

The Real Blurred Lines: On Liminality in Horror and the Threatened Boundary  
Between the Real and the Imagined

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ABSTRACT (Academic)

The horror genre is obsessed with being treated as fact rather than fiction. From movies that plaster their title screens with “Based on actual events” to urban legends that happened to a friend of a friend, the horror genre thrives on being treated as fact even when it is more often fiction. Yet horror does more than claim verisimilitude. Whereas some stories are content to pass as reality, other stories question whether a boundary between fiction and reality even exists. They give us monsters that become real when their names are spoken (*Tales from the Darkside*) and generally undermine the boundaries we take for granted. *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare*, for instance, shows a malevolent being forcibly blending the characters’ reality with the fiction they themselves created. But why are scary stories concerned with seeming real and undermining our notions of reality? To answer this, I draw on various horror films and philosophical and psychological notions of the self and reality. Ultimately, I argue, horror is a didactic genre obsessed with showing us reality as it is, not as we wish it to be. Horror confronts us not only with our mortality (as in slasher films) but also with the truth that fiction and reality are not the easily divided categories we often take them to be.

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## General Audience Abstract

The horror genre is obsessed with being treated as fact rather than fiction. From movies that plaster their title screens with “Based on actual events” to urban legends that happened to a friend of a friend, the horror genre thrives on being treated as fact even when it is more often fiction. Yet horror does more than claim verisimilitude. Whereas some stories are content to pass as reality, other stories question whether a boundary between fiction and reality even exists. They give us monsters that become real when their names are spoken (*Tales from the Darkside*) and generally undermine the boundaries we take for granted. *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare*, for instance, shows a malevolent being forcibly blending the characters’ reality with the fiction they themselves created. But why are scary stories concerned with seeming real and undermining our notions of reality? To answer this, I draw on various horror films and philosophical and psychological notions of the self and reality. Ultimately, I argue, horror is a didactic genre obsessed with showing us reality as it is, not as we wish it to be. Horror confronts us not only with our mortality (as in slasher films) but also with the truth that fiction and reality are not the easily divided categories we often take them to be.

“Horror films don’t create fear. They release it.” -Wes Craven<sup>1</sup>

Dedicated to the memory of Wes Craven

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<sup>1</sup> Mufson, Beckett. “13 Wes Craven Quotes Remember the Original Master of Horror.” 13 August 2015. [https://creators.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/13-wes-craven-quotes-remember-the-original-master-of-horror](https://creators.vice.com/en_uk/article/13-wes-craven-quotes-remember-the-original-master-of-horror)

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## Introduction

“The following is based on a true story.” We often see these words at the beginning of movie credits or featured prominently in trailers. If a horror movie has some basis in reality, it will probably tell you so.<sup>2</sup> From *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* to *Primeval*, if there is a kernel of truth buried in the narrative, Hollywood marketers will probably make it a key advertising point. Reality sells, even if it is not actually real.<sup>3</sup> Hollywood has no regulations to require that a film that bears this label or the more truthful “This film is loosely based on actual events” actually has any truth to it.<sup>4</sup>

We notice this same trend outside of film. Urban legends are particularly interesting here, as they are orally (and increasingly digitally) disseminated tales that purport to be true. I have had a handful of legends repeated to me as if they were real, and there are people who believe these events, which are widely documented as fictional, actually happened precisely because the stories are told as if they really did. Few people start a good scary story with the disclaimer: “The following never happened, and I am making all of it up.” No, we reserve such statements for the end credits, buried where most viewers will not notice them and where they can slip harmlessly by. In other words, we do not want people to remember that our scary stories are fictional even when they are, and we seem obsessed with the notion that scary stories are real. But why is this? Why do so many scary stories predicate themselves on a false assertion of reality? What about the horror genre lends itself to interrogating or blurring the distinction between fiction and reality?

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<sup>2</sup> There are exceptions to this rule, of course. Both *Scream* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* were loosely based on real-life events, but neither film advertises this fact. This omission is an interesting rhetorical move on Wes Craven’s part.

<sup>3</sup> See “Reality TV.”

<sup>4</sup> The film *Fargo* famously bears such a tag. The directors have since admitted they merely made it up. The label, they said, could be added because there was no rule against it. Mikkelsen, Barbara. “‘Fargo’—A True Story?” *Snopes*. 2 April 2015. <http://www.snopes.com/movies/films/fargo.asp>

I seek to address these questions. In the succeeding pages, I will argue that horror fiction is largely didactic and specifically that it wants to tell us about the nature of our reality. Thus, I will assert, the horror genre questions, blurs, or threatens the boundary between fiction and reality because it acknowledges, and wants us to acknowledge as well, that this line is, in fact, blurry and not as stark as we like to believe.

To get to this point, however, I will discuss the horror genre as well as my central texts. In the first chapter, I will identify my key texts and justify their inclusion in this work. Then, in chapter two, I will analyze, summarize, and criticize existing literature on the horror genre. In that chapter, I will engage with those critics whose work forms the bedrock upon which my thesis will rest.<sup>5</sup> In the third chapter, I will discuss the methods by which various horror stories blur the line between fiction and reality. This will begin my critical analysis of my central texts. Thereafter, each chapter, while potentially referring to a variety of works, will focus on one or more of the central texts. The fourth chapter will give me room to begin this analysis, as I will discuss the first aspect of these stories, specifically, how this bending often works. This chapter will rely primarily on the *Tales from the Darkside* episode “Seasons of Belief” and the horror films *Candyman* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. The fourth chapter is devoted to magic.

If the first and second chapters are devoted to “what” and the third and fourth to “how,” the fifth and sixth chapters will address the question of “why.” In chapter five, I will argue that reality is scarier than fiction and that horror stories try to convince us of their verisimilitude because doing so makes them scarier. To do this, I will focus on two of Wes Craven’s films, i.e., *Scream* and *Wes Craven’s New Nightmare* (also known as *New Nightmare*), and Conor

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<sup>5</sup> I must acknowledge that this work could not exist without the creativity and insight of those before me. Many brilliant people have labored to make it possible for me to make any progress in this field. Isaac Newton famously said “If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.” And I concur wholeheartedly.

McPherson's play *The Weir*. I will also argue that horror is a didactic genre. Then, in chapter six, I will return to the critical discourse to build upon this point and argue that the line between fiction and reality is, in fact, blurred. Chapter six will form the crux of my analysis.

With those matters established, we reach the first door on our journey. While you, dear reader, have turned some pages already, be aware: what follows, from here on, is the culmination of many nightmares from many sources drawn together into a single document whose very goal is to undermine your conception of existence. Turn the page if you dare. You have been warned.

### Chapter One: **United In Darkness: On the Gothic**

As stated in the introduction, this thesis should be considered an overview of a specific type of horror story. Specifically, I am focusing on those horror stories that blend or threaten the boundary between the real and the imagined. I devote substantial time to many different works, but no single one will be the focus of my analysis. The problem, however, is that analyzing a variety of works naturally leads to questions about justification. Why am I using these texts and not others? My central texts are united in two ways. First, they address the boundary between fact and fantasy. Second, they are Gothic. My "central texts" are the films *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), *Wes Craven's New Nightmare* (1994), *Scream* (1996), and *Candyman* (1992), the television episode "Seasons of Belief" (1986), and the play *The Weir* (1997). Each of these, I will argue, is a Gothic text, and their inclusion in this subgenre, coupled with their treatment of fiction versus reality, justifies their inclusion here.

M.H. Abrams defines the Gothic in his glossary of literary terms. Abrams discusses how the Gothic has evolved past its initial conception, moving beyond castles and locales. He writes:

The term 'Gothic' has also been extended to a type of fiction that lacks the exotic setting of the earlier romances, but develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and



terror, represents events that are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states.<sup>6</sup>

While Abrams's definition is useful, I realized the relevance of the Gothic to my topic only after reading Kendall Phillips's work on Wes Craven, who the savvy reader may realize directed three of the films I will be discussing: *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *New Nightmare*, and *Scream*.

Phillips argues that the Gothic is obsessed with the line between fiction and reality: "...the gothic has centered around the thin line that exists between the world of day, and with it reason, rationality, and normalcy, and the world of night, and with it superstition, illusion, madness."<sup>7</sup>

We can immediately categorize as Gothic one of the central texts. "Seasons of Belief" started life as a short story before becoming an episode of *Tales from the Darkside*. The series begins every episode with a voice-over narration that states, rather ominously: "Man lives in the sunlit world of what he believes to be reality. But there is, unseen by most, an underworld, a place that is just as real, but not as brightly lit: a darkside."<sup>8</sup> This is the same division Phillips is talking about. *Tales from the Darkside* takes as its central premise the idea that reality is not as we take it, that there is "a world of night...superstition, illusion, madness."<sup>9</sup> The story is therefore thrust into a Gothic series, which highlights its underlying Gothic tenets. I will discuss the episode in detail later, in chapter four. For now, suffice it to say that, by raising the idea that

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<sup>6</sup> Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999. 111. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Phillips, Kendall R. "Gothic Dimensions in the Films of Wes Craven." *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 73-74. Print.

<sup>8</sup> "Tales from the Darkside Intro." YouTube, uploaded by publicposter, 1 February 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UnE3-0X-174>

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, Kendall R. "Gothic Dimensions in the Films of Wes Craven." *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 73-74. Print.

words can create, that a fireside scary story can bring its monster to life, “Seasons of Belief,” according to Phillips’s framework, becomes a Gothic tale.

*Candyman* is possibly the most straightforwardly Gothic work in the current project. Indeed, descriptions of it are liable to label it as such.<sup>10</sup> The film, and its short story basis, both show a legendary creature kept alive through stories, and they show the dangers of disbelief (a topic covered extensively in chapter four). *Candyman* also borrows from the Gothic’s older traditions. When one thinks Gothic, one tends to picture tall, brooding castles, per Abrams, and exotic locales.<sup>11</sup> In *Candyman*, the castles of yore become the dark, foreboding Cabrini-Green, a sort of modern-day ruin with its graffitied walls and dilapidated interior.<sup>12</sup> The film and short story both therefore hit our marks for being included in the Gothic subgenre.

Meanwhile, *The Weir* may be the least outright Gothic of our six central texts. But it nevertheless warrants inclusion. The play’s set, a rural Irish bar, is decidedly Gothic. The place may not be in ruins, it may not be as grand as Dracula’s castle or as dark as Cabrini-Green, but it is nevertheless the lone and lowly remnant of civilization in a desolate part of the country. Sitting around telling ghost stories in a rural Irish bar? Sounds Gothic to me. Also, examining the play’s inspiration can help us determine its Gothic roots. The published play begins with an “Author’s Note” that reads:

*The Weir* is an ensemble piece where the actors do talk to each other. It’s full of ghost stories. This play was probably inspired by my visits to Leitrim to see my grandad. He lived on his own down a country road in a small house beside the

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<sup>10</sup> Peterson, Evan J. “SHRIEK: Women of Horror.” Scarecrow, ND, <http://blog.scarecrow.com/shriek-women-of-horror-candyman/>

<sup>11</sup> Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999. 111. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Peterson, Evan J. “SHRIEK: Women of Horror.” Scarecrow, ND, <http://blog.scarecrow.com/shriek-women-of-horror-candyman/>

Shannon. I remember him telling me once that it was very important to have a radio on because it gave him the illusion of company. We'd have a drink and sit at the fire. And he'd tell me stories.

And then when you're lying in bed in the pitch black silence of the Irish countryside it's easy for the imagination to run riot. I always felt different there. I can still see him standing on the platform at the station. He always waved for much too long. Much longer than a person who was glad to have their privacy back.<sup>13</sup>

*The Weir* thus occupies a traditionally Gothic space, that of the scary exotic location, as well as a more modern one, that of questioning the boundary between fact and fiction, which we see once the ghost stories reach their climax.<sup>14</sup>

Phillips writes that Craven is interested in "the uncertain dividing point between reality and the fantastic."<sup>15</sup> The sheer number of Craven's films in my thesis supports Phillips's argument. Turning to the films, though, we easily see Phillips's case developed. He writes, "The blurring of the lines between waking and dreaming clearly establishes *Nightmare* and its sequels within the broad parameters of the gothic and the journey between the diurnal and nocturnal world."<sup>16</sup> He furthermore lists other Gothic elements the *Nightmare* films contain: "...some past crime...continues to haunt the space of its occurrence, and the unwitting protagonist stumbles upon this dangerous intersection of the world of day and the world of night."<sup>17</sup> Finally, he argues

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<sup>13</sup> McPherson, Conor. "The Weir." *The Weir, and Other Plays*. New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1999. 3. Print.

<sup>14</sup> Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 7th ed. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999. 111. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, Kendall R. "Gothic Dimensions in the Films of Wes Craven." *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 74. Print.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* 77-78.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 79.

that *Scream* is also included in this sub-sub-genre, that it has a “blurring of the lines between the trivial and the deadly.”<sup>18</sup> In fact, he states, “it is Sidney’s refusal to succumb to the seductive implosion of film and reality that ultimately saves her.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, if we accept Phillips’s argument that the Gothic includes the blurring of the line between fiction and reality, we accept that *Scream* belongs in this category.

And yet, even he or she accepts that these stories are, in fact, Gothic, the savvy reader may well ask why I have chosen these particular Gothic texts. These texts are useful because they not only question the line between fiction and reality, but do so by addressing the line between truth and story. That is, each of our central texts addresses the line between the stories we tell and the reality we live. While other Gothic works may blur the line between fiction and reality, they often do so by questioning what is real versus what is not. Our central texts still do that, but they go a step further by making the question revolve the divide between our tales and our truth. *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a possible exception here, as it deals less with the question of story than the other five texts do. The film is, however, still about a dream, dreams fundamentally being stories in their own right. And, by dealing with questions about belief, which our other texts raise to a degree, *Nightmare* becomes useful for developing the other sources.

Relying largely on Kendall Phillips’s work, I have argued that all of my six central texts are Gothic in at least some form. While this thesis is not a generic exploration of the Gothic per se, it is helpful to make this distinction. We should understand why these works are grouped together and how we can discuss them.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter Two: **Keeping it Real: Fiction and Reality**

To write about horror, we must first define what we mean by horror and what works we will be discussing. Horror is, after all, a varied field with many subgenres, which deserve their own theses and their own study, the scope of which is far beyond this project. *The Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines horror as “The quality of exciting repugnance and dread...”<sup>20&21</sup> The horror genre wants us to feel scared, but even more so, it wants us to feel tension, tension about what is to come. In this way, horror and suspense are similar. Noël Carroll, however, argues in *The Philosophy of Horror* that these two genres, horror and suspense, are not the same. Carroll argues that the two are linked through their mediation of audience expectations. In a suspense story, the desired outcome is often the less likely outcome; suspense, he argues, thrives on the unlikely.<sup>22</sup> This is the link between horror and suspense. Suspense thrives on the unlikely, and horror makes the likely outcome, the villain winning, the less desirable one.<sup>23</sup> Horror movie protagonists tend to be underdogs, facing against seemingly impossible odds, after all. But Carroll is clear that, despite these similarities, the two genres are distinct because, whereas suspense stories focus on the event or situation, the object of horror is the monster.<sup>24</sup> So, we have two genres that are similar but ultimately different. As usual, we run into the issue of perfect definitions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> “Horror, n.” *OED*. 1899.

<http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.lib.vt.edu/view/Entry/88577?rskey=GINT3D&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>  
<sup>21</sup> As expected, the *OED* offers numerous definitions of horror, spanning the entire chronology of its use. This definition, however, is the most suitable for our purposes and the one I will rely on throughout this project.

<sup>22</sup> Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 138. Print.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 139.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 143.

<sup>25</sup> The problem of perfect definitions, more commonly known as “family resemblances,” comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s work, particularly his *Philosophical Investigations*. The idea is that one cannot create a perfect definition of something, say the word “game,” where “perfect” is defined as a definition that includes everything we want included in the category of “game” and excludes everything else (e.g., a definition that includes “basketball” but not “chess” or “dinner”). I mention this here because, like the definitions of “game,” genre definitions are not perfect. Choosing whether a work is horror as opposed to fantasy, science fiction, or thriller can be difficult and may be more effort than it is worth.

