

# The Grip of Fear

## Art Horror's Challenge to Distance Embrace Theory

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### Abstract

The continued growth of the genre of art horror demonstrates an appetite for works that arouse pleasurable fear. 'Distance theory' posits that such responses are possible due to the space between audience and work, motivated by the audience's awareness of the work's fictional nature. While distance theory is viable, even its comprehensive contemporary formulation faces dilemmas. This paper will provide an overview of distance theory emphasizing the 'Distancing Embracing Model' (DEM) articulated by Winfried Menninghaus and others. Despite its advantages, DEM fails to acknowledge or explain two prevalent art horror engagement acts. These are (1) distance reduction and (2) distance suppression, complex phenomena wherein audiences strive to minimize or otherwise ignore their awareness of the distance between them and the work. Although these acts challenge the model, they need not invalidate it. Synthesizing DEM with a metatheoretical account incorporating multiple-order evaluations adjusts the original model, dissolving the dilemma while strengthening its explanatory capacity. The article will outline the DEM, the relation and complications of reduction and suppression phenomena, and propose a modified model. The conclusion will respond to objections and briefly illustrate potential contributions of adopting the proposed modifications.

### Keywords

Pleasurable Fear, Distance, Aesthetics, Philosophical Psychology

### 1. Introduction

The horror genre continues expanding across aesthetic media. While there are many explanations for the ever-increasing desire for horror, the

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trend illustrates prevalent appetites for works that successfully arouse fear (Bantinaki 2012, 383–84). How can such an ordinarily undesirable emotion attain pleasurable valence in the context of aesthetic engagement (Neil 1992, 54)?<sup>2</sup> “Distance theory” posits that pleasurable discomfort is possible due to the presence of a “space” between audience and work, resulting from awareness of the experience as aesthetic. While distance theory is inventive and viable, even its contemporary formulations encounter dilemmas in the face of two techniques prevalent in art horror engagement.

This paper will briefly outline and analyze distance theory, emphasizing Menninghaus et al. (2017)’s Distancing Embracing Model (DEM), which integrates current empirical findings to produce an updated, detailed explanatory schema of how distance facilitates pleasurable discomfort phenomena (Menninghaus et al. 2017). Despite its advantages, DEM cannot comprehensively explain pleasurable fear qua art horror. This stems partly from its failure to acknowledge prevalent mechanisms occurrent during horror engagement. These include distance reduction, wherein audience behavior incorporates efforts to minimize distance awareness, and distance suppression, a complex phenomenon in which participants strive to repress distance awareness. Subsequent sections analyze each technique and consider their implications for DEM.

Interestingly, DEM’s application to art horror receives little focus despite distance remaining a common explanation of pleasurable fear.<sup>3</sup> Distance manipulation weakens the explanatory power of DEM, but introducing minor modifications accomplished via synthesizing manipulation into the existing DEM framework, alongside inclusion of multiple-order evaluations, fortifies DEM’s explanatory capacity. Having thus established peculiarities of horror and the potential means by which to modify and defend DEM, I respond to potential objections in §7. This section will re-

- 2 Neill’s summation is of the “paradox of horror” (alternately known as the horror paradox). This paper will discuss the appeal of horror and pleasurable fear within the context of the broader paradox of pleasurable discomfort, as that is how it is analyzed within the DEM.
- 3 Outside of a brief application to the emotion (discussed in the article), neither the DEM’s authors nor invited contributors dedicate extended analysis to the relation between the model and pleasurable fear in art horror. For Menninghaus et al.’s proposal of DEM, as well as some responses, see Davies et al., eds. (2017).

spond to objections directed towards the proposed modification of DEM, not critiques of distance theory in its entirety.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. Distance Theory

Proponents of distance theory use the concept of *pleasurable discomfort* to explain why emotional states that typically produce unease or distress (e.g., fear, disgust, sadness) can simultaneously be enjoyable during aesthetic engagement. Because of their representational nature, aesthetic objects remain distinct from reality. The audience's awareness of this produces "interspace" between audience and work (or "token") that is not only physical or ontological, but also allows a degree of affective, emotional distance.<sup>5</sup> Cognizance affords audiences a measure of detachment (Di Muzio 2006, 280). Base distance theory presents an intriguing albeit vague explanation. By what mechanisms does pleasure become possible? What vectors are required? Winfried Menninghaus et al.'s DEM purports to address such concerns by providing a model formally detailing the procedural processes through which negative affect contributes to an overall positive aesthetic evaluation and experienced pleasurable discomfort (Menninghaus et al. 2017). Doing so necessitates segmenting the event into two mechanisms, "distancing" and "embracing." These function in an ordered process that, when successful, allows for pleasurable discomfort in art reception. The authors go so far as to provide a diagrammatic outline of the process. On engaging with a work, the audience imports prior explicit cognizance of distance factors that, if successful, "keep negative emotions at some psychological distance, thereby safeguarding hedonic expectations of art reception against being inevitably compromised by the experience of negative emotions" (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 3). These factors *reframe* negative feelings that occur during aesthetic engagement. Thus, distance awareness prior to felt negative emotions allows audiences to not have the fears and worries they would have if what was depicted in the work was real, thereby allowing positive embrace of the emotions.

- 4 Debate over distance theory viability is an already well-trodden discussion which is outside the purview of this paper, which, again, is only to consider an *amendment* to DEM.
- 5 Ontological distance is taken to reference knowledge that the object of horror is not a genuine existing entity but a part of the story world domain of construct (actor, costume, computer generated image, etc.).

