

天主教輔仁大學英國語文學系學士班畢業成果
ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, FU JEN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
GRADUATION PROJECT 2020

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**The Gothic Horror Movie that Endears: *Coraline* and its
Animation Techniques**

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CCIII 2019S
10 July 2019

Final Draft: The Gothic Horror Movie that Endears: *Coraline* and its Animation Techniques

Outline:

I. Introduction

- A. Plot summary of the story *Coraline*.
- B. How characters in *Coraline*, the animated version, are believed to be reshaped
- C. Literature review on stop-motion animation and 3D technique
- D. My research question: Why with all its visual and technical complexities, does the film present Coraline as a cute and cubby girl, instead of following the original character design by Dave McKean? Technically, moreover, why does the film use both stop-motion and 3D technique to lead the name-sake character and the audience step by step to the Other World?

My hypothesis/Thesis Statement: Based mainly on textual analysis of the animation, I will be analyzing the character design, stop-motion and 3D technique in the animation respectively and argue that *Coraline*, the animated adaptation, presents a world which is both terrifying and endearing with its visual elements achieved through character shape design, stop-motion and 3D spaces.

Methodology: A brief research map of this paper

II. *Coraline*--from Character Design to Stop Motion and 3D Technology:

- A. Comparison and contrast of the *character design* from novel to animation
 - 1. Comparison and contrast of the protagonist
 - a. The facial expression and the eyes
 - b. The overall color
 - 2. Comparison and contrast of residents in the Other World
 - a. Similarities between McKean's and the animation's design in terms of none horrifying images
 - b. Both illustrations from McKean's and the animation's design became alike when Coraline realize the truth side of the Other World: The Other Mother and Father's image changed after the Beldam's evil intention was revealed
- B. Character design placed cuteness before horror in extending the horror in the exposition.

1. Created a contrast and make the horror unique
 2. Added layers for horror as the shift of loveable and horror in the animation kept switching
- C. Compare and contrast the movements of characters in *Coraline* through stop motion and how the techniques strengthen the horror within one's emotion.
1. The imperfectness of **stop-motion** creates an in-between shift between reality and the Other World and cute and horror
 - a. The Smooth action: appealing to the audience
 - i. Coraline's hair movement when wind blows on her face: sense of the reality in the real world (16:00)
 - ii. Coraline's childish and clumsy action: the act of any other ordinary kid
 - b. Mechanical action: elements of horror
 - i. The image of a good father is actually controlled by others: puppets being controlled by puppet
 - ii. The movement of the Other Father went lag when attacking Coraline in the garden scene
 - c. Metaphorical definition seen from mechanical action
 - i. Physical control: the possibilities of one's becoming just a puppet
 - ii. Emotional control: the control of parents or family
- D. **3-D** effects can break the barrier between the screen and the real world, which further produces a sense of depth, an endless abyss of one's psyche.
1. **The tunnel that breaks the barrier:** Coraline being attracted and trapped
 - a. The tunnels stretches inward: not only Coraline is being attracted and trapped but also the audience are being pulled into the Other World (The first entrance to the Other World 16:05)
 - b. The tunnels pushes outward: bringing the original 3D into a blocked, and flat 2D (The final escape from the Other World 1:25:44)
 2. **The flat surfaces of the living room:** Coraline's desired being satisfied
 - a. Creating flatness in the real world (qtd. in Higgins) (8:26) while the Other World is more 3 dimensional.
 - b. Emptiness of the Other World
 3. **Blank space:** Coraline discovering Beldam's limitations

4. **Living room as a spider web:** Beldam's anger and anxious transform the place to a web (1:24:37 The escape from the Other Mother's web)

5. **The horror remained and existed elsewhere:** the Other Mother's hand still remain in the well

E. **3-D** effects presented multiple space as the third space in and outside of the Other World (photo, snow globe, old well, and the Pink Palace)

1. Coraline's schemes of fighting back

2. The film's suggesting the existence of the third space

IV. Conclusion

A. In the animation, the experience with horror has been visually extended and technically enhanced.

B. Elements of horror were reinforces to one of its own kind: how one's mirror image reflect on the animation.



I. Introduction

The animation *Coraline* (2009) adapted from the namesake children's novella written by Neil Gaiman in 2002, presents how the protagonist, Coraline Jones, discovers a mysterious door which connects her world with the Other World. In the Other World, everything looks like a copy of Coraline's original world, yet with one significant difference - the residents there all have button eyes. Though everything, her parents and neighbors, seem idealized in the Other World, the place happens to be a trap set up by the antagonist, the Other Mother, in order to eat up Coraline's soul.

