

**The Presence of the Freudian Uncanny in
21st-century Magical Realist Cinema**

by

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Certification

I, AVILES ERNULT Jose Rodolfo (Student ID 61120600), hereby declare that the content of this dissertation is original and true, and has not been submitted at any other university or educational institution for the award of degree or diploma. All information derived from other published / unpublished sources has been cited and acknowledged appropriately.

In accordance with Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University regulations, I hereby submit this dissertation with the approval of my supervisor, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Asia Pacific Studies, Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University.

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Abstract

This study is an attempt to develop a novel approach to the study of Magical realism, an underexplored convention in film criticism, especially considering the popularity it has gained as a literary convention. The purpose of this study is to theorize (and test) a novel approach to the analysis of visual narratives dealing with trauma, fractured identities, disruption of memory, and unsettled historical conscience specific to contemporary media. Thus, the dissertation posed two main research questions: How is magical realism reformulated to address the experience of trauma and (decon)textualization? How is the uncanny constructed as a defining property of the narrative of magical realist cinema? To answer the first research question, this study proposes expanding the narrative genre of magical realism through its coupling to the Freudian uncanny (1919), with a general objective of operationalizing the narrative genre as an analytical concept geared towards explaining the central role of trauma within magical realist narratives. By contextualizing the concept of the uncanny into magical realism, this study proposes a novel approach to the analysis and interpretation of both concepts: magical realism as a narrative genre, and the uncanny as the epistemic structure (structure of knowledge) of this narrative mode. To answer the second research question, this study looks at selected films of the twenty-first century, Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* (2001), Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), and Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), to identify the core narrative components centered around individual and collective trauma. The use of magical realism in these films highlights its potential to provide unique and insightful representations of (universal) trauma and historical consciousness beyond postcolonial, postmodernist, and regional frameworks – approaches often associated with the analysis of such phenomena. This study demonstrates that magical realism conceived as the narrative counterpart of the uncanny, an aesthetical concept

that describes the role of repressed memories in the experience of dread, better explains the work of filmmakers such as Miyazaki Hayao or Guillermo del Toro, who are not postcolonial directors, but whose work is at the threshold of sub-genres such as fantasy, historical drama, science fiction, and horror often deal with memory and trauma. To critically address the (re)negotiation process between memory, identity, culture, and historical conscience this study proposes the concept of uncanny magical realism. This is with the objective of explaining the role of trauma in contemporary cinema and visual narratives which serve as a medium to represent contemporary experiences.

Key words: Uncanny, Freud, magical realism; narratives; cinema; trauma

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1. Overview of Magical Realism and the Uncanny

The term magical realism was first coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925 to describe a new style of painting that depicted everyday scenes with a sense of mystery and wonder. Later, Latin American writers adopted it to describe their own literary style that combined realism and fantasy, often reflecting the cultural, political, and social turmoil of their countries.

Magical realism cinema emerged as an adaptation and extension of magical realism literature, as well as an influence from other artistic movements such as surrealism and expressionism. Some of the pioneers of magical realism cinema were Luis Buñuel, Federico Fellini, Alejandro Jodorowsky, and Carlos Saura, who experimented with unconventional narratives, symbolism, allegory, and visual effects to create films that challenged the conventions of mainstream cinema. Common themes and motifs of magical realism cinema these directors employed are the use of magical or supernatural elements in mundane settings, the exploration of memory, dreams, and identity, the representation of social and historical conflicts, and seismic sociocultural changes brought about by historical processes or conflict.

However, beyond themes embedded inside the subtext of a magical realist in film, the most recognizable feature is a specific use of worldbuilding, —namely, the accumulation of detail the merging of a realist setting and magical elements— which becomes the linchpin of its aesthetic proposal. Magical realism in cinema typically depicts a realistic world that is disrupted or enriched by the presence of the supernatural or magic, often without explanation or

rationalization, and by which themes of postmodernity and postcolonialism, social or political criticism are discussed.

Maggie Ann Bowers elaborates on the transgressive and broad appeal of the magical realist narrative genre to regenerate and question categories of discourse, knowledge, and being:

The transgressive and subversive qualities are hinted at in the term itself [magical realism]. The oxymoron 'magical realism' reveals that the categories of the magical and the real are brought into question by their juxtaposition. If in magical realism, as we have established, the magical is presented as a part of ordinary reality, then the distinction between what is magical and what is real is eroded (Bowers, 2004, p. 63).

It follows from this conception that Magical realism combines elements of fantasy and realism in a way that challenges the conventional boundaries between the two, but also looks at fiction as a continuous of non-fiction, and thus, a mirror of objective reality. Accordingly, one of the major topics in criticism of magical realism is precisely the relation between the categories of realism, magic, and fiction to non-fictional texts and genres, as magical realism offers a space for the articulation of reality and categories of knowledge that may differ from an objective or positivistic construction of reality. In this sense, magical realism goes beyond a literary genre, since the term applies to various themes, types of content, or subjects, and instead, it indicates how a narrative is constructed. Magical realism then operates as a narrative mode, providing a manner or style in which a story is known and constructed, where the magical and the supernatural are continuous and a part of objective reality.

This study interprets magical realism as a narrative mode that reflects the repression of traumatic, unacceptable memories or desires, which are projected onto the fictional world as

magical events or phenomena. This interpretation has its basis in the acceptance of magic as a narrative device that expresses subjective contents of the mind as an objective reality and provides an alternative approach to the interpretation of repressed and traumatic content. According to Freud (1933), repression is a psychological mechanism that prevents certain thoughts or feelings from reaching conscious awareness and instead pushes them into the unconscious, where they can influence behavior and emotions without being recognized. However, repression is not always successful, and sometimes the repressed content can resurface in dreams, slips of the tongue, neurotic symptoms, or even creative expressions (Freud, 1933). Narrative modes such as magical realism which integrate magic and the supernatural into the rationality and materiality of literary realism, appear to bridge the gap between the contents of the mind and the objective reality.

The theory of the uncanny remains at the intersection of several discursive disciplines: psychoanalysis, literature, aesthetics, and philosophy, among many others. After the 2000s the concept became integrated into poststructuralist humanities, which empathized conceptual ambiguity, the marginal, the liminal, and the vague to address the postmodern experience of the twenty-first century—for instance, epistemological, political, and societal instability, immigration, displacement, and a surrealist construction of reality. Deconstruction, paradoxes, déjà vu, haunting, and epistemological instability, among others, constitute a semantic field to which the uncanny came to be associated with. Closely associated with postmodernism in that it questions and defamiliarizes the epistemological assumptions embedded into the rationality of modernism. The outcome of the identification between postmodernism and the uncanny is that, as evident by Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny* (2003), the signifiers attached to the concept of the uncanny have grown outside of its primary conceptualization, which was specified by Freud (S.

Freud, 1955c) as the return of the repressed. By the beginning of the millennium, the uncanny became diluted, as the uncanny was decontextualized to generate tangential and adjacent publications to its conceptual core; case studies and critical studies that had little genealogical relation to the primary Freudian definition came to be part of the academic criticisms. In fact, the dissemination of the uncanny throughout humanities has not been about theoretical clarity; similarly, to the conceptualization process of magical realism in the twentieth century, the uncanny has been conflated either with Todorov's (1970) theory of the fantastic or with deconstruction and postmodernism. Freud's main question in his seminal essay on the uncanny is rather restrained and almost naive: how could an anxiety-inducing affect produce pleasure?

The main function of the Freudian uncanny in its primary form describes phenomena and processes that have come to determine the experience of trauma, anxiety, and defamiliarization in an individual who has repressed memories. Masseurlein suggests that the uncanny is appropriate to address contemporary experiences derived from the postmodern condition such as alienation, haunting, and defamiliarization:

At the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, the Freudian uncanny can thus be summarized as a blend of psychological and aesthetic estrangement, political and social alienation resulting from a deeply rooted, disturbing unhomeliness that characterizes human existence in the world, but tempered by mild, surrealist undertones and the guise of familiarity (Masseurlein, 2011, p. 147).

Defamiliarization analogous to alienation evokes a cluster of contemporary societal issues such as discrimination, homelessness, inequality, trauma, etc. It also implies new problems brought to the forefront of collective consciousness in the disjunction of the mind, leading to multiperspective, non-linearity, fragmentation, paranoia, and temporal distortion among many

others. The human experience of the twenty-first century, with the advent of new technologies and media landscapes, such as photorealistic animations, cybernetics, or automatized conscience, defies the conventional conception of reality, in favor of virtuality and impersonal societal interaction. Hence the rise of the uncanny in critical literature responds to the necessity of giving an account of the psychological phenomena (in the 20-21st century), which the analogous concepts such as Marxist alienation would not explain. The Marxist concept of alienation would explain the material causation but not the psychological causation of trauma, apart from the incompatibilities between Freudian psychoanalysis and the Marxist framework¹.

Magical realism is an underexplored convention in film criticism (Bowers, 2004; Zamora & Faris, 1995), especially considering the popularity it has gained as a literary convention. Magical realism in film started appearing most significantly around the late 1980s and early 1990s, with films such as Alfonso Arau's *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992)², based on the novel by Laura Esquivel, being one of the first examples of this genre. The film features everyday life concepts and events that are enlivened with just a bit of magic, such as food that can transmit emotions, a woman who cries so much that she fills a room with water, and a man who can smell his lover from miles away. The attention to magical realist cinema has its inception in the 1980s' eclectic interest in postcolonial, and alternative narrative modes. One of the most remarkable characteristics of this cinema genre is its adaptability to the shifting modes of storytelling, such as the multinarrative, multiverses, postmodern, and post-colonial³ perceptions of time, space,

¹ For instance, anxiety and trauma as thematic presences found in the films of David Lynch, David Cronenberg, Tim Burton, Guillermo del Toro, Jordan Peele, and Robert Eggers to name a few, require other theoretical recourses to deal with the complexity of their horrifying cinema.

² The film was Mexico's official entry for Best Foreign Language Film at the 65th Academy Awards and became the highest-grossing Spanish language film in the United States at the time.

³ Postcolonial narratives often use non-linear techniques such as fragmentation, disruption, multiple perspectives, intertextuality, and hybridity to question the authority and objectivity of historical representation to subvert the

change, and metaphysics, which traditional and established linear narratives do not account for. Other cinema genres such as science fiction, horror, and fantasy, since they thematically overlap with magical realism, present similar attributes. However, magical realism given the inherent hybridity of its constructed reality (magical element plus realism), shows this characteristic as a necessary component of its conceptualization. Developments such as post-trans-modernism, metamodernism⁴, and their intellectual and aesthetical awareness of linear and multilinear narrative time are compatible with magical realism's typical plot structures with a rejection of stylistic patterns of conventional literary realism (Swanson, 1995)—usually converging or collating timelines but not limited to those.

At the turn of the millennium the production of magical realist films overlapping other conventions—such as horror and science fiction—reached its tipping point and a very prolific period of releases ensued. Through this time and onwards the influence of uncanny associated imagery on the narrative is established as a staple of the genre of magical realism, the definition of the genre was not explicitly associated with the Freudian tradition⁵. The inception of the uncanny into mainstream cinema occurred at the same time that the gothic, fantastic, and surrealist literature saw increased popularity at the beginning of the 1980s, with saw its peak at the beginning of the millennium. Miyazaki Hayao, Alfonso Cuarón, and Guillermo del Toro directed films that used themes and images overlapping science fiction, horror, and fantasy. The

dominant and Eurocentric discourses of the colonizer and to create alternative and diverse voices for the colonized and the marginalized.

- Non-linear narratives and multiplicity of human experience and subjectivity. They often employ devices such as flashbacks, flashforwards, parallel timelines, circular structures, and metafiction to disrupt the chronological and causal logic of traditional narratives.

⁴ Metamodernism is an approach that includes and transcends both the modernist thesis about rationality and science and the postmodern antithetical, pluralistic, and nihilistic commitments.

⁵ Some instances of magical realist films include Martin Brest's *Meet Joe Black* (1998), Frank Darabont's *The Green Mile* (1999), M. Night Shyamalan's *Sixth Sense* (1999), Alejandro Amenabar's *The Others* (2001), Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* (2001), Tim Burton's *The Big Fish* (2003), Kon Satoshi's *Paprika* (2006), Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), and Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) among others.

reintroduction of the uncanny to popular culture came not only with the associated motifs of the double or the automaton, but also creates new iconography of body homelessness, mechanical implants, body modifications, space, and time distortions, among others, which served as an unrecognized thematic linchpin.

With the emergence of the three amigos, Alfonso Cuarón, Alejandro Iñárritu, and Guillermo del Toro during the early 2000s, the magical realist film became a mainstay in international cinema, as these three directors crafted critically acclaimed narratives that prominently use the conventions and themes associated with magical realism: the real-world settings featuring magic and the supernatural, multiperspetivity, non-linearity, textualization of the viewer⁶, historical awareness, and metafiction among others.

A potential research puzzle of magical realism concerns with its ambiguous standing in academia due to, (a) over-association with the idea of concrete aesthetical and sociocultural processes happening in a specific region (such as Latin America), (b) the use of magical realism as the primary narrative form of postcolonial versus western discourses (creating a binary) and, (c) the fluidity of themes, images, and interpretations of the literary mode which create a contradictory and unpredictable reception, and complicates the categorization of the mode. This bars it from going beyond descriptive definitions, as the possibility of creating a well-defined corpus of text is daunting. There is also the reluctance of many authors and filmmakers to label their work associated with magical realism features to be recognized as a phenomenon of Latin America. Anne C. Hegerfeldt acknowledges that the genre has faced significant criticism despite its literary success.

⁶ Textualization of the viewer implies the intrusion of the reader into the text as a signifier, or the removal of boundaries between the reality signified by the text and extratextual reality.

[Magical realism] has been condemned as escapist literature, as exoticist and commercialized kitsch. It has been pigeonholed as a typically Latin American phenomenon. More fundamentally, the concept of magic realism has been found too vague to be legitimately treated as a separate literary mode at all (A. Hegerfeldt, 2002, pp. 1–2).

The lack of academic consensus regarding literary magical realism carries over to cinema, where magical realism is an ambiguous genre seldom used to categorize films that otherwise would perfectly fit the genre of magical realism; Hegerfeldt’s claim that the literary genre lacks “legitimacy” appears to more accurately describe magical realism in cinema. Especially given that the only systematic formulation of magical realism in cinema was proposed in the 80’s—namely, Fredric Jameson’s (1986) Marxist reading of the cinema genre.

This position leaves the nascent genre in cinema somewhat separated from more recognized and established genres such as science fiction, horror, and fantasy. The term has been co-opted by diverse producers to generate interest in or promote their works that do not possess the defining characteristics of the genre, since the allure of the term has led to its use as a catch-all phrase to describe other adjacent genres. This does not necessarily diminish the value or significance of the genre but highlights the need for academic precision in its definition and application. In this sense, there seem to be two opposing interpretations of the term magical realism, one is the interpretation of the producers and directors, and the other is of academic criticism. The present study aims to expand and precise the scope of magical realism for academic criticism and establish within it the presence of the uncanny.

In such an environment the uncanny becomes a pertinent and central component of the (post)postmodernity that explains and addresses the perpetual defamiliarization and anxiety that

haunts contemporary historic conscience –Multiperspectivity, multilinearity, and synchronicity are characteristics of contemporary experience, which must find parallel in the narrative structures of our time. Consequently, magical realism should become the prime narrative mode of the uncanny to establish a coherent and stable corpus of texts to attach and fix the contemporary analysis of both concepts. Proposing magical realism as the narrative mode of the uncanny expands the scope of the literary convention to a set of texts, from where the canonization of magical realism as a film genre can be completed. Similarly, the uncanny can be further developed as a useful analytical concept, for example, in cultural criticism, film studies but also social sciences, art, and aesthetics.

This study looks at selected films of the twenty-first century to identify the core narrative components centered around anxiety, and individual and collective trauma. The use of magical realism in these works highlights its potential to provide unique and insightful representations of trauma and historical consciousness beyond postcolonial, postmodernist, and regional frameworks, which may have universal appeal and applicability. This study attempts to demonstrate that magical realism conceived as the narrative form of the uncanny, by examining the work of filmmakers such as Miyazaki Hayao or Guillermo del Toro, who are not postcolonial producers, but whose work is at the threshold of genres such as fantasy, historical drama, science fiction, and horror. Such an intersection of conventions deserves to be critically studied to address the (re)negotiation process between memory, identity, culture, and historical conscience; always interwoven with trauma and fractured worldviews stemming from the multicultural, defamiliarized, and ambivalent globalized society brought about at the beginning of the century.

1.2. Research Objectives and Research Questions

This dissertation critically analyzes the existing works, through an extensive review of literature, to achieve the research objectives laid down below, through responding/answering to the following research questions.

1.2.1. Objectives

The following are this study's objectives:

1. Demonstrate how the uncanny is present as a defining narrative process in magical realist visual narratives, and a viable analytical tool for the study of narratives dealing with trauma, repression, fragmented identities, and memories.
2. Show how the uncanny is operationalized as a defamiliarizing process within the narrative of magical realist cinema.
3. Address the theoretical ambiguity of both uncanny and magical realism by merging them into the narrative mode of uncanny magical realism.

1.2.2. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. How is magical realism reformulated in cinema to address the experience of trauma?
2. How does magical realist cinema function as the narrative form of the uncanny in cinema?

3. How is uncanny magical realism viable to explain the traumatic experience of postmodernity?

Thus, the prime objective is to operationalize the uncanny by showing how the process of defamiliarization within magical realist visual narratives conforms to the cycle of the return of the uncanny and trauma model embedded in the Freudian uncanny. Additionally, the overarching inquiry that motivates this study is the development of a theory of the uncanny to make sense of the contemporary and postmodern experience of (decon)textualization-induced trauma –this is indicated as a third research question. This study will look at how a magical realist film presents narrative conflicts and characters through narrative devices and techniques such as (decon)textualization and defamiliarization, anxiety, and defense mechanism among others. More prominently, uncanny magical realist narratives employ the uncanny cycle of trauma-induced (decon)textualization and defamiliarization as the central struggle to overcome in a narrative.

1.3. Originality and Contributions to existing scholarship

By contextualizing the concept of the uncanny into magical realism, this study proposes a novel approach to the analysis and interpretation of both concepts: magical realism as narrative mode, and the uncanny as the epistemic structure (structure of knowledge) of this novel narrative mode. This study terms this approach uncanny magical realism. This approach provides an interdisciplinary tool with which to address ineffable and irrepresentable phenomena and experiences characteristic, and sometimes fundamental, to the (post)modern experience and beyond. However, the operationalization of this approach is not only limited to contemporary

trauma, but it also contextualizes concepts such as the fantastic, the surreal, the supernatural, and magical thinking, among others. This is potentially possible as long as a phenomenon presents properties in the same semantic field as the uncanny—i.e., (decon)textualization, déjà vu, repetition compulsion, and castration fear, to name a few. Fantasy, science fiction, and horror, literary genres which overlap with magical realism, could be perhaps analyzed under this new concept to reveal a similar core of recurring trauma and generate alternative readings. This is a novel approach to narrative analysis which has no precedent in pertinent literature.

The narrative devices used to analyze the films, similarly, within the context of the uncanny magical realism are a novel way to operationalize narrative strategies which would bridge the gap between fiction and non-fiction, especially as this framework can be extrapolated to any narrative text, given that the criteria of. The framework of analysis proposed in this dissertation has wider applicability such as for the analysis of intergenerational and collective trauma as viewed through sites of history and memory, such as history textbooks and museums.

Another noteworthy contribution to the scholarship of aesthetics is advancing the theory of the uncanny and magical realism. Both concepts are notorious for being difficult to define. Mainly due to the flexibility of their application and the lack of a stable corpus of text which would reduce their scope. This dissertation is a step closer to canonizing magical realism as a well-defined cinema genre. Likewise, the uncanny now is pertinent as an analytical concept, fit for addressing narrative text written in the magical realist mode.

1.4. Structure of the dissertation

- Chapter 1- Introduction: this chapter is a guide and introduction to the concept of Freudian uncanny and magical realism. It problematizes the process of conceptualization of the uncanny, which has expanded far beyond Freud's concise definition into an ambiguous multidisciplinary term. Similarly, magical realism is a term widely contested and plagued with theoretical tensions and revisions. It offers an outline of the dissertation's structure, research questions and objectives, contribution to the current scholarship, and limitations.
- Chapter 2- Offers a review of the pertinent literature on the conceptualization process of the uncanny and magical realism. It identifies major topics of criticism and points of convergence, both in cinema and literature. It focuses on key characteristics associated with magical realism in three axes: categorization, properties, and definitions. Likewise, it looks at the Freudian Uncanny's associated concepts and limitations found in academic literature.
- Chapter 3- Provides the theoretical framework for the integration of the uncanny into magical realist narratives. It uses conceptual analysis to clarify and select the theoretical components necessary to operationalize the uncanny as the epistemic structure of magical realism. It offers a description of the methodology used in the analysis chapters. It also identifies narrative devices as conceptual tools to be used in the following chapters.
- Chapter 4- Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006): it offers an analysis of the main characters of the film displaying repression of traumatic memories. The focus of analysis is Ofelia, who is a displaced character dealing with the despair of the Spanish civil war.

She finds refuge in an alternate reality of a fairy tale, where her double Moanna struggles to reconcile both worlds.

- Chapter 5- Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) Analyzes Theo Faron's journey to overcome despair and infertility. It focuses on Theo's isolation as a consequence of humanity's spiritual infertility and the lack of historical consciousness.
- Chapter 6- Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* (2001), focuses on how Chihiro's identity is doubled into a doppelgänger. It looks at Chihiro's displacement and loss of her family.
- Chapter 7- This chapter presents the findings and conclusion of the present dissertation. It also suggests avenues for further research.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter is concerned with the conceptual status of magical realism, and the uncanny, as narrative strategies to address trauma, fragmented realities, disruption of memory and time, and unsettled historical identities, among other contemporary experiences associated with the cinema convention. Magical realism has proven to be an important and popular literary convention of the twentieth century; however, the convention has been underused regarding the analysis and categorization of films. For the analysis of the proposed films three key concepts are employed to analyze the chosen films as an analytical framework: the magical realist convention, the Freudian uncanny, and the agent that links both, trauma-induced (de)contextualization. These three concepts are the axes through which this literature review is constructed. The prime function of this chapter is to trace the process of conceptualization, the narrative mode of magical realism and the Freudian concept of the uncanny share, as well as locating the intersection of both terms in cinema.

This chapter has identified major topics of criticism concerning magical realism, the uncanny, and their convergence in cinema and literature. This chapter will first address the key characteristics associated with magical realism. This is to establish three critical topics in the formation of magical realism as a narrative mode –opposed to its classification as a literary genre: the status of is magical realism a literary movement, a literary genre, or a narrative mode; the properties and associated concepts of magical realism identified by critical literature; and the definition of magical realism within cinema. Regarding the uncanny, this chapter will look at the conceptualization process of the Freudian uncanny, in reference to adjacent or associated

concepts in the Freudian corpus, such as trauma, repression, repetition compulsion, and anxiety. This shall lead to the objective of understanding what mechanisms underpin the experience of the uncanny and the limitations of the definitions provided in academic literature.

2.1. Conceptualization process of magical realism: preliminary concept formation.

2.1.1. Realism and magic: the territories of magical realism and regional definitions of the term.

The term magical realism is found attached to several different media, painting, literature, film, and within different categories or styles, expressionism, surrealism, fantasy, science fiction, and horror films. Most of the research done is primarily concerned with literary criticism of the narrative mode, as well as the history of its inception which remains contested. Nevertheless, magical realism is a well-established term in aesthetics and arts, if not for other reasons than to further narrow the scope of studies dealing with more fringe pieces and offshoots of fantastic themed artistic production.

Magical realism is an aesthetic style and literary genre in which magical elements blend seamlessly with the real world, usually to provide a deeper understanding of reality (Bowers, 2004). "...a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe" (Strecher, 1999, p. 267). It is closely associated with the literary sub-genre of fantasy which shares supernatural and magical elements but is clearly differentiated by the accumulation and juxtaposition of realistic detail to the magical element (Bowers, 2004; A. C. Hegerfeldt, 2005; Wexler, 2002). The magical realism genre in literary criticism is typically associated with the Latin American literary boom of the 1960s and 1970s. Put simply, it places magical elements in

realist settings. In terms of narrative style, magical realism uses specific conventions and techniques to create a believable reality overtaken, invaded, occupied, conquered, or otherwise altered by an entity or force which is strange to the normal logic of that reality. For instance, the use of metafiction and textualization to draw in the reader and address extratextual reality is used as a narrative device to explore the impact of magic on objective reality. Traditionally, the idea of reality has been linked to empiric evidence or direct attribution coming to an individual's subjectivity, through the senses from experience, to form a mimetic representation of the world. So, the criteria for any narrative representation associated with the term realism is the correlation of experience and representation. Commonly, narrative realism finds its most fertile ground on lengthy units of writing, such as novels, since the format allows for more articulated and detailed descriptions which imprint on the reader a sense of wholeness, gravitas, and coherence in the world represented.

The connection between magical realist cinema and literary magical realism is complex; the differences between them are not clear in the scholarship regarding the conceptualization of magical realist cinema. Consequently, the focus of this research is centered around the status of magical realism in cinema and how to identify the uncanny as part of the cinema genre. From the recent scholarship on media studies, the use of magical realism is of a versatile category, fitting to address films as well as literary texts. However, it tends to create a divide among scholars on the history of the term, its theoretical substance, applicability, and usage (Bowers, 2004). The scholarship postulates one distinct yet overlapping definition in every major work of academic criticism, rendering the concept redundant or too vague. Jean-Pierre Durix is of this opinion and asserts that "commentators have used that term 'magic realism' to refer to so many different works of art that the term has largely lost its value for making distinctions between

genres.”(1998, p. 116). Durix’s opinion about magical realism has not yet been superseded in more recent scholarship, since up until the 2010’s, the term magical realism appears as a convention that has not been consolidated into a concrete specific corpus of academic discourse, and thereafter its usage is ambiguous and challenging as an analytical concept. This aspect of the magical realist convention points to its theoretical incompleteness.

Regarding the genesis of the term, the academic consensus is that a historian, Franz Roh⁷, coined the term to refer to the systematic focus of post-expressionist painters toward the mystification of everyday reality in the 1920s. Irene Guenther (1995) speculates that Franz Roh attempted, through the novel production of paintings, to establish a relevant aesthetic category. This aesthetic category informs the creation of images of everyday reality as marvelous, uncanny, and strange, eliciting a sense of wonder and awe in the perception of what otherwise would be unremarkable (Zamora & Faris, 1995, p. 36).

According to Roh, the creative process of discovering magical elements within the everyday objective reality would allow the painter to see the object in a new way to the outside world. Roh's use of the term in 1925 was initially used in the realm of painting where the effects of the rendering of the familiar unfamiliar would be construed as a psychological effect of perception. Before too long, the term propagated to other art forms besides painting where the effects of rendering the familiar unfamiliar would be construed as a psychological effect of perception. Consequently, Roh defamiliarized the subject matter, objective reality itself, implying that the actual content or reference could be anything. In Roh’s conception a change of framing in the depiction of a familiar subject is what created the magical realism –Roh prioritizes

⁷ Franz Roh was a German historian, photographer, and art critic who coined the term "magic realism" in 1925. He emphasized the "magic" of the normal world as it presents itself to us, rather than the world of magic that is transformed by fantasy.

form over content. In this sense, Roh's magical realism is an epistemological framing applied to reality. Cinema specialist Barbara Klonowska (2010) argues that the Eurocentric variant of magical realism proposed by Roh is centered around the cycle of defamiliarization/familiarization of nature, where fantastic and supernatural devices are not required. Instead, in Roh's conceptualization of magical realism, the composition, perspective, and framing are the structural elements of a painting that achieve "the strange or uncanny effect" (Klonowska, 2010, p. 184) without the magical component.

Interest in the term created by Roh waned until after the Second World War when Latin American literary criticism developed the parallel concept of *lo real maravilloso* as proposed by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier. This was a departure from Roh's application of the term, who mainly used magical realism to describe a thematic focus of post-expressionist painters onto the mystification of the quaint. This is a territorialized form of magical realism used by novelist, Alejo Carpentier, to express the effective reality perceived and constructed in the Latin American context. Carpentier (1995) justifies the specificity of his literary mode by saying that the land and life in Latin America are wondrous and magical, suggesting that the subject does not need fantastic embellishments, and instead that an accurate account of the Latin American concrete experience needs to flow from a realist narrative mode. It appears that Carpentier's concept does not stem from Roh's conception of magical realism but appears independently as an assertion of the radical difference between the Latin American and European cultural horizon and sensibilities, as it originates from the local and mestizo experience. It also correlates to the

specificity of the region literature production. Latin American authors, by interpreting their own culture, allow for a seamless integration of the magical element into fictional reality⁸.

According to the literary critic Angel Flores, magical realism represents a departure from the European tradition of fantastical and surrealist literary discourse and inaugurates a new narrative mode that would permeate all genres of fiction (Flores, 1955). Flores argues in *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction* (1955) that the commitment of Latin American writers, such as Borges and Mallea, to developing a new narrative voice for the region, detonated the Latin American literary boom as early as 1935, and achieving autonomy from realist and romantic literature. Flores (1955) describes the phenomenon as follows:

With Borges as pathfinder and moving spirit, a group of brilliant stylists developed around him. Although each evidenced a distinct personality and proceeded in his own way, the general direction was that of magical realism. [...] From then magical realism has grown in an exciting crescendo. Suffice it here to declare that the decade 1940-50 saw its most magnificent flowering. During these ten fruitful years, Latin America produced prose fiction comparable to the best in contemporary Italy, France, or England (Flores, 1955, p. 190).

Flores' argument is analogous to s, as well as for the adoption of similar styles such as the Spanish surrealism. Nonetheless, the consolidation of the term to describe Latin American literature comes with a rupture from European realism and romanticism, heralded by Jorge Luis Borges's *A Universal History of Infamy* (1935), which shares the hallmarks of the genre, a realistic and objective writing style, (also) showcasing fantastic settings or characters. The

⁸ In contrast to European Surrealism and science fiction, where the wondrous and fantastical appear forced and heterogeneously integrated into the narrative,

definition Flores (1955, p. 195) puts forward is not complex, defining it as the homogenous representation of realism and fantasy, whereby the fantastic is shown naturally to the setting. His article *Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction* (1955), is comprehensive of the (nascent but) growing literary convention of magical realism, wherein the inclusion of obscure literary texts extends the scope of applicability of its definition of the term. In contraposition to Flores, Luis Leal's (1995) way to introduce magical realism as a literary genre is to limit its scope, as he does not offer a formal definition of the term, but a genus, a family resemblance, which is narrower in scope compared to Flores' formulation:

If you can explain it, then it's not magical realism... without thinking of the concept of magical realism, each writer gives expression to a reality he observes in the people. To me, magical realism is an attitude on the part of the characters in the novel toward the world (Leal, 1995, p. 128).

Purposefully inbuilt into Leal's (1995) definition is an aporia, which points to the undecidability or impossibility of a working definition of the term magical realism. As a result, when he talks about the attitude of the writer toward the world, he is describing a disposition to deny or reconstruct reality in favor of the mystification of the setting. Another consequence is that Leal's formulation is almost trivial since a lot of literary genres predate magical realism, and mystify the natural order of the world, especially those with which magical realism shares the conceptual field –i.e., surrealism, fantasy, etc. Leal's definition, however, established the theoretical incompleteness of magical realism; the difficulty in formulating clearly and precisely set off properties beyond the staples of fantastic literature.

Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris in *Magical Realism: Theory, History, and Community* (1995, p. 14) identify Leal and Flores as the inceptors of the critical analysis of the

term. They argue that Flores sought to territorialize magical realism to the American continent and broaden its theoretical extension, while Leal's response to Flores by narrowing the scope of the term magical realism was to reject the works proposed by Flores as a magical realist.

Together with Roh, Carpentier, Flores, and Leal provide the main theoretical underpinnings of the literary theory on magical realism for the conceptualization of the magical realist genre, which are: the coupling of fantasy and a realist setting; the theoretical incompleteness; Latin American experience as a renewed source for the European convention; and the process of familiarization/defamiliarization of the everyday world (Zamora & Faris, 1995).

2.1.2. Magical realism in the postcolonial framework: narrative as the locus of trauma

After the Latin American Boom, magical realism became the primary literary mode of colonial and postcolonial contexts, due to the inbuilt features of the genre, i.e., the subversion of the hegemonic narrative. The dissemination of magical realism became an international phenomenon with authors such as Milan Kundera, J.M. Coetzee, Toni Morrison, Robert Kroetsch, and Angela Carter –even if their production is not addressing in strict sense colonial and postcolonial settings, all of them present a distancing from the hegemonic discourse and the oppressor-oppressed binary. These authors participated in the creation of text which subverts colonial discourses and the status quo through the use realist and fantastic literary conventions. Stephen Slemon (1995) states that such writers used magical realism to represent oppression and fragmented societies, affected by historical processes which lead to collective trauma. He argues that magical realism is a postcolonial discourse precisely because through this type of narrative

the focus of this genre extends from the cultural periphery of the world to postcolonial societies, and back to dominant capitals and former colonial powers. The disruption of structures of knowledge would come from the binary opposition of magic plus realism. The contraposition of the discourses belonging to the periphery and the center disrupts the rationale lying within hegemonic and mainstream narratives. Slemon's conceptualization of magical realism identifies three characteristics of postcolonial magical realism: 1) dual narrative structure presenting the perspectives of both colonizer and colonized; 2) a text which identifies contradictions and omissions in system of knowledge; 3) it provides an alternative to the dominant systems of knowledge by recuperating the colonized perspectives. He writes:

A battle between two oppositional systems takes place, each working toward the creation of a different kind of fictional world from the other. Since the ground rules of these two worlds are incompatible, neither one can fully come into being, and each remains suspended, locked in a continuous disjunction within each of the separate discursive systems, rending them with gaps, absences, and silences (1995, p. 409).

