

## UNCANNY NORTH AMERICA IN CONTEMPORARY HORROR FILMS: AMERICAN MARY, MANIAC, AND THE INVITATION

*América do Norte Insólita no Cinema de Horror Contemporâneo: American  
Mary, Maniac e The Invitation*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines contemporary examples of the uncanny in horror films from North America. Three films are analyzed: *American Mary* (2012), *Maniac* (2012), and *The Invitation* (2015). These three films use the uncanny to examine contemporary issues, such as body-modification surgery and murder/suicide cults. Thus, the films utilize a familiar method to invoke the feeling of the uncanny in the viewer while dealing with tropes not common to the horror genre. These three independent films invoke feelings of unease without the use of common tropes of the genre, such as vampires and zombies. The methodology employed is a Freudian critical theory base to look at the manner in which contemporary horror films employ the idea of the uncanny to address contemporary issues. While Freud himself developed the idea of the uncanny utilizing works contemporary to his time, most especially E.T.A. Hoffman's "The Sandman," his theory applies to works of horror decades later. For example, the trope of dolls, which is key to Freud's argument in "The Uncanny" (1919), still produces the same feeling in the audience nearly one hundred years later. The conclusion is that Freudian theory remains a viable method to examine horror films.

**KEYWORDS:** Uncanny; Freud; Horror; Dolls.

**RESUMO:** Este ensaio analisa exemplos contemporâneos do insólito no cinema de horror norte-americano tendo em conta três filmes: *American Mary* (2012), *Maniac* (2012) e *The Invitation* (2015). Estas três obras usam o insólito para explorar questões contemporâneas, como modificações corporais realizadas através de cirurgias e seitas assassinas/suicidas. Deste modo, os filmes utilizam um método familiar para invocar um sentimento de estranheza no público recorrendo a tropos pouco habituais no género de horror ao invés de figuras comuns, como vampiros ou zombies. A metodologia usada baseia-se na teoria crítica Freudiana, de modo a olhar para a forma como o cinema de horror contemporâneo usa o insólito para comentar questões actuais. Apesar de Freud ter desenvolvido o conceito de *unheimlich* recorrendo a trabalhos dos seus contemporâneos, em particular "The Sandman" de E.T.A. Hoffman, estas teorias viriam a ser usadas décadas mais tarde na análise de obras de horror. O tropo dos bonecos, fundamental para o argumento de Freud em "The Uncanny" (1919), ainda hoje gera o mesmo sentimento no público quase 100 anos depois. Assim, concluímos que a teoria Freudiana continua a ser um método viável para o estudo do cinema de horror.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Unheimlich*; Freud; Horror; Bonecas.

Horror films often present the audience with uncanny others. Voluntary amputees, a serial killer with a mannequin fetish, and members of a murder/suicide cult are found in three contemporary independent horror films. Rather than using clichéd tropes such as vampires and werewolves, these films use tropes from our contemporary world to create feelings of unease. In these films the seemingly familiar becomes eerily unfamiliar, as Freud discusses in “The Uncanny”, (1919d) “*Heimlich* [familiar] is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich* [unfamiliar]” (p. 225). Thus, in these films, seemingly familiar things, such as the human body, surgery, mannequins, and dinner parties, become uncanny, an Other that both haunts and destroys.

An example of this representation of the uncanny is embodied in *American Mary* (2012), which follows the story of Mary Mason, a medical student close to completing her degree, who leaves the supposed safety of the university for the underground world of sex clubs. Seeking financial stability, she applies for a job as a stripper at a club called “The Filth.” Her medical qualifications, however, soon shift her focus to performing illegal surgeries. She finds herself in the midst of the body modification world, in which she is paid handsomely to perform operations. When she is drugged, raped, and filmed by her mentor, Dr. Grant, she quits medical school and devotes herself full-time to body modification surgery.

Then Mary finds that her practice as a body-modification surgeon is an uncanny double of her life as a medical student. Adrian Mack notes that, “Mary’s binary world is divided between a strip club run by violent gangsters . . . and a med school where students are referred to as ‘useless twats’” (2013). The film opens with Mary practicing surgical suture on an uncooked turkey. For the viewer, the image is one of unfamiliar flesh as we struggle to recognize the body that she is suturing. Thus, we feel unease and confusion. Mary radically goes from practicing on turkeys to a serious operation on a mutilated mobster, for which she is paid five thousand dollars. Thus, surgery becomes something immediate to her. After the initial surgery she performs, she is traumatized. She sleeps with a baseball bat and is afraid.

