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The Uncanny Valley: Extimité and the Lacanian subject



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"Oh you glorious, profound nature, only you, you alone understand me completely!"

The creation of sexually functioning automata has propagated troubling questions, from those focussed on issues of autonomy and agency, to wider concerns around ontology, and ethics. 'Sex robots' have, in numerous instances, been portrayed as compliant puppets, which further the sexual objectification of women, and reinforce patriarchal power relations marked by inequality, and violence.¹ It is even assumed that sex robots might propagate coercion within sexual encounters between humans.² This paper turns those readings on their head, arguing that the rise of the 'sex robots' may in reality provide liberating opportunities, whose dimensions may be more accurately gauged through the implementation of Freudo-Lacanian - and Queer - analyses of the hetero-normative cultural fantasies which they disrupt.

Central to these critiques is the Freudo-Lacanian concept of 'the uncanny' (*Das Unheimliche / extimité*)³, which is mobilised in order to delimit those troubling places where the intimate coincides with the exterior, provoking a sense of anxiety. As such, the uncanny is fundamentally paradoxical, and contradictory. Dolar argues that 'extimité is simultaneously the intimate kernel, and the foreign body,' obscuring - whilst making tractable - the porous boundary between subject, and object. Therefore, in negotiating the uncanny we necessarily bring into focus the split (or 'barred') Lacanian subject, and unlock the potential for that subject to transcend existing binaries, both philosophical, and material.

1 Richardson, K. (2016) Sex Robot Matters: Slavery, the prostituted and the Rights of Machines! IEEE Technology and Society, 35 (2), pp. 46-53

2 Gutiu S (2016) The robotization of consent. In: Calo R et al (eds) Robot law. Edward Elgar Publishing, Cheltenham, pp 186-212

3 Dolar, M "I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night": Lacan and the Uncanny (1991) October, Vol. 58, Rendering the Real (Autumn, 1991), pp. 5-23

Further, given its fissile potentialities, the uncanny is claimed as an integral dimension of that which has come to be called 'Queer.' 'The queer experience' may be characterised – in this instance - as 'an encounter with the strangeness of the sexual, as it manifests in the...identity' of certain individuals.⁴ Thus, the modulations and disturbances created by an encounter with the queer are contiguous with those engendered by 'the uncanny', and similarly emanate from psychic conflict. To the extent that the two are coterminous, to embrace the uncanny is, even to a limited extent, to embrace the queer. In queer terms, the encounter with the uncanny sexual automaton is not limited to the apprehension of an other who is impossible to define in terms of gender identity. Rather, the automaton, in its uncanniness, allows for a simulated resurfacing of the tensions and psychic conflict of the split human subject, provoked by the collapsing of the division between subject and object, interior and exterior.

Thus, this paper demonstrates that the contemporary concept of the 'uncanny valley's is – in the context of sexual automata – not an abyss to be negotiated, but rather an axial site around which are clustered fundamental ontological conflicts, masquerading as concerns over agency and autonomy. The purpose of this article is neither to prescribe, proscribe, nor caution. Rather, it is to rigorously apply key psychoanalytic concepts in an effort to reveal the hitherto-unspoken dimensions of 'the queer uncanny.' Further, to note the implications for ontology, psychoanalysis, and queer theory; both the points of coincidence, and the dissonant notes.

Das Unheimliche in Jentsch

A review of the academic literature on 'the uncanny' necessarily begins with Ernst Jentsch's seminal essay '*On the Psychology of the Uncanny*.'⁶ Setting the mode of enquiry that would be followed by later commentators - most notably Freud, and Dolar (*supra*) - Jentsch begins by discussing the linguistic roots of *das Unheimliche*. He offers a straightforward - though provisional - definition, categorising it as a disorientating impression of unease, and noting that the subject 'to whom something 'uncanny' happens, is not quite 'at home'. Notably, Jentsch rejects attempts to provide a more comprehensive, generalised definition, or a totalising conceptual explanation of 'the uncanny,' predicating his decision on the subjective origins of the subject matter, its lack of universality, and its inconsistency of affect. Therefore, the author proceeds inductively,

4 Bourseul, V. (2010). The "uncanny" and the queer experience. *Recherches en psychanalyse*, 10(2), 242a-250a.

5 Mori, M. (2012). *Translated by MacDorman, K. F.; Kageki, Norri. "The uncanny valley". IEEE Robotics and Automation*. 19 (2): 98-100

6 'Zur Psychologie des Unheimlicheen' was published in two parts in *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 25th August 1906, pp.195 – 198; and 1st September 1906, pp.203 – 205.

providing a series of examples and *indicia*, whose aggregate psychological, and physiological, manifestations, he posits, together reveal the essence of the concept.

