

The Desire-Frustration Theory of Suspense

In his 1962 interview with François Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock reveals the secret of his success at creating suspense. According to Hitchcock, the key to the most effective method of arousing suspense is to give the audience some crucial information that the characters lack. This certainly is not the only technique for creating suspense, but it is an extremely effective one. We find it in most of Hitchcock's films and in almost every movie in the suspense genre. For instance, in *Rear Window* (1954) Lisa (Grace Kelly) breaks into the apartment across the way in search of evidence to incriminate a suspected murderer. Hitchcock allows the audience to see the killer enter his apartment, unbeknown to Lisa, who is hunting through the bedroom. The scene is one of the most suspenseful moments in cinema. But, we must ask, why should *merely* knowing more than a character create suspense? Each of us knows lots of things that other people do not but might want to know; a mere epistemic difference does not create suspense. So what is it that makes Hitchcock's technique successful?

In this article, I develop a theory of suspense that explains the mechanism behind Hitchcock's technique. I argue for a theory called the "desire-frustration theory of suspense," which holds that the frustration of a strong desire to affect the outcome of an imminent event is necessary and sufficient for suspense. Not only can this theory explain Hitchcock's technique, it also accounts for these three curious facts about suspense:

1. It is widely thought that suspense requires uncertainty, but we often feel suspense in response to narratives when we know their outcomes ("the paradox of suspense").
2. Although we frequently feel suspense intensely

in response to narrative artworks, we seldom feel it in our daily lives ("narrative imbalance").

3. Typically, the amount of suspense we feel diminishes on repeated encounters with a narrative ("diminishing returns").¹

It is not my goal to offer a detailed description of the various aspects of the emotional state of suspense; rather, I will attempt to offer a theory of its causes. Most controversially, and perhaps most significantly, I argue that uncertainty is not necessary for suspense. I begin by describing the standard account of suspense and show how it leads to a paradox. I then develop the desire-frustration theory and show how it avoids the problems facing the standard account. Finally, I consider several objections to the desire-frustration theory and attempt to clearly differentiate it from another theory of suspense.

I. THE PARADOXICAL STANDARD ACCOUNT

Psychologists Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore, and Allan Collins put forth a useful theory of suspense that we might call the "standard account." The standard account holds that suspense is composed of three things: fear, hope, and the "cognitive state of uncertainty."² Ortony, Clore, and Collins define 'fear' as a feeling of displeasure about the prospect of an undesirable event, and 'hope' as a feeling of pleasure about the prospect of a desirable event. On the standard account, people feel suspense when they fear a bad outcome, hope for a good outcome, and are uncertain about which outcome will come to pass. For example, we might feel suspense when walking through a dangerous neighborhood at night; we fear that we

might be mugged, hope that we will be safe, and are uncertain what the outcome will be.

Ortony, Clore, and Collins argue that fear and hope are “prospect emotions”—emotions that depend on the desirability and likelihood of the yet to be determined (prospective) outcome of an event. For example, fear is amplified as the degree of danger increases. If I am fearful of being attacked, I am more fearful if the prospective attack is more undesirable: Given equal likelihood, I would be more afraid of being stabbed in the gut with a knife or beaten about the torso with a pillowcase full of oranges than merely punched repeatedly. Similarly, the more likely I believe an undesirable outcome to be, the more fearful I would be. The converse is true regarding hope: The more desirable and likely an outcome seems, the more hopeful we may feel.

The intensity of our feelings of suspense seems to rely on two features of an event’s outcome: its uncertainty and the significance of what is at stake. The standard view suggests that the greatest suspense is felt in cases where the outcome is very uncertain and the stakes are very high. You can have suspense with low stakes if there is great uncertainty or with low uncertainty if there are high stakes, but, on the standard view, if there is no uncertainty, there can be no suspense. Similarly, if nothing is at stake, there can be no desirable or undesirable outcome, hence no fear or hope, and consequently no suspense. This account of suspense sounds plausible, but by overemphasizing the role of uncertainty, the standard view runs straight into a problem known as the paradox of suspense.³

The paradox of suspense is revealed by asking the following question: If uncertainty is integral to the creation of suspense, then how is it that some films can still be suspenseful on repeated viewings? When we have already seen a movie, and we remember it well, then we are certain how it will end. Although we may not feel suspense as intensely as we did upon first viewing, it is undeniable that we do often feel some suspense upon repeated encounters with the same movie. However, if uncertainty is necessary for suspense, such suspense is impossible. The paradox of suspense can be stated more formally as follows:

1. Suspense requires uncertainty.
2. Knowledge of a story’s outcome precludes uncertainty.

3. We feel suspense in response to some narratives when we have knowledge of the outcome.

Although in isolation none of these claims is objectionable, together they are incompatible.

