

Revisiting the Uncanny: a Model of Visuality for Architectural Speculation

Is Vidler's Uncanny Uncanny Enough?

The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely by Anthony Vidler is a satisfying and provocative work.¹ Erudite, thorough, and grounded in the intellectual and urban history of modern Europe, it has the additional benefit of connecting a central architectural topic with one of psychoanalysis's most curious terms. There is, in short, little in Vidler's characteristically witty work that one could cite as a shortcoming on any level. This brief essay nonetheless asks, of some imaginary fan-club of the uncanny, what might have happened had Vidler shifted his point of view slightly; if he had, as a matter of fact, applied the principle of the uncanny to his own inquiry?²

This project begins with the beginning, Sigmund Freud's original essay.³ This work has been made widely available through translation and re-printed as a stand-alone book. Freud begins with an etymological consideration of the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. Curiously, the word *heimlich* is itself "uncanny," for it contains within its own philological past the seeds of the idea of the uncanny.

The steps from the homely to the uncanny have to do with hiding things. In the sense that "hidden away" can be a part of coziness, it at first belongs to the security that can be offered by the home: concealment from the eyes of strangers. Later, however, the uncanny comes to specialize on this theme, emphasizing "something that ought to have remained a secret" but is discovered; something that was "there all the time" but once brought to light becomes harmful or, at the least, scary.

Vidler's study depends on examples of the architectural uncanny: being buried alive, homesickness, cyborgs, transparency. Adeptly, Vidler de-familiarizes the familiar. More time spent with Freud might have added an element of structural interest by permitting the uncanny to expand in several unexpected ways. What if, for example, Vidler had first explicated the famous example of the contest between Zeuxis and Parhassius, the Greek painters who matched talents with competing murals? Zeuxis's entry seemed perfect — so much so that a bird took his bowl of fruit to be the real thing and flew, fatally, into the wall. Moving down to Parhassius's entry, the judges demanded that the artist pull back the curtain to let them see his entry. He could not, as the famous tale goes, because the curtain was painted. The bird, which had seemed to be the final line in the proof of Zeuxis's excellence, drew attention to the analogous fatal flight of the judges "into the wall of illusion," and so Parhassius won, point, game, and match.

What's uncanny with the Parhassius story is how the first half of the tale structures the second, and how the role of the viewers is undermined to re-write the rules of the game. The issues of self-reference and recursion make the story uncanny in the same way that the *word* uncanny itself grows out of its opposite and predecessor.

In returning to Freud's essay we find the curious piece of literature that provides us with a parallel opportunity of digression: E. T. A. Hoffman's short story, "The Sand-Man." The child Nathanael is frightened by a story his nurse tells to get him to go to bed, that a "Sand-Man" will be coming to collect eyes to feed to the voracious children of the half-moon. Burning with curiosity about the mysterious late-night visits of his father's

lawyer, Coppelius (whose name means “eye socket”), Nathanael conceals himself behind a curtain and witnesses strange alchemical experiments. Years after his father’s suspicious death following one such experiment, an older Nathanael is frightened by an itinerate lens peddler, Coppola, who resembles the lawyer. Coppola has conspired with a Professor Spalanzani to produce a mechanized automaton, Olimpia, whom Nathanael believes to be the professor’s beautiful daughter. He falls in love until an argument between Spalanzani and Coppola leads to the destruction of the doll. Nathanael suffers a nervous breakdown but slowly recovers, until a final encounter with Coppelius leads to his returned frenzy and suicide.

Freud lead us to two main themes in Hoffman’s story: (1) optics — references to eyes, looking, and optical instruments and also the role of Nathanael’s childhood spying and his later “false witness” to Olimpia’s humanity; and (2) the crisis of identity, intensified in the involvement of the automaton. Identity crisis is perhaps the most recognizable element in the uncanny in general. Themes of the double, travel through time, mirrors, and the loss of self through mistaken identity fill artists’ arsenals of the spooky. Optical themes claim the ancient pedigree of the evil eye, a nearly universal belief in a generalized “being seen” where the looker cannot be precisely located — a detachment of looking from geometric lines that are usually drawn between the viewer and the viewed.

