

The aesthetics of the shock, part I: Adorno, avant-garde art and the uncanny

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Abstract:

Even though Freud's well-known concept of the uncanny has gained considerable influence in the field of aesthetics and beyond, the meaning of the term still remains vague. Is it a mere psychological concept with aesthetic and social implications or is it a culturally produced experience? And although Adorno's aesthetic theory does not place the concept of the uncanny as its central axis, when linked to Freud's theory, Adorno's conception deepens not only various interpretations of modern art, but also our understanding of the very nature of artistic practice. Psychoanalytic interpretations of modern art couple the uncanny with technology and progress since human-machine interactions usually entail disturbing experiences. Yet no psychoanalytic interpretation of art to date has seen the uncanny as the theoretical foundation of all art. The first part of this essay deals with Adorno's concept of aesthetic representation in relation to Freud's uncanny and examines Benjamin's application of that reasoning in interpreting the technological uncanny and the artistic uncanny.

Keywords: Adorno; Freud; Benjamin; uncanny; aesthetics

If Schubert's music remains alive for us, it is because it has already incorporated death, like a poison, and has not needed to go [...] through a period of historical decay.

Shierry Weber NicholSEN²

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nature of artistic practice. Psychoanalytic interpretations of modern art couple the uncanny with technology and progress since human-machine interactions usually entail disturbing experiences.³ Yet no psychoanalytic interpretation of art to date has seen the uncanny as the theoretical foundation of all art.

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² Shierry Weber NicholSEN, *Exact Imagination, Late Work: on Adorno's aesthetics* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997), 40.

³ Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993).

In arguing this case this paper relies upon two supposedly obsolete concepts concerning the interpretation of art: the autonomy of art and subject-object relationships. Postmodern thought has allegedly revoked the first⁴, and the second has been repudiated by Habermas and his followers.⁵ In Adorno's thought these two leitmotifs are dialectically intertwined and to relinquish either one is to omit a significant part of our ability to understand art.

The autonomy of art is usually interpreted as the formation of a work of art out of its own unique aesthetic laws. But art's autonomy may also be interpreted as the unconscious belief in the life and subjectivity of an artistic object. In psychoanalytic interpretation, the work's inner regularity has unconscious, subjective significance. Yet from this limited point of view, works of art cannot be distinguished from any other man-made objects, since both allegedly serve human desires and needs. Furthermore, this also means that works of art cannot be firmly distinguished from mass-produced commodities. According to Adorno, an individual work of art can only be produced when its inner law confronts the social framework out of which it evolved. Following the detachment of art from practical life, as the Enlightenment has ruled out magical or supernatural systems of belief, art's autonomy has been founded on the premise that works of art have their own "life." That line of reasoning leads in turn to the examination of works of art as instances of Freud's *das Unheimliche*. Moreover, the movement of the uncanny through the works of Adorno and Benjamin might also shed light upon their proximity of their thought beyond their well-known disparities.

Assuredly, Freud did not think of all works of art as prompting uncanny experiences, nor did Adorno. Yet Adorno's use of the term "nature" conjures up Freud's uncanny since for Adorno, the nature found in works of art is a damaged, impaired articulation of life. Adorno's implementation of the concept of nature is part and parcel of his dialectical thought which cannot be understood as detached from technology and human domination over it. Domination leaves a mark, a wound that is articulated in what Adorno indicates as nature's "non-identity." In Freud's latter terminology, that "flaw" is a reflection of the death wish. The artist, in order to reveal this damaged life, must first create an illusion of it and then deform and distort that imagined structure.

The negation of the magical and ceremonial element of art, which initially was inseparable from it, is expressed in what Adorno and Horkheimer entitled as the "Dialectic of Enlightenment"⁶, as well as in Weber's *entzauberung der welt*. Although an important step in releasing aesthetic practice from other ends and an essential condition for the development of artistic technique, that removal of art from practice isolates art from social life. By reducing artistic creation from magic to fantasy, art was transformed into an impotent-perceived practice. Moreover, in sustaining these boundaries art undermines its own end as a practice. According to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the negation of magic and mimesis in art is an integral part of social repression. For Adorno, authentic art defies that repression – revealing rather than concealing. As such, a work of art must include reflection. Mimesis should not to be taken in this context as mere imitation of "reality," but rather as a decryption of culture's foundational trauma.

