Meditations
on the Uncanny
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Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen
The contemporary sensibility that sees the uncanny erupt in empty parking lots around abandoned or run-down shopping malls, in the screened trompe l’oeil of simulated space, in, that is, the wasted margins and surface appearances of postindustrial culture, this sensibility has its roots and draws its commonplaces from a long but essentially modern tradition. Its apparently benign and utterly ordinary loci, its domestic and slightly tawdry settings, its ready exploitation as the frisson of an already jaded public, all mark it out clearly as the heir to a feeling of unease first identified in the late eighteenth century – where architecture became intimately linked to the notion of the uncanny.

Aesthetically an outgrowth of the Burkean sublime, a domesticated version of absolute terror, to be experienced in the comfort of the home and relegated to the minor genre of the Märchen or fairy tale, the uncanny found its first home in the short stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe. Its favorite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same.

At the heart of the anxiety provoked by such alien presences was a fundamental insecurity: that of a newly established class, not quite at home in its own home. The uncanny, in this sense, might be characterized as the quintessential bourgeois kind of fear: one carefully bounded by the limits of real material security and the pleasure principle afforded by a terror that was, artistically at least, kept well under control. The uncanny was, in this first incarnation, a sensation best experienced in the privacy of the interior.

But beyond this largely theatrical role, architecture reveals the deep structure of the uncanny in a more than analogical way, demonstrating a disquieting slippage between what seems homely and what is definitely unhomely. As articulated theoretically by Freud, the uncanny or unheimlich is rooted by etymology and usage in the environment of the domestic, or the heimlich, thereby opening up problems of identity around the self, the other, the body and its absence: thence its force in interpreting the relations between the psyche and the dwelling, the body and the house, the individual and the metropolis. Linked by Freud to the death drive, to fear of castration, to the impossible desire to return to the womb, the uncanny has been interpreted as a dominant constituent of modern nostalgia, with a corresponding spatiality that touches all aspects of social life.

Thus psychologized, the uncanny emerged in the late nineteenth century as a special case of the many modern diseases, from phobias to neuroses, variously described by psychoanalysts, psychologists, and philosophers as a distancing from reality forced by reality. Its space was still an interior, but now the interior of the mind, one that knew no bounds in projection or introversion.

Its symptoms included spatial fear, leading to paralysis of movement, and temporal fear, leading to historical amnesia. In each case, the uncanny arose, as Freud demonstrated, from the transformation of something
that once seemed homely into something decidedly not so, from the heimlich, that is, into the unheimlich. For Freud, "unhomeliness" was more than a simple sense of not belonging; it was the fundamental propensity of the familiar to turn on its owners, suddenly to become defamiliarized, derealized, as if in a dream.

As a concept, then, the uncanny has, not unnaturally, found its metaphorical home in architecture: first in the house, haunted or not, that pretends to afford the utmost security while opening itself to the secret intrusion of terror, and then in the city, where what was once walled and intimate, the confirmation of community, has been rendered strange by the spatial incursions of modernity.

In both cases, of course, the "uncanny" is not a property of the space itself nor can it be provoked by any particular spatial conformation; it is, in its aesthetic dimension, a representation of a mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming.

In this sense, it is perhaps difficult to speak of an "architectural" uncanny, in the same terms as a literary or psychological uncanny; certainly no one building, no special effects of design can be guaranteed to provoke an uncanny feeling.

If there is a single premise to be derived from the study of the uncanny in modern culture, it is that 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.

Yet the contemporary sense of the uncanny is not simply a survival of a romantic commonplace, or a feeling confined to the artistic genres of horror and ghost stories. Its theoretical exposition by Freud, and later by Heidegger, places it centrally among the categories that might be adduced to interpret modernity and especially its conditions of spatiality, architectural and urban.

As a frame of reference that confronts the desire for a home and a struggle for domestic security with its apparent opposite, intellectual and actual homelessness, at the same time revealing the fundamental complicity between the two, das Unheimliche captures the difficult conditions of the theoretical practice of architecture in modern times.

Equally, consideration of the theory of the uncanny allows for a rewriting of traditional and modernist aesthetic theory as it has applied to categories such as imitation (the double), repetition, the symbolic, the sublime. Questions of gender and subject might be linked to the continuing discourse of estrangement and the Other, in the social and political context of racial, ethnic, and minority exclusion. The resurgent problem of homelessness, as the last traces of welfare capitalism are systematically demolished, lends, finally, a special urgency to any reflection on the modern unhomely.

But it is in this very confrontation with social and political practice that the aesthetic theory of estrangement finds an apparently intractable and unyielding test.

The Realm of the Uncanny
Jonathan Lutes
A word that is born as an explicit negative of another word usually clings to its useful and oppositional meaning. Words such as unintelligent or unclear are less likely to take on additional connotations and nuance; unamnny, however, is one word that has strayed from this course.

Not only has unamnny dwarfed the word from which it sprang, amnny, in terms of frequency of use, but it has taken on a meaning and spirit that transcends the simple opposite meaning and spirit of its original antonym.
Furthermore, and this is a critical leap in meaning, because things and ideas that cannot be easily understood are perceived as threatening, the word *uncanny* has ultimately come to describe phenomena that should not be trusted, and even feared, for their inexplicability.