Should the process advance as outlined, the experience's product is pleasure and enjoyment.

As formulated, DEM makes at least two important contributions to the discourse on pleasurable discomfort. *First*, it details vectors that produce distance and embrace, thereby mitigating the accusation of vagueness levelled against earlier formulations.<sup>6</sup> Both vectors must be present, including, minimally, one distancing factor prior to evoking at least one means of embrace. Menninghaus et al. argue that findings in aesthetics and philosophical psychology demonstrate embracing factors such as mixed emotional interplays, artistic schema, importing meaning, and emotional regulation via genre recognition (Menninghaus et al. 2017). This enumeration is unlikely to be exhaustive (Strohl 2019, 7).

*Second*, DEM corrects prior accounts of distance as an inversion of negative emotional states (Strohl 2019, 7–8). Presence of pleasure does not merely swap negative emotions for enjoyment. Embrace requires ongoing negative affect in order to produce the overall aesthetic experience. For instance, art horror experiences that are without an element of discomforting fear are weak if not ineffectual. Distance embrace classifies pleasurable fear as a type of hedonic ambivalence, a complex state with necessary discomfort *and* enjoyment components (Strohl 2012, 206). Compositional interrelation between distance and embrace demands that both must be present and occur in a certain order. Distance is a precondition for embracing. Minimally, one “distance factor” must come first, or else the audience will be unable to adjust negative emotions, making it impossible to evoke embracing responses. Should the engagement allow both distance and embrace factors to activate, it becomes sufficient for the audience to experience pleasurable discomfort (Menninghaus et al. 2017).

Core tenets across distance theories, up to and including DEM, rely upon both the presence of, and the audience's desire for, distance. Audiences must acknowledge and accept depictions that are sufficiently removed from them. Should this ‘contract’ be broken, enjoyment approaches inversion into displeasure. You may enjoy the sadness evoked by a well

6 This paper will not provide exegesis of every individual factor proposed by Menninghaus et al. This would take us outside the present aim of emphasizing the relation between distance/embracing states as a whole to distance theory. The limit and nature of specific distance and embrace factors is currently undetermined. Critics, alongside Menninghaus et al., concede that the factors provided are not an exhaustive enumeration. For a list of those currently considered to comprise distance and embrace, see Menninghaus et al. (2017).

written tragedy, but you would obviously not enjoy the sadness were *you* to be struck by such a tragedy. Obversely, existence of distance alone is insufficient. Imagine an artist, X, who interrupts a show for their dedicated fans to announce that X has contracted a fatal illness. X presents a detailed, convincing account. Once attendees are sufficiently distraught, X reveals this was part of the show. Many audience members would doubtless respond to such deceit with displeasure. Importantly, their emotional state during the artist's "confession" and prior to the reveal would not be *pleasurable* sadness, but pure upset. Some might rationalize or reinterpret the experience, but only once the performative nature was clear. An analogous case may include the change from pure, unmitigated sadness or sympathy felt towards actors who have claimed to be the victim of disease or violence before revelations have prompted them to disclose it was faked. A further case within the horror community may include the dissatisfaction felt by some after learning that early "found footage" films (e.g., *The Blair Witch Project*) were staged.

### 3. Peculiarities of the Art Horror and Distance Relation

Distance theory requires that the audience maintain both the *existence* of distance between audience and work (through the work's being fictional), and their own *awareness* of that distance. Not all pleasurable discomfort functions according to this specific process. Pleasurable fear via aesthetic horror employs techniques that facilitate disrupting the relation between audience and distance. The first technique, *distance reduction*, occurs when the gap between audience and work is minimized. One common example is offering participants increased narrative agency by, for instance, giving them direct control over the decisions of a character in the work. This is most often seen in interactive narratives, such as survival horror games. The *Silent Hill* video game franchise include player control over the main characters, as well as branching paths that are opened and closed by the player's actions (Perron 2015, 98). Others involve enhanced sensory immersion, for example via augmented reality. Distance reduction encompasses a diverse range of methods, though, and exhaustively listing techniques is unnecessary.<sup>7</sup> All serve the aim of weakening aesthetic boundaries, thereby facilitating an audience's drawing closer to a work.

7 I will not provide an exhaustive list of all possible reduction techniques and innovations. Categorizing distance manipulation methodology is better served for projects in adjacent disciplines such as narratology, film studies,

While not a new phenomenon, distance reduction has become more prevalent in recent years. The persistent use of distance reduction in crafting art horror illustrates its potency in producing pleasurable fear.

The second technique for disrupting the audience's sense of distance is distance *suppression*. Unlike distance reduction, distance suppression receives minimal formal attention in aesthetic discourse.<sup>8</sup> Yet the phenomenon is intriguing and equally commonplace. Distance suppression occurs when the audience strives to facilitate pleasurable fear by *actively ignoring* their awareness of the distance between them and the work. Such behavior supplants explicit, overbearing acknowledgment of safety to nurture increased terror. Audiences who act thusly seemingly do so because, if successful, the act enhances discomfort and its concomitant pleasure. Awareness of the aesthetic gap eliminates the intense terror that would potentially occur in nonaesthetic analogues. For instance, consider how different a normal response would be between watching a horror film that features a killer on one hand, and on the other, finding oneself targeted by a murderer (Strohl 2019, 7). Significant numbers of horror audiences appear resistant to explicit, continuous distance awareness. The muting effect that distance theorists praise, horror audiences find at least partially dissatisfying, as it blunts fear. Appetite for suppression is not confined to connoisseurs with intense macabre predilections. Too great a sense of distance renders any art horror unable to arouse enough disquieting terror, and so impotent. Increasing the intensity of the audience's discomfort, in this case fear, amplifies their experience in a manner that can increase accompanying pleasurable hedonic experience (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 12).

