sup> that Dewey is concerned with here, but rather lived, qualitative space. Experienced space is “infinitely diversified in qualities.”<sup>20</sup> Qualitatively, space can be roomy or cramped, stifling or emancipatory. Though it offers room to live, it is not experienced as a container; instead “space and time are also occupancy, filling.”<sup>21</sup> A different spatial environment has a substantially different feel as our relations with it vary.

Perhaps the fundamental element of Dewey’s account of space is *place*, or particular spaces. Dewey explains how “places, despite physical limitation and narrow localization, are charged with accumulations of long-gathering energy.”<sup>22</sup> Lived space is not encountered as a homogeneous “container”<sup>23</sup> in which one can move about as if it were

nothing but a life-sized map, but as a living site with locales of personality. Places are experienced as qualitative—as fearful, depressing, nostalgic, alienating, and lonely—because they are invested with accumulated meanings. Novelist Toni Morrison captures this element of lived place with her animistic rendering of the house in *Beloved*: “Shivering, Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits.”<sup>24</sup> This perfectly captures Dewey’s insight into how places are experienced.<sup>25</sup> They are often encountered as having a temperament of their own; sometimes a temperament so terrible that all one can do is flee, if one can.

Most important for haunted house narratives, Dewey explores the relationships we have with the spaces of experience, and how they fund our future interactions, adding to their meaningfulness. It is not just the investment of familiar lived space with which Dewey is concerned, but with how present experience is “funded” in our relations with new space when the “past is carried into the present so as to expand and deepen the content of the latter.”<sup>26</sup> Haunted house films often try hard to “fund” the space of the house in an effort to control our response to the idea that a particular place might be haunted, and they offer evidence so viewers will be willing to accept this premise. As we shall see, one of the primary strategies of disbelief mitigation employed in *The Haunting* is to predispose us by providing a historical background for the house, so that we will understand how the characters must feel when approaching it.

Our willingness to accept the presence of a haunted house in a film can be partially explained as the result of a process of associational aversion that produces barely cognitive beliefs, resulting in higher-order filter liberalization. The animistic belief in cursed spaces may not be pronounced, and if it does present itself to examination we will most likely deny a rational belief in the matter. Many beliefs of this kind sit in an unexamined state until something calls them forth and they are cast out in a rational exorcism. The belief in cursed or haunted places holds a special position among the unexamined, since it is often seen as acceptable even when made explicit. For example, the preternaturally popular Oprah Winfrey once held a show on the power of place, and recounted her experiences of a house that emanated the pain of its past inhabitants. She explicitly expressed a belief in the space’s supernaturally charged quality. No one in the audience seemed to find this the slightest bit ridiculous, and the belief remained “unsurmounted.”

Lingering unexamined beliefs play a crucial role in the course of an emotional response. Greg M. Smith has provided an account of the

emotions as an “associational network,”<sup>27</sup> whereby signals triggering emotional responses come from various sources, often prior to cognitive evaluation:

Emotional evaluation takes place in parallel to the conscious assessment of stimuli. If the emotion system’s signals become strong enough to reach consciousness, emotional experience results. Once both conscious thought and the emotion system are initiated they tend to interact through a highly interconnected linkage, allowing thought to influence the course of an emotion and vice versa.

If we accept something like Smith’s account of cognitive reassessment of emotional response as leading to intervention, reduction, or amplification, the importance of mitigating disbelief is crucial. Interference with the fear produced by disbelief is harmful to the film’s success, and building associations that provoke the fear reaction is vital for maintaining higher-order filter liberalization. Instead of stopping at a purely low-level associational emotional response, the unexamined belief in cursed spaces provides a semi-cognitive amplifier for the viewer’s response, or, in Schneider’s terms, something “for the fear to latch on to.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Disbelief Mitigation in *The Haunting***

In fictional worlds, we are less likely to fight supporting beliefs, and rational examination is less likely to diminish the emotional response since we are not asked directly to believe, but only to hold the belief for the sake of the story. However, when a fanciful fictional truth engages with a nonfiction belief, the two domains interfere and real-world disbelief mitigation becomes necessary. One side of disbelief mitigation involves holding criticism at bay. This “defensive” work is achieved in two ways: 1) a character will present a refutation of the belief only to suffer from its denial or eventually be converted; and 2) often the required belief will not be made explicit within the diegesis.

