

The Uncanny Home: Familiarity, Repression, and the Return of the Repressed in *Girl in the Basement*

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Abstract

This paper is a psychoanalytical interpretation of the film *Girl in the Basement* (2021) as it draws inspiration from the Fritzl case, following the theoretical framework of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny as developed in his 1919 essay "The Uncanny" (*Das Unheimliche*). Focusing on how the film reconfigures home and family: the home is now a prison, the father is the perpetrator, and every day object and routine has an unsettling significance. The basement is concealed, metaphorically a space of repression and secret. It suggests that horror in the film is not so much from the supernatural events as much as the unsettling, warping of common domestic and family relationships. The film embodies Freud's ideas on return of the repressed, a hidden reality which has the power to destroy the illusion of normalcy in the domestic sphere. The study shows the uncanny as the defamiliarisation of the Familiar, reveals that the most horrifying is the familiar made strange, and that the unknown is more terrible than the familiar.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic, Uncanny, Repression, Defamiliarisation, Domestic Horror

Introduction

The most terrifying places in cinema are few and far between the haunted castles of the gothic imagination; they are the spaces that are already known to us. Contemporary horror has turned in large part from the supernatural, the monstrous, and the alien toward the familiar, the everyday, the family home, the domestic space, and the faces we see every day. Freud depicts the uncanny as a specific type of psychological disorientation that occurs when something familiar, intimate or homely becomes repulsive and unfamiliar. The idea of repression, concealment, repetition, secrecy, and psychological and/or social thing, is central to this. The latter is especially pertinent to the psychological drama of the real-life Fritzl case, as depicted in the film by Elisabeth Röhm.

The research focuses on the portrayal of uncanny family home, particularly the basement as a space associated with repression and concealment. The film fosters this uncanny ambiance not by means of supernatural objects, but by means of the uncanny haunted spaces, doubles, ghostly upheavals, ghosting, monstrous bodies, or technological and psychological anxieties are often discussed. Freud's concept of the uncanny

illustrates a range of possibilities, but in certain instances it can overlook one of the most unsettling aspects of cinematic horror today.

The nature of the research problem examined in this study is grounded on the juxtaposition of the familiar and the bizarre. The home traditionally presented as a safe haven and a place of comfort is transformed into a space of secrecy and repression. The research examines the home as a place of mystery and horror, where the inexplicable occurs and explores the ways in which mystery, repetition, and familiarity converge. The film has largely been examined through the lenses of domestic violence, captivity, abuse and the affair with the Fritzl case, with limited scholarly attention directed towards the psychoanalytical mechanisms by which the film turns the familiar into the frightening.

The aim of this research is to fill that void, in a sustained dialogue between Freud's conceptualisation of the uncanny and the film's representation of domestic space, family relations, repression, and hidden trauma. Instead of the basement being a location of the story, the study provides a symbolic and psychological perspective on the basement that allows the relationship between material and repressed material to be explored. It demonstrates how the film unsettles the common perception of home by exposing the tension between familiarity and estrangement.

The paper examines the film from the perspective of Freud's theoretical framework of the uncanny and to show how the film creates horror by altering the familiar aspects of domestic reality into psychological disruptions. It explores the connections between repetition, secrecy, confinement, and the return of hidden realities. In light of this, the following questions are used to guide the research:

- (1) How does *Girl in the Basement* transform the familiar setting of the home into a space of repression and unbidden emotions?
- (2) With reference to the representation of violence and captivity in the film. In what ways can Freud's ideas of repression, concealment, repetition, and the return of the repressed illuminate the representation of violence and captivity in the film?
- (3) In what ways does the father-daughter dynamic inversion help to create the uncanny?
- (4) How is the basement at the same time a space of incarceration and a space of the repressed?
- (5) How does the film embody a kind of horror that is not supernatural or unexpected but instead comes from normal life?

This study undertakes an interpretive, qualitative examination of the film through the lens of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic understanding of the concept of the uncanny. This research does not focus on the film's message of violence and captivity but explores how horror can be most effective if it is not from an alien realm but from the uncomfortable realization that the familiar realm itself holds what is hidden, suppressed, and feared.

Literature Review

Compared with the critical literature which has developed extensively on psychoanalytical theory, horror cinema, and representations of captivity, scholarship on *Girl in the Basement* is fairly sparse. The ongoing discourse on the film is mainly framed as a crime drama or psychological thriller, with focus on the unsettling themes of the film, patriarchy, family abuse, and captivity. Its narrative structure, spatial allegories, and psychological dimensions are seldom explored in the academic discourse.

The little substantial scholarship on the film creates a significant scope for psychoanalytic interpretation, offering considerable scope for psychoanalytic exploration. The literature on the uncanny, as a whole, shows the emergence of a new analytical category in literature, cinema, architecture, art and cultural studies. The key

work is Freud's "The Uncanny", which is essentially a work that explores the uncanny as an experience that occurs when something that appears familiar unfolds in an anomalous way.

