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Weak monstrosity Schelling's uncanny and atmospheres of uncanniness

Abstract

This paper aims to examine the very unstable concept of the “uncanny” (das Unheimliche) from an atmospherological point of view. Its official theoretical “sanction” is due to Heidegger, who considered it the latent but fundamental ground of any being-in-the-world, and especially to Freud, who described it as the feeling that arises when something familiar suddenly becomes unfamiliar. Freud claimed to be inspired in this conception by Schelling's definition of unheimlich, which I try to explain to better understand what an uncanny atmosphere is. It seems characterized by elements such as ontological ambiguity-vagueness and paranoid subjectification, alien corporeality and unpredictable situations.

The paper ends with a brief analysis of the specific uncanny of houses, both in terms of their transformation from a secure interior to an uncanny place and in terms of the anxiety about materially inheriting a house and thus cohabiting with the past. In the perspective adopted here, the uncanny shows that we are not at home within our own body because we always coexist with an external-foreign and in this sense “monstrous” presence.

Keywords

Uncanny, Atmosphere, Monstrosity

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1. *Where it (almost) all began*

A few years ago, one could legitimately talk about a “weak” or background monumentality. Similarly, I would like to speak here of uncanniness as a “weak” monstrosity. As is well known, the “uncanny” is a very unstable concept with an uncertain origin and a vague semantics, an “ambulatory” feeling¹ (so to speak) that describes (maybe too) many things. It’s therefore hard to say what the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) is, exactly. Nevertheless, its ambiguity and vagueness turned out to be a veritable goldmine for deconstructionists and post-structuralists, easily convinced that only an indefinable concept can really express the inexplicable². This favourable atmosphere made this concept “one of the most supercharged words in our current critical vocabulary” (Jay 1998: 157)³, thus proving once again that, as in any self-respecting negative theology, the more ineffable a thing is, the more you can say of it. Even if it is neither only terror and discomfort nor something that necessarily leads to (Derrida’s) “hauntology”, the (private and public) uncanny experience seems to have almost inexhaustible resources and appears to be easily applicable to almost every discipline. To be a really productive concept, however, it has to avoid any too-generic definition⁴ and clarify its essential prerequisites, which I will list below.

a) In line with a secularized era disillusioned about the superiority of reason, the uncanny (unlike the sublime) brings our sensitivity and inescapable mortality to the surface, thus preventing us from taking refuge in the transcendent(al) and logocentric and proving that what we feel outside of us belongs to us deeply (and we to it)⁵.

b) The uncanny should be considered an “invention” of the Enlightenment and therefore an integral part of Modernity, which is its “toxic side effect” (Castle 1995: 8), so to speak. Only regimes based on instrumental and rationalist imperatives that conceal the dark side of reality and the resulting intellectual impasse force one to “flight into phantasmatic projection and spectralization of the world” (Johnson 2010: 36).

¹ Bernstein (2003) spoke of “The ambulatory uncanny”.

² See Zilkosky (2018).

³ “It is now the height of canniness to market the uncanny” (Jay 1998: 163).

⁴ Like this one: “the uncanny can perhaps provide ways of beginning to think in less dogmatic terms about the nature of the world, ourselves and a politics of the future” (Royle, 2003: 3).

⁵ See Johnson (2010: 54-6).

Only they force one to reject any involuntary remembrance of the pre-rational worldview as strangely familiar, viewed as a pathological betrayal of the allegedly unstoppable progressive project. It follows that, despite the disenchantment of Modernity, a part of our self and our world is still inevitably fascinated⁶ by all that lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience, appearing frightful and demanding our attention (also from an ethical point of view)⁷.

c) Far from applying only to well-defined types of objects and situations, the uncanny also seems at home in modern technology (a “technological uncanny”). In fact, “photo, film and phone have all been resources through which the uncanny presence of a disturbing otherness is revealed” (Collins, Jervis 2008: 1), especially if used in increasingly disembodied and therefore properly “haunted” media⁸.

If modern rationalism is certainly what brings out the uncanny, it is well known, however, that the official theoretical “sanction” of the concept of *unheimlich* is due to Heidegger and Freud. A long but very instructive passage from the first Heidegger clarifies well the central role that the uncanny, understood as an effect of angst, plays in his theory. According to him,

Angst as a basic attunement is disclosive in this way. We said earlier that attunement reveals “how one is”. In *Angst* one has an “uncanny” feeling. Here the peculiar indefiniteness of that which *Da-sein* finds itself involved in with *Angst* initially finds expression: the nothing and nowhere. But uncanniness means at the same time not-being-at-home. [...] *Angst*, on the other hand, fetches *Da-sein* back out of its entangled absorption in the “world”. Everyday familiarity collapses. *Da-sein* is individuated, but as being-in-the-world. Being-in enters the existential “mode” of not-being-at home. The talk about “uncanniness” means nothing other than this. [...] The uncanniness [...] lies in *Da-sein* as thrown, as being-in-the-world entrusted to itself in its being. This uncanniness constantly pursues *Da-sein* and threatens its everyday lostness in the they, although not explicitly. This threat can factually go along with complete security and self-sufficiency of

⁶ “The more we seek enlightenment, the more alienating our world becomes; the more we seek to free ourselves, Houdini-like, from the coils of superstition, mystery, and magic, the more tightly, paradoxically, the uncanny holds us in its grip” (Castle 1995: 15).

⁷ There is a “necessity of estrangement, disorientation, and in fact of disloyalty, to one’s own past and culture in order to interact with others on humane terms” (Johnson 2010: 10, fn. 3).

⁸ “Sound and image without material substance, the electronically mediated worlds of telecommunications often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form”: hence a kind of “spectral world” and “haunted apparatus” entering our homes (Sconce 2000: 4, 83).

the everyday way of taking care of things. *Angst* can arise in the most harmless situations. Nor does it have any need for darkness, in which things usually become uncanny to us more easily. In the dark there is emphatically “nothing” to see, although the world is still “there” more obtrusively. If we interpret the uncanniness of *Da-sein* existentially and ontologically as a threat which concerns *Da-sein* itself and which comes from *Da-sein* itself, we are not asserting that uncanniness has always already been understood in factual *Angst* in this sense. The everyday way in which *Da-sein* understands uncanniness is the entangled turning away which “phases out” not-being-at-home. The everydayness of this fleeing, however, shows phenomenally that *Angst* as a fundamental kind of attunement belongs to the essential constitution of *Da-sein* of being-in-the-world which, as an existential one, is never objectively present, but is itself always in the mode of factual *Da-sein*, that is, in the mode of an attunement. Tranquilized, familiar being-in-the-world is a mode of the uncanniness of *Da-sein*, not the other way around. Not-being-at-home must be conceived existentially and ontologically as the more primordial phenomenon. And only because *Angst* always already latently determines being-in-the-world, can being-in-the-world, as being together with the “world” taking care of things and attuned, be afraid. Fear is *Angst* which has fallen prey to the “world”. It is inauthentic and concealed from itself as such. Factically, the mood of uncanniness remains for the most part existentially uncomprehended. Moreover, with the dominance of falling prey and publicness, “real” *Angst* is rare. Often, *Angst* is “physiologically” conditioned. This fact is an ontological problem in its facticity, not only with regard to its ontic causes and course of development. The physiological triggering of *Angst* is possible only because *Da-sein* is anxious in the very ground of its being. [...] Uncanniness is the fundamental kind of being-in-the-world, although it is covered over in everydayness. *Da-sein* itself calls as conscience from the ground of this being. The “it calls me” is an eminent kind of discourse of *Da-sein*. The call attuned by *Angst* first makes possible for *Da-sein* its project upon its ownmost potentiality-of-being. The call of conscience, existentially understood, first makes known what was simply asserted before: uncanniness pursues *Da-sein* and threatens its self-forgetful lostness. [...] *Da-sein* stands primordially together with itself in uncanniness. Uncanniness brings this being face to face with its undisguised nullity, which belongs to the possibility of its ownmost potentiality-of-being. In that *Da-sein* as care is concerned about its being, it calls itself as a they that has factically fallen prey, and calls itself from its uncanniness to its potentiality-of-being. (Heidegger 1996: 176-7, 256, 264)

