Coraline: Gothicism, intertextuality, and The Uncanny in the children’s film

*Coraline* (Henry Selick, 2009) is a popular children’s film, adapted from the novel written by Neil Gaiman in 2002. *Coraline* can clearly be considered a gothic film, having many of the classic traits. It was not only a technically innovative film, but also hugely popular amongst both adult and child viewers. This essay will aim to account for the dual viewership of *Coraline*. I will briefly discuss some trends concerning Gothicism in children’s literature and film, before outlining the presence of “The Uncanny” or *unheimlich* in *Coraline* because, as I will outline, it can be seen as a dominant aspect of the narrative. I will then move on to present the gothic aspects of the film, before finally demonstrating how the text can be seen as intertextual.

A huge selection of the most popular books for children in recent years can be seen to contain many of the characteristics considered to be “gothic”. They include a preoccupation with the dead and undead, supernatural beings, isolated protagonists and fantastical worlds. Authors of such children’s literature include Derek Landy, Joseph Delaney, Darren Shan, Cassandra Clare, Anthony Horowitz, Charlie Higson, R.L. Stine, Chris Riddell, and Sergei Lukanenko. It seems clear that in literature at least, Gothicism is a profitable theme amongst young readers. This is supported by the fact that many of these books became a series, with The Saga of Darren Shan, for example, having 12 books in Shan’s first series. Additionally, it is worth noting that there has been a trend of these films being adapted to film. A recent example of this is *Goosebumps* (Rob Letterman, 2015), an adaption of the novella series, which were first released in the 1990s.
It is also interesting that the large majority of these books are aimed at the 12 to 15-year-old age category. However, as I will discuss in the case of Coraline, there is an interesting tension in the area of Gothic children’s literature and film with regards to its “suitability” for children. Gothic narratives are consistently shown to be amongst the most popular for children, and yet there is a looming anxiety over whether such things are “good” or “suitable” for children. Coraline is not only unique in the sense that it is, as Germaine Buckley notes, “Crucially… a discrete, stand-alone novel”\(^1\), but also in terms of its categorization. There appears to be differing opinions as to what age category the novel is intended for. Easons classes it under both 9-12 and 12-15.\(^2\) Many reviewers on Goodreads and similar websites felt it was not suitable for their children of this age, while others felt it was.\(^3\) In his discussion of the novel, Gooding notes that when he attempted to introduce Coraline as an audiobook to his nine-year old daughter, she found it too frightening.\(^4\) The film is classed as PG for Parental Guidance, which suggests that the suitability is at the discretion of parents. Additionally, commenters on the trailer for Coraline on YouTube express the extent to which they were terrified by the film as children.\(^5\) Given that the film adaption of Coraline can be considered a gothic text, it is interesting to consider how this has impacted the film’s viewership. Gothicism in

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Coraline has the effect of creating layers of readership when viewing the film, which results in the ambiguity of an intended audience (which I’ve just explained). I argue that this is achieved in Coraline through an engagement with gothic tropes, the Uncanny, and intertextual references.

The research currently available on Selick’s Coraline is limited. There is very little academic scholarship which focuses specifically on the film. Most of it looks at Gaiman’s novel and the tendency is to look at it using a psychoanalytic frame. When the film is discussed, as in Lindsay Myers’ article, the impulse is to compare the film adaption to the novel to determine whether the film was “successful”. This analysis will borrow some of the observations from the literature analyses, while adding to the research by looking at qualities unique to the film and by looking at intertextuality.

In his discussion of the novel, Gooding quotes Gaiman as saying “the thing I find oddest… is those people who, after reading it, tell me that it seemed really familiar… familiar in that the shapes, once they’ve read them, just sort of assimilated into the way they saw the world. They felt they’d always known them.” This immediately draws to mind Sigmund Freud’s “Uncanny” or “Das Unheimliche” from 1919. The phrase “Das Unheimliche” does not translate directly into English, but it has been described as deriving “its terror not from something externally alien or unknown but--on the contrary--from something strangely familiar which defeats our efforts to separate ourselves from it.” Evidence of the Uncanny can be considered a common trend in Gothic literature and film. Some of the ways in which this is expressed include “doubles, déjà vu, the dead, the immediate granting of wishes,

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6 Gooding.: 391
live burial, blinding, dismemberment, coincidences implying fate, inanimate objects coming to life, and a loss of distinction between imagination and reality.”