Superstition certainly plays a role in the labeling of things as *uncanny*. When it is said that, say, a person has an uncanny ability to predict a rise in a stock price, the implication is that this power comes from a mysterious source. Although in this case the source is not particularly threatening, it is nevertheless imbued with something supernatural.

The word *canny*, which means astute, shrewd, knowing as well as careful, cautious, prudent, derives from the English word *ken* (knowledge, understanding, cognizance), as does the very common verb *can*. *Canny* thus connotes a mental capacity for intellectual endeavor, physical prowess, as well as wise behavior.

*Uncanny*, although originally used to mean *not canny*, has drifted in association and has now taken on a more metaphysical definition. *Uncanny* has ceased to describe a person, as *canny* still does, and is now used to describe a phenomenon or sense that is beyond the grasp of understanding for someone who is *canny*.

Sigmund Freud’s 1919 essay titled *The Uncanny* (*Das Unheimliche*) was one of the first academic works to address the phenomenon of the uncanny and has since become the seminal piece on the subject. Freud approached his study from both a linguistic and psychoanalytical angle, while using E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* as a literary centerpiece on which to base his ruminations on the odd effects of the uncanny.
More recently, however, hard scientists have applied more methodological techniques to isolate the moment on a continuum when humans instinctively interpret something as uncanny. In 1970, the Japanese roboticist Masahiro Mori coined the term *uncanny valley* after conducting experiments that gauge subjects’ reactions to a series of robots with increasingly human-like characteristics. He found that, in general, a person’s empathy and positive feeling towards the robots increase as they take on more recognizably human traits. The trend is constant until the point at which robots become just human enough, but still perceptibly artificial, to repel the subjects. Then, as the human qualities of the robots are enhanced further still, the subjects’ reactions become positive once again, creating a “valley” on a graph charting the people’s responses, with the positivity of their reception reflected on the y-axis.

The findings seem to indicate that humans interpret human-like qualities in non-humans as reassuring, even charming, as long as they fully understand that the robot is indeed a robot. And the ultimate acceptance of the final robots suggests a willingness, a desire even, to embrace those that present only a modicum of incomprehensible, non-human qualities. But this interval of repulsion, the uncanny valley, where the subjects’ familiarity and similarity with the robots become synthesized with estrangement and trepidation at such a balance as to reverse the otherwise constant trend of acceptance, shows a paradox that cuts to the heart of the uncanny.

Despite the etymology of the word, which is only partly responsible for the common misunderstanding that the uncanny stems primarily from fear of the unknown, it is this threat posed by the known that lends the uncanny its distinctly unsettling effect. It is, of course, particular to the individual whether we find more frightful the idea of a ghost, which incorporates the spirit of a human but not the physical embodiment of one, or a snake or an outer-space alien, which may bear a threatening physical presence but has a spirit quite foreign to our own. That is to say that some of us are less sensitive to the uncanny than to terrestrial phenomena, but why that is so is a matter for psychoanalysts. Good ones will know, however, that the threshold for the uncanny, i.e. what and when certain phenomena reach the critical balance of known and unknown so as to be perceived as uncanny, is constantly in flux.
At the inception of the telephone, some considered a recognizable human voice delivered over wires and presented through a metal contraption with an ear and a mouth piece to be too far beyond understanding to be trusted; and cyber video chats are still too much for some who came of age before the dawning of the internet. As the frontier of the uncanny continues to shift, it may be that robots lose their status as uncanny and are treated more like *Blade Runner* replicants – that is, as a controlled and disenfranchised minority and not as a viscerally repulsive other. At which point, the sphere of the uncanny will move into an as-yet-unknown realm.
Talk About Me

Sladja Blazan

Me
I’ll give you a typical story that happened only recently. It was early in the morning. Someone rang my bell and as there was nobody there

I cried, only in writing, mind you:

please do come in!
It had been so still and empty inside of me, I felt energized at the idea of hosting someone. Needless to say, the undesigned visitor ran off, as if I'd pointed a gun at her. For many years now, people have been running away from me like this; I don't know what to tell you about it. My existence alone seems to be enough to scare them off. My weight doesn't allow me to move around freely.

Oh, I long so for the old days of cheerful whispers and blissful smiles.

Actually,

let's start with how people see me. I know this might seem an evasion. I'm not dodging your question. Shifting the responsibility will help me deceive myself into talking; so bear with me for a while. First things first: I understand that I'm kind of square, which sometimes troubles me. Because in spite of my rather discomforting shape, I feel that I embrace visitors without prejudice. I keep them warm when cold, I protect from heat when needed. I let them arrange me according to their own needs and wishes. So why square me like this? It could be my unfortunate shape that scares people off.

The only thing that keeps me in high spirits – no pun intended – is the many voices inside of me. Apart from a few cases, I cannot reveal anything about their origin, since they never introduce themselves. Grateful for their company, I ask no questions. Afraid that they might feel compromised, I don't bother them by inquiring about their whereabouts or their destinations. But I will say, I've become aware of a certain pattern. They usually sneak in at nightfall, and mostly leave at the wake of the dawn, often in a hurry. They use no keys and always behave as if they were appearing at a great event after a pompous invitation, but as soon as the first sunrays puncture the windows, they're gone. Their sudden departure is always the saddest moment of the night. Sometimes I play little tricks with myself and I pretend that they're still there. Boasting with self-consciousness, I blubber and sigh and giggle and rustle, just as they do. I know, this sounds a little crazy. I think this might be what scares the living off. Consequently, I've decided not to do it anymore.

