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SOMETIMES; OTHER TIMES: UNSTITCHING GOTHIC AMBIGUITY IN SOFIA CARRILLO'S PRITA NOIRE/BLACK DOLL

Helena Bacon & Luis Daniel Martinez Alvarez

While clearly following in the footsteps of stop-motion animators such as Jan Švankmajer, Wladyslaw Starewicz and the Brothers Quay, Sofia Carrillo's short animation *Prita Noire/Black Doll* (2011) steps away from the allegory and textural weightiness of Švankmajer's work, the complex narratives and humour Starewicz applied to dead animals and the ornate, self-contained structures of the Quays, becoming something altogether more contemporary, mercurial and fragile and a highly original production in its own right. It is a film that, significantly, refuses to answer any of the questions it poses within its narrative or through the means of its construction; its internal mechanisms are created and sustained by repeated contradictions that permeate its constituent components. Narrative elides with and slides away from narration, imagery from object, and doll from human in a fantastical melding of incoherent elements that, in the film's slight eight minutes, leaves the viewer with a series of incompletenesses that speak to – in their inchoate nature – a wider postmodern Gothic that goes beyond any moral, psychological or narratological framing, and un-anchors even familiar Gothic elements from what might be reliable or programmatic forms and readings. This elliptical assemblage is realised through stop-motion animation, the subsequent kineticism this creates affecting the man-made figure of doll Prita, the spiders that accompany her, and, perhaps more surprisingly, her human sister (a human performer also filmed in stop motion). All are subject to the stop-start method of production stop-motion entails, which creates a disjointed, uncanny mood that permeates the film through the physical manipulation of human and material beings on screen, and indeed by the screen. Because the production process involves a temporal disjunction – with action created through the intense truncation of the painstaking work involved in setting up each static shot – the screen itself in stop-motion becomes not simply a passive recorder of the directed but internally generated movement of an actor filmed with a rolling camera; instead, it becomes an active producer of motion created by external sources – the animator's hands moving or guiding the scene frame by frame.

In *Understanding Animation* (1998), Paul Wells, discussing the idiosyncrasies of short-form stop-motion animation, suggests that "[t]hough all the elements that construct any film are important, the *mutuality* of the constituent elements of the animated film all call attention to themselves as the bearers of significant information because of their place within the short film" (99). The hidden-in-plain-sight elements of cinema that disguise their own construction, then, produce the hyper-real appearance of live-action cinema and, as Wells argues, inform some orthodox forms

of animation also: “[i]ronically, the dominance of the *cartoon* (i.e. traditional cell animation in the style of Disney or Warner Brothers, which is predicated on painting forms and figures directly onto sheets of celluloid which are then photographed) has unfortunately misrepresented the animated film *because* its art seems invisible or, more precisely, is taken for granted by its viewers” (7, original emphasis). *Prita Noire* resists such orthodoxies through its form and its subject matter. Discussing stop-motion, Suzanne Buchan in *Quay Brothers: Into a Metaphysical Playroom* (2011) states that “[t]he viewer of such films [...] is confronted with an illogical, yet comprehensible vision of objects that move, have intent and personality, and can be cunning” (xii). The ‘mutuality’ of the elements in Carrillo’s animation, combined with the internally illogical yet overwhelmingly coherent stop-motion construction elide with Gothic aesthetic and thematic concerns here.

Following this pattern of construction and disintegration, structure and fragmentation, then, we intend in this article to situate *Prita Noire* within the realms of animation and Gothic studies; we will explore how recognisably Gothic traces within Carrillo’s film work, in symbiosis with stop-motion animation, construct a world within which this process of coalescence and destabilisation can take place, and how this world presents an extreme and postmodern form of the uncanny, its elements becoming unfamiliar, drifting away from any demonstrable position or exegesis, as soon as we recognise them and projecting a distinct and determined ambiguity despite the material, concrete elements utilised in the film’s production. To articulate this, we will examine, using aesthetic, ontological and narrative frameworks, how the film both stitches and unstitches itself (stitching a key motif in the film itself) in both material and narratorial terms; and how specificity – as demanded again by the film’s form and its reliance on the material and the object – seems to stand for, or create a series of disquieting absences.

