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‘Where, meantime, was the soul?’ – The uncanny as an aesthetic image of impossibility

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Abstract

The uncanny experience refers to unsettling feelings when confronted with events that seem remotely familiar but still strange and opaque. It relies on magical thinking, as the experience seems to take place emphatically in the sensorial realm, partly lacking symbolic quality. In this article, I approach the uncanny as representing an inability to represent, revealing discontinuities and gaps in experience. I suggest that the uncanny representation can be approached in a creative way and turned into an aesthetic experience. The uncanny as an aesthetic experience enables a creative elaboration of being unable to overcome a gap. Thus, it can contribute to self-growth and deepening of a subjective sense of self. To illustrate the creative potential of the uncanny I look at two examples, one from literature and the other a personal account. I further elaborate the position of the uncanny in the field of aesthetics by comparing it with the sublime experience and suggest that the uncanny is a negative of the sublime. In the sublime, a representation of the infinite and unspeakable is formed, while the uncanny, in contrast, represents the impossibility to do so.

Introduction

In casual language, the uncanny usually refers to feelings of strangeness or mystery that seem frightening and unsettling. Being unsettled without quite knowing why, there may be a sense of familiarity involved that one finds difficult to understand. The experience is fleeting and immediate – the uncanny consists of being obscure and opaque, a feeling of something *about* to happen. Uncanny objects often mentioned in literature include ghosts, mirror images, déjà-vu experiences, living dolls, human-like robots, and doubles. There is a mixture of doubling and difference: for example, an almost human-like robot may engender uncanny feelings, while a clearly different one doesn't have this effect.[1]

The uncanny has received much attention in various fields of humanistic study, Freud's (1919) well-known essay being a major influence. The definition of the concept has been evidently difficult. As ffytche (2012) notes, the criticism for theorization of the uncanny often focuses on it being ubiquitous – to the point that everything that is "other" or "liminal" is categorized as uncanny. Its essence seems indeed to be a certain reluctance to position itself firmly – for Masschelein (2011), it is an "unconcept" (p. 7) that doesn't locate itself but stays in between things.

Despite the weight of Freud's essay on later theorizing in the humanities, the uncanny has remained somewhat peripheral within the psychoanalytic spheres. ffytche (2012) even expresses his view that it can no longer be considered a psychoanalytic concept. It hasn't been rejected in psychoanalytic thinking, however, being related to concepts like abjection (Kristeva, 1982). Recent contributions emphasize, for example, its depersonalizing qualities (de M'Uzan,

[1] This is often cited as an example of the uncanny valley effect, the "valley" referring to a decrease in comfort as the similarity of the robot to a human increases.

2009/2013; Kohon, 2016) and its connection to unrepresented experience (Botella and Botella, 2005; Cassorla, 2020, Levine, 2020).

The first psychological study of the uncanny was by Jentsch (1906/1997) who interpreted it as intellectual uncertainty: when encountering something new one's presumptions are questioned so that knowledge of something and the paralleling experience itself seem to contradict, leading to an uncanny effect. Freud (1919) acknowledged Jentsch's contribution but emphasized the role of the unconscious: the contradiction between unconscious or developmentally early experience and conscious, present experience stirs an uncanny sensation. In this contradiction lies a distinctive feature of the uncanny, also noted by Freud: an experience of a mixture between supernatural and real. Castle (1995), pondering on the effect of Freud's essay on her thinking, places this crossing point to the centre: "What makes them [the uncanny objects] uncanny is precisely the way they subvert the distinction between the real and the phantasmatic— plunging us instantly, and vertiginously, into the hag-ridden realm of the unconscious" (p.6). This crossroads is also where I place my emphasis: the uncanny experience lacks, at least partly, an "as if" or a symbolic quality. Thus, it seems to refer to overwhelming or unimaginable mental content that one is not able to represent and integrate in the continuity of self-experience. There is a sense of the uncanny event "actually" taking place in the sensory realm. For example, Parsons (2014) notes a personal uncanny experience (that I will return to later) being "more than just fantasy" (p.53). This vacillation between real and symbolized relates to the role of magical thinking in the uncanny: for example, a strange coincidence may seem to hold actual, magical relevance that connects external reality with one's psychological reality instead of expressing symbolic meaningfulness.