Jentsch's taxonomy is somewhat abstruse, encompassing those situations in which individuals apprehend new, and frequently unsettling, dimensions of quotidian phenomena. He gives the example of 'fakirs breaking rocks'. Though phenomena of this type may exemplify the novel, and outré, these lack the grounding in familiarity that would later come to properly characterise *das Unheimliche*. Indeed, his examples range across stimuli, and qualia, that could more suitably be classified as intense, alarming, or startlingly novel.

Jentsch is far less discriminating in his selections than his successors. Writing prior to Freud, he understandably traces the roots of the uncanny to cognitive capacities (and a lack thereof), positing that the perception of the uncanny is dependant on faculty, and intelligence. Indeed, in this first part of the essay, he devotes a significant part of his analysis to the ways in which the unfamiliar impacts upon on the young, the 'mentally infirm', and those with limited intellectual capacities. However, in the latter part of the first section of the essay, discussion moves from cognitive capacity to a number of modalities which later commentators would classify as signifying the essence of the uncanny.

Indeed, Jentsch places emphasis on one notable example; 'the [imperceptible] doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate.'⁷ In the second section Jentsch then develops this idea, discussing automata, wax figures, and lifelike dolls. Indeed, it is Jentsch who first alludes to the story of 'The Sand-Man', in *Tales of Hoffman*⁸, and its protagonist - Nathaniel's - infatuation with the lifelike doll, Olympia. This theme would be later elaborated upon by Freud, and given a theoretical grounding.⁹ Jentsch' survey then closes with discussions of pareidolia,¹⁰ apophenia, and pathological instances of the uncanny. Crucially, he focusses on the porosity of the boundary between the psyche, and the external environment, noting a common feature which unites the disparate instances of the uncanny; the way in which, 'such a thought may often push its way into consciousness so that it is itself capable of giving the lie to appearance, thereby...setting the preconditions for...psychical conflict'¹¹ This tension between interiority and exteriority would assume greater significance in the works of

7 Ibid. at p.8

8 From 'The Sand-Man' by E.T.A. Hoffman (1982) *Tales of Hoffman* (Hammondsworth: Penguin Books)

9 Freud, S. (1919). The 'Uncanny'. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, 217-256

10 Pareidolia refers to the perception of clear patterns drawn from vague stimuli (e.g. seeing faces in clouds). Its uncanny dimension involves the perception of design in inanimate matter. Apophenia is a spontaneous perception of a meaningful connection between unrelated phenomena. Its uncanny dimension occurs when a series of seemingly unrelated events suddenly take on a portentous meaning.

11 Op. cit. Jentsch, at p. 8

Freud, and Lacan, leading to the latter's conception of divided subjectivity. However, Jentsch – writing prior to the psychoanalytic dawn - closes by concluding that such uncanny threats to the stable duality of the interior and exterior stem from the human desire for the intellectual mastery of the sensory environment. Nonetheless, this prescient conclusion prefaces Freud's tracing of the uncanny to the infantile development of the ego and its limits in the social world, as discussed below.

Das Unheimliche in Freud

Precisely one hundred years ago, in May 1919 - following a decade-long hiatus - Sigmund Freud completed his revision of a hitherto-unfinished essay on the subject of the uncanny; an essay which would come to define the topic.¹² For Freud, the uncanny properly fell within the province of aesthetics, where it fell to be contrasted with the sublime. As such, it might be posited that the uncanny did not constitute a typical subject for psychoanalytic investigation. However, due to the efforts of Freud, Lacan, and their successors, treatment of this topic has made a significant contribution to the psychoanalytic oeuvre.