Distance reduction and distance suppression are performed by audiences, but horror works, as well as many other genre artifacts, enable and facilitate this distance manipulation. Given the diverse proliferation of techniques, sample cases best illustrate the process. One method involves "modal fear construal," where audiences perceive the work as depicting a world where narrative events are possible, if not probable. Modal fear construal manipulates the audience's worldview, attributing concrete status to narrative, which aids in suppressing knowledge of the work as fictional.<sup>9</sup> Audiences behave in a similar way in interactive aesthetic con-

and literary analysis. That compiling such a list would prove significant underscores the pervasive quality of distance awareness reduction.

8 Some briefly discuss historical considerations, but none delve into the phenomenon. See, for example, Beardsley (1982), 288, 291.

9 For detailed analysis of modal fear construal, see Pascale (2016).

texts. Consider, for example, friends who explore haunted houses, abandoned penitentiaries, farms, or asylums. Participants derive enjoyable fear from the heightened sense of realism and they deprioritize awareness or acknowledgement of the experience as simulated. Works often facilitate distance suppression behavior. Cinematic horror often heightens realism and makes use of real-world analogues. Actors in haunted houses, for instance, are instructed to appear menacing by applying detailed makeup while shocking the audience by jumping out of hiding places or even physically grabbing them. Many such works also utilize pre-existing buildings, from homes with histories of hauntings, to former asylums and prisons (see Stone 2006, 149). Interactive virtual reality narratives compound sensory immersion through superior graphical and auditory fidelity alongside tactile and olfactory simulators. Each innovation is designed to aid the audience in hampering their awareness of the experience as simulated. Nor is wanting to aid the audience in this respect recent. Recall the myriad campfire tales, which often begin by noting how the (fictional) murders that occur in the story transpired at this very location exactly one year ago. Doing so strips away significant distance and safety, increasing fearful dread and anticipation. Finally, classic cinematic horror also employs techniques designed to bring the work into closer confrontation with the audience,<sup>10</sup> for example by hiring actors in monster makeup to enter the theatre mid-screening or utilizing three-dimensional effects. Others have gone so far as to wire cinema seats to deliver small electric shocks, simulating a monster approaching from behind (Hutchings 2004, 80–81).

Although narrative and metanarrative attempts to draw audiences away from conscious aesthetic awareness in order to establish distance minimization and suppression are not new, recent narratological and technological advances produce more effective immersion with higher success thresholds. Scholars of cinema note that earlier, unsophisticated manipulations met with inconsistent success. Some attempts, such as the introduction of live actors and large rubber spiders into the theater, unintentionally hindered audiences' desire to forget distance and were instead perceived as humorous (Hutchings 2004, 81). Use of contemporary im-

10 In this instance, “confront” is meant to denote an ordinary language referent of presenting the horror object to the audience in a manner meant to induce fear. It is distinct from its usage in specific aesthetic contexts (e.g., Derek Matravers’s sense of artistic “confrontation” as specified in *Fiction and Narrative* (2014)).

mersion techniques, including real-world analogues, have proven more successful, increasing demand for use in art horror (Freeland 2003, 201).

#### 4. Art Horror Oddities and Current Distance Theory

If art horror employs distance manipulation, this prompts two questions. First, does distance manipulation relate to the arousal of pleasurable fear? If not, further inquiry proves unnecessary. However, a relationship is evident. Distance-manipulating techniques can cultivate intensified terror fostering pleasurable fear. Many horror audiences respond positively to such devices, particularly when a work proves conducive to reducing and/or suppressing the felt distance between the audience and the work. While diverse in many respects, art horror artifacts share the goal of generating pleasurable fear (Gaut 1993, 335). A subgenre, style, or approach which proves ineffectual in this regard will fall out of use.<sup>11</sup> If audience reception to distance reduction and/or suppression were received negatively, works that facilitate their use of such behaviors would find less success. But the consequent here is demonstrably false. Audiences often gauge the success of a horror work by how much terror it inspires. Some means of measuring fear can include how “real” it felt, and whether the fear remained after the work concluded—in brief, whether the work facilitated the audience’s capacity to feel as though the work was *more than* just a work. Distance manipulation has proven a persistent factor behind the notoriety, impact, and resultant success of horror works.

Having now answered the initial inquiry, it is possible to analyze what implications, if any, each phenomenon might have for distance theory, particularly DEM. While reduction and suppression behave distinctly, both suggest greater complexity behind the distance phenomena than DEM posits. This is particularly salient in relation to audience behavior and desire. Distance *reduction* is not incompatible with distance *awareness*. Some audience member X may want more narrative immersion, which requires diminished distance. However, X does not want the experience to override underlying recognition of the fictional status of what is represented in a work. Nevertheless, distance reduction demonstrates a largely unacknowledged complexity in distance theory’s claim. All formulations of distance theory treat as a foundational premise that audiences have an explicit need/desire for distance. Although this is broadly accurate, reduc-

11 For discussion of horror as reflecting cultural anxieties, see Freeland (2000). See also Asma (2014).

tion phenomena show the existence of distance simpliciter is insufficient. Minimally, horror audiences only desire distance in appropriate measure. Reduction often proves vital to producing requisite fear. A significant sense of distance renders a work ineffective at generating terror. Worse, it may provoke an opposing response of humor. While such “schlock” or “camp” works provide a form of entertainment, they will not satisfy those expressly interested in experiencing pleasurable art horror fear (Freeland 2000). Conversely, too *little* distance may lead audiences to disengage due to excess fear, thus impeding embrace.