While acknowledging that the uncanny experience may hold several functions, my perspective is that of uncanny as an aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is here understood as an everyday,

fundamental aspect of being human, not limited to arts or beauty. There is a possibility of the uncanny experience to fade without further significance, to turn into a depleted, oppressive event, or, where I place my emphasis, to develop into an aesthetic, creative experience that intimately deals with one's selfhood. As an aesthetic event, the lack of representation that one contains is acknowledged, and the image of oneself as someone who is lacking can be creatively elaborated and included in self-experience. Here lies the central argument of the paper: by aesthetically elaborating the uncanny experience, an impossibility to represent is encountered and addressed in the form of an aesthetic object[2], adding to self-growth and a sense of being a subject. Here, magical thinking can be used creatively rather than defensively: it is in the service of insight instead of shunning from painful realizations.

The uncanny problematizes the relationship between the symbol and the symbolized: the simultaneous difference and similarity between them becomes a core concern in the uncanny representation. Thus, the ghost is both present and gone, the mirror image both self and other, and the déjà-vu experience belongs both to the past as well as to the present.[3] In this way, the uncanny reveals fragmentation that the self necessarily contains. As an aesthetic experience, the uncanny is a creative achievement, a recognition of discontinuities.

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[2] The aesthetic object consisting of, in Hagman's (2005) words, "a phenomenon (an object, event, sound, or other perception) or a set of phenomena (a group of objects, a sequence of events, a melody, or a complex structure of perceptions) that is/are felt to possess perfection or ideal form" (p.15).

[3] A close psychoanalytic concept is that of the aesthetic conflict (Melzer & Williams, 1988), or the dawning awareness of the (m)other's unattainable psyche beyond direct sensory experience, and the experienced asynchrony between the sensuous, "known" body of the mother and the hidden, "unknown" psychological self of the mother.

In the following, I look at the uncanny as a liminal experience, essentially expressing a boundary between experience that is felt to be a part of the self and experience that seems to exclude the self. After that I discuss the uncanny from the perspective of aesthetic experience and use two examples to illustrate this. Subsequently, I propose my main argument of the uncanny aesthetic experience representing an inability to represent. I elaborate on this by looking at a closely related concept of sublimity and suggest that the uncanny is a negative of the sublime experience.

The uncanny and liminality

Being between things seems to be an essential condition for the experience of the uncanny. "It is the *between* that is tainted with strangeness", notes Cixous (1976/2011, p.33, emphasis in the original). The uncanny experience is at home in the gap – the ghost is both dead and alive, familiar in being another "subject" but fundamentally changed into something else. This is stressed by Masschelein (2011): the logic of "either/or" transforms into "neither/nor" or "and/and" (p.8) as the uncanny stays in between things, not locating itself firmly. Freud (1919) notes how the uncanny emerges in silence, solitude, and darkness (p.246).[4] There may be a feeling of repetition, especially visible in the déjà-vu experience. Both familiar and unfamiliar, the uncanny is a realm of intangible uncertainty, unease, and possibly dread. For Alparone and La Rosa (2020) the uncanny is "[g]eneral uneasiness" …"[that puts] in crisis the harmonic relationship that the subject typically has with reality" (p.33). Indeed, in the uncanny experience one's sense of self "may seem strangely questionable" (Royle, 2003, p. 2). There is a presentiment of something about to happen that has not yet taken place, an emergence of an event one only vaguely anticipates (see Kohon, 2016,

[4] He explains this by them being little children's usual subjects of fear.

p.13). This indefiniteness creates a feeling of being in the middle of a strange event, not recognizing its full meaning and purpose.

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Premature Burial" (1844/1995) the narrator ponders on the mystery of physical states where all life has seemingly left the body, yet it remains alive: "The silver cord was not forever loosed, nor the golden bowl irreparably broken. But where, meantime, was the soul?" (p. 56). What happens to the person in this state, visiting a death-like condition before recovering back to wakefulness? The narrator himself suffers from an unknown disorder where he occasionally slips into a swoon, a sort of a lethargic trance where all vital functions drop to the minimum. Owing to this, he is obsessionally terrified of being buried prematurely, making careful arrangements with friends should this happen. During one fit, he has a vision of an unrecognizable being grasping him by the wrist, telling him to arise. Demanding to know who the strange creature is, he hears its reply: "I have no name in the regions which I inhabit" (p. 64). The creature shows him the landscape with countless open graves. Many of their inhabitants show signs of feeble movement until their graves are closed again, leaving the dead crying out in despair. It is a formless land between life and death inhabited by nameless beings that is deeply dreaded by the protagonist.[5]

[5] Freud (1919, p. 244) attributes the fear of being buried prematurely to the fantasy of prenatal existence. Be that as it may, I think that the uncanny aspect here refers to being on the verge of losing one's boundaries by submitting to a greater force, that is, being enveloped in impenetrable darkness and insurmountable physical limit. One is confined to the zone between life and death, or between being a self and ceasing to exist as a self – somewhat resembling the idea of the fetal stage but in inverse order.

