

“HOW DID IT GET SO DARK?”: MAPPING LIMINAL SPACES IN MUSIC VIDEOS OF BILLIE EILISH

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ABSTRACT: Darkness as it exists in one’s imagination and in the tangible realm is inextricably linked with a confusion of boundaries, a period of uncertainty and transition. By blurring the boundaries between familiar and unfamiliar, liminal spaces are safe yet intimidating. The paper analyses the lyrics and the music videos of songs “bury a friend,” “everything I wanted,” “NDA” and “Happier Than Ever” released by Billie Eilish from her albums *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* (2019) and *Happier Than Ever* (2021) to trace the configuration of liminal spaces. The dark visuals and lyrics that hint at fear, hatred and death act as liminal spaces where the numerous conflicts arising from separation, nightmares, violation of privacy, and intrusive thoughts are addressed, if not fully resolved. The darkness contributes to the evaluation of personal beliefs, aspirations and challenges in uncanny settings. Engaging with Eilish’s lyrics and music videos facilitates an investigation into the conceptualization of darkness in the popular American imagination.

RESUMEN: La oscuridad, tal y como existe en la imaginación y en el reino tangible, está inextricablemente ligada a una confusión de límites, un periodo de incertidumbre y transición. Al desdibujar los límites entre lo familiar y lo desconocido, los espacios liminales son seguros pero intimidantes. El artículo analiza las letras y los vídeos musicales de las canciones «bury a friend», «everything I wanted», «NDA» y «Happier Than Ever» publicadas por Billie Eilish en sus álbumes *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* (2019) y *Happier Than Ever* (2021) para trazar la configuración de espacios liminales. Los visuales oscuros y las letras que aluden al miedo, el odio y la

muerte actúan como espacios liminales donde se abordan, si no se resuelven del todo, los numerosos conflictos derivados de la separación, las pesadillas, la violación de la intimidad y los pensamientos intrusivos. La oscuridad contribuye a la evaluación de creencias, aspiraciones y retos personales en escenarios insólitos. El análisis de las letras y los videos musicales de Eilish facilita una investigación sobre la conceptualización de la oscuridad en el imaginario popular estadounidense.

In the arts, spatiality often becomes an integral component, communicating meaning on the visual level as well as on a thematic level. For the singer and songwriter Billie Eilish, space serves a dual purpose. On the one hand, it enhances the aesthetics of the music videos and on the other, it complements the lyrics of the song. The music videos of Billie Eilish exemplify the coalescence of the spatial and lyrical components, facilitating an inquiry into how liminality becomes a part of this equation. The study of space both physical and abstract warrants the inquiry into its nature and the borders that define it. As opposed to rigid borders, some spaces are created by the porosity of the established borders. Such borders threaten stability and simultaneously offer a leeway to address, contemplate or embrace a range of issues and/or feelings born out of a certain kind of anxiety that is amplified by spatial un-rootedness. This anxiety could be momentary or become a perpetual state of being for individuals occupying what can be referred to as a liminal space. In the introduction to the collection of essays titled *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place*, Dara Downey, Ian Kinane and Elizabeth Parker define liminal spaces as those that are “simultaneously space and place” by being “familiar, yet unknown” and “secure and, yet intimidating” (3). The ambiguous construction of liminal spaces allows the proliferation of varied meanings and associations.

Although the liminal space can be applied to a host of elements, this research concerns itself with the long-standing connection between liminal space and darkness. The scope of this research is restricted to the study of the creation of liminal spaces on multiple levels which intensifies the level of ambiguity while maximizing the potential for creative engagement with real life predicaments. The paper attempts to provide a comprehensive understanding of the same through the analysis of the lyrics and

music videos of the singer, Billie Eilish from her albums *When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* (2019) and *Happier Than Ever* (2021).

Research on lyrics, especially in the context of the US American music industry, is quite interdisciplinary in nature as it combines perspectives from various fields ranging from literature to politics. According to Pete Astor, the words in a song possess a "provenance and function that needs to be looked at above and beyond their place within the sound palette of a track" (148). From Bob Dylan to Taylor Swift, US American pop music icons have evoked interest from academic circles.

Bruce Springsteen's songs have been interpreted as a commentary on the "social apocalypse" and the degradation of the American lifestyle (Wolff 4). *Lady Gaga and Popular Music: Performing Gender, Fashion and Culture*, although focusing on the interaction between sound and imagery in the songs of Lady Gaga, highlights how lyrics contribute to the performative aspects (Iddon and Marshall 2). Thus, song lyrics can not only give voice to the personal but also help in bridging the gap between the private and the public. They are no longer a solitary artistic production but a cultural product accumulating meanings and generating interpretations. As one of the major figures dominating US American popular music, Billie Eilish's significance cannot be eluded. She provides the material, both textual and visual, to investigate the employment of darkness as a theme and a device to create liminal spaces. Her songs embody the in-betweenness that arises due to the straddling of various genres of music.