Different from the original story, director Henry Selick decides to bring "new life" to the characters in *Coraline* by not only adding a new character, Wybie, into the animation but also re-shaping public understanding of gothic horror figures as merely unfavorable, spooky or pale-white-and-black Goth style as that in *The Night before Christmas*. Its main character, Coraline, in particular, turns out to be a cute and chubby young girl.

Besides character design, *Coraline* is special also because of its use of stop motion and 3D technique. Before *Coraline*, the entire history of stop-motion had already lasted for over hundreds of years, yet the most well-recognized stop-motion animation presented of the modern times is probably *The Night Before Christmas*. Directed by Henry Selick, and produced by Tim Burton in 1993, *The Night Before Christmas* has set a model which strongly influence audiences' understanding of the "tone" presented by stop-motion as the film successfully creates a "surreal creepiness" in comparison to traditional hand-drawn animation ("The Eternal Appeal of Stop Motion Animation"). However, unlike *The Night Before Christmas*, Selick claims that *Coraline* has somehow both softened and reinforced the elements of horror as stop motion "[gives] the appearance of sweetening things when in fact it's actually a stronger, bolder way to show the scary stuff" (qtd. in McLean). "At the crossroads of animation and live-action," *Coraline* combines stop-motion with 3D technique, and creates a different "level" of depth that breaks the barrier between animation and reality (Higgins). Hence, while stop-motion produces an in-between shift between the Other World and reality, 3D technique, which further transforms visual reality to produce multiple spaces, can further "absorbs audience into [its] diegesis" (Higgins). Moreover, according to Selick, 3D technology in *Coraline* is different to other animation because it has a way of highlighting his film's handcrafted artisanal look in contrast to CGI" (Higgins). The entire animation was hand-made from characters to scenes so the "3D effect was basically created by the different angles shot by the digital camera with only a few CGI used to erase the movable parts on puppets' faces" (McLean).

No wonder *Coraline* won the Annie Awards for not only Best Character Design but also Best Production Design, making the audience dazzled its superb combination of the animation techniques of drawing, stop motion and 3D. Why, then, with all its visual and technical complexities, does the film present Coraline as a cute and cubby girl, instead of following the original character design by Dave McKean? Technically, moreover, why does the film use both stop-motion and 3D technique to lead the name-sake character and the audience step by step to the Other World? Therefore, based mainly on textual analysis of the animation, I will be analyzing the character design, stop-motion and 3D technique in the animation respectively to come down to a possible solution on how *Coraline*, the animated adaptation, presents a world which is both terrifying and endearing with its visual elements achieved through character shape design, stop-motion and 3D spaces.

In this paper, I will first compare the character design between novels and animation to explain how the adaptation uses both terrifying and loveable figures. Next, I will be focusing on how stop-motion is able to create an in-between shift between the Other World and reality through the transformation of smooth and lag motion. Lastly, I will analyze how, together with stop-motion, 3D technology helps develop a deeper meaning or emotional appeal through presenting different spaces. I will conclude with how *Coraline*, the animated adaptation, presents a world that is both horrifying and endearing because of its radical difference from and similarity with our own.

