

Jentsch and Freud on the Uncanny: Origin and Influences

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Abstract

This study presents a review of two essays on the idea of the uncanny by Jentsch and Freud. In his essay, Jentsch concentrates on the notion of “uncertainty” and its psychological effect on the subject in the process of perceiving an unfamiliar phenomenon, an idea which inspired Freud’s further elaboration on the term. However, Freud relates the uncanny to the intrusion of the "repressed familiar" in the form of the unfamiliar. In other words, he uses the idea of repression to explain the different instances of the uncanny such as the castration complex, confrontation with the figure of the double, and fear of death in the form of the return of the repressed.

Keywords: uncanny; jentsch; uncertainty; freud; unfamiliar

1. Introduction

The uncanny as a concept has been proved to be resistant to clear-cut definitions. In her study on the uncanny and its representation as a well-established idea in the late twentieth century, A. Masschelein opts for the term “the unconcept”. Masschelein’s denomination aptly describes the principle of assertion through negation which is at the core of the term “unheimlich”, the German word for the uncanny defined by Freud as “the opposite of what is familiar” (2017, p.593). This study reviews the origin of the notion of the uncanny in Jentsch’s essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny” and its further development and point of departure by Freud.

2. Jentsch: "On the Psychology of the Uncanny"

In his essay, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny", published in 1906, Jentsch notes the particular contribution of languages to the formation of certain psychological perceptions. The

notion of making "the terminology clear in one's own mind" (Jentsch, 1997, p. 7) seems to be a pertinent opening for the discussion of the uncanny as a psychological idea. As Jentsch explains, the term itself suggests "a lack of orientation" (1997, p. 8) which indicates that any attempt to define the essential nature of this experience is doomed to failure. An apparent reason for this indeterminacy can be related to the word itself because it defines itself by what is not canny, i.e., "not canny".

Jentsch's emphasis on the subjective nature of experiencing the uncanny seems to reinforce this indeterminacy. From one individual to another, the experience that causes a sense of the uncanny differs. Nevertheless, Jentsch attempts to explain the "psychical processes" involved in what he calls "the subjective impression of the uncanny" (1997, p. 8). What has been long familiar to the observer seems to establish the principle of normality. In other words, the idea of what is considered normal is closely related to what is familiar to the observer. The spectacle of the daily rising of the sun, which is readily taken for granted happens to be challenging only when the subject starts to question this phenomenon. Therefore, those individuals who in their perceptions are "more intellectually discriminating" are more prone to that feeling of uncertainty that Jentsch considers to be elemental in leading to the experience of the uncanny. This quality is best manifested in man's search for knowledge which is the driving force in the development of science. After elaborating on the idea of the familiar as the habitual, Jentsch concludes that it is this sense of unfamiliarity which can lead to a feeling of "uncertainty" and "disorientation". Thus, the lack of orientation regarding a phenomenon or situation becomes the prelude to the uncanny (Jentsch, 1997, p. 8).

Jentsch contends that an important factor which contributes to the creation of uncanny sensation is man's natural disposition to assume that everything in the outside world is animate. The primitive mind imagines a world filled with demons; in the same manner children often talk to inanimate objects such as their dolls, a chair, or a spoon. At times, the same projections, which are often the reflections of man's unconscious fears, come to haunt the individual, who in his inability to understand the psychic process at work, feels threatened by what appears to be an alien force. An instance of this uncertainty is "doubt as to whether an apparently living being is animate" (1997, p. 11). This situation is often used in stories where the storyteller attempts to create a similar

effect by leaving the reader in doubt as to whether a certain character in the story is, in fact, a human or "an automaton". Jentsch mentions Hoffmann as one of the successful authors who benefited from this psychological strategy. This idea was later developed by Freud in the in-depth analysis of Hoffman's *The Sandman*.