The theme of an indefinable zone between life and death is not unusual in literature and art[6], also dealt in other writings by Poe, for example in "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845/1995), where a terminally ill man's dying process is prolonged by using hypnotism. The inanimate patient, in a mesmeric trance, is being asked of his feelings and wishes. He is able to cry out in agony: "For God's sake – quick! – quick! – put me to sleep – or, quick! – waken me! – quick! *I say to you that I am dead!*" (p. 18, italics in the original). Poe, with his profound understanding of uncanny horror, portrays in his writing the dread that liminality may arouse in us.

Freud (1919) attributes the uncanny experience both to emergence of repressed material – something once known becomes visible again – and to "forms of thought that have been surmounted" (p. 251), or to infantile beliefs that have been abandoned as the reality principle has gained in significance in maturation. These surmounted forms of thought can also be understood as undifferentiated self-states, or as experience before the emergence of a delineated sense of a self. This is what Freud implies when he refers to the uncanny as "a harking-back to particular phases in the evolution of the self-regarding feeling [i.e., the self-conscious subject], a regression to a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world and from other people" (p. 236). However, as I later elaborate further, this regression should not be viewed only as a failure in maturation but also as a creative effort where movement between differing self-states gives the opportunity for self-growth (see Parsons, 2014, p. 57).

Indeed, many psychoanalytic authors describe an uncanny effect when the self encounters its own aspects that seem alien. This is explained by the structure of the psyche: the development of self-consciousness is thought to bring about an experience of estrangement, the self being both an

[6] Kohon (2016, Ch. 3) explores this theme with interesting examples.

experiencing subject and an observable object (see, for example, Alparone & La Rosa [2020]; Kohon [2016, Ch. 1], Levin, C. [2012]). Uncanny resides in the "vague transitional zone" (de M'Uzan, 1976/2013, p. 28) between experience that locates clearly to the area of "me" and experience that seems more alien, unknown, and other.

The uncanny as aesthetic experience

Freud (1919) begins his essay on the uncanny with these words: "It is unusual that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics, even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of qualities of feeling" (p. 219). He goes on to point out that aestheticians usually explore aesthetic feelings of a positive nature (such as beauty) but rarely feelings like the uncanny which cause "repulsion and distress". Freud's note on the negative tone of the uncanny experience is easy to understand since at the heart of it lies sensations of alienation, detachment, and fragmentation, just as the word *unheimlich,* unhomely, suggests.[7] Alienation is perhaps not something typically associated with aesthetic experience. For Berleant (1991), central to the aesthetic feeling is engagement with the aesthetic object, even if the experience engenders negative feelings. Freeman (2012) as well argues that the key to art's effect on us is emotional engagement that makes us feel *at home*. The uncanny seems to point to a very different direction. How, then, to understand the uncanny as an aesthetic feeling? What are we engaged with?

[7] Freud's (1919) lexical analysis of *unheimlich*, though, acknowledges its less straightforward bearings.

The way I approach aesthetic experience emphasizes the following assumptions.[8] It is principally a healthy capacity that intimately and profoundly forms a relationship with the world/object, thus resonating with one's early caregiving experiences and the formation of the mind in a relational setting. It centres on the quality – form, rhythm, feel, and so on – of the aesthetic object rather than only its content, making links to non-verbalizable experience. There is a strong bodily aspect in aesthetic experience as it essentially deals with perception. For Berleant (2010), an emphasized perceptual awareness is a primary quality of aesthetic experience. Also, a central feature is idealization, where the experience of the self with the aesthetic object is felt to approach perfection, rendering it particularly valued.[9]

Approaches vary in how broadly the concept of aesthetic experience is understood to cover the bodily-emotional level in general, or whether it refers to a more strictly defined peak experience that stands out from the usual flow of experience. Both views seem valuable, although, for the sake of clarity, I keep to a more narrow definition in this text. In my understanding, idealization combined with the emphasis on the quality of the object seems to form an important part on explaining psychoanalytically what makes an experience aesthetic. Whatever the adopted viewpoint, the theoretical stances that I base my above definition on emphasize the contribution of the aesthetic level of experience to self-growth. It is not restricted to arts or beauty but functions as a more fundamental psychological capacity that is of central importance to the experience and

[8] For a more thorough psychoanalytic look on the topic, see Bollas (1978; 1979); Hagman (2005); Glover (2009); Rose (1992); Civitarese (2018); Handler Spitz (1985), Meltzer & Williams (1988).

