

Topic 4

The Uncanny etc,
Additional notes and questions

Freud 'The Uncanny' (1919)

Homely ('heimlich') + unhomely ('unheimlich')

Thus *heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*. *Unheimlich* is in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*. Let us bear this discovery in mind ... (347)

Question 1

Can you think of fiction film examples, scenarios in which the HEIMLICH becomes UNHEIMLICH?

HOME ALONE

CAPE FEAR

FACE-OFF

FATAL ATTRACTION

How is this ambivalence – or the characters' fears – resolved?

The Uncanny

‘As I was walking, one hot summer afternoon, through the deserted streets of a provincial town in Italy which was unknown to me, I found myself in a quarter of whose character I could no longer remain in doubt. Nothing but painted women were to be seen at the windows of the narrow houses, and I hastened to leave the narrow street at the next turning’

The Uncanny

... But after having wandered about for a time without inquiring my way, I suddenly found myself back in the same street, where my presence was now beginning to excite attention. I hurried away once more, only to arrive by another *detour* at the same place yet a third time. Now, however, a feeling overcame me which I can only describe as UNCANNY, and I was glad enough to find myself back in the piazza I had left a short while before ...'

Question 2

How do you understand Freud's UNCANNY feelings the third time He finds himself in the same place?

Do you have similar memories?

The Uncanny

Freud goes on to discuss REPETITION and its relationship to the uncanny:

‘ ... we naturally attach no importance to the event (‘chance’) when we hand in an overcoat and get a ticket with the number , let us say, 62 ... But the impression is altered if two such events, each in itself indifferent, happen close together – if we cross the number 62 several times in a single day, or if we notice that everything which has a number – addresses, hotel rooms, compartments in railway trains, invariably has the same one ... **We do feel this to be uncanny’.**

The Uncanny

‘ ... if psychoanalytic theory is correct in maintaining that every affect belonging to an emotional impulse, whatever its kind, is transformed, if it is repressed, into anxiety, then among instances of frightening things there must be one class in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which *recurs*. This class of frightening things would then constitute the uncanny ...’

The Uncanny

‘ ... an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality ...’

The Uncanny

‘It may be true that the uncanny (*unheimlich*) is something that is secretly familiar [*heimlich*—*heimisch*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfills this condition. But the selection of material on this basis does not enable us to solve the problem of the uncanny ...

Question 3

Relating some of these ideas about the UNCANNY to RE-ENACTMENT, let's think about some of the ways in which re-enactments are different from their original

➔ For example: the JFK assassination and its repetition

Clip 1: *The Eternal Frame*



Questions

What does this – or any later version – do to the notion of the original?

Can the original remain simple and authentic?

Or is it always going to feel UNCANNY, because it's become so familiar through having been re-enacted so many times?

Question 4

And how do these ideas relate to some of the interpretations of 9/11 I've mentioned? Here's Zizek's again:

Slavoj Zizek 'Welcome to the Desert of the Real'

For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and when we watched the oft-repeated shot of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since – as Jeremy Bentham knew – reality is the best appearance of itself?' (11)

Question 5

How would you begin to discuss *Man on Wire* in terms of the uncanny?

What are some of the ways in which this image is 'uncanny'? (next slide)

Photo from 1974, used in *Man on Wire*, James Marsh 2008



Questions

Can – as I suggested in my lecture may be the case – one actually view *Man on Wire* as if it is NOT ‘uncanny’?

Can we – in the present, as we watch the film – temporarily repress the knowledge that makes it uncanny?