Narrative Condensation: Mutuality and Chronology in *Prita Noire*

The summary of *Prita Noire* provided at and by the Festival Internacional de Cine de Morelia, in which *Prita Noire* won Best Animated Short in 2011, simply states “[p]risoners, two sisters share their lives in a foreign land. The everyday and curiosity will lead Prita to turn to the limits of the safe zone” (*Prita Noire* – FICM). Carrillo herself provides an alternative encapsulation on the film’s Vimeo page: “[u]n relato espeluznante de dos hermanas unidas por los lazos que las atan: la co-dependencia, la ansiedad de separación y la rutina/A spooky tale of two sisters bound together by the bonds that bind them: co-dependence, separation anxiety, and routine” (*Prita Noire* – Vimeo). These are both sufficient – basic narrative events are accounted for in the former, thematic concerns in the latter – but, if we are to consider the mutuality of filmic components as Wells suggests, then they seem to render them if not inaccurate then severely abridged or simplified and we soon find these components are not harmonious. We are shown Prita’s unnamed human sister in a close-up pan down her body – she is sat on a chair; the camera then changes the angle of its approach and we zoom in on Prita herself, a doll sat in a kind of conical jar placed between her sister’s legs on the chair. Both are asleep to begin with though Prita soon awakens. Her sister appears troubled by strange dreams, her head twitching and her eyelids flickering as she sleeps. We see a spider stitching up a tear in the sister’s lace outfit. Prita sings and looks out at the clouds that surround them and is visited

by a spider. Then we regress to an earlier moment, and see an armless baby doll in a web, presided over by a spider with a doll's face; we view the baby walking, attached to something above it out of shot by threads; finally, we are shown that it has grown hair, the threads have fallen and are being dragged behind it in a world made of scratched walls before we see Prita's face in close-up, staring at the camera, the film suggesting using the most minimal elements that the baby was, in fact, Prita. The spiders then stitch Prita some arms and raise her out of her jar onto her sister's shoulder. She leaves her sister, jumping off a ledge only to be hoisted away into the cloud, seemingly by the spiders. How she got into the jar, where her sister came from, why the one spider has a doll's face when the others do not, why she has no arms... these are just some of the deliberately signposted anomalies and mysteries that the film contains but does not address.

We might hope then that the film's non-diegetic narration might provide further elucidation regarding what these characters are doing here but once again we are left without anything that might resemble clarification:

There were once two sisters who lived together; only one grew up, but she remained strangely overpowered by the will of her little sister, name Prita. Sometimes if Prita is thirsty, she will sing. Sometimes she is curious. Other times she gets very bored. Sometimes, spiders pay her a visit. Prita does nothing all day. Are days possible here? Time seems endless. Children can lose themselves sometimes; they go to sleep, and grown-ups awake.

Though there are some clear moments of elision – two sisters, singing, spiders, and Prita's stasis – the narration here again minimally suggests any tie to the sequential events of the film itself. These slight, short statements do not adhere in any strict sense to what we are being shown, with the question posed by the narration considered implicitly through this loose collection of images and events. Ewan Wilson in "Diagrams of Motion" (2018) states that "live-action filmmaking halts the march of time for its subjects, while animation creates time for that which has none of its own" (149). Given that *Prita Noire* utilises both 'live-action' in the form of Prita's human sister yet applies stop-motion to her and to puppet Prita, the temporality of the film is disjointed throughout via its specific elements and 'actors'. Wilson continues, suggesting that "stop-motion animation employs the evocative quality of the plastic arts to give the illusion of occupying the same temporal reality as its audience" (150); the manufactured plasticity of stop-motion figures and their interaction with their surroundings seems to locate them in an equivalent corporeal and sequential arena to the viewer even if a fantasy world is being depicted. This 'illusion' is constructed, then, through the way each frame is forcibly creating a sense of time for the film's puppets, as well as the defined running time of the film itself, and also synchronously through the film's narration and its single human presence. The question as to whether 'days' are possible within the realm it depicts is answered both in the affirmative and the negative because time seems to pass for one character and not the other and the live-action element of the film suggests a stasis while the animated elements create a

temporal movement, the two interfering with each other through their interaction within the film and their separate, representative presences.