Hailed as the "neo-goth, chart-topping teenage popstar," Billie Eilish occupies a space created by deviating from the strict conventions of pop and goth to create a combination of the two (Harding). The purposeful defying of genre boundaries by blending pop, alternative, goth and electronic aligns with the larger understanding of liminality. This paper investigates the manner in which the lyrics and the music videos enable the production of liminal spaces. It also intends to delineate the necessity and functions of such spaces in highlighting the "darkness" which can be interpreted in both literal and metaphorical senses. In her article titled "Liminality, Landscape, Lament," Ann Carragher states that liminality can be applied "both temporally and spatially and both psychologically and physically" (315). The research focuses on how Billie Eilish experiments with spatial dissociation that in turn affects her physical and psychological stability in the songs "bury a friend" from the album

When We Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?, “everything i wanted” which was first released as a stand-alone single and then included in the deluxe edition of *When We Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?* and “Happier Than Ever” and “NDA” from the album *Happier Than Ever*. The depiction of the liminal space is made possible by the use of visual techniques and media technologies which maximise the aestheticization of such spaces through creative elements (Broadhurst 1). Billie Eilish’s music videos are infused with images that evoke feelings conventionally associated with negativity. The coupling of these images with lyrics that are equally pessimistic in their tone accentuates the portrayal of liminal space as that which deviates from the established order of stability and comfort. The darkness imposes on the liminal space the quality of being symbolic, facilitating transitions and creating a transformational impact.

THE HOME SPACE: CONVERGENCE OF THE FAMILIAR AND THE UNFAMILIAR

As opposed to setting the music videos in otherworldly spaces, Billie Eilish’s songs are rooted in familiar spaces. Yet, the deployment of familiar settings does not make them conducive to the comfortable existence of an individual: the familiarity of the surrounding is made unfamiliar by the addition of novel elements. In his essay “The Uncanny,” Sigmund Freud introduces the notion of *unheimlich* or the uncanny to refer to a “species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (124). Freud’s conceptualization of the uncanny gave rise to further explorations on how it manifests in various forms, its repercussions and implications. In his attempt to discuss the fantastic, Tzvetan Todorov sheds light on how the uncanny allows the occurrence of events which can be interpreted through the laws of reason but are somehow, “incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected” (46). Such events tend to evoke in the character of the narrative or the singer in this context a sense of fear (47).

The space of the home in Billie Eilish’s songs embodies the uncanny and subsequently creates a liminal space. The idea of “home” conventionally evokes a sense of positivity, a safe haven or a place of comfort for people. On the account of being a sphere of the private, the home space serves as a place where “we feel we can be at most ourselves, most intimate, and protected in our relation both to ourselves and to others” (Kumar and Makarova 330). In contemporary

Western culture, the home is viewed as a domain of intimacy, privacy and autonomy as well as a site of consumption, leisure and entertainment (Kumar and Makarova 331-332). According to Mary Douglas, the home begins when some space is brought under control (289), which reiterates the idea that home is a space where power or autonomy can be exercised to ensure regularity and predictability. However, this is a heavily contested idea. In the Gothic tradition, the house occupies an ambiguous position as it alternates between a "protective haven" and a "hostile space" threatening the existence of the inhabitant (Ng 2). Billie Eilish extends this tradition to her music videos where she complicates the construction of the home as a haven. The music video of the song "bury a friend" begins with the singer occupying the space under the bed, seemingly exemplifying the "monster under the bed" trope. The bedroom is spacious but without any furniture besides the cot to adorn it; long white curtains are haphazardly drawn to allow faint light from outside to penetrate into the room. Before the song starts, the sound of sirens is heard, adding to the gloomy setting. One gets the visceral feeling that something is amiss. The scene then shifts to the long winding corridor, through which the singer staggers. The flickering lights intensify the eeriness of the setting. Multiple pairs of hands with black gloves grab a hold of the singer's hair and neck as the lights dim. The hands then inject something unknown into the back of the singer. The fragmented depiction of the hands may symbolise a clinical procedure under different circumstances. However, in this music video, the gloved hands assume a more sinister connotation of controlling someone by administering suspicious black coloured serums.

