

**“BABEȘ-BOLYAI” UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF THEATRE AND FILM**

DOCTORAL THESIS

***The Monster Is Never Just a Monster:
Post-Familiarity and the Grammar of Horror
in Global Cinema***

Summary

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SUMMARY

Introduction

This thesis proposes and develops the concept of *post-familiarity* as a theoretical instrument for the analysis of horror film, arguing that the genre's central mechanism does not consist in the intrusion of the stranger into the familiar order, but in the structural contamination of the familiar itself. Post-familiarity describes the process by which the recognizable elements of everyday existence — the body, the home, the family, the institution, the community — reveal themselves to be the very vectors of danger, without ceasing to be familiar.

This conceptual shift constitutes the central stake of the thesis. Starting from the observation that existing studies of horror film tend to reproduce the opposition between a threatened familiar interior and a monstrous exterior attacking it, I propose a theoretical framework in which familiarity is no longer positioned as the victim of the monstrous, but as its source or vehicle. The house is no longer the space in which intrusion produces horror — it becomes, through its own structure, the mechanism that generates it. The family is not attacked from outside — it is itself the form in which the monstrous organizes itself. This repositioning has consequences both for the understanding of the genre and for the understanding of its socio-cultural function.

Through this operation, post-familiarity distinguishes itself both from Freud's concept of the *uncanny* (*Unheimliche*) and from Kristevan abjection. The uncanny, as Freud describes it, localizes horror in the mechanism of repression and return: the familiar becomes threatening because something that had been excluded returns to haunt the present. Abjection, in Julia Kristeva's reading, operates through the delimitation and expulsion of that which cannot be assimilated by the subject, generating monstrosity at the boundary between self and non-self. Post-familiarity, by contrast, dissolves the very boundary between interior and exterior, showing that the form of protection and the form of danger have always been identical — that the familiar is the matrix in which the monster forms.

The thesis is structured around a fundamental distinction that represents its major theoretical contribution: post-familiarity as *narrative process*, in which familiarity gradually erodes, producing a logic of progressive unmasking — paradigmatically represented by Michael Haneke's films —, and post-familiarity as *ontological condition*, in which contamination is given from the first frame, refusing the consolation of an origin or a moment of rupture — an operation visible in the Romanian New Wave, in certain experimental films such as *Skinamarink*, or in David Lynch's filmography. This bifurcation is political: the two modes of operation produce different types of horror and distinct sociocultural implications.

The motivation for choosing this topic resides in the observation that, although horror film represents one of the most productive and most analyzed contemporary cinematic genres, the existing theoretical frameworks remain largely prisoners of the classical familiar/foreign, home/unhomely, sanctuary/intrusion opposition. This opposition can no longer satisfactorily explain films such as

Hereditary, *The Witch*, *Skinamarink*, or *Get Out*, in which horror does not come from somewhere outside, but is already installed within the familiar structure, waiting to be recognized. What was therefore required was the elaboration of a conceptual instrument capable of capturing precisely this shift — from the horror of intrusion to the horror of recognition.

I consider that this theoretical proposal inscribes itself in a critical filiation worth mentioning explicitly. The idea that the familiar may conceal a secondary, malevolent structure appears already in Mircea Deaca's work, in *Camera Secundă* (2011), through his analysis of Dario Argento's *Inferno* and the topos of the “house-labyrinth”. What I propose here is the general framework that systematizes this intuition and extends it to a transversal cinematic grammar, articulated on a global corpus and across multiple sub-genres. The contribution of the thesis is its coherent theorization and the demonstration of its systematic applicability.

Methodology

The methodology of this thesis is theoretical-analytical in nature, articulated along three complementary axes: conceptual analysis, application to a cinematic corpus, and dialogue with the relevant theoretical traditions. The corpus of analysis consists of films belonging to the horror genre — from the origins of the genre to contemporary productions — and, in an extended section, of films that do not formally belong to the genre but operate with the same post-familiar grammar.

The choice of a broad corpus is a deliberate decision, motivated by the theoretical nature of the project. A concept with a claim to general applicability — the claim that it describes a mode of operation of contemporary horror, not a particular case — must be tested on a sufficiently diverse corpus to be credible. A theoretical instrument that works only on a few films remains a reading, at best, not a demonstration. The corpus is therefore not exhaustive but demonstrative: each film is chosen because it illustrates a specific facet of post-familiarity, and the repetition of cases shows that we are not dealing with exceptions, but with a grammar.

