

Student Name: Elizabeth Cassin

Student Number: 2204604

Programme of Study: Illustration BA(Hons)

Module: ADAD5004 Research in Practice

Word Count: 2,308

Tutor Name: Delyth LLOYD-Evans

Three Keywords: The Uncanny, Formal Elements and Storytelling

Research in Practice Proposal

Introduction

This proposal will explore three keywords, The Uncanny, Formal Elements and Storytelling within the context of abandoned and urban landscapes. These keywords will guide my exploration of 'fundamental fears', driving my understanding of how formal elements can combine to create truly unsettling imagery. Through investigating these themes, I intend to develop my understanding of what people fear, why they fear it and how formal elements and semiotics can be used as a tool to infiltrate the psyche of the viewer. Furthermore, it will investigate narrative structure and typography, to grasp how text and illustration can

collaborate. Knowledge of these themes will inform my creative decision making in formal elements, content and writing style, which will be beneficial to my third year practice.

The Uncanny

Fear is one of the seven universal emotions experienced by everyone around the world. Fear arises with the threat of harm, either physical, emotional, or psychological, real or imagined. While traditionally considered a “negative” emotion, fear actually serves an important role in keeping us safe as it mobilizes us to cope with potential danger.

(Ekman, 2019)

Fear is a constant in daily life, argued by Ekman to protect us from harm, however, interestingly, fear can develop from imagined threats, which might even be irrational.

Proving that an individual's psyche directly impacts what they view to be a threat.

Psychological theorist, Sigmund Freud, introduces the term ‘uncanny’, an adapted translation from ‘*unheimlich*’, which directly translates to ‘unhomely’. The ‘uncanny’ refers to the fear of the unfamiliar or something that is not yet understood. He writes about the term, “There is no doubt this belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (Freud, 1919, in Freud, 2003, p.123). However, this understanding of the word is not exhaustive, as unfamiliar stimuli may not evoke this feeling and familiar stimulus might with additional elements. Therefore, it would be wrong to assume that the ‘uncanny’ only refers to the entirely unfamiliar. “The term ‘uncanny’ applies to everything that was intended to remain secret, hidden away, and has come into the open” (Freud, 1919, in

Freud, 2003, p.132). This suggests that the 'uncanny' may also refer to both the unknown, and a known stimulus with an unknown element. These 'uncanny' stimuli result in a feeling of unease, threat or might even trigger the fight or flight response (Barlow, 2002).

Abandoned buildings can be determined as 'uncanny', as they fall into the category of a known stimulus with an unknown element. The building or home itself is all too familiar, as most people will live in their own and be surrounded by others constantly, however, they become 'uncanny' once left vacant. This vacancy lends room for one's imagination to create any answer for what remains behind the crumbling walls or boarded up windows. This fear is further amplified by how abandoned locations are portrayed within the media, often portrayed as negative or threatening locations (Erk and McConnell, 2023).

Abandoned space is seldom explored, but it has become a term that conveys a dark demeanor. A person having never had a bad experience regarding an unoccupied or neglected space may still choose to avoid it.

(Erk and McConnell, 2023, p. 171)

Additionally, abandoned buildings have been described as "Dead houses" (Vidler, 1992), with another source explaining, "Abandoned materials decay over time, mimicking our own mortality" (Erk and McConnell, p.174). This suggests that abandoned buildings could create an unconscious connection to oneself, providing an unusual sense of familiarity or relatability, deepening the feeling of 'uncanny'.

This established fear of the unknown, unfamiliar or 'uncanny' is believed to be directly linked to the fear of the dark (Kwidzinski, 2023). This fear is a common phobia that is often generalised to young children and toddlers. However, in a study conducted by Krisztina

Kopcsó and Andras Lang in 2014, 71% of secondary and university students confessed to suffering from this fear, at least occasionally.

The combination of our overactive imaginations, paired with the blank canvas that is darkness, tends to lead us into scaring ourselves by imagining all the things that could be hiding in the dark

(Kwidzinski, 2023)

With the constant that abandoned buildings lack electricity or artificial lighting and often have boarded up windows and doors, preventing natural light from filling the space, there is no question that they can embody the fear of the dark and subsequently, the fear of the unknown.

Formal Elements

Communicating a message or emotion through imagery, specifically with a vastly diverse audience, is not an easy task. Explained by John Berger, "The way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe" (Berger, 2008, p. 8), later adding, "Although, every image embodies a way of seeing, our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing" (Berger, 2008, p. 10). However, artistic tools in the form of formal elements provide an artist with some control over how their image will be understood. These formal elements consist of line, shape, space, value, form, texture, and colour. An artists' understanding of these key tools is vital in creative decision making, justifying a range of artistic choices and deepening the visual communication of their works of art.



