

# The Ghost is the Thing: Can Reactions to Fiction Reveal Belief?

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## Abstract

I argue that emotional responses to some horror fiction can plausibly reveal that audience members harbor beliefs in the supernatural that they might otherwise deny holding. To clarify the terms of the discussion, I begin by documenting five important features of belief. I then explore the role of belief in the production of emotional response by posing a hard question that none of the leading theories answers directly: Why are some fictional scenarios and events so much more effective than others? I argue that the answer sometimes has to do with belief—that is, the beliefs about the world that audiences bring to fictions. After briefly laying the groundwork, I argue that cultural differences in emotional responses to some horror fiction are best explained by what supernatural beliefs audience members hold.

## Prologue

I have heard

That guilty creatures, sitting at a play,  
Have by the very cunning of the scene  
Been struck so to the soul that presently  
They have proclaim'd their malefactions;  
For murder, though it have no tongue, will speak  
With most miraculous organ, I'll have these players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle: I'll observe his looks;  
I'll tent him to the quick: if he but blench,  
I know my course. The spirit that I have seen  
May be the devil: and the devil hath power  
To assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,—  
As he is very potent with such spirits,—  
Abuses me to damn me: I'll have grounds  
More relative than this.—the play's the thing  
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

*(Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2)*

## 1 Introduction

At the end of Act II, Hamlet devises a clever strategy to determine if his father was the victim of fratricide. He decides to stage a reenactment of what he suspects is the method of his father's death. If his uncle Claudius is indeed guilty, the play will likely arouse emotions that will manifest his guilt for all to see. Hamlet's strategy is ingenious. It is highly plausible that Claudius' reaction to "The Mousetrap" could solve the mystery of his father's sudden death. But does this situation have broader applicability? Can the cunning of a scene help catch the conscience of the audience? The question I want to ask in this paper is whether reactions to fiction can reveal anything important about what beliefs audience members hold.

There is at least one reason to think that Hamlet's strategy is not generalizable, namely, the situation of most audience members is radically different from that of Claudius. If guilty, Hamlet's uncle will be witness to a fiction of remarkable coincidence, one where an extremely odd form of murder that he recently committed shows up in the prelude to a stage play. In a sense, the play is no longer a fiction for Claudius, but this is seldom the case for actual audiences.

Although normal audiences are not in a situation analogous to Claudius, there is good reason to believe that reactions to fiction can indeed sometimes reveal important information about a wide variety of beliefs that audience members hold. For example, one's sense of injustice can only be aroused if one believes that a character is treated unfairly. Of course, one does not have to believe that the characters exist, but one does indeed need to believe that the behavior portrayed is unjust. Similarly, it is difficult to root for swift revenge if we cannot plausibly be said to believe that the situation at hand warrants retaliation.

However, these are not the kinds of beliefs that concern me in this paper. Instead, I ask whether emotional responses to some horror fiction can reveal that audience members harbor beliefs in the supernatural. In fact, I think they can. And most significantly, I think that the beliefs putatively caught by horror are often those that audience members might otherwise deny holding.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the particular question that I intend to answer is this: Can emotional responses to horror fiction reveal audience beliefs in the supernatural?<sup>2</sup>

In order to answer this question, we need to be clear about what we mean by "belief." Accordingly, I begin with a general overview of the nature of belief and document five of its important, but controversial features. I then proceed to discuss the role of belief in the production of emotional response by posing a

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<sup>1</sup> The seminal work on the philosophical problems arising from our engagement with horror fiction is Noel Carroll's *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart*, (Routledge, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> Less there by any ambiguity, here, I mean that they have partial beliefs in particular types of supernatural forces and creatures, not some vague supernaturalism.

hard question that none of the leading theories answers directly: Why are some fictional scenarios and events so much more effective than others? I argue that the answer, at least partly, has to do with belief. I do not provide a comprehensive account of the way in which belief factors into our emotional responses to fiction, rather, I merely argue that differences in belief plausibly help to account for variations in the intensity of our reactions. After discussing a few important aspects of belief and sketching the role of belief in the production of emotional response to fiction, I proceed to develop an argument in support of the position that differences in audience responses to some horror movies are best explained by what beliefs they hold.

## 2 Five Features of Belief

In order to determine if emotional response to fiction can reveal audience belief, it is unnecessary to defend a particular theory of belief, such as a representational, dispositional, interpretationist, or functionalist theory.<sup>3</sup> This would merely court unnecessary controversy. Besides, most theories of belief developed in the philosophy of mind are products of larger theories of the mental, which are principally designed to solve the mind body problem, not to illuminate mundane features of our everyday concept. With a bit of supplementation, our everyday "folk psychological" theory is more than adequate for the present task.

We typically make reference to beliefs in conjunction with desires in order to explain someone's actions. People follow a certain course of action if they believe that pursuing it will fulfill some desire that they hold. For instance, to use a familiar example, we bring an umbrella with us when we leave the house if we believe that it will rain, we do not want to get rained on, and we believe that an umbrella will keep us dry in the rain. However, if we desired to get wet, then even if we believed that it would rain, we would not carry an umbrella. On the standard Humean account of motivation, beliefs are not sufficient for motivation; it is only in conjunction with a desire that we can be motivated to act. We are motivated to act only when we believe that pursuing some course of action will satisfy an end that we desire.<sup>4</sup>

One can further elucidate the concepts of "belief" and "desire" by contrasting what is called their "direction of fit." Crudely, we say that beliefs aim to fit the world, whereas, desires aim to change the world—to make it fit the desire. Beliefs are therefore world-*corrected*, and desires are said to be world-*correcting*. When we find out that the world is not as we believed it to be, our

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<sup>3</sup> Schwitzgebel's entry on "Belief" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* provides an excellent overview of theories of belief.

<sup>4</sup> For a remarkably clear critical discussion of motivational Humeanism and references into the vast literature, see chapter 5 of Russ Shafer-Landau's *Moral Realism: A Defense* (Oxford UP, 2003).