Definitions for subgenres are also inherently imperfect. *Alien*, for instance, is a science-fiction film, a horror film, a slasher film, and a creature feature. These categories overlap. Nevertheless, it will behoove us to differentiate the stories I will discuss from those I will not. Mikel J. Koven, a cinema and folklore scholar, describes in “The Terror Tale: Urban Legends and the Slasher Film” what he calls the “terror tale,” an urban legend meant to arouse terror rather than disgust.<sup>26</sup> In this essay, as expected, he focuses on terror tales rather than other types of horror. Horror, you see, has the perhaps dubious distinction of including varying levels of fear as well as innumerable approaches to the subject matter. In *Danse Macabre*, a treatise on horror, Stephen King gives three levels: terror, horror, and the grossout.<sup>27</sup> These levels correspond to high, middle, and lowbrow horror, respectively. The grossout, King claims, is the final refuge of the horror writer, the last resort of one who has failed to inspire fear or dread.<sup>28</sup>

I introduce Koven and King here because both treat this notion of distinctions within horror based on the works’ intended goals. It should be clear to even the layman that different horror stories seek different results. Whereas films like *Candyman* build suspense throughout and do not primarily seek to disgust, other films such as *Hostel* rely on viscera and excessive violence rather than atmosphere. Like Koven, I will focus my analysis on “terror tales,” and will largely ignore those works which primarily seek to shock their audiences through excess. My interest is on works whose concepts are frightening, works which bend or threaten the boundaries we rest our own existential notions upon.

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<sup>26</sup> Koven, Mikel J. “The Terror Tale: Urban Legends and the Slasher Film.” (2003): 4. University of Wales, Aberystwyth. Web. 5 Oct. 2015. <<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2003/may-2003/koven.pdf>>.

<sup>27</sup> King, Stephen. *Danse Macabre*. New York: Gallery, 2010. 25. Print.

<sup>28</sup> I agree with King, and I have no interest in viewing films that are excessive purely for the sake of being excessive. I am not a fan of the so-called “torture porn” genre. Nevertheless, I tuck this digression away in a footnote because I do not wish to denigrate others’ views and this thesis is not a treatise on what makes for good horror. Also, as I have conducted my research for this project, I have stumbled on some thought-provoking analyses of “torture porn” that make me consider giving it a second look or at least greater respect.

Works that rely on excess do not, so far as I can tell, tend to question the boundary between fiction and reality. Nevertheless, the question has been addressed in some scholarly literature. In “Does the word ‘Dog’ bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend Telling,” Linda Dègh and Andrew Vàzsonyi point out how legends can become fact.<sup>29</sup> From Dègh and Vàzsonyi’s analysis, we can conclude: “From copycat killers to the more fantastical true figure behind the horrific legend, the line between legend and reality is blurry...”<sup>30</sup> In other words, stories can inspire reality, and the notion that we can easily, unambiguously, and flawlessly group events into either “stories” or “facts” is flawed. As discussed, even our definitions tend to be imprecise. Our categories are no different. The really scary thing, then, the true fear, and the terror these works evoke, is that we do not know what is real and what is not.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, to arrive at this point, we must cover much scholarly and conceptual ground. The horror genre is often maligned.<sup>32</sup> Horror is probably also one of the few genres whose very name elicits a negative reaction.<sup>33</sup> Again, I can back this with plenty of anecdotal evidence. Something about the desire to scare tends to alienate some audiences.<sup>34</sup> Still, horror

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<sup>29</sup> Dègh, Linda, and Andrew Vazsonyi. "Does the Word "Dog" Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling." *Journal of Folklore Research* 20.1 (1983): 5-34. Print.

<sup>30</sup> West, Brandon. “Exploring the Dreamscape: An Analysis of the Critical Commentary of *Candyman*.” 2015. 3. TS. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

<sup>31</sup> I will develop this point at length later. For now, one should note that mine is a nuanced position. I am not lapsing into solipsism or claiming that our notions of reality are useless or entirely flawed. My philosophy is not Humean. Rather, I mean that the categories we use of “reality” and “fiction” are not as fixed as we believe. Can Freddy Kruger literally reach out and kill you in your dreams? Probably not, but the idea is less farfetched than it seems at first. Not only can fiction reach out and hurt us, but that which we deem fiction can become real and may already be more “real” than we initially give it credit for being. This thesis should therefore point out where the holes in our conception of reality are, rather than destroy our notion of reality entirely.

<sup>32</sup> When I was considering graduate school, my adviser told me to not study horror, saying I would be relegating myself to lesser works.

<sup>33</sup> The only other genres I can think of that achieve this same effect are romantic comedy (“rom-coms” or “chick flicks”) and pornography.

<sup>34</sup> I have to be careful here to not overstate my case. Given its popularity, horror does not, in fact, “alienate” its audience. Rather, I mean to say that horror alienates some members of its potential audience. Some have no interest in watching or reading horror stories. As a genre, its mere name can make people react or even withdraw. For instance, when I was an undergraduate, I would look for friends to watch horror movies with me on different occasions (e.g., Friday the 13<sup>th</sup> or Halloween). But none of my friends expressed much enthusiasm. While one friend

does get some respect, and the genre itself is not entirely neglected. Outstanding entries like *Se7en* and the aforementioned *Alien* have both found their way onto the Internet Movie Database (IMDB)'s top 250 ranked films.<sup>35</sup> The point stands, however, that even great horror films, even films that were widely popular and full of social commentary, such as *Candyman*, do not make the list. To be fair, great films from other genres are also left off, but if we combine all the above, we see that horror is often viewed negatively, perhaps more so than any other genre.

We might ask, therefore, why horror even matters. Of course, such a question carries the implicit assumption that horror does matter, and, indeed, I think any critic will have a difficult time arguing it does not. One need only look at the genre's popularity with audiences to see that horror is here to stay. When films like *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* can make profits far exceeding their budgets, the horror genre proves it can be a cash cow, giving studios the option to make films cheaply, then get huge returns on their investment.<sup>36</sup>

From their popular appeal, we know that horror films, and horror fiction in general (look at King's book sales), do matter. Clearly, people want to hear scary stories. The question, then, is: why? On this, King writes, "The answer seems to be that we make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones."<sup>37</sup> To support this, he shows how horror films tend to follow subgeneric trends that reflect the anxieties of the time. For instance, he points out that the different versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956 and 1978) changed to correspond with America's fears at the time.<sup>38</sup> And he writes, "although the uneasy dreams of the mass subconscious may change from decade to decade, the pipeline into that well of dreams remains constant and vital."<sup>39</sup> Wes

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did watch several films with me, and others jumped in for the occasional feature, they were more interested in spending time with me or seeing a particular film. They watched in spite of the genre rather than because of it.

<sup>35</sup> The entire list can be found here: <http://www.imdb.com/chart/top>

<sup>36</sup> King, Stephen. "What's Scary." Foreword in *Danse Macabre*. New York: Gallery, 2010. Xiv. Print.

<sup>37</sup> King, Stephen. *Danse Macabre*. New York: Gallery, 2010. 13. Print.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



Craven shares a similar sentiment: "[Horror movies are] like boot camp for the psyche. In real life, human beings are packaged in the flimsiest of packages, threatened by real and sometimes horrifying dangers, events like Columbine. But the narrative form puts these fears into a manageable series of events. It gives us a way of thinking rationally about our fears."<sup>40</sup>

So, why do we like scary stories? We like them partially because they speak to our fears. Fear is in response to a lack of control. The rat fears the cat because it cannot control the cat's actions. Once the rat has control over the cat, the rat fears less the cat itself, but rather the loss of its control over the cat. Thus, we engage with our fears so that we may control them. Telling stories is one method of control.

When writing about recounting dreams, Paul Schwenger quotes Maurice Blanchot in saying we do so "to appropriate them and to establish ourselves, through common speech, not only as the master of our dreams but as their principal actor, thereby decisively taking possession of this similar though eccentric being who was us over the course of the night."<sup>41</sup> In the same vein, we tell scary stories partially so we can externalize and control our fears. By vocalizing our fears, we place them, if temporarily, outside of ourselves and thereby make them easier to control. A named being like Freddy Kruger is less scary than an unnamed, unknown entity.<sup>42</sup> Thus, these stories help us control our fears. If you want to know what someone fears, look at his or her nightmares and scary stories.

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<sup>40</sup> Mufson, Beckett. "13 Wes Craven Quotes Remember the Original Master of Horror." 13 August 2015. [https://creators.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/13-wes-craven-quotes-remember-the-original-master-of-horror](https://creators.vice.com/en_uk/article/13-wes-craven-quotes-remember-the-original-master-of-horror)

<sup>41</sup> Schwenger, Paul. *At the Borders of Sleep: On Liminal Literature*. University of Minnesota Press, 2012. 85. Print.

<sup>42</sup> I believe Wes Craven was aware of this fact. In *New Nightmare*, Freddy is distinct from his previous appearances. Heather and Robert, the latter of whom played Freddy in the preceding films and this film itself, call him "darker" (*New Nightmare*). That is, this Freddy is not the Freddy they know. Craven wanted to make Freddy scary again. To do so, he had to distance the new Freddy from the wisecracking character he had become. In other words, Craven had to make Freddy an unknown again. He had to destroy the familiar character and replace him with a new version, one who is "darker," whose rules we do not know, and whom we cannot control. Without doing this, Craven never could have made Freddy scary again (*Never Sleep Again*).

Liminality in horror is a surprisingly under-researched area. While the 2017 Popular Culture Association Conference had a panel on the subject, there does not appear to be much existing literature examining this topic. In several ways, then, my research into this area has been indirect. Few sources really address it at its heart, though a few scholars, such as Robert Egginton, do discuss it, albeit without using the term “liminality.” In some ways, therefore, my work is doing something new, taking bits and pieces from various sources to answer a question that largely lacks direct answers. Most sources about horror, liminality, and fiction versus reality have not put these pieces together as I have done, at least as far as I can tell. I will, however, now turn to perhaps the closest source I have found: a book on found footage horror films that directly discusses the line between fiction and reality in horror films.

As chapter two shows, my thesis revolves around Gothic works. There is, however, another subgenre of horror, one perhaps more popular today, that also blurs the line between fact and fiction: found footage. When planning this project, I had to pare down the number of fictional texts I would discuss, and there are many variations of this project that, like various deleted scenes and alternate endings, did not make the final cut. The found footage subgenre is indeed helpful and relevant, but, as I have chosen to focus my analysis on the Gothic, I will relegate it to a brief discussion here with some citations and footnotes in later chapters.<sup>43</sup> The found footage genre’s central gambit turns the nature of filmmaking on its head. These films explain, diegetically, the camera’s presence, most often having the protagonists filming their adventures.

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<sup>43</sup> For a thorough and enlightening discussion of found footage horror films, please see Alexandra Heller-Nicholas’s *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and the Appearance of Reality*. Full bibliographic information is available in this work’s bibliography.

Perhaps the most important and seminal found footage horror film is *The Blair Witch Project*. The film revolves around a group of “filmmakers” (really actors) making a documentary about a local legend, the titular witch, in the forest. They become lost and disoriented, and the film’s frame narrative is that the footage is genuine. Note that *The Blair Witch Project* does not claim to be a fictional film, though it is. Rather, the film’s popularity was based on its marketing platform, that of claiming to be the recovered footage of three missing filmmakers. The film’s poster proclaims, “In October of 1994, three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary... A year later their footage was found.”<sup>44</sup> The film was a hit, making over 200 million dollars on a budget of under 40 thousand dollars.<sup>45</sup> Interest in the film (at least critical interest), though, focused less on the film and more on this phenomenon surrounding it: its claim of reality.<sup>46&47</sup>

On this point, Stephen King writes, “One thing about *Blair Witch: the damn thing looks real*. Another thing about *Blair Witch: the damn thing feels real*” (emphasis King’s).<sup>48</sup> He furthermore states, preempting this thesis by three chapters, “And because it does, it’s like the worst nightmare you ever had...”<sup>49</sup> I will talk about the importance of verisimilitude for creating fear in chapter five, but for now this is a useful introduction to the idea, and it illustrates the point about *The Blair Witch Project*: the film’s success can be largely attributed to its claims of reality. Aesthetically speaking, the film is not well-done. It is amateurish, and it gave me a headache just

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<sup>44</sup> Available in Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and Appearance of Reality*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 94. Print.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> *Blair Witch* is not alone in this. The Italian film *Cannibal Holocaust* had a similar marketing gimmick. The director, however, ended up in legal trouble when some believed he had, in fact, killed the actors on camera, and he was forced to reveal the illusion. Deodato, Ruggero (12 November 2000). "Cult-Con 2000." *Cannibal Holocaust* DVD Commentary (Interview). Interview with Sage Stallone, Bob Murawski. Tarrytown, New York.

<sup>48</sup> King, Stephen. “What’s Scary.” Foreword in *Danse Macabre*. New York: Gallery, 2010. Xiv. Print.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

watching it. Aesthetic issues aside, I am not trying to reach a conclusion about the film's overall quality, but rather to show that it succeeds mostly because its brilliant marketing strategy bills the story as real.<sup>50</sup>

The found footage subgenre is therefore uniquely suited to questioning the line between fiction and reality, as it often presents its material as reality rather than as fiction. Compare this to the films I will examine, which do not claim to be real (though some of them have a basis in reality) but rather use their fictional frameworks to examine the nature of reality and fiction.

Heller-Nicholas makes the following observation about found footage films:

We expect to indulge in a fictional fantasy, but these films make concrete attempts to usurp this belief, hoping the stories will therefore necessarily become closer to our own realities. Filmmakers seek to unsettle and discomfort spectators through this sudden, unexpected proximity shift, milking our suspicions that what we are watching may in fact have actually happened.<sup>51</sup>

In other words, found footage films do, in fact, threaten the boundary between fiction and reality, though they do so by trying to seem real themselves. Our central texts will instead show fictional stories within their universes becoming real or real events in their stories becoming fictional.

Moreover, one should note, found footage does not rely merely on trying to seem real, and, indeed, Heller-Nicholas argues that the subgenre has largely moved past this technique, as

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<sup>50</sup> The definition and defense of a full aesthetic criteria for film quality are beyond the scope of the present study. I observe, nonetheless, that *The Blair Witch Project* misses many of the marks for a well-done film. The camera work is shaky, there are essentially no special effects, and there is very little plot or action. That being said, I still enjoyed the film. My point is not that it is bad (again, whatever that means) but that it is not quite a traditional film. The early, most dedicated members of the found footage genre really changed the game for what constituted a movie. As King says, *Blair Witch* does not feel like a movie, something we should be watching in theaters; it feels like a true, candid account of events as they transpired. It is not, but such is its illusion. And that is arguably the marker for brilliance.

<sup>51</sup> Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and Appearance of Reality*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 26. Print.

audiences have grown wise to it.<sup>52</sup> After *Blair Witch* and others got away, for a time, with pretending to actually be real, viewers became aware of the deception, and the subgenre has therefore had to find new tricks to stay relevant and interesting. But let us look now at our central texts and see what techniques they use to interrogate the nature of truth and fiction.

### Chapter Three: **Horrific Angles: How to Disrupt the Status Quo**

In this chapter, I will discuss the various methods horror auteurs can use to blur the distinction between fact and fiction. The following works are grouped loosely by category, and I will discuss each category later on.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, many of these works raise the question of belief. Here, we reach our first category. This is a large category, containing *Tales from the Darkside*, *Candyman*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*.

“Seasons of Belief” is a short story by Michael Bishop that Michael McDowell adapted for television. In the *Tales from the Darkside* episode (my focus), we see two parents attempting to entertain their children around Christmas time. To do so, the parents begin to tell a story. The parents, we have learned by this point in the episode, have a penchant for improvising fanciful tales, even adding details to each other’s fabricated stories. When the father discusses Santa Claus, the mother chimes in with comments about Mrs. Claus’s favorite recipe, which, the mother claims, Mrs. Claus got from Eleanor Roosevelt.<sup>53</sup> In this vein of fabrication, the father agrees to tell a scary story for the two children, Stefa and Jimbo.<sup>54</sup> Now, it should be clear, the father is making this story up as he goes. He begins a tale about a creature he names the grither.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 4.

<sup>53</sup> McDowell, Michael. "Seasons of Belief." *Tales from the Darkside*. Laurel Entertainment Inc. 29 Dec. 1986. Television.

<sup>54</sup> Unlike the kids, the parents remain unnamed. To a savvy horror viewer, this will likely foreshadow their fates.

<sup>55</sup> According to the story, saying this being’s name aloud is dangerous. Thus, I encourage the reader to read this section silently.

The grither, he states, hates his name being said aloud—so much so, in fact, that this being is, according to the parents, heading toward their home, enraged at the mere mention of his name. The parents continue the story until Stefa becomes too upset and they decide to stop. And yet the story’s conceit is that the only way to protect oneself from the grither’s rage once one has spoken his name is to finish the story. The parents never finish the story, the story they made up. At the end of the episode, both parents are killed when two large hands, remarkably like those they described the grither as having, reach through their living room windows and snap their necks.

