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# ADRIFT IN AN UNFAMILIAR PLACE

Exploring the Architectural Uncanny in  
Rachel Cusk's *Outline* Trilogy

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# Abstract

**Title:** *Adrift in an Unfamiliar Place: Exploring the Architectural Uncanny in Rachel Cusk's Outline Trilogy.*

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**Abstract:** This essay explores the uncanny as an overarching element of Rachel Cusk's *Outline* trilogy. This is done within the theoretical framework of Freud's uncanny, the architectural interpretations of the concept, as well as with the help of Lacan's extimacy, a concept that will be defended as closely related to Freud's. The results of this research suggest that the uncanny is present in the themes of the different stories of the novels, the literal and metaphorical dimension of architectural spaces, as well as in the narration. All these elements form an interconnected network of uncanny and *extimate* realities that allows the consideration of the novel as an architectural object and the questioning of the subject-object relationship.

**Keywords:** Rachel Cusk, Outline, uncanny, Freud, architecture, Jacques Lacan, Anthony Vidler, uncanny architecture, extimacy.

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# 1. Introduction

Towards the middle of Rachel Cusk's *Outline*, Paniotis, a friend of the narrator, Faye, talks about an excursion he took with his children shortly after getting divorced from his previous wife. On the trip, the ruined state of a hotel seems to mirror Paniotis's inner self and the collapse of the home he built with his partner.

That, he said, was the loneliest of realisations; and it was not helped by their arrival at the hotel where they were due to break their journey for the night, which was a most terrible place in a scruffy, windswept seaside town where a giant apartment complex had been half built and then abandoned [...] The building itself, an aborted embryo in a still-fresh swirl of tarmac, stood in all its spectral madness, staring with its glassless windows out to sea. (Cusk, *Outline* 116)

At a first glance, the description of the buildings of this scene is interesting because of its mystical aura. The “abandoned” houses and the desolated landscape seem to almost mirror Paniotis's own feelings about the destruction of his marriage and the life he and his wife had built together. This use of architecture, far from being an isolated characteristic of this particular story, is repeated throughout the trilogy. Buildings are often described in an uncanny way which matches the theme of the fallen marriages and relationships of the novels and suggests the key role of architecture in the *Outline* trilogy.

Cusk herself seems quite interested in architecture. In her recent essay collection, *Coventry*, the writer describes the remodeling of her London flat, a task upon which Faye also embarks in *Transit*. This renovation, which causes quite a lot of problems to Faye in the book, is depicted in *Coventry* and *Transit* in quite a similar and uncanny way. In *Coventry*, Cusk affirms that she was brought to the “brink of a mental collapse” (70) when “at home, everywhere I looked I now seemed to see a hidden part of myself that was publicly exposed” (71). As with Paniotis' story, Cusk's house seems to be more than just a building and is metaphorically merged with Cusk herself. In *Coventry* and in the *Outline* trilogy, it is difficult to tell at which point houses cease being mere mimetic objects and become a sort of embodiment of the characters' inner self.

Moving forward, another element of the books that has attracted different critics (Thurman & Ali) is the stories of the secondhand narrators. Faye, the expected protagonist and main narrator remains silent for most of the time in the books, turning into a sort of chronicler of her interlocutors' stories but rarely participating in them as a character. Faye “narrates her

story by telling those of others” (Valihora 20). This could at some level remind of the use of the houses in Paniotis’ scene, as both architecture and the stories of the secondhand narrators are involved in the narration of third characters’ feelings, as Paniotis or Faye.

Looking for a theoretical framework that could help us connect the metaphorical use of architecture, the themes of the stories of the trilogy, and narration, one could turn to Freud’s 1919 essay “The Uncanny”. In that essay, Freud approaches a particular and mysterious kind of “dread” (Freud 123) that is to be found in what is familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Something uncanny has in its familiarity its most disquieting feature and arises from the idea of the existence of a disturbing familiar element buried inside the bounds of the homely. Given the usefulness of this concept on different levels-the literal descriptions of family secrets and architecture and the metaphorical crossing of subject (familiar) and object (unfamiliar)-my research aim is to propose Freud’s uncanny as an overarching element in the Outline trilogy.

The first step to take will be to study how the uncanny can be found in different elements of the books. First, the uncanny will be explored in relation to the themes of the trilogy, paying particular attention to the stories of broken intimate relationships. Later, the uncanniness of architectural spaces will be studied on both the literal and metaphorical level with the help of Anthony Vidler’s *The Architectural Uncanny*. Finally, for the last point about narration, I will draw on Valihora’s idea of Faye’s narration through others and incorporate Jacques Lacan’s concept extimacy. Once the unheimlich has been investigated in relation to these elements, my essay will propose a way to connect them and interpret the trilogy under the overarching uncanny.

