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Critically Examining Filmmaking Practitioners

In this essay I will examine the fundamental aspects of three films, discussing the creative decisions by their authors in order to synthesise three keywords that I can take forward into my future practice as a creative individual.

I have chosen three films, *Possum* (2018), *The Lighthouse* (2019), and *The Ring* (2002). Each has the tonal similarity of psychological horror themes, each tackling numerous issues in its own way. Existentialism, abuse, and psychological breakage are themes that are present in each film, with the very core being the exploration of said theme.

Matthew Holness's 2018 expressionistic psychological horror 'Possum' is about the intolerable and oppressive burden of trauma, depicted through the lens of the uncanny.

The story follows a disgraced puppeteer called Phillip, who returns to his childhood home hoping to rid himself of his grotesque puppet, only to confront his haunted past where he was viciously abused by his uncle Maurice.

'Possum' is a fiercely enigmatic film that gives you subtle clues and implications as to the events that have plagued Phillips's life, but without the catharsis of understanding everything.



We, as the audience, never learn why Phillip was let go from his job as a children's puppeteer, yet tapping into our societal unease, distrust and Prejudice, the perception it gives us is not a pleasant one.

'Possum' was adapted from Holness's own short story published as part of

'The New Uncanny: Tales of Unease', an anthology conceived around the premise of psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud's theory of the uncanny. (Salt, 2019) Holness's story combines our fear of doppelgangers and puppets to explore a fragile, introverted man who channels his trauma into a puppet he wishes to destroy, only to realize he can never truly get rid of it.

The film's visuals have a meticulously crafted vintage quality that conveys the film's uncanny themes with incredible precision—presented with such a broodingly 'slow burn', which only gives the audience minor glimpses of the titular 'Possum' that looms over Phillips's turbulent day-to-day existence before fully revealing the creature in close detail.

The Uncanny as a concept is easier to see than say, because it is a visceral experience. It is the phenomenon of something that looks so seemingly familiar yet feels unnatural and alien to us; there are only so many ways to articulate it in its most primitive context, that being it is something that looks real but is not.

However, in the case of Sigmund Freud, he argued that the existentialism caused by the uncanny called upon our deepest fears and taboo inhibitions; it reminded us so much of ourselves.

The 'id', as Freud himself put it, the part of us that is purely instinctual and tapped into our supposedly forbidden repressed impulses, which to Freud were predominantly sexual and narcissistic.

In a way, since the uncanny is technically unseen for what it truly is, for example,



being distracted by a puppet's eerily realistic features that remind us of ourselves, it must be dangerous to our psyche and thus our existence as a whole.

In the case of 'Possum', the threat is human. However, metaphorically, it has become so distorted and mangled by emotional stress that it does not feel human.

When Phillip interacts with his abusive uncle Maurice, both characters are so profoundly disconnected that even their human interactions feel distinctly unnatural.

As the film progresses, Philip's attempts to take control of his life by ridding himself of his trauma becomes increasingly streamer by its constant reemergence, yet we could say, going back to Freud's theory of being distracted by the uncanny, the puppet itself distracts Philip from Maurice's increasingly insidious presence to the point that Maurice seemingly hijacks the story when he narrates the final chapter instead of Philip. Something we would expect from power-hungry abusers looking to control their victim's life.

Seeing the puppet as a metaphor for trauma, it is just as much of a manifestation of Philip's entire identity. He seems to blame himself for his own trauma, and seeing him fight with it, burn

it, and run away from it but always wake up the very next day face-to-face with it compounds this inescapable self-hatred.

Cinematography, sound design, and set design are multifaceted areas that converge to create an atmosphere that an actor can leverage to deliver a consistent, engaging performance.