Suppression behaviors further complicate the process. The DEM is, as stated above, a *model*, and it depicts the process as a strict, linear function. The model aims at “identifying processing components that are hypothetically relevant for the hedonic processing of negative emotions across the art domains” (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 4). However, DEM fails to account for the role of suppression in the process of generating pleasurable fear in art horror. The model conceives of the creation and maintenance of distance as straightforward. For the audience, situational activation of awareness of distance factors “precedes the online processing and is maintained throughout it” (3). Modeling the process exclusively in this way is too simple. Presence of distance alone is sometimes insufficient to generate the enjoyment required for overall pleasure. Pleasurable discomfort can require adjustment beyond simple continuous awareness and maintenance of distance.

The DEM considers simple continuous maintenance of distance awareness necessary and sufficient (Strohl 2019, 6, 8). Awareness satisfies the necessary precondition for progress towards enjoyment of what would otherwise be undesirable fear (contingent on fulfilling remaining aspects of the DEM process). The existence of distance suppression demonstrates that some audiences actively resist prioritizing acknowledgment of distance. Deriving a rewarding art horror response requires subverting space between depiction and viewer. Audiences may want to surmount recognition, which is seen as an obstacle to a rewarding engagement. As DEM describes, the audience recognizes one or more distancing factors alongside felt negative emotions. This, in turn, motivates the process towards allowing the audience to open themselves to the embrace factors. This simple transition is not always possible. An additional process must occur, during which the audience member needs to manipulate this distance awareness to spur stronger felt negative emotional intensity sufficient to eventually produce an output of pleasurable enjoyment. DEM portrays the process as analogous to a linear computational function. The simple inputs of distance and felt negative emotions allows progress to embrace factor(s),

producing a pleasure output. Extending the computational metaphor, some engagements require an additional subroutine, where distance is manipulated post-recognition.

Distance reduction and suppression, while distinct, both highlight an obstacle to DEM's explanation of pleasurable discomfort. Consistent acknowledgment of distance simpliciter is not always sufficient for one to progress towards embrace and eventual pleasure. Distance awareness must sometimes undergo additional alteration, or else the audience will fail to reach adequate levels of fear required to achieve the necessary threshold for eventual pleasure. However, these mechanics are not addressed by the DEM. The rationale behind their exclusion is unclear, given that distance manipulation is a common practice of horror audiences. Regardless, the consequence produces an incomplete model.

## 5. Addressing Complications

Introduction of distance reduction and suppression complicates DEM but does not necessarily render it useless. The authors identify DEM as an initial construct of an evolving model, which can benefit from further research to determine additional criteria and model components within the processing schema (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 15). Incorporating distance manipulation is not only possible, but further strengthens DEM's application and explanatory capacity regarding pleasurable art horror. This requires acknowledging the presence of manipulation alongside determining how it factors into a modified model. Contrary to what might seem to be the implications of this, pleasurable fear does require existence and awareness preconditions. The desire for distance suppression and reduction does not change these foundational concerns. Manipulation only concerns audiences adjusting their perception of distancing schema (art, spatiotemporal awareness, or fictional status). It does not *eliminate* awareness but rather assists in reducing overwhelming acknowledgment.

How can the presence and acknowledgement of distance be reconciled with seemingly competing reduction and suppression desires? Before progressing onto substantive proposals, it is beneficial to analyze the initial model's proposed application to pleasurable fear. Interestingly, Menninghaus et al. only offer a brief application to horror, asserting a need for future development. Increased negative affect produces increased enjoyment, as positive embrace is due in no small part to fearful feelings. The authors further claim, "roles of suspense and thrill seeking are widely acknowledged . . . suspense-driven arousal is an important factor in the

co-activation of positive and negative affect and that this factor may be instrumental in making fear/horror enjoyable” (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 16). Fear and horror generate sources of arousal, with suspense providing the added component necessary to generate mixed affective dread/anticipation that (assuming presence of distance) can prove pleasurable.

For the purposes of this paper, the dominant concern is DEM’s lack of inclusion of and (by extension) explanation for distance manipulation behaviors of reduction and suppression, which are distinct from its depiction of distance awareness as an immediate, simple, and prevalent occurrence. As a secondary concern, DEM proponents offer little explanation of suspenseful dread particulars. Although they classify this state as the pre-eminent mixed emotion/embrace factor, they provide no suggestions as to how one generates the state during horror engagement, nor why the intensity required differs between individuals. Remodeling DEM to incorporate distance manipulation can better explain each. Awareness simpliciter is conducive to neither fear nor suspense. By its nature, distance awareness is designed to push against and lessen an otherwise purely negative felt state. Achieving the requisite fear and dread requires a measure of persistent felt negativity. Since fearful dread is limited by scope and awareness of a work as fiction, intensity may need to be achieved indirectly, namely, by suppressing or reducing overt acknowledgment of distance. Effectively, this behavior is performed to foster sufficient horror and suspense to generate the integrally mixed emotion of fearful dread. Acting thusly demonstrably correlates to more intensity and greater potential enjoyment (Menninghaus et al. 2017, 16). The requisite level of intensity is variable across individuals. Some desire, if not require, more intensity than others do. Such individuals may utilize distance manipulation, and may pursue aesthetic horror experiences more conducive to such behaviors. This can explain differences in horror preferences as well as the seeming correlation between how intense an experience someone wants, on one hand, and how much they engage in distance manipulation behavior, on the other. Consider, for example, the horror aficionado immersing themselves in the horror community.<sup>12</sup>