Anyway,

I wanted you to know that I like their presence. People have been badmouthing these nocturnal companions ever since Enlightenment kicked in; all of a sudden they're supposed to be threatening and undesirable. This is not my experience. They come to enjoy themselves, giving me pleasure in turn.
That’s all.

I’ve noticed that even those who visit for the first time seem to know their way around. For a proud square old dig like me this can be difficult. I mean, what remains if I can’t even play the host? When they give me this uncomfortable feeling, I let off some steam, literally. Sometimes I just open and close my doors and windows for them. This always seems to provoke an irritating effect, since they commonly don’t use doors. Aware that they don’t need this assistance, I use it as my own pathetic way of recovering agency. I don’t want to complain. Apart from this little disturbance, they make me happy. They stay for a while, and that’s more than I can say about anyone who’s stepped inside of me for half a century now.

Perhaps you’d like to know the reason for my forced isolation. I often wonder about it myself. I wonder and I cry out to myself: “Why?” Like I said, I do this in writing, but even this little vent seems to scare the neighbors. They come running out of their houses and I’ve overheard them on many occasions whispering stories about a murder that supposedly happened inside of me. People, please! Show me a spot where someone didn’t get murdered in this world. But who’s counting? Actually, it’s not the murders they mind; what they mind is the returnees. You know, at times like this, I’d like to scream out to all the Madelines of this world: “What was worse, dear Madeline, resting firmly within a secure embrace or facing the spooky visage of your autistic brother? Be honest!” I suppose she cannot hear me, but really now, why did this girl Madeline need to leave her resting abode, Mr. Poe? And look what this unnecessary outbreak led to. It really messed things up. I’m recalling all this for you, so that you can understand: it’s because of women like her that people like the idea of living inside of me, but they despise … Well, what is the word … how come there is no word for a continuation of being dead … deading? All right, so people dread the idea of deading inside of me! For heaven’s sake, I’m good enough to provide shelter in life, why not in death?

Where was I?
Oh yes, Madeline ruined it.

Now people walk around pointing their noses towards heaven, keen to know all there is to know. They talk among themselves about me being doomed; they describe me peeping with two gouged-out eyes at the street and the passers-by who are not careful enough to avoid me. I keep silent. Even when I’m forced to overhear their vulgar conversations about my convenient price and how no one cares to own me in spite of my incomparable cheapness, I stay calm. Well, the truth is, I know I’d shudder if I had to confront them, and this always makes them scared, so I keep my eyes closed. This is why there’s no light inside of me.

But let’s try to find something positive. All this tension makes me feel anxious. It was so kind of you to go to such trouble to come and see me, I want to be amusing and informative. This is why you came by, right? Here’s something: you know, there are people in this world who do understand me. I think Schelling was one of them. At least he seemed to have come close to getting me when he yelled out that architecture was frozen music. That’s right, you have to yell it out. No one listens otherwise. Just think back to what I told you about the voices inside of me. Frozen music! And did you know that Goethe picked it up from him and then turned the phrase into “petrified music”? How good is that!
I do feel petrified.

And I do play music. Strange synaesthetic analogies sometimes work wonders.

I feel a little better now that I’ve shared all this. I can’t say that I’ve recovered. I’m worn to a shadow. Please excuse my appearance. All their talk about me being doomed has taken its toll. But your magnificent presence gives me fevers of hope. And reminding myself of all the splendid minds that have given me some thought … I don’t need to tell you Edmund Burke knew what he was talking about. Forget all the blubbering about the German words

heim, heimelig, heimlich, unheimlich.

Have you ever seen something that wasn’t comfortable and uncomfortable at the same time? Or something that couldn’t change into its opposite in the twinkling of an eye? All this fuss about the unfamiliar context … I have to say, people are strange. Especially when they’re alive. Luckily they die and at least afterwards they seem to make sense.

It’s getting late and I am running out of walls, writing all this. You know, it bothers me that they call me “the haunted house”. “We are all haunted houses,” wrote H.D., and I agree with her, but not many do. Heidegger does. “Tranquilized and familiar is a mode of Dasein’s uncanniness, not the reverse,” he writes. And still, people like to present me as an anomaly. Hosting people year in year out, I’ve seen a lot, I can tell you that much.

And I know this: It’s not me who’s haunted!
two
content
porary

Yard

Ow
feel-bad
film's
When the smiling young stranger dressed in immaculate golf attire drops – for the second time – the eggs he has borrowed from our now slightly annoyed heroine, and when, with a mixture of threat and bonhomie, he insists on his right to borrow the last of her eggs as well, we know that it will be a very long evening for the polite family in Michael Haneke's notorious *Funny Games* (1997).
In the most famous scene in *Funny Games*, for instance, our heroine snatches the rifle from the two golf-clad psychopaths, kills one of them, and thereby provides us with the satisfaction we have been craving for fifty-five minutes (at the film’s first screening in Cannes, the public cheered and applauded this murder). But the satisfaction is short-lived: the other psychopath grabs a remote control, rewinds the film, brings his collaborator back to life, and the torture resumes as if nothing has happened.