In *The Haunting*, characters unreceptive to the film’s premise are put in extreme danger and punished for their doubt. Dr. Markway’s (Richard Johnson) wife is skeptical about the possibility of a house being haunted and finds her husband’s work a waste of time. She arrives at Hill House late in the film and, ignoring protest, decides to stay the night in the haunted hot seat: the old nursery. The house grows angry at her

arrogance and, working as an agent of Nell's (Julie Harris) jealousy, puts Mrs. Markway (Lois Maxwell) through an inquisition. The pounding and thumping grows to an unprecedented intensity, the passage to the nursery is blocked, and the entire group of characters is threatened by the mistake of her skepticism. When finally discovered running through the grounds, she recalls trying to escape from the house, explaining that when fleeing from the evil place she somehow fell from a trap door in the library and then ended up outside in the woods and badly shaken. The house puts her through hell as a punishment for her sinful heresy.

Luke Sanderson (Russ Tamblyn), the skeptical nephew of the current owners who is sent to Hill House to keep an eye on things, is slightly traumatized by the house and is eventually converted; he avoids extreme punishment only because his disbelief was not as firm as Mrs. Markway's. When he arrives, the doctor warns him that the doors of his closed mind could be "ripped from their hinges" in a traumatic episode if he does not at least consider the possibility of a haunting. Early in the film, Luke strongly doubts the legend surrounding Hill House, and can only think of how much he stands to gain when he succeeds in selling it; however, after the torment of the doctor's wife, he too becomes a believer in the haunting and suggests burning the evil place down, partly so that skeptics like him do not endanger the lives of anyone else. *The Haunting* presents a world in which heretics who threaten the film's premise with disbelief are punished or converted. This serves as a suggestive example to deter any viewer who might be entertaining similar doubts, letting them see the error of their ways.

To be effective, a haunted house film needs to do more than offer rebuffed skeptics as examples. The mitigation of disbelief is not only a reaction against raising critical questions, as the film can also try to encourage the belief, or else draw upon the source of an unexamined belief that we may hold. This "offensive" work is performed by 1) personifying the house; 2) personalizing the haunting experience; and 3) funding the space through a history of the location. In the process, the film keeps any statement of the belief in haunted houses unnecessary and implicit by making the source of the events ambiguous, serving the second defensive function.

Haunted house films are in a curious bind concerning the presentation of visual evidence, since it is not exactly clear what a manifestation of the haunting would/should look like. There seem to be two basic types of hauntings: those in which the house is inhabited by ghosts that do the haunting (e.g., in *The Others* [2001]); and those in which the house itself is the source of the haunting, as in *The Haunting*.

Films featuring the second type of haunting have both hands tied behind their backs, since they are unable to throw a ghost at the audience; however, this can work to their advantage, as Jan De Bont's criminally bad remake of *The Haunting* (1999) demonstrates with its goofy computer generated monsters. In Wise's original version, some puzzling visual evidence is presented (mainly the closing of doors when no one is looking), but the film refrains from other, more obvious means of visually presenting the threat. Furniture never moves around the house and plates never fly off tables. Instead, the film builds a mood of confusion and looming danger by portraying the house as a living maze of doors and a trap of loose staircases. Schneider points out that the director frequently animates the house by giving it a perspective through point-of-view shots, distortion, and pans that take the view of neither character nor objective camera.<sup>29</sup> In the staircase sequence, for example, the camera shifts views from Nell's perspective of her feet on the stairs to the house's view of her climb. Pam Keeseey finds that the house, "described in the novel as 'diseased' and 'not sane' remains essentially the same [in the film]. Hill House, we are told, is not merely haunted. It is the haunt."<sup>30</sup> Instead of localizing the horror to a supernatural inhabitant as many haunted house films do, the source of the haunting (and the numerous point-of-view shots) here is Hill House itself. Again, it is not ghosts who do the haunting in Wise's film, but lived place that is the mechanism of fear.

Like taste aversion, people seem to have a "place aversion" response to the locales of traumatic events. *The Haunting* draws on our understanding of the obvious associational aversion Nell would have to Hill House. Knowing that her coincidental relation to the house primes the space as one she should not be in is a first step in setting up the haunting. Nell's particular relationship with Hill House is emphasized both cinematically and situationally. Keeseey provides an excellent description of how Wise's camerawork portrays the house as watching Nell. When she first arrives, Wise establishes a shot-reverse-shot pattern between the house and Nell, as if they were looking at each other. Once inside, Nell's image is reflected in the floors and mirrors throughout the house, as if her image is reflecting off the house's eyes. When Nell enters her room, the camera sweeps down from the ceiling around and under Nell, as if the omniscient house has swallowed her whole.<sup>31</sup> One of the house's many direct calls to Nell comes when an inscription shows up on the foyer wall, telling her to "go home." It is Nell's history that makes the house, in popular horror slang, "shine." We expect space so charged with individual meaning to be experienced as such. It is thus no surprise

that Hill House seeks out Nell throughout the film. In the end, her relationship with the house makes her unable to leave, and Theodora (Claire Bloom) suggests that Nell has been absorbed by or joined the house since she was so much a part of it to begin with.

