

LOUCHE OPS

The Hypochondriac's Dream House

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The German word for the uncanny (*unheimlich*) appears to negate that which is *heimlich* (homelike) to situate the experience as an opposition between the familiar and the unusual. The play between these words in context can occasionally suggest a distinction of the *heimlich* in terms of what is kept private and the *unheimlich* as an exposure of what had been hidden. The ambiguity that softens the boundaries of the definition seems to have also ingested the suspicion it might engender, true to the experience it attempts to name.

In English, there isn't much divergence from how the uncanny is discussed, with the exception that a plausible opposite is omitted. *Canny* means something like shrewdness or cunning (particularly to do with money) and is typically used as an adjective rather than a noun. If the uncanny is, as Freud suggested, "a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then returned from it," then this logic appears to perceive the inability to maintain what had been repressed within a state of repression, a dereliction of cultural sophistication.

As predominant models of the Western fantasy of primitive identity, children and paleolithic humans are often considered through an analysis of their artworks. In these works there are repeated displays of the interiorization of their environments and projections of their interiorities onto these environments. The subjects of both models seem to comprehend the ambiguity of what it means to be at home.

For children, the threshold between what is consciously accessible and what is repressed appears to be loosely separated, as if by a beaded curtain. In their drawings of architecture, they anthropomorphize the buildings they inhabit. Houses and schools take on the features of a face with windows as eyes, doorways as mouths, etc. Legible expressions given to these structures might signal an unconscious confession about the child's feelings about what happens within the walls of these structures.

Children govern their dolls by giving them jobs, enacting sexual relations between them and having them commit acts of violence. Although dolls are archetypal objects in discussions of the uncanny, it's this realization made by observing how they're played with, that unsettles the adult's fantasy of what childhood is. It becomes uncanny for the adult who prefers to believe in concrete developmental separations and self actualization, to see the child as already having a more or less totalized psychological template set in place, hopefully, without having experienced the activities they dramatize.

Neolithic cave paintings made tens of thousands of years apart share common traits in that the people who made them represented human form with an apparent reluctance to draw their features naturalistically. The human figures in these paintings, when present at all, were often represented with the heads of animals. It's impossible to know if this was intended as a ritualistic tribute to the prey of their hunts or to signify that naturalistic representation of the human face was taboo. The great facility with which animals were drawn and painted on the walls of the same caves, implicates the distortions of human faces and bodies as having been made deliberately.

The impulse to outsource our subjectivity may be matched only by our revulsion with what it returns to us as. The Surrealists attempted to utilize the unconscious as a mechanism with which to sidestep what they saw as conditioned signifiers for selfhood and identification. A dearth of artists now look to AI, some using it as a tool of displacement to find the gaps in techno-philosophical determinations of what intelligent differentiation is or isn't. Many others have flirted with its employment to illustrate the limits of their reach through an ancient ritual of submitting to the processing of an external gaze.

The uncanny threatens us by declaring that there is no solution to the ceaseless instability of our own subject-hood. It resists becoming outmoded and interrupts any fantasy of progress or nostalgia. Many of us would prefer to think of children and our cave dwelling ancestors as existing somewhere behind us, at least developmentally. But they may have produced a human portrait that we've yet to exceed, a figure that is always somehow behind themselves.

James Krone - June '23

