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## UNCANNY

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It. *Perturbante*; Fr. *Inquiétante, Étrangeté*; Deut. *Unheimlich*; Span. *Ominoso*. The uncanny is an unstable concept, and since Freud's seminal essay *Das Unheimliche* scholars have attempted to identify its specific qualities and distinguish it from the eerie and the frightening. The feeling arises when something familiar, ordinary, and well-known suddenly appears strange, unfamiliar, and even disquieting. Rather than a strong shock reaction, the uncanny involves intellectual and emotional uncertainty, blurring stable categories of truth and fiction, reality and imagination. This relationship with the potentialities of fiction made the uncanny immediately attractive not only for psychoanalysis but also for aesthetics; then, since the beginning of the century, the concept has branched out into various disciplines. Besides a sense of menace, the uncanny also exercises fascination and attraction. It is never totally repulsive, but its disturbing potential is also intriguing, and this feature differentiates it clearly from other aesthetic categories such as the abject or the disgust. Thanks to its capacity to defamiliarize the expected, the uncanny results as an ambivalent feeling, which, undermining habitual modes of thought and perception, can also foster alternative ones.

### THE ORIGINS

Although anticipated by Schelling and Nietzsche, the first attempt to analytically explain the phenomenon of the uncanny can be traced back to Jentsch (1995). He describes it as an affection due to intellectual uncertainty about whether something is animate or inanimate, alive or dead. However, Heidegger's and, above all, Freud's texts represent the most influential contributions for the genesis of the discourse about the uncanny.

In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger uses the substantive *Unheimlichkeit* (Uncanniness) to express "the fundamental kind of being in the world" (Heidegger 1996a: 256). Homelessness and homesickness are thus the essential

ontological condition of the human being, even if they are covered up by a familiar, tranquilized, and yet deceptive everydayness. In later writings (1996b, 2000), Heidegger plays with the rich semantic of the word. *Unheimlich* is thus the translation of the Greek *deinon*, that unifies three different areas of meanings: the fearful, which is overwhelming and yet fascinating, the powerful, and the "inhabitual", i.e. that which "move[s] out of the limits that at first and for the most part are accustomed and homely" (Heidegger 2000: 161).

The semantic dimension is equally central in the analysis of Freud. Since it was neglected by research in aesthetics, too focused on positive emotions such as the beautiful and the attractive, Freud aims to delve into the qualities of the feeling of the uncanny. This belongs to the brighter sphere of the frightening, but it shows specific features. Freud starts his reflections with a linguistic investigation, noticing the difficulty of translating the German *Unheimlich* in other languages. *Unheimlich* is, in fact, the antonym of *Heimlich*, which is not univocal, but "belongs to two sets of ideas, which, without being contradictory, are yet very different" (1974: 224). Along with the most obvious connotation of familiar, comfortable, intimate – connected with the root of the word from *Heim* (home) – *Heimlich* is associated with a second meaning, indicating what is concealed, kept hidden. By becoming extremely close, something familiar turns opaque and blurred, until it loses its contours and appears extraneous. The prefix "un-" does not simply denote a linguistic negation, but "the token of repression" (1974: 245), because the uncanny is at the same time familiar and strange, buried in the unconscious but always present and ready to reveal itself. With a famous quote taken from Schelling, Freud defines the uncanny as "the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light" (1974: 224).

In the second part of the essay, Freud analyzes concrete situations and things that arouse the feeling of the uncanny, considering literary examples and engaging in a long close-reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann's story *The Sand-Man*. Finally, in the third part, he examines the differences between the experience of the uncanny in real life and fiction. The conclusion is that the uncanny is due to the return of repressed and forgotten infantile material, particularly the castration fear, or to the revival of surmounted primitive modes of thinking of the human species, such as animism, magic, and the omnipotence of thoughts.

#### THE RECONCEPTUALIZATION IN FRENCH POSTMODERNISM

Remained overlooked for decades, Freud's essay was rediscovered starting from the mid-1960s, then, in the 1970s and 1980s, it experienced a phase of new conceptualization within French Postmodernism. Thanks to its intrinsic ambiguity and vagueness, the concept affirms itself as "a veritable goldmine for deconstructionists and post-structuralists" (Griffero 2021: 106), hence generating a myriad of readings. One line of interpretation uses the text to discuss the ambivalence between fiction and reality. According to Freud, the experience of the uncanny in literature arises when, in a text with a pretense to verisimilitude, an author breaks the promise of realism inserting fantastic occurrences: "he deceives us by promising to give us the sober truth, and then after all overstepping it. We react to his inventions as we would have reacted to real experiences" (Freud 1974: 250). In a line-by-line deconstruction of his essay,

Cixous shows Freud's impossibility to grasp the specific denominator of the uncanny through the method of psychoanalysis, thus admitting the necessity of turning to literary works. In this way, the uncanny becomes paradigmatic for "the mystery of literary creation and the secret of this enviable power" (Cixous 1976, 527), the paradoxical and elusive character of fiction, which can never be crystallized in fixed categories. Along the same line of thought, in *La double séance* Derrida dedicates three rich footnotes to Freud's text. Investigating the relationships between literature, truth, and imagination, Derrida underlines how literary invention always doubles reality. The uncanny characterizes "the endless exchange between the fantastic and the real, the 'symbolized' and the 'symbolizer'" (1981, 268), a process of continuing deferral of the signifier.