Accompanying these visuals are the lyrics, "Like I wanna drown, like I wanna end me/ Step on the glass, staple your tongue" (Eilish 1:02 - 1:06). The repetition of the line "I wanna end me" conveys the intense emotional turmoil that the singer is battling with. Stepping on glass and stapling the tongue are violent and destructive actions that induce physical pain and suffering. Billie Eilish occupies the liminal space between experiencing physical pain on one hand and emotional conflicts on the other. In the essay "In Between Days: Domestic Liminality in the works of Aileen Barry," Tracy Fahey discusses the idea of home as a site of "unstable domesticity" in the light of gothic fiction. The same is applicable when discussing Billie Eilish's music wherein the home plays vital a role in "evoking the return of the repressed" and functioning as the "liminal space, a threshold place and a site of dangerous possibilities" (74). The phrase

“dangerous possibilities” is significant in understanding how Billie Eilish subverts the domestic space.

The lines “Honestly, I thought I would be dead by now” and “Bury the hatchet or bury your friend right now” are examples of dangerous possibilities that find expression in the liminal space (Eilish 2:14 – 2:23). In “bury a friend”, there is a “return of the repressed” through the character of the singer who adopts the identity of the monster under the bed. She stands as the embodiment of her repressed emotions. The repetition of “I wanna end me” and the last stanza of the song shows how the repressed emotions are taking control of the singer. The battle between letting the monster go and wanting the monster to stay in order to feel a sense of familiarity is exemplified in the song. The graphic representation of injections piercing through Billie Eilish’s skin and her cry to end her life unearths the repressed thoughts. What is repressed actually becomes un-repressed, thereby exemplifying the dangerous possibilities.

In the liminal space of the home, the singer becomes the one who holds herself hostage. She becomes the Other and in doing so re-evaluates what it means to be the self in the Self versus the Other equation. Her identity on one hand is a human being plagued by nightmares and on the other is the monster that forces the human to take unhealthy decisions. In the liminal space, she is both here and there, the human and the monster, the rational and the irrational. The domestic space of the home enables the existence of such a contradiction. Moreover, it is only in the liminal space that the co-existence of the two entities is possible. The constant changes or rather the mutation of identities becomes a salient feature of the liminal space.

In his work *The Memory of Place: A Phenomenology of the Uncanny*, Dylan Trigg connects the uncanny with the domestic spaces. He writes that the conducive places for the uncanny are those that “we cherish, that we hold dear to us, be it the places in which we dwell or the places of our own bodies” (28). Similarly, in *Women and Domestic Spaces in Contemporary Gothic Narratives*, Andrew Hock Soon Ng states that the domestic space possesses the potential to “unnerve, fragment and destroy its inhabitant” unless order and normalcy is restored through the employment of some means (Ng 1). In *American Nightmares: The Haunted House Formula in American Popular Fiction*, Dale Bailey comments on how the haunted house not only serves as a mere formula for novelists but also metaphorically conveys the “nightmarish tensions of gender, class, and culture hidden at the

heart of American life" (24). In the case of Billie Eilish's music videos, the house assumes a haunting quality when it becomes the embodiment of the uncanny. Eilish's songs, as careful observations on the uncanny, allow the repressed thoughts to resurface and thereby hint at the nightmarish quality of societal pressures, anxiety and vulnerability that comes with fame and recognition as a representative of US American popular music. The notions of haunt and liminality mutually enforce each other, adding to the eeriness of the space. Together, they contribute to the overall unsettling experience when the uncanny is encountered. In the music video of "Happier Than Ever," the space of the home becomes the central object of focus.

As opposed to the house in "bury a friend," the house in "Happier Than Ever" features light coloured walls. The video begins with the representation of a living room which includes multiple pieces of furniture, blankets, cushions, a vase with fresh flowers, a bowl with fruits in it and a cup on the coffee table. These objects can be correlated with the feelings of comfort, security and warmth and signify the ability to create a welcoming and hospitable environment. The home transforms into a liminal space when uncanny things occur. When the water drips onto the floor and lights flicker, the singer opens a door from which a flood of water gushes into the room. Billie Eilish swims to the surface, which happens to be the roof of her home. With the influx of water, the bright coloured setting is quite literally washed away. The resultant darkness created by the water and the night sky is in stark contrast to the opening visuals.

