



Bringing to Light: Reflections upon the Cinematic Uncanny

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The familiar and taken for granted delights of being able to visit cinema buildings at will came to an abrupt and dramatic cessation in the UK on the 20 March 2020 in the lead up to the government's first coronavirus (COVID-19) lockdown (Kanter, 2020). As many cinemas subsequently decided to mothball their operations, after brief attempts at reopening under required safety conditions during brief lockdown breaks, the precarity for workers in the film exhibition sector became increasingly visible, with many staff laid off while the cinema buildings remained closed. Alongside this, news footage of near-deserted urban spaces during lockdown presented eerie images of depopulated environments denied their intended users, as if they were scenes from dystopian science fiction films but now our everyday reality. Thus the previously familiar became extremely strange and uncanny almost overnight. Anthony Vidler, in his classic study *The Architectural Uncanny*, usefully remarks that:

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—one thinks of Rousseau's Geneva—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. (Vidler, 1992: 11)

In this article I wish to address what I regard as the fundamental, yet often unnoticed, uncanniness of the cinema experience, located within those places where we go specifically to become immersed in films, where the slippage between waking and dreaming that Vidler mentions is purposefully made available for us in these privileged sites, and where the architectural and the aesthetic combine to provide a unique metaphorical ‘home’.

Michel Foucault defined the cinema, one of the sites of contemporary relaxation, as an example of a heterotopia: ‘a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found in within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’ (Foucault, 1984: 3). Furthermore, he remarks that architecturally, ‘the cinema is a very odd rectangular room, at the end of which, on a two-dimensional screen, one sees the projection of a three-dimensional space’ (ibid., 6). These physical oddities and spatial complexities add to the ambiguities of the cinematic arena,

whilst also demonstrating the complex interaction between the theatre — the space and layout cinema inherited and transformed from a previous place of entertainment and leisure — and the medium of film exhibited therein.

Apparently Sigmund Freud was not particularly interested in the new filmic medium of his time and was reported by Ernest Jones as being ‘only dimly amused by “one of the primitive films of those days”’ (Heath, 1999: 25) which he saw on a cinema visit during his sole trip to the United States in 1909. However, Freud’s essay ‘The “Uncanny”’ (*Das Unheimliche*) of 1919 has been of fundamental importance in the analysis of film, and other analysts, such as Otto Rank in his work *The Double* (1971) for example, which was initially published in 1914, quickly understood and analysed the ramifications of this new cultural form with its profound ability to render psychological states of mind in its filmic productions.

2019 marked an important year for psychoanalysis with it being the centenary of Freud’s excursion into the tricky area of ‘The “Uncanny”’, and several events were laid on to mark this significant anniversary, including an exhibition and a conference at the Freud Museum in London (30 October 2019 – 9 February 2020). Although it appears that Freud may have been working on the paper as early as 1913, its publication following World War 1 brought to light and into the (anti)aesthetic field many of the ghostly and disturbing manifestations of modern life and death which came to the fore as the result of the traumatic impact of that imperialistic war upon the world at large.

In his essay Freud expressed his reservations about venturing into this area of study but felt compelled to do so as it was ‘one which has been neglected in the specialist literature of aesthetics’ (Freud, 1919: 219). The difficulty in rendering the German word ‘*unheimlich*’ with its connotations of being somewhat ‘unhomely’ in English thus brings out some slippage between the term in translation and, as we know, Freud devotes a substantial part of the essay investigating the etymology of the word in various languages. Whilst most contemporary references to the essay tend to ignore the ‘scare’ quotes from Ernest Jones’ translation, I have kept them here as the suspension of the term in English is, I feel, useful to some degree and helps us to keep in mind the linguistic difficulties and slippages of the term, which is as it should be, for the uncanny is not a stable translatable concept, if indeed it is a concept at all.

The structure of Freud’s essay is itself revealing in that it is presented from the reverse side of what he actually did in preparing the piece. In reality, as he points out, he began with instances of the uncanny in art and literature and then investigated its linguistic usage in various languages. However, in the actual essay Freud doubles back on himself and sets out from the various linguistic meanings of the word, and then applies the insights gained from various aesthetic examples. Summarising the linguistic explanations Freud concludes that the term relates to two distinct sets of ideas: ‘on the one hand it means what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight’ (ibid., 224-5). The second thread which came from the German philosopher Schelling, ‘throws quite a new light on the concept of the *Unheimlich*, for which we were certainly not prepared. According to him, everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained hidden but has come to light’ (ibid., 225). Within this analysis there is another set of references which adds to the complexities of seeking to come to

grips with this phenomenon. Freud's reference to something 'for which we were certainly not prepared' is itself revealing and suggests an unexpectedness associated with the uncanny even within the most familiar surroundings, coupled with the notion of something coming to light, of something emerging from darkness. However, as Freud also points out, both methods of investigating the topic led to the same result: 'the uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar' (ibid., 220).

Anthony Vidler makes the point that while the uncanny had both individual and poetic roots in romanticism, it finally became public in the metropolis as a generalised condition of modern anxiety and alienation, and that 'it was seemingly as disrespectful of class boundaries as epidemics and plagues' (ibid., 6) — a comment that seems decidedly prescient for us today in the midst of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic!