Coraline is certainly no exception from this trend. However, what is most interesting about the representation of The Uncanny in Coraline is how literally it is portrayed.

As Germaine Buckley notes in her observations on the novel, “Gaiman’s descriptions of the other mother and her animistic other apartment recall specific examples from Freud’s essay: the removal of the eyes, inanimate objects becoming animated, images of intra-uterine existence, dismembered limbs.” Coraline is threatened with blindness, her toys and photographs come alive, and her “Other Mother” attempts to trap her in her womb-like other realm. Additionally, I would argue that Coraline’s name itself is Uncanny. Her name is consistently mispronounced as “Caroline” by the adults around her and Rudd attributes this to her frustration of feeling neglected and a need to assert her identity. Germaine Buckley builds on this by positing that the name “Coraline” is deliberately wrong sounding, “calculated to be off-kilter, slightly unreal [It is] obviously the name of a storybook character.” By sounding familiar but slightly “wrong”, the construction of Coraline’s name and by extension, her character can be said to be influenced by The Uncanny.

Many other Gothic tropes can be seen in Coraline. Firstly, there is a literal representation of “the dead” and “live burial” in the film. The ghosts of the children who previously lived in the house and were captured by the Other Mother appear before Coraline when she is trapped in the mirror. They tell her that the Other Mother trapped them there and she “ate up their lives”. I would also argue that Coraline’s

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8 Gooding.: 392”
10 Ibid.: 71
method of production works to emphasize The Uncanny in the film. Gooding notes that the Uncanny effects of the novel "are aided by Gaiman's technical innovations to a familiar narrative pattern." Technical innovations to a familiar pattern can also be seen in the film adaption. This was a stop-motion film made in 3D, which makes for an interesting visual dichotomy. Due to the nature of stop motion, some of the textures in the film, such as blankets, hair, and water appear flattened and cartoonish, while some of the effects added for the benefit of the three-dimensional viewing experience, such the giant spider web at the end of the film, appear hyperreal. This technical innovation has the effect of creating a sense of the Uncanny within the visual aspect of Coraline and helps to blur boundaries between realities.

The trope of doubling and the doppelgänger is common within Gothic narratives and it is very clearly present in Coraline. Coraline’s parents and neighbors are “doubled” between Coraline’s world and the “Other” realm. Additionally, the “Coraline doll” which the Other Mother makes to spy on Coraline can be seen to be a double. Crucially, this doll is not present in Gaiman’s novel and perhaps the film adaption calls back to the many “possessed” dolls seen in horror films, such as Poltergeist and Child’s Play. This connection with the horror film is something I’ll return to later. Doubling and doppelgangers can be said to be associated with The Uncanny in the sense that they draw attention to the fact of repetition itself. As Sedgwick argues, what is doubled is less important than the fact of its doubling.

12 Lindsay Myers, "Whose Fear Is It Anyway?: Moral Panics and "Stranger Danger" in Henry Selick's Coraline," The Lion and the Unicorn 36, no. 3 (2012): 252
13 Germaine Buckley: 67
14 Ibid.: 67
As Jackson, Coats, and McGills note, “part of the reason for the persistence of the Gothic across centuries of children’s literature must be due to the ease with which the typical Gothic chronotope can be allegorized as the mind… a place, very often a house, haunted by a past that remains present.”\(^{15}\) This observation of children’s literature can also be applied to Selick’s *Coraline*. The Pink Palace is typical of the settings seen in Gothic texts. It’s an enormous old multi-story house with a turret typical of gothic buildings. It’s positioned in an ambiguous location, surrounded by hills and mist. This sense of placelessness can also be considered typical of the Gothic genre. It also reminds one of Freud’s description of the uncanny journey, in which he imagines being “caught in a mist perhaps, one has lost one’s way… every attempt to find the marked or familiar path may bring one back again and again to one and the same spot.”\(^{16}\) This is made literal in Coraline, when she attempts to leave the “other” realm, but although she walks away from the house, she arrives back to it a few minutes later.\(^{17}\)