## 2. Previous Research

An exploration of existing literature on *Outline* reveals that despite the novel's recent publication date a number of critics have turned their sights to it. Among these, it is possible to identify an interest in Cusk's narrative form as well as in her publicly expressed discomfort with traditional narration and characters (Cusk *The New Yorker*). The interpretations of these elements vary, and they have been defended as a neo-modernist feature (Ophir), or even as a resource allowing Faye to write about her personal experience with the shield of conversations with characters that might or might not be real (Prose). Nonetheless, none of these pieces of research have investigated the role of the uncanny in the trilogy.

It is worth mentioning that Freud has been used by one previous study. In her essay, Karen Valihora connects *Outline* with Freud's interpretation of dreams, which could suggest the relevance of the Austrian psychoanalyst for approaching Cusk's trilogy. Nonetheless, it is in Valihora's analysis of Penelope's narration in *Outline* (27) that I find the most useful viewpoint for defending the convenience of using the uncanny for the analysis of the books.

Valihora draws attention to how in Penelope's narrative, what started as a broken windowpane, a "tiny flaw" (28), represents the crack that "weakens the whole to the point it falls apart" (28). The half-broken window, ignored by the owners of the house, falls apart in the middle of a party, symbolizing the destruction of their marriage. This is interpreted by Valihora as a metaphor of the numerous "linked narratives" (28) of broken marriages in the trilogy, that suggest the "the crossing of subject and object, the blurring of outlines" (29). This idea could be seen to resemble Freud's uncanny, where the boundaries separating what is familiar and unfamiliar are also put into question.

Nonetheless, there is one last notion from Valihora's essay that I would like to mention. For Valihora, Penelope's narration mirrors the structure of the trilogy's own narration. Faye is telling the reader a story she was told by Penelope, who at the same time knows about the event from her sister, who was informed of the event by her friend. This friend is the wife of the story and the first-hand narrator of the story. Here, Valihora argues how this sequence of narrators is repeated in the novels suggesting how "other people's stories either become or already contain our own" (28). This is for Valihora a further instance of the blurring of the line between "subject and object" (28).

Furthermore, in Valihora's essay it is also argued that Faye's journey represents a search for an escape route out of "the conventional structures, whether those of the epic, the novel, or marriage" (27). Taking this into account, one could wonder if the questioning of "subject and object" in narration might represent Faye's, and moreover, the novel's attempt of escaping the conventional structures of narration (Thurman). This hypothesis could be helped by Jonckheere's essay on Jacques Derrida's discussion of Freud's uncanny, where the *unheimlich* is described as a "contamination of what is held to be natural, a crossing of a boundary or threshold" (Jonckheere 210).

### 3. Theory and methods

Given that this analysis approaches Cusk's trilogy with the main help of the uncanny, it might be helpful to delineate the concept in a way that facilitates the understanding of its use in relation with the novels. Here, one of the problems one might encounter is that "the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense" (Freud 123). Moreover, the uncanny seems to "derive its force from its very inexplicability" (Vidler 23).

Despite this, Freud, in his 1919 essay, takes on the task of clarifying this particular kind of "dread" (123). For this, the psychoanalyst turns his sights to semantics to find that the meanings of the German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* overlap. Though *heimlich* refers to what is of the home, Freud notes that the word has also a second meaning, describing what is concealed or hidden (123). It is here that the two apparent antonyms merge. For the purpose of making sense of this relationship, Freud turns to Schelling's definition of the uncanny as provoked by the revelation of that which was supposed to remain hidden (Schelling qtd. in *Freud* 213). For Vidler, this reveals the uncanny as the capacity of the "familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly [...] defamiliarized, derealized" (7).

At the same time, digging further into Freud's curious observation on the overlapping meanings of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, another conclusion is drawn. The word *unheimlich* designates that which is not homely, yet the uncanny (*unheimlich*) exists within the realm of the familiar, or in other words, within the home (Freud). Here, the uncanny seems to be related with the blurring of the line separating the intimate and the exterior sphere. In this light, it could be argued that the problem of space has a significant relevance for the *unheimlich*, suggesting that there is something specifically architectural about the uncanny.

In *The Architectural Uncanny*, Vidler explains how different architectural forms might be interpreted as uncanny. At this point, it is important to note, that even though Vidler starts his argumentation with Freud's uncanny, his take on the concept deviates in occasions from Freud's, taking it as an inspiration to build an architectural understanding of the uncanny. Among these uncanny architectural compositions, houses are perhaps one of the clearest examples of the *unheimlich*. A home is a presumed space of intimacy, a "residue of family history and nostalgia" (Vidler, 18), a "shelter" (18), whose corruption by foreign entities might result in an uncanny feeling. In this light, it does not seem strange that Vidler points at abandoned houses as some of the paradigmatic examples of uncanny constructions. A house is



“killed by its very emptiness” (19), a home, deprived of its very intimacy, of its capacity to host family realities, could arguably become quite uncanny.

