




An Unheimlich Media: Bringing the Uncanny into the World

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Abstract. This paper looks at how the uncanny has become a fundamental element in the creation of media art. How the juxtaposition of desperate elements has become central to how we understand the creation of meaning in contemporary culture. It traces how the idea of the uncanny has developed in Western culture and how it has our changing idea of Otherness has influenced and been influenced by the uncanny in the form of montage. Lastly it looks at examples of how contemporary media works as 'pataphysical objects embody the uncanny.

Keywords: The uncanny · Media art · Montage · Martin Buber · Emmanuel Lévinas · Freud · Pataphysics

1 Introduction

Since the invention of photography, we have entered the age of media art and mass media. How we encounter and relate to images and sound has transformed how we experience the world. It has allowed us to see beyond our direct environment and has allowed us to experience the world beyond our physical presence. As such it has concretised Otherness, that which is not the self, as an active agent in our lives. As new mediums have developed this relationship with Otherness has changed. We have moved away from Cartesian thinking, the self is paramount and Otherness is at best a reflection back on the self if not an obstacle to the self [1]. Our devices, the photograph, film, video the smart phone has made us face Otherness as the reality that defines us. In order to understand how we live within otherness we have to understand how it functions and how those forces have moved us away from fearing the other to facing otherness as part of reality. Starting from the classic Freudian understanding of the unheimlich, the uncanny, as a source of terror moving through to an understanding of the montage as a way of using the uncanny as a way for us to face the other. We will see how the uncanny relates to this and how our relationship to the uncanny has changed as we have embraced the Otherness in our cultures.

2 The Uncanny and Montage

2.1 The Unheimlich

Sigmund Freud wrote about what the nature of the uncanny in its various forms in his essay of the same name. [2] the word he used for uncanny was *unheimlich* in German and started the essay with a detailed look at its various meanings. It translates as the unfamiliar or literally the unhomey. Implying the importance of familiarity and comfort to a sense of personal identity. Conversely saying that the unfamiliar is a threat to one's sense of self. Further saying that we naturally shy away from the unfamiliar because we find it threatening. For Freud the confronting of the other in the form of the uncanny is a challenge to the ego. It takes the form of confusing the internal (the ego) with the external (the other). As such the emphasis on the idea of terror and a threat to one's sense of personal identity may seem out of proportion in relation to our standards. It is still grounded on Cartesian idea of self. Where Being is grounded in an idea of a self that is singular and its relation to the other is secondary. In this view otherness is either a threat to the sovereignty of the self or it is a necessary inconvenience that we must come to terms with to survive while persevering our identity. For Freud, although we live in a world of otherness, the other possess a threat to the self and the issue is if we allow it to overwhelm us or not.

It is important to note that Freud's essay was written as narrative cinema was being developed and reflects a pre-media view of how we experience the world. It was written before media was a part of how we form our own identity and how it has changed our understanding of the relationship of the individual to others and Otherness.

What is interesting for us in Freud's work is how he defines what works possess the uncanny and why. He states that "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality." [2]. He goes on to say that different works that may possess the same unreal or magical effects or imagery may not be uncanny. He refers specifically to "fairy-tales" as an example of works that do not possess the uncanny. They are complete worlds unto themselves and as such what would seem to be uncanny in our world is just part of the logic of that world. Upsetting the sense of identity for characters in such a world is impossible because what would seem unworldly to us is normal in that world. In A. E. Hoffman's *The Sand-Man* the events that happen to Nathaniel create an uncanny effect because the world created is the same as our normal world. While the events that happen to Harry Potter are not uncanny because they exist in a world where they are just as logical as ours. The uncanny is found when the logical world we live in (the familiar) is put into juxtaposition to something that disrupts it.

The uncanny, *unheimlich*, exists through the confronting or juxtaposition of the real with something that interrupts or contrasts it. The discomfort found therein is caused by this interruption making us view our own position to the real in a different way. It takes the real from being a given that we live into something which becomes a vehicle for meaning and makes us conscious of our relation to otherness. Such a situation is found in our modern media environment. As we moved from the early mass media of daily newspapers, cheap prints & books to the variety of media that directly challenge our

sense of time, place and the sovereignty of the self, montage has been a key tactic that has framed how we encounter the world. It has allowed us to experience fragmentation as being meaningful and made what Freud describes as a threat into a way to find a place for ourselves within society.