Figure 1: *All Saints Chapel – Bath* (Piper, 1942)



Figure 2: *Somerset Place, Bath* (Piper, 1942)

Figures 1 and 2 display the work of John Piper, a wartime illustrator who documented the destruction of buildings affected by the bombings. Although they are reportage pieces, they achieve far more than a quick photograph could. Both figure 1 and 2 were created whilst “ruins were still smouldering and bodies being dug out” (Piper, n.d., quoted in Tate, n.d.b), adding to the emotions that shine through the work. The overall communication of the pieces is rather sad and dull, which is no accident, as the decisions made by Piper capture the emotions felt at the scene. The colours that Piper has used are indicative of the war, utilising muted and ‘muddy’ browns, greys and blacks, almost all featuring either a yellow or green undertone suggestive of camouflage. The grey and black tones blend beautifully in the sky, suggesting the smoke and fire, whilst creating this overcast sky and implied doom. In a study by Jonauskaitė et al (2020), 61% and 45% of participants associated grey and black with sadness respectively, with other associated emotions being regret (55% and 45%) and disappointment (54% and 48%). Additionally, Molly Bang argues, "As a result of our inability to see in the dark, black often symbolizes the unknown, and all our fears associated with the unknown" (Bang, 2000, p. 68).

In figure 1, the material used by Piper is equally as compelling as the colour, using ink, chalk, gouache and watercolour (Tate, n.d.b). These materials have allowed him to generate a great sense of texture and movement within the work, by blending and smudging elements together. This movement and texture, specifically around the centre of the image, creates a visual of the bomb exploding, as the bricks almost look to be falling whilst viewing the image.



Figure 3: *J'ai baisé ta bouche lokanaan* (Beardsley, 1893)



Figure 4: *The Woman in the Moon* (Beardsley, 1984)

Figure 3 portrays the work of Aubrey Beardsley, a late-Victorian illustrator who utilises the Art Nouveau style. Beardsley's work demonstrates an entirely different approach than Piper's, as it does not feature tone or blending, instead featuring bold contrast and linework. Many of Beardsley's pieces feature a monochromatic approach, with vast solid blocks of black and white. Gathering inspiration from Japanese art and the line block printing process that was gaining popularity at the time (Tate, n.d.a), he created bold and contrasting imagery that easily captures viewers' attention. Despite the emphasis on the aesthetic value of the work, his consideration of formal elements cannot be overlooked, as although his imagery was often intended to approach subjects deemed as taboo, he did so, in figure 3, in a rather delicate and ornate way. Throughout this piece, the lines are curved

and the shapes are rounded, according to Molly Bang, “Curved shapes embrace and protect us... Pictures with curved shapes feel more secure and comforting” (Bang, 2000, p. 71). This element of the image is a stark contrast to the subject matter, creating a tension or almost humour between the depiction of a severed head and the unconscious sense of comfort that comes from the chosen shapes and linework. This tension creates a rather unusual quality to his imagery that subconsciously plays with the viewers perspective and understanding of the work.

The Victoria and Albert Museum (n.d.) argue that many of Beardsley's compositions appear unbalanced. For example, this approach can be seen in figure 4, as most of the artwork is seen in the top third of the image, with the lower portion made-up almost entirely of whitespace. However, by no means is this a criticism of his work, as this compositional approach is evidently intentional. As previously mentioned, his work is bold and, in some ways, jarring, not only through subject matter but also through his creative approach. Therefore, this unbalanced or asymmetrical composition embodies the message and subject of his work perfectly, playing into this idea of ‘edginess’ and the rejection of societal norms and his interest in the “bizarre” (Tate, n.d.a). Additionally, this piece is illustrating the woman in the moon, with obvious reference to the unusual and bizarre which aligns with the placement in the top of the image, which is argued to be the most spiritual placement (Bang, 2000).

Storytelling

Narrative, similar to fear, is present in everyday life; situating itself in the daily experiences and memory of an individual. In this sense, an understanding of a narrative can change depending on the individuals' own experiences. Thus, when approaching storytelling, it is extremely important to consider that there are two 'viewpoints' of a story, the narrator and the reader (Barthes, 1966). Consequently, this can explain the favouritism towards a first-person understanding of a book, as explained by Barthes (1966), when the narrator does not refer to themselves, the reader will automatically understand the sentence in the first-person. This 'rule' also applies to imagery or illustrations within narrative, as "When we 'see' a landscape, we situate ourselves in it" (Berger, 2008, p. 11). When considering how to tell a story, there are many different tools that can be used, "Articulated language, whether oral or written, pictures, still or moving, gestures, and an ordered mixture of all" (Barthes, 1966, p.1). Written text can address the concern of a reader's personal bias, whilst pictures can deepen a reader's understanding of a scene and allow them to experience a story in a personal way. Thus typically, words and images can work together harmoniously to communicate the chosen narrative.