In order to exemplify this, Vidler recurs to different descriptions of haunted and abandoned houses in Edgar Allan Poe and Victor Hugo. In Poe’s *The Fall of the house of Usher*, a haunted house is characterized by its vacancy, by its emptiness and facelessness (Vidler 18). Victor Hugo also describes houses from his exile in Guernsey as quite uncanny. Here, the emptiness of the house has led to different superstitious theories to arise as an explanation for its lack of an owner (Hugo In Vidler 20). A home, if inhabited, gives place for the secret, for the existence of the unknown within the bounds of the supposedly “familiar” (Freud 123).

There is one last aspect of the architectural uncanny that this essay would like to take into consideration. Vidler explains how traditionally, architectural monuments have been able to be identified as an abstraction of the human body (69). This embodiment, continues Vidler, used to take a direct approach: for example, facades were a representation of the human face (69). Nevertheless, the humanistic proportional embodiment started to disappear with the collapse of the classical tradition. From the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, romanticism, and later modernism gave place to a different kind of body: one *frankensteinian* array of pieces, “fragmented, if not deliberately torn apart and mutilated beyond recognition” (Vidler 69). This way, buildings began mirroring the “state” of the body rather than its “aspect” (Vidler 72). Progressively, the power of “unity” or harmony gave place to a conception of embodiment where the human psyche was considered best portrayed in a state of fragmentation (Vidler 70). By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the postmodernist architecture of desolation had turned the body into “an object of nostalgia”, a loss (76, 77).

Leaving architecture behind, for the analysis of narration in *Outline* I will make use of Jacques Lacan’s concept of *extimité*. The neologism, coined from the French words *exterieur* and *interiorité*, blurs the line between exteriority and interiority (in Pavón Cuellar 661). This way, *extimacy* merges the two words and suggests that they should be represented as communicating vessels: *extimacy* is an “intimate exteriority” (Lacan *Écrits* 139), an “excluded interior” (Lacan *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 101).

The need for this neologism is explained by Lacan’s formulation of the “unconscious” as “the Other’s discourse” (*Écrits* 10). In *The Mirror Stage*, Lacan explains how the process of self-recognition of the child is characterized by the identification with their own reflection in the mirror, a process supported by the reassuring words of adults accompanying the child through such identification. This way, one’s interiority is proposed as constructed by the discourse of external others, whose speech is sought by the subject to locate itself (Bowie).

There is an “Other, who more intimate than my intimacy, stirs me” (Miller 77), and *extimité* is the word proposed by Lacan for the purpose of defining this subject-object relationship.

Freud’s uncanny and Lacan’s *extimité* share an interest in the interior-exterior relationship. More accurately, they propose ways in which the isolated vessels of interiority and exteriority reveal themselves as communicating. The etymological work in Freud, exploring the definitions of *heimlich* and *unheimlich* to discover that at some point, these merge, reminds of Lacan’s attempt to combine *intimité* and *exteriorité* into a single word: *extimité*. This way, Lacan’s extimacy arises as some sort of Lacanian uncanny, suggesting that connection between both concepts.

## 4. Uncanny tales

In the thematic level, the novels portray the destruction of families and other intimate relationships that are repeatedly described in an unhomely way. The study of these dysfunctional families represents a good starting point for the analysis of the uncanny.

Towards the end of *Transit*, all the guests in Eloise and Lawrence's house gather around the table to have dinner together when Eloise makes a curious observation about how she thinks people might be "frightened of their own children" (232). To answer this, Faye tells the story of the moment she believes symbolizes the beginning of the end of her marriage. One night, she and her children were waiting for the father to come home for a bit too long (232). During this wait, the family is thrown into a tense and unhomely moment:

It was as though our ability to believe in ourselves, in our home and our family and in who we said we are, was being worn so thin it might give away entirely. I remembered the pressing feeling of reality, just under the surface of things, like a secret that I was struggling to contain (Cusk, T 233)

The feeling of realization that the end was near came suddenly, with the pressure of "a secret" that was waiting to come out. This quote and its use of "secret" as hidden reality, pulsating into the open, aligns with Freud's definition of the uncanny in an almost too perfect way to believe that the *unheimlich* was not in Cusk's mind when writing this passage.

The above example, part the climatic final chapter in *Transit*, represents one the most prominent descriptions of uncanny families found in the trilogy. Here, Faye visits her cousin Lawrence's new house, where he lives with his new wife. This is Eloise, with whom he shares an apparently idyllic family life. Anticipating what is to come and setting the mood for a quite uncanny visit, Faye drives through a "series of narrow, circuitous roads that never seem to pass through any settlement but wound lengthily through dark countryside shrouded in thick fog" (211). "It was entirely possible that I would crash at any moment" (211), continues Faye.

When Faye arrives at the house, she is welcomed to her cousin's new life and an "immaculate" (214) house full of "unfamiliar modern paintings" (213). Unlike the outside, the living room is well illuminated. Here, Faye makes a curious observation: the room "was illuminated by so many candles that it seemed for an instant to be on fire" (213). The light of the room is therefore not as innocent as it might seem, having a disquieting feature to it. After describing a space that shares the mysterious and uncanny aura of most of the trilogy's

architecture, Faye ventures into a representation of a perfect family that will slowly reveal itself as unhomely.