Adorno's notion of aesthetic representation has two aspects: first, acknowledging artistic representation's independence from its inner law and second, employing that independence to re-present violent cultural relationships:

In the image of catastrophe, an image that is not a copy of the event but the cipher of its potential, the magical trace of art's most distant prehistory reappears under the total spell, as if art wanted to prevent the catastrophe by conjuring up its image. The taboo set on the historical

⁴ There are, of course, numerous examples of postmodern criticism of the notion of art's, autonomy. One example could be found in Jacques Ranciere's *The Politics of Aesthetics: the distribution of the sensible* (London: Continuum, 2006).

⁵ Adorno did not develop an adequate conception of the intersubjectivity of language which "would have allowed him to link the disenchantment of the world – the 'explosion of metaphysical meaning' – to gain in communicative rationality. But as soon as one allows for the possibility of such a connection (and arguments for it can be found particularly in the work of Habermas), then the difference between Adorno's two answers becomes apparent. [...] It rather signifies the condition of a spirit that has come to recognize itself as finite, and which, as it reflects upon its own finitude, might be able to discover and develop its potential as a potential for communicative reason." Albrecht Wellmer, *Endgames: the irreconcilable nature of modernity (essays and lectures)*, trans. David Midgley (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), 161-162.

⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1997), 120-168.

telos is the single legitimization of that whereby the new compromises itself politically and practically: its claim to being an end in itself.⁷

The image of catastrophe (or utopia for that matter) signifies the persistence of magic in art. Magic reappears as the return of the repressed: Nowadays subjectivity is assimilated into a world by technological means, a mediation that contains enormous power which no individual can overcome. Even if one masters a small portion of technological knowledge, one cannot even begin to comprehend the vast economic, bureaucratic, political, and communicative systems. The assimilation of subjectivity as a skilful form of control is self-castrating. The image of catastrophe expresses a domination over one's true desire – an upsurge of the Freudian death wish. By contrast, the image of utopia indicates the persistence of magical aspects in art that convey creativity assimilating into reality. While in this instance magic functions only in the realm of fantasy, its assimilation of subjectivity is more aligned with the pleasure principle.

This implies that modernity's negation of the magical aspects of art is far from complete. Artistic objects reappear as images of power exerted from the outside world, but this time as normative and enhanced by technology. While the over-evaluation of an object is not unique to art, what in Adorno's conception separates authentic art from other objects is the articulation of tension between inner structure and its disruption so that a significant shock [*Erschütterung*] occurs. Both modern and traditional art overvalue the power of an object as having the ability to alter our experience of it. Yet modern art differs in the endeavor to overcome its historical castration by radicalizing its fetishistic tendencies, attempting to create the desired shock by intensifying that objectification. In the process of identifying the object with its assimilated subjective power, the artistic object becomes an anxiety stimulant. This radicalization allows modern art to re-present fetishism even beyond its appearance as a manifestation of the death wish:

In their movement toward truth artworks are in need of that concept that for the sake of their truth they keep at a distance. It is not up to art to decide whether its negativity is its limit or truth. Artworks are *a priori* negative by the law of their objectivization: They kill what they objectify by tearing it away from the immediacy of its life. Their own life preys on death. This defines the qualitative threshold of modern art. Modern works relinquish themselves mimetically to reification, their principle of death. The effort to escape this element is art's illusory element which, since Baudelaire, art has wanted to discard without resigning itself to the status of a thing among things. Those heralds of modernism Baudelaire and Poe were as artists the first technocrats of art. Without the admixture of poison, virtually the negation of life, the opposition of art to civilizational repression would amount to nothing more than impotent comfort.⁸

Problematically enough, Adorno engages here with several ideas starting with the statement that the *a priori* negation in art is due to its objectification, which he then links to violence and death.⁹ Works of art negate life by extracting the material content from human experience. That kind of objectification is not unique to art; in fact it is precisely the skilful violence that Adorno ascribes to technology. But how can this be considered as "negativity"? To mould an object according to one's desire is not necessarily a rebellious act. Furthermore, Adorno argues that art works' life "preys upon death," and then links art's "death principle" to modern art. However, if art allegedly reiterates social violence, how does this undermine the social structure? There can be no "negation" unless something occurs within a work of art that does not transpire outside it. This means that fetishization in art should be rigorously separated from all other forms of fetishization.

In artistic fetishism, unconscious belief in the animated object undermines the death wish that manifests in non-artistic fetishization, since works of art involve only the *imaginary* creation and destruction of life forms. The contradictory structure – which first creates imaginative life and then negates it – inherent in works of art is not

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁹ Adorno uses dialectically the known Marxist concept of commodity fetishism. See Karl Marx, *Capital* (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), 165.

contingent upon any specific content. Rather, it is a *necessary condition* for any work of art. This necessity signifies the historical formation of art, i.e., that works of art are subordinate to the manner in which they were excluded from social practice. The term “necessity” is also part of the hegemonic ideology supporting the border between reality and fantasy. As long as the ideological separation between life and art persists, all works of art work exhibit that conflict by virtue of the very technique that is embodied in them.