Figure 5: *Thornhill* (Smy, 2017)

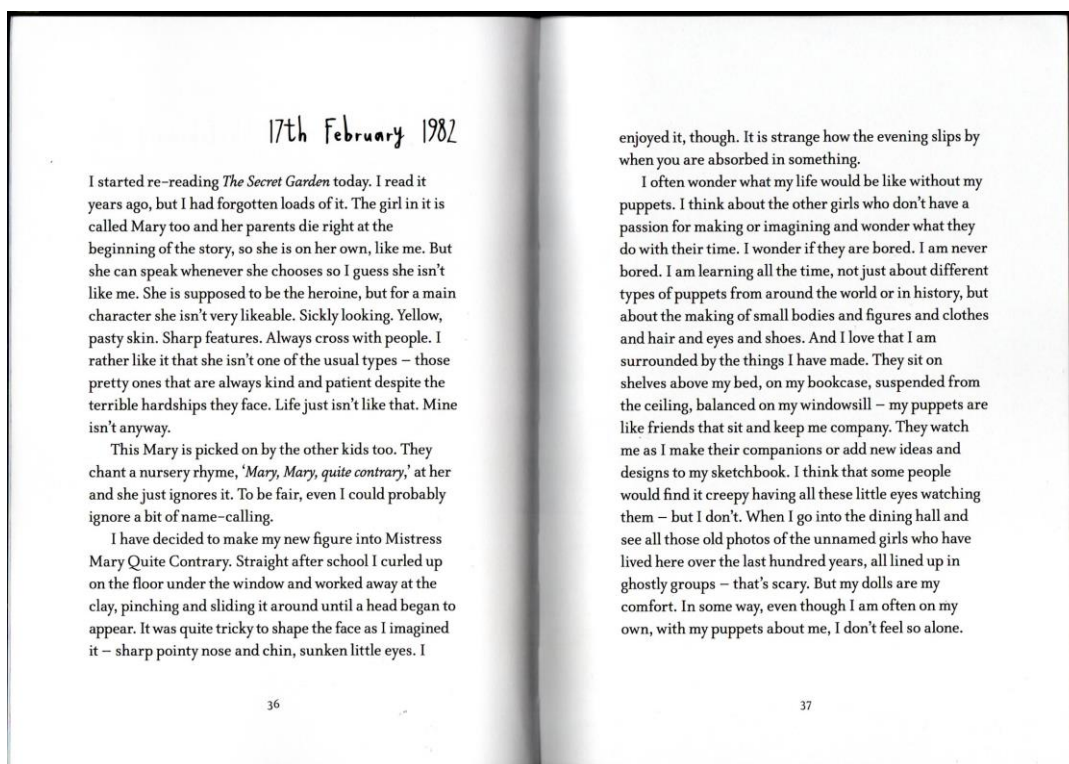


Figure 6: *Thornhill* (Smy, 2017)



Figure 7: *Thornhill* (Smy, 2017)

In 2017 author and illustrator, Pam Smy, created a picture book titled *Thornhill*. The primary location of the book is a boarded up abandoned home (Figure 5).

I passed an old, boarded-up house behind a high brick wall. The wall had 'keep-out' signs on it and I was intrigued... Straight away started to imagine who could live in a house like that, and what stories it may keep locked away

(Smy, 2017)

The picture book utilises a first-person structure, following a young girl, who is both afraid of and intrigued by the abandoned home that sits across from her own home. This book incorporates the blend of written text and illustrations previously mentioned as the reader will watch a scene transpire silently (Figure 5), concluding each scene with plain black pages, then being jolted back into a novel style journal entry (Figure 6). Throughout the text and imagery there is a first-person structure. This is achieved within the text by simply referring

to the protagonist as 'I'. However, within the imagery it appears slightly more subtle, in figure 5 and some other pages of the book, the scene is illustrated through the eye-level of the protagonist. It is not a direct view of the abandoned home but is instead looking up slightly, suggesting the shorter height of the character and allowing the reader to 'see through' the protagonists' eyes. However, this approach is not entirely consistent throughout the book, as there are pages that include elements of a third-person perspective, for example in figure 6 the reader is watching the protagonist advance into abandoned home, rather than from her perspective. Thus, Smy appears to have combined multiple different narrative structures, creating a rather unconventional style of storytelling that bends the idea of a linear picture book.

Question

Beyond the Crumbling Walls: How Visual Text Communicates Abandoned Buildings

Practice

Ultimately through researching the three keywords, The Uncanny, Formal Elements and Storytelling, my interest in the genre of fear and storytelling has grown. Each of these keywords interlink to provide foundational underpinning for my selected topic. The research

conducted will allow my work to be well-informed, equipping me with the knowledge and tools to successfully create unsettling imagery that delves into the viewer's psyche.