As with Jentsch before him, Freud's treatment of 'the uncanny' begins with a review of its linguistic roots. Freud compiles an exhaustive list of usages from a number of historical, and literary sources, within the Western canon, tracing the subtle conjunction of the homely (*Heimeligkeit*) with the occult, or hidden (*Heimlichkeit*). Freud then proceeds inductively, in his typically digressive style, compiling a somewhat abstruse collection of examples of the uncanny, focussing on; the paradoxical realm between the living and the dead, which Lacan would later refer to as the 'area between two deaths'¹³; the anxiety provoked by an encounter with 'the double,' which Freud characterizes as the point at which narcissism becomes unbearable; 'the evil eye' as a particularly potent instantiation of the gaze; a series of seemingly unconnected coincidences, which suddenly resolve to convey a fateful, or portentous, meaning; and amputated limbs and prostheses.¹⁴

Curiously, Freud mentions Nathaniel's infatuation with the doll Olympia only in passing, expanding instead on the relationship between the protagonist and his father(s). However, it may be argued that it is the protagonist's infatuation with the lifelike doll which is the most apposite element of the tale. Nathaniel's obsession could be viewed as a paradigm a example of what Freud called the 'splitting of the ego'; a process definitive

12 Freud, S. (1919). The 'Uncanny'. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1917-1919): An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works, 217-256

13 Žižek, Slavoj. The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology. London: Verso, 1999. p.170

14 See, for example, the myoelectric 'Vienna hand.'

of instances of fetishism and psychosis, whereby two contradictory attitudes – acceptance, and disavowal - come to exist side-by-side in the ego. This topic would later gain significance in Lacan's disquisition on the 'split subject'.

Nonetheless, this disparate catalogue of cases share one common denominator. The disruption of the homely, or rather the irruption of something subjective into the seemingly objective plane of commonly accepted reality. Perception of the uncanny betokens the emergence of some entity which eludes the standard divisions between subject and object; between interior and exterior. At this moment the hitherto-immutable status of both the subject, and of the field of objective reality, is placed in doubt.

In order to make this phenomena tractable, Freud attempted to marshal the entire panoply of psychoanalytic concepts: castration complex, Oedipus, narcissism, compulsion to repeat, the death drive, repression, anxiety, and psychosis. All of these appear to converge on the uncanny. As such, the uncanny itself appears as reified, and it may be stated that it forms the pivotal point around which these psychoanalytic concepts revolve. This *locus* would re-emerge in the work of Jacques Lacan as the '*objet petit a*' (object small a) - the point of disjunction between the symbolic and imaginary which comprises his most significant contribution to psychoanalytic theory.

From *das Unheimliche* to *Extimite*: Lacan and the Slovenian School of Psychoanalysis

As demonstrated above, psychoanalytic scholars of the Freud-Lacanian school have ably demonstrated that the Lacanian project was of far wider scope, and greater importance, than was initially thought.¹⁵ Their work offers unique insights into the intimate connections between philosophy and psychoanalysis, and provides fresh perspectives on the place of the uncanny not only in relation to ontology, and materialism, but in relation to sexual desire. Alenka Zupančič's latest work¹⁶ provides a typically erudite example of the way in which these fields interact, demonstrating that the uniquely unconscious nature of sexual desire enables it to serve as a key to the understanding of wider questions. Further, this work serves as a necessary riposte to both relational ontologies (such as object oriented ontology, ontogenesis, and 'new materialism'), and to the identity politics from which queer theory attempts to distinguish itself.

Zupančič explores the crucial ontological implications of the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality, in its Freud-Lacanian instantiation. Being irreducible to particular sexual practices, and contents, the concept of sexuality is shown to carry a conceptual weight that makes it particularly relevant for philosophical (in particular ontological) theorising.