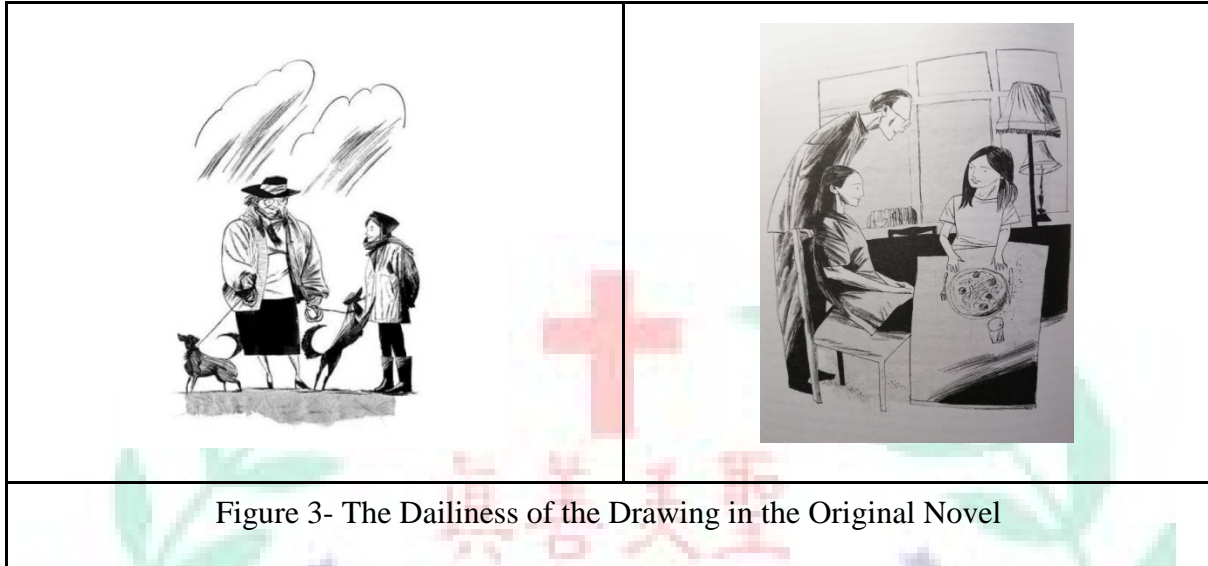
II. *Coraline*--from Character Design to Stop Motion and 3D Technology

To begin with, by comparing the protagonist's character design in novellas to animation, it is believed that the image of Coraline has transformed from a spooky and scary figure to a cuter and appealing image (Figure 1, 2). The differences such as Coraline's eyes, facial expression and the overall usage of the colors are all some of the most obvious changes.