The films analyzed cover American cinema (from the classical Hollywood era to contemporary productions), European cinema (with an emphasis on the British, French, Italian, German, Greek, and Romanian traditions), Asian cinema (with a focus on J-horror, K-horror, and Chinese film), and Australian cinema. This geographical openness is intentional: post-familiarity, as a theoretical instrument, functions differently depending on the socio-cultural context, and transnational comparison allows the identification of patterns that would remain invisible from a single perspective.

The theoretical framework mobilized combines film studies (Barbara Creed, Carol J. Clover, Robin Wood, Noël Carroll, Colette Balmain, Adam Lowenstein), psychoanalysis (Freud, Kristeva), continental philosophy (Mark Fisher, Anthony Vidler, Henri Bergson), and cultural studies (Homi K. Bhabha, Sara Ahmed). The Romanian filiation is integrated explicitly through the mobilization of works by Mircea Deaca, Ioan Pop-Curșeu, Andrei Gorzo, Doru Pop, and Christian Ferencz-Flatz. The citation system adopted is Chicago (footnotes).

The narrative-aesthetic analysis of the films is complemented by a discussion of the socio-political and cultural implications of the representations of the monstrous. Film is treated as a cultural operator — capable of producing, reflecting, and amplifying collective anxieties. This dimension becomes central in the final section of the thesis, where I examine how post-familiar structures have historically been instrumentalized in the service of discrimination.

Chapter III — Literature Review: The Uncanny, Abjection, and Their Incursions into Familiarity

This chapter constructs the theoretical dialogue from which post-familiarity draws its relevance, examining the concepts of the *uncanny* and *abjection* both in their original formulations and in their recent extensions through the works of Mark Fisher and other contemporary researchers.

The analysis of the Freudian uncanny begins from the 1919 essay and from the double semantic mechanism of the German term *heimlich* — familiar and secret at the same time. For Freud, the uncanny arises when something familiar encounters something that had been repressed, generating the experience of a disturbing recognition. This configuration has structured, for nearly a century, the way film criticism thinks about domestic horror. Psychological horror film, from Hitchcock to Aster, relies largely on this logic of the return of the repressed.

The extension offered by Mark Fisher, through the concepts of the *weird* and the *eerie*, remains largely within the same phenomenological register — the description of modes of perceiving a world in which something does not fit. Fisher is important because he separates the weird (the presence of something that should not be there) from the eerie (the absence of something that should be there), offering a finer vocabulary for cinematic analysis. However, his framework remains one more of description, and less of mechanism: it says how the experience feels, not how it is structurally produced.

Abjection, in Julia Kristeva's reading, offers a more productive apparatus for the analysis of the monstrous. Barbara Creed demonstrated, in *The Monstrous-Feminine*, how abjection systematically organizes the corporeal representations of the monstrous in horror film, with particular emphasis on the monstrous feminine. The delimitation and expulsion of what cannot be assimilated by the subject — blood, bodily fluids, the corpse, the archaic mother — becomes the mechanism by which horror is narratively and visually organized.

Post-familiarity, I propose in this chapter, positions itself as a subsequent moment in this theoretical tradition. It takes from Freud the attention to the internal mechanism of horror, from Kristeva the analysis of the socio-symbolic structure of the monstrous, and from Fisher the sensitivity to affective topography. But it proposes an operation that none of these authors articulates explicitly: the distinction between horror as process (something contaminates itself in front of the camera) and horror as ontological state (the world is already contaminated from the first sequence). This distinction, I argue, allows a finer classification of contemporary productions and explains why apparently similar films produce radically different effects.

Chapter IV — Post-Familiarity as Narrative Process

The central chapter of the thesis examines the more extensive of the two modalities of manifestation of post-familiarity: the process by which familiarity gradually erodes, before the spectator's eyes, revealing itself as source or vehicle of the monstrous. The structure of the chapter follows two axes: the figures of the human monster and the spatio-temporal contamination of familiarity.

The Human Monster and the Familiar Origins of Evil

The first axis analyzes four major figures of the human monster: the familial monster (section IV.1.2), the serial killer (section IV.1.3), transformation through the supernatural (section IV.1.4), and, as a historical precondition, the metamorphosis of the human into monster in early horror film (section IV.1.1).

