FREUD'S *THE UNCANNY*

AN EXPLORATION OF ITS UNCANNY POTENCY

Freud is curious. Only rarely, he suggests, is he to be tempted away from the serious work of psychoanalysis, but the subject of the "uncanny" has presented itself as a remote and neglected province of the field of aesthetics, and he feels compelled to investigate its provenance; thus his paper *The 'Uncanny'* comes into being.

Freud's compulsion - he "has" to interest himself in the uncanny[1]; "we have drifted into this field of research *half involuntarily*"[2] - is inscribed within the text itself, in its relentless and interminable pursuit of what Cixous characterises as "'something' - be it a domain, an emotional movement, a concept, impossible to determine yet variable in its form, intensity, quality and content"[3]. Within the labyrinthine movement of the text, she writes, "the scenes are centred and dispersed, narratives are begun and left in suspension … what in one instance appears a figure of science seems later to resemble some type of fiction. This text proceeds as its own metaphor …"[4]. The reader is both distrustful and fascinated in the face of such a rich but uncertain patterning of discourse, and we find it no surprise that *The 'Uncanny'* has exercised a strange attraction over literary critics, critical theorists, architectural theorists, psychoanalysts, cultural commentators, philosophers, and others upon whom we call to quilt together the discipline of 'cultural studies'.

In *The 'Uncanny'*, Freud, says Derrida, is "more than ever attentive to undecidable ambivalence, to the play of the double, to the endless exchange

between the fantastic and the real, the 'symbolized' and the 'symbolizer', to the process of interminable substitution"[5].   Attentive Freud may be, but disregarding the inherently unstable nature of the object of his enquiry, he appears interested only in closure, in pinning down and draining the 'uncanny' of that which is constitutive.

Freud's project is to find "the common core which allows us to distinguish as 'uncanny' certain things which lie within the field of what is frightening"[6], and his method is two-fold; to find the meaning attached to the term 'uncanny' throughout its history, and "to collect all those properties of persons, things, sense-impressions, experiences and situations which arouse in us the feeling of uncanniness, and then infer the unknown nature of the uncanny from what all these examples have in common"[7].

During the course of the collecting expedition which forms the second of his methodological attacks, Freud tries to locate various necessary and sufficient conditions for the eruption of the uncanny experience. For example, for something to be uncanny, it is necessary that it is "something which is secretly familiar, which has undergone repression and then returned from it"; but this is not sufficient, for "not everything that fulfils this condition … is on that account uncanny"[8]. What is necessary for the *experienced* uncanny - when "infantile complexes which have been repressed are once more revived by some impression, or when primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed"[9] - is not so for the *fictional* uncanny, because whereas the confirmation of a surmounted belief depends upon comparison of experience with reality, the "realm of phantasy depends for its effect on the fact that its content is not submitted for reality-testing"[10].

The attempt to locate a definitive circumstance for the uncanny ranges over Freud's personal experience, fiction, case study, psychoanalytic theory, myth; finally it is unsuccessful, however, unable to generate the closure that Freud clearly desires. But he is not on that account shy of concluding (and in fact the conclusion is stated before a step in the detection process has been taken) that "the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar"[11]. Not only that; a quote from Schelling extends the definition: "'*Unheimlich*' is the name for everything that ought to have remained … secret and hidden but has come to light"[12].

Further, Freud feels confident in detailing the associations, conscious or unconscious, that turn something frightening into something uncanny. They include the "doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self"[13], "constant recurrence of the same thing"[14], "animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man's attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex"[15], along with a special case of animism - "when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes"[16].

One further characteristic of the uncanny, posited by Jentsch but explicitly rejected by Freud, is the necessity of the existence of a state of intellectual uncertainty. Freud rejects this on the grounds that the conclusion of E T A Hoffmann's *The Sand Man,* the text which forms the case study for analysis in the Part II of the essay, leaves us in no intellectual doubt about our position as readers - about what "we are supposed to be looking on at" - without

disturbing the "impression of uncanniness in the least degree"[17]. But later, discussing the production of uncanny effects in fiction, Freud admits that one technique open to an author is to "keep us in the dark for a long time about the precise nature of the presuppositions on which the world he writes is based, or (to) cunningly and ingeniously avoid any definite information on the point to the last"[18]. This point is an important one, not only to instance the self-contradiction that permeates *The 'Uncanny'*, but also because it introduces the thought that, in his ambivalence towards 'intellectual uncertainty' and its relation to the *unheimlich*, Freud may in fact have suggested an essential feature.

