



The Uncanny in Stop-Motion Animation for Children

Katsari Polyxeny

PhD Student, School of Applied Arts & Culture – Department of Graphic Design and Visual Communication – University of West Attica (UNIWA) - Athens, Greece / Research conducted as part of PhD dissertation / Scholar of UNIWA ELKE

Dr. Eleni Mouri

Supervising professor, School of Applied Arts & Culture – Department of Graphic Design and Visual Communication – University of West Attica (UNIWA) - Athens, Greece

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ABSTRACT: Stop-motion animation occupies a unique position within children's media due to its handcrafted aesthetic, materiality and deliberate, slightly imperfect movements, which collectively generate uncanny experiences. This article examines how the uncanny—defined as the sense of the unfamiliar embedded within the familiar—operates in children's stop-motion animated films, exploring its capacity to evoke ambiguity, fear and existential reflection within a safe and developmentally appropriate framework. Through case studies of animated works, the analysis highlights the role of materiality, object animation, gothic aesthetics and liminal narrative spaces in producing psychologically and emotionally engaging experiences. The study argues that stop-motion animation's hybridity—blending horror, fantasy, comedy and gothic elements—enables children to confront themes of identity, mortality and the "Other" in controlled imaginative environments. Ultimately, the uncanny in stop-motion functions as a productive pedagogical and affective tool, fostering imaginative exploration, emotional growth and reflective engagement with uncertainty, while exemplifying the medium's enduring aesthetic and narrative distinctiveness.

KEYWORDS: Stop-motion animation, Uncanny, Children's media, Gothic aesthetics, Otherworld, Child development, Animated films, Fear, Identity, Pedagogy

I. INTRODUCTION

Stop-motion animation is inherently uncanny due to its materiality and movement: slightly imperfect, tactile figures are animated in ways that mimic life, creating a subtle tension between the animate and inanimate. This aesthetic produces the uncanny—a sense of unease or disorientation into something familiar—even within seemingly playful or child-friendly worlds.

This raises a central question for children's media: when the uncanny intersects with animation designed for young audiences, does it pose a risk or can it function as a productive, developmental dynamic? Rather than simply frightening, the uncanny in children's stop-motion animation movies can expand imaginative engagement, safely exposing young viewers to ambiguity, the "Other" and controlled experiences of fear, curiosity and existential reflection.

II. THE UNCANNY

The concept of the uncanny emerged as a theoretical framework in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although its core features can be traced to earlier literary works such as Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). Freud's seminal essay *The Uncanny* (*Das Unheimliche*, 1919) defined the phenomenon as the return of repressed fears and unresolved psychic material, closely associated with death anxiety, doubling and the instability of identity (Freud, 1919/2003). Subsequent thinkers, including Heidegger and Lacan, expanded the concept to address broader questions of alienation and subjectivity, while Georges Bataille shifted the focus toward transgression, excess and the collapse of social norms. Within Surrealist thought, the uncanny became a key mechanism for exploring the unconscious, particularly through cinema, which was regarded as a privileged medium for confronting the irrational and the repressed (Crawte, 2017). Overall, the uncanny is defined by an ambivalent tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, revealing the persistent return of repressed aspects of the self.

Key stop-motion animation creators whose work is strongly associated with the uncanny, focusing on how materiality, object animation and distorted embodiment destabilize the boundaries



between the familiar and the strange. Jan Švankmajer employs object animation to reveal the hidden life of everyday materials, drawing on Freudian and Bataillean notions of repression, death and transgression (Freud, 1919/2003; Crawte, 2017). Similarly, the Quay Brothers construct fragmented, dreamlike worlds in which inanimate objects perform irrational movements, producing psychological unease and a sense of “living death” (Shadbolt, 2018). Contemporary practitioners such as Nick Park (Aardman Animations) temper the uncanny through humour and domestic familiarity, while still exposing anxieties surrounding technology, transformation and hybridity (Crawte, 2017). In contrast, Tim Burton and LAIKA Studios foreground gothic aesthetics, reanimation and distorted identities in films such as *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) and *Corpse Bride* (Tim Burton, 2005), where handcrafted figures evoke both emotional attachment and estrangement (Salisbury, 2005; Fitzpatrick, 2022). Collectively, these creators demonstrate how stop-motion animation uniquely mobilizes the uncanny to explore fear, identity and mortality within both adult and child-oriented narratives.