The assumption that Slemon makes is that the colonizer has distorted their own historical consciousness through the process of rewriting other people's culture, practices, and history to benefit its own agenda. Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris (1995, p. 2) coincide with Slemon in that even though Latin American authors and their critical scholarship have been the locus of production and discussion, postcolonial Magical realism is now an international phenomenon that empowers voices previously relegated to the periphery.

The overall procedure that Slemon uses to explain magical realism in the framework of postcolonialism is to assume the magical and the real are both in equilibrium, "neither managing to subordinate or contain the other (1995, p. 10)". Slemon's position here is unique compared to

other definitions of magical realism, as both texts, the magical and the realist, exist in a state of balanced tension, negotiating to fill the gap that lies between them. This tension becomes unsustainable. From the perspective of properties, the narrative form that Slemon proposes as magical realism uses the experience of historical struggle and trauma and applies it to literary and film narratives. However, two potential issues arise when applying Slemon's strategy to the analysis of cinema: a) there has been no significant work done to develop film-specific narrative techniques which would explain the continuous disjunction of the supernatural and the real or the perspectives of the colonizer and colonized and; b) that in terms of the actual subject of representation, magical realist cinema does not follow the sociopolitical program of the literary magical realism. The binary of colonizer-colonized is always often employed as part of the setting. In other words, postcolonial narratives are overwhelmingly represented in literary magical realism, whereas their film counterparts are not.

Additionally, it has been shown by Slemon, Theo D'haen (1995), and particularly by Homi K. Bhabha (2013), that there is a tendency of the magical realist authors to share in the concerns of postcolonial discourse and the depiction of time and historicity. For instance, D'haen describes the properties of magical realism as "self-reflexiveness, metafiction, eclecticism, redundancy, multiplicity, discontinuity, intertextuality, parody, the dissolution of character and narrative instance, the erasure of boundaries, and the destabilization of the reader (1995, p. 192)"; it is not coincidental that the very same properties could be predicated on a wide set of contemporary literary texts. In fact, it has been established by literary critics, such as Anne Hegerfelt (2002, p. 64), that magical realism is a sub-genre of postmodernism and post-colonial discourse, located not exclusively within the domain of colonization but also in alternative modes of being and thought, beyond the purview of the 'self' and the other, recursively dealing

with fragmentation. Similarly, even though Bhabha (2013, p. 7) affirms that textualization of the postcolonial condition positions magical realism as the prime postcolonial mode of narrative, there is a limitation to this statement. This process of conceptualization limits the analytical potential of magical realism to address fundamental components in the worldbuilding in some magical realist narratives since the main colonial binary is often absent⁹.

2.2. Cross-cultural definitions of magical realism

2.2.1. *The binary conceptualization of realism and magic: epistemological and ontological magical realism.*

Several terms have been proposed to address and explain the diverse narrative style(s) that fall under the mode of magical realism. The wider scope of those terms imply that each of those signifiers is associated with a slightly distinct set of literary texts belonging to a variety of aesthetic approaches. These texts are often formulated specifically to conform to the art form or body of works targeted—to be used in specific contexts for a particular purpose. Within the scope of magical realist narratives in literature and film, each signifier and definition explain the limits of the narrative mode. Some of the most prominent are Carpentier's *Lo real maravilloso*, surrealism, Italo Calvino's Fabulism, Carel Willink's imaginary realism, and Todorov's the fantastic. These terms point to the fluidity of magical realism, and consequently, the properties of magical realist texts are critically contested around the theoretical subdivisions generated by many of the associated signifiers.

⁹ Magical realism as defined by Slemon does not offer a viable framework to address the subjects of films such as *The Green Mile* (1999), *Amélie* (2001), *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), *Big Fish* (2003), all of which have a more personal, overt fantastic or historical setting, instead of primarily postcolonial stories and themes.

In this regard, Seymour Merton (1983, pp. 13–29) proposes a definition of the magical realism genre based on a set of properties through which an analysis of magical realist text, namely painting, could be conducted. He focuses on details, objectivity, an intellectual appeal over an emotional one, and most importantly, a portrayal of fantastic subjects in a realistic way. It is remarkable that Merton, when writing about elements of composition in pictorial art, repeats the staples of magical realism established by Flores in 1955, such as the intrusion of fantasy into a realist setting or world, and the application of subjective, almost clinical, construction of an objective reality unsettled by the supernatural. Edwin Williamson (1987) similarly identifies the synthesis of fantasy and a realist narrative mode as the only common property around which most of the critical literature has reached a consensus:

At the level of simple definition there can be little disagreement: magic realism is a narrative style which consistently blurs the traditional realist distinction between fantasy and reality. Beyond this critical opinion is divided as to whether magical realism is entirely self-referring or whether it establishes a new kind of relationship between fiction and reality (Williamson, 1987, p. 45).

When Williamson (1987) mentions a “new relationship between fiction and reality,” or when Flores (1955) defines magical realism as the transformation of every day into the unreal, they are both identifying the kernel of the magical realist genre and how it is different from other overlapping or related terms such as the fantastic or European surrealism. In fact, this relation between fiction and the objective world is widely accepted by contemporary critical literature (Bowers, 2004, p. 19; Schroeder, 2004, p. 5) as the foundation upon which to predicate any academic discussion of magical realism –which implies a constant redefinition of magical realism to the extratextual objective reality.

Ann Bowers affirms that when theorizing magical realism, it is the ‘magical’ component that is dependent upon the domain of ‘realism.’ The co-domain of magic can only be plausible if the setting is believable. In other words, the magical exists within the context of a realist world only to the extent that it remains coherent with the realism of the style (Bowers, 2004, p. 21). Williamson definition appears to make little difference between reality and fantasy, just stating that the disruption of otherwise realistic narratives would categorize several different classes of texts as magical realism.

Further developments in the process of conceptualization efforts led to the development of ontological and epistemological variants of magical realism. These variants of magical realism were firstly proposed in Roberto Gonzalez Echeverria’s (1977) article on Alejo Carpentier’s critical work. Contrary to what the nomenclature would indicate, the ontological and epistemological varieties do not directly refer to philosophical notions of knowledge and existence; instead, they refer the sources (texts) and traditions used to create the setting and textual reality of a story. The **ontological** variant of magical realism here indicates that the source material is from one cultural context. The **epistemological** variant of magical realism uses an eclectic set of sources belonging to two or more traditions. What is important to get from Echeverria’s variants is that they are defined in function of their relation to the plausible order of the world (Faris, 2020, pp. 165–166; Spindler, 1993, p. 78). Both variants focus on how they uphold the realist style and setting, with just enough disruption coming from the invading magical text not to challenge the plausibility of the whole narrative. Hence, a balance needs to be achieved when constructing the setting of magical realist narratives, more so for the epistemological variant. Echeverria’s variants seem to have influenced other literary critics, who

similarly use the same terms, even if only to redefine and incorporate these variants in their own conceptualization of magical realism.

Another author who uses Echeverria's epistemological/ontological variants as a theoretical model is Christopher Warnes (2009). He made use of the ontological-epistemological binary to introduce their own 'faith' and 'irreverence' toward the expansion of the European epistemic paradigm through literary text and/or the secular thought that authors such as Borges and Kafka employed to question the rationale of western modernism. As reality is problematized in magical realist narratives, Warnes argues that reality does not signify a metaphysical dimension, but a discursive one, addressing questions of power, knowledge, and language. Likewise, Jean Weisgerber (1987) used the binary of "scholarly" and "folkloric", —critical, and modern as opposed to premodern and vernacular and ethnic— to introduce another sub-classification to the magical realism, an already fragmented conceptualization landscape.

Ontological and epistemological variants of magical realism respond first to the process of historicization of magical realism. Echeverria's view is that instead of using regions or territories, a tradition (folklore, mythology, literature, history, among many possible sources) must be the main essential principle with which magical realism text should be identified and defined. William Spindler in *Magical Realism: A Typology* (1993) justifies the use of the European variant of magical realism as an explicative classification to address changes of perspective and how reality is framed or constructed through a combination of different cultural frameworks. Spindler identifies European literature with the epistemological magical realism variant in which "it describes works where two contrasting views of the world (one "rational" and one "magical") are presented as if they were not contradictory, by resorting to the myths and beliefs of ethnocultural groups for whom this contradiction does not arise" (1993, p. 78). He

then, elaborates further: “This type of literary or artistic work presents reality from an unusual perspective without transcending the limits of the natural, but induces in the reader or viewer a sense of unreality (1993, p. 78)”.

Spindler’s conception of magical realism, however, presents some issues when critically used to explain and deconstruct European literary texts which have traditionally been considered magical realist narratives. For instance, Franz Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* (1915) is strongly associated with epistemological and European magical realism, given the matter-of-factness in which the transformation of Gregor Samsa is narrated, after which the style of narration returns to purely realistic narrative strategies. However, there are two issues with classifying Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as epistemological magical realism: first, Gregor’s transmutation can also be understood as a shift in the natural order of plausible reality, a supernatural occurrence, thus making the reading of this text align with the ontological variant of magical realism rather than the European epistemological variant. Second, and most important, the text of Kafka’s novel constructs its setting with only one context as its main source, never using references, frameworks, or beliefs from outside of the European context. Hence, a consistent application of the epistemological classification, as proposed by Spindler, is not possible in Kafka’s case. In this sense, Echeverria’s and Spindler’s classifications underscore that the regionalization of magical realism takes precedence over other potential properties, such as the conceptualization of worldbuilding, or other aesthetical and psychological processes.

The binary conception of magical realism contributes to the fragmentation of critical scholarship, with definitions and distinctions created to suit specific theoretical commitments when addressing the nature of realist and fantastical narratives. Additionally, the binary conception of the uncanny was formulated without engaging in an overarching conceptualization

process, which would allow the categorization of a stable corpus of text or narrative strategies of magical realism.

Lastly, Wendy B. Faris conceives magical realism as a genre: “an irreducible element of magic; the presence of the phenomenal world; unsettling doubts in the reader to explain the nature of the events; the merging in the narrative of different realms; and disruptions of time, space, and identity” (Faris, 2020, pp. 7–8). However, in *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of Narrative* (2004)(Bowers, 2004) Faris gives more weight to her definition of the element of magic “that cannot be explained according to the laws of the universe as they are formulated according to empirically based discourse” (Faris, 2020, p. 7) (over other properties).

Faris’ definition of magical realism may include texts that otherwise be better categorized as fantastic, surrealist, and gothic among many others. Also, Faris’s set properties seem too general or broad to restrict many other overlapping fictional texts from being included in the category.

2.2.2. The Todorovian Fantastic and its derivatives: comparison of magical realism with related genres

Besides Echeverria’s binary of ontological and epistemological magical realism other conceptions of magical realist exist which should be mentioned in the conceptualization process of the narrative mode. One of the most impactful concepts adjacent to magical realism is the Todorovian fantastic. He defines it as follows:

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event [...] ‘I nearly reached the point of believing’ that is the formula which sums up the spirit of the fantastic (Todorov, 1973, pp. 25–31).

Todorov described the fantastic as a hesitation towards the fictional text. His fantastic is not equivalent to fantasy-themed literature or fantasy in general. For him, the term denotes an affect that either the reader or a character experience in a narrative. His concept indicates a liminal feeling towards the narrative which collapses into one of his two proposed genres: the “marvelous” (Todorov, 1973, p. 25) and the “uncanny” (Todorov, 1973, p. 25). Todorov constructs the uncanny as the experience of something both strange and familiar, which triggers an often-negative response towards something extraordinary, whereas the marvelous is simply the occurrence of something extraordinary. According to Todorov, this play between belief and disbelief is from where the fantastic emerges.

One derivative conceptualization of the Todorovian fantastic is Jaime Alazraki’s application of Todorov’s structural analysis of the fantastic genre. He proposes magical realism as a derivative of the “neo-fantastic” (Alazraki, 1980, p. 288). For Alazraki, the neo-fantastic is the normalization of the supernatural in narrative and solves the hesitation that arises from rational and fantastic devices combined narrative’s setting. Alazraki’s neo-fantastic deviates from Todorov’s in that his neo-fantastic still maintains the tension between the belief in the supernatural and its rational explanation, but he eliminates the need for hesitation, thus stabilizing the concept. It neither disappears nor makes way for either the marvelous or the

uncanny. Alazraki's concept suffices structurally to establish a genre but lacks the societal, political, or cultural dimension that would make it ideal for the analysis of postcolonial narratives, and text dealing with political oppression or social instability. The neo-fantastical is not altogether a definition of magical realism. Both the Todorovian fantastic and Alazraki's own variation are explicative concepts that address some of the functions of magical realism as a narrative mode. However, other properties of magical realism are left out.

2.3. Conceptualizations of magical realism in cinema

The definitions of magical realism in film are scarce in academia and usually have not gone beyond the compilations of films describing with signifiers such as, "mysterious", "magical", 'grotesque' and 'uncanny' (Klonowska, 2010, p. 185). Nevertheless, one common strategy to theorize magical realism in cinema has been to use tools of literary criticism to create a conceptual language to deconstruct and analyze the nascent film genre. However, even using the term magical realist genres is problematic since "Film is not often considered as magic(al) realist in criticism and neither magic realism nor magical realism is recognized categories of film. **However, it is possible** to recognize features of both magic realism and magical realism in many films (Bowers, 2004, p. 104)."

It is also noteworthy that the number of studies about the conceptualization of magical realism in cinema or its effectiveness as an analytical concept is limited. The first conceptualization efforts...The first conceptualization efforts in cinema came by the middle of the 1980s, with Fredric Jameson's *On Magical Realism in Film* where he describes magical

realism as a “possible alternative to the narrative logic of contemporary post-modernism (1986, p. 302).”

Jameson gives three properties of magical realism in the film:

these are all historical films; the very different color of each constitutes a unique supplement and the source of a peculiar pleasure, or fascination, or *jouissance*, in its own right; in each, finally, the dynamic of narrative has somehow been reduced, concentrated, and simplified, by the attention to violence (and, to a lesser degree, sexuality)(Jameson, 1986, p. 303).

Being a Marxist scholar, Jameson interprets postmodernist aesthetics as a reaction to the absence of historicity in the global post-industrial society, and to the philosophical commitments of modernism—namely, objectiveness and universality, the univocity of the work of art, and the positivistic progression of the avant-garde. In Jameson’s view, postmodernist narratives clash with magical realism as both are mutually exclusive. Postmodernism, in this interpretation, brings a lack of historical conscience which denies a comprehensive understanding of the capitalist model and its subsequent demise caused by its own contradictions. Jameson’s understanding of magical realism, on the other hand, registers historical change as a dialectic movement between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie.

Jameson argues that, by debilitating historical conscience, a proper critical account of the past is not possible, which renders films, such as *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959 film), *American Graffiti* (1973), or *Forrest Gump* (1994), trivial, self-contained narratives. These narratives only address the superstructural experiences of society. Historical representation of post-industrial societies is tied to the lack of imagination and the inability to find alternatives to

late capitalism. In a sense, as Jameson argues, postmodernism's focus on isolated contextual readings over historical dialectical progression¹⁰, denies the possibility of conceiving the future by disconnecting artistic representation of the present from the past. Magical realism is a sort of remedy to the postmodernist symptom, by reframing it as the clash of economic classes or historical struggles as opposed to the post-modernist conceptions¹¹.

Jameson's Marxist reading of magical realism breaks with literary definitions of the term. During the subsequent decades, it became the only serious attempt to define magical realism in film, partially due to a lack of critical interest in the status of magical realism as a convention of cinema.

In *On Magic Realism in Film* Jameson (1986) provides three main traits exclusive to magical realist cinema:

- A) A vibrant color palette;
- B) widespread depiction of graphic violence and sex to register historical trauma, and;
- C) the setting is placed in a time of transition in the means of production.

Noteworthy is the lack of mention of the realist and supernatural components of magical realism, and consequently the tension and ambivalence between those two, a staple in the process of conceptualization of magical realism, is barely discussed. Without the supernatural and a realist setting Jameson's set of properties becomes too inclusive of films that potentially would not belong to the magical realism mode of narrative. Moreover, Jameson's account does not

¹⁰ Marxism understanding of history is teleological and, in a sense, deterministic.

¹¹ Postmodernism rejects the teleological reading that is an integral part of Marxism.

connect these characteristics to any general theory of magical realism in film, nor does it introduce, nor produce one. It does not conceptualize the convention.

Felicity Gee's (2021) efforts in the structuring of a coherent history of the magical realist convention are noteworthy. She uses Jameson's conceptualization and analysis of the convention but makes some important modifications. She argues that cinematic magical realism is not a narrative mode, but an active discourse that can be loaded with different knowledge-systems. In the Foucauldian sense, this weaves epistemology and aesthetics into magical realism with the purpose of intersubjective transmission and destabilization of structures of power. Accordingly, Gee views magical realism as a destabilizing agent to interact with these structures, specifically hegemonic power-knowledge, and ideology. Employing Jameson's *combinatoire* she proposes a cycle of key modes of expression of cinematic magical realism which occupy the space between avant-garde and a concrete philosophical inquiry:

My own definition of cinematic magic realism requires hesitation and surprise as affective responses, which (a) trigger a philosophical enquiry, and/or (b) establish thought as poetry that does not need to be 'explained' or 'resolved' even though it may be explored through the 'reasonings' [...] The "unsettling doubts" penetrate the very practice of reception, to the point at which uncertainty replaces certainty, and confusion replaces conclusion (Gee, 2021, p. 195).

Her proposition is that magical realism as a discourse remains in a state of constant "influx", as Jameson suggests, or in constant movement between past and present, which results in "haunting", a constant presence that keeps the past relevant and negotiating with different modes of historical discourse such as "colonial and post- colonial histories, revolution and image making, childhood trauma, the projection of sexual desires and wish-fulfillment" (Gee, 2021, p.

196). Gee argues that magic realism is a resistant, geopolitical form of world cinema that acknowledges the importance of feeling, atmosphere, and mood to subtly provoke and resist global capitalism and systematic structures of discursive power. Magical realism, therefore, is in perpetual change as it is an extratextual response, in flux, constantly changing according to the reaction of audiences and the conversation about the reception of the film.

This reflects two principles of the convention: 1) magical realism reflects the contradiction, and so modernity, latent in the avant-garde as mode or dialogue, and 2) Gee's magical realism expresses a discourse located between politics and the mainstream. In a sense, her definition is not a descriptive or prescriptive conceptualization, nor it is an analytic concept, which addresses film with a structural guiding principle. Instead, her definition is an attitude towards the text (film). Gee analysis is pointed to the cultural localization and diachronic analysis of the discourses embedded in the magical realist convention; as well as the role of adaptation in consolidating the movement from literature to cinema. Ultimately, however, the main feature and limitation, of her analysis is that magical realism in cinema has a political application, since it focuses on the ideological tools of reproduction of knowledge – that is the cinema apparatus, camera, and the cinematic technique (Gee, 2021, p. 3). Moreover, Gee does not propose a stable definition, which would provide a corpus of text to be canonized under the convention. Instead, magical realism is proposed as in a state of ambiguity, perhaps only fully realized by the avant-garde, the innovators of the genre, or purist *auteurs*, such as Ruiz, Quay Brothers, Jean Cocteau, Miguel Gomes, Guillermo del Toro, or Lucile Hadžihalilović¹².

¹² Raúl Ruiz (1941-2011) was a Chilean-French director who made over 100 films in various genres and languages. He was known for his playful and inventive use of storytelling techniques, such as multiple narrators, unreliable perspectives, intertextual references, and complex temporal structures. The Quay Brothers are American twin brothers and stop-motion animators who have been based in London since the 1970s. They have created numerous

Subsequent efforts in the conceptualization of magical realism in film, came back to the idea of magical realism as the medium to discuss essential traits from a region to the genre. More recently, Aga Skrodzka used territorial essential definitions to produce a critical analysis of magical realist cinema localized in central Europe. Skrodzka (2012, pp. 2–3) argues that in East Central Europe the inception of magical realism is a natural development of the aesthetical, cultural, and political context of the region, triggered by the defamiliarization (the uncanniness) of the space suffered by the immigrants and marginalized individuals. Skrodzka continues to elaborate two vernacular forms (appealing to consumerism and the depiction of the countryside and in contrast to the displaced regions by industrial development), which synthesize the staple magic and realism to fit the cultural context of various regions of East Central Europe. The first vernacular is focused on the depiction of slow-dying communities, or the disappearance of the inner magic found in those, forsaking the region and space it used to inhabit. The second vernacular introduces the concept of “non-synchronism of time (Skrodzka, 2012, p. 2)”, which, by the marginal communities of Europe, resists the ideological and economic siege of capitalism. It invokes the past and combines with modern and transforms hegemonic ideologies into a heterogenous discourse that limits and disrupts the ideological domination of post-industrial societies, resists consumer capitalism and the invasion of every sphere of life by production-

short films that combine live action and animation, using puppets, dolls, objects and found materials. Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) was a French poet, artist, writer, and filmmaker who was a prominent figure in the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century. He experimented with various forms of expression and media, such as poetry, theatre, painting, sculpture, and cinema. Miguel Gomes (born 1972) is a Portuguese director who has emerged as one of the most original voices in contemporary cinema. He blends fiction and documentary, realism and fantasy, humor, and tragedy in his films, which often draw inspiration from literary sources, folklore and history. He is also known for his innovative use of sound and music, as well as his long and episodic formats. Guillermo del Toro (born 1964) is a Mexican director who has achieved both critical and commercial success with his films that explore the genres of horror, fantasy, and science fiction. He is renowned for his imaginative and meticulous visual design, as well as his themes of monsters, fairy tales, childhood, and social issues. Lucile Hadžihalilović (born 1961) is a French director who has made only three feature films so far but has established herself as a singular and visionary filmmaker. She creates atmospheric and enigmatic films that explore the themes of childhood, sexuality, nature, and transformation. Her films often feature female protagonists who undergo mysterious rites of passage or encounter strange phenomena.

consumption dynamics (Skrodzka, 2012, p. 31). The main feature behind this process is the depiction of the intricate political environment of colonial and hegemonic discourses being rejected to form a specific type of visual narrative supported by new cinematographic conventions (Skrodzka, 2012, p. 16).

2.4. The Freudian uncanny and its conceptualization process

Traditionally, critics and historians distinguish three conceptual kernels of the uncanny:

- i. The pre-Freudian notions of the term predating psychoanalysis Jentsch's, Schelling's, or Nietzsche's but not limited to continental philosophy.
- ii. The Freudian conceptualization focused on the psychological underpinnings of literary aesthetics.
- iii. The Lacanian/Cixous interpretation was defined as "a circle of anxieties (S. Freud et al., 1976)" and later absorbed by Derrida into his own deconstruction.

The reason for this historicization of the term comes from the position of Freud's essay, *The Uncanny* (1919). It is quite revealing that Freud's inception of the uncanny focused primarily on the aesthetics of literary creation, and how fiction triggers an effect on the reader, and less on its applicability or position within the framework of psychoanalysis –i.e., the theory of anxiety, the topology of the psyche, or its relation to the drives. It is suggested that Freud considered the uncanny as a stylistic or aesthetic phenomenon.

2.3.1. *Prime kernel of the uncanny: The uncanny conceptualization in Freud's Oeuvre*

2.3.1.1. *The first conceptualization of the uncanny: The Uncanny (1919)*

It is rather revealing that contemporary commentators such as Helene Cixous (1976), Nicolas Royle (2003), and Kauffman (1998), each own in their respective time, were still debating over the significance of Freud's seminal essay on the uncanny even when they acknowledge the marginal position of the essay in new interpretations of the concept or within psychoanalysis itself. Thus, the process of conceptualization of the uncanny is marked by ellipses and loops through which each reader and commentator attempts to link their idiosyncratic definition, theory, or conceptualization to the Freudian kernel of definitions.

The normative or lexical meaning of the term 'uncanny' is defined in English primarily as an attribution 'strange or mysterious, which is often in a way slightly frightening'. Alternatively, the uncanny is quite often associated with the semantic field of '*unsettling*', '*eerie*', and 'difficult to understand'. Certainly, Freud honors this common use of the term and begins with a philological recounting of the uncanny down to the distinguishing between '*heimlich*' and '*unheimlich*'—the European (German) sensibility of (not)being at home—which would be a reasonable translation of the dyad. This raises the question of whether the uncanny and the *unheimlich* can be conceived as the same concept, as it suggests the universality pretensions of Freud's analysis, or perhaps the conceptualization depends on semantics and philology. Freud, however, in his first theoretical account of the concept, takes and builds from Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling's concept of "*Unheimlich*", as it "is the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light (S. Freud, 1955c, p. 224)".

From this, Freud derives the uncanny fear which takes us back to the transition from concealed and familiar to exposed and unfamiliar; familiar being the innermost contents of the psyche, since whatever is too intimate and private, making it public (exposing it) would change its nature to strange and unfamiliar.

This discovery is applied in the third chapter of Freud's (1919) essay to analyze E.T.A. Hoffmann's "*The Sandman*" to great effect. For Freud (Royle, 2003), the source of the uncanny is an objectivation of the repressed private content of the psyche, the token of the uncanny, such as dreams of castration, losing body parts, or the unearthing of taboo, the psychosexual history buried and suppressed. In Hoffman's *The Sandman* (1817), the token of the uncanny is present symbolically as being deprived of one's eyes. Psychoanalytically this symbolism points to the fear of castration, manifested in neurotic phantasies when Coppélius is replaced by a double. In this state he interferes with the affective pulsion of Nathaniel. Nathaniel, hence, is taken to a previous stage of his psychosexual development, the regression is manifested as a castration complex and is established as trauma.

Freud's second definition of the uncanny presents itself as a corollary of his previous definition: "the uncanny is the return of the repressed (S. Freud, 1955c)", where the repressed is recalled from the infantile process of psychosexual development. While acknowledging that Freud's oeuvre contains inconsistencies in the articulation of the uncanny, sometimes taking the concept from a purely psychoanalytical discourse to an aesthetical one, this second definition is the most developed and coherent account which is compatible with Freud's theory of anxiety developed in *Beyond of the Pleasure Principle* (1920), mainly because it is incorporated into the framework of psychoanalysis, opposed to the first definition intended to be an standalone concept for literary analysis.

Contrasting the second definition of the uncanny (as the return of the repressed) with the literary device of the double¹³, Freud mentions Ernest Jentsch's (1906) theory of the automaton, in which he identifies the locus of the uncanny experience as both intellectual uncertainty and undecidability of inanimate perception. In *The Uncanny* (1919) Freud analyses the phenomena of the double as residing in the loving doll Olympia and finds it insufficient as the kernel of the uncanny. In the case of Hoffman's *The Sandman*, the character Coppelus, is an castrating paternal figure who later in the story is replaced by a double. The double Coppelus is a device through which Hoffman demonstrates the transfer of energy repressed during infancy to the adulthood of Nathaniel. The fear of losing his eyes is what reignites the previously surmounted castration complex in Nathaniel, reawakening both latent but forgotten psychosexual impulses and infantile narcissism; together with the presence of his father alter ego this takes back Nathaniel to his early infantile stages. Thus, Nathaniel's madness is correlated in Hoffmann's story, as interpreted by Freud, to signify psychosexual regression caused by the fear of loss of the self, however, given that regression is a defensive mechanism, the madness must be construed as a threat to the ego and the individual. This interpretation is coherent with "Instincts and their vicissitudes (S. Freud, 1915, p. 131)" where Freud describes the ambivalence of the drive, which could turn against the individual.

The double or doppelgänger is indirectly addressed in Freud's *Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through* (S. Freud, 1914) when discussing the mechanisms of repetition compulsion. This behavior is defined in a therapeutic setting wherein the patient reiterates past events or memories through patterns of behavior. Most often the memories and experiences

¹³ The double represents the ego's split between the conscious and the unconscious, the familiar and the unfamiliar (S. Freud, 1955c). The double also evokes the fear of castration, as Freud illustrates with his interpretation of E.T.A. Hoffmann's story.

causing this reiteration are repressed, the same as the compulsive patterns. The figure of the double follows a similar process as described in “The Uncanny” where it stands as the corporealized experience of repetition compulsion, déjà vu, moving in circles, and random recursive encounters, what later Gustav Jung (1930) would name synchronic events. Freud asserts that the compulsive nature of a child’s self-love causes multiple mental shadows or reflections of the self, imaginary projections, which signal the desire to either deny death or perpetuate one’s life. Alternatively, the double could also be construed as all experiences rejected or antagonistic to the ego, possibly also impossible dreams and hopes, and then suppressed, either by the reality-principle or the super-ego, in which case return as an embodiment: “There are also all the unfulfilled but possible futures to which we still like to cling in phantasy, all the strivings of the ego which adverse circumstances have crushed... (S. Freud, 1955c, p. 236)”. In later works, such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), a repetition compulsion is a defense phylogenetic mechanism that is in-built into the very foundation of psychosexual development to conserve and protect the individual: “the aim of all life is death, and, looking backward, that inanimate things existed before living ones (S. Freud, 1955b, p. 38)”.

As a defense mechanism, the uncanny is the prototypical loop of trauma, a vicious cycle that is compulsive and self-maintaining and is a direct reaction to the presence of something that is frightening, which is typified as a type of anxiety.

If psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs. This class of morbid anxiety would then be no other than what is

uncanny, irrespective of whether it originally aroused dread or some other affect (S. Freud, 1955c, p. 241).

If an individual experiences a traumatic event, the mind stores it as a memory and represses it from integration with the content acknowledged by the ego (S. Freud, 1961). Repression here is the mechanism by which traumatic experiences are stored and relived in the mind to protect the ego (S. Freud, 1955c). This process, however, is also mentally harmful since it is cyclical: the repetition of fixed traumatic content manifests itself as an anxiety attack (fight or flight response) which further reinforces the trauma. The uncanny, Freud (S. Freud, 1955c) argues, appears when the emotional affects generated by repression turn into morbid anxiety, following the same defense.

As Freud indicates, underpinning his conceptualization of the uncanny is the reiteration of the symbolic repressed as the general structure of the unconscious. One source of repressed content manifested as repetition compulsion is the primitive phylogenetic traumatic experiences of the species, namely, the tendency of the species to create magical and animistic beliefs – mainly the fear of death; the second source is the ontogenetic individual experiences of trauma, such as the fear of castration and other traumatic experiences. However, Freud himself mentions that even though the repetition compulsion, reiterative defense mechanisms, and the double are necessary symbolic conditions for the uncanny to arise, it is only through a specific configuration of fiction that the uncanny can be effectively experienced. If considered, Freud's first definition offered in "the uncanny" where it is defined as "everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" and the second definition is a result/effect of the previous one where the uncanny is a recurrence of the repressed together with a focus on fiction and style, the uncanny as a purely psychoanalytical concept lacks explicative power to address the transferring

of surmounted trauma to the reader and explain alternate readings of texts such as the “*Sandman*”.

Rather than using the uncanny as a therapeutic tool Freud intended it to further the study of psychoanalytic aesthetics. Referring to the uncanny as “subdued emotional impulses which, inhibited in their aims and dependent on a host of concurrent factors, usually furnish the material for the study of aesthetics (S. Freud, 1955c, p. 219)”. To address this, Freud in his seminal essay indicates the vital role of fiction in breaching the natural distance between the reader and the text and gives some clues into how this transference, from the fictional to the subjective domain is possible. In his essay (1919) he describes the components of the uncanny as follows:

- i. Repetition compulsion of
 - a. phylogenetic trauma or
 - b. ontogenetic trauma

Which means the Identification of the uncanny as a cycle of symbolic trauma, namely anxiety.

- ii. Aesthetic properties of the uncanny:
 - a. The uncanny requires a locus of effect, usually centered around a character, but also a time/space or setting where a process of reiteration must occur.
 - b. This process of reiteration consists of the projection of memories onto reality, stylistically the projection of subjective onto objective narratives.
 - c. The quality of ambivalence or intellectual uncertainty as a catalyst for the overlapping of the real and the fantastic; the symbolic repressed must invade compulsively a real/objective setting.

To sum up, the key components in Freud's conceptualization of the uncanny in his seminal 1919 essay are: first the psychoanalytic catalyst of the uncanny, repression, and repetition compulsion feeding a loop of memory identified as anxiety; second the aesthetic/stylistic component (which makes the textual reality in the narrative believable) is the conditions for transference from the realm of fiction to the conscience of the reader.

2.3.1.2. Freud's subsequent theorization of the uncanny: Outside of the 1919 essay

Outside of the 1919 essay Freud further addresses the term in *Totem and Taboo* (1912–1913) and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921) and indirectly in *Beyond the Pleasure principle* (1920).

If we follow the chronological order of Freud's clinical writings relevant to the concept of "uncanny", he first mentions it in the *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) where it is used to explain the sound associations of childhood trauma when the individual discovers or suspects the sexual dimension of his parents (S. Freud, 2010). This reference, arguably, is an early-stage conception to what later would be his theory of anxiety or perhaps the concept of taboo, and closely tied to fear of castration and psychosexual development. Nevertheless, within Freud's writings placing the uncanny as a conceptualization or even a pre-conceptualization is not a straightforward clear task, one reason is that Freud's theory was a constant work in progress which grew with his focus and attention directed to specific phenomena or cases, and, as a result, it is partially unfinished.

Freud in *The Psycho-Pathology of Daily Life* (1901), commonly referred to as an anthology of slips (parapraxis) and blunders, elaborates on the occurrence of repetition, coincidences, dreams, and premonitions and defines them as projections of the psyche into the present experience. The source of these repetitions is manifestly the unconscious and it takes the form of a memory that does not originate in experience but in some fantasy. The uncanny as an adjective is mentioned in the twelfth chapter of this work, however, it is not conceptualized as a theoretical or clinical term but used as an adjective. What is further elaborated is the connection of latent sexual impulses with the repetition of desires and fantasies, exemplified by the desire to return to the mother's womb. This phenomenon commonly referred to as *déjà vu* is like that of the double or doppelganger further developed in "The Uncanny", where the repetition source for both phenomena is surmounted trauma.