We are left with two figures, then, human and doll, flesh and plastic, the trajectories of which converge and diverge, highlighting and distorting each other as they progress within a concurrently existent and non-existent timeframe. Wells suggests that “[a]nimation predominantly occurs in the short form and manages to compress a high degree of narratorial information into a limited period of time through a process of condensation” (76). Both definitions of the term ‘condensation’ seem to apply to *Prita Noire*: the film compacts a great deal of information into these stylistic and temporal confines. We have seemingly a longer chronology squashed into the film’s running time, with the suggested flash-back to Prita’s development from baby to girl, as well as a whole world suggested, if withheld in actuality, that encompasses a doll/human relationship, some kind of transgression or oppression indicated from the manner in which they are contained, the influential presence of arachnids, and the possibilities left open by the sisters’ separation. The film also produces different states through the instability of the images themselves, the disjointed material textures Carrillo contrasts – the flesh of a human and the clay and cloth of a doll; thick, inert glass and ever-spinning and unravelling spider silk; shifting cloud occasionally punctured by reflections of light – and the strange way the visual story both is and isn’t reproduced in the film’s verbal one. These combinations mean that we get the never-quite-fluid transformation of narration into image and vice-versa, the narrative so insecurely collected, like Prita’s unfinished arms, that the compression of these elements, instead of distilling them into greater clarity, pushes them into new, unclear territory. The solidity of Prita and her sister and the way in which they move – the visible effect of the animator on their presentation – directly contrasts and, therefore, highlights the more amorphous nature of the narrative and narration that directs them, as well as the rain, tears and cloud that make up the other less concrete matter that features within the film. Condensation disturbs, through proximity and truncation, any real sense we might get here of what is going on beyond the direct, immediate statements Prita makes – thirst, singing, boredom – and leaves us to weave together or untangle these facets as we can, the process of stop-motion animation itself indicating its own compacted form of continuity because of the way it is produced, one cell or still at a time, and the way that it cannot avoid revealing the method of its production through its tangible, material qualities and the never-quite-fluid transformation of image into movement.

Returning to the Morelia Festival’s summary, the only signification we have that they are ‘prisoners’ (the term, or anything similar, not actually used at all within Prita’s account) is the glass jar Prita appears in and the chairs they are both sat on, though it is unclear whether the sister is tied to hers with her arms behind her back or if she too simply lacks arms. It seems at first that it is solely Prita who is contained in this way, the sister sat among the clouds with no other built environment around her. However, at 03.43 minutes into the film, for just a moment, we see a wide shot of the sister who appears to be in her own much larger jar; this seems to be a fleeting hint at the way their world might be constructed as a series of prisons, the ‘safe zone’ Prita escapes a form of entrapment which is then simply replaced by a larger, but otherwise identical one. These ‘safe’ prisons are without origin or function beyond both being and signifying walls and the only opening is the gaps in the tops of the jars. What that freedom might be, the realm beyond the glass and the cloud, is never realised.

Material Disjuncture: Animate and Inanimate Systems in *Prita Noire*

This loose end suggests then that the means of Prita's new-found freedom at the end of the film become the new terms of her confinement, just as the mode of animation becomes the means of narrative confinement because the two cannot be undone or unpicked from each other despite seeming to have separate lives. The crafting of the film itself draws attention to itself as a form of containment through simulation, one that the sisters are trapped in and one in which we struggle to locate meaning, a synthetic world where the human has no agency and even her tears are produced by the whims and absences of her fabricated sister. Buchan states that "since many of the worlds that animation conjures technically can have little to do with the tangible world, the viewer must be able to develop different schemata from those she constructs for live-action film" (117). If, as Wells continues, "[t]hree-dimensional animation is directly concerned with the expression of materiality and, as such, the creation of a certain *meta*-reality which has the same physical property as the real world," (90) then the film seems to be making a case for moving away from materialism into a new conceptual schema – the equal positioning or conceptualising of objects and people within an ontological framework. Graham Harman establishes this philosophical position clearly in the opening chapter of *The Quadruple Object* (2011) when he suggests that materialism "is the hereditary enemy of any object-oriented philosophy" and that "objects must be given equal attention, whether they be human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional," (107). *Prita Noire*, in positioning a doll as 'sister' to a human without seemingly needing to explain why, animating both through stop-motion/pixilation and having their entrapped states echo each other, suggests a levelling of the material and human within this cloud-filled plane that reflects Harman's philosophical position. The synthetic features of the film stand on equal terms to the corporeal and human, this footing granted again through the animation employed to move every element that sits within the film's frames. Despite the ambiguity the film consciously employs, there appears to be some interaction here with the idea that objects are just as possessed of significance as the human realm and – contradicting Buchan's assertion that the "human form is paired in binary opposition with the nonhuman creatures and inanimate objects" (53) in stop-motion – fuse with it in developmental ways within Carrillo's film.