The analysis of the familial monster occupies a central place in the chapter. Starting from key films such as *Les yeux sans visage* (Franju), *Repulsion* and *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski), and moving to contemporary productions such as *Hereditary* (Aster), *Goodnight Mommy* (Franz and Fiala), *The Witch* (Eggers), *Lamb* (Jóhannsson), and the films of Yorgos Lanthimos, I argue that the family functions in these films as a system that produces its own monster. The theoretical frameworks mobilized include Foucault's biopolitics, the theory of enclavization, and, in constant dialogue, Ioan Pop-Curșeu's Romanian works on cinematic witchcraft.

The analysis of the monstrous feminine, developed with reference to Cronenberg, Kent, and Julia Ducournau, extends Barbara Creed's argument by positioning the female body as the first territory of post-familiar contamination. The body that transforms — in *The Fly*, *The Babadook*, or *Raw* — reveals itself as being the mechanism of monstrosity.

The analysis of the serial killer proposes a comparative portrayal between the American, European, and Asian traditions. In American film, from *Psycho* to *American Psycho* and *Se7en*, the killer often functions as an amplification of a cultural norm (toxic masculinity, consumer capitalism, religious pathology). The European counterpoint — *M* (Lang), *Peeping Tom* (Powell), *Man Bites Dog* (Belvaux et al.), the films of Denis — shifts the emphasis from the individual to the social structure that produces him. Asian cinema (Bong Joon-ho, Kim Jee-woon, Kiyoshi Kurosawa) instrumentalizes the killer as a vector of a broader critique, in which monstrosity becomes ideology.

The analysis of the supernatural monster (vampire, witch, ghost, possessed) takes up Robin Wood's fundamental intuition — that the monster represents the return of what culture has repressed — and revises it through the post-familiar framework. The vampire no longer appears as foreign invader (Dracula-the-immigrant), but as a system preexisting in the family or community that produces him. The witch, in the systematic reading offered through Pop-Curșeu's works, becomes the expression of a structural tension within the rural or religious community — not an accident, but a symptom.

The Contamination of Spatio-Temporal Familiarity

The second axis of the chapter analyzes how familiar spaces and temporal contexts themselves become generators of danger. The operative distinction is between *close-range horror* — the intimate

space, the dwelling, the room, the body — and *distant horror* — the cabin, the community, the forest, the village. In both cases, familiarity is reconfigured as contaminated territory.

The analysis of temporal contamination examines the logic of the remake, the sequel, the reboot, and serialization as operations that contaminate cinematic time itself. *Halloween*, *Scream*, *Saw*, *Insidious* function as demonstrations of the impossibility of closing horror — of the fact that the familiar time of the genre is itself contaminated by repetition and return. This dimension opens a broader discussion about the industrial economy of horror and its relation to post-familiar mechanisms.

The section on folk horror (IV.2.3.1) mobilizes both the Anglo-Saxon specialized literature (Adam Scovell) and the Romanian tradition of research on rural folklore and magic (Pop-Curşeu). The films analyzed — from *The Wicker Man* to *Midsommar* and *Lamb* — demonstrate how landscape, ritual, and rural community function as the return of an archaic familiar that never disappeared. This perspective is complemented by an analysis of ecological and biological horror, where nature itself becomes an agent of monstrosity.

Horror Film as Generator of Sociocultural Movements

The final section of the chapter examines the capacity of horror film to produce, not merely reflect, social anxieties. The cases analyzed — from *The Exorcist* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to contemporary online phenomena such as creepypasta, analog horror, and the virality of independent films — demonstrate that the genre functions as cultural infrastructure, capable of channeling and amplifying collective concerns. Mediated horror, in television and on the internet, produces distinct interpretive communities, with their own codes and ways of organizing collective anxiety.

Chapter V — Post-Familiarity as Ontological Condition

If in the previous chapter post-familiarity was analyzed as a process unfolding before the camera, in Chapter V I examine how it can function as the ontological foundation of the film's world itself. Here, contamination is not built progressively — it is given from the first frame, as a preexisting condition over which the narrative has no power. This modality has major implications, both for the understanding of certain contemporary cinematic tendencies and for the extension of the analytical framework beyond the strict boundaries of the genre.

The Object-Monster, the Landscape-Monster, and the Future of the Genre

The analysis of the object-monster (V.1.1) begins from the observation that contemporary horror film has produced a new category of the monstrous: animated materiality. From *Annabelle* to *M3GAN*, from *Smile* to *Talk to Me*, domestic objects become agents of monstrosity not because they are possessed by external forces, but because they function as extensions of an already contaminated familiarity. This category is doubled by the concept of the landscape-monster, present in films that make space itself — forest, room, hallway — the monstrous protagonist.