For Freud, the mechanism which allows unexperienced recollections to irrupt into consciousness and cause *déjà vu* is based on the fluidity of the conscious and the unconscious, whereby the instability of their boundaries all humans are affected by leakage of content from one section of the psyche into the other. Therefore, all individuals partake in a certain degree of neurosis which affects our daily lives by isolating us from actual experience. But what the experience of *déjà vu* causes is estrangement: the feeling of being strange to our memories and dreams. The experience of *déjà vu*, a new experience, feels familiar because reality is correlated to some unconscious symbolic representation; however, some sort of identification between the symbolic and reality is maintained. In some cases, this identification is weaker, and the feeling of isolation stronger, thus *déjà vu* and the feeling of strangeness are opposed to the reality principle and fostered by the pleasure principle. Masschelein (2011, p. 22) describes this mechanism of disassociation of reality as a contentious discussion between Wilhelm Skelter Alfred Adler, and

Freud who viewed it as both a defense mechanism and a voluntary rejection of reality. The disassociation of reality is an indication of a narcissistic personality disorder, but not limited to it, since it is also a paramount condition for artistic creation: the fluid limits of imagination and reality.

Moving on from artistic production, the defense mechanisms—repression, denial, projection, displacement, etc.—make possible the doubling and fragmenting of reality as described later in “The Uncanny”, with the experience of déjà vu and estrangement originating from a form of temporal failure of memory and the development of a neurotic relation to reality. This idea is central in the case of the *Rat Man* (S. Freud, 1955d, p. 163), where the patient developed obsessive-compulsive neurosis steaming from sexual trauma in his childhood and leading to repeated superstitious acts and self-imposed rites on top of anxiety about his father. The defensive mechanism observed in *the Rat Man* in dealing with obsessive-compulsive neurosis is a fragmented personality, with one of them fixated on strange coincidences and premonitions, which stems from the specific repression of the source of his trauma and, ultimately, is unconsciously expressed as superstitious behavior—a manifestation of the surmounted past.

The idea of surmounted past or traumatic past appears in *Totem and Taboo* (S. Freud, 2001b), as a prelude to the formal conceptualization of the uncanny later in the 1919 essay. In this text, the return of the repressed, which is the basis of the experience of the uncanny, finds its roots in the ideas of intellectual uncertainty, castration, repression, and narcissism, and the formulation of the ontogenetic and phylogenetic components of the psyche. Whereas in *The Psycho-Pathology of Daily Life* (1901) Freud suggested intellectual uncertainty as a coadjutant condition for the experience of then uncanny to form ambivalent experiences. In *Totem and*

Taboo, intellectual uncertainty is precisely defined as the dialectic of the sacred and the damned/taboo as an antinome without internal tension or opposition—the term sacred, is analogous, to damned/taboo and not opposed to it. This is grounded in the religious practice of bestowing objects of worship with an elevated status which renders them removed from the plane of action in which members of society commonly interact. Touching or interacting with such objects is thus forbidden and frowned upon; analogous to touching or interacting with undesirable objects or entities. The transference of the symbolic meaning of the practice between the sacred and the damned turns totem and abject subject to similar connotations; hence, they are ambivalent.

The ambivalence of both terms, taboo and the sacred, Freud argues, is rooted in the past, in the primitive past of the human species, in the case of the phylogenetic component, and in the psychosexual development of a concrete individual in the case of the ontogenetic component. This liminal definition of ambivalence finds its correlation in the behavior originating in a specific obsessive compulsive-neurosis that Freud named “taboo illness” (S. Freud, 2001b, p. 12). In the case of the Rat Man, his superstitious compulsive behavior mimics primitive societies which place strict norms and rituals around taboo places, persons, and objects of worship. This is a fixation on an object or the objectification of persons and agents. The Rat Man's projections of his unconscious into his behavior presented the same ritualistic fetishes and fixations, as well as magical thinking, coming from the phylogenetic ambivalent worship of primitive societies, even when his traumatic experience was ontogenetic.

The central mechanism of projections is rooted, Freud elaborates in the third essay of *Totem and Taboo* (1913), in the assumption that unconscious harmful or unsettling feelings are in fact not originating from the psyche, but instead, come from the outside of it, so any negative

energy or emotion can be treated as strange and foreign, and finally expelled as a projection onto objects or persons. The key mechanism of ambivalence is the lack of means of identification between the psyche and the exterior world. In “The Uncanny” the analysis of “The Sandman” focuses on the very same projections of feelings in the narration that are so potent that the character of Nathaniel becomes ill or mad from them and suggests certain potency of thought anchored in a primitive fear of magic or surmounted past. The surmounted past is key in understanding the relation of ambivalence to the conceptualization of the uncanny. Wherein the surmounted past is a trigger to negative energy or feelings,

It seems as if each one of us has been through a phase of individual development corresponding to this animistic stage in primitive men, that none of us has passed through it without preserving some residues or traces of it which are still capable of manifesting themselves, and that everything which now strikes us as “uncanny” fulfills the condition of touching those residues of animistic mental activity within us and bringing them to expression. (S. Freud, 1955c, p. 240).

This section of “The Uncanny” articulates the findings first formulated in the third chapter of *Totem and Taboo* and it describes the phylogenetic experience of the species which rooted knowledge in animism and magical thinking, filling the world with spirit and forces, what later construed by Freud as psychic energy (2001a, pp. 61–62). This understanding of the world is contingent on the idea that every entity possesses some spirit or soul, a projection of the sum of the psyche’s energy towards those entities; hence Freud’s insistence in calling them spirits of human beings. In “The Uncanny” Freud points to the doppelganger as the projection of the negative self, which has taken independence from the ego. The problem of death, in the mind of primitive humans, and all negative energy emanating from rejected experiences, then is

addressed with the splitting of the mind, body, and spirit into the double which can satisfy hidden impulses of the id with fantasy and wake dreams.

All this is set up as a necessary framework to address the ontogenetic development of the individual, and the parallel stage of animism and magical thinking which happens in infancy and later develops into the doubling and partition of the self in the adult, albeit not originating from primitive beliefs, but in the early trauma. As intellect becomes more potent in the adult, the necessity of magical and superstitious beliefs becomes less necessary; libido is contained by the reality principle—the Id contained by the superego— and the primitive narcissism of the phylogenetic component instead turns into intellectual narcissism.

2.3.2. The post-Freudian kernel: the uncanny as an epistemological framework.

Before the period of explosion in the production of theoretical scholarship of the uncanny, there is a lapse that can be regarded as a stage of latent theorization between 1919 and the mid-1960s. However, the interest in the subject diminished during the next 50 years. Only Otto Rank's *The Double* (1925) and Theodor Reik's *The Dread* (1929) stand out as a continuation of the Freudian conceptualization, where the concept offers explicative potential. However, both texts would be forgotten until after the 70s when the resurgence of the concept would direct attention to their work.

Later, in the century the position of the uncanny is reevaluated within Freud's body of work, especially in relation to literature and psychology. As psychoanalysis falls out of favor as a scientific discipline, Freud's uncanny is more often employed by literary criticism to reinvigorate

the connection of subjectivity and the historicization of genres and narratives. Noteworthy are Derrida's *The Double Session* (1970), Bernard Mérimot (1972), and Todorov's *The Fantastic: A Structuralist Approach to a Literary Genre* (1973). However, the conceptualization process of the uncanny diverged from the Freudian canon in the early twenty-first century with the publication of Nicholas Royle's *The Uncanny* (2003), whereby reframing Derrida's Hauntology and deconstruction of the text lays out the field of contemporary application in which the uncanny acts as a ghost from the past which inhabits the postmodern landscape. Even though he starts recognizing the staples of uncanny literature in Hofmann's *The Sandman* (1817), and Poe's Doppelgängers in *William Wilson* (1839), to explain his uncanny experiences, his work core is built around the defamiliarized uncanny. He states that the uncanny provides a process of deconstruction when he defines it as: "[t]he Uncanny is (the) unsettling (of itself)" (Royle, 2003, p. 5). Armed with rhetorical analyses Royle deconstructs texts through the uncanny, focusing on semantic ambivalences, synchronic meanings, contradictions, and logical disjunctions, instead of linear textual interpretations, uncovering new epistemological and ontological assessments. The uncanny already charged with conceptual fragmentation, a field of signifiers pointing to disruption, it quickly became coupled with deconstruction by Lacan in 1962 and Derrida in 1970.

One outstanding concern for the post-Freudian conceptualization process is how to relate all definitions and conceptualizations of the uncanny to the term "uncanny". In other words, how the formulation of the word "uncanny" stems from its conceptual structure, composed of several signifiers in various discourses and texts. This makes the uncanny term susceptible to ambiguity, imprecision, and overuse. By the term uncanny, a semantic field of more terms is summoned, including *unheimlich*, *heimlich*, *eerie*, *insolite*, *inquiétante étrangeté*, *unfamiliar*, *Unheimlichkeit*, *déjà vu*, *uncanny valley*, *strange*, *intellectual uncertainty*, *cognitive dissonance*, *usugimiwarui*,

and *bukimi no tani* to name a few. The nexus between affects, experiences, and the theoretical concept of the uncanny is, as Saussurean analysis has made evident, subjective, and objective at the same time.

Anne Masschelein (2011, p. 7) illustrates this fluidity of the term uncanny by pointing out how, at the decline of Marxism, the uncanny was used as a descriptor of the phenomena of alienation, estrangement, and defamiliarization, terms which by the late twentieth century were in disuse. Likewise, the attachment of the literary conventions of Todorov's *l'étrange* (the strange) and *le fantastique* (the fantastic) to the uncanny at the outset of the '70s through translations and recontextualizations of his work further exemplifies the complex intertextual status of the term. In literature, Alejo Carpentier's Latin-American concept of *lo real maravilloso* is often thrown in together with the uncanny to refer to an entanglement with the strange and liminal Latin-American space (Bowers, 2004). Whereas in philosophy, aesthetics, and epistemology specifically, the term is associated with cognitive indetermination and disruption in the process of identification (Aviles Ernult, 2020; Avilés Ernult, 2021). The main reason that the uncanny is a theoretically incomplete concept—or at least difficult to inscribe into an analytical framework—is that the technical sense of the term in psychoanalysis is confounded by its entanglement with natural language as an adjective, eventually poses the problem of translatability and equivalence from concept to concept.

To this day new associations of the term uncanny add to the complexity and fluidity of the semantic field it belongs to, which further undermines any effort to capture and define it in terms of etymology or convention. It is perhaps due to the fixation of scholars on the lexical value of the term and the assumed Freudian roots that have contributed to giving “On the Uncanny” its seminal status and excluded Ernst Jentsch, Friedrich Schelling, or Friedrich

Nietzsche from being founders of the discourse. Nevertheless, the huge number of associations of the signifier dilute its explicative and analytic potency at the same time it increases its extension and, as a result, it transmutes from a concept to a category or field of conceptualizations with idiosyncratic readings of it.

Consequently, given the inconsistent use of the term “uncanny “and outstanding corner of the following chapter is to define properties and definitions in which to conceptualize the uncanny as part of a narrative mode. How to operationalize the uncanny inside a magical realist narrative? In order to answer such questions, this study focuses on a very specific aspect of the uncanny field, that is, the aesthetic conceptualization of the uncanny steaming from the power of fiction to transmit representations and affects from the unconscious of the audience to its consciousness –namely how the transference from fiction to subjectivity occurs in the uncanny narrative.

Chapter 3

Theory and Methodology: Operationalization of Magical Realism and the Uncanny

3.1. Places of convergence of magical realism and the Freudian uncanny

This chapter is concerned with establishing the theoretical clarifications necessary to operationalize the Freudian uncanny as the conceptual structure that allows the analysis of magical realist narratives. Having reviewed the main theories regarding the uncanny in the previous chapter (chapter 2), the present one introduces the uncanny as the epistemological framework of the literary mode of magical realism, with the goal of integrating them into a unified definition and achieving operationalization. The chapter argues that the presence and integration of the Freudian uncanny in discussing magical realist narratives provides insight into the role of trauma and anxiety within those specific texts. Specifically, this dissertation attempts to demonstrate the possibility of enabling the uncanny to function as an operative principle in magical realist visual narratives. To that end, this chapter defines the following three key concepts that are employed to analyze the chosen films in the next chapter: the magical realist convention, the Freudian uncanny, and the agent that links both, trauma-induced (decon)textualization.

Keeping at the center the advancement of the conceptualization process for the uncanny and magical realism, this study argues that the uncanny is a useful concept to comprehensively describe the core process within magical realist narratives. This may lead to a reinterpretation of the magical realist genre in the following two aspects: a) integrating uncanny into magical realist narratives would make it possible for the canonization of a body of texts (and narratives) to be

categorized as magical realist, b) providing magical realism cinema with a theoretical framework and an analytical language. The definition of the magical realism film genre will, consequently, thread the space between the description of a cinema phenomenon and psychoanalytical narrative theory.

To accomplish these goals, this study proposes the inception of the term uncanny magical realism, defined as a narrative mode for which trauma-induced repression, understood as reiterative (decon)textualization, becomes the central narrative conflict to be solved or addressed in a realist setting invaded by the supernatural. The affect this narrative process produces is the uncanny.

Through the following sections this chapter discusses the key properties of the proposed uncanny magical realism. First, the cluster of magical realism reintroduces and redefines ontological and epistemological magical realism, (decon)textualization of trauma and how it generates defamiliarization, hesitation, historic awareness, and cyclical reiteration. The kernel of the uncanny covers the role of trauma, anxiety, the unconscious, the preconscious, defense mechanism, repetition compulsion, and word-presentation. The purpose of this categorization is to make the explanation of an inherently obscure and ambivalent theoretical process coherent. Since the uncanny and magical realism's set of properties is converged, this means that the exposition method in this section should be cumulative, working through repetitions and cycles, avoiding linear thought, and embracing complex thinking. These properties are used as analytical tools in the subsequent analysis chapters as narrative devices or techniques, namely, the token of the uncanny.

3.2. The cluster of magical realism and its convergence with the uncanny: constructing (decon)textualization and trauma as the catalyst of magical realism in film narratives.

The notion of the magical realist film genre and literary mode which should refer to a delimited corpus begins with the reduction of its narrative themes to a set of categories taken from philosophy, psychology, or aesthetics. Defamiliarization, historical and political critique, and metafiction among others are recognized in literary criticism as the strategies magical narrative uses to express traumatized, fragmented realities which are taken from the existing, objective familiar world and then decontextualized into a sense of estrangement, eeriness, or dread. (decon)textualization, is hence, the precursor to magical realism since it allows for the representation of historical and contemporary trauma and anxieties and its eventual upsetting.

3.2.1. Reiteration and cycles of defamiliarization in magical realism

Within literary criticism, two trends of magical realism are recognized as techniques that magical realist narratives use (Bowers, 2004, p. 86; Carpentier, 1995, p. 104; González Echevarría, 1977; Spindler, 1993, p. 39): epistemological and ontological magical realism, as explained in the previous chapter (Chapter 2, 2.2.). Within these two techniques or devices, “magical realism originates either from a particular folk tradition or is cultivated from a variety of traditions in order to produce a particular narrative effect (Bowers, 2004)”. However, this is limiting, particularly when applying it to the analysis of cinema, which is a collaborative

medium, as it usually takes the work of a vast number of authors and creators to film and compose even the smallest production.

The ontological technique of magical realism is the most common application of the magical realist convention; perhaps due to an overlap of the setting of the narrative and the cultural context of the author, which allows for more authenticity and the depth in the crafting of the fiction. Bower's defines the ontological variant of magical realism as: "it presents the magical as an inherent and accepted part of reality, often based on the beliefs or practices of the people who inhabit that reality."

Often this form of magical realism is used to represent specific sociopolitical and historical issues, where the intention is to contextualize and bring forth a discussion about the societal depiction. For instance, in Hayao Miyazaki's *Mononoke Hime* (1997) the set of characters is derived from the late Muromachi period in Japan (approximately 1336 to 1573) but includes fantasy elements taken from the Japanese folk tradition and actual locations within Japan- such as Shiratani Unsuikyo Ravine in Yakushima. In Miyazaki's film the supernatural, gods, and spirits walk among humans, which represent a latent and omnipresent reality, finding its home in the self-contained geopolitics and folklore of the region. It incorporates the theology of Japanese Shinto, which considers reverence to nature—the linchpin of its animistic pantheon—of the utmost centrality to its framework. This is a recurring aspect of Japanese mythology, which is featured prominently in several of Miyazaki's works, such as *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (2001) and *Tonari no Totoro* (1988), both of which bind their supernatural depictions of deities and spirits to the cultural and historical context of the Japanese tradition. Hence, as the supernatural is firmly embedded into the aesthetics of Miyazaki's style and

worldbuilding, which is acknowledged internally to the characters of the narrative as normalized; (decon)textualization is present as the hesitation and ambivalence resulting from the integration of both discourses.

The epistemological magical realist category takes the mundane and transmutes it into the supernatural and unfamiliar. It does so by using diverse cultural systems of knowledge, traditions, and historical setting as sources to produce specific narrative effects (Delbaere, 1992, p. 76). In this case, the intertextual sources refer to the system of knowledge outside the narrative, which comes from the viewer's reality, but inside a magical realist text, they mutate into magical, alienating, and decontextualizing elements. This contraposition destabilizes other systems of knowledge already constructed in the text, turning the otherwise coherent and plausible narrative into a deeply unsettling and unhomey fictional place. Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) is an excellent example to show how intertextual references are used to defamiliarize both characters and the viewer. In this dystopian science fiction film Cuarón adapts P. D. James's 1992 novel, *The Children of Men*, to show us a postindustrial United Kingdom which has lost the ability to produce and regulate life, due to global infertility, degenerating into a ruthless predatory control state. The protagonist Theo functions as an identificatory nexus for the viewer and linchpin for the humanizing gaze¹⁴ of the camera, which is tasked with not only following him and documenting his narrative journey but also pausing occasionally, through long pans to the periphery of Theo's vision. It is through the camera's deattached from Theo, its movement and positioning and filmed emulating a newsreel or a documentary¹⁵, that the viewer

¹⁴ In this case, the camera awareness and engagement with the background, sidelines and oblique angles of viewing, other individuals, anthropomorphizes with compassion the function of the camera work.

¹⁵ Cuarón and cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, used in *Children of Men* (2006) a hand-held camera technique, which gave the film a first-person, free perspective, which is common in documentaries or the 1920' newsreel format.

gets to see the decontextualized iconography carefully embedded in the background of the film. For instance, Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), Michelangelo's *Madonna della Pietà* (1497-1501), Pink Floyd's *Animals* art cover, Abu Ghraib's prisoner torture case, imagery inspired by the Jewish Holocaust, among others, are part of the intertextual symbolism prominently used in *Children of Men*. These references and images are often quite prominent, given the time the camera's gaze lingers on them. While there may be a discussion about the shared genealogical provenance of the sources in *Children of Men*, they do not originate exclusively from either the director's background or the setting of the film. In the context of the film, they are a reminder of the lack of historical conscience of society, which becomes a reminder of the infertility crisis and humanity's eventual extinction. In particular, the effect achieved is a sophisticated layering of details that by virtue of accumulation confers gravitas and reality to the setting, but also alienates the otherwise familiar image.

It is noteworthy that these variants, the epistemological and ontological magical realism, are not mutually exclusive, and, in fact, they are part of the same cyclical process of defamiliarization often overlapping, which corresponds to how magical realist narratives treat and relate to memory and historical trauma – one familiarizes the supernatural into the real, while the other defamiliarizes the normal. The cycle of defamiliarization overlaps with, but also complements, the concept of (decon)textualization which makes it a necessary property of uncanny magical realism.

3.2.2. Trauma correlation with memory and historicity:

Magical realism's defamiliarization positions the cinema genre as an excellent mode of translating historical or cultural experiences. Especially when considering that the literary inception of magical realism in Latin America came as a way of expressing the surrealism of the historical process of the region. In this regard, critic Stephen Slemon's third proposition on magical realism identifies "...fragments and voices of forgotten or subsumed histories..." as alternative to the dominant systems of knowledge by recuperating the colonized perspectives (Slemon, 1995, p. 410) as a central element in narratives. Slemon argues that magical realism fulfills the requisites to be identified as part of the spectrum of postcolonial discourse, with a political and socially charged narrative that recognizes the historic relations between the colonizers and colonized, and the consequences in the collective memory and identity of both.

In postcolonial narratives using the mode of magical realism, the techniques subvert the realist convention by supplementing realism with a text which highlights (and identifies) gaps, omissions, and contradictions found in hegemonic practices and dominant discourses. On that point, Irmtraud Huber remarks that: "The combination of the marvelous and the realist mimesis in magical realism has frequently been interpreted as a combination of the rationality of the colonizer and the magical beliefs of the colonized (Huber, 2013, p. 213)". In essence, the postcolonial use of magical realism supposes an opposition, the colonizer and a colonized, the magical and real, with different logic and norms of coherence, each suspended and in tension with the other to become the foundation of the metaphysical discourse in a magical realist narrative.

However, to add to this argument, three elements seem constant in postcolonial magical realism: 1) the oppressive rationale of the colonizer opposed to the cultural specificity of the folklore and magical thinking of the colonized, and 2) the setting of the narrative as a symbolic *locum tenens*, 3) and a substitute, of the country, region, or body of the group. The trauma suffered by the collective, the nation, produces a reaffirmation of the relation between the colonized and colonizer, as the trauma of the process of colonization is mirrored and reiterated through a narrative. Accordingly, the objective of a magical realist narrative is to represent some ineffable contents of the collective unconscious, which otherwise would not be plausible; the magical element is what makes such a representation possible.

Trauma-induced defamiliarization in postcolonial magical realism acts not only as lynchpin or a nexus from where to start to look at the narrative but also as the mental place where the process of decolonization should be completed. This centrality of trauma, thus, is well acknowledged in critical literature. For instance, Elleke Boehmer conceives magical realism as a medium to narrate and represent the historical experience of postcolonialism as the trauma of cultural displacement:

Drawing on the special effects of magic realism, postcolonial writers in English are able to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement... They combine the supernatural with local legend and imagery derived from colonialist cultures to represent societies which have been repeatedly unsettled by invasion, occupation, and political corruption. Magic effects, therefore, are used to indict the follies of both empire and its aftermath (1995, p. 235).

Similarly, Eugene Arva uses the narrative to give an approach, a way to access a specific experience that may escape the grasp of realistic representation and history's objective truth:

Magical realist writings should be regarded not as an escape from horrific historical ‘facts’ or as a distortion meant to make them more cognitively or emotionally palatable but rather as one of the most effective means of re-creating, transmitting, and ultimately coping with painful traumatic memories. In such a context, the re-presented or reconstructed truth will not be of what actually happened but of what was experienced as happening (2011, p. 6).

When Boehmer and Arva mention, “horrific historical fact” or “cultural displacement,” they are talking about the locus of defamiliarization, and trauma, which catalyzes the postcolonial representation in magical realism.

Magical realism’s circular and cyclical narratives, its inexplicable events, uncertainties and ambiguities, its affinities with myth and mysticism, with alterity and knowledge beyond logic and reason seem singularly well suited to address the difficulties of trauma narratives (Huber, 2013, p. 220).

The precedent found in academic criticism proposing magical realism as a viable outlet for narratives dealing with individual and collective trauma, displacement, and disrupted identity is plenty (Boehme, 1995, p. 219; Bowers, 2004, p. 92; Delbaere, 1992; Slemon, 1995, p. 409; Zamora & Faris, 1995). However, as Arva indicates, “establishing a nexus between magical realist writing (viewed primarily as a postmodern literary phenomenon) and trauma (understood as an individual and as an often-invisible cultural dominant) requires an interdisciplinary tool (2011, p. 5).” This is particularly important for the nascent cinema genre. To firmly couple magical realism and the uncanny, understanding trauma must be the core of any attempt to theorize the category. As the operation of memory formation is intrinsically bound to the formation of identity and the self-concept, the question of how magical realism is suitable to

express collective trauma and historic displacement, implies an act of self-reflection and deconstruction of the unconscious.

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3.3. The Kernel of the Uncanny: understanding the sources and mechanism of reiterative trauma in narratives

3.3.1. The Todorovian fantastic: the magical and supernatural as functions of the uncanny

In psychoanalytic aesthetics, one of the conceptualizations that is pertinent in the analysis of trauma, anxiety, displacement, and disruption of memory as a function of fantastic literature, surrealism, and the supernatural, is the Freudian uncanny. Trauma and anxiety play a paramount role in the literary conventions of gothic fiction, science fiction, and the fantastic, wherein

conflicting, and fragmented realities are often displayed in the worldbuilding of such narratives, as a questioning of the coherence and plausibility of the events narrated. This focus is often expressed in the tendency of exploring the limits of knowledge, reality, memory, and identity; hence this cluster of genres' heavy use of textualization and metafictional narrative devices. Moreover, the uncanny presence within the magical realist convention dates to the inception of the literary convention, when the psychoanalytical work of Sigmund Freud was used by Franz Roh to interpret post-expressionist paintings (Bowers, 2004; Faris, 2004, 2020; Menton, 1983; Zamora & Faris, 1995). In this conception of the term, art historian Irene Guenther comments that “the juxtaposition of 'magic' and 'realism' reflected...the monstrous and marvelous *Unheimlichkeit* [uncanniness] within human beings and inherent in their modern technological surroundings (Guenther, 1995, p. 36).”

Todorov's argues that the fantastical as an analytical concept has been superseded in certain functions by the discourse of psychoanalysis: metaliterary commentary, the relation between fiction and cognitive process, and the deconstruction of the narrator as a voice of the unconscious. Within Todorov's conception of the fantastic, the Freudian uncanny appears as the stabilization of a reader's response after hesitation has been solved into fear. Consequently, the uncanny and the fantastical, in fact, are different responses to the very same phenomena:

...psychoanalysis has simply replaced (and thereby made useless) the literature of the fantastic... [] The themes of the fantastic have become, literally, the very themes of the psychological investigations of the last fifty years. We have already seen several illustrations of this; here we need merely mention the theme of a classic study (Otto Rank's *Der Doppelgänger*) (Todorov, 1975, pp. 160–161).

The implication is that both psychoanalysis and fantastic study the phenomena which constitute the kernel of signifiers of the unrepresentable: madness, anxiety, ambiguity, transgression, liminality, and gothic. However, the uncanny, in its association with psychoanalysis, is a concept with more extension than the Todorovian fantastic, as the uncanny scope is not only limited to aesthetics, poetics, literary criticism, and fiction; it extends to conform to a framework and a system of knowledge outside of fiction to cover social, political, and cultural non-fictional discourses. Todorov presents the uncanny as the *telos* (a final form) of the fantastical; it is through this relationship that they became conflated, transforming the hesitation of the Todorovian fantastical into the transgression and defamiliarization of the uncanny.

The contemporary discussion about the status of the uncanny as within literary criticism and aesthetic concepts is succinctly summarized in Todorov's *The Fantastic: a Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975): "The uncanny is not a clearly delimited genre, unlike the fantastic. More precisely, it is limited on just one side, that of the fantastic, on the other, it dissolves into the general field of literature[...] The literature of horror in its pure state belongs to the uncanny." Here Todorov's use of the uncanny, as opposed to the fantastic, is mainly a differential convention; it is one of the outcomes that ensues after the hesitation produced in a narrative is solved. Todorov writes: "the fantastic (...) lasts only as long as a certain hesitation (...) it seems to be located on the frontier between two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than be an autonomous genre (Todorov, 1975, p. 40)". Whether this distinction is completely accepted or not, the fantastic and the uncanny are structurally defined by different reading attitudes or affects that the reader experiences. In Todorov's definition, the fantastic and the uncanny may designate the very same text. The difference for him is that the uncanny is

(relatively) stable¹⁶, whereas the fantastic may only exist as a transition to either the uncanny or to the marvelous. As a property of uncanny magical realism, hesitation generates ambiguity and intellectual uncertainty. Since the uncanny takes over the fantastic, in a magical realist narrative it refers to the opening of the uncanny cycle, postulating the protagonist's struggle. Ambiguity regarding the outcome of the story, whether the protagonist reintegrates the content of repression into his/her conscious.

In this study, the uncanny is read in its psychoanalytic formulation; i.e. what Todorov presented as the fantastic, overlapping it with the marvelous, one of three adjacent genres: “the fantastic... last only as long as a certain hesitation: a hesitation common to readers and character, who must decide whether or not what they perceive derives from ‘reality’ as it exists in the common opinion”(1975, p. 41). Todorov proposed the fantastic with the uncanny, together with “the marvelous,” as a set of differential genres which overlap with each other: the uncanny, the fantastic-uncanny, the fantastic-marvelous, and the marvelous. In *The Fantastica: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1975) Todorov proposes that the fantastic, and its subgenres of the uncanny and the marvelous, are underpinned by addressing the construction of their respective narrative world, primarily, whether a rational explanation is sufficient to address the events narrated; a type of intellectual uncertainty.

The Freudian uncanny, however, explains the cognitive process behind the concept of “intellectual uncertainty (Jentsch, 1997, p. 9),” unconscious content in the conscious mind, and ties it to the expansive theory of anxiety. In Freud's seminal essay intellectual uncertainty is part of the same symbolic process as repetition compulsion, since both cause damage to the self-

¹⁶The stability that Todorov associates with the uncanny is only sustainable in the Freudian uncanny as long there is unacknowledged or unintegrated trauma manifesting itself as a cycle.

concept and generate latent anxiety. This process depends on previous experiences of anxiety which the conscious mimics to protect itself from another instance of anxiety. Hence, the operating property of “hesitation” used by Todorov to define the fantastic is what permits the Freudian uncanny to overlap with it and to transfer itself into the fantastic, replacing it. This is not without theoretical basis, since psychoanalysis is a vital component of Todorov’s work, as noted by Maria Tatar:

The fantastic draws its very lifeblood from an event that, defying reason, shatters the stability of the world to create a condition of radical homelessness. A world once safe and secure becomes hostile and treacherous. The new world is situated at the crossroad of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, at the point where the two worlds converge in meaning to suggest the sinister and the oppressive. With knowledge, the intellectual uncertainty created by the uncanny event yields to conviction, and the fantastic gives way either to the marvelous or to the strange (Tatar, 1980, p. 182).

Accordingly, the conceptual association of the uncanny, as far as its part of the structural analysis, happens through the integration of both Freud’s and Todorov’s use of intellectual uncertainty (understood as hesitation) and anxiety to change the reader’s attitude towards the text. Todorov’s entire analysis tries to go beyond establishing a genre, it is proposing a creative process or a framework to achieve a particular effect. It is an extratextual tool that aims to impact the attitude of the reader towards the text.

The appeal of the Freudian uncanny comes from its usefulness in engaging with phenomena and processes that have come to define the contemporary experience, at its core (being) the function of defamiliarization. The fantastic on the other hand, as indicated by Tatar, is inherently unstable and transient, and must collapse to give way to either magic or dread. What

the Todorovian fantastic accomplishes, is to open the discussion about a genre—whether this is for the uncanny or the marvelous—to the effects it produces on the reader¹⁷, rather than constrain it only with the formal attributes of text. The uncanny as it takes over the functions and properties of the Todorovian Fantastic becomes a cluster that theorizes the supernatural and magical components of magical realism.

3.3.2. The function of the preconscious in the associative model of the psyche

In his topological model of the psyche, Freud proposes three spaces as systems that contain cognitions and representations: the unconscious, the pre-conscious, and the conscious (S. Freud, 1915, p. 159). Libido acts as a drive-energy that is attached to the contents of the psyche but can be moved out of the three spaces. The unconscious is latent and impossible to directly be accessed; here all repressed contents are stored as primitive, potent, undiluted forms which Freud names things-presentations. These representations exist in the unconscious as with time or negation and, within the psyche take precedence over the outer reality. Contents of the unconscious are always monstrous for the conscious, as by definition they are repressed, and thus, their incursion in the consciousness implies conflict as they threaten the self-concept. For thing-presentations to move and integrate into other spaces, they require to be reinterpreted as word-presentations, otherwise, anxiety may ensue.

Word-presentation in Freudian theory acts as a mental representation of a word that is associated with an object or thing-presentation. According to Freud, word-presentations are derived from the act of naming objects or things, and they gain meaning through this reference.

¹⁷ Or the viewer in the case of cinema.

Word-presentations are also linked to sound-presentations, which are the acoustic images of words. Freud proposed that word-presentations are connected to thing-presentations through associative pathways that can be activated by conscious or unconscious processes. Through these pathways, word-presentations are able to pull out from the depths of the unconscious content that otherwise would have remained repressed. The unconscious has only space for thing-presentations, opposite of the unconscious which can contain both word- and thing-presentations. In Freud's conception language can be understood as the conscious process of thought, which allows for psychoanalysis to translate and access all contents, and representations in the three spaces of the psyche.

The contents of the unconscious, thing-presentations, are pre-verbal images of individual or collective trauma, which are the result of the internalization and reappropriation of mnemonic traces. This is content formation stemming from the cathectic activity that predates the perception of object and memory formation and is bound to hallucinatory processes of wish fulfillment and fantasy. For unconscious images to move into other spaces and produce anxiety, the remnants of the activity within the unconscious must be associated with a recent content located in the consciousness, usually a fuzzy memory trace. The preconscious role is then to translate/connect the content from the unconscious to a word-presentation so the integration of both contents would discharge the pent-up mental energy associated with repressed and unconscious content. The uncanny would only manifest if the preconscious fails to establish a strong enough connection between the two contents, as the affect separated from the content is discharged in the form of ambiguous anxiety.