2.2 The Montage

About a century and a half ago with the coming of rotogravure cheap mass market periodicals came into being. In the early 20th century photogravure allowed images to be easily incorporated into the newspapers and magazine. Along with this was the development of cinematic language. A consequence of this was forms of artistic practice developed, the collage and montage. It was developed by Dadaists, Russian Constructivist and film artist. As a form it was interested in finding new ways of communicating a new vision of the world to a general public. While at times collage and montage have been used interchangeably, a distinction needs to be made in order to understand the intentions of the two different image making processes.

There were 19th century examples of collage in photography. Most notably in the Pictorialism of Henry Peach Robinson's *Fading Away* and Oscar Rejlander's *The Two Ways of Life*. Here desperate images were collages together to create a realistic image. The collaging of the image was meant to be hidden. The image was to be read in the same manner as the tableaux vivant as exemplified in works such as Jacques Louis David's *The Death of Socrates* or Gustave Courbet's *The Painter's Studio*. Such images were very easy to read because of how it related back to our reality. We can see a direct relationship between Robinson and David's images. They both depict the climactic moment of their stories, the moment before death, and they follow Diderot's ideas of narrative and tableaux vivant. In the case of Courbet and Rejlander, although they are tableaux vivant images, they are in the tradition allegorical paintings such as Raphael's *School of Athens* or *The Disputation of the Holy Sacrament* in composition and form. They tell a moral tales where the people depicted are there not as a part of a narrative, but for symbolic reasons. This type of photography, Pictorialism, saw itself as extending painting into photography and thus giving it the status of fine art. The use of collage here is to take various images and recreate them into a new image that maintains the language of realism. It is this aspect of what a collage is that I want to distinguish from montage. While montage is a subset of collage, montages allow the viewer to be aware of juxtaposition of the disparate elements that create it. It disrupts the visual plane so that meaning is found through the interrelationship of the various elements as they come together into a new whole.

The Dadaists and Surrealist used montage to find a new visual language that moved beyond the rational and objective world. Trying to find a way of making sense of a world where pure reason had been torn asunder by the irrational chaos of the First World War. In the Dadaists and Surrealists cases they were invoking the irrational. While the Constructivists wanted to find a new vision for a new society. For them the new images had to upset the traditional pictural language, just as their political revolution had the Czarist system. We can see this in the work of the Constructivists like the Stenberg brothers, Alexander Rodchenko and Lyubov Popova, to name a few. In the Western left-wing press artists like John Heartfield were using collage as political commentary.

These types of photomontage worked through the creation of juxtapositions that were contradictory, associative or had a visual continuity that created a new visual world. Meaning was created through how the disparate images came together; the new image's meaning is formed by the relationship of the elements to each other creating a message not found in the original images. In this way photomontage works similarly to Gilles Deleuze explanation of the function of cinematic montage [3]. The significant difference being that cinematic montage can be used to create a seamless feeling of reality and photomontage emphasises the disparity of images.

The nature of these juxtapositions of disparate images is to create an effect that is uncanny. It is the disruptive nature of the final image that makes one stop and question what was happening in the image and what its greater meaning is. Photomontage assumed that the viewer approached the image much like a text. They created works that were meant to be read like a text. Much like Western advertising would do later, they tended to incorporate text into the montages to regulate the meaning of the montage. As a political tool it has had great effect as commentary on the world. We can see this in the works of not only Heartfield in the 1930s, but more recently in the work of contemporary artists such as Peter Kennard, Hans Haacke and Krzysztof Wodiczko. The Surrealist drew directly from Freud and his theories of the unconscious and the uncanny. In their hands, the montage was more derived from the artist's discovering an unconscious that runs under the surface of their psyche. Their images were more confounding in meaning, tended to incorporate text as title for a work and be less interested in an easily derived meaning from the work; being more ambiguous images.

In both cases, photomontage was used to bring out meaning lying below the surface. It presented us with a strange world residing within our ordinary one. Reflecting on and critiquing the real as we experience it. As such they were linked to the idea of the uncanny. Its uncanniness is what activates it as a form.

Where the Freudian *unheimlich* has been interpreted as one's relation to dread or terror, in this paper the aim is to look at the uncanny as the facing of otherness as being beyond interpretation and control, dislocation and the unease this causes.