Look again, however, at the film's components and we find that even this conceptualisation does not fully adhere to what the film is showing and telling us. *Prita Noire* seems to leapfrog Harman's conceptualisation of the object and, through simulation, ascribe all of the 'life', or consciousness, to Prita and *not* her sister. Rather than simply a 'meta-reality' that either emulates, mirrors or matches the real world in any given ontological hierarchy, the objects here, whether it be Prita, the spiders, the glass jars, or the threads, all enact some kind of effect within the film as opposed to the human sister, who sits, eyes shut until the film's end, clearly tormented but unable to react to the forces being exerted upon her. Of course, Prita and the spiders are granted movement, agency and influence where glass jars and silk are not, but they exist, materially, within the same realm and inhabit the same man-made parameters. The film does not try to disguise their material qualities, but instead enhances them through their textual and physical relation to the paralysed human form among them.

Wells suggests that “[t]hese aspects of signification create the climate of the uncanny yet maintain the essential concreteness of objects rather than place them in transition” (91); while the narrative may be fluid in a sense, we never lose sight of Prita’s doll form and the importance of the material and the textural within the film – the spiders stitch the film’s title as they stitched her arms, and the credits do not show either sister but are overlaid against a range of surfaces featured within it: glass, lace, mirror, carved walls. What is concrete remains concrete: Prita moves, sings, gasps and experiences emotions but her proximity to her human sister mean we never forget that she is a ‘made’ object that is doing all of these things, and not a puppet passing as human because of a lack of other defining context that we might find in a film that solely animates the man-made, without human presence. Indeed, Wells continues: “[s]imultaneously, the object etc. is both alien and familiar; familiarity is a mark of associational security while alienation emerges from the displacement of use and context” (91). We know Prita is a doll but might accept the possibility of her being ‘alive’ within certain confines due to the familiarity and abundance of non-human or semi-human figures within animation in general, as Buchan suggests: “[w]e see a moving image, but we know that the objects we see appear alive are pure artifice [but] the spectator may oscillate between this awareness and a sublimation of it that allows her to perceive animated objects as living” (104). The viewer straddles or at least shifts between belief and disbelief, allowing Prita to become not just doll but character within the same tangible realm as her sister, at least some of the time. Here, however, we have none of the usual narrative referentials that might make this acceptance quicker or easier. We are continually presented with a discordant doll/human relationship and are faced with the prospect that Prita is in control, as the narration suggests: the human sister remains ‘strangely overpowered’ by the little doll below her, and unable to exert any control over her attachment or detachment to her.

The potentially sinister quality of the uncanny life located in Prita points us towards reading the film as Gothic Horror, a more productive framework than any kind of ontological experiment and one more obviously manifested here. In *The Gothic Vision* (2002), Dani Cavallaro suggests: “[n]arratives of darkness give shape to the disorientating sensations [...] by intensifying their power and frequency through an emphasis on the irreducible hold of the inexplicable” (14). Alongside the distinctly Gothic aesthetic Carrillo models, then, we can also pinpoint the ways in which the uncanny enhances the film’s generation of symbiotic order and disorder. Multiple strands of the uncanny are woven together here, each enhancing the other. As Joana Rita Romalho suggests in “The Uncanny Afterlife of Dolls” (2020): “[i]n the Gothic imagination, dolls are scary simply because they are dolls, their presence is enough to instil fear. Moreover, it is the camera itself that creates Gothicity by privileging the object and making it the focus of the action” (33). Dolls as simulacra of human life are innately uncanny creations, even more so if they appear to move, to model the autonomy of the living (or in this case, to appropriate it), to speak, to think without explicit human manipulation. Romalho emphasises that the object becomes subject here, the material superseding or even erasing the human as the locus or driver of said action. The film’s aesthetic certainly overlaps with this threat; though removed substantially from standard signifiers and locations of the Gothic or of Horror cinema, there is still a presentation of dark influences and possibilities here generated by Prita. The Gothic seems located in Prita herself and the spiders that seem to tend her and her sister. She is the eponymous ‘black doll’ of the film’s title – both named ‘doll’ and made ‘doll’ by Carrillo’s

decision to make her a model and use a live actor for her sister. Her 'doll' qualities are further emphasised and yet corrupted by the ways in which her form is rendered in Gothic terms. She is, in essence, what a doll should be – small, babyish, with short limbs and a large head that houses disproportionately large eyes but otherwise small features.