I propose that we reject the first claim of the paradox, that uncertainty is necessary for suspense. But before explaining why I reject the uncertainty condition, it will pay to ask whether it is less plausible than the others. Indeed, it is fairly easy to show that the second and third claims are strong by briefly looking at two failed solutions to the paradox: Richard Gerrig’s “moment by moment forgetting” theory and Robert Yanal’s “emotional misidentification” view.

Gerrig denies the second premise of the paradox—that knowing the outcome of a narrative precludes uncertainty. Roughly, he argues that evolution has not equipped humans with the ability to recall known outcomes to repeated events, since there are no exactly repeated events in nature. As such, repeat viewers can feel suspense, because while they are caught in the grip of a story they are unaware of the outcome. In this way, Gerrig argues, narrative scenarios can be effectively uncertain for viewers even if they know the outcome.⁴

We need not worry about the details of Gerrig’s account. A decisive reply to his view, or to any suggestion that viewers suffer from something akin to temporary amnesia while engrossed in a narrative, is that it is common to find clues on subsequent viewings of a movie that are only noticeable because we know the outcome. For instance, consider Hitchcock’s *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943): Early in the film, aspects of Uncle Charlie’s (Joseph Cotton) behavior that, on first viewing, might go unnoticed provide obvious evidence of his murderous past on repeated viewings. This common experience requires the same kind of recall abilities that Gerrig posits as necessarily retarded in order to feel suspense. If there were, as Gerrig suggests, “a systematic failure of memory processes to produce relevant knowledge as the narrative unfolds,” then our ability when informed by knowledge of the narrative outcome to notice new clues upon a reviewing is mysterious. Any theory that says that I cannot both feel suspense on a reviewing of *Shadow of a Doubt* and notice new clues during the same scenes should be rejected for contradicting the evidence. Our ability to notice new clues on repeated viewings gives us excellent reason to believe the second claim of

the paradox—that knowledge of the outcome of a narrative precludes uncertainty.

Whereas Gerrig takes aim at the second claim of the paradox, Yanal rejects the third—that viewers can feel suspense when they know the outcome.⁵ He asserts the first two claims of the paradox, that suspense requires uncertainty and that it is obvious that many viewers do indeed know the outcome to stories they have already encountered. Based on the intuitive plausibility of these two premises, he argues that viewers must be mislabeling their responses—they are probably just confusing the feeling of fear with what they take to be suspense.

In reply, one may point out that it is no less clear that fear is possible without uncertainty than it is that suspense is possible without uncertainty. How can one fear the outcome of an event that one knows will turn out well? If fear is best described as a prospect emotion, then the cognitive state of uncertainty would plausibly be necessary for one to feel fear. Indeed, some think that uncertainty is one of the “appropriateness conditions” for fear.⁶ But consider *Speed* (Jan de Bont, 1994): If you have seen the film or know the genre conventions, then you know that nothing bad will happen to the main characters; nevertheless, it is still possible to feel fear upon repeated viewings. How could this be? How is that you can feel fear at an outcome that you know will turn out for the best?

Again, it is no less obvious that feeling fear at the outcome of an event requires uncertainty than feeling suspense. Using Yanal’s style of argument, one could argue that when viewers report fear at the prospect of a bad outcome, when they know how it will turn out, they must be misidentifying their emotional state. But this is absurd. Although we may not be infallible introspectors, we cannot help but assume that when people identify their state as fear, it really is fear. The same goes for suspense. In any case, an a priori assumption that fear or suspense requires uncertainty is not sufficient to warrant the attribution of pervasive emotional misidentification. Since rejecting the third claim of the paradox would force us to attribute gross unreliability in everyday emotional reporting—a highly unpalatable consequence—we have good reason to believe this claim.

Since the second and third claims of the paradox of suspense are very strong, I propose that we reject the core of the standard account—the claim that suspense requires uncertainty. Although it

may seem obvious that you cannot feel suspense without uncertainty, I will argue that this intuition is erroneous. In fact, a common class of suspenseful narratives readily casts this premise in doubt, namely, historical re-enactments. Dramatizations of known historical events are based on events whose outcomes are known to audiences.⁷ Despite the fact that one knows the outcome, one can still feel suspense. If suspense requires uncertainty and one knows that a major battle will be won or a race lost, one would not be able to feel suspense when watching such dramatizations. But one can.

