

The Medium of Film: Uncanniness and Narrative Hyper-Realism

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This essay explores the inherent uncanniness of live-action films by analyzing their interplay between concealment and revelation. By utilizing Masahiro Mori's uncanny valley, I argue that certain films can achieve what I label as narrative hyper-realism: the concealment of their contrived nature, embodying human likeness that produces a heightened sense of affinity. I draw on Stanley Cavell's insights into film's foundation and detachment, and Slavoj Žižek's "objet petit a" to understand how film navigates between reality and fantasy. Ultimately, this essay proposes that the medium negotiates between revealing and concealing its uncanniness and that when it successfully conceals it, it achieves narrative hyper-realism. This examination provides a nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between film and its inherent ability to mirror a human perception of reality.

In this essay, I will explore whether the medium of film is inherently uncanny. For this discussion, I will focus solely on live-action films, excluding any form of animation.¹⁴⁶ I will begin by giving an overview of Sigmund Freud's meaning of the uncanny and analyze how it pertains to film, particularly focusing on the interplay between concealment and revelation, where I will suggest that films work to conceal their contrived nature. Drawing on Masahiro Mori's uncanny valley, I will argue that films that succeed in this concealment produce a high sense of human likeness and affinity, occupying the second peak of the graph, while films that

¹⁴⁶ I consider the uncanniness of animation to be an essay in itself: animation's proximity to and imitation of human likeness varies substantially from that of live-action. Animation would most likely fall somewhere between the *first* peak and the uncanny valley of Mori's graph, tracing a different area and movement than live-action.

reveal their contrived nature inevitably fall into the uncanny valley. I will justify the high human likeness and affinity produced by films that conceal their artificiality by drawing on the perspectives of Stanley Cavell and Slavoj Žižek. I will suggest that in such films, the constructed reality seamlessly blends and even surpasses human likeness by presenting a sort of narrative hyper-realism, thus justifying their position in the second peak. The ability of films to either fall into the uncanny valley by revealing their constructed nature, or stand in the second peak by achieving narrative hyper-realism — successfully fulfilling the human desire for a comprehensible reality — reflects both the inherent, but also surpassable, uncanniness of the medium.

In *The Uncanny*, Freud seeks to define what exactly is meant by “uncanny” and identify how the feeling arises. Specifically, he draws on the intricate interplay between concealment and revelation. In Freudian terms, the uncanny is that which was meant to remain concealed but becomes unveiled.¹⁴⁷ I consider this dynamic to be central to the medium of film. As a medium, film partakes in various forms of concealment. To begin, films are composed of sequences of images that quickly change from one to the other, creating the illusion of motion. Images present lifelike objects through their ability to capture 3D elements such as shapes, surfaces, textures, and depths extremely akin to human visual perception. Additionally, in its essence, films are also narrative—they present a story. The combination of these two aspects of the medium then results in realistic objects encapsulated in an artificially constructed manner, in a narrative. However,

¹⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, 132–3.

and fundamentally so, this constructed nature of film is made to pass unperceived, to depict the narrative as *naturally* flowing. Otherwise, spectators are taken out of the narrative by having the film's momentary resemblance to reality broken. This break of the illusion brings forward the secret the medium of film attempts to conceal, producing an uncanny effect.

Freud's account adds that the uncanny arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred.¹⁴⁸ I consider this observation to find resonance in the illusion woven by film. The medium of film exists in this liminal space between fantasy and reality as it uses elements from physical reality to create an illusory narrative. Its position in this liminality grants it the potential to become deeply uncanny. When a movie successfully conceals its artificiality, spectators are drawn into the narrative reality, momentarily accepting the constructed world and its logic. However, because the medium of film exists on this border, the uncanny aspect of the medium becomes evident when a film fails to maintain the assumed reality of its invention — film's illusion. This is what tends to happen in what are mostly considered “bad” movies — in these, the medium of film becomes evident. Movies filled with bad acting, an awkward script, clumsy cinematography, and inconsistent storytelling lay bare their artificiality, and the uncanny elements of the medium cease to be concealed. The discomfort produced stems not only from the revelation of artificiality but also from the reminder that what is being witnessed is a carefully crafted attempt at representing reality. In contrast, films that conceal their constructed nature are commonly considered “good” films. Depending on the mastery of the filmmaker, these films

¹⁴⁸ Freud, *The Uncanny*, 150.

produce a reflection that is a “suitably spacious, yet contained, and visually resonant metaphor for the moving images and affective sounds” on the screen.¹⁴⁹ What I will be referring to as “good” films are those that successfully conceal the human hand that carefully produced each second of them, and what I will be referring to as “bad” films are those that (accidentally or purposefully) reveal their assembled nature.¹⁵⁰

To illustrate the point that for a film to escape the medium’s uncanniness it must successfully conceal its constructed narrative reality I would like to point to two specific scenes in David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*. In the film, there is a scene that occurs twice: Betty’s audition. The first time, Betty acts out the script alongside Rita in their house.¹⁵¹ However, what is particularly interesting about this moment in the film is that it does not work. Spectators can recognize that it is not a real scene within the film — it is an artificial one — it is not part of the reality the movie wishes to create. The scene thus comes across as forged and cheesy. The stilted dialogue and unconvincing delivery exhibit the secret the scene wishes to conceal, momentarily lifting the veil on the fundamentally fabricated nature of the medium of film.