[9] In literature, idealization often seems to be implicitly assumed as a part of aesthetic experience but surprisingly rarely explicitly acknowledged, perhaps due to its "background" quality or the negative connotations attached to it. Hagman (2005, Ch. 4), drawing from self-psychology, places idealization to the centre of his theory.

emergence of subjectivity, providing meaningfulness and depth to one's experience of being in the world.

Although Freud categorized uncanniness as a negatively tinged feeling, other writers after him have emphasized also its positive potential: Andrade (2007) mentions feelings of ecstasy, elation, and sacredness; Royle (2003) describes it as "something strangely beautiful" (p. 2); Parsons (2014) notes how the uncanny, mysterious and elusive as it is, is able to defy a rationalist ideal (p. 58)[10], and Alparone and La Rosa (2020), while describing it as "a sense of wonder mixed with fear and anguish" (p. 34) notice a possibility of the uncanny to turn either into growth or disintegration: "The experience of the uncanny is an experience that coincides with the very limit of subjectivity; a liminal experience that can lead both to the expansion of the subjectivity itself towards new openings and possibilities as well as to the definitive derailment of the signification" (p. 34). A similar possibility is noted by Kristeva (1991), to whom the uncanny is "a *destructuration of the self* that may either remain as a psychotic *symptom* or fit in as an *opening* toward the new" (p. 188, emphasis in the original).

Kohon (2016) dedicates a whole book to the link between the uncanny and aesthetic experience from a psychoanalytic perspective. In fact, for him, the uncanny is a developmental achievement, and being open to it presents a necessary aspect of any aesthetic experience: arousing a sense of derealization or depersonalization, the uncanny approaches the self's borders, thus engendering unsettling feelings, but also clearing the way for new experience. Uncanniness distances from the idea of a unified self, but at the same time, defying rigid boundaries, contributes to the ongoing

[10] This resonates with the idea of the psychoanalytic tradition moving forward to emphasize a non-binary or dialectical approach to experience – the "and/and" instead of "either/or" (see Aron and Starr, 2012).

process of becoming a subject. Similarly, the aesthetic object invites us to widen our vision, so to say. Hepburn (2001), exploring the life-enhancing quality of aesthetic experience, describes it involving a continuous, "inexhaustible emergence of the new" (p. 65). It presents us with new possibilities and enlivenment, but also requires tolerating strangeness and uncertainty. Acknowledging the unhomely in us will lead us closer to "home", or closer to the person we are and can become.[11] To perceive the uncanny as an aesthetic experience transforms it from being perceived as a mere dread to a creative achievement, something to value rather than avoid.

Growing up and giving birth – magical thinking in the service of self-growth

Here I will explore the uncanny by looking at two experiences, one from literature and the other a personal account, to demonstrate its creative potential as an aesthetic experience and its characteristic quality of an uncertainty between reality and fantasy. Both examples present an uncanny experience from a rather "benevolent" side of the spectrum as the sensation of dread remains distant.

Parsons (2014, pp. 51-55) gives a beautiful account of an uncanny moment he experienced. Teaching a seminar group in a psychoanalytic training, he encouraged the group to engage in an exercise which he also undertook himself. The idea was to listen to the silence at night for at least half an hour and observe how the perception of the environment evolved. He drove, in the middle of the night, to a wood familiar to him from his youth. Noticing a plane flying over him, he was struck by a familiar observation: he was perceiving the plane at two separate moments at the same

[11] It is easy to see how the uncanny can be of importance in therapeutic settings (see Botella and Botella [2005, Ch.7], Cassorla [2020], Kohon [2020], Levin [2012]).

time as the light of the plane reached him faster than the sound, the latter thus belonging to the past. Subsequently, he noticed a feeling of not being alone. Looking around, he could see no one, but the feeling persisted. Pondering on this, he realized that with him was the presence of his younger, adolescent self: "I knew, of course, that there was nobody there. I was not hallucinating. But the sense of another human presence was distinct. This was more than just fantasy. It seemed apt that, in the wake of my thoughts about the plane, two parts of my own life should encounter each other. How real the imaginary can be, I thought, and we settled down – myself as I am now and myself as I was then – to savour the night together" (p. 53). The experience indeed included something that made it particularly real, such as when, driving away from the woods, Parsons failed to put on the seat belt, just as there were no seatbelts in the cars when he learned to drive – something he felt to be a "deeply uncanny moment" (p. 54).