When six-year-old Jason – who lives on Elm Street – challenges Grace’s ideals of humanism by insisting on his right to a good spanking (“If you *don’t* hit me, I will tell my parents you hit me!”), and when his father Chuck rapes her soon afterwards, it becomes obvious that the “good citizens” of *Dogville* (2003) are considerably less pleasant than Lars von Trier had initially invited us to believe.

When Haneke, von Trier and other filmmakers make our stomachs churn and have us twisting and writhing and wishing for it all to end, then we are in the company of what I call the “feel-bad film”.

Unlike a (debatable, but) common view of the European art films of the 1960s and 1970s (by Jean-Luc Godard, Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, for instance), feel-bad films call for the emotional investment of spectators. At times, they solicit an almost corporeal identification with the characters on the screen and in doing so they seem to operate along lines that are closer to Hollywood movies. But contrary to the typical Hollywood product, feel-bad films do not deliver the cathartic experience we long for; instead, they deliberately frustrate our desire for release.
At the end of *Dogville*, Grace finally takes revenge on the townspeople. But this revenge – a ‘sublime’ and methodical destruction of the town and all its citizens – is so comprehensive that our emotional satisfaction gives way to confusion: Grace goes too far. No matter how satisfactory we initially felt this revenge to be, we gradually realize that the killings are problematic. In this manner, Trier carves out the difference between our emotional and our intellectual responses and he leaves us suspended in the abyss between the two. Thus both *Funny Games* and *Dogville* foreclose our access to a truly cathartic release.

This foreclosure depends on the combination of two very dissimilar aesthetic frameworks that both originate in the 1930s. First, these feel-bad films draw on Bertolt Brecht’s anti-cathartic writings. Brecht believed that a direct emotional investment in the onstage characters would be detrimental to the understanding of the conflicts explored by the plays; essentially, he associated emotional absorption with bourgeois escapism. In an attempt to stimulate the political awareness of his public, he sought to prevent his spectators from identifying with the characters so as to elicit a more intellectual response to the plays (although this in no way prevented them from being thoroughly entertaining). Second, these films are indebted to the very different (but equally anti-bourgeois) theories that were developed at the margins of the Surrealist movement in Paris; theories that investigated the emancipatory potential of the cathartic experience. Inspired by phenomena such as animistic ceremonies and Dionysian rites, Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille attempted to create theatrical rituals that would overwhelm the spectators and friends who took part in the activities. Their ambition was to offer an experience that would radically change the participants and thereby produce new human beings who could rescue a society that they predicted was heading straight for disaster. As Artaud writes in his manifesto on the “Theatre of Cruelty”: “In our present degenerative state, metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body.”

The feel-bad effect is achieved through a blending of these traditions, an approach that sets *Funny Games* and *Dogville* apart from both Brecht and Surrealism. Haneke and von Trier are obviously un-Brechtian in their manipulative approach to the emotions and bodily responses of their spectators, but they still use Brechtian distancing effects with the aim of educating the spectator (think of *Dogville*’s deliberately artificial mise-en-scène and *Funny Games*’ rewind-scene). At the same time, these films flirt with a typical avant-garde belief in the progressive potential of transgression but ultimately deny spectators any ecstatic release by raising questions about the potential and the problems of that transgression. They draw us in, push us away, appeal to our bodies and frustrate our desires. As Haneke explains: *Funny Games* is an attempt to rape the viewer into being reflective. The spectator is offered a visceral lesson in moral education.
The feel-bad approach is problematic to many viewers (this is part of the point). The most obvious objection to the particular form of shock-therapy that we find in *Funny Games* is perhaps that a moral message delivered via assault is necessarily tainted. I agree. But I suspect that if this message had not been tainted, *Funny Games* would have been a painfully didactic film that made us feel bad in far less stimulating ways.
Sphere I, oil on canvas, 70x55cm, 2010.
Delirious Disaster, oil on canvas, 178 x 120 cm, 2009.

Spacey, oil on canvas, 127 x 165 cm, 2008.
Ile Bridge, oil on canvas, 105 x 184 cm, 2009.

Driveway, oil on canvas, 134 x 184 cm, 2007.
Modern Living, oil on canvas, 100x130cm, 2008.

Passageway, oil on canvas, 100x130cm, 2008.
Filla in the Exhibition, oil on canvas, 178x120cm, 2010.

Tower, oil on canvas, 94x155cm, 2007.
Billboards, oil on canvas, 108x184cm, 2007.

The Escape Button, oil on canvas, 130x100cm, 2009.
Shadows in the House, oil on canvas, 70x63cm, 2008.