In response, one may argue that in most cases there are other uncertainties driving the suspense. For instance, the aspect that creates the suspense in war stories may not be the outcome of the big battle, but whether all or some of the featured characters will come out alive. However, this is not always the case. Consider *Touching the Void* (Kevin Macdonald, 2004), a documentary about a harrowing Peruvian mountain climbing expedition. At the beginning, the film introduces us to the two principal characters who proceed to recount the story. Since their account frames the narrative re-enactment, we are aware from the very beginning that none of the climbers dies—that is, we know the outcome of every single minor skirmish, so to speak; nevertheless, several moments in the film are incredibly suspenseful. Yes, it is true that we may not know precisely how the climbers escape from one peril to the next, but we are perfectly aware that the climbers do indeed manage to escape largely unharmed from each intermediate predicament. The major outcome involving all the characters is known at the start of the documentary; yet, the re-enactment remains incredibly suspenseful. It pays to note that uncertainty around the particular details of how the climbers escape from one perilous situation to the next is not the source of the suspense. Although we are ignorant of the how, we are certain of the result. If one has seen the documentary, one knows that their engagement with the movie is experientially unlike that of a “who done it” mystery. This can be made clear by simply watching the movie again: Unlike a mystery, it remains suspenseful on repeated viewings. If suspense requires uncertainty, then this is impossible.

Some explanation is in order for the intuition, made apparent by Yanal’s argument, that it is unquestionable that uncertainty is required for

suspense. Often suspenseful narratives include many surprises, and one can feel suspense if they think a surprise is up ahead. Picking up on this, many discussions of suspense, such as Kendall Walton's, lump together their treatments of suspense and surprise.⁸ This tendency to think of suspense as intimately related to surprise, for which uncertainty is required, may be one reason why many people think suspense requires the same. Although the two are often found in the same stories, and the prospect of a surprise can be the source of some suspense, the connection stops there: Surprise is clearly not involved in all or even most cases of suspense. For instance, there is no surprise resolution to the bedroom scene in *Rear Window*.

Rather than deny the obvious fact that we can feel suspense while watching *Touching the Void*, we should reject the notion that suspense requires uncertainty, and along with it the standard account offered by Ortony, Clore, and Collins. Since the standard account of suspense runs into a paradox and the emphasis on uncertainty appears to be misguided, we need a new theory. Because I reject the most widely accepted premise of the paradox—the assumption that suspense requires uncertainty—it is necessary to provide an alternative account of what is responsible for suspense. In the next section, I explain the desire-frustration theory of suspense and show how it can explain both Hitchcock's technique and the three curious features of suspense outlined in the introduction.

II. DESIRE FRUSTRATION

Consider the phenomenological aspects of this scenario: John is a tremendous fan of the New York Knicks, who are in the playoffs trailing the Chicago Bulls by one point in the last seconds of a pivotal game. Knicks' player Jared Jefferies is fouled and ends up on the free-throw line, giving his team a chance to win if he makes both shots. Jefferies misses the first shot and the crowd grows tense. If Jefferies misses the next shot, the game is over; if he can make the last free throw, then the game will go into overtime, giving the Knicks a chance to pull ahead. It goes without question that John would experience tremendous suspense in the moments before the final shot, but the case is not so clear with Jefferies. As a player, Jefferies wants to win and it is largely up to him whether the game will end with the Knicks defeated or

go into overtime. Standing on the free-throw line, Jefferies may feel incredible pressure and anxiety, but as he is raising the ball and propelling it forward, it seems unlikely that he would feel suspense. However, after the ball is released he may well feel suspense, along with the crowd, as the ball moves toward the goal.

The difference between Jared Jefferies and John at the moment of the last shot is similar to that between a driver involved in a car accident and a mere spectator. For instance, the experience of witnessing a dog wandering into traffic and barely escaping with its life is far different from the experience of swerving out of the way and barely missing a dog. The helpless spectator feels suspense, but the breathless agent feels none. The important thing to note is that even when the stakes are high, if we are actively working toward the realization of a desired outcome, suspense is precluded. However, what we find in all suspenseful narratives and in all suspenseful situations in real life are factors that suspend our efficacy by frustrating our ability to work toward the satisfaction of a desire. Suspense only arises when our ability to make a difference is radically diminished. Suspenseful situations are those where we want to affect an outcome—that is, where we strongly desire to have a causal impact—but our desire is frustrated.