She longs to go back to what she believes is the familiarity of medical school. However, medical school is doubled with the underground world she has encountered. Hints about her mentor’s questionable morals have been placed in the viewer’s mind. Dr. Grant stalks her. He refers to surgeons as “slashers.” When she is invited by Dr. Walsh to a surgeon’s party, she believes she is being accepted as an equal. However,

when she is brutally raped by Grant, Mary understands that the so-called stable world of medical school is as brutal as the strip club.

In “The Uncanny” (1919d) Freud sets forth his view of what produces the uncanny in works of art. He argues that “the ‘uncanny’ is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (p. 244). Mary’s experience performing illegal surgeries horrifies her because it is a doubling of her work at medical school. Her patients, who seek body modifications including amputation, castration, tongue-splitting, and other mutilations, are an uncanny version of her job as a surgeon who heals people. These new patients believe that they will be healed by surgery, although these surgeries are, in fact, mutilations of healthy flesh.

Furthermore, her patients produce a feeling of the uncanny in the viewer. Mary is first approached by Beatress, a woman who has undergone plastic surgeries so that she can resemble Betty Boop. Beatress implores Mary to help her friend, Ruby. Having had surgeries with the goal of resembling a doll, Ruby then wants one last surgery to make this transition complete, but no doctor will perform it. For twelve thousand dollars, Mary agrees to remove Ruby’s nipples and labia. Ruby is tired of being a sex object. She believes that dolls do not inspire sexual desire, and this is what she wants to become: a beautiful, sexless doll.

In his discussion of the uncanny, Freud (1919d) also argues that many uncanny works of art use infantile wishes to produce the feeling of the familiar within the unfamiliar: “the idea of a ‘living doll’ excites no fear at all; the child had no fear of its doll coming to life, it may even have desired it” (p. 232). For Ruby, the idea of giving in to infantile desires to become a living doll is appealing. She believes that the transformation will return her to the safety of childhood in which men do not desire her sexually. However, for others, it produces fear and repulsion. Ruby’s husband is horrified by her new body and kills both Beatress and Mary for making this alteration to his wife.

Other patients also produce this uncanny effect. Mary is approached by twins, played by the film’s co-directors, Jen and Sylvia Soska. They are so close to each other that they desire to switch left arms so that they can be further connected, illustrating Freud’s theory that doubles are often key to the uncanny. The twins are already uncanny because they are twins, but they want to go a step further by switching arms and having devil’s horns implanted into their foreheads. Thus, they seek an immortality at odds

with the human world, what Freud (1919d) describes as an “invention of doubling as a preservation against extinction” (p. 234).

The film itself produces a feeling of the uncanny as mutilation of the body is represented as a positive life-choice. In an interview in *The New York Times*, Jen Soska comments that, “body modification is about creating your own idea of what is beautiful” (PIEPENBURG, 2013). Will Johncock describes body modification in the following terms: “the body modification community generally defines its practices in terms of control over corporeality, and defiance of, or detachment from, social power and regulations” (2012, p. 243). The film unsettles the viewer by suggesting that the urban underground of body modification is a kinder world than the mainstream world of professional medicine. The film suggests that this world is desirable, not repulsive.

Before her murder, Mary contemplates moving to Los Angeles. As other contemporary horror films illustrate, she would find an uncanny Los Angeles, one fraught with danger. *Maniac* (2012) is a first-person horror film that follows a disturbed serial killer, Frank. Frank murders beautiful young women, scalps them, and puts their hair on the mannequins in his vintage mannequin store. He suffers from delusions and severe headaches. He is haunted by the memory of his promiscuous mother who forced him to watch her having sex with men.

Frank is other to the audience and to himself. We only see him reflected in mirrors. The first-person camera forces us to identify with this disturbed killer. When Frank looks at himself, he is startled. He imagines blood dripping from his head like it does in his victims. He also frequently hallucinates that he is part mannequin, significantly imagining himself as a female mannequin from the waist down. He is horrified of adult sexuality and cannot handle sexual advances from any woman. He believes that the mannequins are alive, talks to them, and even sleeps with one he calls his girlfriend.

In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (1930a) discusses the psychopathic personality as one that blurs the line between the ego and the outer world. The psychopathic personality involves “cases in which parts of a man’s body, even component parts of his own mind, perceptions, thoughts, feelings appear to him alien and not belonging to himself” (p. 11). When Frank meets Anna, a photographer who is interested in photographing his mannequins, he tells her he thinks the mannequins “have more personality than most people” (*Maniac*). When he attends a screening of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* with Anna, he sees himself as the main character in the film. He

cannot distinguish between himself and the outer world. He has a mannequin designed to look like him as a young boy, representing his arrested development. When Anna discovers he is a killer, she stabs him with a mannequin's hand, finally fusing him with the other with which he identifies.