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beliefs are corrected; beliefs aim at the truth.<sup>5</sup> We may believe that durian fruit smells like honey, but if we cut one open, the odor of molding feces would quickly correct our belief. However, if we merely desire that durian fruit smelled like honeydew, then the actual foul odor would do nothing but strengthen our desire.<sup>6</sup>

For present purposes, this general overview will almost suffice. There are a few other important features of belief that any plausible theory will likely have to account for. I will note five: (I) behavior is the chief source of evidence for attributing beliefs, (II) we have fallible access to our own beliefs, (III) beliefs come in degree, (IV) beliefs can be partial, and (V) any actual person's total set of beliefs likely includes contradictions.

*I.* No matter the theory of belief, behavior is of utmost importance for both the nature of the concept and for its application. In many cases, behavior provides the sole source of warrant for attributing belief. Indeed, it is the primary source of warrant for thinking that others hold certain beliefs. Just as we typically come to learn about other people's beliefs from their behavior, not from inspecting their mental representations, we often come to learn about our own beliefs based on our own behavior. In fact, sometimes, this might be the only way can learn about our own beliefs.

*II.* It is relatively uncontroversial to note that we do not have infallible access to all of our own beliefs. Many think that we have first-person privileged, non-inferential access to *many* of our own beliefs. That is, we seem to be able to tell what beliefs we have by mere introspection, whereas other people can only discern our beliefs based on our actions. But we certainly do not have non-inferential access to *all* of our beliefs, even though we may sometimes have first-person privileged access to some of the evidence. Although we have access to our private thoughts, which include explicit assertions of belief, our thoughts are merely one type of fallible evidence from which we can infer belief. Indeed, few philosophers think that it is impossible to discover that we unexpectedly hold beliefs that we might otherwise deny having. We might even go so far as to say that there are some beliefs that are introspectively inaccessible.

*III.* Not only are some beliefs likely introspectively inaccessible, some beliefs are held more strongly than others. I am certain that I know my birth-date, but I am far less certain that the capital of Kazakhstan is still Akmola. As it is commonly put, beliefs come in different degrees. Depending on one's theory of belief, one may prefer to describe what appear to be different degrees of the same belief as, in fact, two beliefs, each with a different degree of

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<sup>5</sup> For further development of this claim, see: Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe," In: *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge UP, 1973): 136-151

<sup>6</sup> This is a very crude formulation of the direction of fit distinction between belief and desire. Some think that it smuggles in belief as part of the definition. For further development of this criticisms, see Copp and Sobel, "Against Direction of Fit Accounts of Belief and Desire," *Analysis*, 61 (2001): 44-53.

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probability.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of whether or not we speak in degrees, the best theory of belief needs to be able to account for variability in conviction.

IV. For our purposes, one aspect of belief that should be emphasized is that our beliefs are not always fully formed. We are often in a state of partial belief—learning, forgetting, or in a state of self-denial. We do not have to accept a broad holism to agree that one cannot unambiguously be said to hold a belief if they do not realize extremely obvious implications. And cases where we might have partial or contradictory beliefs are not uncommon. For instance, when one is in the process of learning something new, we might be best described as having a partial belief: One may recognize only a few consequences of a newly forming belief and be less confident in its implications.<sup>8</sup> The same goes for forgetting. Although someone may not be able to recall the name of a grade-school friend, she might be able to pick the name out of a list. In such cases, it is not clear that we want to say that she still knows the name. It is not just inaccessible; it seems to be fading, just partially there—only a few sounds remain. Similarly, someone undergoing a crisis of faith might rapidly vacillate between feeling the benevolent hand of God and the cold emptiness of a godless universe. Or, one may deny the existence of God and still be prone to attribute good fortune to providence. It seems fair to say that these are cases of partial belief.<sup>9</sup>

Also, there are common cases of self-deception where we may be best described as both holding and denying painful beliefs, such as the belief that one's spouse is unfaithful. These cases do not always involve conscious willful denial. In some circumstances one might be suspicious, jealous, or resentful, but sincerely defend one's spouse's fidelity when confronted by a friend. Someone may behave as if it were not true and defend their spouse against the suspicions of others, but at the same time they may fail to feel surprise when presented with incontrovertible evidence of infidelity. In such a situation it is fitting to describe the belief in infidelity as partial. As we shall see, the notion of a partial belief is

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<sup>7</sup> This leads to the bizarre result people almost always disagree, unwittingly, since they likely differ ever so slightly in confidence.

<sup>8</sup> In the literature on belief, the notion of "partial belief" often takes on a far different meaning, where it is contrasted with "flat-out" belief. That notion of partial belief tracks degree of conviction, whereas, the notion of partial belief that I'm discussing concerns the content of the belief. For more on the notion of partial belief that I'm working with, see Eric Schwitzgebel, "A Phenomenal, Dispositional Account of Belief," *Nous* 36:2 (2002): 249-275. Due to limitations of scope, it is not possible for me to adequately defend this notion of "partial belief" here.

For more on the relationship between partial and "flat out" belief, see Keith Frankish "Partial Belief and Flat-out Belief," In: *Degrees of Belief*, eds. F. Huber and C. Schmid-Petre (Oxford, 2007). See also Ronald de Sousa's seminal essay on the topic: "How to Give a Piece of Your Mind: Or, The Logic of Belief and Assent", *Review of Metaphysics* 25 (1971): 52-79.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Schwitzgebel gives similar examples in "In-Between Believing," *Philosophical Quarterly* 51 (2001): 76-82, p. 76.

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of crucial importance to understanding audience reactions to horror fiction.<sup>10</sup>

V. If some beliefs are indeed introspectively inaccessible, others partial or not fully formed, it would not be surprising to find blatant contradictions. In fact, it would be miraculous if our web of beliefs were perfectly consistent. Undeniably, each of us has a vast number of beliefs, the implications of which we are scarcely aware. It would be the height of hubris to think that even the best of us could realize the implications of all of our beliefs. And it would be even more ridiculous to think that there would be no contradictions in the bunch. The only real controversy is how pernicious the lurking contradictions might be.

For our purposes, this brief sketch of belief will be adequate. Although I do not adopt a particular theory of belief, in the following discussion I will assume two important things about belief. First, I assume that our beliefs can be partial—not fully formed, nascent, and perhaps mildly contradictory. This state is typical of beliefs that we are forgetting, dispelling, and acquiring. Second, I assume that we can be unaware of some of the beliefs that we hold. Some beliefs might even be inaccessible via introspection. My argument rests on these two highly plausible, relatively uncontroversial assumptions. But for obvious reasons, neither can be adequately defended here. This should not be cause for concern, since both assumptions are far less controversial than my ultimate conclusion.