How does one manipulate distance awareness to engage with a work as if the boundary between oneself and the work has collapsed, while simultaneously *retaining* awareness of distance? Is this not contradictory? No: such maintenance is achieved through the complex *meta*-response of

12 I will not discuss horror immersion and its extensive relation to DEM in the present paper, as it is an issue that requires significant detail that has yet to receive consideration. This is work I hope to do in the future.

art horror engagement. Initial usage of meta-response within art horror is commonly attributed to Susan Feagin's attempt to dissolve the paradox of horror (Solomon and Shaw 2003, 261). She considers art horror enjoyment as rooted in "meta-pleasures," second order feelings toward one's initial fear response (Feagin 1992, 83). If horror provokes fear, it means one can respond appropriately to the given stimulus (*ibid.*). This produces pleasurable self-satisfaction. Conversely, if someone considers taking pleasure in horror appropriate, they enjoy feeling thusly. The final potential response occurs when someone becomes "psychologically flexible" enough to enjoy horror they previously could not (*ibid.*, 83–84).

Feagin's proposed framework of "meta-response as conceptual architecture" is invaluable, as it accurately identifies horror engagement as multilayered: capable of comprising more than a singular evaluative and emotive state. Importantly, mental states can persist at a second order without requiring uninterrupted immediate awareness. Audience failure to manifest immediate awareness and constant, conscious maintenance of some emotional state does not render that state nonexistent. Such considerations are crucial to both a robust explanation of the experience of art horror and a reconciliation of DEM with distance suppression and reduction. Meta-theory explains simultaneous behaviors of distance cognizance while pursuing reduction and suppression for generating stronger felt negative emotions. Some find felt ambivalence desirable and evaluate it positively. However, there are typically limitations. Extreme or insufficient discomforting fear overwhelms ambivalence, resulting in displeasure. Conversely, insufficient fear will not produce pleasurable unease. Here, the *variable* nature of distance proves vital. A sense of distance can keep fear from overwhelming an audience preserving the internal environment necessary for the mixed-emotion state to flourish. Should one's experience intrude on their distance awareness threshold, it increases the likelihood of becoming too unpleasant. It ceases to be a complex concomitant state (e.g., ambivalence), transitioning to unambiguous terror. Levels of discomforting terror required for successful arousal of ambivalence are not identical. For some, this requires more intense levels of suspenseful fear, which may necessitate closer approximation to real horror. Closing this gap can prompt one to seek out and utilize either or both distance reduction and suppression.

Meta-responses explain how seemingly contradictory impulses between desire for distance and distance manipulation attain homeostasis. When individuals engage with horror, they have a persistent awareness of the work as separated by distance. For many, this is an explicit requirement. Were there no distance, the experience would be identical to gen-

uine horror. However, successful engagement does not, as DEM posits, require retention at the immediate level of first order (e.g., explicitly conscious) awareness (Strohl 2019, 8, 9). If one requires stronger discomfort in order to experience sufficient pleasure, an overbearing recognition of distance between work and audience would render the experience insufficiently enjoyable. In such cases, the awareness of distance must be relegated to a second-order position. A background recognition of aesthetic nature persists, but it is below conscious acknowledgment.

In such cases, one is engrossed at the first-order level with continuing through the experience of pleasurable fear. Since second-order awareness persists, the individual remains capable of proceeding into the embrace phase of the process. This accounts for a crucial aspect of engagement overlooked by DEM theorists. As I have shown, distance theorists inaccurately assume that awareness and distance maintenance retain prominence (or at any rate they fail to explicitly state otherwise) (Strohl 2019, 8, 9). Distance reduction and suppression behaviors do not entail the *elimination* of the audience's awareness of distance, only that some audiences cannot have it consistently foregrounded. Distance awareness may exist "out of focus," without thereby being erased altogether. Awareness persists at the second order, on standby, should the individual require reminding—as they might, for instance, if their terror reaches such intensity that it unbalances the desirable mixed emotion. One possible occurrence during horror experiences is the act of reminding oneself of the fictional nature and resulting distance. Hence, the repetition of phrases such as, "It is not real, it is only a (movie, book, etc.);" This mantra is uttered as a safety mechanism, and only when reassurance is necessary. It is not uttered by every individual throughout every horror engagement.