Her form, however, does not adhere completely to these expectations but rather takes on a specifically Gothic presentation. She has rough cut black hair; her eyes are mismatched in size and seem – despite the muted tones Carrillo employs – to be heterochromatic; her teeth are primitively rendered and appear blackened again by the almost monochromatic world the pair exist in, her mouth caught somewhere between a smile and a sneer. She has no arms until the spiders weave some for her, and despite being both doll and the younger, or certainly smaller sister (we are never given their ages but are simply told that 'only one grew up') is the one in control. Romalho continues: "Gothic dolls rarely appear fully undamaged, their physiognomy vividly displaying the corruption caused by human manipulation and the passage of time" (30). Here, intriguingly, the damage and corruption visible on Prita's form does not seem to have been caused by human hands but is inherent to the doll herself – she has 'grown-up' looking like this, inhabiting this aesthetic. What are supposed to typify baby-like features – innocence, cuteness, what is, in essence, doll-like – is recognizable but made even more unsettling, uneven, or incomplete because we are not sure if Prita's appearance is simply surface detail or an organic manifestation of an inherently 'corrupt' nature, as this physiognomy only intensifies as Prita develops, as depicted in the flashback sequence covering Prita's babyhood before the spiders finally stitch arms for her, concretizing her 'made' status. The film goes on to suggest this nature is possible: if, in its bridging the distance between past and present and artifice and the real, "contemporary Gothic seeks the illusion of the hand-made" (Spooner 200) as opposed to the natural, the modern or the mass-produced, and privileges the explicitly crafted in order to hide a possible lack of meaning behind an aesthetic artifice, then the hand-made, the artifice, here seeks both the illusion of the real then control over it, revealing the uncanny un-life Prita possesses, and seems to use if not against, then in manipulation of her sister. She is only stopped by something more material and unbending than her – a wall of glass she cannot be lifted over or climb.

If, as Sigmund Freud suggests in "The Uncanny" (1919, McLintock translation, 2003), "children are not afraid of their dolls coming to life" (141), this possibility an extension of the manner with which they play with them and respond to a doll's mimicry of human qualities, then the implication is that (in what Freud leaves unsaid) an adult response to a doll 'coming to life' is fear, or certainly trepidation, generated through the knowledge that, while it looks human, it is not and should not model life but remain a static, mimetic image of it; its potentiality always rests in the human hands that touch and move it, rather than in its own form. Buchan states:

[p]uppet animation can create an analogous experience for the viewer of similar so-called miracles – nonorganic entities, machines, and objects that are materially extant in the phenomenal world but have qualities on-screen (cognizance, intention, ability to move independently, to react) that would otherwise reside only in the imagination (xx).

Prita is the moving force here, the creator and narrator of her bid for freedom in the limited world she inhabits at the film's beginning. It is her 'will', as she says, and not that of her grown, human sister, that dominates the relationship, which has little physical interplay other than the suggestion that Prita singing somehow produces tears from her sister that assuage Prita's thirst, an effect produced from an unconscious response. In *The Secret Life of Puppets* (2001) Victoria Nelson, discussing a "post-religious intellectual culture" that has led to the use of the grotesque, and puppets and dolls specifically, in a wide range of cultural productions suggests that the "repressed" religious experience or desire:

endures as a fascination with the spiritualizing of matter and the demiurgic infusion of soul into human simulacra [... which] came to carry the burden of our outlawed but tenacious belief in the holiness of graven images, and behind that in the immortality of the human soul [...] (20).

Here, this material reversal and spiritualization is taken to extremes – we go beyond a doll physically manipulating a human, and instead see a doll subconsciously manipulating one instead. The material, the graven image, goes beyond itself, embodying a form of holiness to the human beside it and becoming not only physically grotesque or uncanny, but psychically affective also.

