

The Exploration of the Uncanny: Understanding Liminal Spaces

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Abstract

The phenomenon of the uncanny and liminality has remained a subject of fascination for many individuals over the years, giving rise to a multitude of books and media that have endured across generations. It is a common theme in gothic literature, horror, and strange fiction, ranging from Lovecraft to the photographic works of Gregory Crewdson, and is prevalent in gaming regardless of genre. Regardless of the medium, this subgenre thrives. These are the books, thesis and articles that guided the research into the uncanny, the eerie, and most importantly; the liminal.

It is unheimlich (or unhomely) - unfamiliar and leaves a sense of dread, leaning towards the realms of the frightening. Unheimlich comes from the German for family, or familiarity. Tame, not strange; unhomely. From places, to inanimate objects that we fear are secretly animate; such as mannequins and dolls to storytelling devices, there are a multitude of ways to create the feeling of unease that comes with the uncanny. (*The Uncanny, Sigmund Freud*).

The uncanny has a setting bias of the rural - the coastlines of M.R James, the forests of Robert Holdstock, and others, but “less critical” views towards the urban. The rural is presented as unknowable yet familiar, though is skewed into the folk-horror genre as many of the population have never lived in such areas. Budden describes city-dwellers like himself as ignorant to the countryside, which feeds into the unknowable, with ideas of what these places are taking over; like hostility to outsiders, whatever comes from the ancient lands, and a difference in culture. He also describes the use of the rural as over used due to this, and in his own work strived to find the stranger places, or more aptly put - the *ordinary* spaces - in the denser populated areas in order to commit to a process he refers to as “re-weirding”. (*Half-concealed places; Writing The Uncanny, Gary Budden*).

Liminal spaces are defined as transitional states or places that are uncanny, unsettling or dreamlike, not one of terror or revulsion. This unsettled feeling can be created by negative space in a shot, creating that unsettled feeling - one that plays on fear of something lurking in the darkness that we are also drawn to. The withholding of information, or seeking something that should be there but is not. (*Negative Spaces and Ambiguity: A Toolkit for Writing Uncanny Fiction, Lucie McKnight Hardy; Writing the Uncanny*) and in creating that sense of strange Mark Fisher states that doors, or any other type of threshold or portal, anything that creates that feeling of being in between is necessary. That the weird is an intrusion into the everyday routine; something outside of our day-to-day reality, whereas places and structures are eerie. (*The Weird And The Eerie, Mark Fisher*).

The word itself comes from the Latin word for “threshold”, and can be attributed to non-places of travel, such as highways and airports, along with such landscapes as beaches. An alternate analysis of such a space is that it is a change in the day-to-day rhythm of life, the leaving from an eventual return to the ‘home world’. Roberts focuses on a holiday destination being liminal, and finding that of the home world (in this case, Britain) abroad. (*Spatial Anthropology: Excursions in Liminal Space*, Les Roberts).

If ignoring previous research that focuses on the liminal being only uncanny and strange, The Chronicles of Narnia qualifies as a liminal space outside of chronological time that was created in part from war time childrens’ trauma in order to escape. The paper also refers to childhood itself being a separated phase of life that many believe should not undergo traumatising, or partially scarring experiences while others argue that it is important for a child to learn to cope from an early age. Narnia, here, acting similarly to a vessel to make sense of the negative experience. (**War and the Liminal Space: Situating The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe in the Twentieth Century Narrative of Trauma and Survival** by Nanette Norris).

In the same vein, *‘Just Passing Through’: Liminal Space and Re-enchantment in C. S. Lewis’s The Chronicles of Narnia*, a thesis by Rakel’ Elizabeth Sampson speaks of the importance of doorways within the series, as a state of transformation for the characters as they grow through the arcs within the first book, The Lion, The Witch, And The Wardrobe.

Much like the title suggests, *‘No traveller returns: the liminal world as ordeal and quest in contemporary young adult afterlife fiction’* a thesis written by Sophie Masson focuses on the liminality within young adult fiction and the afterlife. In which, she details how the afterlife with its various portrayals and shifting landscapes can mirror the young adult experience.

Following on from the theme of the afterlife, in *Death, Dreams and the Disorderly Dead: Liminality and the Discernment of Spirits in Early Modern England* by Janine Rivière documents death and the afterlife through religious practice, describing the concept of the afterlife itself along with ghosts, along with the concept of dreaming as the ultimate begging of liminality.

