

A Matter of Liminality:

Unraveling the Uncanny in the Miniatures of *Hereditary*

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ABSTRACT: When delving into the exploration of any given topic through the lens of the uncanny, it is frequently instinctive to immediately associate it with Sigmund Freud's interpretation, often disregarding the original formulation by Ernst Jentsch. Despite Freud's more detailed analysis, Jentsch highlights a crucial aspect of what truly defines something as uncanny: its liminality—its ability to be simultaneously subject and object. Miniatures serve as a perfect illustration of this liminality. This study, drawing from Jentsch's concept of the uncanny, demonstrates how these objects epitomize ambiguity through their materiality combined with an implied subjectivity. Using concepts such as Bill Brown's 'thing theory' and Judith Butler's 'sense of self', I showcase how these small objects have the potential to evoke the uncanny, and how this sense of uncanniness is artistically manifested through an examination of the miniatures in Ari Aster's film *Hereditary* (2018).

KEYWORDS: Ari Aster; *Hereditary*; Liminality; Miniatures; Uncanny.



RESUMO: Ao mergulhar na exploração de qualquer tópico através das lentes do "uncanny", é frequentemente instintivo associá-lo de imediato à interpretação de Sigmund Freud, muitas vezes desconsiderando a formulação original de Ernst Jentsch. Apesar da análise mais detalhada de Freud, Jentsch destaca um aspecto crucial daquilo que verdadeiramente define algo como "uncanny": a sua liminaridade – a sua capacidade de ser simultaneamente sujeito e objecto. As miniaturas servem como uma ilustração perfeita dessa liminaridade. Este estudo, baseado no conceito de uncanny de Jentsch, demonstra como esses objectos sintetizam a ambiguidade através da sua materialidade combinada com uma subjetividade implícita. Recorrendo a conceitos como a "teoria das coisas" de Bill Brown e o "sentido de identidade" de Judith Butler, mostrou-se como esses pequenos objectos têm o potencial de evocar o "uncanny" e como esse sentimento de "uncanniness" é manifestado artisticamente através da análise das miniaturas presentes no filme *Hereditary* (2018), de Ari Aster.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Ari Aster; *Hereditary*; Liminaridade; Miniaturas; Uncanny.



Introduction

Though often associated with something out of *Le Grand Guignol*, where blood, guts, and all manner of viscerally explicit imagery are ever-present in its storytelling, the horror genre has, at its core, something of a more complex and delicate nature: fear. H. P. Lovecraft defines fear as a primal emotion with its strongest form being the “fear of the unknown” ([1927] 1973, 3). The quality of being ‘unknown’ has afforded the genre an association with the uncomfortable phenomenon of the ‘uncanny,’ wherein something familiar is transformed into something unfamiliar. The unknown, having persisted in many horror narratives in the form of monsters, aliens, ghosts (and with them death), haunted houses and dolls, masked serial killers, among others, seems to be a prevalent theme not only in the genre, but in human emotion as well. As a result, the uncanny proves to be a perfect match for this fear-driven realm.

Among the scholars who have defined the concept of the uncanny, Sigmund Freud ([1919] 2003) is perhaps the most well-known, overshadowing Ernst Jentsch, who first discussed this experience. Jentsch defined the *Unheimliche* (uncanny) as ambiguity and uncertainty, rooted in liminality. Freud, however, rejected this notion in favor of his own psychoanalytic constructs. Since then, the different expressions of the uncanny have been explored across various media, most recently through the often-called ‘uncanny valley’ phenomenon, popularized by Japanese scholars. This examines the eerie qualities of humanoid objects in robotics (Mori, MacDorman, and Kageki 2012).

Numerous objects have the power to provoke feelings of uncanniness, with dolls frequently taking center stage in horror narratives. Alongside dolls, miniatures have recently garnered considerable attention in the genre, particularly seen in Ari Aster’s *Hereditary* (2018). The film explores familial trauma within the grieving

Graham family, particularly focusing on Annie, the mother, whose profession as a miniature artist serves as a symbolic representation of her inner struggles and unresolved familial conflicts. Miniatures play a pivotal role in the narrative due to their uncanny qualities as liminal objects.