In "Happier Than Ever" there is an expulsion of the singer from the safety of the house. With the flood of water, the singer is left stranded on the roof. Tracey Fahey considers domestic space as a "charged liminal space, a precarious space fraught with the possibility of mutation and transformation" (72). In this music video, both the house and the singer undergo a transformation. The transformation of the house from a hospitable condition to a hostile environment exemplifies how the liminal space supports the mutability of elements. Like the singer, the house exists in a state of in-betweenness. Although the house has now become flooded, the singer does not abandon it. She continues to sing while standing on the roof of the house and then plunges deep into the water. From Shakespeare's Ophelia to Billie Eilish, the act of drowning is a frequently used trope. Helen V. Emmitt traces the gendered aspect of drowning through the analysis of the "canonical drowning women" which include Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* and Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* and Jane Gray in

The Waterfall (317). Evaluating the purpose of water for men and women, she concludes that water functions as a “narcissistic mirror” for men until they plunge into it, when the water transforms into a “devouring female” (317-318). For the woman, in the absence of the mirror to reflect her, embracing the water provides self-fulfillment (318). Billie Eilish is not alarmed but prepared to confront the suddenness of the flood of water. She views the water not as a means of purification, but a transformative force that brings the end closer. Sydney Schultze on delineating the similarities between the female characters who drown in Russian literature claims that they have the misfortune of “choosing men who cannot return their love and devotion in equal measure” (83). Billie Eilish in “Happier Than Ever” acknowledges this misfortune and hopes to distance herself from her lover. She resorts to drowning, for it provides her an escape which is liberative in quality. The sudden influx of water causes spatial disorientation, thereby reinforcing the nature of liminal spaces. There is no explanation as to why or how the phenomenon occurs but the possibility of such events in the liminal space is undisputable. The blurring of the boundary between fantasy and reality or the confrontation with the reality which was presumed to be only imaginary until a specific point is attributed to the uncanny effect (Freud 150). Moreover, in Todorov’s terms, the flood that displaces the singer and rids the house of its functionality is the disturbance or shocking feature of the uncanny.

In this song, the singer is coming to terms with not being obliged to deal with her problematic lover. She sings, “You’d do the opposite of what you said you’d do/ And I’d end up more afraid” (Eilish 1:22 – 1:30). She also sings how she was scared her to death when her lover drove around under the influence of alcohol. Fear for Billie Eilish is a constant companion. It manifests itself through the darkness which she embraces albeit with palpable amount of tension while also trying to battle against it. Her identity does not necessarily have to be defined in relation to her previous lover and in fact, she abhors that identity. As a result, there is an effort to reconstruct the identity as she finally asserts, “I don’t relate to you.” She accuses her former lover of ruining “everything good,” making her hate her city and waste her time among other things. The use of phrases like “wasting my breath” and “ruined everything good” highlight the gradual decay of all things the singer had held dear owing to the activities of her lover (Eilish 2:40-2:41, 3:48-3:50). When analysed at the surface level, the house which is shown initially in the video with its bright walls and lighting

becomes "ruined" by the end of the video. Moreover, towards the end of the video, the singer dances on the roof of the house and intentionally jumps into the water with a smile on her face. Here, the uncanny reigns supreme as the boundary between habitable and uninhabitable spaces collapses and only darkness (in the metaphorical and literal sense) thrives.

In the work, *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory* Susan Broadhurst discusses how performances like that of Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds demonstrate the Dionysian features like "disruption, immediacy and excess," all of which she considers are "quintessential aesthetic features of liminal performance" (165). She also states that such a performance allows an aesthetic intervention which in turn creates an "immediate effect, though perhaps indirectly on the social and political, in as much as it questions the cultural beliefs that sustain those systems" (Broadhurst 165). The Dionysian features can be traced in the music videos of Billie Eilish who eschews elaborate and flashy visuals to create a space of dread. The music video of "bury a friend" incorporates the Dionysian features of disruption, immediacy and excess through the use of jarring visuals. The sequence of multiple hands groping the singer, injecting and manipulating her exemplifies the forces that deviate the singer's natural flow of thought. The visuals of the singer hiding under the bed, waltzing through the corridor, being dragged by mysterious hands and levitating throughout the duration of the music video disrupt the ability to predict her actions. The immediacy is conveyed through the techniques that involve the viewer in an intimate connection with the singer. The viewers are thus allowed a foray into her mind to understand the extent of Billie Eilish's vulnerability. The excess becomes apparent through the exaggeration of gruesome imagery like the pouring out of black liquid from the singer's eyes and the insertion of needles into her back. The use of excessive visuals heightens the element of horror and disorientation.