A similarly vivid experience happened to me when I was expecting my first child. During the third trimester of being pregnant, I experienced a strong sensation of an alteration in the environment. In a summery afternoon while outside, lying in the garden swing with my overgrown belly, the surroundings seemed to change fleetingly in an indefinable way. It was as if there was a change in the quality of the air and the objects around me. Subsequently I had a clear sense that the branches of an oak tree nearby, slowly swinging in the light breeze, were speaking to me in silence – or rather, as if there was something behind the tree that had to take the form of the branches. It was as if it was making delicate, gentle contact with me – not metaphorically, but in a rather concrete way. The concreteness was partial; just as Parsons knew he wasn't hallucinating I knew that my sensation was not "real." Even still, the experience seemed to take place emphatically in the sensory realm, and I was unaware of any affect or psychological event taking place that I could connect to the experience. There was a passive feel, as I merely perceived what was happening.

Although I wasn't frightened or uneasy, but perhaps a bit baffled, there was a strong uncanny feel, as the defining features of the moment were a certain depersonalizing tone, concreteness, and a familiar setting turning into unfamiliar.

Perhaps the oncoming birth of a child caused a pressing need to deal with the question of boundaries. The need to fathom the complex interplay between fusion and separateness in pregnancy and the anticipated recognition after birth (who the infant *is*) may have created an experience that turned out uncanny, not to mention the past and present coming together as the care that I once received from my parents as infant I should now rework and pass on to my own child. From this perspective, the experience emerged to relieve a tension related to the infant being both incessantly unknowable (different from me) but thoroughly familiar (a part of me) into acceptance and embracement of the paradox of the situation without diminishing it either into a flat, undivided fusion or distance and estrangement. It made way for a beginning of a novel self-experience.

Parsons as well expresses gratitude for his experience: "The separation between past and present had collapsed, and my present-day 'I' suddenly found itself in a car that it did not know. I had become a vagabond in my own life history. After a while, I put on the seat belt of the present-day car and drove on, shaken by the experience but grateful at the same time for its astonishing richness" (p. 54).

How to understand these strong experiences that seemed more real than imaginative? In pathology, we may approach hallucination or magical thinking as a desperate attempt to ward off awareness of reality. For Bion (1956/1984) the psychotic person uses projective identification to get rid of unbearable, unrepresented mental content to inhibit awareness of internal and external reality. Owing to this, the projected material becomes totally associated with real external objects, leading

to a disruption in symbolic capacity. The objects serve as "prototypes of ideas" (p. 40) that pre-exist words. Ogden (2010) defines magical thinking as a form of non-thinking where the objective is to reject painful experience by substituting it with invented psychic reality, preventing psychological growth.[12] Being predetermined, magical thinking turns away from new openings, uncertainties, and unexpected possibilities. In its extreme, thinking becomes delusional or hallucinatory. There is a "progressive deterioration of the individual's capacity to differentiate dreaming and perceiving, symbol and symbolized" (Ogden, 2010, p. 321). In contrast, Ogden also describes a form of thinking, dream thinking, in which one is able to attend to experience from multiple perspectives (such as those of primary process and secondary process thinking or infantile and mature experience). Dream thinking supports psychological growth as it enables us to create personal meanings and "allows us to enter into a rich, nonlinear set of unconscious conversations with ourselves about our lived experience" (p. 328). In the examples presented here the realness or non-symbolic feel of the experience served a purpose of becoming aware rather than hiding from awareness. There was a trust that the grasp on reality will not break down. The experiences represented a creative way to address magical thinking and thus turned into dream thinking.

Why the emphasis on magical thinking then? As I argue in the following, the uncanny experience represents an inability to represent. The faltering attempt to represent (present in these examples, as discussed later) is visible in the need to turn to magical thinking. However, this can be approached in a creative way, the experience becoming an aesthetic event that recognizes a gap that one is unable to overcome.

[12] It is important to note that here Ogden (2010), in accordance with Bion, uses the word "thinking" as containing both thinking *and* feeling.