¹⁵ See, for example, Mladen, D. (2007), „Freud und das Politische“, *Texte. Psychoanalyse, Ästhetik, Kulturkritik* 4: 14–38. ; Zupancic, A. (2008). *Sexuality and ontology*. *Filozofski Vestnik* 29 (1):59 ; Žižek, S. (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso ; Žižek, S. (2006) *The Parallax View*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁶ Zupančič, Alenka. 2017. *What is sex?*

Starting from the hypothesis that something about sexuality is constitutively unconscious – that is to say, existing only in the form of the unconscious – her thesis demonstrates that sexuality is predicated upon a singular short-circuit of object and subject, on the epistemological and ontological levels: a short-circuit which cannot be neglected in a complete philosophical examination of the uncanny *viz* automata.

This leads back to a discussion of the split subject (*Spaltung*) which, in Freud, was characterised as a process unique to fetishism or psychosis. Lacan expands the concept of ‘*Spaltung*’ to define a more fundamental characteristic of subjectivity itself. For Lacan, the subject cannot be anything other than split, and is thus irreducibly divided and alienated from themselves. As this split - and the resulting gap - cannot be erased, or healed, there is no possibility of synthesis. The split denotes the impossibility of the ideal of a fully present self-consciousness. Thus, the subjects will never know completely comprehend themselves, and are destined to be perpetually sequestered from complete self-knowledge due to the splitting of the subconscious element and their attachment to external objects. It thus indicates the presence of the unconscious, and is an effect of the signifier. It is for this reason that Saussure depicts the split (or barred) subject by way of a symbol ‘S’ struck through with a bar.¹⁷ However, to the extent that the appearance of the uncanny signals a partial breach in the division between subject and object, there exists, in theory, the potential to negotiate the hitherto-hidden dimensions of split subjectivity.

Like Freud and Lacan, contemporary scholars of the Slovenian school of Lacanian psychoanalysis – such as Mladen Dolar - place the uncanny at the centre of the psychoanalytic project: ‘a dimension where all the concepts of psychoanalysis come together.’¹⁸ Dolar sheds further light on the linguistic origins of the uncanny, noting once again that the ambiguous, and paradoxical, dimensions of *das Unheimliche* derive not from its negation of - or opposition, to - the commonplace and intimate, but rather from the ‘direct implication’ of the *Unheimliche* in the familiar. Dolar clarifies Freud’s exposition, noting that the familiar, and the homely, are generally regarded as conveying a sense of restfulness akin to the security found within the family home. By extension, that which is *heimlich* is also that which is private, hidden, and concealed from public gaze. By further extension, that which is hidden is therefore threatening, and occult. Thus, by a complex series of steps, commencing with *Heimlich* (in the sense of small, and quaint), it is possible to reach *das Unheimliche*. The two become inseparable.

However, Dolar highlights the provisional nature of Freud’s treatment, noting that Freud assembles an array of examples, but fails to demonstrate how these fit together. Thus,

17 Saussure, Ferdinand de. (1916) *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (Glasgow: Collins Fontana), at p.114

18 Dolar, Mladen (1991). “*I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding Night: ” Lacan and the Uncanny*. October, 58(Autumn), 5–23.

his work comprises a mere ‘prolegomenon to a theory of the uncanny.’¹⁹ Dolar notes that all efforts had hitherto consisted of efforts to demarcate the interior from the exterior, proceeding upon a series of philosophical binary concepts.; subject and object; essence and appearance; material and metaphysical. It is Lacan who provides the theoretical ‘glue’ which unites the diverse elements of the uncanny, as first considered by Jentsch and Freud. Extimite blurs the boundary between these binary elements, describes the place where the intimate coincides with the exterior. It is this interposition which becoming provokes anxiety. In short, ‘extimite is simultaneously the intimate kernel and the foreign body,’²⁰ blurring the division between psychic and real. Once again, it is this process of interposition which provides the uncanny with its potency.

Uniquely amongst writers on the uncanny, Dolar further posits that the concept of the uncanny is historically situated. He argues that ‘there is a specific dimension of the uncanny that emerges with modernity,’²¹ issuing forth from the ‘historical rupture’ which gave birth to the Enlightenment. Those phenomena which had been considered sacred and occult - the resting place of the uncanny – are thus subjected to scrutiny, and the uncanny emerges into the liminal world. Counter-intuitively, romantic literature, and the myriad monsters of gothic fiction, thrive in the age of reason, for reasons which will by this stage be apparent.