Similarly, *Candyman* sees a creature’s name as a powerful thing, a word to be avoided.<sup>56</sup> Set in Chicago, the film, directed by Bernard Rose, follows a graduate student, Helen, trying to research a thesis on urban legends.<sup>57</sup> Helen becomes intrigued with the legend of Candyman, a specter said to haunt the Cabrini-Green housing project.<sup>58</sup> The legend, as the condescending folklore professor, Purcell, tell us, is that Candyman (he receives no other name) was the son of a slave. His father, however, became wealthy, and Candyman was raised in comfort, going to elite schools. Candyman became a renowned artist, known for his skill at portraiture. When he was hired to paint the daughter of a wealthy white man, he fell in love with her. When she became pregnant, the father organized a mob to chase Candyman down. They cut off his painting hand,

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<sup>56</sup> And again, I will warn my reader against reading this out loud. The rule is five Candymans and one grither. Tread carefully.

<sup>57</sup> The film is based on Clive Barker’s short story “The Forbidden,” which is set in England rather than Chicago. Thus, many of the film’s central tensions (e.g., race) are not present in the source material but rather unique to its American adaptation.

<sup>58</sup> Cabrini-Green was notorious, both in the film and real-life, for being crime-ridden and dangerous. The mayor of Chicago famously spent some time living there, attempting to dispel its notorious mystique. This effort backfired, though, when she and her husband spent only three weeks there and did so with a substantial amount of security.

See:

Weidrich, Bob. “Jane Byrne is making History.” *Chicago Tribune*, 26 March 1981, Section 3.

“Jane Byrne’s Easter at Cabrini-Green, 1981.” *Chicago Tribune*, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/81972514-157.html>

replacing it with a hook. They then smeared him with honey and released bees from a nearby apiary, allowing the bees to sting him to death.

Helen dismisses the story, and she completes the ritual of repeating Candyman's name five times in front of a mirror.<sup>59</sup> After her testimony leads to the arrest of a drug dealer using the "Candyman" name, the real Candyman appears before her and tells her: "You were not content with the stories, so I was obliged to come...I am the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom. Without these things, I am nothing. So now, I must shed innocent blood."<sup>60</sup>

Candyman proceeds to murder a Cabrini-Green woman's dog, kidnap her infant, and frame Helen. He also kills Helen's friend and research partner, Bernadette, again framing Helen. Ultimately, Helen is forced to embrace the legend, as she enters Cabrini-Green again, confronts Candyman, and dies in a funeral pyre. At the end of the film, Helen's husband summons her spirit by chanting her name five times in front of a mirror, whereupon she murders him with a hook, echoing Candyman's modus operandi and showing how she has become part of the legend.

To round out this section on belief, we come to the first of our Wes Craven films, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Craven wrote and directed the film, in which a group of teenagers realize they are having similar nightmares of being chased by a horribly burned figure. After a few of the group are killed, the protagonist, Nancy, begins to put the pieces together. She realizes that this figure is Freddy Kruger, a child murderer who, after being executed via vigilante justice, is taking revenge by slaying his killers' children in their sleep. Freddy succeeds in killing most of the group, and Nancy is left alone to face him. She ultimately defeats Kruger when she realizes

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<sup>59</sup> The ritual to summon Candyman is similar to real-life Bloody Mary legend, in which repeating "Bloody Mary" the requisite number of times in front of a mirror will summon her spirit. In fact, monster-in-mirror legends are their own topic worthy of study. For one such discussion, see: Tucker, Elizabeth. "Ghosts in Mirrors: Reflections of the Self." *Journal of American Folklore* 118.468 (2005): 186-203. Print.

<sup>60</sup> *Candyman*. Dir. Bernard Rose. Perf. Tony Todd and Virginia Madsen. TriStar Pictures, 1992. DVD.

that his power relies on her fear. Thus, she defeats him by turning her back on him, declaring she “take[s] back every bit of energy [she] gave [him].”<sup>61</sup>

Our second category includes not questions of belief but rather questions of story and storytelling. One should note, however, that these are not fixed categories but rather convenient groupings. *Candyman*, for instance, combines storytelling and legend creation with its theme of belief.

Our second Wes Craven film is *New Nightmare*, which he again wrote and directed. This film’s plot is highly irregular and layered. In it, Heather Langenkamp and the cast of the original *A Nightmare on Elm Street* play fictionalized versions of themselves. Throughout *New Nightmare*, Heather and her family are being stalked by an actual entity similar to the film character, Freddy Kruger, but who exists outside of the *Nightmare* films. This new being is distinguished from Robert Englund’s portrayal of the “fictional” Freddy Kruger, as Englund himself, in character as the fictional Robert Englund, claims the real Freddy to be “darker.”<sup>62&63</sup> This “darker” Freddy, we find out, is a real being whom Wes Craven restrained by means of the *Nightmare* film series, but who, now that the films are over, is managing to break free, back into our reality. In the end, Craven, also playing a fictionalized version of himself, hands Heather a script, telling her she must “play Nancy one last time” to defeat Freddy.<sup>64</sup> Heather does this and defeats Freddy. In the end, we find out that the script the fictional Craven handed her is the

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<sup>61</sup> *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Dir. Wes Craven. By Wes Craven. Prod. Robert Shaye. Perf. John Saxon, Ronee Blakley, Heather Langenkamp, Johnny Depp, Robert Englund, and Jsu Garcia. N.p., n.d. Web.

<sup>62</sup> *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Heather Langenkamp, Robert Englund, Miko Hughes, John Saxon. New Line Cinema, 1994. Film.

<sup>63</sup> These multiple layers can be hard to track. While I try to do justice to them above, it is a difficult film for the same reason it is interesting: its complexity. Blurring the boundary between fiction and reality tends to blur the overall picture and cause our preconceptions to fall apart, in turn frustrating our understanding.

<sup>64</sup> *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Heather Langenkamp, Robert Englund, Miko Hughes, John Saxon. New Line Cinema, 1994. Film.



movie's actual script. Of all the works discussed here, this one particularly resists simple summary.

Our third and final Wes Craven film is *Scream*, directed by Craven but written by Kevin Williamson, whose plot is mercifully more straightforward than *New Nightmare*'s. In *Scream*, a group of teenagers find themselves being stalked by a masked killer. The characters, including main character Sidney (Neve Campbell), are well-versed in horror movie tropes and clichés, and they actively discuss the killings as if they were occurring in a film, projecting assessments of film survival strategies onto real-life terror, with mixed success. The killer reduces the core group to only a few survivors, two of whom reveal the film's twist: there is not one killer but rather two. Billy and Stu then torment Sidney before she, “final girl” that she is, outmaneuvers and overcomes them.<sup>65</sup>

*New Nightmare* and *Scream* both actively discuss the stories that contextualize them, thus making their narratives a metacommentary on the nature of the horror genre or, in the former case, its own film series.<sup>66</sup> Our second category, then, is of works that comment on the nature of storytelling and fiction more generally. These works are sometimes more self-aware than the works in our first category, those dealing with belief. Our final work in this second category is Conor McPherson's *The Weir*. In this play, rural Irishmen sit around in a pub and share supernatural tales with one another. They tell the stories for the benefit of Valerie, an outsider who has only recently arrived in their area. The stories address various themes and creatures, from fairies, to ghosts, to loss. Most of the characters, however, accept Valerie's story as true, as

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<sup>65</sup> Carol J. Clover coined the term “final girl” in her seminal work *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*. I direct the reader to her for a thorough and enlightening discussion of gender in horror films.

<sup>66</sup> *Scream*'s sequels, which I will not discuss at length, do this as well. In the third film, we see a video of Randy (killed in the second film) discussing his theory that the series will be a trilogy. This aids the protagonists with their predicament. Randy's theory is frustrated, however, when a fourth *Scream* film appears. He does not return from the dead to discuss this contradiction.

her story is very personal to her, relating the loss of her daughter and her receiving a phone call from said deceased child. Thus, while *The Weir* does not dwell within a genre and does not state whether any single story is, in fact, true, it nevertheless engages with this question of verisimilitude, as the characters cast doubt on each other's stories.

In addition to the two broad categories I have drawn, we should take a moment to consider that these stories run in two directions. The line between fiction and reality goes both ways. If it is porous, as I will argue, one can move from either category into the other. It is permeable both ways, in other words. One may notice, however, from the works above, that most of these stories show the fictional becoming real. The stories either have a "fictional" being assert its reality or have their stories becoming real. The rarer version is for something "real" to become "fictional." Indeed, in the works I will address here and the works I have viewed in my experience with the horror genre, the former variation is far more prominent. Only *Candyman* and *New Nightmare* show the real becoming fictional. Sidney and Tatum do discuss it in *Scream* when they muse about making a movie of the film's murders.<sup>67</sup> It is, however, only a brief conversation and does not preoccupy the characters. The killers, Billy and Stu, are more concerned with making a real-life sequel than with making a movie.<sup>68&69</sup> Their story's becoming a movie is therefore a minor concern for most of the characters. Thus, we fear our stories' becoming real more than we fear our reality's becoming more fictional.

The "status quo" is to respect the line between fiction and reality. After all, we know what is real and what is not. There is no Freddy Kruger, no nightmare demons, no fairies, no

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<sup>67</sup> *Scream*. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. David Arquette, Neve Campbell, Courtney Cox. Dimension Films, 1996. Film.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Scream*'s sequels do treat this topic with the *Stab* franchise, a film-within-a-film based on Billy and Stu's murder spree. The fourth film also includes one of the murderers mentioning "making a movie." As this project requires a narrowing of scope, I will not treat the entire *Scream* franchise in depth. Nevertheless, this is worth noting for now.

ghosts. Right?<sup>70</sup> Well, probably not. And the status quo in fiction is to acknowledge this truth. Within the story's narrative, then, the supernatural may be real, but the story makes little effort to move beyond that, to claim that it happened in the reality of the viewers. *Halloween* does not tell us that its events transpired or even that they can. John Carpenter does not deem it necessary to tell us that the boogeyman is after us.

Of course, any story in the horror genre leaves that seed of doubt in the viewer's mind. What if Michael Myers is real? Or, what if a masked killer begins following me? This is the window, the opening Wes Craven and our other auteurs use to worm their way into our psyches. When we leave ourselves vulnerable, when we doubt our reality, Craven can come along and open that gap, telling us that we are, in fact, vulnerable to the threats our horror movies show us. Thus, we get horror stories that try to blur, bend, or even destroy the line between fact and fiction. As discussed above, there are multiple ways for a story to go about this task. They may prey upon our belief, or they may question the nature of storytelling more generally. Either way, they disrupt our status quo, our comfort, by doing so. They make us vulnerable, open to the horrors they want to show us. But, remember, they can only come in because we leave the door open. And why do we do that? See chapter four for answers.

There are those who claim they are not scared by horror movies. To those people, I do not say "I don't believe you." Rather, I say "I am sorry." The horror genre is not for everyone, and its tricks and tropes will not affect all of us equally. For some, they will not be effective at all. This is, I believe, a matter of disposition.<sup>71</sup> When a horror movie fails to be scary, it may be

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<sup>70</sup> While I, the author, hold this position, I am uncomfortable asserting these matters as definitive truth because, if I may channel a *Scream* character or two, I recognize what happens to skeptics in horror films, and I do not wish to damn myself to a quick and brutal end.

<sup>71</sup> In *Danse Macabre*, King states, "I believe that horror does not horrify unless the reader or viewer has been personally touched" (12). King therefore believes that horror has a personal element. Not everyone can be touched the same way, and some may not be able to be touched at all.

less a failing of the film and more a lack of audience-film compatibility. Just as not all couples have chemistry, not all films can have chemistry with all viewers. I am not scared by all horror films. Most horror films I watch do not affect me very much. Some can make me momentarily tense, but only the very rare film can make me truly scared, too afraid to go to sleep. I am, however, a person who can experience fear from fiction. Since I do not usually fear fiction, though, I have learned to appreciate the genre for other reasons. The horror genre is rich in conceptual material. The line between fiction and reality, for instance, should be an interesting subject. Whether the works I discuss are particularly scary is largely irrelevant, though I will devote chapter five to discussing how blurring the line between fiction and reality can make stories scarier. As with all tricks of the trade, though, this one, too, may fall short for some. Even then, I hope one can, in a spirit of flexibility, welcome the intelligence of a film that can warp our perceptions and lead us to question the very nature of the world in which we live.

#### Chapter Four: **The Binary that Isn't: How Magic Muddies the Waters**

Doors are tricky. We shut them, we lock them, but we know they are a flimsy barrier, able to be breached through every part. In this chapter, I will argue that we still believe in magic and that our belief gives these stories power.<sup>72</sup> I will start by analyzing the role of belief in three central texts: “Seasons of Belief,” *Candyman*, and *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. I will conclude by showing how this notion of belief is not so far-fetched and is, in fact, in keeping with our everyday practices.

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<sup>72</sup> This chapter will draw upon my paper “‘What’s in a Name?’ Quite a Bit, Actually: On the Importance of Naming and the Power of the Spoken Word in Mythology Celtic and Otherwise,” as my work there will form the bedrock for my work here.

West, Brandon. “‘What’s in a Name?’ Quite a Bit, Actually: On the Importance of Naming and the Power of the Spoken Word in Mythology Celtic and Otherwise.” 2016. TS. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Ultimately, I will show that the stories that bend the line between the real and the imagined are not as fanciful as we imagine them to be, that they actually align with our implicit (and sometimes explicit) superstitions, thereby exploiting openings we left without realizing it. These gaps, once we notice them, reveal the porous, non-binary boundary between reality and fiction, a boundary which is not, as this chapter's title suggests, as fixed as we tend to believe. Rather, our superstitions and implicit belief in magic show that we often fail to understand our own views. We blur the line between fiction and reality every day, often without realizing it. This blurring takes the form of belief in magic. That is to say, our belief opens the door for the blurring.<sup>73</sup> And, as I will argue throughout this thesis, horror fiction is perfectly suited for demonstrating this phenomenon to us.

Let us start with something simple. What is your superstition? Surely you have one.<sup>74</sup> I check things. In college, during finals week, I would check my alarm over and over again to ensure it was properly set, even though, after the first inspection, it certainly was.<sup>75</sup> Despite rationally knowing that my checking my alarm or not checking it a third time would not change whether it was set, I could not help myself. I had a nagging feeling. I followed that nag. And I am not alone here. Those who are driven by anxieties develop little rituals which, to our rational selves, do not make sense, but that we repeat, day in and day out, regardless. These are our

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<sup>73</sup> While I use the colloquial phrase "open the door" to mean that our belief causes the line between fiction and reality to blur, my doing so also confuses the metaphor. In reality, doors are still something of a binary. The threshold represents an often-clear boundary between inside and outside, one room and another. Thus, it would be more accurate to describe fiction and reality as mixing within this threshold, doors aside. There is, after all, a liminal space within the door frame, where one is neither quite inside nor quite outside.

<sup>74</sup> Just as not everyone is capable of being affected by horror films, I suspect there are some who have zero superstitions. Nevertheless, many, if not all, of us retain some rudimentary and possibly implicit belief in magic.

<sup>75</sup> I am adapting this example and sequence from my paper "'What's in a Name?' Quite a bit, Actually: On the Importance of Naming and the Power of the Spoken Word in Mythology Celtic and Otherwise."

modern-day superstitions. Little rituals, we believe, no matter how much we know better, can change the outcome of events that are surely independent of them.<sup>76</sup>

My choice of “ritual” is not accidental. Rather, ritual is a key component of magic. When discussing magic and the occult, J. Lawton Winslade writes, “magic consists of acts that are ritual performances enacted to achieve specific results... words do not ‘do something’ just by being uttered. They must be vibrated, chanted, ritualized.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, magic involves multiple components, including ritual and the spoken word. The latter is relevant to two of our three major works in this chapter, and the former is the focus of my work on Celtic mythology and names. I wanted to make the leap to words here because they are more intrinsically tied to magic. That is, we can acknowledge that our rituals are absurd, but we believe that using words to modify the external world is even stranger.<sup>78</sup>

And yet many of us do use our words to (try to) modify external reality. If you think you do not, picture yourself watching your favorite sports team or your favorite TV show. Have you never yelled at the players or characters who cannot hear you? Have you never shouted “behind you” to the character who is about to get stabbed in the back? To the purely rational person, all of these acts are just as absurd as the rituals described above. They may strike her as even more absurd. But, just as we repeat rituals, we also mutter things under our breath, hoping to thereby influence the outcome of an event otherwise out of our hands. And that, folks, is magic. The idea

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<sup>76</sup> Many players of the *Dungeons & Dragons* roleplaying game are superstitious when it comes to their dice. They may put away dice that roll low and refuse to play with them, at least for that night. Of course, dice are random or at least mostly random, and just because a die rolls low a few times in a row does not mean it will continue to do so or that the player will have better luck with a different die. And yet, despite knowing and understanding this, many players opt for swapping dice out regardless. This is but one of many examples showing this superstitious ritual in action.

<sup>77</sup> Winsdale, J. Lawton. “Techno-Kabbalah: The Performative Language of Magick and the Production of Occult Knowledge,” *TDR: Drama Review* 44 (2000), 2, 98, accessed April 25, 2016.