Based on this passage, which obviously would deserve much more in-depth analysis, one can say that uncanniness is as latent as it is the fundamental ground of any being-in-the-world; life is pervaded by a homelessness which should not be considered a deficit but a necessary ontological-phenomenal condition. Tellingly, a few years later Heidegger would add that

we understand the un-canny as that which throws one out of the “canny”, that is, the homely, the accustomed, the usual, the unendangered. The unhomely does not allow us to be at home. Therein lies the over-whelming. But human beings are the uncanniest, not only because they spend their lives essentially in the midst of the un-canny understood in this sense, but also because they step out, move out of the limits that at first and for the most part are accustomed and homely, because as those who do violence, they overstep the limits of the homely, precisely in the direction of the uncanny in the sense of the overwhelming. (Heidegger 2000: 161)

Unlike those who tried to mitigate the existential drama opposing the ontogenetic primacy of familiarity and the “canny” or homely (think, for example, of Otto Friedrich Bollnow’s and Gaston Bachelard’s *topophilia*), Heidegger made the uncanny a precondition of both human experience⁹ and the fact that humans overstep any limit.

However important Heidegger’s contribution (here brutally summed up) may be, it was Freud who generated the most influential debate in the twentieth century on the “uncanny”¹⁰. He actually used the term “uncanny” in relation to different kinds of experience (fright, helplessness, fatefulness, inescapability) whose common core is an unsettling feeling of unfamiliarity within familiarity¹¹. In his early works (such as *Totem and Taboo*), Freud claimed that the uncanny was the exclusive prerogative of old religious animism and superstition. However, he later dedicated a groundbreaking essay to this feeling, despite declaring himself, with a degree of condescendence (and somewhat defensively) to be extraneous to the uncanny experiences he was about to describe¹².

⁹ Following Heidegger, one could even find that “when we finally arrive at the ‘there’ of there-being (*Da-sein*), [...] there isn’t any there there” (Farrell Krell 1992: 45).

¹⁰ Of all the (now vast) literature on the subject, see at least Masschelein (2010; 2011) and the first monograph on the topic (Royle 2003).

¹¹ Ratcliffe (2008: 54).

¹² In fact, we know from a 1936 letter (Freud 1981c) that in 1904, during a visit to Athens with his brother, Freud felt that the Acropolis at which he was gazing was not real. Freud was astonished by a sense of uncanny repetition to feel guilty that he was capable of more passion and insight than his father. “The repetition inherent to the uncanny – the return of repressed content – is a way of revealing what the subject knows, but does not realize or admit that he or she knows. Freud’s indirect and aestheticized reliving on the Acropolis of earlier conflicts with his father brings those conflicts to light, and ultimately undermines their power to continue to trap him in frustration and helpless feelings” (Johnson 2010: 28).

His thesis, as is well known, is that the uncanny brings back something that was previously repressed.

I will be very brief: the uncanny is the feeling of unease, similar to that of a dream, a symptom or a slip of the tongue, that arises when something familiar suddenly becomes strange and unfamiliar. It is “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1981a: 220), that is, what is now frightening but was once familiar. “Gripped” by the German term’s ambivalence – *heimlich* indicates both one meaning (the familiar) and its antonym (the hidden) – Freud referred it to “animism, magic and sorcery, the omnipotence of thoughts, man’s attitude to death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex” (Freud 1981a: 243). The uncanny impression “is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (Freud 1981a: 241). Given an onto- and phylogenetic repression, it is “everything that recalls repressed desires and surmounted modes of thinking belonging to the prehistory of the individual and of the race” (Freud 1981a: 245). In short, “the uncanny proceeds from something familiar which has been repressed” (Freud 1981a: 247).

But what is of interest here is neither Freud’s general approach to the uncanny nor the rivers of ink it yielded, but rather the occurrence of the term *unheimlich* in Schelling’s texts, which Freud himself noted (Freud 1981a: 224-6, 241): the uncanny is “something which ought to have remained hidden but has come to light” (Freud 1981a: 241). To tell the truth, Freud did not seem to know the context of this quotation at all¹³, nor did he realize that it somehow echoes the metaphysical demand *par excellence* (from Leibniz to Heidegger)¹⁴. What he seems particularly interested in is rather the word “ought”¹⁵. This verb confirmed

¹³ In a previous version of the essay, Freud even attributes this definition to Schleiermacher (!).

¹⁴ Why is there something when there should be nothing? In the case of the uncanny one could ask the opposite question. For Fisher (2016: 61), the sensation of the eerie “is constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*. [It] occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing, or is there is nothing present when there should be something”.

¹⁵ I don’t know if there is really a “social attitude concealed in the phrase ‘ought to’, which is quintessentially modern and progressive in its assumptions” (Sandberg 2015: 21). What is certain, however, is that “Freud’s ‘should’ is powered by repression, a factor that has no place in the greater framework of Schelling’s definition” (Lalonde 2017: 102).

to him the idea that individuals are split into a deep self, containing once familiar secrets (fears and desires), and a current self, repressing those contents by means of some inhibiting law ("ought"). Consequently, the uncanny as disturbing disorientation and uncertainty is not an encounter with the unusual: in the uncanny, what is unusual is rather the unexpected encounter with something familiar, i.e. the impossibility of completely de-familiarizing the repressed secret. Ruling out that this may be the effect of intellectual uncertainty (as Ernst Jentsch suggested), Freud focused especially on the uncanny's aesthetic significance, as demonstrated by the large space he dedicated to E.T.A. Hoffmann's tales. As a result, Freud talked about the emasculating complex as the re-awakening of childhood anguish, as well as the double and telepathy, the return of the same, etc., establishing as the lowest common denominator of these experiences the "fact of involuntary repetition".

Nevertheless, I don't aim to use the uncanny as an all-pervasive theoretical "passe-partout", nor do I wish to go deeper into Freud's and Heidegger's interpretations, as many others have already done. My intention here is just to explain the "real" context of Schelling's definition (a). I will then try, partly also on this basis, to apply the uncanny to atmospheric feelings (b) and especially to uncanny houses (c).

2. Schelling: a "monstruous" (personal and ontological) melancholy

Scholars know that the "second" Schelling, violating "the shimmering myth of his youth", which made of him "the idol of the early generation of Romantics" (Sloterdijk 2013: 59-60), tragically descended from ontological euphoria (and maybe a too rapid academic career) to a widespread gnostic *malheur de l'existence*. His juvenile "radiant prose", whose "goal was to prove that finally a confidant of God was once again among us" and to speak "from the vantage point of the Absolute as though from a secure position" (Sloterdijk 2013: 59) – the perennial phi-

Lalonde's interpretation of Schelling's uncanny is instead much more questionable. According to him, "the tension arises because the revelation of eternity [provided by the formless pre-Homeric forces] is a violation of its nature. The anxiety associated with this uncanny is caused not only because we are perceiving something that we are not supposed to perceive, but also because we are not supposed to *be able* to perceive it" (Lalonde 2017: 103).

losophy of identity in the Jena and Würzburg years –, ended up giving way to a deep personal crisis. Schelling's concept of something that should remain hidden but is instead manifested, which was the starting point for Freud's uncanny, was also a step in this transition from the sunny part of being to its dark side.

This dark side referred to "everything that, according to the Platonic expression, falls within the domain of the non-existent, such as a sin, a lie, a mistake" (Schelling 1856-61, XIV: 276)¹⁶. Although one may be tempted to think of monstrosity by following the thread offered by Schelling's meontology and not to stop at themes such as pain and melancholy¹⁷, the first thing to emphasize is that already in *Clara* (1810), at least thirty years before the page containing Freud's quotation, Schelling addressed issues that Freud would identify as uncanny, including animism, omnipotence of thoughts, and man's attitude toward death¹⁸.