In the music video of "Happier Than Ever," the disruption occurs when the familiarity of the home space is subverted through the flood of water. The suddenness of the whole event conveys the immediacy of vulnerability that draws the viewer's attention. Attributing the Dionysian feature of excess to her music video might seem misleading. It is thus necessary to establish the nature of the excess. Here, excess cannot be equated with the amount of visual elements or technology added to make the video visually appealing. The video is minimalistic owing to the meagre props used and the

ordinary setting of the house. The excess is brought out through the intensity of darkness (literally and metaphorically) and the amplification of the eeriness through the use of excess water that rushes in through the door which the singer opens. The lyrics convey the excess of emotional depth from which Billie Eilish makes her statement, addresses her predicaments and shares the hope for solving them. Thus, Billie Eilish tweaks the Dionysian features which Susan Broadhurst claims are required for the liminal performances. With respect to the commentary on the social or political systems which liminal performances usually involve, the songs and music videos of Billie Eilish initiate discussions predominantly on mental health, the adversities of fame and the struggle to maintain privacy. These themes are present in varying degrees in her songs in addition to related themes of being betrayed, suffering from an identity crisis and confronting one's demons. Billie Eilish's songs NDA and "everything i wanted" include amalgamation of distressing issues with equally distressing visuals.

TOPOGRAPHICAL ANXIETY AND TRANSITIONAL SPACES

Equating liminal spaces with in-betweenness allows the configuration of the same as transitional spaces. The concept of liminality in the context of transition was first propounded by Arnold van Gennep in *Rites of Passage*, in which he proposes three subcategories: the rites of separation, incorporation and transition. He refers to the rites of separation from the previous world as the "preliminal rites," those executed during the transitional stage as the "liminal rites," and those performed during the incorporation into the new world as the "postliminal rites" (21). In "NDA," Billie Eilish walking on the road signifies her physical and psychological detachment from former claustrophobic world of fame. The estrangement that has occurred as a result of the fame contributes to the phase of separation. The preliminary stage is only hinted at in the video but never fully depicted. It is the liminal stage which features in the video through the visuals of the road which signifies an escape from the previous world. However, the third stage is never reached for there is no incorporation into the new world. The new world could either be the afterlife or a kind of renewed integration into the society. The music video fails to explore the possibility of the postliminal, thereby existing in a state of limbo.

The interpretation of a road as a liminal space proves to be vital in the discussion of how it serves as a tool for transition. The road symbolizes movement and journey towards the known or the unknown. In the music video of "NDA," Billie Eilish walks along a tar road in what appears to be a semi-arid area in the midst of darkness. Cars zoom past her, narrowly avoiding Billie Eilish who is walking in the middle of the road. There are no signposts and streetlights for one to figure out its location. It is not clear whether Eilish is "going" to a specific place or "coming" from a location. The road is a straight long path without any bends, cross roads or exits. In other words, there are no ways to escape. Occasionally, she is joined by people whose facial features are not well-defined. The minute the singer turns around to confirm their existence, they vanish into thin air, thereby adding a sense of mystery to the setting. The only other addition to road and the disappearing people is the cars which neither stop nor offer the singer a ride back to safety.

The road gives rise to a myriad of associative meanings. In his essay, "On the Road from Dante to Jack Kerouac (Stopping by Frost, Pound, and Eliot)," Willis Barnstone states that Dante "thrives" on the uncertainty of the road while for Kerouac, the road aids his "cumulative search for spiritual transcendence" (248, 251). The road ceases to be a mere physical component in a journey by becoming a metaphor for comprehending the complexities of life. Commenting on the genre of the road film, Christopher Morris considers roads as "figures for something of the utmost importance—for example, 'self-discovery' or 'national identity' or 'the Moebius strip of American capitalism'" and as "figures for figuration and for reading itself" (Morris 26). As opposed to the road facilitating an acutely individualistic experience, David Lynch's films construct the road as a space of "reunion, not rebellion" and "community and communication, not of solitude and silence" (Orgeron 32). The road in "NDA" is for Billie Eilish a road for self-discovery, where she contemplates on the burden of fame. However, she subverts Orgeron's perspective on the road behaving as a space for reunion and communication. As a liminal space, the road allows Billie Eilish to engage in a solitary journey. The cars and people who appear and almost immediately disappear, hint at the possibility of a reunion and communication. The lack of direct communication between the singer and those on the road emphasizes the singer's rejection of the possibility of interactions. Moreover, the road travel is linked to the transgression of social laws and bounds and hence positions the individual who embarks on such a journey as