Past shadows

In its infancy the new medium of film was sent out into the world to seek a place for itself within the pre-existing exhibition spaces of late-nineteenth century mass entertainment. Initially homeless, film was presented in a variety of different exhibition spaces such as at travelling fairground shows, music halls and 'penny gaffs', jostling to find a secure base for itself within the crowded market place of fin-de-siècle displays of modern delights and distractions. As Tom Gunning has pointed out, many of the earlier films were actuality recordings of everyday life which exerted an 'uncanny and agitating power' on its audiences (Gunning, 1995a: 116). In addition, Gunning also points out that what he refers to as the 'cinema of attractions', prior to the domination of narrative films in the early decades of the twentieth century: 'persists in later cinema, even if it rarely dominates the form of a feature film as a whole. It provides an underground current flowing beneath narrative logic and diegetic realism, producing those moments of cinematic *dépaysement* beloved by the surrealists' (ibid., 123).

Louis Lumière's actuality film, *Sortie d'usine (Workers Leaving the Factory)* of 1895, is rather instructive for our purposes here in that it presents images of the Lumière brothers' own workforce taking their lunch break from the factory in Lyon where this new medium was assembled, with the footage being bookended by the opening and closing of the factory gates, which thus provides a primitive narrative structure to the events shown. These workers, whose labour helped to construct the new entertainment medium, can therefore also stand in as a synecdoche for the new urban and predominately working-class audiences for whom these films were presented as a novel leisure activity. In this short example we have a demonstration of the dialectic between astonishment and narrative which, I suggest, has been in place since the origins of film, and which helps to account for some aspects of the uncanny 'nature' of the medium.

Roland Barthes points out that narrative 'is simply there, like life itself' (Barthes, 1977: 79), and is a universal feature of human existence, and we often impose a narrative structure upon even simple events in everyday life as a means of trying to make sense of what might appear to be very disparate actions. Even in these early actuality films there is a 'primitive' form of narrative that 'structures' them to some degree within or even because of their short duration. Although many of these early films depict everyday

events, the strangeness of their ‘look’ was remarked upon very early on. In one of the most well-known reflections upon the visual impact of early films, Maxim Gorky remarks that: ‘It is not life but its shadow. It is not motion but its soundless spectre’ (Gorky, 1896). Shadows, reflections and spectres were thus singled out from the beginning, as was film’s status as an inferior art form in a hierarchy below the more elevated Fine Arts. Yet, at the same time, Gorky could not fail to remark upon both the strange effects he perceived, and also the dialectic between stasis and movement (and thus between photography and film), as the film he refers to, the Lumière’s *A Street in Paris*, starts with a street ‘frozen into immobility’, however, ‘suddenly a strange flicker passes through the screen and the picture stirs to life’ (ibid.). Contained within Gorky’s brief yet telling analysis of the experience of viewing this new medium are key terms which have continued to haunt the study of film from then on, however much mainstream cinema has sought to normalise its strangeness.

Gorky first witnessed the Lumière brothers’ films at a show at Charles Aumont’s Théâtre Concerto Parisienne on either the 30 June or 1 July 1896. It is interesting to note that this theatre also served as a brothel. So here we have a Benjaminian constellation of the modern – the depiction of a new form of mass entertainment in ‘Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century’ (Benjamin, 1999), where all the contradictory and dialectical aspects of modernity jostled against each other in the gaudy market place of modern industrial capitalism’s emporia of distractions and delights.

Writing about the emergence of photography, with a particular emphasis upon spirit photography of the period, Gunning remarks that:

However, if photography emerged as the material support for a new positivism, it was also experienced as an *uncanny* phenomenon, one which seemed to undermine the unique identity of objects and people, endlessly reproducing the appearance of objects, creating a *parallel world of phantasmatic doubles* alongside the real world of the senses verified by positivism. (Gunning, 1995b: 42-3, emphasis added.)

Thus the experience of observing photographs and films in which a parallel world is represented alongside the ‘real world of the senses’ demonstrates the ontological uncanniness of photography and film, combining in a strange manner both a sense of scientific objectivity but, at one and the same time, providing the possibility of demonstrating suggestive images of another ‘parallel world’.

The rise to dominance of narrative film as opposed to the cinema of attractions was consolidated in the early part of the twentieth century by the construction of purpose-built cinema buildings which were designed to house the longer feature film, and thus take the new art form away from its roots in other forms of popular culture. The fledgling film industry’s desire to raise the status of the new medium by moving it on to more ‘respectable’, i.e., middle class, terrain came about with the construction of purpose-built cinema buildings modelled on existing theatre architecture. Seeking to make film a respectable and highly profitable medium required a sleight of hand — a ‘magic trick’ of linguistic, cultural and architectural proportions — to make reputable what initially appeared as an unruly upstart and proto art form that required ‘taming’ from its more anarchic and lower-class origins of exhibition. The semantic shift involved in the decision to rename *The Moving Picture News* as *The Motion Picture News* in 1913 is but

one example of the deliberate shift in respectability that the burgeoning film industry sought to make in the early days of film (Paul, 1989: 321). Changing the title of this publication from moving pictures to motion pictures thus signified a class shift that was economically motivated to increase audiences and profits. At the same time, 'Moving the film image into the realm of the traditional theater via the introduction of the feature film seems to have generally demanded a different kind of setting, one that moved it away from magic' (ibid., 336).