The sisters, though different 'species' in material terms, act also as an uncanny double, which seems amplified, in accordance again with Freud's conceptualisation, "by the spontaneous transmission of mental processes from one of these persons to the other – what we would call telepathy – so that the one becomes co-owner of the other's knowledge, emotions and experience" (141). Prita's sister never actually looks at her, and never speaks. The film never seems to address whether this telepathic, uncanny connection the two have is benign or not, Prita's will a force that is neither defined as keeping her sister stable or subjecting her to (though limited by setting and context) the unknown whims of her animated counterpart. The film retains this ambivalence and an enduring sense of the *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich* converging in Prita as she moves to separate herself from her living double. This is again another reversal – here of the typical horror trope of someone trying to rid themselves of a wayward or malevolent doll animated by any number of suspicious circumstances. Prita's movement has no obvious cause: she and her sister just 'are', existing symbiotically in their glass jar world. Uncanniness is then generated through her relationship to her sister and not through the common referentials of the material world of horror with some recognizable 'real-life' settings – Prita is not actually 'haunted' or possessed, just as her aesthetic has not been brought about through degradation, but she nevertheless troubles her sister here through the ways in which her movements and presence seem coupled to the distress the sister exhibits and then through the creation of distance between them as Prita leaves.

Freud continues: "[i]t is only the factor of unintended repetition that transforms what would otherwise seem quite harmless into something uncanny and forces us to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable, when we should normally speak of 'chance'" (44). The sister's doubling

continues through their repeated, concurrent experiences and the imagery used to invoke them, Prita's 'escape' thrown into question as there is no indication that she has breached the larger jar; narrative resolution is withheld despite our attempts to create a form of orthodoxy or locate a logical structure within the film. Instead of linear storytelling, the narrative sequence is further distorted through these repeated images – vases that contain worlds that relate but barely interact, and that represent vessels used to store flowers, beautiful objects that are dying as they are admired until their visual value rots into collapse. Prita cannot 'die' because she is a puppet, a simulacrum of a human, yet she seems to bear the marks of the deathly as determined by her Gothic presentation and traditional Horror patterns which again problematise her connection with her living and troubled counterpart. Prita, until her escape, has a simple existence. She is either thirsty, curious or bored – the simple, nascent emotions of a child – whilst her mute sister seems to suffer unspoken psychical torments that cause her head to twitch in staccato fashion, movements interspersed with the odd, troubled smile. When her eyes open as Prita is leaving, we hear the sound of something crumbling, the image and sound bearing little obvious relation to each other, as Wells suggests: "[o]ften [...] apparently impossible relationships are created through the fusions of contrasting figures and forms, placing formerly disjunct or unrelated elements into new conjunctions" (93). A new sign is produced through previously unrelated images and sounds, and becomes a new language for psychological collapse, which seems to continue as Prita escapes and tears track down her sister's face, again depicted through stop motion rather than a rolling camera, every movement or micro-movement separated by the incremental motion capture of the animated form. This gives the film its own uncanny life, one much longer and more expansive than the simple information given by the object and spaces bounded within the screen. These iterations and repetitions of the uncanny, however, are left unresolved as no narrative resolution is ever reached; indeed, the film determinedly resists such outcomes and retains a distinctly homogenous irregularity.

Gothic incoherence: an unanchored uncanny in *Prita Noire*

We can link this resistance to the idiosyncrasy of animation (and of stop-motion animation specifically) with notions of representation and postmodernism as related to the Gothic. In *Gothic Literature* (2013), Andrew Smith suggests that "a contemporary post-modern [...] world is defined by the absence of absolute meaning, and in literature this becomes manifested through stylistic play in which narrative and form are run together to create synthetic worlds which foreground issues about representation above any moral or metaphysical concerns" (141). Though Smith is discussing literature, his analysis still adheres in relation to animation; the animated form, through the slow craftsmanship involved and the manner in which animation has always been subversive, as Wells suggests, because it has been marginalized or relegated to limited or child-based audiences, has meant that these 'unguarded spaces', unseen or disregarded by mainstream and/or adult audiences, have produced opportunities for animators to use the "unique vocabulary available to the animator which is not the province of the live-action film-marker" (11). Smith continues: "post-modernism seems to be peculiarly suited to the Gothic because it questions the notion that one inhabits a coherent or otherwise abstractly rational world" (141).