At the beginning of the passage, two simultaneous narratives appear, both of them contributing to the uncanny. On one hand, Faye sits on the sofa to converse with Birgid and Gaby, who are both Eloise's friends. On the other hand, the conversation is surrounded by the fight occurring in the "other room" (220), where Eloise's and Lawrence's respective children, both from their previous marriages, are fighting over a toy. When Eloise tries to intervene, she is "mauled from all sides" (220). Meanwhile, "Lawrence was sitting in the sofa, legs crossed and glass in hand, appearing not to notice" (221); though he could help her, the married couple has agreed to not participate in their children's fights, explains Lawrence (221).

Simultaneously, trying to ignore the fights, Faye establishes a conversation with Birgid. This exchange develops in a philosophical key, getting really close to Freud's description of the uncanny. Birgid shares how she tries to avoid family meals with her daughter that remind her of her Swedish parents' rotational menu, consisting of five dishes that were repeated over and over (223). Having moved from Sweden to England at the age of eighteen (222), Birgid does not enjoy thinking about her home back in Scandinavia. Moreover, she has come to hate returning to her home in Sweden "because of the food, which overwhelmed her with memories while leaving a bitter taste in her mouth, for it seemed familiar while being, in fact, entirely alien" (224). Once again, an unhomely discomfort is provoked by something alien found in the familiar. This is such an accurate approach to the uncanny that it could make one wonder if Cusk wrote these scene with Freud in mind.

In the second part of the chapter, with all the guest sitting together to have dinner, the families' problems will keep surfacing one after the other for Faye to observe them in an almost surrealistic way. Lawrence is obsessed with control, over food (230), and over almost every single aspect of affecting the upbringing of their kids. On the other hand, Gaby's daughter, also there, discovers that her real father is a one-night stand Gaby had years ago. Now, Gaby's daughter wants to meet him, which results in an uncomfortable situation for Gaby (250). The couples' arguments keep spiraling out of control until the dinner ends with Eloise and Lawrence arguing and Eloise's expensive dress destroyed by the children, who she does not get help dealing with.

In the morning, Faye wakes up to a further instance of space being used to metaphorically reflect on the characters' selves: "the ruins of dinner remained on the table. The melted candles were hardened into sprawling shapes [...] I found my bag and my car keys and I let myself silently out of the house" (259-260)

To provide another example of this pattern, turning the homely into unhomely, towards the end of *Kudos*, Faye meets a woman named Felícia who has recently divorced her husband, Stefano. Since Felícia was granted the custody of their child, the ex-couple's car goes to her during weekdays, when her daughter has school. Here, what could seem as a fair agreement is revealed as part Stefano's strategy to get the car for himself. Given that the car is most of the week with Felícia, who has to take her daughter to school, the costs of its maintenance will also fall mostly on Felícia. However, Stefano knows she will not be able to cope with it given her slightly more uncomfortable economic situation, which will give him an excuse to get the car for himself. This is confirmed when Felícia receives a letter from Stefano's lawyer explaining how her salary is "not sufficient to justify having a car and to cover the costs of maintaining it" (217). The next morning, Felícia discovers that Stefano has taken the car without warning, leaving her and her daughter unable to get to school. This is to the surprise of Felícia and her friends who admired Stefano for being "intelligent" (219). Nevertheless, it is precisely this cold intelligence that allows Stefano to design a plan indirectly weaponizing the custody of his daughter to get the car for himself.

Even though these are just some examples of uncanny families, these reappear in different parts of the trilogy with enough assiduity to consider that the *unheimlich* is present on the thematical level of the trilogy. These families, whose heart is voided or taken by the exterior represent the first stone of the overarching *unheimlich* in Cusk. This thematical uncanny is translated onto the metaphorical level by architectural spaces.

## 5. The architectural uncanny in Cusk

In the first book of the trilogy, Faye is being driven to the sea by a man she calls her “neighbour”. This neighbour, who was casually seated next to Faye in the plane to Athens, is never given a name, suggesting the relevance of the figure of the “neighbour”, and foreshadowing its appearance in *Transit*, where neighbours will be materialized in quite an uncanny way. On the way to the sea, Faye mentions how the vision of the abandoned houses by the Aegean Sea strikes her:

Then the arching road curved around and began to descend, and there was the sea, blazing blue beyond a khaki-coloured scrubland littered with low abandoned buildings and unfinished roads and the skeletons of houses that had never been completed, where skinny trees now grew through the glasses windows. (Cusk *O* 61-62)

What could be surprising in the description of this scene is the tension created by the juxtaposition of the beauty of the sea and the ruins of the houses. On the surface there is nothing specifically wrong with the view, which one could even define as pleasing. However, the contrast with the magnificence of the view Aegean sea seems to amplify the uncanniness of the buildings, highlighting the emptiness and ruined state of houses, that stand out in the middle of the idyllic landscape and cover it with tension. It is almost as if the disquieting features of the abandoned homes would have the capacity to contaminate the apparent tranquility of the landscape, to spread through the painting. Such is the power of the uncanny.