I turn now to a brief exploration of the role of belief in our emotional responses to fiction.

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<sup>10</sup> My ultimate conclusion could be restated in terms of degree without much trouble. But I think that the notion of partial belief better captures the phenomena. I discuss this when considering the first objection.

### 3 The Role of Belief in Emotional Response to Fiction

Why are vampires, werewolves, and other assorted horror monsters frightening for people who deny believing in such supernatural creatures? In order to appreciate the major answers to this question, we must first look at a closely related puzzle. How are horror movies able to horrify when we are perfectly aware that what we are watching is fiction? We know that there is no such person as Marion Crane who is about to be stabbed by Norman Bates and no poolside party of teenagers about to be ripped to shreds by Freddy Kruger, but we are scared nonetheless. This puzzle is known as the "Paradox of Fiction," which boils down to the question of how it is that we respond to fictional scenarios with genuine emotions.<sup>11</sup>

It seems plausible to say that an emotional response requires a belief in the reality of its object. To see why, consider this scenario: Imagine that you are at lunch with an old friend that you have not talked to in a while. Over the course of the meal, he describes in great detail how his wife of many years recently died after a painful battle with cancer. It is not controversial to think that you might feel sorry for your friend, depressed, and perhaps distraught. After paying the check, on the way out your friend tells you that he's been "pulling your leg" and that his wife, alive and healthy, would like to meet for drinks later. In this situation you might be angry with your friend: Had you known that his wife was alive and well, it seems that you would not have felt painful sympathy for your friend, or so we assume.<sup>12</sup> But knowing that many fictional narratives are merely make-believe has no dampening effect on our emotional responses. The paradox of fiction asks: How is this possible?

I do not intend to provide a complete answer to the question here, but a

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<sup>11</sup> There are two puzzles that are said to fall under the banner of "The Paradox of Fiction." Radford's original problem concerned the rationality of our responses to fiction. The biggest problem with charges of irrationality is that no one, not even Radford, thinks that we have any reason to stop responding to fiction. Without reason to do otherwise, it is hard to say that our emotional reactions to fiction are irresponsible to reason, i.e. irrational. A second, psychological question, has taken center stage. Much of the debate, including this article, revolves around the psychological problem of accounting for how it is that we seem to respond to fictions with genuine emotions.

For more on the rationality question, see Colin Radford, "Fiction, Pity, Fear, and Jealousy," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 53 (1995): 71-75, p. 75; Tamar Szabó Gendler and Karson Kovakovich, "Genuine Rational Fictional Emotions," In: *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Blackwell, 2005); Derek Matravers "The Challenge of Irrationalism, and How not to Meet it," In: *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Matthew Kieran (Blackwell, 2005); Richard Joyce, "Rational Fear of Monsters," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 40.2 (2000): 209-224; and Berys Gaut, *Art, Emotion, and Ethics* (Oxford, 2007), pp. 216-227.

<sup>12</sup> Noël Carroll tells a similar tale in *The Philosophy of Horror*.

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brief discussion of the contours of the major solutions will be instructive.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most popular account of fictional engagement among non-philosophers is the Illusion theory. Illusion theorists claim that audiences in some way partially believe in the existence of the fictional characters and events. They typically argue that audiences either "suspend disbelief" or merely half-believe in the reality of the fiction. But, this should strike us as odd since audiences fail to behave as if they genuinely believe that fictions are real. Shakespeare reduced the illusion theory to absurdity via The Rude Mechanicals in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Worried that the play might scare the women in the audience, Bottom decides that he will remind everyone that what they are about to see is merely fiction:

I have a device to make all well. Write me a prologue, and let the prologue seem to say we will do no harm with our swords, and the Pyramus is not killed indeed. And, for the better assurance, tell them that I, Pyramus, am not Pyramus, but Bottom the weaver. This will put them out of fear. (III.1:15-20)

Of course, no such warning is necessary. Bottom's well-meaning prologue is funny precisely because the illusion theory is wrong: Audiences do not confuse fiction and reality, not even a little. They do not need to be told that the lion is Snug the joiner.

Assuming that genuine emotions require belief in their objects, Kendall Walton asks if an imagined horror fan named Charles is genuinely afraid of the *Green Slime*, or if perhaps Charles is only experiencing make-believe or, what he calls, quasi-fear. Walton argues that Charles uses the fiction as a prop in a fictional game of make-believe, one in which he features. Of course, we might balk at that suggestion that audiences imaginatively assume a first person role in the fiction, since there is no experiential support for such a view.<sup>14</sup>

Simulation theorists, in contrast, note that the source of many of our emotional responses to fiction is our engagement with characters. Simulation theory is largely an account of how it is that we understand the psychological state of characters. It suggests that we simulate the psychological state of characters "off-line."<sup>15</sup> This is worth noting because an adequate theory of character engagement would take us close to a solution to the paradox of fiction.

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<sup>13</sup> For an accessible recent summary of theories of fictional engagement, see chapter six of Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Of course, far more can be said in favor of Walton's pretend theory. But further discussion is out of scope. See Kendall Walton, "Fearing Fictions," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75.1 (1978): 5-27; and *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (Harvard UP, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Currie's work on simulation theory is foundational. See: "The Moral Psychology of Fiction," *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 73.2 (1995): 250-9; and "Imagination and Simulation: Aesthetics Meets Cognitive Science" in *Metal Simulation*, eds. Martin Davies and Tony Stone (Blackwell, 1995). For an alternate, nuanced account of character engagement, see: Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford, 1995). The collection *Passionate Views: Film, Cognition, and Emotion*, eds. Carl Plantinga and Greg M. Smith (Johns Hopkins UP, 1999) contains several excellent articles on the topic.