Works of art and the Enlightenment movement both exclude magic. But whereas the Enlightenment discredits magic as fictitious, art nevertheless sequesters an essential principle from magic and animism in its created objects. In Freud’s terms, art is the sublimation of magic which was repressed by the Dialectic of Enlightenment. On the one hand, the fictitious representation of an object of desire in the imaginative realm is already castrated in its unreality. On the other hand, the very distinction between imaginative and real is part of castrating ideology, which exiles contents to the unreality of imagination. This line of reasoning raises two questions:

1. How do works of art preserve principles taken from magic and animism? What are the essential differences between art and magic?
2. If in fact works of art do preserve principles from magic and animism, how does this affect their epistemic, moral, and political significance?

Uncanny Objects

One of Freud’s central propositions about the uncanny is that the strange, frightening, and intimidating (*Unheimlich*) is nothing but its repressed obverse - the homey, common, and familiar (*Heimisch, Heimlich*).¹⁰ The prefix ‘un’ connotes a mental negation which transposes the familiar into the realm of anxiety. In Freud’s view, there is always something covert and intimidating in the all-too-familiar¹¹, thus ambivalence is already present in the negated content. But in order for something to induce anxiety, it must be perceived not only as having superior force, but also as containing the possibility that that force may turn against the subject. Allegedly, artificial objects cannot create such anxiety. The transition from “natural” to “artificial” neutralizes nature as a threatening force and thus in art there should be no object-related anxiety. However, according to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the domination over nature cannot be total due to the fact that human beings are themselves natural creatures. Domination over nature also means domination over “Das Es,” those deep-rooted desires which control our behavior.

Works of art, as they are always saturated with uncanny representations, testify to repression of the failure to realize human desires. Part of this failure stems from the very ideological distinction between fantasy and life, and so Freud argues that:

We have noticed one point which may help us to resolve these uncertainties: nearly all the instances that contradict our hypothesis are taken from the realm of fiction, of imaginative writing. This suggests that we should differentiate between the uncanny that we actually experience and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about. What is *experienced* as uncanny is much more simply conditioned but comprises far fewer instances.¹²

Freud’s theoretical difficulty regarding the uncanny is ascribed to the freedom that artists have to remove themselves from reality. Themes that incite experiences of the uncanny – such as the revival of the dead – may be presented in such a way that they do not stimulate that experience, as in the case of fairy tales. Authors allegedly dominate mental phenomenon by invoking the fantastic realm, overcoming unpleasant appearances via artistic technique. Aesthetically, in order to enjoy what Kant entitles as the “negative pleasure of the sublime,” the object must not pose a real threat to the subject; otherwise there can be no reflective judgment. The artist attains potency to the degree that real content which has been castrated is moulded into an innocuous re-presentation. The author creates

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud (SE)*, Vol. XVII, trans. and ed. James Strachey with Anna Freud (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953-1974), 220.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

¹² *Ibid.*, 247.

a *privilegium* by which he enables his readers to overcome uncanny experiences and thus special force is given to the impotent.

However, one of the early insights of psychoanalysis is that fantasy is not just mere castration, or a sheer disconnect from reality. Fantasy maintains synchronic relationships of continuity and disruption with its outer context. In Freud the persistence of infantile belief in the power of thought to change reality corroborates this idea. Infantile “omnipotence of thought” presupposes the indistinct boundaries between mental and objective spheres. Their separation is a result of trauma: a painful penetration of outer force into the expanse of inner, more familiar territory. From the moment that a child becomes aware of its dependence upon other people or objects for the fulfilment of its desires, its inevitable weakness is exposed. Magic and animism, according to Freud are based on pre-trauma and connote an irretrievably lost mental condition.

The reversal of positions in Freud’s argument is intriguing: First, a child can fulfil more needs through complicated social mediation than by its infantile state of mind. However, in order to do so, the child must be aware of his initial weakness as one who cannot act directly upon reality. There is a truth content in that ideology. The endeavor to fulfil desires through magic and animism is more of a symbolic effort than it is an active intervention in nature via technology. But the fixation upon normative mediation as the only path for fulfilling human desire excludes the mental sphere as acting upon the objective realm. The ideological difference here is that we act as if we do not actually mold reality with our own thoughts. Indeed, Freud discredits magic and animism as part of the subject’s “narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental process.”¹³ Freudian ideology, which interprets human cultural development from its infantile stage to maturity, does not emphasize here (as in *Civilization and its Discontents* does¹⁴) the real gain in power over nature due to the renunciation of the primal fantasy. In other words, the rise of real power over nature is accompanied by a gradual reduction in the belief in human potency.