Thus the whole of nature's elevation, too, depended on man's freedom. It rested on whether he would forget what was behind him and reach toward what lay before him. Now, however, man reached back (*how* this happened and why God permitted it, I do not ask); man even called for and hankered back to this external world, and by stopping not only his own progress, but that of the whole of nature, he thereby lost the heavenly world. Whoever has seen with their own eyes what terrible consequences a constricted development has on the human body, a development that nature strongly desires; whoever has seen how a crisis in an illness remains, due to an inept treatment or to a weakness already present, making the crisis unmanageable, and how such a crisis immediately causes the body's strength to relapse to a mortal frailty unfailingly resulting in death; whoever has seen this will be able to get a general idea of the destructive effects that the constriction of evolution suddenly entering in through man must have had on the whole of nature. The strength that had emerged fully and powerfully, ready to rise up into a higher world and to reach its point of transfiguration, withdrew back into the present world and consequently suffocated the inner drive toward life. This drive, though still like a fire enclosed within, now acted as a fire of pain and fear looking everywhere for an outlet because it was no longer possible for it to rise up. *Any stage leading upward is delightful, but the one that has fallen is frightful.* (Schelling 2002: 24; the last emphasis is mine)

¹⁶ Henceforth = SW.

¹⁷ For a broad contextualization of the theme of melancholy in Schelling (and its influence on aesthetics) see Griffero (2000a). See also Staiger (1954); Hogrebe (1995); Shibuya (2008) and Sisto (2009).

¹⁸ See Johnson (2010: 77).

This passage is programmatic not only because it brings out some key topics (“freedom”, “nature”, “God”, “death”, “transfiguration”, “pain”, “fear”), but especially because it dramaturgically delineates a principle that will occur several times in Schelling’s work: a “healthy” (because linear) ascent in the direction of a higher principle is constantly threatened – because of an action that is human (setting the world *extra Deum*) but also involves the divine – by stagnation, if not by an explicitly ruinous regression. The veil torn up by this catastrophic usurpation over the entire creation as well as humanity’s past explains the deep melancholy that Schelling saw everywhere.

Whereas God bears within himself the condition that, alone, makes every existence real and is able to dominate it, man has it instead outside himself: “it is only lent to him, and is independent from him” (Schelling 2006: 62). What in God is just a “source of sadness”¹⁹, depending on a *Grund* which is in God but without being God himself, in every finite existence becomes instead the very possibility of evil: hence, “the sadness that clings to all finite life [...], the veil of dejection that is spread over all nature, the deep indestructible melancholy of all life” (Schelling 2006: 62-3). This sadness is to be borne by human beings, because “in man there is the whole power of the dark principle and at the same time the whole strength of the light. In him there is the deepest abyss and the loftiest sky or both *centra*” (Schelling 2006: 32).

This view results in the abysmal problem that God is also a living being, a person who has the root of finiteness in himself (*Grund von Existenz*). However, instead of discussing this issue or the role of suffering in the divine economy, here I wish to de-theologize, as far as possible, Schelling’s basic idea that “each subordinated nature, whose guiding connection with its higher principle is interrupted, is sick” (Schelling 2000: 69), in order to investigate the condition of possibility of the uncanny as weak monstrosity. As brilliantly summarized by Sloterdijk,

the terror at the heart of the world became visible to him, and he recognized melancholy as the deepest stratum of nature. In incomparably dense and dark studies, he contemplated Evil as an attractive world power; he probed the eerie power of the Base to set itself up as the Lofty as the sinister driving force behind the course of the world; he brooded on the unfathomable abyss of God with a

¹⁹ Whereas a few years before, in his philosophy of identity, Schelling rather insisted that neither the Greek gods nor the Christian God can suffer or cause suffering.

tenacity that seemed less suited to Munich in the early nineteenth century than to Alexandria the third century CE. (Sloterdijk 2013: 61)

In his later years, Schelling become increasingly hypochondriac, and indulged in melancholy both in his life and in his speculation. His “bad aging”, characterized by almost total editorial silence and a paranoid fear of being plagiarized (a real “anguish of influence” in Harold Bloom’s sense), was maybe the price of his youthful speculative genius²⁰. The solid and “beautiful” anagogic-exemplaristic narrative developed in the Jena years, supported by an unbridled sense of mission (*Sendungsbewusstsein*), after 1806 appeared fully roped by the cosmotheandric drama of fall and redemption, by “problems of consciousness” (so to speak) from which not even the absolute is exempt.

This shift towards pessimism was certainly theosophically mitigated by the enthusiastic hope for mysterious paranormal phenomena attesting the lordship of man over nature and his final redemption through a spiritual palingenesis, or a spiritual body²¹. However, Schelling’s path into darkness was also the development of a philosophical sensitivity able to capture phenomena and nuances that previously went unnoticed. Certainly, though, everything seemed to come to the worst. For example, the young Schelling merely stigmatized the allegorical fate that looms over the Christian-modern-romantic world, painfully orphaned in its deferring the fullness and mutual transparency of being and meaning that instead had characterized the symbolic antiquity²². Ten years later, after casting a glance on the *Abgrund* or, which is the same, on the “past” as the immemorial age of the world, Schelling saw the allegorical destiny of the entire universe as tied to sadness and melancholy. This now seemed to be a condition that could no longer be reconciled by the philosopher-poet as a “transcendental doctor”, but that was deeply inscribed in creation itself.

Melancholy (*Schwermuth*) would be the “deepest manifestation” of yearning or nostalgia (*Sehnsucht*) and of foreboding, that is, of “what is

²⁰ I have discussed Schelling’s obsession with plagiarism and copyright (almost *ante litteram*) elsewhere (Griffero 2005).

²¹ On death as “essentification” and especially on spiritual corporeality – two topics coming from Friedrich Christoph Oetinger’s theosophy – see, respectively, Griffero (2000b: 33-60) and Griffero (2006: 30-42).

²² On Schelling’s symbol- and mythology-based first philosophy see Griffero (1994: especially 99-208).

darkest and therefore deepest in human nature [...] which is, so to speak, the internal heaviness of the soul" (SW VII: 465). Melancholy is therefore the potential stagnation of a sub-power (nostalgia, followed by appetite and feeling) within the first real power (the soul). It is the weighing down of this sub-power, in full conformity with the tradition that connects melancholy as internal heaviness to the representation of hostile spaces reducing movement or preventing it altogether.

It is precisely in melancholy (Schelling's words are *Schmerz, Unseligkeit, Unglück des Seins, Trauer, Schwermuth*) that we can find the closest link between nature and man as its fulfillment.

It is especially through it that man's sympathy for nature is expressed. Even that which is deepest in nature is melancholy (*Schwermuth*); nature, too is saddened by a lost good, and an indestructible melancholy weighs upon every life, because beneath itself it bears something independent of itself (what is above itself it raises, what is beneath itself it pulls down). (SW VII: 465-6)

Man manifested that which should have remained the hidden foundation (*ground*), and thereby spread an element of mortal disintegration of consciousness universally. Man has thus generated

this external and lacerated world, which cannot find an internal point of unity in any consciousness that is present or self-contained, and which, now that it lost that interiority for which it yearned, is completely abandoned to absolute exteriority. In this exteriority, the individual has lost the position by which he was only a stage [of a wider orderly development; T.G.], and now appears only accidental and meaningless. [...] Putting himself in God's place, he has reawakened that principle, [...] he has placed the world outside God, and thus properly usurped the world, [which] in discord with itself [...] does nothing but repeat itself in a sadly uniform manner. [...] With this catastrophe a veil has been cast over the whole of creation. (SW XIII: 352)

Thus organically disintegrated, the Earth and the animal world suffer (in silence) from a curse waiting for a magic-salvific formula to break the spell²³. They must travel along a path of pain (SW X: 266) that also acts

²³ "The whole Earth is one great ruin, where animals live as ghosts and men as spirits and where many hidden powers and treasures are locked away as if by an invisible strength or by a magician's spell" (Schelling 2002: 25). An analogy with Freud should be noted here. In the brief essay *On Transience* (Freud 1981b), he talks about a summer walk before the outbreak of the First World War, during which he listened as one of his companions, a "young but already famous poet" (Rilke maybe), lamented that "all this beauty

as a transcendental condition of human melancholy itself. And the world suffers – it is worth noting this – not in its most tremendous phenomena, but in the ordinary or even graceful fruits of nature. It is clear then that the axiological evaluation of a single moment along this path of pain entirely depends on one's (temporal as well as spatial) orientation: it's good if it's going up and it's bad if it's going down, because "whoever does not want to go onward, sinks back" (Schelling 2002: 26). In other words, the direction is obligatory – the second Schelling, at least in this respect, was very much influenced by the one-sided modern philosophy of history – and everything depends on reconverting the perverted vectoriality, the "positive perversion or reversal of the principles" (Schelling 2006: 35) in which evil properly resides. This reconversion is able to release the repressed forces of nature and to transform an arrested development in a healthier and supra-personal ascendent series (*animus*→*spirit*→*soul*). This, alone, can move beyond melancholy as an interruption of the series at the level of feeling: a sluggish circularity that Jacob Böhme's tradition, well known to Schelling, condemned (*Rad der Natur* or *Rad der Geburt*)²⁴ by projecting the succession (*Folge*) forward.