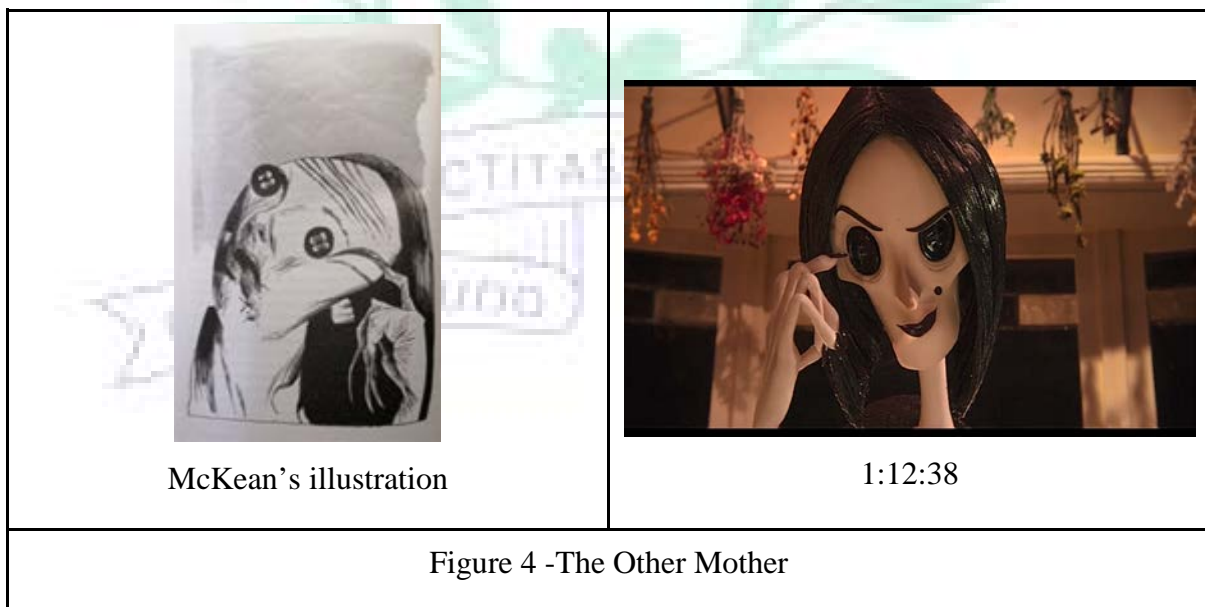


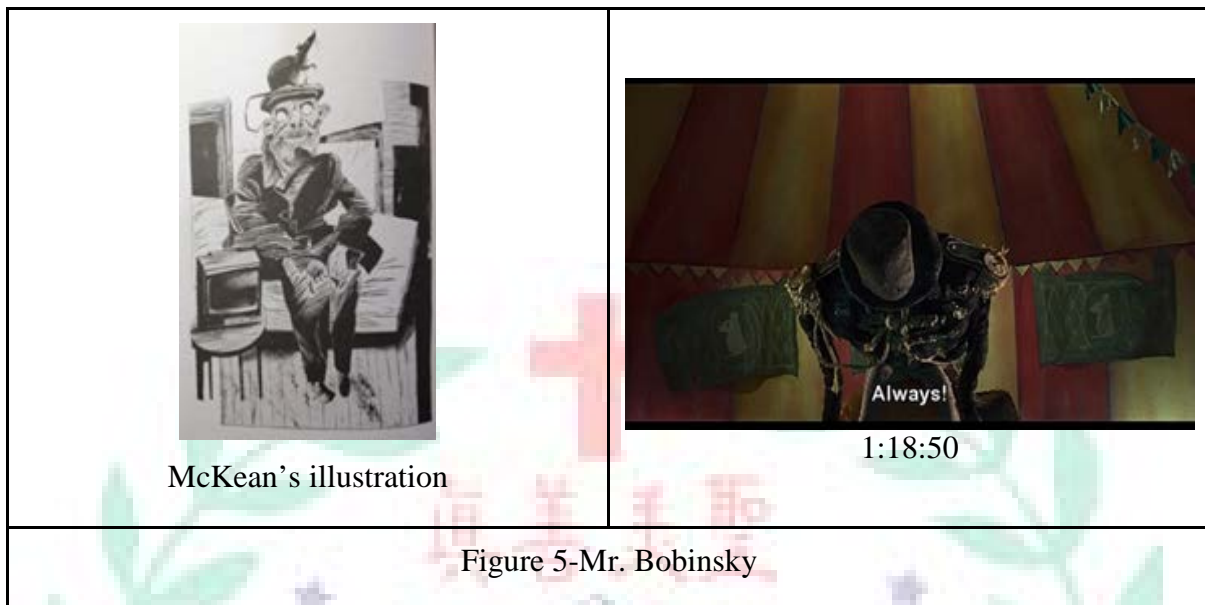
Dave McKean, the illustrator who created the very first image of Coraline (Figure 1), in particular, portrayed Coraline as a girl with a pair of “dotted” eyes and a rigid facial expression. This “eyeless girl” immediately creates a sense of absurdness as she looks so emotionless, especially from the blankness of her glimpse. Moreover, the small size of the eyes makes her look more mature as a teenager. In terms of the overall usage of colors, the novel chooses to leave the background in black and produce a sense of creepy and spooky atmosphere.

In contrast to the novel's cover image, the animation decided to take another approach, which is reshaping Coraline as a childish figure with hands crossing in front and a courageous facial expression (Figure 2). Eventually, Coraline looks cuter and more appealing in the adaptation for her eyes was bigger and with energy. From the comparison mentioned above, the animation undoubtedly reshaped public's understanding of Gothic horror from the influence of Tim Burton's style of Gothic, which is often Pale-white-and-black, to a more chubby and loveable image. Although Coraline's design is reshaped from horror to a cute and loveable image, it does not mean that the novels and the animation share no similarities. As in the novel, there are illustrations that do not look horrifying as they represent daily activities in life (Figure 3).



However, as the film makes Coraline younger and cuter, it also visualizes and thus intensifies the horrifying elements. By taking the Other Mother, the Other Father and Mr. Bobinsky for examples, there is a turning point in the story where these characters correspond to the novels' design. The shift happened when Coraline refused to have her eyes sewed in buttons and was kept in the Other World by the Other Mother for the first time. Hence, after this incident, the residents in the Other World soon match and animate those in McKean's illustration (Figure 4, 5) and thus intensify either the horror or the fun they convey. Beldam's image matches her personality as a very calculative person with calloused hands (Figure 4). Moreover, the dark house of Mr. Bobinsky and his rats (Figure 5) also correspond to the elements of gothic horror as "darkness allows those sudden and frightening appearances of people, animals, ghosts, apparent ghosts, or monsters" (*Elements of the Gothic Novel*).





Focusing on the overall shape of characters in terms of the Other Mother and the Other Father, their faces either turn from the favorable circular face to a villain like triangular face (Beiman), or stretch long or become disfigured as shown in Figure 6 and 7. Therefore, the Other Mother and Father are not completely reshaped to loveable figures but characters that are a mixture of the familiar and the horror.