As a result, the doll is an uncanny figure from childhood that serves as a key transition into adulthood. Eva-Marie Simms argues that the doll "stands at the threshold of narcissism, forcing the child to assume an identity of his own, and to distinguish between I and the world" (1996, p. 676). Frank clearly has not made this transition. He cannot cope with the outer world and remains trapped in an imaginary world where his human feelings can only be expressed to the mannequins. He hits the mannequins because they do not respond to him. His primal scalping of the human victims represents an attempt to fuse the human female with the mannequin. Because of the lifelessness of the doll, it confuses "toy and corpse" (SIMMS, 1996, p. 674). Frank enacts that by placing the scalps on the mannequins. His room is filled with flies, indicators of the human hair and blood that is rotting on the lifeless mannequins.

In the uncanny underworld of Los Angeles, the boy next door—Frank is played by the innocent-looking Elijah Wood—is a dangerous and tormented psychopath, hunting women to maintain an illusion of human relationships. After Frank murders Anna, the only person he has any real contact with, he places her scalp on a bride mannequin and engages in a mock-wedding ceremony with the mannequin. His struggle to become an adult is painfully illustrated in that scene. He dies from the wound Anna inflicts on him with the mannequin's hand. No matter his efforts, he remains the young boy mannequin with which he strongly identifies.

*The Invitation* (2015) is another contemporary horror film that portrays an uncanny Los Angeles. Will and Kira receive a mysterious invitation to a dinner party in the Hollywood Hills hosted by Will's ex-wife, Eden, and her new husband, David. Will has had no contact with Eden for two years and is reunited with many of his old friends. However, Will and Eden have been traumatized by the death of their five-year-old son and soon after they arrive he begins to think that something is very wrong at the dinner party because Eden and David behave oddly. They soon reveal that they have joined an organization that helps them cope with grief. The movement, led by Dr. Joseph, claims to be able to remove fear and guilt from the human experience. They introduce two of their fellow members in the group, Sadie and Pruitt, and then show a video of a woman's death, which they find beautiful, but which horrifies everyone not in the movement. As

the evening progresses, Will becomes more and more suspicious. Finally, it is revealed that Dr. Joseph leads a murder/suicide cult. The plan is for everyone at the party to die so they can go to a better world. Kira, Will, and another friend, Tommy, survive. Everyone else is dead either by suicide or murder.

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud (1927b) examines civilization's need for religion as a bastion against nature and the suffering it brings. He argues that religion emerged as a cushion "from the necessity of defending oneself from the crushing superior force of nature" (p. 75). While Freud primarily analyzes Christianity, the same needs are present in the cult the film portrays. The cult seeks to rid humans of suffering and offers an idyllic afterlife where everyone can be reunited in happiness. After joining the cult David says, "I don't have to be afraid anymore." The motive of the members of the cult is to find happiness in abandoning normal human emotions, such as grief and fear. The members become increasingly ominous during the course of the evening. David introduces a game called "I Want." In this scene it initially seems that the guests are playing a harmless parlor game; however, the game quickly escalates as sex and drugs are introduced. This game leads to dangerous behavior and results in one of the guests, Claire, leaving and presumably being murdered by Pruitt. Edward M. Levine, in his discussion of cults, notes that cults offer "a religious doctrine that purports to be able to resolve the problems of the world and those of their members" (1981-82, p.42). This solution is what Dr. Joseph promises to the members of his cult.

The guests are skeptical of the cult, but find it hard not to take it seriously. Will is the only guest who consistently remains suspicious and afraid of what he is witnessing during the course of the evening. Gina, one of the other guests, exclaims early on in the film that, "They're in a cult!" Ben remarks to Eden that, "You sound like a pamphlet." Eden then ferociously slaps him for treading upon her illusion. Before she leaves, Claire remarks that, "It feels like you're selling us something." Will voices his concerns, accusing the members of being in a cult and in denial. He is correct, but the other guests believe him to be overacting because he is haunted by his son's death. We see Will experiencing flashbacks to his happy life with Eden and their son. When he enters the son's former bedroom, he experiences the room intact with toys and clothes when, in fact, the bedroom has been changed into an office. Because of Will's inability to distinguish between past and present, the viewer also doubts his reasoning capabilities. The other guests' willingness to believe the situation is normal is based upon the fact that they cannot accept that their close friends could have changed in the past two years.