3 Montage and Otherness

3.1 The Self and the Other

Common to Kant's sublime and Freud's uncanny is a confrontation between the self and an otherness bigger than the self. For both of them this confrontation invokes dread and fear. It questions the idea of the self as singular and Being as supreme. It exposes the possibility of Otherness being prior to and fundamental to the establishment of Being. This idea of the self as unique and supreme to world grounded in the Cartesian *cogito* and the establishment of the subjective as identity. The statement, 'I think therefore I am' first defines the speaker as subject and then acknowledges the speaker through self-reflection. I am the subject of the statement and my subjectivity is enunciated. I exist because I can state that I exist. It is propositions that are linked up naturally, because if it is true that a statement is produced by a subject, then for that very reason this subject will be divided into the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement." [1]. The cogito establishes the importance and supremacy of the self in the world. What we encounter,

how we encounter it is based on this split between the subject and an enunciation that goes back to the subject. In Cartesian terms all thought and experience comes from the interaction of the subject with the world. Our desire or *jouissance* comes from how we encounter the world on the one hand, but also how we incorporate it back to ourselves as subject. It acknowledges the world while trying to subsume it to the self. This is why for both Kant and Freud the first reaction to facing the reality of Otherness is terror. Because it cannot be subsumed into the self, it challenges how they have constructed identity and terror is a reaction that goes beyond reason. Otherness is seen as a challenge to the sovereignty of the self which Kant resolves in the divine. For Freud this challenge is subsumed back into the ego. Thus, defusing its threat. In both cases encountering the others or the Other does not challenge supremacy of the cogito. We make our way in the world despite the fact that there are others. The relationship of Otherness.

3.2 The Uncanny as Facing Otherness

In the 20th century a different understanding of the Other was developed. Finding the cogito to be a fallacy it posited that we are defined through our relationship to the Other not despite it. This view of being as in relation to the Other is posited by Martin Buber in *I and Thou*. Cartesian thought sees the self as subjective and the world as objective. Being in the world is interacting with a series of objects as an I-It relationship. Others may be animate, but they remain as It to us. Buber replaces that with I, You and It. For him the I-You relationship is one of dialog and mutual interdependence. We are defined through our interaction with others one which creates a space in between. “There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It.” [4]. The I-It is the world as we experience in relation to goals. The I-You is experience as relation. “The world as experience belongs to the basic word I-It. The basic word I-You establishes the world of relation.” [4]. I-You is defined by relation and not turning that which is before you into a means to an end. For media art practice, this means that even though an image or work is a thing for Buber we can still enter into an I-You relationship.

Emmanuel Lévinas further elaborated on the I-You concept into a fuller understanding of our being-in-the-world as not just a relation with the other, but that we as individuals bare a responsibility for the Other. Taking from Martin Heidegger, the importance of existence of self as being-in-the-world. He moves further to our being-for-the-world. For him we are not merely in relation with the other, but we exist because of and for the Other. Our living in the world can only happen as part of the interrelationship with reality that we call the world. That we come from the other and form the self in relation to the other means that as much as it is responsible for us, we in turn are responsible to it [5]. The means that we must enter into relationship with it without reducing its otherness to symbols or themes. We have to face otherness in its reality. We first experience what the montage as a whole, we look at it in its face only then can we come to terms with it and start to ask what it wants to tell us.

This is in very direct contrast to Freud whose process is to reduce our encounters with the other to understandable symbols and themes. It is in this in this irreconcilable tension between having to face the other in its reality, beyond meaning, and the desire to reduce those encounters to symbols that have meaning to the self that is the source of the

terror and threat Freud writes about. The terror of the uncanny is found in the inability to face being in the world with the Other.

With the invention of montage, we find that the confrontation of desperate elements with each other creates a new way of presenting meaning. We can see the relationship between montage and to Buber's idea of dialog. On one level conversation is the centre of montage, both between the elements in the image and between the montage and the viewer. On top of this, Lévinas' contention is that we have to face the other head on as something that we cannot reduce to a sign or read just as signification. If we look at montage as a vehicle for communication, we see that the uncanny is the excess that brings us face to face with the work as an experience.

It is a method grounded in a view where we exist because of our being-in-the-world not despite it.

4 The Uncanny as an Artistic Form

The uncanny as a manifestation in art and design is asking us to face that other and accept it as more than a projection of self or a threat. Instead, it presents questions of how we see the world and asks us to be present within it. The montage aesthetic is one that allows disparate elements to interact. They become other than their elements. It makes sense only in how each part makes the different elements face each other without thematizing one to the other. It is the coming together of the elements while maintaining an identity through a medium that gives these works resonance.