In **Uncanny Architecture and the ‘Terrible Place’: Representations of the Gothic Space in Shirley Jackson’s The Haunting of Hill House** written by Elinor Bowers notes Jackson’s shift in the traditional gothic horror (no big scary castle, no skeletons nor murder), to create a unique American gothic novel. She explains that Jackson relies on three ingredients of the gothic to create a possibly haunted-possibly psychological house, those three things are use of; the sublime, the excessive and the uncanny.

In the same vein; **The Haunting of Hill House** by Shirley Jackson follows Eleanor Vance with her slow decline, and rapid obsession with the house. It is left unspoken on whether the house truly drew her in, that it was as haunted as the title suggests, or if the true ‘haunting’ was Eleanor’s sudden need for the house, that follows an unfulfilling life.

Throughout a **Spotlight on Shirley Jackson**(*Writing The Uncanny*), Alison Moore documents Shirley Jackson's life, the events that might have inspired her to write, but crucially it also pinpoints The Haunting of Hill House and how the house is reflecting Eleanor Vance's current state, further confirming how it is Eleanor herself that is likely haunted, but making the house almost a living thing by letting it take on her feelings and trauma.

Living loss: an exploration of the internal space of liminality by Angela Kelly explains social and medical issues through the lens of liminality, using dementia and the loss of a person through AIDS as a guide. Living Loss is the term she's coined for this, to explain loss and grief for someone that is still here

Constructing The Real: The New Photography Of Crewdson, Gursky And Wall is a thesis by Melissa A. Schwartz of the University of Kentucky, breaking down what is the reason behind how the unsettling nature is captured within their photography. It touches on the philosophy of whether or not an image is real, as a sliver of something that existed in some form of the past. Following on through the words of Crewdson, in an essay by Russell Banks (*Beneath The Roses*), the works of Crewdson's photography is compared to that of a 1950s technicolor movie still, and classed as having an incompleteness. A moment caught in time, or a story left unsaid with no beginning, middle or end, just *being*.

Gothic Music: The Sounds of the Uncanny by Isabella van Elferen, much like the title suggests focuses on music and its aesthetics within the gothic horror genre. As the liminal is largely seen in gothic horror, while not exclusive to it, it has a good focus on how music affects the tone of whatever is seen, whether it be film, tv or games. She documents how, through the use of a leitmotif, can remind the audience that there is more going on within the plot just off screen, and keep them from getting too comfortable while watching a TV or film, or while playing through a video game.

The Exploration of the Uncanny: Understanding Liminal Spaces.

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Introduction

The phenomenon of the uncanny and liminality has remained a subject of fascination for many individuals over the years, giving rise to a multitude of books and media that have endured

across generations. It is a common theme in gothic literature, horror, and strange fiction, ranging from Lovecraft to the photographic works of Gregory Crewdson. Regardless of the medium, this subgenre thrives. The purpose of this dissertation is to delve into the unsettling nature of these spaces across a few select genres, comparing how each plays with the format.

The idea of the uncanny can be interpreted as that which unsettles the observer. As Freud coined it 'unheimlich' - a term stemming from the German word 'heimlich' - a term signifying familiarity. "Here the *unheimlich* is the unfamiliar, the new and strange. about the meaning of unheimlich, namely, that the term 'uncanny' (unheimlich) applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open."(Freud, 2003. PG.132)

The concept of uncanny encompasses a broad range of phenomena, such as mannequins and inanimate objects that evoke apprehension about their potential to move. Another view of the uncanny in this case would be "stories that leave you haunted"(Hardy, 2021. PG.9) - something that does not terrify or scare, and does not disgust nor revolt, but leave the audience with a deep feeling of being unsettled.

The feeling that can come from simply withholding information is more uncanny, so what exactly is the *liminal*?

Spaces

In terms of settings, Gary Budden points out the prominent bias towards rural environments, as evidenced by the coastlines of M.R James and the forests of Robert Holdstock; stating that we pay "less critical attention... to the importance of urban, suburban and edgeland landscapes" (Budden, 2021. pg.95) while looking at the uncanny . There is a strange familiarity within these settings, rural towns and farm lands rarely differ from each other in matters of representation, yet Budden describes them to be unfamiliar to city dwelling folk because of the fears of the unknown. From hostility from the locals, to the feeling of ancient lands, Budden explains that these are tropes that are overused, and instead we should be more interested in "reweirding" the urban.

