

The Queer Uncanny

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‘I think that when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place.’ (Butler, 2004, p.27)

‘The queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny.’ (Castle, 1995, p.383)

Introduction

In a preliminary, rather than exhaustive, exploration of the contemporary role of the uncanny, this article considers the relation between the queer and the uncanny, focusing on how the ‘queer uncanny’ may offer new ways of problematizing notions of ontological stability and notions of normality. It seeks to demonstrate how the uncanny may work to destabilize definitions of gender and sexuality and raise questions about definitions of the human. Nicholas Royle alerts us to the significance of the relationship between the queer and the uncanny, noting that:

the emergence of “queer” as a cultural, philosophical and political phenomenon, at the end of the twentieth century, figures as a formidable example of the contemporary “place” and significance of the uncanny. (2003, p.42)

Through the notion of the uncanny, this article suggests, we may also attempt a queer critical reading that, following Sue-Ellen Case’s incitement, works ‘at the site of ontology’ rather than gender and identity politics hinged on representation (1997, p.382).

Freud’s 1919 essay on various manifestations of the uncanny provides a theoretical starting point for my discussion, and I will explore particular aspects of Freud’s thoughts on the uncanny that I believe may prove specifically fruitful and worthwhile expanding in terms of reading the uncanny politically, which is in effect what I am attempting to do here. For

example, the way Freud positions the uncanny in a liminal position, the way he points towards a problematization of ‘reality’ in terms of ideology, and the way he struggles to classify the uncanny in literature as different from the uncanny in culture are some of the more stimulating aspects in his essay. By linking it to contemporary notions of queerness, my discussion will contextualize the uncanny in historically and politically specific terms. Royle indicates that the uncanny is:

a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was “part of nature”: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. (2003, p.1)

As I will try to formulate it here, the queer uncanny is foremost conceptualized through its confrontation of a *heteronormative* category of the real.

Hélène Cixous (1976) points out Freud’s tendency to universalize the uncanny by assuming that everyone recognizes the uncanny in the same way. But Freud’s text is not without cultural and historical markers. The particularly strong reference of the uncanny to the homely in Freud’s writings may be understood as one such cultural and historical marker. It further indicates that what may be at stake is a particular bourgeois set of anxieties about family structures, family property, and family values. At the same time the focus on the home in Freud’s essay takes on a particular meaning in light of European race politics of the time.

As several scholars have pointed out, it is difficult to say exactly what type of essay ‘The Uncanny’ is.¹ The essay is, on the one hand, incorporated in Freud’s extensive textual production on psychoanalysis. However, if on the other hand, we pay particular attention to the close reading of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s ‘The Sandman’ (1817) that Freud undertakes in his essay, we may want to describe it as a piece of literary criticism. Terry

¹ For further commentary on this point, see for example Royle’s introductory chapter in *The Uncanny* (2003), as well as Castle (1995) and Cixous (1976).

Castle's (1995, p.4) description of the essay as 'a sort of theme-index: an obsessional inventory of eerie fantasies, motifs, and effects, an itemized topology of the weird', is appealing, though perhaps we should not think of the uncanny only as a literary theme or motif. Commenting on the essay stylistically, Cixous seems to suggest that Freud's text in itself may be read as an uncanny space:

[Freud] keeps his text in these indistinct and libidinous regions where the light of law does not yet cast its logic and where description, plural hypotheses, and all the pretheoretical games are given free reign. (1976, p.538)

So in a double action, Freud's essay both attempts an operational definition of the term 'uncanny', and through its inconclusiveness, indicates to us the elusiveness of the uncanny, which by nature is that which is 'to remain strange' (Cixous, 1976, p.529), and provides both a manifest (psychoanalytical and patriarchal) discourse and the possibility of a counter-discourse.