Regression, unless it is simply a retreat aimed at proceeding better and overcoming the element that acts as an obstacle (*principium luc-tae*)²⁵, always makes exoteric what should remain esoteric, producing a moral and physical evil: "any regression, except that which is achieved

was fated to extinction, that it would vanish when winter came, like all human beauty and all the beauty and splendour that men have created or may create". Freud responded that our own mortality is exactly what permits us to enjoy and value the cyclical rhythms of natural beauty: "As regards the beauty of Nature, each time it is destroyed by winter it comes again next year, so that in relation to the length of our lives it can in fact be regarded as eternal". Human beauty is like a "flower that blossoms only for a single night": which only increases its worth (Freud 1981b: 305-6).

²⁴ "It is a life that eternally circulates within itself, a kind of circle because the lowest always runs into the highest, and the highest again into the lowest. [...] In this constant annular drive, the differentiation of the higher and the lower again sublimates itself. There is neither a veritable higher nor a veritable lower, since in turn one is the higher and the other is the lower. There is only an unremitting wheel, a rotatory movement that never comes to a stand-still and in which there is no differentiation. Even the concept of the beginning, as well as the concept of the end, again sublimates itself in this circulation. [...] A true beginning is that which is the ground of a steady progression, not of an alternating advancing and retreating movement. Likewise, there is only a veritable end in which a being persists that does not need to retreat from itself back to the beginning" (Schelling 2000: 20).

²⁵ "The person who is not capable of confronting the past has no past. Or, better put, never emerges from it, but lives steadily inside it" (Schelling 2019: 66).

with progress, is ruin and decadence” (SW VIII: 4). Development cannot be instantaneous, because this would exclude all form and “the world might perhaps already have truly dissolved into nothingness” (Schelling 2019: 111), but it cannot, nevertheless, completely dissociate itself from “the barbarian principle that, conquered and not abolished, is the actual ground of everything that is great” (Schelling 2019: 111). Anti-melancholic, anti-uncanny and, as we’ll see, anti-monstruous: this is how Schelling views the continuous interweaving and separation of powers in view of the production of a new and superior level, of a self-transcending (*Potenzierung*) able to interrupt the obsessive rotation around one’s own axis that we call depression.

Clearly subscribing to a “progressivist” and developmental interpretation of the world and the self (as Freud almost always did), Schelling thought that the stasis-regression consisting in the undue actualization of a ground (a *Basis* not meant as a cause) was a pathology. While being necessary as a place of *ex contrario* manifestation of the opposite and superior pole, and therefore in itself endowed with a dynamic-generative function, this ground should nevertheless remain relatively non-existent, i.e. it should never “come to light” (SW VII: 470)²⁶ but rather stay behind as a *caput mortuum*. Moral and physical sin is overcome neither when the dark ground, the irrational residue of existence, is removed, nor when this ground is required to generate autonomous expressions and monsters, but when its energy is exploited and its content precipitates. It is in the light of this confidence in the reduction and “domestication” (so to speak) of *Grund* that Schelling could candidly engage in a veritable eulogy of repression: “Feeling is glorious if it remains in the ground, but it is not so when it steps into daylight, wanting to make itself into a being and to rule” (Schelling 2006: 75).

That’s why Schelling lies at the origin of the very concept of uncanny (*unheimlich*). Turning that which ought-not-to-have-been into an ought, thus giving birth to the history of the world – and “the no less bloody stage of modern history” (SW XIV: 264) – is what allowed horror and the uncanny to emerge.

²⁶ Which Schelling also makes explicit about madness as the basis of the intellect, given the definition of the intellect as a regulated madness.

3. What Schelling really said

The first impression is that the later Schelling's made a rather generic use of the term *unheimlich*²⁷. For example, he wrote that the history of emperors has uncanny and cruel aspects (SW XI: 544) and that certain expressions describing necessary mythological facts appear uncanny to some (SW XII: 193); he posited that the darkness that enveloped Beijing in 1818 was uncanny (SW XII: 536), and he used the same term in reference to certain feelings oppressing humanity (SW XI: 14) as well as to some invisible natural phenomena in which savages see ghostly beings (SW XI: 72). He wrote that Typhon, as hidden and opposed to Osiris, is an uncanny god (a *Deus sinister*) within Egyptian mythology (SW XII: 420); he also claimed that today's Indian people view monuments showing Buddha as Vishnu's servant as "uncanny, homes of evil demons" (SW XII: 507). Finally, he wrote that even a scientific discovery too far ahead of its time (he was thinking of the micropaleontologist Christian Gottfried Ehrenberg) could be uncanny and harmful (SW XIII: 26).

A much more important finding that we owe to Schelling is that the state of consciousness (or third power), fully forgetting its preconditions (the real principle or first power), shows a spirituality so imperfect that it precipitates back into brute materiality. After losing the oneiric image of material existence, the human soul thus cannot reach the superior immaterial unity and can only aspire to the physical one. Separated from the body, it still has an appetite for materiality, just as wine becomes heavy and viscous when the vine it was made from blooms again. Given the succession of Egyptian, Indian and Greek mythologies, respectively representing the body, the soul and the spirit, one should admit that "something uncanny and ghostly pervades the Indian essence and its gods" (SW XII: 572). The physiognomically evanescent corporeity of the Indians and their magicians' arts, for Schelling, perfectly reflects their fundamental idea that the sensory world is illusory and transient; their art's wonderful and soulful nature always implies "an uncanny, the feeling inspired by a beauty that, cleansed to the point of pure appearance, seems to be but a flame in the wind about to die out" (SW XII: 573). *Unheimlich* therefore seems to be the essential property of Indian "unhappy mythology".

²⁷ Here I am sticking to the texts contained in the complete 19th century edition of his works, especially *Philosophy of mythology* and *Philosophy of revelation*.

According to Schelling, an uncanny feeling is generated by the return of things that should have remained hidden. Even Greek mythology, the last and most perfect one in history, was as false as nature is, because it implied the “elevation of the principle that properly should not be” (SW XII: 645), i.e. the principle that should remain hidden underneath. And yet it managed to overcome this error – at least “with respect to the effect” of this principle (SW XII: 645), which I suppose means from an aesthetic point of view – that Greek mythology became a relative truth. By objectifying what should have remained a mere subject (to something else) and mere potentiality (*potentia*), the nature and mythology of the Greeks, insofar as they transfigure this mistake, may legitimately be viewed as beautiful and attractive errors. This is why Greek mythology, whose anthropomorphism did not derive from the corruption of some original spiritualism (as claimed instead by Friedrich Creuzer), left behind the severity and harshness of previous times and became poetic, creating figures whose truth became poetic not at the beginning but at the end of the process. Through Greek gods, “beings produced by a higher imagination” (SW XII: 647), as well as real gods made of spiritual bodies (a *Geistlichkeit* also promised to Christians), Greek mythology generated poetry before it even existed (so to speak).