<sup>78</sup> Bernard, LL. “The Unilateral Elements in Magic Theory and Performance,” *American Sociological Review* 3 (1938), 6, accessed April 25, 2016.

that you can say certain words, do things a certain way, and thus change the course of events without directly interfering with them is sorcery of the first degree. The irony, then, is that we could go out and ask people if they believe in magic, and most would say “no.” I suspect if we prodded further, we would see that many of those people had these same superstitions and performed these same actions.

The issue is, we believe that our notion of reality is not fixed.<sup>79</sup> This belief is usually implicit, but as I have shown, many of us, more than would probably admit it if asked outright, have some belief in magic. And so, we have a belief that our rational mind rejects. But belief is nothing if not stubborn. Once we leave open this door, belief and magic start to influence us. Our fictional works tell us that belief is a powerful thing. And, also ironically, once you open the door by believing in magic and hoping it can help you, you leave the door open for the monsters to come in.<sup>80</sup>

Candyman and the grither both enter, or more accurately smash, through this opening. The latter comes from an episode of *Tales from the Darkside* entitled “Seasons of Belief.” As described in chapter three, the grither is an odd case in that, unlike any other monsters on this list, he seemed to have no existence prior to inspiring belief. When the parents begin their story, it is clear they are improvising. When challenged about the creature’s theme song, for example, they ad-lib “Oh I am the grither” to the tune of “O, Come All Ye Faithful.” The parents are

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<sup>79</sup> This implicit belief contrasts with our typical avowed belief that reality is, in fact, fixed. Despite our superstitions suggesting otherwise, we tend to say that we do not believe in these things, even though, as I have shown, we often do. Thus, in the course of this thesis, I am addressing beliefs stated and unstated. Here, I have unearthed our unstated belief. Later, in chapter six, I will discuss how this contrasts with our stated belief.

<sup>80</sup> In *The Skeleton Key*, the main character, Caroline Ellis, played by Kate Hudson, struggles against some voodoo practitioners. At the end of the film, the villain gloats, telling Caroline that she, the villain, can only hurt Caroline because the latter now believes. The audience and Caroline thus learn that voodoo only works against believers, and the villain had to wait most of the film before moving against the protagonist because the protagonist was initially a skeptic.

talented at improvisation, but the important thing is that they are improvising. They make up a creature which then kills them.

I believe (note that word) that belief is the key factor here, the grither's power source. The episode is, after all, entitled "Seasons of Belief." And, while the parents do not believe, their daughter, Stefa, does. She insists that her parents finish the story, but they never do.<sup>81</sup> The literary source of this episode, Bishop's short story, is clear on this point: "For Stefa believed in the grither, and what she believed in could certainly do her harm, couldn't it?"<sup>82</sup> And, when the grither shows up in the story, neither Jimbo nor Stefa is surprised: "But because they weren't a bit surprised, Stefa and Jimbo didn't even scream."<sup>83</sup> This is, perhaps, an alternative reading, as one could argue that the grither is powered not by Stefa's belief, but rather by having been named. Both explanations are plausible, and the episode does not give a definitive answer. In either case, though, we are faced with an unreal creature's becoming real because it has been named or believed in. Words become creators.<sup>84</sup>

This analysis leaves out a key issue, though, that of disbelief. In fact, disbelief may be more central to this tale than belief is. The episode opens on the family finishing dinner. They discuss Santa Claus, and the father says it is wicked to disbelieve in Santa. The camera then cuts to the other room, in which the toy train at the base of the Christmas tree sparks and falls over.

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<sup>81</sup> I have advanced this same argument in "'What's in a Name?' Quite a Bit, Actually: On the Importance of Naming and the Power of the Spoken Word in Mythology Celtic and Otherwise."

<sup>82</sup> Bishop, Michael. "Seasons of Belief." *One Winter in Eden*. Arkham House Publishers, Inc. 51. 1984. Print.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> The idea of words as creators is fascinating and was the topic of my previous paper on Celtic mythology and the spoken word. It is of only moderate relevance here, though useful insofar as it facilitates my discussion of magic and belief. For a more thorough discussion of the subject, please see the work of German philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who writes of this at length in *Language and Myth*. Cassirer writes, "all verbal structures appear as *also* mythical entities, endowed with certain mythical powers, that the Word, in fact, becomes a sort of primary force, in which all being and doing originate" (emphasis Cassirer's) (45). He goes on to argue that names are endowed with power because they encapsulate one's individuality and become a sort of symbol for that individual being (51). His analysis should help us understand why beings like the grither and Candyman so jealously guard their names.



This foreshadows the episode's paranormal elements as well as the danger inherent in disbelieving. Looking again at the parents' song, we see that the grither wants "To keep you from taking his name in vain."<sup>85</sup> Now, the children clearly believe the story. They both shout "no" when their father interrupts the story to answer the phone, a fateful choice.<sup>86</sup>

The parents, however, do not believe the story. The father, the one who chastised the children for not believing in Santa, repeats their argument against the Christmas icon back to them, telling them that, like Santa, the grither does not exist. This ironic reversal of belief is his undoing. Right after this, the grither kills the father and the mother. The implication is clear: the grither does not tolerate disbelief. The source material presents this slightly differently. The father's disbelief is less ironic but still present. Rather than finish the clearly improvised story, he says, "I hope neither of you believes in the grither...Because if you don't believe in what isn't, it can't do you any harm."<sup>87</sup>

It is therefore an open question as to whether the grither is able to harm the family because of the children's belief. The belief may be incidental. Whereas the parents do not believe in the original story, the children clearly do, and, as noted earlier, they are not surprised when it arrives to punish them. The story ends on that line, though, so we never learn who, exactly, the grither kills. In the television episode, it kills only the disbelieving parents, but, in the story, it may well kill only the children or it might kill the entire family. We do not know. And we do not know whether it was belief that powered the creature and gave it life. I suppose one could argue that the creature existed already, that the father had the bad luck to make up an accurate story

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<sup>85</sup> McDowell, Michael. "Seasons of Belief." *Tales from the Darkside*. Laurel Entertainment Inc. 29 Dec. 1986. Television.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Bishop, Michael. "Seasons of Belief." *One Winter in Eden*. Arkham House Publishers, Inc. 51. 1984. Print.

about a dangerous creature. This seems very unlikely, but, then again, so does everything else about this story. Choose your poison, I suppose.

*Candyman*, however, is clearly about belief.<sup>88</sup> The question of faith hangs over the film. Faith, for *Candyman*, is inescapable, necessary, his power source. In fact, the film's central conflict is driven by this notion of belief. Helen begins the film a skeptic. As is usual with a horror protagonist, she questions the existence of the horrors she will experience, and she consequently puts herself in danger. Her confident disbelief is so strong that she ventures into Cabrini-Green despite the real-life danger, and strong enough that she summons *Candyman* himself.<sup>89</sup> Significantly, she and Bernadette begin the ritual to summon him because they raise the question of belief: "You don't believe in that nonsense, do you?"<sup>90</sup> Like so many adolescents before them, they perform the ritual on an unstated dare, each silently pushing the other to prove she does not believe the legend by performing the ritual. If this is the game, then Helen wins. Bernadette chickens out, but Helen finishes the ritual, saying *Candyman*'s name the requisite fifth time.

*Candyman* himself does not appear until over 40 minutes into the film. He shows up not only after Helen has completed the ritual, but also after her actions have led to the arrest of the man masquerading as *Candyman*.<sup>91</sup> And he tells her, "You were not content with the stories, so I was obliged to come. I am the writing on the wall, the whisper in the classroom. Without these things, I am nothing. So now, I must shed innocent blood."<sup>92</sup> So, *Candyman* manifested not just because Helen was looking for him, not only because she summoned him, but also, most

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<sup>88</sup> This sequence also comes from the above paper.

<sup>89</sup> Helen is ambitious, and she enters Cabrini-Green also because she is driven to succeed in academia. There are, therefore, other motivations for her actions than mere disbelief in *Candyman* and the supernatural.

<sup>90</sup> *Candyman*. Dir. Bernard Rose. Perf. Tony Todd and Virginia Madsen. TriStar Pictures, 1992. DVD.

<sup>91</sup> There is a criminal in Cabrini-Green who goes by the name "Candyman." He assaults Helen when she is visiting Carbini-Green. When doing so, he explicitly references her search for him (*Candyman*).

<sup>92</sup> *Candyman*. Dir. Bernard Rose. Perf. Tony Todd and Virginia Madsen. TriStar Pictures, 1992. DVD.

importantly, because she raised doubts about him. After the criminal's arrest, Helen tells Jake the criminal "took [Candyman's] name so he could scare us."<sup>93</sup> The criminal, the pretend Candyman, was keeping alive the legend of the real Candyman. After one Candyman is jailed, the other has to come, lest his legend die. Candyman is therefore candid about his nature and his reliance on belief. Later on, he reinforces this, telling Helen to: "Believe in me."<sup>94</sup>

Candyman wants to keep alive belief in him, and this is one of his goals throughout the film. He tries to make Helen believe, and he makes overt references to ensuring the people in Cabrini-Green continue to believe: "Your disbelief destroyed the faith of my congregation. Without them, I am nothing... Your death will be a tale to frighten children... Come with me and be immortal."<sup>95</sup> He is, by his own admission, a "rumor."<sup>96</sup> Candyman occupies a liminal space of existence. He is a legend, a story, and yet he can reach out and kill. He does so to maintain his story. As we learn, he needs belief to exist. The legend embodies Candyman and gives him means of life beyond death. Should the story die, he would as well. We therefore have a story directly altering reality, and the line between reality and fiction becomes blurred. Clive Barker takes this point further in "The Forbidden," in which Candyman says to Helen, "I am rumor. It's a blessed condition, believe me. To live in people's dreams; to be whispered at street-corners; but not have to *be*" [emphasis Barker's].<sup>97</sup>

Both of these stories are difficult. They lack definitive answers to many of the questions they raise. What, exactly, is the grither? Did it already exist? How did the people of Cabrini-Green know when to light their bonfire? Barker makes an interesting point about this in his short

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Barker, Clive. "The Forbidden." *Books of Blood Volume 4-6*. London, England: Sphere. 2009. *Volume 5*, 33. Print.

story. When Helen is musing, Barker writes, “Perhaps (why did she sense this?) the terminology of verifiable truth was redundant here; perhaps the final answer to his question was not an answer at all, only another question.”<sup>98</sup> The stories may therefore be purposefully ambiguous and difficult to interpret. We are engaged in an act of hunting truth in a sea of stories. When one quests after the truth behind a legend, one can often be only so certain. In “The Forbidden” and *Candyman*, we learn that Candyman himself is the source of the stories.

When one blends fact and fiction, one raises the question of truth in the narrative. And thus, the quest is born. Helen tries to find out the truth behind the legend of Candyman (in the story, she is concerned with murders and does not hear that name until meeting the being himself), and she does. The quest for truth and the line between fiction and reality are part and parcel. These stories are therefore talking to us about what happens when one quests after truth in addition to telling us what truth is and trying to scare us. As with so many questions, our central one has many answers.

I have argued that we retain some belief in magic, and I have shown how two different horror stories give us characters born of or sustained by belief in them. When we combine these, we realize that our horror authors are not inventing new terrors, but rather twisting and exaggerating existing ones. That is, Bishop, McDowell, and Rose do not invent the notion of belief as powerful. Instead, they borrow a trend from history, a fact from psychology, and take it to its horrific extreme. If we analyze this phenomenon, we realize that they have shed light on the very real dangers of belief. While the grither and Candyman might not come to get you, your own psyche can prey upon your belief and harm you. The nocebo effect is just this: when you believe something will hurt you or make you sick, it may well do it even if there is not an actual,

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 13.

biological, reason it would.<sup>99</sup> We notice, then, that our belief in a fixed reality is threatened in real-life. Our beliefs, our thoughts, intangible phantoms, can hurt us. And we seem to realize this on an implicit level. Our horror stories then lay out an explicit framework.<sup>100</sup>

But this is only the negative side. If belief can hurt us, it can also help us. And here, we bring in our final text for the chapter, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Like *Candyman*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is a dream-like film. The latter was, in fact, originally intended to be a single nightmare, with Nancy dreaming the entire film.<sup>101</sup> Throughout the film, Nancy struggles against Freddy and against her overarching dream.<sup>102</sup> The film's original ending was to reveal that the entire film had been Nancy's nightmare, a single nightmare on Elm Street, if you will.<sup>103</sup> Craven and producer Robert Shaye battled over this, and they ultimately settled on the current ending.<sup>104</sup>

Nancy's struggle is not only to defeat Freddy, but also to escape her dream. The two are, of course, intertwined, and she has to get some pointed advice from her boyfriend, Glenn, and mother, Marge, before she is able to accomplish this task.<sup>105</sup> Glenn tells her about the Balinese way of dreaming. He claims they turn their backs on dream monsters to defeat them. When Nancy asks about the people who do not turn their backs, he says: "Well, I guess those people

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<sup>99</sup> "This Video Will Hurt." YouTube, uploaded by CGP Grey, 23 December 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2hO4\\_UEe-4&t=1s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2hO4_UEe-4&t=1s)

<sup>100</sup> This point will return in chapters five and six, when I argue that the horror genre is didactic.

<sup>101</sup> *Never Sleep Again: The Making of A Nightmare on Elm Street*, documentary on the Special Edition 2006 DVD of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2006, New Line Cinema Entertainment).

<sup>102</sup> I have discussed this film before in my paper "On Nightmare Fiction and Escaping the Dream World." For the sake of argument, I am going to discuss the film as if the original ending were preserved. I believe many of the film's elements support this interpretation, as much of the film seems to take place in a dream, and it therefore follows that the film did, in fact, take place in a dream. The film's current ending seems to overturn Nancy's victory, but does not mesh well with the film's overall story.

<sup>103</sup> West, Brandon. "On Nightmare Fiction and Escaping the Dream World." 2016. TS. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

<sup>104</sup> *Never Sleep Again: The Making of A Nightmare on Elm Street*, documentary on the Special Edition 2006 DVD of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2006, New Line Cinema Entertainment).

<sup>105</sup> My previous paper discussed this topic at some length.

don't wake up to tell what happens.”<sup>106</sup> In this same vein, her mother tells her the following: “You face things. That’s your nature. That’s your gift. But sometimes you have to turn away too.”<sup>107</sup>

Glenn and Marge lay out an explicit framework for Nancy, a game plan she has to follow to finally defeat Freddy and end the nightmare on Elm Street. Their advice is also ironic. Note that Marge contrasts Nancy’s typical strategy with her recommended one. She claims Nancy is prone to fighting, facing challenges directly, but then says her daughter must learn to turn away. One is reminded of the two contrasting Biblical edicts of “an eye for an eye” and “turn the other cheek.” In this case, Marge claims and the audience later learns, the latter is preferable. Yet this runs counter to typical horror movie strategies. Compare Nancy to, say, Sidney from *Scream*. Like most “final girls,” Sidney triumphs not from facing away from her fears but rather by attacking (i.e., facing her fears). Nancy, on the other hand, has to do the opposite.

This is an interesting subversion of the typical horror trope. Horror is often criticized for having weak characters and even being misogynistic. The final girl trope can go some length toward ameliorating this, as characters like Nancy are strong and resourceful. Nancy is, after all, self-sufficient. While she is intelligent enough to seek help from others, asking her father and Glenn for help, she ultimately has to defeat Freddy herself. To do so, she tries to fight, that is, she appropriates the strategies we typically recommend for “final girls.” But all of her booby traps fail, and she wins not because she retaliates against Freddy by forcing him to suffer the damage he has brought to others (in the spirit of “an eye for an eye”), but because she can turn her back on him and take his power away.

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<sup>106</sup> *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Dir. Wes Craven. By Wes Craven. Prod. Robert Shaye. Perf. John Saxon, Ronee Blakley, Heather Langenkamp, Johnny Depp, Robert Englund, and Jsu Garcia. N.p., n.d. Web.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

This is a moment of faith for Nancy. To turn her back on Freddy, a nightmare demon who has killed her mother, boyfriend, and friends, she has to trust that the advice Marge and Glenn gave her is correct; she has to trust that this strategy can succeed where all others have failed. Imagine if Freddy did not rely on her fear for his power. The scene would end not with Freddy disappearing, but rather with Nancy being eviscerated. In this case, it is harder for her to not fight, to turn her back on the horror. She turns around, and she wins. In other words, Nancy defeats Freddy with belief. She believes that this advice is correct, that she finally has the answer. It is ironic that Nancy's culmination of belief is not in her ability to fight, but in her not needing to fight. This is also a shift for Nancy's character, a move away from her typical strategy, as described by her mom.

