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Edited by Connell Vaughan and Iris Vidmar

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The European Society for Aesthetics

Department of Philosophy University of Fribourg Avenue de l'Europe 20 1700 Fribourg Switzerland

Internet: http://www.eurosa.org Email: secretary@eurosa.org

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Tales of Dread

Mark Windsor<sup>1</sup>

University of Kent

ABSTRACT. 'Tales of dread' is a genre that has received scant attention in aesthetics. In this paper, I aim to elaborate an account of tales of dread which (1) effectively distinguishes these from horror stories, and (2) helps explain the close affinity between the two, accommodating borderline cases. I consider two existing accounts of the genre, namely, those of Noël Carroll and Cynthia Freeland, and show why they are inadequate. I then develop my own account of tales of dread, drawing on two theoretical resources: Freud's essay on 'The "Uncanny", and Tzvetan Todorov's theory of *The Fantastic*. In particular, I draw on Freud to help distinguish tales of dread from horror stories, and I draw on Todorov to help explain the fluidity between the genres. I argue that both horror stories and tales of dread feature apparent impossibilities which are threatening; but whereas in horror stories the existence of the monster (the apparent impossibility) is confirmed, tales of dread are sustained by the audience's uncertainty pertaining to preternatural

1.

In The Philosophy of Horror, Noël Carroll identifies a narrative genre that

objects or events. Where horror monsters pose an immediate, concrete danger to the subject's physical wellbeing, these preternatural objects or events pose

a psychological threat to the subject's grasp of reality.

<sup>1</sup>Email: mw426@kent.ac.uk

he calls 'tales of dread'. Unlike horror stories, Carroll claims, tales of dread do not feature monstrous *entities* or *beings*, but rather a distinctive kind of preternatural *events*. These events are designed to elicit in audiences an emotion which Carroll calls 'art-dread':

The uncanny event which tops off such stories causes a sense of unease and awe, perhaps of momentary anxiety and foreboding. These events are constructed to move the audience rhetorically to the point that one entertains the idea that unavowed, unknown, and perhaps concealed and inexplicable forces rule the universe. (1990: 42)

Tales of dread have been prevalent since the late-Romantic period. Examples of the genre include short stories by Edgar Allan Poe ('The Fall of the House of Usher'), Charlotte Perkins Gilman ('The Yellow Wallpaper'), Guy de Maupassant ('Le Horla'), and Robert Louis Stevenson ('The Body Snatcher'). Tales of dread can also be found in contemporary works of literature, including novels by José Saramago (*The Double*) and Mark Z. Danielewski (*House of Leaves*); and films by David Lynch (*Lost Highway*), David Cronenberg (*Videodrome*), and Duncan Jones (*Moon*). Moreover, recent episodes of the television series *Twin Peaks* and *Black Mirror* show the continuing appeal of the genre, and how these stories have adapted to encompass new uncanny technological possibilities, such as artificial intelligence and simulated consciousness.

Given the enduring popularity of tales of dread, it is unfortunate that the genre has received scant attention in aesthetics. In this paper, I aim to

address this deficit by elaborating an account of tales of dread which (1) effectively distinguishes these from horror stories, and (2) helps explain the close affinity between the two, accommodating borderline cases.

I consider two existing accounts of tales of dread, namely those of Carroll and Cynthia Freeland, and show why they are inadequate. I then develop my own account of the genre, drawing on two theoretical resources: Freud's famous essay on 'The "Uncanny" (2001), and Tzvetan Todorov's account of literary genre of *The Fantastic* (1975). In particular, I draw on Freud's account of the uncanny to help pinpoint what is distinctive of these stories by specifying the object of 'art-dread', and I draw on Todorov's account of the fantastic to help explain the fluidity between the genres.

Notwithstanding certain challenges that it faces, in what follows, I shall assume that Carroll's account of horror is broadly correct. Carroll defines monsters as 'beings not believed to exist now according to contemporary science' (1990: 27). Monsters are presented in horror stories as both *threatening* and *impure*. This combination of features is intended to elicit in audiences a peculiar blend of fear and disgust, which emotion Carroll calls 'art-horror'. I argue that both horror stories and tales of dread feature *apparent impossibilities* which are *threatening*; but whereas in horror stories the existence of the monster (the apparent impossibility) is confirmed, tales of dread are sustained by the audience's *uncertainty* pertaining to preternatural objects or events. Borderline cases are those that are designed to centrally evoke both art-dread and art-horror. This can be achieved either by withholding confirmation of the monster's existence until relatively late on in the narrative, or by maintaining some degree of

ambiguity as to the monster's existence.