This work specifically focuses on this theme—the uncanniness of miniatures and its artistic manifestation. My hypothesis is that the unsettling feelings evoked by miniatures arise from their liminality, that is, their ability to embody and imply a certain subjectivity while remaining rooted in their materiality as objects. To corroborate this argument, I will begin by exploring different perspectives on the concept of the ‘uncanny,’ ultimately relying on Ernst Jentsch’s ([1906] 2008) formulation as the guiding framework for the essay. Secondly, I will briefly delve into the history of miniatures, distinguishing them from dolls and dollhouses, while discussing how their material and cultural attributes might correspond to uncanny elements. Thirdly, I will explore materiality, subjectivity, and their role in constructing the liminal quality of the uncanny. Lastly, I will examine how the uncanny characteristics of miniatures are potentiated and occasionally exacerbated within *Hereditary*’s narrative and cinematography.

Approaching the ‘Uncanny’

Amidst the multitude of discussions surrounding the definition of the horror genre, two aspects emerge as crucially significant in that effort: the genre’s ability to produce intense affective experiences, and the consistent influence of the Gothic, the Fantastic, and the uncanny in that same affective process. While the term ‘Gothic’ has a preponderant appearance in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its origin is often attributed to Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto*:

A Gothic Story (1764).¹ Since then, it has become a pivotal concept extensively examined across various media (Wasson 2020). Similarly, the Fantastic² has maintained a continuous presence throughout history, spanning from ancient myths and folklore to modern literature, film, and art (James and Mendlesohn 2012). Although these two elements are integral components of the genre, the uncanny holds a specifically distinct prominence in horror. As Alexandra Reuben (2004) notes in her dissertation, the concept travels through the realms of the Gothic and the Fantastic before ultimately settling in what can be identified as “the literary uncanny ‘attic’” (2004, 2), which has since come to define its essence throughout different media. As argued by Sigmund Freud (2003), this concept creates a space where one’s orientation falters, transforming familiar elements into unsettling and eerie unfamiliarities. These qualities render it especially apt for the horror genre, given that horror is affectively concerned with fear,³ and the uncanny delves into a specific manifestation of that emotion by blending the familiar with an unsettling sense of unfamiliarity.

When delving into the concept of the uncanny across various fields such as psychology, cultural studies, literary criticism, film studies, and even architecture,⁴ it becomes evident that Sigmund Freud is widely recognized as a leading figure in its understanding. The author’s articulation of the return of the repressed,

¹ As E. J. Clery remarks, Walpole is credited as the first to employ the term ‘Gothic’ in response to the rise of the novel, during the Age of Enlightenment, whose main purpose was to “exhibit life in its true state” (2002, 23). As Gothic literature predominantly relies on supernatural elements, it served as an ideal contrast to the rational values prevalent in the novel during the eighteenth century.

² Tzvetan Todorov aptly characterizes it as a “hesitation” when “confronting an apparently supernatural event” (1973, 25).

³ H. P. Lovecraft defines fear as “the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind” (1973, 3).

⁴ Anthony Vidler (1987), for instance, utilizes Freud’s understanding of the concept to explore the uncanny qualities of architectural spaces.

intertwined with other psychoanalytic concepts such as the pervasive fear of castration and narcissism coupled with anxiety, forms the cornerstone of the general knowledge of this uncomfortable phenomenon. Thus, the use of Freud's definition is quite understandable, especially in relation to 'doll-like objects',⁵ which is what concerns this essay. The author's study of E.T.A. Hoffmann's "The Sandman" (1817) as a means to explore, identify, and define his understanding of the uncanny underscores one of the tale's most notable features: the doll. More specifically, a life-sized doll the protagonist becomes infatuated with, unaware of its inanimate condition. As exemplified in Eva-Maria Simms's "Uncanny Dolls: Images of Death in Rilke and Freud" (1996), some scholars focus on the uncanniness of dolls through the same lens as Freud, therefore operating within the framework of that regression towards a primitive period in human development. Alternatively, other researchers have sought to entirely dissociate dolls from Freud's theoretical framework of the uncanny (Quintieri 2018).

Despite the fascination with and significance of Freud's approach to the subject, there remains an essential aspect of dolls and doll-like objects within the realm of the uncanny that warrants exploration: their liminality; that is, their ability to exist simultaneously as both subject and object. Psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch, often credited as the first to introduce the notion of the uncanny, is also the first to articulate this liminal quality of being both subject and object as an *intellektuelle Unsicherheit* (intellectual uncertainty). This concept can be defined as a "doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate" (Jentsch 2008, 221).