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An additional solution to the paradox, one compatible with a variety of theories of character engagement, is known as the "Thought Theory".<sup>16</sup> Noël Carroll develops a version of the Thought Theory in reaction to both Illusion and Pretend theories.<sup>17</sup> Unlike Pretend theorists such as Walton, Carroll 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. 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 a "Thought Theory," which states that "thought contents we entertain without believing them can genuinely move us emotionally."<sup>18</sup> Given the plausibility of the analogy between our imaginative involvement with fictions that we create, in cases like those where we imagine the sudden death of a loved one, and our engagement with fictions not of our own construction, the Thought Theory is an incredibly intuitive, high-level account of how it is possible to be moved by fictions.

For present purposes this attenuated survey of major accounts of fictional engagement will suffice.<sup>19</sup> It turns out that it does not matter which theory we accept, since they all land in the same spot. The situation is the same for any explanation of how it is that we have what appear to be genuine emotional responses to fictional characters and events. Every theory owes us an explanation for why some fictional scenarios are so much more effective than others. No matter if simulation is the correct account of character engagement or if the Pretend Theory will ultimately prevail or if the Thought Theory is a better account, it is still the case that some fictional situations are less effective when simulated, or when used as the source of games of make-believe, or when entertained unassertively. Often this will have to do with formal devices, but it also has to do with us—with what we bring to fiction.

A complete explanation of our imaginative engagement with fictions will require, at least, an account of the role of belief. Perhaps the most fundamental questions about how we understand fictions are these: What beliefs must readers bring to fictions and how are they able to do it? No fiction could ever specify all the information required for even the most basic comprehension. For instance, Shakespeare did not have to specify that Hamlet has two eyes, a heart, and two kidneys. We bring to fictions a tremendous amount of beliefs about the world, genres, and the norms of the work's contemporaries. Regardless of the correct account of our cognitive architecture—whether the imagination works as a separate system apart from our belief system and merely imports beliefs in mass or on an as needed basis, or if the imagination is our belief system taken "off-

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<sup>16</sup> Peter Lamarque and Noël Carroll both defend versions of the "Thought Theory." Peter Lamarque, "How Can We Fear and Pity Fictions?" *British Journal of Aesthetics* 21.4 (1981): 291-304. Carroll defends the "Thought Theory" in *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Carroll argues against both in *The Philosophy of Horror*.

<sup>18</sup> Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> For an excellent recent summary, I highly recommend chapter six of Noël Carroll's *The Philosophy of Motion Pictures* (Blackwell, 2008).

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line"—the role of ordinary garden-variety beliefs is indisputable.<sup>20</sup> I propose that a useful test of the comprehensiveness of any theory of the imagination is to ask it to explain why we are willing to entertain certain ideas and not others. Why are some thoughts so much more effective at arousing emotional responses than others?

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 discusses an example of a person standing near the edge of a cliff, in no danger of falling, but able to become frightened by thinking about dropping off.<sup>21</sup> 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. However, one could argue, and the thought theorist could consistently 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 a great number of trivial things such as: things fall; I can fall; I could get hurt if I fall from high up. 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. Some of these are 1) explicit, occurrent beliefs; others may be 2) low-level unexamined beliefs; and many more might be 3) partial beliefs, perhaps variations on previously rejected beliefs that still linger in our minds 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. It is common to hear people criticize a film by saying "It just wasn't believable. I couldn't get into it." A proponent of the Thought Theory, for instance, does not need to dismiss the role of such beliefs in the process of rejecting the role of the Illusion theorist's existence beliefs.

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<sup>20</sup> For more on the working of the imagination and references to the literature, see: Aaron Meskin and Jonathan Weinberg, "Imagine That," In: Matthew Kieran, ed. *Contemporary Debates in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). See also the collections: *Imagination, Philosophy and the Arts*, eds. Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes (Routledge, 2003); and *The Architecture of the Imagination*, eds. Shaun Nichols (Oxford UP, 2006).

<sup>21</sup> This example has a rich history: Pascal, Montaigne, and Hume all develop explanations. For an interesting discussion of the history of the example, see: Tamar Szabó Gendler, "Alief in Action (and Reaction)," *Mind and Language* 23.5 (2008): 552-585.

## 4 Horror and Belief

But just what kinds of supporting beliefs are optimal for horror viewing? Some psychoanalytically-inclined theorists attempt to explain the effectiveness of horror by recourse to Freud's theory of the uncanny.<sup>22</sup> Roughly, Freud argues that one experiences the uncanny when one recalls a repressed or surmounted belief that seems to be confirmed. In one of the more compelling psychoanalytic accounts, Steven Jay Schneider argues that horror monsters can be seen as metaphorical examples of repressed beliefs and desires.<sup>23</sup> They gain their effectiveness as sources of fright through a belief-revival process initiated by the fiction.

Although the effectiveness of some monsters might be attributable to repressed beliefs, there is no reason to think that repression funds most of the products of the genre. For instance, what plausible repressed belief does the killer sea monster in *The Host* (John-ho Bong, 2006) represent? And, rather than having their repressed beliefs revived, don't devote Catholics bring them to *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1976)?<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the uncanny is nearly the exclusive providence of the fantastic—the genre where a supernatural explanation for the events in the fiction is tenuous. And there is some debate as to whether the fantastic should count as horror proper. Although there is certainly more to be said about the role of the uncanny in the effectiveness of horror, there might be a more general way to explore the role of belief in the effectiveness of horror that does not carry with it psychoanalytic baggage, by focusing on surmounted rather than repressed beliefs.

In fact, based on a common response differential, a case can be made that audience reactions to some, but not all, horror fiction provide evidence that many audience members hold beliefs in the supernatural. A great deal of horror fiction is cross-culturally portable, that is, it is effective for audiences across the globe; Global superstition is highly adaptable and shares many common elements. However, much of the most effective religious-themed horror fiction produced in the West falls flat on those raised outside a Judeo-Christian culture. American supernatural horror movies are not widely distributed internationally

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<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachery, vol. XVII, (Hogarth, 1953). Perhaps, the most well-known Freudian account of the power of horror is Robin Wood's. See: Robin Wood, "Return of the Repressed," *Film Comment* (1978); and *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (Columbia UP, 1982). For an overview see [REMOVED FOR REVIEW].