"The eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or is there is nothing present when there should be something."

- Fisher. 2017.(p. 61).

Which, in shorter terms; things or beings in an area that they're not supposed to be, or the lack of things and beings that are meant to be. Perhaps a room with the outline of where windows should be, but they're not there, or in the case of a blog post now lost to time; a room with only a single doll in it. But does the eerie nature of belonging and absence create a liminal space on its own?

Fisher continues with this train of thought of ‘something where there should be nothing’ by pointing out features in some of the works of Daphne Du Maurier, specifically in the story *The Birds*.

Similarly to Budden, Les Roberts attributes the feeling of uncanny not only to places such as airports, but defining a ‘liminal moment’. Homing in on his example of the airport(or travel in general), it is a disruption of the every day - a tourist can travel and have a sense of familiarity as ‘tourist landscapes’ are, by design to be a neutral ground - or as Roberts puts it a “performative playground”.

“As a liminal landscape and liminal ‘moment’, the holiday experience is played out as if in a crucible, the heat and concentrated energies of which forge a strong sense of selfhood and identity that the tourists potentially take back home.”

- Roberts 2020. PG.34

This implies that a liminal space is more than just a physical setting; it is an experiential state as well. It does not have to be uncomfortable or last a long time; in fact, it can be a pleasant experience that one can return to at any moment. It also frames liminality as something familiar within an unfamiliar setting, which can both make it more of a man made structure, and also potentially far more common. From this, it contradicts the initial understanding of a liminal space *needing* to be eerie, unsettling or otherwise otherworldly in order for it to qualify. And while the contradiction is there in that aspect, it still comes under the fact that it is still a means of transition, which opens up the question of: what *else* can be liminal? Taking away the concept of it being something that *must* be unsettling, The Chronicles of Narnia by C.S Lewis would certainly qualify.

Narnia, the land from the famed book series and now film adaptations, is a place that is arguably outside of normality. The Wardrobe within this series acts as a threshold between the two worlds; the reality of the second world war and the home the children had been evacuated to, and the fantasy land in which they become heroes and royals after overcoming the evil of that land. The *transition* of characterisation, and that the space itself has transformed them. In a thesis by Rakel’ Elizabeth Sampson on the subject, it is stated that (especially in the case of the character Edmund), that doorways appear to be the key to these transforming moments; “All four of the Pevensie children sometimes pass through the same portal but it does not affect each in the same way”.) Narnia in and of itself is a liminal space in the traditional sense, while the doorways are the gateways that encourage change.

Returning to the outcome that a liminal space is an experience; Narnia can be viewed as a manifestation of the fear and trauma that the Pevensie children would have experienced as evacuees during the second world war.

“Memory operates in a manner similar to The Chronicles of Narnia narrative, in dissembling experience and recreating a newly-ordered narrative with which to make sense of the (potentially traumatic) experience.”

- Norris, PG.3.

This implies that the manifestation of liminality as a concept can occur through an inciting event. Whether it is to revisit or to comprehend something that negatively impacts one’s mental state, can transform or conceal a situation into a positive encounter. A liminal space being a dissociative state rather than a physical plane, still fits within the current exploration that it is one, a place of transformation and two, something that can be revisited.

Haunting and Liminality

Haunting is a large part of liminality - the in-between of life and death. One such film that comes to mind is *The Lovely Bones*, based on the novel of the same name by Alice Sebold. The film follows a fourteen year old Susie Salmon, who had been murdered by her neighbour, and her time within the world in between life and death. From this world, she can both watch over her family as they try to move on from her tragic passing, while also existing outside of the space of the living. “Unlike the fixed end-points of Heaven or Hell, where time and fate are static – there are still possibilities for personal agency” (Masson, 2018. PG.10), and throughout the film it is shown how the landscape of the ‘in-between’ changes over the course of the run time; from simply a reflection of Susie in the window watching her father grieve, to a gazebo in an ocean of nothing to a bright field where she can meet and play with the other victims of her murderer seemingly shifting to whatever fills her whims at whatever moment in time (or out of time, whatever the case of this world may be). It is not, however, a world without trauma; her anger at dying creates storms, when the killer is revealed, she is shown either the cause or the bodies of the other young girls that were murdered. This circles back to the liminal, and by extension haunting, being a possibly traumatic state, or a state of mind born from trauma.