The uncanny as a representation for not being able to represent

Kohon (2016, p. 13) notes that the uncanny brings together the "*strangely familiar* and *disquietingly unfamiliar*" (p. 13, italics in the original). How can something be both unfamiliar and familiar?[13] There seems to be a connection between two things that apparently should negate each other, resembling the process of symbol formation, described by Bion (1957/1984) as "…the ability to bring together two objects so that their resemblance is made manifest, yet their difference left unimpaired" (p. 50). Making connections between different aspects of experience is central to the emergence of aesthetic experience in general: a possibility to link levels of being that seem to work according to differing premises, or even negate each other. We live in a "multiplicity of realities in space and time" (Kohon, 2020, p.78). These realities and the gaps that divide them can be approached, depending on theoretical emphases, with the help of concepts like primary and secondary process, bodily and conscious experience, the Real and the Symbolic, and so on. I will here refer to unrepresented and represented experience.

There is a certain suspicion distinctive to the uncanny experience: it is *strangely* familiar and *disquietingly* unfamiliar, as if leaving open the possibility that there is still something that hasn't quite come through. The peculiar, unsettling bind between familiar and unfamiliar becomes visible: the simultaneous resemblance and difference between the symbol and the symbolized does not feel "natural" as is often the case. For example, the simultaneous similarity and difference of the mirror image with the self becomes problematized – uncanny, in fact. Something that binds

[13] Freud (1919) attributes this to repression and surmounted mental states: mental content is repressed or surpassed in development, becoming unfamiliar to consciousness, while in the unconscious it remains known.

the experience into a continuous flow seems to be missing. It is not a "positive" experience that adds up but represents something that doesn't happen. The ghost is the presence of a person already gone – it is a concept that consists of a seeming impossibility, as in the case of the unfortunate M. Valdemar, who was plunged into a state where he simultaneously existed and did not exist. The uncanny representation emerges through the negative.

The negative refers to the area behind a boundary. It is there not to be seen. Extensively explored by Green (1999) through his concept of the work of the negative, it appears, for him, crucial in the psychoanalytic understanding of the mind. For Green, the mind is essentially composed of an idea of a lack. The sense of a self emerges around the notions of what we are not or what we don't have – a counterpart of *what is* is always that of *what is not*. For Masschelein (2011) the uncanny is a thoroughly negative concept. Being in between, it is in touch with "nonthinking" (p.11). It seems, following Botella and Botella (2005), Cassorla (2020), and Levine (2020), that the "unknown" aspect of the uncanny experience refers to unrepresented mental content, something that has not been sufficiently symbolized. I don't consider, however, unrepresented experience as a necessary threat. This is in contrast to Levine (2012) who, following Bion, considers it – raw and uncontained as it is – as traumatic. While Bion looks at gaps, infinite voids, and crossing insurmountable spaces, a comparison to Winnicott emphasizes the vitalizing source of an unintegrated level of experience.[14] Winnicott, though mindful of discontinuities and existential threats, often finds a certain ease in conjoining of things, well represented by his emphasis on playfulness and pleasure in transitional phenomena. In contrast, if the unrepresented is defined to refer to psychic voids that

[14] See Pihlaja (2023) and Taipale (2023) on the value of unintegration in Winnicott.

cause “terror, emptiness, annihilation, and despair” (Levine, 2023, p. 3) a need for representation naturally becomes urgent.

I suggest that the uncanny represents a process of transformation from unrepresented to represented experience that falters for one reason or another. In other words, there is a need to represent and an inability to do so, and the uncanny representation in its ambiguity, opaqueness, and concreteness stands for that inability. What I wish to emphasize is the possibility to elaborate this experience creatively and turn it into an aesthetic experience. The examples above illustrate how representing an inability to represent can be a creative achievement – one can elaborate the uncanny representation into a symbol that carries the idea of a self incapable for creating new representations. How can one truly understand – emotionally – the passage of time and the change in one’s being as that time goes by, or the emergence of a new human being where there used to be nothing? Ogden (2010) notes that in magical thinking there is a need to create an illusion that “one is not subject to the laws that apply to others, including the laws of nature, the inescapability of time, the role of chance, the irreversibility of death, and so on” (p.321). There are aspects to elemental questions like these that not only may feel painful but may be impossible to represent. A gap is sometimes unavoidable.[15] Through the uncanny representation it becomes acknowledged, or “known”, that there is something that stays unknown. If an uncanny experience dissolves because of excessive fright or disgust, it doesn’t “succeed” as an aesthetic experience and fails to represent the failure in a creative way.

[15] Certainly, the inability to symbolize in the uncanny experience may very well, and often seems to, refer to overwhelming experience related either to personal vulnerabilities – I am thinking of autism spectrum in particular – or trauma. A striking example is the uncanny dreadfulness represented in the still-face experiment (Tronick et al., 1978).