<sup>23</sup> Schneider, Steven Jay, "Monsters as (Uncanny) Metaphors: Freud, Lakoff, and the Representation of Monstrosity in Cinematic Horror," In: *Horror Film Reader*, eds. Alain Silver and James Ursini, (Limelight, 2001).

<sup>24</sup> Noël Carroll raises this objection in "Afterword: Psychoanalysis and the Horror Film", his contribution to *The Horror Film and Psychoanalysis: Freud's Worst Nightmares*, eds. Steven Jay Schneider (Cambridge UP, 2003).

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outside of Western Europe, and do not do so well in the Far East.<sup>25</sup> The kinds of horror movies that do well in the East are more akin to action movies, where vampirism might make the villain a particularly formidable opponent in hand-to-hand combat.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the allure of the vast global market might help account for why Hollywood has produced so few religious-themed supernatural horror movies since the 1980's.<sup>27</sup> Movies that are cross-culturally portable have a much larger potential audience. Bigger market, bigger money.

The target audience for some horror movies is far more specific than mere Christendom. As expected, these movies do not travel well. For instance, the Brazilian horror icon, Coffin Joe, is the star of a series of heavily Catholic themed movies. Coffin Joe is a sadistic undertaker who engages in scandalous behavior. He does not masturbate with sacred artifacts or desecrate crucifixes; no, he eats meat on Friday! I understand his irreverence, but he is no more frightening than your average trench-coat mafia bully. Of course, the Coffin Joe movies seem primitive now, but this does not weaken the evidence. I merely claim that it is very hard to imagine that a non-Catholic audience of the day would find any of his movies frightening. And it is important to note that bad filmmaking cannot explain why the movies fail on non-Catholics. Brazilians found Coffin Joe terrifying.<sup>28</sup> Surely they can recognize bad filmmaking as well as can Americans.

There are far more interesting contemporary cases. For instance, many of my friends from India and China do not find *The Omen* (Donner, 1976) or the *The Exorcist* to be effective as horror movies, but these films are largely thought to be eerie, horrifying, and disturbing in the West. Similarly, I do not know any Westerners who find the hopping vampires in some Chinese horror scary. What is particularly interesting about the situation is that it seems to be the case even for those who profess no religious or supernatural beliefs. The apparent

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<sup>25</sup> Given the complexity of international film production and distribution, a large comparative study would be needed to provide adequate empirical support for my claims. [REMOVED FOR REVIEW] speculated that the box office data might not support my claim. But this is wrong. It does. I note the box office data because it appears to provide more than merely anecdotal support for the basic claim upon which I build my argument. I admit that the empirical support is inconclusive, but it certainly does not support an objection.

Box office data is available from a variety of online sources. The Internet Movie Database is particularly useful: <http://www.IMDB.com>. As is Box Office Mojo: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com>

<sup>26</sup> Similarly, although Asian action movies have a Western fan base, you do not find many takers for Chinese ghost romances, such as *Rouge* (Stanley Kwan, 1987). Sure, the West had *Ghost* (Jerry Zucker, 1990), but that was a far different animal.

<sup>27</sup> For an overview of the Hollywood's dependence on the global market since the 1980's and reference into the literature on the economics of contemporary filmmaking, see chapter 28 of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson's *Film History* (McGraw-Hill, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> Andre Barcinski, "Coffin Joe and Jose Mojica Marins: Strange Men for Strange Times," In: *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe*, ed. Steven Jay Schneider (FAB Press, 2003).

difference in effectiveness begs for an explanation.<sup>29</sup>

One explanation of why *The Exorcist* is not scary for many Buddhists is that the religious lore and mythology upon which the fiction draws is not familiar to those raised outside a Christian culture. If you are not familiar with the notion of possession by evil Latin-speaking spirits, then it might be difficult to become immersed in the story. However, this explanation radically overestimates the complexity of the folklore. Any audience can be brought "up to speed" and made fluent in the superstitions of a culture in mere minutes. I understand the properties of slow bouncing vampires and Coffin Joe's irreverence, but neither frighten me. Similarly, it is fairly simple to explain that in the world of *The Exorcist* there are powerful forces of good and evil, ancient evil spirits sometimes possess the bodies of humans, and Catholic priests are brought in to dispel the spirits when this happens. Overall, the situation is not very complicated and most of the subtleties are explained during the movie.

The difference in responses most plausibly has to do with our long-term affective inculcation into the mythology of our culture. It is uncontroversial to note that when we are immersed in a mythological tradition a few important things happen that are relevant to the effectiveness of some horror fictions. First, we become experienced in the mythology. It is not just that we understand a great deal about vampires and spirit possession, but that each subsequent vampire we encounter inherits something from those that came before. Monsters get a reputation, so to speak. This reputation undoubtedly contributes to their effectiveness. However, the reputation-building is not decisive: No matter how many times I encounter a hopping vampire, they will never be terrifying monsters for me. Nor will Coffin Joe.

The second important thing that happens when we are immersed in a culture's mythology is that we develop beliefs. Yes, children are generally adept at distinguishing between fantasy and reality, but nevertheless, they do believe in lots of fantastic things.<sup>30</sup> In the West, we can expect children to develop

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<sup>29</sup> Other than the lack of box office success, I have not seen any empirical research to support or question my claim that such response differentials exist. Here, I will simply take it as a given. Based on the features of belief, I argue that the best explanation for the response differential is that audiences harbor partial beliefs in the supernatural. Of course, if there is no differential, there is nothing to explain. But there is good reason to think that such a differential does indeed exist.

<sup>30</sup> For a study of the imaginative play in children, see Paul L. Harris, *The Work of the Imagination* (Blackwell; 2007). [REMOVED FOR REVIEW] raised Harris's work as a possible objection to my claim that children do develop beliefs in the supernatural. But his work supports no such denial. It would be wrong to argue that because children, in the cool light of reflection, can differentiate between fantasy and reality in some cases, that they must be able to do it in all cases. Unfortunately, Harris might seem to suggest such a bold conclusion. He begins with a discussion of children afraid of monsters in the attic, studies them involved in pretend play, and concludes that children can *sometimes* distinguish between fantasy and reality (pp.58-65). Sure, but what about the kinds afraid of the monsters in the attic? Harris gives us no reason to think that children who are too terrified to go into the attic for fear of monsters do not really believe that there are

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beliefs in vampires, werewolves, ghosts, evil spirits, zombies, and witches. This is not an outlandish claim. Just think of how many children will assent to a belief in Santa Claus, not to mention a variety of other magical beings. Similarly, there are few *de facto* atheists. Most atheists pass through an early stage of belief only to actively reject the religious tradition in which they were raised. Freud argues that "It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive men."<sup>31</sup> Assuming that such claims are plausible, one may wonder what the beliefs of children have to do with the effectiveness of horror on adults who deny believing in werewolves, ghosts, vampires, demons, witches, and their kin.