The experience of the uncanny in art is not one of numerous individual emotional responses, but rather an unconscious, *a priori* aspect of the general structure of art. Its detachment from practical life is a negation of the belief in the power of the symbolic act. In this negation, art gains *another* real power: its individual technique. So while magic is denied, its own “interiority,” the direct subordination of action to desire is maintained. One may argue that every human act can be regarded as the fulfilment of some desire. Yet art’s interiority is highly associated with immediacy of fulfilment which fantasy allows. In literature, fictional characters are wholly subordinate to the author’s will; hence actualization of the words is immediate. That immediacy is a kind of imagined domination, a fictional potency which by the same token emphasizes real weakness. While the artist has direct control over his creations, this can only be done through the artistic mediation. It may also be argued that magic and animism have never been “direct” at all; they have always been a mediated attempt to dominate reality through symbols, objects, rituals, and words. Yet immediacy was always expressed by those means (even if technical know-how was required in conveying it) in a way that designated it for the private realization of desire within a social context. The desire for that privacy has been fulfilled as the privacy of the object (in Benjamin’s words, its “aura”) and has been denied in the industrialized epoch.

In that sense, immediacy does not convey direct control over nature, but only imagined domination over otherness – the living object. Domination here is not real since real domination (or certainly a more effective one) is attained via technology. In achieving this more effective domination, the use-value of objects becomes collective instead of private: with the same products supposedly benefiting “everyone.” Even commodities designed only for certain audiences or for certain social segments can be included under this rubric. The essential difference between use-values is that between the private and the collective: with consumerism the private sphere is rendered more and

¹³ “These last examples of the uncanny are to be referred to the principle which I have called ‘omnipotence of thoughts’, taking the name from an expression used by one of my patients. And now we find ourselves on familiar ground. Our analysis of instances of the uncanny has led us back to the old, animistic conception of the universe. This was characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject’s narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that belief; by the attribution to various outside persons and things of carefully graded magical powers, or ‘mana’; as well as by all the other creations with the help of which man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to fend off the manifest prohibitions of reality.” *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *SE*, Vol. XXII.

more ideological. Its ends are determined by technical experts who now mould objects according to whatever is considered (or more precisely, imagined as) common taste.

Another objection can also be raised: antecedent practices have always had the same heteronomous regularity, they were never private or rather their privacy was always public. Yet in previous epochs there was no ideology that presented commodities as fulfilling *everyone's* desires, not just those of the privileged class. In the absence of such ideology, unfulfilled private desire was displayed conspicuously. Since tragedy is one of art's prominent means of expressing unfulfilled private desire, Steiner's *Death of Tragedy*¹⁵ is an ideological symptom of the modern repudiation of individual suffering. Furthermore, pre-modern heteronomous domination was not nearly as effective as its modern counterpart. The unification of the private and the collective is part of the blurring of differences between private and collective in postmodern ideology, the erasure of boundaries. Contemporary ideology sustains a semblance of wish-fulfilment through normative mediations. The pseudo-freedom attained by removing those traditional boundaries well befits the homogeneity of cultural products, as they allegedly satisfy all of us.

The Technological Uncanny

An elucidation of this line of reasoning can be found in Walter Benjamin's *Little History of Photography* wherein many examples of the uncanny appear in his attempt to grasp the cultural ramifications of the invention of photography. One of the major leitmotifs of early photography is the disfiguring of identity which for Benjamin signifies a desertion of the original subject of the photograph. But since photography is considerably more precise than painting can ever be, the new technique bestows "a magical value such as a painted picture can never again have for us".¹⁶ This "magical value" appears at the moment of transition between means of production. The early photograph eludes simple representation:

For it is another nature which speaks to the camera rather than to the eye: 'other' above all in the sense that a space informed by human consciousness gives way to a space informed by the unconscious.¹⁷

The photographic perspective supposedly exposes people's postures in that "fraction of a second when a person actually takes a step."¹⁸ The optical unconscious apparent in those small details is bound up with the transition not only between painting and photography, but also between magic and technology. Cameras produce a mimetic affect, a picture "that seems as real and alive as nature itself."¹⁹ This new mimesis was inevitably bound to cause anxiety, as the Dauthendey quotation attests:

We didn't trust ourselves at first [...] to look long at the first pictures he developed. We were abashed by the distinctness of these human images, and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see *us*, so powerfully was everyone affected by the unaccustomed clarity and the unaccustomed fidelity to nature of the first daguerreotypes.²⁰

The first appearances of photography roused anxiety due to the quasi-magical aspect of the figures photographed. Viewers felt reluctance to examine those tiny faces out of an animistic belief that the figures were actually looking back at them. Reproduction as a counter-representational act is expressed here via the imagined intimidating independence of the photographed figure. Inversely, as techniques of reproduction evolved and brought photography "closer" to its source, it became merely a means for perpetuation of the moment. Over-proximity to

¹⁵ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

¹⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," in *Selected Writings, Vol. II*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1996-1999), 510.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

the source has debunked belief in its vitality. What Benjamin tries to describe is that moment of transition where the negation of life is not yet wholly effective due to the initial technique. Benjamin proceeds with depictions of traumatic experiences by stating that the cemeteries which were Hill's photographic locations are "characteristic [of] this early period."²¹ Naturally, there were technical considerations in that peculiar choice. Graveyards were quiet, "separate, closed-off spaces"²² highly suited for the procedure.

These technical considerations bring death into the scene; the subjects looked as if they were "at home there."²³ *Heim* is of course a central subject for *das Unheimliche*, and as a technical issue for the photographer, photography uncovers death instinct, revealing the close connection between technical evolution and dehumanization. In Benjamin's words, "The human countenance had a silence about it in which the gaze rested."²⁴ Dehumanization is not merely manifest in the trivial silencing of the subject but in the cutting off of its dynamic. Benjamin quotes Orlik:

The synthetic character of the expression which was dictated by the length of time the subject had to stand still is the main reason these photographs [...] produce a more vivid and lasting impression on the beholder than more recent photographs.²⁵

Not by chance, nothing here connotes violence. The "vividness" ascribed to the subjects is linked to their being forced to stand still for a considerable length of time. Mimesis here conceals violence - it is as if one's vitality were reproduced as inanimate material. Benjamin somehow finds in early photographic technique an analogy between the time of the subject's exposure to the imitating instrument and the final product. Irrespectively of the violence involved, Benjamin notes that in the originality of the technical means something in its "frozen time" enables some sort of self-reflection: "The procedure itself causes the subject to focus his life in the moment rather than hurrying on past it."²⁶ At first, it may seem that Benjamin's concern is that photography's clarity and proximity to reality enables vivid reflection. Yet that is not his direction. In early photographs, "everything was built to last."²⁷ The low technical level of the instrument requires long exposure, and so to speak, enables the vivid reflection it reproduces. Early photographs were lasting because technique was not highly developed enough to enable manipulation of the representation that could deny its independence.

From this point, it is easy to show how in the course of photography's development fulfilment of desire has failed. As Benjamin argues, the real victims of photography were not landscape painters but portrait miniaturists and by 1840 "most miniaturists had become professional photographers."²⁸ Aesthetic alienation was diminished as photographers started to provide the service of commemorating their clients. Representations were distinctly attached to their subjects, democratizing the self-glorification that was reserved until then for the elite. As businessmen came to the fore with the retouched negative, the result - "the bad painter's revenge upon photography" - was according to Benjamin a sharp decline in taste.²⁹

Such a judgment may sound arbitrary. Why had taste deteriorated? Benjamin takes us to into the smallest details of his perspective on family albums, the aesthetics of "leather-bound tomes with repellent metal hasps."³⁰ Those ornaments placed upon family albums correspond to the studios that he describes as places of ambiguity between "execution and representation, between [...] torture chamber and [...] throne room."³¹ The new aesthetic manoeuvre in all these ambiguities is far from obscure: it is an endeavor to satisfy with the delight of alienation, to

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 514.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 515.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ "This was the period of those studios [...] which occupied so ambiguous a place between execution and presentation, between torture chamber and throne room, and to which an early portrait of Kafka bears pathetic witness," *ibid.*

embellish “raw material,” to re-present technical domination as congenial while concealing its sadistic implications. In other words, they are flawed phantasmatic structures. The traumatic experience of this failure converges in an early photograph of Kafka:

There the boy stands [...] dressed up in a humiliatingly tight child’s suit overloaded with trimming, in a sort of greenhouse landscape. The background is thick with palm fronds. And as if to make these upholstered tropics even stuffier and more oppressive, the subject holds in his left hand an inordinately large broad-brimmed hat, such as Spaniards wear. He would surely be lost in this setting were it not for his immensely sad eyes, which dominate the landscape predestined for him.³²

The artificial scenery was supposed to create a different climate zone, transforming the child into a disguised tourist. Dehumanization appears with an overload of stimuli surrounding the model and technique submerges us with details that create the spectrum between “a torture chamber and a throne room.” In the process of symbolically leaping to an allegedly exotic space the subject is reduced to a technical accessory. Alienation turns paradoxical as the subject is transposed into a part of the scenery. Rather than relishing his new environment, he is assimilated into it as equivalent to other details.