The desire-frustration theory of suspense holds that the frustration of a strong desire to affect the outcome of an imminent event is necessary and sufficient for suspense. In order to feel suspense, one must care about an outcome—that is, one must have a strong desire to make it turn out the way one wants. A middling desire will not do. At a certain level of intensity, the strength of a desire can reach the level required for suspense. In addition to a strong desire, the event one cares about must be imminent. Although one can feel suspense in response to events whose outcomes are certain, one cannot feel suspense in response to events that have already transpired. Yes, one can feel suspense when an event earlier in a story is presented out of sequence, but this is only because during the presentation the event is still unfolding; it is still imminent. If one has a strong desire to achieve a particular outcome from an imminent event, suspense results when one's ability to make a difference is radically diminished. When one realizes that one's desire to make a difference is frustrated, one feels suspense.

Perhaps the best way to explain the desire-frustration theory of suspense is to show how it can account for narrative imbalance—the fact that we seldom experience suspense in real life but frequently feel it intensely in response to narratives. According to the desire-frustration theory, narratives are extremely effective at creating suspense because, unlike real life, where we can actively work toward the satisfaction of a desire, we are completely powerless over narratives. The reason narratives are so effective at creating suspense is the same reason why recidivism is possible; it deals with the very nature of narratives.⁹

Our inability to affect narratives is often something we are aware of—and something that masters of suspense frequently exploit. We all have been in a theater and wanted to yell “Look out!” or have heard someone else say it for us, venting a frustration inherent to suspense, that is, the inability to let a character know that danger lurks just around the corner. As mentioned above, one of the most suspenseful episodes in Hitchcock’s *Rear Window* (1954) is when Lisa breaks into the apartment across the way in a search for evidence of murder. Through binoculars, Jeff (James Stewart) sees the suspected murderer enter the apartment as Lisa is hunting around in the bedroom. Jeff’s position mirrors that of the audience: We are unable to warn Lisa of the danger, utterly helpless and incapable of using our knowledge to affect the outcome. A similar situation occurs in Brian De Palma’s *Sisters* (1973) when the detective is exploring the apartment while the reporter watches from an apartment across the courtyard.

There are many other examples of this technique, whereby the narrative gives the audience critical information that they can do nothing with. In Dario Argento’s *Deep Red* (*Profondo Rosso*, 1975) a girl wanders into a strange house in order to escape a deranged German shepherd that has been chasing her for the last five minutes of screen time.¹⁰ In the house, she discovers pictures of known murder victims and a tray of cut newspaper letters for composing anonymous notes. She finds her way upstairs and decides to call the police. In a deep-focus shot, the girl faces the camera in the lower left of the frame as the killer enters from behind in the upper right. The scene is incredibly suspenseful, because our ability to satisfy our desire to warn the girl is thwarted.¹¹ One of the most suspenseful scenes in *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) follows a similar pattern.

McClane (Bruce Willis) is the only person in an office building who is not held hostage by a gang of terrorists. He takes an elevator to get to a floor near where his wife is held hostage. When the elevator stops, a man, whom the viewer knows to be a terrorist, gets on. To our frustration, McClane, unaware that the man is one of the terrorists, hands him a pistol.¹² In all of these examples, the spectator’s inability to make use of information that could easily affect the outcome of a narrative situation is made apparent. Not only are these scenes effective on the first viewing, they stay suspenseful on subsequent occasions.

Merely knowing more than a character does not create suspense, but when we know something that could help a character that we care about stay alive, and we are unable to relay the information, we feel suspense. Our desire to make use of the information is frustrated—that is, we want to help, but there is nothing we can do. Hitchcock describes the experience of the audience as one of longing:

Now let us take a suspense situation. The bomb is underneath the table and the public *knows* it, probably because they have seen the anarchist place it there. The public is *aware* that the bomb is going to explode at one o’clock and there is a clock in the décor. The public can see that it is a quarter to one. In these conditions this same innocuous conversation becomes fascinating because the public is participating in the scene. The audience is longing to warn the characters on the screen: “You shouldn’t be talking about such trivial matters. There’s a bomb beneath you and it’s about to explode!”¹³

The nature of noninteractive narratives precludes the satisfaction of our desire to send a simple word of warning to any and every character. The most important reason why these scenes are so suspenseful is that they are highly effective at frustrating the audience’s ability to satisfy its desire to make manifest a particular outcome. Although not all of our desires to affect the outcome of imminent events are frustrated in our daily lives, non-interactive narratives are perfect frustrators.