The early dialectic between actualities and more purposely structured narrative film soon appeared to have been resolved as narrative film quickly rose to dominance in the early decades of the twentieth century and appeared to displace its earlier competitor. However, this dialectic has remained in place ever since film's origins, albeit perhaps rather better exploited in avant-garde or art house films, and one only has to think about how the surrealists exploited early cinema effects in their work against prevailing conventions of easily understood narrative flow. An exemplary example of which is apparent throughout Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Similarly, we might also refer to the French *Nouvelle Vague* and the explicit breaking of the fourth wall in Michel Poiccard's (Jean-Paul Belmondo) direct look at the camera as he drives from Marseille to Paris at the start of Jean-Luc Godard's *À bout de souffle* (*Breathless*, 1960), which unsettlingly acknowledges us as the audience directly into the narrative. The latter can therefore be usefully compared to the cowboy's direct look at the camera in Edwin Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and the fact that the shot in Porter's film, which does not represent any direct action from the narrative, and which could be placed either at the beginning or ending of the film, thus allowed exhibitors to have some control over the audience's viewing experience.

These interactions or connections between early film practices and subsequent avant-garde use of film's inherently astonishing potential versus the normalisation of narrative coherence (although such normalisation requires a knowledge and understanding of the conventions of film language, particularly continuity editing), highlights the continuing dialectic between astonishment and narrative trajectory, as well as mainstream cinema's unsuccessful attempts to normalise or domesticate the 'cinema of attractions' in a (fruitless) attempt to restrain its magical and uncanny counterpart. Indeed, Nicholas Royle argues that: 'The entire "industry" might be defined as a palliative working to repress the uncanniness of film' (Royle, 2003: 75). For film is indeed manifestly materially ghostly with spectres haunting the screen filling us with delight and terror. Unlike the theatre where the bodies of performers signify their unique actual presence in time and space, and with each performance being in some sense a one-off; in cinema we are presented with the same performance each time, but experienced differently by us depending upon our mood, our position within the cinema auditorium, the time of day or night we watch the film, and our proximity to others, amongst other factors. Additionally, as Giuliano Bruno points out: 'Cinematic space moves not only through time and space or narrative development but through inner space. Film moves, and fundamentally "moves" us, with its ability to render affects and, in turn, to affect' (Bruno, 2007: 7). Film can indeed 'move' us as we sit in the cushioned comfort of the cinema auditorium. Although developed from pre-existing theatre architecture and including the proscenium arch, the purpose-built cinema buildings of the twentieth

century opened up new opportunities for experiencing this new medium, which have had and continue to have profound cultural effects.

Into the light

The development of new purpose-built cinema buildings provided large-scale opportunities for capitalist expansion for the new film industry from the early twentieth century into the boom time of the Hollywood Studio System for the Big Five vertically integrated US companies and their architects, with opportunities to showcase their modernity and to seek to outshine their rivals, followed on by a spate of construction of similar picture palaces around the world. Anne Friedberg comments about the rapid scale of cinema building development in the early twentieth century in North America whereby: ‘The movie “palace” was the architectural embodiment of the shifting taste and class distinctions accorded to the moving image’ (Friedberg, 2009: 166-7). The size and scale of these cinema buildings were designed to showcase the grandeur of the film companies and to impress upon audiences the magnificence of the products lavished upon them as consumers. However this wish to make the medium respectable could not fully contain the fundamental and foundational strangeness of film. Sean Cubitt has remarked that ‘there is something fictive, something uncanny, or something that however marginally, fails the reality test in even the most engrossing film, and perhaps in them most of all’ (Cubitt, 2004: 1). Furthermore, Giuliano Bruno also points out that: ‘Film is always housed. It needs more than an apparatus to exist as cinema. It needs a space, a public site – a movie “house”. It is only by way of architecture that film turns into cinema’ (Bruno, 2007: 44).

Now, in a process of cinematic free association, an image comes to mind from a film that one wouldn’t usually refer to in relation to the uncanny — Giuseppe Tornatore’s *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) — a seemingly straightforward, nostalgic and beautifully sentimental love letter to cinema. Here the cinema building is a more modest structure but still one that would have been impressive for the local inhabitants and which attracts a wide variety of people from the Sicilian village to its shows, with the workers and their families seated on the ground floor and the petit bourgeois in the balcony above. Early on in the film young Salvatore ‘Totò’ Di Vita (Salvatore Cascio) desperately tries to gain admittance to the inner sanctum of the projection room, from where he knows the magic of cinema emanates. Told off by the projectionist Alfredo (Philippe Noiret) for trying to peer in, he is made to return to his seat, only to turn round again to look back towards the source of the imagery that transfixes him. As he looks up towards the projection room, he and the audience (of *Cinema Paradiso*) are presented, via canted framing and an oblique camera movement towards the source of his fascination, an out of kilter view of the cone of light shining through the open mouth of the decorative lion’s head which permits the projector’s light source into the heart of the cinema building, and thus is magically transformed into more than a purely functional aperture. As he looks spellbound towards the light Salvatore sees the lion’s mouth seemingly roar which makes him blink in fear and then look back again but where everything appears to have returned to normal.