The mystical element – not the certainly later doctrine of mysteries – is more ancient than the world of the Homeric gods, which, nonetheless, “tacitly contains a mystery, and is as if founded on a mystery, on an abyss that it fills up with flowers” (SW XII: 649). The mysticism outdated and overcome through Homer’s pure polytheism marks the victory of the human being as a supreme materialization and spiritualization over the animal and the rough non-human Pelasgian figure. At the same time, it marks the victory of polytheism over the imperfect monotheism dominant in the past and in the East. The same mysterious rite alluded to by Plato (*Phaedrus*: 250b), which ends in the contemplation of perfect and blessed figures (*epopteia*) typical of pre-material human existence, however, had to first pass through the initiatic vision by which the contrasting “shapeless ghosts, aroused by the wild struggle of forces, and therefore frightful, uncanny and unhappy” (SW XIII: 456), are the “spawn of the purely material process” (SW XIII: 457). Furthermore, by assuming that Zagreus is the mysterious (and oriental) name given to the oldest version of Dionysus, Schelling defines the latter as “the most mysterious and the uncanniest” (SW XIII: 471).

This means that Homeric polytheism with its “pure sky” succeeded in “taking over against [the uncanny principle] and pushing it back com-

pletely into the interior, that is, into the realm of the secret, into mystery (from which it had originally come out in the open)" (SW XII: 649), that is, exiling it to the Mysteries. The well known definition – "uncanny is the name given to everything that should remain secret, hidden in latency, and that has come forth" (SW XII: 649) – therefore refers to a real religious principle which was more spiritual but also pre-historical and pre-mythological: a kind of empty infinity. The uncanny is therefore what "resist[s] progress" (SW XII: 652)²⁸, what does not "start down" and "get in the way" (SW XII: 655), but remains bound to a mandatory astral mobility. It is something that should not become the matter of something higher, that is to say of that religious principle whose rough images, showing neither sufficient detachment from the ground nor agility and free movement – which makes such figures more similar to columns than to living beings – are the result not "of the roughness of art but of anguish in the face of the human being" (SW XII: 654).

The uncanny is therefore a way to represent the divine – in an "extrahuman or non-human" form (SW XII: 658) – through figural characteristics that should have been overcome. This is the case with the old non-naturalistic style which, due to its reverent fear of the past, painted and sculpted the face of the gods using twisted human traits, as if a figure were all the more divine the less it is human. In fact, Schelling finds an uncanny feeling even in the contemporary perception of certain saints' mask-like images, which appear distorted and overburdened. The caricature, and with it the uncanny, was replaced by "complete images of the gods" (SW XII: 660) only in Egyptian and Greek colossal statues and buildings. Schelling makes two examples of this. One is the contrast between insignificant faces and detailed bodies in Aegina's sculptures (a clear sign of coexistence with a less mature past, fig. 1). The other is Christ's blood-stained, severe and rigidly symmetrical face in van Eick's and Hemmelinck's (Hans Memling) paintings (fig. 2), which he says he saw in Munich. Both works would arouse a "refined horror" (SW XII: 657), an uncanny feeling. Now, it is unclear what paintings Schelling re-

²⁸ See what Johnson says thanks to a hermeneutically productive anachronism: "Attempts to 'defeat' the mythical past by pushing it back into the inscrutable mystery from whence it came are necessary for the ultimate re-emergence of the past as representation and its integration into the modern present. This integration is not a collapse between present and past, but rather a working-together, through analysis and interpretation, that acknowledges the unbridgeable difference between the mythical and the modern" (Johnson 2010: 39).

ally saw in Munich²⁹ – which, of course, is of little theoretical importance –, but above all, it is unclear whether these images are as such examples of the uncanny or rather ways of veiling its unsustainable power.



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

I leave aside here any possible further philological and historical-philosophical insight. I'll only say that this constellation of references

²⁹ Maybe the "Holy Face" catalogued as a copy by van Eyck and the "Veronica" by the so-called Master of Saint Veronica. I owe this clarification to Michele Di Monte and Fabio Marcelli.

show that myth itself – as revealed also by archeology, in which the later Schelling was increasingly interested³⁰ – is mistaken and uncanny; and that all attempts “of art, theology, philosophy, and psychology to make sense out of myth’s mistakes are, to an extent, repetitions or re-enactments of those mistakes (or of the false revelations that myth provides)” (Johnson 2010: 25). This does not mean, of course, that Schelling was a forerunner of the modernist therapeutic program based on escaping the past in order to better face the present. In fact, repeating the relative truth of the mythical past and mythical texts may also be liberating if it merges with Nietzsche’s “active forgetting”: only when anxiety ends up perpetuating the past as such (or trauma in the Freudian sense) does the uncanny really trap us, preventing the right psychic-ontological (biographical, ontological and even cosmotheandrical) vectorization that Schelling so strongly desired.

4. *Turning to uncanny atmospheres*

Can Schelling’s conception of the uncanny, echoed by Freud³¹ but here restored to its original context³², maybe help us to better understand

³⁰ In the last decades of his life, Schelling actually published mainly short and erudite writings on mythological-archaeological subjects, probably naively unaware that “just as we have returned to the past, so the past has returned to us. In doing so, something else was assimilated in the return, a life independent of the event of remembering itself” (Trigg 2012: 280). Nevertheless, it is right to note that “by revealing what should have remained invisible, [archeology] had irredeemably confirmed the existence of a ‘dark side’ of classicism, thus betraying not only the high sublime but a slowly and carefully constructed world of modern mythology”. In fact “on a purely aesthetic level, too, Pompeii seemed to reflect precisely the struggle identified by Schelling between the dark mysteries of the first religions and the sublime transparency of the Homeric hymns, but in reverse, as if reenacting the battle in order to retrieve the uncanny” (Vidler 1992: 48).

³¹ I can’t focus on the relationship between Schelling’s and Freud’s uncanny here. I refer the reader to Fenichel (2019), according to whom for both Schelling and Freud becoming who we are and feeling at home in existence can only happen if we acknowledge an irreducible uncanniness.

³² One mustn’t forget that the term was extraordinarily popular at the beginning of the 19th century, also in the music aesthetics notion of *ombra*. See Lalonde (2017: 107): “the *ombra* passage creates a musical narrative of chaos resolving to the comparative stability of the Allegro, or a passage from a state of darkness and irrationality into light and rationality. [...] These *ombra* passages are revealing the uncanny nature of music itself”, that is, its inherent liminality.

what an uncanny atmosphere is? One could object that an atmospheric phenomenology should only focus on present (and not hidden) phenomena. However, a) the uncanny refers to something hidden that is *manifested* in what is present-familiar, and b) the phenomenological *epoché* necessarily implies a (non-pathological) uncanniness undermining everyday trust in the world. It is also worth adding, in particular, that my neo-phenomenological atmospherology turns to philosophy precisely as a result of feeling irritated by situative disorientation. Far from being a topic like any other, the uncanny is both the starting point (personal disquiet and defamiliarization) of this approach and one of its salient results (insofar as the affective externalization breaks a sedimented introjection of emotional life). In other words: the uncanny as an atmosphere “is not a subjective state produced by intra-psychic conflict, as we would find in Freud” (Trigg 2020: 537).

Now, there are two caveats to keep in mind. The first is the following: in order to analyse everyday uncanny atmospheres, one needs to do away with too-generic definitions (think for example of “the uncanny emerges when a dark, irrational, essentially Romantic trait within the self or within a society comes to ‘light’, invades rational space, and refuses to be assimilated into a comprehensible, enlightened agenda”, Johnson 2010: 9). Likewise, one needs to avoid the late-Romantic axiology according to which only secret Gothic mansions or dark streets can be really uncanny. Indeed, one certainly does not have to go into situations like those to encounter the little “monsters” arising from the uncanny³³.

A second caveat is whether the uncanny is a specific atmosphere, or whether any atmospheric perception, insofar as it somewhat implies a phenomenal and ontological disorientation due to outside (non-psychic) and authoritative feelings, is already uncanny in itself. These two perspectives, as we will see, blend in the concrete analysis.