Garage, oil on canvas, 103x155cm, 2010.
Rotaprint, oil on canvas, 105x134cm, 2010.
The Buildings
All Have Souls

Michael Eddy

On the hunt we followed the vagrant footsteps of a herd
Into a land, an alien desert void
Populace of creatures whose minds are not like ours
On the prowl, it’s their being or mine
Shifting dunes and plants that would engulf us whole
Carousel of carrion birds turns overhead
Cresting the ridge we spotted in the distance
A shining mass like endless shards of ice
We’ve lost our symbols
And then the wind blows

Chorus:
Walking on the rock paths cautious there’s no sign of life
Echoes cross back and forth against the windows
We can see inside
The slumber’s been disturbed
A low hum can be heard
The buildings all have souls
I believe they have good intentions
Their lights are all aglow
They want us to go into them
It appears as if something like us did live here
There are things that easily conform to my hands
I could swear that eyes stare at us, being watched
Solid objects move themselves and beckon
Is this a place fit for people to dwell?
There is power everywhere, good or bad
Into the cave-like passages we creep
Where the roles of night and day conflate
We’ve lost our symbols
And then the wind blows

Chorus x 2

Take two simple classes of pictures: those that are accessible to the observer – in the sense that he may imagine himself taking a walk or otherwise following a trajectory in pictorial space – and those that are not so accessible. Imagining such a trajectory forms a basic type of diagrammatic experimentation that the viewer may undertake interpreting the picture. This distinction cuts across that of figurative versus abstract – as I have argued in *Diagrammatology*.

Many human environments include exteriors or interiors where socially established supports for such trajectories are central: paths, tracks, lanes, stairs, roads, streets, motorways, crossroads, intersections, road forks, railways, ramps, garages, sidewalks, crosswalks, entrances, gateways, tunnels, stations, airports, bus terminals. Indeed, the whole of human imagination is saturated by such structures that facilitate traffic on many different levels. Human or animal intentionality is basic in understanding such structures – here, somebody walked (ran, drove, etc.) before I showed up – and here somebody may continue to do so when I am no longer there.

Traffic density, of course, varies over time; it is not surprising that traffic lanes are sometimes overcrowded, sometimes less so, sometimes completely empty – constituting the basic patterns and rhythm of the social organism. Consistently empty traffic lanes, however, present a sort of riddle to the observer. They were evidently constructed so that people may make their way there – yet, nobody does. There may be several reasons for this. Roads or railways may be abandoned due to development, now constituting traces of past traffic that we may take as romantic or desolate signs of past lives – perhaps providing important information about the long-lost cultures and civilizations.

It is a modern artistic device to apply this emptiness to the traffic routes not of long ago, but of our own, contemporary civilization. I do not know who was the first to employ this potential; the sinister quality of de Chirico’s urban scenes certainly owes much to the fact that they are predominantly empty, leaving the arcade streets typical of Northern Italy as strange, metaphysical ruins of our own time. The Danish photographer Per Bak Jensen has done something similar with his high-resolution depictions of industrial facilities, motorways, zoological cages – abandoned by their normal, busy users. Such an artistic strategy applies a device originally cultivated by the perfectionists of the still-life and Vanitas genres of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The fact that meticulously arranged pyramids of delicious foods are not eaten, the fact that the displayed book is not read by anyone, the fact that the musical instrument remains silent and the accompanying score untouched, the fact that time goes by without anyone using those utensils for the purposes to which they are conspicuously designed – this is what gives such pictures their creeping uneasiness. When taking this technique out into the urban landscape of driveways, sidewalks and gas stations, this uneasiness is extrapolated from the individual (not playing the instrument, etc.) to the whole of a city or a civilization (no longer there to use the cityscape).

Such an interpretation, of course, relies on a crucial temporal experiment undertaken by the observer. That
a depicted fruit bowl is untouched or a painted street is empty might, rationally speaking, just be a matter of coincidence. Maybe the picture depicts only a moment of emptiness, and in the next second, a jolly, hungry person will enter the scene with his fruit knife, and the silence will be broken by the roar of an approaching car. The mild feeling of discomfort, of course, comes from the picture-experiment saying: but what if not? What if the silence remains? What if it is eternal?

A further complication of this scheme is introduced by different conditions for different traffic forms. In the classic city, all traffic used the same road: walkers, cyclists, cars, buses, trains, etc. One of the great changes brought about by modernist city planning is the separation of traffic types – for better or for worse. Increased efficiency and speed is one result; another is the increasing emptiness of certain traffic zones. The walkers path suddenly appears vulnerable, taking you through the dark space from one suburban project to the next, no longer protected by the other road-users in parallel. And certain traffic areas designed for car use, exclusively or primarily, suddenly appear as dangerous, threatening spaces for the walker accidentally finding himself there. This, of course, has given rise to the topos of certain dangerous spaces in feature films, such as the underground car park or the motorway where people without the protective steel shell of a vehicle suddenly find themselves strangely naked in spaces devoid of other walkers.

This is the background for a specifically modern version of the empty route. It is not only vacated by its normal users, but may be inhabited by some abnormal users. Gangs, criminals, rapists and so on may prefer the emptiness and lack of witnesses offered by such deserted spaces. Added to the metaphysical uneasiness of abandoned routes is the more profane uneasiness of the virtual crime scene. It may even be difficult to tell one from the other, so that two types of uneasiness melt into the overall sinister quality of unused accessibility.

“Ghosts accompany us everywhere, and the longer you live, the more of them are following you around.”