Moments later, when Betty undergoes the real audition, the scene completely shifts — it works.¹⁵² This scene not only completely subverts the audience’s previous expectations of how

¹⁴⁹ Bolton, *Contemporary Cinema and the Philosophy of Iris Murdoch*, 27.

¹⁵⁰ To clarify, this is not a critical claim of what makes a movie good or bad. I do not wish to equate “goodness” with concealment—many films that would be considered good reveal their artificiality. Neither do I wish to equate “badness” with an unsuccessful attempt to conceal. Although there is a general pattern that what are considered good movies do not reveal their contrived nature and what are considered bad movies do. I will only use these labels in the broad sense I have outlined for clarity and conciseness.

¹⁵¹ Lynch, *Mulholland Drive*, 01:10:24–01:11:34.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 01:17:33–01:20:37.

the audition will go, but also brings about a deeply uncanny feeling, as this second reiteration is inevitably compared with the first. It is made obvious how the dynamic between the actors, the camera work, and the delivery of the lines, change in *exactly* the necessary way so that everything is positioned to imitate the human perception of reality convincingly. Through these changes, audiences become momentarily convinced and absorbed into the events taking place in this instance.

The first iteration of the audition scene (before being explicitly revealed as Betty and Rita rehearsing a script) is itself an uncanny moment — it presents a “bad” scene in the movie where audiences are reminded they are watching a movie. Something that was premised as being real within the movie is revealed to be orchestrated. However, the second iteration further underscores the uncanniness of the medium, as the dialogue that had already been established as constructed is made to momentarily feel real precisely because it once again hides its contrived nature through the cinematic technique — it is made “good.” This second execution becomes uncanny because it makes obvious the illusion of the medium of film by emphasizing what was not well-executed before. This careful interplay makes obvious the constructed narrative artificiality of the medium of film. It shows how, under correct execution, film presents narratives in a way that seems real, so that we momentarily forget that they are narratives. Thus, the conjunction of these two extremely similar but enormously different scenes reveals how the medium of film possesses a great uncanny potential.

I believe that film's existence in this peculiar position as a medium that can both reveal and conceal its uncanniness can be explained through the roboticist Masahiro Mori's "uncanny valley," which seeks to graph a particular realm of human perception and affinity. As seen in Fig. 1., Mori graphs the level of affinity felt for an entity against its level of human likeness. The line delineates Mori's proposed trajectory. He suggests that, as non-human entities approach human likeness, the affinity increases, until it reaches a critical point. At this point, the sense of affinity rapidly begins decreasing, until it plunges into negative affinity.¹⁵³ This is what Mori labels the uncanny valley. The uncanny valley traces this space characterized by a sudden negative affinity, invoking an eerie sense of strangeness and aversion.¹⁵⁴ Yet, Mori proposes that, as the entities continue to progress in human likeness, the affinity ascends once again, resulting in an even higher peak than before.¹⁵⁵

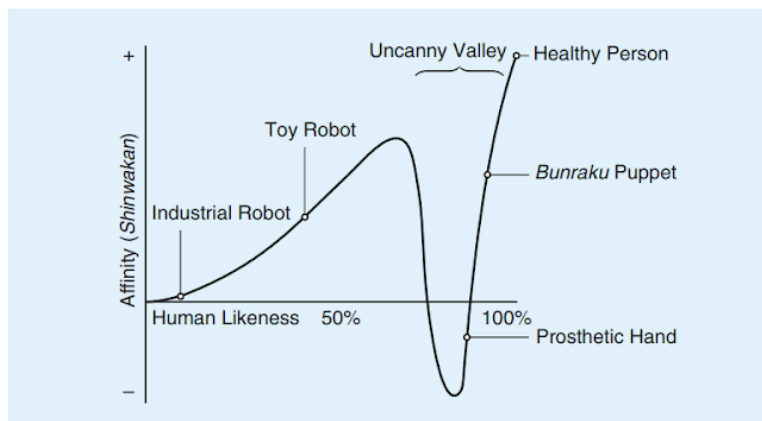


Fig. 1. Mori, "The Uncanny Valley," 99.

¹⁵³ Mori gives the example of not realizing a person's limb is prosthetic until one touches it and senses it to be cold.