Consequently, the uncanny, at its most basic, is part of unconscious phenomena, i.e., a process that is based on the experience of anxiety and repression, and which mirrors the previous

affects of it. Reading the uncanny as a function of anxiety and defamiliarization, the Freudian definition of uncanny as the return of the repressed is a corollary of the process of unconscious content invading consciousness and triggering a defense mechanism to repress the latent anxiety. The experience of the uncanny mirrors the magical realism narratives in that the main consequence of the experience leads to a destabilization of the psyche by an invasion of a decontextualized memory. (Decon)textualization thus, because of trauma-induced anxiety, takes centrality.

Hence, the associations of the Freudian uncanny to the whole conceptual field of existential/postmodern terms and adjectives which culminate with defamiliarization, is justified, as it parallels the use of (decon)textualization to explain two temporal realities (present consciousness invaded by traumatic memories) clashing and questioning assumptions and the truth value of present cognitions. In a magical realist narrative, all these components often coalesce and function, following the same criterion: two heterogeneous texts are merged into one (past and present) through an invading haunting element, and ambiguity ensues, thus, decontextualizing the narrative.

3.3.3. Anxiety, repression and repetition compulsion: understanding the affects associated with the uncanny and magical realism

The grounds for identification of the uncanny and magical realism reside in their structural similarities and the way they are grounded in parallel aesthetical commitments. Freud originally proposed the uncanny as an aesthetical descriptor, a narrative device that addresses the experience of defamiliarization in gothic literature. In his seminal essay, *The Uncanny* (Freud,

1919), Freud identifies the two subconscious sources for the experience of the uncanny, namely, unsurmounted primitive beliefs and infantile morbid anxiety leading to regression to an early stage into the psychosexual development of the subject (Freud, 1919, p. 16). In the former, the magical thoughts of the anthropoid ancestor to the human species remain present in the modern human mental structure and, under reaffirmation of their plausibility, can resurface in the form of unconscious thoughts or behavior; in the later, the uncanny experience comes from repressed infantile complexes such as castration fear or the Oedipus complex. Where the uncanny experience comes from invoked unsurmounted primitive beliefs the process corresponds to the phylogenetic component of trauma, the source of the death drive, and leads to repetition compulsion. In the case of infantile complexes, if some trigger or impressions connects by mimesis or analogy to the recollection memory of trauma, then an uncanny experience takes hold of consciousness (Aviles Ernult, 2020; Avilés Ernult, 2021).

The expression of anxiety observed as a tendency to repeat neurotic behavior, and pattern repetition observed in infants, points to some deep and fundamental process that constitute the basis of the reiterative morbid anxiety associated with the uncanny. Freud identifies this type of morbid anxiety, as an expression of some powerful unconscious affect:

If psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every emotional affect, whatever its quality, is transformed by repression into morbid anxiety, then among such cases of anxiety there must be a class in which the anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs. This class of morbid anxiety would then be no other than what is uncanny, irrespective of whether it originally aroused dread or some other affect. (Freud, 1919)

In the very first remarks of the 1919 essay Freud asserted that the uncanny is an unconscious phenomenon. Considering that Freud constantly used images, the contents of dreams, and artistic representations to circumscribe the uncanny to an essentially unconscious phenomenon, it follows that the uncanny is fundamentally the return of the repressed or an unconscious process. As Freud suggests:

It is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a ‘compulsion to repeat’ proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character [...] All these considerations prepare us for the discovery that whatever reminds us of this inner ‘compulsion to repeat’ is perceived as uncanny (Freud, 1919, p. 44).

Repetition compulsion is a concept that Freud addresses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), as a revised account of the theory of drives, and introduces the death drive, a more primal phylogenetic component of the mind. In previous works, Freud contraposed the pulsion of the libido located in the unconscious, the pleasure principle, to the conscious and the reality principle. However, in his second theory of the drives, he reformulates his account of libido to mean the instinct to maintain and support life; in opposition, the death drive comes to signify the tendency to reduce mental energy, expenditure, conflict, and the return to the state of inactivity, outside of the boundaries of organic life (Masschelein 2011, p. 40). This new formulation of the drives is problematic for the conception of the uncanny. In his 1919’s essay, *The Uncanny*, Freud defines the uncanny as an aesthetical concept, addressing pleasure-seeking behavior and the manifestation of latent impulses. However, simultaneously, the uncanny is a type of anxiety, a negative emotion that conflicts with pleasure-seeking (S. Freud, 1955a, 1955d). The implication

is that identifying the uncanny as an aesthetic concept appears to be antithetical to the effects that it produces: anxiety. How is it possible then to justify the uncanny as an aesthetic concept and a catalyst of anxiety simultaneously? One possibility is that, in the short term, dealing with the integration of trauma and repressed content is less energy-taxing than mild and recurrent form anxiety. Another possible answer is the identification of repetition compulsion as a drive, a phylogenetic imperative that seeks to silence the uncanny through repression, generating as a byproduct of anxiety. It follows then that the experience of the uncanny, as an aesthetic experience, does not generate pleasure, but a temporal relief from the incursion of the repressed into consciousness.

However, in his second theory of anxiety, Freud abandoned his topological model of the psyche, in favor of a structural model where anxiety rests in the ego rather than in the id, and instead of being a byproduct of repression, it becomes the primary source of repression (Freud, 1933, p. 85). The primary trauma, the experience of birth, is stored in an infant's psyche as the experience of danger, which later reappear when confronting dangerous and similarly stressful circumstances and, hence, serves as a prototypical formation of how to experience future anxiety (S. Freud, 1926). For the ego to experience the uncanny it must store the fears and dependent condition of infancy, and in doing so the ego anticipates future conditions of similar trauma and danger (S. Freud, 1926). New experiences of danger may come from reality or the psyche, but in all cases, the new experiences are stored in the id, as the unconscious content associates itself with the primary trauma and mimics the primary experience of anxiety. Repressed content is always traumatic and monstrous, as it triggers fear and anxiety as released from a process which, as the source of the content of repression, must at least satisfy two conditions: a) the content repressed is ineffable as far as that no unconscious content can be attached directly to a

conscious representation, and b) it exists always in an ontological pure form, without negations and outside of the flow of time. Castration, for example, is a typical instance of repressed content, which, when present in the ego, requires repression through the id to protect the ego from the effects of anxiety, but at the same time, reinforces the presence of traumatic content in the unconscious; thus, fixating the experience of anxiety to the memory of castration. Following this argument anxiety is associated with any ideational content subjected to repression (Freud, 1961)

The cycle of the return of the repressed or cycle of the uncanny is a loop that produces further repression, which is necessary in order to cope with anxiety and protect the ego's self-concept. Implied in this process of the uncanny is a defense mechanism that is necessary to provide a way of dealing with the negative emotional load produced. The uncanny is not a defense mechanism *sensu stricto*, but the defense mechanism is implied in its cycle of reiteration. Instead, it is a precursor of less intense anxiety, with its main function being to protect the ego as a reaction to danger, and paradoxically becoming the motor of repression (Masschelein, 2011, p. 45). So, the uncanny reproduces a cycle of trauma, as it mirrors the ego's experience of phylogenetic and ontogenetic trauma, to which the ego reacts with regression into earlier stages of infancy. Anna Freud defines a defense mechanism as a protection of the ego drive demands and influence (1937, p. 31). This means that the id, located in the unconscious according to the second special theory, mounts an incursion into the ego, to which the ego responds by pushing back aggressively into the id:

The situation of the peaceful frontier traffic ends. The drive excitations hold with their own tenacity and energy to their drive goals and undertake hostile ideas in the ego in hope to surprise and overwhelm it. On the other hand, the ego becoming distrustful

undertakes counter actions raids into the area of the id. The ego's intention is a lasting paralyzing of the drives by suitable preventive measures, those which serve the protection of its boundaries(A. Freud & Baines, 1937, p. 10).

Sigmund Freud uses the terms “defense” and “regression” interchangeably, at least before 1926, to indicate a form of resistance that would oppose unacceptable representations, images, and emotional content in the consciousness, with the strong implication of neurosis because of undergoing this resistance. These reactions to the perceived danger tie the first and second theories of anxiety— the function of trauma— to the process of repetition compulsion the uncanny, which, if not neurotic, at least is extremely taxing to the mind. However, if the uncanny is “the mark of the return of the repressed (Freud, 1919, p. 13)”, or “the name for everything that ought to have remained . . . hidden and secret and has become visible (Freud, 1919, pp. 3–4)”, then the uncanny is manifested through devices which act as tokens or symbols of the unconscious painful content which has left a scar in an individual's mind.

Based on the previous sections of this chapter, the properties of the Freudian uncanny as expressed in Freud's 1919 essay are summarized as follows:

- a. The uncanny arises as the recurrence of something forgotten and repressed, which takes the mind to relive the relation it had with said memory. This takes the form of a cycle of the uncanny.
- b. This recurrence has two sources: infantile (traumatic) memory and the primitive experience of the human species.
- c. Thus, the uncanny depends on repetition compulsion which is a structure of the unconscious.

- d. To translate this into fiction, the aesthetics of the uncanny narrative should represent a plausible reality, for which a character should act as a linchpin of it (Freud, 1919).
- e. The aesthetics of uncanny fiction require the merging of objective and subjective styles into one, the merging of realism and dream logic, to provide a sense of ambivalence and intellectual uncertainty to the narrative.

3.4. Convergence of the Freudian uncanny into magical realism: towards a unified conceptualization of (decon)textualization and defamiliarization

The interest in the literary and aesthetic convention of the uncanny is a relatively recent academic development incepted about a century ago with Sigmund's Freud essay *The Uncanny*. However, the web of interconnected phenomena it refers to is more eldritch and arcane than the initial conceptualization that Freud suggested. For psychoanalysis and the continental tradition, the interrogative of what the uncanny is, begins with the influence of arts and fiction on the subject; specifically, how does the experience of narration correlate with mental pathologies and its therapy? Indeed, this appears to be the prime interest of Freud when he connects the uncanny to the surmounted ontogenetic past and morbid anxiety.

The uncanny belonging to the first class—that proceeding from forms of thought that have been surmounted—retains this quality in fiction as in experience so long as the setting is one of physical reality; but as soon as it is given an arbitrary and unrealistic setting in fiction, it is apt to lose its quality of the uncanny." (Freud, 1919)

Following Freud's conception, in fiction, the uncanny is a text which is grounded in reality or a sense of plausibility, for an unrealistic setting would compromise the perception of forms coming from the primitive past of the species. The experience of the uncanny depends on the disruption of a setting or a context (text A), by a decontextualized memory, (text B). The other class of the uncanny, which is further constructed in this essay, is infantile morbid anxiety, whose source is early trauma. Both classes of trauma follow the same overall pattern: a memory or extrinsic text which disrupts coherence or unity in a setting or baseline, and the subsequent generation of anxiety. The operating assumption we are making in this paper is that the conceptual commitments expressed in the above pattern, the essential core of the Freudian uncanny and magical realist narratives is a form of intertextuality.

This study focuses on narrow reading of the concept of intertextuality. Intertextuality is the relationship that unites two texts, A and B, in which one of them is called in or invoked into the other. While it's true that intertextuality generates meaning without anachronism—for example metaphor and allusion—this study defines intertextuality as a function of intersubjectivity which facilitates the assimilation of texts. What the uncanny causes is a specific type of (decon)textualization, a disruption of the work of intertextuality. This is perhaps better defined in terms of disruption of history-time, meaning, a concrete coherent historical moment that is unsettled similar to which Walter Benjamin understands revolutions in history (Wohlfarth, 1979). It implies the ripping of an image out of the past and placing it into a new context so that it can disrupt contemporary ideological relations. If we understand the narrative of history as the movement between opposing static and revolutionary forces, Benjamin's conception suggests a decontextualized text coming from a forgotten or disjointed past, disrupts the present construction of history and identity by virtue of an anachronism which is hard to assimilate. This

clash of two texts is what would keep the narrative of history updated and possibilities either the advancement or stagnation of a timeline. The stagnation of a timeline indicates that the decontextualized text intruding into the narrative is denying resolution to the narrative. Conversely, an advancement of the narrative would imply the disruption caused by the intertextual, when decontextualized text is contextualized and assimilated into a narrative's timeline. Hence the resolution of the narrative is achieved once contextualization of all dissonant texts is achieved.

According to Per Linell, recontextualization can be defined as the “dynamic transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text-in-context ... to another” (Linell, 1998, p. 54), where one text receives and assimilates another one, through different means: of reference, allusion, deixis, metaphor, etc. This mechanism is vital to understand the production of meaning in contemporary fiction since every genre or textual convention is interlinked to others that conform to a context in which to interpret and assign cultural value. In the case of cinema, given its contemporary relevance and its relatively recent inception as an art form, it relied on literary texts to validate and negotiate a place among the aesthetic conventions of the high arts¹⁸.

Intertextuality, then, is an implicit component of literary fiction and film narratives that takes more relevance as the process underlying uncanny experiences and magical realist texts. Moreso, a specific mechanism of intertextuality is embedded within the concrete narrative distortion that the use of both realism and magical texts bring to deny a timeline resolution.

¹⁸ A point that Jefferson Kline ('s *Screening the Text: Intertextuality and the New Wave French Cinema*) (1992), demonstrated as he addressed the New Wave to identify the references and absences of literature in the art firm. Literary texts and cinema, Kline elaborates, are art forms that constantly resort to intertextual structures to transpose realities and timelines into contemporary narratives.

As the concept of intertextuality enables the process of (decon)textualization— (decon)textualization is an effect of interconnection between a wide corpus of texts—, (decon)textualization within uncanny magical realism explains the narrative process of disruption in the production of meaning.

3.5. Exploring how narrative reality produces the effects of defamiliarization

If this reading of the uncanny is used to explain magical realism, where does it fit? If we look at the definitions that have been formulated at least on textual components, the magical, supernatural, fantastic text; plus, literary realism. Matthew Strecher proposes magical realism as a “descriptive concept of a highly detailed realistic setting invaded by something too strange to believe (1999, p. 267)”. Here is where the concepts of memory and reality, which play a fundamental role in the conceptualization of magical realism, require a theoretical substrate to explain how the questioning of the narrative reality produces the effects of defamiliarization, normalization of the supernatural, dread, and estrangement. The phrase used by Stretcher “too strange to believe” indicates identical properties of the Freudian uncanny aforementioned: firstly, disbelief in the narrative world or epistemological textualization of hesitation, secondly, the process of invasion leading into defamiliarization, and thirdly, estrangement. This suggests that Todorovian and Freudian uncanny, together with the fantastic, are more than overlapping concepts, but theoretical expressions of the very same operative principle aforementioned. Thus, justifying the reading this dissertation assumes.

We have seen that the use of magical realism allows the reader to immerse him/herself in the text as his/her objective extratextual reality is questioned and undermined. The articulation of

different realities and heterogeneous interpretations of the embedded realities, each with its own history and logic, destabilizes assumptions and certainty, even if only unconsciously. Working similarly to a postmodern framework, magical realism in a narrative (decon)textualizes the text through self-reflexivity and references to history. Linda Hutcheon (1988) sustains that: “Its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs... is made the grounds for its rethinking of the form and contents of the past (2003, p. 5)”. Giving the example of García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, she recognizes that its narrative is an attempt to rewrite history and to question the status of the conventional assumptions of the past. Even questioning its own reinterpretation of history, multiple approaches destabilize textual and extratextual knowledge systems.

In the concrete case of magical realist narratives, (decon)textualization fulfills a double role: it points at the presence of trauma or repressed content and defamiliarizes what otherwise was unproblematic, normal, or quotidian. By juxtaposing the mundane and the fantastic, the historical and the mythical, or the rational and the irrational, invading texts or elements become part of a multiple-perspective narrative. Since no single component of such a narrative can be given a preferential truth value, everything becomes unreliable and unfamiliar. Hence the removal or distortion of the historical, cultural, and personal contexts of a narrative affects the meaning and impact of the events depicted. Alternatively, (decon)textualization can be seen as a form of silencing or erasure that denies the complexity and specificity of the experiences of the individual or the collective. By stripping away the contextual factors that shape and influence the characters and their actions, (decon)textualization can create a false or incomplete representation of reality that reinforces dependence on recollections of the past.

However, when (decon)textualization functions as a symptom or consequence of trauma, it reflects the repression of traumatic or unacceptable memories or desires, which are projected onto the fictional world as magical events or phenomena. Hence the unsettling and defamiliarizing effects appearing on the narrative have at its source repressed and returning content. For the analytical framework used in the analysis of the selected films, this study identifies the magical component, the invading supernatural element, of magical realism as the symbolic return of the repressed, made manifest using narrative devices to make evident the influence of a traumatic experience as the overarching conflict to be solved or addressed.

Having examined Freud's uncanny and its deconstruction of the cognitive process implied in the experience of the return of repressed memories, this section now turns back to the newly coined category of uncanny magical realism, its conceptual structure, possibilities, and limitations.

One vital argument is that the magical realist convention in cinema lacks a stable and delimited corpus of films to designate. In other words, the lack of a stable definition of magical realism convention is causing difficulty in designating/identifying specific films to categorize under the magical realist genre, thus limiting the analytic usefulness of the category as a film genre. To address this limitation of the magical realist convention, this study proposes to focus on the textualization that happens within magical realism, where the supernatural/magical component shifts the reception of the text on the three levels of structural analysis: the verbal, syntactic, and extratextual levels. Most important is the textualization occurring on the extratextual level, where ambiguity sustains the immersion of the reader into a narrative. For the uncanny to operate as an explicative process, some degree of textualization of the viewer established a continuum between the cognitive structures of the psyche and narratives.

The new concept, magical realism and the uncanny conflated is addressable through psychoanalysis, which is a hermeneutic discipline both suited to structural analysis since it explains the cognitive processes and mechanisms of epistemic textualization and the interpretation of hidden meanings behind the narrative structures of the psyche.

For instance, to unify the concept of magical realism, this study proposes to embed the uncanny within the definition of magical realism—namely, a realist setting plus a magical/supernatural element. When expressed as a logic formula, magical realism becomes a predicative/decisive function in the form of a logical identity¹⁹: *for every concept that is magical realism (MR), if MR then, MR is magic(M) and realism(R)*²⁰. Which expresses the following statement:

- magical realism is *realism + [magic]*.

And if we embed magic (M) with any of the signifiers of the Freudian uncanny, namely defamiliarization, estrangement, the return of the repressed, epistemic contextualization, the macabre, intellectual uncertainty, trauma, etc.; we obtain a function that can be placed in the most conceptual framework of magical realism. For instance, Arturo Uslar-Pietri's definition:

- magical realism is “man as a [mystery] surrounded by realistic facts (1995, p. 161).”

We can embed it as:

man as a [magic] surrounded by realistic facts.

¹⁹ A logical identity is an operation for two predicates are coupled together.

²⁰ In logic of predicates: $\forall x [MR(x) \rightarrow (R(x) \wedge M(x))]$.

Then embed [magic] with any concept belonging to the Freudian uncanny kernel:

man as [estrangement] surrounded by realistic facts.

or:

man as [trauma] surrounded by realistic facts.

The result is that the original definition of magical realism is expanded and addressable by psychoanalytical aesthetics and by the theoretical framework of the uncanny. Moreover, the definition {magical realism is [realism] + [magic]} is an analytic judgment whose predicate is contained within the subject of the concept, and therefore, adds no new information. Through conflation with the uncanny, the definition of magical realism becomes ampliative since the predicate gives new information to the concept. Hence, reformulating the definition of magical realism into a function is perfectly coherent with the theoretical sources used to redefine magical realism as a concept.

The magic here is a predicate of the function which defines magical realism, and as such, embedding or adding to its set of properties must maintain three vital elements of the original magical realist definition:

a) the magical realist function collapses into either the epistemological or ontological magical realism; and

b) the tension between these categories corresponds to the tension between two sets of texts, which must be maintained through cyclical recursiveness or reiteration (see Figure 1).

c) Embedding new attributions/properties into the magical component, means that, the magical in a narration should be interpreted in function of a new attribution, and not an

abandonment of the magical. The magical and the supernatural are still present, but in the case of the uncanny clusters, magic becomes a signifier of the new embedded attribution.

Different from the Todorovian fantastic, the new concept of uncanny magical realism must maintain the ambiguity and tension between two texts, even after the epistemic textualization, namely hesitation/intellectual uncertainty, collapses. The uncanny cycle of memories and trauma, regression into repression of unconscious content, maintains this tension, ambiguity, and intellectual uncertainty, through the mechanism of anxiety. Uncanny magical realism, thus, places the Freudian uncanny as the defamiliarizing agent which through repetition compulsion, and repression maintains a connection with painful, traumatic experiences stored in the unconscious. These are never integrated so they instead are thrown into the mind's ego, to be again repressed back into the unconscious. Thus, as has been explained above, magical realist texts use magic and the supernatural to force the characters and readers to think historically, or at least in terms of the past, in order to solve this tension.

3.6. Methodology for analysis: operationalizing the uncanny within magical realism

The methodological approach of this dissertation is interdisciplinary, drawing on literary theory, psychoanalysis, film studies, and semiotics to analyze the presence of the uncanny in selected films that employ magical realism as a narrative mode. The selection of films proposed ensures a manageable scope and a representative sample of different varieties and degrees of uncanniness in magical realism. The selection of animation, science fiction, and fairytales as thematic axis ensures the viability of the operationalization of uncanny magical realism across different films and themes. The previous scholarship on magical realist cinema has engaged with the genre in a rather isolated manner, most often engaging with a limited number of films,

directors, or authors. This study also suffers from the same limitation as it is inevitable to manage the scope of analysis. However, as this study is a proof of concept, in that it is testing the operationalization of the uncanny magical realism as a tool of analysis, further research should expand and refine the method proposed here. Also, it seeks to avoid the pitfall of categorizing magical realist cinema as a function of literary adaptation of the more established literary genre.

The data collection methods consist of three main components: a) a comprehensive literature review of the relevant sources on magical realism and the uncanny in cinema; b) conceptual analysis of the conceptualizations of magical realism and the uncanny to produce a synthesis of both; and c) textual analysis of three films that exemplify different aspects of the uncanny in magical realism using the concept of uncanny magical realism defined in this chapter. The following film will be looked at: Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* (2001), Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006),) and Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006). The analysis method is based on the application of the concepts and frameworks developed in the theory section of this chapter to the selected films, focusing on the use of narrative devices and techniques. The methodological choices made in this dissertation are justified by the following reasons:

a) an interdisciplinary approach allows for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex phenomenon of the uncanny in magical realism and cinema.

b) a literature review provides a solid theoretical foundation and a critical overview of the conceptualization process and convergences of magical realism and the Freudian uncanny.

c) a textual analysis enables a detailed and in-depth examination of the specific features and strategies that produce an uncanny experience in film.

To expand on the work already done in the existing criticism, this study employed film textual analysis with a focus on psychoanalytic narrative analysis and character analysis to complement this hermeneutic approach. It will coin the concept of uncanny magical realism to identify a narrative device, a token of the return of memory repression. The properties of uncanny magical realism used as concepts to identify narrative devices are the following: trauma, anxiety, defense mechanism, (decon)textualization and defamiliarization, and the cycle of the uncanny.

To accomplish this, it looks at three magical realist films with diverse narrative conflicts:

- 1) *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (2001), focuses on how the main character identity, Chihiro, is doubled into a doppelganger, Sen, in order to cope with her displacement and loss of her family. Chihiro shifts her native drives and unacceptable emotions into behaviors that are constructive and socially acceptable, recontextualizing her memories and achieving escape from the cycle of the repression of her identity.
- 2) Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), Ofelia in this visual narrative is a displaced character who is dealing with the despair of the Spanish civil war and finds refuge in the promise of immortality, of an alternate reality where time has stopped, and her family is intact. In this sense, Ofelia shows regression into earlier stages of mental development, but her main defense mechanism is the denial of her past traumatic experiences as Moanna inside the magical timeline. This generated a split in her personality, which correlates to the two texts found in the film: (a) the main realist setting of the Spanish civil war, and (b) the invading magical memories of the Underground realm where Moanna came from.

- 3) Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) is used to illustrate the final research of this dissertation which is the internal process of conscience to integrate a fragmented persona in an internal process which is experienced by the protagonist of the film: overcoming spiritual infertility and the lack of historical consciousness.

In order to address the past using narrative and character analysis the uncanny is operationalized in magical realist texts by answering the following guiding questions corresponding to the requirements of uncanny magical realism:

- a) Are the setting and characters fragmented or fractured, so the plot deals with healing trauma?
- b) Do reiterative memories take the form of narrative devices or images that disrupt or deny catharsis in cycles of (decon)textualization solving?
- c) Is the uncanny present as this cycle of (decon)textualization, and is it a central component in the construction of the setting and narrative?

If all conditions are satisfied by the narrative analysis, and the tokens of the uncanny (narrative devices) are identified and shown to immerse characters in the uncanny cycle, then the uncanny is operationalized. Uncanny magical realism follows a cycle in order to sustain the intellectual uncertainty that is required to defamiliarize the narrative's plot as a central component in the construction of the fractured worlds and characters dealing with trauma.

- 1) The setting and characters are fractured or traumatized, so the plot (narrative conflict) deals primarily with healing the cause of the fracture (trauma).
- 2) Reiterative memories take the form of narrative devices or tokens of the uncanny that disrupt or deny catharsis; cycles of (decon)textualization solving.

- 3) When, and if, the disruption stops and the image is assimilated into a new context, it gives rise to recontextualization. Thus, magical realist narratives employ the uncanny as this cycle of (decon)textualization solving as a central component in the construction of the world and its narrative flow.

The following internal process of the uncanny describes how the uncanny operates within magical realist narratives.

- The uncanny within magical realism works as an intertextual relation between the realist text and the magical text.
- This relation form/structure is expressed as a heterogenous text invading a realist one, thus, creating (decon)textualization between them.
- This dissonance originates from repetition compulsion-- a decontextualizing structure of the unconscious, denying meaning generation until the dissonance between those is solved and the decontextualized text is recontextualized.
- The denial of meaning captures the timeline's progression; without meaning-making characters are stuck relieving the past to recontextualize the heterogeneous text.
- Within the narrative, a systemic disruption, the uncanny, is expressed as a narrative device, a token of the uncanny: trauma, anxiety, defense mechanism, (decon)textualization and defamiliarization, doubling, and cyclical repetition, among many.

The following chapters will illustrate the application of how uncanny magical realism is operationalized in the narrative conflict as well as in the construction of meaning in each analyzed film.

Chapter 4

Decontextualized Memories in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006): The Fractured Identity of Ofelia²¹

This chapter seeks to establish the presence of the uncanny in *Pan's Labyrinth* as well as argue for its categorization as a magical realist narrative. It does this by focusing on the analytical question: How are trauma and fragmented memories (the uncanny) constructed as a defining property of magical realist narratives? This allows us to make use of narrative analysis and to focus on the structures of storytelling, themes, and plot lines which point out the reiteration of traumatic memories as a source of the character's inability to move and integrate contents from the unconscious and consciousness.

4.1. The narrative structure of Ofelia/Moanna's journey through the labyrinth

Pan's Labyrinth is a 2006 fantasy film directed by Guillermo del Toro, set in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. The film combines elements of a fairy tale, horror, and historical drama, and explores themes such as innocence, violence, fascism, and resistance. The film consists of two parallel narratives: one follows the life of Ofelia, a young girl who discovers a magical world in a labyrinth near her new home; the other depicts the brutal reality of the war and the oppression of the Francoist regime. The film interweaves Ofelia's fantasy with the

²¹ Major parts of this chapter were published in: Avilés Ernult, J. R. (2023). Analyzing Magical Realist Narratives through the Freudian Uncanny: Decontextualized Memories in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). *Ritsumeikan Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, 41(1), pp. 1-21.

historical events of the post-war period, where her mother is pregnant with the child of a cruel and authoritarian military officer, Captain Vidal, who is hunting down the remnants of the Republican resistance in the nearby forest.

The film opens with a voice-over narration that tells the story of Princess Moanna, the daughter of the king of the underworld, who escaped to the mortal world and lost her memory. The narrator says that her father left portals open for her to return, but she never did. The scene then shifts to 1944 Spain, where Ofelia and her pregnant mother Carmen are traveling to meet Carmen's new husband, Captain Vidal, a ruthless officer in charge of hunting down the anti-Franco rebels hiding in the nearby mountains. Along the way, Ofelia encounters a stick insect that she believes is a fairy.

At Vidal's headquarters, an old mill in the forest, Ofelia meets Mercedes, a housekeeper who secretly supports the rebels, and Dr. Ferreiro, a sympathetic doctor who also works for Vidal. Ofelia is unhappy with her new life and dislikes Vidal, who only cares about his unborn son and treats Carmen harshly. Ofelia encounters a stick insect that she believes is a fairy and follows it to an ancient stone labyrinth near Vidal's mill. There, she meets a mysterious Faun who tells her that she is the reincarnation of Princess Moanna, the daughter of the king of the underworld, who left her realm to explore the human world and lost her memory. The Faun gives her a book, the Book of the Crossroads, that contains three trials that she must complete before the full moon in order to prove her identity and return to her true home. Meanwhile, Vidal interrogates and tortures two farmers who he suspects are rebels, killing one of them and mutilating the other. He also shows his cruelty and indifference towards Carmen and Ofelia, whom he only cares about as means to produce a male heir.

The first trial is to retrieve a key from the belly of a giant toad that lives under a fig tree. Ofelia succeeds in obtaining the key, but also causes the death of the toad and the destruction of the tree; also, she ruins her dress and shoes in the process. She returns to her room and hides the key under her bed. The next day, Vidal and his men ambush a group of rebels who were trying to get supplies from Mercedes. Vidal brutally tortures and kills two of them, while letting one go as bait for the others. He also discovers that Dr. Ferreiro has been helping the rebels by giving them medicine and executes him.

The Faun gives Ofelia a second trial. Ofelia should use a magic chalk to draw a door on any wall and enter a banquet hall where a dagger is hidden. However, she must not eat or drink anything from the table, where a monstrous creature called the Pale Man awaits. Meanwhile, Vidal interrogates and tortures some captured rebels, and kills Dr. Ferreiro, who was secretly helping them. Ofelia fails to follow the instructions of the trial and is unable to resist temptation. She eats two grapes from the table, which awakens the Pale Man and puts her life in danger. She manages to escape with the dagger but loses one of her fairy companions. Ofelia must take a dagger from a locked cabinet without touching anything else or making any noise. The Faun warns her not to eat or drink anything there, as it is a trap. Ofelia enters the hall and finds the dagger, but she is tempted by some grapes on the table and eats two of them. This awakens the pale man, who chases her and tries to eat her. Ofelia barely escapes with the dagger, but two of her fairy companions are killed by the monster. Meanwhile, Captain Vidal is busy at dinner. The scene takes place in a lavish dining room, where Vidal has invited some local officials and clergy to celebrate his military achievements and assert his authority over the region. The table is covered with fine porcelain tableware, silverware, and lavish food, contrasting with the poverty and hunger of the rebels and villagers outside.

The Faun is furious with Ofelia for disobeying him and tells her that she has failed and will never see him again. He also takes away her book and leaves. Meanwhile, Carmen's health deteriorates due to complications with her pregnancy. She finds the mandrake root that Ofelia had placed under her bed as instructed by the Faun to heal her. She throws it into the fireplace, believing it is a bad omen. As soon as she does so, she goes into labor and gives birth to a boy. To the dismay of Ofelia, she dies shortly after.

Vidal learns that his men have been betrayed by one of his servants. He takes his son and orders his men to prepare for an attack by the rebels. Mercedes, who is a spy for the rebels, tries to flee with Ofelia, but they are captured by Vidal's soldiers. Mercedes tries to rescue Ofelia but is caught. Vidal interrogates her. However, she manages to free herself with a hidden knife and injures Vidal's face before fleeing to join the rebels. Ofelia is locked in her bedroom by Vidal, who discovers that Carmen is dying from complications during childbirth. He orders his doctor to save the baby even if it means sacrificing Carmen's life.

The final trial culminates in a confrontation between Ofelia and Vidal at the center of the labyrinth. Ofelia's final task is to bring her newborn brother to the labyrinth and offer him as a sacrifice to the Faun. Ofelia refuses to harm her brother and defies Faun's request. As Ofelia refuses to harm her brother, she is confronted by Vidal who has followed her to the labyrinth. Vidal shoots Ofelia in the chest and takes his son out of the labyrinth. He is then ambushed by Mercedes and some rebels, who take his son away from him and execute him. As he dies, he asks Mercedes to tell his son about his death, but she denies him this last wish. Meanwhile, Ofelia lies dying in front of the altar stone, where her blood has opened the portal. She sees herself being welcomed by her father, mother, and brother in a magnificent throne room, where she is hailed as Princess Moanna. The Faun tells her that she passed the final test by choosing to

sacrifice herself rather than spill innocent blood. He also assures her that she will not remember anything from her mortal life and will live happily ever after in her true home. The film ends with the narrator's voice that says that some people believe that Ofelia still rules as a princess in a secret place where there are no lies or pain.

4.2. Ofelia/Moanna Traumatic Past as the Systemic Distortion of the Realist Timeline

Magical realist texts, specifically visual narratives, are a vehicle to express and problematize the metaphysical need for a space in-between epistemic categories and reject the constraints of totalizing purer narrative genres, so as to express a negotiation process between the past and the present, the natural and supernatural and consciousness and the unconscious, of both the individual and the collective. In this sense, Jennifer Orme argues, Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* uses a subversion of the traditional repertoire of children's narratives, Snow White, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* which by intertextual references Ofelia's character shares a strong resemblance to mentioned heroines: well-kept hair, white, skin, pinafore and dress, shoes, and full and red lips. Ofelia is part of the very same lineage of protagonists, however, her journey, and the tragic resolution to it, is centered around the symbolic manifestations of the heroine's subjectivity and feelings in the way she experiences them. Ofelia is a displaced character who is suffering from repression and dissociation, evident in her forgotten memories as Princess of the Underworld realm, and the resolution to her character arch is to deal with recovering her past identity in order to escape the violent and deadly Francoist period and recover her family.