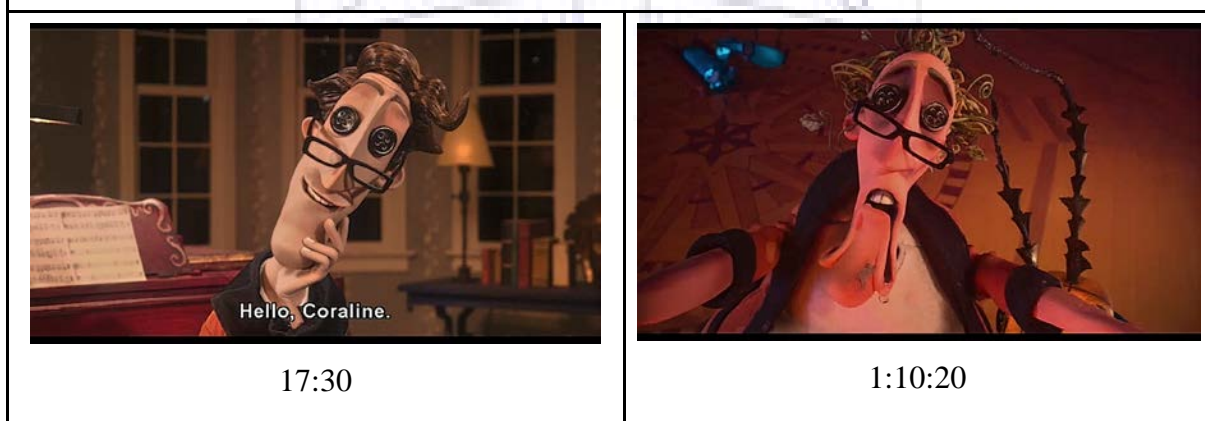


Figure 7- The Other Father

In short, through comparing the character design in terms of their shapes and colors, the animation visually emphasizes both cuteness and familiarity on the one hand, and the horrifying on the other in order to defer the horror in the first place, and then further reveal it after the protagonist's realization of the evilness in the Other World. To be specific, the animation centers around a cute little girl and makes the world she enters "familiar" to her only to gradually reveal its horrors layer by layer.

Similar to the visual attributes in character design, which was disclosing layers of horror gradually in animation, stop motion and 3D technology had also contributed this kind of effect. However, in term of stop motion, it had strengthened the horror visually, especially in a more self-reflexive approach. According to researches done before, it is believed that stop motion had shown its flexibility in creating an in-between shift between the animated world and reality. Hence, with the line between reality and animation blurred by stop motion, *Coraline* seems to comment on animation self-reflexively; animation, however real it seems, is artificial like puppeteering. As a matter of fact, the characters in the Other World are nothing but the Other Mother's puppets.

To begin with, even though stop motion is done by "moving the object in increments while filming a frame per increment," ("What Is Stop Motion Animation? - Definition from Techopedia") the overall animation was smoothly presented like real human beings acting from the beginning to end. Coraline is presented as not only lively but loveable in terms of her connection to human's own experiences as a kid. In order for the realistic movement to be established, all the movements were carefully shot frame by frame through minute adjustments of the figures. Even the movements of Coraline's hair were carefully adjusted frame by frame to imitate the real movement of wind blowing on to a human's face (Figure 8).



16:10

Figure 8

The smooth movement also makes Coraline a cute and loveable character like an ordinary kid in life. Coraline clearly demonstrates what a childish kid would act like when we were kid. Whether she is doing some annoying actions, such as creating creaking sound from the door (Figure 9) to get her father's attention, or jumping on the rug to make the hill on it disappear (Figure 10), she eventually makes herself relatable to the viewers as either themselves or a girl next door.



Though the smooth action of characters continued through the entire story, there are still places which imply that the Other World of *Coraline* was neither real nor as adorable as it appeared to be. The mechanical hands and mechanical movement of the Other Father are perfect examples. When Coraline first met her Other Father, he was introduced to the audience as a wonderful and funny father who would play piano and sing a song for Coraline. However, even though the movements were still very smooth as he sings, it is clearly shown and even stressed by the Other Father that it was the mechanical hands in the piano that were controlling him (Figure 11). The mechanical hands, then, convey the idea of “puppet in control of another puppet,” reminding one the fact that stop motion was actually produced with the control of human moving the puppets bit by bit within each shot; hence, creating horror by delivering the sense of “controlling the same kind.”