Nonetheless, it is relevant to identify the exact architectural characteristics making the houses of the passage uncanny. It has been mentioned how in *The architectural uncanny*, Vidler names several characteristics that might make a home *unheimlich*. Among these, it is possible to find the lack of an owner, its vacancy. A home is intended to host, to guard familiar realities. In the above passage, the abandoned nature of the constructions is a manifestation of the uncanny. The homes have been deprived of its essence, left in ruins to die. Furthermore, no one has come to clean those ruins, the hoses, the “unfinished roads” remain still in in time, exposing their incompleteness for others, like Faye, to look into.

The figure of the abandoned house will appear again throughout *Outline*. In one of these occasions, one of Faye’s students, acting as narrator at the moment, provides a particularly uncanny description that might complete the meaning of the episode by the sea. The student accounts for how on his way to class, he had passed some buildings which were set on fire during the demonstrations of the previous summer. The windows of the house, now “glassless”

(147), allowed him to look “into the cavernous, ruined interiors, all blackened and ghostly and still filled with the mess and detritus of their own destruction” (147). Once again, no one has come to clear out the ruined interiors. The romantic imagery of this depiction adds to the *unheimlich* in the novel. The figures of the ghost and the cavern shroud the building in a mysterious aura, making it feel not only abandoned, but haunted, “invaded by alien spirits” (Vidler 17), unhomely.

Windows are of particular relevance in Cusk’s architecture. In *Transit* Pavel, one of the employees working on Faye’s house renovation, describes how he stopped working for his father’s architect firm when he criticized the house Pavel had built for himself. The house “had enormous windows [...] that went from the ceiling to the floor” (180), to what his father exclaimed: “Pavel, you idiot, you forgot to build the walls – everyone can see you in there!” (182). Here, it might also be deduced that windows are not only dangerous when opened but are threatening because of their mere existence. They are the doors allowing others to observe the interior of the home, exposing the *heimlich* to the influence of the *unheimlich*.

Nonetheless, this is not the only occasion in which windows can cause a considerable level of uneasiness. In *Outline*, the windows of the classroom where Faye is giving her class on creative writing cause a heated discussion. The inside, by contrast with the Kolonaki Square, whose “hot spaces were already deserted by ten o’clock in the morning” (132), is “morbidly cold” (132). Since no one knew how to turn down the air conditioner, students and employees start to discuss “whether the windows should be open or close”, a discussion that escalates to also consider if doors should be open or close as well as what to do with the projector of the class (132). This way, Cusk’s writing appears as concerned with the role of barriers, windows, walls and other realities separating the outside from the inside.

Another word that has a particular relevance in the trilogy is “skeleton” (176, *T*). The noun, part of the quote from Paniotis that opened this essay, also appears repeatedly in *Transit* (176, 195) to describe Faye’s feeling of exposure upon the renovation of her newly bought property. One of these accounts, made by Faye herself, provides a deeply uncanny description: “skeletons of walls and floors” (195) made the house feel “unshielded, permeable, as though all the things those walls and floors ought normally to keep out were free to enter” (195).

The uncanny problems caused by this renovation work remind of the previously mentioned essay in *Coventry*, where Cusk is brought to the “brink of a mental collapse” (70) by the demolition of the walls that kept her secrets, leaving them “publicly exposed” (71). As for the protagonist of her trilogy, the renovation work becomes quite an unpleasant experience for quite a concrete reason: they feel as if the former intimacy of their homely space were now

“unshielded” (*Coventry* 195), allowing others to access its intimacy and to observe the secrets hiding inside. The issues of the renovation are topped by the “trolls” (195) inhabiting the apartment beneath Faye’s. These trolls are indeed Faye’s new neighbors, who will cause all possible kind of problems during the renovation work. The description of these “trolls”, symbolically living underneath the floor of Faye’s house, is not short in uncanny characteristics: “a power of elemental negativity” (195), “crouched malevolently in the psyche of the house” (195). This description, incorporating a certain almost Poe-esque mysticism, reminds the unhomely as something hidden (crouched) inside the intimate (the psyche of the house). Moreover, this suggests neighboring itself as an uncanny force.

However, there are other forms in which the uncanny manifests itself in the architecture of the novels. Vidler mentions how uncanny architecture might take the form of labyrinthine constructions (49). In *Kudos* Faye travels to Berlin, where she and other writers are hosted in a hotel that was previously a water tower. The tower hotel, whose architect has won “many prizes” (31), is highly unpractical despite its originality: “Several times I had try to go somewhere and found myself back where I started” (34). These difficulties are exaggerated by the lack of light in the building (35). The description of the hotel comes quite close to Freud’s own depiction of the uncanniness he experienced when walking around an Italian town: “I hurried away, only to return there again by a different route. I was now seized by a feeling that I can only describe as uncanny” (144).