Previous analyses of *Pan's Labyrinth* have taken the approach of creating two sets of mutually exclusive interpretations for the events narrated in Del Toro's film: one is the historic setting of the Francoist period after the Spanish Civil War where the protagonist ten-year-old Ofelia travels to meet his stepfather the Falangist Captain Vidal who is hunting down republican rebels in the countryside where she imagines strange creatures populating the ancient ruins of a roman labyrinth; the other interpretation unfolds as the narrative of the Princess of the Underworld journey to the human world where the sunlight erases her memory and becomes lost to her father. The King of the Underground Realm then constructs labyrinths, and portals, in the hope of the princess' eventual return. In the film, these two interpretations of Ofelia's experience and identity are presented as a unified, coherent set of events that are left open-ended regarding Ofelia's fate. The negotiation between two realities is made clear in how she is an unwanted stepdaughter of the violent Captain Vidal in the realist setting of the Spanish Civil War and, simultaneously she longs to recover her memory and identity as Moanna Princess of a fairy tale by passing three tests given to her by the gatekeeper an old Faun. The resolution to the story comes from the intersecting timelines, and she needs to decide between the corruption of the mortal realm or dying and regaining her memories and immortal life.

Del Toro (Spelling, 2006) has stated that the first interpretation, the realist one, implies that all the magical occurrences, the Faun, fairies, monsters, and the underworld kingdom are playing only within Ofelia's head since no other human character perceives such magical occurrences. Therefore, there is a reduction of the fantastical to a psychological phenomenon. However, the centrality of the fantastical characters and their narrative devices demonstrate a concern with the symbolic and metaphoric rather than the concreteness of a historical drama. The

first narrative device used in the film, the narrator's exposition, informs the audience of the Journey of Princess Moanna/Ofelia, as the first act of worldbuilding:

“A long time ago, in the underground realm, where there are no lies or pain, there lived a Princess who dreamed of the human world. She dreamed of blue skies, soft breeze, and sunshine. One day, eluding her keepers, the Princess escaped. Once outside, the brightness blinded her and erased every trace of the past from her memory. She forgot who she was and where she came from. Her body suffered cold, sickness, and pain. Eventually, she died. However, her father, the King, always knew that the Princess' soul would return, perhaps in another body, in another place, at another time. And he would wait for her, until he drew his last breath, until the world stopped turning...” (G. del Toro, 2006, 00:01:51)

The above exposition is the myth of the underground kingdom, which is narrated in the convention of a fairy tale to accentuate the fantastical as the backdrop of the acts the film depicts. It also marks the point of systemic disruption, where Ofelia's trauma first expressed itself and her identity split. Two texts, corresponding to the experiences of Moanna and Ofelia, then split. They are distinctive texts within this narrative since these two realities are underpinned by radically different sets of metaphysics; where fantastic discourse exists, the Francois historical setting needs to withdraw.

Moanna is a tragic princess, marked with the desire for mortal pleasures, childlike and naïve, she is oblivious to the reality of the human condition which comes with pain, lies, and suffering. A poetic indication of a loss of innocence can be inferred from the phrase “the brightness blinded her” into the subsequent “her body suffered cold, sickness and pain” (G. del Toro, 2006, 00:01:51). It is indicated by the director that some traumatic experience befell

Moanna, however, what precisely happened is not disclosed ever during the film, but it constitutes the primary trauma that the protagonist experiences, and which belongs to a very ancient past, disjointed from the context of the Spanish Civil War; a timeline which Ofelia and Captain Vidal inhabit. It is in the opening sequence where the omniscient narrator uses, according to Rosemary Jackson, “an impersonal authoritative voice” (Jackson, 1981, p. 34) to signal the conventions of the fairytale. However, the contraposition to the historic setting appears as white titles just as the narrator begins the tale of Moanna that the sequence opening “make an implicit claim of equivalence between the represented fictional world and the real world outside the text” (Jackson, 1981). In doing this, the film juxtaposes the two timelines, one of the Underground Kingdom as a forgotten past, a disembodied, decontextualized text: the Spanish Civil War being the realist, main timeline.

The dichotomy of Moanna/Ofelia is of paramount importance for the narrative structure of the film since it exposes the conflict which the characters need to address to give a resolution to the film’s story and mimics the timelines separation, since the integration of the split personalities coincides with the final scene and integration and acceptance of Ofelia of both realities: the magical one as a set of remnants or tokens from the past taking over the Spanish Civil War timeline as the main one. This is reflected in the resolution to other character’s arch “Every major character has compelling, contradictory relationships to the story, especially the captain” (Yocom, 2008, p. 347), where the captain tries to maintain a structured, organized, and orderly world, which does not need either fantasy, emotion, or disobedience; symbolized in the cold colors and lines of the clockwork imagery that surrounds him. The contradiction of his own devotion to his father’s memento, his own watch, and the power of the myth behind it betrays the tight control he desires to retain and maintain, especially as the magical timeline reaches into his

own timeline. Through the journey of Ofelia, after each trial passed, the magical timeline gets homologated, unified, and contextualized into the captain's world order, and the symbolic Underground Kingdom takes over.

On a discursive level, both the characters of the captain and Carmen are punished repeatedly by their lack of awareness of the magical timeline since, as a decontextualized and intruding text, it denies them a space in the timeline of the film's narrative. Carmen repeatedly falls sick after her rejection of Ofelia's fairytale books, and more importantly, in rejecting Ofelia's take on the mandrake and accepting the captain's worldview, hurling the mandrake into the lit chimney, she seals her fate as a mortal, not pure enough to accept the magic of Moanna. In this sense her defense mechanism before the intruding magic is denial. Both Carmen and the Captain are in denial of the magical elements which surround them. This represents a failure to generate meaning from the signs of Ofelia/Moanna passing through the world, thus, the narrative denies them movement through time, symbolized in the shattered watch. Ofelia, however, passes her trials, recognizes her immortal soul, and refuses to give up her little brother, an infant whom she barely knows, and instead embraces and reads the signs of the magical timeline as real and meaningful, thus achieving integration of her past and present. As Moanna her forgetfulness and denial of the pain and suffering experienced in mortal reality are behavior fitting of a defense mechanism trying to cope with harmful experiences. However, her acceptance of the magical timeline, throughout the film, indicates she has recontextualized the tokens of the Underground Realm, and that she remembers her own pure identity.

And it is said that the princess returned to her father's Kingdom and that she reigned there with justice and a kind heart for many centuries. That she was loved

by her people. And that she left behind small traces of her time on Earth. Visible only to those who know where to look. (G. del Toro, 2006, 01:52:04)

The tokens of the uncanny are signals that point out the invading magical text, taking over the reality of the character in the story. The resolution of the plot is where the integration of the unconscious contents of the mind, in this case, Moanna's traumatic memories of suffering and her experiences during the Spanish Civil War, are achieved as a resolution to the film's narrative. The uncanny is a loop of memory; its denial of meaning-creation is present only if the defense mechanism reinforces a trauma: the displacement and denial of Ofelia/Moanna to recontextualize her past and present. This is what Captain Vidal could never accomplish, thus denying him an escape from repeating his father's story. Accordingly, his part in the story ended with his inability to participate in a world out of his control. A reality he equated with the resistance and magical timeline's complicit actions.

4.3. The Trials of the Labyrinth

The labyrinth after which the film is named when interpreted analytically, reveals the structure of Moanna/Ofelia's unconscious, as she journeys from a fragmented identity - one stored in the unconscious, another in the conscious - into an integrated mind at the end of the film. As a symbol of the journey, the labyrinth's role in dreams is to point the mind towards its interior, the inner shrine of the unconscious, which cannot be reached by the consciousness without a process of trial, tribulations, and intuition.

The token of the uncanny, in this case, the labyrinth, overtakes consciousness with content from the unconscious, reminding the individual of ontogenetic trauma. To this invasion,

perceived as a danger, the ego proceeds to reseat this content into the unconscious and to evoke by analogy the affects and reactions with which the conscious defended itself during its infancy. This defense, in the case of Moanna, is of repression, and of the doubling of her personality, creating Ofelia (Image 1).

This correlation between the spatial structure of the mind as proposed by Freud, and the narrative significance of the labyrinth is strongly emphasized in Del Toro's film. In his first theory of the mind, Freud conceptualizes three spaces as structures that comprise the mind: the unconscious, the pre-conscious, and the conscious. For Moanna/Ofelia's journey through the labyrinth to be complete, Moanna (the personality stored in the unconscious) must merge with Ofelia (which represents the conscious). The process of bringing back the repressed Moanna is painful; impossible without the pre-conscious which makes possible the movement from one space into the other. The supernatural/magical nature of the Faun points to him fulfilling this function as he is both, the catalyst and the one to provide closure to Moanna's Journey.

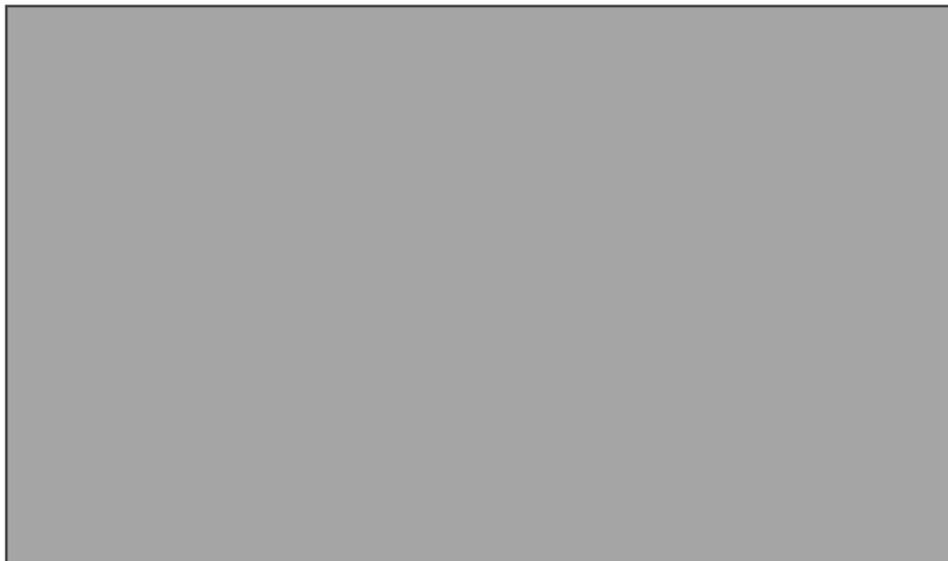


Image 1: Ofelia/Moanna representations of her unconscious and conscious mind.

Source: Prepared by the author with screenshots from (Toro, 2006).

If we look back at the logical structure of this story, this narrative conflict works in a cycle of triads: the journey is possible by three aspects of Moanna/Ofelia's personalities, which correspond to the three spaces of the mind, which in turn are tested by three trials and finally achieve integration (see Figure 1).

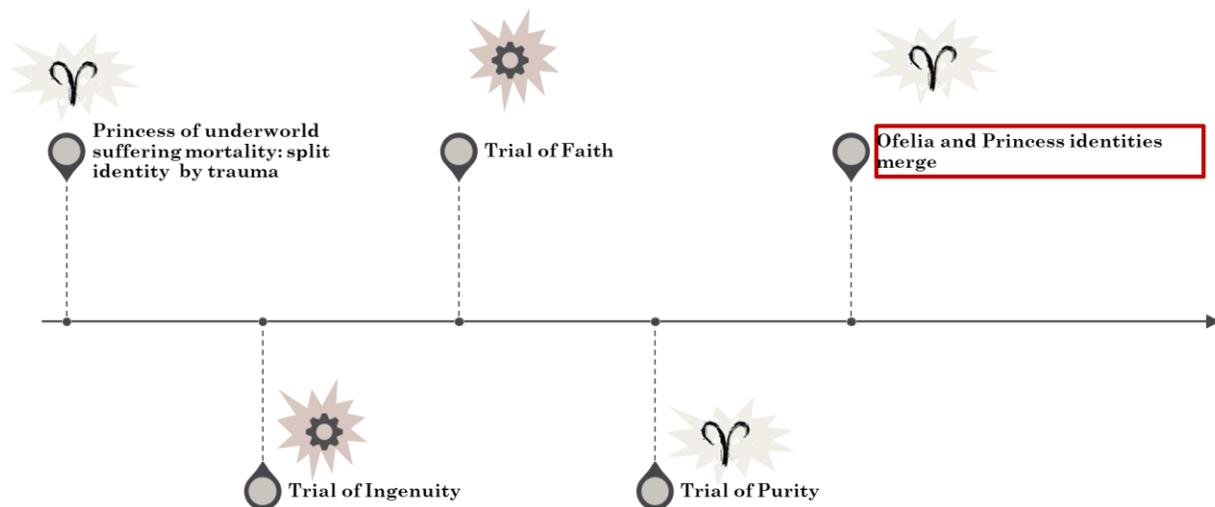


Figure 1: Diagram of Ofelia/Moanna's Journey through the Labyrinth

Source: Prepared by the author.

The symbolism of consumption appears early in the film and is related to the oppressive and greedy attitude that the Francois regime and capital Vidal display towards the population of Spain. It correlates thematically with the events occurring in the film through the double structure of the underworld realms and the mortal realm.

If the fig tree represents symbolically Spain itself, which is suffering under the dictatorship of Franco and his followers, then the toad devouring its roots is a metaphor for the fascist regime, which exploits and consumes the natural resources and the people of the country.

Moanna/Ofelia's task is then mirroring the actions of the resistance movement, which seeks to overthrow tyranny and restore democracy and freedom. So, by killing the toad and restoring the tree, Ofelia/Moanna starts the process of initiation, symbolically entering her unconscious to confront the danger, brutality, and suffering that initially traumatized her. As the key, the toad guards are the symbol of initiation and closure, which Ofelia/Moanna needs to complete her quest and return to her true home. It also signals access to the labyrinth and symbolically into the self. Mirroring the logic of the Freudian triple systems of the psyche, the key is one of three objects, which act as a narrative strategy to enable the integration of the different repressed contents of her mind.

Moanna/Ofelia's journey is painful, primarily, because she rejects the reality and brutality of the human world and seeks deliverance from it the invading reality of the supernatural. The heterogeneous nature of the supernatural narrative devices - the Underworld Kingdom, the Faun, the Fairies, the pale man - contrasts strongly against the stark background of the Spanish Civil War. The supernatural, Moanna's world, hence, acts as the decontextualized text which is seeking a place in the consciousness of Ofelia, defamiliarizing her relationship with reality. There is a mirror function in how the supernatural text's appearance and its token (device) correlate with the tragic events in the Journey of Ofelia. For instance, during the second trial, Ofelia faces a monster named "the pale man", who is sitting in front of a banquet table, ready to feast. The viewer learns through the fresco paintings on the walls of this monster's lair, that the pale man eats innocent children. This grotesque scene is a doppelganger, a mirror image, of a previous one where the inhuman Captain Vidal is sitting at a similar banquet table, conveying the Francoist state agenda of symbolically devouring the resources and life of the Spanish population - namely, the dispossessed and innocent (See Image 2).

Guest 1: God has already saved their souls. What happens to their bodies hardly matters to Him.

Guest 2: We'll help however we can, Captain. We know you're not here by choice.

Captain Vidal: You're wrong about that. I choose to be here because I want my son to be born in a new, clean Spain. Because these people hold the mistaken belief...that we're all equal. But there's a big difference. The war is over and we won. And if we need to kill every one of these vermin to settle it...then we'll kill them all, and that's that. We're all here by choice.

All Guests: By choice! (G. del Toro, 2006, 40:05-40:50)



Image 2: The pale man and Captain Vidal as mirror images.

Source: Prepared by the author with screenshots from (Toro, 2006)

Another uncanny scene is when Ofelia meets the Faun for the first time in the labyrinth. The Faun is a mythical creature that is half-human and half-goat, and he claims to be a servant from the underworld kingdom who knows Ofelia's identity as Princess Moanna. The Faun is uncanny because he is both familiar and unfamiliar to Ofelia, who doubts his intentions. The Faun speaks in an archaic and poetic language that contrasts with the direct, harsh, and brutal speech patterns of Captain Vidal and his subordinates. He gives Ofelia three tasks that involve facing dangers and sacrifices, such as retrieving a key from a giant toad and giving her own blood to open a portal. The Faun, as a liminal being, moves between realms as he influences the outcome of Ofelia's relationship with her family and Moanna's return home. In this sense he fulfills the role of Ofelia/Moanna preconscious, as he is the catalyst of Ofelia's desire to recover her memories and escape the setting of the war, but also her anxiety and fear of losing her mother or hurting her baby brother. The liminal appearance of the Faun sustains this interpretation: his body is presented as an animalistic bottom half and a humanoid upper half. The preconscious fulfills similar functions to the Faun, one of Freud's systems of the psyche, which contains both word-presentations and thing-presentations, conscious and unconscious contents. Consequently, the Faun, similarly to the preconscious, is both monstrous and civilized.

After the last trial, as Ofelia/Moanna bleeds, she sees a vision of the Faun and her parents welcoming her back to their kingdom, where she is hailed as their long-lost daughter. Since her last act of defiance proves that she is able to recover the previously repressed memories of her past, her decision to sacrifice herself over letting an innocent die symbolically rejects the worst elements of the narrative: the suffering caused by the Francoist regime and Captain Vidal's crimes.

Each trial of the labyrinth is another manifestation of the cycle of the uncanny, where repression and decontextualized supernatural images and memories interfere with the consciousness of Ofelia. The model of the uncanny, the return of the repressed through repetition compulsion, dictates that the narrative should reach finally either of the two outcomes. For example, repression of the supernatural decontextualized memories, or recontextualization of them. The final scenes left this resolution open-ended if the viewer ascribes to interpret the realistic text and the supernatural text as mutually exclusive. However, if the narrator of the film is reliable, the outcome is that Moanna/Ofelia exits from the cycle of (decon)textualization, and finally integrates both aspects of her identity with the help of the Faun.

Whether this vision was real, or a dying fantasy is left ambiguous. If interpreted as a realist text, this last vision suggests that Ofelia has found peace and happiness in death. However, when read as a magical realist narrative, the meaning of the third trial, then, was to reveal Ofelia's true character; pure and untainted by the brutal and violent nature of the mortal realm. The intrinsic condition of the human realm, initially repressed by Moanna, created a double, Ofelia.

4.4. Conclusions: Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* as a prime example of magical realism narratives

The centrality of the tokens of the uncanny as narrative devices in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), which play the roles of decontextualized memories, (re)embody the past to the effect of capturing the narrative into a loop of time. The reality, then, transforms into a reiteration of the past, and the possibility of moving through time is denied, thus denying catharsis. Ofelia in this visual narrative is a displaced character who is dealing with the despair

of the Spanish Civil War and finds refuge in the promise of immortality, of an alternate reality where time has stopped, and her family is intact. In this sense, Ofelia shows regression into earlier stages of mental development, but her main defense mechanism is the denial of her past traumatic experiences as Moanna inside the magical timeline. This came from a split in her personality, which correlates to the two texts found in the film: (a) the main realist setting of the Spanish Civil War, and (b) the invading magical memories of the Underground realm from where Moanna came from. This is a systemic distortion of the realist setting, which is carried over to its final expression, as the reiteration of the magical realm images and memories which ultimately take over the reality of Ofelia's Mother and Captain Vidal.

Three criteria were proposed to test the operationalization of the uncanny as a central narrative conflict in Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* and evaluate it as present in the film:

- i) Moanna/Ofelia is constructed as a character suffering denial and repression due to her traumatic experiences in the mortal world, resulting in the doubling of her personality; accordingly, the plot's development is centered around solving this dichotomy.
- ii) The supernatural text is constantly interfering with Ofelia's relation to her experiences of the war during the Francoist period, which reinforces her repression and displacement and creates a series of trials that she needs to overcome to resolve her double identity.
- iii) The narrative structure of this film closely follows Ofelia's advancement inside the labyrinth. This is symbolic of her inner journey to confront her forgotten past as Moanna, princess of the Underworld since decontextualized memories that mirror the realistic text defamiliarize and oppose her journey. This progression conforms to the

model of the uncanny, manifested as the return of decontextualized memories through repetition compulsion.

The operationalization of the Freudian uncanny to interpret magical realist cinema advances the theoretical development of both and enhances the scope of interpretation of arts. The present study contributes to presenting a novel and relevant interpretation of magical realist cinema, which advances the academic consolidation of this film convention into a film genre. Similarly, the Freudian uncanny belongs to a group of concepts that were developed to codify liminal spaces, ambiguity, and in general ineffable phenomena. As such, it is theoretically slippery, if not incomplete. This study develops the analytical potential of the uncanny and advances integration into the larger set of analytical and methodological repertoire used to produce academic criticism of cinema.

This study at its core addresses the phenomenon of trauma; persistent, enduring cyclical trauma. Trauma is present in fiction, but it has its source in the relationship between narrative and the human mind, history, and everyday realities. Filmmakers such as Guillermo del Toro codify this as a universal story of neo-horror, a fairy tale, and a fable; denouncing the brutality of humankind, their oppressive states, and the madness which populate the past of all nations, i.e., a haunted house of cosmic proportions. The application of this conceptual pairing, the uncanny and magical realism, to the study of historical trauma, in fictional and non-fiction narratives, would allow the analysis not only of aesthetics and art but also of historical grudges and geopolitical conflict that impact the construction and understanding of society and power structures embedded in those.

Chapter 5

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006): (decon)textualization as the token of the uncanny

5.1. The Humanizing perspective of the camera in *Children of Men*

Alfonzo Cuaron has commented on his 2006 film *Children of Men* that he set forth to address the current sociopolitical “state of things” through the narrative act of “referencing reality” (Cuarón, 2007b) The world-building of the film takes familiar landscapes and plausible locations and merges them with the iconography of a postindustrial and decadent 20th and 21st centuries, to propose an unsettling *mise-en-scène* to conjure a decontextualized sense of the reality of the historical moment. This reality stems from the plausibility of the narrative realism employed here by Cuaron and the accumulation of details borrowed from non-fictitious texts of our contemporary media ecosystem²². As a result, *Children of Men* centers its aesthetic proposal on an intertextual generation of meaning, namely the interplay of current political imagery, celebrated paintings and sculpture, and references to popular culture.

This vast iconography presented in the film, together with the camera work, gives the audience a sense of gravitas and realism while conveying spatial and temporal immediacy to the impending crisis of humanity. Thus, the genre convention under which this film is categorized, dystopian science fiction, is fitting thematically but perhaps falls short of addressing the magical realist narrative created as part of the subtext. One of the main points of tension in the narrative

²² The concept of media ecosystem refers to the complex interactions between different types of media, such as print, broadcast, digital, and social media, that create a self-referential information environment (Zuckerman, 2021). It can be argued that the dystopian depicted in *Children of Men* is already a closed system, hence self-referential.

of the film is the theme of infertility, and how it informs the internal conflict of the main character Theo Faron to overcome despair. Theo is a former activist turned bureaucrat who has for a long time suffered grief and despair from the loss of his family. This personal loss finds its correlation globally through a pandemic of infertility, which leads humanity to dissolution and dread: an uncanny world.

Cuaron's film, contrary to the typical narrative techniques of science fiction²³, focuses on the internal spiritual development of his lead character instead of an explorative voyage or speculative science imagery. Accordingly, *Children of Men* interpreted as a narrative of magical realism focuses on a broken and spiritually empty ex-activist who is, along with society, unable to move on with his life, due to spiritual and biological infertility, and the trauma implied in this condition. The theme of infertility, in the film, is interpreted in this study as the denial of historical consciousness²⁴ or historicity. Because of the inability to procreate and nurture new generations, the necessity of maintaining and constructing a continuous culture and society is absent. In other words, the absence of a conscience of history discourages any attempts to conceive and construct frameworks of knowledge that would make possible the existence of concrete individuals or part of the collective. Under these circumstances, social, cultural, and political disintegration takes over.

This chapter will analyze the film *Children of Men*, arguing a magical realist film that deals with infertility-caused trauma. Biological infertility, in turn, causes a lack of spiritual fertility and historical consciousness which is constructed by the loss of a meaningful historical

²³ Science fiction is a film genre that uses speculative, fictional science-based depictions of phenomena that are not fully accepted by mainstream science, such as extraterrestrial lifeforms, spacecraft, robots, cyborgs, dinosaurs, mutants, interstellar travel, time travel, or other technologies.

²⁴ Cfr. Commentary by Slavoj Žižek (2006).

experience. In Freud's conception, this is an experience that implies a cyclical return of repressed memory and signals the presence of the uncanny as a narrative device, since it reminds the conscious of unavoidable spiritual death of humanity.

5.2. The Mechanisms of Repression in *Children of Men* (2006): Isolation and Memory Association as Narrative Devices

Any reproductive problem, in Freudian psychoanalysis, is well established as a result of deviant psychosexual development, and most commonly castration fear as repressed trauma. The Oedipus complex is part of the phylogenetic content of the unconscious²⁵; trauma and repressed content that is primal and foundational to the species. The inability to love, to form meaningful relations with a sexual partner and the incapacity of having any sort of sexual intercourse is immediately associated with the lack of offspring and barrenness, which should be read as the return of the oedipal castration fear. Since Freud (2002) sees sexual fulfillment as a discharge of nervous tension, the inability to produce offspring in the film becomes the cause of neurosis stemming from symbolic castration fear²⁶.

In *Children of Men*, two types of infertility exist a) biological and b) spiritual, both occurring on two levels, individual, and societal. The narrative of the film implies that biological infertility caused spiritual infertility and the societal decline of humanity –namely, the lack of historical meaning or the inability to contextualize the past, present, and future, given that

²⁵ The phylogenetic content of the unconscious refers to the idea that the unconscious mind contains traces of the evolutionary history of the human species, as well as the individual's personal history. Mainly as type of pre-history. Freud believed that phylogeny influenced human behavior and personality, along with ontogeny (the individual's personal development).

²⁶ Castration fear is a term coined by Freud to refer to a boy's dread of losing his penis or being harmed in that area because of his oedipal desires for his mother and his hostility toward his father. This fear is triggered by the boy's observation of the sexual difference between males and females.

society collapses into anarchy, authoritarianism, and inhumanity after biological infertility arrives. However, In the individual, concrete case of Theo, his situation at the beginning of the film is deplorable. He is an empty shell of a man, apathetic and isolated by his grief. His only friend, Jasper, is an old cartoonist who has chosen a life of isolation to become a hippie. Jasper and Theo base their friendship on a similar experience of long-lasting and continuous grief: Jasper's wife was tortured as a political prisoner which rendered her completely catatonic, while Theo's son's life was lost to a flu pandemic. Theo copes with this grief by drinking himself into a stupor and isolating himself from almost all significant relations, thus enacting withdrawal as a defense mechanism. Withdrawal is a form of repression, as effort is placed into hiding and covering trauma and moving it from the consciousness into the unconscious. Theo exhibits this behavior throughout the film but is more visible in the first half where his character is introduced.

Jasper: What'd you do on your birthday?

Theo: Nothing.

Jasper: Come on. You must've done something.

Theo: No. Same as every other day. Woke up, felt like shit, went to work, felt like shit.

Jasper: That's called a hangover, amigo.

Theo: At least with a hangover, I feel something. Honestly, Jasper, sometimes...

Jasper: You could always come and live with us.

Theo: Yeah, but if I did that, I wouldn't have anything to look forward to.

(Cuarón, 2007a, 00:06:53-00:07:16)

5.3. Reading *Children of Men* (2006) as a journey of Theo's redemption

The film begins with Theo Faron waiting at a coffee shop to get a cup. The news is broadcasting the tragic news of the death of the youngest persona in the world. As he is leaving the shop, the camera follows Theo over his shoulder as he stops close by to add what appears to be whiskey to his drink. Suddenly an explosion takes Theo by surprise as people come out of the coffee shop wounded. Theo barely escapes with his life, as he makes it to his day job at the Department of Energy. Finally, at his office, he excuses himself and asks to finish his day of work at home, feeling more apathetic about his tasks at the office, than affected by his near-death experience. He goes to visit his only friend, Jasper, an old hippie who lives deep in the countryside where he grows marijuana and takes care of his catatonic wife. Jasper and Theo have a good time there, but still reminiscent of their own losses. Theo shows contempt for any semblance of hope or a cure for the infertility crisis, while Jasper encourages indirectly him to let his apathy go and come and live with them.

Next day Theo is abducted by the Fishes, an immigrant-rights group led by Theo's estranged wife, Julie. Theo, now a bureaucrat, is asked to assist their militant group for which Julian offers him money. He refuses initially; however, Theo visits his cousin, the curator of the Ark of Arts, a governmental project with the goal of rescuing works of art from around the world from vandalism and civil society collapse, from whom he gets transit papers for an illegal refugee named Kee. These papers are vital for Kee's travel across the United Kingdom, where the government has been hunting down refugees after the collapse of most other governments. At this point in time, the UK is effectively a police state, which systematically dehumanizes, tortures, and executes any illegal immigrants it apprehends.

Theo, Julian, a former midwife called Miriam, and a member of the Fishes named Luke, get on escorting Kee through the country, in the direction of the coast. Unfortunately, a mob ambushed them and kills Julian. Luke drives them to a Fishes' safe house since now the police are looking for them after Luke killed two of them on their way.

In the safe house, Kee reveals to Theo that she is expecting a baby and asks for his help and advice in reaching the Human Project, a secretive research organization with the goal of avoiding humanity's extinction. However, unbeknownst to them that Luke was responsible for Julian's death so Kee's baby would become a political weapon in their struggle against the government. While Kee initially agreed to stay with the Fishes, she is later persuaded by Theo of the ill intentions of Luke and the Fishes and that is better for them to escape together. After, their narrow escape, Theo takes them to the hideaway house of his friend Jasper.

In order to get Kee to the human project, they need to reach the coast, and then meet the research ship "The Tomorrow," before it departs from Bexhill's waters. Jasper arranges for Kee, Miriam, and Theo to disguise as refugees, with the help of a security guard named Syd, and infiltrate Bexhill now turned concentration camp. That night Jasper, Miriam, and Kee have a conversation about Theo, Julian, and their son Dylan and how Theo lost his faith after Dylan's death. This is a significant scene since it shows the audience to what extent Theo's trauma has impacted his life.

The next morning, they wake up to the news that the Fishes have caught up with them and are about to break into Jasper's house. They escape but Jasper stays put to stall and misdirect the Fishes. However, Jasper is killed while hiding in the high ground Theo witnesses the whole scene, after which Theo escapes with Miriam and Kee.

As promised, Syd takes them to the refugee camp Brexhill, but on the way, Miriam is taken to be, presumably, executed. Inside the refugee camp, Theo and Kee meet Marichka, a Romani refugee who gives them a room where Kee gives birth to her daughter. The next morning, Syd storms Theo and Kee's lodgings, much to their displeasure. War has broken out between the government and the refugees, along with the Fishes who have made an incursion into the camp. Syd's intentions are not to help Theo, Kee, and the baby girl, but to claim the reward placed on their heads. Fortunately, Marichka helps Theo to disable Syd, and to move into a safe house within the camp, presumably Marichka's own home. From there, they try to sneak outside the camp, but on their way to the sea, they are intercepted by the Fishes who take Kee and her baby. However, before the Fishes could execute Theo and Marichka, the government army engages with the Fishes, allowing Theo to track down Luke into a building under siege by the military. Theo finally retrieves Kee and her baby, after a heated exchange with Luke who is killed while fighting the military. The baby girl's sudden cry allows Theo and Kee to escape since both the refugees and soldiers are mesmerized by the sound of a baby's voice and briefly stop the fight to see and touch the baby girl. Marichka then takes them to a boat and sets them on course to meet The Tomorrow.

As soon as Theo, Kee, and her baby girl escape the danger, jet fighters come and conduct airstrikes on the refugee camp. It is then revealed that Theo had been wounded and had been bleeding profusely. Kee then decides to name her daughter after Theo and Julian's son, Dylan. The Tomorrow finally appears as Theo loses consciousness, leaving his destiny open to interpretation.

5.4. Intertextuality and the haunting memories

The cornerstone of magical realist narratives is the formula: realist setting plus supernatural element invading the realist setting. In other words, the invasion of a setting written in a realist style by a disrupting fantastical heterogeneous text creates estrangement, dissonance, and alienation. According to Echeverría epistemological magical realism describes a fictional text which uses diverse “aspects of knowledge rather than from cultural belief (Bowers, 2004, p. 126)” to destabilize assumptions of reality and historicity. In *Children of Men*, Cuarón crafted an eclectic setting, where imagery and iconography would merge into a not-altogether coherent unity. The text of *Children of Men* presents a juxtaposition of the converging artistic and media sources, which allows for the accumulation of details to create a sense of realism in the setting, but simultaneously, creating a disjointed sense of cohesion and continuity in the narrative. In the case of *Children of Men*, the film not only incorporates the landscapes and locations of the contemporary UK but also looks back to the larger European cultural history to anchor the viewer in a very plausible near future. Simultaneously, it inserts references as metatextual commentary which disrupts the cohesiveness of the UK setting. The supernatural element in this case is represented on a collective level, by the lack of voice of Children or symbolically, the lack of renovation, which in turn points to the darkest unconscious fears of death and castration, a trauma shared by all humanity. Accordingly, humanity in *Children of Men* knows itself to be a depleted and decadent society that has turned its back on making sense of its historical moment.