The need to turn to magical thinking is understandable when we approach the uncanny representing a halted attempt to represent. If unrepresented refers to a lack, it is not the same as loss, since lack refers to nothing, and in loss there is *something* one has lost. In other words, a representation of the missing object has been formed, it thus becoming a lost thing. A possibility for mourning emerges and the loss is felt to be a part of the self. A lack is not "there" to be symbolized and worked through. In the uncanny experience the lack is accessed from another direction, from the concreteness of magical thinking. When used as a defence, magical thinking stands as a negative of dream thinking, retreating from generating new meanings. In the examples above, in contrast, it was used creatively, in the service of dream thinking – thus, instead of replacing unwanted experience with omnipotent thought, the existence of unrepresented experience was acknowledged and the incapacity to represent it was lived through in an aesthetically structured experience.

The uncanny and the sublime in subjectivity

Finally, I would like to consider the uncanny in contrast to the sublime experience to further elaborate its position in the field of aesthetics and my view of it as an aesthetic experience that represents an impossibility to represent. Specifically, my suggestion is that the uncanny experience is a negative of the sublime: the sublime experience represents the subject's ability to represent in the face of unthinkable experience, while the uncanny experience represents the inability to do so.

Sublimity, a category of aesthetic experience, refers to feelings of awe and fascination that elevate the subject in the face of imminence or the unspeakable. Typical examples of sublime encounters

include nature's grandeur – one may think of, for example, a thunderstorm or a raging ocean. Edmund Burke, who in 1757 published one of the major works on the sublime, *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757/2020), describes in a l744 letter to a friend, Richard Shackleton, his wonder at the starry sky, with "innumerable luminaries at such an immense distance from us", all created by the "word of the Creator sufficient to create universe from nothing" (in Leadbeater, 1862, p. 19). There is a sense of an infinity that goes beyond one's capacity to think, an awe that borders terror as the "small" subject approaches the overpowering object. One of sublimity's core features is a certain dual structure (Doran, 2015, p. 10): it includes both the pain of being overwhelmed as well as the pleasure of being exalted – or for Civitarese (2018, p. 45), the possibility to transform dread into pleasure, even if they are experienced simultaneously. Even though the object seems overwhelming, one keeps safe – and feels aesthetic enjoyment at the borders of dread and fascination. It is a negative type of pleasure, though: "While the beautiful gives itself to be seen, or at least makes us think so, the sublime lives in the tension, destined to remain unsolved…between what we can see and what we can only intuit" (Civitarese, 2018, p. 9).

In Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790/2007), which is a prominent work on the sublime, the sublime experience is essentially of the subject becoming aware of their capability to reflect on things that are beyond comprehension. Thus, the sublime profoundly deals with selfhood and the experience of being a subject who represents even in the face of infiniteness. Civitarese (2018, p. 11) explains the preservation of safety and pleasure in the sublime with the sheltering effect of a representation: the object can be represented and thus "looked at" from a safe distance. A possibility for a temporary merger in the aesthetic encounter emerges as the object's absence or excessive presence is avoided. For Civitarese, the sublime experience illustrates the process of

subjectivation, or differentiating oneself from the boundless nature or from the "undifferentiated relationship with the mother's body" (p. 44). Thus, it also represents the subject's developing capacity to form symbols.

The line between the uncanny and the sublime experience is not always easy to draw. For example, Bloom (1982, as cited in Kligerman, 2012, p. 31) regards Freud's essay on the uncanny dealing, in fact, with sublimity. Civitarese (2018) gives a "silent" example of the sublime, or "when bottles and items of china are arranged on a table to project their shadow onto the background of a painting" (p. 9). One can easily find uncanny tones in it. In arts, the overlap between the uncanny and the sublime is studied, for example, by Freer (2013) on René Magritte's paintings: his suggestion is that the sublime content of the paintings is hidden and suggested in an overtly uncanny presentation, so that the uncanny becomes a sort of a shelter to engage privately with the sublime.[16] Here, the intimate connection and the close resemblance between the uncanny and the sublime become visible.