⁵ In applying the term 'doll-like objects,' I am referring to any object that shares characteristics or qualities commonly associated with dolls and/or dollhouses such as puppets and mannequins, for instance. These objects often bear a resemblance to human figures or existing physical structures, either in their appearance or functionality. Miniatures would also fall in this category as will be argued later in the essay.

Scholars have also looked to Jacques Lacan when delving into the uncanny nature of dolls. Works like Rosalinda Quintieri's (2018) previously mentioned dissertation and Mladen Dolar's "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night: Lacan and the Uncanny" (1991) demonstrate how Lacan's concepts of the '*sinthome*' and '*jouissance*' can reshape our understanding of the uncanny, shedding light on the ambiguous nature of dolls and similar objects. However, these scholars tend to prioritize the subjective aspect of analysis, oftentimes overlooking the materiality of the objects themselves.⁶ In light of this, my aim is to explore how doll-like objects, specifically miniatures, possess the remarkable ability to exude subjectivity while remaining rooted in their materiality. Given Freud's dismissal of dolls' liminality⁷ and the prevalence of Lacan's work for the exploration of subjectivity alone, I will be relying on Jentsch's approach to the concept, in order to articulate how miniatures exist "in between states" (Mills 2018, 250), thus exuding uncanniness.

Dolls and Miniatures: A Few Considerations

In discussing dolls and dollhouses, one crucial aspect requiring attention is their definition. These objects tend to be viewed as playthings for children, functioning within the private sphere as personal belongings designed for interaction. Available in various shapes and sizes, their inherent nature is mimetic, intended to emulate

⁶ Lacan's concept of the '*sinthome*' emphasizes the unique psychic structures individuals develop to navigate unsettling experiences associated with the uncanny. In works such as those mentioned, this concept tends to be coupled with Lacan's idea of '*jouissance*' to explain how the complex interplay of pleasure and pain contributes to the uncanny's affective impact. This approach, particularly in the study of dolls, underscores their subjective essence while overlooking their materiality.

⁷ In the study of dolls, Freud explicitly dismisses Ernst Jentsch's idea concerning the crucial role of dolls' 'intellectual uncertainty' (their liminality) in generating the uncanny effect: "that intellectual uncertainty, as Jentsch understands it, has nothing to do with this [uncanny] effect" (Freud 2003, 138).

real-life objects and people. The title of Nicola Lisle's book *Life in Miniature: A History of Doll's Houses* (2020), as well as its contents, point to a crucial detail missing from this brief definition: the tendency to 'miniaturize' dolls and dollhouses. This pattern is intricately connected to their genesis in the sixteenth century, when their predecessors were what is presently acknowledged as miniatures—decorative objects with a semi-private nature, often pursued as a hobby with a desire for public display. Miniatures, often overshadowed and mistaken for dolls and dollhouses, possess similarities with the latter but also significant differences, particularly in their intended use. Unlike dolls and dollhouses, miniatures are meant to be displayed without the physical interaction characteristic of the former, emphasizing their decorative rather than play-oriented nature.

Defining miniatures can indeed be challenging due to their close association with dolls and dollhouses. To understand them fully, we must consider their purpose, as explained above, their history, and physical characteristics. Laura Forsberg (2015), in her dissertation on miniatures of the nineteenth century, describes them as reduced versions of other objects, with their materiality evoking wonder and emphasizing their physical form. This is part of the reason why their materiality holds equal significance to their subjectivity when discussing what truly renders them uncanny, something I will explore in more detail later in this essay.

According to Constance Eileen King (1983), the term 'miniature' first emerged in the Middle Ages, initially associated with illuminators of medieval manuscripts. Eventually, it expanded to include small-scale replicas of houses and other items, particularly as the construction of model houses gained popularity in the fifteenth century, coinciding with the waning relevance of manuscripts due to the Gutenberg press (King 1983, 21). However, it wasn't until the fifteenth century, with the rise of the merchant class in cities like Nuremberg, that 'miniature' became linked

to small-scale decorative houses crafted for display. Influenced by the humanist tradition and the desire to collect objects of wonder and rarity, miniatures evolved into the German *Wunderkammer* (Cabinet of Curiosities) during the Renaissance, aiming to represent the entire world on a smaller scale in true *ante oculos ponere*⁸ fashion (King 1983, 27). The significance of miniatures became more evident in the eighteenth century, exemplified by model houses like Sara Rothés' *The Dollhouse of Sara Ploos van Amstel-Rothé* (1743) and Petronella Oortman's *The Dollhouse* (1710). Though termed 'dollhouses' during that era, their attributes align more with miniatures—crafted as hobbies by their owners, intended for decorative display rather than play, and semi-private in nature.