The liminal position of Freud's text, as well as the elusiveness of the term, has been highlighted here because it is my contention that it is in the suspension of a fixed meaning of the uncanny, as well as in the word's etymological movement (also something to which Freud draws our attention), that we can situate the queer uncanny, causing further tension between the two semantic levels and exploring its sexual-political potential. Firstly, the cultural and epistemological placing of the queer 'on the edge of', 'at the back of', 'in opposition to', and even 'underneath' heterosexuality resembles the relation of the *unheimlich* to the *heimlich*. Secondly, the uncanny effect of making strange and uncomfortable the world as we know it is an element identifiable both in queer theory and what we may want to call a queer aesthetic, drawing on both repetition and the carnivalesque. Lastly, by paying attention to the uncanny in the meaning of that which 'ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light'

(Freud, 1990 [1919], p.345), and which relates to the second semantic connotation of *heimlich*, meaning concealed, kept from sight and secret, we can see how the uncanny structures the cultural space of ‘the closet’ and ‘the open secret’.² D.A. Miller conceptualizes the logic of the open secret, arguing that ‘the fact that the secret is always known – and, in some obscure sense, known to be known – never interferes with the incessant activity of keeping it’ (1988, p.206). In other words, Miller outlines in his reflection the paradoxical structure of the secret that is known as a secret at the same time as the secret’s content is maintained. Further he points out to what extent secrecy works to both establish the dichotomous categories of ‘private/public, inside/outside, subject/object’ and maintain their hegemonic relation (1988, p.207). The open secret as, in this sense, a performative ‘structure of narrative’ is something that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick further develops in her discussion on the cultural meaning and epistemological structure of the closet (1992, p.67).

In what follows I will mainly focus on two aspects of the uncanny. Firstly, I will discuss anxieties about ontological boundaries and their relation to gender ambivalence in light of the recent theoretical writings of Judith Butler and Sue-Ellen Case. Secondly, I will revisit the metaphor of ‘the closet’ as a materialization of heteronormative domination, as theorized by Sedgwick, to investigate its uncanny presence in the domestic space and in social life.

Gender ambivalence and the haunted house

In Freud’s essay there are a number of indications of the uncanny as gendered. Notably the repetitive ‘haunting’ of castration anxiety for one, but also Freud’s particular anxiety revolving around female genitalia and the womb as uncanny. The approximation of the uncanny and femaleness is illustrated in a peculiar personal anecdote where Freud, lost and walking in

² For Freud’s elaboration on the etymology of the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich* and their relation, see Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, pp.341-347

circles, uncannily returns over and over again to the same red-light district of an Italian city, where the female takes on the meaning of the uncanny in the form of prostitutes, as if they were making him involuntarily return back to their street (1990 [1919], p.359). The anxiety of what constitutes the human, which is discussed below, is also gendered in Freud's essay through the example of the *female* automata, Olympia. The life-like doll in Hoffmann's tale is the idealized object of desire at the same time as she is the cause of Nathaniel's suicide. The uncanniness of the automata is in fact an idea that first appears in Ernst Jentsch's article 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny' (1906), and with which Freud later engaged.

Moreover, the prominence of castration anxiety in Freud's essay reveals an anxiety of an androgynous state of being that threatens to diffuse the borders of any gender categories as impelled by the heteronormative matrix. Put simply, any gender ambivalence in a person may produce uncanny effects in others. Further investigating how this may work to account for contemporary formations of gender identities, Steve Garlick suggests that a reading of Judith Butler's work on gender melancholia through the terms of the uncanny may help to clarify 'the role of unconscious desire within the reiteration and disruption of gendered identities' (2002, p.862). For instance, the repetition that Freud ascribes to the uncanny, Garlick argues, resembles the 'miming of the lost other' within Butler's theory on gender melancholia (2002, p.869). In a radical move, Garlick likens the formation of gender to a shelter or home from which the subject may construct an identity, but underlines the precariousness of this dwelling and, using the uncanny's imagery, asks if perhaps 'gendered identities are the equivalent of haunted houses – melancholic structures inhabited by the lost other?' (2002, p.861).