A short sequence of shots, perhaps not consciously recognised within the overall narrative trajectory, yet for Salvatore (and me), these shots signify the way in which the uncanny strangeness and magical power of cinema can so easily be manifested within the

overall normalising framework of film exhibition, as Cubitt suggests. The power of film encased within the confines of the cinema building, and that of the fantasy of the projected images, together with the fantasies that we bring with us from our everyday lives, is thus momentarily depicted at this point and stands dialectically at odds with the forward trajectory of the narrative. Indeed it stands at the other end of the image and is manifested here by a turning away from the screen towards the light source as the conduit of film's 'magic' (although presented to viewers on the cinema screen, thus doubling levels of ambiguity). As such it signifies young Salvatore's bodily felt realisation of the uncanny and magical power of the medium, and which perhaps acts as the primal scene for his lifelong love of cinema in which Alfredo comes to act as a stand in for his absent, dead father, and as a mentor introducing him into the sanctified space of the projection room. What makes the effect 'work' for Salvatore, and for me, is the effect and affect produced by his turning away from the screen towards the source of the cinematic magic, and the hallucination that appears before his (and our) eyes. As Freud points out: 'an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced' (1919: 244), as we see here in Salvatore's 'vision' of the lion's mouth roaring with the light source emanating from within its open mouth as its conduit towards the screen.

Barthes also references the largely unnoticed aspect of cinema by suggesting that while the very fascination of film resides in the darkness of the cinema, it also relies upon a largely disregarded support: 'visible and unperceived, that dancing cone which pierces the darkness like a laser beam' (Barthes, 1989: 347). This largely unnoticed presence helps to support a fetishistic response to the medium and, as he puts it, 'It's exactly as if a long stem of light had outlined a keyhole, and then we all peered, flabbergasted, through that hole' (ibid.). The scopophilic and voyeuristic connotations of Barthes' remarks bring out the erotic dimensions involved in watching a film in which the image and its surroundings thus constitute the uncanny intertwining of film and cinema, of the psyche and the social which are dialectically intertwined in a Möbius-like structure where individual and collective fascination come together in one and the same place. One might go to the cinema to lose oneself in a film for a short duration but then one takes that felt fascination out with you into the wider world.

A cinema building can thus be both homely and unhomely, safe and unsettling, at one and the same time — a large-scale simulacrum of a private sanctuary — a home away from home and yet a distinctly public space where one can let down one's guard. The eroticism of film is thus a key component of its illicit pleasures that are sought out by audiences. Again *Cinema Paradiso* provides examples of this as the audiences are denied the sight of cinematic kisses due to the Catholic priest censoring films prior to them being shown to the public, but the collection of excised materials is left as a gift for the older Salvatore (Jacques Perrin) by Alfredo as a form of cinematic relic following his death, thus reigniting Salvatore's memories of his special friendship with Alfredo which instigated his love of cinema leading to him becoming a film director. (The metaphor of ignition can also refer to the flammability of celluloid film which led to the fire in the projector from which Salvatore rescued Alfredo but which left the latter blind.)

The interconnection between film, the cinema building and eroticism also brings to mind Weegee's (Arthur Felling) photographs of the clandestine behaviour of cinema

audiences taken using infra-red film in New York movie theatres in the mid-1940s. Here the eroticism of cinema, encased within its apparatus and sought for by audiences since film's origins, also provides a refuge, a place to let down one's guard, a space for sexual encounters, particularly for adolescents away from parental eyes, or for affairs to take place in semi-darkness, usually relatively undetected unless the house lights came on or a pesky photographer lay in wait with an infra-red light! Weegee also specifically photographed the power of the projected cone of light in another cinema image titled 'Saturday afternoon show for the youngsters' (ca. 1945).¹

Being(s) in the dark

As well as the different levels of meaning and affect to be found and felt watching feature films, is there not also an overall uncanniness to the materiality of films that the imagery and narrative structure somehow seek to elide? The examples from *Cinema Paradiso* and Weegee's cinema photographs point to the magical power of light as a conduit for this uncanniness to be experienced by the audience as images appear in front of their/our eyes as two-dimensional shadows on the material support of the screen. In this regard, several film academics have pinpointed the significance of Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs of the interiors of cinema buildings. Taken using an extended exposure time for the duration of the film photographed in that location at that time, what we are left with is an empty and eerie white screen devoid of the film's images. Friedberg argues that Sugimoto's photographs of cinema interiors help to provide an understanding that: 'The film screen is a surface, a picture plane caught in a cone of light, dark and empty projected images are caught in its veneer. Despite variations in theater architecture and films projected, what remains—constant and haunting—is the screen' (Friedberg, 2009: 166). Giuliano Bruno also argues that 'When he pictures film, Sugimoto pictures an architecture, making tangible the geography of cinema in the architectonics of its reception' (Bruno, 2007: 52). We shall probably never know what the actual film shown was, all that is left for us is the white, haunting screen.² The projector's light is thereby encased for all time on the screen, manifesting the magical conduit of the medium in front of our eyes. Thus, intermingled here is the 'magic' between projector and screen, and between darkness and light, set within the confines of the architectural space.