Optics, identity crisis, and the automaton theme frequently team up in artistic productions incorporating the uncanny. For example, in the cult film *Dead of Night*, nearly every episode involves this weird trio. A race-car driver recuperating from an accident uncurtains his hospital window at night to reveal a daytime scene with a hearse whose driver nods back to the coffin, saying, “Just room for one inside, sir!” He recovers and is released, but on the way home he almost boards a bus whose conductor is a double of the hearse driver and who also says, “Just room for one inside, sir.” With this omen, he backs out of the bus, only to watch it crash down an embankment seconds later.

Another episode recounts the tale of a mirror that stubbornly reflects the room in which it hung for years, driving the new owner into accepting the invasion of the original owner’s murderous personality. In the last story, a ventriloquist’s dummy “gets the upper hand” and drives his master to kill off his rival.

Between the Two Deaths

The film’s entertaining display of the uncanny, like Hoffman’s fantastic story, makes it easy to underestimate the serious thematic structures that connect the uncanny to the visual dimensions architecture. We must “stick to a path” that leads from motif to rule.

The first path is given by the most fantastic element of the Hoffman story, the notion of eyes out of their sockets. In literal form, this is the scary tale of the Sand-Man who robs children of their eyes to feed the half-moon’s brood. Figuratively, the eye out of its socket is the dreaming eye, the imaginary journey of the soul after death, or (less spectacularly) the eye of the audience, the reader, the art-viewer who must “leave the body behind” in order to enter into the illusion of art. In the mythologies and folklore of every culture, the reason why Freud was so interested in the uncanny becomes clear: the dis-embodied eye is the *psyche*, the soul. More precisely, it is the soul “between the two deaths.”

“Between the two deaths” is the interval established by all cultures to separate the physical death of the body from the imagined point when the soul achieves rest. In many cases, the period is defined by the decay of the body, where typically an animal (worm, bird, dog, etc.), fire, or simply stone (sarcophagus = “eater of flesh”) does the job of reducing the body to dry bones. The interval between the two deaths always involves uncertainty that is settled by magic intervention, prayer, or pre-schooling the soul to find its way through the labyrinthine puzzle of the underworld and answer the questions of the infernal deities.

The eye separated from the body, the “organ without a body,” as Slavoj Žižek would put it to get the better of Gilles Deleuze, is both the pre-analytical *psyche*, or soul, the migrating initiate Freud encountered in museums and travels. If we could hit the pause button of psychoanalysis at the point where Freud read

Morelli's essay on art authenticity, we might have diverted the young doctor towards critical theory entirely.⁴ Or, if Freud had been young at the time of World War II and managed to get to Maresfield Gardens decades rather than a year before his death, we might imagine an encounter with Alan Turing, the inventor of the Bombe, or "Enigma Machine," used to decode German radio transmissions. An early advocate of the idea of artificial intelligence, Turing authored a test that might have led Freud to add to his topics of optics and identity a third, justified by the doll Olympia, that of the automaton.

In a back-generation of history, we might consider that Freud would have improved Turing's famous test for machine intelligence, a proof that stated fundamentally that if you don't know that you're talking to a machine, the machine for all goods and purposes is "thinking." Freud might be particularly interested in one of the list of objections Turing listed in presenting his case for artificial intelligence: that of Lady Lovelace, the daughter of the poet Lord Byron, who, upon inspecting Charles Babbage's proto-computer, the "analytical engine," noted that a machine could not produce anything that was not placed in it to begin with. This objection answers an important question about the human component of Turing's test, played in Hoffman's tale by Nathanael in conversation with Olympia. Clearly, it wasn't what Olympia said but what she *didn't say* that fascinated Nathanael and convinced him of her wit, charm, and depth.



Fig. 1. Freud's desk, Maresfield Gardens, UK. Photo by author.

When Freud completed his examination of a patient, he returned to his desk to gaze into the faces of a number of ancient figurines — images of gods that served much the same purpose for centuries as Olympia did for Nathanael: the creation of a divine intelligence not through expression but from silence (Fig. 1). Here it must have occurred to him that the analysand was "uncanny" in terms of what psychoanalysis revealed — that which *ought to have remained hidden*; that which only an "automatic" process of concealment could select and order without the conscious knowledge of the subject; a double, residing within the mind, released by dreams, errors, and psychic trauma.