*A Nightmare on Elm Street* hits the audience where it hurts. It takes us back to our scariest moments: those dark nights of our childhood when every creak was a demon, every shadow a monster, when our imaginations ran wild and when we actually believed in these nightmares. The film gets at our childhood fears of the night. Our parents cannot help us, but our boogeymen, those demons that haunt our dreams, can hurt us. This is true for the film's characters as well. Nancy's mother gives her some sound advice, but this comes after her spending most of the film buried in a vodka bottle and burying the truth. She hides Freddy's identity from Nancy and would have saved her daughter much trouble had she come clean sooner. Nancy's father is likewise unhelpful, deflecting blame onto Nancy when he uses her as bait to lure out Rod. Meanwhile, Glenn's father appears only toward the climax, and his sole contribution is to thwart Nancy's attempts to save Glenn's life. Parents in this film are useless.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Christensen, Kyle. "The Final Girl versus Wes Craven's "A Nightmare on Elm Street": Proposing a Stronger Model of Feminism in Slasher Horror Cinema." *Studies in Popular Culture* 51.1 (2011): 135. Print.

And is that not the greatest fear for a young child? That the people he trusts to protect him from the world cannot do so?

Freddy therefore embodies the link between fear and belief. The two are united in him, and through him we realize that, for us to fear, we must also believe. At the film's climax, Nancy tells him, "I take back every bit of energy I ever gave you. You're nothing. You're shit."<sup>109</sup> Compare this Nancy with the Nancy screaming "It's only a dream!"<sup>110</sup> The two are separated by experience, the former at the film's end and the latter early in the film, after Tina's death. The first is the fearful, desperate scream of someone making a faithless assertion. She hopes proclaiming her nightmare a mere dream will end it, but it is clear that she is afraid. Her faith is shaken. On the other hand, Nancy makes the climactic statements calmly and through gritted teeth. Here, she is confident, and her words carry weight. Instead of betraying her fear, her voice and demeanor now scream conviction. Belief is necessary for fear, but also for its absence. If Nancy believes Freddy can harm her, if she fears him, then he can, in fact, harm her. But once she believes he cannot, once she no longer fears him, he loses his teeth.

Belief, as we have seen, is a double-edged sword. It can hurt us, conjuring up the childhood fears we would rather keep buried, or summoning entities to enact horrible vengeance on us. But it can also turn the tables on these horrors. If belief is a weapon Candyman can use against us, it is also a weapon we can use against him. I previously discussed the nocebo effect, how our belief can harm us in real-life. Well, this effect has a more famous counterpart, the placebo effect. Our belief can also help us. The case, then, cannot be taken as for or against belief. Rather, belief occupies both states at once, straddling the boundary between positive and

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<sup>109</sup> *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Dir. Wes Craven. By Wes Craven. Prod. Robert Shaye. Perf. John Saxon, Ronee Blakley, Heather Langenkamp, Johnny Depp, Robert Englund, and Jsu Garcia. N.p., n.d. Web.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*



negative, harmful and helpful. Belief's liminal existence makes it appropriate for our discussion. In either case, we see that belief alters reality. We fear something, and it becomes something worthy of fear. We dismiss something, and it becomes dismissible.

I have shown that the border between fiction and reality is not, as we often take it, fixed, but rather somewhat permeable. Our thoughts can alter reality, making fiction fact (to a degree). I will discuss this phenomenon more in chapter six. For now, the more important take-away is how we believe the border to be porous. We retain, many of us, a rudimentary belief in magic, and we know empirically that our fictions, our beliefs, alter external reality. I have therefore demonstrated that the border between fiction and reality is permeable not only in fiction but also in reality. There may not be a real-world Candyman, but the story is perhaps closer to truth than most of us would like to believe. Belief has been a useful starting point, showing how fiction and reality interact with one another. We turn now to self-reference to see another method fiction uses to play with this boundary.

#### Chapter Five: **Harsh Realities: Truth is Scarier than Fiction**

I am going to cover a lot of ground in this chapter, starting with self-awareness in horror films and then moving to the purpose for this self-awareness. Along the way, I will discuss the nature of the slasher genre and the danger of clichés. When we discuss the purpose of self-awareness, I will return to our central question: why horror stories claim to be true. I am going to discuss three major works: Wes Craven's *Scream* and *New Nightmare*, and Conor McPherson's play *The Weir*. I will use the first two works to develop the last one. Ultimately, I will argue that truth is scarier than fiction and that horror movies claim to be real so they can scare us, and that they scare us so they can teach us. Horror, I will assert, is didactic.

The slasher film genre is, broadly speaking, characterized by a killer stalking a group of adults (usually young adults) and killing them one by one until the final young adult, typically an attractive and virginal brunette (the final girl) defeats the killer and then lives for the sequel or disappears from the franchise.<sup>111</sup> Slashers ruled the big screen in the 1980s, when the *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* series were at their peak popularity. As the years passed, and as the sequel count grew, the subgenre became increasingly stale. Once one has seen a single slasher, it can seem that one has seen them all. Of all horror genres, it is perhaps the most criticized for its formula. From it, we get such beloved horror clichés as the teleporting, indestructible killer, death by sex, and protagonists tripping over their own feet.<sup>112</sup> Like any subgenre, the slasher had run its course, and it eventually fell out of the public eye.

In 1996, however, Wes Craven revived the genre with the fresh, deliciously ironic *Scream*, which revitalized the slasher and ushered in a wave of sequels and imitators. The slasher was back and better than ever. Well, more self-aware than ever. *Scream*, like many other horror films today, is perhaps most notable for its ironic self-awareness.<sup>113</sup> Clichés are frustrating because they mean the characters are playing by different rules than the audience is. When we watch a film, we want to identify with the characters. We picture ourselves as them, and we try to put ourselves in their position. Many horror films run into trouble and alienate their audiences because the characters end up being unbelievable.

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<sup>111</sup> The slasher genre includes such entries as *Halloween*, *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, and *Black Christmas*. It also includes our central texts *Nightmare*, *New Nightmare*, and *Scream*.

<sup>112</sup> Slasher films are sometimes mocked for how their ostensibly human killers act. These murderers, despite having no explicit supernatural powers, seem to be able to teleport, magically appearing in front of characters who were running far faster than the killer. Just before the killer catches up to the victim, the victim often trips and falls. While somewhat realistic in many circumstances, this stumble became frequent enough to be mocked. The killer, moreover, would somehow survive assaults that would kill a normal person. These films also have the unfortunate distinction of punishing sexually active young adults with death. One can often predict which characters will die merely by noting which ones the audience sees having sex.

<sup>113</sup> I have treated this topic at length in my paper "A Disrupting Scream in a Postmodern Nightmare: Ironic Self-Awareness in Wes Craven's Horror Films."

A frequent criticism of horror is that it has stupid characters who make decisions the audience would not make.<sup>114</sup> If a character in a horror film makes idiotic decisions that any audience member believes he or she, or anyone with an instinct of self-preservation (e.g., my cat), would not make, then the bond between audience and character is broken. The audience is no longer in the character's shoes, and nor do they want to be. Once this connection is broken, so is the audience's immersion, and the story loses its teeth because the viewer transitions from experiencing the film to criticizing it, a fundamental change of perspective. *Scream* therefore represented a step away from clichés. I have to choose my words carefully here because *Scream* is not quite without clichés, but it is able to distinguish itself enough to refresh its narrative and subgenre and keep the audience interested.

Wes Craven started the trend of self-awareness, but, ironically, he started it not with *Scream* but rather with his *New Nightmare*, which predates *Scream* by two years. *New Nightmare* was not as imitated as *Scream*, however, and the latter can safely be said to have started the trend toward self-awareness in modern horror.<sup>115</sup> *Scream* is the more ironic of the two films, but *New Nightmare* is the more self-aware. In fact, *New Nightmare*'s relative lack of popularity may be due to its multi-layered use of self-reference.

*Scream* is a slasher film fully aware of the relationship between audience and character. Like most slashers, it stars an attractive cast of young adults. And the cast mirrors the film's

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<sup>114</sup> Abed, a particularly media savvy character from the sitcom *Community*, makes this observation when criticizing one of his friend's Halloween stories. He tells her that her story was ineffective because the characters made choices the audience would not make. He then proceeds to tell a horror story with completely rational characters, which likewise proves ineffective. Audiences, this example shows, want characters who are believable and yet flawed enough to allow the story to progress. A slasher film where no one gets attacked is no fun.

Harmon, Dan. "Horror Fiction in Seven Spooky Steps." *Community*. Krasnoff Foster Productions. 2011. Television.

<sup>115</sup> To avoid breaking narrative flow, I will relegate this to a footnote. To see self-awareness in modern horror, please refer to such *Scream* imitators as *Urban Legend* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* and also to the more recent films *Feast* and *Cabin in the Woods*. I considered writing about the latter two for my original paper on ironic self-awareness, and the *Cabin* especially lives up to *Scream*'s mantle, providing intelligent and humorous criticisms of the genre. It is also the more tame and incisive of the two.

presumed audience in that its characters are fans of the horror genre. They are well-versed in its clichés and nuances. The irony comes when they try to apply their knowledge of horror film rules to their real-life horror with mixed results. For instance, during Sidney’s first brush with Ghostface, she talks about horror film clichés, saying she dislikes “scary movies” because they always feature characters making poor decisions, such as running upstairs when they are chased by the killer, instead of out the front door.<sup>116</sup> When she is attacked, she attempts to flee through the front door, finds it locked, and flees upstairs. In other words, she has to perform the clichéd action she previously derided.<sup>117</sup> This is obviously ironic. One should also note that it levels a “take that” at the audience.<sup>118</sup>

To develop that point, let us look at the film’s resident horror guru, Randy, played by Jamie Kennedy. Randy believes he has everything figured out, but, like Sidney above, he does not. At one point, he watches *Halloween* and yells at Jamie Lee Curtis, telling “Jamie” to look behind her. The camera in *Scream* shows the killer standing behind Randy, raising his knife to strike. Here we have an ironic self-reference. Randy, the know-it-all horror expert, is telling Jamie Lee Curtis to turn around, but his use of the actress’s name rather than the character’s means that we think of Randy not as Randy but rather as his actor, Jamie Kennedy. Thus, we see Randy unwittingly telling himself to turn around and giving himself sound advice. That the horror expert’s best advice of the film is directed toward himself when he does not realize it is decidedly ironic, and in a biting sense. Both with the Sidney example above and the Randy example here, we see *Scream* pushing back at the idea that any horror fan can survive a horror movie. The characters’ knowledge does not always help them. Randy’s note that the killer will

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<sup>116</sup> *Scream*. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. David Arquette, Neve Campbell, Courtney Cox. Dimension Films, 1996. Film.

<sup>117</sup> West, Brandon. “A Disrupting Scream in a Postmodern Nightmare: Ironic Self-Awareness in Wes Craven’s Horror Films.” 2015. TS. Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.* 10.

come back for a final scare proves helpful, but his statements about turning around and not having sex prove unhelpful.

Wes Craven asserts that audiences want to know: “What are the rules? How do you defend yourself?”<sup>119</sup> We as viewers try to seek the rules of the narrative and apply them to real life to stave off our mortality. *Scream* problematizes this because it shows us that, in real-life, there really are not set rules. Someone might kill you whether you are a virgin or not. Sex does not necessarily equal death, but it can. And that ambiguity scares us. *Scream* therefore confronts its audience with a harsh truth: you can do everything right, live your life by the book, following all the rules, and still die at 16. There is no clear guide in real life, and there is no clear guide in a self-aware film like *Scream* that purposefully pulls the rug out from under its complacent viewers.

*New Nightmare* likewise pulls the rug out from under us and its characters. No other film shows the collision between the real and imaginary so explicitly. In fact, no other film shows it as a collision. Unlike the situation in the original *Nightmare*, the “real” Freddy in this film is actively trying to break into the real world and affect the characters.<sup>120</sup> In Heather’s house, we can see his attempts to breach this increasingly thin barrier. We see long gashes open in her wall and on her son Dylan’s stuffed T-Rex, whom he considers his protector.<sup>121</sup> Note, then, that Freddy begins with our defenders. We trust that our walls will shelter us from the outside world

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<sup>119</sup> Eyes on Cinema. “Wes Craven ‘Scream’ interview-A Confused, Cynical Generation Looking for Essential Truth.” Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 13 Apr. 2015. Web. 5 Dec. 2015.

<sup>120</sup> The *Nightmare* franchise has an interesting relationship with reality throughout its run. In the original film, Freddy does not want to be pulled into reality; doing this is Nancy’s idea, and it helps her remove Freddy’s power. Later on, in *Freddy vs Jason*, Freddy is noticeably weakened when the protagonist, Laurie, pulls him into the real world, thereby forcing him to fight Jason Vorhees without the use of his dream powers. In the second *Nightmare*, however, Freddy actively tries to enter the real world, just as he does in *New Nightmare*. *New Nightmare* is not canon for the franchise, however, and the second film notably departs from its predecessor and is something of a black sheep for the franchise.

<sup>121</sup> *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. Heather Langenkamp, Robert Englund, Miko Hughes, John Saxon. New Line Cinema, 1994. Film.

and its dangers, be they wolves or nightmare demons, just as Dylan trusts that his T-Rex can protect him. And we, like Dylan and Heather, would be wrong. Heather Langenkamp calls the film a “reality-based nightmare.”<sup>122</sup> The film is, after all, strangely real. Just days after they filmed their earthquake sequence, there was an earthquake, which is included in the film.<sup>123</sup> Moreover, elements of the story are based on real-life. Langenkamp did, in fact, have a stalker and, like her character, was a young mother married to a man in special effects.<sup>124</sup>

The film is even more meta than *Scream* in the sense that its many layers of reality versus fiction are nigh impossible to keep track of. From Langenkamp, we learn that we have our reality. Then, we have the film’s realities, with all the various characters being fictionalized versions of their real-life counterparts. All of these layers collide together in a mix wherein it becomes difficult to distinguish fiction from reality if such a thing is even possible. The only other work I have found with such confusing meta-levels is, perhaps ironically, a Renaissance play, *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* by Francis Beaumont (1607), in which some audience members get annoyed with a play and decide to interject and change the story, even having their servant, Rafe, join the cast. And yet somehow the play-within-a-play mostly works, with Rafe being included in scenes and having his own story arc.

It is important to note, however, that audience members join in. Craven states that *New Nightmare* was a precursor to *Scream* and that the former was for the adults, the latter for the teenagers, the audience.<sup>125</sup> Whereas *New Nightmare* was a reunion for its cast members, *Scream* is a collection of references for its audience to parse out.<sup>126</sup> All of this connects back to the

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<sup>122</sup> *Never Sleep Again: The Making of A Nightmare on Elm Street*, documentary on the Special Edition 2006 DVD of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2006, New Line Cinema Entertainment).

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

postmodern notion of play. Specifically, horror hereby becomes a game for the audience to play with the filmmakers. Angela Ndalians notes that *Blair Witch* did well in Australia despite the truth about its fictionality being well-known by time of its release, and she writes, “pleasure now circulated around both film and extratextual information being about a game of horror.”<sup>127</sup> One should therefore note that this ironic self-awareness is postmodern in nature and invites the audience to participate, making the films fun in a new way.

*New Nightmare* has two Freddy Krugers: Robert Englund’s “fictional” Freddy and the real Freddy, played by Robert Englund but not by the character Robert Englund.<sup>128</sup> It takes the wise-cracking Freddy who inhabited the sequels and replaces him with a more dangerous, serious Freddy. Thus, it changes the narrative. But it does so for a clear purpose. As I pointed out earlier, Craven meant to make Freddy Kruger darker, scary again. *New Nightmare* goes far in showing us why Craven and others made this move toward self-reference. They wanted to scare us again. Horror movies are more fun, and I will argue, more effective, if they can give the audience a few good jolts if not terrify them outright. *New Nightmare* reinvents its antagonist to make him scary again, and, if you look at the original film, Freddy Kruger was indeed scary. So, we see that this push toward self-reference is an attempt to scare us.<sup>129</sup> The question becomes “why scare us?”

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<sup>127</sup> Ndalians, Angela. *The Horror Sensorium: Media and the Senses*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 172. Print. Quoted in Heller-Nicholas, 101.

<sup>128</sup> The film is confusing to write about. There are two Robert Englunds here (and indeed two Heather Langenkamps and two of every actor). One is the real-life Robert Englund, the actor you might meet on the street or whenever you have a casting call for a creepy character. He plays two versions of Freddy Kruger in the film. The other Englund is the character. Englund plays a fictional version of himself, a version who has also played the fictional Freddy. The “real” Freddy, likewise played by the real Englund, is set apart from this “fictional” Freddy, the one from the films, and the one the film itself acknowledges as fictional.

<sup>129</sup> Of course, self-awareness serves many functions. It is also funny. But this thesis can only consider the “why” for one genre, so for the purpose of comedy I am afraid the reader will have to look elsewhere.