Awareness can exist as a simultaneous first-order state alongside pleasurable fright. Some audiences attain satisfactory fear by retaining a consistent immediate cognizance of the fictional status of the work to which they are attending. In such cases, the initial DEM accurately captures the experience. However, this is not always the case. Whether one finds constant maintenance desirable or instrumental to maintaining hedonic homeostasis required for pleasurable fear is contingent on individual factors. This also proves true when it comes to how little distance one may require. Situationism cannot be disregarded, as engagement preference is shaped by individual factors (see Doris 2002). In this regard, art horror is no different from other, distinct mixed states such as pleasurable sadness or pleasurable disgust. Aesthetic and nonaesthetic experiences offering scant to no distance attract significantly smaller willing audiences. Such experiences are not altogether nonexistent. For example, there are those

who seek out life-threatening extreme activities, or who derive pleasure from the reception of significant pain. Advocates for such avenues as a source of pleasure are comparably minimal, but they exist (see Klein 2014, 47). Their existence helps to demonstrate that pleasurable fear particulars are not homogenous across persons.

Fostering the state of art horror can involve multilayered cognitive processes. The ability to maintain background awareness of distance while simultaneously approximating a sense of close involvement can increase the discomfort crucial for end-state enjoyment (Prinz 2004, 135). Such processes are particularly noticeable during instances of heightened distance suppression. Inclusion of such processes and awareness of aesthetic distance allows the account to address prevalent desires for less awareness. Thus, the present proposal supplements the DEM.

How would this complex mechanism be integrated into Menninghaus et al.'s DEM? The initial model places distance awareness as the primary step in engagement. Felt distance accompanies felt negative emotions, allowing for embrace of the mixed emotional state of fearful dread/horror/suspense. Stronger emotional responses correlate with more potent enjoyment. For some, this greater intensity is desirable, and for some it is even necessary. Achieving these stronger responses requires stepping closer to fear, which is achieved via manipulating distance awareness. In terms of Menninghaus et al.'s model, this distance manipulation occurs after the initial interplay of distance and felt negative emotions. At this point, distance awareness undergoes manipulation, providing an opportunity for the audience to remove it from primacy while transforming it into a second-level meta-awareness. Doing so fosters an environment that is less obstructive to greater intensity of fear and resultant suspenseful dread. This process, which generates mixed emotions, occupies the first-order or priority state. The process retains the quasilinear behavior of the original DEM, albeit with the addition, sometimes, of a step where distance recognition undergoes adjustment prior to embrace. Revision and manipulation (including meta-response mechanisms) facilitates producing the mixed emotional state central to pleasurable horror. Despite its frequency and prevalence, distance manipulation is not always present. As shown, some individuals do not require adjustment, deriving sufficient fear and suspense from engaging while distance awareness maintains consistent and significant. Regardless, when manipulation is present, the model must be adjusted accordingly. The fact that distance manipulation is not ubiquitous does not provide sufficient grounds for discarding the present proposal. In its current state, DEM is persuasive but ultimately incomplete. The model merits further development to better account

for the complexity and nuance of pleasurable discomfort reactions in aesthetic engagement.

## 6. Illustrative Cases

Contrasting two cases demonstrates audience and procedural mechanics. Proponents of distance theory utilize the “actual killer” example. You can enjoy fear while watching a slasher film featuring a killer stalking and dispatching victims. Should you return home to meet an actual killer intent on murdering you, the fear you feel in response is less likely to incorporate pleasure. Advocates take this to support that pleasurable fear requires necessity and awareness of distance (Hills 2005, 4). This case does appear to demonstrate the veracity of their claim. If the “actual killer” were to reveal themselves as the viewer’s friend playing a prank, distance always existed, as the viewer was never going to be harmed by the “killer.” Homicide was never your friend’s intent. Regardless, it would not make the fear felt before the reveal enjoyable, as the “victim” was unaware that there was no danger. On a basic level, the case demonstrates necessary existence and acknowledgment of distance. However, it is an oversimplified illustration.

Compare a purely aesthetic experience incorporating full awareness of fiction. Specifically, the interactive horror narrative *Doki Doki Literature Club (DDLC)*. Widely known and positively received, *DDLC* casts the player as a member of an extracurricular poetry club. They attend meetings and gradually befriend other club members for an extended period. This all establishes the appearance of a high school drama narrative.<sup>13</sup> Soon, though, minor surreal occurrences begin happening. Characters behave erratically, exhibiting shifts in mannerism and poetry. And then, suddenly, one character, after presenting a disconcerting poem repeatedly imploring an unknown presence to “get out of my head,” commits suicide. From this point on, the game vacillates between ordinary club activities and sudden shifts in tone while the architecture appears to develop errors. Options within the menu start to disappear; camera angles shift; dialogue becomes replaced with illegible glitching or artifacting; and characters become distorted, becoming suddenly and briefly replaced with monstrous deformed creatures. Furthermore, aspects of the game from menu options to character dialogue begin referring, not to the protagonist whom the player is controlling, but to the actual player themselves.

13 Such narratives are typically classified under the “visual novel” subgenre.

Importantly, these “glitches” are neither programming nor computing errors, but intentional design choices made to appear as such. Direct references to the player are accomplished via scanning their online accounts or gamer profiles, thereby producing tailored references at preplanned points during the game’s narrative. The climax reveals that the poetry club president (who is a non-player character) has become self-aware and developed an obsessive fixation on the player (*not* their avatar). The suicides, glitches, and shifts stem from her corrupting the game to make the player choose them as their object of love. At this point, players must go into the game’s code and delete the character file of the villain to successfully reach the end. Failing to recognize this action and act accordingly results in a program lock, during which the player cannot exit the game.