In transforming the architecture of the theatre for cinematic purposes, the use of curtains became an important adjunct to the positioning of the screen. However, while the use of curtains was not strictly necessary, they added to the uncanniness of the filmic medium within the auditorium. As such, 'The strangeness of curtains in movie theaters

1 An exhibition entitled 'Weegee: At the Movies' was presented at the ICP, International Center of Photography, in New York, Dec 16, 2014 – Jun 14, 2015, details available at: <https://www.icp.org/events/weegee-at-the-movies>. Weegee's 'Saturday afternoon show for the youngsters' is available at: <https://www.icp.org/browse/archive/objects/saturday-afternoon-show-for-the-youngsters-at-loews-commodore-theater-on>. (All links provided throughout this essay were in working order at the time of writing.)

2 Hiroshi Sugimoto's photographs of cinema interiors can be accessed from his website at: <https://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/new-page-7>

lies in the fact that the production of the image has its origins on the other side of the curtain, beginning in the space that we inhabit' (Paul, 1997: 344). This comment brings to mind the work of Bridget Smith whose photographs of cinema curtains taken from within the empty auditorium highlight the beguiling strangeness of this material aspect of spectatorship, and our desire to see what might lie beyond.³

Paul also points out how in early cinema the beginning of the feature film would start off by being shown on the curtain itself prior to it opening, thus 'briefly making the image spectral before it returned to a seemingly more solid situation on the screen' (Paul, 1997: 345). Another image springs to mind here which appears to hark back, perhaps unconsciously, to the use of curtains in early cinema. In the opening shot of David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986) we are presented with the initial credits unfolding upon an undulating 'curtain' of blue, fetishistic velvet, accompanied by Angelo Badalamenti's haunting music, all of which helps to provide an uncanny prescience of what will be presented to us within the narrative of the film itself.

Cinema in other places

Alongside cinema buildings, Foucault also mentioned museums and by extension, I would suggest, we need to add the art gallery as another example of a heterotopia. The uncanny architecture of cinema buildings, particularly their interiors, takes on a special significance in the work of the Canadian artists Janet Cardiff and Georges Bures Miller, but now displaced into an art gallery and reduced in scale. *The Muriel Lake Incident* (1999) is a multimedia installation consisting of a simple plywood box structure of approximately 4 feet by 4 feet set on raised metal legs, inside which a detailed miniature cinema interior has been created. Up to three spectators at a time can don headphones and look into the space where depicted upon a screen is a short five-minute mid-western set film noir.

The script of the film is short enough to warrant setting it out in full:

On screen: Fade up to car driving scene; cut to bedroom with telephone ringing, man lying on bed. He answers the telephone. Scary music.

Woman (in theater, beside you): Is there any popcorn left?

Man (in film): Hello, yeah, hi Frank. *(Listens)* Yeah, I know where that is. Yeah, uhuh. Why would they go way out there I wonder? OK you can forget about it now. It's taken care of. But Frank,...remember...This time you buy dinner. *(Laughs)*

Woman (in theater, beside you): This isn't the film I thought. Wasn't it supposed to be directed by Orson Welles?

He puts phone back, looks out of window. Cut to phonograph player. Music starts.

Cut from phonograph player to woman dancing as if she's drugged.

Woman (in theater, beside you): This is too weird. She looks just like the woman in my dream last night. I was walking down a hallway and I opened a door into a room...

Audience (in theater, behind you): Shhh!

Woman (in theater, beside you): I'll tell you later.

³ Examples of Bridget Smith's photographs can be accessed from the Frith Street Gallery website at: <https://www.frithstreetgallery.com/artists/bridget-smith>

Cowboy on beach shot. Man lurking in bushes.

Woman (in theater, beside you): Did you see that crazy man outside the theater? I think he's sitting behind us.

Cowboy (in film, voice over): It was too perfect. It felt like a set-up. What was I doing here anyways? Listening to that music over and over. Playing babysitter to a couple of city slickers. All I could do was to sit and wait and hope I was wrong.

Woman (in theater, beside you): I'm going down now. He's supposed to be sitting in the second row. I'll meet you outside after the film.

Sound of woman in theater getting up and leaving occurs at the same time as the film camera is sneaking up to cottage. Shot moves into the cottage and cuts to the cowboy on the beach. Slow-motion camera moves towards the cowboy. Film breaks and burns up. Fade to black.

Sounds of gunshots in theater. A woman screams from somewhere in the theater. Repeated gunshot. Crowd goes crazy. Man's laugh behind you.

(In Christov-Bakargiev, 2003: 127)

A version of *The Muriel Lake Incident* is available to be experienced on the Cardiff and Miller website.⁴ The uncanny auditory impact of the piece is particularly brought to the fore by the use of binaural recording which produces its full effects when you wear headphones. Binaural recording is created by having a microphone in each ear so that it reproduces the way people actually hear. It doesn't work to the same effect if played over loudspeakers, but by wearing headphones you hear exactly what the person who recorded it would hear. The sounds for *The Muriel Lake Incident* were originally recorded in a full-sized theatre so you are presented with the disjunction between the sound originating from a large architectural space in which it was recorded in the first instance, but which is now compressed into the tight confines of a miniature theatre in which the events are depicted and made audible on personal headphones.

As Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev points out, 'Intimacy is a key notion in understanding Cardiff's work'⁵ and further that 'Not only does she bring intimacy into the public realm, she also explores how it might be possible to achieve the experience of private enjoyment in the public sphere' (ibid., 30). And does this not link us back to both *Cinema Paradiso* and Weegee's photographs of cinema theatres in that the audience is always to some respects an uncanny supplement to the supposedly self-contained medium of film? The intimacy of individual audience member's responses to films, such as whispered comments or the sounds of food being eaten, and other activities happening in the darkness beneath the cone of light, interact with the film being exhibited to create unique responses to what is being seen, heard and felt, adding another layer of meaning and affect. *The Muriel Lake Incident* provides for a strange dislocation of the senses as you try to differentiate the different levels of sound between the dialogue and music from the depicted film on the screen which intermingles on the same sonic level as the comments heard from the 'audience'. As the film stutters and burns up on screen, the

⁴ *The Muriel Lake Incident* can be viewed on the Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller website at: <https://cardiffmiller.com/otherworks/the-muriel-lake-incident/>

⁵ Initially the works mentioned were designated as the authorship of Janet Cardiff (collaboration with Georges Bures Miller). However, now they tend to be designated as a joint operation between Cardiff and her husband, George Bures Miller.

interaction between what we see, hear and experience becomes more confused and disorienting. Wearing headphones adds to the unsettling combination of simultaneous proximity and distance, combined with a clear lack of understanding of the source of the sounds.

Cardiff and Miller's *The Paradise Institute* (2001)⁶ is a larger miniature multimedia installation of the interior of a cinema which was originally made for the 49th Venice Biennale, for which they received the Special Jury and Benesse Prizes. It consists of two rows of velvet-covered seats, each with individual headphones to listen to the 13-minute film shown on the screen. Similar to *The Muriel Lake Incident*, as you watch and listen to the piece, there is the strange interconnection between the sounds of unseen audience members prior to the film starting, interspersed with comments throughout, presented on the same level as the diegetic world we look into. The film itself presents a tale of a patient who is bound to a bed in what appears to be a psychiatric hospital. At one point his nurse lifts up the patient's T-shirt and kisses his chest, to which we hear a man from the audience say: 'That's excellent nursing' which elicits nervous laughter from his friends. Then we hear a woman say 'did you check the stove before we left?' And who hasn't done something similar to that? This dialogue is juxtaposed with an extreme close-up of the patient in the film who opens his eye and appears to be responding directly yet silently to this question, almost accusingly, adding another layer of confusion and ambiguity to the different levels of 'reality' shown to us in this work.

The woman's reference to the stove also provides a connection to film theory in respect of the Biff Products cartoon used on the front cover of the first edition of Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake's *Film Theory: An Introduction* (1988) where we see a speech bubble coming from the head of a man depicted watching an 'arty' French film saying, 'This requires one's undivided attention...and the cancellation of extraneous thoughts', while at the same time in another bubble we see the contradictory words 'Which reminds me, did I leave the electric fire on?' The uncanniness of being in (at least) two places and two worlds at one and the same time, beside ourselves, so to speak, is itself an indication of our own strangeness to ourselves, which accompanies us into the cinema space where reality and fantasy are interwoven between us and the screen of our desires.

It has been suggestively argued that 'the miniature screen in *The Paradise Institute* seems to propose a form of collectivity' (Connolly, 2009: 170) even while each person has to don individual headphones to experience this immersive work. This interweaving between an individual and yet strangely collective experience is very much at the forefront of Cardiff and Miller's work in this regard — one is never quite/quiet alone while watching a film in a cinema theatre and one is, at one and the same time, both experiencing events in a highly subjective manner, whilst simultaneously being part of a collective experience. It has also been suggested that this work 'was in essence a laboratory for the study of cinema' (Jacobson, 2006: 58).

In both of these examples from Cardiff and Miller, hearing the audience whilst simultaneously looking into an empty auditorium adds another eerie level to the

⁶ An extract from *The Paradise Institute* can be accessed from the Janet Cardiff & George Bures Miller website at: <https://cardiffmiller.com/installations/the-paradise-institute/>

experience. The complexities of sound in these two works amplify the dislocation of the senses produced by these complex multimedia works, and evoke, I would argue, the Lacanian notion of extimacy, the problematisation of inside and outside, which cinema architecture plays with or produces in the interaction between the film we watch and seek to attend to, while at one and the same time being aware (however much we perhaps try not to be) of others around us in the cinema. Thus we are simultaneously intertwined between ourselves as spectators, seeking to become lost in the folds of the film, yet combined with the possible intrusion of our restless thoughts, all of which intermingle in the complex act of spectatorship in this complex 'private' public space. As Jacques-Alain Miller has pointed out, 'Extimacy is not the contrary of intimacy. Extimacy says that the intimate is Other-like a foreign body, a parasite' (Miller, 2008). Cinema buildings, and artistic works that centre on cinemas, can thereby enable us to come to experience in detail the uncanny sensations made available for us in these spaces of 'relaxation'. Similarly, psychoanalysis, combined with these aesthetic examples, can also help us to come to an understanding of the complexities between inside and out, between container and contained, and between the psyche and the social.

The return of the repressed

This sense of intimate Otherness, or disturbing strangeness, within the ordinary, which Cardiff and Miller's works evoke so well, also brings back to mind again another artist who bridges the gulf between the avant-garde and popular film — David Lynch. The Silencio nightclub scene in *Mulholland Drive* (2001) has rightly been analysed in great detail by many scholars because of the highly uncanny feeling it can produce. Richard Martin points out that the interior used for this scene was that of the Tower Theater which was the first one in Los Angeles 'to be equipped for talking pictures' (Martin, 2001: 60). Is it not thus not most appropriate that Lynch should demonstrate within this cinema the illusion of the cinematic experience, of how images and their affective sounds are manufactured for us, as if by magic?