If as Lévinas says that the our relationship with the Other grounds us in the ethical, [6] then the uncanny's excess allows such works to function as art. The montage, especially as contemporary media art, moves away from simple meaning in the fashion of semiotics and becomes experiential. As works become more experiential in form they can only become complete works through some type of interaction. They exist through the effects that they present to the viewer. In this way they become conversational. As Freud reminds us the uncanny is an effect, it only exists when it is experienced. It is actualised in its becoming. For works of art we can say that is emphasises interaction as creating a relationship between the work and the viewer, that the situation is one created through being-with. As such the viewer is forced to face the work as another, the experience is an event, a moment out of time where we face the other in their fullness. Such an experience presents an effect that moves beyond programmed meaning into a relationship between the work and the viewer. Making meaning an act of being-with-the-other. And by doing so placing us in the world.

4.1 The Montage Becomes Presence

The nature of our relationship to the uncanny has been transformed by technology. As Freud stated that the "fairy-tales" cannot be uncanny, because they create a whole or unified world. In contrast the montage does use the uncanny because it questions the very idea of a unified or whole world. Starting with photography, we have been able to create images which are direct records of the real world. We have put these images into relation to each other and the viewer to create new ways of seeing and interpreting

reality and our relationship to otherness (both people and images). As the technology has developed artists have continued to develop new practises utilising the idea of the montage. From the late Fifties and early Sixties montage started to move in two parallel tracks, the fine art world and independent cinema. In the art world the main focus revolved around Fluxus. Much like Dada before it, Fluxus questioned art practice and reinvented it through a montage aesthetic. They brought in different elements of the world into works by breaking down the relationship of audience to work through what Allan Kaprow called happenings. Where traditional works are objects to be observed, happenings are occurrences that happen in time and space. The work is the unfolding of a planned moment in time and space. They are moments when participants move outside of their daily world and the laws of cause and effect, to become present in a moment of direct relation to the other. The combination of disparate elements now incorporates the viewer, the image, time and space. It becomes pure presence where differing parts exist in relation to each other, what Heidegger has called *being-there* [7].

We can find this creation of the event as being-there in John Cage's *4':33"* (1952) and Nam June Paik's *Zen for Film* (1964). *4':33"* is a performance in which the performer doesn't play music, turning the ambient sound of the environment into music. While *Zen for Film* projects blank filmstock on to the cinema wall making is aware of being in relation to the machinery of cinema, the projector and film. In both cases there is an absence of what is expected in the performance experience which makes us question the nature of the form as well as an uncomfortableness in being present within the event creating an uncanny feeling. Common to both works also is a relationship to the technology of performance. Where we easily understand that Cage's work is never the same twice, Paik's work also has this quality. When a piece of film goes through the gate of the projector a mark is left. A piece of dirt or scratch will occur which demotes the physicality of film as well as marking the movement of time. This trope was later used by Derek Jarman in his film *Blue*. All three works exist as becomings and not as objects or performances in the traditional sense. They unfold via the relationship of the work and the audience.

The other direction where montage was developing as artistic practise was in the experimental and expanded film movements. The earliest experimental films to the 1920's made by artists such as Ferdinand Léger, Hans Richter, Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. They combined ideas of cinematic montage from Eisenstein and combined it with cubist and photomontage. Creating a new form of cinema. What they gave us was both the beginnings of independent film and a new less narrative film form. This was picked up by post war artists such as Stan Brakhage, Harry Smith, Bruce Conner who use visual montage as well as film makers like Isadore Isou and Guy Debord separated image from sound as a form of montage. For these artists, cinema was becoming a form of expression as unique as painting was for the generations before. Incorporating the ideas of the uncanny and associative thinking within their work, they set out to reinvent film to address the same concepts as the Surrealists and Cubists before them. These artists created films for the cinema. They expected their work to be seen in a blackened theatre with a seated audience. They pushed what could be seen on the screen but remained within the basic form of film. As they started film collectives and alternative

spaces, they tried to turn the cinema (theatre) into a parallel to the art gallery. Giving us a relationship of the white cube (the gallery) to the black box (cinema) [8].

Continuing with fine art practice the gallery was used as a space in which to stage performative events and to be the site of a new sense of montage as objects in physical space. Works like Hans Haacke's are made as dialogs. They continue the use of montage as a way of creating new understanding through the juxtaposition of disparate elements. A work like *Helmsboro Country* (1990) uses not only the 2D montaging of the Marlboro cigarette box with images of Jesse Helms a senator with financial ties to the cigarette industry and the cultural wars of the time, but by making it a three-dimensional object that is human sized the viewer is put in direct relationship to the work presenting the uncanny through scale and proximity. This continues through with artists such as Tiffany Chung, Kara Walker, and Tintin Wulia who use the physicality of the exhibition space to transform it into an environment.