Hoffman’s tales are a similar product of this promethean age. However, Dolar opines that the paramount example is the monster from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. The monster is the *ne plus ultra* of the enlightenment preoccupation with automata – both physical and spiritual – which emerges from the subversion of Cartesian dualism, and form the axial point between matter and spirit, nature and culture, which we now label the uncanny.

Similar to the automaton, the creature emerging *ex nihilo* – the material from the spiritual – and thereby stands as the embodiment of the enlightenment project (whilst simultaneously disrupting its scientific foundations, and signalling its limit). Crucially, Dolar highlights the political dimensions of the monstrous uncanny, aligning the emergence of the creature with the birth of the proletariat (and the horror it provoked amongst the bourgeoisie), the French revolution, and the currents of radical and feminist praxis engendered by William Godwin, and Mary Wollstonecraft.

Ultimately, the creature may be regarded as a floating signifier capable of embracing a diverse array of social and ideological connotations, all of which are repressed by society. This includes not only proletarian ideology, but sexuality, and alternate ways of be-

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid

21 Ibid at p.7

ing, whose uncanny roots derive from their lack of integration within the dominant culture. As such, the monster occupies a similar place to the sexual automata of the twenty-first century who act as empty signifiers onto which the unconscious elements of split subjectivity are projected. That process will be exemplified in the following section.

'The Uncanny Valley' and the Sexual Automaton

Discussion now turns to a consideration of sexual automata proper, and the attendant concept of 'the uncanny valley.' Relative to the degree of traction that the concept now affords, Masahiro Mori's paper on 'the uncanny valley' is comparatively succinct.²² Mori provides a number of examples of human and non-human entities, which he places on a graph which plots the degree of 'affinity' against the degree of human similarity. These disparate examples straddle multiple modalities; organic and inorganic, cultural and industrial, animate or inanimate, dead or alive. They include corpses, industrial robots, and culturally situated examples, including 'yase otoko' masks from Japanese *Noh* drama, *Bunraku* puppets, and *Okina* masks.²³ Mori embodies the uncanny and provides the link between puppets, automata, and robotics. Mori demonstrates that affinity is not a continuously increasing function relative to mimesis. He notes that affinity increases until it reaches a point of near-mimesis, whereupon it plunges into a valley, which he labels 'the uncanny valley'. The author explains this phenomenon with familiar examples from Jentsch and Freud. However, his exposition does not include a comprehensive philosophical or theoretical analysis.

Such an analysis is attempted by Richardson, whose departure point is a disquisition on slavery, coercion, and sexual exploitation,²⁴ thence to robots having rights then to robots as moral agents. These are two separate topics which should not, at this rudimentary stage, be conflated. However, proceeding further, it may be posited that these (predominantly female) automata are shaped to fit the writer's purposes in no less an instrumental fashion.

The crux of Richardson's analysis is the assertion that sexual automata take on the role of a certain class of persons who have historically been subject to systemic inequalities. In counterpoint it may be asserted that this is not the case. Robots – at this stage in their development – are incapable of taking on the role of persons. Rather, they perform a limited set of functions previously undertaken by persons. These functions are depend-

²² Mori, M. (2012). Trans. MacDorman, K. F.; Kageki, Norri. "The uncanny valley". IEEE Robotics and Automation.

²³ In Japan the *Bunraku* doll is regarded as possessing a soul. This adds a cultural dimension to the discussion.

²⁴ Richardson, K. (2016) Sex Robot Matters: Slavery, the prostituted and the Rights of Machines! IEEE Technology and Society, 35 (2), pp. 46-53

ent on exposure to a narrow set of inputs, whilst being situated in a controlled environment, in the same manner as adding machines, supermarket check-out machines, and facial-recognition cameras. Crucially, these machines are neither independent, nor inquiring, moral agents, enjoying an independent existence in the world. In short, this is not the objectification of a subject. This is the subjectification of an object.