Though, the use of an explicit magical component in *Children of Men* is absent. This study has interpreted the movements of the camera, the decontextualized art recurringly haunting Theo, as a type of DeJa’Vu, a supernatural occurrence which indicates that the act of

remembering is attached to the magical component necessary for magical realism. Perhaps, this is the most controversial case study among the three analysis, since the categorization of this film as uncanny magical realism is less evident here.

Within the film, this dystopian UK is anchored by its historical identity, practices, traditions, and shared memory as a people, but opposed by the meaninglessness of that very same identity facing an imminent end of time. Hence in *Children of Men* humanity's inability to produce offspring, their biological infertility as the uncanny fear of castration²⁷; hopelessness, despair, decadence; and alienating tendencies as a defense mechanism against any incursion from the repressed past.

Characters in the film do not look past their own path; they do not look with human eyes at the world around them. Instead, they let everything become stranded and decontextualized since the will to reach out to create meaning and recontextualize the world around them would imply remembering that they are biologically and spiritually castrated. For instance, the opening scene of the film begins with a close-up of a television screen showing a news report about the death of Diego Ricardo, the youngest person on Earth, who was killed in a brawl at the age of 18. The camera then pans out to reveal a crowded and grimy London Cafe, where people are watching the news with various expressions of shock, grief, anger, or indifference. The protagonist, Theo Faron, is among them, but he seems detached and bored. In this scene, there is a strong reaction of grief and despair which overcomes the viewers of the news. This collective defense mechanism finds its individual expression in the narrative arch of the film's protagonist,

²⁷ The loss of fertility symbolically implies an absence of sexual capabilities. Sexual impairment is the core of the Freudian castration complex.

Theo. Just as the collective is traumatized by their symbolic castration, Theo is unwilling to engage with the cognition of his deceased son and his own infertility.

Howsoever broken and in despair, Theo is presented in the film, he alone stands as the only character with enough humanity left to become hopeful and spiritually fertile again; though for most of the film, it is only through the influence of Julian and Jasper, and later on Kee that he is able to engage positively with his past. Initially Jasper and Julian provide hope through a proxy, giving Theo a connection to his lost son and family, as well as a connection to his more memorable and meaningful days. It is only under their presence that he is willing to reminisce about the past. Jasper and Julian particularly allow memories associated with the traumatic cognitions in Theo's mind to have a presence in his conscience without creating anxiety and triggering his isolating behavior. Later, this role is transferred and bestowed, partially, to Kee and her baby girl, who ultimately unify Theo's repressed memory of his lost son and the newly revitalized future.

5.5. Accumulation of details and the function of the camera as a humanizing gaze

The camera work in *Children of Men* is complex and rich in subtext, as the construction of the settings is done through the humanizing gaze of the camera. Cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek argues the "true focus of the film is in the background [...] a paradox called anamorphosis. If one looks at the thing too directly, the oppressive, social dimension, you don't see it. You can see it in an oblique way only if it remains in the background" (Žižek, 2006). Since it is in the background where constantly the presence of alienated and dehumanized subjects is shown, in

order to depict the true trauma and neurotic behavior of society, the camera takes human qualities: where the protagonist of the film does not dare to pay attention, the camera's gaze humanizes the tragedy of society's demise, absolving Theo from his lack of empathy and compassion. Acting as a proxy for the audience, the camera channels the most humane emotions of empathy and mercy through its gaze.

The cinematography of the film provides most of the worldbuilding through its attention to the human condition, of a society in decadence, and allows the viewer to gaze into the intertextual imagery that Cuarón uses to express the uncanny as well as the loss of historical meaning-making in the society. The decontextualized images in the narrative may not trigger a response from the characters, or even show awareness of the decontextualized content. However, the camera's humanizing gaze marks those images and events in the background and their repetition, as significant for the narrative. So much so that they appear to haunt and follow Theo's and Kee's journey, doubling the internal turmoil of the main characters. The most notable of this decontextualized image is Picasso's *Guernica* and its double Michelangelo's *La Pietà* displayed in the film. These two images share a similar topic and overlapping subjects: a woman, a mother holding a deceased man. *Guernica* is a celebrated anti-war painting²⁸ depicting the horrors of the Spanish Civil War which prominently comprises a gored horse, a bull, flames, and a screaming mother holding her dead son. *La Pietà* is an Italian Renaissance dolorous sculpture of Mary holding a deceased Jesus at the Golgotha. It should not be overlooked that both works are depicting a deeply sorrowful woman who is mourning the loss of her son, which echoes the

²⁸La Madonna della Pietà Painted in 1937, Paris. Oil on canvas, with dimensions of 349.3 cm × 776.6 cm.

absence of infants in the world of *Children of Men*, but also perhaps points to unconscious cognitions such as death and the denial of innocence.

Nevertheless, this is not the only function of Cuarón's use of intertextuality in his 2006 film; there is also the matter of the extratextual effect of the referred texts. The world-building of *Children of Men* looks and feels real due to the attention to detail of the background subjects and in general the *mise-en-scène*. According to Roberts (2000, p. 9), science fiction through the right use of detail, accumulation, and density of it, achieves a non-symbolist mode of writing where the reproduction of an experience of living in a concrete historic place and moment takes priority over the more imaginative narrative modes. The use of symbolism in science fiction cinema, thus, must modify its use of symbols in order to ground them to a naturalistic or realistic mode of cinema. The literary convention of science fiction, according to Roberts, would be more aligned with documentary and non-fiction modes of film, rather than fiction dealing with fantasy, the supernatural, and a heavy use of symbolism. Hence symbolism in cinema allows for a disconnection from the sense of plausibility of the world crafted, as it takes the effects and consequences of the narrative, to other spheres of action.

In principle, SF has to be judged, like most naturalistic or "realistic" fiction and quite unlike [supernatural] horror fantasy, by the density and richness of objects and agents described in the microcosm of the text (Suvin, 2014, p. 80).

Children Of Men transgressed science fiction cinema as a highly symbolic film, apprehending the experience of infertility of a huge group of people and coding it into its extradiegetic use of modern iconography. For instance, the image of the wailing mother and a dead son is complex, overlaid with different levels of meaning, which help take the audience's attention to the most immediate narrative of the film, the journey of Theo, to contemplate the

ethical dimension of meaning the whole narrative proposes (see Image 3 and Image 4). Instead of making the image of the wailing mother an object of the foreground, a symbol of dehumanization and war, which would take the concrete conflict of the film to the realm of the extratextual; Cuarón instead murks this process through the cinematography. Focusing the camera on the wailing mother as she appears in the background, the camera disengages Theo and Kee to look sidelines and bestowing the image a significance beyond the symbolic.

The appearance of this image in the background is only one instance we see the mentioned image as part of *Guernica*, as the overarching background to a fancy dinner between Theo and his cousin Nigel. Then later it is shown as part of the final action sequence, on which the camera stops to look upon the tragedy of humanity, as a real woman wails, holding her dead son in her arms (See Image 3). While these two examples share the very same semantic field, i.e., maternity and loss, it is ironic that one of the most potent anti-war paintings of the 20th century, *Guernica*, is part of the machinery of a repressive state who wages war against illegal immigrants. Thus, maternity and loss in the two examples represent prominent themes that sophisticated audiences may perceive as two scenes with different tones, emotional loads, and framing, creating an intense sense of ambivalence and conflicting interpretations. Always in the background and looked at by the human gaze of the camera, the wailing mother appears sometimes as an addendum, long enough on screen to be cinematographically relevant, but not completely contextualized by the narrative or the *mise-en-scène*. The ambivalence of *Children of Men* is thus implied in the camera work—especially those long pans which Cuarón employs often—its prominent use of extradiegetic decontextualized iconography and the accumulation of details in a realist setting.



Image 3: Mirror image of the wailing mother. Picasso's Guernica to the left; refugees at Bexhill to the left.

Source: Prepared by the author with screenshots from (Cuarón, 2007a).

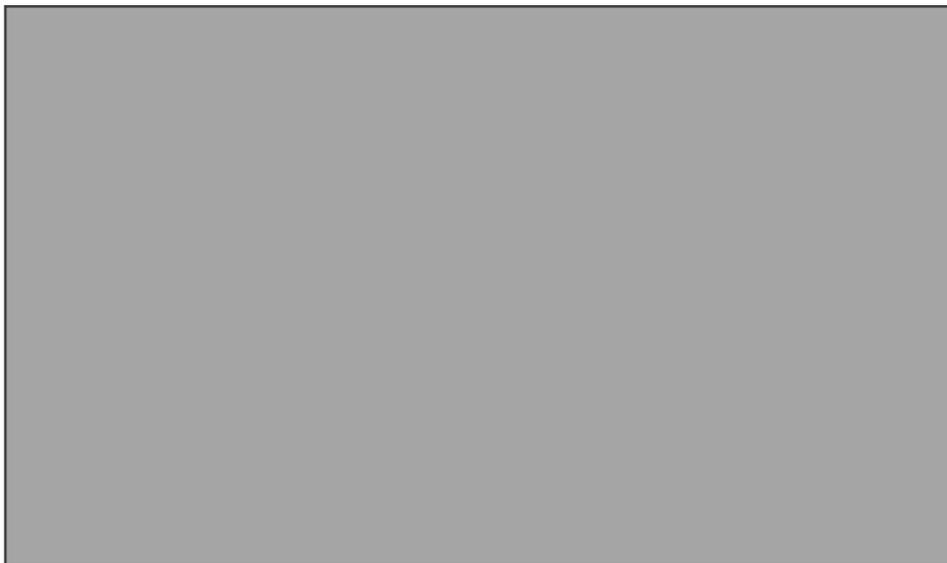


Image 4: Theo and Kee pass by the wailing mother without even looking at her.

Source: Prepared by the author with screenshots from (Cuarón, 2007a).

These are elements in a process of (decon)textualization of the experience of the viewer:

a) a realist setting is constructed through the accumulation of details, and then b) the humane

camera disengages from Theo, c) then places its gaze upon the haunting and decontextualized images. Accumulation of details coupled with the camera work bestows an almost supernatural aura to these images, appearing in a highly realist setting, in moments of high tension or emotional significance, just to be ignored or not addressed by the characters of the film. The image of the wailing mother is referenced at least four times in the film:

1) The death of Baby Diego Ricardo: women or maternal figures appear weeping and traumatized by the death of the youngest person on earth; symbolically, Diego Ricardo is a baby son of the whole of humanity, and now a reminder of infertility and the loss of hope.

2) As mentioned by Nigel at the Art of Arts. “couldn’t save *La Pieta*... Smashed up before we got there”, he comments to Theo as he welcomes him to the museum he curates.

3) During a meal between Nigel and Theo, where Picasso’s *Guernica* is hung in the dining room. A wailing woman appears as one of the subjects of the painting.

4) The camera contemplates a distraught mother who holds her dead son in her arms. The scene comes as Theo and Kee set out to escape Bexhill, which has become a battlefield after the Fishes stormed in to retrieve Kee and her baby girl (See Image 4).

These four instances of decontextualized images are introduced to little reaction from Theo. In the case of the death of baby Diego, Theo initially does not acknowledge the traumatic impact of his death as the youngest human. The film makes a point of contrasting the distraught faces of the customers at the coffee shop, his coworkers, and the uncaring expression of Theo, who later on expresses contempt for baby Diego. Symbolically the death of baby Diego is a reminder of the imminent demise of humanity, and more painful is the fact that he was meaninglessly murdered by a fan. Given that the castration complex is associated with sexual

repression and biological lack of virility, the subject feels anxiety, impotency, and more importantly, loss of control over one's life. Freud argues that since this repression is adjacent to the fear of death, unrealized sexual desires bring out anxiety about one's own mortality since: "I am therefore inclined to adhere to the view that the fear of death should be regarded as analogous to the fear of castration and the situation to which the ego is reacting is one of being abandoned by the protecting superego (1926, p. 129)". In Freud's view loss of love and castration anxiety (unrealized sexual desire) are the primary traumatic experiences, all subsequent instances of trauma reproduce the same affects of powerlessness which provide the foundations for the repetition of anxiety (S. Freud, 1926). In *Children of Men*, as baby Diego's death hits the human population around the globe, it triggers an association of cognitions, wailing, and anxiety coming out of self-harm—as baby Diego was ironically killed by another human—or suicidal tendencies. The social unrest that ensues is symptomatic of repression and defense mechanisms affecting the whole of humanity: grief, riots, violence, alienation, and authoritarianism are expressions of coping with social anxiety and social self-harm. However, Theo's reaction is absent. Instead, he uses the death of baby Diego to escape work and just go home to drink.

Nigel's and Theo's meeting is significant as it illustrates the British elites' reaction to the infertility crisis. Nigel informs Theo that the Michelangelo sculpture, *La Pieta*, was destroyed, and smashed into pieces. Such vandalism is indicative of the (decon)textualization of hope and faith—themes that *La Pieta*, a sculpture depicting Jesus and Mary, prominently alludes to. For a humanity without the historical sense of self, such an object may be useless or insignificant because, more than anything, it symbolizes the decontextualized status and lost meaning of the previous historical moment, and the potential repression of the best attributes of humanity, as

loss that subsequently haunts Theo and the whole of humanity. In other words, art is rendered meaningless because it belongs to an already extinct set of sociocultural relations.

Refocusing the image of the wailing mother on the realistic setting of *Children of Men*, Picasso's *Guernica* embodiment of the symbol is dreadful and despairing. It overshadows Nigel's dining room, while both have a lavish meal and discuss Kee's transit papers on which her future as a refugee depends. *Guernica* was originally commissioned as anti-war work depicting the 1937 bombing of the town of Guernica in the Basque country, by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Given the placement of the painting and the occasion which motivated Theo to request Nigel for transit papers, *Guernica* is categorically decontextualized, especially considering that the viewer was just made aware some scenes ago of the imprisoned refugees waiting to be executed or sent to a detention camp like the ones used in the Jewish Holocaust. The symbolism of the image reconfigures the *La Pieta*²⁹ subject, into the confines of the historical moment in Theo and Nigel's lives, where *Guernica* acts as a foreshadowing of events to come later in the film. In this sense, *Guernica*'s wailing mother represents the very repressed condition of humanity in *Children of Men*.

Finally, the wailing mother is embodied at the last stretch of the film before Theo and Kee set out to reach the research ship, the Tomorrow. As the last appearance of the recurring image, it appears as a bad omen before the film's climax and resolution. Here, the theme of maternity in Michelangelo's *La Pieta* is reversed, as a mirror image of the famous sculpture, it is a grotesque image from the depths of the unconscious, a violation of the laws of nature and utterly suppressed by Theo and Kee as they walk pass it. The audience again depends on the

²⁹ The destruction of the piece is significant against the survival in perfect condition of its counterpart Guernica

camerawork to disengage from the lead character and linger a few seconds on the sidewalk in horror. Given that in the previous scenes hope is again brought to humanity, symbolically in the daughter of Kee, it throws back the audience into the concrete conflict of the protagonists. Hence, it is more appropriate to compare this image as a visual quotation of *Guernica*, since this incarnation of the wailing mother reminds the audience of the original trauma of infertility.

5.6. Repression in *Children of Men*: humanity trapped in the past

The main narrative conflict of the film is expressed in the reaction of humanity to the lack of fecundity or the lack of reproductive potential, where unconscious infertility reverts the subject to castration fears. Two parallel conflicts take place in the narrative of *Children of Men*: a) Theo's emotional suffering and spiritual isolation as a consequence of his failed paternity; and b) the biological and spiritual barrenness of an exhausted society that is unwilling to move past the *here and now* and confront death. These two parallel conflicts also find resolution in the narrative: a) Theo's emotional suffering and spiritual isolation yield to hope, spiritual healing, and resurrection; and b) Kee's baby daughter serves as a remedy to the exhausted, hopeless society. Fortunately, the latter also provides redemption and catharsis for Theo as he completes his narrative journey. Consequently, this film, when prioritizing Theo's emotional development, should be read as a redemption narrative, where the miracle of Kee's fertility gives Theo another chance to become a father.

Both humanity and Theo, consequently, are stuck in a temporal limbo, unable to move forward, as the spiritual and biological barrenness denies them a prospective future to strive for. At the same time, both humanity and Theo are unable to completely live in the nostalgia of the

past, i.e., a painful reminder of the catastrophic loss humanity has experienced. This condition, as implemented in the structure of the narrative, becomes the token of the uncanny: a traumatic experience that is compulsively repeated and generates a defense mechanism to deal with its attack on the subject's consciousness.

Spiritual infertility predates the biological one, at least as a trigger of the uncanny. The anxiety produced by the castration fear, and the missing children, sit together with other repressed content in the unconscious. So, when one of them invades consciousness and attacks it, the anxiety and defense mechanism are generated, mimicking past instances of anxiety and fear. Hence, as infertility triggers an incursion of the contents of the unconscious into the conscious, any other repressed, traumatic and painful experience, by association, gets pulled out of the unconscious.

This is the reason for humanity grieving and being affected by the uncanny— the loss of children, innocence, and infancy-- renders it stuck in place and in time. Symbolically, the consciousness of the self cannot engage with the nostalgic and painful past, nor can it generate a plausible vision of the future, as it becomes a consciousness of the *here and now* exclusively. The film implies that, without historical consciousness, a sense of historicity, and tradition, humanity falls back into social disintegration and violence, which are depicted in the repressive police state of the UK in the film, showcased through the character of Syd.

The most illustrative dialogue sustains this interpretation of why spiritual infertility predates and causes the biological one. It begins with Jasper trying to tell a joke about the "Human Project":

Jasper: Human project is having this dinner and all the wisest men of the world are there...

Theo: “Human Project” Why do people believe this crap? You know, even if these people existed with those facilities in secret locations. Fuck me, that is strong. Even if they discovered the cure for infertility it doesn’t matter. Too late. The world went to shit. You know what? It was too late before the infertility thing happened, for fucks sake.

(Cuarón, 2007a, 00:09:04- 00:09:29).

Theo here is verbalizing two ideas: a) his overall outlook towards the future of humanity along with his cynicism and nihilism, b) an assessment of the socio-cultural crisis that in his mind maimed humanity before the infertility pandemic. For Theo, then, the crisis of postmodern, liberal societies, and the depletion of Western institutions, such as the one depicted in *Children of Men* was symptomatic of a more fundamental malaise. As the protagonist, Theo is the nexus through whom the viewer can assess the neurotic tendencies and aberrations of the collective; he stands in for the prototypical man. In his mind, as well as in the mind of the collective, thinking of hope, solutions or even joking about them, brings out all the monstrosities hidden in his unconscious. Hence, for him and the collective, the past and the respite of nostalgia are not havens that can withstand humanity’s demise. Quite the opposite, it is a danger to the integrity of the conscious, and it risks further neurosis and damage to the individual’s self-concept.

Throughout the film, different defense mechanisms are manifested in the behavior of society as acts of self-harm, especially executions, torture of refugees, and brutal migration policies. These indicate, perhaps, a projection of the blame for infertility on the immigrants, and hence the use of violence on them to symbolically purge the UK government from any “guilt.”

This reaction, however, is not only symptomatic of political elites and governmental collectives. The insurrection and revolutionaries, namely the Fishes, similarly are not able to see past the *here-and-now*, or fully commit to helping Kee. Instead, they resort to bombing, and terrorism and use guerrilla tactics, which further accelerate the demographic decline of humanity. Both the UK government and the Fishes do not have a long-term vision as they suffer from the very same lack of historical consciousness.

The structure of *Children of Men*, when read as a redemption narrative focused on Theo's spiritual and ethical resurrection as a father, has its resolution in the very last scene of the film – namely, the very final shot of the film, where Kee and Theo having escaped from Bexhill are adrift on a small boat waiting for the Human Project's ship— where Theo teaches Kee how to tap the back of her baby girl to relieve the baby of the trapped air. This paternal gesture completes the redemption arch of Theo, as he is able to remember his own past as a father without repressed content invading his consciousness and causing anxiety, apathy, or dread. The integration of the content from his unconscious into awareness is finally achieved when the repressed memory of his lost son is sublimated through the name Kee gives to his baby daughter Dylan. This symbolic re-embodiment grants Theo absolution from his past and allows him to let it all go with a smile, knowing that his second paternity is now granted.

Theo: Whatever happens, whatever they say, you keep her close. It's going to be okay.

She's probably got wind. Wind her. Put her on your shoulder. Just... Just tap her back.

Gently. Gently. There you go. Oh, Jesus.

Kee: Dylan. I'll call my baby Dylan. It's a girl's name, too. Theo? Theo? Theo! Theo, the boat. The boat! It's okay. We are safe now. We're safe.

(Cuarón, 2007a, 01:37:34-01:39:57)

For the narrative in *Children of Men* to justify Theo's resolution, the main conflict of the film, the dread, and anxiety stemming from spiritual and biological infertility, appears in the form of either: a) decontextualized trigger which exists in an ambivalent interplay between background and foreground; b) defense mechanism used by characters to cope with the anxiety generated by confronting the return of the repressed.

To illustrate this argument, the next section discusses a list of narrative devices interpreted as tokens of the uncanny throughout the film.

5.7. Narrative devices and the tokens of the uncanny

Nigel and Theo's meeting informs the viewer of the defense mechanism that the government and collective, and political elite use to cope with the uncanny dystopian society. It also shows the condition of infertility that humanity has fallen into. Theo, in order to get the transit papers for Kee, which his estranged wife Julian requested, resorts to calling his well-connected influential cousin Nigel.



Image 5: Theo and Nigel discuss how to cope with the despair.

Source: (Cuarón, 2007a).

Theo: I'm really sorry, Nigel. I just don't know who else to ask.

Nigel: I'll see what I can do...What?

Theo: You kill me...A hundred years from now, there won't be one sad fuck to look at any of this. What keeps you going?

Nigel: You know what it is, Theo? I just don't think about it. (Cuarón, 2007a, 00:20:37 - 00:21:03)

After meeting in his museum-like-house, and having a meal discussing the situation, Theo is intrigued about how Nigel is coping so well and is able to carry on with his curatorship despite knowing that after the eventual demise of humanity, his lifelong endeavor would be

rendered inconsequential. Nigel's answer is honest and cynical, as he is very self-aware of the futility of salvaging and preserving art for posterity. By saying "I just don't think about it", Nigel reveals an avoidance of the trauma instilled in his mind by the fertility crisis and his defense mechanism of isolation. Isolation is a defense mechanism proposed by Freud (1926), in which an individual isolates repressed cognitions so to avoid the association of ideas or contents to attach to trauma³⁰. This limits the effect of word-presentations to suppress incursions of unconscious content into the conscious. So, Nigel's defense mechanism is quite like Theo's, in which both either depend on the abuse of substances or alcohol and in the case of Nigel, a hedonistic focus on his work. Hinted previously in the film is the fact that society is suffering from neurosis since the government was providing English citizens with tranquilizers and suicide kits. There is some evidence on the screen that Nigel and his son consumed such anti-depressants, which is not too dissimilar to what Theo does on screen, by compulsively consuming alcohol. Inserted throughout this scene in the background, there are decontextualized references to works of art.

The most significant of them all is a floating pig outside Nigel's window which is a reference to George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, as the pig symbolizes the overindulgent consumption of the elites in capitalist and industrial societies (Image 5). Theo, on the other hand, is identified with Picasso's *Guernica* which appears behind him whenever the camera looks at him. This is a reflection of his suffering, unsuccessful attempts to isolate his painful unconscious memories, and the awareness of the refugee holocaust being perpetrated in the UK, all of which get reflected in the scene through the play between the background and the foreground, at the dining table with *Guernica*. This contraposition of Nigel and Theo speaks of the tension and the

³⁰ Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, published in 1926. In this book, Freud described isolation as a process of separating an idea from its associated affect, so that the idea remains in consciousness without any emotional impact. Freud considered isolation as a form of deactivation, or withdrawal of psychic energy from an object or idea.

similarities between the two antagonizing collectives in *Children of Men*, when one is the establishment and the elites, while the other is the common man and the refugees. However, both are equalized by trauma and having to cope with the diverse crises that humanity is suffering from.

Theo has been depicted, throughout the film, numbing himself to the pain of losing his child, as well as avoiding any discussion of the baby or his suffering. In a scene where he meets his estranged wife on the bus to discuss the possibility of helping a refugee, he accuses his wife of getting over the death of their child too quickly, to which she responds: “No one could get over it. I live with it. I think about him every day”.

Julian: “You don’t have a monopoly over suffering...you always carried his memory like a ball and chain...”

Theo: “What do you fucking know about my memories...”(Cuarón, 2007a, 23:58-24:02)

It is revealed that he has not only grown unsympathetic to his wife’s suffering, but he is also dealing with the loss of a relationship he shared with his wife before eventually losing her to a gunshot wound. This is another loss he is unable to cope with, and another tragedy he is unable to mourn. The loop of trauma manifests in the form of events in Theo’s life where he loses people close to him one after the other. He loses his child, which triggers the dissolution of his family. Then he loses his wife Julian because she is killed, and then Jasper who is also shot, the anxiety he feels is not only coming out of the immediate tragic event that he witnesses but the accumulation and association of losing all these people dear to him, together with the castration trauma as the lack of family results in lack of virility and fertility. Hence, this trauma is recurring in him, as he is in perpetual grief. The uncanny cycle makes him relive his repressed memories,

causes his alcoholism and isolation, and keeps him caged, symbolically acting as the “ball and chain” that Julian mentioned.

Theo’s disengagement, anxiety, and repression are mechanisms feeding a loop or cycle of the uncanny. However, the presence of Kee and the promise of Theo’s redemption through Kee’s baby daughter provides Theo with hope and hence, the possibility of escaping the reiteration of his trauma. The film through the mirroring of scenes depicting Theo’s close-ups shows his progression in overcoming his trauma:

- i. Theo is on board the train deep in thought and oblivious to the refugees or the violence outside.
- ii. On his way to visit his cousin Nigel, he apathetically looks at privileged UK citizens overindulging in leisure. Theo glances at them uninterested or perhaps in contempt.
- iii. At Jasper’s house, Theo is reminded of the loss of his family, especially his son Dylan, as he overhears Jasper, Miriam, and Kee talking about them. It is noteworthy that Theo while overhearing them, refills his alcohol.
- iv. For the first time, Theo is shown engaged and hopeful looking at Kee, playing outside a children’s school while he listens and comforts Miriam, who talks about her painful experience as a midwife during the crisis and mentions “very odd what happens in a world without children’s voices (Cuarón, 2007a, 1:02:56)”



Image 6: Images of Theo's disengagement and withdrawal into himself.

Source: Prepared by the author with screenshots from (Cuarón, 2007a).

These four shots show the progression of Theo's isolation and apathy as a broken shell of a man at the beginning, to being rekindled spiritually by the escape from barrenness that Kee and her daughter represent (See Image 6). Especially, Theo escapes from his depression by engaging with Miriam, hearing her experience at the beginning of the crisis, offering comforting words to her, and echoing the hope that he feels now, thanks to Kee's pregnancy:

Miriam: As the sound of the playgrounds faded, the despair set in... Very odd what happens in a world without children's voices...I was there at the end.

Theo: Now you're gonna be there at the beginning.

Miriam: Yeah. I'll be there at the beginning. Thank you.

(Cuarón, 2007a, 1:02:44-1:03:14).

Miriam as a prenatal care professional felt the alienating strangeness of the infertility crisis more intense than most people, as she is associated with the absence of children's voices with her trauma. A voiceless world symbolizes her, death, and uncanniness. Theo's gaze, now changed, shows that he is allowing himself some home, something unthinkable before, as his repressed cognitions would trigger him to deflect or react cynically to the likes of Jasper. As Theo is looking at Kee from a window of a room, she is framed by the broken glass, a symbol of the uncanny starting to peel from Theo's unconscious.



Image 7: Theo's looking outside, partially shattering his withdrawal.

Source: (Cuarón, 2007a).

Whereas these three scenes of Image 6 are composed as mirrors of each other, depicting Theo's empty gaze and compulsive apathy, the fourth image at the bottom right (also see Image 7) shows him looking outside of his isolation and his defenses against despair. An important

motif is how glass is used to show Theo trapped or separated from other individuals. The glass acts as a material barrier symbolically protecting his self-concept from the despair of his failed fatherhood. However, Image 7 shows him looking outside of himself, through a broken glass window partially overcoming his trauma.

Theo finally overcomes his trauma in the last scene of the film, where he fulfills his role of father to his lost son Dylan through a proxy: he instructs Kee how to path her daughter in the back to relieve her. Then he exclaims: “There you go...Oh, Jesus” as if indicating that his task is done. (1:38:48). Kee, then, looking at him states “Dylan. I will call my baby Dylan. It’s a girl’s name, too.” Theo smiles. For him the journey is complete, and he is out of his trauma of having lost his son Dylan as he passes out. The film then fades out after Kee sees the approaching boat *The Tomorrow*, symbolically giving them closure from trauma and the uncanny and restoring their humanity.

5.8. Concluding remarks

The uncanny is present in Alfonso Cuarón’s *Children of Men*, primarily as the repressed fertility crisis that permeates all spheres of life in the dystopian future depicted in the film. This affects most characters in the film to some degree, but mainly Theo Faron who represents the collective of humanity and the nexus point from which humanity sees the possibility of redemption. Theo displays a series of defense mechanisms that construct him as a cynical, apathetic, and empty character, who is just focused on survival over ethical and spiritual engagement with the world. However, he is suffering not only from biological infertility but also from a spiritual one since the death of his only son to a flu pandemic. His apathy and

overindulgence in alcohol manifest tendencies of isolation as a defense against the re-incursions of the repressed past.

Narratively the film shows the audience a redemption story set in a dystopian future. Accumulation of details and genre-defiant use of symbolism, construct a reality that is invaded by the ghost of the past. The uncanny finds its place in the narrative, as shown in the neurotic behavior of the character, in the agenda of repression and violence against refugees, and the isolation of and lack of compassion and humanity. Isolation and overindulgence in alcohol fit Theo's inability to acknowledge completely his anxiety and depression and reach integration of unconscious cognition. Theo embodies all these tendencies of humanity as his redemption arch threads a possible path for society which is still waiting for the miracle Theo has witnessed in Kee.

Cuaron's cinematic structures allow for the use of cultural references as extratextual decontextualized ghosts, haunting the characters of the film like the memories they are unable to address. The humanizing camera's gaze fulfills what the dehumanized lead characters will not, that is, to look beyond themselves to the tragedy of humanity. It is only by looking beyond their compulsions that the cycle of the uncanny is dispelled.

The presence of the uncanny in *Children of Men* is an essential property of magical realist narratives, as it appears as the invading heterogeneous text disrupting the realism which gives its plausibility to the film. Cuaron's film manifests this primarily in its use of symbolism as decontextualized triggers which exist in an ambivalent interplay between background and foreground and reiterate themselves, coming back again to inform the audience of the absence of historical consciousness which pervades the reality constructed in the film. The concept of Uncanny Magical realism allows for a reinterpretation of *Children of Men* as a story centered

around a fractured world and historical trauma since the resolution to Theo's redemption provides a counterpoint to the apathy and solipsism.

Chapter 6

Pollution and Spiritual Contamination as the Token of Uncanny in *Spirited Away* (2001)

In 2001 Japanese filmmaker Miyazaki Hayao released his *pièce de résistance* titled *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (*Spirited Away*), to critical and commercial acclaim as the apex of Miyazaki's aesthetics. The coupling of nativist sources and the domestication of the foreign aesthetics and sensibilities favored in Japan made an exuberant blend of previous visual discourses coherent, renewed, and contemporary. Much has been written about the contrast and symbolic significance of the nostalgia-driven world-building, or the European steam-punk³¹ dreamscapes, in Miyazaki films.

Efforts to address the complex imagery deriving from merging these two sources are well established as topics in the critical literature of *Spirited Away* –for instance, asserted by Susan Napier (2006) and Noriko T. Reider (2005). However, the matter of the most grotesque and disturbing elements of the film, such as the topic of personality pollution, isolation, recurring trauma, and painful memories, require a specialized analytical tool to address the liminal psychological spaces they open.

³¹ 'A subgenre of science fiction that incorporates retrofuturistic technology and aesthetics inspired by 19th-century industrial steam-powered machinery(Wegner, 2019, p. 439)'.

6.1. Synopsis of *Spirited Away*

Initially selfish, withdrawn, and perhaps defiant Chihiro's journey is structured as a coming-of-age story where the negative traits of Chihiro's personality get cleansed or reconciled/integrated into her true self. Miyazaki comments in several interviews that his underlying objective with Chihiro's story was to show the growth of the character, a young girl, through her personal journey across the spirit realm (Napier, 2006, p. 288). Here Miyazaki's work fulfills the role of counterpoint and rehabilitator to the popular genre of *shōjo*, in which the heroines face more lighthearted and romance-focused growth arcs, to portray storylines filled with *gravitas* in darker and complex worlds with intense psychological struggle. Miyazaki's focus is internal and sometimes aligned with psychoanalytical objectives especially when crafting narratives that require more mature imagery, so the darker and subconscious themes become known: "In the act of creating a fantasy, you open up the lid to parts of your brain that don't usually open (as cited in Napier, 2006, p. 288)."

Miyazaki's oeuvre frequently employs nostalgia-loaded fantastic narratives that derive not only from the director's experiences and recollections but also, albeit indirectly, from the collective imaginary/memory of contemporary Japan, constituting the bread and butter of fantasy films. Insights into collective trauma tapped by Miyazaki's *Spirited Away*, are indicated by the heavy imagery of spiritual contamination, grotesque excess and gluttony, and a longing for the years of the economic bubble and traditional way of life. These insights rather betray the tension in the subtext of the film, which is how remembrance acts as both: a catalyst for narrative conflict and resolution to the main characters of the film. In this sense, the recollection of

memories functions as a narrative device that seeks to address an event of the past of Chihiro/Sen and make whole her fractured identity.