However, the situation with interactive narratives is far different. Here, narrative imbalance does not hold true. Interactive narratives are seldom suspenseful, perhaps far less often than daily life. Typically, the experience of playing videogames, especially first-person shooters, is no more suspenseful than playing soccer or running

a 100-yard dash. Although action movies are frequently praised for offering moments of incredible suspense, one seldom hears action videogames described as suspenseful. If one looks closely at the moments when action videogames are able to elicit suspense, one finds that the player is often taken out of control—that is, the player is made helpless, forced to wait and see.¹⁴ But why would this be the case? The desire-frustration theory provides an explanation. The reason why non-interactive narratives are so effective at creating suspense, why videogames put players in helpless positions to create suspense, and why real life is usually not very suspenseful is that the partial frustration of our ability to satisfy our desires is necessary to the creation of suspense.

The desire-frustration theory of suspense is not only a good explanation for narrative imbalance; it can also explain diminishing returns. At root, frustration is a matter of impatience and this is probably why suspenseful events need to be imminent. Recognizing this fact about the causes of frustration, we should not be surprised to find that suspense diminishes in cases where particularly patient viewers know the outcome or where viewers feel only faint desires. With foreknowledge of a happy outcome, we are in a position to focus on the fact that our desire will be fulfilled, and if we are particularly patient, we may feel less suspense. However, we are often not so patient, and when our ability to satisfy our desire for a particular outcome is frustrated, suspense is the typical result. There are undoubtedly multiple desires involved in our narrative-guided experiences. Some desires such as those to learn the outcome or to figure out the solution to a puzzle posed by the story are precluded by foreknowledge. Other desires, such as the desire to see the outcome manifested this time around, cannot be satisfied by knowledge of the outcome. Where there are strong desires for an imminent outcome and the viewers are not in an unresponsive, affectless state, we have the breeding ground for suspense.¹⁵

Since the desire-frustration theory does not propose uncertainty as a necessary condition of suspense, it avoids the paradox of suspense. It can provide a straightforward explanation for how suspense is possible in conditions of certainty about the outcome of an event. For instance, in the case of the mountain climbers in *Touching the Void*, we desire to see them return safely to base camp. During their return trip, however, various

obstacles are put in their way, prolonging the harrowing adventure. These intermediate events frustrate our desire to see the climbers return successfully to camp and repeatedly frustrate our desire to lend aid to the injured.

Audiences feel suspense on subsequent viewings of a movie not because they cannot remember how the story will turn out, but because their desires have not been fulfilled this time around. On a general account, what it means to desire is to want something to be the case. As it is usually put, desires are world-correcting, and beliefs are world-corrected; we adjust the world to fit our desires, but we adjust our beliefs to fit the world.¹⁶ The desired outcome has not yet occurred when the story is still unfolding, so there is still something to desire even if you know how the situation will be resolved. One may know the outcome of a narrative, as audiences do with *Touching the Void*, but still want to see it take place—to see the climbers return to camp—and want to lend aid in times of crisis. Stories can arouse and frustrate many of the same desires on subsequent encounters.

Typically, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, the most effective way to make us desire to see an outcome is to make us care for the characters, and it is fairly hard to make us want something as airy as knowledge of the solution to the crime, when we already know it from a previous reading or viewing of the narrative. Ineffective stories that fail to engage audiences are not suspenseful because they fail to elicit narrative desires. To generate suspense, a story must create and then frustrate audience desire. But to remain suspenseful on repeated readings or viewings, a narrative must accomplish a far more difficult task: It must be able to repeatedly arouse audience desire. Accordingly, we might say that *diminishing suspense is most often a failure of the narrative to make us want; and recidivist suspense is most often our failure to get what we want from the narrative when we want it.*

III. OBJECTIONS

There are a few avenues of attack one might take against the desire-frustration theory of suspense. First, one may object to the claim that uncertainty is not a necessary condition of suspense, since there seem to be cases where uncertainty

is required. For instance, contrast the experience someone without a lottery ticket would have in watching the selection of winning numbers with the experience of a ticketholder.¹⁷ It is hard to imagine someone without a ticket feeling any suspense, but someone who holds a lottery ticket might plausibly be thought to feel suspense as the numbers are revealed. The important difference between the person without a ticket and a ticketholder is in knowledge of the outcome: The nonticketholder does not feel suspense since she knows with certainty that she will not win, whereas the ticketholder does not know the outcome. Hence, the objection concludes, there are some cases where suspense requires uncertainty.