The analysis is not aided by the author's monolithic approach to sexuality, which remains restrictively hetero-normative. Women, Richardson intones 'are the creators'. Meanwhile, men 'buy sex and use pornography'. The author goes on to cite a number of historical examples to bolster her case. However, rather than attempting to survey, and analyse, a range of examples (such as Olympia, from the *Tales of Hoffman*), Richardson restricts her analysis to selecting only those which involve prostitution, and coercion (such as *Pygmalion*). This haphazard review then closes on the surprising admission that 'there are really no sex robots'.

Richardson states the central issue as being 'that a person is recast, often without bodily integrity, as property that can be bought and sold'.²⁵ Again, it may be argued that Richardson is partly correct, insofar as the use of sex robots involves the interplay of subject and object. However, to reiterate, this is not the objectification of a subject. This is the subjectification of an object, and it is the subjectification process which reveals hegemonic forces and systemic inequalities. And, just as the automaton and 'the double' emerge from underbelly of the enlightenment (see Dolar, *supra*), so the sexual automaton emerges from the crises of late capitalism. Further, Richardson states that 'arguments for sex robots reveal a coercive attitude towards women's bodies as commodities, and promote non-empathetic encounters'.²⁶ It may be argued, in counterpoint, that this is a cogent definition of capitalist exploitation in general, and is not confined to the sexual sphere. The capitalist mode of production, it has historically been argued, is predicated upon coercive working practices and conditions. Indeed, non-empathetic encounters have defined capital since Adam Smith furnished neoclassical economics with an articulation of 'enlightened self-interest', and this may be characterised as little more than a contemporary instantiation of the pervasive and proliferating modes of late capitalist production.

However, as argued above, the subjectification of an electro-mechanical automaton does reveal resonant psychic dimensions, which exceed, and elude, the process of commodification. And it is these elements which deserve further scrutiny, in the next section of this paper, dealing with 'Queer' critiques of the uncanny.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Queerness and das Unheimliche

Beginning with Bourseul, we encounter a definition of ‘the queer experience’ which is grounded in social terms, as ‘an encounter with the strangeness of the sexual, as it manifests in the...identity’ of certain individuals.²⁷ Bourseul proposes that the disturbances created by an encounter with the queer are similar to those engendered by ‘the uncanny’, both phenomena being generated through psychic conflict. Bourseul thus views queerness as simultaneously embodied and disembodied. It is embodied to the extent that queerness is conflated with sexual, and with gender, identity. However, it is also generated through an encounter with the other, emerging as a source of discomfort, or incomprehension. Thus, queerness interpellates certain psychoanalytic phenomena, particularly those attached to the experience of the uncanny, and is applied to an other who is impossible to define in cis-heteronormative terms.

Bourseul commends Freud’s exposition on the uncanny as revealing a phenomenon that ‘presents itself as complex and polysemic, and whose modulations are explored under the shadow of ambivalence and contradiction...bordering on the confusion between a meaning and its contradiction’.²⁸ As noted above, in Freudian terms the uncanny is connected ‘with the manifestation of a perceptible disturbance of the ego’s limits vis-à-vis the rest of the world’, the resulting effects leading to apprehension and psychic disturbance. Lacan traces this disturbance to the resurfacing of an infantile conflict relating to sexual difference. Hence, the uncanny is implicated in any encounter with subjects whose gender and sexuality are not easily read. Indeed, strangeness is latent in the uncanny. Thus, the sexual automaton, in its uncanniness, allows for a simulated resurfacing of this childhood tension. Conversely, to the extent that the two concepts are interposed, or coterminous, to embrace the uncanny is - to a limited extent - to embrace the queer.

However, even if the queer is uncanny, can we claim the obverse? Is the uncanny queer? This question will be elaborated below, in a discussion of the work of radical queer theorists who understand the queer uncanny in ontological terms. However, at this stage it is sufficient to note (as Freud-Lacanian scholars such as Zupancic have argued), that the roots of sexual attraction are non-sexual. Sexuality acts merely as a vector, which allows us to understand other phenomena. And it is perhaps in the non-sexual (though sexualised) dimensions of these robotic automata, that we might locate ‘the queer uncanny’ and its obverse.

