Kylie's Unheimlich Maneuver: The Uncanny Materiality of "Padam Padam"

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Abstract

This paper explores the concept of the uncanny in contemporary pop music through the lens of Kylie Minogue's 2023 track "Padam Padam". Drawing on Freud's notion of the uncanny, which suggests a discomforting familiarity in the simultaneous presence of the known and unknown, the paper argues that digital production tools in contemporary pop music facilitate a novel exploration of sonic materiality that can invoke uncanny effects. Discussing depth, surface, minimalist sculpture, materiality, and signification, the paper situates the song and its meta-elements within music development since the 2010s. This includes the rise of the so-called condensed chorus—a new formal unit that gains its climax and focal effect through absence and starkness rather than richness and fullness. Analysing the track's intro, the paper examines how the use of reverberation, side-chain compression, and synthetic textures creates an oneiric, almost ghostly atmosphere. Using the term breaks-in-presence from Gestalt-derived theory, it further discusses how the chorus marks a substantial shift as reverberation is abruptly cut off, creating an uncanny break in the mix's spatial continuity. This break contributes to the unsettling yet compelling impact of the track, enhancing its affectual power. The paper positions "Padam Padam" as an artistic example of how contemporary pop music's engagement with digital tools reshapes aesthetic expectations, particularly in relation to sonic materiality. The study extends our understanding of pop music by emphasizing how uncanny elements in sonic texture and form contribute to its evolving creativity and aesthetics.

Keywords: pop music, music production, timbre, sonic materiality, uncanny

Introduction

The concept of the uncanny is indeed somewhat contentious. Since Freud's 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche* suggested a relationship between psychoanalysis and aesthetics, it has rightfully been criticized for being vague, crude, male-centred, and colonialist. Additionally, as Anneleen Masschelein writes, "the Freudian uncanny is a late-twentieth-century theoretical concept" (Masschelein, 2011, p. 4). However, the term "uncanny" is still commonly used both inside and outside academia, sometimes referring to Freud's ideas and sometimes not, making it even more undefined. It often simply refers to something unsettling, evoking a feeling of unease or eeriness when something is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar. There is also surprisingly little research that applies the concept of the uncanny to contemporary popular music[1].

So why revisit this well-worn, Freud-derived term once again? Because there is a facet of pop music that seems to increasingly excel in a material lack of depth. It challenges traditional notions of meaning and signification through its programmed insubordination to performance gesture and lyrical content (Reuter, 2022). We simply lack adequate vocabulary to fully articulate how and why this music holds such a distinctly compelling power. The potential for understanding contemporary pop music aesthetics—at least in part—seems to lie in examining how digital production tools facilitate new negotiations of sonic materiality. While we cannot truly escape the vagueness of the uncanny, it may offer an avenue for understanding not only a particular part of pop music, but also a particular dominant development within the genre.

[1] It has, however, been explored in relation to a variety of other types of music, from Late-Romantic music (Cohn, 2004), noise music (Hegarty, 2007), and gothic music (Van Elferen, 2012), to drum n' bass (Christodoulou, 2013), popular music harmony (Forrest, 2017), and AI-based music production (Avdeeff, 2019). Another example is philosopher Mark Fisher's (2014) analysis of the electronic musician Burial, whose blurring of past and present Fisher finds both uncanny and, more specifically, eerie (Fisher, 2014; see also Fisher, 2016).

This paper will therefore use the concept of the uncanny to offer new perspectives on explicitly digitally programmed contemporary pop music. Using Kylie Minogue's 2023 song "Padam Padam" as an example, I will explore how the uncanny can be used to understand the song and how it negotiates sonic materiality in distinctive and novel ways, drawing on perspectives from minimalism, formal music theory, and music production analysis. While the song may not represent all evolving trends, it does exemplify some of the key characteristics of contemporary pop. The goal is to investigate how the song's staging of technology and depth holds significant artistic potential, thereby contributing to a broader understanding of contemporary pop music aesthetics.

Metapop, depth and minimalism

"Padam Padam" can be interpreted as a meta-commentary on the nature of pop music itself. The "padam padam" phrase references both the Edith Piaf's 1951 song and the sound of a heartbeat, thereby evoking physical attraction and corporeal reaction, as suggested by the blatantly prosaic lyrics. Furthermore, it can be perceived as an exposé of the most basic pop template, with its intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-outro structure. In other words, instead of narrative depth, "Padam Padam" wears its own formula on the outside.