Imagine your closest brush with death. Were you awake for it? I was. Now, imagine the scariest movie you have ever seen, maybe that moment when the protagonist is the closest to being murdered, when Candyman or Freddy is closing in. All right, I have my movie. Do you have yours? Good, answer me this: which of those is scarier for you? The question should be easy: which one got your heart going, your stomach sinking? You feel it, do you not, the tightening muscles in your core, the shortness of breath? Okay, we have found fear. And, if I am half as on-point as I think I am, you are not thinking about the movie. No, you are picturing that time death stood outside your door but did not knock.

The truth is, reality is scarier than fiction. Our fiction pales in comparison to real-life horrors. The serial killer prowling your neighborhood is more menacing than Michael Myers. Even if the latter is immortal, the actual boogeyman, he is not real. This distinction is pivotal, and, try as we might as horror authors, we cannot quite compete. The reason why should be obvious. That real serial killer might actually murder you tonight. Michael Myers, not having corporeal existence, is incapable of doing so. If you fear your mortality as most people do, the former is the bigger threat and the greater source of fear.<sup>130</sup> We all know that a movie is a movie—that is, a fiction. No wonder, then, that so many movies want to claim to be otherwise.

To see that true stories are scarier or more effective than fictional ones, let us look at McPherson's *The Weir*. The play gives us multiple stories steeped in the supernatural. We encounter beings ranging from fairies to ghosts. *The Weir* is also useful here for showing that reality is more effective for most emotions, not just fear. That is, real life events are also sadder, more exciting than fictional events. The play's plot revolves around a group of men in rural Ireland, sitting in a bar, telling stories to the newcomer, a woman named Valerie, and the only

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<sup>130</sup> I apologize for this point's morbidity, but I hope it gets the argument across.



one in the bar not used to the setting, the stories, and their characters. The men begin to tell stories to entertain Valerie and just generally reminisce. It is clear, in fact, that Valerie is their audience, as they address their stories to her.

As stated, the stories begin with a theme of horror. They harken back to old Irish folklore, pulling on the horrors of our past. One tale, Jack's, involves fairies, or rather the hint of them. In the story, a family sits around their house late at night. According to legend, their house lies on a fairy road. They hear a knock on the door, only the knock comes lower on the door than any of them would expect, lower than a person would knock. The knock happens on different doors and on the window, but the mother will not let her daughter investigate, and she, the mother, lets the fire go out, not daring to go outside for more wood.

While the presumed fairies show no malice in this tale, it is unnerving nonetheless. Here, we have a typical urban legend or paranormal encounter: unverifiable, pulling on older traditions, and creepy. The question of veracity hangs over the play's stories. Whereas Valerie represents the audience, Finbar represents the skeptic. He is quick to explain away all the paranormal phenomena from these stories. He says of Jack's tale, "You're not bothered by that, are you Valerie? 'Cause it's old cod, you know? You hear these around, up and down the country."<sup>131</sup> Valerie, however, responds: "Well. I think there's probably something in them. No, I do."<sup>132</sup> Her belief is important because, of all the play's tales, hers is arguably the least terrifying but is certainly the most believed. None of the men place much stock in their various stories, attributing them to sickness and alcohol.<sup>133</sup> Then Valerie tells her own story.

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<sup>131</sup> McPherson, Conor. "The Weir." *The Weir, and Other Plays*. New York, NY: Theatre Communications Group, 1999. 33. Print.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid. 58-59.

Valerie's story shifts the narrative. To this point, the stories have largely been frightening to some degree. While they are not as unsettling as say, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, they are still scary. Valerie's story, though, is sad. While hers maintains the supernatural element, it shifts the group's emotions. We move from somewhat scary stories and joking to somberness. Valerie tells the story of getting a phone call from her dead daughter. The story is less frightening and more depressing, and Valerie gets emotional while telling it. This sobers the party. And they are less skeptical of this one. Jim and Finbar try for a moment to rationalize the events, but they relent in the face of Valerie's belief. She is adamant about her experience: "It's something that happened."<sup>134</sup>

We do not know whether Valerie believed in the paranormal before her experience, but it is clear she believes now. She takes comfort from the other stories. And this is important: these stories affect people whether they are real or not. Finbar says, "no one knows about these things, sure, they're not real even...there's usually some kind of explanation for it."<sup>135</sup> And yet, whether Valerie's story is true, it clearly affected her and everyone around her. Now, let us assume for a moment that our beliefs about reality are correct. This is a big assumption, but humor me. This means also that our assumptions about death are correct, if only for argument's sake. This means that a dead girl cannot call her mother on the phone. I think most of us will accept this premise as true. If all of this is correct, though, it means Valerie never got that call, that her story is not, as she asserts and the men largely seem to believe, true. And yet it affects her regardless. The important thing here is not whether it happened but that she believes it happened. Not only do we see once more the power of belief, but this also brings up the blurred nature of reality, a topic I will cover in the next chapter.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid. 58.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

But we do not know whether this story happened in the play's universe. It is possible that, within *The Weir*, Valerie actually got that call, that she had a supernatural encounter. As we have seen, trying to impose the rules of our reality onto fictional realities is an inherently flawed enterprise. Of all the stories, the men seem to believe this to be the most credible. But I have to disagree with readings that assert this story to be obviously true. The men do not seem to press the subject of its being false as much as they do with the other stories. Although it seems the most credible, they may refrain from pressing because the story's teller is also its main character. Also, Valerie is new to the men. They may therefore be less likely to question her than they are to question each other, not being as comfortable around her. They may also be uncomfortable questioning such an emotional story. They have enough tact, one could argue, to not push the issue. If Valerie wants to believe, they might as well let her, as doing so is better than hurting her feelings further.

If those first few stories were scary, this one is definitely sad. That it might actually be real, its veracity backed only by the teller's fervent belief, makes it sadder. Jack tells another story, the play's last, which does seem to be real. He tells of losing his girlfriend for reasons he does not quite understand. His tale has no supernatural elements, but it is clearly a tale of loss.<sup>136</sup> It and Valerie's tale end the play on a sobering note. They affect the characters more than the more clearly fictional tales before them did. Thus, the more we believe something aligns with reality, regardless of how much it necessarily does, the more effective it will be. These tales of loss, told by those who experienced them, are stronger, more striking, than the scary stories before them.

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<sup>136</sup> For this point, I must credit Dr. Shoshana Milgram Knapp.

Returning to our opening quotation from this project's first chapter, we see why films want to claim they are based on true stories. Every ounce of reality a film can claim makes it seem more real and, therefore, more threatening. Robert Egginton writes, "Given that the loss of reality is a priori one of the most unsettling feelings one can have, it should come as no surprise to learn that bleeding came into its own as a technique peculiar to horror films."<sup>137</sup> The film we make about that serial killer terrorizing your neighborhood is more relevant and more poignant than a pure fiction like *Halloween*. Its horror is based on something that can happen with a real-life subject that did happen, and its narrative is therefore less far-fetched. When a film can stretch that boundary between fiction and reality, it can reach out and touch us. And horror stories want to touch us.

Horror runs on making us afraid and tense. Any technique that makes it better able to do that is up for grabs and sure to be used. And we cannot blame horror writers and directors for that. I celebrate them for it. The question remains, though: why do horror authors want to scare us at all? Obviously, this question has many answers. It does, after all, question the existence of an entire genre, as expansive and diverse as any other genre. It therefore defies a single, all-encompassing answer. I gave one answer already in the literature review. As Stephen King would have it, horror reflects the fears of our times. It lets us control our fear. Of course, it is also just fun to be scared. I want to propose another answer, though. Not only does horror help us control our fear, but, in doing so, it teaches us. Horror, as I said I would assert, is didactic. It scares us so it can teach us a lesson.

Wes Craven says, "Horror films talk about the bare bones realities. We are corporeal beings. Rich, poor, whatever we are, someone sticks a little piece of metal in us—we can die right

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<sup>137</sup> Egginton, William. "Reality is Bleeding: A Brief History of Film from the 16th Century." *Configurations* 9.2 (2001): 218. Web.

there. Our existence comes to an end.”<sup>138</sup> We have a master of horror telling us that horror films are here to instruct. Couple this with the quotation above about horror movies and rules, and we see that Craven believes horror films teach us about our reality. And Craven is the director of three films I have discussed: *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, *New Nightmare*, and *Scream*, all of which question the line between fiction and reality. We are, I believe, getting a glimpse into Craven’s philosophy. If horror reflects reality, what is the reality we are seeing here? Clearly it is a reality where fact and fiction blend together, where creatures from dreams can reach out and kill, where belief is dangerous, and where stories can come true. If horror is about reality and includes all of these things, the conclusion is inevitable: reality is blurred. Like the line between fiction and fact in these stories, in real-life, the line between truth and tale is not dichotomous. We live in a blurred reality, and, though we tend to miss this fact, our horror stories have been trying to tell us this for a long time. Egginton writes:

What Craven and Carpenter realized was that cinema had a heightened capacity for frightening its viewers owing to its tendency to coerce them (without their noticing) to adapt a certain point of view-to accept, in other words, new coordinates for the experience of what we are calling base reality.<sup>139</sup>

When films move us to a new reality, they make us reflect on our reality.<sup>140</sup>

I need to say more about horror being didactic. I will support my claim about reality in the next chapter, which will also lend further support to this notion of didacticism. Horror is

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<sup>138</sup> Eyes on Cinema. “Wes Craven ‘Scream’ interview-A Confused, Cynical Generation Looking for Essential Truth.” Online video clip. YouTube. YouTube, 13 Apr. 2015. Web. 5 Dec. 2015.

<sup>139</sup> Egginton, William. “Reality is Bleeding: A Brief History of Film from the 16th Century.” *Configurations* 9.2 (2001): 218. Web.

<sup>140</sup> Phillips writes, “The appearance of the nocturnal world’s uncanny creatures forces upon both the protagonist and the viewer a space for reflection about those norms that underlie regular understandings” (Phillips 75).

often taken to be an agent of the status quo.<sup>141</sup> Take a look at the slasher film. The genre popularized the idea that sex kills. And is that not a puritanical notion? Do not have premarital sex or you might be brutally murdered. It sounds like a public service announcement printed on pamphlets handed out in 1950s high schools. In *Scream*, Randy points out that this is, in fact, a “rule” for surviving horror films. With notable exceptions, *Scream* being one of them, those who have sex in horror films tend to not live through the end. This leads to the charge that horror is about the status quo, maintaining morality. Add in *Scream*’s second rule about not using drugs, and we only strengthen our case. But whether horror is or is not an agent of the status quo is not important for our purposes here. Because, whether it is or is not, it is clearly trying to teach us something. If the slasher genre is about pushing puritanical morality, then having promiscuous characters die teaches the audience the rule that sex kills. That is didactic. If horror is about subverting the status quo, about showing that this is not the case or that fears of sex are overblown and ridiculous, then it is still teaching us something. That, too, is didactic.

When the stakes are as high as life and death, as is so often the case in the horror film, it is easy to learn lessons. Note Craven’s quotation about learning rules. We look to horror films to learn how to survive, and they are therefore uniquely suited to teaching us lessons (e.g., about morality). One might make the argument that other genres fit this bill, that, perhaps fiction is didactic.<sup>142&143</sup> I believe there is a case to be made here, though it is beyond this thesis in scope. Nevertheless, even if all fiction is didactic by nature, that does not refute my arguments about horror and the specific lessons it teaches. Rather, it just broadens our analysis of fiction as a

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<sup>141</sup> This is actually a fairly common criticism. Noël Carroll tackles it, for instance, though he points out that some horror stories are outright progressive.

Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 196-197. Print.

<sup>142</sup> Indeed, Jonathan Gottschall writes that “Fiction is, on the whole, intensely moralistic” (Gottschall, 130).

<sup>143</sup> On this topic, and considering Gottschall’s quotation, I believe we should distinguish didacticism from moralism. Certainly all moralistic tales are didactic, but I do not think all didactic tales are necessarily moralistic.

whole. Fiction may also be particularly well-suited to this role, as it holds a powerful sway over the human mind: “If the storyteller is skilled, he simply invades us and takes over. There is little we can do to resist, aside from abruptly clapping the book shut.”<sup>144</sup> Jonathan Gottschall writes, “But the land of make-believe is less like heaven and more like hell. Children’s play is not escapist. It confronts the problems of the human condition head-on.”<sup>145</sup> A fiction full of problems is more likely to educate. Just as a cat treats her owner’s shoes like captured mice, human children treat their imaginary creatures as threats, obstacles to overcome.

Craven’s points really boil down to another truth: horror is confrontational.<sup>146</sup> It confronts us with reality as it is, often through strange lenses. As I have shown, belief can be dangerous. And we learn that from all the stories in chapter four. Premarital sex can be dangerous, and we learn that from, well, insert slasher film title here. We are all mortal and can drop dead at any time. Craven and, he says, all of horror tell us this. Thus, we see that horror has plenty of lessons to teach us. The idea is that scaring us is a means to an end sometimes. Like any other genre, not all horror stories are meant to teach us anything, but many of them do, and they teach a lot about the world we live in. Moreover, because horror is so dark, it is uniquely suited to teaching us the uncomfortable lessons we might prefer to not learn, lessons about our deaths, lessons, I believe, about our reality. Welcome to chapter six.

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<sup>144</sup> Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 4. Print.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.* 32.

<sup>146</sup> Count Jackula makes a similar point in his analysis of *I Spit on Your Grave*: Count Jackula-I Spit on Your Grave. Dir. Count Jackula. TheCountJackulaShow. N.p., 6 June 2013. Web. 24 Mar. 2016.

<<http://www.thecountjackulashow.com/misogyny-in-horror-i-spit-on-your-grave-part-2/>>.

David Cronenberg has also said, “I think of horror films as art, as films of confrontation. Films that make you confront aspects of your own life that are difficult to face. Just because you're making a horror film doesn't mean you can't make an artful film.”

“David Cronenberg.” BrainyQuote.com. Xplore Inc, 2017. 9 March 2017.  
<https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/d/davidcrone158502.html>

## Chapter Six: **Blurred Lines, Blurred Selves: Horror as the Genre of Reality**

I have made a broad assertion: that horror fiction interrogates and blurs the line between fiction and reality because the horror genre is didactic and the creators of these works want to confront us with this fact. In this chapter, I will build on my assertion that horror is didactic in order to analyze what my chosen stories want to teach us. I will argue that our reality actually is blurred, that fiction and reality are not the easy, stark categories we often take them to be. To do this, I will draw on my previous points, discussing the nature of dreams, human memory, and the self.

As I argued in chapter four, our innate, vestigial belief in magic means that most of us still implicitly think that reality is not set. That is, we retain a notion that our fictions, our magic, can alter external reality around us. Of course, such a phenomenon as magic will defy easy, singular explanations. Magic likely evolved from older superstitions.<sup>147</sup> But magic also, I believe, reflects our implicit understanding that the line between real and fake is not so easily drawn.

We have all had one: the dream that seems real. Until we wake up, we cannot tell dream from reality, and, depending on the dream, waking up brings either relief or disappointment. But what about dreams that are even harder to distinguish from reality? Sure, we have all had dreams that seemed real but were exposed the moment we awoke. But there are dreams that are harder to distinguish. Some dreams blur the line between real and fake, and, sometimes, it may be impossible to tell them apart at all. Take my anecdotal evidence: I once dreamed that I woke up and saw my brother's head floating in mid-air. The head turned, looked at me, then disappeared

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<sup>147</sup> Bernard, LL. "The Unilateral Elements in Magic Theory and Performance," *American Sociological Review* 3 (1938), 6. 775. Accessed April 25, 2016.



into the wall. Now, I call this a dream because that is what my brothers insisted it was. But, the truth is, I do not actually know.

Logically, I accept that my brother is not capable of phasing through solid objects, or else he would have displayed this ability far more often and in the daylight. And yet my experience of the dream was very real. I had no defined waking point at which I could distinguish it from reality. Today, I remain divided. On the one hand, I saw something that could not be, and, on the other, I cannot be sure I was actually dreaming. As I have maintained a largely skeptical stance throughout this thesis, I will not argue I saw a ghost or experienced any paranormal event. Perhaps my brother was sleepwalking or out and about. There are mundane explanations other than my dreaming about a floating head.

The point here is that not all dreams can be easily distinguished from reality. The line between waking and dreaming is thin. Indeed, E.B. Gurstelle and J.L. de Oliveira have proposed a phenomenon called daytime parahypnagogia, an experience in which waking individuals experience brief, fleeting dreamlike episodes, of which they are aware.<sup>148</sup> Their work shows that one can pass from waking to dreaming quite quickly. And this seems to track with our everyday experiences, in which we pass in and out of day dreams. Think also about the passage from waking to sleeping. There is a liminal space between these two states, where it is difficult to judge oneself to be either awake or asleep. In early sleep stages, the mind can begin to dream, and yet conscious thought can still intrude. Indeed, I have woken from many dreams because of this exact experience.