Peter Straub
Crime works like a magic wand. It turns space into a scene of crime, a crimescape. Whatever a space was before a murder, theft, violence, rape, etc., the act of crime transforms it into a space inhabited by ghosts. Crime institutes a caesura that frees space from the flow of time and charges the now with the events of the past. In other words, crime slows down time and charges a given space with intensity, atmosphere, and emotions shaped by the events of what has been. The air is thick with past, memory, and spectres, like a heavy morning fog that makes you slow down your pace and calls forward long-forgotten childhood scenes. A crimescape is a force field that becomes an obsession in the mind and imagination of all who pass through its radius.

The scene of the crime is a space of clues. Visible and invisible clues. Clues are marks of action, of time, of passion. Clues have to be found and pieced together into a story, a narrative that reconstructs the past as a whole and fixed incident, a crime. Not everybody perceives clues. It takes a special sensibility: patience, boredom, ecstasy. One has to train one's senses and develop an ability to use sensations as components in a moving sculpture, and perceive the evildoer as somebody who sculpts time. Thus crime encourages the investigator, the audience, to sharpen the senses, to observe and to dissect the input of the sense apparatus, to become conscious of the flow of information that bombards our perception and which is normally filtered away as superfluous and non-practical waste. It is a matter of slowing down time by decomposing and recomposing sensations; to objectify sensations and work with them as sculptures that can be modelled, simulated, and manipulated; and, finally, to restage the vision of the evildoer in order to make the past present, physical, crime fiction.

Clues turn individuals into seers, listeners, feelers who want to re-experience the crime; clues fuel the imagination, the cinema of the mind, that automatically pieces together information into episodes by using the fears and fantasies present in the social imaginary. A body, a knife, a piece of cloth are clues that conjure up the stories in the collective mind and unconsciousness. Crime, in that sense, transforms individuals into voyeurs, peepers, watchers, spies. Crime breeds a certain form of collective scopophilia, the uncanny pleasure of looking at the mutilated and dreadful. Crime turns us into architects of sensation and memory.

Clues have many forms. Clues can be fluid as a blood pool or a spilled drink. Clues can be material clues, like a body, a finger with a ring, a broken button with a stain, a crushed beer bottle, a dirty needle. Clues can be a scream heard through a wall, a growl or a piece of music. Clues can be microfibers from a foreign body in a wound, a smell, or a certain arrangement of the furniture in a room. Clues can be the strange tone of a voice, a woman passing quickly or a car running slowly. Clues call for a sensitivity to detail, to the phantasms of an overly present material world. Clues foster new eyes, new ears, new visions, new senses, a stereoscopic perception, to borrow a concept from Ernst Jünger.
5. Clues overwrite the world with a hieroglyphic meaning that needs to be deciphered. The body is no longer an active living entity that eats, works, and makes love; the body is now the leftovers of a fatal act of aggression. The body is no longer part of a life world composed of emotion and thought; the body is an entity of forensic analysis made by medical examiners and other specialists. The knife, the club or the gun are no longer made for a practical purpose; they become evidence, specific objects connected to a murder, a crime, a victim. The clues are the witnesses of the phantom world of a foggy past, ghosts of evildoers, Fata Morgana of intentions, and of the crime that still pervades the space.

6. Crime produces an obsession with space. The investigator and the audience cannot leave – neither physically nor mentally – the scene of the crime before the curse is broken and space is somewhat normalized. It can never, though, return to what it was before. Crime is a hostile take-over of space. It produces a range of obsessive questions that will not let go of the minds and bodies of those asking what happened? Who did it? Why? The not-yet-knowing becomes a state of space. Something happened here. It lives on in the shadows, the sounds, the memories, the whispers of the walls. Unsolved crimes – Jack the Ripper, Elizabeth Short – will not leave us alone and continue to occupy our cultural space. Even solved crimes – Eddie Gein, Josef Fritzl, Laura Palmer – pervade the collective imagination with dark and destructive narratives that refuse to be archived. Crimes become undead, like a mental breed ofensible memories embedded in the fabric of our collective stories. The public and the media are mythographers, endlessly and tirelessly depicting details and retelling versions of crime. The horror! The horror!

7. The scene of the crime is the home of heterogeneous activity. Crime is the opposite of civilization, the homogenous. In civilization everything is organized as a complex and socializing game of accumulation and consumption, Georges Bataille teaches us. Evildoers refuse to be part of the general economy and disregard social contracts; they eclipse the collective and the common. Rooted in desire, lust, revenge, greed, evil, loneliness, accident, madness, the individual or the group or the conspirators commit their crimes and become enemies of civilized society, of the common. We are fascinated by this sovereign act. It makes us afraid. Paranoia. Everything is connected. Virtually every crime is a threat against our carefully constructed social systems and patterns. Crime is a step towards anarchy, dissolution, chaos, and death. Crime makes us tremble and invites us into the machinery of secrets, betrayal, violence, and corruption. Crime shows us how to transgress and destroy the fragile systems of a life, and of life as such. The scene of the crime marks the black hole of destruction and disaster inside of civilized space.