During the Victorian era, there was a notable shift in the perception of dollhouses: "Victorians were fascinated with miniature objects which seemed to belong to another world on a small scale" (Forsberg 2015, 3). This inherent connection to "another world" immediately suggests its association with not only the horror genre but also the uncanny and the Fantastic, as all delve into uncertainties that suggest events, places, and/or entities beyond the confines of the real world. The miniature, by its very definition, compels the viewer to venture into a new dimension—not only spatially, in terms of its power as object, but also affectively, in relation to its power as subject. In his book *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard advocates for the miniature's capacity to transport the viewer into a new spatial realm by proposing an "inversion of perspective" ([1958] 1994, 149) concerning our perception of miniatures. Likewise, Forsberg suggests that these doll-like objects have the capacity of "shifting the owner's focus from

⁸ Meaning 'to place before the eyes,' it was a commonly utilized phrase in the Renaissance, especially during the Age of Discoveries. It referred to documenting new discoveries, like exotic foods, with detailed descriptions and illustrations. Cabinets of Curiosities emerged from this practice to showcase new findings.

material realities to immaterial possibilities" (2015, 1). This is where their liminality lies, and the notion sparked by Jentsch's expression of 'intellectual uncertainty' takes form: an in-between "state of being which neither the exclusively living nor the exclusively nonliving can occupy" (Panszczyk 2011, 6).

Throughout the twentieth century, miniatures began to solidify into the forms most commonly recognized today. From Carrie Walter Stettheimer's *Stettheimer Dollhouse* (1916-1935) to Narcissa Niblack Thorne's *Thorne Rooms* (1932-1940), and Francis Glessner Lee's *Nutshell Studies of Unexplained Death* created during the 1930s and 1940s, miniatures acquired a distinct identity that set them apart from other similar objects. In some instances, miniatures transitioned from their hobbyist origins to serve practical purposes, as seen in the case of Frances Glessner Lee's dioramas. These elaborate models depict true crime scenes and were utilized as training aids for forensic investigators. They often depict incidents of death within a household—typically a familial setting that initially conveys comfort but is disrupted by the presence of corpses. Zofia Kolbuszewska (2017) highlights the fact that both the dollhouse and the miniature, representing enclosed familial spaces, are frequently seen as idealized models of domestic harmony, marked by order, proportion, and equilibrium. Hence, the abrupt intrusion of violence into this setting, mixed with other household items, is usually jarring and unsettling as it explicitly violates the familial space. Miniatures can also implicitly allude to the infringement upon family space, with the extent of this symbolism depending more on the surrounding context of their creation.⁹ This is the case with the miniatures depicted in Ari Aster's directorial debut film, *Hereditary* (2018), which I will later on use as a practical example to illustrate how miniatures exude uncanniness due to

⁹ While beyond the scope of this essay, the extrinsic analysis of miniatures represents a fruitful avenue for future research surrounding the relationship between their sociocultural role and their uncanny qualities. For more on this topic, see: Kolbuszewska (2017).

their essence as inanimate objects that suggest subjectivity.

The Material and the Subjective

Before delving into *Hereditary*, however, two crucial topics must be clearly defined: materiality and subjectivity. Throughout history, materiality and subjectivity have been intertwined, from Plato's concept of the soul and his view of material objects as imperfect representations of ideal forms, to René Descartes' mind-body dualism. Later, these realms were separated, with scholars such as Martin Heidegger focusing on subjectivity, and others on materialism, like Jean Baudrillard. In the late 20th century, postmodernism brought a shift, with the so-called 'material turn' favoring concrete, tangible realities over linguistic abstraction (Schleusener 2021). This transition signifies a move away from solely linguistic or subjective methodologies, instead embracing a more materialist, realist, or object-oriented theoretical perspective, even as the study of subjectivity continues to hold significance (Malabou 2009). Materiality and subjectivity, formerly regarded as distinct realms, have become once more interconnected aspects.