Yet what saves Kafka in this photograph, according to Benjamin, are his sad eyes that somehow overcome their stifling surroundings. The expression of pain and the perspective of the victim are conceived as having an opposing force. The preservation of the magical element, the unconscious belief in the vitality of the object, is re-presented in Kafka’s childhood photograph. This preservation allows the photograph to be mimetic in a completely different manner: it reiterates pain, a pain that is its source. Benjamin continues:

This picture, in its infinite sadness, forms a pendant to the early photographs in which people did not yet look out at the world in so excluded and godforsaken a manner as this boy. There was an aura about them, a medium that lent fullness and security to their gaze even as it penetrated that medium. And once again the technical equivalent is obvious: it consists in the absolute continuum from the brightest light to darkest shadow.³³

The reflection of sadness enables photographs to appear as if they were alive, as if the very expression of pain might be powerful enough to confront external forces. The child’s supposed joy in this exotic setting is interrupted and revealed as a failed phantasmatic endeavor to produce collective gratification. The gaze which brings discord into an imagined harmony reveals its total incapacity to be such.

The Artistic Uncanny

A more explicit clarification of both the proximity and the disparity between art and magic is required before proceeding further with Benjamin. Both share an element of mental immediacy which is distinctly associated with Freud’s *Unheimliche*. The uncanny is produced by repression of infantile belief in the “omnipotence of thought” whereas art is formed from a sublimation of that principle. As such, art is situated midway between magic and the Enlightenment. On one hand, art’s practices deny any immediate influence upon reality. On the other, its technique and consequent specialization intensify the potency of the phantasmatic sphere that enables art to achieve imaginative immediacy. It allows the world to be perceived as full of vividly portrayed apparitions, while nature is grasped as being alive, just as it was when magic dominated human consciousness.

However, magic’s immediate domination is self-contradictory since the object is not “external” to “inner” reality, but rather carries its own subjectivity. The mental antagonism between man and forces of nature beyond his control that is inherent in animism can be interpreted as psychoanalytically akin to the child’s discovery of its own

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 515-517.

dependency. Wish fulfilment upon demand, stemming from a child's perception of its mother rapid reaction to its own crying is now exposed as utter weakness, a paradise lost. Once having acknowledged dependency upon parents or forces of nature, the child recognizes the fraudulence of the fantasy of "omnipotence of belief." That the fulfilment of desire is fundamentally dependent upon subjective otherness is for Freud and Lacan always traumatic.

Every adult endeavor to actualize desire is based on alienation from the inner world. In the construction of the ego that alienation has another meaning. In the interpretation of childhood games³⁴, Freud maintains that the lack of distinction between living and inanimate objects is not due merely to insufficiency of knowledge, but rather to the indistinctness of an ego that is not sharply delineated from its object of desire:

Now, dolls are of course rather closely connected with childhood life. We remember that in their early games children do not distinguish at all sharply between living and inanimate objects and that they are especially fond of treating their dolls like live people. But, curiously enough, while the Sand-Man story deals with the arous[al] of [...] early childhood fear, the idea of a 'living doll' excites no fear at all; children have no fear of their dolls coming to life, they may even desire it. The source of uncanny feelings would not, therefore, be [...] infantile fear in this case, but rather an infantile wish or even merely an infantile belief.³⁵

This projection of animate features upon inanimate objects demonstrates that the ego has not yet been shaped into a dominating (and hence traumatized) subject, for immediate control cannot be realized unless unequivocal distinction between the ego and its objects is made. In a child's game, the doll is transformed into a fetish in which the child attains special power over it. However, this is not necessarily a demonstration of sadism. The imagined domination over the doll evokes a relationship between subject and imaginary other. First, the subject moulds an *other* subjectivity, and then wishes to be reunited with its creation in an imaginary relationship. The fact that the imaginative figure does "as he commands" enables the child to deviate from the law which determines how one should "be." It is not the child "himself" doing these deeds, it is the doll; nevertheless the doll does as the child wishes.