8. Crime works like a magic wand. It vitalizes space, gives it aura. Everything virtually becomes an object of desire. Don't touch anything. Retain the scene of the crime as it is, save photos, keep silence, leave no new traces, preserve, freeze, observe, listen to your imagination, the voices in your head, dream with open eyes. Crime takes possession of the dark ghosts of deaths.
While in Russia, I had the opportunity to live in a notorious remnant of the Stalin era, namely a communal apartment. The *kommunalka*, as it is referred to in Russia, was the predominant form of housing in the urban Soviet Union. In this curious living arrangement steeped in utopia and ideology, citizens were forced to cohabit with strangers, sharing kitchen, toilet and bathroom. Generally a space of intimacy, the familiar domestic realm was made strange by the Soviet regime in its aim to control the Soviet everyday.

In order to organize themselves under the chaotic circumstances caused by the inherent discrepancies between a virtual ideology and the spatial reality, neighbors came up with pragmatic rules that necessarily ordered the space. Paradoxically, these rules and regulations permitted freer movement in this interstitial space.

I had no idea of what awaited me behind the make-shift walls of the *kommunalka* years after the collapse of the
Soviet Union, but I was ready to oblige in whatever way I could, since I was the outsider. It goes without saying that I had to take my turn washing the floors and taking out the trash. Yet while standing in the kitchen preparing food on my kitchen table, in my pots and on my side of the stove, there was no expectation that I should engage in polite conversation with a neighbor who happened to be in the kitchen at the same time, although I could do so if I wished. The same was true for my Russian neighbors. Born out of this publicness within the private space was not only the strong need for separation from the other, but also a respect for the other’s private sphere, regardless of whether this was in one’s own room or in the public common spaces. (Granted, in Soviet times those borders were regularly violated, but respect for the other still existed.)

With this in mind, it is interesting to ponder the curious voluntary migration of people into high-security residential areas, commonly referred to as “gated communities,” a form of communal living that is increasing in popularity in urban spaces around the world. In addition to gaining access to shared facilities like swimming pools, as well as the prospect of preserving property values and enjoying the nostalgic feeling of belonging to a community with common values, one of the main reasons for settling into these exclusive and excluding compounds is an unsettling sense of social insecurity.

Caused by fear of an unidentified and disconcerting “other,” this sense of social insecurity is transferred into a need for physical security. It is at this juncture that the borders between the inside and the outside, between the self and the other, and between the familiar and the strange begin to blur. These inchoate borders need to be reestablished so that the meaning of the “other,” as the perceived strange or uncanny, can be established through its opposition to the familiar and the secure. And, for some, the next best thing to being secure is apparently the feeling of being secured. Thus, with the help of controlling structures that reestablish borders such as surveillance cameras and gates, the strange is made familiar, but not too familiar.

One of the determining features of gated communities is order: the strict rules and regulations that control life within the gates. While many residents complain about intrusive regulations, the benefits of community living seem to override the drawbacks. Residents are willing to give up some of their freedom in exchange for a sense of security. A large proportion of the residents are glad that the rules exist and welcome the discipline and resulting order, feeling more comfortable in the knowledge that these rules are also being applied to their neighbors.

While the kommunalka was a microcosm of Soviet urban society, gated communities are a microcosm of an urban dream; both are socio-spatial constructs in search of a better community under perceived extraordinary circumstances. The utopian pursuits of the Soviet regime are well known; gated communities, however, also have their origins in utopia, namely in Ebenezer Howard’s...
“Garden City.” Howard’s ideal of communal private ownership has been taken over by powerful real-estate interests and the concept of economies of scale is now being applied to property development. Simultaneously, developers are building urban dreams of a small-town community.

To me, the subtle (or not so subtle) similarities between these two distinct housing forms are uncanny. In both, elements of community are contained, including common space, common values and essentially a common vision or dream. In both, the boundary between the inside and the dangerous outside is marked by walls. Regardless of the shape, size, permanence or make-shift nature of the walls, they indicate a multidimensional and ambivalent border, simultaneously communicating danger and protection as well as inclusion and exclusion to the inside and to the outside.

The arrangements and conditions accepted with the signing of a gated-community contract ultimately reach deep inside the residents’ private sphere and redefine not only the boundaries between the public and the private represented by the first set of walls, but also the intimate and personal boundaries between individuals living behind the second set of walls of each home. While the residents of kommunalki tried to reestablish these boundaries in order to protect the private sphere from anonymous forces representing the dangerous outside, gated-community residents subject themselves to anonymous forces in the form of impinging rules that reach inside of the private sphere.