Eventually, only after Coraline insisted in going back to the real world, do we discover the fact that under this good father image, he is actually incapable of any of his action (Figure 12). Unable to move under his own will, the Other Father's movement finally goes lag like the traditional stop motion animation when he is forced to attack Coraline in the garden (Figure 13). Therefore, it is believed that stop motion in *Coraline* had purposely adjusted the characters' movements from smooth to lag actions in order to emphasize the horror through the contrast made between the spectacular and smooth on the one hand, and the mechanical and rigid on the other. While viewing the smooth actions, the audiences are easily immersed in the loveable effects presented by Coraline as fluent motion often relates to human movements and reactions. However, on the other hand, when smooth movements are shifted to lag and mechanical movements such as the garden attack of the Other Father, the more likely for the fearful and scary feeling to reach out as in recalls a sense of lifeless and controlled. Basically, stop motion make good use of its feature of visualizing different movements in forming both horrifying and lovable effects through emotional attempts.



1:14:36

Figure 13


If stop motion was able to create blurred line between reality and the animated world through adjusting characters' motions, then the film's 3-D effects can further break the barrier of the screen and produce a sense of depth through examples such as the tunnel to the Other World, the kitchen in both real world and the Other, the empty part of the Other World, Beldam's web, and the old well. For instance, the images of window scenes or living room scene may seem to present a 3-dimensional world; however, they, like the door turning into the tunnel to the Other World, can be familiar images and spaces of a family home being transformed into an endless abyss of one's own.

To begin with, in the tunnel scene where Coraline first enter the Other World, not only Coraline but also the audiences are being both guided and pulled into the Other World when 3D effect eventually extend the depth of its space by stretching the image inward (Figure 14). However, in Coraline's final escape from the Other World (Figure 15), we can also see how

the tunnel transformed from pulling to pushing audience back to a flat 2D screen. As when the tunnel first appears, Coraline is curious about what is on the other side which inevitably presented a sense of depth in pulling or attracting Coraline in. On the other hand, while she aims to escape the horror, the tunnel immediately became a horrifying image which is “chasing after her.”

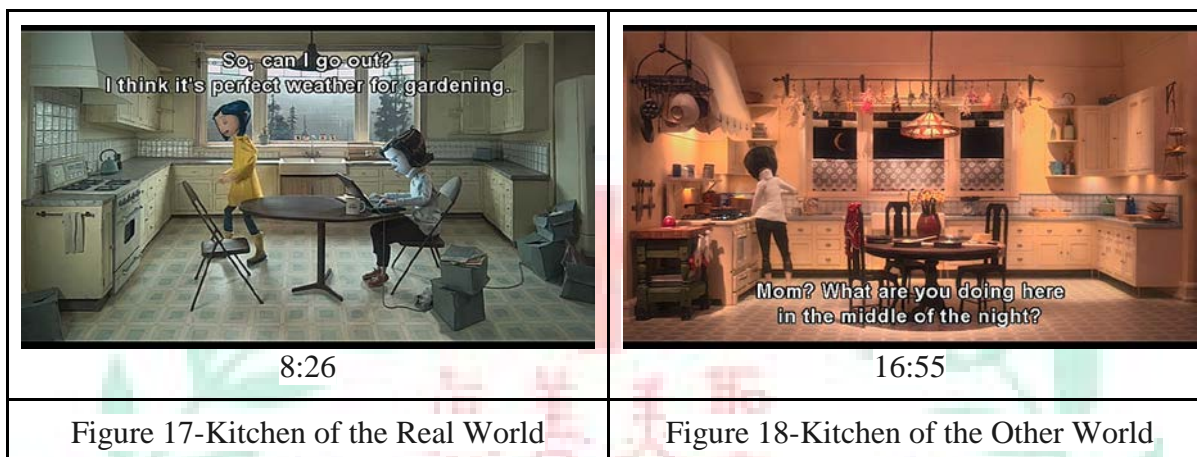
 <p>16:05</p>	 <p>1:25:44</p>
<p>Figure 14 -The first entrance to the Other World</p>	<p>Figure 15-The final escape from the Other World</p>

However, not only stretching in and out, we can also see how the 3D scenes present a depth that makes the viewers feel like they are falling deep down to the screen from the scene of Beldam’s web (Figure 16). In the animation, when Beldam’s real intention is discovered and her offer declined by Coraline, Beldam’s anger and anxious transformed the space into spider trap, which stretched deeply down. At this very moment, 3D animation visualizes its power in pulling us under as if it were trapping Coraline, enlarging the sense of fear the audience feel together with Coraline.