The Master Signifier

In Lacan's program of the mind, the "master signifier" is created as a kind of key metaphor that is an "idea of ideas." Not logical itself, it regulates the creation of subordinate ideas through a curiously reversed protocol. First, the signifier appears as a summation or abbreviation of a set of conditions, ideas, or objects. Second, this set is seen to be the *cause* of the signifier. Third, in a completely ungrounded and irrational way, the direction is reversed, making the signifier the cause of its own antecedent conditions.⁵

Such master signifiers serve to "quilt" and stabilize ideas that normally slide past each other. When quilting takes place, the resulting master signifier is not only durable, it is nearly impossible to eradicate. Žižek famously has used the example of the film *Jaws* (1975). Here, the avarice of businessmen wanting to keep the beach open at all costs, lewdness of teenagers having sex in the water, and the encroachment of the beach on the domain of nature are given as "prior conditions" summarized by the menace of the shark. The conditions become causes, and then the shark itself seen as the cause. By this Möbius-band logic, the shark must then be destroyed. *Pristis delenda est!*

The issue of identity and even the "crisis of identity" is contained by the master signifier with its contradictory means of stabilizing meaning by de-rationalizing it. To model the process in the form of the syllogism, we have the following: If (A)B and (B)C, then (A)C. "If all A are B" — that is, if a set of conditions can be abbreviated by the master signifier 'B'; and

"if all B are C" — that is, if the master signifier is caused within the set of now-causal conditions; then all of the prior conditions are caused, not causing, by means of an enigmatic element, 'B'. The master signifier takes the position of the "silent middle term," the element that does not appear in the conclusion of the syllogism but is the means of bringing together the idea of cause and reversed cause. If this middle is extracted — (B)B — it creates a "contradictory" set that is "contained by itself," a statement of the Gödelian paradoxical condition. The master signifier at one and the same time operates as a universal and a particular, cause and effect, victim and victimizer. But, it is most crucial that this recursive, self-referential term be put, in the form of a "matheme" (reworking the Lacanian sense), into works of art, where the function of the master signifier, a flag of the "identity crisis" of the uncanny, can also guide themes of visibility. It would be even more interesting — or, rather, uncanny — if the function could be expounded to cover the case of the automaton, the intelligence that is attributed to the machine by the user, the audience, the spectator, the reader.

From the Master Signifier to 'Automaton' and Anamorphosis

Vidler recognizes the role of the automaton in the uncanny but, good historian that he is, he documents Twentieth-Century examples and paraphrases their interaction with architecture. William Gibson (*Neuromancer*, 1984) and Donna Haraway (*Cyborg Manifesto*, 1991) are given a past (Surrealism, H. G. Wells) and a future (Diller and Scofidio). But, what constitutes a "present"? What are the active ingredients and effective relationships that make the automaton work?

To fully activate the uncanny as a source informing an architectural understanding of visibility, the issue of identity should be fully understandable *in terms of* a theory of automata. This is important not just for the "anecdotal" relationships where variations of automata occasionally relate, as in "The Sand-Man" and Surrealism's examples, but for a comprehensive understanding of the *spatial structure* required by the imagination in its transposition of "hidden" contents from the viewer to the viewed.

If Alfred Hitchcock, master of the uncanny in film, can be asked to supply an example, we might choose *Strangers on a Train* (1951). A tennis pro, Guy Haines, meets playboy Bruno Anthony on a trip to Washington DC. Bruno seems to know all about Guy's professional and personal life, including his failed marriage and current romance with a socialite. Bruno proposes the "perfect crime" in terms of the logic of a self-inscribed master signifier: "I'll do your murder, you do mine." Guy refuses but he unintentionally leaves behind a monogrammed lighter that will enable Bruno to force his compliance once he carries out "Guy's murder." The subjective actions of the plot (interaction of characters) is governed by the possession of the mechanical lighter which, additionally, provides the film with its best visual moments (its flame illuminates the face of the soon-to-be victim, Guy's estranged wife; it menaces a guest at a party; it is dropped down a storm sewer).

Writing up the plot in syllogistic form, we condense the action into three steps: (1) conditions are abbreviated; (2) causality is set in motion; and (3) cause is reversed. The lighter belongs to Guy — (L)G — but unless this changes there is no story. (L)B, Bruno's possession of the lighter, gets things rolling. Bruno is then the cause of Guy's sorrows, (B)G. When the lighter is restored to Guy, (L)G, the story concludes. Bruno is "crazy" and self-referential. As a middle term, (B)B, Bruno extends both to a subjective idealization, Guy, and an objective materialization, possession of the lighter.