an “alternative to society’s conventions” (Laderman 43). In this music video, the singer walking without any security especially during the night, is a deliberate refusal to conform to the conventions of fame. Hence, on one level, the road can be considered as an aid for introspection and contemplation of the events that have occurred in life of the singer. On another level, the road and the darkness together evoke a sense of fear and precarity of existence. The absence of light other than the occasional flashing of the headlights of the cars, connotes the possibility of ominous events. It also highlights the emotions of dread, vulnerability and apprehension that are amplified with the lyrics of the song. Billie Eilish enumerates the pitfalls of fame, especially those that lead to the invasion of privacy. She mentions investing in installing security due to the threat of a stalker. Released in 2021, the song features deeply autobiographical elements. In 2020, *Cosmopolitan* reported an incident of Billie Eilish getting a restraining order against a fan who trespassed through her property (Harvey-Jenner). The song also hints at the singer making a “pretty boy” sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA) to protect her privacy (Eilish 0:27). The final stanza of the song ends with the lines, “How’d it get so dark? I saw stars” (2:53-2:57). As she sings the last stanza, the cars that were initially travelling in one direction, start circling her. They swerve around her in opposite directions signalling a complete breach of the traffic rules. The disruption of the established norms of driving leads to the creation of a liminal space where laws or any kind of rules for that matter, are abandoned. This in turn allows the transition from a place where laws are followed diligently to one where such codes are thwarted. The singer becomes a part of this transition by continuing to walk along the path despite the unnatural motion of vehicles. Furthermore, she transitions from a place of order and stability to one where there is a deliberate breakdown of the same. The unconventionality of this circumstance is further complicated by the dark figures who emerge momentarily. Their fleeting presence emphasizes the stalking behaviour of some fans which inevitably put the singer’s safety in jeopardy. By reflecting on alternate career prospects and the necessity for NDAs, Billie Eilish battles with the pressures of popularity. The same is depicted through the visuals of sombre colours like black and metallic grey which dominate the entire music video. Without any markers for the place, the ambiguity of the liminal space is foregrounded. The nondescript setting and the motion of the cars thus cause topographical anxiety for the singer.

DESTRUCTIVE AESTHETICS IN LYRICS AND LIMINALITY

The interconnection between liminality and destruction is undisputable. Susan Broadhurst writes that works formulated on the concept of liminality generate excitement and a "feeling almost of awe, something akin to discomfort" (13). The use of destructive aesthetics evokes the above-mentioned feelings in addition to creating unease in moving within liminal spaces. The term destructive aesthetics applies to the collection of images or visuals that embody the grotesque and the weird. The intermingling of the two challenges the ideas of safety, comfort, beauty and order. The portrayal of the uncanny, chaos and decay symbolize a host of internal conflicts experienced by the singer. The disturbing visuals lead to a breakdown of the perceptible boundary between the external and the internal world.

Released in 2019, the song "everything i wanted" is replete with references to Billie Eilish's nightmare of dying. An article titled, "Billie Eilish's 'Everything I Wanted' Was Originally About a Much Darker Subject" published by Billboard online, reports how the singer shared a dream of her dying to her brother Finneas, a singer-songwriter himself. After due consideration, the song touched upon the bond shared by the siblings and their promise to each other (Aniftos). The lyrics of the song deal with the pressures of fame that can drive one to fatal ends such as jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge, which is mentioned in the song as well as hinted at through the cover of the single, an abstract painting of the bridge by Jason Anderson. As opposed to the struggle of being visible to the public eye at all times in "NDA," this song encapsulates the invisibility of the singer's struggles. She sings,

Nobody cried
Nobody even noticed
I saw them standing right there
Kinda thought they might care (0:58 – 1:10).

In another stanza, she discusses the hostile reactions and apathy towards her when she sings,

I tried to scream
But my head was underwater
They called me weak
Like I'm not just somebody's daughter (2:03 -2:22).

As she is engulfed by the questions of self-worth and survival, her brother offers her words of comfort. The verses, "...As long as 'm here/ No one can hurt you" indicates how the presence of the brother acts as a shield to guard her from the preying eyes of the people whose harsh criticisms infuse dreams of dying in the singer (Eilish 1:30-1:36). Billie Eilish's vision of death as an "ultimate way of avoiding sufferance in life" is explored by her through the music video which also features her brother Finneas (Giri 270). In her essay, "The Paradox of Mortality: Death and Perpetual Denial" Devaleena Kundu states that the very process of imagining the annihilated self confirms the existence of the individual as an "observing and thinking being" (12). Billie Eilish's nightmare of dying is an affirmation of the singer's existence. However, in the music video, she acts upon the thought of dying, which was previously a psychological barrier to experiencing death (Kundu 12). The video begins with the singer driving a car along a bridge, through a tunnel and finally on a road that leads to a beach. Billie Eilish drives along a straight path and plunges the car into the water towards the end. Her brother who is seated in the passenger seat is merely a passive observer. He is allowed to witness and be a part of Billie Eilish's dream without actually modifying it. After the car drowns, Finneas and Billie Eilish hold hands and smile at each other. As the water starts seeping into the car, the headlights switch off. What happens to the singer and her brother is not depicted in the video, yet the darkness of the visuals is suggestive of a bleak end. This signifies the complete cessation of thought and the absolute embracing of death.

