

the three aspects of the uncanny

donald kunze

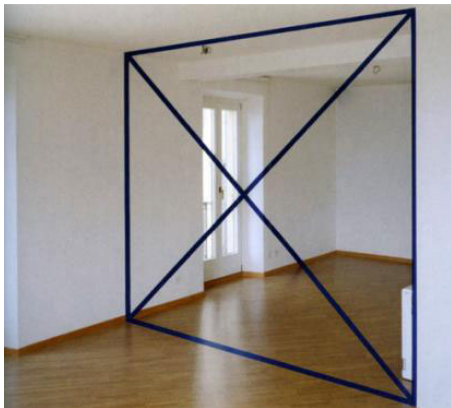
Three themes resonate within the uncanny: anamorphosis (and its spatial cousins, 'flips' and 'inside frames'), the phenomenon of the voice, and the more Lacanian themes of the 'partial object', the undead who journey between 'the two deaths', and the theme of travel itself. All of these themes endeavor to educate us about the uncanny in relation to desire, and in cinema, which might count for a fourth aspect itself, is the place where we find them collected, sharpened by use, and magnified. These three components are structurally related and logically intertwined. Each theme stands on its own in terms of traditions within culture and the arts and sciences. Anamorphosis, a primarily visual phenomenon, appears in many guises; its most 'characteristic' historical treatment occurs with the Enlightenment, where it blurs the distinctions between inside/outside, subject/object, familiar/strange, etc. The voice, which never quite belongs to the subject (the 'minimal element of ventriloquism' that accompanies every speech act), has a leading role in ancient religion but makes a striking come-back with the advent of technologies allowing for its actual displacement. Finally, themes that condense the gap between symbolic relationships in the everyday and the Real of desire, which cannot be symbolized, condense around some uncanny classic Lacanian themes: the partial object (e.g. the double, the clue, etc.); the interval 'between the two deaths', the biological death and the cultural death; and the theme of travel itself which, though not specifically Lacanian, shows how psychoanalysis adopts easily to the literary and artistic wealth of the theme of the journey, and how the journey can apply to literal travel as well as to dialectic conditions where travel is a matter of thought, perception, or psycho-topological relationships.



1. anamorphosis, flips, inside frames

Anamorphosis engages so many aspects of the visible (position of the viewer, perspective theory, space as curved, monstrosity, etc.) that it is easy to ignore the purely psychological aspect that makes anamorphosis a model of the Hegelian dialectic. Here we confront the Enlightenment's effort to domesticate the uncanny through stable dichotomies: subject/object, inside/outside, mind/body, familiar/strange). Through the logic of the forced choice, rationalism sought resolutions of these 'problems' that would for once and for all avoid the complexities of metaphysics (= 'Hegel'). Today, the same dichotomous thinking establishes ideological 'master signifiers' that effectively neutralize the radical otherness of one of the dichotomized terms: *body/mind*, *practice/theory*, etc.

Behind ideology and its cure is some framing operation that, in one way or another, duplicates the logic of anamorphosis: the 'flip' of the frame that, in the closed curved topology of human space, manipulates point-of-view and the vanishing point; the 'inside frame', which organizes a spatial inversion around a 'black hole' or gap created by the radical Other — the unresolvable obscene surplus that structures desire.



Anamorphosis presumes a direct involvement with a destabilized point of view and vanishing point.

2. the voice

As Slavoj Žižek puts it, there is always a minimum element of ventriloquism in the human voice. The voice does not belong in the body, a real spokesperson for the subject, but always comes from elsewhere, an 'extimate' element that is permanently uncanny. Maden Dolar emphasizes the point that the voice lies outside of phonemic linguistics and is, thus, somewhat immune to the rules of semiotics/semiology that underlie most discussions of linguistics. It is important to remember that psychoanalysis is based entirely on the evidence of the voice as distinct from speech; Freud's 'talking cure' began with the hypothesis that the subconscious, though structured like a language, could externalize itself only by breaking the rules of language in the use of the voice.

Interest in the voice is primarily modernist, given its central role in psychoanalysis, but it is important to recognize the pre-modern prominence of voice in theology, folklore, and popular culture. Vico's theory of imagination is based on the perception of the thunder as voice, and the key to his 18c. conundrum lies in understanding just how modern his point was: that the thunder was an instance of 'signifier-ness' rather than meaning, and that this first instance of cosmic ventriloquism was decisive in establishing the interpolation that led the first humans to convert private vices to public goods.