The analysis dedicated to David Lynch's filmography, with particular emphasis on *Twin Peaks*, proposes a reading of the domestic uncanny as the fundamental signature of Lynchian work. *Twin Peaks*

is a formal demonstration of how melodrama, soap opera, romantic comedy, and noir can be contaminated with the grammar of horror without losing their familiar form. The result is a work that operates entirely in the post-familiar register: nothing enters from outside, everything reveals itself as already being there.

Analog Horror Film and Digital Pre-History

The section on analog horror film (V.1.3) constitutes one of the original contributions of the thesis. The phenomenon, emerging at the intersection of YouTube, creepypasta, and experimental auteur cinema, demonstrates how domestic media instruments (VHS, analog television, surveillance cameras, the personal computer) themselves become post-familiar operators. The analysis covers *Ghostwatch* (1992) as pre-history, *Local 58* and Alex Kister as contemporary phenomena of digital creepypasta, *Backrooms* as an architecture of abandonment, culminating with *Skinamarink* (2022) by Kyle Edward Ball as the formal limit of post-familiarity.

Skinamarink is the pivotal case of this section. The film refuses almost entirely narrative, identifiable characters, and causality. What it offers is an experience of contaminated familiarity in its pure state — a house filmed at night, in fragments, in which the camera cannot protect, and children are abandoned in a world in which spatio-temporal coordinates decompose. The film functions as an experimental demonstration of the fundamental thesis: horror does not come from outside — it is the very structure of familiarity, revealed in its pure state.

The Uncanny Valley as an Instrument of Post-Familiar Horror

The section on the “uncanny valley” (V.1.4) proposes a revision of this concept — initially formulated by Masahiro Mori in robotics — as an analytical instrument of film criticism. The central argument is that the uncanny valley is not equivalent to post-familiarity, but a specific mechanism of it, activated when a familiar form (human face, body, movement) is slightly derailed. The analysis covers both unintentional activation (degraded CGI effects that produce the valley by accident) and deliberate use (from *The Polar Express* to *Us* and *M3GAN*), extending as far as auteur cinema (Zulawski, Lanthimos, the films of Ari Aster).

The Everyday Uncanny: Post-Familiar Grammar Beyond Genre

The second major section of Chapter V (V.2) represents the most ambitious extension of the theoretical framework: its application to cinematographies that do not formally belong to horror film. The analysis covers the Greek Weird Wave (Lanthimos, Tsangari, Avranas), the Romanian New Wave (Mungiu, Puiu, Porumboiu, Netzer), New Mexican Cinema (Reygadas, Escalante, Franco), and the individual filmographies of Darren Aronofsky, Jonathan Glazer, Roy Andersson, and Michael Haneke.

The inclusion of these non-horror films is the demonstration that post-familiarity is a cinematic grammar, not a genre convention. If the analysis had been limited strictly to films commercially labeled as horror, I would have described only the visible manifestations of the phenomenon, not its mechanism. The fact that the same mode of operation — familiarity revealed as the source of the monstrous — appears structurally in Mungiu, Haneke, Andersson, and Glazer demonstrates that we are dealing with a transversal cinematic operation, capable of crossing genre boundaries and distribution markets.

The Romanian New Wave is examined with particular attention. *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu*, *Aurora*, are not horror films — but they operate entirely with post-familiar grammar. The institution (the hospital, the police, the family) appears here from the first frame as a contaminated system, which the character confronts without the hope of externalizing evil. This opening has important implications: it demonstrates that a theoretical framework developed for horror film can illuminate an apparently completely different cinema, precisely because it captures a formal structure that is independent of the commercial label.

Post-Familiarity as Ideological Instrument

The final section of the chapter (V.3), and of the thesis as a whole, examines the political dimension of the cinematic monstrous. The analysis — organized around paradigmatic cases such as *The Birth of a Nation*, films predating the Hays Code, the tradition of the representation of the Roma in European cinema, colonial films about the African body, and the American tradition of *Get Out* — shows how post-familiar structures have historically been instrumentalized in the service of discrimination.

The central argument is that the cinematic monster is never merely an aesthetic object or a genre convention: it is always also a statement about who belongs to the familiar and who remains, structurally, outside of it. Racialization, queer coding, the marginalization of the immigrant, and cinematic Orientalism are operations that use post-familiar grammar to produce exclusions. This section constitutes the moment when theorization finds its most direct political implication: the analysis of horror film is, ultimately, an analysis of the way society produces and distributes belonging.