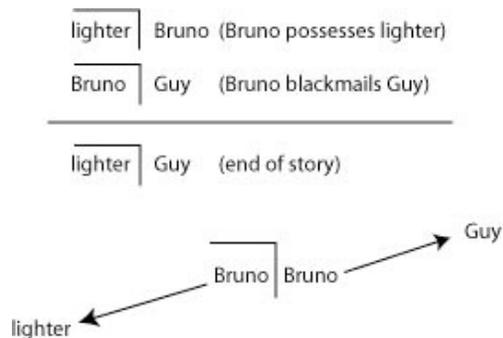


Fig. 2. Bruno as a middle term.

Bruno works as an *anamorphic* element, and it is the key allowing us to connect the automaton to anamorphosis. In the machine-doll Olympia, Nathanael imputed intelligence

because of her “pregnant” silences and enigmatic blank looks. “Mind” was detected behind her few words and gestures because of Nathanael’s point of view — not an abstract point within a geometrical arrangement of the visual field but a “Gnostic” position of projection, opposite but paradoxically adjacent to (or identical with?) the soul of Olimpia. Unaware of his involvement in projecting Olimpia’s intelligence, Nathanael reads this distance as infinite. He cannot fathom her feelings, her mysterious desires. They are antipodal to his own desire for her love. His point of view is a “sweet spot” able to transfer his own desire to a point that seems opposite, a “vanishing point” in perspectival terms.

The conniving Bruno is not an automaton in Olimpia’s truly mechanical sense, but he meets the “Turin test” with a flair that would impress even Lady Lovelace. Once Guy reveals his problem marriage, Bruno sets the plot in motion. The lighter is the mechanical seed that, like some key component in an electrical circuit, allows evil to flow. Guy cannot “turn Bruno off.” He goes so far as to fake his part of the bargain, breaking into Bruno’s mansion to murder Bruno’s rich father; but his confession to the sleeping father is in vain; the father is unexpectedly out of town and Bruno, sleeping in his bed, hears all of Guy’s apology before admonishing him to fulfill his side of the contract.

Bruno’s machine-line execution of crime is coupled with his mastery of several anamorphic devices operating within the film. Bruno wears a tie with his name on it. Like so many characters who name themselves in complex ways (Humbert Humbert of *Lolita*, Jeff Jeffries of *Rear Window*, Kaplan the non-existent spy in *North by Northwest*, Odysseus as Nohbody of the *Odyssey*), Bruno admits “he never made much of himself.”⁶ At a tennis match, Guy sees Bruno’s face motionless as all of the other faces in the audience swerve from side to side as they follow the path of the ball. Bruno’s murder of Guy’s wife Miriam takes place at an amusement park. Bruno follows Miriam and two boy-friends through a tunnel-of-love boat ride, where at one point his shadow menacingly overtakes Miriam’s. On the island in the park’s lake, he locates Miriam with light from Guy’s lighter and we watch him strangle her in the reflection from her

fallen eye-glasses. Coppelius indeed! This seen really does knock your eyes out.

Anamorphosis is as much, however, about the position of the subject as it is about the visually intriguing double-image. The automaton constitutes a double screen, the front of which presents an enchanting, enigmatic blank to the subject who projects intelligence coming from behind. The second screen mediates this intelligent emergence, often as a voice or counter-gaze. The voice cannot be located (the *voix acousmatique* described by Michel Chion) or the source of the gaze cannot be precisely identified (cf. the evil eye). At a party, Bruno seems to hypnotize guests: at one point he nearly chokes a matron; at another, he scares Guy’s fiancée’s young sister with a flame from the lighter.

From Automaton and Anamorphosis to the Three Gazes

Anamorphosis and automatism, coupled with the self-containment of Bruno’s logic, make the playboy the ideal middle term and, hence, the master signifier, the *spell* from which Guy struggled to break. Bruno’s anamorphic function is not simply to provide the plot with a villain. As an automaton, he mediates the rather mechanical coordination of what is most revolutionary about Lacan’s theory of visuality: the three gazes.

Architecture theory has not been influenced significantly by Lacan’s distinction of three separate kinds of gaze. Scholars have preferred to draw from Michel Foucault’s gaze-as-power model or Jacques Derrida’s mono-directional gaze of power-plus-gender. Derrida himself commented that he didn’t understand Lacan’s idea of the counter-gaze (used to explain the subject’s desire as a recognition of the desire of the Other). Certainly, the comprehension of a third gaze would have been out of the question.