We see this same phenomenon in fiction. In *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, the line between dream and reality becomes increasingly hard to distinguish. Early on, it is not too hard for the

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<sup>148</sup> Gurstelle, E.B., and J.L. Oliveira. "Daytime Parahypnagogia: a state of consciousness that occurs when we almost fall asleep." *Medical Hypotheses* 62.2 (2004): 166-168. Web.

audience to tell. When Nancy dreams in the classroom, the events are outlandish, nightmarish. We therefore understand them to be part of a nightmare, as does Nancy, screaming toward Freddy (but probably also to herself) that “It’s only a dream.”<sup>149</sup> One should note that there is an element of doubt throughout the film. Tina, for instance, has trouble telling whether she is awake or not, and Nancy checks the wall above her bed after dreaming about its moving. This doubt, though, grows greater with time.

After Nancy pulls Freddy out of her dream, she and the audience are subjected to some bizarre imagery. After Freddy kills Marge, we watch her body disappear into a storm within the bed. This is clearly dream imagery, and yet, to this point, we have believed Nancy to be awake. It is not really possible to tell the difference anymore. Then, after Nancy banishes Freddy, we get a sudden cut to the film’s last scene, where Nancy exits her house, her dead(?) mother following, and gets into a car with her dead(?) boyfriend and friends.

As noted previously, the film’s ending is notoriously difficult to analyze. On the one hand, the entire film, as I argued in chapter four, seems to show that Freddy is beaten. The last scene should, therefore, be one where Nancy is awake. And yet the blurring of the background, the overly bright light, and the out of place, unacknowledged jump-roping little girls all indicate that this scene is a dream, as does the other inexplicable phenomena with the car and Freddy pulling Marge through the door window. None of this makes any sense if the scene is not a dream. But the scene should not be a dream, given the narrative to this point.<sup>150</sup> Issues with producers aside, this scene is useful for showing the difficulty in distinguishing dreams from

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<sup>149</sup> *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Dir. Wes Craven. By Wes Craven. Prod. Robert Shaye. Perf. John Saxon, Ronee Blakley, Heather Langenkamp, Johnny Depp, Robert Englund, and Jsu Garcia. N.p., n.d. Web.

<sup>150</sup> I am not alone in this belief. Indeed, Heather Langenkamp has said, “...with the ending we have now, it doesn’t quite make sense” (*Never Sleep Again*).

reality. As shown with my own experience above, dreams are difficult things that exist in a liminal state.

The film gradually blurs this line, so my point about the ending should be taken as at most a nuanced criticism. There is a famous shot (one of many for such an iconic film) where Nancy's phone rings. She answers and hears Freddy on the other end, telling her that he is her boyfriend now, and she is then licked by a tongue extending from the phone.<sup>151&152</sup> This one becomes tricky to analyze in the context of the film because, so far as the audience can tell, Nancy is not asleep when it happens. She is trying to get in touch with Glenn to wake him up. We therefore understand that the line between waking and dreaming, reality and fiction, is not only blurred, but blurred by degrees. That is to say, the line can become increasingly strained. As *A Nightmare on Elm Street* progresses, the line becomes harder to navigate, with dream "fictions" beginning to crossover into the "real world."

We see this trend too in our other works. In "Seasons of Belief," the grither's supernatural presence becomes more powerful throughout the episode, beginning by breaking a toy train and ending by breaking the parents' necks. Candyman is initially content to let the real-life criminal keep his name alive, and he only appears to Helen after this has proven insufficient. From there, the charge that Helen is delusional begins.<sup>153</sup> Before Candyman appears we have no reason, in-universe, to believe that he is real. If we were to extend to the film the same skepticism many of us extend to everyday ghost stories, we would believe that he is merely a legend, as Helen and Bernadette believe him to be. Once we see him, though, the question is raised. We have a reason to believe. From there, it matters less that Helen becomes delirious and

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<sup>151</sup> *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. Dir. Wes Craven. By Wes Craven. Prod. Robert Shaye. Perf. John Saxon, Ronee Blakley, Heather Langenkamp, Johnny Depp, Robert Englund, and Jsu Garcia. N.p., n.d. Web.

<sup>152</sup> Langenkamp wanted to keep the tongue prop afterward (*Never Sleep Again*).

<sup>153</sup> On this point, I credit Dr. Shoshana Milgram Knapp, as she offered the interpretation to me.

seems to faint whenever she is around Candyman because, either way—whether Helen is, in fact, a delusional murderer, or whether she is being chased by a vengeful spirit being of legend—our line between fiction and reality is blurred. We have to start asking what is real and what is not. And the film’s ending, with Helen now her own Bloody Mary-esque spirit (See Footnote #59), blurs this line even further, with legends evolving to encompass a truth that would not exist if not for the legend. (See what I did there?)

In fact, we can take this gradual blurring as a natural extension of plot structure and story development. Movies tend to accelerate as they near their climaxes. Applying this rule to horror movies, we see that the threat to our protagonists, particularly our central protagonist, tends to get more palpable as the story develops. In one way or another, the violence escalates. In slasher films like *Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>*, the killer begins by lurking in the shadows, picking off individual characters as they separate from the herd. Once this is done, however, the killer emerges to engage the final survivor(s) in a life-and-death chase.

What we are really seeing is an escalation. Whatever trends the movie has established to that point become exaggerated toward the end. It is therefore natural that these “reality bleed” films gradually escalate their blurring of fiction and reality.<sup>154</sup> In *Scream*, the overt film references become talk of life as a movie. Billy says to Sidney, “It’s all—It’s all a movie. It’s all one great big movie,” and Sidney quips “Not in my movie” after shooting Billy in the head.<sup>155</sup> In other words, the references to horror films and the treatment of life as if it were a film get more explicit as the film progresses. At the end, the characters refer to their own movies, thereby taking ownership of the narrative and staking their own claims to it. The film’s events become

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<sup>154</sup> Egginton, William. “Reality is Bleeding: A Brief History of Film from the 16th Century.” *Configurations* 9.2 (2001): 207-229. Web.

<sup>155</sup> *Scream*. Dir. Wes Craven. Perf. David Arquette, Neve Campbell, Courtney Cox. Dimension Films, 1996. Film.

increasingly acknowledged as film events to be shaped by each character. In *New Nightmare*, Freddy's incursions into the real world become increasingly explicit, and the line between fiction and reality is all but dissolved. Freddy reaches down out of the sky to move Heather's son on a highway, and Heather ends the film by reading the film's script, written by Wes Craven's character. When a film wants to increase the tension, the dramatic stakes, it can attack the line between fiction and reality. Once the audience is primed by having seen that the line is porous, it is poised for a full-on assault, with fiction and reality violently blending. That this blend is violent hints at horror's unique ability to confront this subject matter.<sup>156</sup>

There is an underlying factor here that bears discussion: that of nightmares. Note that *A Nightmare on Elm Street*'s relationship with fiction and reality is that of dream and the waking world. While I cannot give an exhaustive review of nightmare phenomenology here, I will attempt to give a brief overview of relevant data. Patrick McNamara, a sleep researcher, has written that nightmares comprise goal-oriented narratives in which the dreamer's avatar strives for a unity of self.<sup>157</sup> Nightmares, McNamara argues, are memorable experiences that leave a lasting impression on the dreamer.<sup>158</sup> I do not think his claim is particularly controversial. Certainly, my nightmare experiences have lingered with me. But look at what is happening here. We are being affected by events that are not real. I mean, they are not, right? Nightmares happen only in our heads. My childhood demon, Mr. Scareface, has no objective existence in the external world.<sup>159</sup> On this point, Phillips says, "Craven seems to suggest that while our

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<sup>156</sup> Count Jackula-I Spit on Your Grave. Dir. Count Jackula. TheCountJackulaShow. N.p., 6 June 2013. Web. 24 Mar. 2016. <<http://www.thecountjackulashow.com/misogyny-in-horror-i-spit-on-your-grave-part-2/>>.

<sup>157</sup> McNamara, Patrick. *Nightmares*. Praeger: Westport, CN. 2008. 46 & 136-138. Print.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid. 111.

<sup>159</sup> Readers will have to pardon my first-grade mind's naming conventions. Mr. Scareface is a character from a nightmare I had as a child. A substitute teacher with bluish-black hair was reading to us, saying he would tell us a story. His face then changed suddenly, becoming that of a monster clown, and he announced the story would be about "Mr. Scareface." Needless to say, I did not enjoy the experience.

fantasies—no matter how dark—are not bound by the realities of our physical world, they will leave a real mark, a psychic residue that bears real consequences.”<sup>160</sup>

I want to challenge the binary view of reality. These “fictions” our minds invent, as Phillips and Craven note, clearly have an impact on us. Their effects are very real. This is a notion of personal realities, as I mean to assert that dreams are real in a way. They exist in a liminal space between reality and fiction, in that they are fictional insofar as our minds create them, but they are real in that they actively shape the world around us. This is a nuanced position. I do not mean to argue that the beings from our nightmares can kill us, as does Freddy, or spring out of our dreams and into the external world, but I do mean to say that our stories, our fictions, are more real than we tend to give them credit for being. One should note that both *Scream* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* are based on real-life events, the former on the Gainesville Ripper and the latter on a rash of strange deaths.<sup>161</sup>

Wes Craven states that he got the idea for *A Nightmare on Elm Street* from some *Los Angeles Times* stories. The *Times*, he said, reported that some young Asian men had died in their sleep. One kid had told his parents he was afraid to sleep and died when he did finally lose consciousness. His parents then found a coffee pot hidden in his closet, hooked up with an extension cord, and they found the sleeping pills his father had given him, hidden in the room.<sup>162</sup> You may recognize the detail of the hidden coffee pot from *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, as Nancy employs a similar tactic in her quest to stay awake. From Craven’s account, what

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<sup>160</sup> Phillips, Kendall R. “Craven’s Gothic Form: Nightmares, Screams, and Monsters.” *Dark Directions: Romero, Craven, Carpenter, and the Modern Horror Film*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2012. 81. Print.

<sup>161</sup> Kevin Williamson, the screenwriter for *Scream*, wrote the film’s initial scene after seeing some news footage of the Ripper case. The Ripper murders occurred in 1990, and *Scream* was released in 1996. *Behind the 'Scream' documentary from Ultimate Scream Collection* (DVD). United States: Dimension Home Video, 2006.

<sup>162</sup> *Never Sleep Again: The Making of A Nightmare on Elm Street*, documentary on the Special Edition 2006 DVD of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2006, New Line Cinema Entertainment).

happened here, then, was an attempt to create a story around a real-life horror.<sup>163</sup> On the one hand, as we have seen, this strategy is a control mechanism. But on the other, it acknowledges both the power of fiction and the dubiousness of trying to create a hard line between tale and truth. As the unfortunate example above shows, beliefs can kill.<sup>164</sup>

Craven's story is terrifying. If true, it might be the scariest thing I have ever heard. I have, however, been unable to substantiate it. I looked through the *Times's* online archive but could not find the story. Moreover, I am not the only one. Adam Bulger, a journalist for *Van Winkle's*, has also looked through the archives to no avail.<sup>165</sup> Bulger argues that Craven likely misattributed the story to the *Times* and that he mistakenly came to believe that details he had invented for the script had come from the news.<sup>166</sup> This assessment does track with my upcoming argument that human memories are flawed.

I put in a research order with the *Times's* archive department and asked them to find Craven's story. The archivist found three articles, none of which substantiated Craven's account. One was of him recounting the story but failing to mention either the *Times* or the coffee pot.<sup>167</sup> That this article was an interview Craven did with the *Times* seems to support Bulger's position. The other two articles concerned sleep deaths but came from 1983 and later, too late for them to be the inspiration for *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, as the film was released in 1984 and it took

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<sup>163</sup> I have made some of these points in my previous work, as the bits about nuance and stories having teeth both come from my work on *Scream* and *New Nightmare*.

<sup>164</sup> I do not mean to disrespect anyone's memory here. I am very sorry for the families and the young men affected.

<sup>165</sup> Bulger, Adam. "Sudden and Unexplained: The Sleep Deaths that Inspired Freddy Kruger." *Van Winkle's*, 30 October 2015, <https://vanwinkles.com/sudden-and-unexplained-the-sleep-deaths-that-inspired-freddy-krueger>

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Mitchell, Sean. "A Gallery of Craven Images." *Los Angeles Times*, 18 November 1989, p. F1 & F4.

three years for the script to be picked up.<sup>168&169</sup> Thus, the script would have to have been completed, at the latest, by some time in 1981.

We do not actually need Craven's account for my point to stand, though. You see, many Asian-American men did, in fact, die in their sleep through the late 70s and early 1980s. They died seemingly without explanation, with deaths peaking in 1981 at a rate equivalent to the five leading causes of natural death of American men in that age group.<sup>170</sup> The phenomenon became known as Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS). And it was very real. Note, then, that regardless of whether Craven's recollection corresponds to an identifiable journalistic account, he created an iconic horror film based on a real series of unexplained events. Again, we see that horror helps us control and contextualize our fears. Even Freddy Kruger is less scary than SUNDS.<sup>171</sup>

That is a scary thing: people dying suddenly in their sleep. It gets worse, though. You see, the deaths were not just particular to Asian-American men; they were particular to Hmong men (an ethnic group from Laos) who had emigrated to the United States. The Hmong, moreover, had a strong cultural belief in nightmares, evil spirits which they believed would pay nocturnal visits to those who failed their cultural and religious obligations, which would weigh upon them, and which could kill them after repeated visits.<sup>172</sup> The symptoms for SUNDS align with those of the Hmong nightmare with frightening parallelism: "The symptoms of SUNDS-related events

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<sup>168</sup> Doyle, Larry. "Medical Experts Seek Clues to 'Nightmare Deaths' That Strike Male Asian Refugees." *Los Angeles Times*, 11 January 1987, p. 11.

Schoenberger, Karl. "Night Deaths of Asian Men Unexplained: Healthy Indonesians, Filipinos, Japanese Expire 'With a Snap.'" *Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 1983, p. 2 & 18.

<sup>169</sup> *Never Sleep Again: The Making of A Nightmare on Elm Street*, documentary on the Special Edition 2006 DVD of *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2006, New Line Cinema Entertainment).

<sup>170</sup> Adler, Shelley R. *Sleep Paralysis: Nightmares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011. 94. Print.

<sup>171</sup> Again, I mean the utmost respect to those who were affected by this phenomenon. I am sorry for their losses.

<sup>172</sup> Adler, Shelley R. *Sleep Paralysis: Nightmares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011. 98-101. Print.



clearly mirror the features of the nightmare as it has been known across cultures and throughout history.”<sup>173</sup>

Eventually, SUNDS would be explained with Brugada syndrome, a heart disorder with a genetic component, which would help explain its prevalence among a single ethnic group.<sup>174</sup>

Notice that I said “help explain.” Per the Center for Disease Control: “Only in times of unusual stress and possibly in conjunction with other, as yet undefined factors are these people at risk of developing abnormal electrical impulses in the heart that result in ventricular fibrillation and sudden death.”<sup>175</sup> I discussed the nocebo effect earlier, the mind’s ability to make harmful something that would not be otherwise. Here, Adler argues for taking the nocebo a step further, making deadly that which would otherwise not be. The CDC believed there needed to be a trigger to set off the Hmong men’s underlying heart condition. That trigger, Adler argues, is their nightmares, which are tied to their powerful cultural beliefs:

It is my contention that in the context of severe and ongoing stress related to cultural disruption and national resettlement...and from the perspective of a belief system in which evil spirits have the power to kill men who do not fulfill their religious obligations, the solitary Hmong man confronted by the numinous terror of the night-mare (and aware of its murderous intent) can die of SUNDS.<sup>176&177</sup>

Once again, we see the dangers of belief. In this case, that belief can allow nightmares thought to be lethal to actually become lethal, as they raise stress levels enough to trigger underlying heart conditions. And Adler’s position does have additional scientific backing. First,

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid. 95

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. 124-126

<sup>175</sup> Quotd. in Adler 121

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. 130

<sup>177</sup> Here, Adler hyphenates the term “night-mare” to emphasize its roots. The earliest use of “nightmare” in English was defined as “A female spirit or monster supposed to settle on or produce a feeling of suffocation in a sleeping person or animal,” in other words, a mare of the night (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

cultural beliefs and practices can shape other phenomenon, including schizophrenia, whose symptoms vary by culture.<sup>178</sup> Second, previous research has supported the notion that nocebos can kill. For instance, Chinese Americans with strong beliefs in traditional Chinese medicine and afflicted with diseases and birth years considered unlucky die an average of five years earlier than others with the same disease who were born in different years (i.e., ones not considered unlucky).<sup>179</sup> Whether or not Craven's recollection is strictly accurate, the reality behind *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is terrifying and our beliefs can kill us.