A cinema interior also functions in a strange and disorientating fashion in *INLAND EMPIRE* (2006), which similarly employs the disturbing figure of the double, utilised as a particular cinematic manifestation of the uncanny from its earliest days, as Otto Rank analysed. In *INLAND EMPIRE* we are presented with the diametrically opposed figures of Nikki Grace/Susan Blue (Laura Dern) who is/are caught up in a highly intertwined, Möbius-like tale, working on a film within a film, one that is haunted from the outset, and which thus highlights the ontological strangeness of the filmic medium.

Towards the dénouement we see Nikki/Susan stabbed on the street in Los Angeles and who, staggering across Hollywood and Vine, falls to the ground in front of a shuttered shop front between a black woman and a young Japanese girl with her boyfriend who are also seated on the ground. The two women carry on a bizarre conversation over Nikki/Susan's prostrate body while she slowly dies. 'You dyin', that's all' says the black woman, and who then uses the flame from a cigarette lighter to help Nikki/Susan 'into the light', in a similar manner to how Special Agent Dale Cooper helps Leland Palmer to die peacefully in episode 16 of the second season of *Twin Peaks* (1990, dir. Tim Hunter, written by Mark Frost) after being exposed as the murderer of his

daughter and whom he had sexually abused for years in the guise of BOB, his evil doppelgänger.

After Nikki/Susan's death we then hear the director of the film being shot in this *mise en abyme*, Kingsley Stewart (Jeremy Irons), say 'cut it and print it', and we see a camera move on a crane back and up away from the body for us to realise that this is a scene from the feature film they are working on, shown as being shot on 35mm film, whereas Lynch's film was shot on an already technically 'obsolete' Sony DSR-PD150 digital video camera. The complex ambiguities presented here between the use of different forms of cinematic technology adds another aesthetic layer to the experience of engaging with *INLAND EMPIRE* and brings to the fore key issues about film production, distribution and exhibition in the twenty-first century. Kingsley Stewart then asks the assembled cast and crew to clap Nikki's performance, so we now know this is Nikki acting in a scene from the feature film. Nikki then arises very slowly as the other actors and crew disperse from the set, yet she seems haunted and transfixed and doesn't come out of character. She does not respond to anyone on set, instead she carries on walking off the film sound stage, which directly leads to her being seen walking alongside a typical 'Lynchian' red curtain before entering into a seemingly empty cinema auditorium where her image is shown on the screen in close-up recounting words she said earlier as 'the battered woman/Susan' (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Nikki/Susan encounters 'herself' in *INLAND EMPIRE*

We hear her say: 'I guess after my son died I went into a bad time. When I was watching everything go round me while I was standing in the middle. *Watching it, like in a dark theater, before they bring the lights up* (emphasis added).' This dialogue, now recounted within the cinema auditorium, thereby links her account of her trauma as akin to the act of cinema spectatorship. The man to whom she'd spoken these words earlier on, listed as 'Mr. K' (Erik Crary), suitably named with all the attendant Kafkaesque connotations of one of Lynch's inspirations, and who listened without saying much (and whom some reviewers suggested acts as a form of quasi-analyst), now appears at the side of the auditorium and goes up the steps she'd previously used earlier before saying the words that now she now hears herself recounting on the cinema screen.

This scene itself is also very reminiscent of another of Lynch's artistic inspirations, the painter Edward Hopper's *New York Movie* (1939) which depicts a female usherette leaning against the side wall of a cinema interior by a similar staircase to that in *INLAND EMPIRE*. The woman in Hopper's painting suggests a strong sense of alienated ennui seemingly at odds with the comforting pleasure of the cinema interior in which we see the backs of other people watching the film on the screen. The usherette's posture and pose demonstrate how such a place of sanctuary can also be a site of boredom, particularly for those who work there, and shows the underside of poorly paid urban modernity.

The theatre used here in *INLAND EMPIRE* was the Orpheum Theater and as Martin points out: 'in *Mulholland Drive* and *Inland Empire*, the interiors of two classic Los Angeles cinemas — the Tower Theater and the Orpheum Theater — stage uncanny confrontations. The cinema, then, is an essential space for Lynch: an environment constitutive of more than just film spectatorship' (Martin, 2014: 147). This 'more than film spectatorship' that Martin refers to reminds me of Freud's comments about the special power of the uncanny in art and literature which he suggests 'is a much more fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides' (Freud, 1919: 249) to which I'd now like to turn.

Beyond the uncanny?

In his final, posthumously published book, *The Weird and the Eerie*, Mark Fisher argues that the two terms which form the basis of his various analyses are in a sense a beyond of the *unheimlich*. He suggests that the Freudian *unheimlich* has taken precedence over the two other terms he sets out to analyse, and that both elicit an outside in that 'the weird is that *which does not belong*' (Fisher, 2016: 10) which he likens to montage, whereas the eerie 'has to do with detachment from the urgencies of the everyday' (ibid., 13). I'm not sure that separating these two terms out from the *unheimlich* is a useful or necessary precondition for their detailed analyses. Indeed, Freud specifically states in 'The "Uncanny"' that in his linguistic investigations the weird and the eerie are often found in terms where the negative 'un-' comes more to the fore. Indeed, he states that: 'the *unheimlich* is what was once *heimisch*, familiar; the prefix 'un' ['un-] is the token of repression' (Freud, 1919: 245). Therefore, I'd suggest that these terms subsist within the uncanny in a form of 'an *eerie, performative twisting*' (Royle, 2003: 46, emphasis added), and that the Lacanian neologism *extimacy* is more helpful in maintaining the various links or threads of the *unheimlich* within a band of feelings and sensations, rather than seeking to go beyond.