I shall argue, in fact, that the essence of the uncanny is that it has no essence. It is a marker which comes into being in the gap (one instance of which is where we are intellectually uncertain); to quote Cixous again:

> The effect of uncanniness reverberates (rather than emerges), for the word
> is a relationsl signifier. *Unheimliche* is in fact a composite that infiltrates the
> interstices of the narrative and points to gaps we need to explain.[19]

"It is the *between",* says Cixous, "that is tainted with strangeness"[20].

To relate this directly to *The 'Uncanny'*: in his search for a reductive solution, Freud generates various pairs of opposed terms in the interplay of which his paper evolves: *heimlich/unheimlich*; psychoanalytic enquiry/aesthetic enquiry; the experienced uncanny/the fictive uncanny; psychic reality/material reality; repressed infantile complexes/surmounted primitive beliefs (what Fletcher calls the "personal uncanny" and the "social uncanny"[21]). These opposed terms constantly overlap and shift into different registers in relation to one another, even while Freud is searching for the definitive uncanny core. Stable

relationships do not hold between them; there is constant slippage and displacement, repetition, doubling and mirroring. The categories that are called upon to explain the uncanny are themselves uncanny, in that their instabilities create absences, gaps, repressions and empty reflections.

To test this thesis, that the uncanny is produced in gaps, I will be exploring ways in which it has been adopted by instances of discourse within architectural theory, literary criticism, and psychoanalytic theory, and demonstrating that there is always an element of uncertainty, undecidability, and absence at just the point where it is posited as an effect. I will also introduce the idea that a gap is inherent in the theoretical underpinning of cultural studies and its components, and that in this sense the discipline itself is uncanny. At this point, however, I simply wish to draw attention to this assessment by Anthony Vidler:

> A postmodern uncanny has been construed, the product of the rereading of Freud by Lacan and Derrida but also of the application of critical theory to the analysis of popular culture. For Lacan, the uncanny formed the starting point for his examination of anxiety, the very "image of lack"; for Derrida, the uncanny lurks behind the unstable links between signifier and signified, the author and the text; for Baudrillard its propensity for the double, for the elision between reality and fiction, its insistent trompe l'oeil, gives it a central role in the explication of the simulacrum.[22]

To turn first to the nucleus of Freud's paper, the *unheimlich.* In his first methodological attack, Freud presents us with what can be read as a paradigmatic Derridean exercise, (and our first example of a gap), demonstrating how the term itself is inherently unstable, and that a definitive meaning cannot in principle be determined. In deconstructive thought, to echo Vidler above, "the uncanny lurks behind the unstable links between signifier and signified"; the relationship with the signified is constantly deferred, and it is

impossible to arrive at a final term.   Freud traces the etymology of *heimlich* and demonstrates how the meaning develops an ambivalence, and eventually coincides with its opposite, the *unheimlich.*

The homely/unhomely from where the uncanny erupts has naturally provided a focus for architectural theory.   For Vidler, for example, the "disquieting slippage between what seems homely and what is definitively unhomely" opens up "problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence". The *unheimlich* has force "in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis"[23].

Vidler's focus, then, is the spatial uncanny; discussion of haunted houses, nineteenth century archaeology and its link with fantasies of burial and return, imaginings of the 'lost' birthplace and the deracinated nature of post-industrial society, are themes which shape his examination of a number of contemporary architectural and urban projects.[24] In particular, it is in relation to the "idea of an architectural monument as an embodiment and abstract representation of the human body"[25] that the uncanny is invoked.   The tradition of bodily reference, "the anthropomorphic analogy for proportion and figurative authority"[26] was abandoned "with the rise of a modernist sensibility dedicated more to the rational sheltering of the body than to its mathematical inscription or pictorial emulation"[27].   Recent returns to the bodily analogy, by architects such as Coop Himmelblau, Bernard Tschumi, and Daniel Libeskind, moreover, incorporate a body "radically different from that at the centre of the humanist tradition"[28]. It is now in pieces, fragmented, torn apart, mutilated, and poses "a

fundamental break from all theories of architecture that pretend to accommodation and domestic harmony"[29]. This body