Starting in the 60's with the development of small projectors for film and video art, gallery practice has combined with the expanded cinema movement. Expanded film saw the relationship between the image and the audience as being-with relationship. They called this intermedia. Today we now use names such as Mixed Reality or Installation for similar works. Artists like Stan Vander Beek were interested "intermedia environments [that] turn the participant inward upon himself, providing a matrix for psychic exploration, perceptual, censorial, and intellectual awareness; on the other hand technology has advanced to the point at which the whole earth itself becomes the 'content' of aesthetic activity." [9]. We can see that although the language used may seem dated to us, it is referring to the idea of a facing of Otherness as a method of expanding the consciousness of the self.

As imaging technology developed with video and later digital imaging, the white cube could become a place to present time-based images. The cinema as art space became absorbed into the gallery opening up the ability to create unique environments to present uncanny environments. Where the cinema or even the Movie Drome was fixed in form now each work could create its own form. Allowing a unique way to present the zone for the work and the audience to experience each other. Artists such as Gary Hill, Bill Viola and Isaac Julian have placed fragmented images into galleries as constructed space. They have used multiple screens as a form of fragmentation where it becomes impossible for a viewer to experience as a whole. This turns what in a cinema would be a passive experience into one where the viewer discovers their own relationship with the images before them. The experience of viewing becomes both uncanny and a montage at the same time. Julian even calls his method multiscreen montage. It is this being-with which defines the work. Taking this in a different direction, people like Nam June Paik, Tony Ousler and Daniel Rozin have create time-based media works that are more sculptural based. Works like Paik's *TV Buddha* (1974) and Rozin's mechanical mirrors use the media as a way of the viewer to find a level of self-reflection a way to understand the relationship of self to the Other. Viewers are turned into images of self that they experience as both being and other at the same time. These contemporary works be they multiple images, installations or image/objects all resonate because they have moved away from established form into unique objects. They have used a montage aesthetic to create uncanny objects to communicate to and with us. The individuality of

the workplaces us into direct relation to us demanding that we relate it as other to us. As other we first face it in its reality, as something irreducible to the semiotic order and only from there can we start to create meaning. It is the individuality of the viewer and the work, this facing of one to the other which creates an uncanny feeling, forcing us to face Otherness in its reality. Each object exists as a unique and particular being who we enter into relationship with. This relationship is uncanny and ethical, while the object in its individuality is also a 'pataphysical object.

5 The Montage as the Pataphysical Object

In *The Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician*, Alfred Jarry creates and defines as "pataphysics will be, above all, the science of the particular... Pataphysics will examine the laws governing exceptions and will explain the universe supplementary to this one[.]" [10]. We can say that the 'pataphysical is the uncanny brought to life. It is the creation of a unique moment outside of our normal life, which bares meaning on all those involved. It is not exception for the sake of difference, but rather the valorisation of the event. Doctor Faustroll's opinions parody scientific knowledge in a way that puts it in relation to its exception or opposite. His opinion is montage as thought. As a model 'pataphysics becomes a way of understanding and facing the uncanny not as terror, but rather as parody or even joy. It calls the supremacy of logic and reason into question. When we call 'pataphysics parody we do not mean that it is a joke as much as a way of using existing elements in juxtaposition to ideas of fancy or moving accepted reason to a logical conclusion which becomes absurd. As such it incorporates the same type of methods and tools as montage. The 'pataphysical as parody demonstrates that rational knowledge is always a reduction of the experience into a simplified form. Its function is to make us understand our assumptions of reality as being as constructed as any fantasy. It does not deny the Real, rather it reminds us that we find it hard to face and that we create explanations and frameworks so that we don't have to face it in its own reality. 'Pataphysically experiences are more real than explanations.

This is why Jarry and the 'pataphysical were adopted by the Surrealists along with Freudian psychology. From performative art to the Movie Drome and now site-specific art we can see how 'pataphysical has become a model for how art defines its relationship to the Other. That by creating something unique it can create a place and a moment, an event, where the experience of facing the work as other comes first and before any chance to turn the work into a semiotic object. The 'pataphysical aspect of this is the recognition that once we do turn a work into a sign, we have reduced it to a parody of itself. By using the montage aesthetic, contemporary art has tried to make come face to face with Otherness and by doing so they have created 'pataphysical objects.

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