By the same token, an author's characters are not identical with the author himself, their deeds are not his; yet they nevertheless do as he desires. This incongruity is associated with one of the *leitmotifs* of the uncanny - the doubleness of the ego. Freud argues that the division of the self enables one to regard himself as an object.³⁶ The subject capable of regarding himself as an object or someone affiliated with an outer sphere that is not identical to himself (the "reality principle") is part of the traumatic distinction between that which is compartmentalized as inner or imaginary and outer reality.³⁷ Therefore, ascribing life-like quality to inanimate objects attests to the indecisiveness of the border between ego and otherness. It signifies the traumatic genealogy of the ego and its inner-otherness, the superego.³⁸ Anxiety is thus generated out of the mechanisms of normative domination and self-domination which initially construct the ego, invalidating any appeal to certain "undesired" elements. The reflective aspect is suppressive since reiterating thoughts about the ego depends upon the very adjudicating faculty which considers the ego as a separate subject. Hence these reflective thoughts implicate a *negation* of the ego and reveal the death instinct embedded in the superego.

The ego as a symptom appears to be an object of desire for repetition compulsion. But repetition compulsion can also become an internal attack upon the ego, since repetition compulsion is interlinked both with narcissism and

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming*, in *SE*, Vol. IX, 141-155.

³⁵ Freud, "The 'Uncanny'," 233.

³⁶ "The idea of the 'double' does not necessarily disappear with the passing of primary narcissism, for it can receive fresh meaning from the later stages of the ego's development. A special agency is slowly formed there, which is able to stand over against the rest of the ego, which has the function of observing and criticizing the self and of exercising censorship within the mind, and which we become aware of as our 'conscience'. [...] The fact that an agency of this kind exists, which is able to treat the rest of the ego like an object - the fact, that is, that man is capable of self-observation - renders it possible to invest the old idea of a 'double' with a new meaning and to ascribe a number of things to it - above all, those things which seem to self-criticism to belong to the old, surmounted narcissism of earliest times," *ibid.*, 235.

³⁷ This is, of course, not corresponding in any sense to the famous Lacanian distinction between the imaginary, symbolic and the real.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 236.

its denial. In modern art, the undermining of the stability of the ego turns into a violent offence, as in Hal Foster's interpretation of surrealism wherein Eros becomes Thanatos.³⁹ If there is some affinity between modern painting and the human figure, then the human figure is re-presented in a distorted form. On the one hand, distortion has always been part of artistic practice, for the human figure is always trapped in imaginative time. On the other hand, even in the most obscure presentation, the creation of an imaginary figure is conditioned by its life context. The re-presented figure simultaneously carries along with it both a detachment from life and the pain of this detachment. The enjoyment of this imaginative transgression is therefore not equivalent to real transgression even though the historical border between the two is still intact. Hence if art is analogous to transgression, it should not be considered a real transgression.

Returning to Adorno's statement that art derives its very life out of death, the detachment of art from its source does not necessarily lead to delight in the death instinct even when there is some symbolic affinity or continuity in the relation of a representation to its source. As long as the imaginative severance maintains symbolic affinity to a living context, that severance is maintained in reality, bearing within it the additional aspect of art's perpetual failure to resurrect the living via its processes of imagination. If art could resurrect life and then actually destroy it, then that would indeed be a sadistic manoeuvre. It is this inherent failure that gives art the power to criticize sadism as well as all other forms of violence.

Thus Adorno argues that

the shock, which people scurry away from in embarrassed giggles, is developed in full in Beckett's work. Just as after an intensive reading of Kafka alert experience thinks it sees situations from his novels everywhere, so Beckett's language effects a healing disease in the sick person: the person who listens to himself talk starts to worry that he sounds the same way. [...] Gaps open up between the mechanically assembled phrases of everyday speech. When one of Beckett's two characters [in *Endgame*] asks, with the routine gesture of someone jaded by the inviolable boredom of existence, "What in God's name could there be on the horizon?", this linguistic shrugging of the shoulders is apocalyptic precisely by virtue of its utter familiarity.⁴⁰

According to Adorno, the severance of context in a work of art which produces the experience of shock does not construct something new, but rather reveals daily familiarity itself to be uncanny. The gap between familiar "mechanical" speech and the alienation that is inherent in art allows the suppression of the aggressive elements within quotidian "instrumental communication" to be articulated so forcefully. Adorno's analysis of the instance of listening in aversion to oneself, incites reflective thought about the overly-familiar. While novelty and surprise are valued in and of themselves in commodity society, in Adorno's context innovation stems not from realization of desire in the erotic sense (*i.e.* from synthesis with other life elements), but rather from disclosure of the suppression of the death instinct that is present in daily life. Beckett's question, "what in God's name could there be on the horizon?" is derived from the inherent domination embedded in the forces of production. The transformation of human life into the "too familiar" emanates therefore from growing submission to social control via the agency of professionals, utilizing every phenomenon for what they determine to be beneficial ends.