³³ Just to give an example: uncanny situations “include a ‘crisis of the proper’, a ‘crisis of the natural’, ‘a commingling of the familiar and the unfamiliar’, a ‘strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality’, fears of dismemberment or loss of body parts, or the sudden perception of aspects of the self as foreign, to name just a few. These experiences of the uncanny, all of which are essentially varieties of decentering and uncertainty, are typically prompted by encounters with ‘curious coincidences’, various kinds of ‘mechanical or automatic life’, tokens of death, or remnants of the past experienced out of proper place and time” (Sandberg 2015: 18, quoting freely from Royle 2003).

a) *Ontological ambiguity and vagueness*. Just as the uncanny³⁴ is neither only homely nor only unhomely, neither only familiar nor only strange (but rather strangely familiar)³⁵ every atmosphere, being neither inside nor outside, is always uncanny (at least in a mitigated form). This is because of its vagueness and indeterminacy, which undermine any ontology based on thingly borders and any para-Cartesian dualism between inside (psyche) and outside (material world). Because of their airy being and ghostly elusive coming and going, their violation of the law of non-contradiction and ontological dualism³⁶, atmospheres also both “are” and “are not”. Just as “the feeling of uncanniness is largely resistant to rationality” (Trigg 2020: 334), they lack the intentional structure of usual emotions and are uncanny insofar as they refuse “to concretise into a circumscribed, objective danger” (Fuchs 2019: 103), so that their components “oscillate between foreground and background” (Fuchs 2019: 103). Unlike the atmosphere of derealization (loss of all meaningfulness) and that of horror (when an uncanny atmosphere condenses around certain objects or persons), every twilightness and foggy perceptual situation can then be considered as weakly uncanny.

b) *Mise-en-scène and paranoid subjectification*. An uncanny atmosphere implies “a changed structure of perception itself – a change that can be described as subjectification and fragmentation” (Fuchs 2019, 110). The loss of the appresented aspects present in any normal perception then leads to a delusional mood in which “the object becomes instead a mere surface – a simulacrum, a *mise-en-scène*” (Fuchs 2019: 112). This defamiliarization and ambiguity between real and unreal ends up in a paranoid version of the phenomenologically “healthy” *tua res agitur*. Bringing out every time a “fatal chain of circumstances”, it invalidates our rationalistic culture, considered superior to the animistic view, and uses the idea of “coincidence” to neutralize everything that happens out of the blue. Suggesting a fatalistic supra-personal intentionality – such as when Freud finds himself again in the same street of a

³⁴ Also think of the Lacanian term *extimité*, meaning the merging of inside and outside.

³⁵ “Strange within the familiar, the strangely familiar, the familiar as strange” (Fischer 2016: 10).

³⁶ What Bernstein (2003: 1113) says of the uncanny – “the opposition between subject and object also falls away with the erosion of the structure of identity; subject and predicate can no longer keep their boundaries intact” – applies almost entirely to prototypical atmospheres.

redlight-district – this affective hetero-determination triggers a deep cognitive dissonance³⁷ in a world now devoid of any wonder.

c) *Aggressive authority*. A dispossession based on the subjectification of what happens and the desubjectification of its agency applies especially to prototypical atmospheres³⁸. They are immediate, groundless and attack the percipient from the outside, thus inhibiting – be they positive or negative – any critical reaction or divergent mood. If profound, an atmospheric experience always implies something uncanny, and its irresistible authority can show itself when “the dead and mechanical, as well as the past and the blindly-necessary [...] suddenly appear in the living, the present, and the spontaneous” (Fuchs 2019: 102). But the uncanny emerges also when Rudolf Otto’s “numinous” forces us to have religious, aesthetic and even tremendous erotic experiences³⁹ by emitting an anxious-uncanny quality irreducible to the experiencer’s head or soul.

d) *Repulsive and attractive centripetality*. The uncanny defamiliarization always consists in a centripetal affect imposed by an anonymous-hidden supra-personal power, in an affective direction opposed to the centrifugal direction which our being-in-the-world is normally based on. The atmospheric uncanny does not come from the kind of situation or phenomenon at play but from the centripetal manner, as such really daemonic, in which it forces us to feel something (for example, to repeat it compulsively) and deprives us of control⁴⁰, thus corroding our

³⁷ Dokic (2011) also associates the uncanny, understood as an existential meta-feeling, with a cognitive dissonance that involves familiarity, mistakenly believing that he can disregard much of the vast philosophical bibliography on the subject.

³⁸ According to my atmospheric phenomenology there are three different types of atmospheres: prototypical atmospheres (objective, external, and unintentional, sometimes lacking a precise name), derivative-relational ones (objective, external and intentionally produced), and even some that are quite spurious in their relatedness (subjective and projective). See Griffero (2014: 144; 2017: 27-31; 2019: 95-6).

³⁹ See Dawson (1989).

⁴⁰ Freud already makes this clear: “The daemonic character of repetition in ‘The uncanny’ seems to come from the compulsiveness of the repetition itself, not from the situation or phenomenon that is repeated. Even something innocent would, if incessantly repeated, be uncanny if we felt that we could not control the repetition. The uncanniness, I would suggest, comes from this feeling of lack of control, of not being at home, of being controlled by someone or something other than oneself. The repetition itself could be viewed as a mechanical, unfamiliar principle regulating the self beyond its possible control and comprehension” (Svenaeus 1999: 246-7).

attunement to the surrounding lived space in a way that always invokes both repulsion and attraction.

e) *Bangnis*. It is odd that a philosophy so focused on affective states as Hermann Schmitz's New Phenomenology only occasionally mentions the notion of *Unheimlich*, preferring to talk about "anxiety", "disquiet" or "restlessness". But by using a very rare term like *Bangnis*⁴¹, meaning a felt-bodily "centripetal excitement" triggering terror and curiosity, this approach refers precisely to what we call uncanny. In fact, *Bangnis* – not to be confused with *Furcht* (intentional feeling) and deep *Angst* (felt-bodily and sometimes even intentional emotion paralyzing the subject) – is precisely an atmosphere of anguished "as if". In it, there are no single menacing objects and no objective contours, but there is "the atmospheric encompassing, undivided whole of the uncanny (*Unheimlich*)" (Schmitz 1969: 283). This uncanny might be both the initial schizophrenic anxiety but also the "normal" indetermined and spread irritation that acts as a *basso continuo*, possibly condensing into more circumscribed (and often casual) moments or objects, which absorb it and therefore take on a spectral character.

Schmitz imagines a continuum where an indeterminate initial *Bangnis* or uncanniness – as such also (if not above all) empty and devoid of objects⁴² – sometimes gives way to an object-precise fear acting as a real anchoring point. One may then wonder whether this relatively objectual focus of *Bangnis* accentuates or mitigates it. Much depends on whether this focus is (in Schmitz's Gestaltic language) the real anchoring point or rather the condensation zone of this feeling: in the first case, the better identification of the element that triggers the feeling (without being its "cause" in an epistemic sense) definitely reduces the initial indeterminacy and then transforms it, for example, into fear. In the second case, which in uncanniness is probably the rule, its increasing pervasiveness may even accentuate its menacing nature, at least until the situation pushes us to some sudden decision (which is therefore also relatively extra-reflective).

f) *Alien corporeality*. As a feeling that is spatially poured out and permeates a place, every atmosphere, more so if uncanny, "activates the body" and "becomes profoundly constitutive of our sense of self" (Trigg 2012: 11). Freely applying New Phenomenology's felt-bodily alphabet,

⁴¹ Schmitz (1969: 280-94, 300-6; 2003: 205-22).

⁴² As in the example of the empty squares painted by De Chirico (Boissière 2019: 51-6).

one could say that a deeper atmosphere of uncanniness (or *Bangnis*) is characterized in its centripetal directionality by the exclusion of the “normal” rhythmic alternation of contraction and expansion, that is, by an exceptional intensity of the contractive impulse at the expense of the expansive one. Instead, a softer atmosphere of uncanniness allows the alternating felt-bodily rhythm, whose centripetal and centrifugal direction gives the feeling a tone that is threatening as well as attractive.