Additionally, as Gooding and others have noted, the alternative realm, the “other house”, is a near literal representation of the Unheimlich in that it is both familiar but unknown. So familiar, in fact, that when Coraline first visits the realm she believes at first that she is still in her own home. As Freud describes in his notes on The Uncanny, it is a place that “ought to have remained hidden and secret, and yet comes to light.”\(^{18}\)

In her notes on Selick’s films, Lindsay Myers posits the influence of the Hollywood horror film. Evidence of intertextual references can be seen in *Coraline*,

\(^{15}\) Ibid.: 62-63  
\(^{16}\) Ibid.: 66  
\(^{18}\) Myers.: 249
even in the setting. The Pink Palace can be seen to bear a striking resemblance to the mansion where Norman’s mother resides in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) [Fig.1+2]. Myers also contends that the opening sequence, in which we see the “Other Mother” sewing the Coraline Doll, Selick references *Psycho’s* famous shower scene. This is most obvious in this shot in which we see the “Other Mother’s” hand cast a shadow against the wallpaper of Coraline’s bedroom wall (Fig.3+4). Given that until recently, the genre of The Hollywood horror film was the exclusive domain of adults, this could help to explain the dual viewership and ambiguous intended audience of *Coraline*.

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19 Ibid.: 252
20 Ibid.: 252
Interestingly, Freud also asserts that “a hand cut off at the wrist” has ‘something peculiarly uncanny about [it]”21. This can easily be applied to the images seen in the film’s opening sequence. Additionally, Selick’s representation of the Other Mother’s hand is visually uncanny, in the sense that it moves in a familiar way, the knuckles and fingers moving in a manner expected from human hands. However, they are eerily thin, drawing to mind images of spiders legs and they appear metallic, eliciting images of mechanization. This has the effect of making the Other Mother’s hands feel uncanny.

21 Germaine Buckley.: 64
Intertextual referencing is further evidenced in the soundtrack of the film. The score can be best described as creepy, tension-building, and chilling. Myers attributes the soundtrack’s influence to the Hollywood Horror film, which is convincing based on the evidence previously outlined. A further insight can be gleaned when one considers that the composer, Bruno Coulais has been quoted as saying that *The Night of the Hunter* (1958) is his favorite film of all time.  

*The Night of the Hunter*, as a classic Gothic films, shares key narrative elements with *Coraline*, given that they both center around children trying to escape the clutches of an evil “Other” parent. The soundtracks of the two films also have some stylistic similarities, in the sense that they share a ghostly, eerie feel and both feature youthful female vocalists. It is clear from the evidence provided that *Coraline* can be said to be intertextual. Selick makes use of motifs of classic horror and gothic films in his children’s film in order to create layers of readership, appealing to both adult and child viewers.

To come to a conclusion, it is clear from the evidence outlined that Selick’s *Coraline* can be considered a Gothic text. It presents many of the tropes which we associate with a Gothic sensibility, particularly when we consider the representation of The Uncanny. What is unique to *Coraline*, however is how literal this representation is, causing the anxieties of The Uncanny to become amplified and emphasized. For this reason, *Coraline* can be said to not only have an intertextual relationship with the horror film, but also to intertextually reference Freud’s Uncanny, that is, the text itself.  

This is perhaps where the perceived ambiguity of the intended audience is detected. Until recently, at least, Horror and in-depth

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22 Myers.: 253  
23 Ibid.: 253  
24 Germaine Buckley.: 64
psychoanalysis, might have been considered too frightening and/or complicated as content to be included in children's films. The inclusion of Gothic tropes in the case of Coraline has the effect of creating an ambiguity in terms of the intended audience and a dual readership, in which the film is watched and enjoyed by both adults and children, but using radically different frames.

Word Count: 2,261
Bibliography


Filmography

Coraline (Henry Selick, 2009)

Night of the Hunter (Charles Laughton, Robert Mitchum, and Terry Sanders, 1955)

Pschyo (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960)