Hence the excess of familiarity is nothing other than an excess of domination. The potency formerly ascribed to magical objects or to the vitality of nature is now reincarnated in technology. Shock and surprise are intertwined with loss of control — a familiar *leitmotif* in Kafka whose stories are constructed as nightmares. Loss of control is depicted in his settings of bureaucratic systems whose function and proceedings can never be entirely understood. In our social reality such understanding stems from professional specialization: in order to grasp the functioning of social, economic, or bureaucratic systems one must be an expert. Yet even professionalization can never attain comprehensive knowledge of social structures, only a narrow, one-sided understanding of them. Esoterics, or the

³⁹ "In short, just as surrealist automatism suggests not liberation but compulsion, so surrealism in general may celebrate desire only, in the register of the uncanny, to proclaim death." Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), 11.

⁴⁰ Theodor W. Adorno, "Trying to understand *Endgame*," in *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991-92), 262.

concealment of knowledge is now carried out under the guise of free and obtainable education, at least for those interested in it. While decentralization of knowledge may give an apparent sense of freedom of thought, it renders the task of comprehending complex apparatuses into a formidable challenge. To the layperson, understanding an “overly-familiar” commodity as a highly sophisticated product has become almost unfeasible. The human environment has itself been rendered into an increasingly uncanny habitat.

It is the ego itself as an object of desire that has been transformed into the most uncanny of objects. After the mystification of the boundaries between social reality and the imaginary sphere, whether by regarding the human species as no different from any other object of scientific study or by regarding it as a mere object of desire-fulfilment, privacy is uncanny as it now stands before its own self-destruction. Adorno transposes the “over-familiar” into a realm which is no longer private. Its elimination implies not merely physical death, but every reference in Adorno to the body as “physical” treats it as though already dead. He states:

But once the subject is no longer unquestionably identical with itself, no longer a self-contained complex of meaning, its boundary with what is outside it becomes blurred, and the situation of inwardness become those of *physis*, of physical reality. The verdict on individuality, which existentialism retained as an idealist core, condemns idealism. Non-identity is both the historical disintegration of the unity of the subject and the emergence of something that is not itself [a] subject.⁴¹

The experience of the uncanny exposes the blurring of the ego and its otherness. This obfuscation is interpreted as elemental to the consideration of human beings as natural beings. As such, the force of nature within us is grasped not as being vividly alive, but rather as passively dismantled into psychological, biological, chemical, and physical components. Modern disintegration of the subject is related to the leitmotiv of the “omnipotence of thoughts” in which inner and outer spheres are co-extensive. Yet this blurring is not a symbolic endeavor to unify the self with other subjectivities. From this unification, “nature” arises, dead and mechanical, activated by outer forces which are not fundamentally differentiated from it. Since knowledge of the ego is divided into various professional spheres, individuality turns into an almost arbitrary generalization — a repertoire of diverse parameters from various fields of study which are then reconstructed into what we “are.” By the same token, society is ideologically presented as an incidental conglomerate of equivalent items which are arbitrarily assembled. Negating private content as a coincidental occurrence of “facts” also reduces anyone performing within that content to the fungible. According to Adorno, this is exactly what happens in Proust where distinctive qualities of character, personality, feelings, and values turn into caricatures deprived of individuality:

In the process it becomes clear that the characters are not characters: a frailty appears in what is stable, a frailty ratified but by no means produced by death. This process of dissolution, however, is not so much psychological as it is a fugitive series of images. In them Proust’s psychological work attacks psychology itself. What changes in people, what becomes alien to the point of unrecognizability and returns as in a musical repeat are the images into which we transpose them. Proust knows that there are no human beings in themselves beyond this world of images; that the individual is an abstraction that its being-for-itself has as little reality as its mere being-for-us, which the vulgar prejudice considers an illusion.⁴²

Yet for Adorno, the ideological appearance of the individual as a mere abstraction does not necessarily attest (as perhaps it does for postmodern scholars) to a metaphysical void that lurks behind it. Once the strengthening of the social ego is revealed as enfeebling its own erotic aspects, incapacitating it from within, the ego as an object becomes

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁴² Theodor W. Adorno, “Short commentaries on Proust,” in *Notes to Literature, Vol. 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991-92), 262.

the ultimate lost object. But that which has become a historical object is never conclusive and fixed and that is what the metaphysics of the ego as a null entity disregards.

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