As outlined by Freud in his survey of the dictionary entries of the '*heimlich*' and the '*unheimlich*', the uncanny is etymologically rooted in the domestic (1990 [1919] pp. 341-347). Freud was fascinated by the word's

etymological transformation from the meaning ‘homely’ and ‘known’ to the ‘unhomely’ and ‘strange’. Throughout his discussion of the uncanny, the concept retains this etymological movement, or slippage, between the different meanings. The transformation of the homely, or what once seemed homely, into something strange, from the *heimlich* to the *unheimlich*, has similarities to an analytical process associated with queer critical theory. Within queer criticism the naturalness of gender, sexuality and heteronormative kinship is shown to be a constructed (and hegemonic) paradigm. The uncanny as an instrument of ‘defamiliarization’ thus relates to the critical tools of the deconstructive thread of queer theory in that it destabilizes the notion of the known and the knowable, undermining the position of the home as a stable and ‘safe’ cultural space and its symbolic function within a heteronormative economy.

It is the particular fusion of the familiar and the unfamiliar in seemingly contradictory ways that constitutes the uncanny. An uncanny feeling may arise when we unexpectedly identify something familiar in a strange context or the opposite, when we find strange things occurring in a familiar setting. The uncanny effect is not the fear of something externally strange or unknown, as Freud points out, but quite the opposite in that it is strongly anchored in the familiar. In his reading of Butler’s writings on gender melancholia, Garlick (2002) illustrates how this ambivalent uncanny effect is (re-)produced in the drag-act. The following section focuses on this particular part of Garlick’s article in which he discusses Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) and her notion of the melancholic formation of gender in terms of our culture’s (in-)capacity to mourn the loss of homosexual attachment. Butler presents a model for the construction of heteronormative gender identity that relies on a disavowed homosexual identity. For Butler, the homosexual taboo precedes the incest taboo and involves a process where the lost (same-sex) love object becomes incorporated as the melancholic other. This loss, or melancholic process,

constitutes the subject and could thus be viewed as an ontological aspect of human existence as much as an ordering of gender.

Butler's theory is that the drag act not only highlights the performativity of gender but also reveals how 'certain forms of disavowal and repudiation come to organize the performance of gender' (1997, p.145). Through allegory, the drag act dramatizes the process where the renounced feminine position (from which it is culturally possible to love a man) is inhabited by the man through identification. Garlick identifies this as the 'return of an unconscious desire' which the heterosexual matrix cannot allow to be represented (2002, p.872). From this he concludes that the drag act therefore not only reveals how normative gender is constituted through the process of gender melancholia or through 'disavowed attachments and unacknowledged identifications', but that it also allows for their temporary and highly uncanny return (2002, p.873). In Freud's words, 'the "double" has become a thing of terror' because to acknowledge it constitutes a confrontation with the limits of identity and of being (1990 [1919], p.358).

In her theory of gender performance Butler underlines the importance of repetition and rupture (1990, pp.146-47). Often referring to the example of the drag act she explains that the copy of a copy puts the category of the original into crisis. Further, the fact that the repetition in the drag act is 'out of sync' (and this is a key element) highlights the performativity. By making the fault lines visible the drag act also draws attention to the act of repetition itself and repetition is something that Freud clearly situates within the realm of the uncanny. Under the category Freud calls 'the phenomenon of the double', he groups 'the doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self', as well as experiences of telepathy, and more generally repetitions of the same thing (1990 [1919], p.356). He notes that 'whatever reminds us of [the] inner "compulsion to repeat" is perceived as uncanny' and furthermore links the notion of repetition to the image of the double (1990 [1919], p.361). Anything that reminds of these fault-lines

must, for the heteronormative matrix to remain intact, stay hidden and secret.