Susan Broadhurst states that neo-gothic music makes use of destructive aesthetics (152). Billie Eilish's employment of such aesthetics works on the principle of making the familiar seem unfamiliar. The thought of destruction is infused with the lyrics as well as the visuals that accompany it. The intersection of destruction and liminal spaces gives rise to feelings of dislocation and detachment. In the music video of "everything i wanted" there are two different categories of components that bring out the destruction aesthetics. On one level, there are the tools that aid the destruction and on the other hand, are the elements that are actually sabotaged. In the first level, the road, the bridge and the tunnel that lead Billie Eilish and her brother to the beach can be considered as those that facilitate the destruction. On the second level, the singer and her brother are those who face actual destruction. The car performs a dual role in this

instance. It not only aids and acts as a catalyst in this equation of self-destruction but also falls prey to the destruction itself. This duality makes the space of the car a liminal space in its own right.

The movement of the car across different terrains symbolises a physical transition. The physical transition from a bridge to a tunnel and then to a road mirrors a deeper psychological transition. Billie Eilish begins with the line, "I had a dream" and ends with, "If they knew what they said would go straight to my head/ What would they say instead?" (0:26-0:28, 4:00-4:06). In the initial stages of the song, she seems to be conveying the content of a dream which was actually a nightmare. By the end of the song, she is in a state of quandary. She is sceptical only about what people would say about her but does not appear to waver in her decision of drowning with her brother. The vast expanse of the water creates a sense of isolation and foreboding. It resonates with the singer's feelings of alienation that sometimes accompanies fame. Conventionally, roads, tunnels and bridges are viewed as objects that connect and link passages, and thus have been associated with growth or progress. They have been used as analogies for the process of confronting and overcoming obstacles, both literally and metaphorically. Here, the roads, tunnel and bridge as depicted in the music video serve the opposite purpose of stunting the growth by leading to death. The breakdown of conventionality emphasises the unsettling quality of transitions.

One of the key features of liminal spaces is the idea of crossing a threshold. David Punter construes the threshold as the realm from which "it is, or might become, impossible to return" (311). In the music video, Billie Eilish crosses the border between the land and water by driving into the beach. The deliberate crossing of the boundary between two different environments signals the crossing of the threshold from the known to the unknown. Another defining feature of liminal spaces as previously discussed is the existence of the elements in a state of in-betweenness. After being submerged into the water body, the car remains suspended for a life, proving a glimpse into the reactions of the singer and her brother as they prepare to meet the end. The seeping of the water into the car and the headlights switching off hasten the process of destruction. No longer emblematic of control, the car functions as a symbol of gradual deterioration of life. In the liminal space, the original functions of objects are subverted as they take on newer unpredictable roles to perform. There is no struggle for survival or a hint of doubt which clouds the singer's face. As the duo anticipate the end, they accept the inevitable. The

submergence of the car exemplifies suffocation due to the pressures and expectations that the singer is forced to meet as an artist and a public figure.

As Paul Stenner in *Liminality and Experience: A Transdisciplinary Approach to the Psychosocial* notes, in the liminal space “the expectations and rules which normally lend structure and predictability to the practices of daily social life are temporarily suspended” (16). According to normative social behaviour, cars should not be driven on the shores, let alone into the water. Such an attempt hints at complete disavowal of social regulations. As opposed to the mobility, stability and sophistication that a car can usually denote, Billie Eilish here considers the car as a symbol for destruction, precarity and escapism. Instead of acting as a place for leisure or reflection, the beach intensifies the suicidal tendencies of the singer. The final scene where the car settles on the ocean floor highlights the descent into despair where her dream of dying has turned into the actual reality. It is quite strange how no one notices the car and offers help to the singer. The lack of help underscores the truth of the line, “Nobody even noticed” (Eilish 1:02-1:04). The suspension of predictable behaviour forms the basis of the music video and the lyrics of “everything i wanted.”

BILLIE EILISH AND BEYOND

In the introduction to *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, Agnes Horvath, Bjørn Thomassen and Harald Wydra refer to liminality as a prism through which “transformations in the contemporary world” can be understood (1). Although they refer to the transformations in an anthropological and political sense, their definition supports this paper’s argument that liminality can be used as a lens through which transformations (not as an event but as an aesthetic and psychological/physical phenomenon in this case) in popular music can be viewed. The examination contributes to the study of liminality by analysing the mental transformations and transitions between self and Other, life and death and ultimately, imagination and reality in the music videos of Billie Eilish. It also reconfigures liminality as a tool to study darkness in the popular imagination, either literally or metaphorically through the connotative meanings of the lyrics, adding to Susan Broadhurst’s formulations on how liminality influences contemporary performance. According to Broadhurst, a liminal performance can be described as “being located

at the edge of what is possible" (12). The analysis of Billie Eilish's music videos has revealed how the singer plays with the very idea of what is deemed possible by incorporating the uncanny. The edge that Billie Eilish experiments with is not simply a territorial edge but also the edge of life, sanity and safety. Moreover, it provides new directions for spatiality studies to enquire into how various kinds of spaces infiltrate into each other. The music videos of Billie Eilish highlight the fluidity of physical, psychological and the textual spaces and the effects of their convergence.