In an interview, Eggers outlines several fundamental facets of production that give 'The Lighthouse' its gritty atmosphere. "The atmosphere of a black and white, crusty, dusty, rusty, musty, world in a boxy aspect ratio, with the pipe smoke and the facial hair, and the Guernsey sweaters and the salt cod, and what is the story that then suits that atmosphere?" (Robert Eggers



on Preparing Robert Pattinson and Willem Dafoe for The Lighthouse, 2020)

Robert Eggers considers tone before all else, using it as a catalyst for stories to stem from.

Many of his precise and controlled decisions as a director are with the ultimate objective of achieving a consistent and palpable tone, despite being a rather enigmatic concept, the atmosphere of 'The Lighthouse' can be understood by simply deconstructing the fundamental building blocks

placed by Eggers and his team. At the start of the screenplay is a technical note, "This film must be photographed on black and white 35mm negative." (Eggers and Eggers, 2019)

By utilising vintage lenses and black and white 35mm negative film stock, Eggers and his Director of Photography Jarin Blaschke, achieve a textured and grimy look, emphasising the lived-in quality of the set.

The cinematography of 'The Lighthouse' is different from most contemporary cinema, in that it uses slow black and white 35mm film stock and an enclosed '1.19:1' aspect ratio, which makes the composition of each shot feel increasing claustrophobic and repressive.

Eggers describes the aspect ratio choice as being "motivated not as an attempt to ground the film in that history, but to create a frame that would be optimal for composing images with the height of The Lighthouse itself" and "Simultaneously create an enclosed, claustrophobic feeling".

The film has a stark and distinctive lighting style that appears to be entirely naturally lit; however, the black and white film stock utilised to shoot the film required an abundance of bright fill lighting to gain proper exposure. Each creative decision made by Eggers is a deliberate way to serve the atmosphere in order to create an otherworldly, idiosyncratic tone that can be felt in every frame of every scene.

Alongside the other core facets of production, Eggers employs numerous sound design techniques to immerse the audience in the gritty world. The constant blaring of the Lighthouse's foghorn, rumbling wind and scavenging seagulls to name a few.

Eggers and his production team constructed each set by hand. Including The Lighthouse itself and the accompanying cabin, paying close



attention to time-period accurate details. When building these sets, designing costumes and writing dialogue, each element works together in tandem to create a sense of place and time. The Lighthouse is more an exercise in atmosphere and world-building than a conventional narratively driven film. The atmosphere is crucial to what the Lighthouse is. The film has a story, but it's ambiguous, asking more questions than it ultimately answers.

It deals with many themes and can be interpreted in different ways. For example, if the film is watched in a group environment, each person will likely have a different interpretation and perspective on what happens on-screen; however, each person will likely walk away feeling that same encroaching sense of unease and deep claustrophobia that Eggers and his team worked so tirelessly to convey effectively.

Gore Verbinski's 2002 film, 'The Ring', is an unorthodox, introspective, and meticulously crafted gateway into foreign horror. Adapting from The Japanese horror film, 'Ring' from 1998, by Hideo Nakata. The film tells the story of a reporter as she attempts to find the origin of a cursed

videotape that, upon watching it latches onto the viewer, who is killed exactly seven days later by a vengeful spirit called Sadako who emerges from the nearest television screen.

However, the story is more focused on the characters trying to understand what exactly caused this curse to begin with while dealing with the psychological torment placed upon them by said curse.



The film's most brooding feature is the emphasis placed on reminding the viewer how long the reporter has left to uncover the truth before her time is up. Playing on this thematic association regarding how our lives are dictated by limited time.

This plot device ultimately helps

build tension; there is no ambiguity as to how valuable time is to her, and it does not try to mask any of the supernatural aspects behind a thin veil of scepticism.

Instead, the opening of the film is quick to establish that something truly terrifying is contained within the tape, with the death of her niece and her friends being the catalyst that inspires the reporter to investigate the bizarre circumstances around what actually killed them.

It harkens back to Alfred Hitchcock's 'bomb under the table' logic, as the audience knows that something bad is happening unbeknownst to the characters, even if we are still left relatively little information about the insidious threat posed against our protagonists.