Although we may not profess a belief in the superstitions when the propositions are made explicit, our responses to fiction suggest that—like school children—many of us do indeed harbor beliefs, albeit partial, in the supernatural. It may seem as if this claim oversteps the evidence—the response differential—but an extremely plausible account can be given for how it is that rational adults could hold such beliefs. Simply put, it is not easy to shake off the kinds of beliefs that many of us develop as children. In fact, many Americans never shed their schoolyard superstitions: According to one poll almost 30% of Americans profess a belief in witches and 40% believe in ghosts.<sup>32</sup> One reason why these kinds of beliefs are so prevalent is due to a fundamental dissimilarity between believing in something and believing that something does not exist. Beliefs that things do not exist are easily corrected; all we have to do is see the thing. I might not believe that flying snakes exist, but show me one and I will be converted to a believer in flying snakes. However, beliefs that things do exist are much harder to vanquish, since it is typically impossible to prove that something does not exist. How exactly would you get someone to stop believing in flying snakes? Needless to say, it would be much harder than proving that they exist.

Someone might deny that he believes in vampires, but if he wears garlic around his neck and carries a wooden stake at the ready, we would assume that his denials were disingenuous. Similarly, if someone categorically refuses to spend a night in the "haunted" house down the street despite the prospect of a large reward, then there is no reason to think that he does not believe in ghosts. If someone runs past the cemetery on a late night walk home, not because he fears the wrath of grave-robbers, but because he got "spooked", then we have excellent justification to attribute a belief in ghosts. It does not matter that in calm moments of reflection he denies any such belief. In his study, he might not occurrently believe that specters haunt the graveyard, but his skepticism clearly

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monsters above the rafters? Such a conclusion would far outstrip the evidence. Happily, he does not explicitly draw this conclusion.

<sup>31</sup> Freud, "The Uncanny."

<sup>32</sup> The results of these kinds of survey vary widely, but one thing is consistent: The percentage of believers is always high.

[http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris\\_poll/index.asp?PID=618](http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=618)

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did not prevail out in the world.

I once performed an informal experiment on a couple of classes. I asked one class if anyone believed in ghosts. No one raised a hand. I then asked if anyone would stay a night in a cemetery, and about half the class raised their hands. I switched the order of questions on the second class. When I asked if anyone would stay the night in a cemetery, almost no one raised a hand, but again no one in this class professed a belief in ghosts. We can plausibly account for the difference in the number of hands in this way: When I asked about ghosts first, it suggested that any reluctance to stay in a cemetery over night would indicate a belief in a silly superstition. By bringing the question of a belief in the existence of ghosts to the fore, the contradiction between the two was readily apparent. Because of this, the students who did not want to look like they believed in ghosts consented to an overnight stay in a graveyard. Although rough, informal, and merely anecdotal, my simple experiment supports the claim that many people are disingenuous, consciously or not, about not believing in monsters. It just might be that the ghost is the thing that reveals that audiences believe in the monsters of horror fiction.

The response differential between acculturated and non-acculturated audiences is not the only reason to think that horror fictions might be making use of audience beliefs in the supernatural. Many horror fictions enact a process of belief revival through the presence of a skeptical character, whereby a previously surmounted belief is slowly given credence in the fiction. As Carroll has identified, one common horror plot structure involves the discovery and confirmation of the existence of a monster prior to its confrontation. Typically an extremely skeptical character, often in the guise of a scientist, will belittle accounts of the monster. Not only does the skeptic end up converted, but often he is one of the first to die, as he is the least prepared to deal with a genuine threat. John Carpenter's *Prince of Darkness* (1987) follows a similar pattern. A group of physicists, mostly graduate students from UCLA, are asked to investigate a mysterious canister locked away in the basement of a Catholic church. One of the students, a cocky Asian stereotype, repeatedly makes jokes about their assignment. Eventually it is revealed that the canister is filled with liquid Satan. Not only do the skeptical students come to believe in the presence of Satan, the dark lord's minions quickly dispatch many of the most incredulous.

The role of skeptical characters is to mirror the skeptical audience, but to what purpose? Audiences witness the conversion of fictional characters with similar beliefs into believers in the supernatural, and not only do they convert but they also suffer for their skepticism. Perhaps it is satisfying for some audience members to witness the demise of an arrogant rationalist, but what about audience members who are more like the rationalist than the ready believers? I suspect that the skeptic in horror fiction serves to chip away at the skeptical audience's certainty for the course of the fiction. I am not suggesting that audiences walk away from horror movies thinking that they should be careful and renounce naturalism, but that we should consider the plausible effects of imagining such a drama on our often tenuous rejection of supernatural

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beliefs.<sup>33</sup>

Furthermore, some of the most effective horror fiction, what might be better called the fantastic, involves a complex play of evidence, never definitively asserting the existence of the monster. For instance, both Henry James' *Turn of the Screw* and Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* allow for a plausible interpretation of the monsters as the product of psychological instability.<sup>34</sup> That is, the audience never has to fully assent to the fictional presence of the monster. There is good reason to think that this helps quell responses that might otherwise threaten the tenuous, partial beliefs of the audience.

Clearly, not all horror monsters require beliefs in the supernatural to be effective, such as the aforementioned terrifying mutant squid in *The Host* or the *sui generis* monster in *Jeepers Creepers* (Victor Salva, 2001). Indeed, there are numerous ways to frighten and disgust audiences that have nothing to do with the supernatural. It is indubitable that death, dismemberment, gore, and suffering can disgust and terrify. But, my claim is that in the supernatural cases, where there is a clear response differential, the best explanation is likely that audiences harbor partial beliefs in their native supernatural tradition. Although the beliefs may be held weakly, the existence of supernatural forces, to put it in William James' words, is for some audiences "a live option" with behavioral manifestations characteristic of partial beliefs.