> no longer serves to centre, to fix, or to stablize. Rather, its limits, interior or exterior, seem infinitely ambiguous and extensive; its forms, literal or metaphorical, are no longer confined to the recognisably human but embrace all biological existence from the embryonic to the monstrous; its power lies no longer in the model of unity but in the intimation of the fragmentary, the morselated, the broken.[30]

It is the loss of the body, and its recuperation into modern architecture in a radically deformed form, that provokes a strangeness, a response in the register of the uncanny. And as so often, the uncanny here is working on several levels. It is "the return of the body into an architecture that had repressed its conscious presence that would account for our sense of disquiet"[31]; and the return of the repressed has two facets - the seeming confirmation of surmounted primitive beliefs, and the return of repressed infantile complexes, particularly that of castration. "Dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist … feet which dance by themselves"[32] are given by Freud as examples of the uncanny, because of their relation to the castration complex. So it is not only that the repressed body has returned, but that it has been recuperated in an absent, castrated state that renders it uncanny. The breaking of the link, the gap, between the body and the productions of modern architecture, are, says Vidler, generative of "a fundamentally unliveable modern condition"[33], for which the uncanny, as an absence, is a metaphor.

"The uncanny as it is depicted in *literature,* in stories and imaginative productions … is a much more fertile province that the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that

cannot be found in real life" writes Freud[34]; indeed, around a third of his paper is devoted to the (selective) retelling of ETA Hoffmann's story *The Sand Man* and an analysis of its uncanny effect.

Neil Hertz, in his paper *Freud and the Sand Man*, foregrounds Freud's dual reading of the story. The first relates to its manifest surface, "in the interest of showing that what is uncanny about the story is … 'directly attached to the figure of the Sandman, that is, to the idea of being robbed of one's eyes'"[35]. By the end of the story, we know that Coppola is Coppelius is the Sandman. Within the logic of the fiction, Nathaniel *is* the plaything of dark powers, and "we are not supposed to be looking on at the products of a madman's imagination, behind which we, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth"[36].

Freud's second reading, however, as Hertz points out, is precisely the sober truth detected behind the products of a madman's imagination. In a footnote, "the psychological truth of the situation in which the young man, fixated upon his father by his castration complex, becomes incapable of loving a woman"[37] is revealed in detail, as Freud unpacks the various complexes, repetitions and doublings that characterise Nathaniel's subjectivity.

Hertz wishes to present a third reading, relating to the production of the uncanny effect through the intertwining of narrative technique and thematic concern[38], a theoretical focus born out of his position as literary critic. He argues that Freud has "overstablized" the narrative, effectively rendering invisible Hoffmann's narration, which is "vivid, shifty, and extravagant, full of assonances, verbal repetitions, literary allusions, and startling changes in the

pace, in the mood, and in the quasi-musical dynamics of its unfolding"[39]. There is a likeness, Hertz argues, "between the unfolding of Nathaniel's fate and the elaboration of a narrative, between the forces driving Nathaniel and whatever is impelling the narrator"[40]. The narrator appears in the text only after the reader has been presented with the three opening letters, to communicate his possession by the story of Nathaniel, and to impart his anguish at the difficulty of beginning to write it. We are "obliged to consider a compulsion that has been slightly dislocated", says Hertz, for

> it seems to be neither exactly exterior and 'daemonic' (in the sense that Nathaniel imagines himself to be the 'horrible playing of dark powers') nor exactly inner and psychological (in the sense that Klara intends when she reassures Nathaniel that 'if there is a dark power … it must form inside us, form part of us, must be identical with ourselves'), but something else again.[41]

Consideration of the intervention of the narrator, then, introduces a third reading, in addition to Freud's "psychological/daemonic" readings, which Hertz labels a "literary" reading. But Freud's reading should not yield to this other scheme; Hertz's point is

> "rather that a sign of the story's power - what makes it an instance of Romantic irony at its most unsettling, or, if you like, of the uncanny - it its availability to both these schemes, its shifting between the registers of the psychological/daemonic and the literary, thereby dramatising the differences as well as the complicities between the two."[42]

In the shifting between registers, in resonances within the gap, the uncanny is produced again.