Works such as *DDLC* manifest art horror distance reduction and suppression. The narrative initially provides prominent distance. The gradual intensification of distance reduction in the work causes a corresponding intensification of the player’s fear. The inclusion of tailored interactions and what seem to be programming errors strongly impede distance awareness. These inclusions help audiences effectively suppress their awareness of distance. For example, by slowly transitioning the player’s awareness that the horror object’s fixation is directed towards the player, *not* the player avatar. *DDLC* has become a noteworthy horror artifact, drawing attention in both gaming and horror communities, and even more broadly.<sup>14</sup>

Broad assertions of “real killer” cases retain persuasive components, insofar as the hypothetical examples demonstrate a distinction between actual horror and art horror. *DDLC*-type cases adhere to this as well. At no point does the game *actually* violate distance: all it does is create *illusions* of such a violation. Nor do most players believe themselves targeted by a malicious program, as the narrative is geared towards audiences with developed boundary awareness. A meta-awareness model explains subtle mechanisms at play, particularly their means of cultivating distance central to pleasurable fear. In *DDLC*-type cases, the player retains awareness of the work as sufficiently distanced. However, this remains beneath overt or explicit awareness, so as not to intrude on establishing fear necessary for pleasurable frightful dread. Distance reduction nurtures distance suppression, the two techniques working in tandem to deepen the experi-

14 I owe my awareness of *DDLC*’s presence in popular culture, as well the initial suggestion of its potential as an illustrative example, to Derek Matravers’s contributions in the Göttingen University Conference on the Role of Emotions in Aesthetic Psychology (2017).

ence and allowing for a more robust first-order felt negative emotion for those seeking more intensity. Audiences remain aware that they could always simply close the program. This knowledge does not need to be at the forefront of the audience's mind, though: rather, the awareness is revisited and adjusted after the felt negativity to maximize the sense of fear needed to produce a sufficiently potent contribution to achieve the mixed state. Prominent distance awareness would not allow enough fear to supply the vital component to fearful dread.

## 7. Objections and Responses

Having established the proposal, the paper will consider and counter three potential objections. It might be questioned whether distance reduction and suppression are distinct. And indeed, ascertaining strict boundaries between states is challenging. It does not follow, though, that they are identical. Distance reduction only requires that audiences take steps to deepen immersion, not that they desire to reject or ignore aesthetic awareness. The viewer may desire more realism to make a work sufficiently interesting. Insufficient realism (e.g., unconvincing effects or ineffectual cinematography) hinders immersion, and risks transforming a work of art horror into a parody. Distance suppression, by contrast, involves *active effort* to undermine awareness of a work's fictional status. While each exhibit distinct attributes, they do not have to remain separate nor mutually exclusive. *DDLC* exemplifies how the audience uses cooperation between suppression and reduction in order to facilitate pleasurable fear ambivalence. Audiences may employ distancing and suppressing behaviors in a single engagement. Distance reduction proves useful, if not necessary, to distance suppression. Conversely, reducing distance does not necessarily benefit from, nor must it explicitly rely upon, active distance suppression.

Separate concern may arise over the proposal's use of meta-responses, an aspect of Feagin's methodology that critics have argued contradicts her stance.<sup>15</sup> Feagin asserts her solution is integrationist in nature. That is, her solution explains pleasures of art horror as stemming from the capacity to enjoy fright (Feagin 1992, 77, 80). However, some meta-responses she provides do not depend on enjoying fear. Not only can some of her proposed positive second-order evaluations exist independently from such pleasure, but some *must* (Feagin 1992, 78). These meta-pleasures are

15 See, among others, Carroll (1992), Strohl (2012), and Pascale (2016, 2019).

contingent upon the audience *not* enjoying the fear they are experiencing. X believes responding to the work with fear and disgust is appropriate. Knowing that this is the intended reaction, X feels second-order pleasure towards his or her appropriate emotional composition. It is not the fear X enjoys, but their feeling towards the fear.<sup>16</sup> Conversely, another of her methods requires fully enjoying horror, which denies the presence and contribution of discomfort. Compared to other genres, “horror doesn’t like you. It does not care if it causes you to lose sleep. Horror doesn’t mind if it frightens you so much it makes you swear off something you love, like camping or swimming in the ocean” (Tallon 2010, 35). If one straightforwardly enjoys what one feels, one is not reacting appropriately. For the second-order response to exist necessitates finding the experience less than fully enjoyable. In instances of “psychological flexibility,” pleasurable response can only come from learning to look past distasteful fear. Were it the case that one found it entirely enjoyable or appropriate, no flexibility is involved (Carroll 1992, 87).

Feagin’s proposal is substitutive. It explains horror’s appeal via arguing circumstances of engagement reshapes the experience from one of terror to pleasure (Strohl 2019, 10). A positive second-order response to art horror fully transforms a discomforting experience into an enjoyable one. As Menninghaus et al. assert, responses to horror more accurately comprise a concomitant mixed state, neither fully pleasant nor unpleasant, but strongly ambivalent (Strohl 2019, 10). Will usage of meta-responses in the proposed amendment prove vulnerable to similar objections? While both build on a foundation of first- and second-order cognition, there are no further similarities. The DEM amendment does not necessitate a substitution framework, thus circumventing the maligned aspects of Feagin’s account. The amendment also does not discuss the specific valence of emotive states (Prinz 2004, 134–35). Rather, it uses meta-responses to explain the specific mechanism behind how audiences can simultaneously sustain the desire for and awareness of distance, on one hand, and the need for a state of minimized/suppressed immediate cognizance, on the other.