For the sake of argument, assume that the important difference between the person without a ticket and the ticketholder is foreknowledge of the outcome, and that in this case uncertainty is necessary. This casts no doubt on the claim that uncertainty is not necessary for *all* cases of suspense, that one can feel suspense on some occasions without uncertainty. Further, this example is not a problem for my explanation of the *paradox of suspense*, since the lottery case does not admit of repeated suspenseful encounters. It is hard to imagine that either a lottery winner or loser would feel suspense reviewing the selection of the numbers if they already knew the outcome. Similarly, mystery stories where the suspense (if it is properly so called) is merely predicated on the revelation of the murder do not admit of recidivist suspense. Ryan calls this “who done it suspense”; Hitchcock goes so far as to deny that mysteries generate suspense even on initial encounters.¹⁸ But supposing that they do, once one knows the outcome there is not much else to desire from a “who done it” mystery. It is less uncertainty than ignorance that drives suspense in mysteries. Not knowing a fact about a past event (such as, “Did the butler or the driver do it?”) is far different from the kind of uncertainty thought to be necessary for suspense—uncertainty about how a future event will turn out.

A more direct reply to the lottery counterexample is forthcoming. The relevant difference between the experience of a ticketholder and a nonticketholder is one of desire, not uncertainty. In the lottery case, the event is merely a revelation. The ticketholder’s anticipation is exclusively based on lack of knowledge, but there is nothing to desire if one knows the outcome: Most plausibly,

one cannot desire what one already has.¹⁹ One desires to know if one has won the lottery—that is, if one holds the winning numbers; the desire is not simply that one wishes to win the lottery. And even if it were, it is hard to imagine desiring to win a game that one is not playing. Nonticketholders may have some kind of vague desire to come into a windfall or to win a lottery of some kind, but they do not have a desire to find out if they have the winning numbers to any particular lottery and certainly do not have a frustrated desire to affect the outcome of some imminent lottery.

On a related line of argument, one may object that the desire-frustration theory of suspense cannot account for cases of suspense where we do not seem to desire anything at all. Consider watching a hockey game where you do not know either team or a boxing match where you are not a fan of either boxer. The objection continues: Don’t we often feel suspense in response to such occasions? As an initial response, I would answer no. Necessarily, we do not feel suspense in response to an event if we do not care about the outcome. If we do not care about the outcome, the game will leave us flat. But when we get involved in a game, there might be several different kinds of desires at work. Fans desire to see their team win and fear that they will lose. Watching a close match, even a nonfan can get caught up in the struggle. It is hard not to root for the underdog in a drawn-out competition. Also, one might simply develop the desire to know who will win, as in the mystery case.

Rather than fear, hope, and uncertainty, the desire-frustration theory holds that suspense results from the frustration of a strong desire to affect the outcome of an imminent event. Most typically, narrative situations that elicit strong desires will also arouse fear. As an objection to the desire-frustration theory, one may argue that such situations smuggle in uncertainty via fear. We can see how this might be the case by pointing out that the standard account is redundant. If fear and hope are prospect emotions, as Ortony, Clore, and Collins claim, then the uncertainty condition is redundant. Both fear and hope have uncertainty built in, since a known outcome is not a prospect; it is a given. Rather than develop a theory of fear, I reply by arguing that fear is not predicated on uncertainty, and, hence, neither are the majority of suspenseful situations that are accompanied by fear.

To see why uncertainty is not necessary for fear, consider an example that is not an action movie or a thriller. Argentinean director Lucrecia Martel's movie *The Swamp* (La Ciénaga, 2001) is an excellent example of a narrative whose outcome is in some sense well known, but nevertheless suspenseful. Throughout the movie, via subtle foreshadowing and shadings of character, we are led to know that the youngest child, Luciano (Sebastián Montagna), will come to a horrible end. Early in the movie, he was terrified by an urban legend about a girl who takes home a dog that then eats her cat. In the legend, the girl takes the dog to the veterinarian and finds out that it is actually a dangerous African rat. Later in the movie, Luciano is found to have teeth growing out of the roof of his mouth, just like the African rat's legendary double ring of teeth, thereby establishing a connection between the mythical rat and Luciano. In another scene, in front of his mother and sister, Luciano ominously holds his breath well past the point of comfort, scaring his family into thinking he will do himself harm—he is playing dead, in a sense.

Luciano's cousins and siblings joke that an unseen dog living across the courtyard wall is actually an African rat, stoking Luciano's curiosity. Luciano's mother props a ladder against the wall to make some adjustments to a hanging. When his mother tells him to stay off the ladder, Martel makes it clear that he will die here. The viewer waits in fear for Luciano to fall over the wall and to be eaten by the growling, unseen dog. When Luciano falls off the ladder back into his own yard and hits his head on a pot, the viewers are not surprised at the fact that he dies, only at the method. Our fear did not result from uncertainty, quite the opposite: We feel fear and suspense during the course of *The Swamp* precisely because we know that something terrible will happen to Luciano.