III. STOP-MOTION AND MATERIALITY

Stop-motion animation is intrinsically linked to the uncanny due to its material processes, discontinuous movement and visible manipulation of inanimate objects. Emerging at the turn of the twentieth century, the technique exposes moments of suspension and artificiality that destabilize the illusion of life, intensifying the tension between motion and stillness, life and death (Crawte, 2017). Through object animation, puppets and materials acquire an unnatural vitality that evokes repressed fears, mortality and childhood anxieties, activating the Freudian ambiguity between the animate and the inanimate (Jentsch, 1997; Boyacıoğlu, 2021). Scholars have emphasized that the absence of motion blur, the use of miniature sets and irregular movement patterns heighten the sense of estrangement, producing a phenomenological experience of the uncanny, unique to stop-motion animation (Shadbolt, 2018; Aaron, 2007).

Materiality plays a central role in this process: handcrafted textures, fabrics and physical imperfections collapse the boundary between the fictional and the real, allowing viewers to experience fantasy as tangible and emotionally charged (Gong, 2023; Langan, 2023). In works by studios such as Aardman and filmmakers like Tim Burton, material decay, costume and bodily fragmentation become visual metaphors for identity, transformation and mortality, reinforcing stop-motion animation’s

distinctive capacity to render the uncanny both unsettling and aesthetically compelling (Davies, 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2022).

The presence of the uncanny in children’s animated films reveals the capacity of seemingly innocent and fantastical aesthetics to evoke unease, ambiguity and existential instability. Although animation—particularly stop-motion animation—is commonly perceived as child-friendly, its distinctive visual and material qualities can generate psychological tension when combined with narratives involving the supernatural, the strange or the ambiguously real (Crawte, 2017; Lester, 2018). Through stylization, exaggeration and non-realistic movement, animation creates a distancing effect that moderates fear while simultaneously rendering it accessible and manageable for young audiences. However, stop-motion animation intensifies the uncanny by animating inanimate matter through imperfect, unnatural motion, blurring the boundaries between life and non-life. Films such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Tim Burton, directed by Henry Selick, 1993), *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) and *Frankenweenie* (Tim Burton, 2012) exemplify how this aesthetic ambiguity destabilizes the distinction between fantasy and reality, producing controlled yet affectively powerful experiences of fear. Rather than functioning solely as a protective filter, children’s animation can serve as a mediated space where young viewers engage with uncertainty, identity disruption and existential anxiety within a secure imaginative framework (Crawte, 2017; Lester, 2018).

IV. OTHERWORLDS AND GOTHIC AESTHETICS

The *Otherworld* in animated films, influenced by classical fairy tales, functions as a liminal space where characters transition between reality and fantasy, confronting existential and psychological challenges (Potgieter, 2023; Justice, 2020; McHale & Edgar, 2017). These narratives often evoke the uncanny, blending the familiar with the strange and allow protagonists to undergo personal growth and self-reflection. Films such as *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009), *Over the Garden Wall* (Patrick McHale, 2014) and *ParaNorman* (Sam Fell and Chris Butler, 2012) use animation to create visually and psychologically rich worlds where danger, humour and moral lessons coexist, providing young audiences with safe spaces to explore fear and identity (Trickey, 2021; Pop Culture Literary, 2017).

Gothic aesthetics further enhance these narratives by emphasizing haunted settings,



supernatural threats, isolation and distorted or uncanny imagery. This style, seen in works like Tim Burton's *Corpse Bride* (2005), creates atmospheric tension and highlights characters' inner conflicts while challenging social norms (Boyacýoglu, 2021; Kristeva, 1982; Bassil-Morozow, 2010; Bassil-Morozow, 2021). The combination of the Otherworld and Gothic elements allows animated stories to explore complex themes—life, death, coming-of-age and identity—in a visually compelling and psychologically engaging manner (Potgieter, 2023; Justice, 2020).