Twenty years later, Derrida gets back to Freud's essay in *Specters of Marx*, connecting the subverting feeling of estrangement typical of the uncanny with Marxist alienation and Heideggerian homelessness. In opposition to ontology, Derrida proposes a hauntology – a philosophy of the return of the repressed, of spectral traces recurring from the past to haunt the present. On this wise, Derrida inserts the uncanny within a political project, since the feeling, by destabilizing conceptual distinctions, "should disturb both the ethics and the politics" (1994: 174). An ethical and political reading of Freud's essay also leads Kristeva to claim that the experience of uncanniness "teaches us how to detect foreignness in ourselves" (1991: 191). The uncanny strangeness (*inquiétante étrangeté*) cannot be led back to a menace originating from the outside, but rather to the discovery of our disturbing otherness, "the apparition of the other at the heart of what we persist in maintaining as a proper, solid 'us'" (1991: 192).

Finally, Lacan addresses the topic in Seminar X, acknowledging that Freud's essay "is indispensable for broaching the question of anxiety" (2014: 41). Lacan focuses on the fear of losing the eyes, central in Hoffman's *The Sandman* and explained by Freud within his psychosexual framework as repressed castration anxiety. On the contrary, Lacan interprets it as fear of losing the subject's autonomy. As long as the subject is in control of his eyes' look, he feels as if he masters the world of things, framing it into a stable symbolic order. The uncanny takes over when the materiality of existence irreducible to a univocal system of signification (the Real) undercuts the symbolic structures. The subject gets the impression that the object of his glance looks back at him so that the distinction between internal/external, subject/object shatters. Returning to this topic in Seminar XI, Lacan illustrates his theory through a close reading of Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*. Thanks to the technique of the anamorphosis Holbein hides a skull in the composition, an uncanny distortion of the order space of vision that challenges the centrality of the subjective, "geometrical" perspective. By relating the uncanny with questions about gaze and visibility, Lacan offers a fruitful reflection for aesthetics, on which Didi-Huberman (1992) partially returns.

#### TODAY'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC THEORIES

Given its success in French Postmodernism, the uncanny transforms itself into "one of the most supercharged words in our current critical vocabulary" (Jay 1998: 157), with the effect of losing its characterizing nucleus and becoming "an insidious, all-pervasive, 'passe-partout' word to address virtually any topic" (Masschelein 2011: 2). As noticed by Windsor (2019), instead of being characterized as a feeling

(Freud), an existential condition (Heidegger), or an aesthetic category, the uncanny becomes only a critical tool that seeks to create an effect of defamiliarization by disrupting epistemic stability and semantic coherence. This approach can be found in Royle's (2003) first monograph devoted to the topic, where the uncanny takes on the traits of a vague synonym for the methodology of deconstruction. Following this tendency, the uncanny has been put to work in a myriad of disciplines: from architecture (Vidler 1992) to film studies (Spadoni 2007), from visual arts (Kelley 2004) to cultural studies (Collins and Gervins 2008), from literature studies (Weber 1973, Slethaug 1993) to queer theory (Palmer 2003).

However, there are also recent attempts within philosophy to actualize the concept without losing its original core. Some authors (Trigg 2012, 2020; Griffero 2021) draw a parallel between the feeling of the uncanny and the phenomenological method. Like the uncanny overthrows our familiar expectations, the phenomenological approach aims to suspend the natural way of seeing the world by drawing attention to the strangeness of things in their facticity. By bracketing habits of thought and experience, the phenomenological *epoché* is a non-pathological and potentially productive way of defamiliarizing sedimented perception patterns and "undermining everyday trust in the world" (Griffero 2021: 123). Moreover, while according to Freud the uncanny is evoked by the encounter with specific things, the phenomenological tradition (Heidegger 1996a, Jaspers 1963) considers it as a subtle feeling irreducible to particular objects and thus referring to a hidden intentionality (Fuchs 2019). This allows an interpretation of the uncanny in atmospherical terms, as a quasi-objective phenomenon proper of specific spaces and situations.

A further attempt to revitalize the concept is carried out by Rebentisch (2012, 2013), who translates Cavell's (1998) idea of the "uncanniness of the ordinary" from the philosophy of language to aesthetics. Criticizing Danto's ontology of art, particularly his description of ordinary objects in contemporary art as metaphors and embodied meanings, Rebentisch shifts the focus on the sensorial and material dimensions of the artworks. Artistic interventions and displacements, even if minimal, modify the identity of use-objects and move them into the sphere of aesthetic experience, making every element of their sensuous appearance potentially significant. While everyday objects typically lay unnoticed under the attention threshold, these artistic dislocations deprive them of their familiarity by fostering an active observation. Therefore, such an uncanny experience is irritating and subverting, yet not destructive or annihilating. On the contrary, it highlights the contingency and fragility of the ordinary, encouraging to enact alternative modes of perception and rediscover what has been taken for granted.

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