One can produce many common examples to show that fear does not require uncertainty. The first time one watches Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), one may feel mild fear for Marion Crane (Janet Leigh) as she chats with Norman Bates (Anthony Perkins) in the hotel office. Filled with stuffed, menacing birds, the office creates an aura of danger, but audiences have no reason to suspect that in the next couple of minutes Norman will bury a carving knife in Marion's chest as she showers. On a second viewing, one feels a great deal more fear and suspense during the office scene. Norman's disturbance seems obvious on repeated viewing.

How could Marion fail to see it? One wants to scream "Get out of there!"

On a similar line of argument, one might try to suggest that my account of suspense and my solution to the paradox is indistinct from Noël Carroll's theory.²⁰ Carroll argues that even if we know that a film will end in a certain way, we can still imagine, while watching it, that it will end otherwise. He argues that merely imagining that an event's outcome is uncertain is enough to create suspense, thereby qualifying the first claim of the paradox—uncertainty is necessary for suspense. Since my account does not make reference to uncertainty and I explicitly deny that uncertainty in any form is necessary for suspense, I see little similarity. Perhaps it would be instructive to explain why I do not make reference to the "entertained uncertainty" view.

My primary concern with the entertained uncertainty view is that, depending on what one might mean by 'entertain,' it seems awkward to suggest that what allows narratives such as *Touching the Void* to be suspenseful is that they encourage viewers to entertain the story's outcome as uncertain. Neither an active nor a passive explanation of what it means to entertain the uncertainty of an unfolding narrative is satisfying. Active entertaining lacks phenomenological support: Viewers certainly are not actively attempting any such disavowal of their knowledge of the outcome. The passive notion of entertaining is too thin: If entertaining the thought that the outcome is uncertain is the same as following a narrative, then this seems to substitute a new name as an explanation. I am not claiming that the entertained uncertainty view is simply a word game. It does provide a substantive and extremely convincing account of what viewers are up to when they are following a story; they are entertaining thoughts. Carroll argues that the activity of merely entertaining thoughts is sufficient to arouse emotional responses, and that by entertaining the thoughts prompted by an unfolding narrative, viewers are effectively entertaining the uncertainty of the outcome of the narrative's events. This, Carroll argues, is often sufficient to create suspense when audiences are concerned about a narrative outcome. However, there is good reason to think that the theory's focus on uncertainty is misdirected.

If entertaining a narrative outcome as uncertain roughly means to follow a story, then all narrative outcomes are uncertain; however, not all

narratives, even the outcomes for which we are deeply concerned, are even remotely suspenseful. Likewise, most of the events in our daily lives are uncertain, but almost none are suspenseful. As such, in order to explain how we could feel suspense under conditions of certainty, the entertained uncertainty theory requires supplementation with a theory of suspense. The entertained uncertainty theory tells us that audiences merely need to entertain the narrative outcomes as uncertain, which chiefly involves nonassertively entertaining a variety of propositions as the story unfolds. This does not explain why narrative art is more likely to arouse suspense than events in our daily lives, even though anything occurring in our actual lives has objectively higher stakes for us than something merely happening in a story. Nor does it explain why suspense diminishes on repeated encounters with a narrative. Rather than supplement the entertained uncertainty view with a theory of suspense, I propose a unified solution. But none of this constitutes an objection to the theory of "entertained uncertainty."

I reject the entertained uncertainty theory because, as *Psycho* and *The Swamp* demonstrate, certainty rather than uncertainty can often make a narrative more suspenseful. The reason why the office scene in *Psycho* is more suspenseful on subsequent viewings cannot be that audiences are entertaining that the outcome is as uncertain as it was on their first viewing; rather, it is more suspenseful because they know with certainty that Marion Crane will soon be murdered, they do not want it to happen, and they cannot do anything about it.

IV. CONCLUSION

The desire-frustration theory of suspense holds that suspense results when one's desire to affect the outcome of an imminent event is frustrated. Rather than fear, hope, and uncertainty, the desire-frustration theory holds that suspense results from the frustration of a strong desire to affect the outcome of an imminent event. This theory explains the three curious facts about suspense that I describe in the introduction. On the desire-frustration theory, there is no paradox of suspense, since it does not propose uncertainty as a necessary condition for suspense. Regardless of our knowledge of the outcome, we can be frus-

trated in our attempts to affect the outcome of a narrative event. Narrative imbalance is explained by reference to the fact that in our daily lives we can usually actively work toward the realization of desired outcomes, whereas we are completely powerless over noninteractive narratives. When this powerlessness is made apparent, frustration can result. The desire-frustration theory can also explain diminishing suspense: Since some desires are vanquished by knowledge, one yearns for less on subsequent encounters with a story. And one often yearns less for what one has had before. Not only does the desire-frustration theory account for these three facts about suspense, it also offers an explanation of the mechanism behind Hitchcock's technique. We feel suspense not simply because we know something that could potentially save the life of a character, but because no matter how strongly we desire to help, we cannot do anything with our knowledge. The Master of Suspense honed the method; the desire-frustration theory explains why it works.²¹