From this perspective, the song repeats an ironic/non-ironic feat previously perfected in Kylie's semi-comeback 22 years earlier. Her track "Can't Get You Out of My Head" (2001) took this meta-approach to pop to a new level, blurring the lines between a love-interest narrative and self-referential pop song commentary. This was demonstrated by the song's title, the now-classic "La-la-la" lead melody, and the song's wallowing in stiff, programmed, synthetic repetition that lacked any apparent depth in meaning, spatial variation, or sonic opacity. Seemingly, "Padam Padam" sounds like its "sonic sister". Similarly devoid of depth, it could appear to be a metapop song signifying nothing but a mixture of blunt horniness, Kylie's diva persona, and pop music's ostensible fondness for formal templates. The term metapop here refers to pop music that reflects on its own form, function, lyrical content, or its very status as a pop song—a mode that arguably runs throughout Kylie Minogue's discography—as it excels in its own manufacture, its own "pop-ness".

However, there is more to the subtle yet powerful attraction of "Padam Padam". It arguably became the summer hit of 2023—particularly for the LGBTQ+ community—following the pandemic shutdowns, which amplified the need for club-based connection and celebration. However, there may be something significant in the apparent lack of depth in the simplest of songs.

Paul Ricoeur rightfully warns us of the tendency to engage with what he calls a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Ricoeur, 1970; see also Felski, 2011). This is how we are taught to read texts, symbols, and ideologies with scepticism in order to expose repressed or hidden meanings. We ask what lies beneath the surface and appearances, seeking hidden meanings. According to Ricoeur, the principal figures—the three masters of suspicion—are Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, with the latter urging us to uncover subconscious motivations and repressed desires.

We find a different approach to surface and depth in early minimalism—arguably the most vital exponent of an aesthetic based on materiality, surface, and repetition. Art theorist Rosalind E. Krauss writes about early minimalist sculpture, focusing on how materials like steel, glass, and plastic are often explicitly industrial, emphasizing their raw material qualities (Bois & Krauss, 1997; Krauss, 1998). She describes how simplicity and reductionism create a paradox regarding surface and depth: on the one hand, the works are explicitly non-referential. "What you see is what you see," as Frank Stella famously said (1968, p. 160). On the other hand, according to Krauss, their geometric, repetitive forms activate something deep and unnameable in the viewer. The heightened materiality makes objects, such as Donald Judd's famous stacks, seem forcefully present, almost threatening, as though challenging the viewer's relationship with space. For Krauss, this intensity of presence produces an uncanny quality. In the following, I will pursue this perspective as suggested by Krauss, in relation to contemporary pop music's "surface aesthetics."

Pop form and the condensed chorus

If we understand pop as what is most popular, then the cliché of pop being many things at the same time could be truer now than ever. However, 2011 can be deemed an overall turning point in contemporary pop music (Osborn, 2023). Electronic dance music—or rather, the label EDM, which has since become the umbrella term for most popular electronic subgenres—entered not only the recording industry, festivals, and charts

but also the sound of pop. The pivotal track was arguably that year's "We Found Love" by Rihanna and Calvin Harris, as the song took the dynamics of the dancefloor and the DJ and compressed it into the three-minute format of the pop song.

The key signifier of this new sound was the introduction of the drop, the undeniable climax designed for maximum impact and corporeal energy driven mainly by bass and beat. Contrary to the chorus's traditional role as the focal centre, the drop suspended harmonics, melody, and the lead singer's vocal presence. Additionally, the formal dynamic of building up energy towards the climactic drop also emphasized a novel focus on textural design (Adams, 2019; James, 2019; Reuter, 2021, 2022).

However, trends with major impact often have short lifespans, and it did not take long before the drop and its derived pop form began taking new shapes. The drop was renegotiated, subverted, shifted, and blended into new formal constellations throughout the 2010s. A growing body of music-theoretical research has examined this development, highlighting how formal negotiations of texture introduce formal ambiguity and create a deliberate tension between expectations and dynamics (Adams, 2019; Barna, 2020; de Clercq, 2017; Nobile, 2022; Osborn, 2023).

A particular result of this expectation-defying development was what I have elsewhere termed the condensed chorus[2]. This is mainly characterized by its subversion of the otherwise well-established trope of a chorus gaining its focal role—the "larger-than-life chorus" (Everett, 2009, p. 145)—by being louder, bigger, denser, and wider (Clercq & Margulis, 2018, p. 160; Zagorski-Thomas, 2020, p. 14). Instead, this type of chorus seemingly derives its climax from absence. In line with the drop's discoesque roots, sounds are reduced to the bare minimum, often leaving only a dry vocal against the beat, devoid of reverberation, exposing an unadorned sonic texture and the rhythmic grid that organizes it. "Padam Padam" can in many ways be heard as an example of utilizing what we could call a textural condensation as a way to create tension and dynamics.

[2] In a recent publication, I have traced in greater detail the development of the drop's incorporation into pop form toward what I term the condensed chorus, from a more historical, theoretical, and media-based perspective, including analysis of *Padam Padam* (Reuter, 2026).