The shared history of Nell and Hill House's previous residents allows the horror to be experientially located and presented through the perspective of a character, which opens the possibility for doubting the veracity of evidence. This is especially effective when the sanity of the character is constantly being questioned.<sup>32</sup> A fundamental means of mitigating the rational absurdity of a haunted house is to present a view of the house through the experience of a particular character. The house is rarely portrayed as terrifying unto itself, without the verification of a character's fear. Though this is a common horror device, it is especially pronounced in *The Haunting*, where we are shown more than just screams and reaction shots: throughout the film, we are allowed to hear Nell's unspoken thoughts and reactions to events. For much of the narrative, we actually experience events through her perspective. Theodora's ESP gives her at least partial access to Nell's thoughts, such as her desire to change into her new clothes and her feelings for Dr. Markway. When exploring the house, Theo shares in Nell's feeling that the house wants her. The initial haunting episode on the first night is mainly filtered through Nell and her psychic channel, and only later do the episodes questionably involve others outside her experience as the evidence mounts and the premise becomes easier to accept.

Our spatial experiences are largely governed by our historical understanding of particular locales, especially our personal relationship and role within that history. *The Haunting* gives a careful recounting of the sordid history of Hill House, which is marked by successive female deaths resulting from mysterious causes. Charging the space by providing it a history is the primary means by which viewers are brought into a ready state where they will be willing to accept the haunting. The place must "shine" for the audience as well as the characters in the story, and it is often necessary to build a historical understanding of the site for the film in question to succeed. Preconception formation is crucial for audience acceptance and understanding when dealing with haunted houses.

*The Haunting* presents evidence for the house's haunting and punishes those who do not believe, but it never actually *forces* viewers to accept the reality of the supernatural. The film is careful never to show us too much, never to push our belief to the limit where it would have to be accepted for a scene to work. In Montague Summers's classificatory

scheme, this is an “equivocal gothic”<sup>33</sup> narrative—a fiction that casts the supernatural origins of events in doubt. Keeping the source of the horror ambiguous is a central strategy for disbelief mitigation, since it prevents skeptical thoughts from interfering with emotional responses that rely on unexamined beliefs. This is done by primarily relying on nonvisual evidence of the haunting, never visually presenting a monster, questioning evidence, and continually disputing whether the haunting is in Nell or the house.

While the film relies primarily on sound to present the source of terror, we are also given temperature evidence of the evil. Employing what is now a common trope in horror films, when the thumping noise comes for Nell, her room grows cold and we can see her breath. The house also has a cold spot in front of the nursery door that all the characters feel but for which they have no explanation. The source is never directly presented as the house itself, but this is a conclusion arrived at by the characters and the viewers through suggestion. We are never beaten over the head with causes, since that strategy can backfire; instead, viewers are asked to come up with their own answers supporting the premise prior to (or without) their presentation in the diegesis. Providing a history of the house is crucial to funding our imaginative experience of the place, so we will actively come to the conclusion that it is indeed haunted.

*The Haunting* is careful to avoid showing the source of the horror even when characters are being attacked by something in the house. On the second night of their stay, Nell goes to sleep next to Theodora in an adjacent bed. When she wakes up she does not realize she is now alone on that side of the room and assumes it is Theo’s hand that she is holding in the dark. The grip becomes tighter until it is almost crushing, but Nell never looks over. Wise never reveals what is on the other end of the grasp; it is only suggested to us through Nell’s comments and reaction. This keeps the source of the haunting ambiguous and allows us to question whether it is the house or Nell that is mad. After allying us with Nell, Wise employs Hitchcock’s suspense technique of giving the viewer more information than the characters. This is achieved by shifting the perspective from Nell to Hill House in order to provoke a protective reaction. We know it is the house squeezing her hand and want her to get out of the room. Instead of confining our knowledge to what the characters know and sharing in their skepticism, the film puts us in a superior but helpless position where we are incapable of applying our knowledge. To reiterate: the film is careful not to present the source of the horror, which might serve to provoke reactions of disbelief; instead,

we are asked to imagine the source and take the bait. By providing superior situational knowledge, we are encouraged to apply our belief in a protective emotional response. Provoking the application of an encouraged belief—one that might be questioned in other contexts—is a clever strategy of disbelief mitigation.<sup>34</sup>