The manifestation of something past and unexpected, and even more so Merleau-Ponty’s idea of an older body’s anonymous life, suggest a way to make Schelling’s definition of “uncanny” productive (in a deliberately anachronistic way, of course). But the self is not master in its own body, in a double sense. If the pre-personal and anonymous component of our material bodily perception can surely be considered as a past which has never been present, as an unconscious that is always active but resists reflection (impersonal bioanatomy)⁴³, there are also felt-bodily components that actively belong to the person without being known (impersonal corporeality) except when the usual “focal disappearance” of the body⁴⁴ in favour of the worldly objects of its engagement allows us to experience them. This impersonality thus acquires a much less dramatic tone. Obviously being (physically and/or psychically) ill, old, fatigued, injured, weakened, spied on by others – also just being at the disposal of one’s body-for-others or even mirror experienced⁴⁵ – as well as feeling one’s own body as (sexually or socially) wrong is something uncanny⁴⁶, because it implies a dissociation between self and body: I feel my own body, now emerged from its habitual self-concealment, as an alien, thing-like presence⁴⁷, perceived at a distance and unfaithful because of an inhibited intentionality – a non-possessable body to which I remain an outsider⁴⁸.

⁴³ As Trigg (2016a) claims, referring it back to Schelling’s “barbaric principle”. “The body reveals itself as a recalcitrant existence, something which has its own agenda apart from my intentional projects and goals” (Burwood 2008: 266).

⁴⁴ Leder (1990).

⁴⁵ See Rochat, Zahavi (2010).

⁴⁶ “To be ill would [...] mean to experience a constant sense of obtrusive unhomelikeness in one’s being-in-the world [...]. The behaviour of the body in illness is often no longer under control [...]. Of course the body has a life of its own even in health” (Svenaeus 2000a: 126, 131). See also Svenaeus (2000b).

⁴⁷ See Zaner (1981: 54-5).

⁴⁸ See Trigg (2016b).

However, a) feeling my body as an alien thing is something always circumscribed and a bit abstract, since it also implies that I begin trusting the body as mine⁴⁹, that the “body as not mine” (uncanny) is nothing but another facet of the “body as mine” (familiar)⁵⁰. Furthermore, and more importantly, b) losing the smooth flow of our engagement with the world can even be experienced in a positive way. In fact, I can realize that I am not identical with my (physical) body also when my felt body, acting as a sounding board of feelings and affordances encountered outside, surprisingly activates this or that felt-bodily isle (previously unperceived and even imagined)⁵¹. Like a phantom limb, a felt-bodily isle is uncanny because it lies between absence and presence and reveals a life that should not exist (anatomically) but we certainly feel (felt-bodily). In other terms, the impersonal or prepersonal physical body is surely uncanny, showing itself not as mine but “as an it, which has its own nature and rhythms” (Trigg 2020: 560)⁵². Likewise, my felt-bodily experience, insofar as it witnesses that my felt body belongs to me and at the same time I belong to it⁵³ and I can be at its mercy⁵⁴, is uncanny – but in a positive way now (so to speak). A body whose edges are no longer clearly delineated certainly gives life to a body of anxiety⁵⁵ but is also the very nature of a felt- and non-organic body able to felt-bodily

⁴⁹ This also applies to a house’s uncanny, given that the uncanny is hardly generated by the squalor of a natural place: “the effect of the *unheimlich* depends on a secure and comfortable starting point, an anchor of domestic comfort. Otherwise, there is nothing to unsettle” (Sandberg 2015: 45). For more on the uncanny of houses, see the next paragraph.

⁵⁰ “Dissociation is [...] an experience of the uncanny: but far from indicating a separation of self and body, it occurs because I realise I am my body. For example, when I look in the mirror and see this aging body, I may say to myself ‘I don’t recognise this face as me’; yet my horror at what I see is precisely because I do recognise it as me. The origin of dissociation and its peculiar form of self-alienation lies in this recognition and its combination with a sense of ‘otherness’” (Burwood 2008: 274).

⁵¹ See Griffero (2017: 55-67).

⁵² “The shift from the *heimlich* to the *unheimlich* can be understood as a movement of becoming conscious of the body as thing having its own independent history and experiences”. This implies “the uncertainty of whether or not ‘I’ am truly identifiable with my body itself” (Trigg 2012: 35).

⁵³ “A battleground between possession of oneself and oneself as being possessed” (Trigg 2012: 301).

⁵⁴ “The knowledge that within me dwells another self, ambiguous and ancient, of which I am only partially conscious, is a thought more attuned to the sense of being possessed by another body rather than the sense of possessing our own bodies” (Trigg 2012: 166).

⁵⁵ As Trigg (2016b) brilliantly demonstrates.

communicate with its environment precisely because it exceeds the skin boundaries. Also, discovering that what should not emerge instead emerges, i.e. that one is not master in their own (physical and felt) body, is not a negative experience at all in a pathic and atmospherological aesthetic promoting the ability to let oneself go to what happens instead of neurotically trying to control and manipulate it.

g) *Trema*. Jaspers' well known phenomenological description of a situation in which everything is unpredictable was the starting point of any later psychopathological specification of the uncanny.

Patients feel uncanny and that there is something suspicious afoot. Everything gets a *new meaning*. The environment is somehow different – not to a gross degree – perception is unaltered in itself but there is some change which envelops everything with a subtle, pervasive and strangely uncertain light. A living-room which formerly was felt as neutral or friendly now becomes dominated by some indefinable atmosphere. Something seems in the air which the patient cannot account for, a distrustful, uncomfortable, uncanny tension invades him. (Jaspers 1963: 98)

Similarly, a definitely uncanny feeling is the one induced by distrust and delusion characterizing what Klaus Conrad calls “*trema*”, i.e. the first moment of incipient schizophrenia. He exemplifies it through an anxious subject walking alone through a dark forest.

In the dark, where it is not possible to cast a glance, “it” spies on us from behind the trees, although we do not wonder what it is that spies on us from that place. It is something totally undetermined, it is the act of spying itself. *The spaces lying between what is seen and what lies behind*, [...] namely the very background against which perceivable things stand out, has lost its neutrality. What makes us shudder is not the tree or the bush we see, the rustle of the tree tops or the cry of the owl we hear, but rather everything that is hidden, all the surrounding space from which the tree and the bush, the rustle and the cry stick out: what makes us shudder is the very *darkness and what is hidden as such*. (Conrad 1958: 43)

This situation, in which a usually neutral background becomes an aggressive figure and loses its randomness, is the same one finds when, saying “there is something in the air”, one feels a subtle change permeating the environment without being able to reduce it to specific objectual components. For this reason, however, one does not need darkness or a forest for this feeling to arise – suffice to consider how David

Lynch's films are able to arouse deep uncanny atmospheres in banal and familiar environments like a fast food restaurant⁵⁶. Indeed, anxiety "can arise in the most harmless situations. Nor does it have any need for darkness, in which things usually become uncanny to us more easily" (Heidegger 1996: 177).

An uncanny atmosphere, therefore, is a feeling that hangs in the air and refers to a situation that is halfway between known and unknown. It appears more or less threatening, if only because it's vague, diffused, non-thematic, and all-around centripetal, hindering any impulse to escape and being entirely out of one's control. In a sense, its affordances arouse what in the perceiver should be dead and gone, especially the feeling of being involved and driven by outside powers. The everyday uncanny therefore has exactly the same properties as an atmosphere (at least a prototypical one): one can never perceive it without being emotionally involved and grasped by it.

5. *What about houses?*

To conclude, a few words on the specific uncanny of houses. This is not by chance, given that the house is clearly something familiar, but also a mystery excluding those who do not belong to it⁵⁷. The neologism "unhomeliness", which maybe better captures the sense of *unheimlich* (instead of uncanny, weird, eerie), expresses "the perpetual exchange between the homely and the unhomely, the imperceptible sliding of coziness into dread" (Vidler 1992: 57)⁵⁸ which took place two centuries ago. The cultural itinerary that led home, until then understood as a secure interior as opposed to fearful and alien invasions, became an uncanny place holding secrets or hiding places – an itinerary that reflected the "fundamental insecurity [of] a newly established class, not quite at home in its own home" (Vidler 1992: 3-4)⁵⁹. This went hand in hand with

⁵⁶ See Seiler (2013: 169-70).

