

Call for papers

# Phantasmata

## Techniques of the Uncanny

(Workshop, ICI-Berlin - 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> April 2009)

The concept of the 'uncanny' is one of the most floating in contemporary aesthetics. The 'uncanny' delineates a strange proximity between the known and the unknown, either as something familiar presenting itself under an extraneous shape, or as something extraneous revealing an element of familiarity in its features. Structurally close to other experiences of 'defamiliarization' theorized between the 19th and the early 20th centuries (e.g., the Marxist notion of 'alienation', Russian formalists' definition of *ostranenie* (Sklovskij), Heidegger's *Unheimlichkeit*, Brecht's 'A-effect'), it reverberates in 20th century debate, from psychoanalysis (Lacan) to deconstruction (Derrida, Royle), from literary theory (Todorov, Cixous, Kristeva) to philosophy of history (de Certeau), and eventually to architecture (Vidler). In our perspective, the tension individuated by Freud between familiarity/un-familiarity (homely/unhomely, *Heimlichkeit/Unheimlichkeit*) can still be used as an approximate framework in which to place the manifold aspects of uncanniness. Specifically, the semantic area of the 'house' (*Heim*, intended as the perimeter of *familiarity*) can be interpreted as a 'semiotic code', namely as a constellation of sign relationships defining a horizon of expectation in which interactions, causes, and effects, seem to follow a series of rules. From this point of view, the uncanny is related to scientific paradigms and epistemological practices, insofar as these define what a given cultural context interprets as natural or un-natural, or rather *super-natural*.

The two keywords of our proposal – 'techniques' and 'uncanny' – are interconnected, since they both refer to a common cultural background, namely that of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment western culture. The epistemological model of critique produces a number of techniques in the sense of both structured thought and scientific practices. In the 'culture of critique', the subject is split, as reflected in the double genitive in the expression 'subject of observation'. This causes a constant abstraction from individual experience to a common and collective level.

We therefore propose to interpret the uncanny as a model for understanding the interrelation between possible and impossible, norm and deviation. Papers on (aspects of) the following areas of inquiry are particularly welcome:

1. The uncanny as a transformation and secularization of pre-Enlightenment metaphysics

Our inquiry aims at the relationship between the 'traditional' supernatural (religious, theological, exotic, superstitious, mythical) and the uncanny as the 'after-image' of its metamorphosis through the critical process of the Enlightenment.

2. Staging the uncanny in literature and the arts

Specific topics of the uncanny (monsters, ghosts, *Homunculi*, doubles, haunted houses) can be considered, as well as the media techniques used to produce uncanny effects (automata, phantasmagorias, photography, cinema). 'Uncanny techniques' can refer both to concrete objects and to narratology and poetics.

3. The uncanny as a political topos

The concept indicates both repetitive structures and situations of unhomeliness *within/alienation from* contemporary world. The uncanny as a 'return of the repressed' (e.g. being haunted by the ghost of the past, the spectre of idealism, the phantom of human essence) can be understood as crucial for political theory and practice in which the past and the future collide. The uncanny can thus be examined as an imaginary providing a basis for political diagnoses and utopias.

This conference is organized within the frame of the Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry's current core project *Tension/Spannung* (<http://www.ici-berlin.org>), in collaboration with the Friedrich Schlegel Graduate School of Literary Studies, Freie Universität, Berlin (<http://www.geisteswissenschaften.fu-berlin.de/en/friedrichschlegel/index.html>). It aims to gather scholars and artists from different disciplines and backgrounds to engage in a three-day interdisciplinary workshop, where participants are expected to present their papers (15 minutes). Texts will circulate among attendants before the beginning of the workshop, in order to build up the basis for discussion. The workshop will be complemented by the participation of keynote speakers as well as the projection of a movie by Siouxi L

Mernagh (<http://www.emersioncreative.com>), followed by a discussion.

Please send an abstract (maximum 400 words), together with a short bio-bibliographical profile to [uncanny@ici-berlin.org](mailto:uncanny@ici-berlin.org) before 15<sup>th</sup> January 2009. An answer will be given before 1<sup>st</sup> February 2009, and a program will be published soon on <http://uncanny.ici-berlin.org>. Participants will be requested to submit their texts by 15<sup>th</sup> March.

### Concept

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