Our assessment of reality is at stake here. In chapter four, we discussed how most of us have some belief that the line is not set. Now, however, let us look at how humans judge reality. Not only does a binary view of reality ignore the obvious power of fiction and the human mind, but it also ignores the fallibility of memory. We filter reality through our memory and trust it to give an accurate account of real-life, but it is not nearly as good at this job as most of us want to believe. When told "I know what I saw," Dr. Stephen Novella has a habit of saying, "No you don't."<sup>180</sup> Novella is right to make this move because human memory is notoriously unreliable.<sup>181</sup>

The podcast *Skeptoid* did an episode on the fallibility of memory and began with the quotation "We are a story our brain tells itself. And our brains are habitual liars."<sup>182</sup> The author,

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<sup>178</sup> Banerjee, Anwasha. "Cross-Cultural Variance of Schizophrenia in Symptoms, Diagnosis, and Treatment." *Georgetown University Journal of Health Sciences* 6.2 (2012): 18-24. Web.

<sup>179</sup> Adler, Shelley R. *Sleep Paralysis: Nightmares, Nocebos, and the Mind-Body Connection*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011. 5-6. Print.

<sup>180</sup> Quotd. in Good, C. "The Fallibility of Memory." *Skeptoid Podcast*. Skeptoid Media, 23 Dec 2014. Web. 21 Feb 2017. <<http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4446>>

<sup>181</sup> When I was in AP History in high school, our teacher wanted to make a point about eyewitness testimony in regards to the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. She asked one of her student assistants to step out of the room and then asked one of my classmates what the assistant was wearing. My classmate could not answer the question. My teacher pointed out that if he could not remember what someone looked like when she had been in the room with us the whole period, then it is very easy to make mistakes identifying or describing someone you merely glimpsed.

<sup>182</sup> Good, C. "The Fallibility of Memory." *Skeptoid Podcast*. Skeptoid Media, 23 Dec 2014. Web. 21 Feb 2017. <<http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4446>>

Craig Good, mentions researchers, such as Novella above, who agree with this sentiment. Good brings in the famous example of Elizabeth Loftus, whose work on false memories is noteworthy. Loftus has showed that human memories are malleable.<sup>183</sup> In her research, she showed that she could make people believe they remembered events that did not happen (being lost at the mall) or could not have happened (seeing Bugs Bunny, a character who does not belong to Disney, at Disneyland).<sup>184&185</sup>

Again, we reach the issue of personal realities. Two people will experience and remember the same event differently. At the end of the day, it can be difficult to judge what is real and what is not, what happened and what did not. For a fictional take on this, Heller-Nicholas turns to the found footage film *Home Movie*, in which the parents and children of a dysfunctional family produce dueling home videos. The children, Heller-Nicholas writes, “construct their own version of reality, but their story is strikingly different from the upbeat version that David [their father] has presented.”<sup>186</sup> Different authors, she notes, produce different versions of reality, as do different spectators: “‘The Jack and Emily Show’ therefore argues that home videos are not a straightforward documentation of reality. They can construct a range of realities, which in the hands of different authors present diverse narratives about what are sometimes incomprehensible secrets.”<sup>187</sup>

Going back to the *Skeptoid* quotation, we see fiction’s role in all this. The truth is, we live fictional lives, constantly crafting narratives to suit our own ends. Your life is your story, not only in sense of having a beginning and end, but in the sense that you are creating a fiction for

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Beck, Jerry. “Cartoon Research FAQ.” *Cartoon Research*, <http://www.cartoonresearch.com/questions.html>, accessed 9 March 2017.

<sup>186</sup> Heller-Nicholas, Alexandra. *Found Footage Horror Films: Fear and Appearance of Reality*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 168. Print.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid. 170.

yourself, a narrative twisted to your own needs. As the famous saying goes, everyone is the hero of their own story.<sup>188</sup> Good writes: “Our brain is constantly filtering information, and constructing its own reality... But just as things get lost, distorted, or added when your favorite book becomes a movie, the running story your brain puts together isn't a faithful rendition.”<sup>189</sup> Jonathan Gottschall agrees on this point: “We tell some of the best stories to ourselves. Scientists have discovered that the memories we use to form our own life stories are boldly fictionalized.”<sup>190</sup> Thus, the line between fiction and reality is hard to judge because our memories are fallible and our brains prone to spinning their own stories.

While an objective reality may well exist (John Doe either committed the crime or he did not), we do not experience an unfiltered, objective reality. Rather, we each experience our own, subjective, reality, where truth is a question rather than a tangible object and we all view events from our own self-centered perspectives. Our fictions, Gottschall notes, affect our realities: “In laboratory settings, fiction can mislead people into believing outlandish things: that brushing their teeth is bad for them...”<sup>191</sup> He writes, “Take fear. In a 2009 study, Joanne Cantor showed that most of us have been traumatized by scary fiction. Seventy-five percent of her research subjects reported intense anxiety, disruptive thoughts, and sleeplessness after viewing a horror film.”<sup>192&193</sup> He later adds, “In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than

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<sup>188</sup> See Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 170. Print.

<sup>189</sup> Good, C. "The Fallibility of Memory." Skeptoid Podcast. Skeptoid Media, 23 Dec 2014. Web. 21 Feb 2017. <<http://skeptoid.com/episodes/4446>>

<sup>190</sup> Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 18. Print.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid. 149.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Fiction may have the ability to change our minds and affect us, but this does not undermine my point about reality being the scarier of the two. In some ways, fiction is the vehicle of reality, teaching us lessons it is probably better that we not learn the hard way.

nonfiction...<sup>194</sup> I suspect this thesis will not find an audience uninterested in or skeptical of fiction's relevance. My goal is not to convince the reader that fiction matters, if only because I assume he or she already believes this.<sup>195</sup> Rather, I want to show how fiction matters and acts in ways we typically do not consider.

I have argued that horror fiction is often didactic, teaching lessons about morality. Here, then, horror begins to teach us a lesson about reality. I have shown that human memory is flawed, that we all construct our own narratives of events and therefore experience different "realities" than those around us do. Again, my argument is nuanced. While these subjective realities do not overwrite objective truth when it does exist, we must acknowledge that truth is not always objective.<sup>196</sup> But here is an objective truth: reality is not fixed. We know now that fiction affects the world around it. It actively changes us and our beliefs, and our beliefs in turn alter our realities. Thus, we conclude that the line between fiction and factuality is not stark, but rather poorly defined, permeable. What is fake may become real. The *Candyman* mythos no longer seems so implausible, and the more down-to-Earth *Scream* seems frighteningly possible, a reality acknowledged, if grossly exaggerated, by social conservatives.<sup>197</sup> The truth is, the line between fiction and reality is not set, and is that not the scariest thing of all?

Do you know who you are? The question is more insidious than it may seem at first. In his final episode of *Doctor Who*, Matt Smith's Eleventh Doctor says, "We all change. When you

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid. 150.

<sup>195</sup> In the future, though, I would like to delve deeper into the question of why fiction matters. It clearly does, given both Gottschall's argument and its popularity, but I am interested in finding out more about its role in our societies and psyches.

<sup>196</sup> I must be clear here that I am not arguing for ethical relativism. My argument does accept relativism but only to a degree.

<sup>197</sup> Horror, and violent media in general, are often blamed for violence. Indeed, sometimes a single film, such as *Child's Play 3*, will be directly blamed for a murder. See: Kirby, Terry. "Video Link to Bulger Murder Disputed." Independent, 26 November 1993. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/video-link-to-bulger-murder-disputed-1506766.html>, accessed 9 March 2017.

think about it, we're all different people all through our lives, and that's okay, that's good, you gotta keep moving, so long as you remember all people that you used to be.”<sup>198&199</sup> To apply this to our everyday lives, think of who you are now. Are you the same person you were 10 years ago? What about 20? But that is pretty straightforward, is it not? Even a single decade can see large changes in one’s experiences, which will, in turn, change one’s personality. Someone who has spent ten years in combat may be far more aloof than he or she was before, and someone ten years removed from combat may have become more open and friendly again. These are but some examples. I am sure we can think of many more. The harder move, and the more significant one, is showing how we do this every day.

Think about how you talk to the various people in your life. Are you the same person to your parents that you are to your friends? How do those two “yous” compare to you when you are alone? In public? Teaching a class? Having a job interview? We present different versions of ourselves every day, from hour to hour or even from minute to minute. When I teach my students about writing to an audience, I tell them that I do not talk to them the way I talk to my parents, which is different from how I talk to my friends, which is different from how I talk to my cat. I even talk differently depending on which friend I am addressing. This is a common rhetorical strategy. In a job interview, you want to put on your best face. You seem formal, respectful, and intelligent. When you relax with your friends, you peel away some of those niceties. You put them back on when your grandparents come to visit, and you get rid of them again when your

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<sup>198</sup> Moffat, Stephen. “The Time of Doctor.” *Doctor Who*. BBC. 25 December 2013. Television.

<sup>199</sup> Since *Doctor Who* comes up but once in this thesis, I will explain the context. One of the show’s central conceits is that the protagonist, the Doctor, is an alien who can “regenerate” whenever he is mortally wounded. In universe, this causes the character’s appearance and personality to change. In real life, a new actor comes in to play the character. The Eleventh is regenerating here, and he refers to the process explicitly. While the change is more literal for him than for most of us, the point stands nonetheless.

spouse gets back from a business trip. But, then, which of those is you? In our hypothetical day, you presented four different versions of yourself. Which is the real person?<sup>200</sup>

The answer may well vary depending on the individual, but I will offer an answer: they all are. Each of them represents part of your personality, just not all of it. Humans are complex creatures, with wavering motivations and emotions that can make them hard to pin down. Humans are multiple. You likely do have respect for the interviewers, and you really are intelligent and hardworking, but you cannot always act like that. It gets draining. Around your friends, you can loosen up and be the class clown, only you are not in school. That can also get exhausting. When your spouse returns, you do not have to worry about being entertaining; instead, you become the romantic. And, well, that has its own downsides. In this case, “You” is really more of a concept than an actuality. “Self” is the amalgamation of various smaller “selves,” various traits that get expressed more or less depending on the situation.

Moreover, split-brain surgeries further complicate this dynamic. As a last-resort treatment for epilepsy, doctors may sometimes sever the corpus callosum, the part of the brain that joins the left and right hemispheres. Once this is done, though, you get some interesting results. The right and left hands will operate independently of one another, as their corresponding hemispheres are no longer able to communicate. If you present the name of an object to the right side of the body (controlled by the left hemisphere), the subject will be able to both pick up the correct object and correctly explain why he or she picked it up: because the screen said to. If, however, you present the name of an object to the left side (controlled by the right hemisphere) and try to do the same, the subject will be able to pick up the correct object but not provide the

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<sup>200</sup> For a fictional look at this, think about superheroes. Are they their “alter egos” or are they the hero? Superheroes often present two different personalities to the world; which of the two is the real person? (Though I can no longer recall where I first heard this question asked, a quick Google search reveals that many are still asking this question about Batman.)

correct explanation. Instead, the subject will spontaneously tell a plausible though incorrect story.<sup>201&202</sup>

The left hemisphere controls language, so, when the right hemisphere has to grab something, the left, once they are separated, does not know the real reason, but it knows how to come up with a good story. Again, we see that the human mind is a creative storyteller fully capable of deluding itself. At this point, my two sources diverge. Gottschall writes, “The storytelling mind is allergic to uncertainty...[it] is a factory that churns out true stories when it can, but will manufacture lies when it can’t.”<sup>203</sup> CGP Grey, an educational YouTuber, argues that we can take this as evidence of a separate consciousness within ourselves. The two parts of the brain operate independently and seem to even have differing views, disagreeing on choices the person makes.<sup>204</sup> “You,” Grey states, “are two.”<sup>205</sup> Gottschall does not go this far, but he does agree that split brain surgeries teach us about the intact brain: “But this research has important implications for how we understand ordinary, intact brains. The storytelling mind is not created when the scalpel cuts into the corpus callosum. Splitting the brain just pins it down for study.”<sup>206</sup> Thus, the more we study psychology, the more we realize how much there is to this idea of the blurred and multiple self. You may be two, but more likely, you are many. We are legion, I guess.

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<sup>201</sup> Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 96-99. Print.

<sup>202</sup> “You Are Two.” YouTube, uploaded by CGP Grey, 31 May 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfYbgdo8e-8>

<sup>203</sup> Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 103. Print.

<sup>204</sup> “You Are Two.” YouTube, uploaded by CGP Grey, 31 May 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wfYbgdo8e-8>

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 99. Print.



We therefore learn that reality is complicated. We want to believe that we know who we are and that our memories, our perception of the world around us, are accurate. As I have shown, however, the truth is far more complex. We are actually very complicated, presenting different versions of ourselves and possibly possessing multiple consciousnesses. And like our “selves,” our reality is blurred and multiple. Unitary truths are lost behind legends and flawed recollections. And we hate this. We try to grasp for certainty in an inherently uncertain world. Remember, fear arises from a lack of control. So, we create stark boundaries: this is real; this is not. But those boundaries are every bit as flawed and arbitrary as the biases that color our personal narratives and render our personal realities subjective. What we think is reality often is not. The objective truth is lost beneath our subjective beliefs.

We claim dreams are fake, but they can reach out and kill us. We claim stories are not real, but they capture reality, externalize our fears, and, like dreams, affect us. Sure, they might not be real in the strictest sense. If they were, the grither would probably have killed me by now. But they are real in the sense that they modify external reality. Remember that the father from “Seasons of Belief” tells the children that something they do not believe in cannot hurt them but that Stefa does believe and therefore knows that she can get hurt.<sup>207</sup> Sure, Freddy may not be real. The grither may not be real...yet. Because the moment you believe in them, these nice, easy categories of real and fake stop being so useful. And because belief enters the picture, not everyone experiences the same reality. The Hmong could die from their nightmares, but most people cannot. When you believe something is real, it becomes real for you while not necessarily being real for everyone else.

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<sup>207</sup> Bishop, Michael. “Seasons of Belief.” *One Winter in Eden*. Arkham House Publishers, Inc. 1984. 51. Print.

So, let us put all of this together. Horror stories have a tendency toward what Egginton calls “Reality Bleeding.”<sup>208</sup> I have showed not only that horror stories attempt to blur the line between fiction and reality in various ways, but also that they try to do so partially because doing so makes the stories scarier. I argued that what is real is, usually, scarier than what is not, though I also showed that scary fiction is not to be dismissed. In chapter four, I showed that our notions of belief begin to frustrate dichotomies between fiction and reality. And I drove this point home here in chapter six, showing that our belief and memories actually cause reality to be far less “real” and fiction far less “fictional” than we usually think them to be. This blurring not only heightens horror, but it does so, often, for a deliberate end. As I argued in chapter five, horror is a didactic genre. So, we have stories trying to be real to be scarier, and these stories are trying to teach us something. But what? The horror stories I have discussed in this thesis come together for a common goal: to teach us that reality is not as we take it to be.

Throughout this chapter, I have offered various bits of evidence to suggest that reality and fiction are not binary opposites, their relationship not a dichotomy, but rather to show that a liminal space, that of dreams, experience, and story, exists between them, where the line becomes impossible to distinguish. Why do horror stories want to be real so badly? Well, partially because they want to scare us. But also because they want to show us this truth, and scaring us makes these lessons all the more powerful. Fiction makes us confront reality vicariously.<sup>209</sup> Horror, with its exceptional ability to leave lasting scars, is uniquely suited to making us confront uncomfortable truths, in this case that our reality is not what we believe it to be. If our fiction is to teach us about reality, horror is the logical choice, and our masters of

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<sup>208</sup> Egginton, William. “Reality is Bleeding: A Brief History of Film from the 16th Century.” *Configurations* 9.2 (2001): 207-229. Web.

<sup>209</sup> Gottschall, Jonathan. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012. 52-63. Print.

horror have shown us the truth psychologists and philosophers already knew, that these stories are not so far-fetched but rather reflective of reality as it is.

So, the next time you see a horror story that proudly proclaims itself “based on true events,” feel free to scoff. You know better. But also take pause, because you know better. The story may not be “true,” but it can reach out and touch you all the same. All it needs to do is plant that seed of doubt, make you think it is real, and if your conviction slips for a moment, a single second, it can all become so very real. Those nightmares from your childhood never left. They are still inside you, and that frightened kid hiding beneath the covers is still inside you, too. He already knew the truth you forgot under the easy comfort of ignorance: monsters are real. And the monsters we create are just as powerful as the real ones because these monsters are harder to grasp and control. They hit us where it hurts. Death is easy; doubt is hard. Go forth, dear reader. You are free from this nightmare. Until you think about it again. Or, God forbid, say its name.

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