Similarly, the game *Cozy Grove* is a recent delve into the haunting genre, taking a more classic take on the idea of ghosts. This game revolves around the player's journey to befriend and assist the ghosts, ultimately helping them break free from the realm between worlds. Unlike many from its genre, it, like the name suggests, it is comfortable - Cozy, even. That this (taking the concept from *The Lovely Bones*) *in-between* between worlds is simply there, however, unlike Robert’s vacation analogy, is a one way street. You die, you can be held within this purgatory-like veil, and pass on; there is no returning from this permanent vacation. Ghosts are “therefore the ultimate liminal beings, or go-betweens between the world of the dead, the supernatural and the world of the living and the natural world” (Rivière, 2009. PG.7), and while not considered a *space*, the existence of the concept safely ties hauntings as either a cause or an after effect of a

liminal space or occurrence. While the hauntings are never truly explained within the game - outside of the obvious “they died” - the island acts as both an anchor and a container for these spectral beings. A host, almost. The island also acts as a living thing, changing as the player completes their little tasks; laying colourless and grey until the job is done, returning to bright colours after each ghost is helped.

The liminal ghostly space isn't a new phenomenon, however, though arguably it is rather blatant within the area of this game. In a more traditional setting, *The Haunting of Hill House*, a book written by Shirley Jackson set in an alleged haunted house much like the name suggests, though whether or not the house is haunted is up to debate, the effect it has on both the narrative and the narrative character of Eleanor Vance. Now, in this book the only true death, or haunting, is Eleanor Vance herself, who ends the book ending her own life rather than be taken away from the house that she had become so enraptured with. Eleanor, in love with the place can “even hear, with her new awareness of the house, the dust drifting gently in the attics”(Jackson, S. 2009. p.223) - that she herself is almost the house itself, after so long without having a place she saw as ‘home’ for so long. Perhaps, the only haunting truly is Eleanor.

To break down Eleanor as a character, one that evidently was never happy with her life, is to return to looking at liminality as a mental state. Moore suggests during a spotlight on the author herself, that much like in another tale *Moominpappa By The Sea* by Tove Jansson where the characters become scared, that the island reflects this and becomes scared itself, that during Jackson's own novel Eleanor's “emotional burden appears to transfer itself to her surroundings.” (Moore, 2021. PG. 79). This near implied that the house is a living thing, or at least living in the sense of fictional personification, enough so that it to an extent becomes Eleanor; that it takes on her pain, her wishes for things to be different and *that* is the true haunting; the haunting that is Eleanor herself.

“Liminal spaces are between cultural states, making them an in-between place, a non-place. In this space, initiates are between social roles, cultural expectations, and status. While at once a socio-cultural space, what adds to the enormity of residing in these spaces is that they are simultaneously a medical and psychological space.”

- Kelly, 2008. PG. 3.

This, if anything, solidifies liminality outside of the uncanny, though nonetheless liminal, with it becoming a mental, medical and social state. Not the undead, no ghosts or anything of the sort. To be liminal, is also to be in limbo. This works rather in the same way as the theory of trauma as a liminal space, though rather than drawing away into a fictional world, a day dream, but instead a real physical place, that becomes so entwined with a person that it is almost them themselves. To be out of place, physically, mentally, or due to health. The haunting, while still here.

Taking the idea of haunting, could a liminal space also be simply classed as an overlap of 'worlds'? Something that lingers when there is nothing left, or something that we hold on to? Either in the case of *The Lovely Bones*' *in-between*, or *The Haunting of Hill House*'s Eleanor as the haunting, despite drawing further away from the traditional viewing of a liminal space, regarding trauma and what can come from it (Narnia's daydream land, Cozy Grove's physical liminality) as a type of liminality opens the classification wider than initially considered. However, within the context of the media, such things cannot always be portrayed as easily as on paper, so how would this translate towards the screen?

Creating the Liminal

To return to reality, there is a certain feeling of *not right* to Gregory Crewdson's photography. At a glance, his images are unsettling, but is it simply that?