3. Freud: "The Uncanny"

Freud's oft-cited essay has been the most influential academic resource in the theoretical development of the uncanny. As F. Morlock has asserted, even though Jentsch is considered to be the first to "take the path toward the psychology of the uncanny" (1996, p. 118), his preliminary contribution to the concept is mostly recognized through Freud's essay as at a certain point in the essay he refers to Jentsch's view of the uncanny. Freud, however, begins by asserting the necessity of establishing a psychoanalytical approach to certain aesthetic concepts which are often neglected. One of these concepts is the uncanny, which is initially described by Freud as "what arouses dread and horror" or more specifically as "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (2017, p.593). As it was explained before, all the examples cited by Jentsch emphasize the role of uncertainty on the part of the observer. It is probably the dominance of this idea in Jentsch's essay that led Freud to infer that Jentsch believes that the most important element in experiencing the uncanny is an encounter with the unfamiliar:

The German word 'unheimlich' is obviously the opposite of 'heimlich' ['homely'], 'heimlich' ['native']- the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is 'uncanny' is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar. (Freud, 2017, p. 593)

Yet, before proceeding to reject this definition through an extensive etymological analysis of the word "unheimlich", he ascribes the above mentioned idea to Jentsch: "Jentsch did not get beyond this relation of the uncanny to the novel and the familiar" (2017, p. 593). This seems to be a misunderstanding of Jentsch's account of the uncanny. In fact, nowhere in his essay has Jentsch described the uncanny as something which is not "familiar". What Jentsch actually has done is to describe some situations in which "disorientation" happens as a result of failure of intellectual

mastery of an unfamiliar situation. So as in Jentsch's argument, the object itself is not unfamiliar, it only appears so because the individual's perception is being obscured.

In his essay, Freud's conducts an extensive inquiry into the lexical meanings of the words "heimlich" to prove his premise about the return of the repressed familiar as the origin of the uncanny. Among the different meanings of this word as quoted from Sander's dictionary, Freud highlights two apparently contradictory meanings: "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar..." and "concealed, kept out of sight..."(2017, p. 594). The concluding remark that "heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, unheimlich “ (2017, p. 596), establishes Freud's theory that the sensation of the uncanny is always related to the fear experienced at the moment when a person is confronted by a repressed thought.

Due to the enigmatic nature of this experience, in the second part of the essay, Freud, following Jentsch's example, ventures to explain the concept by examining particular instances of uncanny moments. At this point, Freud initially agrees with Jentsch that the doubt regarding the animatedness of an object such as "wax-work figures", and "automata" or the odd feeling we experience when we witness an epileptic patient or insane person can be cited as appropriate examples of the uncanny; yet this only works as a starting point. Apparently, at this point in the essay, Freud has referred to Jentsch since it provides him with an opportunity to repudiate Jentsch's contention that in all instances of the uncanny, the principle of "uncertainty" plays an important part. Later in his essay, as will be discussed in this study, Freud attempts to downplay the role of "uncertainty" and instead to give prominence to the "return of the repressed familiar" as the real cause of an uncanny experience.

Like Jentsch, Freud mentions the German Romantic writer, Hoffmann, as the master of the uncanny, specifically in his short story *The Sandman*. In his interpretation of this story, Freud asserts that the undeniably uncanny atmosphere of the story is certainly not due to the figure of Olympia, the life-like doll-figure, who becomes the object of the protagonist's obsessive affections. Following the motif of the eyes in the story, Freud states that the state of obsession, madness and the eventual suicide that Nathaniel is driven to, is actually evoked by castration anxiety. The

mysterious figure of the Sandman who dominates the entire story is the incarnation of this fear. The Sandman, as the appalling destroyer of the children's eyes, first appears in the bed-time stories told by the mother and the nurse, throwing sand on the eyes of the children who refuse to sleep. Nathaniel, as a child, projects this fear onto the lawyer Coppelius, the repulsive man who visits Nathaniel's father on certain nights. Thus, the "familiar" bed-time stories in the child's imagination trigger the fear of punishment, incarnated in the ominous, yet fictive, presence of the Sandman. This figure reappears later when Nathaniel is studying in another city, this time in the form of Coppola, a seller of weather glasses, who shows up at Nathaniel's door much to his horror urging him to purchase the 'fine eyes'.

Freud believes that the Hoffman leaves us in no doubt as to the real identity of the Sandman; both Coppelius and Coppola, having similar names and reflecting the attributes of the Sandman, i.e. their rather aggressive preoccupation with eyes, represent "this phantom of horror from his childhood" (2017, p. 598). Therefore according to Freud the "intellectual uncertainty" which Jentsch considers as the basic cause of uncanniness has no bearing here. Nathaniel's uncanny fear of the loss of his eyes, undoubtedly, reflects his unconscious anxiety over the loss of "male organ" as a punishment for his Oedipus complex, as in the myth, Oedipus had his eyes put out after discovering how he had, inadvertently or as Freud would put it unconsciously, killed his own father and married his mother. Thus, the Sandman, as the agent of punishment, represents "the dreaded father at whose hands castration is expected" (2017, p. 600). Freud argues that the association of eyes with the "male organ" can be inferred from dreams and myths and is best exemplified in the case of Oedipus, "the mythical criminal" whose "self blinding ... was a mitigated form of punishment of castration" (2017, p. 599) or a type of displaced castration.