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1. In *Narrative as Virtual Reality*, Marie-Laure Ryan notices the imbalance in theories of suspense, which are far more weighted to explaining the paradox rather than the common case. See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

2. Andrew Ortony, Gerald L. Clore, and Allan Collins, *The Cognitive Structure of Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 131.

3. For an overview of the major solutions to the paradox of suspense, see Aaron Smuts, "The Paradox of Suspense," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (forthcoming). Jonathan Frome and I introduce the paradox in a similar way in our co-written essay on the creation of suspense in videogames, "Helpless Spectators: Suspense in Videogames and Film," *Text Technology* 1 (2003): 13–34.

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

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

6. For example, in his excellent lectures on the rational fear of death, Shelly Kagan argues that for fear to be appropriate there must be uncertainty; see <http://open.yale.edu/courses/philosophy/death/sessions/lecture22.html>.

It pays to note that my concern is not with the rationality or fittingness of fear or suspense to an object, but with the conditions that give rise to fear and suspense.

7. Richard Gerrig calls this kind of situation “anomalous replotting,” saying that it is related to the paradox of suspense; however, I see no essential difference between the two, and I do not think that they are different enough to warrant two labels. See Richard Gerrig, “Re-experiencing Fiction and Non-Fiction,” p. 278.

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

9. The situation is different if the narrative is interactive. I am referring to noninteractive narratives unless I explicitly say otherwise.

10. For more on *Deep Red*, see Aaron Smuts, “The Principles of Association: Dario Argento’s *Profondo Rosso* (*Deep Red*, 1975),” *Kinoeye* 2 (2002).

11. I would argue that our ability to modify the narrative in noninteractive narratives is logically thwarted. If the narrative is noninteractive, its story cannot be modified by audiences. This is an analytic truth. Hence, there are no possible worlds in which audiences can modify the stories of noninteractive narratives. Accordingly, our ability to warn the girl in *Deep Red* is metaphysically impossible. This is not an ontological but a logical gap.

12. I thank Jonathan Frome for this example.

13. Francois Truffaut, *Hitchcock/Truffaut* (Touchstone, 1983), p. 73.

14. I first noted the role of helplessness in videogame suspense in “Film Theory Meets Video Games: Issues and Methodologies in *Screenplay*,” eds. King and Krzywinska,” *Film-Philosophy* 7 (2003). For more on videogame suspense see Frome and Smuts, “Helpless Spectators.”

15. Imminence gives a situation a sense of urgency, which may be necessary for suspense. As Paisley Livingston pointed out to me, most rational people think that they will

die some day, but it is not typically an all-consuming worry. However, as soon as our death becomes imminent a sense of urgency is created, and we may even feel suspense at our own impending demise.

16. For criticisms of the direction of fit account of belief and desire, see David Sobel and David Copp, “Against Direction of Fit Accounts of Belief and Desire,” *Analysis* 61 (2001): 44–53.

17. I thank Jonathan Lange for raising the lottery objection. As a point of clarification, I assume that the person without a ticket does not have any close friends with tickets and so forth.

18. *Hitchcock/Truffaut*, p. 72.

19. There is some controversy around the claim that one cannot desire what one already has. If not logically or even psychologically impossible, it is, no doubt, exceedingly rare. Of course, one might “want” something to stay the same, such as wanting to keep a sweater rather than give it away or wanting to keep one’s car in the same spot when asked to move it. Echoing Socrates’ argument in the *Symposium*, Anthony Kenny is correct to point out that the “want” in such cases is just shorthand for “wanting to keep,” which is essentially a desire for the future. L. W. Sumner makes the same point in *Welfare, Happiness, and Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 129. On the opposite side, Chris Heathwood argues, albeit unconvincingly, against the claim that we can only desire what we do not have in his intriguing essay “The Reduction of Sensory Pleasure to Desire,” *Philosophical Studies* 133 (2007): 23–44.

20. See Noël Carroll, “The Paradox of Suspense,” in *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

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