In their pursuit of the familiar and a sense of community, gated-community residents try to recreate a small-town feeling where everybody knows and can trust each other. What unites residents is a common understanding of what this means, as well as the coercive values contained within this image and its associated rules. This fantastic and familiar(ized) past is something that can be merely imagined. Within this context, I wonder whether the intention of controlling this sense of social insecurity and preserving property and community values has resulted in making the familiar strange? In the ideology of the Soviet regime an imagined future was contained, while in gated communities the imagined past is contained (in both senses of the word: to incorporate and include, as well as to hold, control and restrain). The question remains: which of the two is more dangerous?
It was pitch black and I had no sense of where I was. I had woken up all of a sudden, perhaps because of a noise, but couldn’t see anything in the empty, heavy, massive darkness. I was breath and a still-increasing pulse, but had lost that body that, although connected to the world, we do not think about, living as a latent system of possible actions. This time the world was completely gone. For too long I was nothing but an abstract placeless thought with an uncanny certainty that I was unable to think my way to clarity.
We had left Paris, where we were studying, the evening before. I only knew the Norwegian and the Swiss superficially, but we agreed that precisely this would make a weekend trip to the hometown of the Swiss a special experience. He owned a car, and we could stay at his parents’ house in a smallish village. We arrived long after midnight and went straight to bed, each in our own bedroom on the first floor. Before I turned off the light and fell asleep, I noticed that the windows had shutters.
When I poked my foot over the edge of the bed, I realised that the mattress was lying on the floor. A long, uncertain time had passed, and I only managed to overcome this uncertainty when I touched the freezing-cold lacquered floorboards. In one strike, the world returned to me. Although it was still pitch black, I was aware of the direction and distance to the door.
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Sandra Evans (b. 1970) is a lecturer at Tübingen University and has written her Ph.d on the Kommunalka during the time of Stalin. Selected publications: *Extreme Aesthetics: Solidarity as a Form of Resistance in the Totalitarian Everyday in Texts by Charms and Bradbury* (Phare, 2008) and *Histories of the Kommunalka: On the Resulting of Intimacy* (Verlag Otto Sagner, 2005).

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Education
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1996–03 MA in literature and philosophy, University of Copenhagen.

Solo exhibitions
2010 Meditations on the Uncanny, Helene Nyborg Contemporary, Copenhagen.
2008 Life in the Box, Helene Nyborg Contemporary, Copenhagen.
2007 Supernumeral (with Emil W. Hertz), Marstal Museum, Aeroe.
2006 Mentalscapes, Helene Nyborg Contemporary, Copenhagen.
Frontal/Sideways, The Scandinavian House, Prague.
2004 Melting Barricades (with Inuk Silis Høegh), North Atlantic House, Copenhagen, and Kamaq, Nuuk, Greenland.
Collapsing Structures (with Rune Sachting and Jonas Olewien), The Projectroom, Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen.

Selected group exhibitions
2010 Paintedly-Delight, Art Centre Silkeborg Bad, Denmark.
Greetings to B. Gertsen, Danish Graphic Center, Copenhagen.
Radical Adults, The Forgotten Bar Project, Berlin.
CRW – Contemporary Reflections on Warfare, BKS Garage, Copenhagen.
Copenhagen City Art Collection 2006–2009, Copenhagen.
The Hello Show, Helene Nyborg Contemporary, Copenhagen.
Art in the Blood, Utzon Center, Aalborg.
A Formal Figure, Galerie im Regierungsviertel, Berlin.
Formation, Halle 41, Berlin.
Exit, Gl. Strand, Copenhagen.
InnenRaum, Galerie MøllerWitt, Aarhus, Denmark.
2007 Ausstaher, Brandenburgischer Kunstverein Potsdam e. V., Germany.
PT07, Vestyjyllands Kunstmuseum, Tistrup, Denmark.
Proverbs, Portalen, Greve, Denmark.
Re-thinking Nordic Colonialism, The Living Art Museum, Ísafjörður, Iceland.
Contemporary Art, Spring Exhibition, Charlottenborg, Copenhagen.
2005 Total Production, Islands Brygge 83, Copenhagen.
2004 Typhoon, Maeda Studio, Kitakyushu, Japan.
Minority Reports, Aarhus, Denmark.
2003 Young Contemporary Art, Frederiks Bastion, Copenhagen and Iskonor, Malmö, Sweden.
Bibliography


Bente Scavenius: Klinisk rent for liv (review), Børsen, August 2008.


2005 May Misfeldt: Melting Barriades, Danish Art 05, Aschehoug, Copenhagen, 2006.


Other Activities

2009 Founder of Büro für UrbanPraktik with Boris Bell-Johansen.

2007 Co-organizer (with Andreas Harbsmeier and U-Turn) of Spaces of Desire, Desire for Spaces, a seminar with Roman Ondak and Ivaylo Ditchev, held at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen.

2006–07 Co-organizer (with Andreas Harbsmeier and Lars Bang Larsen) of Ideas and Processes: Four Conversations About the Making of Contemporary Art, four seminars held at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Copenhagen.

Participants: Miwon Kwon & Joe Scanlan; Claire Bishop & Phil Collins; Ina Blom & Tobias Rehberger; Diedrich Diederichsen & Judith Hopf.
Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen: Meditations on the Uncanny

This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition Meditations on the Uncanny at Helene Nyborg Contemporary, Copenhagen, 4 June – 10 July 2010.

Editors: Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen
Copy-editor: Melissa Larner
Proofreader: Andreas Harbsmeier
Design: Claus Due, Designbolaget
Printer: Mediefabrikken
1,000 copies

A Mock Book by Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen and Lettre

© 2010 Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen, the contributors, and Lettre
ISBN: 978-87-91482-98-4

Lettre
Kongens Nytorv 1
DK - 1050 Copenhagen K
www.lettre.dk

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Photo credits: Asmund Havsteen-Mikkelsen, Anders Boll-Johansen (page 58), and unknown photographers.

The catalogue is kindly supported by the Danish Arts Council.
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