It would be unusual if Freud's paper had not attracted attention by virtue of its psychoanalytic content, and here I shall explore Samuel Weber's approach to what he sees as a weakness in Freud's methodology, that when he is faced

with the "necessity of affirming the interdependency (of formal, thematic and causal factors) without having sufficiently developed their constitutive connections, he resorts to a genetic-empiricist derivation, which explains less that it obscures"[43]. In reply to Freud's pseudo-explanation of the causal relation between ocular anxiety and castration anxiety, Weber will posit an alternative argument, which he calls "structural"[44].

Weber traces the development of Freud's theories of anxiety; at last, "the particular anxiety which now became paradigmatic for the structure of anxiety itself was *castration-anxiety*"[45].   The implication is that it is not the return of the repressed as such which produces the uncanny, where castration is only one complex amongst others, but "on the contrary, the castration-complex now appears as the *nucleus* of the Freudian theory of the uncanny"[46]. The shift in focus, argues Weber, permits a synthesis of disparate elements and lends the theory a new coherence - but only on the condition that the castration complex is read in the correct way.

Weber brings into play here Lacanian theory, as it developed Freud's theory of castration. Castration is neither real event nor a fantasy. The child discovers the absence of the materal phallus, but this negative perception is nothing but a difference , "although no simple one, since it does not refer to anything, least of all itself, but instead *refers itself indefinitely*"[47].   Or to use Lacan's formulation, "castration inscribes the phallus in a chain of signifiers, signifying the sexual difference, but also as the difference (and prohibition) which necessarily separates desire … from its 'object'"[48].   Castration then is a structuring of the subject, confronting it with its unconscious desire as a violent

and yet constitutive difference, "preventing the subject from every being fully present to itself, or fully self-conscious"[49].

The implications of this characterisation of castration Weber hopes to demonstrate by discerning a "more stringent necessity linking castration to the eyes, in a much as they play a decisive role in the peculiar *non-discovery* of castration"[50]. The eyes present the subject not only with the negative perception of the absence of the maternal phallus, but also with the necessity to restructure experience, as the subject can never again believe its eyes. This restructuring involves the relation of perception, desire and consciousness, "in which the narcissistic categories of identity and presence are riven by a difference they can no longer subdue or command"[51]. The evidence of castration is violent, as it implies a threat to the notion of the totality of the body, and in that, disturbs the original narcissism of the child.

It is at this point that Weber return to Freud's text in order to position castration and narcissism in relation to the uncanny motifs of doubling and repetition. Freud, following Otto, discusses the doubling of the self as both an attempt to protect the self against death by duplication, and as a portent of death once primary narcissism has been surmounted.[52]. Weber extends Freud analysis, in that he posits castration as the structure which marks a shift in the form of repetition, from that based on identity, "the repetition of narcissism", to that based on "the articulation of difference, which is equally a dis-articulation, dis-locating, and even dis-membering the subject"[53]. Weber writes:

> What should have remained concealed and what has nonetheless …
> emerged, engenders the uncanny because its very appearance eludes
> perception, its being is not to be had, because it side-steps and side-tracks

> … by repeating, doubling, splitting and reflecting. The uncanny is thus bound up with a *crisis* of perception and of phenomenality, but concomitantly with a mortal danger to the subject, to the 'integrity' of its body and thus to its very identity, which - if we accpet the psychoanalytic theory of narcissism - is based upon this body-image as its model.[54]

which economically relates the uncanny to the gap - here in the crisis of perception - once more.

In conclusion, I wish to explore the uncanniness of cultural studies itself. In this I will be leaning heavily on the work of Christopher Herbert, as filtered through the paper "Prosecuting Arguments" by Andrew H Miller.

For Miller, it is "when an understanding of the limitations of theoretical arguments routinely accompanies their prosecution"[55] that the process of cultural critique becomes uncanny. The prosecution becomes self-reflexive: there exists on the part of practitioners "(an) inclination to foreground their awareness of the dilemmas presented by the uncanniness of their topic."[56]

Miller calls on Christopher Herbert's *Culture and Anomie* to elaborate. Herbert analyses the emergence of the "culture-concept" in nineteenth century discourse and finds it philosophically incoherent. While claiming to "ground itself in minute observed detail", it yet "moves in a realm of pseudoentities where "no positive terms" are to be found"[57]. Culture is defined as a structure or set of relations, a metaphysical, immaterial substance, a symbolic complex whole; it as such it is inaccessible to empirical observation[58]. The "fundamental incongruity between methods and object of study" produces either a determinedly referential language or a "brilliantly suasive figural rhetoric"[59] in response.