Subjectivity, as Judith Butler (1990) argues, refers to the internal experience and sense of self shaped by interactions with social norms, cultural discourses, and power structures, suggesting it is constructed and performed through repeated actions and behaviors. Conversely, materiality, as Bruno Latour (2005) defines it, pertains to qualities and properties of physical objects that influence and shape human actions and interactions. This indicates that the significance of materiality lies in how an object's physical attributes lend it newfound meaning. The tangible essence of an object, its inherent "thingness"¹⁰ (Brown 2001, 4),

¹⁰ I am applying the term here as it is defined by Bill Brown (2001): the ontological status of

engages in a perpetual struggle with associated meanings, often leading to an incomplete harmony. While materiality may appear impersonal and objective, it carries subjective weight, shaped primarily by human creators. This theoretical framework, known as “thing theory” (2001, 1), will serve as the basis for my analysis of liminality. I will utilize this framework to examine three scenes featuring miniatures from *Hereditary*, illustrating how Jentsch’s concept of the uncanny applies to these objects’ capability to appear inanimate yet imply subjectivity.

The Miniatures of *Hereditary*

The horror film *Hereditary*, as the title indicates, delves into the intricate layers of familial trauma and recurring abuse, skillfully intertwining the themes of loss, supernatural occurrences, and inherited behaviors. Centered around the grieving Graham family coping with the demise of their secretive grandmother Ellen, the narrative navigates through the complexities of their shared history and confrontations with their past. At the heart of the story is Annie, the mother, whose career as a miniature artist becomes a symbolic gateway to show her tumultuous relationship with her mother and the unwanted life path Ellen forced upon her. From Annie’s perspective, the miniatures serve as symbolic manifestations of her internal struggles and unresolved family issues.¹¹ As the film revolves around the theme of ‘family,’ the use of miniatures to elucidate Annie’s complex relationship with her mother highlights both the subjectivity she infuses into them as a coping

objects as physical entities with tangible properties and characteristics. In order to explain this phenomenon, Brown suggests that we become aware of an object’s thingness when said object “stops working for us” (2001, 4).

¹¹ Steve Newburn, the designer responsible for crafting the miniature dioramas, acknowledges this connection: “The miniatures tell you about her [Annie’s] state of mind” (Champagne 2018).

mechanism and their material nature. Miniatures are “by nature a smaller version of something else” (Millhauser 1983, 129), inherently implying a sense of control in their creation and in their use. As exemplified in Annie’s case, they serve as a controlled means for the character to navigate past and present familial trauma and abuse. Their materiality grants this control, but the insinuation of subjectivity in these doll-like objects challenges that control, blurring the distinction between mere objects and something beyond their physical essence which, as explained above, dictates that ‘intellectual uncertainty’ which Jentsch highlights as pivotal in the formation of the uncanny.

As Steven Millhauser remarks, part of the ‘charm’ of miniatures relies in our relation to them, the ways in which they affect us, allowing “ourselves to surrender completely, untroubled by danger” (1983, 130). Because of its shift in size and scale, and with it the “fantasy of mastery” (Briefel 2022, 315), the miniature poses no apparent threat—here is where the uncanny is able to take root. It transforms something familiarly charming and delicate, by inscribing unfamiliar characteristics unto it such as that of a suggested malevolent subjectivity, which is the case with the miniatures of *Hereditary*.¹² This tendency is evident in Ari Aster’s horror filmmaking approach, wherein the director strives to revitalize overused tropes in order to defy the spectator’s expectations. In essence, this approach itself embodies a certain type of uncanniness, as it reshapes the familiar into the unfamiliar, and it can be particularly seen through the presence of miniatures. The uncanniness of the miniatures is particularly evident in three scenes within the film, that will be used to explore the uncanny factor according to Jentsch.

Much like Annie, miniature artists often use their craft as a way to express and

¹² This phenomenon often extends to the prevalent horror genre motif of cursed dolls which has been vastly researched and connected most notably to Freud’s theorization (Lu 2019).