The second theme which Freud, in his reference to Hoffmann's story elaborates on is the theme of the "double". In the similar manner, Freud is careful to "trace [this] back to infantile sources". The phenomenon of "the double" was first discussed extensively by Otto Rank. Freud mentions Rank's contribution to the development of this concept; "the double was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego". This idea originates from the stage of "primary narcissism", which is basically preeminent in children and the aboriginal man. When this stage is surmounted, the double is changed into what Freud calls "the uncanny harbinger of death" (2017,

p. 601). Consequently, this once-friendly, unconscious presence is alienated, at times, turning into an uncanny object of horror.

However, Freud notes the uncanniness of an encounter with "the double" precisely because it confirms his idea about the uncanny return of the repressed familiar. Thus, in Hoffmann's story, the uncanniness of Olympia, resides in the fact that she is "nothing less than the materialization of Nathaniel's feminine attitude toward his father in his infancy" (2017, p. 612); in other words, she acts as Nathaniel's double, an expression of his unconscious desire. The doll's bleeding eyes act out, symbolically, the protagonist's much dreaded castration anxiety performed at the hands of the Sandman, the life-long repulsive father figure.

Referring to the stage of "primary narcissism" (during childhood) as "a time when the ego had not yet marked itself off sharply from the external world" (2017, p. 602), Freud mentions other instances of the uncanny resulting from the return of what he calls the "surmounted beliefs". In another words, Freud recognizes two stages in man's psychic development: the first one that he terms as "primary narcissism" is related to childhood and the child's inherent tendency to see the world as the extension of the self. The second one that happens on a collective level is connected to primitive man. While man's "infantile complexes" are repressed as he passes through the first stage, repression does not seem to be the word to describe the same process for the aboriginal man. According to Freud both stages are characterized by the principle of "omnipotence of thoughts". However, Freud prefers to use the term "to surmount" instead of to repress; since for the primitive man repression does not exist.

Freud contends that other examples of the uncanny such as coincidence, "repetition compulsion" and the "dread of the evil eye" are related to "omnipotence of thoughts"; the principle leading us back to the "old, animistic conception of the universe"(2017, p. 604). According to this "animistic" point of view the world we live in, is filled and governed by spirits and that the primitive man's "narcissistic overvaluation" of his psychic reality is, in fact, an attempt to overpower the intimidating power of this universe. The uncanny feeling experienced at the time of "involuntary repetition", the inevitable helplessness one feels when confronting some hidden power, seems to confirm this "animistic" view. Freud, however, attributes these so called

"daemonic" powers to "instinctual impulses" originating in the unconscious mind; and their uncanny effect to that class of "frightening... in which the frightening element can be shown to be something repressed which recurs"(2017, p. 604). Here, as in other cases of the uncanny discussed by Freud, the instances of coincidence and repetition he mentions in the essay confirm his notion of "the return of the repressed". Nonetheless, one can expand Freud's examples to trace back the cause of the uncanniness, not necessarily to the notion of repression but to the significant role of uncertainty and disorientation on the part of the subject or the observer.

Fear of death, of dead bodies and the uncanniness of madness and epilepsy are the other examples mentioned in Freud's essay. Like the previous instances of the uncanny, Freud traces the source of these fears back to primitive times; in other words, they are the reflections of man's long-surmounted fears. Fear of death has always been present in human psyche, as a matter of fact; man's primary uncertainty regarding the reality and nature of death gives credence to the element of uncanny fear discussed by Freud in this essay. Similarly, magic, madness and epilepsy are treated by Freud as other instances of the uncanny since they appear to certify to the viewer the recurrence of long-surmounted fear of "daemonic" possession, leading back to the principle of "animism".

As can be seen, despite his relentless efforts to de-emphasize the role of uncertainty in the creation of the uncanny, Freud's assertions about the controversial nature of death and our insufficient scientific knowledge about it reinforces the idea that the uncanny fear regarding death arouses from our doubts about death as an unknown phenomenon. Evidently, Freud contradicts himself when he denies the significance of uncertainty in the uncanny experience, while in most of the instances of the uncanny that he discusses in his essay, uncertainty plays a determining role, an idea which was originally discussed by Jentsch.

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