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The Return of the Uncanny

My own interest in the uncanny was provoked by accident, in a request from a Princeton symposium on fairy tales – I was asked to contribute something on fairy-tale castles – but was diverted by a remark from a colleague in the German department, who not entirely innocently inquired whether I had read E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story, *The Sandman*. Which precipitated me down a rabbit hole from which I thought I had emerged until Elisabeth's invitation¹ to re-enter the burrow. I followed the trail – first Hoffmann (*Rat Krespel*), then of course Freud, followed by Sam Weber, Neil Hertz, Derrida, and Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous, and later Sami-Ali, and of course Lacan. In these readings I was struck by what I began to identify as a potential figure of a *spatial* uncanny, which eventually led to my book on the subject, *The Architectural Uncanny*.²

The Architectural Uncanny book was an inquiry into the *domestic* space of un-homeliness, that »*Heimlichkeit* of the home,« starting with an analysis of that extraordinary list of »definitions« from Daniel Sanders' *Wörterbuch der Deutschen Sprache*, and translations of the term in different languages, and continuing with an exploration of its emergence from the late 19th century to the late 20th century in literary texts from Maupassant to Georges Bataille – and in the aesthetic practices of art and architecture, while noting its re-emergence in 1960's psychoanalytic work.

I was especially interested in the work of Sami-Ali, who joined his study of Freud's uncanny to Lacan's Mirror Stage, through the question of reflection arguing from the proximity, noted by Freud, of the familiar and the strange – the »profound modification of the object which from the familiar is transformed into the strange and as strange something that provokes disquiet because of its absolute proximity,«³ that demands a particular structure of *space*:

»the feeling of the uncanny implies the return to that particular organization of space where everything is reduced to inside and outside and where the inside is also the outside.« In terms of *spatial form* – this means that the space of vision is collapsed; normal binocular, three-dimensional space, is modified by being deprived of depth: the familiar becomes uncanny by being conflated on the same plane. There is an imperceptible slippage between the subject and what is perceived; perception gives way to unconscious projection. Thus space contracts, distances can be overcome, and, contrary to Freud's claim in *Civilization and its Discontents*, two bodies can suddenly occupy the same space at the same time.

For Sami-Ali, the absence of a third dimension changes the whole organization; for this uncanny »space« was not simply a two-dimensional space collapsed into a single space. Rather, on the plane of projection that receives images of the double, space resolves itself into a concentric series of the same figures, where the part reflects the whole and the whole the part. Vision here can only be object of vision and the spectator – in the formula »A includes B which includes A.«⁴ Here Freud's understanding of the »return of the past« while not in itself the generator of the uncanny is itself uncanny. In the uncanny space described by Sami-Ali, the experience of the subject must unfold on the plane of perception, translated by the effacement of the line of demarcation between the real and imaginary; space loses its dimensions of *here* and *there*, and the distance normally maintained between subject and object is lost. Yet, paradoxically enough, this moment of collapse, occurs briefly in a space that has not in fact lost its three-dimensional character – the context, – we would say the site of the subject – which is thereby thrown into instability. The ambiguity of the uncanny occurs precisely because of this co-existence of two mutually exclusive spatial forms.

In my book, this understanding led to the exploration of a wide range of examples from historical and contemporary art and architecture. In a series of chapters I touched on the »unhomely houses« of Romanticism – de Quincy, Nodier, Hoffmann, and Victor Hugo; I seized on the remark by Freud that for »some people the idea of being buried alive is the most uncanny thing of all,« to trace the cumulative effects of the disinterment of Pom-

peii and Herculaneum in literature from Théophile Gautier's *Arria Marcella* to Jensen's *Gradiva* with this tale's own history in Freud's archeological digs. I looked at the »homesickness« revealed in late 19th century neo-classicism, that pale sublime of wistfulness exhibited in Walter Pater's dream of what Nietzsche called the »late afternoon« of classicism in *Marius the Epicurean*. More directly in the domain of architecture, I studied the development of the psychology of projection – the effect of bodily identification in the monument from Burke to Wölfflin, and thence to the contemporary »deconstruction« of the monument in architects like Coop Himmelb(l)au and Bernard Tschumi – here Lacan's analysis of the disintegration of the subject before the mirror was helpful: »it [...] appears in the form of disconnected limbs or of organs exoscopically represented, growing wings and taking up arms for internal persecutions that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch fixed for all time in painting ... manifested in schizoid and spasmodic symptoms.«⁵ In these and similar projects the architectural dream of a humanistic order of totality and formal unity was literally dismembered. I was preoccupied with the loss of »facades« in contemporary architecture – the again literal but symptomatic »loss of face« for buildings; with games being played on sites, as if elaborate derivations of Alice's world behind the looking glass were being enacted in space (Tschumi's *La Villette*); with the loss of any indication of stable ground for the architectural foundation, as if deconstructed by a Derridean earthquake in the works of Peter Eisenman; with the techno-play of architectural fragments, as if architecture, in a mode made celebrated by Donna Haraway, was building its own cyborgs, as in the topsy-turvy domestic worlds of Diller and Scofidio; with the darker special regions of the nightmare sublime, those »dark spaces« of the late Enlightenment identified by Foucault – from the shadow tombs of Boullée to the contestation of modernist transparency in the translucent projects of Rem Koolhaas.

In this book, I was confirmed in my spatial analyses by the originary spatial enactment of the uncanny, embedded in the little apparently innocent phrase of Schelling picked out by Freud from the host of *Wörterbuch* citations (originally misattributed by Freud to Schopenhauer in the first publication of the essay – another