Theoretical development of "The Uncanny" has gradually moved from the psychoanalytical model of Freud to a wider interdisciplinary and critical approach. Nicholas Royle helps to position this shift, especially beyond Freud's focus on repression, the return of the repressed and the disturbing repetition of the familiar. He defines the uncanny as an ambivalent experience that may appear in literature, culture, language, identity and everyday life. Nicholas Royle, in *The Uncanny* (2003) notes, "the uncanny is destined to elude mastery, it is what cannot be pinned down or controlled" (15-16), broadening its scope beyond a psychology of individuals to literature, culture, space and film.

Academic research on the film is still at an emerging state especially pertinent within literary and psychoanalytic frameworks. The study of the uncanny is primarily concerned with Gothic literature, on the supernatural in the film, on doubles, or on artificial entities or on aesthetically impressive horror, but much less on realistic horror of domestic abuse or captivity. Against this backdrop, the film's uncanny transformation of the home into a space of fright remains insufficiently explored.

Freud's uncanny is one of the most persistent and versatile term in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. It has migrated from psychoanalysis into literary theory, philosophy, film studies, architecture and contemporary art. *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (2011) by Anneleen Masschelen, labels the uncanny as "Because the uncanny affects and haunts everything, it is in constant transformation and cannot be pinned down" (2). The uncanny has therefore emerged as a fruitful theoretical lens for exploring the curious and strange qualities of familiar places, people and experiences.

Theoretical Framework

Sigmund Freud's theoretical framework of the uncanny is especially applicable to the film due to its horror arising from normal domestic scenes and relationships being transformed into places of fear. As Cixous elucidates, "in the infinite game of substitutions, through which what constitutes the elusive moment of fear returns and eclipses itself again" (536). In the text, Freud discusses the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, and focuses on the paradoxical nature of these two terms: the familiar and unfamiliar can also be unseen, strange, and frightening. Freud associates the uncanny with the repression, the repetition, the double, uncertainty, and the return of something that should have been kept hidden.

The uncanny is a space that lies between familiarity and unfamiliarity. Not just the unknown, but the return or metamorphosis of the familiar that is terrifying. Freud links the uncanny with repression, in which the disturbing thoughts, memories or experiences are driven out of the conscious mind. He describes that the uncanny is not the wholly unknown but the familiar which has been turned upside down; the German word *unheimlich* is bound up with *heimlich*, meaning the homely, the familiar, the intimate, the concealed. Freud equates the uncanny with repression, repetition, double, and the inevitable return of what should have remained concealed.

The uncanny further manifests itself through anxiety, it causes a person to lose his sense of security and certainty. The desire to speak freely and express opinions is being denied to people, even in solitude, and this makes them increasingly anxious in the film. Sara's attempt to voice her suffering against her confinement is itself perceived as an act of defiance. Don finds her secret message to her mom, and says, "you haven't learned a

thing.” His words seem to reveal that the domestic space is a space where Sara is denied the freedom not only to move around, but also the freedom to express herself.

The film embodies Freud’s ideas on repetition, the prolonged confinement where there is repeated routine, repeated abuse, and the constant hiding of the truth, Sara’s situation encompasses all of these elements. The basement is a recurrent space in which the familiar world of the domestic space meets the hidden and threatening. The repetition is not only Sara’s traumatic recollection of confinement, but it also illustrates Freud’s paradox of the familiar becoming unfamiliar.

The framework focuses on detailed considerations of the domestic space, basement, familial dynamics, repressive elements and secretiveness, and anxiety representations within the film. The study investigates not only the transformation of the familiar home into an uncanny home, but also the familiar father transforming into a threatening figure. Such reversals obscure the difference between known and unknown, resulting in an uncanny film-like experience and emphasizing the film’s ability to depict the most horrifying threat coming from the seemingly safe domestic space.

Analysis

The horror in the film stems from the uncanny, where fear is not caused by the fundamentally unfamiliar environment, instead it defines the concept of violence as a part of the domestic sphere, which is usually familiar, private and secure. “...the “uncanny” is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (Freud 220). The change is one of the most crucial elements in the film’s eerie appeal.

Freud contends that uncanny is not synonymous with strange, but a disruption of the familiar itself. The prominence of home as an image is especially relevant in Freud’s definition of the uncanny, the home, the location of the film, is a space that is familiar but contains elements of mystery, force and fear.

Elisabeth Röhm’s film constructs the home as a fractured and misleading place where apparent normality exists while violence lurks in the shadows. Ernst asserts, “this word appears to express that someone to whom something “uncanny” happens is not quite “at home” or “at ease” in the situation concerned” (8). The film centres on an eighteen-year-old girl Sara whose father, Don, confines her in the basement of their family home. The family goes about their everyday life above without knowing what is happening below and Sara is stuck in the basement. Don lies about Sara’s disappearance and maintains the facade of normal family life, hiding the violence.