Queer unlife

It is true, as Cixous points out, that Freud clearly prioritizes Nathaniel's anxieties about losing his eyes (which he relates to castration anxiety), leaving the issue of the automata (Olympia, the doll in Hoffmann's tale) under-developed (Freud, 1990 [1919], pp.348, 351; Cixous, 1976, 535). Jentsch locates the anxiety towards the automata in the doubt as to, on the other hand, 'whether an apparently living being is animate' (or not) and, on the other hand, 'whether a lifeless object may in fact be animate' (1995, p.11). Freud also includes other states of being that bear a resemblance to mechanic or automated movements, such as an epileptic seizure or states of insanity (1990 [1919], p.347).

The aspect of the uncanny that Freud draws our attention to in his discussion of the automata is powerful also in contemporary culture as it points towards our ever-current anxieties about what constitutes the human and the non-human. Today anxieties may be caused by matters like: the interface between the human body and the (technologically sophisticated) artificial body; the medical technology used in our bodies; the increasingly effaced boundaries between the biological body and its artificial modifications; the inter-sexed body; the cloned human; the paralysed body; and the cyborg, for example. Perhaps we can also include here our emotional attachment and erotic relation to things non-human, and forms of remote intimacy such as an 'on-line' emotional life. The uncanny feeling caused by the doubt about an artificial living being, the artificially modified body, or even the non-normative body, reminds us not to take the field of the human for granted and highlights the epistemological aspect of the boundaries of the human.

In this section I would like to connect Freud's thoughts about the uncanny notion of 'unlife' with Butler's recent writings on how norms govern what is considered 'intelligible' life and when we defy the norms it becomes, to put it in Butler's words, 'unclear whether we are still living' (Butler, 2004, p.206). Further, I would like to suggest, using Case's notion of the queer as situated in the category of 'unlife', that by considering the queer as a challenge to the borders of life and death, natural and unnatural life, and the Platonic organism that 'defines the living as the good' we may formulate a critique of the notion of naturalness which works to sustain the heteronormative paradigm (Case, 1997, p.382).

As discussed above, Judith Butler demonstrates in her writings how the binary gender system, and indeed heterosexuality, forms a precondition for one's identity and observes that 'the very notion of the subject, [is] intelligible only through its appearance as gendered' (1990, p.33). As a consequence of this, to 'stray outside of established gender is in some sense to put one's very existence into question' (2004, p.27). The question of how a heteronormative organisation of gender defines and regulates the human in terms of gender expression thus evolves into a question of how a heteronormative organisation of gender 'delimits the very field of description that we have for the human' (2004, p.99). The idea of gender as 'natural' is one such delimiting statement that legitimates which bodies are considered 'real' or 'true' and as such it works to circumscribe reality in that the norm determines the field in which bodies become intelligible.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler asks 'what is it to live, breathe, attempt to love neither as fully negated nor as fully acknowledged as being' (2004, p.58). In this attempt to get to the minimum conditions of humanness or the conditions of life as the less-than-human, Butler points to the discussion on 'Homo Sacer' as initiated by Giorgio Agamben (1998) and taken up by Slavoj Žižek (2002). The difference between being called 'real' and being called 'unreal' is, for Butler, not only a question of a form of social control

but must, she insists, be considered a form of dehumanising violence. So it is in light of this that she calls for a social change and plainly asks what it will take to work against this violence from a human rights point of view: ‘what resources must we have in order to bring into the human community those humans who have not been considered part of the recognizably human?’ (Butler, 2004, p.225).