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<sup>33</sup> In fact, there is some anecdotal evidence that suggests that certain supernatural beliefs are strengthened by horror. Belief in pre-cognition seemed a bit high in some polls after *Minority Report* (Spielberg, 2002). It would make for a good study to run more surveys before and after such movies are released.

<sup>34</sup> [REMOVED FOR REVIEW]

## 5 Objections

### *I. Merely Probable Monsters*

One may object that although the response differential is best explained by belief, attributing actual beliefs in the supernatural is not necessary; rather, audiences might just hold beliefs in the possibility of particular kinds of supernatural entities. This objection raises the question of whether or not a belief in the possibility of such monsters will explain the response differential better than the attribution of a partial belief. In the abstract, I think they are roughly the same thing. But in particular, I do not think that possibility will work, partially because possibility cannot serve the appropriate role. Certainly, the demons in *The Exorcist* seem no more logically impossible to Japanese Buddhists than to American Catholics. So, we must ask, do the latter think that demons are more supernaturally possible? I cannot see how, since talk of more or less possibility does not make sense. Something is either possible or not. Although there are different kinds of possibility, it does not admit of degrees. However, something can be more probable or likely than something else. Hence, the language of probability is more useful for expressing this objection.

So, let's consider the suggestion that the best explanation of the response differential is that some audiences merely think certain types of monsters are more likely than others. The claim would be that if audience members think that the existence of a certain kind of monster is more likely, they are more apt to find the horror fiction effective than if it featured an unfamiliar supernatural threat. In terms of belief, there are two different ways in which philosophers have tried to explain what it means to say that someone thinks that something is probable. Compare two people: C and S. C is certain that ghosts exist, whereas S is highly skeptical. We can describe the difference between C and S either as a difference in the degree of belief or as involving different beliefs. We could say that S has 25% certainty in the claim that ghost exists—that is, S has a lower degree of belief in ghosts than C, who is completely convinced that her house is haunted. Alternatively, one can argue that the entire notion of a degree of belief is unnecessary; instead, one can simply say that what looked like different degrees of the same belief are actually different beliefs: The belief that there is a 25% chance that ghosts exist is a different belief than the belief that there is a 50% or a 100% chance that ghosts exist.

For present purposes it is unnecessary to settle the issue of whether or not the notion of degrees of belief is needed to express the difference between someone who has low confidence in the existence of ghosts and someone who is convinced that their house is haunted. Although some audience members might admit that they think there is a credible chance that ghosts exist, many deny holding any such belief or of holding it with any degree of confidence. Hence, I find the language of partial belief more compelling, for it better captures what is going on here. In many ways, we have something like a belief, but it fails to function as a full fledged belief in all circumstances. In calm reflective moments one may deny holding it, but occasionally it seems to influence

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behavior nonetheless. The important point is that regardless of whether we describe what is going on as a belief held with low confidence, or a belief in a low probability, or as a partial belief, it does not matter.<sup>35</sup> The notion that ghosts exist, for instance, is still live for such audiences—live enough to have behavioral manifestations. Hence, we have compelling evidence to attribute a (partial, probable, or degree of) belief in the supernatural.

### *II. Bottom's Worry*

I appeal to the notion of partial belief to help account for the apparent cultural response differential, but one might object that the notion is too underspecified, or at least that I have left it unclear when it should be applied. It seems that based on behavioral evidence, we would be warranted in attributing partial beliefs to spectators of all fictional events—not just beliefs in real-world analogs, but beliefs in the existence of the actual fictional events. But this would be ridiculous. Clearly, as the absurdity of Bottom's prelude shows, audiences do not believe in the reality of fictional characters and events. If the theory of partial belief suggests otherwise, we should reject it.

Indeed, I think that this is correct: We should reject the theory if it implies that Bottom was correct. Happily, my position does not lead to any such absurd conclusion. Although I cannot develop a principle for when one is warranted in attributing a partial belief, a sketch is in order. I argue that if our behavior is indicative of belief in some ways and not in others, we are likely warranted in attributing partial belief if no other more economical solutions are on the table. We should also have a good story to tell about how the partial beliefs were formed. But this is not the case with emotional response to fiction. Feeling pity for a fictional character is not indicative of belief in the reality of the character. To think otherwise, one must hold the theoretical claim that genuine emotional responses require beliefs in the reality of their object.<sup>36</sup> But we have no good reason to believe this.<sup>37</sup> Further, we have alternate accounts of how it is the case that we can have genuine emotional reactions in response to fiction, accounts

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<sup>35</sup> Due to limitations of scope, I have not address Gendler's intriguing notion of alief—an innate or habituated propensity to response to apparent stimuli in a particular way. I do not have much confidence that we can explain the response differential via habituated dispositions of this kind. Feeling fear from a complex fictional scenario such as that involved in the *Exorcist* does not appear to be a good candidate for a habituated response. How could anyone develop a habit of feeling fear in response to demonic possession? Yes, there are lots of other sources of fear in the movie, but I'm concerned with those that exhibit a pronounced cultural response differential. Much more can be said, but it is out of scope. See: Gendler, "Alief in Action (and Reaction)"; and "Alief and Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 105 (2008).

<sup>36</sup> I omit "rational" from the attributes, because I am not confident in any standard of assessing the rationality of emotions.

<sup>37</sup> Walton largely assumes that genuine emotions require belief. Radford comes to this conclusion after further considerations involving a theory of the rationality of the emotions that is far less plausible than his conclusion. For references into the theoretical literature, see the citations in note 8.

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such as the Thought Theory. In addition, we lack a story for how audiences could come to form any such partial beliefs. Hence, we have no good reason to think that audiences have partial beliefs in the reality of fictional characters and events. My explanation correctly implies that Bottom's prelude is unnecessary.