explore their personal experiences, both past and present, aiming to gain insight into significant moments in their lives. Scott Huler, in his article on the relevance of miniatures in contemporary society, recounts the story of a miniature artist to shed light on why people are drawn to creating these objects. In this instance, the artist, Bob Off, reflects on his own childhood experiences of loneliness after losing both parents: "For some reason, my boxes [dioramas] tend to be about lonely people" (Huler 2023). The profound bond between creators and their miniatures is vividly depicted in two specific scenes from *Hereditary*. Among the various dioramas that Annie has constructed for her upcoming exhibition, one stands out: the unfinished diorama of the Graham family house, particularly focusing on the bedroom shared by Annie and her husband Steve. In this scene, the audience is introduced to the first indication of supernatural activity. Annie witnesses the ghostly apparition of her deceased mother in the darkness of her home studio, where she constructs her miniatures, vanishing when Annie switches on the light. As she prepares to leave, the artist confronts the miniature bedroom she crafted, depicting herself breastfeeding her baby daughter Charlie, with a miniature version of Ellen attempting to breastfeed Charlie as well. Distressed, Annie turns the diorama around to face the wall before exiting the room. This scene not only highlights the dysfunction within the family and Annie's complex relationship with her mother but also introduces the idea of the subjectivity of these small objects.

As Gaston Bachelard suggests, "[t]he cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world, the better I possess it," and "in doing this, values become condensed and enriched in miniature" (1994, 150). This notion encapsulates the essence of the scene: until this point, the 'thingness' of the miniatures remained hidden from both the audience and Annie. However, it is here that their physical attributes are magnified by the suggestion of subjectivity as posed by Bill Brown's inquiry:

“Does death have the capacity both to turn people into things and to bring inanimate objects to life?” (2001, 7). Ellen’s apparition triggers this suggestion. It is after her death that the first instance of uncertainty regarding the essence of the miniatures is brought to the forefront. Annie herself experiences this ‘intellectual uncertainty’ regarding her own miniatures, prompting her to turn the display away from her gaze as the miniature bedroom scene fills the whole screen, appearing almost life-like.

After the preceding scene, the film shifts to the same bedroom depicted in the diorama, with Steve already in bed and Annie joining him. This sudden transition to the real-life counterpart of the diorama amplifies the suggested connection between the miniatures and their living counterparts, echoing the initial notion of subjectivity seen in the portrayal of the ghost of the deceased grandmother with her miniature replica. The metaphor is clear: the family is being manipulated as if they were ‘dolls in a dollhouse’ by the cult Ellen was part of. Furthermore, it illustrates the notion of an object infused with subjectivity, confirming the idea of an existence “between states” (2018, 250) as indicated by Mills. The notion of the miniatures existing ambiguously, seeming to be both one thing and another, perpetuates the uncanny feeling as formulated by Jentsch, and that persists throughout the film and into the next scene I will explore.

The following scene bridges the gap between subject and object by introducing the concept of size while keeping the same subjective implications. Annie, still haunted by her mother’s apparition, tries to make sense of the whole situation by doing what she does best: create miniatures. Once again, the screen is taken by a diorama depicting the bedroom shared by Annie and Steve, crafted to deceive with its convincing depth and subdued lighting, blurring the line between reality and artifice. The enclosed space is suggested without revealing its boundaries, leaving the scale of the objects ambiguous. A hand positions a

miniature replica of Annie's mother at the bedroom doorway, while Annie and Steve lay in bed, seemingly asleep. Gradually, the camera reveals a disproportionately large head compared to the miniatures, culminating in a shot of Annie's face alongside an unfocused replica of Ellen, emphasizing Annie's dominance in size.

In this scene, Annie's sense of self-importance, described as her "sovereign self, a center of absolute plenitude and power" (Butler 1990, 149), manifests through her creation of the family replicas, imbuing them with her subjective perspective. This assertion of her identity is further underscored by her towering presence juxtaposed with the miniatures, intensifying the contrast between real life and supposedly inert objects, thereby accentuating the implied subjectivity inherent to the scene. In this manner, miniatures skillfully leverage one of their most crucial aspects to evoke the uncanny in viewers. As previously mentioned, due to their manipulation of size and scale, along with the illusion of control they offer, miniatures typically lack the threat associated with larger sizes. However, by juxtaposing Annie's towering presence with the diminutive replica of her mother, the film communicates two distinct messages.

Firstly, echoing Millhauser's observation that "the magnified miniature" (1983, 133) provides a false sense of completeness, the scene underscores the protagonist's misguided belief that she can comprehend her life's complexities by encapsulating them within miniatures. This juxtaposition suggests that despite Annie's scrutiny, she remains unable to grasp the full truth behind her mother's inflicted trauma, perpetuating a cycle of generational abuse onto her children. Secondly, it highlights that Annie's perceived control over the miniature objects diminishes when the symbolic weight they carry, such as trauma in Annie's case, transcends their physical confines. This blurring of boundaries between the subjective and the physical realm amplifies the 'intellectual uncertainty' suggested to the audience, as the miniature world operates by its own distinct rules (Forsberg

2015, 4) that defy easy categorization. As Bill Brown (2001) emphasizes, regardless of how stable objects may seem, they possess a fluid identity that varies with their surroundings.