Prita Noire seems, again through the potentiality of its form, to exist with and utilise this incoherence. Everything is carefully chosen: there cannot be anything we could confidently label as arbitrary here, given how each frame in its eight minutes has been tangibly manipulated by the animator herself. And yet, once again, nothing quite adds up. The uncanny is usually employed with a purpose; Fred Botting, having previously suggested one iteration of it was the unresolved past returning to trouble the present in *Gothic* (1996), updates his position in *Limits of Horror* (2008), arguing that “[t]he uncanny, less a return from the past, becomes an effect of a disturbed present, a present affected by massive upheaval and transformation” (7). Though there exists, as outlined, the possibility that the film is engaging in ideas of material equality or even superiority, that the human condition is at risk from interference by a representative of the world of objects, or even the more familiar trope of a child-like or doll-like figure having unnatural abilities that may not be entirely without malevolence, the uncanny here is also here a venue for the “doubleness of modernity: fantasy erupts into reality, ghosts, death, darkness and monstrosity crossing lines of exclusion, otherness returning upon the same,” (Botting 7). The bare-bones formulation of this animation means that, though it uses the uncanny in intense ways, it stops short of suggesting that it has any real kind of allegorical function or is engaged in a meaningful contemporary commentary or returning formerly repressed aspects to the fore. The uncanny here exists, through image and narrative, but is not given its usual textual or contextual purpose; it is freed from any usual historical or cultural anchors and becomes simply another undefined element in this collection of assorted incompletions, identifiable only in form rather than function, the material concealing the absence beneath.

If, as Noël Carroll suggests in “Why Horror?” (2002), “horror thrives as a narrative form” (34), and that it focusses centrally on “not the monster as such but the whole narrative structure in which the presentation of the monster is staged,” then once again, *Prita Noire*, beyond Prita’s appearance, avoids orthodox manifestations of horror and any such manifestations become sublimated into the specifics of the world she occupies; it is a narrative of ideas, rather than one of sequence. Carroll continues, suggesting that “what leads people to seek out horror is fascination,” (40) a fascination that is indulged, disgust set aside or quelled, because the logistical and moral issues regarding how to deal with a monster are negated through its unreality; we know it is a fiction, a mirage. *Prita Noire* embodies this allure, creating an implicit horror that resides within the unknowable that takes our fascination and returns it to us, unanswered. If “[h]orror stories, in a significant number of cases, are dramas of proving the existence of the monster and disclosing (most often gradually) the origin, identity, purposes and powers of the monster” (Carroll 34), then Carrillo allows us to know only the identity (in very limited terms) of her horror and makes us guess at the rest. We return to the uncanny as a force suspended between two states or spheres of influence – Prita remains ‘concrete’ rather than ‘transitional’ but the circumstances regarding her existence and future remain very much in flux and open to interpretation despite the ‘flashback’ we are given regarding her relationship with the spiders. Cavallaro suggests that “[u]ncanny effects arise when familiar circumstances unexpectedly acquire unfamiliar connotations without our being able to ascertain how or why this has happened” (4). We are used to flashbacks providing or leading us toward narrative closure; here though not only does the chronological regression remain completely untethered to Prita’s narration, but it remains, itself, incomplete. Her connection to the spiders is undefined, whatever she is tied to above her

remains resolutely out of shot and the temporal parameters of her development are unclear and unmarked. We know the spiders have tangible effects on this world in that they stitch bits of it together, but given they also stitch the title, as mentioned, their presence draws attention to this film as construction – another one of their incomplete projects and an example of artifice perpetuating artifice. The resolution we expect is denied by these usually explanatory sequences, and Prita's origin remains incompletely rendered. The sequence ends with Prita looking directly at the camera as if in rebuke to our expectations and as confirmation of her undefined existence, the close-up shot of her face at 03.37 the most unsettling moment within the film, Prita's expression undeterminable yet not blank, her smile-come-sneer turned fully on us. The viewer is positioned briefly as Prita's sister is, stuck in between the known and unknown and subject to both the influence of narrative absence and potentially malevolent presence.