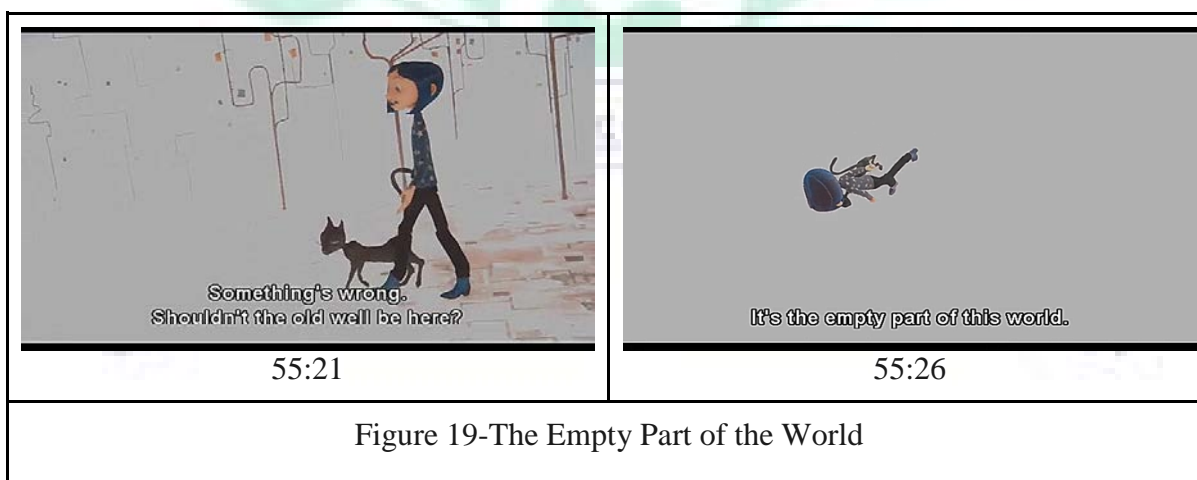
 <p>1:24:39</p>
<p>Figure 16</p>

Apart from previous emotions such as curiosity and fear, we can also see Coraline’s desire being revealed and satisfied by comparing the kitchen if the real world and the Other World (Figure 17, 18). Apparently, the Other World seemed more three dimensional and closer to our image of the real world while the real world was present flat and graphic-like. “With 3-D

an element in the movie, the Other World sets are constructed with more depth to make them feel more open and inviting than the comparatively cramped real world” (McLean).



Despite her attempt to satisfy Coraline, Beldam and her space are limited, as we can see from the revelation of the emptiness on the margins of her world (Figure 19). However, the 3D effect here chooses to present the flatness (no images in the background) through revolving the camera while Coraline walks. Yet, as if Coraline was walking in an endlessness space with no particular direction, she eventually ended up the same place where she started. In this particular scene, the difference between the empty part of the Other World and the flatness of the kitchen in real world lies in the “different desire of the character” that is being visualized. As according to the cat, the Other World is created by Beldam to impress Coraline; therefore, the white world is on the margin of her creation as the pink palace as the only “world” the Beldam aims to live in as it has Coraline in it. In other words, it also implies the fact that there are limitations in Beldam’s creation since the Other World turns out “not” a reflection of the real world but instead a very limited space.



By looking at the scene, the empty part of the world, in Figure 19, it is believed that 3D effects can also create multi-space (a space within a space), and this effect can also be seen from the scene of the moving picture of Coraline’s the Other Friends (Figure 20), the

snow globe which the Beldam imprisons Coraline's parents (Figure 21), and the ending scene where the cat disappears in the house sign (Figure 22). These scenes functions the same as the tunnel in figure 14 as they somehow imply as a "portal" or "door" which leads to another possible world (space). However, these multiple spaces presented in the animation are left unknown as no one really knows whether the world behind what we see is exactly the world that we believe. To be specific, the space that is within a space may not be merely a physical or a psychological space but a possibility of "a third space" that is in-between physical and psychological space. And by looking at the Other World, the animation eventually implied this "third space" by using 3D effects in presenting the different implication of spaces: how they actually reflect, refract and even distort. Therefore, to some degree the elements of horror presented through multiple spaces, again, lies behind of what is the "unknown" to human.