Taking the above into account, it may be argued that Bourseul’s understanding of queerness is restricted, and is predicated upon an explicit link between queerness, and

27 Bourseul, V. (2010). The “uncanny” and the queer experience. *Recherches en psychanalyse*, 10(2), 242a-250a.

28 Op. cit.

homosexuality: a link which queer theorists have sought to deny.²⁹ Edelman, in counterpoint, restores queerness to the uncanny, and *vice versa*, through emphasising the distinction between queerness and homosexuality. This allows for a comparatively radical treatment of the queer uncanny, as the key means to resist, and negate, the advance of pervasive forms of ‘reproductive futurism’.

Queer Negativity

Edelman’s radical and uncompromising thesis proposes a revised ethics of queer theory focussed upon the figure of the child, universalised representations of which, Edelman regards as the organising concept around which the politics of ‘reproductive futurism’ are built.³⁰ The child - presented as ‘innocence in need of protection’ - represents the promise and possibilities of an unwritten future, against which the queer is positioned, as the manifestation of ‘a relentlessly narcissistic, antisocial, and future-negating drive’.³¹ Edelman goes on to argue that the potency of queerness derives from its endless refusal in the face of this pervasive socio-political ideology. In *No Future*, Edelman urges queers to abandon the stance of accommodation and accede to their status as figures for the force of a negativity that he links with irony, *jouissance*, and, ultimately, the death drive itself.³²

It is clear to see how sexual automata might figure in Edelman’s anti-reproductive concept of queerness. Further, it is the direct and indissoluble link with psychoanalytic concepts such as *jouissance*, and the death drive, which provides the link between Edelman’s queer negativity, and the uncanny. The subversion of the representation of heteronormativity-as-futurity, stands as an obstacle to any forms of fantasmatic investment in reproductive futurism, through which subjects attempt to compel nature to endorse the chain of signification constructed by language. This may explain the tendency for critics of sex dolls to invoke stereotypical representations of heteronormativity, and fixed gender roles, of the sort encountered in Richardson’s work.³³

From Edelman’s perspective these commentators are attempting to mobilise reproductive futurist tropes in the face of a phenomena which is disruptively queer, insofar as it is incapable of being assimilated into this pervasive cultural fantasy. Notably, Richardson herself states - midway through her critique - that there are no such things as sex

²⁹ See, for example, Brown, W.. Wounded Attachments Political Theory 21, no. 3 (August 1, 1993): 390–410; Gitlin, Todd. The Rise of ‘Identity Politics.’ Dissent 40, no. 2 (April 1993) pp.172–177

³⁰ Edelman, L (2004) *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Duke University Press: North Carolina)

³¹ Ibid. at p.30

³² Ibid. at p.1

³³ See infra.

dolls. This is not viewed as an impediment to her critique, and it is argued that this unproblematic treatment of their actual non-existence is due to the fact that these automata are uncanny representations which belong properly in the realm of the symbolic.

As was demonstrated above, psychoanalysis posits that an individual's self-identity is a precarious and contingent formation, which relies upon the symbolic structure of language. However, in addition to being subject to an unending process of semiosis, individuals are simultaneously exposed to a host of psychic drives, whose insistence – circulatory, demonic, and repetitive – serve to threaten, and subvert, our symbolic identifications, thereby exposing the subject to an excess of *jouissance*; an abyss of radical 'enjoyment' which exists 'beyond the pleasure principle'.³⁴ For Edelman, queerness is the reconceptualised force which threatens, disfigures, and renders incoherent, that chain of signification, unpicking the narrative net, and exposing the subject to the radical existence of *Das Ding*.³⁵ Thus, queerness becomes the primary vector of the death drive: the compelling force which seeks to propel the subject beyond the semiotic realm.

Returning to the instant study, it is clear that the collapse of subject, and object, positions, so characteristic of our experience of the uncanny - specifically those experiences engendered by encounters with lifelike automata - simultaneously resonates with Edelman's conception of queerness, insofar as these encounters challenge the narratives of reproductive futurism, forcing the subject into a radical encounter with *Das Ding*.