Crewdson creates his images through extensive staging, his sets rivalling those of a film or tv production, then later edited digitally. In a thesis by Melissa Schwartz it is detailed how the camera is the stand in for the audience - "an impartial witness that documents the real, that produces a 'perfect analogon' of the object, yet their processes create images that call into question the 'but it has indeed been' thereness of the objects in the images." (Schwartz, 2011. PG. 12) - that we must trust that it captures the past, that at some moment it simply *was*.

Crewdson's work sits somewhere short of a film still, something that is classed as perfect incompleteness - there is no beginning, middle nor end, no true story to unfold, it simply *is* - "no detail is meaningless and all details are equally significant" (Banks, 2008). So what makes a Crewdson photo unsettling? It could, possibly be that there is a reliance on the viewer to fill in the gaps. A photo, after all, is standalone and there is only so much information that can be portrayed in one snapshot. The viewer is left to their own devices, to come to their own understanding of what they are witnessing. Returning to Budden's theory of *reweirding*, Crewdson is a near perfect example of it. The normal and mundane made eerie, a story unfolding outside the frame, nestled within largely urban landscapes - what is likely more common to its audience.

To class his work as liminal, opens up the idea that in creating or investigating the concept is to be left unsatisfied. That, though chasing understanding, will probably never have a full definition on screen, as we, the audience, are never given the full story. Though when attempting to create such a space in film, what would that look like? If we strip away most of the plot, what is left for a film production?

Something that films have that photographs do not - not only plot and the time to let it unfold - is music. Atmosphere. If assuming the goal of creating a liminal space is to unsettle, ignoring other points discussed for now, what does a ghostly, otherworldly place sound like, and how would that be conveyed through the medium of moving image?

To look at what a liminal space would sound like places us back within the gothic horror genre, the cornucopia of liminal themes. “Sound suggests presence even when this presence is invisible or intangible, and is thus closely related to the ghostly” (Van Elferen, 2012. PG. 4) - non diegetic sound and music is important to the audience, who has learned the cues of what a ghostly or intangible presence is from decades of cinema. Violins, vocals, even the instrument aptly named *The Nightmare Machine*, have all been used as cues of the eerie for generations, but these alone do not cause that eerie, uncanny feeling. Through the use of leitmotifs, Van Elferen uses zombies in horror game Resident Evil as an example, the audience can be reminded that even while off screen, there is still a threat lurking around every corner ready to cause harm to beloved characters(or in the case of games; the player themselves). This again feeds into the theory behind Crewdson’s work, that it is the *unseen* that leaves that eerie feeling, to let audiences’ minds to wonder what’s coming next, or what isn’t. That the unknown remains the uncanny.

Conclusion

A liminal space by itself is rather difficult to narrow down a matter of *what it is*. On a physical, earthly level it can be simply a place of transport, where one requires to wait within its walls for an undisclosed amount of time. Or, it could be something like a resort, or a place that was created to mimic another, something that isn't necessarily a negative experience.

It could even stay close to its roots and remain as an unsettling place, either physical or mental. A place that cannot be classed as horror, but remains uncanny in its original unheimlich understanding. An eerie world between worlds, a strangely unsettling place of transition, one where you may perhaps return some day. Or not. Or are simply trapped there.

A mental place to escape the terrors of the waking world, a dreamlike world such as in *Narnia*, or *The Lovely Bones* that cushions the blow somewhat of the horrors they, the characters have endured. Or, in the case of *The Haunting of Hill House*’s Eleanor Vance, who is arguably the haunting, therefore the liminal, herself.

However, when it comes to understanding how to *create* a liminal space for any media such as film, TV, etc, it is important to keep the audience guessing. Not in the way of a murder mystery, but instead keeping them alert through not showing too much on camera, weaving thoughts - or the actual term leitmotifs - into the soundtrack that remind the humble viewer that something is still very much there, as it is something an audience has been almost trained into picking up on through years of theatre, cinema and now gaming.

Regardless of which direction the liminal may take you, either down the traditional route often found in gothic horror, or in other terms such as the mental image and the concept of living loss;

certain things remain true. That the liminal, at its core, is uncanny - something that is slightly off, that it is a different state to what you were before (transitional state; physically, mentally, socially), that any mundane place can be uncanny given the correct circumstances, and it is now, through research, something that can be created.

Perhaps, in short; the liminal is what you decide to make of it. The liminal is what you need it to be. It is something that within itself seems to transcend genre and true, concrete definition, and frankly; what is more liminal than that?

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