¹⁵⁴ Mori, "The Uncanny Valley," 99.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* As an additional note, Mori also adds that movement intensifies both peaks and the valley (99).

I propose employing this nuanced movement between uncanniness and affinity as a theoretical framework for exploring the uncanny aspects inherent to the medium of film. Mori's theory provides insight into how the medium of film can navigate the spectrum between uncanniness and affinity either by revealing its contrived nature or effectively concealing it. In essence, "good" films (those that conceal their artificiality) occupy the second peak (the highest sense of human likeness and affinity), while "bad" movies (those that reveal their constructed nature) fall into the uncanny valley (a strong sense of human likeness but a negative affinity). This showcases how the medium of film lends itself to revealing its uncanny disconnect from reality. "Bad" films just tend to reveal both their attempt at imminent reality and their complete disconnect from it, more often unintentionally. The medium of film then can mediate between the two spaces in Mori's graph. It can either descend into the uncanny valley, as is the case with "bad" movies when revealing their artificiality, or stand on the second peak, offering a sense of indistinguishable human likeness by creating a narrative representation of reality, a concept I term as narrative hyper-realism.

The juxtaposition between the acting scenes in *Mulholland Drive* encapsulates the dynamic interplay between the uncanny valley and the second peak of the medium of film. I contend that the initial revelation of the constructed nature induces a temporary sense of strangeness, having the scene fall into the uncanny valley. However, during the actual audition, the scene ascends to a heightened state of narrative hyper-realism through its convincing delivery that conceals the artificiality of the medium.

In *The World Viewed*, Stanley Cavell delves into key elements that shed light on how the medium of film generates its narrative hyper-realism. According to Cavell, the foundation of the medium of film lies in the succession of photographs whose placement captures an automatic projection of the world.¹⁵⁶ These sequential images maintain a sense of presentness within the depicted reality, giving the impression that events are unfolding. Simultaneously, the audience acknowledges their physical absence from these events.¹⁵⁷

Further, we should note that the medium of film not only distances the spectators from events, as Cavell observes, and conceals the human creator, but the medium *hyperbolizes* the absence of the human creator. “Good” movies convince us that there is no human creator orchestrating the events taking place, and the narrative hyper-realism passes unperceived, occupying the second peak. The medium’s automatic hiding, cutting, and framing presents reality in a digestible way, reinforcing the narrative hyper-realism. Conversely, “bad” films precisely remind audiences of this, revealing the secret that should have been kept hidden — that all of what is being depicted is false — thus, plunging into the uncanny valley.

I consider that the combination of these two elements contributes significantly to creating the narrative hyper-realism of the medium of film. The sense of presentness creates just a sufficiently absorbing experience while the spectator’s inevitable detachment — absence from the events taking place — allows for the feeling that the reality presented — although a carefully

¹⁵⁶ Cavell, *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, 16, 72–3.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 22–3, 25.

constructed and orchestrated one — is more tangible as it is more comprehensible than the often perplexing nature of actual reality. Film's medium precisely allows the spectator to uncover its reality, a reality they will never form part of, but one that is central for it to be perceived and created.

To exemplify what I mean by narrative hyper-realism I would like to allude to Christopher Nolan's film *Memento*. The film intricately manipulates time and memory, unfolding its narrative in a non-linear fashion. This nonlinearity immerses spectators in a mental state that mirrors that of the protagonist, Leonard. However, and very crucially so, the revelation of the narrative's key element does not take place until the end of the movie.¹⁵⁸ *Memento*'s ending renders its narrative comprehensible — it allows the movie to make sense. However, it becomes comprehensible only to audiences (it's a matter of seconds before Leonard inevitably forgets once again). In the film's ending, the audience and possibly Leonard (momentarily) escape this confusion.

I consider this delayed revelation to be more than just a plot twist; it encapsulates the essence of the narrative hyper-realism the medium of film can achieve; the accurate sequence of Leonard's story is finally *made* comprehensible exclusively for the audience — each second in the film is placed into a comprehensible order. Through this narrative hyper-realism, *Memento* imbues coherence into its preceding complexity. Prior to this revelation, audiences occupied a similar position to Leonard, navigating a reality that was simultaneously familiar and perplexing.

¹⁵⁸ Nolan, *Memento*, 01:43:26–01:48:35.

By meticulously portraying a humanly constructed reality, *Memento* allows its spectator to become the sole understander of the film's reality. This comprehension arises precisely because the narrative, as a story, is fundamentally graspable and framed. This is what I refer to as narrative hyper-realism.