## 2.

Carroll only briefly mentions the tales of dread in *The Philosophy of Horror*; he comments that 'art-dread probably deserves a theory of its own', though he does not have one 'ready-to-hand' (1990: 42). Since then, two attempts have been made to elaborate an account of the genre. First, in a chapter titled 'Horror and Art-Dread', Cynthia Freeland sets out to describe tales of dread, but without accepting that there is a clear distinction between these and horror stories. For Freeland, tales of dread are rather a subset of horror—one in which the 'horror is subtle and lingering, a matter of mood more than monsters' (2004: 189). Second, Carroll has elaborated an account of tales of dread in the television series *The Twilight Zone*. In this text, Carroll narrows his notion of the genre by making it a necessary condition that a character is punished for some wrongdoing in an ironic or 'mordantly humorous way', such that 'audiences entertain . . . that the universe is governed by an all knowing and controlling intelligence that metes out justice with diabolical wit' (2013: 223).

Neither of these accounts of tales of dread is adequate, however. Freeland's account is too vague, for it does not sufficiently distinguish between horror stories and tales of dread. While the two genres certainly have much in common, and while there are doubtless borderline cases (such as those that Freeland discusses), there is nonetheless a useful distinction to be drawn between them. Carroll's account, on the other hand, is too narrow.

Not all tales of dread—including those which I take to be paradigmatic of the genre, such as Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'—imply a moralistic universe that metes out diabolical punishments. Nor do I subscribe to Carroll's earlier distinction between monstrous *entities* and preternatural *events*. For the emotion that Carroll calls 'art-dread' can focus on preternatural objects or entities as well as events. A case in point is the recurrent narrative motif of the double or doppelganger—an object of dread *par excellence*.

## 3.

The underlying assumption here is that, like horror stories, tales of dread are defined by the emotion which is their central purpose to evoke in audiences. So what exactly is this emotion that Carroll and Freeland call 'art-dread'?

Freeland characterises dread as 'an ongoing fear of imminent threat from something deeply unnerving and evil, yet not well-defined or well-understood'. Like fear, dread involves a sense of danger, but is different in that it is 'looser and less focussed on a particular object'. Horror, she notes, tends to be a response to a 'fairly specific object' (2004: 191). Freeland offers the following example of an object of dread: the threat of anthrax being transmitted through the mail. 'Art-dread', Freeland claims, is just the name for dread 'evoked by or in response to an artwork' (193).

As a *general* characterisation of dread, this is mostly well and good. But it misses something crucial about the kind of stories we are interested in. 'Art-dread' is not just any old dread. Not all objects of dread are objects

of 'art-dread', and that is not just because not all objects of dread occur in the context of art. Not all *fictional* objects of dread are objects of art-dread, either. All things being equal, a story about a terrorist threat which plays on people's anxieties about anthrax being transmitted through the mail would not be a tale of dread. That this should be so is highlighted by the recent cinematic examples of art-dread which Freeland identifies: *The Sixth Sense*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Others*, and *Signs*. Surely it is not incidental that all of these stories involve a dread of something *supernatural*.

Now, I suggest that another—and indeed better, in the sense that it is more descriptive—name for 'art-dread' is 'the uncanny'. Freud's theory of the uncanny has oftentimes been co-opted as a theory of horror, including by Carroll, who thinks it 'fair to surmise' that horror monsters fall within the class of phenomena that Freud identifies as 'uncanny', 'along with a lot of other stuff' (1990: 174). In fact, what I want to show presently is that Freud's essay on the uncanny offers the resources for *distinguishing* objects of art-dread from those of art-horror.

Freud's theory of the uncanny is typically referred to in the literature as 'the return of the repressed'. However, contrary to popular conception, Freud does not explain all instances of uncanny phenomena in terms of repressed infantile complexes. Freud also offers another explanation for why we experience certain phenomena as uncanny. This has to do with the apparent confirmation of 'surmounted primitive beliefs'. According to this theory, we all inherit certain 'primitive' beliefs in animistic and magical phenomena—such as belief in the existence of spirits and in the 'omnipotence of thoughts'—which, as educated adult Westerners, we have

largely, but not totally, 'surmounted'. When anything happens in reality that appears to confirm such a 'surmounted primitive belief', we are apt to experience it as uncanny (Freud 2001: 247–51).

I have argued elsewhere that compared to 'return of the repressed', Freud's theory of 'surmounted primitive beliefs' faces fewer serious objections and carries greater explanatory power in respect of the uncanny. 'Surmounted primitive beliefs' provides a relatively rich, and plausible, explanation for why we experience certain phenomena as uncanny: because they create the dubious appearance of the supernatural in the context of one's experience of reality.