However, this situation with responses that exhibit a marked cultural response differential is very different. We have a good story for how audiences might form partial beliefs in the supernatural forces featured in the mythology of their culture. And given that the effectiveness of some fictional scenarios appears to vary based on a suite of beliefs about the real world, we have some justification for attributing partial belief when the effectiveness of a fiction varies. The principal worry will be that the attribution of partial belief is not the best explanation for the horror response differential. This brings us to the next objection.

### *III. Monster Conditioning*

I support my claim with an argument to the best explanation. Of course, if there is a better, more parsimonious, explanation, we should adopt it. One might argue that there is indeed a better explanation. It is not that acculturated audience members have developed partial beliefs in the supernatural; rather, they have simply been conditioned to respond to representations of particular monsters (vampires, werewolves, etc.) with fear. Like little Albert's fear of fluffy white beards, acculturated audiences have simply been conditioned to fear the monsters of their mythology.

Prima facie, such an explanation is more economical. And it does not require that we attribute beliefs to those who loudly deny believing in such nonsense. However, it is difficult to explain just what such conditioning would amount to. Watson's little Albert was made to fear Santa through classical conditioning. The experimenters clashed loud symbols behind the boy shortly after presenting him with an image of Santa. The comparable process for horror audiences would most likely involve primitive reactions such as disgust and startles. I suppose that the conditioning explanation would hold that early film experiences condition audience members to associate certain monsters with disgust reactions or mere startle responses.

However, this line of explanation runs into several problems. We often feel disgust at the monster, or when imagining coming into contact with such creatures. We do not merely associate disgust *with* the monster; we feel disgust *at* the monster. The associational explanation gets the process backwards. The monster is more like the clanging symbols than the fluffy white beard. Further, acculturated and non-acculturated audiences seem to find similar things disgusting, given allowances for individual variance in disgust reactions, but they often do not find the same monsters frightening. The startle response is universal, but fear of Coffin Joe is not. And, if the process were simple conditioning, we would expect that adult audiences would be ripe for this kind of conditioning as well. But this does not seem to be the case. Of course, a fiction might enhance a pre-existing fear, such as being attacked when vulnerable in the shower (*Psycho*) or eaten by a shark (*Jaws*), but no matter how

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many times I watch *At Midnight I'll Take Your Soul* (Jose Mojica Marins, 1963), Coffin Joe will not become a source of terror.

### *IV. The Devil is in the Details*

Perhaps it is plausible that many people do in fact believe in ghosts, but why should we assume that the ghosts of horror fiction bear any resemblance to those of the imagination. For instance, someone may believe in a kind of immaterial ghosts that can move through walls. Perhaps they think that such ghosts cannot have any impact on the physical world, but the ghost featured in most horror fiction can often be harmful to living people. The general objection is that the details of the supernatural in fictions will rarely mesh with what audiences bring to the theater.

In response, three brief comments are in order. First, frequently the monsters of popular fiction do indeed follow the general contour of those of folk superstition. But more often than not, the specific details of monsters are withheld from audiences. One often hears that horror fictions that do not show the monster, or only give us a glimpse, are far more effective than those where the monster is pried open for all the world to see.<sup>38</sup> Perhaps the technique of vaguely suggesting the appearance of a monster is effective because the mere hint of a monster's visage allows audiences to fill in a personalized demonic image. Moreover, since we are dealing with partial beliefs—those that are not fully formed, or function only partially as typical beliefs—the objection is blunted. In general, it is a rather loose belief in ghosts that funds the reaction, not a detailed description of ghosts, and all of their properties. A general overlap certainly seems to do the trick.

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<sup>38</sup> [REMOVED FOR REVIEW]

## 6 Conclusion

On any plausible theory of belief, whether or not we are justified in attributing a belief to someone depends largely on behavioral manifestations. The behavioral difference between acculturated and non-acculturated viewers gives us good reason to suspect that the former may harbor some beliefs in monsters. However, given any particular person's reaction to a horror fiction, we lack conclusive evidence to attribute a belief in the kind of monsters present in the fiction, since some non-acculturated viewers can find the supernatural horror fiction of alien cultures effective. Most horror movies have more tricks up their sleeves than merely the monsters of our mythology: They also rely on the startle response, primitive disgust reactions, and automatic sympathetic responses in audiences. As such, there are many other reasons why one might find a fiction effective at provoking a wide range of emotions than the mere representation of a monster. Hence, although we might suspect the presence of a belief, we lack justification to attribute beliefs in monsters to audiences without reservation, unless we rule out other relevant factors.

However, the cases where there is a pronounced response differential are far different. Unless one has a better explanation of the response differential between the acculturated and the foreign, one should not be so certain that they have effectively shed belief, however partial, in the existence of the monsters of horror fiction. Although we may only be warranted in attributing partial supernatural beliefs in cases where there are clear response differentials, if such beliefs are at play in some cases, it is not unreasonable to assume that they might be active in others.

My claim is that audience members are much like the vampires in Richard Matheson's novella *I am Legend*. Late in the book, the main character, Robert Neville, describes the results of his research on the vampires that now cover the face of the earth. The vampires exhibit a response differential much like the one found among modern day horror audiences. In the early days of the vampire plague, Neville learned of the differential and the power of acculturation by observing his friend turned zombie, Roger Cortman.

"When I showed him the cross," [Neville] said, "he laughed in my face" [. . .]  
"But when I held a torah before his eyes, I got the reaction I wanted." [. . .] "I had him tied up, but when he saw the torah he broke loose and attacked me." [. . .]  
"So you see, the cross hasn't the power the legend says it has. My theory is that, since the legend came into its own in Europe, a continent predominantly Catholic, the cross would naturally become the symbol of defense against powers of darkness."<sup>39</sup>

"Why should a Jew fear the cross?" he said. "Why should a vampire who had been a Jew fear it? Most people were afraid of becoming vampires. Most of them suffer from hysterical blindness before mirrors. But as far as the cross

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<sup>39</sup> *I am Legend*, p. 129.

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goes—well, neither a Jew nor a Hindu nor a Mohammedan nor an atheist, for that matter, would fear the cross."<sup>40</sup>

Robert Neville was wrong about one thing: Many professed atheists *do* indeed still "fear the cross," probably because they harbor partial beliefs in the supernatural.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *I am Legend*, p. 123.

<sup>41</sup> I thank [REMOVED FOR REVIEW].