Lee Edelman (2004) takes a critical stance against Butler’s theorisation of the human possible, which he understands as advocating a wider, more inclusive definition of the human, and is something he queries as being neither possible nor desirable. Edelman’s point is that the queer *is* the abject, or in other words, that which cannot be included in any one category; that queerness can ‘never constitute an authentic or substantive identity’ (2004, p.24). He argues that the queer should be that which ‘refuses intelligibility’s mandate and the correlative economy that regulates what is “legitimate and recognizable”’ human within the Symbolic order (2004, p.105). So how should we understand Butler’s ambition to extend and expand the category of the human in light of her own theories of the homosexual as abject and her otherwise firmly anti-assimilationist view? Firstly, it is important to note that for Butler there is no meaningful reference to a human reality outside the terms of culture.³ Secondly, it may be a mistake to equate her willingness to suspend ontological certainties of what counts as the human with a plea for inclusion (which ultimately only serves to strengthen the hegemonic structure). The political dilemma is not a new one: within queer politics debate is ever ongoing regarding political strategy and the value of citizenship and the interpretation of human rights. Edelman (2004) argues that rather than expanding the realm of the human, which is Butler’s appeal, we should enlarge the category of the inhuman instead. We should aim to expose the human itself as ‘always misrecognized catachresis’, insisting on its unintelligibility (2004, p.152). Edelman’s line

³ Butler is also sceptical about the Lacanian category of the Real, which forms part of Edelman’s argument.

of reasoning thus opens up a possible connection between queer critique of unifying ideological structures and the notion of the uncanny. Moreover, following Edelman's account of how the queer has come to signify the negativity inherent in sexuality that heteronormative culture persistently works to cover up and forget about, we can see the uncanniness of the queer figure that functions as a reminder of the 'negative', non-procreative or 'meaningless' aspects of sexuality haunting the normalising heterosexual narrative.

A similar argument has been made by Sue-Ellen Case (1997) in her writings on the queer as a confrontation with the dominant notion of the 'natural' based on a heterosexist notion of being. Case proposes that the queer created a discourse that rejected (hetero-)sexual meaningfulness, 'revelled in proscribed desiring by imagining sexual objects and sexual practices within the realm of the other-than-natural, and the consequent other-than-living' (1997, p.384). Rosemary Jackson alerts us to the subversive potential of this position, proposing that the 'countercultural implications of [the] assertion of non-signification are far-reaching, for it represents a dissolution of a culture's signifying practice, the very means by which it establishes meaning' (1981, p.69). I would suggest that it is perhaps here that the queer uncanny manifests itself as a powerful critique of heteronormativity.

Case (1997) traces in an historical overview (reaching as far back as the 16th century works of John of the Cross) the significance of 'pure' blood in relation to racial and heterosexual discourse that privileges genealogy. She also investigates the upholding of the mother-as-life-giver within heterosexual feminist discourse and, linking the queer to the infertile and other-than-living, Case suggests that 'queer desire punctures the life/death and generative/destructive bipolarities that enclose the heterosexist notion of being' (1997, p.384). By appointing the vampire the role of the lesbian (anti-)heroine *par excellence* and underlining the alliance between the queer,

the monstrous and the unreal, her text anticipates Edelman's proposition that the queer should embrace the category of the inhuman (Case, 1997, p.388). Fully employing the uncanny categories of the un-living and un-natural, the queer *declines* intelligibility and violates the boundaries that are meant to secure the ontological basis of heteronormativity.

The dead (but haunting) metaphor of the closet

As mentioned earlier, Freud calls attention to the lexical ambiguity of the word *heimlich*, pointing in particular to its two different and paradoxical meanings; the familiar and the secret (Freud, 1990 [1919], pp.345, 347). This further evokes the idea of the uncanniness of the incident where something secret is exposed: 'everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light' (1990 [1919], p.345). Similar to what Freud has set out as a function of the uncanny, Jackson observes that the uncanny threatens to 'uncover all that needs to remain hidden if the world is to be comfortably "known"' (1981, p.65). Her point is an interesting one that can be further explored in relation to the trope of the closet. Building on the concept of the 'epistemology of the closet' as formulated by Sedgwick (1992) and Michael Brown's exploration of the closet as a '*spatial* metaphor' (2000) the uncanniness of the closet, and its spatial connotations of a domestic, hidden, and confined space, may be explored. This all relates strongly to the uncanny and the paradox of something unhomely in the home and the threat of revelation that Freud evokes.