53:16

Figure 20-Multi-space: Picture



1:23:44

Figure 21-Multi-space: Snow Globe

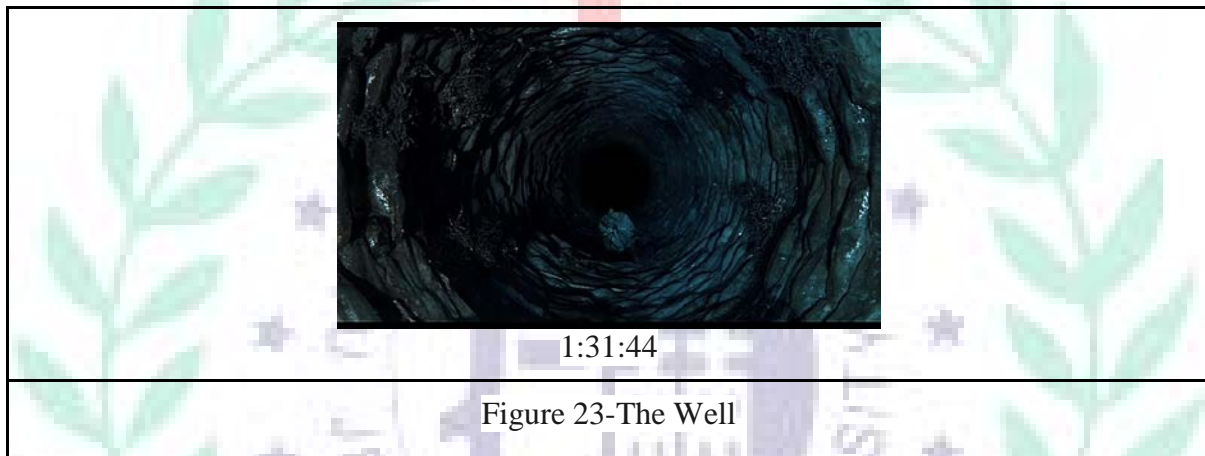


1:34:40

Figure 22-The Ending Scene

Lastly, the shot of the old well (Figure 23), the 3D effect also presented a sense of depth (stretching downwards) which likely for the audience to relate to the web scene (Figure 16). Yet, the old well here delivers different message which is quite different from the emotion of fear from the web. Different from Beldam trapping others in multiple spaces such

as the Other World and the snow globe, the old well here somehow suggests that Coraline, too, can turn the table and use the same scheme of play to trap Beldam by throwing her hand down the well. Meanwhile, this scene creates a mystery unsolved as the hand of Beldam still remains deep down in the well -- as if the horror still remains and exists elsewhere. Therefore, 3D indeed produced a “more memorable experience” (McLean) as it not only visualized the abstract emotions of the characters in *Coraline* but have it reached the audience and even planted the horror deep down in every human to the very end.



III. Conclusion

This paper analyzes the contradictory meanings conveyed through *Coraline's* three main techniques, and argues that in the animation, the experience of horror has been visually extended and technically enhanced exactly because images of horror are juxtaposed with images of the cute and familiar. Though *Coraline* is originally categorized as a gothic horror children novel, the animation has reshaped the elements of horror into a style of its own. Elements of horror was indeed reinforces through visualizing the one's psyche, which is mainly the vague or repressed emotions that humans are either unaware or afraid of. Yet, the elements of horror may also be extended because it was continuously being alternating with the lovable ones. As a matter of fact, the mixture of cute and horror and how they seemed alternate with each other in the animation may have a lot to do with how humans respond to their own mirror images. Hence, if the familiar and cute in *Coraline*, like the theme of parent-child relationship, engage us and make us feel that its world is no other than ours, the weird and bizarre shock us into an awareness of the terrors of desire, respectively for love and for control. Perhaps the world beyond the pure reflection (the familiar) may be a world which is unknown and totally different from ours. Maybe love itself is a form of control, whiles the desire to control one and eat one up is simply love pushed to an extreme. In terms of space, moreover, if the familiar makes us feel like the world we live in, then the horror lies in

visualization of the invisible, either in terms of the unknown abyss of one's desire or the ugly and twisted image of the Other World.

Word Count: 3,454



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