Wells states that symbols are "defined by a series of substitutions" (63). The images curated and presented resist firm interpretation, remaining distanced behind the screen despite their hyper-tangible appearance and effects. We know they have meaning, but we must engage in continuing analysis and addition in order to interpret what that meaning might be, and even then, we are not guaranteed conclusions, just as Prita seems suspended between possible freedom and further entrapment. The form itself takes on the mechanism of its narrative in a labyrinthine yet rapid wind towards an end, or series of dead ends. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981, Glaser translation 1994), Jean Baudrillard suggests that "an entire linear and accumulative culture collapses if we cannot stockpile the past in plain view" (10). We require a visible continuum, a visible point, a visible myth, or origin, which reassures us about our end. Prita and her sister have no 'past' we can stockpile: their world, though real in a material sense, disintegrates into cloud beyond their bounded forms. We, and they, are denied this sequential hoard, and are simply given an ontological accumulation of individuated objects; we must drift between symbol and state as they do – all we have are the frames we are given: "[s]imulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality, a hyper-real" (Baudrillard 1). This accumulation in the film constructs a sense of this "hyper-real" but withholds what the objects collectively and individually might even begin to mean as we struggle to locate them within a given textual framework or a cultural one beyond the horror of postmodern dissolution, as Botting suggests: "Boundaries between fiction and reality blur, to the extent that each interpenetrates and shapes the other, dismantling conventional patterns of differentiation" (Botting 5). We are given a heterochromatic experience – real and manufactured, symbol and source, substitution and original – to unravel and must consider the animation as Prita does her own existence – naively, thirsty for progression and unsure of the outcome because Carrillo's presentation paralyzes any approach beyond this natal dubiety. We are positioned as are Prita and her sister in this evasive Gothic form, only more culturally helpless as we do not have the spiders to patch up our unravelling comprehension.

Cavallaro suggests that:

[t]he interaction of terror and horror is most explicitly conveyed by stories that articulate the experience of fear as an ongoing condition. Such narratives intimate that fear is not triggered by a single disturbing moment or occurrence but is actually a permanent aspect of being-in-the-world [...] Concrete and intangible phenomena contribute equally to its dynamics. (6)

What *Prita Noire* is doing then, both directly, indirectly, quickly and gradually, through objects, symbols and visual dialogue, is generating fear – fear of and fear for Prita, small and vulnerable in a vast but limited world, and fear for her sister, who seems both vulnerable to Prita and vulnerable without her; fear that we either don't understand what is happening in this world, and fear that there might be nothing to understand, that there is no meaning – we cannot fill in the gaps because there is nothing to fill them with. Mutuality, then, involves vacancy. We, or it, are deficient. The sisters' separation, instead of resolving this or assuaging our anxieties, only perpetuates this sensation, rendering it 'ongoing.' We, in our world and in theirs (we can barely see more than they can, barring the larger glass jar) have no choice but to accept the indeterminacy we are constantly subjected to in the film, and live with the distress it generates.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the film's refusal to provide any standard narrative cohesion, undoing each interpretation it suggests as it suggests it, returns us time and again to the form itself. The eight minutes of stop-motion animation that utilises both man-made, material, 'plastic' life *and* the human, shown in conjunction and subject to the same formal processes, forces us to acknowledge that we are trying to stitch things together like Carrillo's spiders. However, our interpretations are forever thwarted by the resistance of the images presented to our attempts to constrain them through conventions of narrative, setting or time. The inherently uncanny nature of stop-motion is exacerbated in *Prita Noire* by numerous other instances of the uncanny – alienated forms and figures, temporal discordance, doublings, and repetitions – that are never determined. Gothic aesthetics provide a source of further disruption, giving life and power to the embodied, deathly world Carrillo has created while holding the ghostly living in a tormented stasis, the material beings around Prita's sister moving and acting as she should be moving and acting. Her agency is displaced, transposed onto a small, ghastly doll who is, nevertheless, her sister. Even the horror this might generate, however, is ultimately disturbed by a fleeting clue that Prita's escape might end up limited by the new parameters that she will eventually discover keep her trapped still in this world of glass jars and cloud storms, simply in larger confines. Wells' mutuality here is once again condensed back into a world of specifics – indeed, all we are left with are specifics that we cannot then piece back together in any satisfying way nor use to get beyond the hand-made artifice we are shown: the 'synthetic world' of *Prita Noire*, in its taciturn oscillation between temporal, corporeal, material, and narrative states, presents a new kind of stop-motion arrangement. The film generates an acutely nebulous form of the uncanny and a refusal of

representation, perversely, in its truncation, stretching the incoherence of postmodern frameworks Smith outlines to new limits and rendering even familiar Gothic elements uncomfortably inconcrete.

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