This chapter attempts to identify (or demonstrate) the uncanny cycle as central to the resolution of the narrative structure. That raises several interesting questions emerging from the presence of the uncanny in the film, such as: Is the uncanny present as the cycle of decontextualized memories? Does this cycle of the uncanny correspond to the central struggle of *Spirited Away*? How is the uncanny present as the central struggle that Chihiro needs to address to escape from the spirit realm?

The chapter argues and demonstrates how nostalgia, remembrance, the use of flashbacks, and imagery are a reference to the forgotten past, polluted, displaced, and disappearing from the objective human world. These are tokens of the repressed and symbolic appearances of trauma that Chihiro/Sen must recontextualize to become whole and return to the human realm. However, to delve deeper into the analysis, the next section offers the necessary base through the discussion of the film's plot.

6.2. The plot of *Spirited Away*: hinting forgotten trauma and spiritual and mental cleansing

Spirited Away follows a Japanese girl, Chihiro, as she is moving into a new town, together with her parents. At the very beginning of the film, the audience can observe Chihiro stuck in the back of her parent's car, as they go along the countryside, looking for their new residence in a quaint Japanese village. As they approach their destination, her father decides to take a secluded road into the forest of the hills, which is marked by Shinto's ritualistic objects: a

*torii*³², statues, and *hokora*³³ (dwellings for the spirits). Chihiro and her parents eventually end up in front of a large structure, later identified as an abandoned theme park, through which they travel to a wide expanse of green and open rolling hills across a dry riverbed. On the other side of the river, they find a deserted commercial town, full of stores and food stalls; at one, there is a restaurant with delicious-looking food being cooked. Chihiro's parents sit down and start devouring in that restaurant, despite Chihiro urging them to leave the food alone. After this point, the camera and action of the film leave her parents and follows Chihiro almost exclusively.

Chihiro, somehow spooked by the ambiance and loneliness of the town, wanders off looking at the closed shops and structures of the area. As the day grows dark, across a bridge, she is confronted by the looming presence of *Yubāba*'s bath house.³⁴ It is at this place that a young boy named Haku, discovers Chihiro trespassing into the town and in haste yells at her to flee this place before night; otherwise, the inhabitants might be bothered by her intrusion.

In confusion, Chihiro flees to the place where she left her parents to engorge in food, but to her dismay, she finds them transfigured into a pair of pigs. Increasingly in panic, she runs back into the riverbed, now flooded with water. Just as she crumbles in anxiety, Haku calms her down and explains to her that the town and bathhouse are, in fact, another realm, where spirits and apparitions come to bathe and be revitalized. Chihiro is thus trapped inside this realm for the time being, compelled to play by its laws; otherwise, she risks her life, as she might end up being transfigured into an animal like her parents.

³² In Shinto a torii is a threshold which separates the sacred space from the profane.

³³ Small Shinto shrine use to house spirits and gods outside the jurisdiction of larger shrines.

³⁴ Yubāba (湯婆婆) is an old lady who manages the bath house.

To keep herself safe in the bathhouse, Chihiro sings a work contract for the witch of the onsen, Yubāba, the manager, who takes her name and bestows her the new one of 'Sen' (千). Chihiro (千尋)/Sen (千) is then forced to work and adapt to the dynamics of the bathhouse, clean and obey, while at the same time figuring out a way to help her parents and escape from the spirit realm. She befriends Lin, a bathhouse worker, Kao-nashi, a faceless masked apparition, and Kama-ji, the boss of the lower levels of the house; and comes across many other *yokai* (monsters and ghosts from Japanese mythology) and wondrous characters.

Haku offers Chihiro/Sen friendship and solace in an emotional scene where she sees her parents fully transformed and living as pigs in the stables of the spirit town; after which she breaks into tears. Haku offers her some food and some of the lost objects that Chihiro/Sen lost inside the bathhouse. Of particular significance is a goodbye card where her real name, Chihiro, is written. Haku explains that she will need to remember her real name if she intends to escape the spirit world; Yubāba controls both Haku and Chihiro/Sen by stealing their names and assigning a new identity. He laments that he has forgotten his name already.

The first struggle Chihiro/Sen faces, comes from the visit of a stink spirit, a polluted, slimy, repugnant inhabitant of the spirit world which has come to the bathhouse despite the best efforts of the workers to keep it at bay. Yubāba assigns Chihiro/Sen to welcome, guide and assist the newcomer into the biggest bathtub full to the brim with onsen water. There, with the help of Yubāba, Lin, an intruding Kao-nashi, and all the workers of the bathhouse, Chihiro/Sen discovers a bicycle handle protruding from the slimy body of the stink spirit, a part of huge garbage and pollution blockage oozing out filth and slime, which they proceed to remove. The stinky visitor then is revealed as a guardian spirit from a great river, who in gratitude gives Chihiro/Sen a bitter *dango* (a round-shaped Japanese sweet), with some purging properties.

Yubāba and her workers celebrate Chihiro's triumph, and the golden bounty left behind by the river's spirit.

Meanwhile in the bathhouse, Kao-nashi after unlawfully roaming through the ground floors of the building and growing unhealthier devours a lone worker by luring him with gold. Later, he deceives the workers of the baths, presenting himself as a generous patron and using the voice of the previously devoured worker. In another part of the bathhouse, in the workers' quarter, Chihiro/Sen comes to see that Haku in dragon form is in trouble as he is being chased by a flock of paper dolls sent by Zeniba, Yubāba's twin sister; she hurries to his rescue, just in time to save his life.

By that point, Kao-nashi has already become a nuisance to Yubāba, who summons Chihiro/Sen to attend the ever-growing, gluttonous spirit called Kao-nashi. Chihiro feeds him the bitter *dango* and escapes his rampage to board a train to the swamps to see Zeniba, along with a slimmed-down and purged Kao-nashi, Yubāba's son transfigured into a muse, and her bird servant.

The train journey is one of the most mesmerizing portions of Chihiro/Sen's journey, where finally Chihiro has some time to process what has happened during her time at the bathhouse. The train is a contrast to the chaotic and colorful world of the bathhouse, as there are no dialogues. The train travels across a vast and flooded landscape, passing by abandoned stations and submerged buildings. The scenery evokes a sense of nostalgia, loss, and transience. The passengers are mostly shadowy figures who do not interact with Chihiro or each other. They appear to be lost memories or ghosts in transition to the other world. They carry trunks and luggage, which they take with them, as they get off the train and get off at different stations in the middle of the sea. After a while, only Chihiro/Sen and her party remain on board.

Finally, after hopping off at the Swamp station, the party is welcomed to a cozy home and a meal by Zeniba. She immediately understands Chihiro/Sen's plea and situation and offers advice in uncovering the mysterious relationship between Chihiro and Haku. Chihiro/Sen describes to Zeniba how she has a faint recollection of meeting Haku somewhere else before the current events. Zeniba enigmatically answers her that: "everything that happens stays inside you even if you don't remember it."

When Haku arrives at the farmhouse of Zeniba later, Chihiro and her party ride with him back to the bathhouse; only Kao-nashi stays as a helper to Zeniba. On the way back, Chihiro experiences some of her recurring flashbacks, of falling into a river and being rescued by Haku in dragon form. When she snaps back from this memory, she whispers Haku's original name to him: "*Kohakugawa*" (Kohaku River). At this moment Haku transforms back into human form and thanks Chihiro/Sen for helping him to remember his real name and his real identity as the god and guardian of the Kohaku River that had been reclaimed and now runs underground.

Finally, just outside the bathhouse, Yubāba, a herd of pigs, and all workforce of the bathhouse have gathered. Kohaku and Chihiro/Sen flying through the sky just as morning broke, arrived to help her parents. Yubāba reluctantly promises to release Chihiro/Sen's parents only if she correctly identifies them among all the other pigs gathered. Chihiro/Sen agrees to the challenge; she correctly guesses that none of the pigs present is her family. Immediately, Chihiro/Sen's contract bursts into smoke and pigs transfigure themselves into workers of the bathhouse; after which, begrudgingly, Yubāba allows everybody to go freely.

Kohaku and Chihiro, now with their identities restored, and their memories recovered, run through? The spirit town towards the tunnel to the human world. As they say goodbye, they promise each other to meet again. Chihiro then crosses the riverbed, towards her family, who are

waiting for her –albeit without memory of the whole endeavor. Finally, they board their car, and together part, unceremoniously through the way they came.

6.2.1. Spirited Away main narrative conflict and plot structure

According to Freud (1933, p. 85), the uncanny manifests itself through neurotic behavior in the form of anxiety and a defense mechanism in a cycle that emulates the individual's reaction to early trauma or a collective surmounted trauma. The uncanny presence is then coded into a narrative through devices that express individual or collective trauma. The trauma for the protagonist Chihiro and deuteragonist Kohaku is unbeknownst to both initially: a) Kohaku is a river spirit named Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi, whose river was destroyed and covered with apartments buildings; and b) Chihiro once fell into Kohaku River and almost drowned before he saved her. This event traumatizes the protagonist Chihiro and deuteragonist Kohaku who repress the memory from the pre-narrative until the climax. This seeds the main trauma in the film: the primary repressed memory with which other instances of trauma and repression are associated. It is not until the climax of the film that Chihiro and Kohaku both uncover their shared past leading to the resolution of the main narrative conflict of the film.

Spirited Away postulates conflict initially using the transfiguration and imprisonment of Chihiro's family. However, the resolution of this conflict is not directly addressed by the climax of the film; instead, it is one outcome of the identity transformation and restoration that Chihiro undergoes. Rather, Chihiro's rescue of her family comes as secondary, in the backdrop of parting from Kohaku with an emotional goodbye. The central problem of the film is seeded in the pre-

narrative stage of the plot, which is resolved in the climax through Chihiro growing from a fearful girl into a confident person, restoring her bond with Kohaku, and recovering her own lost memories. The following diagram shows a five-act dramatic structure, with which this chapter divides the narrative of the film as follows: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. See Figure 2 below:

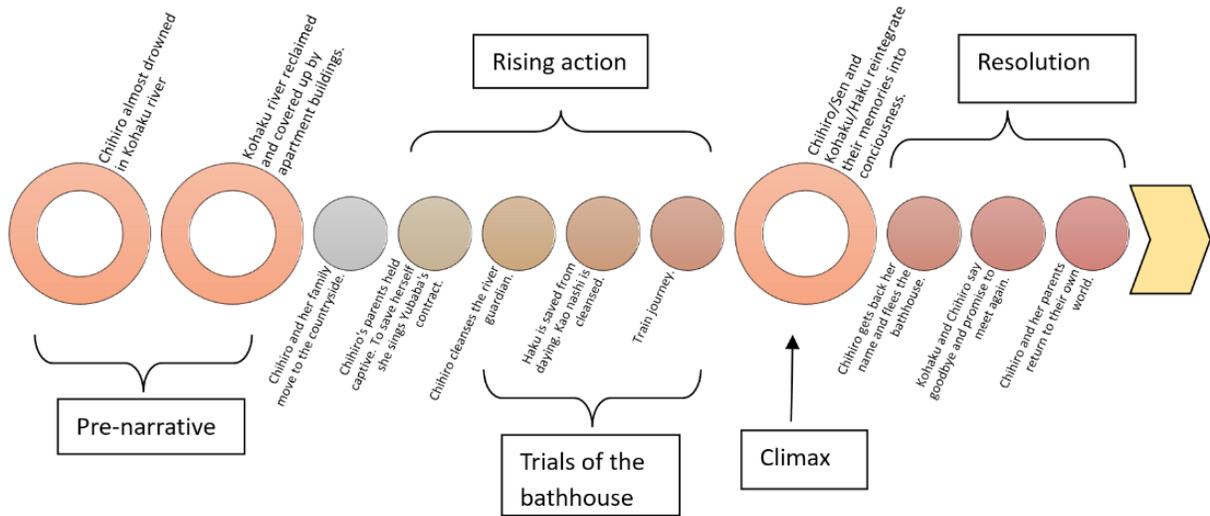


Figure 2: Diagram showing the main events of the plot. Source: Prepared by the author based on Freytag's (1900) dramatic model

Spirited Away is recognized in the academic literature as a coming-of-age film (Napier, 2006, p. 288; Ramos, 2020, p. 121), since it emphasizes the home-away-home plot structure, where the main character goes from safety, into danger, and back into safety, as shown in the film. However, the climax focus is on the recovery and reintegration of the past into the consciousness of the main characters, where Chihiro and Kohaku remember something outside of the narrative of the film; a previous traumatic incident for both, not directly shown but with

widespread ramifications which allows Chihiro to escape and rescue her family; while Kohaku gets to go home, made whole again, and quit his apprenticeship. Accordingly, the focus of the falling action and final resolution indicates that even though Chihiro has matured and become less frightened, the return to 'home' or to safety is ambivalent and tinted with longing and bittersweetness. The fixation with a returning past that haunts the main characters, is one of the characteristics of uncanny magical realism, which in this case overlaps with the coming-of-age convention.

Chihiro and Kohaku come to develop and internalize their deviant personalities because of previous trauma. The narrative of *Spirited Away* indicates that some personality pollution resulting from an intruding and reiterative memory related to water is causing both Chihiro and Kohaku problems of misidentification or doubling of their personalities. In this case, the unconscious repressed memory intrudes into the consciousness and causes anxiety. This leads to further repression through a defense mechanism that protects the conscious from further suffering, thus reinforcing the cycle of reiteration. In the case of Chihiro, she shows fear and panic in new settings and circumstances, which partially explains her unruly behavior at the beginning of the film. Haku, on the contrary, develops a greedy and cold persona, as he was willing to enter the services of Yubāba against the warning of Kamaji. It is hinted during the film that this happened after losing his home – a river covered up by buildings. Even though Kohaku does not indulge in overconsumption or other pleasures inside the bathhouse like most other inhabitants, he covets Yubāba's skills.

6.3. The spirit realm and the bathhouse as the mirror image of Chihiro's unconscious

The specificity of magical realist narratives is the capacity of the film genre to bridge the space between past and present, the natural and the supernatural, providing a way to integrate unconscious and forgotten content into the individual's conscious mind. The protagonist and deuteragonist of the film, Chihiro and Kohaku, function as doppelgangers of each other, i.e., mirror images, who to a certain extent are suffering from repression and disassociation. This is hinted at throughout the film, wherein Chihiro and Kohaku need to cleanse their personality and recover their complete identity before they can move on and find a resolution to their narrative arch.

Chihiro and Kohaku's narrative journeys follow two distinctive movements: reiteration and mirroring. As a magical realist text, these two movements correspond and correlate to two settings or texts: the spirit world and the objective human world. Conventionally, the magical realist narrative requires a clear distinction between the realist text and the invading supernatural elements. However, in *Spirited Away* this relation is flipped; Chihiro and her family invade and disrupt the spirit world to the surprise and panic of its inhabitants –whereas the audience perceives the opposite effect of wondrous and frightening awe. The eponymous protagonist has a peculiar effect on most of the spirits and workers of the bathhouse: a smell or a “stink” gains Chihiro the rejection of her coworkers initially, but also marks her as a decontextualized figure within the order of the bathhouse. Chihiro (later Sen) embodies the invading element of the magical realist convention. Reiteration and mirroring occur as a necessary exchange between Chihiro and Haku since they remember a part of each other's past. Both Chihiro and Haku

possess fragments of each other's memories and identities, thus symbolizing the flow of content between the supernatural and the natural, and the repressed into the conscious.

The terms mirroring and reiteration are analogous to the Freudian repetition compulsion, as explained previously (3.3.3), and quite applicable to the infantile trauma of Chihiro:

How exactly we can trace back to the infantile psychology of the uncanny effect of such similar recurrences is a question that I can only touch on in these pages[...] For it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious of a "compulsion to repeat," proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of small children; a compulsion, too, which is responsible for a part of the course taken by the analyses of neurotic patients. All these considerations prepare us for the notion that whatever reminds of this inner "compulsion to repeat" is perceived as uncanny (Freud, 1919, p. 238).

Chihiro's close experience with death in the Kohaku River (*Kohakugawa*) appears to be repressed inside her unconscious mind as is apparent from her visions of drowning in a water body, and fearful reactions to water (such as bottom left in Image 8). Miyazaki hinted early in the film a connection between Kohaku and water imagery, as this seems to reactivate or retrieve content from her unconscious, initially triggering panic but later subsiding as the narrative advances. This is a repetition of her near-death experience, as shown in Image 8 below.



Image 8: Chihiro reacting to Haku and flowing water.

Source: Prepared by the author with screenshots from (Miyazaki, 2001)

The first time that Chihiro comes close to flowing water is just after exiting the tunnel leading to the expanse of the spirit world, where an almost dry riverbed protects the borders of the spirit town. Chihiro is altogether anxious from the moment she enters the tunnel, being cautious just before crossing the riverbed. Chihiro shows signs of intense distress as she tries to maneuver over the rather minuscule remnants of a river (top right in Image 8). Immediately after this ordeal, Chihiro is shown calmer though still cautious, while walking down the streets of the spirit town. The next noteworthy instance of fearfulness in Chihiro is shown after her family is transformed into pigs. Here she is confronted with the true nature of the place they were trespassing into. So when she flees back to the riverbed she is already panicking, which compounds with the presence of a river in the previous almost dry riverbed. After submerging herself by accident until her waist, Chihiro immediately and frantically retreats into the dry-stone

steps behind her and immediately crumbles into herself, trying not to acknowledge her desperate situation. Just as she is wishing for everything to disappear, to her horror, she starts to vanish.

The plot's main narrative conflict deals with a traumatic event of the past triggering anxiety, then a defense mechanism, and subsequent repression of the unconscious content ensues. Chihiro, in times of intense psychological tension at the beginning of the film, shows panic and fear, which evolves into a more assertive persona as the film progresses, parallel to her knowledge of Kohaku's past. If the resolution of Chihiro's journey is tied to her internal development, the source of conflict for Chihiro is not simply escaping her entrapment as a bathhouse worker, or even rescuing her family, but acknowledging, and remembering the trauma which made her fearful. This reading of the narrative of *Spirited Away* shifts the interpretation of the film from character growth and development to an internal journey to the inner depths of herself, rediscovering the past and cleaning her "polluted" identity. In this regard, the film presents Chihiro's growth inwards, reaching for authenticity; instead of the more prevalent reading of coming-of-age stories oriented to the character progressing from naïve or callow behavior to a sense of maturity pegged to social integration (Millard, 2007).

This fundamentally makes the objective of Chihiro's journey a psychological catharsis, and symbolically, the spirit world is a space correlated to the Freudian topology of the psyche. Her entrapment in Yubāba's bathhouse comes with a price: the dilution of her persona, her consciousness, or her ego into the unconscious realm of the spirits, as attested in how she just started to fade away initially after being confronted by the transfiguration into pigs of her family. It is only by the intervention of Kohaku taking the role of a psychopomp, that her spiritual

disappearance is stopped, and her symbolic loss of identity³⁵ averted. This narrative device is a mythological motif in Japanese tradition: for instance, in Japanese mythology the goddess Izanami is unable to leave the land of the dead after the consumption of its food as it binds any liminal being to the place trapping them inside the land, effectively killing them. In *Spirited Away*, there is an inversion of these properties. Consuming the food of the spirit realm is a necessity to survive. Death is the most primitive trauma and source of anxiety and uncanniness; thus, according to this logic, by eating the spirit realm's food, given to Chihiro by Haku, she is allowed to remain in the realm and confront her deepest feelings of mortality.

But it is a perilous journey; the mind is a complex, layered system of defense, built around the deepest secrets of the self. It is analogous to the bathhouse – a fortress, a castle, or a labyrinth – with all Yubāba's riches and secrets at the top. It fulfills the role of defense against intruders. Chihiro, who has not been initiated like Kohaku, must toil, and be tested through the trials. Hence, Yubāba and Zeniba who act like gatekeepers, task and guide Chihiro along the path she must take to cleanse herself; it is no coincidence that Yubāba and Zeniba are twins, doppelgangers of each other. These trials allow Chihiro to uncover her identity, and her journey involves encounters with other characters in the spirit world, each of whom she must help to receive some assistance in surviving her own trials. For instance, she helps cleanse the stink spirit and receives not only brief access to her repressed memory of being in the water but also the bitter *dango*; Chihiro rescues Haku from Zeniba's spell and Kao-nashi – both of whom receive part of the bitter *dango* to heal and return to their original form. Finally, the journey to

³⁵ A spiritual disappearance which is equivalent, not identical to death.

the swamps to meet Zeniba allows Chihiro access to passage toward the revelation and insights of her identity.

6.4. The Trials of Chihiro's Journey: Spiritual and Mental Cleansing

At its very core, *Spirited Away* deals with the spiritual vanishing of a young girl into a liminal space, the struggle to keep her identity from fracturing, and her eventual redemption. Her fragmented identity, named Sen, comes to the forefront after Yubāba steals (part of) her name, but its inception comes from the repression of her near-death experience at the Kohakugawa, Kohaku's River. In this sense, the Chihiro we meet at the beginning of the film is (already) Sen; a polluted, fearful personality stemming from her lack of concept of self. Kohaku, who saved Chihiro from drowning in the river, functions as the preconscious, moving freely from the unconscious to the conscious. He acts as an intermediary between Chihiro/Sen and the spirit realm as he moves freely between the swamp and the bathhouse. Likewise, his role is one of negotiation, either talking on behalf of Chihiro/Sen to Yubāba or helping her from the shadows. Since it is only through the preconscious that repressed and hurtful content from the unconscious can be verbalized and integrated, Haku's function is to help Chihiro remember her latent memories.

As we follow this reading of the characters, Chihiro and Sen, the title characters, function as mirror images of each other, who correspond to the space of repression – the former is conscious, while the latter is repressed. Chihiro/Sen mentions in a conversation with Haku about Yubāba that: “She almost got my name. I was turning into Sen (Miyazaki, 2001, p.

49:10)”, suggesting that, somehow, the repressed unconscious identity Sen was beginning to take over, or perhaps that Chihiro’s personality was being suppressed. Haku warns her: “without your real name, you’ll never find your way home” (Miyazaki, 2001, 00:49:14). In Freud’s spatial model of the mind, to overcome the uncanny, things-presentations like traumatic memories and repressed content need to be taken by the preconscious to the conscious and be associated with language. Verbalization, hence, is vital to escape the cycle of the uncanny, to stop trauma-induced anxiety from recurring. In *Spirited Away* in order to escape from the bathhouse and break the contract, as Haku states, the name, i.e., a word that defines one’s identity is necessary. Similarly, when Chihiro recovers her repressed trauma before Haku’s transformation, she verbalizes the memory of her near-death experience in Kohaku River. The verbalization represents the integration of the unconscious and the conscious, and accordingly, after this, Chihiro becomes self-confident and rids herself of fear, allowing her to exit the spirit world with her family.

The token of the uncanny is manifested in the image of the spirit realm and the bathhouse. In Shinto, liminal space is marked by the thresholds, *torii*, *shimenawa*³⁶, and gates, which divide the consecrated, purified space from the polluted and unpurified; it is through trial or rites of cleansing and purification that the uninitiated, the intruder, such as Chihiro, can be allowed to penetrate the inner self. The image of pollution then is conflated with the recovery of her identity, thus cleansing Chihiro of the uncanny; the fear of death, and the water which covers her up. The process of unconscious content invading consciousness and the incursion of non-

³⁶ Shimenawa consecrated ropes to delimit the boundaries of sacred spaces of Shinto (Kasulis, 2004).

verbal content³⁷ causes fear. The uncanny produces anxiety through a process in which the affect is mimicked from the primary trauma, which in the case of Chihiro is her near-death experience in Kohaku River. When the mind represses into the unconscious the traumatic memories, the defense mechanism takes charge of protecting the mind from past and future reiterations. In Chihiro, this manifests as intense repression and loss of her memories. But in the film's climax, her trespassing of the threshold, and journey through the trials are acts of cleansing that rid her of anxiety and fear.

When looking at the plot, the mentioned trials appear constantly, throughout the film. However, simple acts of crossing gates and doors, and sharing bowls of rice and dumplings function as rituals of initiation but do not constitute a test of where to reconnect with her past and penetrate the secrets of the bathhouse. Instead, trials take the form of challenging tasks in which the danger of failing may have dire consequences, as well as high rewards. The trials she is given are acts of service, mercy, and cleansing, which reward Chihiro with both spiritual and material help going forward.

In the first trial, she is given the task of cleaning a filthy bathtub along with Lin, a worker of the baths who befriended Chihiro at the request of Kohaku. For this, they toil and work hard in the whole bath area, which is covered in algae, and sludge from previous customers. Chihiro/Sen, who is still being trained by Lin in the inner works of the bathhouse, does not particularly cherish this job, but nonetheless, proves to be competent. At the very end of this ordeal, Lin asks Chihiro/Sen to retrieve an herbal water tag from the foreman. Chihiro/Sen does

³⁷ According to Freud, all mental content in the unconscious is pre-verbal and pre-symbolic. When this content invades the conscious, what ensues is the uncanny, the monstrous and grotesque. As a mechanism of defense, the conscious represses it back into the unconscious. That anxiety, fear experience during the invasion is in fact the uncanny anxiety or the uncanny fear.

so with Kao-nashi's assist, whom she let in previously, unbeknownst to the workers of the bathhouse. It is until after they finish filling the bathtub with herbal water that a stink spirit appears in the house. Yubāba herself tasks Chihiro with the daunting task of assisting the smelly abomination to take a bath. The outcome of the trial is then fully presented before Chihiro/Sen: overcoming her disgust and fear of water to help the spirit to shed his outer pollution and filth, revealing instead a powerful and important river dragon. Fortunately, she does purify the spirit that rewards her with a mysterious bitter *dango*. A psychoanalytical reading of this trial indicates that Chihiro sheds her returning fear of water, to symbolically cleanse the guardian dragon and herself from spiritual contamination. Whereas in her repressed past the water of a river overwhelmed her and forcibly almost drowned her, the gentle water of the river guardian embraces and protects her raising her above the filth. By succeeding in this trial Chihiro's repressed fear of water is dissociated from other repressed contents and integrated into her conscious.

It should not be overlooked the fact that the dragon is a river guardian, entrapped and polluted by human trash and filth. The spiritual cleansing of Chihiro's fear ties directly with her near-death experience at Kohaku's River, transferring her experience of drowning from the unconscious to consciousness, at least partially.

It is significant that the stink spirit initially had a bad smell; same as Chihiro has a "stink" initially before adapting to the food of the bathhouse. As both go inside the same bathtub, Chihiro starts her own process of spiritual cleansing, while the stink spirit reverts to his latent identity as a river god.

The bitter *dango* that Chihiro receives allows whoever may ingest it to purge out any impurity, curse, or damaging object ingested; it is a truly precious gift borne out of the trial she

has overcome. Initially, Chihiro does not know what to do with it, but later it becomes the key to cleansing Kao-nashi and Kohaku of their respective pollution. The knowledge of how to use this bitter *dango* comes to Chihiro in a dream, where she intends to transform back her family with it. It is noteworthy that Chihiro, throughout the film, possesses this kind of foreknowledge or intuitive information, that would otherwise be a secret unknown to any outsider to the spirit realm.

How does she know how to use this magical object? Similarly, how does she recognize Haku in dragon form, or understand the cues/speech from the stink spirit? One possibility is that knowledge in the spirit realms is all but memory, or perhaps a mirroring of the events in the human world. If the symbolism of the bathhouse, analogous to the unconscious, is the cleansing and renewal of the spirits' energy, then the pollution and toil which covers its customers must find its correlation in their experience outside of the bathhouse, in their life in the human world. For instance, the *okusare-sama* or river guardian's filth covering him appears to be just trash and items discarded into a polluted river. Haku's trauma, for example, is also him losing his river to construction over it. Both come to the bathhouse for the same reason – as a result of something that occurred in the human world.

Yubāba's bath house fulfills a double role: for most spirits, it provides cleansing and renewal, but for other individuals, such as Chihiro, Haku, and Kao-nashi, it leads to greed and spiritual contamination. Yubāba herself is bound to the bathhouse rules of transaction and consumptions; contracts must be followed and respected without fault, for instance. Zeniba on the other hand lives outside of the order of the bathhouse and serves as a counterbalance to her sister. However, Zeniba dwellings are only accessible through the train that emerges from under

the spirit town; and then only after Chihiro obtains the tickets, indicating that Zeniba's dwellings are a sublimated counterpart of Yubāba's fortress; perhaps a more civilized form of Yubaba.

During the second trial, Chihiro needs to save Haku from Zeniba's enchanted flock of paper dolls³⁸. To achieve this goal, she climbs up to the very first floor of the bathhouse where Haku crashed in his dragon form. Chihiro finds him inside Yubāba's office, wounded and about to be discarded into a pit by Yubāba's helpers. Fortunately, Zeniba's image suddenly appears before Chihiro and Haku through one of the paper dolls which sneaked into the bathhouse, after which Chihiro gets to know that Haku stole a precious item from Yubāba's sister (Zeniba). Following the tense encounter Chihiro and Haku, accidentally fall through a pit going from Yubāba's office to the lowest level of the bathhouse, where Kamaji resides. There, Chihiro is able to purge Zeniba's spell from Haku and recover the witches' seal by force-feeding him half bitter *dango* to eat. Haku, at this point, is sick and very weak, barely surviving Zeniba's curse. Chihiro decides to return the stolen seal to Zeniba, hoping that she would forgive and heal Haku. Kamaji then gifts Chihiro very rare and coveted train tickets, so she can go to Zeniba's house deep into the swamps. Before she can go, Yubāba requests Chihiro to pacify Kao-nashi who is inside the bathhouse consuming food and paying using fake gold which he is able to produce without limit.

Kao-nashi is obsessed with Chihiro, so he offers her plenty of gold and food, but she is not interested, instead, she asks about his family and home. Kao-nashi can only answer in a borrowed voice: "lonely, lonely... I want Sen". Chihiro feeds the now huge Kao-nashi the other half of the bitter *dango* she was saving for her family, which causes him to throw up all the food

³⁸ In Japanese folklore these are Shikigami, spirits invoked by a powerful magic practitioner.

and bathhouse workers he had until then devoured. Chihiro flees to the sea train station behind the bathhouse, accompanied by a transfigured Yubāba's son and her pet doll, while Kao-nashi follows in pursuit. By the time Kao-nashi reaches Chihiro at the station, he had already completely reverted to his smaller original form. Due to his insistence on accompanying Chihiro, he boards the train with them all toward Zeniba's swamp.

As previously mentioned, one of Haku's functions is as a mirror of Chihiro because both are displaced characters with a traumatic past, and both undergo a similar process of reintegration of memories. But most importantly, they are catalysts of sublimation of fear for each other. Haku fulfills the function of a psychopomp whose role is to guide Chihiro to navigate the spirit realm and help her regain her identity. Freud (1915) maintains that the unconscious is preverbal and pre-symbolic. So, when Chihiro's identity is partly stored in the unconscious, in the deepest part of her mind it exists without the identification of a name. Only the preconscious, a liminal space of the mind, can interact with both the unconscious and conscious.

In this sense, the recovery of her true name brings Chihiro's identity to the forefront of consciousness. Like the unconscious, Haku's dragon form lacks language skills, so when Chihiro rides Haku down to the boiler rooms, it is through kinesthesia that a vision of her past, riding on top of Haku, comes forth. For Chihiro, this decontextualized memory invades her mind in the form of a flashback of her riding Haku in his dragon form. By this point, the memory is not scary anymore, given that she has already dealt with the fear and anxiety she used to experience close to the water. She is still not able to recontextualize all the reiterating memories she is experiencing though. For Haku, similarly, since he has not fully reintegrated his repressed memories, his full recollection of Chihiro is still stored in his preconscious.

This trial for Chihiro meant the obtention of safe passage onwards to the next trial. For its fulfillment, Chihiro used the objects she obtained previously and received two more: the sea train tickets and Zeniba's seal. Kao-nashi is one of the most enigmatic characters in the film, as his intentions are veiled due to the lack of dialogue on his part; however, he is also deceptively simple: he is lonely, and he wants Chihiro/Sen's company; no matter the cost. As Chihiro allows him to enter the bathhouse, he quickly gets to observe the greedy tendencies of the inhabitants of the baths and adopts them as his own, so he tries to lure Chihiro using gold and food, without much success. Kao-nashi thus mirrors some of the attributes Chihiro/Sen express at the beginning of the film, before coming to the spirit realm.

The sense of loneliness and self-centered attitude of Kao-nashi correlates with the Chihiro of the very beginning of the film: uprooted from her old school, Chihiro demands reassurance and attention as she moves into a new context which scares and isolates her. Greed and neediness are born out of the fear of loneliness, showing the token of the uncanny in how Chihiro construes and identifies herself with Kao-nashi – the no-face. Chihiro says:

Where do you come from? [...] You should go home. You can't give me what I want.

Where is your home? You must have a mom and a dad [...] Are you lost? (1:33:21-1:33:37)

Chihiro decides to help Kao-nashi because she sees in him her displaced self, and by helping him get rid of that pollution, she can, by transference³⁹, address the recurring loneliness in her unconscious.

³⁹ Understood as the transference of repressed feeling into a substitute.

It follows that Chihiro is projecting her internal unrest and unexpressed emotional baggage onto Kao-nashi, who appears to be an empty shell desperate to adapt and mirror any environment he is immersed in. Interestingly, his name, Kao-nashi, alludes precisely to this quality, empty or faceless, exemplifying a being with no identity. Perhaps, also indicated in the absence of a name or an identity, Chihiro may suffer the same fate. In psychoanalytical terms, Kao-nashi remains in an eternal state of (decon)textualization, forever outside of the order of the realm; with no past, there is no possibility of recontextualization of new experiences, or forging new memories. While (decon)textualization generates neurosis, as it dissociates different systems of the mind, recontextualization does the opposite by reintegrating different systems in the mind. So, the purification of Kao-nashi is a requirement for Chihiro to shed the anxiety attached to her own gluttonous, greedy, or self-centered past behavior, and advance to her last trial, the sea train journey.