The form of cultural criticism is not the only area affected by the fundamental unease, which also "soaks down to influence the selection of its objects of study"[60]. This situation encourages cultural critics to analyse the "fantastic imagery of invisible forces"[61], "uncanny impulses and invisible frameworks"[62] located securely within psychology and the culture of the self.

> To grant a royal privilege to this category of invisibility as we automatically do, to define as most authentic that which is least accessible to direct observation, signals … a huge investment of prestige in various mechanisms of investigation - essential truth must be deeply hidden, otherwise what function can be performed by strenuous technologies of discovery like psychoanalysis[63]

In foregrounding questions of critical viability and self-reflexivity, Herbert is opening up the "distinction between the performative and cognitive aspects of the texts, between what they (or their authors) know and what they do"[64]. The "shifting distance between knowledge and practice" (the defining characteristic of "cynical reason", after Zizek) is seen as the defining characteristic of not only the analysis of cultural objects, but of the cultural objects themselves: the horror movie, for example, depends for its effects "on our simultaneous absorption and distance, our subject to the power of horror and our understanding that it is all 'just a movie'"[65]. "Culture", says Miller, "and not just its analysis, appears to be formed around the distance between knowing and doing"[66].

This invites a new phenomenology of reading, which would catalogue

> the uneasy and uneven apprehension of texts as theory and as narrative, as well as …a fluctuating uncertainty about authorial intentions. The discrepancy between textual knowledge and action is in this light a central theoretical occasion for the destabilisation of the subject in contemporary

> criticism: the author's inability to control the relation of knowing and doing, of constative and performative, means that readers cannot locate or accurately describe the author's positions.[67].

Responses to "cynical reason" tend to take two forms, characterised by reiteration and repression, and in that sense uncanny responses. Critics repeatedly revisit cultural history because any analytical situation is constitutively incomplete - "the sublime excess of culture" continually escapes the empirical analysis of the critic[68]. Or alternatively, they repress the fragility and provisionality of the discipline's assumptions, and proceed with a "blinkered methodological dogmatism"[69]..

In the sense that cultural studies is always trying negotiate the gaps, between theory and practice, between author and text, and between text and reader, and between the subject and the conditions of subjectivity, then, it is an uncanny field. The question is, whether we can negotiate our way out of the gaps, out of the impotence constructed by Miller, and into a politically potent position.

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[1] Freud, p339. Full references to works cited are to be found in the bibliography

[2] ibid, p 375 (my ital)

[3] Cixous, p525

[4] ibid pp525/526

[5] Derrida, p268, n67

[6] op cit, p339

[7] ibid, p340

[8] ibid, p368

[9] ibid, p372

[10] ibid, p373

[11] ibid, p340

[12] ibid, p345

[13] ibid, p350

[14] ibid, p356

[15] ibid, p365

[16] ibid

[17] ibid, p352

[18] ibid, p374

[19] op cit, p536

[20] ibid, p543

[21] Fletcher, p35

[22] Vidler, p9

[23] ibid, pix

[24] ibid, pxi

[25] ibid, p70

[26] ibid

[27] ibid

[28] ibid

[29] ibid, p71

[30] ibid, p70

[31] ibid, p79

[32] op cit, p366

[33] op cit, px

[34] op cit, p372

[35] Hertz, p302

[36] op cit, p352

[37] ibid, p354 (n)

[38] Hertz, p304

[39] ibid

[40] ibid pp307/308

[41] ibid, p308

[42] ibid, p313

[43] Weber, p1109

[44] ibid, p1110

[45] ibid, p1111

[46] ibid

[47] ibid, p1112

[48] ibid

[49] ibid

[50] ibid, p1113

[51] ibid

[52] op cit, pp356/357

[53] op cit, p1114

[54] ibid, p1131

[55] Miller, p180

[56] ibid, p164

[57] C Herbert, *Culture and Anomie,* Chicago, 1991, p21, quoted in Miller, p165

[58] ibid, p165

[59] ibid, p 165/166

[60] ibid, p166

[61] ibid, p13, quoted in Miller, p166

[62] ibid, p16, quoted in Miller, p166

[63] ibid, p255, quoted in Miller, p166

[64] Miller, p168

[65] ibid

[66] ibid, p169

[67] ibid

[68] ibid, p179

[69] ibid, p180

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