The comprehensible narrative presented by film represents a reality that can be gripped. In everyday life, we tend to be Leonard, struggling to sustain any deep understanding of our reality — whether due to reluctance or to the inherent limitations of our existence (in the case of Leonard, this is illustrated by his inability to form new memories). The narrative, therefore, becomes hyper-realistic by providing the comprehensible reality we yearn for, or constantly wish to deceive ourselves that we obtain, establishing a profound human psychological likeness. This is what allows films that surpass the inherent uncanniness of the medium to occupy the second peak and result in such a great sense of affinity.

An immediate counterargument to my claim arises with surrealist movies. These movies, characterized by their non-linear narratives and dreamlike sequences, challenge the conventional understanding of films. Surrealist cinema, by its very nature, disrupts the natural world projections associated with narrative hyper-realism. Instead of offering a comprehensible narrative, these films plunge viewers into a realm where logic and continuity are abandoned. To this, I reply that the incomprehensibility of surrealist films is a statement in itself. The comprehensible message of reality that surrealist films seek to present is that we cannot make

sense of reality. Thus, the medium of film, as a carefully constructed projection of a fragment of reality, inevitably delivers a narrative (even if this narrative is that there is none).

Finally, I would like to explore Žižek's concept of "objet petit a." For Žižek, the objet petit a is the trace of the real, perpetually perceived in a distorted way. It embodies the surplus of confusion and disturbance arising from the pursuit of an objective reality. In the context of film, this distortion becomes a fundamental element, as it plays a crucial role in the medium's negotiation between reality and fantasy. Žižek contends that the objet petit a is always perceived in a distorted manner because, at its core, it does not exist outside of this distortion, outside of our own, inevitably flawed perception of the real.¹⁵⁹ The medium of film, acting as a conveyor of a fantasy deeply entwined with reality, inherently distorts reality. This distortion takes on an extremely familiar form — a narrative one. However, the extent to which this distortion passes unperceived determines whether a film occupies the peak of the graph or descends into the uncanny valley.

The objet petit a applied to film encapsulates the essence of narrative hyper-realism seen in "good" movies. The distortion introduced by the desire for a digestible reality, manifested through the deliberate construction of narrative and visual constructions, contributes to the immersive quality of cinema. What are generally considered "good" movies are thus those that excel in hiding that they are presenting a distortion and in creating a reality that resonates with viewers' desires and expectations. Conversely, "bad" movies are therefore those that remind

¹⁵⁹ Žižek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, 10, 49.

spectators of the artificiality inherent in the medium of film. Žižek draws on Lacan's point de capiton, the point where a situation perceived as natural or familiar becomes denatured, uncanny, when a detail that does not belong, that seems odd, is revealed.¹⁶⁰ I consider this to be precisely what happens in "bad" movies — those that remind spectators of the artificiality inherent in the medium of film. They pull spectators out of this constructed reality by reminding them that they are watching a human representation of a conceived reality.

Žižek's argument extends to the illusion of narrative flow. Narratives, despite their apparent coherence, conceal the retroactive nature of their consistency. The ending, retroactively assigning meaning to preceding events (as can be seen in the case of *Memento*), exemplifies the manipulation of desire and distortion. It conceals the fact that at every point, things could have gone in a different direction. The concealment of its artificial construction precisely allows for the narrative depicted to be taken as natural and originally flowing, without any type of external intervention.¹⁶¹ Like the objet petit a, the film is perceived in a distorted way, maintaining an illusion of narrative flow while concealing the external interventions that shape its coherence. This process often goes undetected, embodying a great sense of human likeness as it mirrors a reality through human perception that captures just enough of actual reality to feel genuine. The narrative coherence, retroactively imposed, satisfies the viewer's desire for a comprehensible experience. This is precisely the conceit of the medium of film, the creation of a reality that

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 55.

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 40.

appears to spectators as if it emerged organically, mirroring the human perception of our reality. It is a reality that appears so close to the actual reality that we are willing to accept it — even more than actual reality because it is more comprehensible.

In conclusion, the medium of film's uncanniness is not solely rooted in its implication of physical connection with objects but is equally embedded in its meticulously crafted, yet often concealed, nature. Positioned on the boundary between reality and illusion, film operates in a unique space that can either expose or effectively hide its inherent uncanniness. Mori's graph, illustrating the relationship between human likeness and affinity, provides a valuable framework for understanding how film oscillates between revealing and concealing its uncanny aspects. "Good" movies, those that do not reveal that they are a carefully meditated and created narrative, occupy the highest sense of human likeness and affinity. These films achieve narrative hyper-realism by presenting a carefully constructed representation of reality that resonates with the spectator's desires for a comprehensible reality, offering the illusion of gripping the trace of the real. On the other hand, "bad" movies, by exposing their contrived nature, diminish their human resemblance. The acknowledgment of their contrived narrative breaks the illusion and, akin to Lacan's point de capiton, brings forward the oddity (the artificiality), propelling these films into the uncanny valley.

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