In the previous scene, subjective interpretation overshadowed the material qualities of the objects, but in this subsequent and concluding scene, the reverse occurs: materiality dominates, eclipsing any implied subjectivity. Similarly to the preceding scenes, silence envelops the atmosphere, accompanied only by ominous music and distant dog barking. Surrounded by these sounds, two dioramas come into view: a low angled shot of the family home, and an upward angle delving into a representation of the car accident that claimed Annie's daughter's life midway through the film. Notably, the camera movements in this scene diverge significantly from previous shots of the miniatures. Here, the size and scale of the miniatures are distorted, appearing larger than reality. The family home morphs into a monstrous building, while the car accident scene transports the viewer into a new spatial realm, echoing Bachelard's concept of "inversion of perspective" (1994, 149) discussed earlier.

In this instance, the physical attributes of the miniatures take precedence over their subjectivity, not only in their presentation but also in the contextual framework. This scene marks the narrative's culmination, where the cult and the grandmother's control over the family's destiny becomes inevitable, relegating their future to the whims of others. Following this scene, the final shot of the miniatures symbolizes the relinquishment of agency—Annie destroys the dioramas. As the physical objects shatter, the subjectivity confined within those material boundaries dissipates.

In *Hereditary*, the utilization of miniatures unfolds as a pivotal narrative device deeply intertwined with the protagonist's emotional trajectory and the ominous prelude to unforeseen cataclysms. From the initial hints of subjectivity

to the subsequent blurring of boundaries where ambiguity dominates, to a final shift towards a tangible viewpoint that dispels earlier notions of subjectivity, these miniatures serve as triggers: they not only propel the unfolding of the uncanny within the film but also mark the eventual collapse of the family nucleus, the fundamental element that links the miniatures with the narrative.

Conclusion

Jentsch's definition of the uncanny encapsulates what I perceive as the core essence of the concept: an uncertainty regarding the nature of something. This inherent ambiguity can take various forms, and my argument here is that miniatures embody this fundamental aspect of uncanniness. They are inanimate objects that suggest animacy, not only due to their mimetic nature but also because they possess the ability to hold both materiality and subjectivity.

To grasp the inherent uncanniness of miniatures, the present work delved into various theories of the uncanny, explored the history and definition of miniatures, and examined the concepts of materiality and subjectivity. Additionally, the objective was to demonstrate how these uncanny qualities manifest and are utilized in art, hence the accompanying analysis of Ari Aster's film. The abundant use of miniatures provided a fruitful opportunity for applying the theoretical framework established in earlier sections. The approach to the study of miniatures in horror presented in this essay is, of course, only an introductory exploration. Otto Rank's (1971) concept of the Double, Arjun Appadurai's study of material culture in *The Social Life of Things* (1986), and even Charles Baudelaire's notion of a toy's hidden soul in the essay "A Philosophy of Toys" ([1853] 1970) are only a few examples of further theoretical avenues that I will leave here as a suggestion for future, more in-depth research.

These diminutive replicas exude an eerie semblance of life, invoking a sense of enigmatic presence that resonates profoundly with Jentsch's notion of the uncanny. The deliberate selection of his definition over other perspectives underscores the miniatures' remarkable capacity to evoke a haunting familiarity despite their seemingly underdeveloped nature. Across the meticulously crafted scenes of *Hereditary*, the ambiguity inherent in these objects serves as fertile ground for the uncanny to take root and flourish. Miniatures, with their paradoxical combination of modest scale and potent symbolism, transcend mere physicality to evoke grandeur and elicit introspective musings. They inhabit a nebulous realm that defies conventional categorization, hovering in a liminal space that blurs the distinction between the animate and the inanimate.

In essence, miniatures function as enigmatic conduits, drawing viewers into the complexities of existence and prompting contemplation of the intricate interplay between the tangible and the intangible, the known and the unknowable. Ultimately, these captivating little objects hint at a realm beyond our own, enchanting the mind and captivating the imagination "under the spell of the miniature" (Millhauser 1983, 135).

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