The voice is no less an important marker for theory of cinema, where as the 'acousmatic' (unlocatable, off-screen) voice, it raises issues of placement, point of view, vanishing points, and other framing issues to the extent that editing, filming, story-boarding, and screen-play techniques can be integrated directly into discussions of the development of mind and the role of perception.



The subject's voice, notes Zizek, always involves a minimal element of ventriloquism (*Dead of Night*, 1945).

3. partial objects, the undead, travel

What is the partial object? Primarily, it is the object 'out of place' — the organ imaginatively projected outside of the body, or isolated from the body. The ballet slippers of Michael Powell's *The Red Shoes* (1948) propel the ballerina into mad exertions she cannot escape. The arm of *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) reverts to a Nazi salute in times of stress. The collection of movie videos relieves us of the necessity of watching our favorite movies: the collection 'enjoys on our behalf'.

introduction: three parts of the uncanny



RCA Victor's graphic trademark was based on a true story of a deceased artist's brother who, touched by the brother's dog's melancholic recognition of a recording of his master's voice, painted the scene and marketed it to various recording companies. The voice is the a-phonetic but phonic component of the voice: that which cannot be reduced to a semantic relationship.

More striking partial objects involve positive manifestations of the negative. The invisible, which is normally just a technical shadow created by our point of view and limited sight, can be put into a special place where the 'invisible as such' has a three-dimensional existence. Cartoon characters can have their own hidden retreat in the American West or, more credibly, some communal hideaway can serve as a safe refuge for gangsters on the run. Here, we see application of the general rule: privation is converted into prohibition. What we can't see, experience, know, etc. is converted into something specifically prohibited to us, an irrational law denying us access (Kafka's *The Castle* and other works).

Partial objects can, as in the theme of the double, combine opposites (dream/reality, good/evil, present/past, live/dead) in ways that violate the normal boundaries separating them, converting privation to prohibition using themes of moral violation (Stephen King's perennial theme: 'One shouldn't try to bring the dead back to life!'). Here, the interval between alternatives is given material being. Dorothy (*The Wizard of Oz*, 1939) has a cyclone to connect Kansas to Oz; later she has the Yellow Brick Road. Again, passage is put in terms of prohibition:

a magic formula must be known, a password given, a test passed or riddle solved (such as the Sphinx's questions put to Oedipus).

Partial objects are not just about transgression, the violation of some 'moral' as well as spatial boundary, but about materialization of this violation as a passage, trial, or journey, leading us to Travel as a theme of the partial object. In travel, the uncanny spreads itself out over broad landscapes and extended periods of time. Its mechanics are not simple success in moving from one point to another, but the achievement of an 'authentic travel' that distinguishes travel from other kinds of motion. In this, Henry Johnstone's theory of authentic travel in the example of *The Odyssey* is most useful.

4. putting it all together

Travel, inside frames, partial objects, forced choices, anamorphosis, the acousmatic voice, the undead, ventriloquism — once popular culture, politics, philosophy, psychology, and history are thought in terms of the uncanny, there is a lot of re-writing to be done. In this project, the Enlightenment need not be thought of as an oppressive falsification of a more 'pure expression' of the uncanny but rather as a stain (in the sense of the biological laboratory procedure of tagging tissues and cells for certain proteins) that permits what had been uncanny all along, in the context of magic, religion, superstition, etc., to fluoresce under a light of the proper spectrum. This light, and this fluorescence, is method, the 'study method' that Vico advised his readers to undertake, which was itself an example of the Lacanian 'extimate' — an immersion into the alien nature of

the world in order to recognize one's self, in the most intimate (extimate?) sense, embedded within the resistant kernel of the Real.

The uncanny is not only the basis for a revised program of humanistic study; it comes with a 'mandate' to lay bare the ideological substrate of paradigms of mind, to show how reality, written within the 'placements' of Truth, Production, the Agent, and the Other write a topological account of the self-inverting, self-inscribing self.

If the uncanny is, as its German word, *Unheimlich*, suggests, self-negating, then a negative study method is suggested. Thus, the Surrealists are important not because of their product but because of their strategies — in particular, their failures. This leads directly to Raymond Roussel, whose works were notoriously despised but whose own account of his ingenuity far surpassed any apparent achievement.



Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* provides many examples of 'partial objects'. Here, the son masquerading as the murderous mother, super-ego par excellence, appears, thanks to the shower curtain and water spray, as ectoplasm: that which is 'between the two deaths'. Lacan referred to this as the 'lamella', neither dead nor alive, the tissue that mediated the inner and outer worlds: the extimate.