⁵⁷ Tatar (1981: 169).

⁵⁸ Trigg (2012: 215) highlights this exchange between sameness and difference showing that, for example, when one returns to a remembered place, "the familiarity of a preserved memory fuses with the strangeness of an anonymous place".

⁵⁹ For an introductory analysis of the uncanniness of monuments, for example, see Hook (2005): this specific uncanny implies the breakdown of the implicit natural order of history (the separation between past and present) and of embodiment, through a

urban estrangement, whose outcome was that the uncanny became public (especially in the two postwar periods of the 20th century). This metamorphosis was undergone by typically bourgeois dwelling intimacy⁶⁰, whose atmosphere became more uncanny than the external one (while still enslaving people to its comfort). This was a well known phenomenon: in the 19th century, chaotic and threatening external daemons were replaced by haunted houses, i.e. by apparently welcoming interiors that, instead, allowing for the re-emergence of what should remain hidden, appeared to be heavily infested by evil forces⁶¹.

That cozy comfort and ease became over time unease and uncanny, proving, once again, that the uncanny should not be considered a property of a situation as such⁶². Indeed, a relatively constant physical space can gradually reveal a very different atmospheric (in this case, uncanny) potential. And yet my claim is that certain spatial and/or architectural configurations make it at least possible for the uncanny to arise (of course, in a more or less intense fashion) while others can never generate it. As I tried to prove elsewhere in reference to Poe's *House Usher*⁶³, its uncanny atmosphere cannot be attributed to the fantasies of the narrator but rather to the house itself. This also applies to postmodern architecture: it seems to incorporate the uncanny insofar as it develops the classic bodily-anthropomorphic paradigm of architecture in a deliberately non-accommodating way⁶⁴, reflecting a restless if not dismem-

kind of de-corporealized surveillance extending beyond the confines of the human and disturbing the self.

⁶⁰ "In industrialized societies, most of what matters to people is happening behind the closed doors of the private sphere. The home itself has become the site of their relationships and their loneliness: the site of their broadest encounters with the world through television and the Internet, but also the place where they reflect upon and face up to themselves away from others. For this reason it is likely that people are paying increasing attention to their relationship to their own home, to its structure, its decoration, its furnishing and the arrays of objects that fill its spaces, and that they reflect back on it their agency and sometimes their impotence" (Miller 2001: 1).

⁶¹ See Vidler (1992: 36).

⁶² "There is no such thing as an uncanny architecture, but simply architecture that, from time to time and for different purposes, is invested with uncanny qualities" (Vidler 1992: 11-2).

⁶³ Griffero (2018).

⁶⁴ Faced with some examples of postmodern architecture "the owner of a conventional body is undeniably placed under threat as the reciprocal distortions and absences *felt* by the viewer, in response to the reflected projection of bodily empathy, operate almost viscerally on the body. We are contorted, racked, cut, wounded, dissected, intestinally revealed, impaled, immolated; we are suspended in a state of vertigo, or thrust into a

bered body. I will not go into modern art's architectural tropes and into the reason why a suspicious and anti-bourgeois culture increasingly opposed the too self-satisfied *hygge*-ideal (especially strong in Nordic countries)⁶⁵, understood as a middle class and conservative ideal of comfort, good cheer and intimacy. Here it is enough to say that a) a house's uncanny atmosphere implies "alien presences" that take "by surprise the modern confidence in the inevitability of rational progress" (Sandberg 2015: 22); and that b) a safe and circumscribed place like one's house easily turns into a threatening one both because it is attacked by something hidden there and because it seals its inhabitants like a crypt, into an intrauterine existence in which only the most traditionalist and *Heimat*-philosophers (like the already mentioned Otto Friedrich Bollnow and Gaston Bachelard, but also Martin Heidegger and Hans Sedlmayr) could find consolation⁶⁶.

There is another aspect of a house's uncanny which is worth at least mentioning here. "The discrepancy between the longevity of homes and the relative transience of their occupants" (Miller 2001: 107) can arouse, as in the past, the phenomenon of haunted houses (the ghosts being their previous inhabitants). Today, however this usually translates into a certain anxiety about materially inheriting a house (even in terms of its aesthetics, design, and the furnishings left by the previous owners)⁶⁷. The real and uneasy sense of co-habiting with the past triggered by the meeting of canny and uncanny requires new occupants to employ negotiation strategies. They can, indeed, emphatically feel the need to preserve the afterlife of left-behind and inherited materials, even taking pleasure in imagining former residents and being let into their secrets (especially if this makes it possible to experience something bigger

confusion between belief and perception. It is as if the object actively participated in the subject's self-dismembering, reflecting its internal disarray or even precipitating its dis-aggregation. This active denegation of the body takes on, in the postmodern world, the aspect of an autocritique of a modernism that posited a quasi-scientific, propaedeutic role for architecture. The body in disintegration is in a very real sense the image of the notion of humanist progress in disarray" (Vidler 1992: 78-9).

⁶⁵ For an introduction to *hygge*, see Bille (2019).

⁶⁶ "For the apparently warm and all-enclosing interiors of intrauterine existence were, as Freud pointed out, at the same time the very centers of the uncanny. At once the refuge of inevitably unfulfilled desire and the potential crypt of living burial, the womb-house offered little solace to daily life" (Vidler 1992: 152-3).

⁶⁷ On all this and on the following, see Lipman (2014; 2018); Lipman, Nash (2019).

than the self). However, they can also feel deeply alienated and threatened in their intimacy (is it not always uncanny to sleep in someone else's bed, where other people were born and maybe even died?) by past situations that cannot be completely controlled and even by objects' continuing agency (especially if they are ritual objects one has to keep *in situ*). In both cases the immaterial forces persisting within the house and aroused through things' "ecstasies" generate a kind of enchanted atmosphere, which is also uncanny because it evokes a past that should be gone and hidden, and instead does not pass and is manifested in ways that cannot be controlled.

Although exemplarily uncanny, however, houses are not the only sources of uncanniness. Just to make an example, Freud tells us⁶⁸ that he experienced an uncanny shock in a train's sleeping compartment: for a moment he did not realize that the elderly man in a dressing gown he suddenly saw in the bathroom was nothing but his own reflection in the looking-glass on the open door. An uncanny experience can involve people much less inclined to deviant and disturbing experiences than Freud, as is demonstrated by the similar experience surprisingly recounted by Ernst Mach, a scientist entirely averse to psychology.

Once, when a young man, I noticed in the street the profile of a face that was very displeasing and repulsive to me. I was not a little taken aback when a moment afterwards I found that it was my own face which, in passing by a shop where mirrors were sold, I had perceived reflected from two mirrors that were inclined at the proper angle to each other. Not long ago, after a trying railway journey by night, when I was very tired, I got into an omnibus, just as another man appeared at the other end. "What a shabby pedagogue that is, that has just entered", thought I. It was myself: opposite me hung a large mirror. The physiognomy of my class, accordingly, was better known to me than my own. (Mach 1959: 2, fn. 1)

It follows that our life proves to be intimate and alien at once, that we are the site of an anonymous, foreign and menacing – even only because "anterior" *latu sensu* – (bodily-affective) life. This is the case whether this anonymous "it" is the barbaric state of shapelessness preceding the Greek sky (as in Schelling) or a transplanted material organ, the tele-connected global capitalism by which we are secretly driven or simply the anonymous body transcending us and which we belong to. In

⁶⁸ Freud (1981a: 248, fn. 1).

short, we become even uncanny to ourselves as soon as (for whatever reason) we lose control. When we undergo a crisis in bodily certainty – certainly not only when we are away from home but also in our “normal” non-uncanny life – we realize how not only physically and biologically vulnerable but also really felt-bodily dispossessed we are: we are not at home within our own body because we always coexist with an external-foreign and in this sense “monstrous” presence.

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