Lastly, pleasurable discomfort in art reception encompasses diverse states of pleasurable fear, sadness, cringe, and disgust. Such phenomena help explain the appeal of horror, as well as tragedies and those comedic subgenres that employ awkwardness and discomfort. Does horror alone employ distance manipulation? Furthermore, if other pleasurable discomfort artifacts utilize manipulation, will this alter the proposed modifica-

16 For an in-depth critique of Feagin’s meta-theory see (among others) Carroll (1992), and Pascale (2016).

tion? Art horror engagement displays ample, invited use of distance manipulation. In this regard, pleasurable fear during horror engagement is distinct from other sorts of pleasurable discomfort: how often do nonhorror genre tokens employ comparable efforts to eliminate distance-awareness barriers? Is there a plurality of virtual tragedy simulators where we choose whether to die before a partner does, weigh the decision to stop the treatment of a relative, or endure the slow decline of a fatal illness? Do audiences elect to go on “cringe tours” that force them to participate in intensely embarrassing situations? Cringe humor and/or disgust-related pleasurable discomfort remains primarily reliant upon actors and unsuspecting participants. Individuals may endure distressing or humiliating events to attain some ulterior motive or reward external to aesthetic enjoyment, such as financial compensation or public attention. The participants here are not the individuals who derive pleasurable discomfort. Experiential pleasurable cringe or disgust is rather had by those who engage with the depictions as spectators fully aware of the distance while vicariously enduring the ordeal.

Evidence suggests that use of distance manipulation may happen outside of horror. For example, first-person autobiographical narratives emphasizing a crushing loss may allow a reader to better approximate the feeling of living the tragedy.<sup>17</sup> Even if manipulation techniques are utilized beyond horror’s pleasurable fear arousal, their frequency, intensity, and presence are less frequent. Horror involves direct, persistent usage of distance awareness manipulation, making it a central feature of horror engagement.<sup>18</sup> Given the relative nascency of such analysis, it would not be surprising for future research to uncover alternative sources of pleasurable discomfort distance manipulation. Even if corroborations exist, they will not weaken the proposed modification. Indeed, to the contrary, this would establish distance suppression and reduction as more common than so far acknowledged. Horror would simply provide a *clear* case of manipulation, opening the door to further development and application. Demonstrating the presence of distance reduction and/or suppression in aesthetic engagements outside of pleasurable fear and horror would only serve to emphasize the importance of modifying DEM to account for the phenomena.

17 The author attributes this to an anonymous reviewer for *Evental Aesthetics*.

18 For a discussion of the formative, central components of genre, see Friend (2012).

## 8. Conclusion

Granting the proposal due consideration necessitates DEM be considered a viable explanation of pleasurable discomfort. The proposed modification is not designed to undermine DEM in such a way as to render it wholly invalid.<sup>19</sup> Nor should the proposal be viewed as championing an alternative method. Rather, the proposal is designed to draw attention to some underanalyzed considerations while providing further potential support. An exegesis of DEM uncovers a lack of consideration for certain aesthetic behaviors and trends. Interestingly, even this contemporary descriptive model, which endeavors to fully demystify the function of distance and its relation to audience pleasurable discomfort, fails to fully acknowledge the existence of distance suppression and reduction techniques. This oversight is concerning, especially as their use within horror has proven enduring. As such, it is incumbent upon DEM to sufficiently explain how it can incorporate an explanation for such behaviors.

Although significant, these lacunae do not invalidate DEM's explanatory power. DEM's infrastructure can and ought to be strengthened. As shown, integrating metatheory provides such an avenue. Inclusion of metaconsiderations dissolves the seeming paradox of distance manipulation. Furthermore, it not only aids in explaining how distance coexists with distance manipulation, but presents some consequences that may prove instrumentally beneficial. It affords distancing-embracing methodology a closer alignment with the mechanisms of mixed emotion generation, arguably an accurate conception of the pleasurable discomfort phenomenon, and the classification Menninghaus et al desire for their proposal (Strohl 2019, 10).

The modification also potentially further advances discourse in adjacent avenues of discourse. Consider, for instance, the discussion of horror art and morality. Tokens of art horror are no stranger to moral controversy. As a genre, horror often employs controversial subject matter. Thus, it is popularly a target of moral recrimination. Some critics of the genre contest that aesthetic distance serves to exacerbate the immoral influence of the genre. The fact that art horror allows individuals to view the monstrous, sadistic, and gruesome events from a distance, they charge, facilitates desensitization. Audiences come to regard the depictions as a source of entertainment, gradually degrading healthy reactive attitudes

19 Distance theory is not without its detractors. Such objections have been discussed at length elsewhere by, among others, Carroll (1996) and Di Muzio (2006).

towards analogous events in reality (Di Muzio 2006, 286). If one can suppress the awareness of distance into an upper level of recognition, it may affect the influence of art horror on audiences<sup>20</sup>—for example, by expediting the degree to which one may become desensitized. Presumably because of DEM’s relative nascency, any possible interrelation between the model and the moral status of engaging with art horror has been the recipient of little to no analysis. This goes *a fortiori* for DEM’s variations, including the one proposed in this paper. Nevertheless, the potential for intersection exemplifies one of many avenues of future discourse that may result from DEM, which itself provides a fruitful means of explaining pleasurable discomfort in aesthetic engagement.

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20 The author will not discuss this, as such a complex topic requires analyzing a separate set of factors. Its mention suggests potential future research.

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