A change of attitude and subjectivity can be observed when contrasting Chihiro at the very beginning of the film with Chihiro/Sen during the train journey (Image 9). Whereas the former is in deep pain, self-centered, and clinging to her displacement, the latter is composed and concerned with the wellbeing of others, a result of the cleansing she received at the bathhouse. And in keeping the mirroring of the past as a central device of the return of the repressed in this film, the train journey is about going deeper inside herself. Previously, Chihiro was thrown into the back of her family car, uprooted, and at the mercy of others' decisions. Later, on the train, she is composed and unafraid of the situation since this time her journey is of her own choosing to save Kohaku. Helping Kohaku is quite a significant objective since he represents access to her own memories, and as the overarching motivation to visit the swamps where Zeniba lives, Kohaku is the catalyst of any of Chihiro's incursions into her own unconscious.



Image 9: Repetition and mirroring between two stages of Chihiro/Sen's journey.

Source: Prepared by the author with screenshots from (Miyazaki, 2001)

The mirroring of Chihiro/Sen's journey can be construed as Chihiro trapped in her own memories, according to the cycle of the uncanny, where repetition compulsion takes over her consciousness until she can acknowledge and move on from the pain and anxiety she has been suffering since almost drowning in Kohaku River. Additionally, the imagery used in the train journey is structured as dream space: the monotonous rhythm of the moving train over a mirror-like sea surface, distant islands with quaint villages, emotional music playing on the montage of the scene, and travelers and shadows passing through the train into the sea. The symbolism of the mirror sea as an image of a dreamscape is suggestive of the reflexive movement of looking into one's own conscience; Chihiro is given time finally to recollect and investigate her situation. The implication is that safe passage into the deep swamps will only be given to those who have looked into themselves and shed impurities. After Chihiro/Sen gets off the train, she has already

used all her tickets, even if there was a train back, Chihiro/Sen would not be able to ride it back. So, for the time being, there is no going back from the swamp.

Zeniba and Yubāba are doppelgangers, twin sisters, with opposed personalities: Yubāba embodies the spirit of the bathhouse, greed, consumption, spiritual pollution, and earthly pleasures, the opposite of the usual connotations for a purification space; Zeniba, possesses the opposite attributes, generosity, forgiveness, spiritual wholesomeness, and humbleness. Since the space both inhabit is well within the spirit realm, both occupy the unconscious; however, the witch Zeniba dwells in a deeper, difficult-to-reach place⁴⁰. For Freud, the unconscious does not harbor just any unacknowledged content, but only repressed and traumatic experiences; hence all content repressed is thus monstrous and primordial to the conscious processes. Zeniba's house is clouded in darkness and secluded in the woods and swamps, for she possesses raw and potent knowledge. As Zeniba's house is located deep into the swamp, Zeniba can be associated with the unconscious, at least partially, since she reveals to Chihiro the secrets needed to interpret or access her repressed memories.

⁴⁰ In order to reach the swamp, Chihiro had to escape the bathhouse while Yubāba is distracted, and obtain very precious train tickets. Additionally, Zeniba's house is located deep inside the swamp.

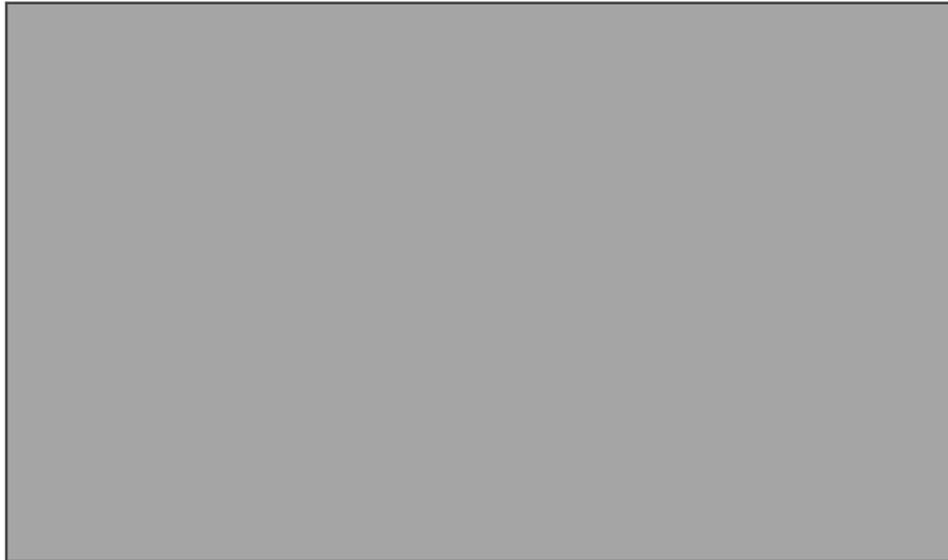


Image 10: Chihiro shows fear and apprehension as she crosses thresholds.

Source: Prepared by the author with screenshots from (Miyazaki, 2001)

Before entering Zeniba's home, there is another mirror scene of Chihiro crossing the threshold of the twin witch (top right in Image 10). At the door, Chihiro stops briefly as Zeniba commands her to go in, quite similar to her first encounter with Yubāba (bottom left in Image 10). The film uses these as a device to showcase the development of its protagonist: Chihiro's transition from a scared girl to a confident one. The first scene (top left in Image 10) shows the audience a reluctant and scared Chihiro who vehemently resists going into the spirit realm tunnel. It is only after her mother commands her to come with them she forces herself through the threshold (bottom right in Image 10). Symbolically in the unconscious, a door or a gate is not only the liminal space between two realities but is also a dynamic compulsion to get in, to cross the threshold of the spirit realm. Given that is implied in the crossing of a door the movement from the known to the unknown, fear and uncertainty ensue to any individual who stands before one. In the case of Chihiro, her journey from the human world to the spirit realm starts with a

threshold and ends with entering the deepest part of the unconscious where the trial, the past, and her memories are unveiled.

Finally, at Zeniba's home, Chihiro/Sen and her friends are warningly welcomed with tea and some snacks. Three noteworthy things happen over their short stay: a) Chihiro/sen returns to Zeniba her seal; b) Zeniba indicates that all the hazy feelings and intruding images Chihiro/Sen has experienced until now are actual memories of a previous encounter Chihiro had forgotten; c) Chihiro is given an amulet, a shining hairband, for her protection. Additionally, Kao-nashi becomes Zeniba's helper and stays behind as everybody departs the swamps riding Haku's dragon form.

At the table, Zeniba and Chihiro have a conversation about the nature of memory, knowledge, and wisdom, which helps her understand the dynamics of the realm she is visiting:

Zeniba: Yubāba and I are two halves of a whole, but we don't get along. You know what bad taste she has. Sorceress twins are just a recipe for trouble. I'd like to help you dear, but there is nothing I can do. It is one of the rules of this world. You'll have to save your parents and your dragon boyfriend all by yourself.

Chihiro/Sen: But can't you even give me a hint? I feel like Haku and I met a long time ago.

Zeniba: In that case it's easy. Everything that happens stays inside you even if you can't remember it. (Miyazaki, 2001, 01:49:40-01:50:19)

If Zeniba's statements are taken as addressing the laws or rules of the spirit realm, then Yubāba and Zeniba as halves of the same mental function, are arbiters and guides rather than wardens or executioners of Chihiro's purification. In this case, Zeniba hints at the correlation between realities, the human and the spirit realm, and the impossibility of moving forward without understanding what has happened to Haku and herself. In other words, she and her family are trapped in the spirit realm until they remember their identities⁴¹, that they were once humans. Until then she is condemned to repeat her past, and be lost in her own mind, perhaps like the shadows of the travelers on the sea train; stranded without a way to get back home.

In the context of the relationship between Chihiro and Haku, Zeniba's advice leads Chihiro to identify an associated/adjacent memory that would make sense of the haunting visions of—a shoe drifting on strong current, and herself riding on top of Haku in a dragon form— which happens to be of her mother describing her almost death experience in Kohakugawa (Kohaku River). Recognizing the associated memories stored in the preconscious allows Chihiro to retrieve her repressed memories of Haku, which directly leads to the resolution of the narrative conflict of the film.

⁴¹ It is implied by Haku that Chihiro's parents have forgotten who they are and that prevents them from leaving. Since it is not showed in the film, we can only speculate how Chihiro's family recuperated their human forms. Would Chihiro be the preconscious for her parents to integrate their conscious and unconscious, to come back to the human world? This is perhaps an unaccounted question of the analysis.

6.5. Resolution of the spiritual journey of Chihiro and Sen: recontextualizing the past

Closure in Chihiro's journey and the merging of her fractured personality come immediately after her conversation with Zeniba. While Chihiro ties her hair with a protecting amulet, a gift from the twin witch, Haku arrives in dragon form from just outside their door.

For Freud, (1978, pp. 5–18) spatial systems of the mind: the preconscious and the unconscious, are differentiated in whether their respective content is completely unknown to the conscious or recallable through word-presentations. Chihiro, throughout the film, constantly recalls repetitions, images, symbols, traces of past perceptions, and memories that are not altogether accessible to her consciousness but indeed retrievable through the association of content. They make up key pieces of her past and finally give her closure. It is only after witnessing Haku's dragon form, that an intruding memory of her immersed in the water comes into her consciousness as a visual construct of word-presentation. Word-presentations (S. Freud, 1978, p. 7) are memories and content of the mind, stored in the preconscious and are easily accessible to the conscious. However, word-presentations are also linked to truly repressed content, such as surmounted primitive beliefs, childhood trauma, or other very obscure and buried experiences. In a way, word-presentations and unconscious content are interwoven, such that by pulling the former from the preconscious, the repressed from the unconscious comes out with it. For Chihiro, this process conforms to the main narrative structure of the film: remembering her past and recontextualizing it in order to cleanse and recover her identity.

Two associated memories allow Chihiro to recover her repressed original trauma at the outset of the film: a) the mother's verbal explanation of the incident, and b) Chihiro's knowledge

of the name of the river. This comes altogether at the climax of the film, on the way back from Zeniba's house:

Chihiro: Haku, listen. I don't remember this, but my mom told me about it. Once when I was little, I fell into a river. Now it's all built over by apartments. It flows underground. But I just remembered. The name of that river... The name was Kohaku River. Your real name is Kohaku.

Haku: Chihiro, thank you. My name is Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi.

Chihiro: Nigihayami?

Haku: Nigihayami Kohaku Nushi.

Chihiro: What a name. It is like the name of a god.

Haku: I remember now you fell into me as a child. You were chasing your shoe.

Chihiro: Yes, and you carried me to shallow water. I am so happy. (Miyazaki, 2001, 01:54:31-01:54:55)

This climax restores and reintegrates Chihiro's repressed memories through Haku's cleansing and restoration of his own. Since Haku represents the preconscious space of Chihiro's mind, he triggers in her a reactivation of repressed images—namely, the image of the lost shoe, a hand reaching into the water, and Chihiro riding on top of a dragon—which kept coming back. Those ideas are all woven together, residing in indifferent space of the mind, preverbal and primal residing in the unconscious and connected to the preconscious verbal and clear content. Haku, by reminding Chihiro of her own name earlier in the film, symbolically pulls out the whole string of

memories regarding her drowning trauma, for which she must go, toil, and work to finally recontextualize everything at this climax scene. The trials she went through eliminated the symbolic anxiety from Chihiro's consciousness so she could see clearly and recontextualize; in the film, she expresses verbally, what happened to her and how Haku's help saved her. Since verbalization is necessary for the integration of unconscious memories into consciousness, the two associated memories –the mother's verbal explanation, and the name of Haku's river— allowed the process of catharsis to succeed, eventually conforming to the model of the uncanny and allowing for Chihiro and her family to return to the human realm.

Given that the climax of the film addressed the main narrative conflict of the protagonist, Chihiro, the narrative structure in the resolution now has to deal with the aftermath and consequences of her spiritual purification. Since her defense mechanism, i.e., the doubling of her personality is no longer necessary to deal with her previously repressed past, Chihiro then goes on to free her family, destroy her contract and recover her full name. Kohaku, who is also purified from his greed, then parts ways with Chihiro, with the promise of meeting, someday, somewhere, again.

6.6. Concluding remarks

The uncanny presence in *Spirited Away* manifests in two main ways: the decontextualized images and memories that Chihiro encounters through her journey, and the mirroring and repetition of events related to her spiritual pollution, i.e., fear and anxiety. Her defense mechanism is the fragmentation of her identity into two components: Chihiro as the repressed, and Sen as the active one throughout the spirit realm.

The separation of Sen and Chihiro is, thus, of vital importance to the narrative conflict of the film. The separation of Sen and Chihiro is tied to the conflict that the characters need to address to bring closure to the film's story –namely, the spiritual disappearance of Chihiro/Sen. At the beginning of the film, Chihiro is seen as a sulky-looking girl, moving to a new town; by the end of it, she comes back as a courageous and more mature young girl. This dissociation is not, however, dichotomous, as there is never a complete disconnection between Sen and Chihiro or the creation of a separate personality. Instead, there is a progressive personality growth from Sen, sulking and selfish, to Chihiro, genuine and sincere.

Throughout the film greed, selfishness, and consumption are presented as the pollution of the self, a narrative device that indicates emotional baggage which covers up the best qualities of a character's personality. This is most evident in Yubāba or Kaonashi, but also indicated in Haku and Chihiro/Sen's motivations and backstories; the flaw of their personalities is presented as a consequence of defensive mechanisms in dealing with their past. It is only when both Chihiro and Haku are able to recall their memories with clarity, that the enchantment which bound them to the spirit realm weakens or disappears. An excellent expression of this idea is uttered by Zeniba close to the resolution of the film, as she offers this piece of wisdom as the solution to Chihiro's problems: "Everything that happens stays inside you even if you can't remember it".

Miyazaki's vision used in *Spirited Away* is trying to recontextualize valuable components of the collective imaginary which constitute the nostalgic images and conceptions of the rural, the quaint, the idealized traditional and folkloric Japan. The film shows powerful depictions of the *fushigi na machi* (a strange or wondrous town), the mysterious train journey to the swamps, where the witch Zeniba, the twin sister of Yubāba, dwells. On the subtext level, and supporting a nostalgia for an idealized traditional Japan, there is a constant presence of undisclosed and

forgotten trauma guiding the actions of Chihiro/Sen and Haku. This is made visible through symbolic pollution of their personalities as something that disrupts both their recollections of their shared past and creates flaws of character in them. Thus, Fear, greed, and selfishness are consequences of the underlying unconscious content which the narrative conflict, the tension the plot needs to resolve, is constructed to overcome.

The main narrative conflict of the film is to merge the two identities of the titular main characters, Sen and Chihiro, in order to escape from the spiritual realm where Chihiro and Sen have found themselves trapped. In keeping with the proposed model of the uncanny, the first task is to identify the underlying trauma that Chihiro/Sen undergoes, its correlation with her subjectivity, and the development of transformation. Miyazaki's film is first and foremost a coming-of-age story, which is centered on a displaced Chihiro who exhibits selfishness and painful attachments to her past life, presumably, in the city. The resolution to her journey comes from helping her friend Haku remember his identity, find her parents, and recover her stolen name from Yubāba. This chapter explored the cleansing of three characters as they move on from being trapped in those personality attributes, construed as defense mechanisms, being cleansed, and purified. Thus, the uncanny is expressed in the filth and pollution which covers an individual's positive attitudes and attributes, as well as past, and needs to be cleansed to move beyond those memories.

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Operationalizing the Uncanny and the Uncanny Magical Cinema

This dissertation has explored the convergence of Freudian uncanny and magical realism and presented a framework that explains how films can employ the concepts of magical realism and the Freudian uncanny to create complex and ambiguous narratives that represent the experience boundaries between reality and fantasy, self and other, normal, and abnormal. Through an analysis of the main narrative devices identified in the three selected films, the research has demonstrated how these concepts can be used as analytical tools to address and explain the mechanism of repressed and reiterative trauma. This concluding chapter presents a summary of the main findings of each film's analysis, discusses the implications and limitations of the proposed theoretical framework, and suggests some directions for future research in this field.

7.1. Reformulating Magical Realism as the Uncanny Magical Realism

Magical realism is constantly presented within literary criticism as a genre, a style, a convention, and a narrative mode, among many others. With major topics of critical study focused on the origins of the term, the conceptualization of magical realism is proposed based on wide-ranging criteria such as geographical essentialism. This creates fragmentation in the conceptual process, as definitions are constantly created based on the problematization of origin and ad-hoc need. As discussed in the previous chapters, there are two main issues with the way magical realism is defined and dealt with in literature. First, the conceptions of magical realism

do not differentiate between magical realist films and those which also, while belonging clearly to other genres, present traits and characteristics of the same. Hence, the definitions become epistemologically trivial since they do not provide a single structural principle that would establish a singular structural feature to propose a stable narrative theory of the genre. Secondly, the genealogy of the magical realist convention focuses on the role of apparatus and the technical imperatives which model the negotiation between the text of cinema and a constant cluster of discourses that demand to be addressed. The core of such work caters to uncovering the potential of the magical realist convention to be reflected upon by the viewer of cinema, thus uncovering the affects and modes of intangible experiences. By nature, the definition is an open-ended term, which makes impossible the inception of a well-delimited genre and narrative mode to the study of cinema, at least in the structural sense.

This study argues that what the uncanny provides to magical realist cinema is a conceptualization of the intuitions found in the descriptive convention. In other words, the uncanny theory is part of a research program that focuses on defamiliarization, alienation, trauma and repression, intellectual uncertainty, ambivalence, liminality, and *déjà vu*, among others, as symbolic phenomena produced by the concrete experience of culture, society, and history; a project which tries to clarify and tame the darkest, liminal, and ineffable aspects of humanity's psyche. By embedding the uncanny as the conceptual structure underlying magical realist narratives, magical realism becomes integrated as a preferential narrative mode of the uncanny theory, allowing the organization of its associated phenomena into a new cognitive structure.

Thus, a new and reformulated category of uncanny magical realism takes the concrete material reality of cinema, its sensory materiality, and proposes it as a method of knowledge production, and as a way of representing the consequences of the wide spectrum of phenomena

implied in the uncanny. It has the potential to describe and explain the costs and the losses caused by contemporary trauma which is, by definition, collectively repressed, out of sight, deeply uncomfortable, but also immediate, intimate, and all-pervasive. The uncanny is thus a negative concept that reflects our anxiety and discomfort in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity.

7.2. Blending the Uncanny and Magical Realism

Finally, the grounds for comparison and unification of magical realism and the Freudian uncanny are constructed in this study through the analog structures of their conceptualizations. Assuming (decon)textualization is a function of both concepts, narratively magical realism organizes and codes the experience of trauma and fragmentation, a consequence of (decon)textualization, into an epistemologically significant text.

The uncanny, similarly, deals with the decontextualizing effects of trauma, both a source and consequence of distortions of the self-concept. Therefore, the centrality of (decon)textualization in both concepts allows the uncanny to function as an internal process and structure of narratives.

Therefore, the integration of the uncanny into the analysis of magical realist narratives comes from the growing awareness of the position of psychoanalysis in literature and aesthetics.

7.3. Addressing the research questions

The purpose of this study is to theorize a novel approach to the analysis of narratives dealing with trauma, fractured identities, disruption of memory, and unsettled historical conscience. The dissertation posed three main research questions:

1. How magical realism is reformulated in cinema to address the experience of trauma?
2. How does magical realist cinema function as the narrative form of the uncanny in cinema?
3. How uncanny magical realism is viable to explain experience the traumatic experience of postmodernity?

As the research argues, this addresses two academic gaps found in the pertinent literature concerning the analytical application of these concepts. The experience of trauma-induced (decon)textualization is the prime phenomenon that is expressed in the convention of magical realism and examined by the Freudian uncanny. The reformulation of magical realism and the uncanny into the novel concept of uncanny magical realism addresses the lack of consensus on the theoretical and critical definition of the terms, a situation that generates difficulties in operationalizing them into an analytical framework. The literature review indicates that both terms have been associated with a broad and ambiguous corpus of texts and works, resulting in their association with a broad range of literary and stylistic conventions. By constructing the concept of the uncanny as the defining property of magical realism as a narrative mode of cinema, this dissertation addresses this research gap and then positions uncanny magical realism as a pertinent and viable approach for the study of the narrative structure of trauma, fragmented identities, and defamiliarization in the twentieth and twenty-first century. It characterizes the

nascent usage of the magical realist convention in culturally significant mediums such as cinema to express contemporary issues.

To answer the first research question, this study addressed the reformulation of magical realism by proposing the integration of magical realism and the Freudian uncanny into the concept of uncanny magical realism. By contextualizing the concept of the uncanny into magical realism, this study proposes a novel approach to the analysis and interpretation of both concepts: magical realism as narrative mode, and the uncanny as the epistemic structure (structure of knowledge) of this narrative mode.

The experience of trauma and (decon)textualization within magical realism is characterized by a complex process of anxiety and repression, which implies the movement of mental content from the unconscious to the conscious. This finds its correlation in a narrative as the tension between two texts: the realist setting and the magical invading element. The uncanny cycle of memories and trauma, regression into repression of unconscious content, maintains this tension, through the mechanism of anxiety and (decon)textualization. The approach that uncanny magical realism proposes, thus, places the Freudian uncanny as the defamiliarizing magical agent which through repetition compulsion, and repression maintains a connection with painful, traumatic experiences stored in the unconscious. When these repressed experiences are forced into the conscious, to again be repressed back into the unconscious, this generates anxiety and further repression (referred to as the cycle of the uncanny in this research).

This study argues that this reformulation of magical realism can address the experience of trauma and (decon)textualization. Magical realism's prime function is to reflect the repression of traumatic or unacceptable memories or desires, which are projected onto the fictional world as magical events or supernatural phenomena. The Freudian uncanny as defined in this study

mirrors perfectly the function and conceptual properties of magical realism as a narrative mode, which are: a supernatural component; (decon)textualization; defamiliarization; and cyclical reiteration.

Cinema is a pertinent medium to craft magical realist narratives. Since the film is a visual format, the realist component of the convention is taken care of by the composition of *mise-en-scène*; contrasting to literature, where the voice of the narrator must deliberately and purposefully construct reality through syntaxes and discourse. To answer the second research question, this study analyzed three films: Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006), Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006), and Miyazaki Hayao's *Spirited Away* (2001).

As a means of identification of uncanny magical realism, the following three criteria were proposed in this dissertation's theory and methodology chapter. These criteria' main function is to establish the presence of the uncanny as the main drive of the narrative structure of the films analyzed and identify the presence of the uncanny through narrative devices:

- 1) The setting and characters are fractured or traumatized, so the plot (narrative conflict) deals primarily with healing the cause of the trauma.
- 2) Reiterative memories take the form of narrative devices or tokens of the uncanny that disrupt or deny catharsis; cycles of (decon)textualization solving.
- 3) When, and if, the disruption stops and the image is assimilated into a new context, it gives rise to recontextualization. Thus, magical realist narratives employ the uncanny as this cycle of (decon)textualization solving as a central component in the construction of the world and its narrative flow.

If all criteria are satisfied by the narrative analysis, and the tokens of the uncanny (narrative devices) are identified and shown to immerse characters in the uncanny cycle, then the uncanny is operationalized. These criteria identify narrative techniques and narrative structures that express the effects of uncanny phenomena: trauma, anxiety, defense mechanism, (decon)textualization and defamiliarization, doubling, and cyclical repetition, among many others. This conforms to the approach this study follows to identify the uncanny in the narratives examined.

Regarding the third and overarching research question, this study has argued that the novel concept uncanny magical realism provides an approach to understanding the contemporary postmodern experience of trauma. Postmodernism is perhaps one of the more complex and conflicting signifiers of the last century. Perhaps, as a working definition, we could venture to assume that postmodernism is an attempt to compel the individual to think and interpret context through a historical lens. Postmodernism often looks at the narration of history and indicates the lack of absolute, coherent overarching truths. The tragedy of the contemporary experience of trauma is, perhaps, this lack of awareness of the past as a repressed content of the unconscious, which is fragmented –no certainties or grand-narratives. The uncanny together with magical realism look to the past. Freudian uncanny in its primary form describes phenomena and processes that have come to determine the experience of trauma, anxiety, and defamiliarization in an individual (or collective) who has repressed memories. This has its correlation in magical realism, where the repressed past is projected on the fictional reality as magical phenomena. Uncanny magical realism allow to address this painful process of looking at the contemporary anachronic condition of postmodernity.

The analysis chapters focus on the identification of narrative devices, termed tokens of the uncanny, which, according to the mentioned approach, drive the plot of the chosen films and coincide with the properties of uncanny magical realism, as explained in Chapter 3. The following sub-sections discuss the research findings from the analyses of the films to summarize the main narrative devices which establish the presence of the uncanny in the narrative arc of their protagonists.

7.3.1. Pan's Labyrinth (2006): dissociation and doubling of the protagonist's identity as a result of the trauma of displacement

In *Pan's Labyrinth*, the uncanny is present as the mirroring of Ofelia/Moanna's memories into the reality of the objective reality of the Spanish Civil War, where the return of the repressed past appears as the supernatural and magical element overcoming reality. Thus, it implies the continuity of the unconscious and objective reality, as one merges with the other. This identifies this film as an uncanny magical realism narrative, as the uncanny narrative devices move Ofelia's journey forward.

Three criteria were proposed to test the operationalization of the uncanny as a central narrative conflict in Guillermo Del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* and evaluate it as present in the film. Moanna/Ofelia is the character undergoing denial and repression due to her traumatic experiences in the mortal world. This results in the doubling of her personality and the plot's development is centered around solving this dichotomy.

The supernatural text constantly affects Ofelia's relation to her experiences of the war during the Francoist period. This reinforces her repression and displacement, thus creating trials that she needs to overcome to resolve her double identity: Ofelia and Moanna.

The narrative structure of this film follows Ofelia's progression inside the labyrinth. This is symbolic of her inner journey to confront her forgotten past (Moanna, the princess of the Underworld) since decontextualized memories that mirror the realistic text defamiliarize and oppose her journey. This advancement conforms to the model of the uncanny, manifested as the return of decontextualized memories through repetition compulsion.

Hence, Ofelia in this visual narrative is a displaced character who is dealing with the despair of the Spanish Civil War and finds refuge in the promise of immortality, of an alternate reality where time has stopped, and her family is intact. In this sense, Ofelia shows regression into earlier stages of mental development, but her main defense mechanism is the denial of her past traumatic experiences as Moanna inside the magical timeline. This came from a split in her personality, which correlates to the two texts found in the film:

- i. the main realist setting of the Spanish Civil War
- ii. the invading magical memories of the Underground realm Moanna came from.

This is a systemic distortion of the realist setting, which is carried over to its final expression, as the reiteration of the images and memories of the Underground realm ultimately takes over the reality of Ofelia's mother and Captain Vidal.

7.3.2. *Children of Men* (2006): isolation and withdrawal as a consequence of infertility and failed parenthood.

The presence of the uncanny in *Children of Men* was found to be present and operationalized according to the three criteria proposed. Mainly, Theo is a character suffering from chronic grief due to the death of his son Dylan, resulting symbolically in spiritual infertility. Literally and symbolically, Theo is a failed father, who uses isolation and withdrawal from the world as a defense mechanism, to cope with his trauma. The uncanny is thus present as a narrative device in this film in Theo's defense mechanism against the trauma caused by his failed parenthood, causing withdrawal and isolation. This is shown in the decontextualized images and iconography from a bygone time, a symbol of the repressed past. In this sense, humanity's infertility and social disintegration mirror the journey that Theo undertakes. This use of repressed memories intruding and defamiliarizing the objective reality of the protagonist identifies the narrative as an uncanny magical realist one. The magical realism's double structure is present in the distortion and defamiliarization of reality is consistent with the return of the repressed content from the unconscious.

The plot resolution is reached when Theo is given a second chance at fatherhood, by taking care of Kee and her baby girl, named after Theo's son Dylan. He alternates, during his journey in the film, between completely in despair and withdrawn to progressively more involved in taking care of Kee and her baby daughter. The repressed memories of his son, whenever he recalls these, he suffers from anxiety and withdrawal.

The narrative structure of *Children of Men* follows the Journey of Theo as he struggles against his own spiritual infertility and humanity's loss of history. As he advances in his journey he is opposed by the memories of his son, which he needs to repress again to continue to survive.

However, gradually he starts recontextualizing his memories and integrating them into his consciousness. He escapes the cycle of repression and (decon)textualization in the last scene of the film when he offers his experience as a father to take care of Kee's daughter. This symbolically grants him a second chance at fatherhood.

The uncanny is present in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*, primarily as the repressed fertility crisis that permeates all spheres of life in the dystopian future depicted in the film. This affects most characters in the film to some degree, but mainly Theo Faron who represents the collective of humanity and the nexus point from which humanity sees the possibility of redemption. Theo displays a series of defense mechanisms that construct him as a cynical, apathetic, and empty character, who is just focused on survival over ethical, practical, and spiritual engagement with the world.

The uncanny magical realist narrative mode is observed in the film which correlates with two texts found in the film:

- i. The main realist setting of a fictional United Kingdom engulfed in societal unrest.
- ii. the textualization of the past, the lost world as the invading element, represented by the accumulation of (decon)textualized reference.

The second text causes a systemic distortion of the realist setting, for example as shown when Theo, Kee, or Miriam refuse to acknowledge the haunting images from the past.

7.3.3. Spirited Away (2001): near-death experience triggering a dissociation of identity and repression of memories

The film is driven by the reunification of the disassociated personalities of Sen and Chihiro. This came to be through Chihiro's traumatic near-death experience of almost drowning in the Kohaku River. The uncanny is constructed as a defining characteristic of the film's narrative through the identification of repression as a defense mechanism against the memories associated with the event, and its subsequent reintegration into Chihiro's conscious. This makes the film an uncanny magical realist narrative as Chihiro/Sen's journey is advanced through remembering and reintegrating memories to recover her lost identity.

Chihiro from the beginning of the film is suffering from this double personality. As Sen, her journey of self-development is one of cleansing and integration with the personality of Chihiro. Her personality flaws are presented as a consequence of defensive mechanisms and anxiety caused by latent repressed experiences of near death. However, as the two personalities integrate, by the end of the film Chihiro changes from a withdrawn and fearful, into a courageous and sincere individual. This change is manifested gradually as she recovers from the memory of her traumatic near-death experience at the Kohaku River. This finds a correlation on screen through flashbacks triggered by the presence of Kohaku.

The uncanny's presence in the film *Spirited Away* was identified through the (decon)textualization of Chihiro's memories, and the mirroring of scenes which indicate that Chihiro suffers from trauma-induced repetition compulsion. This is presented through the narrative devices of anxiety, doubling as a defense mechanism and (decon)textualization.

Her defense mechanism is the doubling of her identity into two personalities: Chihiro and Sen. The disassociation from her traumatic memories, comes with the repression of her own self and spiritual pollution, which in turn further isolates her as a displaced character. This is consistent throughout the film: fear and selfishness appear as a type of hunger that taint and cover Chihiro's true self.

The main narrative tension, the struggle that Chihiro needs to overcome to reach a resolution to her journey, is the reintegration of Sen and Chihiro into one identity, thus escaping from the cycle of the uncanny—namely shown as repetition compulsion. Finding that resolution to her journey comes from helping her friend Haku remember his identity, looking for her parents, and recovering her stolen name from Yubāba, Chihiro sets on the journey to achieve the same. Because Chihiro is successful in overcoming her trauma and repetition compulsion, she can move on and escape the cycle of the uncanny.

Additionally, Kohaku symbolically fulfills the function of Chihiro's preconscious. He provides Chihiro with help and information which uncovers their shared past. It is only when both Chihiro and Haku are able to recall their memories with clarity, that the enchantment which bounds them to the spirit realm weakens or disappears.

7.4. Limitations and Further Research

Since this study is a new expansion of Freudian uncanny and magical realist convention, more research is necessary to ensure the viability and productivity of this approach through analyses of texts within and outside the cinema. Similarly, the uncanny can be further developed

as a useful analytical concept, for example, in cultural criticism, film studies but also social sciences, art, and aesthetics. For instance, a comparative analysis of how different cultural contexts influence the representation of the uncanny in magical realist films from Latin America, Europe, and Asia could not only further the understanding of these two concepts but also reveal context-specific characteristics of the uncanny magical realism, as defined in this study.

Moreover, more research is needed on the critical examination of how magical realist cinema challenges or reinforces the binary oppositions between reality and fantasy, rationality and irrationality, normality, and abnormality, that underlie the Freudian concept of the uncanny. A theoretical exploration of how magical realist cinema relates to other forms of artistic expression that employ the uncanny, such as surrealism, gothic fiction, horror, and science fiction could be another avenue for research.

The selection of animation, science fiction, and fairytales as the thematic axis of analysis ensures the viability of the operationalization of uncanny magical realism across different films and themes. The previous scholarship on magical realist cinema has engaged with the genre in a rather isolated manner, most often engaging with a limited number of films, directors, or authors. This study also suffers from the same limitation as it is inevitable to manage a potentially huge scope of analysis.

Another limitation is, perhaps, a certain conceptual and thematic bias in the selection of films as representatives of uncanny magical realism. This was also unavoidable given the time limitations for a study such as this. However, the selection was done following a transnational principle. Further studies on the topic would have to expand this scope of analysis.

Regarding studies focused on magical realist cinema, a historical study of how magical realist cinema emerged and evolved in relation to the social and political changes of the 20th and 21st centuries, especially in postcolonial and postmodern contexts, across the globe could throw light on global trends for the genre and inform of gaps in research on magical realism. Additionally, an empirical investigation of how audiences perceive and respond to the uncanny elements in magical realist films, and what psychological effects they produce on them, could bind together the analysis of uncanny magical realism and audience/fan studies.

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