Until the end, the film leaves the possibility of doubt an option. Emotional response is rather short-lived, a few minutes at the most, and our belief is both highest and most needed during peak sequences. In less heightened moments, because we are less sure about the source of the horror, critical examination of any loosely held beliefs is not prompted. At the conclusion of *The Haunting*, Nell attempts to leave, but her car seems to be chauffeured by the house. She winds up driving through the woods, blinded by darkness and branches, until she swerves to avoid the doctor's wife and crashes headlong into a tree. However, the true cause of the crash is indeterminate. The other characters question whether it was the house or Nell that brought about the accident. Since she died by hitting the same tree that the original founder's wife crashed into, we are encouraged to believe that the house is responsible, but the source is left open. Keeping the cause ambiguous further mitigates our disbelief in what we are encouraged to believe. Keesey argues that "the key to supernatural storytelling—whether on-screen or on the page—is the power of suggestion,"<sup>35</sup> but this only describes one component of a fundamental three-part structure. The pattern of disbelief mitigation goes from 1) belief encouragement, to 2) suggested application, to 3) reflective options. Such a pattern allows the film to successfully navigate our skepticism, minimize higher-order conservative responses, and leave behind a sense of uncertainty and a mood of horror.

## Conclusion

Disbelief mitigation is a battle engaged in on two fronts: films relying on unexamined beliefs to effectively fuel the imagination must try to both counter criticism and encourage belief. Techniques for countering criticism may well be generic across horror films, and a frequently employed strategy is to prevent the required belief from being made explicit, often by keeping the source of the horror ambiguous. Another common technique for countering criticism is to present and punish heretics who challenge the required belief. On the other front, belief encouragement may be more specific to the type of horror and the particular belief we are dealing with. In a film like *The Haunting*, a belief in the possibility of haunted places is helpful for optimal response. The

film funds the source of this belief by personalizing the house and providing it with a history, thereby making the events understandable, even if not expected. It draws upon the belief by presenting situations and examples that encourage us to decide that Hill House is indeed the source of the horror. Haunted house films often use our interactive experience of space, and an accidental and unexamined animistic belief resulting from this interaction, as their foundation. Often, before we even see the house, we have a foot in the door.<sup>36</sup>

## <sup>1</sup>Notes

. Space does not permit an elaboration of the two rival theories and Carroll's convincing arguments against both in *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> . *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>3</sup> . Carroll highlights two uses of the term "imagination": 1) "entertaining a thought non-assertively," and 2) where we "are the creative and primarily voluntary source of the contents of our thoughts" (88). Carroll finds that the second notion of the term is misleading since viewers need not add anything via the imagination to what the fiction presents.

<sup>4</sup> . Steven Schneider, "Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror," in *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 177.

<sup>5</sup> . Offering an account of how horror might plug in to our imagination, Schneider presents an explanation of our response to monsters as the metaphorical presentation of suppressed beliefs. He argues that: "All horror film monsters metaphorically embody surmounted beliefs, but not all of them manage to reconfirm those beliefs by their very presence." (184). Regardless of whether horror functions by presenting metaphorical examples supporting surmounted beliefs, Schneider's argument emphasizes the necessity of a conceptual foothold to prevent horror films from becoming pure camp.

<sup>6</sup> . Carroll, 80.

<sup>7</sup> . *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> . The other side of the coin might be how fear of a new technology or nuclear war or something poorly understood can broaden the acceptable range of beliefs by putting beliefs in limits in question.

<sup>9</sup> . "Studies of cerebral metabolic activity have demonstrated that most of the regions that are active during overt movement execution such as the parietal and premotor cortices, the basal ganglia, and the cerebellum are active during mental simulation as well." A. Sirigu, et al., "The Mental Representation of Hand Movements after Parietal Cortex Damage," *Science* 273 (1996): 5281. Recent work on "mirror neurons" may provide a neurological basis for the effectiveness of graphic displays of bodily harm.

<sup>10</sup> . See Maria B. Leggio, et al., "Representation of Actions in Rats: The Role of Cerebellum in Learning Spatial Performances by Observation," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, USA* 97, no. 5 (2000).

<sup>11</sup> . Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Quill, 2000), 94–105.