But nonetheless, the unease that is built by the characters' ignorance of the perceived threat creates a palpable sense of tension and heightens the urgency of the story. Especially when the core concept plays on how fast time goes by.

As the clock ticks down for each character and the sinking realisation of their inevitable fate sets in, further panic and discomfort are escalated onto the audience as a result. The hopelessness felt by each character is shared with us as viewers.

The film attempts to ground itself deeper into its folkloric origins by emphasising the cold, dreary colour palette, with the makeup and visual effects accentuating the erratic editing when juxtaposed with the brooding tension and sense of foreboding fostered by the film's score.

The elaborate supernatural powers that the videotape possesses act as a means of foreshadowing the impending evil. It is treated more metaphorical in nature since the storytelling is rooted in Japanese traditions; as Colette Balmain explains in her book *Introduction To Japanese Horror Film*, “The tape and its power are like an embodiment of the fears and anxieties the technological change brought to social norms and traditions in Japan. Especially with the influence of the younger, more liberal generation.” (Balmain, 2008)

The story reveals that a doctor once had an affair with a psychic and tried to help her prove her powers to the world, but upon denouncement, the psychic's adopted daughter kills a journalist, driving the psychic to suicide due to slander, and the doctor loses his position. Later the doctor kills the daughter after she creates the cursed videotape that contains her hatred for the world. The reporter discovers the daughter's body and attempts to appease her spirit. The curse is then presumably lifted now that the girl's body has been recovered. However, it is revealed that the reporter survives the curse,

not because she lifted the curse, but because she copied the tape and unknowingly passed it on to her ex-husband, who meets an unfortunate end.

At the core of the film's tension is the concept of



perpetuating the cycle of abuse; one generation starts something which each subsequent generation will have to carry the burden.

The curse of 'The Ring' is caused by repression; there is no formal resolution. The characters discover that it is already too late to apologise for the misdeeds of someone else.

The film furthers the feeling of absence that death can bring by presenting the curse in a more nuanced way, highlighting the psychological toll that death can have on people, never putting the emphasis on the death scene itself. Instead, focusing on the impending feeling of dread that the harrowing aftermath brings.

After analysing each film, I have concluded that the three keywords that I will move forward with are ‘Uncanny’, ‘Atmosphere’ and ‘Tension’. These are thematic and tonal elements that are

essential to many horror films in order to effectively convey the story, develop a consistent tone and create a sense of place and presence.

The uncanny can be defined as a primal fear of that which looks human but is not. This is a core concept that I have applied to the design and body language of my own character, 'The Gasman', which is a foreboding presence on-screen. The fear of the uncanny taps into a deep, personal fear every person has, so an uncanny object or costume can be used as a metaphor. Such as the titular Possum in 'Possum' (2018).

Atmosphere is defined by the tone or mood of a place. Horror films, most particularly physical horror utilise locals to create an impending sense of dreading or insidiousness. The best known filmic example of this in recent times is Robert Eggers's 2019 'The Lighthouse'.

The uncanny and the concept of atmosphere are similar, yet distinct in key ways. The uncanny can aid in the creation of atmosphere, it is not a substitute for it. Just like cinematography, sound design and editing, the uncanny aspects of films such as 'Possum' are present in the writing and production design. Moreover, films such as 'The Lighthouse' utilise the uncanny in more unconventional ways.

The third word I examined was tension, a core part of every film. Tension can be defined as a deep feeling of emotional strain. This fosters an uneasiness among the audience, engaging them in the story and creating a turbulent viewing experience. Tension is a core aspect of many films, often being the driving force of the plot in many horror films and action blockbusters.

When each of these three concepts is applied to a film and used to explore complex themes, a more rich and nuanced story is often told through visuals. My research question for level 6 is centred around identifying these key concepts, understanding the nuances of each and learning how to effectively incorporate them into my own practice.

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List of Figures: Matthew Hollness, Robert Eggers and Gore Verbinski.