There are two key features of the account which are important for us here. First, the object or event that appears to confirm a surmounted primitive belief must be experienced as taking place *in reality*. Second, this incongruous object or event must bring about *uncertainty about what is real*. As Freud writes, this class of uncanny things cannot arise unless there is 'a conflict of judgement as to whether things which have been "surmounted" and are regarded as incredible may not, after all, possible' (2001: 250).

Together, these features of Freud's theory hold the key to distinguishing tales of dread from horror stories. Albeit, I do not want to adopt Freud's theory wholesale. There are significant problems with the theory as it stands. Specifically, these have to do with Freud's characterisation of infantile and 'primitive' beliefs in terms of animism and magic. However, I suggest that these problems can be overcome if we reframe this dubious appearance of the supernatural in terms of an *apparent impossibility*.

Thus, I propose that tales of dread centrally feature *apparent impossibilities which cause uncertainty about what is real*. From thence derives the peculiar *threat* that tales of dread specialise in.

Let me offer an example. Near the beginning of David Lynch's film *Lost Highway*, one of the two leading male characters, Fred Madison, is approached at a party by a slim, pale, sinister-looking man. This 'Mystery Man' tells Fred that they have met before. Fred does not recognise the man, and asks him where he thinks they met. The Mystery Man replies: 'At your house. Don't you remember? . . . In fact, I'm there right now'. At first Fred is incredulous. Then the Mystery Man produces a mobile phone and suggests that Fred rings his house—which he does, hesitantly. Apparently, the same Mystery Man answers on the other end. 'Fred, mirthful at first, as if it is a party trick of some kind, suddenly turns serious'. Angrily, Fred demands to know who the Mystery Man is and how he got into his house. 'The man laughs—identical laughs—both over the phone and in person', and asks for his phone back (Lynch 1995).

Mirthful at first, it is only when Fred's attempts to rationalise the encounter as 'party trick of some kind' fail that he 'suddenly turns serious'. This marks the point at which Fred evaluates the preternatural event as a *threat*. Such is the kind of dread we are dealing with here: 'identical laughs—both over the phone and in person'.

Notice how in this example it is ambiguous whether the object of uncanny feelings should be thought of as an *event* or an *entity*. Carroll's distinction between preternatural events and horrific beings is orthogonal to the real distinction. It is true that tales of dread may be *associated* with

preternatural events rather than preternatural objects. That is because events tend to be less epistemically robust than concrete objects—events tend to admit of a greater variety and nuance of explanation. Nonetheless, it is also clear that 'art-dread' can be directed at concrete objects.

In Saramago's novel, *The Double*, Antoni Clara discusses with his wife the appearance of his uncanny doppelganger. 'If I were you', the wife says, 'I would just wipe the matter from my mind, I would repeat to myself a hundred times a day that there cannot possibly be two identical people in the world' (2004: 181). Thus, the apparent impossibility which troubles Antoni is the appearance of another who is *identical* to himself. But the point I want to make here is that, in this case, art-dread is clearly directed toward a specific concrete object. We must be careful not to conflate the *object* or *target* of art-dread with its *cause*. Contrary to Freeland's characterisation, art-dread may be directed at specific concrete objects, but the cause of the emotion is necessarily something mysterious and elusive—uncertainty about what is real caused by an apparent impossibility.

To sum up, just as 'art-horror' is not any common or garden variety of horror, neither is 'art-dread' any common or garden variety of dread. Where art-horror is directed at threatening, impure beings that are not believed to exist now according to contemporary science, art-dread is directed at threatening apparent impossibilities which cause uncertainty about what is real. Where horror monsters pose an immediate concrete danger to the subject's physical wellbeing, objects of art-dread pose a psychological threat to the subject's grasp of reality.

Having shown how to distinguish the emotions of art-horror and art-

dread, I will now offer some explanation for the affinities the two genres share. To do this, I turn to Todorov's theory of the fantastic.

## 4.

Todorov offers a taxonomy of literary genres which feature preternatural events. He calls these genres 'the uncanny', 'the fantastic', and 'the marvellous'. Each genre depends on the reader's interpretation of preternatural events; whether, on the one hand, events are given a natural or psychological interpretation, which genre he calls 'the uncanny', or whether, on the other hand, they are given a supernatural interpretation, which genre he calls 'the marvellous'. The genre of 'the fantastic' exists between these: the fantastic takes place for the duration of the reader's hesitation between a natural and supernatural interpretation of events.