This research has developed my ideas for my third year practice. I will be creating a series of zines that will feature illustrations of real abandoned locations combined with imagined stories that I will write. I will draw inspiration from the narrative style and structure of Pam Smy's, *Thornhill*, being inspired by her use of viewpoint and her style of combining written and illustrated storytelling. Furthermore, I will take inspiration from the work of John Piper and Aubrey Beardsley for their artistic styles and consideration of formal elements. Specifically, their approach to composition, tone and space. Finally, I will gather inspiration from Sigmund Freud's theory of the 'uncanny', which will act as the underpinning for the stories that I create and the subjects that I illustrate.

Bibliography

Bang, M. (2000) *Picture This How Pictures Work*. New York: SeaStar Books.

Barlow, D.H. (2002) *Anxiety and Its Disorders The Nature and Treatment of Anxiety and Panic*. Ed.2. New York: The Guilford Press.

Barthes, R. (1975) "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative", *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 237–72. Available at:

https://www.jstor.org/stable/468419?casa_token=Vng6RfYg8AsAAAAA%3AYbKaoCLUvjTP4w0-

[byfiya6suXEahvzZt3cifyowcXtW4RRwoNDLUpvLdU8qxWO96Rgoq7N_bxGSXr0RJ6l0H7iiTcg_ggPCiBHi1MOd2C-IgLAdZe&seq=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/468419?casa_token=Vng6RfYg8AsAAAAA%3AYbKaoCLUvjTP4w0-byfiya6suXEahvzZt3cifyowcXtW4RRwoNDLUpvLdU8qxWO96Rgoq7N_bxGSXr0RJ6l0H7iiTcg_ggPCiBHi1MOd2C-IgLAdZe&seq=1) (Accessed: 29 March 2025).

Berger, J. (2008) *Ways of Seeing*. United Kingdom: Penguin Books.

Ekman, P. (2019) *Fear*. Available at:

<https://www.paulekman.com/universal-%20emotions/what-is-fear/> (Accessed: 22 March 2025).

Erk, G.K. and McConnell, R. (2023) *Slicing Spaces: Performance of Architecture in Cinema*. Illinois: Common Ground Research Networks.

Freud, S. (1919) 'The "Uncanny"', in Penguin Classics (ed.) (2003) *Sigmund Freud The Uncanny*. London: Penguin Group.

Jonauskaite D. et al. (2020) *Feeling Blue or Seeing Red? Similar Patterns of Emotion Associations with Colour Patches and Colour Terms*. Available at:
<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7027086/> (Accessed: 29 March 2025).

Kopcsó, K. and Láng, A. (2023) *Fear of the dark in adolescence and emerging adulthood: general model, gender and age differences*. Available at:

<https://europepmc.org/article/med/25041744> (Accessed: 22 March 2025).

Kwidzinski, K. (2023) *The Fear of the Unknown*. Available at:

https://dc.cod.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1106&&context=srs&&sei-redir=1&referer=https%253A%252F%252Fscholar.google.com%252Fscholar%253Fhl%253Den%2526as_sdt%253D0%25252C5%2526q%253Dwhy%252Bdo%252Bwe%252Bfear%252Bthe%252Bunknown%2526btnG%253D#search=%22why%20do%20fear%20unknown%22

(Accessed: 27 March 2025).

Tate (n.d.a) *Aubrey Beardsley*. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/aubrey-beardsley/exhibition-guide> (Accessed: 29 March 2025).

Tate (n.d.b) no title. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/piper-all-saints-chapel-bath-n05719> (Accessed: 22 March 2025).

The Royal Polar Bear (2017) *Interview with Pam Smy!*. Available at:

<https://royalpolarbear.wordpress.com/2017/06/15/interview-with-pam-smy/> (Accessed: 27 March 2025).

Vidler, A. (1992) *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Available at:

https://books.google.co.uk/books?hl=en&lr=&id=kVKxBIB-En4C&oi=fnd&pg=PR9&dq=Vidler,+Anthony.+The+Architectural+Uncanny,+Essays+in+the+Modern+Unhomely.+Massachusetts+Institute+of+Technology.+1992&ots=Hjh_VB761a&sig=kA1MMIEgko9G4yOtwrotvmX4-6o&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=Vidler%2C%20Anthony.%20The%20Architectural%20Uncanny%2C%20Essays%20in%20the%20Modern%20Unhomely.%20Massachusetts%20Institute%20of%20Technology.%201992&f=false (Accessed: 27 March 2025).

Victoria and Albert Museum (n.d.) Aubrey Beardsley – Decadence & Desire. Available at:

https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/aubrey-beardsley-decadence-desire?srsltid=AfmBOogxEiQT_9gsxUea64JRaF4sFW5nQ9lF3rbAMon0yGDrUzyKQ9u#slideshow=115771&slide=0 (Accessed: 29 March 2025).