Conclusions

This thesis has proposed and developed the concept of post-familiarity as a theoretical instrument for the analysis of horror film and, by extension, of a broader cinematic grammar. The fundamental argument — that the central mechanism of the genre consists in the structural contamination of the familiar itself — has been tested on a diverse corpus, covering different national cinematic traditions, sub-genres, and modes of production.

Original Contributions

The first original contribution of the thesis lies in the formulation itself of the concept of post-familiarity. It continues the theoretical tradition opened by Freud and Kristeva, but proposes an operation that none of these authors articulates explicitly: the familiar is not merely the site of repression or abjection, but is itself the source or vehicle of monstrosity. This move allows for a finer description of contemporary horror film, in which external intrusion no longer functions as an explanatory mechanism.

The second contribution is the distinction between post-familiarity as narrative process and post-familiarity as ontological condition. This bifurcation is an analytical instrument that allows structural differentiation between apparently similar films — between Haneke's *Funny Games*, where contamination is built in front of the camera, and Mungiu's *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days*, where the world is already contaminated from the first sequence. This distinction has consequences both for the

understanding of cinematic narrativity and for the interpretation of the socio-political implications of the films analyzed.

The third contribution is the demonstration of the framework's applicability beyond the strict boundaries of the genre. The analysis of non-horror cinematographies — the Greek Weird Wave, the Romanian New Wave, New Mexican Cinema, the filmographies of Lynch, Aronofsky, Glazer, Andersson, and Haneke — proves that post-familiarity is a cinematic grammar. This allows for an inter-generic dialogue that was, until now, difficult to articulate theoretically.

The fourth contribution is the identification of emergent tendencies of the genre — the object-monster, spectral technology, analog horror film, the “uncanny valley” as narrative instrument — that indicate the probable directions of evolution of horror cinema in the coming decade. These identifications are based on a systematic analysis of productions from the last fifteen years and on the recognition of consistent patterns.

Filiation and Dialogue with the Romanian Critical Tradition

This work explicitly assumes its Romanian critical filiation. The idea that the familiar may conceal a secondary, contaminated structure appears in fragmentary form in the works of Mircea Deaca (*Camera Secundă*, 2011), and Ioan Pop-Curșeu's analysis of cinematic witchcraft constitutes one of the foundations of this thesis. Through the integration of the works of Andrei Gorzo, Doru Pop, and Christian Ferencz-Flatz for the analysis of the Romanian New Wave, the thesis assumes its positioning in an active dialogue with Romanian film criticism, contributing to a theoretical discourse that is simultaneously locally situated and open to global concerns.

Assumed Limitations and Future Directions

This research assumes specific limitations. The corpus, although diverse, is not exhaustive — certain cinematic traditions (African, South American, Southeast Asian cinemas) remain underrepresented, which opens obvious directions for further research. The theoretical framework is predominantly continental (psychoanalysis, French philosophy, critical theory), with a more limited engagement with the Anglo-Saxon cognitivist tradition. The analysis is centered on the film itself, not on its empirical reception — audience studies are assumed as a complementary future direction.

The perspectives opened by this work include: reception studies that would empirically test the proposed framework; comparisons with cinematographies still unexplored systematically through this lens (Africa, Latin America, the Islamic space, the post-Soviet); transmedial applications of the concept (television series, video games, digital narratives, online analog horror); and theoretical developments that would articulate more finely the relation between post-familiarity and other contemporary concepts (post-secular, post-industrial, cinematic Anthropocene).

Final Reflection

The monster, this work argues, is never just a monster. It is always also a statement about who belongs to the familiar and who remains, structurally, outside of it. This proposition, which gives the thesis its title, condenses both the theoretical stake and the political stake of the endeavor. Horror film,

examined through the lens of post-familiarity, does not prove to be a peripheral genre or an exclusively entertainment one: it is one of the modes through which contemporary cinema articulates most clearly the problem of belonging, exclusion, and symbolic coercion.

I consider that this work opens a framework of analysis that I will continue to develop after the completion of doctoral studies — both through scholarly publications that would extend certain arguments, and through interdisciplinary collaborations with researchers in cultural studies, sociology, and media studies. Post-familiarity, as I have proposed it here, is not a conclusion, but a point of departure.

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The bibliography below is a selection of the works most relevant to the theoretical framework of the thesis. Romanian sources are presented first. The complete bibliography appears in the thesis itself.

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