Now, before I go any further, I need to address an apparent tension here between mine and Todorov's use of 'uncanny'. For, on my account, the uncanny is dependent on just the kind of uncertainty about what is real that Todorov posits as the defining feature of the fantastic—which uncertainty is precluded by the genre that Todorov calls 'the uncanny'. However, this tension dissipates once we recognise a discrepancy between two different uses of the word 'uncanny' in Todorov's work in its English translation. First, Todorov describes the genre of 'the uncanny' using the substantive 'l'étrange' ('the strange'); second, Todorov describes a certain kind of narrative event as 'uncanny' using the adjective 'étrange' ('strange'). An 'uncanny event' is another name for 'an apparently supernatural event'

(Todorov 1975: 25), which, on Todorov's own account, is just the kind of event that bring about 'fantastic hesitation'. Thus, Todorov writes, 'without "uncanny events", the fantastic cannot even appear' (92). Moreover, 'uncanny events' are just the kind of events that we find in tales of dread.

Todorov's categories of the uncanny, the fantastic, and the marvellous are insufficient to distinguish horror stories and tales of dread. Todorov's genres are dependent solely on the reader's *interpretation* of the narrative, whereas horror stories and tales of dread are both dependent on the kind of *emotion* that each is designed to evoke in the audience. Nonetheless, Todorov's account is helpful for understanding the boundary between horror stories and tales of dread, and how individual works can straddle that boundary to varying degrees.

The boundary between tales of dread and horror stories can be schematised using Todorov's distinction between the fantastic and the marvellous. Tales of dread are instances of the fantastic, whereas horror stories are instances of an intermediate genre that Todorov calls 'the fantastic-marvellous'. Both tales of dread and horror stories involve the appearance of the impossible in an otherwise ordinary world; but in the case of horror, the audience comes to accept the existence of the apparently impossible being—the monster. At this point the narrative transitions from the fantastic to the marvellous. As Carroll writes:

whereas the fantastic is defined by an oscillation between naturalistic and supernatural explanations, horror requires that at some point attempts at ordinary scientific explanations be abandoned in favor of a

supernatural (or a sci-fi) explanation (1990: 145).

An upshot is that horror stories often evoke art-dread for a time: specifically, up to the point at which the existence of the monster is confirmed. Once the existence of the monster is confirmed, the uncertainty about what is real that is necessary for art-dread is precluded.

In practice, though, the distinction between the two genres is not cutand-dry. That is because the uncertainty about what is real that sustains artdread admits of degrees. Specifically, uncertainty about what is real in a
story—prompted by the appearance of an uncanny object or event—can
vary along two dimensions. First, the point at which the audience gives up a
natural interpretation can vary along the timeline of the narrative. Second,
there are degrees of certainty and uncertainty about how to interpret a story.
Given these variables, we can see how some works may not be more readily
categorised as either a horror story or a tale of dread.

As Todorov points out, pure cases of the fantastic are relatively rare. Most narratives that engage fantastic hesitation end up confirming either a naturalistic or supernatural interpretation of preternatural events. Tales of dread need not sustain such uncertainty through to the end. For example, Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' takes the reader right to the cusp of believing that the eponymous house is haunted, only at the very end to pull back and affirm a naturalistic explanation of events. Conversely, M. R. James's 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad', for the most part plays on the reader's uncertainty about apparently supernatural events, only at the very end to confirm the existence of the ghost.

Tales of dread are stories *the primary purpose of which* is to elicit the emotion art-dread (just as horror stories are stories the primary purpose of which is to elicit art-horror). Thus, although 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is an instance of 'the fantastic-uncanny', and 'Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad' an instance of 'the fantastic-marvellous', both may qualify as tales of dread if it is their primary purpose to elicit 'art-dread'.

Borderline cases are those that centrally evoke both art-dread and art-horror, or where it is ambiguous whether the primary purpose is to evoke one or the other emotion. A good example is offered by Freeland in her book on horror, in a chapter which is aptly titled 'Uncanny Horror'—Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining*. Kubrick commented that he was attracted to Stephen King's novel because it managed to 'strike an extraordinary balance between the psychological and the supernatural' (quoted in Freeland 2000: 217). To the extent that the narrative leaves it ambiguous whether or not there really are supernatural forces at work in the Overlook Hotel, *The Shining* should be classified as a tale of dread rather than a horror story.

5.

In this paper, I hope to have provided a coherent and convincing account of what is distinctive of the object of art-dread: an apparent impossibility that threatens the subject's grasp of reality.

There are surely many interesting and pressing questions about the genre that I have not touched on. For a start, why, given that art-dread is essentially a negative emotion, do we value and enjoy these tales? Call this

'the paradox of the uncanny'. One promising solution has to do with the peculiar kind of cognitive frisson elicited by uncanny phenomena. Tales of dread tend to be more diverse, unpredictable, and thereby more interesting than horror stories because in order to sustain the emotion, the audience must be successfully kept in the dark about the precise nature of the fictional object.

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