Padam Padam

For this purpose, I want to focus particularly on two parts of the song: the intro and the chorus, and specifically how the use of reverberation, combined with arrangement and digital production tools, creates an uncanny effect.

An unconscious intro

The song conveniently begins with its title, but the voice that utters it is down-pitched and drenched in heavy reverb and delay. A swaying synth melody with a low-pass filter (which allows only frequencies below a set threshold to pass) fades in. However, its rhythmic feel is unsettled by the sound's unusual amplitude envelope—its volume subtly bounces up and down in an irregular manner. This effect is likely due to a side-chain compressor, a technique where one sound's signal triggers one or more compressors on other sounds, shaping their dynamic amplitude, though the triggering sound itself is inaudible here. Another synth sound is introduced, providing a wider spatial contrast to the first. However, it too is subjected to a low-pass filter and seemingly a side-chain compressor, albeit with a less pronounced effect on its amplitude. Meanwhile, the down-pitched "Padam" vocal repeats three times as the filters gradually open, leading into the first verse.

In other words, the intro is defined by low-pass filtering, side-chain compression, and down-pitching. The sounds' characters combine to produce a sensation of something submerged, ghostly, and oneiric. Acoustic phenomena apply very little to these programmed sounds, which "behave" in an unnatural, opaquely programmed manner. Overtones, that are crucial for helping us navigate acoustic environments by revealing how surfaces break faster sound waves, are taken away. This results in a muffled soundscape that arguably produces a sense of being underwater.

Continuing along the lines of the surface/depth metaphor, it gains further complexity if we engage Freud's characterization of the mind as topographical. The admittedly somewhat rudimentary idea is perhaps best exemplified by his iceberg metaphor, where the conscious is above the water but rests on a massive, submerged unconscious. Similarly, the philosopher, psychoanalyst, and semiotician Julia Kristeva (1984) describes the concept of *chora*, referring to a pre-linguistic, primal space or realm that exists before structured language and symbolic meaning. In this sense, the intro's oneiric and programmed character, devoid of clear

human presence, evokes a feeling of something pre-linguistic, maybe even unconscious.

The intro is followed by a verse with a beat centred on a four-to-the-floor kick drum and Kylie's high-pitched, autotuned legato vocal, which clearly stands out alone in the upper frequencies due to the low-pass filtering of the other sounds. More drums (hi-hat and a light snare) and subtle bass are added in the second repetition of the verse. While this soundscape remains quite distant from natural acoustic sound behaviour—the synths are still muffled and bouncing—the reverberation of the drums and Kylie's voice combine to reflect or resemble a more traditional pop instrumentation and staging of sonic space. However, this is soon challenged by the transition to the next formal unit.

The transition to the chorus is marked by a break in the drums, subtle filter sweeps, and a sound that resembles a vocal's reverb played backwards. Then, from the first downbeat in the chorus, everything suddenly becomes tight, clear, reverbless, and pumping. Its lack of natural acoustic reference is emphasized not only by the absence of reverb but by the introduction of a syncopated synth bass bouncing simultaneously on the left and right sides of the mix as well. The bass's anchoring function, once centred in mono, is in other words replaced by a programmed wide synthetic bounce that, along with just the kick drum, snare, and vocal. are the only sound sources.

However, the vocal does have reverb, but it behaves unusually. Initially, it follows the vocal, as reverbs typically do, resonating after the vocal phrases, but the tail of the reverberated sound abruptly cuts off. Reverb in music production can be understood as a technique that mimics acoustic properties defined by sound reflections. This is a crucial part of our everyday and habitual use of hearing to navigate not only space but arguably the world. In "Padam Padam", the vocal's reverberation seems to act in a fairly organic way, or at least as is common in the staging of vocal space in popular music production. However, for only a fraction of a second, it shuts off. The effect of this unusual reverb tail behaviour is most likely a programming technique related to side-chain compression, where a sound (the reverb) is only activated when another sound (the vocal) is present. Alternatively, it could also be a noise gate that shuts off all sound when the input drops below a set threshold. Regardless of the technique and the fact that this might seem like a minor detail (which indeed it is in terms of brevity), the effect is crucial.

Firstly, this subtle fingerprint of programming plants a substantial seed of doubt, a crack in the human-based performance and "real-world" sonic behaviour, or, evoking the German *unheimlich*, something distinctly unhomely. While it does not replace it with something entirely virtual, it adds a glimpse of uncertainty. Secondly, the abrupt removal of the vocal's reverb occurs in a chorus that, in its first repetition, consists only of a plugged synth bass, a four-on-the-floor kick drum, and a dry snare. The removal of the reverb exposes a mix of merely staccato sounds, devoid of release, decay, or audible reverberation.