Research on music videos not only highlights the audio-visual aspects of the song but also point towards the direction of narrative structures, cultural implications of lyrics, economic underpinnings and social messages that are intrinsically involved in the production, creation and distribution. Billie Eilish's music videos restrain from providing all information and confront the viewer with "ambiguous and unclear depiction," a feature Carol Vernallis associates with music video imagery (17). As the paper has so far discussed, this ambiguity is a result of the confusion of boundaries and the maximization of the effect of the uncanny. It is important to note that liminality as a device is not limited to the music videos of "bury a friend," "everything i wanted," "NDA" and "Happier Than Ever."

The creative expressions of liminality can also be traced in the music videos of "lovely," "all the good girls go to hell," "hostage" and "when the party's over." Sung by Billie Eilish and Khalid, "lovely" was initially released as a single from the album of 13 Reasons Why: Season 2. This song also problematizes the safety of a home. The lyrics "Oh I hope some day I'll make it out of here" is juxtaposed with, "Hello, welcome home" which hints at the destruction at a psychological level due to physical confinement (Eilish and Khalid 0:37-0:44, 1:24-1:27). The visuals depict the singers confined within an impenetrable glass box-like structure and also rely on the water metaphor. Since the paper's focus was solely on Billie Eilish, the song "lovely" which was a single by both Billie Eilish and Khalid was not selected for analysis. The music video of the song "all the good girls go to hell" from the album *When We Fall Asleep Where Do We Go* follows a similar pattern of constructing the road as a liminal space from the music video of "NDA" while also borrowing the scene of injecting black liquid into the singer's back from "bury a friend." As opposed to the other videos discussed in the paper, this video shows the singer's transformation from a human to a non-human being. The serum that she is administered results in two humongous wings sprouting from her

back. She walks along a burning lane. One can also observe silhouettes of women dancing in the fire on both sides of the road. The song “all good girls go to hell” demands an analysis of biblical references and hence adds another dimension of subversion of religion to the liminal spaces, which is beyond the scope of this article. Further study on this song can explore the paradigm of saving and redemption by investigating how Billie Eilish operates within the binary of God and Lucifer, and heaven and hell. Since the music video depicts the transformation of the singer from the status of a human to a non-human, the notions of abject and monstrosity can also be understood in tandem.

There is also a possibility of equating Billie Eilish’s transformation to Frankenstein’s monster. In “The Monster Within: The Alien Self in ‘Jane Eyre’ and ‘Frankenstein’” Arlene Young writes, “Each is connected to a Doppelgänger, the monster to his creator, Victor Frankenstein...” (327). Billie Eilish re-presents herself in the music video as a monster, a kind of materialization of repressed thoughts, an embodiment of “inbetweenness and ambivalence” (Giesen 64). Her identification with the doppelgänger complicates the understanding of the self and causes the self to be “duplicated, divided and interchanged” (Freud 142). Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* proves that in the effort to represent himself, “man makes himself a monster” (Cottom 60). This mutation of identity can be associated with liminality as a space that allows monstrous transformations.

As opposed to the previously discussed music videos where darkness is an integral element in the construction of liminality, the music videos of “when the party’s over” and “hostage” rely on the transformation of bright visuals into darker tones by the end of the video. The setting of both the videos is an enclosed space with white walls and objects in white colour. It resembles a clinical space devoid of human attachments. There is no familiarity in the space to become unfamiliar for the effect of the uncanny to be realized. Hence, the traditional conceptualization of the uncanny (which can be mapped in the other music videos analyzed in the paper) is twisted. Interestingly, these songs employ the metaphor of consumption which can be further studied. The black liquid that Billie Eilish consumes in “when the party’s over” begins to consume her by invading the space of her body and bursting out through her eyes and mouth. The music video of “hostage” features the singer holding her lover hostage as she sings, “And let me crawl inside your veins” (1:03-1:08). The various levels of consumption, internally and externally can be researched upon, not

only in relation to liminality but also with respect to notions of embodiment. The research can also lead to the study of narrativity and technicality of music videos and shed light on the potential of music videos to reinvent the gothic tradition in the contemporary times by combing traditional gothic motifs with newer, technology-infused landscapes.

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