Tim Burton's stop-motion animation films, including *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993, directed by Henry Selick), *Corpse Bride* (2005) and *Frankenweenie* (Tim Burton, 2012) exemplify the integration of the uncanny into children-oriented animation through gothic aesthetics, anthropomorphism and thematic engagement with death, identity and transformation. The tactile qualities of stop-motion animation—its imperfect movement and material presence—intensify the uncanny by animating figures that exist between life and non-life, familiarity and strangeness (Boyacýoglu, 2021; Fitzpatrick, 2022).

In *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, anthropomorphic monsters such as Jack Skellington and Sally evoke both fear and empathy, allowing the gothic to function as an accessible and emotionally safe framework for young audiences. The contrast between Halloween Town and Christmas Town reinforces themes of misrecognition, self-discovery and the limits of desire, highlighting the importance of self-awareness and acceptance (Harris, 2020; Salmon, 2024).

Similarly, *Corpse Bride* explores mortality, love and sacrifice through the juxtaposition of the vibrant world of the dead and the restrained world of the living. The character of Emily embodies the uncanny tension between decay and emotional vitality, while the doppelgänger dynamic between Emily and Victoria reflects broader anxieties surrounding identity, choice and social constraint (Boyacýoglu, 2021; Keane, 2024).

Frankenweenie reworks classic gothic and Frankensteinian motifs through a child-centered narrative that interrogates grief, loss and reanimation. The resurrected dog Sparky occupies an uncanny position between life and death, familiarity and monstrosity, destabilizing traditional hierarchies between humans and animals. Burton's use of comic gothic elements softens the horror while preserving the unsettling implications of bodily reanimation and moral transgression, allowing young audiences to

confront death within a stylized and emotionally mediated space (Lloyd, 2021).

Together, these Burton films demonstrate how the uncanny is employed not to generate pure horror, but to mediate complex existential themes—death, loss and transformation—within stylized, emotionally resonant and developmentally approachable cinematic spaces for younger audiences (Crawte, 2017; Lester, 2018). By integrating gothic aesthetics, anthropomorphism and liminal narrative spaces, Burton transforms childhood fantasy into a site of existential uncertainty, self-reflection and emotional growth, showing that the uncanny can function as both a narrative and pedagogical tool.

Beyond Burton, contemporary children's stop-motion animated works such as *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) and *Over the Garden Wall* (Patrick McHale, 2014) similarly integrate the uncanny to explore fear, identity and psychological maturation within seemingly safe, fantastical frameworks. Through gothic aesthetics, distorted familiarity and liminal narrative spaces, these works transform childhood fantasy into a site of existential uncertainty and emotional growth (Crawte, 2017; Lester, 2018).

In *Coraline*, the uncanny emerges through the corruption of domestic familiarity, as the Other World initially presents itself as ideal but gradually reveals its predatory nature. The Other Mother embodies a distorted form of care, transforming maternal affection into a controlling and threatening presence. The tactile materiality and exaggerated perfection of stop-motion intensify this unease, while the contrasting color palettes visually articulate Coraline's psychological development—from egocentric desire toward ethical awareness and emotional autonomy (Balbuena, 2024; Fitzpatrick, 2022; Yun, 2023).

Similarly, *Over the Garden Wall* functions as a contemporary dark fairy tale, drawing on folkloric traditions, early animation aesthetics and American Gothic imagery. Its uncanny atmosphere arises from narrative ambiguity, temporal dislocation and the persistent uncertainty surrounding the characters' journey through the Unknown. Rather than parodying fairy-tale conventions, the series restores their original darkness, using fear as a catalyst for introspection, emotional growth and relational ethics (Potgieter, 2023; Van de Veire, 2024).