The panoramic piece of art can be understood psychologically as Freud’s repression, concealment, and the return of the repressed. Sara’s secret suffering lies beneath the safe walls of a regular family home, along with an invisible violence that exists within the home. The film is not just about being captured but about the unsettling sense of an apparently ordinary home and a hidden one that defies it. Sara is spatially isolated from everyday family life, but she cannot be attributed to her lack of existence. Her disappearance is an unacknowledged paradox in the comprehensible reality of the family. “It is undoubtedly related to the frightening- to what arouses dread and horror; equally certainly, too, the word is not always used in clearly definable sense, so that it tends to coincide with what excites fear in general” (Freud 219). This spatial separation is inspired by Freud’s concept of the uncanny which generally occurs when something hidden resurfaces and disrupts the sense of familiarity.

The film is rooted in Freud’s dichotomy of the *heimlich* (homely, familiar, intimate) and the *unheimlich* (uncanny, unfamiliar, frightening). Röhm reveals the paradox of the domestic sphere: what is familiar, is also frightening, and what is safe is also dangerous.

The home symbolizes protection, intimacy and security, is the very place of incarceration and violence. The liberated character of the father makes the uncanny even more pronounced. Traditionally, the father is a figure of authority, protection, and security in the family, but in *Don*, these are perverted into domination, fear, and abuse. He becomes the source of danger, generating the uncanny by a disturbing reversal that transforms a figure of safety into a figure of threat. This turn-around can evoke a powerful feeling of disorientation psychologically.

Research Findings

Röhm's film explains that elements of the haunted and other supernatural are peripheral to the uncanny. The essence of terror lies in the return or metamorphosis of the familiar into frightening. Freud asserts "one is curious to know what this common core is which allows us to distinguish as 'uncanny'; certain things which lie within the field of what is frightening" (220). This distinction is especially noticeable in the film, when Don secludes Sara in the hidden basement of the family home.

Once Sara is subjected to confinement Don constructs a false explanation for her disappearance, claiming that she has "run away," to Irene and Amy. Don's assertion that Sara is gone and the reality of her being captured juxtaposes the family home with an unhomely space. This scene illustrates Freud's psychoanalytic formulation of the uncanny, which is something that is frightening because the frightener is itself familiar. It uncovers that the most terrifying threat isn't always from an external source, but from the very people and places perceived as sources of security.

The study reveals that the uncanniness of the film is generated first through the alteration of the familiar domestic space to the unhomely space. Its intimacy and security fall apart as it slowly comes out of light what is going on behind the scenes in the family home. The basement acts as a metaphor for repression in the centre, what lies beneath the surface of domestic normality exists within it but remains suppressed. The film consequently demonstrates the interaction of familiarity versus hidden violence.

It additionally demonstrates that repression has not only spatial dimension but also psychological one. Sara's assertion, "I want to go home" amplifies her psychological sense of confinement. Freud also argues, "the uncanny is something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it" (qtd. in Barnaby 979-980). The transparent wall constructed between the visible house and the concealed house in the basement evokes the division of what is visible and what remains concealed. The continuation of everyday life in a family while the violence is concealed, intensifies this contradiction, transforming domestic normality into a form of uncanny familiarity. The father as a danger invades the supposed safe haven of family, thus disturbing the traditional link between home and safety. Last but not least, the study holds that Sara's hidden life is the reappearance of that which the household tries to conceal.

Through this eventual disclosure of the hidden reality, the apparent coherence of the family home is disrupted and the normality of the family home depends upon concealment. The film, in turn, reworks Freud's idea of the uncanny, which is the appearance of something familiar made subversive or irrational by repression.

Prospects for Future Research

The intersections between the uncanny and feminist psychoanalysis, trauma theory and spatial theory in representations of the home could be the subject of future research. A feminist psychoanalytical perspective may explore the effects of patriarchal power, gender relations and the regulation of the female body in the experience of the domestic uncanny. Trauma theory might deepen this discussion by examining how the experience of prolonged violence, repression, memory, and the return of the traumatic experiences

change the home from a place of security to a space of psychological and corporeal entrapment. Future studies might also analyze how *Girl in the Basement* engages with other movies or literary works that represent seemingly safe domestic environments as violent, and compare and contrast the different contexts in which the uncanny home is represented.

Conclusion

Girl in the Basement has been explored via the unexplained aspects of the familiar domestic space, through a compelling depiction of Freud's uncanny, to demonstrate how the familiar home becomes a place of fear when hidden truths come to light. The film demonstrates that the most unsettling source of horror emerges from within the familial and domestic sphere. The basement, which is located under the façade of the ordinary family home, becomes a physical sign of repression, the visible manifestation of domestic normal and the disturbing manifestation under it. The study reveals that the division between the upstairs and the basement is also important to the film's conception of concealment. Everyday family life exists side by side with a concealed reality, that is physically real yet socially invisible. The premise of this study is to see the home as the essence of the film's uncanny rather than viewing the basement as a setting. The results suggest that the contradiction between familiarity and violence of the home is one of the most powerful elements of the film's psychological and symbolic power. Ultimately, the film reveals that the uncanny does not arise from unfamiliarity alone; it emerges when the familiar is rendered strange by the return of what it has attempted to repress.

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