Eden is an uncanny double of the woman she used to be. In flashbacks, Eden is shown attempting suicide after her son's death. Now, she appears to be very happy. Freud comments that religion promises a compensation "for the sufferings and privations which civilized life in common has imposed on them" (1930b, p. 77). Eden believes she has found a way to compensate for her son's death so she preaches the gospel of the cult stating, "I am free. All that useless pain, it's gone." Will glimpses Eden's true reason for being happy when he watches her take barbiturates in her bedroom. The happiness and freedom of the cult is pure illusion, fueled by drugs. She refuses to participate in the slaughter of the guests, shooting herself in the stomach and admitting to Will that "I miss him so much." The pain of her son's death is inescapable even though she pretends that it has disappeared. In her attempt to escape the grieving process she has contributed to the deaths of most of her friends.

In "Mourning and Melancholia," (1917c), Freud distinguishes between the mourning and melancholia. While mourning is surmountable, melancholia is not because it is "in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious" (p. 245). While Will is undergoing a normal grieving process for the son, Eden has slipped into melancholia. As Freud states: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself" (1917c, 246). Eden's suicide attempt indicates that she is suffering from melancholia. After joining the cult, she masks her psychic pain by converting it into mania. Freud notes that melancholia has a "tendency to change round into mania – a state which is the opposite of its symptoms" (1917c, p. 253). At the party, Eden is apparently euphoric. She hugs and kisses her friends. She is thrilled when she talks about how she has been able to overcome grief. She, however, has not overcome grief, she has merely relegated it to the unconscious mind. There is no escape from her melancholia, as Eden knows, except through death. The fact that she succeeds in dying in her second suicide attempt indicates this.

Eden is also an uncanny double of a true friend, as she believes she is helping her friends by killing them so they can escape suffering. Thus, the cult turns friendship into a monstrous double of the familiar. She repeatedly tells her friends she loves them, and she does. She wants them to share in the idyllic afterlife the cult promises. As her name indicates, she believes in a return to an unfallen state of humanity, and she wants her friends to be part of the afterlife she believes she will attain through suicide.

The film portrays not only an uncanny Eden, but also an uncanny Los Angeles. The ominous music that plays as Will and Kira drive to the house in the Hollywood Hills elicits an emotion of fear and dread, rather than the positive and glamorous associations that the wealthy area usually has. When he gets to the house, Will finds an unfamiliarity in the house in which he, Eden, and their son lived. Bars have been placed on the windows and a door is missing. His onetime happy home has become a prison. Sunny Los Angeles has turned dark. Miguel, another guest, tries to dissuade Will from his suspicion, commenting about the cult members that “This is LA. They’re harmless.” Miguel and the other guests conveniently forget about events like the Manson murders, which shocked the affluent living in the Hollywood Hills. Unlike the Manson killings, however, the threat does not come from outside, but from within.

The extent of the cult’s influence is revealed at the end of the film. Earlier, Will has seen David light a red lantern in the yard. When Will and Kira emerge from the house, they hear gunshots, police sirens, and police helicopters. They look up to the Hollywood Hills and see multiple red lanterns. Far from being an isolated incident, this cult is legion, at least in Los Angeles. The cult has appealed to a mass group of people wanting to leave behind human suffering.

The cult itself perpetuates a melancholic state of mind. In her commentary on “Mourning and Melancholia,” Mary Bradbury notes that the state of melancholia results in a reversion to original narcissism: “Sadism and hate – all the more powerful owing to the regressed state on the person – have been turned in upon the subject’s own ego” (2001, p. 216). The violent behavior displayed by the cult members that quickly erupts after Will stops the guests from drinking poisoned wine indicates a reversion of its characteristics. From being apparently loving people, the cult members become violent killers, intent on killing every guest by any means possible. The love of the cult turns into its uncanny double of hate and narcissism. As J.R. Jones notes in his review of the film: “The movie traces a steady arc from amiability to apocalypse” (2016).

While the uncanny is certainly a key part of horror as a genre, the most effective uncanny films reflect the anxieties of contemporary life while also causing the viewer to revert to infantile fears. Steven Schneider argues that horror films that succeed in terrifying an audience work because “they embody surmounted beliefs invested with cultural reference” (1999). The audience must believe “the objects (events) being depicted really *could* exist or happen” (SCHNEIDER, 1999). These three films succeed in terrifying through their use of uncanny events that are rooted in contemporary society.



We may not believe that our neighbor is a vampire, but we *know* that there are serial killers, body modification surgeons, and cult members in our world.

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Recebido em 09/12/2016  
Aceito em 10/02/2017.