<sup>12</sup> . I discuss Argento's "visceral technique" in more detail in "The Principles of Association: Dario Argento's *Profondo Rosso* (*Deep Red*, 1975)," *Kinoeye: A Fortnightly Journal of Film in the New Europe* 2, no. 11 (June 10, 2002): [www.kinoeye.org/02/11/smuts11.html](http://www.kinoeye.org/02/11/smuts11.html). (June 12, 2002)

<sup>13</sup> . Building upon the work of Joseph LeDoux, Daniel H. Barratt presents something akin to a mediated shock-response explanation for emotional reaction to visual horror, where visual stimuli take a fast track to emotion pre-evaluating brain regions only to be later refereed by higher-order consciousness: "our biological makeup and our evolutionary history . . . crosses, say, a 'fast-acting' thalamus-amygdala circuit (an 'early-warning system' which effectively sacrifices accuracy for speed) with higher-order consciousness (a late 'error-detection system' which effectively sacrifices speed for accuracy)." Barratt, "The Paradox of Emotion Revisited: Uncovering the Emotional Foundations of Pictorial Representations" (unpublished manuscript): 20. See also Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (New York: Touchstone, 1998).

<sup>14</sup> . John Dewey, "The Live Creature and Ethereal Things," in *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, ed. John J. McDermott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 544.

<sup>15</sup> . Michel Foucault, "Space, Knowledge, Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 253.

<sup>16</sup> . My approach to Dewey has been influenced by John McDermott, especially his book *The Culture of Experience: Philosophical Essays in the American Grain* (New York: New York, 1976), where he develops similar themes in his discussions of Dewey. In the introduction to his edited collection, *The Philosophy of John Dewey*, McDermott points out several of Dewey's major concerns: the lived body, the primacy of growth, nonsexual repression, and the affective dimension of human activity (xxvii). Since these are central themes in Dewey's writings, it is not surprising that some of my concerns overlap with McDermott's. However, in this essay and elsewhere I develop similar themes (especially that of space) in distinct ways, through the intersection of philosophy, literature, and film, in order to argue that Dewey has developed (or else I am distilling out of his analyses) a significant social-critical tool that to date has been unfortunately ignored.

<sup>17</sup> . John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Capricorn, 1958), 207.

<sup>18</sup> . In *The Quest for Certainty*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), Dewey describes the scientific view of space as "homogeneous space" (75; 78).

<sup>19</sup> . In *Art as Experience*, Dewey contrasts the different treatments of space by science and art: "As science takes qualitative space and time and reduces them to relations that enter into equations, so art makes them abound in their own sense as significant values of the very substance of all things" (207).

<sup>20</sup> . *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>21</sup> . *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>22</sup> . Dewey, "The Live Creature and Ethereal Things," 544.

<sup>23</sup> . Dewey describes Newtonian space as "container space" in the *The Quest for Certainty*, 113.

<sup>24</sup> . Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1998), 29.

<sup>25</sup> . Another passage in *Beloved* is relevant and rewarding for thinking about Dewey: "I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget.

Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world" (36). This passage highlights the locatedness of experience and the indelibility of this attribute.

<sup>26</sup> . Dewey, "The Live Creature and Ethereal Things," 545.

<sup>27</sup> . Greg M. Smith, "Local Emotions, Global Moods," in *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotions*, ed. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 111.

<sup>28</sup> . Schneider, 177.

<sup>29</sup> . Steven Jay Schneider, "Thrice-Told Tales: *The Haunting*, from Novel to Film . . . to Film," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* (Summer 2002): 166–76.

<sup>30</sup> . Pam Keesey, "*The Haunting* and the Power of Suggestion: Why Robert Wise's Film Continues to 'Deliver the Goods' to Modern Audiences," in *Horror Film Reader*, ed. Alain Silver and James Ursini (New York: Limelight Editions, 2000), 308.

<sup>31</sup> . See Keesey, 310.

<sup>32</sup> . See Steven Jay Schneider, "Barbara, Julia, Carol, Myra, and Nell: Diagnosing Female Madness in British Horror Cinema," in *British Horror Cinema*, ed. Stephen Chibnall and Julian Petley (London: Routledge, 2001), 117–30, for a discussion of the ambiguity of the source of horror in *The Haunting*.

<sup>33</sup> . Montague Summers, *The Gothic Quest: A History of the Gothic Novel* (London: Fortune, 1938).

<sup>34</sup> . Carroll identifies a larger technique he calls "fantastic hesitation," found frequently in "equivocal gothic," where explanations are disputed and the viewer is asked to puzzle an explanation with a few pointers (156–57).

<sup>35</sup> . Keesey, 306.

<sup>36</sup> . My thanks go out to Daniel Barratt, Heidi Bollich, Jeanne Deslandes, Cynthia Freeland, Anne Jaap Jacobson, Paul Molnoski, and Steven Jay Schneider for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this chapter.