The theories of architectural embodiment are also present in the novels. One of the most vivid examples of this might be the aforementioned use of “skeletons” in the description of houses. The use of a term so symbolically charged does not seem arbitrary and its use adds to the thematic of desolation of familiar structures. In *Outline*, Faye drives pass “the skeletons of houses that had never been completed”, where she sees “the skeletons of walls and floors”. Later in *Transit*, “the floor” of Faye’s house is “lifted” revealing “the skeletal joints” of the building (176). These uses of skeleton show the inclination of the trilogy to personify houses. Nonetheless, it is important to underline that this personification does not take any other form but that of a “corpse” (Barthes In Vidler). This way, the postmodernist desolated body makes its way into the architectural constructions of the trilogy.

As with post-18<sup>th</sup> century architecture, it should be noted that buildings in Cusk reflect the state of a subjective reality rather than a literal physical conception of the body. In other words, they do not show a literal equivalence to physical parts of the human body, but rather reflect the inner state of mind of the characters. Both the desolated hotel of Paniotis and the view of the abandoned houses by the Aegean operate in a similar manner. Paniotis and Faye



account for these scenes shortly after their respective divorces. Here the home seems to symbolize their marriages and families, which are now abandoned, empty. The description of the scenes becomes from this perspective a narration of the uncanny, of an intimate space that is now lost, permeated by the exterior.

Another description of a building, found in *Outline*, might illustrate a further dimension of the effect that the contemplation of architecture might have on the characters. Here, one of Faye's students, who was previously a musician, narrates passing through the open window of a music college from which she could hear the music being played inside:

She recognized the piece as the D minor fugue from Bach's *French Suites*, a piece she had always loved and that caused her, hearing it so unexpectedly, to feel there on the pavement the most extraordinary sense of loss. It was as though the music had once belonged to her and now no longer did; as though she had been excluded from its beauty, was being forced to see in possession of someone else. (Cusk 138)

The nostalgia of the story, originated by the contemplation of an open window that let the music leak compares to the jealousy experienced by Faye when seeing the happy family on the boat during the excursion with her neighbor: "I saw a vision of what I no longer had" (74), "my own fears and desires manifested outside myself" (74). These ideas remind of Vidler's explanation of the body as a "lost object of desire" in architectural fragmentation. Faye and her student long for their intimacy, which now they are forced to see in someone else's hands. Their *heimlich* has been externalized, transferred to others. In this light, architecture acts as a central narrative device in the trilogy. It is the canvas where characters draw their stories to then contemplate the portrait of their losses and fears. They are obliged to see the home turning into a stranger, the merging of the *heimlich* and *unheimlich*.

It is worth mentioning that, once again, the theme of the interior-exterior relationship in the space of the home has interested Cusk herself, who in *Coventry* describes a home as "the body itself" (75), "something both looked and lived in" (75): "entering a house, I often feel that I am entering a woman's body" (76). This way, domesticity is to Cusk as a place "where personal ideals are externalised". This affirmation involves an *extimate* view of the home, a space that presumably belongs to the realm of the *heimlich* but becomes a place where things can be externalized. The displacement caused by this is summarized by Cusk when she expresses how after a trip, she came back to her house to feel herself as a "visitor" (*Coventry* 87), an affirmation that reminds of the uncanny capacity to turn what is known into estranged.

# 6. Narration and the uncanny

## 6.1 Narration as uncanny and *extimate*

While the uncanny inhabits the thematic through the stories of the fallen relationships of the trilogy, and the literal and metaphorical levels through the use of architecture as an uncanny factor in the literal descriptions of buildings as well as in their metaphorical value, narration is also used as an unhomely element, extending the *unheimlich* to the formal aspects of the novel. In *Outline*, Penelope expresses her concern with how stories intertwine to such an extent that they start resembling a nesting doll, disturbingly blurring the notion of oneself:

She was frightened most of all of the boundaries separating these numerous types of mental freight, the distinctions between them, crumbling away until she was no longer certain of what had happened to her and what to other people she knew, or sometimes what was or was not real (Cusk, *O* 154).

By the beginning of her journey in *Outline*, Faye has grown tired of narrative. In the books, narrative is described as “tyranny” (*T* 19), presenting one side of the events; “certain people [...] in good light” (*O* 30) and bringing others in only for the purpose of damning themselves further (*O* 30). Hence, literature, in its conventional form and plot driven structure, does not interest Faye anymore. She no longer wishes to “persuade” others (*O* 19). The harshness of these affirmations, looking at not more than narrative a construction or even a lie is summarized by Faye when she affirms that “belief in narrative could only provide the most absurd and artificial screen” (*T* 105). Interestingly, in *Coventry*, Cusk herself expresses a similar thought when she says suggests that marriage and other narratives only exist thanks to the “suspension of our disbelief” (28). The trauma deriving from the loss of confidence in these narrative structures, as marriage or other kind of relationships, and the search for a renovation of this narrative form is according to Cusk what leads the *Outline* trilogy to a “process of reverse exposition where the meaning of oneself seems to have been transferred to others” (Cusk *Bmb Magazine*).