In 2024, the series' 10th Anniversary short, *Over the Garden Wall: 10th Anniversary Tribute* (Patrick McHale, Daniel Ojari, Michael Please), was created in stop-motion animation, enhancing the uncanny effect and reinforcing the tactile,



handcrafted qualities associated with the technique. This choice highlighted the series' engagement with the mysterious and the unsettling, showing how stop-motion can intensify the psychological impact of the uncanny even in works originally animated in 2D (Snelling, 2024).

Collectively, these works demonstrate that children's animation can employ the uncanny not merely as a source of fear, but as a pedagogical and affective tool. By situating unsettling experiences within fantastical and aesthetically controlled environments, they allow young viewers to engage with anxiety, mortality and identity formation in ways that are challenging yet psychologically contained (Crawte, 2017; Fitzpatrick, 2022).

V. THE UNCANNY AND THE CHILD VIEWER

The use of the uncanny in children's animation reveals how seemingly innocent and fantastical aesthetics can evoke feelings of unease, uncertainty and existential tension. While animation—particularly stop-motion—is often seen as child-friendly, its distinctive style can provoke psychological intensity, especially when narratives involve the supernatural, the strange or the ambiguously metaphysical, in contrast to traditional children's media (Crawte, 2017; Lester, 2018).

Some works selectively employ elements of horror in a controlled manner. Simplified forms, exaggerated movement and imaginative visuals function as distancing mechanisms, creating a "safe" psychological space that moderates fear and makes unsettling content manageable for young viewers (Lester, 2018).

Stop-motion techniques intensify the uncanny, as the slightly imperfect, unnatural movements of characters and objects give life to otherwise inanimate forms. In films such as *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Tim Burton, directed by Henry Selick, 1993), *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) and *Frankenweenie* (Tim Burton, 2012), this quality amplifies anxiety and disorientation, blurring the line between reality and fantasy (Crawte, 2017; Lester, 2018).

Beyond mere protection from fear, children's animation can make the unsettling accessible, offering experiential engagement with the strange and unknown. Through imaginative, animated worlds, these works reveal aspects of the psyche related to fear of the unknown, loss or identity uncertainty, all within a seemingly safe and familiar environment (Crawte, 2017; Lester, 2018).

By integrating the uncanny and narrative ambiguity, such films transform fantasy into a space that challenges normative expectations, providing young viewers with controlled yet meaningful experiences of fear while fostering understanding of human emotions, uncertainty and existential anxiety (Crawte, 2017; Lester, 2018).

VI. CONCLUSION

Stop-motion animation occupies a unique position within cinema due to its handcrafted aesthetic, materiality and deliberate movement, all of which contribute to its uncanny qualities. This tactile and slightly imperfect animation style generates a subtle tension between the animate and inanimate, creating experiences that are both familiar and disorienting. In children's media, these qualities allow young audiences to engage with ambiguity, uncertainty and controlled encounters with fear, fostering imaginative exploration and emotional development.

Films such as *Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009), *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (Tim Burton, directed by Henry Selick, 1993) and *Frankenweenie* (Tim Burton, 2012) demonstrate that stop-motion can safely introduce children to themes of identity, mortality and the "Other" within visually rich and fantastical worlds. By combining gothic aesthetics, liminal narrative spaces and material textures, these works create controlled yet affectively powerful experiences that allow children to navigate existential and emotional challenges in a mediated environment.

At the same time, stop-motion's hybridity—merging horror, comedy, fantasy and gothic elements—underscores its narrative and aesthetic flexibility. The medium's materiality, lighting, set design and physical textures amplify the uncanny while reinforcing emotional engagement, offering a multidimensional cinematic experience that extends beyond traditional genre boundaries. In doing so, stop-motion animation not only captivates broad audiences but also provides children with a space to encounter, reflect on and emotionally process complex aspects of the human experience.

Overall, the uncanny in stop-motion animation functions as a productive developmental dynamic, enabling imaginative exploration, emotional growth and safe engagement with fear and ambiguity. Its combination of traditional craftsmanship with innovative storytelling makes it a distinctive, enduring and pedagogically meaningful medium for young audiences.



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