How can we begin to understand this shift in sonic materiality? Gestalt-derived theories of presence offer a temporally based hypothesis. They suggest that the brain chooses one out of a set of presumptions about whether what we perceive belongs to a physical or virtual world. In relation to computer gaming, Brenton et al. (2008) suggest that these might be superimposed, for instance, when a sound that does not belong to a virtual world is suddenly incorporated into it and vice versa. Brogni et al. (2003) describe how, as in dreams, one might experience a sudden switch in Gestalt from the virtual to the real. Instead of a smooth mixture or transition between modes of perception, this sudden switch, termed a "break in presence" (BIP), can cause an uncanny sensation (Brenton et al., 2008; Brogni et al., 2003; Grimshaw, 2009).

Arguably, the transition from verse to chorus can be heard as such an uncanny break in presence. When the vocal reverb is shut off, the listener experiences a flicker of total silence, exposing the grid-based assemblage of sound, that switches on and off according to a purely programmed logic. This challenges notions of premedial reference and instead presents a sonic behaviour that signifies its own digitally mediatized environment. The materiality of the sound is, in other words, revealed in this dead space, leaving only the presence of their own "thingness."

The overall nature of this binary on-and-off effect of monolithic sounds is amplified by the vocal melody's shift. It moves from the long, legato phrases of the verse to the short, staccato hook of the chorus based on the onomatopoetic "Padam." While verse-Kylie is never entirely unspoiled by something posthuman, the will and subjectivity of chorus-Kylie become a staccato imperative almost defined by a mechanical drive.

Naturally, what is being described here is something that can and will undoubtedly be

heard differently by each listener. Nevertheless, the ambiguity remains, planted, even if it is not consciously registered.

Conclusion

My argument is that the chorus derives its effect, its dynamic climax, and perhaps even its spectacle, from a formal break in presence. Suddenly, all sounds are exceedingly materially present. It can function as a kick to the body, a call to dance, and maybe even a call to the sexual drive. Again, music is perceived subjectively, and I do not wish to argue for any universal interpretations. Yet, as I have tried to describe, the song produces an ambivalence, a doubt, a glimpse that can install feelings of uncanny uncertainty.

I am hesitant to draw overly mind-topographical connections between the intro's oneiric character and the subconscious. While there may be connections, it does seem somewhat simple. However, the intro's oneiric character appears to connect and combine with the uncanny shift in the chorus. It is hardly a coincidence that the song begins directly in a dream-like state and, within 48 seconds, reaches what can be heard as an unusually clear, unmuffled clarity. Arguably, the effect of this development comes not only from the contrast between the opaque indistinctness of the intro and the seemingly extreme lucidity of the chorus, but also from the seed planted by the intro, and the connection between the two types of ambivalence.

On an indeed anecdotal note, I have noticed how people often either love or profusely despise "Padam Padam", its programmed sound and simple chorus melody. Uncanniness, by nature, is not always positive. This tension of ambivalence is perhaps best described by Kristeva. While Freud conceptualizes the uncanny as the return of the repressed, Kristeva situates it in the dissolution of boundaries between self and other, subject and object. It refers to a psychological and existential reaction to something that disrupts the boundaries of the self—something that is neither fully subject nor object, neither fully inside nor outside. It is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva, 1982: 4). This echoes with timbre theorist Isabelle van Elferen. She writes about timbre's paradox, having both material and immaterial components, which engenders "a sublime aesthetic experience that can be described as the aporia of being drawn into a void that appears real but—which the closer you get to it—flickers in and out of earshot and comprehension" (van Elferen, 2017, p. 616).

To that end, digital pop music's uncanny textural negotiations may produce exactly these sublimely ambiguous sensations, challenging boundaries in profound ways. While I may have fallen into the temptation of making overly clear distinctions between (levels and types of) the human and posthuman, the real and the virtual, the homely and the unhomely, it is perhaps more the unsettling slippage between these categories that is relevant to the aesthetic pull (or push) of a song like "Padam Padam".

What might seem like shallow music, excelling only in its surface character, can actually embody a heightened materiality akin to that of early minimalism. It presents an intensity of presence that challenges traditional modes of listening and analysis rooted in meaning and signification.

My intention has not been to install rigid dichotomies between the real and the unreal, the semiotic and the prelinguistic, but rather, from a music-aesthetic perspective, to demonstrate their infiltration. The previously mentioned distinction between surface and "what lies beneath" thereby not only collapses, but the collapse itself becomes a deliberate aesthetic strategy. Lacan (whom I have for many reasons otherwise deliberately abstained from including here) rejects depth-psychology. Instead, he describes the psychic space as a type of flatness, a topological Möbius strip where the unconscious and discourse coexist and fluctuate endlessly on the outside. To that end, it is perhaps these very fluctuations that a novel type of digital pop music stages.

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