Queerness as Ontology

Given that Lacan characterises *jouissance* as a phallic phenomenon, might this process paradoxically signal the return of restrictive heteronormative subject positions? There are two responses. The first, and more basic response, is that this is not the case, since Lacan - in his later seminars - posits the co-existence of a supplementary feminine *jouissance*, or *jouissance* of the other.³⁶ Secondly, and more importantly, in tracing the roots of the queer uncanny, we are no longer following representations of subjectivity predicated upon gender and identity. Feminist scholars may be alarmed by this reading of a the queer uncanny, since it would appear ambivalent to sexual difference. Rather, following Zupancic, and Sue-Ellen Case, it should be stressed that we are actually working 'at the site of ontology'.³⁷ Whilst Case concedes that the blindness to sexual difference

³⁴ Ibid. at note 28.

³⁵ *Das Ding* refers to the thing in its 'dumb' existence beyond all forms of meaning and signification.

³⁶ Lacan, J *Le Séminaire. Livre XX. Encore, 1972-73*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Paris: Seuil, 1975. p. 69

³⁷ Case, S., 1997. 'Tracking the Vampire', in K. Conboy, N. Medina, and S. Stanbury (eds), *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (Columbia University Press: New York) pp.380-400.

is an issue, she posits that the basic categories of gender and sexual difference must be reconceptualised.

Thus, Case moves beyond discourses of male domination, and female subjugation, by making an ontological turn, in order to reframe desire and sexuality. More importantly for the purposes of the instant discussion, her work aims to create an 'alternative ontology of desire' through an explicit invocation of the uncanny (in this case the living undead, or vampire). It is clear therefore, that this ontological reframing of desire resonates with the appearance of sexual automata. As Case explains,

'The articulation of queer desire also breaks with the discourse that claims mimetically to represent that 'natural' world, by subverting its tropes.'³⁸

Thus, Case advocates the creation of novel discourses, capable of accommodating radical forms of desire, and sexual practice; discourses predicated on an ontological position which collapses the rigid dichotomy between subject and object, life and death, reframing subject relations in uniquely queer terms. Thus, queerness serves to challenge the chains of signification, and pre-existing representations of male domination, highlighted by Richardson and others.

In parallel with Edelman, and Case, De Lauretis³⁹ similarly conflates queerness with the Freudo-Lacanian death drive, which serves to destabilise the linguistic chain of signification:

'As I let the figure guide me and displace me through the reading of Freud and of Laplanche's reading of Freud, it takes me to a queer, non-binary place – dis-place – in which the categorical opposition between the psychic and the biological, between the order of the signifier and the materiality of the body, or between the organic and the inorganic no longer hold. This is the figural space inhabited by Freud's drive, a non-homogenous, heterotropic space of passage, of transit and transformation 'between the mental and the somatic', where between does not stand for the binary logic of exclusion but figures the movement of a passing.'⁴⁰

However, de Lauretis' differs from Edelman's in one important aspect. Queer is not mobilised to serve the structural negation of norms but rather calls attention to a site of transition which carries the potential to destabilise subjectivity representations. De Lauretis is alive to this distinction, stating that whilst,

'...Edelman urges queers to embrace a figural identification with the death drive as *jouissance*, a figure for the undoing identity and the heteronormative order of meaning. My

³⁴ Op Cit. at p.3

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ De Lauretis, T. (2008) *Freud's Drive: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film* (Springer: New York), at p.13

reading of Freud's drive offers no programme, no ethical position, no polemic, only queer figures of passing in the uninhabited space between mind and matter.⁴¹

Nonetheless, it is clear that this comparatively neutral, and descriptive, account of the queer encounter with the uncanny, occupies the same space of contingency of meanings and representations, of destabilisation of norms, and of the capacity to compass new ontological horizons.

Conclusion

It is thus demonstrated that the queer encounter with those phenomena commonly labelled as uncanny, offer the potential for fresh perspectives. Queerness is understood not as a restrictive term deployed in counter to identity politics, but as a destabilising vector for silent drives which are, to use De Lauretis phrase, 'upstream of their object cathexes'. The generative collapse of exclusive subject and object positions, far from entrenching timeworn narratives of coercion and subjugation may, therefore, form the *locus* for the creation of new forms of desire, and new understandings which resonate on the ontological plane.

41 Ibid. at p.87