Lacan’s doctrine of the three gazes appeared in *Écrits* (1966), in his essay on “The Purloined Letter,” Edgar Allan Poe’s short story about royal intrigue. In this essay, Lacan differentiated three gazes, each illustrated by a character in the short story. A letter is delivered to the royal apartments where the King, Queen, and Minister are having a conversation. The Queen and Minister

recognize the handwriting, realize that the letter is potentially compromising for the Queen, but are unable to remove the letter without attracting the notice of the King, who is not yet aware of the letter's importance.

The minister is able to take the letter, and although the Queen knows he has done this, she is powerless to act. Later, she has the minister's apartments searched by the police. The minister knows that the police are experts at finding any clever hiding places, so he leaves the letter hanging in a letter basket in plain view, where the police overlook it.

Desperate, the Queen calls in Chief Inspector Dupin, who almost immediately deduces the minister's cleverness and, by creating a diversion outside the minister's apartment that draws him to the window, steals back the letter.

From this story, Lacan formalizes three *types* of gaze. The first is the King's gaze, which accepts uncritically the "pockets of invisibility" established by custom and convention. The police, too, surprisingly, follow the King's rules of looking and ignore the letters plainly displayed on the minister's mantelpiece. They assume that they will find only what is intentionally hidden.

The second gaze, according to Lacan, "sees that the first [the King] sees nothing and deludes itself as to the secrecy of what it hides: the Queen, then the Minister." The third gaze, that of Dupin, sees that the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever wishes to seize it.

Our advance on connecting the lore of the uncanny with this doctrine of the three gazes is afforded by the mediation of the master signifier. In a sense, it is the master signifier's three-step procedure of establishing a universalizing metaphor that, *via* the three gazes, guides the film-maker, architect, and artist in creating spaces that sustain "illusion" in the broadest sense of that term. The key to this advance is the role of the anamorphic middle term that, serving as master signifier (self-referential and bi-polar in its abilities to specify both objective and subjective correspondences), is illustrated in the Poe story by the character Dupin. Dupin "sees that

the first two glances leave what should be hidden exposed to whoever wishes to seize it." Bruno sees that Guy has left his lighter "exposed to whoever wishes to seize it," just as Guy has indiscreetly allowed journalists to publish details of his failed marriage and liaison with a socialite. Later, we watch the film unfold from three distinctive points of view. The "public view" (modeled after the King's gaze), is unaware of the unfolding drama and acts as a datum by which the thriller gains its visual energy. This indifferent gaze is personified by a drunken academic Guy meets during a train trip. Unable to corroborate their meeting (he was too drunk), Guy has no alibi for the time of his wife's murder.

Guy, bound by the role of the contract, is the audience's point-of-view entry into the crime, but it is Bruno, the anamorph, who takes us into the crime's interior; his kingdom is the amusement park with its magical island. Bruno is not the hero of the tale in the way that Dupin is, but he is the hero of the camera, the one who realizes the chiasmic value of the criss-cross plot.

Summary

Retrieving the inner functionality of optics, identity, and automatism lets us extend the lore of the uncanny to some unexpectedly global issues: metaphoric manipulation of public perception and awareness through the "master signifier" and the activation of the master signifier through the three types of gaze. The author invites others to assist with the next step of moving from "filmic architecture" to architecture itself, at present beyond the scope of this short introduction.

Notes

¹ Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny, Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge MA: 1992).

² Asking Vidler to do this directly wouldn't work, because the project I have in mind is more philosophy than history, more speculative than documentary. It would not be in anyone's interest to get Vidler to modify his productive work methods, to ask him to "write like someone else." In this light, I propose building on Vidler's pioneering work through a few adjustments to its imaginative presuppositions — adjustments that will not do violence to the original but which should open up another line of thought.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (London: Penguin Books, 2003).

⁴ Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes," in *The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce*, ed. Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), 81-118.

⁵ For an engaging description of Lacan's idea of the master signifier, consult Rex Butler, *Slavoj Žižek: Live Theory* (New York NY: Continuum, 2005), 44-65.

⁶ This may seem to be a trivial detail, but it connects curiously to Hegel's critique of self-identity, where $A=A$ robs argument of its expected predicate. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 415. Self-reference, in the standard style of the Cretan's Paradox, is a boundary relationship involving the "suture" of an exterior condition to an interior structure.