The adjective 'closeted' means secrecy and the uncanny relates more specifically to secrecy and the structure of the open secret in that it symbolizes what is known and unknown at the same time. Sedgwick's investigation of the cultural meaning of homosexuality in relation to notions of secrecy/disclosure, cognition/paranoia, and knowledge/ignorance is an elaboration of Miller's writing on the open secret and the closet which he

conceptualizes as the ‘private and domestic sphere on which the identity of the liberal subject depends’ (1988, p.ix). Sedgwick argues that the trope of the closet is fundamental to homophobic oppression (1992, p.11). She also demonstrates how the trope of the closet and the act of ‘coming out’, or the ‘gay uncovering’, understood as structures of narrative, are fundamental to Western concepts of identity, gender and sexuality (1992, p.68). The structure of the closet defines the tension between secrecy and disclosure, ignorance and knowledge, and within this logic the notion of silence, as part of language, is rendered performative in the same way as speech (1992, p.5). Drawing on Foucault, Sedgwick demonstrates that, by the nineteenth century, same-sex desire had developed as the:

one particular sexuality that was distinctively constituted *as* secrecy [...] [S]ecrecy and disclosure, became not contingently but integrally infused with one particular object of cognition: no longer sexuality as a whole but even more specifically, now, the homosexual topic. (1992, pp.73-74)

Brown further explores the metaphor of the closet as a ‘geographic signifier’ (2000, p.1), highlighting its ‘manifestation of heteronormative and homophobic power in time-space’ (2000, p.3). He draws attention to the fact that the closet can be uncannily claustrophobic as a confined space and through the circumscribing effects it can have on a person’s life. Here we can draw parallels to Freud’s essay and to the uncanny imagery of being buried alive as well as the uncanny as situated in the familiar, i.e. the significance of the geographic location of the closet within the home and the domestic realm. Brown also speaks of the double life that follows the closet’s ‘ontological demands’: that you cannot exist outside the closet unless you produce a double that is what you are not (2000, p.1).

Though he successfully brings to our attention these many aspects of how queer and straight culture have conceptualized the closet, even suggesting that the current meaning of the closet metaphor may derive from

the expression ‘skeletons in the closet’ (2000, p.5), Brown does not in his discussion relate the closet to the notion of the uncanny. We can, however, productively link the spatial metaphor of the closet and its themes of ‘concealment, elsewhere-ness-yet-proximity, darkness and isolation’ (2000, p.8), to the uncanny, especially through the trope of ‘elsewhere-ness-yet-proximity’. And perhaps this is useful, for, as Brown argues, we can ‘never get outside the closet metaphor; we can only resignify it, or understand it with yet another metaphor’ (2000, p.15).

Conclusion

In my discussion I have aimed to show how the uncanny is linked to both psychological and social dimensions, and how we may read the uncanny in relation to wider political issues: sexual politics and notions of what constitutes the human. Exploring the dynamics between the two concepts of the queer and the uncanny, I have pointed out how the queer, like the uncanny, subversively ‘asserts a gap where one would like to be assured of unity’ (Cixous, cited in Jackson, 1981, p.68). Thus this article has suggested a way to begin to think about the queerness of culture through the notion of the, equally elusive, uncanny. Royle (2003, p.24) suggests that the uncanny ‘overflows’ both deconstruction and psychoanalysis, and I have here put forward the argument that the queer uncanny creates critical disturbance that draws on both these modes of thinking to question notions of normative sexuality and gender formations. Attempting to articulate a queer critique that moves away from identity politics, critics like Butler, Case, and Edelman have focused on the site of intelligibility and ontology in relation to the economy of heteronormative cultural fantasy. This project correlates to the image of the queer uncanny primarily through its resistance to a heteronormative delimitation of the human and haunting of the heteronormative category of the real.

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