Fisher specifically analyses *Mulholland Drive* and *INLAND EMPIRE* with reference to the weird. In respect of the latter, he picks out the significance of the motif of the cigarette-burned hole in silk used in the film as a special kind of threshold or portal into different worlds. Fisher states that: 'The cigarette burn hole could serve as a metonym for the film's entire psychotic geography. The hole in silk is an image of the camera and its doubling the spectating eye, whose gaze in *Inland Empire* is always voyeuristic and partial' (ibid., 57-8). The reference to the 'film's entire psychotic geography' is usefully sensitive to the unfolding of the various disparate geographies, both physical and psychical, experienced in the film as well as in the act of watching

INLAND EMPIRE. We, like the characters in the film(s) shown on screen, are never entirely clear where we are, and from whose perspectives we see and hear things. For example, ‘Smithy’s house’ is depicted as both a set built in a sound studio, and an actual location where Susan Blue lives prior to the reunification of the ‘Lost Girl’ at the end of the film with her family. The anxiety inducing sense of fractured subjectivities, and interlinking locations is, however, brought into sharp focus in the scene in the cinema auditorium when Nikki meets up with her Other self, seeing ‘herself’ on screen.

The anxiety of the uncanny

In his seminar on *Anxiety* Jacques Lacan states:

What I simply want to accentuate today is that *the dreadful, the shady, the disturbing*, everything by which we translate, as best as we can in French, the magisterial German *Unheimliche*, presents itself through little windows. The field of anxiety is situated as something framed. Thus, you’re coming back to what I introduced the discussion with, namely, the relationship between the stage and the world. (Lacan, 2014: 74-5)

And does not cinema, using this example from *INLAND EMPIRE* as our guide, together with the other examples we’ve encountered, encapsulate much of what Lacan suggests here? As with Freud, Lacan also highlights the importance of fiction in being better able to articulate the fleeting nature of the uncanny than does everyday life, because fiction provides a more stable articulation of the uncanny and shows us clearly its relation to fantasy and anxiety.

Although referring to the theatre, Lacan’s comments about the brief moments of anxiety immediately prior to the curtain rising seem just as applicable to the cinema: ‘Without this introductory moment of anxiety, which quickly dies away, nothing would be able to take on its value of what will be determined thereafter as tragic or comic’ (ibid., 75). As such, this initial, momentary, anxiety thereby provides a ‘bridge’ for the spectator into the fiction to be presented both in the theatre and at the cinema. Lacan also emphasises that the structure of anxiety and fantasy are one and the same, which helps to come to an understanding of how the Möbius strip-like interlinking between us as spectators with our own fantasies can combine with the fantasy scenarios played out in front of us in the cinema, and which can remain with us long after leaving the cinema building, thus intertwining various fantasy scenarios.

In his commentary upon Lacan’s seminar, Roberto Harari, via reference to Freud’s reference to Schelling in ‘The “Uncanny”’, points out that

it is *those things that, destined to remain hidden, have nevertheless become manifest*. It is what irrupts when it should not have appeared; what should be lacking is the uncanny. It is, moreover, a *sudden irruption that does not last*. It is an experience that, at a particular moment, comes down on the subject, *leaving him or her petrified or stumped*. It is anxiety. (Harari, 2001: 62)

Just as Nikki Grace is seemingly petrified or stumped in the cinema auditorium, looking at her Other self on screen, are we not all in a somewhat similar position when we are caught by the power of the cinematic experience? As Lacan demonstrates, anxiety is not without an object, and as he puts it, ‘You’ll see that the structure of anxiety is not far

from it [fantasy], for the reason that it's well and truly the same' (Lacan, 2014: 3), and further that Freud's essay on the uncanny is 'indispensable for broaching the subject of anxiety' (ibid.: 41). And the cinema auditorium, particularly its darkened interior, as I hope the examples used demonstrate, seems to provide us with a special space to experience the uncanny.

Since its inception the medium of film, as commentators as widely spaced in time as Gorky and Gunning have pointed out, has left audiences spellbound and astonished. The siting of film within purpose-built cinemas added both to the appeal and strangeness of the fare offered, however mainstream or otherwise. The cinema is thus a privileged site of leisure where we can enjoy a frisson of fear within the folds of the familiar, and from where we can take our 'felt understanding' of what we've experienced back out with us when we leave the cinema building into our everyday lives. As we once again tentatively venture out into public spaces, but which are now experienced rather differently than they were before the pandemic, visiting cinemas may provide us with a special place to become more aware of the everyday strangeness now upon us. As the whole world has been rendered manifestly uncanny over the recent period, a heightened awareness of the strange sensations which cinemas can provide us with might be a most useful means of coming to terms with the changed reality we now face.

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