Both the uncanny and the sublime reside in the boundary between represented and unrepresented. In the sublime, something emerges to be represented, even if it exerts its violent power over us. It is an aesthetic success, so to say. In this way the sublime moves forwards, or upwards as is often described, as the small subject elevates in an encounter with the imminent. The uncanny, in contrast, doesn't find an object to be represented – no wonder that it is an isolate experience. Its content is the absence of representation. Thus, even infinity doesn't exist. The sublime is a sort of

[16] For Freer, this is a way to contain the sacredness of the sublime covertly, without either resorting to religious or supernatural explanations or secular interpretations that may approach nihilism, of the transcendence and wonder of sublimity.

a triumph, something to be marvelled at, even if it includes pain and mourning. There is a "heroic" aspect to it as the subject succeeds in forming representations, as noted by Civitarese (2018, p. 44). The uncanny remains more modest in its silence, incapacity, and vagueness. To sum up, the sublime leans towards the possible while the uncanny expresses impossibility. It appears, in fact, to be a negative of the sublime. In the sublime, one succeeds in forming a representation of an ineffable experience, while also acknowledging it being insufficient in containing it thoroughly as the infinite always escapes one's grasp. In the uncanny, in contrast, the boundary of the ineffable – the unrepresented level of experience – is encountered and the inability to contain it and create a representation of it addressed in the uncanny representation.

The uncanny refers to the self incapable for representation – and yet, this incapacity is represented, making way for a chance to mourn the fragmentation that every self carries to a degree. I think this is why I associate uncanny experiences with a sense of grief. As discussed above, it is not the lack that is mourned – it stays absent. But what *can* be symbolized and mourned, through the uncanny representation, is the notion that there is a lack, and one is unable to overcome it. Mourning related to the uncanny is not so much that of transience or of being separate (from the other or within oneself) as in the sublime, but that of fragmentation, or of not being able to "dream" being separate and become more whole that way. To give an example from the arts, this is something I feel is represented in Berger's (2011) fascinating treatise on Dutch seventeenth-century still life painting. The paintings deal with transition from ripe to decayed, from flourishing to destroyed, or with order being on the verge of disintegration, presented in arrangements of food, flowers in vases, or insects devouring flora.[17] They are traditionally held to emphasize the *vanitas*, or the inevitability

[17] For example, see Floris van Dijck's *Laid Table with Cheese and Fruit* (c. 1615) and Berger's exploration of it (2011, Ch. 6).

of death and the futility of earthly pleasures and achievements in the face of it, or in Berger's words, the "stupid hope that art can conquer death" (p. 1). To cling on to it is both futile and complacent. The *vanitas* represents, I believe, an encounter with sublimity. For Berger, there is another, even darker dimension hidden in the paintings: *damage* of life in addition to transience of it. It is *rapacitas*, rapacity, under the cover of *vanitas*.[18] The imagery of caterpillars and snails eating up fresh, blooming flowers remind of damage – they destroy beauty. The cut flowers in a vase, however fresh they may seem, are held in a suspended state between life and death, heading towards their predestined withering, adding an element of horror to the arrangement. For Berger, this "understated discourse" of the paintings is "even more uncanny and strange" than the usual interpretation of *vanitas* (p. 90). It is the fear of slipping from the realm of the *vanitas* into "the terror of the real" (p.91).

Conclusion

It is easy to look at the uncanny experience purely from the viewpoint of horror. Dread is, after all, an overriding feeling often attached to it. However, acknowledging the uncanny's potential to turn into an aesthetic experience – a creative act that enables us to make links to unthinkable aspects of being – frees it from a mere spooky startle to a nuanced and multifaceted psychological phenomenon. I argue in this article that the uncanny represents a faltering attempt to represent. This is why it emerges through impossibilities and leaves us unsettled in its tangled thicket of known and unknown. It reveals fragmentation and discontinuity, gaps that we're not able to cross.

[18] Interestingly, in Freer's (2011) interpretation of Magritte the sublime "truth" is hidden under an uncanny representation while in this case it is the other way around.

Because of this inability, the uncanny experience utilizes magical thinking and relies on sensory perception, leading to an unclarity between reality and fantasy. Being represented, it is still an achievement – often a quiet, solitary experience.

Lastly, to return to Poe's question: "But where, meantime, was the soul?" If the uncanny experience is located in a borderline area – a sort of a no man's land, belonging nowhere –, what happens to the self, entering a state that seems to exclude it? Where does the soul go? Reflecting on the discussion above, perhaps we could say that the soul encounters itself not being a soul. Instead of looking in the mirror and not seeing (lack) or seeing the form of nothing (loss), what the soul sees in the mirror is its blind self looking in the mirror. Being at the borderline zone of subjectivity is an important aspect of being a subject: the soul includes experiences of failing to be a soul. Acknowledging that failure will regain the soul some of its unthinkable areas, even if in a negative form. This way the value of these unrepresented regions is recognized, and dignity can be found where we face vulnerability, uncertainty, and incompleteness.

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