Cusk’s words align with Valihora’s idea of the trilogy’s narrator as one that is exteriorized, a conclusion she draws from the analysis of the opening quote of this section (28). For the purpose of this essay, this same quote can be used to illustrate the uncanny and *extimate* narration of the trilogy, where the self and the other can be easily confused. Though Faye does occasionally tell her own stories, secondhand narrators account for most of the narration. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that one is deprived from gaining insight into

Faye's interior. The secondhand stories share themes and feelings that are present in Faye's life, as divorce, parenthood or writing. This process of reflection of the one's concerns in others is stated by Faye herself when, while on an excursion with "her neighbor", she sees a family on a boat while taking a swim: "When I looked at the family on the boat, I saw a vision of what I no longer had" (75), "I was beginning to see my own fears and desires manifested outside myself, was beginning to see in other people's lives a commentary of my own" (75).

An example of how one's own stories might be told by means of other's narratives can be also found towards the beginning of *Outline*. The story of how Faye's sons distanced themselves from one another, mirroring the ongoing, but not yet public divorce of their parents, illustrates this. Though the children were really close at an early age and always played together, at some point they simply stopped doing it. Here, Faye is surprised by "the sheer negative capability of their former intimacy: it was as though everything that had been inside was moved outside" (81). This, happening at the same time as Faye's divorce, made "not to see this transposition from love to factuality as the mirror of other things that were happening in the household at the time" (81). This way, one's own stories, narrations, lives, are portrayed as mirrored and intertwined with other's. Nonetheless, it is worth mentioning that this mechanism is not exclusive of Faye, and secondhand narrators often refer to thirdhand narrators. As Penelope says, "she was no longer sure what had happened to her and what to other people she knew" (154).

While exteriorization is part of the narrative strategy of the trilogy, the merging of others and one's own stories can also lead to the opposite process. In *Kudos*, Faye meets an interviewer whose depiction of her own perfect family life had made Faye see her "situation in the most unflattering light" (64). This interviewer is now surprised by how her own stories of success had seem to influence others in an almost mystical way. Later, Faye discovers that in fact, the marriage of the interviewer had been far from perfect and that the story she had once felt jealous of was just a narrative. This idea is synthetized by Faye when she expresses how she "ascribed to outside factors the capacity to alter the self" (K 101). Consequently, the same way that in occasions the interior is transferred to others, these alien others can also find their way into the subject. Hence, the lines between the exterior and the interior, subject and object, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, are blurred, suggesting the pairs as interconnected and in constant communication.

Lacan's concept of extimacy arises as a perhaps even more useful tool than the uncanny for the task of understanding the narration of the trilogy. It has been argued that secondhand narrators incur in a sort of collective storytelling, where stories exist within stories and the self is accessed through the conversation with others and their personal stories. To this equation,

architecture should also be added, given that buildings have been found to reflect, in the metaphorical level, the inner self and state of the characters. Consequently, both architecture and the numerous intertwined stories and narrators of the trilogy place the texts in agreement with Lacan's excluded interior (Lacan 101). They would be *extimate*, allowing the spring of an intimate exteriority that blurs the line between interior and exterior, the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*. Interestingly, this shared *extimate* process suggests that the novel itself could be studied as an architectural object. Narrative, as the houses of the trilogy, is a building permeable to its inhabitants, owners, visitors and hosts, where subject and object are constantly being intertwined, beclouding the line between the home and the alien, the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*.

## 6.2 "Adrift in an unfamiliar place"

So far, this essay has proposed how the uncanny is found in different elements of Cusk's trilogy. From the literal to the metaphorical, the stories of the novels, architecture and narration can be understood in Freudian and even in Lacanian terms. These elements interact in Cusk to create an overarching uncanny atmosphere difficult to scape which is summarized by one of Faye's friends when he affirms that "everywhere he had been in Europe, he had found not the intact civilization he had imagined, but instead a ragged collection of confused people adrift in an unfamiliar place" (Cusk, *K* 118). In *Outline*, Cusk describes a lost Faye, on the aftermath of a divorce, that in line with the quote discovers how realities she once considered firm and proper have fallen apart one after the other. The story of marriage, relationships and their narratives have become questionable, and what once was intimate does not seem as impermeable as once did. Upon the realization of this spiderweb of unhomeliness, Faye is left adrift in that "unfamiliar place", a space that once was familiar. Architecture, secondhand stories, and narration form circle of uncanny elements that feed one another: Faye's stories are uncanny, and the buildings she sees reflect this uncanniness in the literal and metaphorical form. At the same time, Faye's story is found in occasions in the discourse of others', accentuating in a metaphorical level the uncanny capacity to blur the intimate-exterior relationship. The secondhand stories of the novels also contain their own uncanny elements, both in their plot and in their setting, acting buildings once again as *unheimlich* entities, both in the aesthetic and in a deeper level, becoming mirrors of the conflicts of the self.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that Faye's journey through this uncanniness does not remain the same throughout the trilogy. In *Outline* Faye is stroked by her discovery and in search for a way to locate herself in the newly discovered picture of life. Later, in *Transit* Faye embarks in the symbolic task of renovating her own house, uncovering the skeletons hidden behind the walls. The book ends with the suggestive falling apart of the idyllic family life she had attributed to her cousin. In *Kudos*, however, Faye seems to have found a certain degree of peace in this uneasiness and constant displacement. Talking to a German friend, Faye expresses her interest in a word in his language, "that was hard to translate but that could be summed up as a feeling of homesickness even when you are at home" (202). Though the word Faye is referring to could most likely be *fernweh*, which can be roughly translated as a longing for distant places, the conclusions Faye draws from her comment on the word are helpful for the theme of the uncanny in the trilogy. When Faye asserts that "it is with the feeling of displacement itself that true intimacy develops" (202), the uncanny journey of the trilogy arises as one of acceptance of this uncanniness as inherent to human existence.

This acknowledgment is reinforced by one of the last chapters of the trilogy. Here, Faye visits a ruined church with a friend. Though the building had burned down more than fifty years ago, the decision was made to "simply repair the structural aspects of the building" (K 211). "Despite the disturbing extremity of its appearance and the violent events to which that appearance testified" (211). The interior of the building remains in darkness, and "ghostly images" (211) of what once stood there can be appreciated from the outside. "The texture of the thing is so densely affected that it is almost no longer manmade" (212). And yet, somehow, this emptiness is perceived by the protagonists of the chapter as "moving" (212), as if this devastation was indeed its "natural form" (212). Lights had also been placed inside the buildings, emphasizing the places where statues stood, however, "this spectacle was not the result of some monstrous neglect of misunderstanding but was the work of an artist" (213). Here, Cusk suggests that Faye's peace as could be motivated by the acceptance of the uncanny as part of human condition. In agreement with modernist and postmodernist architectural embodiment, that defended the self as best represented as a *frankensteinian* array of pieces, (Vidler 69), the unhomely set of characters, buildings and stories of the trilogy are displaced. Nonetheless, as Faye says, it is in this derangement where "true intimacy develops" (202). This idea of an exterior where, paradoxically, intimacy lays, evokes and reinforces the idea of Freud's *unheimlich* and Lacan's extimacy as central an overarching themes of the trilogy.

# 7. Conclusion

This essay has analyzed Rachel Cusk's recent *Outline* trilogy with the help of Freud's uncanny. To propose the uncanny as an overarching element of the novels this essay has explored the stories of different characters, architectural spaces, and the narration of the trilogy. Here, my research has found different ways in which the uncanny operates in Cusk's novels. The first of this set of uncanny elements lives on the thematical level. Uncannily, the stories of the different families of the novels are concerned with the revelation of a secret hidden inside the bounds of intimate relationships whose revelation causes unrest. The second manifestation of Freud's concept is found architectural spaces. On the literal level, descriptions of buildings contain many of the characteristics of Vidler's architectural uncanny. At the same time, in the metaphorical level, architecture, acting as a mirror reflecting the character's interior thoughts, blurs the subject-object duality and adds to an already *extimate* narration. Consequently, architectural spaces operate in both the literal and metaphorical level as unhomey entities.

The third uncanny element, narration, is explained by the numerous secondhand narrators, that account for most of the narration in the books and allow Faye to avoid expressing herself directly. This way, on the formal level, narration is built on an *extimate* web of stories within stories and narrators within narrators. This results in the beclouding of the line between the *heimlich* and *unheimlich* spheres. Problems and feelings are delivered not directly through the experiencer and owner of these, but rather through other's stories, as well as through the previously mentioned architectural constructions. Here, the similar functioning of narration and architecture could even allow for the ponderation of the novel as an architectural object.

Lastly, it has been argued that vision of the uncanny that the trilogy develops could be a reflection on human nature itself given that in *Kudos*, Faye seems to find a certain degree of peace in the acceptance of humanity as lost "adrift in an unfamiliar place" (Cusk, *K* 118). Here, Faye suggesting that the uncanny might be deeply connected with human nature and inseparable from it.

Overall, this essay has found in the uncanny a helpful perspective for the analysis of the *Outline* trilogy. Nonetheless, the uncanny and Cusk's trilogy represent such a rich study field that future research could find in its interaction with other critical theories a potential research question. For instance, it would be interesting to explore how the architectural uncanny could be employed for the exploration of feminism and domesticity in the *Outline* trilogy and contrast

it with Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Cusk's review of Woolf's story, to be found in *Coventry*, could be a good departing point for this question.

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